

Virtual Quantum Collapse.

By Lutz Barz

Mission Control: Andromeda Station Three – Location Classified.

Beyond Andromeda's galactic edge, amongst a cluster of stars masked by dense dust clouds, a secreted Space Station. Its staff, from distant Arktus designated only by their functions and level of clearance. Their identities ultra secure from any form of scanning, bio based or cyber extractors after the contents of their enhanced minds. The research not present in any data realm. Nor the technology used. The personnel under deep cover in this target specific forward probing intelligence operation with its camouflaged mission parameters. The objectives configured to make it seem like normal scientific research into the super huge gravity well in near space.

The Great Attractor.

Observing the colossal anomaly two hundred light years distant. Using Virtual and real Quantum Computers to probe into the very nature of space itself. Revealing certain discrepancies in the quantum foam of space. Which led to the discovery of EM fields several thousand light years out suggesting the presence of a technological civilisation.

Sentients.

However it was this odd, this differently enphased-base state of space which attracted their attention to this anomalous behaviour. Cosmic freak, natural aberration or a designed process? For what reason? Left over anomaly of the Big Bang? A localized cataclysm in the making or intentional? An event which required answers.

The station was powering up a dozen Vacuum Beam Generators. The technology was not new but its application was. Not only was the Station and its objective absent from all data storage systems but its cloaking capabilities were so advanced even mass detectors would never locate it or its personnel. It had been a lucky if unforeseen by product when an array of vacuum beams homed in on an object, all information regarding mass, radiation, even the minute atomic fields inherent in matter on a quantum level were non existent.

Drawing their power from a mid-range star using an array of collectors, generators were ready to focus their synchronised vacuum beams onto the pre-determined point within the spread out arrays of the space station's dispersed modular design. Virtual simulations verified the program's computations. At the control centre set

well back from the circular array, the mission head gave the go to activate. Security on tight alert.

Reaching optimum output the directed vacuum beams focussed onto the designated area. For a moment the dozen linear trajectories energized the quantum foam of space. It glowed lilac as electrons exploded out of their energy shells, shoving matter out of space itself. In that brief moment, when the collective beams met that tiny region of space it became literally empty.

Space still abhorred a vacuum. It was at this point whereby the quantum computers using digitalized hard core data inserted encoded information into the centre. The generated quantum carrier wave filled the true vacuum now. The insertion of the isolated cubicle successful. The size of a small room in the generated void around it. Outside the relative space-time continuum. Total isolation. Nothing got in or out from the surrounding universe. A unique singular non-event.

The Arktarians masters of manipulating quantum physics. It all came down to probability wave-fields. The universe was filled with them. On their own the meta-order of probable possibilities would have revealed the presence of the separate op centre. With the VBs focussed upon the insertion all data remained within the generated quantum containment field. The cubicle non-existent.

Next the staff. Gathering together their scanned sets of data blocks, insert spatial coordinates, create the pre-determined virtually generated designed reality, in this case the inserted personnel riding their individually specific configured quantum probability fields. Using quantum computational powers, the programme being the possibility, siphoning the free energy of the star they inserted the designated predetermined uploaded quantum scanned inhabitants into the debrief room.

The quantum field-wave collapsed. The configured probability became the designated actuality. They were in place within the void within the cube. Riding the energy state of the probability waves. When they were finished they would uncollapse the probability wave field. It would simply vanish leaving no past, no present and no future probability fields due to the vacuum beams having removed all matter, all data from the normal universe.

Inside the cube seven Arktians The Controller, three Facilitators the role of minders to make sure the three agents achieved their objectives. Uploaded information fields in their symbiot brains. As a collapsed quantum wave secure from the Deep Visionaries, the forward assault teams of the Primaians. An extremely potent race of psychics. With their

mission buried as a series of random field states protected by chaos algorithms. The inserted agents unaware of the true intent of their mission once in place. The requisite data released only when conditions were quantum aligned.

To fathom from within the GA the anomalous changed phase state of space. The knowledge of the Discrepancy non-localised, outside the cover of informational data domains of the incoming agents. If this cosmic phenomenon was an artifice then it was even more imperative for such revelations to be curtailed in the extreme. And finally there was the safety of the agents to consider.

Quantum entanglement. If this changed phase state of space was in itself an expression of a subatomic quantum field wave, the last thing they wanted, it could compromise the very nature of reality. The possibility of alien embedded data, reconfiguring at best, capturing at worst the agents and their enhanced bio-super charged sentient capabilities. Avoiding a massive overwhelming flash-back. Base included.

"Ung" the Controller began as they sat around a table. She was the first of three agents about to be briefed. An almost luminescent hint of yellow in her pale skin, short black hair and deep set black eyes sat awaiting her orders. The walls white, blank giving no indication as to their whereabouts nor allowing them any memory of what might give their location, their origin, their position or their world away when re-inserted back into the normal space-time continuum.

Ung, like the other two agents were young women in their early twenties. An optimal time when their mental faculties, their innate intelligence functioned at their optimum. They were all embedded with Bio Enhanced Artificial Intelligent capabilities. They had to be. Given the environment they would be inserted into and extricated as well. Each agent, apart from the watchful Facilitator backed up by an individual Virtual Quantum Generator, aligned with the resonance of their persona.

"I will begin with you. You are the base-line. You will be the first embedded insert, the beacon."

Ung, demure, focussed, nodded, then allowed herself a hint of a smile. Offset by her ubiquitous woven matte black polymer space capable suit. Ratze and Nervina next.

The Controller, a woman of middling age, the smooth skin of one spending most of her life in space began the briefing with the necessary disinformation to give the agents their appropriate cover. The real objective buried deep in their unconscious,

spread throughout their natural minds. To be as non localised as possible. Detection by Prima's Deep Visionaries next to impossible.

"There is a quadrant of space, around two hundred million light years away where we have discovered two planets. One is known as `Prima' the other `Regum'. From what we have gathered, the Primaian's are the original sentients, the latter their kin. As you will discover they have diverged psychologically. We cannot brief you about them for if they did get into your heads, they would know we know and of our presence as well.

"In short," she continued, "they are in conflict. Luckily they are too civilised to actually engage in physical warfare. It's more a matter of mind control, with Prima being currently the masters of mental manipulation". Not revealing for now their knowledge of Mars and Earth, since the Primaians extended their mental manipulation that far out.

"Your primary aim Ung is to merely be at your insertion point. Nervina and Ratze will arrive at a relative future from your arrival. Once in place your job is to remain as back-up. Neither Primaian nor Reganian detection capabilities will find anything unusual about any of you."

Ung nodded. Ratze and Nervina dutifully attentive..

"Now this is important." The Controller paused to get their attention. "The Primaian's are natural psychics. With your enhanced AI capabilities if they are attuned to your mental resonances will not attract any undue attention."

She turned to Ratze, her dark eyes cold, her face pale being a Spacer like Nervina, the Controller observed these three dispassionately, fathoming any mental disturbances during their briefing. She had tiny character lines indicating her mature years Ratze as pale as ice short cropped auburn hair nodded. "You will be inserted with Prima's Deep Visionaries. They are really just remote viewers. They can probe any future state, any being in that future state similar to our capabilities. However they can only read these future states. What this means is that it's a possibility only. Not necessarily, from their point of view an actuality. More like an intuitive guess. So rest assured their data gathering is only in the realm of what might be, not what is."

The Controller took a breath.

"Given the complexities of your three missions, I'll keep this as simple as possible. The Primaian's have possibly through their Deep Visionaries locked into the past in a universal sense. Focussing on specific ancient Probability Waves. What is unique here is not just the feat in itself. This relative past has revealed certain *differences* in common history. Their primary focus in what we know concerns Regum. Now I have to add that

the Primaian's see history conceptually different to both our view and that of the Reganian's. The latter are an advanced technological and scientifically minded sentient race. Now from what we have gathered so far they have on their planet written records, almost of no consequence in that it essentially deals with Prima's mythological records. I say 'no consequence' for the Reganian's accept history for what it is. Ancient recollections. Interpretations to the Primaians."

"I should like to add at this point that the Reganian's emigrated centuries ago starting a new world on Regum. There is an aboriginal race present. A shaman society who are left alone by the Reganians."

"Theirs a different history and with that of a different *reality*. To the Primaians it's a probability which they see as a threat. Not just intellectually, but spiritually as well. Not their holy revelation. You will discover in due course just how much that cosmic view *dominates* their thinking."

"Ratze. You will be the irritant. Stir things up a bit. Get them to react, hopefully reveal Prima's real intentions. They have through their Deep Visionaries enphased onto space what they want the recipients on Earth and on Regum, the latter with little success to believe. In short Brainwashing. Implications: they are locked in a battle of the mind. Thus their interest in history, folk lore, mythology. Either to use that to their own ends, or to reconfigure the past, an imagined past to fool them into thinking that what Prima wants them to believe is actually real. It is," she paused to emphasise, "in the realm of the possible. Just a matter of re-writing the inherent data contained in the past's quantum probability waves. A matter of substitution. When done no one would even know the difference unless they have access either through quantum engineering to read alternative PWs or in case of the Primaians the natural psychic ability to access these relegated probable domains that had once been actual. For now, suffice it to say Prima has had some success. On Earth. The Reganians immune. Given they are of the same generic stock it is probably more of an inconvenience to them than anything else. They have in place their own meta-reality. Two sets of cyber domains. WebWorld and WebSpace. No matter what the Primaians throw at them it makes no difference." Taking a breath she continued. "All of Regum's knowledge is accessible. Needless to say the Primaians ban any contact of their species to venture into what can be loosely described as the truth in Regum's cyber data domains. That is how things stand between the two planets. Which by the way are in synchronous orbit around their common star."

"Nervina, you are to join a research group whose aim is to take stock on Regum of these disparate ancient texts. The timing thus is indeed fortuitous. Now for all three of

you, you have within your EAI capabilities the necessary information which will be activated automatically as required. Furthermore, your legends, your personal history will automatically upload into whoever you are in contact with and any data system used as well. A smooth and complete transitional insertion."

She turned to Ratze.

"You will deal not so much as to why as there are different time-lines. That will reveal itself in due course. More the how. Then the where will surface of its own accord." She paused gathering her thoughts. "Remember, a little turmoil will be left in your wake. Your inserted capabilities deal with that. Self activated according to need and necessity. Each of your enphased Brains will look after you. Now all this is camouflage. The mystery is the phase change of space. Buried deep in your Brain's. Non localized. Ultra secure. Deleted from your surface memory since the process might be an artifice. The history wars a cover. The timing exquisite for us. So to continue:"

"I can now familiarize you all with what we think is going on. It's not idle speculation. As you know we can scan any probable state. The only limit is our inductive imagination. The universe in a way is a repository of all the information that can exist. Both probable and actual. It's merely," and she paused and smiled at that, "a matter of mindful extraction. We still don't know as to why the universe is so information rich, but it is. How else to explain that all known sentient races follow such similar trajectories. From the stone age to the space age to AI potential? From abacus to computer. The first number the beginning. The concept of mathematics, an abstraction of the mind, within the mind more real than anything thought of. Leading to the discovery through quantum physics of what is known as the fluctuating base state of space. Somehow a sentient mind has access to the embedded data we call knowledge. The current state of play is that Prima wants to curtail it, Regum expand it and Earth manipulate it." The three listened without comment. This was all new to them and totally unknown on their distant planet.

"That's the theory out of the way. Background stuff." Relieved none of them were distracted by the possibilities which might influence their mission.

"The phase-state of space. This is your embedded primary mission. Space you will remember is not constant. What we have uncovered is that there is currently a subtle change occurring. Now for aeons this phase-state has gone down as the universe expands. It was only when a specific level was reached that life arose. But now there is a tiny aberration. A momentary fluctuation. It might be nothing." That much could be revealed.

"We know in the universe's past this has happened before and made no difference. But one thing is certain, there is a possibility that it is moving up. *That means somehow, somewhere a huge source of energy is affecting the quantum foam of space.* Somewhere in the Great Attractor. Your destination, your reason for the mission. It might be that, if this does indeed continue that perhaps new forms of life will eventually appear. But until then we want to survive. And I'm sure so do the other sentient races." And paused for them to digest this.

"All this is downloaded in your Brains but not your EAI's. So once 'in' it won't be accessible to you. We cannot let this get out. Now to the state of affairs. The Primaian's are masters of mental manipulation. They see their universe being threatened by Regum's expansion of WebSpace. And Earth. You see they believe in some nebulous unitary being. They consider the presence not just of WebSpace but concurrent with Earth's expanding resonance field waves as *the* major threat. It's a spiritual crises for them. One I need to emphasise of their own making. The phase-change they have attributed to their mythical supreme deity, supposedly the designer of the universe. Now you are not there to enlighten them. Prima wants mastery of the universe. To have all sentient life follow their evolutionary development. It is up to the Reganian's, or even Earther's to deal with Prima as they see fit. You, we, are not here to change history."

The three accepted the injunction.

"So we get to the point of this exercise. What is certain, what has been verified is this *aberration*. There is a huge Discrepancy in place. It is not a localised event. It is a field. And as a field it has the potential to change or is changing the phase-state of space. It may or may not be connected. What we have here is the effect, not the cause."

"It is up to Nervina and to a degree Ratze to find the source of this Discrepancy. We don't know if it is sentient driven, an artifice or both. Yet something is vibrating at the super-string level. Something or someone wants to change the universe, how life perceives the universe on a level Prima can only dream about. The important thing to remember is that the Primaians must not be made aware of this event. That is why when you are there all this is not know to you. Technically speaking you will be as much in the dark as they are. It could well be that the Reganian's are behind this. As they think like us, or more correctly as we thought like them millenia ago and given their probable future states this phase-change could well be in some sort of harmony. But right now we don't know for certain, in fact we don't know much at all."

What the Controller did not reveal was that this future probability given its huge manifestation of energy and that on a galactic scale, if let run its course would in the future become the fundamental underlying precept through embedded, superimposed, quantum enphased designed, pre-determined data superimposition. Then *the* future would be pre-determined. Free will would vanish from the universe. For ever.

"The massive distortion forming a cosmic sized gravity well. That means the process has started. Dark matter is being pulled in dragging both our galaxy and the neighbouring one with it."

"Of course this is millions of years into the future. As a space faring species the coming catastrophe of three galaxies in collision will be nothing much to worry about."

"To some details. The Primain's use technology to achieve their aims. However they are essentially anti-technology and anti-science as we and the Reganian's and Earther's understand it. They believe in their psychic-spiritual way of being. In itself it's just another answer to how life can be lived. The Primaians manipulate other sentients to their way of thinking. Again it is not your job to interfere with what they consider their divine mission. The Discrepancy is what matters." She emphasised.

They understood.

"Once inserted all this, as said does not exist. Just the knowledge of the Discrepancy, adjusted to local belief systems. It guarantees your being accepted by those around you. No suspicion by either the Reganian's or Primaian's. So you are safe there. In fact when you arrive at your pre-determined locale a natural history in your EAls will download itself. To them you are locals. Of course if for some reason you are in danger of being found out then we can extract you. That is what the Facilitators, " who were sitting silently, "are here for."

"Furthermore, the energy wave-field that inserts you stays with you. You are linked. That means you cannot be permanently injured let alone killed. Now neither races are homicidal so we don't think you will find yourself in such a dangerous position. But the Primain's may try to shut you down psychically. No chance. Your EAI's will see to that. If you are probed or scanned be it artificially or mentally you will perceive a brain itch. You will know instinctively how to react and what to do, or not, depending on circumstances. Any questions?"

They understood. Assimilating the future driven time-lines and the cosmic Discrepancy. Their primary focus.

"Good. Now to the actual scenarios where you will be inserted. First Ung." She turned to her.

"You will officially be a spiritual guide for the DVs. They operate out of an Orbital over Prima. Ratze the same goes for you. You're one of Prima's best operatives. On active status. So your movements will not arouse suspicion."

"Nervina we have arranged for you to go down to Prima itself. You will become one of their agents, a sub. By default ending up with their mission to Regum to trace ancient texts. Their history wars."

"Now your program and that goes for all of you will guide you depending on the information you gain. Specific algorithms will self activate. This does not mean you won't have any freedom to act. They are not constraints. You can self-activate your EAI capabilities. Just one thing. The Reganian's have similar capabilities. Not many. As such any contact with them makes you one of their own. Furthermore given the mental potential of the Primain's they likewise will perceive you in the same manner."

"A Question." Nervina said.

The Controller nodded.

"Why don't we just insert a program anyway? Since we can access future PWFs?" alluding to the discrepancy.

"Because at this stage we don't know of it would subsume the program thus actually enhancing it with information it as yet does not possess. It could turn the tables upon us. Defeat us with our own knowledge. Conscript it. So all of you remember it is up to you to fathom as to who, what and how. When we know that we can deal with it."

"Makes sense." Nervina replied. "But wouldn't our future probability states reveal that anyway?"

"Good point." Ratze did not mind Nervina taking the lead here. The same thing was on her mind. Ung the quiet observer.

"The danger there is if we actually collapsed that probability-wave-field to study or manipulate it we would actually make it happen. And that is the very opposite of the mission. So your embedded programmes even if you become curious as to what it may be simply will not eventuate. You are as 'ignorant' as those around you, as to its possible intent, even its existence."

"What if we're outsmarted?" Ung asked.

"Then that will be a sign that this approach has failed."

"I hope there is a fall back position." Ratze retorted.

"Extraction. Only when you have found its actual location can anything be done. We know its vicinity. It is a field at this stage only. We have reverse calculated it, trying to work our way back to the source but the source just is not there. You know what that means?"

"I can guess." Ratze said.

"It's so advanced it can cloak itself. Anything else?"

The three of them were satisfied with what they had been told.

"So, time to go. Good luck. Because we will need it. All the luck the universe possesses. The alternative does not bear thinking about. All would be lost. Its probability states would be the dominant factor and then there would be nothing we could do about it. Believe me, we would be entrapped. Not just us, all life forms. Its program, its will would be uncontestable. No way out. Except in death." She said with dramatic finality.

The quantum computers, on stand by, projected the three agent's data-resonance towards their designated targets. Successfully inserted each of the three agents was within one QC domain as it generated the PFWs to insert them into their specified location. The three, one by one vanished, each in their own time-line. Ratze and Nervina on hold, in stasis. Ung at the threshold ready to go. The Controller was relieved. The pre-transfer successful.

The Facilitators got their crews together to monitor the three women.

The Controller went back to her private quarters writing up her report. This mission was so secret no electronic data was used since that could be traced. The written word still one of the most secure ways of keeping information secret. She did not even know to whom she was reporting. The courier only knew a drop of point. So far neither the Reganian's nor the Primain's knew of *their* existence. Yet they had discovered Mars and Earth. Interesting times ahead.

After she had finished she leaned back. What she had not told these three agents was that the Discrepancy had all the appearances of being sentient driven. What was more disturbing was the further they calculated its effect into the future the more insane it became. Insane in the classical sense. Totally self-absorbed. No reality, nothing *outside* its field made any impact upon it as it gained strength. Warped by its own sense of divinity. With no balance, no interaction its self-delusional psychosis created self exaltedness. As it expanded its field across space and time it subsumed all sentient

life forms, warping minds into its madness. With all sentient life in the universe in its grasp it aligned their reasoning into its demented revelations as the Ultimate Intelligence. It subsumed all sentients and that would include themselves. They would be brainwashed through its resonating field and accept its mentally twisted sense of self as divine revelation.

For the moment that probable future state was merely one of many. As long as they could tell the difference all was safe. There was still hope that life could develop freely, that knowledge was not polluted by this insipid mental mind field twisting and contorting perception of this self alignment pulling stricken souls into its dominant domain.

Even the Primaian's had not as yet discovered the Discrepancy. There were some disconcerting revelations regarding Prima. Their spiritual resonance, their psychic monomania festering with a latent lambency within their spiritual attitude. Her suspicion aroused that some of the *future probing data* was already taking form within Primaian minds. It would be up to Ung, Nervina and Ratze to see whether Prima was behind this dangerous aberration. Yet the similarities of psychic attunement could not be ruled out entirely. The Reganian's with their EAI capabilities though could be behind this as well. Perhaps one of their EAI programmes had escaped by developing its own consciousness. Not that it was possible for an artifice to gain consciousness. But neither was it entirely impossible either.

She sighed. Given her task the future looked bleak, black almost. She poured herself a coffee mulling over all the potentialities that twisted like a mangled set of chords in her brain.

There was Earth and to a lesser degree Mars to consider in the next galaxy. A nexus of possibilities unfolding among their various races. In a way Earther's were both Primaian and Reganian simultaneously and homicidal as well. Their simian curse. Yet they had the possibilities, like the Reganian's of great scientific achievements. The last thing the Primaian's wanted was another Reganian civilisation.

So the Primaians did their utmost to insert their views upon specifically psychically attuned minds to spread their divine message amongst the Martians as well. With limited success, so far. The Earther's for some evolutionary quirk were amazingly diverse. Accepting and rejecting Prima's torpid infusion. And hopefully over time obviate these alien influences.

Time would tell.

She drained her cup and looked around her cabin as if for inspiration. She could not relax, not yet, given the information so desperately needed. If the Discrepancy was a future sentient construct flooding the universe with its self-absorbed dementedness and given Earth's proclivity for homicidal warfare...the implications frightened her. Her civilisation was loathe to interfere. No species had the right to intervene in the natural development of any other race.

Ratze and Nervina simply *had* to get to the source, use it or shut it down. It might be a localized event. The mega gravity well evidence of an extreme cosmic actuality. It was pulling their two galaxies into a collision course. Then both would in millions of years crash into that galaxy. Simulations had them merging once the dust had settled into one huge super-galaxy. Then with the merging of their inherent central black holes the Discrepancy would be unstoppable. And indications so far had no realistic alternative. The gravity well the process. The millennial countdown had begun. The Event active and growing in strength.

She could not envisage a worse doom laden scenario.

Prima

Roshati one of a team of astronomers surveying space was thunderstruck by an implausible thought. They were manning an array of consoles on the Orbital over Prima's spaceport. Watching the view screens and the great emptiness opening up amongst the receding stars on the spiral arm of their galaxy. The vision of eternal darkness merely an interlude beyond which lay something else. Ever watchful, constantly vigilant they monitored the alien resonance. A field which had appeared out of the depths of the void. Alien because it was encoded with a teeming dark intelligence inimical to their future and their present state of mind: threatening their mental, their spiritual consciousness. Its source an inimical race in distant space.

But that was not what bothered Roshati. The Deep Visionaries up in space were heroically holding the insane ingress at bay. Nor had that malignant infusion penetrated the resonant envelope surrounding and protecting Prima. The sum of their spiritual essence keeping the madness at bay. The connection her mind had just made was a different summation. One she would have to disguise for what she was considering. What had just occurred to her went against everything they had been taught. It made her nervous with anxious apprehension. She felt flushed. Her brain completely taken by the revelation. She could barely focus on the screens, hardly noticing the steady readouts that had been constant ever since the first photon beams had entered their universe from beyond space itself. If what she suspected was more than just coincidence then everything they had been told was one vast cosmic lie.

As astronomers they were an elite. Their knowledge sacred, since they kept check on the health of their universe. For dispersed like an ether throughout all space there resided in awesome mystery: the Great Divine Mind, the Supreme Essence, the Cosmic Consciousness. Threatened by this alien mind field relentlessly pouring its twisted essence into their space. Its origins might be known to the Ecclesiastics, the highest of divine minds and the Divines who ran the Deep Visionaries. They probably knew who or what was behind this infestation. As astronomers they were there to keep an eye on the

physical manifestation, backing up what the DVs sensed as they probed this invasive alien field. What they did know was that a homicidal race existed way beyond the edge of the universe. One with a twisted determination to bring them down. Infest them through murderous intent to collapse the resonant envelope and enslave them in their demented, deluded, deranged insanity. Eviscerate their souls, gut their minds, enervate their lives.

What Roshati was struck by went against the accepted wisdom of centuries. That the alien incursion had wrecked their minds back then. The Great Disturbance, a calamity of global proportions had seen the rise of ancient heresies, the rebirth of dark gods which the Great Mind had subsumed, weakened, dissipated heralding a holy age of peace and harmony. The threat contained by sheer strength of will and spiritual guidance. The equilibrium eventually re-established. All ancient history. Yet if what she thought she discovered, more uncovered was without a doubt perhaps just coincidence then the truth of the great calamity was due to something else entirely. Something much closer to home.

Her body was taut with nervous energy. She just hoped Tregon did not sense her apprehension. She barely dared to continue, the screens merely a backdrop, suppressing her agitation for fear of being found out. They all had the capabilities to sense each others resonances and at this moment she felt like an out of control beacon irradiating her surroundings. Luckily Tregon was busy making light conversation to help them get through their shift.

"Makes sense doesn't it? Look." And he punched in a set of commands to recall the time of the catastrophe. "See? The numbers confirm it. The further one goes back reveals random events that interfere with the natural divine pattern. That is how the alien field manipulated its way in, by chaos and confusion."

Roshati pulled herself together. It was not the event that disturbed her but something else which if it were known meant that the Ecclesiastics, maybe even the Pontiff knew the real cause of those dreadful times.

"That was the cause that nearly unravelled our minds, tunnelling into our resonance, creating the great confusion, nearly destroying our future. And the further we trace this the greater the interference. Amazing what the aliens achieved, possessed with cloaking capabilities."

"Yes of course." She answered distractedly. "Have you ever checked this cloaking out? This chaos?"

"Who hasn't? It's a mess. It harbours a code, one we have to watch until one day we can, with divine guidance and the heroic work of the DVs to obliterate, delete it, subsume it as the Great Mind subsumed the ancient dark gods that once possessed our ancestors souls."

"Well, this encoded field is buried in the data we collected. There must be a way of getting to it. We perceive its effects and where there is an effect there must be a cause." If she was right she might have discovered the source of this enigmatic shock wave that had pulsed through their galaxy, *outwards*. The alien field was travelling in the opposite direction. Yet no data of this other wave existed in any memory banks. What conventional knowledge dictated was that the Calamity was due to this incoming alien field. Which was perhaps wrong. Something had moved through them coming from within the galaxy. *Within*.

"That is what the DVs are trying to find out Roshati."

She changed tact: "But might that not leave us open to its influence?" she asked not giving away her hypothetical conclusion trying to mask her curiosity.

"The DVs..."

"I'm talking about us."

"Oh."

"And it puzzles me why we can't get at it this ancient occurrence. It's so frustrating." Now she was on track, running parallel thoughts, her resonance stable again.

"Maybe it's better that way. In case the Reganians get at it. As long as it is so chaotic it means we're safe."

"Indeed. Lucky for us, but someone will crack this event one day." Dispersing the idea that she just might be the one to uncover this monumental lie regarding their past and all that arose out of that calamitous event.

"We'll get it." Tregon convinced of the path that took their enquiry into the alien field. She was not about to reveal what was on her mind. "They only have machine processors." Tregon referring to the Reganians. "We have our divine minds. Our strength. Something they'll never achieve. Anyway why the sudden interest?"

She shrugged and said lamely "Conspiracy. Sabotaging history." The way Tregon looked at her so innocently made her flush. He liked her. They worked well together. He might even be secretly in love with her. But he was not her type. Too compliant.

"Boredom." She added for good measure. "Scanning the universe for any aberration can get tedious."

"Well it is important."

A yellow security light blinked. Apart from manning the system's status, it was drummed into them to be security conscious. This was the most restricted area of the Orbital, shut off from the rest of the base. As Primaiaans they knew Reganians had built and launched it, given it to them on the premise to broaden their knowledge together, keep in contact even if only in space. Plus their expertise in how to run it, make sure it stayed where it was and maintain all its functions.

On one of the security cams they saw Varus, Lord Qatus's scientific advisors. The twin security doors hissed open and the thin reedy figure glided towards them. He was old, yet his face remarkably smooth with just a hint of character lines, thin mouth and of severe countenance. Piercing probing black eyes. He was more than just a scientist. Lord Qatus his superior was after all the Outer Guardian and that included space.

They both rose in deference, bowed and waited.

"You may resume your duties." Varus said evenly. It was the closest he came to being pleasant. They resumed their seats. "There was some unusual activity." without alluding exactly where. For one of Qatus's other functions was Web Guardian keeping an eye on Reganian activity in their WebWorld that was penetrating space and rapidly expanding. Creating a new domain: WebSpace. Off limits to Primaiaans if only not to be exposed to Reganian influences. Qatus and Varus were there to make sure it remained closed to them as well. "Someone was remote accessing the Web."

"From here?" Tregon completely surprised.

"It could be remote routing. But it is something that must be investigated."

"I thought security would sort that out." Tregon replied off handily a little surprised that one as Exalted as Varus would actually make the journey from Prima for a simple breach of the Web. More a reaction than a considered reply Roshati decided. Then freaked. Had her investigation into this strange outward moving shock wave triggered an alert? The cover being the forbidden Web Domains of Regum. Was the true unsanitized data there? Had she made the transition without realising it? Or had the Reganians inserted rabbit runs to lure them into their domains without the use of portals. Worse, were these entry points known to Varus? Was she under investigation? Did he know? She hoped her agitation was muted enough not be noticed by Varus or Tregon.

"Under normal circumstances, yes. But if this is some sort of reverse entry then we must be on the alert of illegal access. The Reganians will do anything to compromise us." So Varus thinks it was them without revealing what that actually entailed. Maybe, Roshati thought, the Reganian's had dumped some information in the Web that would interest them here. Then she smiled inwardly for they might simply be annoying the Ecclesiastics.

The Reganians considered their WebWorld an open source of information. One the Primaian's were doing their best to block. So a little mischievousness perhaps. She hoped so. Unless it was camouflage when she had accidentally broached the dampeners and blocks in place, aided and abetted by Reganian access points and then created a diversion to cover Roshati's discovery.

"We have to be on the alert. That is why I am here. So I am empowered to reposition SC-3, realign it due north."

Surprised at the order Tregon did as he was told. One of three remote surveillance satellites rotated it's high resolution antennae to the galactic north. All three watched the screens expectantly. Encoded numbers scrolled down rapidly then ceased.

"It's gone passive. Or there is nothing more there." Tregon said superfluously.

"Field steady, no links online no compression no frequencies, nothing." Roshati said somewhat perplexed. There was always something. Space was never empty unless it was a malfunction. But that would have been noticed by the system. With Varus present she dared not think anything at all.

"All right then. Reposition the satellite. Thank you for your time." And Varus left the control room. At the door he said, "I wasn't here. Understood?"

"Yes sir." They both answered, nodding respectfully.

"He will have to wipe his visit but we won't tell him that." Roshati smiled after Varus had exited.

"Which in itself will leave a trace, a residue." Tregon added. Roshati was surprised that he even commented on it.

"What do you think that was all about, searching the void?" Roshati asked her mind racing with her supposition. They all knew what lay in that direction, the alien signals. "You think its the Web. Maybe it picked something up." She said cautiously.

But Tregon was back watching the figures scroll down the screens.

"Want to see what Varus was after?"

Tregon looked at her horror stricken, his face a mask of fear.

"What? It's our duty to keep an eye on space."

"They'll find out we repositioned SC-3. It is our domain. We're allowed if we think it's for the greater good." She tried to persuade him. He was having none of it.

"What, you scared what he found?" she teased him. Within her mind the nagging suspicion she harboured remained in place. Still this was the best chance which presented itself. It was their duty to report any security breaches and if the Web

contained something that was inimical then they had a duty to check it out, remotely of course.

"He found nothing remember?" Tregon sounding uncertain.

"That's what he told us."

"You saw the screen. And he's a Web Guardian."

She returned to the data base of SC-3. The screen was blank then blinked into life, numbers scrolling down the screen. She activated visual mode. For a moment the star field appeared including the alien field computer enhanced as a thin yellow fog in the distance out of which poured hundreds of photon beams. Then the screen went blank.

"Let's zoom in shall we?" Roshati smiled at him. She sensed his fear but pressed on, the Web not even of concern to her. She deleted the alien field. Empty space. Just as she thought. Varus had removed something. All zeros which was not the same as absolute zero in space.

"And a little further." She said to herself. An opaque greyness in the shape of a band became more milky the more she telescoped in on it. To the side of the screen the patterned numbers slowly transmuting into randomness.

"Well well well." She mused.

"What?" he was almost too afraid to look as if the information would somehow indicate his compliance in her somewhat illicit ferreting.

"This electronic fog, or whatever it is." She quickly added to cover what she was really thinking. "It's actually travelling away from us."

"And?"

"Maybe that's what Varus was interested in."

"So?" he was getting defensive. Roshati backed off. She had found what she was looking for, what she intuitively knew, what she suspected and worse. Varus was after the same event. Tregon was squirming in his skin, his jump suit looking almost too big for him. But Roshati wanted, needed evidence if she was to prove her case.

"Now if we put a time line to this," entering a series of commands, "we get...wow!" She took out a spare memory disk from her top pocket inserted it in the console and downloaded the data.

"What are you doing?" Tregon almost whined.

"Look. This fog is a mess, right? It's also an astronomical event." More numbers. "It's got fractals. But not entirely. A mixture. How odd." She had not expected that.

"Well it is natural." He said almost relieved.

"But look at this. Retracing the time-line it, thank you computer, it occurred..." and paused thinking how to get this information out. By telling Tregon of her hunch it would. But she would also be out on a limb. If Varus considered this, as a Guardian restricted data then she would be in breach of protocol. What it implied was what mattered.

"According to the calculations this band of particles, this wave front passed Prima at roughly the same time as the great calamity." There she said it. It was out. Whether it caused it or if it was mere coincidence remained to be seen. Yet she had made the connection. Her flash of insight paid off. As to what to do with this data, who to approach was another problem. Whilst not exactly banned from surveying space in any way they saw fit, going after what Varus just had done, and more importantly the blank screen, the lack of data was interesting and most disconcerting. Without a doubt Varus had removed something from the system, which just happened to be in the same direction she was viewing. Coincidence? Not likely. It also meant that he was following higher orders. But whose? Mission control? The Divines? Ecclesiastics more likely. Maybe even Lord Qatus. Or the Pontiff.

"Are you saying this ties in?" Tregon asked nonplussed his eyes panicking. She sensed his resonance was in turmoil. This fog Roshati had uncovered was coming from the *opposite* direction. Then he consoled himself and said: "Maybe that is, by some odd coincidence, what set the calamity off." He wasn't too sure about anything. He wished he were somewhere else. This would have to be reported but he was not revealing that to her. For the first time he saw Roshati in a new light. The vivaciousness, her lightness, her easy charm, her engaging smile, it meant nothing. Maybe she was a trouble maker, maybe she was under Reganian influence, maybe she was under the alien influence, throwing spanners in the works. He smiled feeling sheepish. This was serious and he knew that he was not going to get the blame for what she had done. Or what she suggested, what she said.

Roshati closed down the run sequence, extracted the data disk and deftly repocketed it. That in itself was a breach of security. Yet no security alerts had gone off, no guards storming into their control centre.

Roshati restored the SC-3's data to it's former configuration. The screen returned to normal observational status. The brilliant stars twinkled serenely in the blackness of space, the numbers scrolled down with familiar patterns, harmony had been restored. And she had what she wanted, proof.

Tregon tried to blend his resonance with Roshati. It had been hyperactive yet within a steady band unlike a Volatile, even a stabilised one. Hers was certainly denser than his, so she was not under the alien domination. He quickly pulled back. Some interaction between the two of them working so close was normal, even encouraged to a degree, to have a united resonance field between them. It kept them in check. If she had sensed him she wasn't saying or even responding.

"Amazing wouldn't you say?" she smiled sweetly.

He was lost for words. She was taking him into his confidence and he did not like it. He did not want to be involved, but now he was. She was spelling it out for him. That made him complicit. He would put it on report. Having decided that he felt better and relaxed. His nervous tension receded, feeling stable once more.

"Yes, amazing." He answered lamely.

"Why weren't we told? After all it is our duty to not just scan the heavens but explain anomalies."

He was lost for words. This was a little beyond him. How Roshati could extract not just data, but dig out Varus's search results, perplexed him. If that was not enough, hypothesize an event that was loaded with dangerous implications. This had to be restricted knowledge not meant to be released. Even to them. He shrugged his shoulders not wishing to know. But the fact was he did know. The discomfort returned.

"What are you going to do?" he asked nervously trying to remain as calm as possible.

"Nothing." She dissembled for she was not sure herself. "I mean, what can I do?"

At last, he felt better. She had the knowledge. Had she been an agent of Regum, or worse he might have sensed her mind trying to cloak her subterfuge. But she was relaxed, quite open about it. He put it down to his active imagination, being thrilled at having discovered something. He hoped he was right in his decision to put Roshati down in his shift report. Calmness resumed its essence within him.

"But you can see what this means don't you?"

Why did she go on like this. It was over. She had what she wanted. He pretended to be puzzled. Maybe she would reveal something as yet buried within her excited mind.

"Look. This electronic band is travelling away from us and that means it must have come from somewhere. It certainly did not originate here or our sun otherwise we all would have noticed that. Which leaves only one other source..." she waited to see if he could connect the dots. Tregon remained passive. She nudged her head at the screen.

The screens showed space. Their galaxy front on this time. She had switched sat links.

"That is the source? Our own galaxy? Impossible!" if only because it was the outward manifestation of the Divine Mind, it's heart so to speak. All he could think of was that maybe the Great Mind had sent out a repulsive wave to counter the alien intrusion. He breathed a sigh of relief. He hoped Roshati saw it in the same light. At last a plausible answer. Except his mind grew cloudy again, thinking of the Great Calamity. He needed to know more.

"How, why? I mean the Cosmic Consciousness protects us, it does not attack us." His voice a little too high pitched, panicky. "You think the galaxy, the heart attacked us from within? That is heresy Roshati."

"Tregon I am not saying the Supreme Soul has done this."

"Then who? We have not found any other souls. So this band which struck us at the time of the Calamity could be coincidence. Anyway if this was intended, then where are they?"

"So you're saying..."

"...that at best it's a natural phenomena."

"Even if Tregon. It goes against everything that is holy."

"You're venturing into dangerous waters Roshati."

"I'm thinking our overlords have to know. Maybe this is hidden just for its implications." She returned the main screens views back outwards.

At last Tregon thought, back to what they were supposed to be doing. Watching the outer sectors.

The relief shift appeared. Saja and Rumanos waiting to be let in. Tregon opened the secure door and smiled relieved that it was all over. They greeted each other pleasantly.

"Anything to report?" Saja asked being the senior of the shift. Was Varus's visit on the roster log?

"Absolutely not." Tregon relieved. No reaction from Roshati.

"Everything stable? Any unknown fluctuations, spikes? The DVs report anything here?" Saja getting the basics out the road.

"All within the parameters. GSX-9 is still spewing, very pretty. RES-2 is occluded behind a gamma ray curtain which won't reach us for a few millennia. The Event Horizon is stable or as stable as can be expected. Absorption rate of black matter is still incrementally on the increase, but still down the bottom."

"So nowhere near critical?"

"Saja," Tregon said, "it's in the distant future."

"I know I know."

"Oh we had a visitor." Roshati added. "Varus."

"What did he want? Checking up on you lot?" Saja asked interested. They rarely had any visitors. Tregon studied the floor.

"He didn't say. Fiddled with the controls, had a look at the void, probably downloaded something via sub-routines and left." Roshati explained. Rumanos was already at his consoles. She was trying to get Saja into her confidence Tregon thought dismally. Spreading her thoughts.

The two women looked at each other. Tregon sensed they were melded momentarily but he could not discern much else. Women he rationalized.

"He redirected SC-3 outwards. I bet there'll be nothing on the log. I thought I'd better let you know in case someone else comes asking. Not that he explained himself."

"He doesn't have to." Tregon added for good measure.

"Yes Tregon." Roshati said bluntly. "But it is our duty to know what is going on as well. He must have been checking something out there." Roshati hinted directly. "Maybe the Reganians are up to something." She added with a wicked smile. "And he took the data with him Saja. Intriguing hey? I mean he could have done this at his end. He's got the access codes after all."

"Why are you gossiping Roshati?" Tregon asked a little annoyed.

"Because Tregon," she eyeballed him, "our shift has been tampered with. You know how things work. He could have put a dummy run in making us look responsible. I'm just clarifying things for Saja. That's all."

"Thanks for that Roshati." Saja answered ignoring Tregon. "Not the first time. So why the sudden interest?"

"Well no warning from our director. So what did Varus siphon out of the system I wonder."

"Roshati he can do what he likes." Tregon said defensively.

"True. But we are also supposed to be alert to, let's say, ahm, agents, spies if you prefer Tregon." Roshati said with a triumphant hint in her voice. Saja alert now.

"Sure Roshati." Saja answered lightly. "He has clearance."

"Watch this." Tregon was horrified. Roshati was overstepping her limits. She inserted the tiny disk on a spare monitor revealing the grey foggy band amongst the

stars. "It's travelling away from us. It's the same location Varus was interested in. It passed us at the time of the great calamity."

"Are you saying..." Saja was intrigued.

"We got hit by that wave front."

"Get rid of it." Saja said icily.

"Sure." Roshati replied easy as she retrieved it and pocketed it.

"What I meant was destroy the data." Roshati deleted the temp files of the console she had just used. "You don't know why Varus was doing what he did. He had his reasons, his orders. You get caught you'll end up back as a Volatile." Saja almost implored.

"Did you know?"

"No of course not. But now that I do I wish I didn't."

"The reason I'm doing this is for our own security. What if 'they' want this. What if Varus is an agent. What if someone made all this happen, what if it was meant to be? We are the victims here Saja."

"I can see what you're saying. Anyway it's all ancient history." She answered placatingly. "Put it on report."

"I thought, since you're superior to me I should go to you first."

A flicker of a smile from Saja. "You making this official?" which would involve the four of them, something Saja did not relish. The interrogations for starters.

"No."

"Then get rid of it. I mean it."

"An order?"

"An order. And don't take this lightly. Lord Qatum has his reasons for sending Varus here. Our duty is to be watchers, not analysts."

"Yes yes. But if this happens again? That's why I thought it should be in the open. So that we are aware of what exactly is going on Saja."

"You know this borders on insubordination."

Roshati slightly taken aback shook her head.

"Maybe our galaxy is *changing*. Maybe it's not as benign as the holy sages told us. Or maybe then it was but now it isn't. Yet calculating its progression," referring to the shock wave, "it's thousands of years ago when it started out. Surely we cannot ignore how our sacred galaxy behaves Saja."

"There must be another answer." Saja deep in thought.

"We know we are sucking in black matter, the stuff of space. Well the Divine Mind is feeding of the universe. Just maybe the access matter is repulsed causing this wave." Roshati watching her.

"Well that puts it in a new light. Leave this with me for the moment." And Saja held out her hand. Roshati gave her the disk.

"Any others?"

"No."

"We may have to discuss this later Roshati. Hopefully it wont come to that."

Roshati was satisfied. "Thank you for listening."

"Just keep it to yourself. This information is, well..."

"I understand. See you next shift change."

"You too. Tregon."

They went through the first security door then down a short corridor, passed an iris scanning checkpoint, down a level at the top of the Orbital where their telescopes and scanning arrays were located. Outside they saw a shuttle fire it's engines on the way down to Prima, shrouded in night. The corridors were empty remote eyes embedded in the ceilings.

"Well I'm going to get something to eat. Join me?" They passed another security hatch, were resonant scanned and into the central hub. Lift shafts allowing access to the higher level staff but not them. Automatically self sealing if they tried to leave their section. They entered their section's cafeteria. Only a few technical staff and computer experts on call ready, on stand-by. As they all knew each other by sight nods were exchanged. They walked over to the self service section.

"I'm having some soup, beef noodles. You?" she asked

"The same, might as well." He seemed unhappy. She could tell it was oozing out of him. She sensed his inner turmoil though he tried to mask it. His nervous energy radiating from him. If this continued it might be picked up by the broad-sweep resonance sensors which would also reflect on her as sensors might be picking up his inconsonance as well. Not that it bothered her too much. She liked other people's minds mayhem.

Having retrieved their steaming bowls of soup from the dispensers she steered him to a far corner so she could view the whole canteen. She started picking out pieces of beef from the soup. It was tough malleable leather but it had the essential nutrients. They ate in silence. When she had finished she asked if he wanted anything to drink. He waved away the request.

Roshati was thinking who to approach with what she knew and what she suspected. They had been for days now on a total security clamp down. This only happened when the surveillance arm suspected or detected unusual activity in Regum's WebWorld, or if some staff had gone Volatile on the Orbital thus sealing off that section from possible mental infection. Something was going on. She punched in mixed fruit juice pulled out the beaker and returned to their table.

"You're not going to do anything." He stated with tortured deliberation. "It's too dangerous. Even mentioning it to Saja, was that wise?"

"She is of higher rank. It happened on our shift and deleting files is illegal."

"You did."

She just looked at him levelly.

"This subterfuge..."

"Records bleached, wiped. It means something."

"He's got rank." He reminded her.

"So?" she was defiant.

"Leave it."

"I will." For now she thought. With the clampdown the only people in and out were too high up to take this too. An underling even approaching one of the Exalted was out of the question. It would be an affront to their resonance, their perception of themselves. Like having their minds muddled.

"I'm glad."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Varus was in the Web as well."

"Roshati."

"Yeah OK. Look I'm not going to accuse him or anybody else. This isn't going on my shift report. But we are dutifully reminded of being on the alert of any suspicious activity."

"Yes, agreed, but not the Exalted, or other such esteemed persons. And I don't like dissention."

So that was it. Tregon was really a mouse. Well she did enjoy having him squirm. Shake his facile placid ness up a bit. Expand his resonance if that was possible.

"You're not working under orders?" he asked nervously.

"Me? Ha! No I'm not undercover." But she might have to be, on her own if what was distracting her was the truth. Thus the conversation with Saja and two witnesses. She could just imagine Tregon when questioned. He'd collapse just like that.

"If this ever gets out it will frighten and confuse a lot of people." He suggested. He was right, it would. The whole point of the exercise. This was a cover up, of historical proportions. Some might even question the wisdom of the Great Divine Mind. "I don't want chaos."

"I don't think anybody does." She drained her fruit juice and looked into its empty bottom, wondering about it all.

"They do."

"The Reganians."

"They have special teams just to cause problems. Sow dissensions, glorify heresies, feed lies, turn our minds, destabilize our resonance..."

"Yes Tregon I know the drill."

"I hope so. The alien infestation is affecting the Reganians. It could effect us if we are not careful, vigilant, strong in our prayers, resolute in our meditations, steadfast in our very souls."

"Yes Tregon. But I don't like being lied to."

"No one is..." But he stopped. To him what Roshati was assuming was really outrageous. No way would they have distorted, twisted or manipulated the truth. The Divine Mind was the truth. Only their limited minds could construct such an outlandish scenario as Roshati proposed.

"Well I'm off to my quarters." And she rose.

"Ah, ahm, right." rising with her. They left the canteen and made their way to their cubicles. In the corridors they passed a patrol who barely deemed to notice them. At her door Tregon was about to repeat his admonition but thought better of it. He had said what had to be said. The rest was up to Roshati. If she pursued it there was no telling what they would and could do to her. He was not going to get dragged down with her, of that much he was certain.

"See you next shift then." She smiled at him. So disarming.

"Bye." Watching him walk with precise steps as if every move had to be calculated to make sure it was right. She expanded her resonance to see if his could be 'read' but it was as tight as a ball. To merely scan the surface would have alerted him.

Inside her room, the sleeping tube reflecting tiny overhead halogen lights, a fold out desk with monitor and inbuilt stand-alone processor, or so she was told for as hallowed astronomers they had certain privileges regarding the security of their data. Her space suit and helmet were ready-to-go as always hanging on a rack with her spare

jump-suits a deep orange her space suit bright yellow. Her other clothes under the sleeping tube. She took a quick chemical dowsing then her body air dusted and a quick douche to rinse off any remaining fine particles in the tiny cubicle.

All the time she could not get what she suspected out of her head. She had to be careful for her thoughts were part of her resonance. Any powerful DV, any of the Divines could if they wanted to pick that up. But so far nothing. Not even Saja. So far so good. This gnawing knowing that something was amiss if correct, the coincidence too synchronized. If the superior's or worse Qatus her DL wished to keep this under wraps then they could re-orientate her, BrainDrain her, or if feeling benevolent remove her to a monastery to exclude her from society. There were even rumours that determined heretics ended up in asylums never to be released. She shuddered at these thoughts.

In a locked cupboard were some books on astronomy, cosmology and technical journals dealing with minor computer glitches. She took out the slim volume on cosmology feeling refreshed after her shower. Even this sliver of knowledge had to be cleared by Guardians sanctioning its use as with most scientific treatises. Vetted on a universal index cleared for her use. She understood in a way they as astronomers were there mainly to re-enforce religious orthodoxy as declaimed from above.

Roshati looked up 'cosmic catastrophes' and found nothing. The term simply did not exist in her edition. Accepted wisdom was theirs was a 'steady-state' universe. Nothing new there. On 'origins' the official line of thinking: divine creation manifesting the physical universe out of the Great Cosmic Consciousness. Every particle, every molecule, all their complex interactions outward projections of the great mystery created by the Cosmic Architect who in its preternatural wisdom showed them the splendour of its beautiful creation. The shining glowing radiant galaxy manifest with subtle decreed laws which was meant to lead the observer to the ultimate revelation of inherent sentient life: the crafted physical energies fused with divine power and ultimate wisdom.

She stared out of her porthole, the overhead halogen lights reflected on the hardened polyblended glass. Out there infinity, so awe inspiring, so unanswerable except through accepted religious dogma. Why even create a universe? Was the Great Mind bored? Was there a meaning to their existence apart from being reunited at death within the realm of the Great Mind. What was the point? Why create a less than perfect race, needing to struggle over aeons just to reach this level over many millennia only to die in the end? None of which were the answers she sought. It begged the question. Something was missing.

Her obvious solution was that the alien signals were totally harmless. Why then this fear mongering? There was too much confusion in her head. One thing was certain she could not go public with her suspicions. Yet this monumental fraud was there. The explanations they as astronomers were given was the existence of a homicidal race waiting at the edge of the universe intending to usurp them, dominate them. These shock waves the first process of softening them up, confusing them with their insipid explanations disseminated by the priests on the ground with the blessings of the Pontiff.

She decided to go into the data bank on the Orbital. She entered the requisite access codes and plugged in her small pc woven into her lower sleeve. Reganian of course. Attached by a fibre-optic strand which lit up she entered both 'cosmology' and 'origins' then waited. The standard line. Then 'particle physics'. Answer: particles manifest in hyper-dimensional space and mind-translated into three dimensional modelling. The Divine Mind was infinite the explanations ran and it could well be that the structure of space would thus reflect that same divine infinity. Given the finite limitations of sentience it was not deemed intellectually worthwhile to pursue without end answers regarding the physical realm.

A hint that research could go only so far. Infinity was off-limits. So that was that. The whole universe was projected out of the Divine Mind. No side effects, no shock waves no evil life forms. Try 'cosmic history'. Much the same. Then a codex: 'It is possible that given the presence of other sentient life forms apart from Prima's, [the original Divine Race] that being misguided or ignorant could stray intellectually and thus emotionally from the divine evolutionary path. It could then be supposed that they manifest certain psycho-pathological traits. Given that such extreme Volatility would therefore present itself in a corrupted sentient resonance it would not be successful as a developing race on the long term. By denying either through wilful determination or duped by their own self deluded cosmic orientation that the universal laws of attraction and repulsion – in this sense attracting the repulsive forces – that any race thus mis-oriented would attract their own doom.' Well that was something, they would self destruct for it went against the grain of the Great Being. So if Primaian thinking would thus be polluted it could be dragged down into this misguided vortex of delinquency with its dangerous implications. They certainly had their explanations down pat. It all fitted, officially at least. It also answered any intellectual qualms that might arise as to why a less than perfect race could actually exist for a limited time in the universe. Which did not get her closer to a plausible answer.

She shut down her computers staring at the blank screen. Something was moving outwards towards that alien race. Maybe it was the Divine Mind's retribution and Prima had unfortunately been in the way. But that then indicated that It was less than perfect which of course It could not be. Her inner conflict was unresolved.

Roshati knew that if she could get word of this accidental screw up out to the Reganians they might find a more scientifically based answer without the religious overlay. But they were sealed off and she was beginning to understand why. It could well be that her superiors way up the chain were aware of what she now knew and to stop the panic the soul searching it would set off was thus best buried. No point creating anxieties amongst the Volatiles below. What a bother.

Confined to this part of the Orbital was not unlike them being confined to this part of the universe. Whatever was out there was off-limits. Their reasoning was tight, it made sense, superficially. No way out. Their universe self-contained, enclosing them, containing them, imprisoning them. Then it would be up to the Reganians to break out. She hoped they would.

Since this was not letting her get to sleep she opened her terminal again. She entered 'history' and 'the great calamity' then 'visual representation'. The graphics were brilliant. Computer enhanced it showed in simple forms light beams coming out of the void and hit Prima. Prima's shield, its resonance field glowed eerily being reconfigured, it's essence distorted in chaotic patterns that merged and remerged in rapid succession. It's inherent geometric beauty distorted. She reran the scenario several times trying different focuses. She entered 'real time' to see what really occurred. No foggy wave front, just the incoming light beams. So the real time had been edited. What was on file to them as astronomers was not even the complete picture.

She then entered 'galaxy formation'. A short message appeared. 'So far the galaxy has always been there. It would be useless to speculate what pre-existed accept the Great Mind itself. As to the 'how' the same logic applies. At this moment no one knows for certain. But there is one theory which might explain in our limited physical knowledge the latent processes the Divine Mind used to achieve this miracle of divine creation.' She entered 'visual process' and waited. Blackness. Then a light grey fog slowly pouring into a centre. Gravity waves pouring out, the inner point starting to glow creating trillions of stars moving outwards. Slowly the galaxy self-assembled itself. At the edge planets formed and sentient life established. The sequence ended there.

Roshati tried 'cosmic history, visuals'. The galaxy glowed in white splendour the majestic spiral arms stretching into the blackness of space. Slight wavering of the spiral

arms as the galaxy rotated slowly around its axis. Dark matter was being pulled in perhaps feeding the energy the galaxy lost in radiation establishing a steady-state equilibrium. There the history stopped, but not the programme. There was something else then. Not in the official history.

She had a flash. Opening a channel to her workstation, for she had not really deleted what she had discovered on duty, merely buried it for she wanted this to come out. She uploaded that data from her sleeve's embedded pc routing it through her terminal. If this wave-front matched what was hidden in the mainframe it might accept it, and thus reveal what was if it was contained there. Moments later the match was complete. The visuals exploded. A massive burst of energy as a wave-field moved out from the centre leaving a trail of cosmic debris in its wake. Like an ocean wave on a beach the froth behind it. Spectacular explosions in its wake, high enough temperatures near the centre melted stars turning to super heated plasma bubbles. Eventually they recollapsed into new stars. The wave front as an event pushed outwards accompanied with a particle zoo of disintegrating electrons. Gravity waves carried the remnant high energy particles further onwards until the combined waves hit Prima. The gravity waves moved at a slower pace yet the other mysterious wave front accelerated to near light speed the further out it reached. There the data stream ended.

Roshati downloaded this cosmic phenomena on her own sleeve's pc. Then she shut down her terminal and deleted all the files, the search history and decided to do a diagnostics as well removing any remnant traces strewn around its memory chip. She dared not access the mainframe and delete her enquiry there. That would be too suspicious. After all she was cleared to access it and there had been no alerts raised as to her enquiry.

Start again. Check the great void. On her terminal screen a note appeared that due to the potency of the alien signals simulations were used. So they were doctored. As an astronomer she knew how weak photons were. They would have a negligible effect, less than a torch. Of course the official explanation was the informational content that made them so dangerous, not the signal strength. But the data did show what the information was. Images of massive weapons of destruction, cities burning as if visited by celestial fires, burnt out shells of towering structures, forests on fire billowing orange hued clouds of smoke, the dead strewn like wreckage amongst strange mechanical devices. These were the aliens who would not be satisfied in wrecking just their own planet. Space ships looking eerily insectoid blasted more robust ships that exploded in glowing radiant light then blown to smithereens as if a small sun had been deposited in them. Debris

slowly spewed forth with fearsome majesty traversed hyperbolic paths in chaotic splendour. Over a pink planet huge vicious looking attack cruisers used bright beams melting cities below. This was their future if the aliens did decide to come their way. In the public domain for all to see. It was frightening, and it was real. She had seen this many times.

By rights given the speed of the wave front it should have hit that distant sector of that other universe eventually. And sure enough, with some clever search patterning, zooming in and out of their history a perturbation was manifest. The time-line coalesced but instead of incoming it was outgoing. A reversed run sequence superimposed to make it *appear* as if it originated from there. In that case the wave front ought to be coming their way. Somehow those in control whilst inserting it there had forgotten to have it coming their way. She had searched the void, as all astronomers did and the only thing coming their way were the photo beams collapsing out of the particle fog. 'Ah', of course, this wave-field was transmuted into a photon light field. How clever. It dovetailed. After all their universe was different, or so it was claimed. The wave front thus explained. Yet it did not exist this end. What impressed Roshati was whether it contained information that sent sentient races insane. The Great Calamity certainly had created decades of incessant warfare. Then finally exhausted amongst the wreckage of their world the priests had introduced the concept of the Great Divine Mind and how strife and murder went against the great cosmic plan. Since then there had been peace. Even on Regum. Until the alien incursion, sending out it's malignant field. There was no way the wave-front could have bounced back. Another thing that was amiss here.

She shut down the terminal, and downloaded the data onto a memory chip. Now she had two. What was going on? If these aliens were coming their way why did the Ecclesiastics and the rest of them do nothing? Why not alert the Reganians. They had the technology to copy at least the alien's weaponry. Yet instead they did their best to try and convince them to be like Primaians. That was no way to fight these homicidal beings if indeed they had their sights here. Another thing that made no sense. Unless of course none of this was true. Not their wars, awful and horrific as they were. Maybe they had no intention of coming this way. Maybe they didn't even know Prima or Regum existed. So much that didn't add up.

Her com-link blinked. It was Saja.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow, well before you start your shift. Meet me in my cabin say ten?"

"Why yes, I'd be delighted. Want me to bring anything?" she hinted vaguely.

"Just your thoughts."

"Fine."

On a secure link Saja said: "It's arranged."

"Good." Dr Shach replied.

Roshati was not that surprised when upon entering Saja's cubicle, identical as they all were that she had a visitor. Tall in the white garb of a Divine, patrician face, friendly brown eyes in a smooth face, middle aged he rose and introduced himself. Just his social standing, not his function. Not that Roshati could not guess as to why. At least he was not security, one of the Domimax's who policed everybody's resonances to make sure they were all correctly aligned to their domain status. If something was seriously amiss then their active arm, the Domimus would intervene doing the actual work of re-aligning the discordant resonance of the unsynchronized individual. Yet both Ecclesiastics and Divines, even the Exalted could not avoid them completely. But Roshati guessed that was just to give the impression of some equality for there had never been a case of any of the higher ones being subject to their scrutiny. Roshati was ready for whatever was coming her way. Knowing what she knew she had the confidence to explain not just her actions but be able to back it up with real-time data, even if massaged into a more anodyne imagery.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Roshati."

"I am honoured by your presence." and waited to be asked to be seated. She felt no probing from either of them.

He gestured for her to a fold out chair recessed in the wall.

"So Roshati, how is everything?" he asked pleasantly.

"Apart from the lock-down, fine Dr Shach."

"Yes it is unfortunate." Not explaining why exactly the extra security precautions were in place.

"Don't tell me there is a mole." Meaning Reganian penetration, a remote as in a turned co-worker, messing with their data-banks...when it struck her that perhaps what she had uncovered later had somehow come to Saja's attention. She was head of astronomy. Roshati relaxed. She had mulled over everything so often that no matter which it was looked at she had a plausible explanation from a Primaian point of view.

"It is just a precaution." He said kindly. "I'm sure we will all manage." Did that include him? She doubted it.

"We have to be alert." Starting on the right track.

"Commendable. There are those who are to a certain degree hostile to our sacred mission."

"So I believe." Which she did not.

"Those same unknowns are very persistent, relentless almost."

He was of course referring to what the Reganians disseminated in their WebWorld. But as she had not entered that she felt on sure ground.

"I have, perhaps in my ignorance missed something Dr Shach." And she looked at Saja who was sitting there merely observing. Her eyes said nothing.

"Your honesty becomes you. There are many ways they try to influence our reasoning. A hint here, an unspoken thought there, corrupt data in the system, false information, anything really to throw us off track." He said in one flowing sentence as if the allusion to the data was on the same low alert level that was in place.

"Well with us being sealed off...I cannot think of anything I'm afraid."

"The Reganians are planning something. Have planned I should say. Disinformation to be precise. It's the price we pay for being on what is really their Orbital. To be expected really." He said resignedly. "Have you noticed anything unusual recently?"

"Well I really only work with Tregon and he is safe, his resonance secure."

"Any of the support staff?"

"None I can think of."

"Has anybody approached you?"

"No Dr Shach."

"It might be nothing. Idle conversation, nothing specific. Speculations perhaps mixed into a conversation, dubious thoughts calling certain assumptions into question. After all it would not be unusual for our support workers to show some interest in our holy work."

"No. Just nods of acknowledgement really. No conversation of any import if that is what you mean." She replied easily.

"We are faced with a problem Roshati. We think there has been a breach from the other side." He dissembled.

"Really?" she was genuinely surprised and looked at Saja looking vacant. "Did you know?" Roshati asked her.

"Not until a moment ago."

"We will have to deep scan everybody." Shach said almost reluctantly and she knew he was sensing her. Roshati could not keep her surprise hidden, that would have been suspicious in itself. So surprised she was.

"We have to uncover this breach. You see it's from the outside, a penetration. We just don't know exactly who has been penetrated. Tedious I know." Roshati wondered why there was no general meeting of all personnel if that was the case. Surely not her! She had done nothing. Just sought information as an astronomer. She tried to keep her displeasure at being singled out in check. Then she thought of Varus. Surely not him. Did she dare mention that?

She told him of his mysterious visit. He listened attentatively to what she revealed, but said nothing when she had finished. She even included going to Saja voicing her concern and added for good measure that she had not put this on report. She was no trouble maker.

"That is appreciated Roshati. You can forget about Varus." Luckily she had not said that he had deleted whatever he had found. Just that he had done something and left.

"I already have Dr Shach. It is of no interest to me."

"Not even the information he may have gathered?"

Roshati had an answer. "Given the positioning of the satellite towards the Void and what it contains, I made sure the data banks, the receiving files were not corrupted by the aliens. I mean with no explanation if one were suspicious it could look as if their data may have been so configured as to compromise our operations."

"Very astute Roshati. But there was something else."

It was an old trick. Pretend to know of an infringement. Not as a question when uncertain but as a declamation of intent, a bluff.

"There probably was, or worse, is." She countered.

"You are correct in that regard." He continued kindly.

"What a mess."

Shach took out a hand-held computer. The screen active merely scrolled down mixed letters, encoded.

"Trevos I am informed sent some information to internal security."

"He is always suspicious. Fixated almost is the word I think. He sees conspiracies everywhere Dr Shach." She said trying her best to diffuse the situation.

"Unfortunately procedure demands any information be acted upon."

"Of course." She did not even bother to look at Saja.

"It is rather odd. He claims you have accessed privileged data, or worse."

"That would be Tregon. You must have a bulging file from him." She tried her best to lower the heat. Still by the very fact that Shach was merely interviewing her, and not officially at that boded well.

"However it does worry me."

"Tregon worries me too Dr Shach. Sometimes I think he wants to be noted. Any excuse will do. For starters checking a system for infringement is nothing suspicious. Whatever he has concluded is subjective. Never mind Varus." She added for good measure. "I mean I could make an official complaint here. Not Varus but Tregon. He's going beyond reasonable doubts. Who knows who else he is suspicious of. He might be covering his tracks Dr Shach. Throw any suspicion off, he could be the mole." She reasoned. Why not? He had doxxed her in so now it was her turn. "I never actually even considered this until just now. It makes sense. Be the vigilant alert studious perfect astronomer. Arouse suspicion of and about others, throw a fog over everybody, well not everybody but certainly not those above him. Makes him look secure."

Shach merely observed her. If he was sensing her he was very good. Luckily for her she meant it.

"I think Tregon is unstable Dr Shach. I say this officially, or in confidence at least. His demeanour is too pat, his resonance too tight all the time. It's like he has woven a shell around himself. Who knows what festers beneath that surface. His resonance might be pure but his thoughts are not." She tried her best. "Maybe Tregon is fishing for a transfer and will use any situation, any person, meaning me Dr Shach to attain his aim."

"I think you are getting a little ahead of yourself here."

"He is playing a vicious game, one of his own making."

"There are other considerations here."

"Perhaps from your exalted position." Roshati feigned a sigh. "Of course I got no idea what Tregon is on about."

"Then let me show you." The screen's information was now decrypted.

There it was in all its holy glory. Tampering with information, illegal access to secured data, throwing suspicion upon one Exalted visitor, accessing hidden portals in the main-frame, downloading limited access information, making contact with the enemy [alien], susceptible to self-manipulation...it was all there. Yet how had her terminal revealed all that? Unless she had been put under surveillance. She checked the time of Tregon's report. Straight after their shift. So whilst she had taken her shower they had put a trace on her system. Thank you Tregon.

"It is my sad duty to inform you Roshati that you will be stood down." She was appalled. On a mere suspicion! Hearsay! Well she would have her day. Her answers she had thought out anyway. It would all come out, tailored of course to what the Inquisitors wanted to hear. Tregon had started this, it would end with him.

"So is Tregon aware of the seriousness of the alleged accusation?"

A look from Dr Shach. Saja opened the door. Four security guards were waiting outside with a body bag and a stretcher. The squad leader pulled out a loaded syringe, whilst two of them held a very surprised Roshati in her seat. The injection was painless. The lights went out.

Dr Shach and Varus were in the Deep Resonance Scanning control room. The four white banks of scanners, each a large square shaped construction with a trolley where the subjects head was inserted then probed. The scanners had been modified from Reganian models used to read synaptic pathways, the condition of dendrites, endomorphin activity and anything pertaining to the neural net of the patient. The Primaian technicians merely modified it so that individual resonances could be checked for any disturbance, any deviation from the subjects relative status. Going Volatile was their primary concern, reverting through undue influence to their ancestor's primitive emotional states. Though the subject could be stabilized, enhanced even, none of this concerned the two men at the moment.

Roshati and Tregon ready to be inserted. The technician on duty waited for the go ahead.

"We'll run them simultaneously." Shach said to Varus. "You did well in alerting me to Roshati's reaction. Now we will know for sure if she is either under the alien influence or an agent of Regum."

"Yes. She had reacted, her resonance had been slightly more perturbed not just by my presence but my activity back there. First the surprise which was dampened too quickly. That alerted me. An indication of having perhaps an 'insert' or her merely being re-conditioned. Either way the result was the same. Her enhanced calmness. As to how they managed to get at her we may never know. They know how to cover their tracks, insert false histories. I've checked that of course. It could be her family. Like many of the chosen they come from the elite, the very top. And they do have contact with Reganians in their normal duties. All it takes is a handshake to pass on the insert. Or a spiked drink. Easily done." Varus relayed to Shach.

Not that he was ignorant of Regum's need to get into their heads, turn them around and get the resultant feed-back through specific resonance field-waves picked up by sub-routines in computers, hijacking comsats or having go-betweens in place on the Orbital, the most likely scenario. Thus the security clamp down.

"I don't think her information got out." Varus said as the trolleys moved the two bodies into the scanners.

"That was a good move on your part. Anyway the data would have had to be removed at some time. Your timing was exquisite. Did you know?"

"Not really. Except for Roshati's controlled head-state. She's not of the requisite level to be even moderately enhanced."

"She the only one?" meaning amongst the astronomers.

"Well Saja is a Stable Volatile. The others are Naturals." Varus related. He had been briefed. Shach was too far up the chain of command for cases such as this. He was there to report to his superiors. Everyone worked in small cells. So that even if the Reganian's got in they would not get very far.

"Test subjects are read to go." The technician said.

"Then let us begin." Shach said.

Screens came on line, scrolling down the numbers indicating the base-level of their resonant activity. It was there that the truth was buried. Not only did the scanners read the aura, the resonance of the individual, but with some hard work in creating reverse algorithmic processing codes a rough image of their thought patterns could be extracted.

The scanners did their job. Tregon's base-state was within the right parameters. Minor fluctuations for whilst the conscious mind was out of the equation the sub-and unconscious mind remained unaffected by the dose they received.

There it was. Heightened activity in Roshati's dual sub layered mind. A program was running trying to cloak her deep mind state. Tregon's sub-conscious a frenzy of activity.

"He knows and it disturbs him." Varus observed.

"Good. It means he hasn't been turned. He'll have to be BrainDrained of course."

"Well we have a pool of applicants. So replacing him won't be a worry. After all a programme could do what they do. Doesn't take a lot of brain power to be an observer. Just a good attention span. We going to go easy on him?"

"He'll be reassigned. As will she."

"Good. I'd hate to see him wasted." Varus replied. "Now Roshati."

"Yes." Shach said slowly. "BrainDraining would be too dangerous. We'd be downloading what she knew. She will have to be terminated."

Varus held back his surprise. It was rare for any termination to be even considered. And then only in the most extreme of cases. So this was extreme.

They had set Roshati's scanner only for a surface resonance scan. They already knew what she knew simply by her accessing the data bases which had been cleaned out. Varus had seen to that. He was not overly concerned what Roshati had uncovered. It was all coincidental. And he had his own explanation which he had related to Qatus. The alien field had reconfigured the wave front. Sent out by the Great Cosmic Mind it had been a counter-move which the alien field then corrupted thus causing the Great Calamity. And that explanation served them proficiently enough. All was well.

"I assume you will handle this?" Varus asked.

"All in place. Well almost." Shach took out a microchip and gave that to the technician.

"Enter that in Roshati's probe. When the run-sequence starts, blend the two base-line resonance states."

The technician followed the instructions. Moments later the two states were in tandem. The microchip uploaded its data.

"This will make sure after Tregon's BrainDrain that he will remember what we want him to." Shach looked at Varus.

"Excellent."

Shach watched the accompanying graphs and satisfied his job here was done, telling the technician to BrainDrain Tregon. The scanners by reversing polarities in the resonance field removed the informational content within their memory. As the memory was both localised and distributed throughout the mind voiding the whole mind made sure nothing was left that should not be there.

The technician entered the requisite commands and Tregon's mind was wiped clean. Shach gave him another microchip. This one inserted his new history his new life. The persona was kept in place. Except he had never been an astronomer had never been in space on the Orbital. Just an Enhanced Volatile working at his new location. Even if some minor remnant remained behind it would be irrelevant. Nothing could trigger his real memory which was no longer in existence. He would be blissfully unaware of what transpired up here.

"I think that is that." As Shach took back the microchips. The computer banks deleted all information regarding the scans.

"Well then. My job is done here Dr Shach."

"Lord Qatus will be pleased. Roshati's delusion is no more."

"And Saja?"

"On hold. If there is a leak then we know who did the leaking. If it remains enclosed, fine. If not, well she knows what will happen to her."

"What about the Reganian cut-out?"

"That is why we are leaving Saja in place. If there is an attempt to contact her then we will know who is the traitor." Shach said satisfied.

"You know there is the slight, and I mean slight possibility that Roshati could have stumbled across this by herself."

"True. Meaning no traitor?" Shach said unconvinced.

"Only in relation to Roshati."

"That could be so. We know though that the Reganian's are all suspect."

"Keeps me busy."

The trolleys extended out. Their work was finished for the moment.

A shuttle was ready to take Shach and the two bodies still comatose back to Prima.

Shach had not told Varus everything. He might be head of security on the Orbital but his domain encompassed much more. His Domain Lord Qatus as Web counter-intelligence needed a facilitator with Lord Pentham. Qatus was an Outer Guardian, Lord Gharbel the Inner and Pentham ground control. He moved amongst the three of them, unofficially for often certain events such as this concerned them all. Pentham's duties were primary active intelligence meaning people not systems. Roshati fell into his domain. The system had not been compromised which made this job easier.

Shach relaxed on the flight down. The programme inserted in Roshati's mind would wrap up her later termination. It would permanently remove whatever Roshati might remember. BrainDraining though an option would leave some deleted information scattered around the memory banks. Computers were simply not perfect. They too were subject to random fluctuations. The more complex the processes the greater chance of some discordance, a tiny data stream left over. He could not take this risk and all three DLs would agree. He did not need specific clearance to act as he did.

Roshati was already classified as dead as was Tregon. The pretence of his survival just that. He had only been BrainDrained to be an aide to Roshati's final demise. Back on Prima the two comatose bodies were taken to the tracking station at the space port. The

perimeter guards had been alerted not to interfere with Tregon and Roshati. A special security detail would handle them at the appropriate time. The inserted mental reconfigurations, the embedded data would do the rest. Their families would be distraught but that could not be helped. It would also be a good excuse to ramp up security. Who knows how linked the families were with their son and daughter. It was reason enough to keep them under light surveillance. From Roshati's point of view her plan could have been hatched right under their noses on Prima. One could never be too sure.

At the end of her shift Roshati asked Tregon to come for a walk. A little surprised for Roshati kept very much to herself at the tracking station within the complex of the space port, he agreed. He was not quite in love with her, but being in the company of a woman made him feel wanted. He had no girlfriend, he was terrified of women. Always fumbling when any talked to him at the canteen or whilst on duty. Even off duty if they went for drinks on the base here in the vast open desert he always seemed to panic. That set off more fright attacks fearing to revert to a Volatile. Whilst he tried to calm himself he said inanities that nonplussed them, wondering what he was on about. Then he would chide himself for being so clumsy which set off another round of introspection. So when Roshati asked him to go for a walk he readily accepted. He would try his best to remain calm, listen, say as little as possible, take cues from her. He might even get lucky and get a date.

The sky was turning into a fierce orange glow as the sun set at the desert's horizon. Purple clouds glowed brilliantly in the distance. Intermittent flashes of lightning turned them momentarily into bright lilac. They approached the outer perimeter gate, away from the launch pads. The four guards attentive to their orders outside their small huts.

"You gonna let us out?" Roshati brazenly asked. Tregon was surprised at his calmness. No one was allowed out, ever. Though he did suspect some staff were, if only to relieve the boredom and take a stroll towards the dry creek bed that during the short wet season let the desert bloom with a cover of multi-coloured flowers. Now it was dry light brown hard packed earth.

The guards looked at each other.

"It's not that we are going to walk out of here and never come back fellows." nudging her head towards the flat land stretching as far as the eye could see. Somewhere out there was a monastery, too distant to be reached on foot.

"We'll have to scan your leaving. Don't want you to get lost. We'll have to tag you two."

Tregon surprised. What a kept secret. He had never even considered leaving their base yet the guards must allow this now and then. They put on the flat bands around their wrists, status light green.

"Nothing out there." One of the guards said.

"Precisely." Roshati smiled. "Just the open space, peace and serenity." She said dreamily.

"Whatever you say miss. I get it..." he smiled mischievously.

"Just a walk." He understood.

"If you say so." He winked. Tregon felt himself flushing, his face red hot.

With their armbands in place they meandered out past the electrified wire mesh fence.

"See, footprints?" Roshati tried to make him feel at ease.

"Perimeter guards." Tregon replied a little nervously. Then thought he'd better say something nice: "You're enjoying this."

"Of course, aren't you?"

"I didn't know one could walk out."

"Oh everybody does it. The boss doesn't mind, as long as it's this gate only. There's nothing out here anyway. Just the desert, you and me." She smiled.

They walked in silence. Roshati at ease but Tregon's mind was in turmoil. What to say? He stole a glance at her. She was looking full of pleasure taking in the nothingness around her. To him it was just desert but she seemed to breathe in its vast emptiness as if getting a natural high. He followed hoping he would not say anything stupid.

"And tell me Tregon, what are your plans for the future?"

"Do my work. Be an observer, why?" he shrugged. It never occurred to him she was talking to him as a person, not just a co-worker.

"Me I want to travel."

"Well you're here."

"Yes but this..."

That had never occurred to him, unless he was transferred.

"I'm actually happy here." He nearly stumbled over a rock.

"Are you going to do some study. Move on, move up, move sideways?"

"I hadn't thought about it really."

"You must have some dreams."

They were approaching the creek bed. The ground more dusty here, tiny rivulets now dry like spidery meandering lines, miniature caverns. It delighted her. Even the small reflected the larger scale of things. There was order in the universe. Then something dark flitted through her mind. A discordant thought, a strange memory like some forgotten dream resurfacing. She shivered momentarily in the still air. In the distance flashes of lightning then a moment later the sonorous rumble of thunder. The wet season was approaching. The air smelt fresh.

After the thunder had rolled across the sky they heard the dull drone of a hovercraft.

"I hope they're not coming for us Roshati." Tregon felt panicky. He was trying to steady his voice, his thoughts, the implications. Demotion. The tribunal, the embarrassment, the associated guilt, breaking rules they were aware of. His family's reaction, maybe incarceration. Loss of prestige. Perhaps sent back to the villages.

"They're getting louder." Yet Roshati was not turning back. He felt like running. He looked over his shoulder. To his right the squat black shapes were still distant dots billowing clouds of dark brown dust behind them. He could make it if he ran right now. But could not tear himself away from Roshati. He looked with dismay at his band. Even if he made it back before they arrived the tracker would reveal his guilt. Had she set him up? Was this some sort of trap? Why? What had he done to her? He couldn't think straight. The beauty of the desert was now like some foreign terrain, forbidden territory imbued with menace.

The two hovercraft were bearing down on them, bouncing over the ground at full speed.

"They're coming this way!" he almost screeched.

They were onto them coming to a shuddering halt momentarily tilting forwards a little. Doors gulled open, the fan driven turbines whining. The second hovercraft stopped a little further out and eight security guards in desert fatigues surrounded them, taking up their positions stun guns drawn, their red lights glowing ominously.

"We're in trouble." He blurted. Roshati's calm unnerved him even more.

"So we went for a walk." she said as she watched four of them approach. "High fellows." She smiled. In their fully body armour and silver reflecting face plates, distorting their own shapes Tregon felt his mind just as warped.

The guns though were not trained on them but the other guards spilling out from the second hovercraft.

"This is weird." Tregon stammered.

"Sure is." Roshati said with a calmness that made Tregon wonder about her. Something was definitely amiss here.

The first group opened fire on the second group. High energy blasts threw four bodies back from their impact. The air crackled at the discharge and burnt charred flesh assailed their nostrils. Their torsos curved into the air then bounced obscenely along the ground. Bits of arms, legs, mangled pieces of bloodied flesh and their oddly tilted heads came to rest.

"Maybe they saved us." Tregon said terror stricken. Hope upon hope.

Four guards inspected the four dead sprawled bodies.

"I'm impressed." Roshati smiled. There was an eerie glow in her eyes which frightened him.

Satisfied the guards then raised their guns onto Tregon and Roshati and fired. Roshati died smiling, her mid rift blown away. Tregon took a hit to his head, his brains spraying in a grey and red mist out behind the gaping hole in his head then collapsed like Roshati blood spurting with bits of guts trailing out her blown out back.

The guards made sure they were dead then put their guns in each of their lifeless hands. They checked the lines of fire, the trajectories and were satisfied. Then walked around the scene of the carnage, made sure everything was in place as ordered by Shach. The squad leader spoke into his wrist com-link, listened for a moment, nodded.

Shach came out of the second hovercraft, stretched his legs as if on a jaunt through the desert, a diversion. The team leader stepped back respectfully.

"Good work. Today we have struck at the lower end of the Kabal. You acted valiantly for the defence of Prima. We have removed a part of the cancer within our kind. A job well executed." Shach said, choosing his words deliberately.

"Check their heads for implants." The squad leader motioned two of his men forwards as Shach gave them two portable scanners. Sure enough to their surprise two tiny microchips were embedded in the back of their necks just beneath their skin.

Shach hid a smile. They had been inserted on the way down in the shuttle.

They cut them out, their grizzly work done as the blood oozed onto the dry desert earth. When they had retrieved the chips Shach put them into two sterilized sample bags.

"Now make this an incident scene. Sound the alarm." Shach ordered. He then handed each of them portable camcorders.

"Your testimonies as agreed. For the investigating committee."

The four guards nodded and began reciting the facts. Moments later the siren at the base started its incessant shrieking alert. Guards on trail bikes roared towards the scene, the carnage. The preliminary team arrived followed by another hovercraft which parked a little back, the dust drifting over them. In the distance the roll of rumbling thunder. Two white clad forensics officers were already busy, another taking cam shots of the bloody scene.

"Not pretty." Shach said to the head officer.

"What happened?" Gert asked.

"A fire fight by the looks of things. Reganian agents." And Shach handed him the two bloody implants.

"Regum."

"They must have been moving out. We haven't searched their bodies yet. They may have classified information. Maybe waiting to be picked up by a shuttle out there somewhere when the first patrol by the looks of things stumbled upon them. They got the worst of it. Taken by surprise no doubt. Such a waste."

"This is a terrorist act then. Murder with intent." Gert said distastefully. "Well at least there's the chips. That may tell us more."

"Let us hope so." Shach said grimly. "By rights I should be the investigating officer but as I am a witness..."

"Very correct sir." Gert answered.

"Have you gone through their pockets yet?"

"No Gert, that would be interfering with the scene of the atrocity, though under other circumstances, in the field would be a different matter. No, I haven't touched anything."

"That will make my job easier."

"That is the general idea Gert."

"Thank you sir. You can leave your statement with me when it is suitable. Let you get over the shock and the loss of four good personnel. You may leave. I'll get the statements of the patrol now, then stand them down for the duration. An unfortunate incidence. They must have been desperate." Gert said appalled.

"The Kabal revealed it's ugly side. We must be careful not to overreact. This could be a deliberate provocation. Let's hope they keep their heads." Shach said for good measure. He certainly did not want this to spiral out of control. The turned agents working for the other side would be buried without solemn rites, in unmarked graves, their bodies incinerated first.

"Sir."

"What I am trying to say is that this is not to be seen as a diplomatic infringement. Officially these two," and he looked dismissively at the mangled pulp of Roshati, the first flies already swarming over the open wounds, "went Volatile. We are in a delicate position here Gert. This is a normal crime scene. It will be up to those in high command to know how to deal with this. The last thing we want is a war amongst the security forces."

"Yes sir." Gert said. He understood.

Reganian Deep Space Habitat

The sleek cruiser docked at Lehra's retreat in its stationary orbit near the gas-giant in the Rust Belt, the industrial sector mining the accretion disk of a failed planet. Far away enough from the many hubs for privacy but close enough not to attract the attention of Prima's spies regarding visitors. Given the thousands of habitats in the area the likelihood of Prima's stooges to notice her visitors was less than likely. Their main objectives the industrial processes, the R & D, the weapons that were rumoured to exist but had as yet not been found. Exist though they did.

The huge dirty orange and motley brown orb had an eccentric orbit cutting across the outer liquified planets allowing Lehra's habitat a free ride past some spectacular sights along the way. Capturing smaller outer planets it was a minor planetary microcosm along with remnant accretion debris. The nature of its aberration allowing Lehra to position her habitat so that it could never be directly detected by Prima's observatories. The perfect location for her hideaway.

The cruiser belonging to Drassid uncloaked as it approached the flattened retro design of Lehra's retreat. Its outer surface embedded with remote sensors above and below made the habitat look like a floating prickly yolk. The extended landing pad protruding like a tongue as the ship landed on it, then retracted into the receiving bay and sealed it in. Her guest disembarked feeling a little groggy from stasis induced sleep.

Drassid let his nano-bots slowly get his body back to normal. They released nourishing vitamins and restocking minerals which hyped him back into mental alertness. Drassid was involved with Virtual Quantum States which hopefully would not just tame but negate the tyranny of distance. The team was making good progress but that was not the reason for this visit. Pleasantly surprised he saw Lehra's private cruiser under maintenance as small insectoid robots crawled into open inspection panels, fibre optic and old fashioned copper wires spilling out. Routine back up systems, he noted, triple sealed in woven polymers undergoing a full overhaul by the looks of things. Next to her

ship, the 'Star' was Fertig's 'Ice Queen'. That was a pleasant surprise. Fertig was with SpaceKorps Orbital security. The timing could not have been better.

Drassid's cover as a research scientist allowed him to liaise with a group of interested parties concerned with Prima's ever growing paranoia. If their work on Virtual Quantum Computers managed to stabilise Probability Waves then space as well as time became an environment with near infinite potential. It would mean they could insert recon-sats, siphon specific data from any area and be out moments later. Barely a blip on Prima's more primitive scanners. But he had not come all this way, even though off duty, just to say hello. A disturbing development concerned him.

Lady Lehra's informants, mainly women, and the odd lover made her astute enough to extract mostly gossip and sometimes pertinent data. A snippet here, a casual remark there. Being Primaian by birth, of exalted status, one of the ancient domain families she had certain privileges which included travelling into space, something forbidden to the majority, the masses. Drassid knew she was a double agent, one leaning towards Regum. As such she was at home on both worlds. The ancient families were revered and accorded social respect on both worlds. The Primaian's held these Families in great store, so deferential as to almost worship the ground they walked on. The Domain Lords might be the visible power base on Prima, but what went on behind closed doors slowly found it's way to Lehra's extended network of observant friends.

He entered the first double sealed portals, was chemically doused for possible alien microbes, then at the second section removed his outer space suit and helmet, dressed in his inner protective jump suit. Drassid wondered why Fertig was here. It could not be just a social visit. Then again it was common knowledge where Fertig had been seen in the company of a very delicate young woman whose name now escaped him. Maybe they were actually visiting. Fertig did travel a lot, mainly with women. Yet he was not a womaniser as such. He merely preferred their company to relax in.

Drassid entered the habitat proper took the lift up and entered the living room. With gracious simple curves, a reticent minimalism was evident in its interior design. View screens were tastefully rounded off frames. As was the furniture. No harsh edges, soft ambient spread out lights, no glare.

Lady Lehra, as tall as himself, in her mid thirties wore a long gown tight at her midriff then flowing gracefully outwards, the sleeves hugging her arms just flaring slightly at her wrists, the gown blending into a slightly ruffled scarf. It hid her strands of fibre optic inputs which gave her enhanced capabilities as an external source. As a Primaian she was loath to implant anything into her head. Drassid was merely low level boosted if only

to be free from having to calculate equations. No intuitive programmes to expand reasoning powers he wanted to do that himself. With soft scan capabilities of course. Prima's DVs could plant themselves just about anywhere psychically. Even out here behind the gas giant. If they had an image to focus upon. Which they had not Lehra assured him. The gas giant's dark orange filled the elongated portals.

Fertig had risen, his friendly face beaming having met Drassid occasionally. He had seen him more than having ever talked with him. As a scientist Drassid moved in different circles. Yet his superiors had sometimes invited him to diplomatic functions if only to satisfy Primaian curiosity of their current developments. The Primaians always knew more than they let on, so it was often Drassid's function to downplay whatever it was that interested them. So he played dumb, stating with ease just how difficult any scientific endeavour really was. Thinking something is possible did not make it so. Primaians were so used to getting their way, manipulating minds to do their work for them that they had no idea the hard work involved in achieving anything.

"Drassid, so good of you to come at such short notice." Lehra's genuine open face made him feel welcome. Fertig was beaming too. They were having cocktails. With a remote on the low glass coffee table she picked it up and lowered the soothing, yet nifty rhythmic music being played.

"Always a delight to be in your company." Bowing gracefully towards her which she accepted with a slight bemused yet thankfully received look on her face. "Captain Fertig."

"Lady Lehra speaks highly of you."

"You have an interesting ship."

"Ah."

"An aperitif? Or a cocktail?" Lehra interjected before they were tempted to start talking techno babble.

"Your cocktails are something else Lady Lehra. Aperitif please."

As she busied herself with the drinks trolley, made of enforced glass, the bottles with their various liqueurs glinted ceremonially under the soft lights. She poured him a thick green liquid handing him the tiny glass. He thanked her and took in the pleasant surroundings. The holograms were muted abstract scenes slowly changing patterns mimicking clouds in the sky.

The drink was both bitter yet subtle with an underlying sweetness that lingered on the tongue. As it coursed down into his empty stomach a soft glow of comforting warmth slowly radiated within him.

"Nice drop."

"Have a bite to eat. The cheeses are just the right temperature now." Drassid saw the side glass table covered in an assortment of cheeses, tiny baked pieces of bread and small colourful sticks to retrieve them with. He had several, he was hungry.

"I am always delighted to be here."

"Anyone show any interest?" Lehra asked meaning had the Primaians followed him remotely.

"Probably at first. Usual traffic. But I used a normal shuttle at first, went down to Regum then left on their blind side. My system sensed no covert probing."

"Fine. Captain Fertig has some interesting news."

"Yes. You know this planet we discovered at the next spiral arm, well it's gonna happen. Factory ships are on their way. It's ours. No life even though it's got a breathable atmosphere. We're inserting algae and specific bacteria to modify the atmosphere. Mass insertions. Cruisers from Regum already on their way. Slow drives. Ready by the time the first settlers will arrive."

"And Prima?" Drassid enquired.

"We want them on board. Well we're not going to stop them. Oh we'll dance around the subject of course, uhm and ah a bit then with polite reluctance accept any contribution they can make."

"What are we going to do there?"

"Make money. It's gonna become a resort planet. And guess what its main industry is going to be." Fertig looking pleased. "You won't believe it when you hear it."

"Surprise me."

"Gambling. One huge casino. Plus support industries for space of course. Leisure oriented. You know the Primaians have a weakness for gambling. The Families from Regum will form consortiums, it will be self sustaining. Credits galore. They'll get a cut of course. Prima has indicated their acceptance. There are still many on their planet who want out. And Regum is too much for them. So 'Novus' as it will be called, will be an outlet for their pent up, ahm frustrations. Nanotech will build the basic infrastructure, then when the Primaian's arrive we'll use more basic robotics. Totally retro industrially and space wise. Can't let them think we're too advanced."

"Sounds good." Drassid had some more piquant cheese. Lehra refilled his glass.

"Something's come up." She hinted.

"Thought so."

Lehra graceful as ever paced the thick magenta carpet. Fertig already knew and merely watched Drassid's reaction. If any.

"As you know we managed to tag some Primaian personnel."

"They haven't suspected you! Is that why you're here? Hiding?"

"No. I sometimes wonder how I get away with it." She said.

"You're connected Lehra." Fertig replied. "Your status of course. And from a security angle it would not be improbable that as you are such a good conduit of information it benefits both sides."

"Yes, I get that impression myself. But this is not about me." She frowned slightly and put her glass on the table. "There was an incident at their space port. A fire fight."

"Bang bang?" Drassid's black humour hiding his surprise.

Lehra nodded. Fertig was studying him.

"That is so...extreme. A rogue cell we don't know about?"

Lehra looked to Fertig.

"It's all very mysterious."

"I can imagine."

"Two body bags left the orbital over Prima. Now they could have been burn-outs. BrainDrained perhaps. Our source confirms that much up there. But our sensors picked up the minor battle. Lethal force."

"Someone did go rogue. There hasn't been something like this..." Drassid shook his head stunned.

"That's just it. And it's covered up. We got this break because one of the security guards is the one tagged. They still don't know we're doing this. This incident concerned their astronomers. Specifically one Roshati and another unknown. Now we know that Prima buries any uncomfortable knowledge that doesn't fit their official stance. This concerns their astronomers and you know how tightly they control them. It attracted our attention at the highest level. Our level I'm referring to. The question arose of course what did they find out? They were removed from the Orbital, flown down and almost within moments of being deposited on Prima ended up getting shot. It gets worse."

"Worse?"

"Oh yes. They made it look like these two astronomers, now at the tracking station at their space port attacked a group of perimeter guards. Officially Prima says, they were Reganian agents and that we were going to pick them up with whatever data they possessed. A second patrol arrived and that's when they were terminated."

"Were they going to be picked up?"

"We know nothing about this. I doubt it. There is one possibility that they might have tried, in desperation to contact us, but nothing was picked up in the ether so to speak. Or they never got that chance."

"This is awful."

"Prima wants something kept secret. It's the worst thing they could have done. Because we started a search analysis. It's not to do with 'Novus', that is more or less an open secret. But now Prima is, at the ground station and on their parts of the Orbital in total lock down mode. They were more or less already. So we initiated as said a search, and found nothing of course. Nothing current." Fertig emphasised.

"Go on." Drassid said carefully dreading the worst.

"So we went through the records, astronomical history looking for anomalies. And there is only one."

"You mean..."

"What they called the Great Calamity. When the so-called alien field was first noted. We know of course it's merely the distant light from that part of the universe which the Primaians spun into a horrific nightmare scenario. But there is something else. A cosmic shockwave passed through at that time."

"Black matter repulsion." Drassid explained.

"What? I'm a bit ignorant there." Lehra said.

"Simple really. Our universe draws in the stuff of space. Space isn't empty you know."

"I'm aware of the probability waves and heard of that. Never really thought about it."

"Nobody really does. But the current theory is that as our galaxy which is huge compared to what's swirling around us has a phenomenal gravity well. So it pulls in black matter. More like quantum foam really. But it can't go on continually and so now and again, in astronomical time that is the odd excess is repulsed re-establishing an equilibrium. Simple really." Drassid smiled.

"Ah. So what Prima is saying..."

"Is humbug."

"Thought so. But why take out Roshati?"

"Beats me."

"Can you see what the gossip is?" Fertig turning to Lehra.

"What, her murder?"

"Anything Lehra, everything."

"Yes, sure."

"We may have missed something. Something she discovered."

"Yes, I see. Well it won't hurt to look. You got a data base here Lehra?"

"Only the basics, for navigation."

"Well whatever this wave was, it happened long before we got really technological. At the time we didn't even notice it. They did."

"Psychic abilities." Drassid was referring to Lehra and her race's unique mental make up. "They sensed what we discovered, only later. I know the wave is way out there in distant space. It's probably dissipated. But," he brightened, "I can do a simulation."

"Would there be more then?" Lehra asked.

"It's not impossible. But if anything were coming our way, we would know. The Primaians think the galaxy is at rest." Drassid was certain of that much.

"Would it, could it affect the Web?" Fertig asked.

"Now there is a good point. Like solar flares?"

"Something like that."

"We got around that. Our distant probes reconfigure that massive spike into lower energy states, quite harmless really. Well slight disturbances, some fireworks in the system, momentary glitches, nothing serious, nothing that cannot be handled. But you've got a point. Thing is I don't think anybody really paid attention to this. So what's your angle concerning Roshati." Drassid addressing both of them. Lehra because she was Primaian and Fertig being SpaceKorps sometime, free roaming diplomat at other times, the perfect cover to gain information and disseminate disinformation. And here he was, a Reganian double agent and scientist involved with spooks. Changes and not necessarily for the better. Primaians taking out their own astronomers. There had to be more to this than some ancient shock wave.

"Maybe she did try and contact Regum" Fertig wondered. "Interestingly enough," turning to Lehra, they were still standing, for one could only sit so long, "Prima is not making a big deal out of this. You'd think having a mole, an agent, a traitor from their point of view they'd milk her for what it was worth. Instead they are very reticent about it all."

"That is interesting. Now Lehra, you always know something." Drassid hinted.

"Fertig is right. Those in the know are appropriately shocked. It could be genuine, a very regrettable incident."

"It's all wrong though isn't it?" Drassid surmised.

"Very. And they were armed. How did they get guns?"

"Oh yes."

"We have to find out what she knew."

"Well that information would have died with her. They obviously did not BrainDrain her. That would go into their repositories somewhere. Maybe."

"It's very very suspicious." She said.

"Oh yes. Taking two of their own out. Something is rotten."

"Murder usually is."

"Any unusual activity on the orbital?"

"Unfortunately no."

"Who knows then, it could be anything really."

"Drassid."

"Yes Lehra. I get the drift. But with no data, and I'm not asking how well acquainted we are up there, well, it's all speculation really."

"So nothing usual out there, except that sentient planet. Maybe it had something to do with them." Lehra guessed.

"Now there I do have some good news. And it's no change."

"We are in the dark." As usual Lehra thought.

"We certainly are that. At least our other experiment," Drassid was referring to their study of probability waves, "is making progress. The theory's all worked out. Should start test runs soon. Calibration's the thing."

"Tricky?" Fertig asked.

"Oh yes. The computational power needed for starters. Not for the test run, but well I can say this, for future projects. But we have that worked out as well, solar power."

"We use that already." Lehra said slightly puzzled.

"I meant star power. All top secret." Drassid reminded them. "So Lehra, the only reason I've mentioned this is in case something drifts your way. Local curiosity within your realm I mean."

"Someone bragging perhaps?" she smiled sweetly relishing the challenge.

"Of course this won't be released in the Web. So Fertig, if any players in there come across anything remotely..."

"The Web does that anyway. It's no news in there. I mean it's all cyberspace anyway. No big deal. It won't be of interest to those inside. More redundant if anything. And relatively cumbersome. Unless those running the experiments leak, it won't appear in there." Fertig aware of Regum's Web status.

"That's something." Drassid said relieved. He used the Web for background information nothing else. He wished he had more time in there but he did not. His work kept him busy..

They sipped their drinks in silence.

"I know we're all a bit shaken by what happened." Lehra said at last. "But we have to plan for the future."

"Ours I assume. By that I mean this group of ours." Drassid probed.

"Yes. The only problem is we need a distraction." Lehra suggested.

"Why?" Drassid asked.

"Prima is too quiet."

"Oh dear." Drassid guessed. "Something political? I hate politics."

"It has it's uses." Fertig laughed.

"I'm sure. Is something being planned I'm not aware of?"

"Nothing that isn't already happening."

"Wouldn't Novus be enough? Plus this other distant planet, I mean it's the discovery of the millennium. Other sentient life. We're not alone. Not enough Lehra?"

"Prima is too focussed."

"Ah, I see. Something local."

"Yes."

"Fertig?" Drassid turned to him.

"I guess we could always negotiate a new treaty."

"That would do fine." Lehra was pleased.

"What about maybe inserting something in the Web. Then again, everything is in there anyway and the Primaians are loathe to go in there. No I'm afraid no one is making any noises at this end." Fertig related.

"Then we should push them a bit about this incident."

"Don't involve us Lehra."

"Well I'm sure you men will think of something."

"The pontiff is getting on Lehra."

"That may have to do. An Ascension only occurs once in a lifetime."

"So Lehra...What are you thinking?"

"I got this feeling Prima is up to something."

"Because...?" Drassid asked.

"Call it a woman's intuition."

"A disturbance in the ether as your race might put it?"

"Something like that."

"Well I have to disappoint you but everything is right in the cosmic realm." Drassid answered.

"I don't know. I've been having these dreams, nightmares really."

"That is rare for your species."

"And if I mentioned this on Prima I might get scanned."

"Well you know our view on dreams."

"Yes much more logical. But we are psychics. And the scenarios I'm getting are something you would not want to go through."

"That intense?" Fertig was surprised.

"And recurring."

"Want to unload it? Helps you know."

"That is sweet of you Fertig. Essentially it's like the ancient days of war and murder, calamity and destruction. Don't know where. The place, the planet is familiar yet alien. It's as if I belong there and yet am outside of it. I'm safe myself but the horrors around me as if the sky were impregnated with a cosmic evil..."

"Ah Lehra, that's the propaganda getting at you."

"You think so?" she asked somewhat relieved.

"What else could it be? Not the aliens surely."

"I don't know, but something is not right."

"Have another drink."

"Yes I think I shall." But it bothered her just the same. Something was very very wrong in the psychic realm. It wasn't just her. Some of her friends back home had these same disturbing occurrences. They were worried they were going Volatile. She felt its impending doom laden scenario like a future state which could not be shaken. As if it had already happened, that they were heading towards it, already written in the stars.

Having gotten the latest information out of the way, they decided to indulge themselves. Then sleep off the hangover before they left. Drassid to Regum's secret quantum research facility, Fertig to Prima's Orbital. Both men polite enough not to ask Lehra's intentions. The less they knew of each others movements the better.

Prima.

The screen on the wall showed the alien planet in that distant disturbing universe. White streaking clouds where its sun shone, flashing thunderstorms, blue oceans, patches of dark green forests, white and grey snow covered mountains downloaded via the foreword probing Deep Visionaries through the computers of Regum's Orbital over Prima. The run sequence not real-time.

The pontiff's aide called up the planet's resonance field, the sum of their sentient intelligence. Swirling patterns appeared, muted browns, khaki greens sometimes flashing midnight blue here and there, indications of highly active individual thought patterning revealing their bio-active minds. No traces of artificial boosted or contrived computer enhanced electronic signatures.

"Definitely Naturals of a very high order, extremely focussed. If we did not know any better, calibrated. Yet that calibration, that resonance of theirs does not fit at times, indicated by the blue lightning flashes as an extra-terrestrial incursion. They are experiencing extremely intense spiritual revelations. At this stage we cannot tell if these are inputs, meaning due influence, or outputs indicating an extremely well developed sense of the divine. Yet after initial analysis differentiation is possible." Semor explained.

Telafus, Pontiff of Prima watched with disturbed fascination the pink, grey patterned planet.

"So this is the bane of our troubles." He considered. Finally a breakthrough. "And no way that this is an artifice of Regum's?"

"Tailored?" Semor asked.

"False, reconfigured, made up to make us think this planet is the source of the alien resonance." Telafus stated adjusting his pontifical robes making himself comfortable as he sat with Semor at the secure situation room buried deep in the pontifical palace.

"No your Exaltedness. The DVs have verified that this is real. The Reganians have more than just observed this distant planet. They are busy calculating the space it is in. As to what they are calculating within that space the DVs have not as yet ascertained. But

we have made some progress. There are certain minor fluctuations in their resonance field. They are showing signs of evolving towards Reganian thought patterns. They're in their infancy. More dream like flashes of divergent inspiration. If left to themselves there can only be one outcome." Semor advised.

Telafus understood the implications. They would eventually follow the evolutionary path of Regum. Something the DVs were working on to obviate. Inserting Primaian resonance fields to keep them spiritually on track. With the alien field not buckling. Absorbing their superimposition with some results yet at the same time it was of concern that these deep blue flashes of logical thought processes diametrically opposed to their natural spiritual inclinations made not to make the slightest difference.

"How long?"

"Millenia, centuries at best. Our DVs are doing their best pontiff."

"I am sure they are Semor."

"It has been verified by System Surveillance."

"So they are on the verge of going active with their insights?"

"Eventually. Unless the DVs get on top of it your highness."

"The disturbance of the alien field itself seems to be mutating. It shows signs of self-creation." Telafus aghast at the thought. For centuries it had been a steady field. Now Semor revealed that it was showing signs of inner activity.

"It could be due to their own aberrations. But that is only an initial assumption."

"But it is not affecting the Trine, System Surveyor's, the Infinity Chip or equally important the state of the Immortals?"

"No."

"Yet there is a disturbance in its fabric, the ether." Telafus said looking slightly distracted at his ruby, glowing rich dark red like a drop of luscious red wine. It soothed his mind. "It seems this is indeed a portent. If they break out of their natural resonance field, if they develop these alien thought patterns it will only increase the pollution of our pure cosmos."

Semor waited patiently. It was not his duty for formulate policy.

"So we can assume then that this perturbation is Regum's doing?"

"They are the only ones capable of such interference."

"Damn Regum, damn their minds, damn their existence." Telafus said with quiet venom. Even though they were their own kindred, having left during and after the Great Calamity, ridding Prima of heretics, the unnaturals, the Volatile had been seen as a good idea at the time. It re-enforced the spiritual purity of those that remained. It left unsullied

the next generation without the discordant self deluding mind set of their misaligned kin. And now it was too late. Regum dominated space with its Web, their space ships and their distant probing satellites.

"This aberrant disturbance that occasionally flashes into life seems to have an effect on the field's overall alignment pontiff."

"A deviation is under way then." Telafus grasped the implications. The field was gaining in strength. The substance itself was undergoing a change. It's content was reaching a more potent level of calamity.

"So it appears." Semor concurred.

"A monstrous challenge. Lord Gharbel is aware of this?"

"Yes Pontiff."

"No indications of this being computer or artificially generated?"

"The DVs are sensing heightened mental activity on that planet. It is assumed it is Regum..."

"Assumed? You mean they don't know for certain?" Telafus asked amazed.

"Something like this, so obvious, so impertinent, executed with such force."

"That is correct." Semor replied not intimidated by Telafus's displeasure.

"There is something else." As he gave a cursory glance at the screen. "There are certain similarities in what the alien field deposits in our universe and what our universe is resonant with."

"You mean not only has it invaded our sacred realm but now it is infusing the holy essence itself?" Telafus tried to maintain his serenity.

"Initial indications would suggest this." Telafus saw that Semor was concerned at this development. "Naturally we are doing all we can..." he seemed to say helplessly.

"Then we have to ramp up DV activity."

"That is being organised as we speak Pontiff."

"Blessed is the truth." Telafus replied slowly. He looked around this situation room, one of his many offices relating to his many functions. Apart from the screen, its wooden carved chairs, the polished oak table they sat at, the bare walls somehow did not reinforce the durability of his station.

Telafus was thinking of the future, riddled with so many uncertainties. As such the Great Cosmic Mind was the only certainty they had. Threatened not just by this dreadful field but one that was going active. His position dictated a spiritual answer not a scientific one. Whilst Reganian science dominated all. Maybe the Supreme Architect had something in mind, in store to eventually deal with this baleful set of events

threatening their very sanity. What concerned him were the containment fields. If they were penetrated, infused with this alien infestation the consequences for Prima's Volatile population could destroy everything. Infected by this poison they could be catapulted back into the dark ages. Everything they had achieved, mental and spiritual equilibrium would fray, dissolve and be replaced by a dominant alien intelligence. Yet it did not bother Regum. Which convinced Telafus that either they had already been taken over or they were in league with the aliens. This was getting bigger by the moment. It was a direct challenge to their cosmic spirituality.

There was no point asking Semor, a vicar at some diocese within the holy city as to how he countered this incoming disaster. They all knew, were all aware of the dire consequences that faced them across the whole planet. The Families who were supposedly the repository of their noble race's direct lineage were almost indifferent. More concerned with their social standing rather than genuinely guiding the rest. Either wilfully oblivious to the cosmic danger, or worse taken over and thus in league with that distant corrupting intelligence.

He might have to set the social agenda. One that brought them back into the fold. They as a race had to remain dominant at all costs. More priests needed to be trained to maintain their precarious equilibrium, more neophytes encouraged, more avatars created, individuals sought out to throw back this highly disturbing mind set that was spawning in space and therefore on Prima. The asylums would have to be expanded for heretics had to be rooted out. The future of the race was in his hands. More proselytes sent to Regum rectifying their distorted minds. The Web was evidence enough of that.

"Anything else Semor?"

"That is all for the moment pontiff."

"Thank you." Telafus rose. The briefing was over. After Semor left Telafus made his way back through the palace. Past red uniformed ceremonial guards stationed at intervals along corridors, patrolling the grounds whom he barely acknowledged weighed down by his heavy responsibilities.

Back in his official office, sumptuously furnished to receive visitors, costly tapestries the heroic history of their spiritual struggle woven in fine intricacies, the view over the gardens enriching the setting he sat behind his ornate desk and using the inner computer system checked which Domain Lords were present. Ah just the man he needed, Lord Nihen. His primary function was to stablelise potential Volatile recruits. He thus had direct insight into how his chosen thought. Telafus was considering a spiritual cleansing. Weed

out the possessed, the wilfully misguided, the apostates and atheists. Starting with the masses, then the Families would appreciate the seriousness of the situation and draw the right conclusions. Mimicking the social mores of Regum would have to be curtailed. They would soon get the hint.

It was imperative for something to be done. To do nothing would only hasten the end of Prima's dominance.

Lord Nihen, in plain dark grey garb, a long flowing robe with the small circular crest of his Domain bowed courteously and awaited to be seated. Telafus merely nodded his head, voiding the screen on his desk.

"Most High One?" he asked humbly, his aged face contrite.

"It's time to pull the masses into line Nihen."

"Yes Pontiff." No surprise, just acceptance. Telafus harrumphed.

"What is the condition of the Stable Volatiles?"

"Doing well." Nihen answered simply.

"No aberrations?"

"Only what I would expect."

"Lord Nihen," Telafus suppressed his annoyance, "are there any indications of extreme bias?"

"Lord Dhekan sorts them out. The rejects go back."

"Are your quotas being fulfilled?"

"Yes Pontiff."

"So their initial stabilities are on track then."

"Indeed that is so."

No joy there. Maybe it was not as bad as Semor indicated.

"No secreted thoughts, no heretical tendencies?"

"They are eager to fulfil their duties. Well aligned. Lord Dhekan is doing his job pontiff."

"And his rejection rate?"

"Around twenty per cent, as statistically predicted."

"Well if it rises, let me know. I do not wish to alert him. It might influence his decision making."

"As you command."

"And Our Domain is at peace, basking in spiritual repose?"

"Yes, the masses are content."

"And on Regum?"

"From my level they are as obstinate as ever."

"No change then."

"Unfortunately not."

"But not worse."

"Worse as in...?"

"Recalcitrance."

"Oh pontiff they are that all the time."

"So not much progress regarding the valiant efforts of our priests."

"They do their best."

"Maybe it's time to become a little more active." Telafus asked his secretary to send in Dhekan. Until his arrival they took tea.

Dhekan entered and waited to be allowed his seat. The pontiff merely nodded. Dhekan sat. Though only a low level nine all Domain Lords maintained their own agents on Regum, their priests on Prima. Dhekan and Nihen dealt directly with Volatiles. They understood the Reganian mind set better than the higher Lords.

"Anything from the Web?"

"It's as insane as ever."

"Well at least we still know what is going on in there. Tell me Lord Nihen, are there any Volatiles who have a natural inclination to be mind attuned to the Reganians?"

"Some of Dhekan's Volatiles," nodding to him, "those that are rejected are realigned through the judicious use of our containment fields. Their volatility is subsequently suppressed. And if I may mention it before I forget, our priests are discovering disturbing records on Regum. It's in the reports." As if Telafus had time to peruse everything that was sent to his office.

"I have some thoughts on that." Telafus began. He knew of their strange mythology from ancient times. The aboriginal inhabitants had their own obscure folklore of potent gods able to accomplish miracles. Gods they still worshiped. Gods their priests could not compete with. "What can you tell me?"

"Oh nothing that has not been divulged already. Miraculous events that defy logic. It's as if they were Web creations, weaving their own domain over that world in the misty annals of ancient times."

"They take credence of this?"

"The aboriginals yes."

"And the Reganian's?"

"They study them at their leisure, out of idle curiosity."

"And their conclusions?"

"Mere mythology. Curious in itself but if you mean do they believe as to its veracity I can safely say they consider them more like dream worlds. Not unlike a state of artificial euphoria rammed up by their use of potent hallucinogenic drugs."

"Yes, indeed, we are aware of their enhanced psychotic states. Is that the opinion of the Reganian's as well?"

"More or less. One thing is interesting though. The Reganians are equivocal about that. More of a personal diversion than recreating that mythological past in their drug induced minds. That is good news. There is no evidence these ancient gods are still in existence, if they ever were. More like created phantoms. Nothing concrete."

"But the intellectuals in their universities actually do study that mythology."

"It's on the curriculum, yes."

"Maybe it's time we looked a little more closely into this."

"As you command."

"Draw up a list of suitable candidates, liaise with Lord Dhekan here if need be. Who are natural Volatiles so that they fit into Reganian society. This cannot be ignored. It is something that has to be done. As to the intent of their mission that is as yet classified."

"I understand."

"This does not go through Lord Pentham's security apparatus. This will be a pontifical mission."

"I obey. It will be safer than recruiting local talent."

"You are correct on that assumption."

"What about Lord Acht's domain?"

"The recruits are high achievers by then. We don't want to attract any undue attention for what I am planning."

"Yes I see the logic in that."

Telafus's insight even surprised him. It had to be divine guidance. Telafus retrieved a 'palatial command' order from his computer's data base, and inserted not the mission but the preliminaries to get it going. Two suitable candidates to go to Regum and study the mythology and folklore of that planet. He printed it out, affixed the pontifical seal so that his orders would be fulfilled.

After the two domain lords had been dismissed Telafus relaxed. His insight he considered brilliant. Why had no one thought of it before? The ancient gods, even their own had been considered back then as real phenomena. Actual living beings.

Thwarted. If it could be discovered how, then perhaps the answer lay in removing the alien incursion as well. Maybe the gods were making a comeback through this alien race on that distant planet. The DVs relayed that truth in its awesome reality. That distant sentient race believed in their actual existence as well. Destroy them and they might destroy the resultant energy field that was projected out of these ancient minds. If they were a hallucination then the containment fields could easily collapse their disturbed minds. The DVs mimicking that target specific resonance had not made any progress so there had to be something of an ethereal substance to this. He would get on top of this, he had to. Prima's future could not be compromised.

Regum

Guron on the standing committee of WebSpace's Systems Management watched with Mahfis who headed the department observe the various spikes of the condensed bell curve on the screen in front of them.

"Very active. This recent?" Mahfis asked. As systems manager he relied on his team to keep him informed of any developments regarding Prima's DV activities. Located at Regum Central, the capital of Regum 'Spatial Solutions Inc.' was one of the many intelligence divisions the Executive had in place. One of the tallest skyscrapers was fitted out with deep probing arrays of antennas, aligned boosters to retrieve with deep penetrating sensors the activity of the DVs in space over Prima through their satellites.

Their agents on the orbital were reporting specific target locations, this time focussed on a distant planet that convinced the Primaian's was the source of what they considered to be the origins of the alien signals. Their scientists knew better of course. The signals were merely normal photon beams coming en mass from that distant universe. The closest galaxy harbouring sentient life. Not much was known except a civilisation had developed there. It was the Primaian DVs response which concerned them. For several years now their forward satellites had gathered the incoming data. It confirmed a world, a race at a pre-technological level. These beings certainly were not intent or envisaged any plans to manipulate anything or anybody so contested by the Primaians.

Yet all the indicators showed Prima's negative reaction. The DVs focussed their remote viewers specifically targeting that planet. The spikes on the bell curve were recent. They were combining their mental capabilities to jam the incoming information rich field data. Other DVs were trying to establish direct mental links to its inhabitants and from what they could gather seemed to have some success, if the indicators were right. Various psychic links existed. Their downloads verified as much. Furthermore incoming data from WebSpace confirmed Prima's specific focus regarding the sentients out there.

Guron like Mahfis working back stage acknowledged Mahfi's question. As heads of their relative command sections they had followed Prima's counter moves confirming the latter's heightened obsession with the other life forms.

"Since day one. But now they are target specific. Homing in on individuals. Not just remote sensing but remote insertion." Guron revealed. The spikes on the screen obvious regarding their change of approach towards the life rich planet.

"In a way their determination to control them is making our job that much easier. With their now totally active psychic push they have opened their minds to our scrutiny. The stuff that is pouring out, bypassing the Web by the way, the meta-waves, their resonance says basically we can do what we want and no one can stop us."

"I wonder if we should mess with their interference." Guron pondered. It was Mahfi's cue.

"We could."

"Ah. You're at the technical end. You're thinking they'd discover more about our activity regarding them."

"Exactly Guron. However, I have consulted some of our brains. If they can insert as remote viewers, using their head space, then there is no reason we can't either."

"Set up a remote division?"

"Too obvious. Too dangerous. Only remote sensing. Which gets us instant access anywhere in the universe."

"Yes. Are you suggesting we insert our data and deposit that? Not a bad idea. Of course we would then be revealing our capabilities. Do you think that wise? After all these sentients are just beginning to get into proto-type urban environments. It could be centuries before they make the connection in harnessing energy, become technologically minded, scientifically oriented." Guron explained.

As CEO of the executive branch of this intelligence unit he only made his decisions based on the valuable input coming from his team and their informants. Mahfis was one of the best. Along with other heads he kept in touch with those on the ground, those working with the interface of the Web. Including AI and EAI research units. At last in the exotic field of quantum physics.

"Something far more direct. Either way a time will come when, depending on what Prima is up to, we have to act. Since we'd come out in the open, I am suggesting when we do we have something of substance."

"I concur. Depending who you talk to, we have I'm glad to say several options at our disposal."

"You are head after all. More feeds coming your way."

It was stating the obvious. For a moment Guron looked out of the clear window over Regum City. Skyscrapers, helicopters moving commuters, thirty stories below tiny monorails gliding on raised single rails between and through buildings. In the distance the green belt, then the sprawling enclaves of suburbia and further out one of several space ports. The sky was cloudy and whilst the solar panels absorbed the non visible heat spectrum, the building's power plant supplied auxiliary energy.

"What's on your mind Mahfis?"

"If they can insert their minds into any part of space then so ought we." He warmed to his latest project. The subsection heads had certain leeway to pursue not just technical problems but also pure research. Sometimes this was done through the universities and if extremely sensitive, private front corporations. At an 'ultra' level, deeper dummy companies were set up specifically for top secret experiments.

Guron was listening. Unlike his predecessor who wanted to know prior any extra activity the feasibility and the security of a project Guron let his people start their seed programme of their own volition.. If it did not work out or encountered difficulties beyond the original scope then the work was split up between all their resources making an overall connection difficult for the Primaian agents crawling over their planet. He was curious what Mahfis was currently engaged in.

"Space itself is full of probabilities whilst at the same time the sum total of the best of all probably states."

"Go on."

"Everything around us is the pre-eminent probability state, of our own making."

"Yes?."

"We have in theory the possibility to collapse a desired probability state not unlike the DVs who insert them remotely."

"Get our own DVs?" Guron did not like that idea. It would get messy, start a whole new possible conflict. He was happy enough for them to get whatever they were doing at the technological end up in space. As for mimicking DVs that was something else entirely.

Guron looked at the fluctuations of the graphs on the screen, then shut it down. Keeping that on line too long would invite other parties to get curious if they made it this far into their secure system. There were Reganian's who were amendable to Prima's psychic and spiritual way of thinking. The screen went blank. They had what they wanted for the moment.

"One better." Mahfis smiled. "The experiments were successful. We have done it."

'At last.' Knowing he was referring to their quantum phasing. The work delegated and carried out by verbal exchanges. Regum's data was mainly open sourced. Yet some things, some projects were too sensitive to be in the public domain. Guron's team, one of several intelligence units worked often in full view. Secrecy attracted attention. So whatever Mahfis accomplished was a welcome surprise. In a society freed from physical time consuming work, there were hundreds involved in their private research. Not just in expanding their knowledge. With so much going on Prima's agents had no chance in coping with it all. They could only guess at best, scratching the surface. Guron was curious. Mahfis would not mention anything not related to what was of immediate concern. Nor did he advance publicly what he was engaged in, or even considered. That in itself could draw attention.

"The team I assembled is in an industrial shed of all places." Mahfis beamed delighted at the subterfuge in doing secret work in an industrial park. It would be barely noticed. There were so many, one more barely registered to those trying to pry out their secrets.

"We have successfully collapsed, on a small scale, not just probability waves per se, but configured ones. All thanks to DV activity."

"Really?" Guron was familiar with the theory but that was about it.

"It is a result of studying the DVs gestalt switch. Thanks to their obsessive behaviour, you know trying to screw with our heads means we have to be prepared mentally to counter their remote insertion with our EAI capabilities. So we ran with that mind set of theirs. But instead of focussing on an object we used digital data as an object. Which the team managed to move several meters instantaneously."

"If I understand this correctly, you are saying we can move objects through space instantly. Anywhere?"

"And as with all research there were surprising by-products."

"Surprise me."

"We can insert digitalized objects, so by extensions real ones as well. The DVs deposit false positives. Power the only limit. All we need is the go-ahead, the resources to expand this on a bigger scale. They have mind-fucked us for too long. We can now return the favour. Strike out into our own territory. I'm referring to space. Counter intelligence is going to take off."

"Counter DV activity." Guron grasped the significance. To think this morning was like any other day and here is Mahfis dropping one of the greatest scientific breakthrough's onto his lap. Just like that. "And I assume the DVs have no notion of this?"

"None so far. There are so many other considerations. Political not just here but Prima as well. It will screw the DVs and that is just the beginning. Imagine. They have their targets in mind. We insert into their domain a redesigned target. They think they're 'in', when in fact it's of our design. We can tailor make what we want them to perceive and they would never know the difference. Imagine the potential. We can let them think they are winning the psyche-conflict. They will relate their results and in reality it's nothing like that at all."

"But for the moment, they're still getting in real time? I'm referring to that planet. You haven't been tempted...?"

"At the moment we are limited by power. The amount of energy required could attract attention. Ideally we should continue this experiment in space."

"A bit obvious." Guron put the idea into perspective.

"Not if it's near a star."

"You have thought about this."

"Just position a station so that it's always facing away from Prima. There is something else that came up."

"Do enlighten me."

"Whilst the probability field is in place, attuned to the DVs mental fields, it's like tapping into it."

"Really?"

"In theory. Both fields would be in phase."

"But they could then trace the second field to its source." Guron guessed. He knew enough of quantum physics to understand the basics of entanglement.

"Right. But not if it has it's own 'reality' within it. It would have to be more powerful in physical scope. By that I mean the actual area and its contents united as one Probability Wave Field."

"But if they are entangled..."

"Yes Guron. But they are so distracted by this planet we can continue another aspect that has come up."

"Do tell." Guron could not believe their luck.

"OK. This is now running at the hypothetical. That other universe is rapidly expanding. We have targeted from our own research station here a vacuum beam to

see what's at the edge. And haven't reached it. We thought maybe a few hours would do it as the beam accelerated exponentially. What this seems to indicate is that space is expanding faster than the speed of light. Can you imagine that?"

"I can try. Fascinating."

"Oh yes. What has been suggested is that space is one huge mega and meta probability set of unlimited fields. Uncollapsed. Whoever has the capabilities to collapse that has access to all probabilities. The only limits our knowledge and more importantly our imagination. Something Prima is very limited in. All we have to do, hypothetically, is get code-writers to build data blocks and collapse them. We could in theory design our own universe."

"There has to be a but."

"You're right. Not just limited processing capabilities. Though our quantum computers if potent enough can make a difference. But it comes down to energy again. Ideally the energy of a galaxy would be needed. The trouble is at the centre, well nothing material could survive there. So for the moment using a star's energy is the only way to get started."

"And that can be done?" Guron asked hopefully.

"No problem. Just build the array to collect the energy."

"What have you and your team in mind? Shut down Prima?"

"That is up to those on high. Very political. No we have something far more benign in mind."

"I'm glad."

"Insert an expedition onto that planet they discovered for us. We're working on the energy quotients to calculate an attempt to en-place a spaceship and its crews. Here it gets tricky. Life forms are so complex. A matter of number crunching. Not impossible. Then calculate the insertion field-wave. A lesser problem numerically. More a matter of getting the co-ordinates right. Then when all that has been calculated and checked of course, we can be on our way. The DVs might be there psychically, in spirit as the spikes showed but we would be there in actuality. The PWF would be of such strength using a star's energy that whatever the DVs throw that way would be a minor irritant. And the PWFs would act more like counter-intuitive sentinels incorporating the functions of smart-ware firewalls."

"Yet they would sense the result when we collapse the PWs."

"Big deal. We're one step ahead. Undoing a reality is a bit harder, even psychically for that effects one mind only than us riding within our PWF. They got no

quantum processors. What we let them have is pretty basic stuff. But we've done our homework Guron. Let's assume the worst. They are aware of us being there in real time. At best they can insert their mind set, bit like going into the Web. The Web stays no matter how insane the user. They could create a hostile reaction amongst the inhabitants. But remember our team is scientific. All we're doing is saying 'hello' to fellow sentients. Letting them know they're not alone in this beautiful and a little less mysterious universe. Of course the Primaians will react. But I bet they will be true to form. Impress the locals with some hallucinatory visions of apocalyptic destiny due no doubt to our presence. So I would suggest some of the team is not just AI but EAI capable."

"You have thought this out. You also know the final decision is not mine."

"Of course, but space is our field."

"It will I hope give the Primaians mental heartburn. We dominate space not just through the Web. Space, the universe has become our neighbourhood as well."

"I'm a bit worried how they will manipulate the locals."

"I agree."

"They could make us out as some antitheses of their Great Architect. Rebels, heretics, apostates, unbelievers pushing our view. Most emergent societies have, for a better word, mystical belief systems. You know, the wind is a god and all that. Challenging that will cause friction."

"Guron we're not going there for that reason. It really is just to drop in and say 'hi'. We'd be honest to any of their questions. Let them decide how they interpret it. Give them the freedom to reach their own conclusion. And there is something else. Since the DVs are 'in place' there, we can use that alignment to project our PWF. They've done the basics for us."

"I hadn't thought of that Mahfis. Neat."

"It is, isn't it?" Mahfi beamed pleased.

"Yet something tells me I should be worried."

"About what?"

"Probabilities we have not thought of."

"The field would be secure. Only a higher energy state could override that. Prima can't, they don't even know the concept. Even though their DVs are using it on a minor scale. Unless there is a civilisation somewhere that does have that capability, we are safe."

"I agree that we cannot let the Primaians get away with distorting these people's minds to their way of thinking. Each race has the right to interpret the universe as it sees

fit. It's a pity really that they just cannot let this be. In a way you're right Mahfis, they have forced us to act. What if the DVs catch on? Or say their Domain Lords or really anybody capable of getting into our heads. Which they have done and will continue to do so."

"Then Guron it gets back to capabilities. First they have to build not just the computers but also a generating source. Even if they copy us and use some star, they're only playing catch up. We'll always be one step ahead. A quantum step at that. Remember I want this team to be EAI capable. DV activity is brushed aside."

"Hm. To be sure. Maybe it's just me. But I have to consider the worse case scenario."

"I should hope so. All the modelling suggest that the expedition can go ahead safely. Maybe in some future others will attain this knowledge. As the probability becomes the possible they may try and undo our contact. They cannot reconstruct the past. That is a universal impossibility. Only the future can be shaped. So whatever they may try it's just not going to happen to make much of an impact."

"I am glad in a way that other universe revealed itself to us. It changed our conceptions, made us go back and revise our limited theories, is making us understand a lot we never considered."

"Like a single universe with a single beginning and a single ending. Yes now that imagined reality is gone for ever. Still the Primaian's persist in their theory which is full of..."

"...themselves.' Mahfis finished off.

"I was going to say 'inconsistencies'."

"The more we see the more we comprehend and the more is revealed. That means more information. Prima's problem is they aren't looking. They're too busy doing, or interpret what they see, making sure it fits their belief system."

"Yes their fantasy might be self-sustaining, even self-verifying. Yet they have no trouble ignoring what does not fit into their theology."

"Their loss, our gain Guron."

"No denying it. Their universe is relatively information poor. But once we've done this, they might reconsider their assumptions. They might use that possibility of using PWFs at some stage through their target oriented DVs. And once that's starts, we're going to be kept very busy."

"True no doubt. At some future time this will come about. I am aware of that Guron. But we cannot let them twist these people onto an evolutionary path that is not theirs."

"It is a moral dilemma."

"Hopefully for them." Mahfis joked.

"We will of course have to really keep an eye on the DVs and their ilk."

"Yes. But you know, how often is life discovered in the universe? This is a first since this planet was discovered and it's people."

"And the local aboriginals want nothing to do with Prima either. Funny really. They're shamanistic, you think they'd see some resonance amongst each other. Instead they keep their distance, keep to themselves."

"As we do. Live and let live."

"Interesting really. The DVs targeting everybody. Space as well."

"The so called alien incursion." Mahfis scoffed.

"Maybe our aboriginals have stronger minds, a more developed psyche."

"Now that would not surprise me. So Guron, what next?"

"We'll get our forward probes to get as much data...'

"Got that."

"Then test run the A and EAI programmes."

"Completed."

"Have you run conflict scenarios?"

"Working on that. Convoluted at best, but early indicators suggest that the DVs will still get through. It might get down to a mental showdown between our EAI capabilities and them. Distracting at best. They can try and screw with us but those with the EAI's in place would know instantly of any hostile DV attempts to thwart us. They certainly cannot affect our mission. I mean they haven't found anything out as yet. If they had they would have...increased..."

"Their activity as we saw just now?"

"They have to be guessing Guron. It could be coincidence. They might have intended to start some next phase. Which means it's even more important the solar base is finished."

"Finished?" Guron asked surprised.

"They didn't tell you?"

"Let me guess."

"Well it's space exploration, not really us. Under wraps, but yes, since we will be involved, it's self assembling around a distant star, even I don't know which. The nanobots are busy. A far side static orbit. Away from Prima. And since no personnel are out there as yet the DVs have no clue."

"When will it be completed?"

"Again I haven't been told. Remember I'm research and development. Since my work is done, I'm out of the loop. But once it's ready I'm sure they will need some of your people to be there. If only to jam the DVs, confuse them, whatever it takes."

"So we're doing it."

Mahfis waited for Guron to explain himself.

"Going out there, making contact. I hope this works out."

"It should. It's pure science. A bit of anthropology thrown in. And not forgetting Prima's interference. They ought to know what Prima is really up to. If that can be revealed then we will learn from them as well. Neuter the DVs. You know how they want us to return to their way of thinking. Diplomatic activity, cultural exchanges..."

"More agents as usual."

"As always, religious seminars, spreading the word to seeking souls alienated by our way of life."

"We do have those." Guron almost sighed. "It's so unfortunate that we cannot make them see the beauty of the universe, the miracle of life itself, how their minds in being able to comprehend the universe is at one with it."

"Well you know the answer to that as I do. They feel insignificant. Think it's all meaningless, looking for meaning."

"Isn't life enough? Rare as it is on a cosmic scale."

"Apparently not."

"Sad isn't it?"

"Ah well, what can you do?" Mahfis asked rhetorically.

"Maybe we should create our own religion. See what these sentients out there think. Get some connection. A united sentient belief system. Actually now that we are on our way, it would be interesting what they really think."

"We know that from the DVs Guron."

"Yes but that's their interpretation. The living gods walk among them. Very anthropomorphic."

"Be funny if they were real." Mahfis joked.

"Wouldn't it just. It would blow our and Prima's belief system out of the cosmos for starters."

"That would be something."

Prima

Lord Qatus, Outer Guardian of physical space, executive head of Prima's mission in space listened carefully to Janon head of planetary security who informed his Lordship without a hint of emotion of the fire fight at the tracking station. Qatus listened without betraying his thoughts on the matter. Slightly surprised. Further confirmation from Lord Pentham in charge of the technical end of intelligence, had noted in his report of no data leaks even with Regum's ever present agents on the orbital. Part of the continual security environment. Really a given. Yet there were times when Prima could not contain their covert activities given their paucity of personnel who were never on par with Reganian surveillance capabilities. Accept for the DVs. This time there was no input from Elentra who ran her domain with extreme precision regarding her designated targets. Without the need of Reganian scientific methods or their technological applications. To stay vigilant. The continual need to negate Reganian methods of thinking which could weaken their spiritually evolved resonance to ascertain the counter intelligence the Reganians applied to gain access to their information. They had to rely on them siphoning off their knowledge by psychic means. With great success. An Orbital handed over as a gesture of good will. Fully equipped and staffed, with agents of influence, spies, provocateurs, cultural attaches. More importantly the technicians and robotic support to maintain the orbital. The danger for the Primaians there and then was the mental reconfigurations Reganian logic demanded. The dramatic demise of Roshati therefore did not come as a complete surprise. She was not the first to have been influenced, manipulated, possessed. In a way it was inevitable that eventually one of their own would succumb yet again. What did surprise him was that she had not been BrainDrained.

Janon, slim, lithe a slight dark complexion indicating his ancient pedigree contrasted with Qatus's corpulence and paleness as Janon was often out there, in the field whilst Qatus was busy within his domain headquarters. Due to the sensitivity of this

case, far from normal they met in more secure surroundings, within the pontifical palace. Isolated, away from the gossip hungry eyes and ears of the staff. Safe from inquisitive minds. Such as the nature of the alien incursion, one that had subsumed Roshati and her co-worker Tregon. That was the official line Janon suggested to Qatus who nodded, his jowls wobbling in agreement.

"Deleted you say?" Qatus asked matter of fact. It was the first time in his life that such extreme measures were considered necessary to totally remove whatever their minds, their souls were possessed by.

"Completely mind warped Lord Qatus. Homicidal." He had the report in front of him. "With such extreme prejudice it was decided too dangerous to even cure these two possessed fallen souls in any of the asylums to try and regain their resonant stability. Readjusting was not an option. We have not had a case of such tragic proportions since even before my time. They were, correctly it was deemed a threat not just to their sanity but whoever they would come into contact with."

"Of course." Qatus replied, lips pursed.

"Even I don't know what they knew." Janon said. "It might well indicate that Regum has successfully penetrated our domain. The order by the way came from Lord Gharbel. He did hint though, through his official channel that the corrupted data was a direct threat not just to those around her, but possibly the Trine. Had she uploaded whatever twisted coruscating knowledge they both possessed it might have reconfigured the overall data base itself. That would have...'

"Yes Janon, I am aware of the flow on effect."

"The ancient ravages might have been resurrected. That horrific nightmare scenario, allied with the alien field could have created psychic resonant disturbances in the people. The anarchy unleashed would have played into Regum usurping our exalted state. You could call it 'enhanced madness' destroying our spiritual fabric that in turn would fracture the resonant envelope protecting our planet. One such rupture would have infested the whole. With the power of disintegrating the foundations of various domains."

"That serious?" Qatus asked.

"All it would take is one microsecond for its malicious intent to do untold damage. Combined with the alien radiation even those tasked with its protection might have come under its influence."

"Any web activity?"

"It's too anarchistic to tell." Janon admitted. "With possibly millions of Reganian minds immersed this unknown inserted revelation enhanced by their multiple computational creation could have doubled the assault in our divinely ordained space. WebWorld reconfigured. Coupled with their cyber minds the onslaught would have fused itself into a new level. The implications a possibly full out assault on our sacred realm. Or aimed in destroying the containment fields or, what Gharbel suggested, reconfigure them. You are aware what that would have done to the serenity of our people." Janon spinning out the threat for all it was worth. The actual truth was secondary. Its implications far more important than the contents of the threat they had obviated.

"Turning them into Reganian agents of influence." Qatus satisfied at this covert attempt to possess Domain Realms.

"Something like that. We would have lost millions of souls. Luckily whatever she did uncover is now voided. It died with her. We averted this dangerous infusion. Even though it took such extreme measures to counter this distorted information, whatever it was, all is stable."

"The DVs?"

"As is Lord Qatus."

"And they had no inkling of what was in store at all?" he asked surprised. Nothing was supposed to get past the DVs.

"I'm glad to say no alerts present. No indications of any aberrant resonance states. Which means this must have come through our computers. The investigators up at the orbital found remnant links, strands of data. Roshati had searched outer space. She had clearance to access real data. Follow up search patterns revealed nothing of interest. Roshati must have been cloaked when she went into the depository. It is for the best that this phenomena, with its evil intent has been safely eradicated."

"So no one knows what she knew."

"Absolutely. Dr Shach himself oversaw it. We were lucky in a way for Shach had sent Varus on a surprise visit ascertaining the inner security of the data base the astronomers use. All I know is that he did delete some information. It may have been related. Camouflaged as a systems check. No one thought one of our own was contaminated at that stage. All indicators suggest of course the ever present alien field, and its source." Adding weight to the argument.

"Ah yes, that alien planet. I have checked the stability of my domain. The DVs are doing a magnificent job. They feed their absorption patterns into the secure orbital data

repositories. And yet it is a puzzle that this, whatever it was, got through. I've gone through sub-routines, see if anything is lurking in there. The information gathered as a whole has remained unchanged."

Janon concurred.

"And Gharbel considered this so heinous that he destroyed the messenger."

"She was by then more than that. A living virus."

"Regum is advancing. They never tried that before."

"They are all infected."

"They, yes. But our people? You are I take it taking extra precautions?"

"Yes Lord Qatus. It means more recruitment, reassigning agents. Now we have to watch the watchers."

"How are you coping?"

"Well there is no shortage of neophytes. But individuals of the calibre my department requires are hard to come by. Different orientation. We have some Reganians of course who are true believers but it will be difficult keeping them all under observation, recognising signs, changes of behaviour, patterns of thoughts, fracturing resonant states, or mutating ones."

"I don't envy your work Janon."

"It is for a worthy cause."

"I appreciate that. And I am grateful that you came to me with this most unfortunate tragedy. The loss of life, so sacred, so unique in itself. I hope she is at rest within the Great Mind."

"I hope so too. She may have been a victim, a test case."

"That is what I am thinking myself Janon." If only to keep en par.

"I have also scoured Regum."

Qatus was attentive. Janon was certainly resourceful.

"Web activity is diminishing."

"That is welcome news. Don't tell me our priests are having an effect there, making them see the errors of their ways?"

"Could be. But there is some heightened data activity instead. More is being encoded, encrypted. Our systems are taking longer to disentangle it. The DVs are aware only of the lesser insertions in the Web. Showing signs of spiritual ennui, that the false realities are not so fascinating anymore or..."

"Yes?"

"This is only a guess, the Reganians are restricting access for some other reason."

"Such as?"

"Reconfiguring the Web. I think the truth is finally being revealed. What we think is, it is returning to it's original intent."

"Oh?"

"Pure data. What it was originally built for. Like a back up system. Inserts, gamers take up huge amounts of computational space. So by removing them from this, it is only a guess, a secondary Web it releases, frees up space."

"How far are they now?"

"All the way. The superstructure, the computational architecture in place."

"Maybe that is what this astronomer got herself into. They might have inserted this new WebSpace into her head." Shocking as this was there were rumours that Regum's AIs were doing just that.

"Our people on the orbital are running scaled down versions regarding this possibility which means if what we are getting is right, the Reganians have *incorporated* the alien planet. A logical extension of their thinking."

"A frightening development. They will be possessed by the alien poison."

"I concur."

"And Gharbel?"

"The Trine seems immune to this event."

"Ah good. So it is contained in their Web and by default their planet."

"So it seems."

"Seems Janon?"

"The DVs are focussed on real not cyber-space."

"Yes, yes. Have you or any of your own agents dealt directly with the contents of the Web?"

"It is off limits to us." The official line. But he did have a handful of very tech savvy ops following Regum's Web progressions. What the boss didn't know would not hurt either of them. If found out, if compromised Janon would simply say they had gone rogue.

"Only the Immortals would have the strength. But their main function is the stability of our race. Our scanners deal with the Web. And since there are thousands of scenarios in there, what the Gamers create it is almost impossible to disentangle truth, reality from fantasy and fiction. The alien planet, or its resonance does not seem to be present in there. Of course it could be disguised as make believe worlds. So far there are

none that have that specific signature. If the alien planet is in there, it's extremely well camouflaged."

"Could the DVs get in?"

"If we had some spares. Elentra would know."

"What about some of the neophytes, the aspirants?"

"How do you mean Lord Qatus?"

"Well," Qatus felt inspired, "essentially they want to meld with the Divine Mind. Now not all are naturals, mystics. Find some candidates whether from Lord Dhekan's inductees, Nihen's stabilized Volatiles or Acht's trainees. The 'walk ins' on the ground. Or at the monasteries, those who have a burning desire to take the spiritual fight to this evil. Those who are inclined to act rather than just be."

"I'll remember that. A good point. Under your jurisdiction?"

"I am outer guardian. This is out there." Qatus reminded him.

"I liaise with you?"

"Just recommend suitable candidates. If you do come across them."

"It will take time."

"Time. Even though we have eternity, Regum is following a dangerous agenda regarding the serenity of our universe. Now Janon as Dr Shach took you in his confidence, what data did he reveal to you. After all, whilst the investigation will be adequately buried he must have given you something. A breach like this..."

"He and Varos are certain the Reganians inserted false data. Roshati took it at face value, their intent obviously. Some sort of field, manipulated of course, technically an artificial construct. It has been released to those with the relevant clearance. I was coming to that."

"Let's see it then."

"Just access your secure section. The 'inner sanctum' I think you Lords call it." pretending he didn't know.

Qatus opened his link entered his access codes and got as far as the portal.

"Enter Roshati?"

"No just the date and the tracking station."

Moments later the shoot out replayed itself.

"That tells me nothing Janon."

"Call up Roshati's resonant state now. The code is: AO5"

"That is rather simple. A for astronomer, O for orbital and she's the fifth one."

"It is in a secure data realm."

"Yes of course." He entered the code. A rich glowing green sphere appeared, Roshati's resonance.

"Just zoom in."

"I am aware Janon of how this is done."

Janon kept silent. He had been privy to the data. Qatus respected him for coming to him, going up one level. By rights Lord Pentham should have revealed this to him. But Pentham played everything close to his chest. Mainly because he saw information as power something Qatus thought childish. Along with Gharbel they were the three top Domain Lords, they should be sharing information. As Pentham was security he also realised he would never advance beyond his level seven. He knew too much and if he ever became pontiff the possibility of revealing anything was just too dangerous regarding the individuals he dealt with. So Pentham tried his best to be a power unto himself. It did not win him any friends. And Qatus suspected that Pentham was really weak within so using his domain like some unassailable citadel gave the impression of being more in control than the rest of them.

Qatus ran a dual programme. Roshati's resonance, swirling green ball with mottled browns, dark reds, the odd flecks of yellow or deep blue all digital data of her mind and soul. Next to that he ran an analysis complete with systems checks and diagnostics. That way the data was checked for what was natural and what was inserted, configured, even created through manipulative insertion.

The first thing Qatus noted was the moment of the subtle transformation of her resonance. To get the deleted data itself, would be like raising the dead. Attainable only through psychics or a very advanced computer expert. As to digging out what her resonance actually had contained needed such advanced know how, that only the Reganians might have that capability. The DVs could scour the past but even Elentra had kept away from the incident. If she knew at all. Then again all it took was one stray DV.

Roshati's prior state to her demise showed a slightly discernable shift in her dormant field energy as something rippled across her resonant fabric. He stopped the run and went back to that first change. A momentary nothingness where the data had been excavated. Not boosted for her mind's activity was peaking at this point. The brightly coloured flecks of yellow, red and blues were mental spikes. Low energy even though it was of a high energy content. DVs when locking into their target displayed a similar pattern. So Roshati did discover something that fired her brain. Content void. Like

a stone falling into a pool he saw the waves but not the object that caused it. Had Roshati self configured? The thought worried him.

The analysis indicated negative flaring. What a neat cover. Something imagined that was not there in the real world. A hallucination. So that is how Shach covered the deleted revelation. A mind going Volatile. How clever. So no outside information. He was relieved.

The cover perfect. As outer guardian Qatus now accessed the orbital's astronomical data base. As Janon indicated, Varos had done his job most professionally. The gaps revealed themselves for at the periphery of its extraction, the fusing of the data stream showed an almost imperceptible edge. The background information of space continued within that gap spread too evenly. What was obvious was the cosmos in turmoil, jagged spikes showing latent energy fluctuations. Smeared across the inserted emptiness where whatever Roshati had discovered no longer existed.

There was another possibility. The satellite sensors themselves. They merely transferred data, they did not keep it. Their memory banks were relatively small. He checked all three of them, collapsing the two screens to see if this cover was similar or dissimilar to the voided content. Sat One at the time showed nothing unusual, neither did Sat Two. But the inward positioned Sat Three showed signs of having been interfered with. Now that was interesting. Whatever Roshati had uncovered did not come from outside their universe. Something had occurred within. Not only that but there was a tiny jump like a bump in its transmission which did not show up on the first two. But no hard data. Only the remnant applications themselves. Not the content. Twice. The first would be Roshati the second the deletion.

So why was Roshati not dealt with on the orbital? Unless Roshati managed to cloak her extraction. Which pointed the finger at Regum. Shach and Varos had acted correctly. The third sat had been used, it's functions momentarily interrupted. Whatever had been deleted had also been reconfigured in the orbital's data banks. Something so dangerous its content no longer present.

Qatus's interest piqued. He would keep the investigation open. The only ones dealing with that were Shach, Varos, Janon and himself. He would have to broach this delicately with Lord Pentham. Maybe Pentham was working on it. Maybe he thought the same.

"Well, whatever it was, it's not there." Qatus voiding the screen. "She did get excited about something. Looks like Volatile activity to me Janon." Hinting how he would present his report. "Pity. Obviously it might only have been an imagined threat, one that

convulsed her mind to such a degree that it sent her over the edge, infecting Tregon's resonance as well. Not my domain really. So that seems to be that. And you're certain whatever Roshati considered to be so threatening was just her fevered imagination?" guiding Janon.

Janon had observed Qatus intently. He was certain Qatus, thanks to Varos's deft work and Shach's sanitizing the data left nothing behind. Janon did not know the contents either, only Shach and Varos might. After the incident at the tracking station the two of them had disappeared, removed or removing themselves from the scene. They would not figure in the investigation itself, airbrushed out of the picture. Even Varos's visit to the orbital never happened. With Qatus pursuing that line then Janon would have had to consider seeking advice from outside sources if he were to gain any insight into what was deemed so sensitive, so dangerous that such extreme measures were so quickly enforced.

"Our best lead would indicate some sort of Reganian activity. Anything on that front?"

"We are following what little we have to go on."

"Does it look like they were behind this attempted manipulation?"

"Yes. But we have a slight problem there."

"Not unusual." Qatus tried his best to cloak his suspicions.

"It could be a new attempt to get at us. Not through the usual means Lord Qatus. A rogue cell, black operations. If that is the case the Reganian's are moving into a dangerous realm."

"You mean this could have political implications?"

"I'm glad you mentioned this. We are treating this unfortunate incident as an internal matter. Our official position is that Roshati and Tregon went violently Volatile. Regum has not been approached. We are containing this."

"That is welcome indeed. Things are complicated enough as it is."

"Yes. Of course there is a total security clampdown on the orbital. All astronomers are now under strict observation. The reason the constant exposure out there."

"Yes, it must take it's toll. It's to be expected. Except when it does happen it is so sad really."

"The price of vigilance."

It was interesting Qatus thought that the Reganian's never seemed to suffer from this alien incursion. But then they were spiritually void.

"I would like to meet with Lord Pentham Janon, at his convenience."

"That can be arranged."

"And I would like you there as well."

"I am honoured." He said surprised.

"Anything else regarding this...?"

"I think we have covered it all adequately to our satisfaction."

"Yes. Well it would have been interesting from a psychological perspective what went on in their heads at that pertinent moment now lost to us. If only so that others would be aware of the danger. Or if this was indeed Regum's doing." He threw in for good measure. "But I'm sure Lord Gharbel and your own group is handling that to the best of your abilities." Qatus said smoothly.

"Thank you Lord Qatus."

Qatus nodded.

Once outside ignoring the immaculate gardens, the majestic trees at the rear of the pontifical palace, the view west over the more salubrious suburbs Janon thought about his interview. In full alert mode when Qatus tried to dig out what Roshati's shadow resonance might have left behind. Concerned all the same Qatus might have uncovered something that could not get out, ever. Which annoyed him as he did not know himself what it was all about. Shach had been adamant there. Only saying it was of such importance, even if manipulated by Regum that its implications were more devastating than the deleted data itself. Shach hinted darkly that the Reganians had invented a new mental virus one that reconfigured perception to such a degree within the mind that reality could appear in a way it simply was not. Thus the reason for Roshati and Tregon's unfortunate termination. This false reality could warp minds en masse. If the Reganians succeeded then they would have won. What was worse Shach intoned sombrely was that the monumental lie, which was what this cover up really did have an element of truth. A new method in spreading mis-information. No one was entirely safe from this mental assault. Only a strong stable resonance, a purity of spirit, complete devotion to their religious ideals would safeguard them from the perfidy of Regum's change of tactics. To wage a war at a psychological level penetrating their inserted mental poison deep into their very unconsciousness, thus deluding their souls. Compared to the alien mind field this was far more subtle, insidious and ultimately it could topple their civilisation.

Dr Shach on his way to see Lord Pentham at the 'Institute for Social Harmony & Human Resources' went over in his mind not just to ascertain what Pentham knew, but what he would try and cover up. How he would react to what Shach could officially reveal. The 'Institute' was a cover regarding their work. It was one of many organisations in Prima's highly stratified bureaucracy. Every task, from the Ecclesiastics, through the Divines the psychic overlords rooting out dissident tendencies, the Exalted, another self interest group to focus on, potential bishops rarely drawn from the priestly caste whose fervent spiritual inclinations were just too hyper-active to have the qualities to fully comprehend the intricate power manoeuvres necessary to maintain one's hard gained superiority amongst the many jostling groups intent on furthering their own agenda. The usual politics.

Pentham's domain covered them all. Whilst designated as the chief CEO Shach kept busy with the day-to-day events of all these aspirational holy individuals. He had recognised a long time ago that Pentham was more a clearing house to weed out those with a weaker resonance who with their often discordant attitude caused friction not just in the great social milieu, but also were tempting targets. And not just Reganian agents trying to use any who had specific character flaws that made them susceptible for recruitment. For the Reganians lacked the capability of their psychic powers to gain their pithy objectives among the fractured departments that was concentrated in the holy city. Out in the field, amongst the many thousands of provincial centres the intensity of always striving to go beyond one's entrenched caste was less obvious. There the bishops marked time, some frustrated in advancing to the inner circles that was more like a dream to aim for and rarely attained. Someone had to look after the Volatiles.

Now it was his duty to inform Lord Pentham of two such Volatiles who had gone rogue. Pentham a wiry thin energetic Domain Lord, his primary function to oversee Web Security, not just the Reganian superimposition but also the information net on the orbitals and their feed down to Prima. Such as Varos's deft intervention, deleting the rather dangerous evidence concerning Prima's actual history of the Great Calamity. In that regard Pentham, sitting with his usual repressed mental energy, an irradiating resonance was fully conversant where exactly his duties lay. Lord Qatus, more concerned with the good life had been amendable with his official findings now that the investigation of these two astronomers deletions were fully explained according to the unwritten guidelines Shach worked with. Varus had gone to ground. For the moment he was on leave. He had fulfilled his duties admirably without showing the slightest interest in what exactly he managed to delete up there. Subsequent systems checks confirmed what his

superior expected of him. This breach no longer present. Secure with that knowledge Shach could brief Pentham with an easy conscience. Truth to him a matter of interpretation. A set of events could be analysed from more than one perspective. That was what mattered, not the facts but their interpretation. It had been his duty that the right conclusions were arrived at. Thus this off-the-record meeting with Lord Pentham.

Shach often wondered how a borderline case such as Pentham ever became a level seven DL. Probably his hyper-state. It gelled with some of the people he used to achieve his specified targets and more importantly the use of the manipulated data to maintain the status quo. Whatever Pentham thought would only matter if he strayed beyond his well defined boundaries. Shach's other duty, as a professional fixer, that rarefied group of individuals who moved with consummate ease between the high domains, made sure the system functioned as it should. The Exalted in a way were *the* watchers of the DLs. Power was their mental sustenance. Luckily in this delicate case Pentham seemed content enough with his position. Then again it could be merely all pretence. But there was a secondary reason for seeing Pentham. The pontiff.

Deeply concerned in the lack of progress regarding the presence of the invasive alien field. As if the DVs were doing nothing, letting the people suffer this intrusion through a deficiency of active engagement adamantly denied by Elentra. Telafus withdrawing into the mystical realm. What he had forgotten, or ignored was that whilst spiritual head of Prima he had to not just show that he was a leader in thwarting this wanton attack but actively engage himself at the vanguard of his most holy warriors, the DVs. Those of the inner circle were whispering in secret conclaves as to the strength of his resonance wondering if he was actually up to the divine struggle. The Great Mind was challenging Prima to rise to the occasion, to usurp the spiritual poison, not merely suffer its demented effects. The palace's informants, relayed to the DLs Telafus's inactivity. They all sensed Telafus's resignation and wondered if the pontiff was up to his duties to be seen to go on the attack, to feel deeply within the bosom of their souls the urge to vanquish the enemy.

They suspected even worse suppositions. That the pontiff himself might be under Regum's influence. For he seemed totally disinterested in the greatest confrontation facing Prima since the Great Calamity. Even the Divines and some of the Ecclesiastics were murmuring whether the pontiff's mind had gone soft. So far they did their best to cover up for the masses the palace's declamation that Telafus was engaged in holy meditations, wrestling with the alien demons at their source. His heroic stance, shouldering the psychic assault thus freeing up all the other Divines to consolidate Prima's resonance. Comparisons were made to the distant Calamity. So far the dissemination of

this construction of divine resistance was accepted by the masses. But in the rarefied atmosphere of the palace, in the almost secluded domains in which the high lords and the holy orders laboured with their spiritual strength to maintain the spiritual status quo of Prima's siege the still unspoken dissatisfaction at the lack of progress created disturbed cells, small groups of like minded Divines who were extremely ill at ease at the soft approach Telfus was taking. It affected those who were aligned with his way of thinking. Let the alien assault burn itself out. Was not the planet's resonance their shield? Were not the people at peace within themselves? Were these not the divine signs that instead of warring with the enemy it might incense its wrath even more? The palace did its best to allay their fears that whilst the usurpers were not gaining on them they were not retreating either. Still it was Telfus's duty to vanquish the alien threat, not merely engage it with so little to show in return.

The Reganians continued to expand unhindered. Was this not evidence that whilst they were gaining, Prima was retreating, leaving the field, their universe open to their foul corruption? And so small groups of extremely dissatisfied holy and divine groups murmured amongst themselves, praying for a divine sign that somewhere amongst them a decisive chosen one would arise, be revealed through auspicious signs to challenge and thwart these alien minds once and for all. They could call a conclave, for in that way their divine institutions would exercise their democratic right to make their voices heard.

Here Pentham had a right to vote and a right of veto. The Ecclesiastics had several candidates ready. For centuries they had always chosen one of their own, considering the Divines only under extreme circumstances. Even going so low as to select some priest whose resonant state was ultra secure from the insipid intrusion of the alien field. Telfus had been one such individual. If Telfus was indeed under its malignant thrall then given the extremity of the situation he could be scanned to re-enlighten his spiritual state. To save him not just from himself but to burn out his fallen state by gentle means of resonant boosting. Back in their distant history the odd misguided pontiff had undergone such treatment. Officially in holy retreat. Gharbel, even Qatus had broached this with Pentham if only to test his position for by all appearances the future did not bode well. They had familiarised him with this possible scenario, a palace coup. Still while merely thinking of taking political action could be considered detrimental, the image the most sacred office portrayed to the masses Pentham saw the logic inherent in their arguments to find a stronger candidate when the time came for Telfus to Ascend back into the bosom of the Cosmic Consciousness.

Whilst concentrating with these serious concerns the strange case of the two astronauts going bezerk at the tracking station was an unwelcome distraction. Astronomers were a part of divine intelligence. A secret order dealing with the ultimate mysteries of the cosmos.

And now this Dr Shach had broached his need to investigate not just why their resonance had collapsed but more importantly whether this was an isolated event due to Reganian influence. Were they agents or was this some new manifestation of the alien signals manipulating their minds? Up at the orbital they were shielded more so than down here under the open skies. To be sure the CFs offered protection yet this tragedy unfolded with such extreme results. It was disturbing if only by indicating the susceptibility of being so easily infiltrated. Shach therefore needed to consult with Pentham, partly as a matter of courtesy and to make sure the technical end of their systems was secure. Pentham had nothing to hide in that regard. From cursory checks both Roshati and Tregon had been manipulated from without not within. This would be laid in front of him.

Pentham could not refuse the request to see Shach at such short notice. Had he stalled it would have alerted Shach that Pentham was stone-walling him. His department was part of the vetting process for any who would go into space. Only the DVs were excluded. They were chosen first by the priests in the countryside on the look out for potential penetrating psychics. Being aware of other mental states was one thing, concentrating for hours on end on a special task or designated target was something else. That took extreme mental powers. And they had to be true believers as well. Pentham's other duty concerned their overall social harmony, dealing with potential heretics before they performed any higher spiritual duties, be it as mentors to the seekers of the Divines, those of a more practical bent making them candidates for bishoprics, even pontifical potentates if they were assiduous in knowing how to use and manipulate if need be those around them. Then through Lord Acht's elite use Volatiles technically endowed to grapple with logic problems that did not influence their resonant state. With all this to consider having Roshati and Tregon slip through somehow really did not come as that much of a surprise. Destined to happen eventually. The Great Calamity had unhinged many back then. That fear still reverberated in the overall social resonance.

What Shach now tried to ascertain was Pentham's reaction. He would begin by being direct and hard. How Pentham handled that would be interesting. He was planetary security after all. Astronomers were an elite set amongst themselves. They had to be solid spiritually yet have the ability to think rationally, not an easy feat. The Reganians were strong on the latter and more than just weak on the former. They

reconfigured through their education their minds in such a way that spirituality was of no consequence. He knew that the data Roshati uncovered and unfortunately related to Tregon had been enough to distort their resonance. To actually accept this cosmic phenomena, the alien field as an assault on their mental state and that of their people the Reganians considered revisionism.

It was more than just a thought-crime. It was heinous to question the divine wisdom of the Great Mind. Implicit in Tregon's reaction. Roshati's was even worse. To translate this event as being a natural occurrence implied a certain helplessness regarding the Divine Mind in not being in control. A perfect mind acted perfectly. Officially explained by the corruption of the alien field. The Great Mind had wanted to cleanse their universe and was thwarted instead. He too was aware at Telafus's soft approach. Let the aliens rage, let them do their worst. In that way they would reveal themselves even more and hopefully a weakness would show itself. Then they could strike at it with all the might of their combined resonance, dissipate its fevered fantasies. What disturbed Shach was that whilst the Immaculate Architect ruled this universe it did not extend to the other more vast universe which now surrounded them. All this had to be taken into consideration. Even if the pontiff seemed indifferent.

Shach's Vertical Ascent Vehicle landed its the engines perpendicular slowly descending behind the institute, part of the sprawling complex of the pontifical palace. It was not just the holy centre of Prima but also the administrative extension of ruling the planet. He had just left Lord Gharbel who had informed him of Telafus's almost reticent approach to their dilemma of the alien incursion. Telafus was undergoing a spiritual crisis. He saw it as the Great Mind abandoning him. Worse Telafus seemed impotent to act. If this continued they might all suffer a complete mental break-down, or worse, go insane. But that was not contemplated just yet. It was Lord Pentham whom he was to brief. As he made his way into the building, ceremonial guards in their garish red uniforms, stony faced, he was concerned as to what exactly had sent the two astronomers over the edge. Officially they had gone retro-Volatile. Was the field, or Reganian targeting affecting even the pontiff who appeared weakened? Maybe this is what happens when a man of the people was chosen. He had been useful for Telafus was not a schemer which meant the Ecclesiastics remained in control of the supreme office. They were extremely subdued, closing ranks. There was a need to find scape-goats for having chosen one with such a weak resonance. Something contained Telafus's lack of decisive action as if he was perhaps corrupted within his holy being. Quick checks regarding the

status of the Immortals who were the planetary spiritual guides, ancient sages uncovered nothing unusual. Maybe it was a coincidence that what Roshati knew, what the pontiff was possessed with could he hoped not be related. The Immortals had spiritual power that encompassed all, the universe, through the accumulated data of the Trine which possessed the accumulated wisdom of all ages. He let the thought drop preferring that that could be ruled out.

Since Pentham had vetted the report it would be interesting to see what he pretended to know, what he possibly covered to save appearances and how he interpreted their possessed minds. The only, as yet, superficial link: alien infection. Was it Regum or was there something more dangerous manifesting itself in their universe? Was it target specific? That was Pentham's domain.

The sky was still overcast. The squat low rise conglomeration of buildings housing different administrations were set in well manicured gardens. Gardeners, doubling as guards were busy trimming hedges, pruning trees with the coming winter and on the look out for unwelcome inquisitive potential infiltrators. Not just Reganian agents either. Some Ecclesiastics in their red garb were conversing, Divines and priests sitting on benches in deep discussion, the odd Exalted, always bearing themselves gracefully thinking themselves above their lower religious caste giving an appearance of inapproachability. They really belonged in monasteries if they thought themselves so pure.

Shach in a unique position to gain access to the DLs. He belonged to a small unofficial group of roving individuals, acquiring both political and spiritual information. By definition he was an investigator of any event that went either beyond the norm, like these two astronauts, or dealing with manipulative secret conspirators, whilst keeping certain political ministers at the very top of the ruling Council informed of the machinations bubbling beneath the polite veneer hiding the subtle conflict of interests. And ferret out those doing the bidding of the Reganians.

The 'Institute of Social Harmony' was as usual busy dealing with the ever present informers, those seeking admission to see some well placed functionary often trying to overturn some decree that affected them or their clients private lives. Flawed resonances in their families, removed for re-alignment in special educational centres or if extreme a spell in an asylum if they had strayed completely from the holy path of spiritual enlightenment. It was the obvious location for Lord Pentham's role, technical surveillance dealing with the possible corruption due to Regum's Web activities. The dampening effect of the countless containment fields covering the planet and the support base for Qatus as Outer Guardian in space containing the alien ingress. Whilst Qatus dealt with

the personnel angle it was Pentham who would notice a shift in the overall resonance of those affected by either extra-terrestrial means and if infiltrated then pass on the target groups to Qatus.

Shach had just come from Qatus who told him of the results of the investigation. This was his final call before making his report, verbatim. The case too sensitive to leave any trace of what he knew in any form.

Palace guards were present all along the corridors. With Shach's computer chip stitched into his arm he was ignored, passing the granite faces. . Shach made his way up a broad sweep of stairs to the mezzanine level where Lord Pentham's front, his public office was located. His visit as such attracted little attention. Conspirators were everywhere. Prima had political groups with outrageous agendas, usually concerned with freedom of expression which could only jeopardise the overall resonant state. These misguided souls wanted to exercise their anarchist intent, obviously the probing of Reganian intentions, with a free ride into their minds, accessing Prima directly through their agenda.

He reached the door and entered the secretary's office. Three priests were waiting to see Pentham. As Shach was in his civilian clothes they looked at him momentarily thinking he was from some ministry, which was the idea. The secretary a middle aged lady smiled professionally at him, having been forewarned of his visit, and over the intercom announced his presence. She then activated the release switch and Shach walked straight into Pentham's office.

Lord Pentham merely looked up from his paper strewn desk. He voided the screen and made a deliberate show of collating his papers into a folder then closed it. Thin, a bony face, deep alert active dark eyes Pentham was definitely old. But not that old. Suppressed energy his presence filled the office even though he was not of preposing appearance physically. He looked frail, his light coat a size too large. His hands more like claws than fingers.

"The incident at the tracking station." Shach was direct. "What are your conclusions?"

Pentham actually smiled. His previous concentration on his work dissipated as he relaxed.

"Officially they went volatile. Something snapped. Why I can only guess. Regressive genes. Probably deluded as well. Imagining that they were in contact, or attempting to make contact with some Reganian agent. Naturally it is all supposition as whatever they had on them or whatever they knew is now deleted. I've gone over their

files which Lord Gharbel graciously let me see. If there is a cell, if," he paused, "it is no more. They were probably isolates, working on their own. The system's have not been compromised." He finished off.

"And your conclusion?"

"I thought I just made that clear."

"Your conclusion."

"My opinion if I had one is of no relevance."

"Humour me."

"With no data to go on Dr Shach what is there to say, to suppose?"

"You deal with unique individuals. Sometimes there are patterns in social behaviour expressed in various forms of specific behavioural traits."

"You should really talk with Lord Gharbel or Qatus. I'm systems."

"Lord Pentham, one of your domains is planetary security. I'm referring to human resources."

"Oversight only."

"I am aware of that."

"Talk to Janon, or his operational commander Reno."

"So their files did not come through here."

"Not that I am aware of. Whoever sent you may have misinformed you."

"I have to follow up leads. And the systems are safe, secure?"

"Yes."

Shach changed tack. The more he uncovered regarding the strange fate of the astronomers the more this isolated event kept nagging him about Telafus's inactivity. "You know Telafus seems almost indifferent to what is going on. Some are hinting he should be temporarily relieved of his sacred duties."

"That would be most unusual."

Interesting. Pentham was not shocked.

"Some wonder at the state of his spirituality."

"It happens more often than is reported Dr Shach." Pentham said non committally. Shach was pleasantly surprised. To even question the pontiff's state of mind bordered in gross insubordination. Yet here he sat, taking Shach's dangerous suggesting in his stride.

"You don't seem surprised."

"Oh I am. Perhaps Telafus being chosen was premature. This is off the record I assume?"

"Lord Pentham, this case is so delicate it is the only way to get at the truth. We are facing an extremely difficult situation. It might be time to consult the Immortal here at the palace. The Trine as a repository is a powerful presence."

"Though the Immortals are accessible to all the people, seeking guidance, receiving spiritual succour, wishing to bathe their souls in the supreme divinity or merely reaffirming their faith, the Immortal encased at the palace seems a rather obscure way to deal with the real matter in hand. Immortals are the gateway, the path to the Great Mind. This Immortal unsullied by the more discordant resonant states of lesser supplicants. Maybe it should be delicately broached to Telafus to seek divine guidance given his apathy." which did not really bother Pentham. The ways of the Supreme Being would always be on a level way beyond their own mortal selves.

Shach was smart enough not to pursue his concerns too far or that of his superiors too intently. The astronauts aberrant behaviour cried out for a resolution. If they could be affected then anybody could. Shach was of course going to report that they were under the influence of some Reganian agent. It would tie up all those still unexplained ends which were his primary concern. The report would blame Regum. It would give them leverage. The Reganians would deny this of course as much as their agents on Regum played the same game. Yet if it could be revealed that greater stakes were involved so much the better. The Ecclesiastics wanted to instigate a cleansing. This could be the moment they needed to set a plan into operation. No one would be exempt from scrutiny. Not unlike after the Great Calamity when thousands were found wanting. They of course emigrated to Regum. If this were to occur again they could rid themselves of the more extreme Volatiles. Destabilise Regum. Create a dysfunctional society. It might even derail their expansion into space.

"Did the diagnostics come up with anything?" for the palace staff had closed ranks. Sealed off the event. Sealed and deleted. Aware of the rumblings, the secret whisper campaign sowing doubt about Telafus's capabilities. Two events. Telafus's reticence to act and the astronauts mentally screwed. Even Shach did not have access to what they made of the astronauts demise. From their view it occurred on the orbital. What Shach wanted to find out was if any were affected within their own ranks. He had the brief to not just investigate the astronauts inherent Volatility but given the need to question the relevant DLs to ascertain their own resonant state.

Shach was there to uncover not just the lay of the land but also which way the winds of change were blowing. Once established they could be fanned in the direction his superiors intended. Affect change. Times in transition. It was an opportune moment to

make the best of a bad situation. With a strong pontiff in place Prima could reassert its strength, its resonance and contain Regum psychically by undermining their minds, the primary intent of his investigations. For this the Domain Lords were essential. Not just to convince the people of the righteousness of their noble path but also to control Regum as well. Then with their technology under Primaian domination they would be supreme in this universe: They could take the fight to the alien race as well. Overwhelm them with superior force. But only once Telafus was removed. So to complete preparations Shach had to survey those in power, see who was on the side of 'right', convince those in the middle where their true duty lay and contain or remove those who were inimical to Prima's resurgence. Great times lay ahead. The universe there for the taking. Regum had shown the way, the aliens had proven what could be achieved and Prima would use that knowledge to finish the job. In a way the incident of the astronomers was almost a divine sign; that it was time to act. The age of contemplation over. It had lead to an inner weakness, one Regum used, one the aliens ruthlessly expanded upon. The weak were now a liability thanks to Telafus's misguided benevolence.

"Diagnostics came up with nothing." Pentham said at last. He had let Shach think whatever he was thinking. A natural manifestation of a deep mind. Reality was not flat, it was intricate and profound. Out of respect, and caution Pentham had not bothered to even probe Shach's momentary introversion. He had his reasons for analysing the situation from as many perspectives as possible. Truth might be self evident yet the means of achieving that truth, given sentient reasoning usually was convoluted. Unlike Volatiles who acted without much thought.

"If diagnostics did which it didn't I would have been alerted. No unusual activity. An induced mental breakdown relative to the individual. Nothing untoward in the system, or the Trine. Nor the Web either. An isolated if very unfortunate incident. I'm sorry that I cannot be of any help." Which was a half truth. The two astronauts though had gotten around the system. They could have been Naturals but now that they were dead no one would ever know. That alerted Pentham. There would be others then. This was not the end of it. He was not going to enlighten Shach. There was something about him that did not add up. He had the highest of clearances, direct from the pontiff's office. Not a monolithic entity. There were many departments many players.

Pentham dealt with planetary security through Janon and Reno who would he hoped be shadowing Shach. A cursory search revealed nothing about him. Varos concerned with Reganian science and technology. It could well be that they had inserted certain subroutines thus being aware of whatever they were engaged in. The

data of course was no more. So he would never know why such a top secret investigator would concern himself with what appeared straight forward. The mental collapse of two astronomers. Janon had found no waiting Reganian ships over Prima to make this supposed contact that was part of the findings. So even if they would have made it into the desert, then what? They could upload their data to some receiver on the Orbital, but then why come down at all? It would have been intercepted. The best place for any clandestine activity would have been up there. There were too many flaws. Not that it bothered Pentham. It was something curious at best and he was within his rights to do whatever he saw fit in pursuing this further. Janon found nothing. Unless the palace was involved in some intricate scheme. Aware that there were those seeking Telafus's removal. He could only think that somehow this was instrumental in achieving some secret agenda. He would make certain his end remained well clear of that. Even talking to Shach was loaded with unspoken implications for Shach was giving nothing away.

Shach was relieved that the system was secure. Pentham assured of his candid approach, enough to confide what he knew which was not much. He had spoken the truth as he saw and knew it.

"You don't seem upset though. Two vetted astronauts who used restricted data to pass on to the enemy. Under Reganian influence or some rogue elements amongst our own."

Pentham liked what he heard. Sowing seeds of distrust. So something was being hatched. Interesting.

"Dr Shach when you have been around as long as I have, these mental deformities become part of the norm. Otherwise we would have no need of asylums, or security departments."

"True enough."

"Is there anything you can tell me?"

"I'm not privy to the contents of what Roshati and Tregon might have assumed. I know it bothers some about Telafus rather benign approach to what we all face. But the two surely cannot be related. Nothing I should know about?"

"As this conversation is not taking place, what if the pontiff is being manipulated."

"An impossibility."

"Our astronomers belong in a way to the Exalted. Their resonance is supposedly secure. If what occurred up there did in fact happen then it is not impossible for something similar to occur down here."

"You know what you are saying?"

"We are all in this."

"If you could be more specific?"

"Alien activity of course."

"No change there."

Shach was not going to pursue the pontiff's state of decay.

Pentham was genuine regarding his ignorance of the deleted data. But not hostile to the suggestion that even Telafus was not completely inoculated in his soul against the incursion. At best he was the dutiful functionary. Politics he left to others. Devoted to the masses. Better than being affronted, or even feigning horror that the pontiff was not perfect. In short Pentham was not rattled. He had barely reacted at Shach's suggestion. It was enough for the moment.

"You have been most helpful Lord Pentham. Well that is all. Thank you for your time."

"I'm sorry I could not be of any assistance. My work is to overview the systems, not the users." Which was not quite true. He knew it, Shach knew it.

"Yes. But news gets around."

"Gossip you mean."

"Even that is information."

"As I said, Lord Gharbel is your best source. Maybe Qatus."

"I appreciate you having taken the time."

"A pleasure."

Pentham was so stable it surprised Shach. Maybe it was age. He probably would have come across so many discordant resonances that a few more made no difference, even if it did concern the pontiff. The trouble was this had never happened before. It had worried Gharbel who thought maybe something was amiss with Telafus. Pentham not concerned. He should be. They all should. If Telafus was going soft then that would filter down through them all. The outrageous idea that Telafus was under Reganian influence could not be ruled out. He tried that approach with Lord Gharbel who dismissed it as non-sense, or spread about by rumour mongers. Qatus merely laughed. Which was all. Maybe Telafus was Qatus's creature. Qatus the very opposite to Gharbel. His portly frame spoke of the good life. He was there to enjoy his status whilst Gharbel was intent on being the power behind the throne. So it made sense that Gharbel would be worried. Another pontiff might not be so amenable to Gharbel's power. He had learnt much during this investigation. The supposed serenity of the whole of Prima's social structure was really seething with various interest groups whilst the people, the Volatiles

were bordering on the anarchic. They just wanted to get on with their rustic lives. Politics they saw with honest disdain. Power to the elite for their own selves, featherbedding their nest. Their real faith was oriented to the Immortals. They accepted the priests only because they could unburden their souls, relieve their inner tensions. For the priests kept the social bonds in place, reassured the people that although the cosmos might be poisoned, as long as they prayed, kept to the divine path of final resurrection at the time of death and led a good pure life the combined resonance would protect the planet, their lives and guaranteed their future. As long as the beer and wine flowed, the harvests were plentiful and peace reigned, then all was well. Any change was not even considered, or that life could be otherwise. What Regum did was of no consequence. As long as the future was a continuation of the past they were content. In a way he envied them. They did seem genuinely happy. But Shach knew that there was a change in the universe. There were other races on other planets who would one day interact with the Reganians and that would have implications for Prima. He had to find out how they would deal with that. His superiors most interested in that, in how the future would play out.

After leaving Lord Pentham there was one more person he had to meet. Janon. It could be that Janon was holding back. That much was certain. The why's were too many. Pentham was momentarily kept out of the loop for several reasons. The official analysis and the mental state of Telafus massaged by the palace's own spokes people. What the Ecclesiastics knew they kept to themselves. They never released anything. The only way to find out what did occur might be hidden in the Trine the system of the Guardians. Another gift of the Reganians to block, reroute, reconfigure any assault on the planet, psychological or on the ground. Janon was one of the few who might get a tailored version of what had overwhelmed the astronauts. The obvious explanation of course was, and it could be true, that they really had suffered a mental breakdown. Unusual but not impossible.

As the VAV lifted off Shach was satisfied he had learnt as much as he could. Varos was already removed from the scene, whereabouts undisclosed if anybody wanted verification as to the data he had deleted. He flew back to one of Prima's secluded monastery out in the desert. Originally envisaged as a retreat for those with a mystical orientation it was also a clandestine meeting place to cover aspects of policy which the outer groups considered important. Upon landing, breathing in the clean fresh air, the purity of its isolation a welcome change from the latent humidity at the

capital. Assured that the loaded data was safely removed he could resume his more serene duties of troubleshooting the mundane aspects that concerned the usual Volatiles on the edge of a mental breakdown. Divines were the mentally aware for the daily grind, carrying out the orders of the executive. Shach's natural inclinations for all things scientific relegated him to an outer group who had some input but were left out of the loop of making real decisions. It gave him more freedom to pursue his own interests and Shach's was certainly his own man.

He had followed Regum's technical achievements with awe. Prima had to decide how far they could go and make that known to the decision makers. Officially developing their own scientific core was viewed with the utmost of suspicions. However if they were to keep up with Reganian breakthroughs they needed to understand not just how the scientific mind worked but equally if not more important how that knowledge was applied. For now the total removal of the data Varos deleted did not sit well with Shach. The evidence they so desperately voided had been a mistake in his view. It would only be a matter of time until another astronomer would stumble across the same cosmic phenomena that set this whole sequence in motion. Maybe not today, but chances were the same process would be repeated. He needed to know what exactly seemed so dangerous that any reference to its existence had to be denied.

So far his brief had gone smoothly. Acting on the palace's orders he and Varos had performed their duties. The termination of both Roshati and Tregon he thought more than extreme. There would be reverberations rippling through not just the astronomers but as it had occurred at the space port, there as well. Rumours were flying about coming to all sorts of outlandish conclusions. Maybe that was intended. It would help to confuse the issue at heart. Since he had not been told directly to make himself familiar with the content of the deleted data he would see if he could dig it out from the mystics. For the desert monastery trained the psychic elite. Some were destined to become DVs, not as the brave soldiers battling the alien field but those behind them for it was important to see the whole picture, not just the remnants and the dangerous information the DVs gathered. Context was everything.

He had arranged to meet with Varos thanks to information revealed by Janon. No order had been given that he could not make contact with the only person who knew its contents. He had also asked Janon to make his way out here. As head of the investigation Shach understood that keeping his section out would not hamper his duties.

Problem: Regum seemed unaffected by whatever passed through space. How could Prima have mentally suffered a collective hysteria back then yet the Reganian's

never even noticed anything unusual? In fact and this was only supposition, as he walked away from the plane viewing the austere building, more like a fortress, that Regum had made great strides. Moving away from basic robotics to the next generation of head inserted smart machines. Alien proofed or alien aligned.

Then there was the paranoia factor. Prima's persistence of being the chosen race. Infusing their benevolent spirituality amongst all sentients. Unite all in their holy embrace. The Reganian's would have none of it. Amendable to Prima's roving priests, the schools they set up on the twin planet orbiting at its opposite apex around their common sun.

A monk came out from the monastery. It's oasis now bare of the few crops they grew to sustain themselves, of the herbs they collected to make medicines and a potent herb liqueur which was very much sought after.

The monk in his white clean cowl had his hood up to shield him from the sun, his face in shadow.

"Welcome brother." Their universal greeting

"Celestial greetings." Shach replied. "Lead on." Taking in the pristine view. The previous thunderstorm, the short wet season they experienced had filled the water tanks using the rooves to collect the precious resource. There were several wells to supplement their need to water their crops, their gardens and the few sheep that grazed on the sparse grass that lasted long enough to supply if only a meagre amount of meat after their fine wool had been shorn. In the distant west towering lilac snow capped mountains that during spring augmented their water supply. An ideal spot for a limited number of people to adequately survive out here. One of the monastery's functions to re-educate the recalcitrant high personages who had strayed from the divine path when their spiritual devotions created a crisis of the soul. In a way they were regarded as being divinely unhinged. Too much too soon. Worth saving. They knew things that were best kept away from the population at large. Even Divines and Ecclesiastics. Nor bishops unless by papal dispensation, or on the advice of DLs in some rare cases. Maybe they could enlighten him as to what did occur back then during the Calamity.

Shach had his own view of the universe. It was a living entity, a pulsing being of which the Great Mind was it's projection. The mystics here saw it as an illusion, one tailored to their sentient consciousness, a mirage energized by the cosmos itself. That interpretation too was kept here, not to be disseminated except to a few who had a solid resonance so as not to come to the conclusion that the Great Mind was merely a chimera at best. It might lead to apostasy or following intrinsic logic to atheism.

They walked through the open gated outer four storey building and into the large quadrangle where in its centre was another well. Inside all were busy. There was a blacksmith to repair and craft agricultural implements. Outlying hills a day's ride away by mule was used as a quarry to repair the monastery and timber was brought from the distant forests at the mountains. The pack animals and their keepers followed the river bed during spring, to replace the odd piece of decaying hardwood. Luckily in the dry atmosphere maintenance was an easy task. The monks and ordained women who sought the mystical path lived in beatific harmony. Sex was not discouraged as long as they did not bond as permanent couples. The way was what mattered and being born of flesh, sex could not be avoided. Some of the mystics managed to overcome the urges of the body, using biological energy to transmute it into fervent spiritual vigour.

The monk led him through the courtyard, the inhabitants joyful in their work, laughing amongst themselves as they went about their duties with a serenity which Shach found relaxing. Every time he came here he felt like staying. He did go on retreat in this sacred place now and again, calming his mind and wonderfully refreshed after a few days of undisturbed meditation. Today other things mattered.

Amongst the busy workers Shach noted security guards. He was surprised and asked his guide as to their presence.

"As we avoid physical force the abbot deemed a small contingent necessary to keep the peace."

"There has been trouble?" Shach asked surprised.

"Some of our guests have shown signs of violence. Self harm. Some are deluded to the point of possession. They have to be restrained. As you are an esteemed visitor whose presence is always welcome and are familiar with our ways you can see the dilemma it posed for us." The monk deftly avoided some animal droppings. A monk near them hurried over with a spade and bucket and collected the dollop. It would be dried and used for fuel. Very little was wasted.

"I've come to see a guest." Was all Shach said. They walked into one of the many entrances of the building. Four circular towers rising high into the clear blue sky. The north facing tower was an astronomical observatory complete with a small telescope. Large enough to study their solar system. What the monastery did not possess were the necessary computers. Their only technology was a communications room to stay in touch with the distant world, distant not just in space but in time. The monastery dated back long before the masses converted to their singular god.

Going back to the very beginnings of their civilisation. They had survived the ancient wars, the incessant battles, the Calamity. Since they accepted the notion of a unifying god which he knew they secretly understood as a manifestation of cosmic energy the pontiffs did not consider them as being unaligned. They also produced through their devotions great thinkers, philosophers, scientists even high born seekers who after a few years returned back into society with a resonance of superior strength that impressed those whom they met.

That Janon was one such adept at first surprised Shach. Here was a man whose duties lay firmly in the mundane world yet in his youth he had sought enlightenment. Janon never alluded to his sojourn here. Some of the more egotistical minded saw themselves as having reached a stage of inner perfection. Janon considered this a false sense of the divine within. Perfection was something to be attained, a life long pursuit in itself. Maybe at death the apotheosis would be complete but until then it was the attunement towards the possibility of reaching some form of divine attainment which mattered. The path was the Way and the Way was both infinite and eternal. The body was not, the soul was.

They walked into the cool of a corridor, heading towards one of the towers climbing the circular stairs to the third floor where Shach was to meet his contact. He was starting to see the monastery in a new perspective. It was more than a retreat. Plans hatched, ideas executed, policy formulated. It looked as if the Domain Lords were not the supreme arbiters of Prima, not completely anyway.

Having reached the top floor the monk told him it was the last door before the stairs leading to the observatory. With that he left. Shach did not even have time to thank him. He walked on. The silence replete. The corridor had some windows into the courtyard below, the noises of busy workers muted. The activity below sounding like a mosaic of calmness. He felt himself enmeshed in the monastery's serenity, a part of an encompassing picture, a living enclosure separated from the outside world. The air was still, the quietude replete, a micro world at ease, everything in its place, the divine all around.

The last door. He knocked and a muffled voice bade him enter. Shach was familiar with the cells the seeker retreated to. Rooms that were austere. A bed, a writing desk near the window, a small wardrobe. At the end of the hallway the privies and downstairs communal showers. The solid wooden doors opened on oiled hinges. With the window lighting the room the two others awaiting him were silhouetted. As he entered his eyes adjusted and he saw Janon and Varos.

Varos or Janon his superior? Varos no doubt. Both here purely for the business at hand.

"Thank you for coming." Varus rose from the extra chairs provided for their meeting.

"Well, a pleasant surprise. Janon."

"Dr Shach. Please be seated. Some wine?" and Shach saw a silver pitcher with droplets of condensation glistening in the light with three silver goblets.

"No thank you, a little early in the day."

He sat with them around the small table. The view north was flanked on the left by the distant mountains, the light brown desert, the dry river beds cutting through the flat terrain, the sky a brilliant blue. And quiet. The stillness an element in itself.

From inside his jacket Shach retrieved his report and merely laid it on the table. It was one sheet only for there was not much to go on. No one knew anything, which perhaps was for the best. Lord Pentham unconcerned, accepting events as necessary if unfortunate. The other astronomers knew nothing at all and suspected nothing except that Roshati and Tregon had gone Volatile. The pertinent information, the supposed discovery of the astronauts not alluded to.

Shach waited, Janon was looking out of the window his gaze tinged with concentrated thought. When Varos was done he turned to Shach.

"Janon informs me that certain psychological disturbances are manifesting themselves. A sort of delusional mass psychosis."

Shach was barely aware of what happened to the people.

"I assume this concerns us? Me?" he asked.

"We have to deal with it. If this continues the overall psychic resonance will destabilise our world."

"Regum's Web."

"Not the alien incursion?"

"Maybe."

"Anyway our superiors have decided to act. A cleansing. It will create problems. We need to move quickly, isolate the Fallen."

"Alright."

"We also have to deal with Regum once and for all."

"I understand."

"Maybe you do." Varos said. "There is no mention in your report as to the content of the information. I hope there are no tell tale remnants around."

"No one knows anything. Of that I am certain."

"The Reganians might through the Web."

"Given the multitude of alternatives in there..."

"Yes, but it will get out eventually. There are illicit immersions on our side, meaning unauthorized access."

"Yes that is the case."

"And they cover their tracks, self delete."

"Very smart."

"The stability of our people is at risk. Perpetuated by Reganians. Maybe not themselves, but traitors in our mist."

"Janon?" Shach asked.

"We have lists."

"Good."

"There are those who are corrupting our people."

"Priests?"

"Some very high persons."

"That is serious."

"Without their conscious knowledge."

"Manipulated."

"Exactly."

Shach looked out the window for a distant rumble echoed across the sky. A powerful white gleaming dot, glinting in the sun was approaching. It was not a shuttle but a cruiser. What was that doing here? Maybe their mysterious master.

"The pontiff is most concerned." Varos said.

"I see." Though he did not. "There have been suggestions that things cannot continue as they are."

"What we thought of as a perfect incident seemed to have been ignored."

"You expected a reaction, yet those who were to be flushed kept their heads."

"Indeed. So we have to create another incident."

"To be sure."

"We need your co-operation."

"Of course."

"We need a defection."

"?"

"There are only a few of us who know this data exists."

"I thought it was deleted."

"Oh yes that is true. But the evidence is still there in reality. What Roshati discovered can be acquired by anybody, if they know what to look for. You for instance."

"Me? Why would I...?"

"Because you want to take it to the Reganians."

"But you just said they already know."

"My mistake. Suppose. It's a guess only. They have inserted many strange phenomena. Let those who stumble across it to draw their own conclusions."

"You want me to be a messenger. Why not yourself?"

"Indeed why not. Because I am coming with you."

"And Janon?"

Varos pulled out a stun gun. Janon looked surprised as Varos shot him. Janon never even reacted just slumped forward.

"It's only knocked him out. He will get over it." Varos looking at the prostrate figure. The sound of the jet above was now a deep rumble as it landed vertically billowing brown clouds of dust around it.

"We are going to walk out of here. I can stun you, carry you or you can come willingly."

Varos looked at Janon once more. Shach cornered, preferred to stay aware and alive. He understood now. Varos was working for Regum. No wonder they never knew their superior, there was none. It was Varos all the time, using Janon. Now Varos was being extracted and he was taking Shach with him. So the data tied in with the Calamity, and Regum could reveal the truth at an opportune time to get at Prima's status quo. They had caused the disaster to gain supremacy of their world. The alien field the excuse. How simple, how effective. The status quo was insecure as was their official ancient history. Would it work? Would it make any difference? The people accepted the cosmic view. Regum did not.

"Shall we?"

Shach decided to go along. Varos was making a mistake he thought in letting it appear that he was part of Regum's attempts to destabilise Prima.

He shrugged his shoulders, accepted his fate. Varos training the stunner on him, walked out of the room as if going for a pleasant walk. Some monks were approaching the sleek cruiser out of mere curiosity. The hatches remained closed, the engines whining in idle. Down the stairs and through an outer door. No one paid them any attention.

Shach was curious. To be amongst the Reganian's, what a turn of events. Luckily he had no real attachments here. The odd mistress but there would always be others.

As they approached the cruiser, brilliant white, a hatch opened and a step ladder cascaded out. They walked up and into the ship. Whoever was in control remained in the cockpit. The hatch closed and they secured themselves in webbed shock absorbent couches. The ship wobbled slightly as it began its ascent, then repositioning its engines to horizontal streaked off into the bright blue sky.

A short time later they were in space. Even if Prima sent a back-dated almost cumbersome shuttle after it this ship was far too advanced for any successful pursuit. They accelerated into space towards the orbital. Varos extracted a needle gun. Within it, the solution carried tiny nanoscale units of information. No need for crude BrainDraining or retarded psychological re- conditioning. Shach would feel normal.

"So what now?" he challenged Varos.

"Oh call it an inoculation. Stabilizing medication. Can't have you make up all sorts of insinuations. Not good for your mental state." and jabbed Shach. He passed out. Varos called one of the support team took a helmet from a cupboard and gently deposited it in Shach's head. They then with some struggle got him into his space suit. He checked the fibre optic links and allowed himself a smile. .

Hooked to the safety systems to make sure the space suit was functioning Shach's memories were slowly rearranged. The reality he perceived would not be altered, just his interpretation.

The ship approached the orbital at a leisurely pace. There was no defection to Regum. What was necessary was for the information to be isolated. Remain off Prima. The DVs were on the other side of the orbital so they had this part of space to themselves. By then Shach was coming out of his trance. For all he knew he merely passed out from the acceleration on take off. Slightly groggy Shach attempted to smile apologetically. The crew members along with Varos helped the almost inert figure into the double set of space-locks

"Well I guess this is where we part company." Shach felt a little strange. As if his mind was in remote control. Yet he felt perfectly OK. He had finished the job at the tracking station. Time to report back. Maybe now he would find out as to whom he reported his findings.

"Give my regards to your superior." Varos gestured for him to lead the way to the air-locks. Varos wanted him to tell the truth. That Shach was a Reganian double agent. That, Varos almost laughed at the simplicity of it would keep them busy. Spreading

disinformation. Another cog in Regum's intelligence units to drop hints that countered Prima's effective propaganda war. Shach the caught out defector. One at the highest level Regum managed to turn. If the Primaian's kept a lid on what the wave-field was about it would confirm to keep secure the real events of their own history. If it was released, even to a select few they would use that as propaganda against Regum.

As Varos had explained. Regum was starting to manipulate data through their extended Web in space, sow seeds of dissention. Maybe even respond with hostile intent. Position Primaians as aggressors. Destablilising their serenity and the peace of centuries. The people did not wish for any conflict or worse a real war. If they were appraised of the truth they might rebel. If not then the Reganian's were certain that the rulers of Prima were in total control. But if they were intent on reacting they would set themselves on a collision course. The Primaian's were adept at dabbling with the minds on the not so alien planet from Varos's point. To change these strange beings misguided view. To impose the historic evidence into their souls.

Varos, from counter-intelligence thought it was time for Regum to finally act. The trigger, Roshati's discovery and her termination. Considering what Regum had in mind, they were now ready to launch their mission and hopefully explain to the Martian's some uncomfortable truths. Reality would win out. Reality could not be denied if Shach acted accordingly to what the molecular data strings contained. Regum as a whole was not that concerned that the Primaians mind-warped their own people but they had no right in the universe to unduly poison other sentients with their monomania.

"We have sent a message announcing your return. Don't worry that you're on our ship. We don't want to be detained by SpaceKorps. So unnecessary."

"Well it's been a pleasure as always." Shach heard himself speak as if he were a third person. Varos hoped Shach would spill the beans. Create a little havoc, unloosen information. But would it set the Primaian's on a more rational course? Regum wanted Prima on side as first choice. This madness of theirs had to come to an end. Use any means to achieve at least an armistice in this battle of their souls with Shach the unofficial messenger. Revealing Primas monumental lies.

"You've got plenty of air, a triple pack of water, enough oomff in your attitude jets to circumnavigate the planet if you wish. We're positioned away from the DVs. We've also announced our arrival."

The monitor showed the orbital. It filled the screen. They saw the tiny short-lived white squirts of service bots.

"Until we meet again." Shach replied a little puzzled. He was under the impression Varos was his superior. Now he understood he was only his minder.

"Who knows. You did well. You're quiet the hero amongst our little community. Not that it will become public knowledge. And if you ever want to get out you know what to do."

"And the shadow programme is on stand by..."

"In case they try it on you? Yes. Your contents are secure. They'll only get out of you what we want them to. Double agents are of use to both sides."

"That was not always the case."

"Your own are learning. After all we are not the enemy."

"I know that. Until whenever."

"Where-ever. Maybe when you retire you can pay us a visit. You know you are always welcome."

"I appreciate that. You know it's not that easy. Torn between two home worlds."

"I guess it depends on what's on offer."

Shach smiled. That was true enough. Both sides wanted him. It was not that bad after all. If he did ever decide to retire on Regum it would be final. It depended on how they would deal with him the moment he was debriefed. He just hoped his people were as open minded as Varos's.

He went into the first airlock. He felt destiny awaiting him. His brain surged with excitement. So much to tell! The second lock opened. Infinite space. So open so inviting. No wonder the DVs wanted to go back again and again. Here was total freedom. The alien incursion of no consequence. Its informational content perhaps weird, its sentients more than just Volatile yet essentially they were not so unlike themselves millenia ago. He made a last check of his system status, the space suit fully functional. The small attached controls at the ready he pressed the forward button. His tiny jets pushed him towards his waiting companions. The orbital, with its many lights, looked welcome. He had only been up a few times to familiarize himself with the astronomers and their sacred duty to observe the beauty around them. So much to discover. He knew that if he could ever get out of intelligence he would devote his time to really study the cosmos in all its glorious and mysterious splendour.

"Why did Janon remain behind?" Heana asked. Another new face. Probably continual rotation so that no bonds could be established. "As intelligence agents they have to work and remain as much as possible in isolation. Avoid inadvertent cross

contamination. Exchange information not meant to be exchanged." She answered to herself. They were in the debriefing room. Triple sealed against electronic scanning, psychic probing and as an added precaution a containment field to make sure nothing got out mentally by inserted micro-boosters when dealing with anybody in contact with the Reganians.

Shach was puzzled. Heana, tall woman, rather thin, determined eyes, pursed lips, a thin nose, prominent cheek bones and being often in space short cropped black hair and pale. No ID.

He was sitting in a sensor chair, hooked up to diagnostics to vouchsafe his resonance for any aberrations he might not be aware of.

"He was to accompany you back." Heana said.

"Maybe he did not want to be seen being returned on a Reganian ship. Undue influence."

"We will get to that in a moment."

"You performed your duties at the tracking station. Your resonant scan," not bothering to look at the monitors "is clear. Yet no squirt or condensed messages present. Still we must assume you being on a Reganian ship..." Heana frowned. She had not been told Shach was a double agent. She was there to make sure the so called deleted data was not lurking somewhere else, whether in the systems, or his mind. Yet she sensed Shach's powerful essence. He was loaded. Unless it was the containment field suppressing his resonance. She decided to switch it off. His resonance became denser. His unconscious mind very active. She consulted her inbuilt pc on her sleeve.

Heana had to tread carefully. Without Janon's guidance she was on her own. Still Varos had dumped him here. Had he loosened Shach's mind controlled lock down mode so prevalent amongst Reganians. Both Gharbel, an assumption and Qatus were taking a direct interest in this event. From what she had been told Shach's data was dangerous. Not in itself but how it could be interpreted and used by the Reganian's. So it was imperative it remained permanently lost. That much was confirmed from the auto sensors running Shach's headspace.

Shach was reading her mind! Though naturally capable at that he was surprised that she seemed to almost present her mind's resonance with such clarity. So it was the data. That triggered off a sequence of thoughts. There was more to the data than a mere physical event. His mind bifurcated. One set of thoughts saw the Primaian end, sent by the Great Mind to counter the alien field, the other the more logical Reganian version a seemingly a natural event due to the massive absorption of black matter by their

galaxy. Like a forgotten dream something else was there. Not discernable with the ease of what his energized mind acquired but something hidden within this now inserted wave-field.

It was more than just energy, something was *embedded*. Encoded data. Subtly in phase, more like a carrier wave. So that was it. That was the big deal. The reason Roshati and Tregon had to be taken out. No wonder Varos had been so considerate towards him. They were after the same thing. Yet Varos had deleted the information. But that did not mean he had not absorbed it if he was EAI capable. That meant Regum needed confirmation. It was their way. One butterfly did not signify spring, but the butterfly was there. Shach had an image of the rolling wave spreading through space. Moving from its source, so there was a source. Of course his Primaian mindset explained it as the work of the Cosmic Consciousness. If that was the case then with this data-gate a set of coded field equations anyone capable would get into the mind of the Great Deity. Were the Ecclesiastics and the Divines concerned that if anybody could access the Supreme Being directly then there was no need for their presence. The whole theocratic structure redundant.

Holy shit. This was exciting. Even better his Reganian mind reverberated. It meant they could decode it. The only problem was the way it was dispersing itself as it moved out at almost light speed inside of his head. For the further it travelled the more entropy took its toll. The embedded information disassembled, infused with all the other waves along with the whole spread of the electronic spectrum so that the unity of the contents became mixed up with the rest of the universe's latent information making it harder to reassemble. It would need an array of super proportions to siphon out the inherent message within the dissipating carrier wave out there. It was all so clear in his brain.

Heana was aware of Shach's heightened mental activity. His resonance so dense her neural resonant awareness was overloaded with so much information that unless she went in, which was hard work and might influence her objectivity in debriefing Shach, could very easily create a false impression. He was a double agent after all. They were necessary but somewhat untrustworthy. It could all be disinformation.

Another woman entered. Tall, lithe, moving with a fluid grace, rich short auburn hair. It seemed only terrestrials grew their hair long.

"We need to e-scan you. It'll be a soft scan. It seems you know more than we expected." Heana explained. "Our system analyst." Looking at Elentra. "She's more attuned to the possibilities of AIs. We know Reganians have advanced in that field if only to counter our psychic abilities."

Shach was amendable. Only too aware of what was locked away within him. Thoughts were after all the tip of the mind's icebergs. An abstract conceptualisation and encapsulation of the greater wholeness of total consciousness.

From a locked cupboard Elentra rolled out a mobile trolley with a monitor, a console and a head brace. Thin optic fibres with touchpads at one end feeding into the main-drive, itself hooked with a thick cable into the recessed cavity in the wall. External linkage to their intelligence gathering data units.

"I wasn't aware Janon had to return with me. I told him what he wanted to know..." though he could not remember much of that. His brain pleased. He had said enough to satisfy him, knowing that it would never get out. As such he looked forward to uploading his contents into their system. Hardened. Deletion impossible. Ah things were working just fine. Keep on going ladies, I'm ready to be honest here.

What Shach did not know was the ruse Varos had used. The ship might have been Reganian but it was manned by SpaceKorps. The pretend abduction done to unsettle his mind. For Varos trusted nobody. Shach a double agent. But which side was primary? The nano packed information making him think he was Reganian on board the orbital. A trigger to unearth the deleted data.

"Don't forget this also concerns Qatus and maybe even Gharbel, not forgetting the pontiff." Shach reminded them trying to place Varos in the scheme of things.

Heana looked evenly at him. Intelligence was certainly moving up in all domains. He was probably being used by intel. That meant Pentham but he was value neutral. This was in Janon and Reno's court. Extending their domain into all sphere's of influence. Prima's intelligence agencies were planning something big his brain alerted him. He had to find out. It might simply be local planetary politics or it might concern Regum. He was fully alert.

Elentra put the headband on him. It felt warm, comfortable. Well they would be in for a surprise. He relished with anticipation the result of their probing.

Elentra fiddled with the controls, made sure they were functioning, slowly attuning themselves to his resonance. Moments later he heard the 'ping' that it was ready.

"Where is Varos?" Heana asked. Elentra was standing next to him paying attention to the read outs. Shach was flooding the system with his knowledge. His mind was now released, relieving itself of its contents. Shach smiled. Heana mistook it for keeping something back.

"He's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes Heana, gone. Back to Regum. Not only that, he may have deleted the data from your system but that did not stop his AI from uploading it." Shach dissembled under the influence of the nano-inserts.

"He worked for Regum?"

"So it seems." Shach's mind answered for him. He was more amused than shocked that they had been totally fooled. "Check his history. I bet he came out of nowhere."

Heana looked at Elentra. "I'll have to call that up." She walked over to another part of the wall and opened up it's recessed terminal. She busied herself as Shach's mind continued to unload all he knew. The system was taking it all in, too fast for Heana to keep up with. He sensed her indecision. Shut down Shach and loose the data, keep Shach going and the secrets would move into their memory banks.

"All I got is that he's one of Janon's. First noted in SpaceKorp, then during routine checks decided through systems checks that his real capabilities were with computers. Came from the outlands, a Volatile. Moved through the usual training programme. Nothing untoward. Family normal as far as Vs go. So he must have been approached during his stint with SpaceKorps. This isn't good Heana. SpaceKorps have been infiltrated. What a shit. They'll all have to be scanned. That will alert whoever else is working for Regum. Shach here we know is a double agent. And he has to be ours otherwise he would have left with Varos." She gave him a cursory look.

Heana merely nodded concerned with Shach's download. The analysis was now starting to unscramble the data. Streams of numbers.

"Elentra you're more mathematically minded. This is dense coding. What do you make of it.?"

She came over, took one look and said: "Shut it down."

Heana pressed the escape, delete buttons. Nothing happened.

"His brain's taken over. He's embedded." Elentra said, taking the headband off him. The numbers slowly went into zero's.

Elentra went over to the wall console and translated the data into imagery.

Space and the foggy wave from the rear as it passed away spreading across the universe, getting thinner with distance. Tiny flecks of red, green, yellow and blues flashing enticingly, the inserted data in the carrier wave.

"This was done on purpose. They used him to feed us this. I'm glad I got full clearance to deal with this." Heana pulled out a gun from one of her jumpsuit's pockets

and shot Shach straight between the eyes. The back of his brain exploded in a mess of grey splatters oozing down the back of the couch.

Elentra merely raised her eyebrows.

"A bit late but..." Heana shrugged her shoulders. "Delete it all."

Elentra got busy on the console. "No joy Heana, its hardened. Regum is getting better."

"So it's in the system?"

"Only ours."

"Right. Rip all the data out. Get a team together. Wherever it is, rip that out. It's gonna cause some consternation but that cannot be helped. I don't care if the whole orbital has to be gutted. We were sent a cyber bomb."

"You think that will be necessary Heana? As I said only in our system." Barely looking at Shach's eyes looking a little glazed if not surprised.

Heana walked over to the com-link at the door and announced that all transmissions in our out from the Orbital were to cease until further notice. She would contain this. Then Elentra told all technicians to assemble in the operational room of the orbital's security centre. All she insisted.

"We got our work cut out. We'll be blind for a while. I'm off to the ops centre if you need me. Get some tools then I'll be back here and rip this place apart. Cables and all. And dump the body." Elentra focused.

"I'm going to send a courier someone I can trust, and not SpaceKorps either. Tell them we we're contaminated. Let them sort the mess out regarding Regum's attempt at sabotage. It looks like there's a war on." Heana passing a glance at the corpse.

Elentra looked at Shach's pale face, his eyes looking at the ceiling totally vacant.

"I guess we're now gonna have to scan all the double agents." Elentra said.

"Make that all agents. Luckily there aren't that many up here."

"That we know of."

"Yes. Still some rats might make a run for it." Heana replied. She walked back over to the comlink. "Attention dispatch and transport bays. No one is to leave the orbital. Anybody feels inconvenienced tell them to see me. This is an order from security. Any incoming are permitted to dock. Out."

"You know Heana, I'm a bit worried."

"That's understandable." She looked with distaste at Shach's dead body.

"I'm thinking of the DVs. They're supposed to be attuned to hostile activity. There's a group dedicated to our security." Leaving the rest unsaid.

"You got a point there. Well we'll have to ship him back for an autopsy. So no dumping. Maybe the Reganian's are really as advanced as they claim. If they can slide through the DVs just like that..."

"Tell me Heana, did you sense anything?"

"Matter of fact yes. His resonance was dense. Thick, viscous. Multiple layered."

"Hmm, now that is interesting. But then he had been with the Reganian's. He was configured. Opened up just like that. Then uploaded."

"We are in for a long shit fight."

"Pity we can't throw off all the Reganian personnel."

"Don't say this Elentra. But sometimes I think it was time the DLs, the Ecclesiastics and Divine's faced the fact that everything changed aeons ago. After the Great Calamity. We let the best brains leave. The few we have we train only to the barest of necessities. All to protect this divine state of ours. The Reganians are walking all over us."

"Heana, just because of Shach?"

"And Varos. They're gonna come back with this. It'll be in the Web. That means more teams to make sure all access denied. That means more have to be trained methodically, that means a weakening of our innate mind set. Shit we're going to have to be like them to beat them."

"Maybe that is a good thing. And I didn't say this OK?"

"I think we understand each other Elentra. How? And why?"

"Well, it's like this. The Reganian's are total techno-heads. Whose in control? Not us. I mean we need them just to keep this place going. We can't even build our own shuttles. I think it really is time to assess where we want to be in the future. Sure we can withdraw into our eternal spirituality. But I got this feeling the universe is changing around us. Alien or no alien incursion. And the change is passing us by. More than that, leaving us behind."

"You think it's that serious?"

"Something is going on."

"Then we'll just have to find out what exactly. Coddle up to them."

"Yeah right. As if they're gonna tell us what they're up to."

"We know what they're up to."

"And is it working?"

"Elentra there is a long term strategy in place here."

"I'm glad to hear it.' She sounded unconvinced.

"We're gonna turn that distant planet our way. Let the Reganian's think they're on top of us. When their resonance gets stronger it will form a common bond. Maybe not today or tomorrow. But we are making progress."

"I'm glad you put it in perspective."

"Elentra never loose sight of the big picture. What happened here and a few days ago we managed to contain. A close call. That's all. If they had gotten away with it then that would be another matter."

"Yes I see your point. Well you know more than me."

Heana said nothing. She did. But then that was only because she was at the cutting edge. As long as the Reganian's did not interfere on that distant planet things would work out.

"Anyway Elentra, so far even with their AI brains they haven't penetrated far."

"Let's hope it stays that way."

"Put it this way in case you forgotten. Our minds are far in advance of theirs. They just ain't got what it takes."

"Yes you are right Heana. Thanks for sharing what you know."

"My job in a way. Well we got work to do."

"We certainly have that." Elentra felt relieved.

Ung

Dislocation was temporary. Her awareness of herself receded rapidly falling into her head's inner data crypt. Her memory of her essence, knowledge, everything she knew disappeared. Momentarily. Instantly her mind filled again. Her re-emergent self reassuring. She was still Uno, with one difference: her embedded uploaded legend. More than complete. Assured that her entwined history wrapped into her molecular being irradiated the environment she was in. Her inserted programme would download itself into every one she came across. If there were computer scans the artificial construct within her mind would establish her bone fides. To those who dealt with her she was for real. Accepted as her persona's uploaded self.

Prima's limited systems were primitive compared to Regum's self-driven smartware, intuitive logarythms, self assembling data banks interlinked in the unitary whole of their two Webspaces. One Global, WebWorld the base and its extention Universal, WebSpace encompassing most of the universe. Her data total, current in this space-time continuum. She was absorbing information fast.

Inserted in space, fully suited up, taking a break. The space cruiser, the 'Ice Queen', instantly recognized through her probing smartware belonging to captain Fertig. Silhouetted against the backdrop of Prima well away from the Orbital. Fertig belonged to SpaceKorps, the only section where both Primaian's and Reganian's worked together. Both spying on each other. It was a satisfactory arrangement that suited both sides. The Primaians needed them more than the Reganians. Off limits to Prima's Domain Lords. Their secure resonance difficult to penetrate. SpaceKorp easier to read often disseminating false information to keep as much from Primaian or Reganian scans as possible. Or let them gain data meant for their consumption. It was a game both sides played assiduously.

Ung had come back on board and made love. Fertig accepted her presence in what Ung revealed about her self, her inserted self. It felt so natural that even she believed it. Her real self prior insertion no longer existed, vanished upon her entry.

Ung watched the glistening crescent of Prima's sunrise. The stars shone in their empyrean splendour arcing back towards the centre of the galaxy. She stepped out from a quick chemical dousing, a short burst of water in the shower, felt clean again after their tumultuous sex and robed herself in an emerald green silken gown offsetting her subtly yellow tinged whiteness.

The first rays of the rising sun poured through the portals of the ship, pearly light shimmering on Prima's circumference, another glorious morning in space.

"Ung." Fertig called out from the bedroom. She came back to reality. In space she felt so free it was overwhelming. The vastness duplicated the sensation of infinity in her mind. She sighed pleasantly. Loving was one thing, doting upon it something else. She felt their combined lust as a wonderful sensation but it was no more than that. Fertig was useful as well. He was more than just a captain in SpaceKorps. As with everything to do with Prima there were clandestine sub groupings. Both up here and even more so down there. Fertig in his prime was not just a good lover and conversationalist he also engaged in discrete assignments at a diplomatic level. Something Regum thought imperative to keep their communication with Prima open whilst the latter did everything to create as many difficulties as possible. Not outward rejection, they needed Reganian technology. Prosaic interactions on a cultural and personal level were currently less encouraging. Fertig detailed to find out why the orbital over Prima was in lock down mode. Computers down, links off, no com traffic, no space traffic either. He held off going on board just yet.

Ung pretended to be indifferent as Fertig tried to find out what the lock-down was about. There was a complex personality hidden under a veneer of suave breeziness. One of the few who saw the Reganian's in a genuinely positive light. Perhaps that's why he was chosen to be assigned to the diplomatic corps. Gaining valuable insights regarding Reganian politics. Not that that was easy. Regum was decentralised. A planetary committee as such did not exist. Groups coalesced around specific issues then disbanded. Rarely was the same face seen twice. Reganian's were not political. They were doers, whilst Primaian were thinkers. Feeling a repugnance for doing business with their fellow beings on the twin planet. Forever at opposite ends regarding policies whilst they circumnavigated around each other just as the planets arced around their common sun.

The other attraction for her to Fertig, apart from his healthy lust for her was his connections. He came from one of the Families. That included a privileged sense of opulence she relished.

"What are you doing?" he shouted impatiently with good humour. She merely grunted returned to the bedroom drying her hair with a towel. Fertig was getting out of bed in the mild gravity of the ship's generators covering himself with the top bed sheet. The sun lighting the bedroom. Her intent was of course to keep him interested in her and one way of achieving that was to ration out their sex. Keep him longing for more. It threw his reason off balance. It also made him talkative and the more she learnt the better. Her curiosity was as insatiable as his lust.

They had met at Prima's only fully fledged university. She had been slightly dysfunctional breaking up with her then boyfriend feeling dissatisfied with his incessant mood swings, his gossipy friends who bored her intensely with who did what to whom and where and how and the endless speculations of why. Primain's were always in each others heads. It was tedious. In the end she gave him the flick. He took to drink, moping frequently, declaring his undying love, wanting a permanent bond. That had done it for her. Then one day at some seminar Fertig appeared presenting a paper on SpaceKorp's cooperation with Regum. The intricacies of diplomacy. He was so polished that she barely paid attention to what he said. She hungered for him. He moved in a world far more interesting than her own family for her father had been involved in some diplomatic activity pro bono. He said he did it for Prima and could well afford to. They were not poor. After the seminar came question time during which drinks were served. It had been so simple. Demure she approached him and pretending, notepad in hand slipping him her com-link contact details. It probably tickled his ego that being ten years younger was enticement enough. It was.

"Just thinking." She answered vaguely watching the sun.

"Coming back to bed?" he asked cheekily.

"Why are you out of bed then?"

"To start again my sweet."

"Not now. You were so good, I'm floating. A cup of tea would be nice." She said dreamily even though it was an act. By being disinterested in what he did he could not help but fill the gaps she created. From what he related there was something happening on Prima. Religious fervour was everywhere even infecting the Families. Religious devotion was becoming a social obsession. Going all dewy and mystical, expressing in endless conversations the magnificent experience they all felt. Luckily Fertig kept his head. He didn't even pray, nor did she. At least they understood each other there. If the Great Mind was totally diffused throughout space it was also diffused within them. They were part of the Spiritual Cosmic Consciousness so having the Holy Spirit within them was

enough. Yet there was something else about this fervour. It was tinged with an obsession that harked back to the distant past. They were all in such an expectant mood of some great divine revelation. Never quite gained, always immanent and there it remained, keeping them longing for more. Pornographic spirituality.

Fertig found his own black robe, which matched his black hair, ambled over to the corner kitchen, pressed the microwave's programme for two teas, waited a moment as it was poured and handed one to her as he sat on the bed still hoping for some more sex.

"Fertig?"

"Yes honey bun."

"I've come to a decision." Her Brain told her.

"Oh?" he tensed a little.

"I'm thinking of joining the DVs. With your reference..."

"The DVs?" he asked nearly spilling his tea.

"Yes."

"Why?" he looked shocked.

"To help." It was a vague enough answer. Her Brain certain she would gain access. Once accepted she would be privy to their data base.

"You got any idea what that means?"

"Means? What do you mean 'means'?"

"Us"" He looked crestfallen. He was losing her.

"Us." She repeated lamely. "Us is good, but it's not forever."

"I know that." He was forlorn. A total surprise as it was for her. But something was guiding her in that direction.

"I sense the infinite. When I was out there just now."

"So it's gotten to you too."

"Gotten?"

"This religious fervour."

"Oh I'm not after that. I don't know. I'm after something which I can't explain. It's more than a feeling, it's like an urge."

"They'll scan you. Then again being Family they'll no doubt accept you. Then there is the burn out rate."

"That's the weak."

"It's the relentlessness of the task. Anyway we can't go to the orbital."

"Why ever not?"

"Well we can, but once there they're not letting anyone out."

"Really? How strange."

"Something happened. Not that they're saying. Even the com-links are out."

"When did this happen?"

"Whilst you were in the shower. Since I'm supposed to meet with a certain person being stuck here indefinitely isn't going to help my work. I tell you what. Let's go down together. Talk with your parents. I'm not against your decision. It's very noble..."

Well he recovered quickly Ung thought for she did not want to loose him entirely. Her Brain of course told her who her family was. With Fertig present it would help establish her bona fides. She even had a sister, or was that two? Fertig would probably have another lover sooner than later. Fertig would also be interested in her Family. To glean information? Father was in the great game after all. Well and good. How he would take her going off into space for good might not sit that well. Yet the kudo's that society bestowed on the DVs, the frontline in space would reflect magnificently upon them. It was hard to resist such a request. And she knew she'd pass the scans. It took a special resonance to be accepted. One of the few departments where aptitude was essential, no matter how connected, well placed, rich, established in their tiny social circles or one's pedigree figured in being selected as a DV.

Her Brain downloaded her Families history. Minor land owners as many others after the Great Calamity her Brain informed her. Regum an opponent of everything Prima stood for. During the Calamity with the mentally dislocated, the lost, the religious hysteria, the bloodletting, the fractious wars, the civil disturbances the Domain Lords needed all the help they could get in re-establishing the status quo. In a way her family became indispensable, having kept their heads. Siding with the people who were simultaneously in open revolt against the medievalism preached by the priests. Some life that. On their estate her ancestors responded by improving their workers living conditions, allowing them small plots to grow their own produce, the profits entirely theirs. It worked. Peace was established. Other more established Families grumbled at their enlightened response. Rather than putting the fear of divine retribution into their souls, her family dismissed the priests imposed on them and chose those who were more aligned to the spiritual needs of their workers. Priests who did not prey on their souls but actually listened to their concerns. Word got around and finally some Divines even visited their estate to see for themselves this social experiment. They came away convinced that a more gentle approach actually worked. Through auspicious timing their estate became a model in itself. Experts came, as did the bishop, even representatives of the divided ruling

council. Her Family quickly rose through the political ranks. Having dealt with such difficult conditions so successfully it was deigned by the powers that be that if they could assuage the Volatile's hostilities through negotiation, they were perfect as diplomats. Leaving the rantings of ideologues to the hard minded who were soon sidelined, other Families followed their example. Most of them were absent landlords anyway who had no idea what real life was like on the ground. Their Family had remained true to their roots. They sent their children to Prima's only university thus maintaining her Family's social standing and the power that flowed on from there. Over time the ruling council enshrined their reforms into laws. Their position was assured and had been ever since.

Fertig flew the 'Ice Queen' down to Prima's only space port. The futuristic-retro design, aerodynamic curves of his ship made it one of the top models from Regum's space factories to own. Guards were everywhere in their matte black full body suits patrolling the complex. Travelling light, their gear remaining on board Fertig to return as soon as the clamp down on the orbital was lifted.

Did she want to really become a DV? Ung nodded. Her Brain insisted this was the way forward. She could see no problems, she knew she'd be accepted. They were always in short supply. She sent a message home announcing her arrival. The return message moments later glad to have her visit. By sending the message, Prima's computer systems would note that, search patterns looking for subversive sub-texts thus inserted Ung's history; her legend. The same went when leaving the space port as they made their way through an internal security check. More subtle insertions giving her clearance to proceed to the adjacent airport.

Even though Ung knew somehow she was secure she still felt relieved with the ease by which she was accepted who she pretended to be. Everyone on Prima was under some sort of surveillance, even when accompanied by one of SpaceKorps major players. Fertig in mufti wearing a light grey suit instead of the usual uniform.

At the airport they went to the air-taxi stand. From the line of VAVs a young pilot detached himself from the group he was standing with, saluted smartly and said: "Ung good to see you. Captain Fertig. Your father sent me to pick you up." Ung gave a wry smile. They had sent their private plane to meet them. Fertig knew of the family but had not had the opportunity to meet them. He was looking forward to it. Maybe Ung might keep him. Love. Lust, Fertig enjoyed both.

"Why thank you, that was sweet of them." Ung beamed, Krost's friendly brown eyes smiled. They walked to the private apron of the airport. The brilliant white VAV was

there with the Family's insignia, a bunch of dark red grapes. Father had never been ostentatious like the other social elite. Their vineyard was one of the best on the planet. Fertig was relieved Krost did not engage them in idle chit-chat.

The VAV's doors folded out, a step ladder released, entering the plane both sitting behind Krost. He went through pre-flight checks, systems A-OK and having received permission from the control tower taxied down the departure zone. They lifted off vertically, wobbled a bit, the jets repositioned themselves and they shot off into the bright blue sky, the light brown desert below, the distant horizon slightly hazy. Flying in silence.

Ung was excited to come back. She had not visited since her graduation from university. She a social scientist specialising in what bothered the Primaian councillors, the theocrats: deviance. That included a special course in alien mind-sets. That part of the curriculum could not be discussed with anybody not even her family. She had been amused at their simplistic reasoning. The tutors not part of the universities teaching staff held their course in a special wing at the pontifical palace. Ung was entering all the right domains as her history slowly expanded itself through Prima's institutions.

The plane jetted over sparse trees slowly turning to forests, then the vast estates, furrowed land, the crops gathered, rolling hills below and in the distance the beautiful mountain ranges and their snow capped peaks. Her Brain receded now that her history was in place.

"Nearly there." Krost informed them keeping his eyes front. He probably used his HeadInDisplay but for extra back up used the HUD system on the windscreen of the plane, its light green configuration glowing lightly. "In range now." Krost announcing their immanent arrival. He vectored in the final approach she seeing their house. A two storey mansion, simple in design, surrounding veranda and the patio out the back looking over the vineyard, the rolling forested hills further out. A little to the east the tiny village of their workers clustered around a central square with its own house of worship.

Krost skilfully lowered the VAV at the designated LZ, a large white circle to the side of their house. The jet shut down, they got out. Her parents were waiting for her beaming happiness. Dad had a similar grey suit, his silver hair giving him a patrician look. Mum with her radiant golden hair, trim as ever in a loose fitting red gown waiting and smiling at her arrival.

Ung led the way. Fertig with Krost checking the VAV. Remaining outside even though they had a hangar. The weather was not going to change. Fertig might be called back any moment when the security blanket thrown over the orbital was lifted. He

conferred with Krost requesting to give the plane a full going over. He then joined Ung and her parents.

"This is captain Fertig, Nahif and Melos."

"A pleasure to finally have the opportunity to meet you."

"The pleasure is all ours." Melos said. "We took the opportunity of having a light luncheon prepared. You do have time to join us?"

"Yes, I'm delighted, thank you." Fertig replied nearly mentioning the shut down of the orbital.

They sat out the back under the trellised vine entwined patio, the mottled sunlight spreading in abstract patterns over the table with it's collation of cold cuts of meat, two salads, a bowl of fruit salad on a tray of ice, a cooler with a dozen small bottles of beer, two silver glistening pitchers of wine. Dad looked fit even though he was well into his sixties and mother as elegant as ever. Ung was happy. It was all working her Brain assured her.

During lunch they talked of inconsequential matters. It was not considered polite to badger a guest about his social position, his duties if any or being overly inquisitive with whom he was in contact whilst engaged in his work. Instead they talked about the difficulties with their herb garden, the soil so important for the grapes, the humidity and the ever present danger of fungal infestation. This years' crop was in, fermenting happily. They sold their wine in bulk letting the distributors bottle it. They did some themselves, well, Melos smiled their workers did that, sterilizing the bottles, a laborious time consuming task. Business was as good as ever.

The meal over they nibbled at the fruit. Fertig had drunk a few beers along with Melos whilst the ladies drank the rich fruity white wine they specialised in.

"How long are you intending to stay Ung?" Nahif asked, taking in Fertig. She was mature enough not to put them in separate rooms unless he or Ung requested it.

"A few days. Depends on Fertig. He's on call."

Fertig nodded. "Negotiations."

"Oh yes." Melos smiled. "So important."

"Always something to consider."

"That is true. Like you I too am on call, even though I've officially retired."

"More leeway I hope. Less constrained no doubt."

"To a degree. Not that I speak my mind. But certain hints can be dropped. It makes for smoother negotiations, gets rid of the wrinkles."

"Lucky you." Fertig finished his bottle and drank some water.

Melos poured more wine, uncapped another beer, Fertig declined.

Ung felt a certain reticence emanating from her parents. Maybe it was Fertig's presence yet they were used to dealing with a whole array of different people. Still it was there, just. Ung was wondering how to broach her wishing to join the DVs. She waited for an opportune moment. No hurry, Nahif rose and returned with a tray of coffee, some biscuits, milk and sugar and set them on the table. She poured for all of them but let them add what and how they liked their brew.

"So what is Mena up to?"

Her parents exchanged looks. That was a surprise.

"Don't tell me, she's got a life, a lover perhaps?" Ung teased.

"If only." Nahif said wistfully, looking over the fields. Ung followed her gaze.

"Gone hiking?" Ung suppressed the urge to laugh. Quiet, reticent Mena.

"She's joined them." Naïf said trying to hide her displeasure and giving a quick look at Fertig. He sensed this was family.

"I could check the plane." He said diplomatically.

"You're SpaceKorps right?" Nahif asked.

"That is correct."

"Being in mufti indicates something diplomatic."

"That is so ma'am."

"Please captain Fertig, call me Nahif."

"Then you must drop the captain."

"Of course Fertig. No you don't have to excuse yourself. It's not that personal. In fact," and she quickly looked at Melos who though frowning slightly was not ill at ease. "well, she's joined the Divines. Wants to immerse herself in holy meditations. Not just anywhere either but up there." There, she'd said it.

"Where is she now?" Ung asked. This might work out well since she was considering the same thing. But not from the spiritual angle. Ung knew what Mena was after, communion with the Divine Mind. She might even be recruited as a DV. That would be perfect.

"At some seminary, preparing herself."

"Wow. Well maybe not 'wow', I mean I'm both surprised at her decision and not, if you know what I mean." Ung said.

"Yes we feel the same. Not shocked exactly but surprised just like you."

"What made her do it? Her first love affair gone wrong? Not drugs I hope. I know how they can make one feel divine, or so I'm told. Maybe she got drunk for the first time.

Or a bad dream or even a divine revelation?" Ung blurted out all at once. Mena going mystical. In a way it did not entirely surprise her. Her Brain told her that she had always been reserved, withdrawn, ill at ease in company, probably terrified of boys.

"She didn't say. She just walked into their reception centre one day. The next thing we hear she's remained there, training for her vocation."

So the priests had her Ung thought

"What bothers us is she's excommunicated herself from us. Sent a message asking us not to contact her."

"That is dedicated."

"It's so sad really. We may never see her again."

Oh dear, and here she was intending to become a DV.

"Er, you may not like this then."

"What is that Ung?" Nahif asked.

"I'm going to enter the ranks of the DVs."

"You're not. Not you too." Nahif tried to hide her shock.

"Ung." Nahif said.

"What dad?"

"I know what they do."

"So do I. I feel the call of the infinite."

"Ah." From dad.

"Oh." From mum.

"I know it must be a blow. The two of us going up there. And we arrived at this independently. Honest. We didn't discuss this. Will you vouchsafe me?"

"You have thought about this? It's not just some whim?" Melos asked.

Fertig tried to look helpless. Nahif gave him a reassuring smile.

"Most definitely." She could not admit to having studied alien psychology, more like spy psychology, but it was a way of ascertaining what they were on about.

"Well it is an honourable calling. As is Mena's." Melos replied slowly. Then he nearly laughed: "Imagine the neighbours, the gossip."

"Oh yes, we will be the flavour of the moment." Nahif smiled at the deliciousness of it all.

A slight breeze was stirring the vines on the trellis above. The scene was peaceful, serene, bucolic. It was tempting to remain here Ung thought but for ever? She wanted to be out there. Space was freedom.

"And tell me Fertig, what do you think of Ung's decision?"

"Commendable. Personally though I would have some reservations." He nearly said 'regrets'.

"Naturally." Melos being urbane. "Life. So many avenues and not always in conjunction with the soul's desires."

"Well said. Ung will be in my heart though."

"For a time yes. But a new love will come along. As long as the memories are fond ones..." Melos lightened the pain of separation. "And you Ung? Maybe you have fallen out of love."

"Dad. It's no that."

"I know. I felt something similar when the diplomatic corps beckoned. It was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me."

"See?" Ung relieved this had gone so smoothly.

"Just don't burn out. You are stronger than Mena. But strength isn't enough for what you are about to engage in. Willpower, determination, eternal vigilance incessantly. Then there are the strange mental manifestations to consider."

"I know, that's probably what makes it so attractive."

"I will give you my blessing Ung." Melos said.

"With a heavy heart so will I Ung."

"It would be most improper of me not to second that." Fertig looked at Ung. Her heart melted for them all. Humbled she said: "Thank you. I won't disappoint you. I promise. I will do my best." 'You will' her Brain added.

"Alien psychology..." Melos hinted. Ung understood.

"Not that alien. They are sentients and as a similar life form by the very fact we can relate even to that alieness means they cannot be that far removed from our resonance."

"You think so?" Menos asked interested. Fertig attentive.

"I can't say I know so, not directly, not yet but from what we do know, they have a world of their own not unlike ours millenia ago. Who knows?" she brightened, "I may even get along with them!"

"We are supposed to repel them." Menos said stating the official line.

"Yes. Interesting isn't it?"

"I see you have your own thoughts there."

"Almost heretical."

"I would not go so far as that. A new infusion then."

"Exactly dad."

"If they let you."

"Well that remains to be seen, literally."

"They are extremely strict. Compared to Mena's chosen path..."

"Too vague for me."

"The divine path?"

"The approach dad."

"Ah. More wine? Beer?"

Fertig asked for another coffee.

"It could turn ugly up there." Melos hinted.

"You know something."

"The orbital is shut down. Something is going on."

"Maybe a security run."

"Maybe. The high DLs are busy."

"So you're still in touch."

"Barely. But the gossipers are at it, as always."

"Making things up." Ung said. See what he would reveal. Fertig was content to listen. The essence of discretion. He could be trusted. He would know some things and yet volunteered nothing.

"There have been staff rotations." Melos ventured.

"Now from your point of view that is something." Fertig responded.

"It's like closing the circle, circles." He added. "People are disappearing, being removed. The Web has gaps in it. Whether that is us winning that one or Regum removing data no one knows."

"That's official?"

"It is. And they are recruiting amongst the Volatiles. The Ecclesiastics are planning something. Some aspiring students are rejected. Many are failing the entry requirements. They are narrowing the intake."

"Yet Mena got into the seminary. Maybe she's a natural."

"So it appears."

"So you're saying something is up. And the DV intake?"

"That is unaffected. The battle continues."

"Battle?" Ung asked surprised. She took a biscuit, found it delicious and had two more, then drained her coffee.

"A slip of the tongue and an unfortunate expression."

Knowing dad, aware how diplomats expressed themselves this was no slip of the tongue. Were things getting complicated up there? Her Brain said nothing. She sighed.

"SpaceKorps is recruiting." looking longingly at Ung.

"Are they?" Fertig asked. That was news to him.

"You didn't know?"

"I was away."

"Ah."

"Looks like a shift of perspectives." Ung's Brain related.

They both directed their gaze upon her calmly, concerned for her well being.

"A change?"

"I don't know. Could be Fertig." Melos replied thinking. "You know we are both in a sort of difficult situation." He began not waiting for an answer. "I mean us, here, socially. You have your orders, priorities and well, I'm not completely out of the game. I can say this much. We deal with our people on Regum. Make sure they stay out of trouble. Conform to norms. If they overstep the line we smooth things over. That's the daily stuff. The broader picture is cultural exchanges, lectures, theatre, the arts. Of course it's one way traffic in our favour. Directives have gotten re-routed. Your department for some reason has taken on some of our responsibility. Your people are getting directly involved, on the ground. The interesting thing is, given we are still responsible for your people's well being, accommodation, venues and the like we are no longer told as to what their stated mission objectives are. That doesn't worry me, I'm out of that, finished with it. But if my old department doesn't know what exactly your people are engaged in, if there were problems, you know, the usual, an incident in a bar let's say well we were there to massage ego's. Now even that is no longer our domain. We're being rolled back, wound down. Not that it bothers me, as I said, I'm out of it. But if I were still 'in', cultural interaction is so important. Curtailed. What remains is student and academic exchanges. That has not changed. I'm not mentioning this for you to explain this change in policy but I'd thought I'd let you know of the shifting priorities, that's all."

"Thank you Melos. It is appreciated. Well you've been in the game longer than I have and must have seen quite a few changes in your time. Allegiances shift. Maybe they think, the ruling council that is and since we are minders in a way that by being more actively engaged we could learn from direct experience. Up to now we were constricted to space itself. It could be to broaden our perspective, a learning thing."

"You are probably right."

Fertig fell silent. If his division was taking over the normal channels of diplomacy then he was beginning to understand the reasons for his mission. The negotiations with Regum were more intense this time round. Heading in an as yet undefined direction. Strengthening their resources in dealing with Regum. If the civilian diplomatic corps was being moved into the background...but he let it rest there. It was enough for now. Speculation whilst useful would at this moment be more of a distraction. He was glad he had come with Ung.

"If you do meet Mena up there, don't tell her anything. We don't want her to worry. You know how she is." Melos changed the subject.

"Yes, she'd freak. Well she ought to be safe at the seminary for now."

"One would assume so." Nahif said unconvinced.

"Is Carias still around? I tried to get in touch but got some automated message. Cannot be contacted for the duration. Must be important." Ung's Brain released.

"We barely know, you were at college with her..."

"She seemed the smartest of our little group. Ah well, maybe later."

The rest of the afternoon was passed walking in the extensive park to aid digestion. The conversation petered out and Ung's parents went back to the house. Sitting under a magnificent ancient oak Ung told Fertig she might as well submit her application to become a DV. She activated her computer on her sleeve, submitted her 'history', details of her family, their resonant state, hers, all courtesy of her Brain and waited. Half an hour later the official encoded reply came back. She had been accepted as an inductee.

"I'm in Fertig." She was pleased. At last. Right at the cutting edge. The data self deleted in her pc.

"Well it's what you want to do." He replied a little unsure. He had not thought of Ung having any aims. Many of the Families remained private citizens. Often their children were empty bubble heads. The vague generation. Not lost, just not there. Unconcerned, indifferent their main concern their own welfare. A life of endless visits, parties, gossip mongering, of upmanship which was a bit hard to follow given the vacuous state of their minds. None of the DLs or the Council seemed to care. It gave the Volatiles a chance to grab vacancies. That gave the people hope that their sons and daughters had a future beyond the farm. And as Fertig guessed they were more committed knowing as Volatiles they had to perform better than their more well heeled fellow students.

"Sweetheart."

"Yes?"

"No matter what happens, be careful. The DVs are the tightest of groups. Not just through their isolation up there but also within. You'll be under constant surveillance, permanent soft-scan. If you deviate from their norms they will BrainDrain you. I'd hate to see that happen. You're too precious."

"I know." She sighed. Looking out at the beautiful scene. The still forest, the wind humming in the trees, the twitter of birds, the white fleecy clouds in the sky. So easy to remain here away from the struggle up there. The convoluted politics between the two planets, the state of Prima's resonance.

"The DVs are in a way the pathfinders as well. They're not just observers."

"I want to learn, to know, to experience what is going on Fertig."

"That is what concerns me. You have to be careful. They have direct access to your mind."

"Good." She answered defiantly.

"I did some checking, more out of curiosity about Carias."

"Oh yes? Her family?"

"I haven't dug that far. You met them."

"Yes once or twice. Strange couple. Her father really quiet. Don't even know what he does, if anything. His wife, oh boy what a woman. If she had power she'd be dangerous."

"Oh?"

"Total control freak. Her husband's more a cipher than a being."

"I've met couples like that." Fertig laughed. "A meeting of extremes. Some are like that. They want their lives organised for them, be told what to do or not. Both sexes. A bit rarer in us men."

"Yes I got that impression as well."

"There is something else. Someone has been making enquiries about me." Fertig said tightly.

"Is that normal?"

"It happens. Anybody can do it if they have clearance."

"You don't think..." Ung was thinking of her parents. Surely not. In the highest of social circles trust was rare. Then again with the games they played, more out of boredom Ung assumed any titbit was used to gain some advantage, socially for sure, sometimes political as well. Positioning themselves favourably.

Fertig shook his head. "Who else knows I'm here?"

"Fertig, the authorities for one. Whoever did this timed it so as to make it appear that maybe my parents instigated this search. What did you find out?"

"Only that." He relaxed, smiled. "I've got some neat hardware."

"Good. If it is malicious then these nosy mongrels will give themselves away."

"You think it's that?"

"Most likely. Though I can't think of anyone. But then appearances amongst us Families is all it is. Appearances. The kindest people can be the most vicious and those who are a bit, er, difficult often the most amendable. You did say you are in some sort of negotiations with Regum. It could be them. Find out who they, meaning you are dealing with."

"Very good Ung." He felt relieved. She might be right. What could never be revealed for his own personal safety was the nature of these negotiations. Even the Reganian's were extremely cautious. So was he since he was in contact with a cell of theirs. That was not so unusual for Reganian's. Fertig understood that these contactees were mere representatives not the main players. They would not have done this search. Not so openly. Preferring to remain out of the picture as much as possible. Set up for something or being vetted for a reason that could simply not be revealed until they were sure where he stood. He knew where he stood. SpaceKorps was expanding. He was rising with it. Uncomfortable with Prima's ever growing insistence of being the dominant factor in just about everything. They wanted to contain Regum. There could well be Reganians who did not take kindly to this change of atmosphere. Strife was brewing. It was not so much that he wished to be on the winning side, he wanted to be on the right side. If Regum proved to be that side he had no problems defecting. That was the easy part. He had no real ties here, except maybe for Ung and she was moving into DV territory. That could be useful if they remained in contact. He was tiring of Prima's politics.

They rose slowly walking back to the house. On their way he remarked he was going, returning. Back to where he did not say. He asked if she would stay or go. Now that they were expecting her at the orbital she would have to leave eventually. Did she want to get in touch with her friends before she left?

"Fertig, the friends I had at college are all over the place now. They do keep in touch. I did. It was tedious. All they banged on about was their work, their positions, their aims in other words their professions their big noting themselves. It was awful."

"I'm sorry to hear that." They neared the house. "What about your sister?"

"Mena? We were close. But now she's gone all religious..."

"Surely that is a good thing."

"For some." Ung said distantly.

Fertig did not insist. He didn't care what Ung believed or did not believe. He liked her for who she was: herself.

"So you coming with me then?"

"Might as well."

"That sounds a bit..."

"Indifferent?"

"Well, not your usual self."

"My usual self." She laughed. "And what is that?"

"Your cool serenity. This sounded almost like some burden, an unwelcome duty."

"It wasn't meant like that."

He nodded.

Back inside the living room Ung and Fertig said they were going. Mother said all the right things, that they were welcome to stay as long as they liked, father in the study came over and said he regretted the shortness of the visit. But they both understood Fertig's position. And now that Ung had made up her mind to join the DVs they certainly did not disapprove. It was her choice after all. Hugs from mum and dad, Fertig standing in the background. Nahif held back her tears, whilst Melos looked lovingly at his daughter.

"Don't burn out. At the first signs, get out." He said when he had recovered from the pain of parting with his daughter.

"I think you should say that to Mena."

"Well she said she's happy and that is what matters in the end." Nahif being philosophical.

"Remember Ung, keep in mind when you're up there of the bigger picture." Melos advised her.

"Space is the big picture dad."

"I meant our orientation. Things are shifting, perspectives are changing, political stances realigning. I see difficulties ahead."

"Isn't that always the case? Maybe you're too close to it all."

"I may be close Ung but you will be in the middle of it."

"I know." Her eyes flashed excitement.

"It's more than just an adventure."

"But dad, for me it is."

"Maybe that is the right attitude. Not burdened with their entrenched views. Don't let it get to you."

"I'll remember that."

"If you have any problems, don't hesitate to get in touch. Even an open channel. I don't care. You're important to us."

Ung was touched.

"Don't be too inquisitive." Melos warned. Fertig thought of the search done on him. Was Melos dissembling? He hoped not. He made a mental note that later, much later if the search pattern was still on file somewhere he might locate it's source. But then if whoever it was instigated this they would not reveal their actual location. It would be done remotely. Unless he was meant to find out. If so then it was a warning. But warning him of what? What he was considering he kept to himself. Ung didn't know. Neither Lehra nor Drassid would have done this. It could be a routine check. He was overreacting. But in his situation one could never be too careful either. The best thing for now was to let it go. Pursuing it would attract attention. It would indicate to the watchers he had something to hide.

"I won't be playing any mental games dad." Ung assured him.

"Good. Be safe, stay safe." He said and they embraced once more.

They walked over to the VAV. Krost had checked the plane and handed Fertig his log report. Shipshape to go. The hatch opened, they both waved and made themselves comfortable in the cockpit.

The ship could fly itself but Fertig wanted to stay familiar keep his skills tuned. Krost in the rear. A final systems check, he activated the engines, her parents well back as the vertically set jets roared into life blasting dust and leaves around them in all directions. They lifted off slowly, the house getting smaller, then reinclining the jets slowly at an ascent angle flew into the slightly cloudy sky. As she was thrust back into her seat she felt a sense of elation, of freedom. Being a potential DV was even more exciting. To be at the frontier, at the very edge of their universe, it couldn't get any better.

At the space port, Ung and Fertig said goodbye to Krost and entered the 'Ice Queen'. Being SpaceKorps they were not denied permission to leave Prima.

After a while roaring into the stratosphere, Ung asked what he was going to do? It was a general question but her Brain was inquisitive. It suggested Fertig had something on his mind. But without instigating a scanning probe and thus alert him the old fashioned way would have to do.

"I've got meetings to attend to."

"I meant," she covered herself, "About us."

The sky was turning dark purple, the first stars coming out.

"Oh I'm sorry. My mind's on other things. I'll get you to your destination." Then frowning said: "I know once you're there it's practically over for us. It's not like you're under contract with the DVs. You will be with an extremely tightened down domain. But since the DV's know *things*, you will be isolated with a rarefied group."

"Yes. I'll miss you."

"Me too. It's been great. Err one last, ahm fling?"

"No it'll make it even harder."

"You're probably right. Best to let us move on."

"In a way it's not an end you know. More like a beginning."

Fertig became curious as to what she meant by that and waited.

Her Brain soft scanned him. No discernable deep mental activity. That could be extreme self control. Nor was she inclined to probe further. When her Brain found out about the search on him it read the data, then isolated it. He had secrets. A clandestine meeting at a habitat. Reganians had thousands of habitats in space. His duties being in the diplomatic corps did not make this in itself unusual. But it was of interest. She wanted him to know she was with him on whatever he was engaged in. Her Brain revealed that much.

"You're going to come to some decision aren't you?" and held her breath.

Fertig tensed. How could she know? Unless she was psychic. Of course. No wonder her application had been accepted so quickly. Yet he had revealed nothing, had not thought about meeting Lehra and Drassid. It was completely out of his mind. Then again she could be guessing. But why would she want to know? Who was she working for? Was this some set up? But then normally an agent would have tried to steer the conversation and in all this time that never occurred. Then again good agents were not that obvious. If she was one. Mentioning this in his ship was also the best opportunity to broach anything delicate. His job always required some sort of decision. Ung not the curious type. She never mentioned much about herself either. This was more complex than he was prepared for. He adjusted quickly.

"Well Ung, whether to keep in touch. It's not that you're not allowed to receive incoming messages, or reply. I'm wondering, since we are parting whether to stay, err, friends."

That was well done Ung thought. He is smart.

"And?"

"Am I? Of course if we move apart, that's life. You might find someone else, I may eventually, sometime in the dim distant future."

"Yes." She breathed out. "Do you trust me?"

"In a way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The sky was black now, the blue glow of Prima illuminating the scene below them. The stars shone in their glory.

"In my work I have to be careful. Now that you're with the DVs, they are real siphons for information. Even a chance remark can fit into their data and be used in ways I would not even consider Ung. So I trust you as you are, but once you're in, it becomes somewhat complicated."

"You must have wondered about me." She changed tack.

"Naturally. You're an interesting person."

"I meant from your professional angle."

"I never did a search if that's what you mean."

"You didn't?"

The engines cut out. They had enough thrust to propel them onwards.

"Never. My superior's might have, probably did. I should have said this. But as no alerts were raised they seemed satisfied that you are who you say you are, what you are and the rest of it."

Whilst not the real answer it satisfied her Brain that her legend was securely in place.

"Any one else perhaps?" Guessing.

She laughed. "You'd be onto it in a flash."

"That's true."

"Anyway they wouldn't find anything that your superior's didn't know already."

He concentrated on the read outs. The ship had it's own systems checks for those on board. AI capable. Ung dormant. He hoped so.

"By the way, what your father said, about burning out."

"Yes?"

"Please don't"

"I wont."

"The alien infusion."

Now Ung was alert. "What I'm gonna say may not be the official line Fertig. OK?"

"Trust me."

"The alien field. Look at the science. They are photons. You know how weak they are. A candle is a trillion times more powerful."

"It's the informational content they carry Ung."

"Yes, granted. But they are so weak they can't penetrate the planet, during daylight anyway. The telescopes needed have to be so powerful to unscramble them, way beyond our mental capabilities. You get my drift?"

"In a way."

"Fertig. If such powerful instruments are necessary then what does that tell you? I'll tell you. It, they can't affect us."

"It's the content Ung." He replied calmly. He agreed with her but had to make sure they were on the same wavelength.

Ung was not too sure where her Brain was leading her. There was something hidden in space, that much was certain. It felt like a hunch. Maybe an event Prima was not revealing so camouflaged they were obsessed with the alien field. The Reganians certainly did not care. Nor were they affected.

"Hard to argue against. But the Reganians aren't off their rocker Fertig."

"Which annoys the superiors."

That was interesting. Mentioning the Primaians as a third party. Thank you Fertig she thought. She was getting somewhere.

"Be careful Ung."

"I'll be my demure self. Don't worry, I'll be so not there they'll barely notice me."

"The perfect subject." He had wanted to let slip 'agent'. But if she were Drassid or Lehra might have said something if there was one this end. Another complication unless, unless there were some on Prima who were not entirely convinced either. Ung wasn't.

"Well I wouldn't go as far as that Fertig."

"You'd make a good agent." And he turned his head a tiny fraction to get a glimpse from his peripheral vision to her reaction.

"Ha. And what secrets have you that would have me be one?"

He said nothing.

"I meant Fertig that there are other ways of finding out." It was as good a guess as any.

"Such as?" see what she knew.

"Well, one leaves a path behind. Pick up the pieces. An agent does not have to be in place."

"True. You could be the distraction."

"Yes I could, couldn't I? But I got no idea where you been, don't care. That you're here is all that matters."

"I do take you for what you are Ung. A student who wants to learn. As to what, well, if I were there to find out I would have asked."

"You are, now, in a way. And I will tell you. I don't believe the spin. But the DVs are onto something way out there. That is no secret. The Primaians boast about it. I want to know the truth."

Fertig was all ears.

"I do. In a way I feel removed from everything Fertig. I'm here but not really in, if you can understand that."

"That usually happens to spacers. Must be a new experience for you. Officially they would say you're alienated. And you know what that means."

"Close observation."

"Which you will be once on the orbital."

"I know. But there is another part of me that can relate, if it wants to."

"Well make sure it does."

So he wasn't probing about her state of mind, minds she corrected herself. Fertig certainly was not your average Primaian. That boded well.

"I think we understand each other."

"I think we do."

"I hope we meet again." She hinted. It could be taken both ways Fertig thought.

"I hope we do." He encouraged her.

"Time will tell."

"It will indeed." He concurred. "Don't let them get to you."

"They won't get much."

"Keep it that way. You have potential." He hinted.

"I feel something stupendous, at the edge of my brain. I know it's not the alien field. This sensation is persistent. That's why I have to be with the DVs."

"It's the best position for you to be in."

The orbital made contact with the 'Ice Queen', still in lock down mode. He acknowledged and said he would deposit Ung in space and they could bring her in. They accepted his decision with some reluctance but agreed in the end. Ung started to get into her space suit. When they were closer, the orbital filling their view it was time to part. She was both excited in her new venture and a little sad in leaving.

"Don't overreach yourself."

"I'm aware of the dangers." Meaning the orbital could be listening in even if the ship was shielded, as could the DVs. The spacesuit had embedded transmitters and could be uploading the conversation. But they were referring to the danger of burning out.

"I'll try and not to overdo it."

"Don't take the whole burden on yourself."

"I'll be in good hands."

"The best." He grinned at the joke.

Even from within her helmet she sensed his sadness. He checked her space suit then escorted her to the double airlock. The locks open she jetted towards the orbital. He saw two other suited figures move slowly towards her, their tiny jets leaving gleaming crystals in their wake. Ung was in.

Fertig returned to the cockpit. Somehow Ung had helped him make up his mind. He would have to play a double game. Not entirely unexpected. His department wanted to know what the Reganians were up to. They might not be enemies just yet but they were certainly antagonists. Why did he feel almost certain and equally comfortable that Ung was more than just an aspirant. True the quest for knowledge was a potent decision maker. Given Prima's restricted education, the almost impossibility of accessing Regum's Web the DVs were her best chance to find out whatever it was she was after. And now he wanted to stay in touch to see what she found out. What ever was out there, cursory searches revealed nothing which his ships computer accessed during their flight up here. Maybe Ung's curiosity might reveal what the Primaian's were up to, something even his department had no knowledge of. At least he had an informant. Things had worked out rather well. More so than he expected. Ung had been a lover and now she was a DV. Serendipity. He felt good, he felt great, he felt free. It was a marvellous feeling.

He set a course for the distant asteroid belt. It was where Regum's space factories were. And Prima being engaged in industrial espionage would not deny him access there. It was also full of bored miners, workers who welcomed a new face. A great place to pick up information, meet people. People who had their own agendas. The place was full of dreamers as well. For after their decade long stint there many were wealthy enough to pursue those dreams. And they did not necessarily concur with Prima's or even Regum's. The spacer's were becoming, along with those in self seclusion

in their habitats a people with their own ideas. A new civilisation in the making. Exciting times.

Mena

"Mena will be a worthwhile acquisition. Candidates of her resonant calibre are rare." Dross said to his superior as they watched the young woman sitting with calm repose in the interview room. Senuf stood next to him observant behind the holographic portal on the wall. All Mena saw was an image of the DVs positioned in space, a glorious dazzling star field behind them. 'In search of the miraculous' emblazoned below on the holo screen..

"Yes. One of the Families." Senuf replied. A smaller bank of screens ascertained her resonant state. Remarkably steady at the high end of her spiritual being. Her overall mindset a tight field. Barely a flicker of Volatile tendencies let alone the accompanying associated disturbed mental activity.

"Worthy." Dross was impressed with her mental state.

"There is the status of the Family to consider." Senuf continued. "Diplomatic Corps, secular tendencies. Could be a cover. Dealing with Reganians. One elder daughter Ung accepted as a DV. Passed the induction tests a while back and now an instructor to the aspirant acolytes. Two members from the same family. Given their parents Resonant State you'd think they were manoeuvring them to embellish their social standing."

"You think they're being positioned?" Dross asked. It would not be the first time that Families used their offspring to further their aims.

"Menos semi-retired would be in limbo. Loss of privilege and the rest. What better way to enhance their status?"

"I won't disagree there. True. Mena is remarkable. Solid resonance. A Natural. Rare. As you alluded to." Senuf making the final decision had to consider all the angles. The burn out rate dictated its own rationale. Those results were conclusive. Such purity of mind so antithetical regarding her parents. It had to be divine guidance. He was for accepting her.

"It could be worse. At least not Volatile."

"You find her to be correctly attuned." Dross said encouragingly. "She has mentioned her wish for spiritual salvation. She could even be a mystic. We do need them. The watchers, resonating with the Divine Mind. The control end of the spectrum."

"I know." Telafus taking an interest. Why now? Senuf wondered.

"Do you have any specific plans for her?"

"You tell me." Senuf smiled expansively.

"Acceptance. Not Domimax level. Leave her unaffiliated. See which way she drifts."

"An unusual view." Senuf looked Dross's way.

"Aligning her might pre-empt her natural orientation."

"Good point." Senuf agreed. "The trouble with mystics is their urge for some spiritual escape from life itself. Very individualistic. Even if we do need their divine state. Not just to expand their resonance into the Great Mind, but to show the way. Pathfinders."

"She seems almost desperate to be there. Signs of latent depression. Could be the result of the Families secular tendencies. It should recede once she is up there, away from their influence."

"Keeping her in the public domain would be a waste. Unduly influence her. Dark forces are at work and not just the Web Dross."

"Of course." He agreed with the policy directives. "So I gather we accept her?"

"As an act of good faith on our behalf." Senuf half smiled. Make Mena feel grateful and indebted to their magnanimousness.

"Who knows? With her expansive resonance she might pick up bits of information as well."

"So we are agreed?"

"Yes Dross. Work with her priest Lenox. He is her mentor. Speaks highly of her. It's all going in her favour. Who knows she might be the one that can get at the source. The DVs are still being repelled. Or rather only get so far..."

"Whereas she may get further?" Dross asked hopefully.

"Correct."

Mena sat in the bare room with the star studded screen of space idly looking at the picture of the suited up DVs. The infinity of space beckoned. Her soul ached for it. This room was so sterile it disappointed her. It was not like the holy house of worship, engraven with beautiful abstract patterns hinting at the soul's brimming matrices when

the mundane mind was released from the daily images it was cluttered with. The microcosm within reflecting the beauty of the holy consciousness of space out there. The Divine Mind reaching out to searching souls. Maybe the sparseness of this room was to remind her that in the end it came down to herself, her own effort to align to any given situation. From now on only her own determination would get her to where she wanted to be: enmeshed with the Divine Being. Nothing less. This could be the last image, the last memory of being on Prima. Maybe the room's starkness hinted at some similar state of mind, that in reality all the visionary presentations were distractions. That in reality, the secret of the divine resided in emptiness as the mind understood it, releasing the potential of the soul.

The memory of Ung. So vague, on the verge of not remembering her at all. A shadow in a living dream. Flash impression: her parents perpetually immersed in a social swirl of meaningless activity. Another distraction to leave behind. Even the alien field did not unduly worry her. Rather have its presence laid bare, its dark effulgence contained. Dissipated. An expression of the aliens soul's contamination. The trick Lenox told her was not to fight it but to void it, as she had to void all her mundane memories. She grasped his point. Prior her decision she had prayed assiduously, fervently with the result that Ung nearly faded from her memory. Ung. Always distant, in her own world. When she considered it there was so little that remained. Letting go Lenox said was part of the divine path. What remained was its glory. She accepted that.

She looked involuntarily around the blank white room. The very opposite of where she would soon be. All over down here. Hoping her memory was less burdened with her longing. Behind her the door opened.

"I'm Dross." He said pleasantly, dressed not in priestly garb but a business suit. His soft eyes grey, his appearance so normal looking it disappointed her. He smiled at her. His radiance warmed her despite his mundane exterior. Dross looked around him and said: "Not much of a place."

She looked at him with hope. He must be significant to be so casually dressed. Mena remembered that often when important people had been at their home for some reception those who mattered often looked almost invisible. Whilst those who thought themselves important dressed impressively.

"Come let us take a walk." He gestured. Out into the corridor, into a pleasant small courtyard. A garden in late bloom, delightful in its serenity, vines covering the surrounding walls, bushes untrimmed growing riotously around the perimeter, tall trees offering shade. A slightly cloudy sky above and beyond that her destiny.

He lead her to a bench and sat. A fountain burbled, the sound of the water calming her.

"Ah this is much nicer."

She nodded.

"Not an easy decision is it?" Dross asked kindly.

"Oh," she felt refreshed in the garden after the starkness of the room, "once I knew, it was rather easy. I certainly could not have done this at home. Even though I have nothing to complain about home was more a distraction slowly suffocating me."

"I concur."

"Endless chatter, constant movement, continual distractions. It was hemming me in, crushing my soul, squeezing it into a tiny compartment, crying for release."

"I fully understand." He said calmly. "It is a good sign. This is no mere whim."

He understood. She believed him. He was speaking from the heart. He continued: "Many who seek guidance, even enlightenment do so for all sorts of reasons. Boredom, wanting a novel experience that is fulfilling. When that does not satisfy for there are no instant results on this path you have chosen and I'm sure Lenox mentioned this..." she nodded, "...good. We believe you have been chosen. It is a sign, a divine blessing. The rest is up to you."

"I understand. I am ready."

"Up there," he cocked his head skywards, "everything will be done to satisfy your special needs. You will be isolated, left in peace to pursue your inner dream, your calling. There will be no group seminars, no course work. You will have a guide of course. Further advanced than Lenox. He to make sure you understood your decision. Many feel the call but do not have the spiritual make up you have. There will be times when your soul is in turmoil. It could be the alien influence, it could be the Web presence, it could even be yourself. Only you will know the truth from now on. You are the vessel of your own redemption."

She felt invigorated. She could listen to him for ever. He spoke from the depths of his own soul, his own experience.

"One or two questions Mena. Is there anybody whom you think might be under undue influence? Spiritually contaminated. A strong word I know. Acting under strange compulsions."

She was slightly taken aback but understood the need to remove such fallen ones for they corrupted, through their own volition those around them. She thought that was the duty of the priests. He must think highly of her then.

Noting her reticence he continued: "Don't think as if you are going behind their backs. It's for their own salvation. Our priests can only do so much. Your uniqueness makes you special." Her heart surged with inner happiness.

"A sort of friend. Not close. It's funny you know..."

"Dross."

"...Dross. I always thought my sister distant, locked in, locked out, locked away within herself but now I know I was wrong. She is with the DVs."

"Ung."

"Yes. Well I never really thought she had strayed but this friend, Carias, she really is strange. Talks of fantasy worlds."

"Oh?" Dross becoming interested.

"She might not be fallen but I think outside influences possess her mind."

"How is that?"

Mena was slightly perplexed confused about Carias.

"She's very dreamy. In a real sense. Talks of her dreams, used to I mean. I haven't seen her in ages. It's like she's in some trance. Maybe she goes into the Web. I don't know."

He nodded slowly. Those like Carias were a danger unto themselves. Fantasy worlds. She could be under the influence of the Web as Mena said or worse be infected by the alien resonance. Creating false realms manifesting dissatisfaction with their home world. Regum's attempts to waylay their minds with their false realities in the Web. Carias would have to be checked out. If her mind was really what Mena just said, she might even have to be put under observation in an asylum.

Mena having unburdened herself felt better. It was for Carias's own good. She had even influenced her for a while. But instead of longing for an alternative world, another reality it had opened the possibility that behind this illusion, for that is all it was, was something else. However that something else could not be as great as the Cosmic Consciousness. If she could be at one with that, then everything else, including Carias's fantasy worlds would fall into place, loose their possessive hold, relinquish its tantalizing power to delude her pure soul, her estranged mind. She felt lucky in that she had chosen the right path. Carias a puppet, an automaton lost in a world of alien designs. She shuddered involuntarily.

"What is it?" Dross watching Mena withdraw for a moment. She told him what she just thought. "You are very perceptive. Not only that but strong, resolute. Blessed."

Her heart soared.

"Do you want to see your parents one last time? You will be gone for quite a while Mena." He asked solicitously. She was touched merely shaking her head. "I understand. It would bring back memories, feelings, emotions creating inner turmoil."

How right he was.

"What now?" Mena asked.

"Why, your journey is about to begin." Dross exuded.

"I am on my way?"

"You are indeed young lady. Welcome to your new domain."

"Oh Dross, I am so happy. Will you tell my parents I love them?"

"You can communicate with them. The isolation I referred to up there is in regard to your spiritual schooling. Not in the classical sense. No classes. You will have your own private tutor, one who is knowledgeable who can answer your questions, concern yourself with your inner welfare, suggest guidance, orient you in case you deviate. For what occurred to Carias could, I say could Mena not would or necessarily will, assail you. It is not a smooth path as some would have it. There will be set backs. There will be crisis, moments of doubt and pain for the mind is both a wondrous creation or it can be its own worst enemy. Up to now you have lived a certain way of life. Your memory is full of that. The mind wants that to continue. When it realises that that life doesn't exist any more it creates its own longings. A sort of mental hunger for the past. But it is your blessed future that will guide you from now on, the Great Mind your focus, your redemption, your salvation."

Mena was partially shocked. She was under the impression that once immersed in holy duties, the inner radiance she felt would overcome all. Yet what Dross said made sense. She was ready. Difficulties. Let them come. Knowing they were mere memories, that her chosen reality was different now she said: "I'll keep that in mind Dross."

"Excellent. It will take years you know."

"Years?" another surprise. She thought she was already on the way, partially immersed in the divine radiance.

"But after around three years of constant practice in the devotional arts of inner enlightenment, your strengthened resonance will be unassailable. Now that is something to look forward to."

Her sudden dismay vanished. "Yes Dross." She said strengthened by his wise words.

"Shall we?"

"Go?"

He nodded like a proud father.

They walked towards the rear courtyard wall. Dross brushed aside some vines and inserted a key into the wall. It opened into a hangar. Several VAVs and two shuttles gleamed under overhead lights. One of the white shuttles was positioned at the front with three figures standing near the mobile stairs leading into it. The priest Lenox, Senuf and the pilot. Delighted to see his charge once more Lenox said 'goodbye' Mena thanking him for his patient guidance. Then they all climbed on board. The pilot up front had done his pre-flight checks. The three of them comfortably behind. Senuf handed the pilot a disk containing their destination, security and access codes letting them leave Prima and be accepted by the orbital still on full security alert.

Wrap-round masks popped out from above each seat. An extra precaution even though the cockpit was pressurised. The hydrogen engines whined into life and they slowly moved out the open hangar, down an apron and onto the runway. Control cleared them for take off. Thrusters full bore they powered along being pushed into their seats. Mena felt marvellous, great, fantastic. As the shuttle lifted off at a steep angle, the ground tilting rapidly Mena sensed freedom, she was leaving her past behind. The future beckoned. She was expecting fantastic things to happen. In the distance the desert, the space port's buildings rapidly becoming tinier. Through sparse cloud cover they thundered into the blue sky above. Her ears popped. The sky changed colour slowly turning a light purple then richer in colour as the first stars appeared. Upward and onward.

"Towards your new home." Dross smiled at her.

"My new home." Mena was happy. At last she could pursue her dreams, fulfil her inner longings..

"The orbital is a city all of its own. You will be in a special section of course away from the bustle. The DVs have a sector to themselves. As a neophyte there will be some initial interest in you naturally. New faces are always welcome. I assume this is your first trip up?"

"Yes. I've flown in planes, not often."

"This is momentous for all of us. We value you highly Mena. I mean it. You are extremely rare, a Natural."

"I am? Lenox said so himself."

"You are. Your parents must be proud having two daughters up here."

"I guess so."

"They were not that endeared? I guess it makes sense. After all it will be a while until they see either of you again. You know, unlike the DVs if things don't work out for some reason there are special circumstances if you think you may want to return Mena."

"I can't think of any."

"Homesickness. Some are still debating if we should be in space at all."

"Really?"

"Well we were created to live on a planet. Space is a hostile environment."

"Hostile?" she asked a little worried.

"Well there is no air."

"Of course how silly of me."

The sky was getting darker, nearly black. The stars spread in front of them.

"Then there is the radiation. The universe is full of lethal rays. Nothing to worry about. This ship and the orbital are well insulated, protected. As is your space suit." Dross explained.

Mena was fascinated by the glorious splendour of space. So enticing, the stars shining like brilliant diamonds. She was awed by the richness of their radiating light.

"Were your parents surprised?"

"A little. They took it in good faith."

"That is recommendable. Lenox will visit them now and again, keep them informed of your progress. For progress you will, you have the faith, blessed by the Divine Mind." Dross said solemnly.

"My parents never big-noted themselves. I know other families who went on incessantly at the success of their sons and daughters."

"Understandable to be happy for their achievements."

"Just the way they went on and on about it."

"Everyone is different to some degree."

"They all seemed the same."

The cabin lights were off. The darkness apart from the glowing console controls, the HUD patterns in the screen the only glow. They all looked eerie.

"Not nervous?"

"Excited."

"This is a big event."

"Finally in my own space."

"Indeed that is so. As infinite as the Great Mind itself."

"Oh I can't wait to get started."

"Very commendable."

Mena was off to commune with the Ultimate, let her soul be immersed with the Immaculate fulfilling her craving. The sense of otherness, so tempting, enriching but always dispersed by the clutter of her mind concerned with everyday things was all past now. The call was strong and she ready to answer it, fill herself to the brim. Let her soul soar.

"We in visual range?" Dross asked the pilot.

"Not yet but the remotes can call it up."

"It can wait." Mena said.

"Leave it." Dross informed the pilot. Then he turned to Mena. "Watch, for you will have one of these embedded into your space suit's sleeve." He pressed something on his sleeve and a tiny screen lit up. A dark ball studded with lights. Some winked red, others green, tiny white points of light flashing momentarily in space.

"It's your own computer. Makes sure you're OK and so you can communicate if you have to or be informed or called back in. About three days worth of nourishment in tubes, plus water. That for your space suit."

Mena looked fascinated at the image.

"Tell me. If you do manage to become One with the Cosmic Consciousness, what will you do?"

"Do?" Lenox had posed that same question. A bit differently but the same.

"I honestly don't know. I didn't know anything could be done with it. I thought it's a state of being."

"It is Mena. It is."

She had no answer as she never even considered doing anything.

"What do others do?"

"Some return as priestesses, some devote themselves to the Immortals, others serve on a more practical level at the palace, some teach."

"I see what you mean. Probably teach them of the spiritual beauty residing within our souls."

"That is excellent. Some progress as DVs, some are Divines. You may even become an Ecclesiastic. So many possibilities Mena."

"Or retreat to a monastery."

"Or that. Others also go to Regum to spread the good word. Have you thought about that?" Dross asked. They could use someone like Mena if she were steered in the right direction.

"Regum?" she asked perplexed. The planet was too confusing, too restless, too disorganized, chaotic.

"I don't know. They seem so distracted, distracting. It would be worse than being back...home."

"Plenty of time. The Divine Mind will guide you. Something will lead you towards your fated destiny."

Mena had never really considered anything at all. They were expending resources on her. It was only natural she would help them in whatever they thought best.

"Final approach." The pilot informed them.

"See the orbital up ahead?" Dross motioned.

In the distance a partially lit round object. Just like the screen showed on Dross's arm. The great moment was arriving. Glowing crystal ice blew out in front of them as the pilot slowed the shuttle. On the HUD a trajectory was glowing yellow, their vector in.

"Are there others like me?"

"Yes, a few. As you will have your own specially tailored course it might be some time until you run across them. Naturals such as yourself are given the freedom to be left alone so you can pursue your divine calling with the least amount of disturbance."

"That is good. I'm not really a people person."

"Then you are indeed blessed." Dross was pleased.

Mena's heart was racing. 'This is it.' The gateway to eternity, the path to divine infinity. The orbital slowly expanded, tiny lights everywhere, some hovering like fireflies around it. A busy place.

"It's huge."

"It is."

A brightly lit hangar, the landing bay glowed in front of them as the pilot manoeuvred with dexterity the bulky shuttle. Then they were inside the orbital, lights above, on the walls, guide lights on the approaching landing zone. They twinkled merrily. The shuttle came to a smooth halt.

"We leave you now Mena." Dross said for though the orbital was still in shut-down mode Dross had special clearance to leave. They were not coming into contact with anyone on board. Mena saw space suited technicians repairing a multitude of strands and wires.

"We'll help you into your very own space suit. There will be a spare one as well in your cabin." Dross said.

Mena was a little disappointed that they would not introduce her to whoever was going to look after her here. He rose along with Senuf helping her into her suit. It felt bulky a bit top heavy in the artificial gravity. She felt like jumping for joy. She was rearing to go. Even the niggling reminder of the alien resonance which Dross studiously avoided mentioning did not bother her. The Divine Mind was greater than that. Since she was going to concentrate on its potential what was the alien incursion? Just another distraction like Regum's Web. Maybe she could contain either or both, master it, prove that the Great Being was more than anything else in the universe.

A white suited figure came through a small exit above the bay's floor, moved down slowly and waited at the bottom of the stairs. On the face helmet her name appeared. Wow. Neat.

"I guess that person is for me." Mena said.

"Yes." Said Dross. "Her name is Niatu. She will be your mentor. Go down the ladder and may your blessed spirit soar." Dross said by way of saying goodbye.

"All the best." Senuf added. "Great expectations await you. You have our faith Mena. You will shine. Your resonance is stable, you are indeed infused with the holy spirit."

"Thank you Dross, Senuf. Give my regards to the pilot. You will visit?"

"Time permitting." Senuf answered. "We will not forget you. We will watch with anticipation your successful progress."

"Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to make my dreams come through."

"It is a pleasure to be of service." Dross said humbly. "Be off then."

Feeling light, not just because of the lesser gravity she literally bounded down towards Niatu. She extended her hand and they walked up the ladder. Menu turned to wave. The shuttle was rotating on the landing zone's turntable.

"Better get in. Before they engage their engines." Niatu said over the intercom. Mena followed her into a corridor, through two airlocks. "We'll take off your suit in your quarters."

Cables were strewn everywhere. The place looked a mess. Along corridors meeting not a soul. It all looked a little cramped. Then they passed several doors.

"This is where the others are." Niatu said. Mena understood, her own kind.

They stopped in front of one door, the light went green as Niatu inserted a card. The room was tiny. A fold out desk, a blank screen which Niatu activated. A logo came

on showing the orbital. "It's for updates, personal information, messages, that sort of stuff."

A perspec tube which Niatu explained was where she would sleep as the cabin would be airless, saving resources. Niatu helped Mena out of her suit. Then managed to extricate herself out of hers. She was the same height, slightly brown skin, probably once an Outlander from the distant provinces. Short cropped black hair, deep dark mysterious eyes.

"I'm Niatu and you of course are Mena. I've been updated. I'll be your initial mentor and guide around this section of the orbital. I'll show you around, where the canteen is, where my quarters are should you need me. Unlike Dross or Senuf I won't be asking you questions about yourself. You're here because you were Called. That is enough. I'll answer any questions I can of course. There won't be any lectures. Your mind, your resonance is your own. It is your decision how or what you think. That is none of my business." Which was not true but as long as her mind stayed within the parameters she would leave Meana to her own devices.

"Now in the inbuilt wardrobe is your spare space suit. Always check the air levels, water and liquid nutrients. Nothing has ever occurred here that could be considered an emergency." Which was true. The odd asteroid hit, some penetrating the outer shell but that had been about the worst of it. Management was negotiating with Regum for lasers to blast them before they hit. So far they were dragging their response out.

"Time to stretch your legs. These slip on shoes have special pads that give a feeling of full gravity, stop you drifting about. You've noticed the handrails of course, even on the ceiling. We've never had a gravity failure, we've never had any failure really. The Reganian's certainly know how to built these things. Oh yes. There are Reganian's on board. They're off limits in this section and a few others as well. If you see any report them to me. They have their section. Maintenance really. So if they're not maintenance, like I said. They'll have that marked on them. But they like to snoop under any pretext. They'll also try and engage you in conversation. It might mean nothing, then again it might not. They can't get into our heads, not like we can, well some of us anyway. I'm not that psychic, I don't know about you. The mind is a wondrous organ, it is full of surprises as you will find out in your devotional meditations. So let's take a walk."

Niatu showed Mena the canteen, the escape routes to stand-by escape pods which reassured her. The way out through innumerable air-locks which they would be using tomorrow. She told her they were in stationary orbit over Prima to keep the bio-rhythms and mental time sequence in place. Certain sections of the orbital, unless

reprogrammed or overridden would deny her access away from her own section. It was to protect her from unwanted distractions. Mena a little surprised concurred. She did want to be left alone. Niatu seemed so practically minded not what she expected. Then again she had no idea exactly what to expect except perhaps a retreat with devotees. Niatu must have been here for a long time. Yet neither Dross nor Senuf, not even kind Lenox mentioned what type of teachers were up here. But she understood the need to think clearly with a certain focus on how the orbital functioned.

And a relief that Niatu did not badger her with questions about herself, where she came from, her family or even how or what she intended to achieve apart from the obvious. Then they were back at her cabin. Niatu went over it once more, how the chemical shower, a cubicle and toilet worked, how to use the terminal, her access code which was the same as for her door, then when Meana could not think of anything further bade her to relax, meditate if she wanted to. She'd be back at around ten the next day. Meana thanked her for the guided tour.

Mena, left to herself squealed with delight thinking: 'I'm there, I'm in, I'm free'. Finally she was on her way. It was really happening. She was too excited to consider any meditation. Everything she needed was here. She sat next to the fold out table and chair, and looked out the porthole. The screen in front of her glowed softly. Outside, space. The odd white short burst flare which had to be the DVs coming back in or going out. She would be there tomorrow. She could hardly wait. Technology was not all bad, it depended how one used it. How weird she thought. Here was the best, the most advanced, her means to salvation. She wondered for a moment about the alien field yet sensed nothing. She turned the lights in the cabin off seeing some of the white suited DVs. So calm just drifting there.

She played with the computer. Took a virtual tour through the orbital. Visually no access was denied, at first. As she travelled down the many passageways some areas were no-go zones. Mainly the engine rooms, the power stations at the core. She could even venture outside. Winking lights indicating antennae arrays, micro-dishes, solar panelling, outer shafts, maintenance hubs attached for repairs, tiny bots like bulky insects doing their job, personnel keeping others out there safe. So marvellous, so different. Prima a million miles away.

She opened a file to send a message home. Everything was fine, she had her own tutor, the place was huge, a marvellous reality. A message to Ung that she was here now. She entered her parents address now another reality far away. Life was so tiny

down there, so limited. Up here the opposite she wrote. She felt better already. She sent them her love. Then pressed send. Message delivered.

Ung felt the strangeness. On duty shepherding her eager wards, ready to flex their psychic capabilities. They crackled slightly in her head with barely suppressed anticipation. As novices she guided them in their adjustment to immerse themselves in the spatial field floating with them. Remarkably easy letting 'go' of her active conscious mind. Which others took years to accomplish. Her task to ramp them up for 'assault' mode in containing the alien field incursion. Then to tunnel through to the source. Advance them to the next level.

It was whilst minding her group that her Brain sensed an opening within space. Leaving her natural mind free to observe what seemed to be an influx of latent energy. Not her students. Her Brain was reading them at their current low probing level. She told them not to get too excited, just 'be', adjust slowly to the field, get the feel of it. Any anomalies at this stage should merely be observed. Study the phenomena, it may not be what it seemed. But keep the source in mind.

The data coming in massive wave like images of life from that distant planet, extremely convoluted. Her Brain receiving inherent future states hovering within the field, of probable realities as opposed to the actual reality of relatively primitive minds. Sensing the different orientation of thousands of minds. An alien group mind to be assessed only. Ung perplexed that an advanced technological future state was hovering within the incoming data-field. She told her charges they were possibilities not actualities. The primary mission was to eventually guide these alien minds along their resonance. Forget the technological diversions. Ung followed her Brain's instructions. Ung's idea was to *allow* these future states to remain so that this emergent race would achieve their potential. That of course was her innate programmed instructions. She had to guide her novices so as not to cause any suspicions of the Domimax since her instructions were completely divergent to that of Prima's.

It was easily enough done. Keep the DVs busy with the lesser resonant state of the developing pre-technological race on that distant planet. Leave the probability states well alone she advised them, the advanced DVs were dealing with that she lied to them. She had a sense of some great overriding principle at work but that was about all. It was vague, hovering like a ghostlike sensation throughout her Brain which fed just enough data to keep her oriented. The idea was to keep Prima's DVs in check. By concentrating

on the lesser actual manifestation, the greater possible reality would thus guide the future development of that race towards its destined evolution. So far. Early days.

Some of her students were locked on this future possibility. She explained without believing it that such odd revelations were possibly Reganian distractions. Ung's Brain analysed a discordant mind on the loose, did a soft-scan to burrow back to the source. Her DVs were ignoring it as instructed. All they were required to do was to practice consolidating their psychic state, establish their base-line as Ung had. Ung knew her capabilities were far in advance held in check by her Brain. The idea was not to alert the Domimax and the lesser Domimus who actually dealt with the individual DVs on a case by case set of procedures. She did not want to come to their attention. They were in effect an extension of the DLs, with *their* active, pragmatic over viewing psychic minds. The controllers keeping all the DVs in line.

One open mind. Not an active DV, a lucky novice maybe. There had been a delivery of a neophyte flown up just yesterday. A special shuttle flight for just one individual. That in itself was rare. They must have found a Natural and now this individual was open minded. No that was not the case, something *else* had opened up. Luckily her DVs could not tell the difference. Obedient they followed her instructions aware that taking on something beyond their as yet latent capabilities could cause premature burn out. That was enough for them to retract their psychic capabilities. Ung was free to explore this new spatial sensation.

The resonance was strong. The image of Mena appeared, asleep in Ung's head. She was in phase with her, riding her mental meta-field, aware of her imagery as Mena's mind accepted her vivid visionary dream. The combined field, that of her boosted sensations coupled with an underlying spatial field felt comfortingly warm. Space was supposed to be absolutely cold, neutral from the outside, yet rampant with possibilities within its quantum states. Mena was 'leaving' her reality. She was neither perplexed nor apprehensive. Welcoming the effect of being drawn away, plunging in.

Mena was minddrifting. Part of the mental makeup of being sentient, a natural disassociation that occurred when impingent realities converged. Mena's vision of the orbital receded as she travelled away from her location. Ung in the background, letting herself be carried with the field. The visceral sensation of warmth remained, gelatinous, the context of this energy field as yet undifferentiated, undefined. Ung sensed a presence but it was vague. It could be a probability state thus explaining its non-specific configuration. Mena thought of the Great Mind something Ung had not considered.

The planetary system receded rapidly. Along some trajectory they both were following, Mena involuntary, Ung only because her Brain was now active. Mena's reaction was pleasant, Ung's Brain itched. A telltale sign of probing. So the field was extremely information rich. That meant a source, sentient or artificial. The difference might be material or it's opposite, another probability manifesting itself in this universe.

Mena's mind, her soul, her psychic being expanded rapidly. Ung held herself in check. She felt the elasticity of Mena's ballooning unconsciousness, infinitely subtle. It allowed for easy access in Ung's current reserved state of being. The field self-energizing. A barrier built into the field. Mena thought she was being reborn.

The reassuring warmth had to be some sort of program. According to Mena it was like an essence of an ancient god, not alien to her perception, just a hint of unfamiliarity. The sudden change nearly froze Ung's mind as it froze Mena's. Something *other*, still vague. Mena a solidified soul. A perplexing transfiguration of an active mind into a passive mind hinted at sentient intent. The sensation of eternity, a false construct within a vast bubble, vague recognition in Ung's Brain. Without time. Thus the impression of eternity for in a way it was. This inner field almost entropy free. That could only mean a huge intake of energy yet the source remained hidden. Mena's reaction was that she had gone too far with this. Her thoughts of her struggling mind shattered like ice crystals. The field inserted a sliver, a low spectrum spike base into Mena's open state. Like some laboratory experiment, a determinate operation. Then Mena's fluidity of thoughts, emotional responses refocussed, then contracted, contained. Stable.

Mena desperate which was understandable. Ung was torn between ascertaining how the field operated on a functional level or whether to let her be and go for the source herself. Her Brain advised otherwise. A flickering moment as the stars spiral arm momentarily vanished. The operation was not over. Ung held off away from the embedded data field. Mena concentrated on the stars trying to will herself out of its weak embrace. A data field. Sentient? Too vague, too early, too remote.

Its inherent unfocussed non localized centre reluctant to disengage. Had Mena stumbled across something that took an interest in her? Ung undecided whether to continue or abandon the process. She let go. Space regained its elasticity. Mena's mind reactivated itself, filled the void that had been opened within her. This vagrant insertion close to collapse, removing its contents, some fleeing apparition avoiding detection. Had she been the cause? It was not aware of her presence for Ung remained steadfast in remaining in the background, minimizing her presence as the distant observer.

Mena was drawing on her own resources. She must have an exceedingly solid, tightly packed resonance. The field's hold dissipated as space re-emerged in its natural state. For a moment the re-emergent universe a blur of streaks of light. Mena travelling at near light speed. Panicked momentarily thinking she was going to crash literally into the orbital. Ung nearly laughed. She braced herself then woke feeling completely unnerved by her experience. Ung remained behind as Mena's memory started to replay what she experienced. That though fell away, whether into space itself, the probing vanishing field or her unconscious mind Ung could not tell. Her Brain avoiding these competing sub-realities.

Ung was perplexed. This was weird. Or maybe there was more in space than previously assumed. Her own data was not much help. Possibilities were after all endless as far as future probabilities were concerned. This had been one of them. Had Mena been targeted? Had it merely probed and used the first available mind? Was it real? Was Mena the source projecting through her psychic imagination what was psychologically within her? Whatever the answer was Mena was not your average Natural. Then again Primaian's were capable of amazing mental feats. They had drawn down from Regum their orbital, extracted enough technical information to manage space flight, use containment fields to control their people, invent a universe to their own design. Either it was a massive hallucination which her Brain was at odds with or it was real. Real is real. Which didn't help much.

Ung blinked to make sure she was where she was supposed to be. Her three students in front of her. None had noticed the event. Taking her advice and ignoring any outside intrusion. The memory of her experience receded just as fast as a waking dream vanished. Only the knowledge that something occurred remained. It was enough even without any detail. Her Brain noted the memory of the memory. Speculation was useless with nothing left to latch on to.

Mena woke confused. The vividness more a grasping attempt to reconstruct her dream. Surely this could not have been the essence of the Divine Mind. It was the fount of life. She shivered still feeling the iciness deep in her bones. She punched in the air intake for her cabin and waited in her sleeping tube. Then when it was safe to exit took her chemical shower, a burst of lovely warm water, her body regaining its inner warmth. The weird dream now a mere distant remnant occurring so long ago it was of no relevance. Just the gnawing residue of something alien. She put it down to the invasive

field. A dark shadow flitted through her mind as if just by thinking about it something materialised within her, yet did not remain, gaining no foothold. A ghost.

She got into her jumpsuit and wondered what she was in for. She wanted peace, not this. She wanted inner communion, not some outer revelation. Maybe the priests were right. They were all infected. Then she would be determined to be rid of this bourn.

Carias

The present locked in, transfixed, nailed down. So potent the past receded, vanished. Her memory with it. Closed off. Everything she ever knew. All gone. All that remained was the present. Vibrant, static, rich in texture. Glowing pastel colours, the kitchen picture perfect. Not a blemish in sight. No dust, germfree, sanitized just like her mind. Not quite. A memory of an alleyway, graffiti covered, dull colours, garbage strewn at a dead end amongst grimy dirt covered grey industrial buildings. Bare concrete, chipped, weathered, eroded, pockmarked, smeared rust stains, dull metal air ducts. A grey sky as filthy as the surrounding impression. Then that vanished too.

The incongruity barely registered as Carias sat in the brightly sun drenched kitchen. All gleaming, glowing in its pristine suburban purity. Even the floor as she directed her gaze down with infinite slowness reflected the glorious morning sunshine. The table in front of her spotless, not a crumb in sight. The benches gleaming, without even a grain of sugar left over. The light warmed her, the kitchen radiating comfort as she saw her mother, her hair looking like some permed whig, a glowing golden hirsute nimbus. She seemed distracted waiting for something or someone. Carias could tell. Mother was all dressed up as usual. Their eyes met. Mother's smiled forced, or reassuring. But of what? Perplexed Carias managed to think for that one moment. Then reality flooded her leaving her mind warm and blank. Out through the window, the shrubs and hedges vibrant with vigour, a clear blue sky, the sun shining. Everything happily bright, pulsating with the joy of life itself. She was bursting with well being.

The empty cup in front of her and could not remember if she had drunk from it, or what she had just consumed. It must be hers for it was right there with a brown stain inside. She smacked her tongue and tasted nothing in her mouth. 'All gone, everything gone.' She thought idly, stupidly. She felt like some child, no a baby, happy to just be. Her hands didn't look like some four year old yet she had trouble remembering her age. All she knew was here she was.

Her mother gave her another bland smile. She was definitely waiting for something, anticipation oozing out of her. Why didn't she say anything? Because there was nothing to say, to tell. They were happily sitting here in the eternal present, the sun still in the same place. The world had stopped turning.

A picture in her head of her sister, vague, trying to reconstruct her. Her memory gone. She didn't care. Everything picture perfect, except for mother's hair. The warm fuzzy calmness returned, so serene it removed all doubt. Of what? Through the door the living room as spotless as a show home. Mother's plastic smile. What was wrong with her? That idiot grin. Had she no brain either?

Carias felt slightly disembodied. A third person in some movie just before the screen went blank, like her mind. Something had gone blank inside her as well. Try replay. Replay what? She had played something within images, had been somewhere outside all this. Outside the house. She looked at the glowing garden, the light reflected here and there on shiny leaves like miniature stars, where it all ended. No beyond. Surely not the grimy alley? Garish graffiti splattered in palpitating thick gore glistening under wan strip lights the smeared filthy sky above. Painted over windows, cracked, encrusted with grey dirt and smudged grime, don't press 'enter'.

For a moment she sensed a lost something, momentous. As dilapidated as the scene was, anticipating an enticing adventure behind or within it. A pumping musical beat, the crash of cymbals, thumping bass notes, silhouettes in dark motion. Dull glowing thick clouds, on the threshold of a lost world. The dark filled with exciting life, make believe menace, with attitude she smiled. Her disassociation complete. So not there, other, beyond vacant. Vacant. So Vacant. No past, just this scrap. Tattered fragments of a ripped out past, sucked away, way down the cyber toilet. Then it was gone. Almost.

"That's real, that present." Carias mumbled, her tongue thick, heavy.

"Which one this time?" mother still smiling a little tighter now, the muscles doing their job of looking friendly through an effort. A volition. Defying gravity in the effort. Why were they sitting here at all? Maybe if she moved but even merely thinking about it was an effort in itself. She looked down, yes her legs were still there. But she could not feel them, just see them. But then what? Where was there to go? Another room? What for? More of the same. Where would it get her? She was exhausted, immobilised. What was going on? Was anything going on? Mother thought so. Did it matter? She was not waiting for anything. Everything was so perfect why change perfection?

Ung, her best friend. Radiant with a slight mischievous smile. Her eyes agleam with delicious secrets, a cute nose, large dark eyes always glowing with something bizarre she

could never grasp. What happened to her? Was she some illusion like that industrial wasteland? Mother wouldn't know. Carias could not even remember when they had last spoken. So why this togetherness?

Ah, not everything was gone. The headband! The gateway to the real world, not this tacky pristine purity, cut-out, makeshift semblance of pretend reality. There was, is, another world out there. Far more complex than this vacuous state just like mother's mind. Carias knew, knew! Shadow worlds vibrant with life, peopled with strange enticing entities, perplexing sub-personas filled with ambience, breathing shadows slipping in and out of reality just like her. Except she was here. Reality taken from her. Deleted. Access denied.

It was too deep. Ha! She had pulsated to machine machinations, the sombre rumble of dynamic pounding rhythms. Maybe if she tried really really hard it would all come back. Just thinking of these images exhausted her and something else, this film, this reality kept on *superimposing* itself. The kitchen was too real, the colours too intense, too palpable. Infusing her brain with this static sense of eternal well being. Mother deliriously content.

Carias looked closely at her. If she looked any harder her face was in danger of sliding off her skull kept in place with her plastic smile. Maybe it was an impersonation, an actor, a wrong sequence of events, all fake. But then how to explain the familiarity between them? It was so casual this connection, so normal, so *wrong*. That means she had been somewhere real. Here the silence of the tomb, yawning emptiness, devoid of substance, devoid of life. A puppet in front of her. Mother had taken the substance away, removed her life, her reality, her past.

Ah I know! Too much life. Too many realities meant to be explored, lived, experienced. Multiple minds equalled multiple realities. So that was it! But why why why? Meta-realities, ultra-meta-realities, not this flat two dimensional pastiche in three D imagery. This was the dead end, a tiny sub-set of the greater deleted whole. Being so tiny, compacted, this reduced reality physically expanding into this space making up for its lack of substance. It pushed everything out of the way. Being compromised in that other realities existed at all. Mother blotting out what Carias did remember.

"Where did you hide it?" meaning the head-band. The words absorbed by the thick air. Her mother's eyes glowed deep brown for a moment, just a moment, then they went flat, like the surroundings.

"Where is it?" Carias demanded

"Where is what dear?" the woman with her mother's face asked.

"The headband."

At last the secret was out. The warmth eddied a little inside of her with that declamation.

"Destroyed." The mask said, "Like you destroyed your room." The change of expression was really badly acted. It shocked Carias, this change of mental states, which one was real? She should not have mentioned her room, she knew there was one but could not remember it. She was barely able to take all this in without adding to her burden. And she had not destroyed her room, merely rearranged it. Big difference. Her room had been all wrong, that was all. Just like this woman. She was creating this false reality so that Carias would fall into the same pattern. Never!

Ung Ung Ung. Mother had tried twisting her as well so that mother could reduplicate her reality, like she was doing to Carias. But why? Did it matter?

She suppressed the urge to laugh. Now she remembered. She had painted her room like the alley she saw, recreating the entities dwelling there, to keep the thieves of reality like her mother out. With their one dimensional thoughts, their substitute pseudo-realism, their clone like behaviour mimicking other clones, repeating masks pasting their thin veneer over everything. Doing their utmost to shut out the meta-worlds that beckoned.

"I have to go." Carias said and somehow was standing at the same time. No effort at all. She was free! Except deflated sat down. Stuck in this reality. Why was she being denied *her* reality? Mother had hers, was that not enough? She had her blandness, the answer to everything. Why deny Carias hers?

Forlornly she looked out of the window. An image duplicated the tiny boxed in gardens, then more and more, cascading outwards in all directions as far as the horizon. Self contained permutations, self replicating, spreading like a disease over the surface of the planet. The whole planet was *infested*. Lifeless, soulless, truncated, deleting everything in its path. Its spread, dominating all the meta-realities and squashing them into this flat dimensional quagmire.

All doing what her mother was doing here. Sitting in their stupid houses, with their boring reality, dreaming vacant dreams of meaningless drive. Did these people do anything at all except to spread their flat brained world into their self compressed, enervated gutted brains?

Well mother could smile all she liked. Ung would return, and then, and then...maybe this prison would explode. Destroy the pap, the crap, the morbid delusions of bright happy faces day in day out. Carias would never be like that. So why was she

sitting here? The warm contentment rushed through her entire being in an ocean of bliss. Her torments receded, shrunk to a minor irritation then vanish. The world was beautiful, everything was right. Picture perfect.

Ah, the feeling of contentment rushed to her head. She understood the emptiness. This was indeed all wrong, all false but it went deeper than appearances. It was a false meta-world. Her mother the bait, the trap, the one who comforted, who made things just so, just right. Shelter, warmth, protection from the evil reality lurking in other distantly removed shadow realms.

The whine of a vehicle pulling up outside. Mother acting relieved. Good. Take her away, anywhere but here Carias thought sluggishly. The stupid wait finally over and she would be free free free. There was something definitely wrong with that woman. No one could grin like that for so long and think that is normal. Maybe the meta-beings had come for her! What a surprise then! Ha!

The awful doorbell chimed. It's two tone `ding-dong' summed it all up. Vacant happiness, vacant conversations, blathering vacant minds a-calling. Then she freaked. If the head-band was destroyed she was stuck here in not just this house but the whole surface of the planet. Its sameness everywhere. There was no where to go except into her head and that had been removed.

Subdued voices in the hallway. Indistinct as if conspirational. Well if it gave meaning to her mother's life then let them enjoy themselves. She strained to listen, woops mother was gone. Could she move or what? Maybe this was a meta-reality. She heard snatches, the sounds inaudible, desiccated.

Two strangers entered. Total unknowns. Not that it mattered. She hoped they wouldn't engage her in their happiness, not that she knew or remembered them. Then again they were all alike. Yet they looked young. Oh no, mother has arranged for me to meet some suitable friends she groaned inwardly. Suitable company. Neat shiny short hair plastered down, not a strand out of place. Oh dear. Neat grey suits and yes the same contented welcoming smile. As if they knew her. So familiar already, so friendly, so respectable, so urgh. They acted as if they knew her. Even mentioning her name. Not that she could remember theirs or them. But then mother always introduced these instantly forgettable types.

Now standing at the door of the kitchen, talking nonsense, a little fidgety. Maybe a blind date. But two of them? Unless unless, no, never, they couldn't be coming for mother, surely not.

No, maybe yes. So confusing. They were coming in. Well she had nothing to say. Maybe they had a secret life. If there were people like her there could be others. Hope upon hope as distaste was replaced by a certain if ever so slightly welcome from Carias. How strange, they both moved towards her. No not a hug, anything but...please, she thought. Instead one of the nice young men shoved a silver gleaming needle gun into her extended forearm.

She nearly melted that's how good she felt. These guys were something else. Reality had more substance, the colours went cooler yet richer, everything had its own dimensionality. That must be it. Mother's present for her. And here she thought all those things about her. How could she have been so wrong? And yet she destroyed the headband. It didn't make sense but then she didn't care. She felt great, greater than great, so great she could explode with greatness. Her head languid, cool, calm, together, immaculate, smoothly infused with an ultra calm serenity. She was queen of the fucking universe. What a way to live! Maybe mother had understood after she had painted her room. Thank you mum, thank you friends.

She raved a little about how superb this surprise was as they led her outside. Adventure time. A third person, the driver was waiting next to a stretch limousine. This was getting better by the moment. A chauffeur as well and two handsome dudes to go with that, yes please.

Mother had come out as well but that was about it. The lovely two young men in their pressed suits kindly opened the door and she slid onto the soft cushioned seats. Funny that's not what a stretch limo looked like on the inside. For as each of them sat besides her they strapped her in. Games she thought. At least they weren't tight. How thoughtful.

Outside mother said to the chauffer: "She will be alright."

"Madam," he replied solicitously, "she will be in one of the best asylums."

"I'm glad."

"You did well in slipping her the special concoction. It makes it easier for us,"

"Anything to be of help. Thank you again."

"Rest assured, as this is voluntary she will be treated accordingly. It is for her own good."

"We can visit her?"

"I am sure something can be arranged. Thank you for organizing her admission."

"She was..."

"It's alright. We understand."

After the stretch limo departed Droonor walked back into her home brimming with satisfaction. She looked around her lovely house content in having done the right thing. Carias was losing her sanity. The episode of destroying her room was proof enough. It was better this way. To have her committed voluntarily rather than being ordered was an appropriate course to take. First the discretion. All the neighbours would have seen was the unmarked limousine. A status symbol in itself. No one would know. A public order would have created a scandal in her elite circle. She would not have coped in explaining that her daughter was an Unstable Volatile. They would assume the whole family was flawed. Invitations would cease, she would be ostracised.

She blamed Regum's Web and Carias's make believe friend Ung. Conversing with an illusion. Her eldest daughter! The infamy of the deceit. And where was Ung? Who was Ung? She never said. Who knew with what undesirable company she mixed with in that false reality. And what did her husband Neghar do? Indulge Carias. Look where that led to.

The house now empty without her. She could take solace in the suffering her wayward daughter caused her. At least she could seek consolation amongst other concerned parents. That the young were susceptible to the Web. It was an outrage that the authorities had not shut it down, deleted it. As long as it existed it would lure the weak of mind, the innocent turning Volatile. Regum's insidious plot to corrupt them all with no thought to the anguish they caused. Carias had fallen into the cyber-snare which had shocked Droonor to her very soul. It was as if an icepick had been driven right through her. Her resonance barely coping as she walked back into the kitchen, absentmindedly rinsing Carias's cup which had contained the drug that had made her task so much easier.

Neghar was of little help. As a systems surveyor he was always busy, rarely home. At least he was doing something to contain Regum's attempt to brainwash them all. It was Droonor who brought up their child. She sat, looking around her making sure everything was neat and tidy as it ought to be. Reflecting on the events leading to Carias's crises of the soul. She chided herself for not having paid more attention, seeing the signs. Carias neglecting her devotional studies, her meditations, letting her divinely given innate resonant state be corrupted. How stupid not to have acted right there and then. Carias could have poisoned her own family with her decaying mind. Who knew how many others she had infected.

Droonor reinforced her decision as she sat pondering her actions. The whole notion of the Web was a ruse by Regum's criminal classes to subvert the purity of their souls. It was as simple as that. She had hoped her daughter would have risen to the challenge, not fallen to their insipid snares instead. Even Neghar could only do so much. She was proud of having acted independently. She had sought advice from the neighbourhood priests as to how to deal with one subject to Regum's infection the Web was loaded with. She had prayed for her daughter's redemption. But as the priests said, once Fallen the return to sanity was a hard road indeed. Better to act sooner than later. She was proud of having come to the right decision. The bright kitchen cleansed. Carias's remnant resonance no longer a blight on the family.

Droonor was surprised to hear the approach of a VAV. The sound came closer. An important visitor. She felt better, made sure she was presentable and awaited eagerly her guests. And no announcement either, rather unusual. Then it dawned on her it was probably her husband. The timing puzzled her. Had he seen the limousine perhaps? Well what was done was done. By volunteering Carias to psychiatric care the judicial authorities would of course take a benign view. She had done her duty. And being voluntarily committed they enjoyed certain rights. No BrainDraining unless absolutely necessary, no social downgrading, no stigma to herself. She would be seen as a courageous mother battling under difficult conditions to make sure the purity of the embracing and protecting resonance remained unsullied. She sighed. It was still a burden though. At least Carias's soul would be cleansed, she would be 'stabilized'. Given the best treatment the asylum had to offer. Even having to trick Carias by drugging her was the priest's idea. It would facilitate a smooth transfer of the patient. It would be painless for both of them. And so the good deed was done.

Neghar walked in with a sprightly step followed at a respectful distance by an associate she had not met before. This was an honour indeed. She had risen, smiling of course for all was right with the world now. Whatever remnant corrupting hyper-illusions Carias might have harboured were now removed. The house was pristine again, as it should be. A model of discretion and harmony re-established. It was a relief.

"Ah darling. This is Troess, one of my superiors."

"An honour to meet you." Now this was as it should be. It was not every day someone so important came into their private house. The neighbours could not but have noticed the VAV landing right in front of the house. She was delighted.

"We have come to talk to Carias." He said as if he had a surprise in store. And Neghar was thoughtful enough to bring one of a higher status along. It could only reflect

well. But the shock of wanting to see Carias didn't fluster her. She felt so fine in having done her duty she could not let it be known in front of their esteemed visitor that Carias was on her way to the asylum. As her husband was with Systems Surveillance, doing what she knew not, this was not the time or place to reveal her accomplishment. They might even intercept the limousine. The last thing she wanted. She would not as yet have arrived so she dissembled.

"She's out somewhere, seeing friends no doubt." It was weak but it would have to do. She had not even thought about this situation. Why would they both be interested in Carias? Unless it had to do with her accessing the Web. Of course. She relaxed. Carias was now locked out of it. Her soul secure.

"Gone? Hmm. When will she be back, did she say?"

Must he put her through this? As if sensing this Neghar said: "We have discussed," and he shot Troess a quick glance, "of our daughter's slightly aberrant behaviour regarding her infatuation with the Web."

How could he! It was preposterous. Completely out of line. She smiled though hiding her confusion.

"Please rest assured Droona," Troess said kindly, "that we can actually help your daughter."

Now that was a surprise. What could they do the asylum could not? This was perplexing. It was Neghar's fault as well. Had he confided in her this would not have happened.

"Well if she isn't here she isn't here. We'll discuss this later." Neghar said reassuringly. Troess nodded politely.

What Droonor did not know was that Neghar had found a way around their dilemma. Volatiles, though suspect were also extremely useful. They could imagine scenarios a stable mind would or could never conceive. They were in their own way free spirits, thus potential agents. What made Carias's case of considerable interest was the way she could handle the Web, deal with it's content without being under its influence. The episode of Caria's repainting her room the trigger that got Neghar thinking. Some became addicted like most of the Reganians yet individuals like Carias seemed immune. It was that alone that made her an attractive proposition to their work. What Troess had suggested was, if this was the case concerning his daughter as System Surveyors they could use one familiar with the Web. Carias was not self deluded. Apart from her imaginary friend. But they knew that was an uploaded persona in the Web. She was no head-case to put it bluntly. She might be bored with what the real world offered, a sign

of youth though suspect to the Ecclesiastics. But Neghar could not voice that to his wife. She was an insatiable gossip.

"So we don't know where she is? Call her."

Now Droonor was panicking. She had to take a chance and agreed.

Neghar called her on his com but the receiver was blocking incoming calls. That was very unusual unless Neghar smiled she had a secret lover.

Droonor was watching anxiously.

"Can I get you anything?" she added quickly.

"No thank you." Troess replied, then turning to Neghar said they might as well go. Neghar consented saying they were busy as usual. They made their way out front. Droonor was relieved and thought for a moment. Troess did say he wanted to help Carias. She walked briskly outside and caught the two of them just before they were entering the VAV. With steely determination she admitted what had occurred. To her surprise Neghar merely nodded but said nothing. Troess barely reacted to the news. Droonor was relieved.

Once in the air the two men said nothing for a while. Finally Neghar felt he had to say something: "A complete surprise. She acted of her own accord."

"Understandable." Troess said.

"My wife is very proper in this regard. A true believer."

"Commendable." But Neghar could tell he was not that pleased. There were other candidates of course but recruiting within a family of an employee was the easy option. It would remain clandestine which was paramount in their case. This was not Troess's idea though he was amendable. It came from up high. Troess understood that Neghar could not discuss his work at home.

Truth was they had to get into the Web. For the moment it was a scouting missions only. All was not lost just yet. They would have no problem accessing Carias at the asylum. A quick enquiry would locate her. In fact Troess mused having Carias working from within an asylum assumed a certain poignancy. They needed focussed Volatiles for whatever plans his superiors had in mind. Carias would need little training, if any. The DLs might be in charge of the asylums yet as System Surveyor's they had certain powers and were granted certain privileges. When it came to planetary security even the DLs would have to listen. The DLs might be in charge of the day to day running of these institutions but they could not deny them access to their patients. And certainly not family members.

Troess would work something out. He could of course have her released. It was only on the `say so' of Droonor that Carias had been picked up. But it would attract undue attention if they interfered. The last thing they wanted.

"We'll work this out Neghar." Troess said assumingly.

"Yes. I appreciate it."

"If only, the timing, it's uncanny."

"These things happen."

"And you had no idea?"

"None at all."

"Would you have blocked your wife's decision?"

"Well we would have discussed it. But then our order only came through today. I would have suggested we think this through first. Consider our options. That would have staid her hand. But, well, we have to plan for the future now. You still want to recruit Carias?"

"Oh yes." What Troess did not say was that he had been aware of Caria's cyber-escapades. It was also assumed that Neghar would know his family was under normal surveillance anyway. All staff were, even the clerks. It came with the territory. Better them than the priests. Troess had been impressed with the dexterity Carias moved through the meta-worlds in the Web. Her resonance was not showing signs of mental strain which was a big plus. She moved amongst its many states with the ease of a practiced Reganian. That was rare.

They were approaching their headquarters, an insignificant four level office block in the commercial part of the holy city. The VAV landed on the rooftop.

"We need some legal clout to effectively recruit valuable assets." Neghar suggested as the engines shut down. "I have broached this with Reno. Hopefully he takes it up with Janon. But we can't make waves."

"The Ecclesiastics and their Domimax get the best of the pick for their DVs. If they can so can we. Eventually I hope."

"Let's keep them out of it. They're fanatics." Troess gave him a warning look. "This is our operation. Will be."

"Of course."

"It had to be said. We need ops like Carias. They have the capability in not getting confused in there. We don't want some warrior caste head-crashing themselves into the Web."

"Definitely not." Neghar concurred.

In recumbent languor Carias looked about feeling royally serene. The plastic straps merely confined her rather than strapped her in. With super-cool attitude Carias dismissed these lackeys for that's all they were, doing their master's bidding.. Either security which still made them mere employees, or considerate thugs. Whatever they pretended to be it made no difference. She was amused at their deference at first. Now that they had her they studiously ignored her as the limo negotiated its way through the suburban labyrinth, designed with convoluted intent to confuse its inhabitants, entrapping them in this maze of twisted streets, reflecting twisted minds. Taking her out. It could not have been easier.

With her non-challance she was above it all. Her sense of superiority supreme. They might have her body but they never would have her mind. She deemed that communicating with these mere servants beneath her. Their sense of duty amused her. If they weren't careful, dealing with one as exalted as her, they might be at the receiving end themselves. Not that she cared. They were nothing. Not even close to her level of supremacy. They might think by serving their master they basked in his glory but as beings they were nothing but useful appendages in a game far beyond their limited self deluded comprehension.

The game. The great game of planetary power. So they had one player, her. Big deal. The tacky houses with their manicured gardens and scrubbed brains inside passed with monotonous succession. Yes do take me into your lair. Just wait and see what you have on your hands. Parklands appeared. The limo accelerated speeding her towards her destiny. A glimpse of a shrine and the usual desperate believers. Conditioned since their school days to accept the priest's pithy belief. Or on holy days when in the forecourt of the Pontiffial Palace the multitude allowed to bask in the pontiff's blessing, praying together by the thousands, feeling the instinctual need to harmonize resonantly, feel the inner surge of belonging to this outrageous lie. She like a few other individuals understood that they were the real chosen irrespective of what the priests advocated: submission to a great fantasy. The combined spiritual strength they experienced was nothing compared to what Carias felt, sensed, realized and comprehensively encompassed: her supreme mind, self-enhanced into an inner realm that in itself was in direct touch with the vast open cosmos. It's infinitude harbouring possibilities the masses barely grasped thinking themselves under the guidance of their spiritual captors of belonging to some exalted race.

The sprawling suburbs were behind them. Woodlands appeared driving at speed hurtling down the empty highway. Her captors mute or under orders not to communicate with her for fear of being bested. If they expected her to be out of sorts with her abduction then she was ready to disappoint them.

The limo slowed and turned into a walled estate through open gates. Driving slowly she saw something akin to a monastery ahead set amongst immaculate gardens. Some people were strolling about, gardeners tending to shrubs and flower beds. No guards. A retreat of some sort. A cover for their sinister machinations. Why else the subterfuge? Her smooth mind still in its expansive mood, her body suffused with an inner comforting warmth. For some reason she thought of Ung with a deeper comprehension. Ung a pathfinder. Maybe a recruiting agent for through her Carias accessed the Web. What these beings feared. The meta-worlds. Present, real, cyber-enhanced, inviolable, impertinent in its presence, irradiating minds into magnificent data rich realms. The great taboo.

All left behind. Not gone, merely out of reach. Yet its very presence by merely being there was enough to give her strength to live on the outside, in this contrived illusion of reality. Their reality, not hers.

The limo glid to a smooth halt. The stooges got out, the braces unclasped, receded. She was escorted with dignified grace accepting her presence as homage to her person. Up the few stairs through gilded oaken doors into a reception area. Hovering near two brawny white clad male nurses. She looked with barely suppressed disdain around her. An asylum. Well well, what a surprise she thought cynically. So mother had committed her. At least she was out of the suburban wasteland. An older lady, prim, conservative dress gave her a winning smile. Carias was ready to snarl but returned the gesture instead. No point bothering these people with what she thought of them. The lady gave her stooges a hand-held pc. They iris scanned her, returned it.

"Welcome Carias. You are our guest. We wish to make you comfortable and your stay a pleasant one. Someone will show you around. You are free to relax in our extensive grounds. You may converse with whomever you wish. There are no restrictions regarding social interaction, we welcome it." She made it sound like some exclusive retreat. How nice she thought cynically. She must thank mother for her consideration.

The goons left. The burly nurses approached keeping their distance.

"We'll take you through the grounds first." One of them said. They looked like duplicates. Short black hair, slightly tanned, well built body guards. Back out the front through the manicured grounds. The grass a soft green, not a weed in sight. No wonder

mother had chosen this establishment. Some bushes were in blossom, trees everywhere providing cool shade. Inmates sitting under them, others strolled about taking the air.

Well she knew of these places. It had been uncalculated in college. The Fallen, victims of an alien disease. Not to be chastised for having lost the way but pitied for their troubled souls riven by unhealthy tendencies of mind, thought and action. Meaning they didn't conform to Prima's strajhackeded rigid social system.

The sun was shining, birds flew amongst the trees, twittering, a gentle warm breeze caressed her. She felt at peace, at one with her new surroundings. Who knows she might find similar minded guests she thought wryly. A meeting of very select individuals. She looked magisterially around her. It would do, for now.

Another building, less pretentious, plain three stories trees well back, open windows, some with grills. A smaller entrance, plain rather than the ostentation at reception. On the ground floor the dining room now empty. The twins in steady step with her. Long benches, cutlery set, gleaming silver, porcelain plates, shining crystal glass. They guided her up a broad staircase, a banister of polished wood, a sky light above. Some guests passed seemingly withdrawn. She could tell, avoiding eye contact.

On the top floor her room. Tiny lights above the doors glowing red, yellow or white. At the end of the corridor her new repose. One nurse entered before her the other remained behind. The room spacious. A large bed to one side, a huge window overlooking the park, no grille and the distant wooded hills. A desk, two chairs ornately carved with an ensuite. One of the nurses opened the inbuilt wardrobe. Long white gowns, simple maybe even elegant. The drawers full of underclothes, flat sensible shoes as mother would say.

Her attendants stood back.

"Anything to read?" she asked. No point thanking them, they were employees doing their duty.

One of them moved a wall panel revealing maybe fifty books. She remembered reading at college. A rarity only for the select. Books were considered mentally disturbing. They created unrealities in the mind. Except devotional books of course. On a side table gleamed a glass cut pitcher filled with water and two crystal glasses.

"View-screens?"

"This is a retreat Carias. Rest for the mind. There is a com at the door. You may receive visitors at your pleasure, but you don't have to answer. Sometimes staff have to enter to clean the room, change the linen, pick up your laundry. They will identify themselves and have e-tags. Only those with clearance can thus enter. There is another

link to your bed for emergency in case you get sick." He handed her a tag. "Wear this at all times."

She stuck it onto her shirt.

"Later someone will speak with you about your presence here."

"Some head-case specialist." Not hard to guess.

"Meal times are announced over the intercom. It's only obligatory."

"What about family visits?" she was thinking of her father, of Ung, no more, and with some distaste her mother.

"Any time. Cleared by reception, bona fides established."

What the nurses did not say was all the rooms were monitored. Scan the patient's resonant state, activate the containment field if necessary. Negate the need for drugs. Too unpredictable for many of the inmates. Apart when installing guests such as herself. Drugs had their use.

"Anything else?"

"You're free to move about at will. Except the administrative building where reception is located. Unless accompanied by a member of staff. Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you then."

She expected them to bow but they merely turned and left. The door clicked shut. She was free of her mother. Free. The room had a nice feel to it. She sat at the table taking in the bucolic scene. The trees rich luscious, vibrant. She felt their urge, like her mind to reach for the sky. In the distance the purple mountains, a thin line of white capping them. Somewhere beyond them, above in space, within space the Web. Other realities. Now out of reach. For the moment that did not matter. That much of her memory remained in place. Mother could not take that away from her.

She felt the comforting world hardening slightly, going edgy, its smoothness being replaced taking on substance, her mind more brittle. The feeling of inimitable expanse dissipating. Another reality moving in, uninvited. She noted the difference of perception. The feeling of being exalted vaporising, diffusing.

A jolt of reality hit her like lightning. One reality trying to subsume the other meta-realities. Trying to suppress ultra-realities. Carias insisted on remembering them no matter what. That could not be deleted. She would find a way to get back in. She had plenty of time. Forever maybe. With concreteness trying to lock out her effusive mind Carias used this new invasive energy to focus upon her inner loci imagining it as a vortice. She closed her eyes focussing inwards. The feeling of boundlessness was still there, less intense as obstructions infused themselves trying to lock her out. The only way in was through

spirituality. She did not feel spiritual, never had. Reality was what mattered. Realities she corrected herself.

When she opened her eyes again the shadows were longer, the distant mountains darker. Time had sped up. She became suspicious. They were playing tricks with her. A malignant control system at work here trying to disorientate her. Well let them. She was good at that. It almost excited her. The challenge not to beat them, but to play with them. If that is how they wanted it, they were in for a ride then.

She would use whatever they threw at her. The challenge was enough to invigorate her sluggish mind. She felt drowsy, drained, exhausted. What a change from that moment ago. The shadows outside even longer, the room darker. One layer of reality subsuming another, the divergence within her receding into the same darkness as outside. Let them do what they wanted. She didn't care. If they wanted to reconfigure her perception she would use that as well. She was used to other realities. This was but one of them.

No wonder the Reganian's thought Primaian's strange. Self enclosing themselves into just one reality. Infantile. Pathetic really. Well she knew what lay beyond their superficial reality. The falseness of their supposition woven on a cloak of spiritual tedium. It was braindraining. She slumped back in her chair.

A soft chime sounded in her room. Dinner to be served shortly. Just when she was getting somewhere. But she had discovered enough. She rose feeling heavy. Should she change? Too lazy. The room steeped in encroaching darkness.

Buoyed by her knowledge that this place was full of tricks Carias felt a little apprehensive at meeting the others. Open or closed minds? Little jigsaw minds. All part of the great mosaic of life. She was going to keep a diary of her thoughts. Not her real thoughts. She would encode them. That way she could keep track of their mental machinations. Keep the inner gates in place.

She found a drawer at her table. Pen, paper. How thoughtful. She wrote down using buildings as the code for their reality and the parklands as the greater reality of her mind. It was obvious they would read it. All they would get would be picturesque ruminations. The sun outside was setting. Having jotted down her initial thoughts she was ready to meet the other guests.

The dining room was almost deserted. A relief. In the centre of the long table a huge soup tureen, platters of cooked vegetables and the remnants of a rump of lamb. Bottles of water. The few left were engaged in conversations. She sat at an empty table

helped herself to the luke warm brown soup. One of the staff cleared away the empty plates. She wasn't that hungry after her soup. No one paid her any attention. Good. Finished she rose and wandered into the living room. Pictures of wooded scenes, still lakes, clear skies hung on the walls. Soft lights above, armchairs everywhere, small tables for coffee, the room animated with the patients conversations. A group of empty armchairs she wandered over and poured her coffee, keeping to herself. On a sideboard a platter of small cakes.

From next to her one young woman, long black hair, a plain face with a hint of character said: "You're new here." Well that was obvious.

"Today." Keeping it simple.

"You here voluntary?" her rich brown eyes curious. "I'm sorry I really shouldn't ask." No you shouldn't.

"A present." Carias answered instead.

" – " she didn't know what to say.

"My name is Fehna."

"Carias."

"Nice to meet you." Sounds like mother. "Voluntary. Why would anybody volunteer?"

"It's better. And you?" Carias countered.

"They listen." Fehna answered instead. How obscure, how wonderfully bizarre. How real.

"They?" wondering what she was on about. Maybe Fehna flared out gaming.

"The staff." Fehna smiled.

"Probably bored." Carias answered lightly. So what?

"Oh no." Fehna looked nervous. "No no no no no no." as if trying to make some point.

"What then?" might as well Carias reasoned find out what could be going on. Either in Fehna's head, or with the staff.

"If you're voluntary they don't mess with you that much."

"Mess?" Carias apprehensive. The mood change in her room for starters. Some sort of mind control.

"To get your secrets."

"Secrets?" Carias bluffed. She was getting the drift and thanked her luck that this Fehna was clueing her in. Carias studied her. She looked both serene and troubled.

Maybe out of sorts. Maybe a real Volatile! Yeah, that'd be something. Though mother warned they dragged one down to their level. Well let's see then how low she could go.

"You ever Gamed?" Carias asked. Might as well dive in the deep end.

"No way." Fehna said quickly. "Horrible things happen to you in there. That's why there's so many burnt cases. You did, didn't you?" half smile, fascination mingled with fear. "You could be infected. Taken over." She pulled back involuntarily nearly spilling her cup.

"It's only make believe Fehna." Carias said gently, amused.

"Yes but it's real isn't it?"

"So it's real make believe. Everybody knows that."

"That's how they control you."

"They?" time to find out.

"Them, the Reganian's."

"They're behind it?" Carias faked her surprise.

"Didn't you know? It's not the Volatiles. And they wouldn't reveal that now would they?" she said with certainty.

"You sound like..." Thinking of mother.

"I will never be one of them. They'll never get me here. That's why I'm here. To get away from them."

"They can't get in here?"

"Oh no, we're protected here. Whatever it takes."

"Takes?" curious.

"Isolate them, destroy them. That's what they want to do you know. If you fall into their domain."

Carias put her cup down. Were they all like this? Why was she here then? Whatever mother thought, like Fehna here, more insane than the insanity Fehna seemed to suffer from. Maybe mother should be here as well. Safe and secure. She had to find out how they blocked the Web. That meant humouring Fehna.

"Destroy them." Carias prompted.

"I was captured by them you know."

"No shit. Really?"

"That's why I'm here. But I never played, never. I can't remember, it can't be real. I mean I feel so normal, sometimes when they're not watching." Though Carias could not tell whether it was the Web, which couldn't really, or the staff who could. How could the Web watch one? Unless they downloaded your resonance. Then they'd have a fix on

you. Maybe they could then make contact with you! What sounded like outrageous paranoia gave her hope. If, and it was a big if, Fehna was right, then she could get out. Mentally at least. Still access the Web.

"They pollute our resonance." Fehna said primly. Mother again.

"Could be accidental. You know like a glitch in the system."

"Oh no, they're too smart for that." She frowned at Carias. "You're not polluted. Maybe just a little. And you were really in the Web?"

"Bits of it." Carias said carefully.

"And they didn't target you, siphon your soul? Muck with your resonance?" she was almost in awe of Carias.

"Don't think so."

"Well something must be wrong otherwise you wouldn't be here. They'd know that. They might have buried something nasty deep in your mind and you wouldn't know they did that. Like some bug or virus. They can do whatever they want."

"Maybe." Carias said agreeably. She rose knowing this conversation could go on for ever. "Nice talking to you. Thanks for introducing yourself. You've been of great help." She added trying to make Fehna feel nice about herself. "I am obliged."

Fehna rose as well. "Want to see my room?"

"Another time. Thanks. I mean it. My brain..." Carias trailed off.

"Yes, know the feeling."

Carias walked out of the warm living room and up the stairs back to her retreat. Even if Fehna was just a tiny bit right, the idea that the Web had a fix on her, which she doubted, gave her courage to put up with her enforced stay. Maybe the Web was impervious to deletion. Maybe it did subsume real space as the priests would have it. Maybe it was everywhere. She hoped so. Maybe she was 'fixed'. Maybe her persona was still in there. Maybe maybe maybe. But without her headband hope was all she had.

Her head hardened inside, her resonance lifted itself above her. That's interesting, jarred. She finally realised what her mother had done. Drugged her! No wonder the present had been so intense back in the kitchen a mere half a day ago. Now imprisoned in this beautiful setting.

She sat at her little table, staring into the infused blackness of night. She seemed to be both in it as it was in her. Was that how their primitive ancestors felt? Night as an entity. Guide lights along the paths gave the gardens depth. As did the shining brilliant glowing star studded profusion above. Reachable. What had their ancestors thought. Suspended lamps once they mastered fire? She knew nothing of her planet's past. Just

that they had at some stage crawled out of their caves, formed farming communities whilst others became keepers of herds of cattle, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens. Then incessant wars, the formation of city states, mass murder by Outlanders, the Great Calamity, spiritual salvation. Thousands of years compressed into one line of thought. Surely there had to be more.

She suspected those distant cave dwellers had certainly not bowed down to their singular deity. If they had they would have been stuck on the cave-age. Accepting their lot as they were required through theological injunctions to accept their lot; whether as Volatiles, or chosen Naturals, gifted spiritualized souls or the mystical inclined. A jolt as her brain solidified into its concrete self. Drugs. Is that how all this came about? Sensational visions of some Great Divine Being projected *onto and into* the cosmos? Were drugs then curtailed, written out of the mental equation for if drugs infused one with a sense of some universal holiness the need of priests would become superfluous. Drugs created false sensations it was claimed. So how real was the Divine Mind? Some claimed to have seen and experienced it in their dreams. Dreams, the dread of other realities supplanting this assumed reality. How did Reganians view it? Whatever they thought was certainly not made clear to them, to her. Since her para-legal forced infusion of whatever the concoction which her mother had so sneakily tricked her into taking her whole *conception* of the universe was changed. Mother and her advisor, some local priest no doubt had made an egregious mistake. She knew of her own *crypto-divinity*. She had tasted infinity and that could not be deleted. It would remain with her until her dying day, or night. What then? Dissolution into the divine entity, or as the ancients would have it, transcendent, becoming divine like an eternally radiating star? From the stars we came. Really? Interesting.

She was getting tired of all this thinking. Knowing was enough. They had made an agnostic of her. All because they felt the need to drug her to accept her fate and destiny. Instead her mind, her soul, her essence, her radiating resonance expanded instead. But no sensation, no hint of the ever present Web. So what were the theologists so uptight about? Oh yes, its meta-worlds. She smiled to herself. Somehow she knew instinctively she would be back. It gave her hope to go on, something to live for.

Fehna's paranoia. Being watched, scanned, spied upon. Were they reading her thoughts now? She looked around the room. Unless she took it apart there was no telling if sensing devices, softscanners were in place. Some claimed to feel the probing like a secondary something inside one's head. Maybe the drugs were overriding their tentacled intrusion. Another maybe. No wonder the patients were disturbed,

unharmonic. Encouraged by the asylum's mere presence to fall into the very mental states they claimed to obviate, occlude, diminish, delete. It depressed her. She might be here for a long long time. If she could get to her father he might be able to extricate her from this madhouse. The others this evening appeared so normal. Then again that could be due to molecular stabilizers, enforced normalcy by truncating their hyper-active imaginings, like Fehna's. Poor girl, woman. Possessed by her own obsession, all too real for her. If they were watching so what? What was there to watch? Her resonance? Prying into souls. Sick voyeurs and legal at that.

Dr. Groben, head psychiatrist working for the great man, the pontiff Telafus watched with some irritation his unannounced visitor. Gelat, gaunt, emaciated, probably a religious fanatic by the looks of his haunted eyes, his aged lined face, thin pursed colourless lips in the robes of a pontifical representative looked challengingly at Groben's soft features. Groben had to deal with the likes of him on a continual bases. They were searching for specific Volatiles. Whether to study them, comprehend their sense of the divine, seeking out heresies, or potential DVs often meant that he could not treat them according to medical dictates. The hopelessly confused, the emotionally unstable, the left overs who were beyond hope of curing, of strengthening their resonance were left to his staff whilst the pontiff's agents cherry picked the best. Those whose resonance was particular solid with potent empathic tendencies to be as one with the Divine Mind. Then the Ecclesiastics took over through the Domimax, the religious order up on the orbital. Almost feared and revered simultaneously they themselves were contained up there. As should be. Prima off limits.

It was Groben's job to inform these pontifical representatives, forever rotated for some spurious reason, of potential patients. To be used as the pontiff saw fit in their clinically mono-maniacal fixe idee of the alien infusion. Groben accepted the facts as they were presented. Privately wondering at the substance of their claims. He understood how they used that information to keep the Volatiles in a perpetual state of fear. Distorting their resonance, potent alien suggestions threatening their sanity with homicidal thoughts, evil intentions, self-deluded, unaligned threatening the group mind of Prima's collective soul. The repeated injunctions of their destabilizing society a mantra, incessantly repeated even to Groben on occasion. Some of the possessed who were utterly fixated on the Divine Mind were sent to Regum to sow their spiritual message of divine redemption amongst that planet's indifferent populace.

Groben guessed as to Gelat's presence. The voluntary admission of their latest patient Carias. Drach, Groben's executive officer was in a meeting with Lord Qatus, formulating policy directives. Maybe Gelat thought dealing now with Groben gave him some advantage. Gelat was certainly superior to both but Drach could hold his own sometimes refusing to release a targeted patient on the grounds of their latent insanity. Studying the condition of their patients for their own agenda, a directive coming through backdoor channels. For some of the inmates had the amazing acumen to block the CFs installed in their rooms. There the suffering individuals could let their disturbed state express itself. It was the only way of observing directly their condition, watched by the gardeners, who were trained psychologists observing the patients surreptitiously.

So when Gelat asked for Carias's file, which Groben had just studied prior his surprise visitor he was up to speed.

"The readouts suggest there is nothing intrinsically wrong with her, except her addiction to Gaming. Illegal as you know. Yet it did not destabilise her." He did not allude to her imaginary friend Ung.

"The very reason why the pontiff has taken an interest."

Data on patients was leaked to even the intelligence services, human management, the social controllers which Groben had to accept as a given even though patient confidentiality was supposedly sacred. Volatiles were becoming more and more of interest to these control groups. Even Telafus. Never in their recent history had a pontiff taken such a direct interest in them.

"I assume you want her released." Groben anticipated Gelat's reason for his visit.

"On the contrary Dr Groben. We have discovered to our dismay that many Volatiles are acutely aware of how they are being used. That causes friction."

"I bet it does."

"They often self-sabotage their rehabilitation. Many actually want to remain unstable. This is extremely worrisome."

"Well if they received proper care..." Groben was direct. Gelat waved that away.

"We need them for our divine mission." Another one. He sighed.

"And how is that going? Getting many converts?" Groben almost sneered. Not that he did not believe how important it was to get the Reganian's re-aligned. Using individuals like Gelat, with their pompous self-importance.

"Not as many as we hope. The Reganian's are recalcitrant. As long as their WebWorld, really now WebSpace is in place, whilst this heinous artifice remains our

difficulties are made more obvious. What I would like, this is a request you understand..." Groben nodded his acceptance, "...I would like a list of those Volatiles who are immune to the CFs"

"That is extremely privileged."

"I am requesting Dr Groben."

"I know. But that is a matter for planetary security." Groben countered. Security, it was beginning to override all other departments. Janon was extremely dexterous in enhancing his status through no doubt the unaffiliated triumpherate of Lord Gharbel, Qatus and to a greater extent, Lord Pentham. Their domains assuming total control, subsuming all other departments, including that of the Pontiff's. Groben liked the political ramifications. It would enhance his role, as it did Drach's who was actively engaged, behind the scenes of making at least this asylum secure from outside interference. Yet the pontiff was the supreme ruler. He could not be denied or so Gelat assumed.

Groben understood the nature of the visit. Carias was an excuse to flex his political muscle. If Groben gave way a precedent would be set. Drach would never forgive him.

"Anyway Carias is really normal. You have the pick of the whole planet for types like her."

"It is not for me to decide. I follow orders Dr Groben." He hinted darkly. "No what is being envisaged here is not her removal as I have made clear. We want her to be studied assiduously. She is a special case." For the pontiff's political agents were also flexing their muscle. If certain departments, like System Management, a euphemism for counter-intelligence began to use patients such as Carias they might, in dealing with the Web become too enmeshed, maybe even being turned. For whilst the pontiff wanted WebSpace shut down, they saw it as a useful tool to be used against Regum. Yet by accepting the validity of the Web they accepted it's logic and that logic was alien to everything Prima stood for.

"I want Carias to remain here, no matter who asks for her."

That surprised Groben. So policy was changing.

"You think Carias is that important."

"What about visitors?"

"Even more so. Who. We need to know this."

"Collecting data are we?"

"Maintaining social harmony. She is a lodestone. She could even be under Reganian influence for the Web is everywhere. The CFs of course make this place a

vacant bubble in their system. But as I said, what is of interest to the pontiff is who is interested in her."

"That include family?" Groben was displeased that his asylum, its inmates were now being used to spy on their visitors. So why not the security arm? Too overt. Was he after a nest of turned Primaian's? That had never occurred to him. Were they getting too paranoid? Or was some hidden agenda at work here. He suspected as much since this request was counter intuitive.

Gerat thinking. Whether to reveal that Fehna was one of their agents. They kept her unstable enough through the judicious use of molecular tailored drugs to give the appearance of her disturbed mind. They had nurses working for the palace. All he knew was the programme was in place. The order came from up high, but how high he was not told. But to Gerat that did not matter. The order itself sufficed.

"May I see the report on Fehna." An order.

Groben rose and walked to the one and only filing cabinet. He entered the password, it opened. He looked at Fehna's file. Stable Volatile, just. Schizophrenic and all that entailed. He handed it to Gerat wondering why this interest in her. Not that unstable in her natural state. That meant she was useless. Yet Gerat was interested and what interested Gerat now interested Groben.

"I would think she would make a good companion for Carias. Make her aware just what a borderline a case Carias is."

How would he know? This place was a sieve.

"We want to see if Carias can be destabilized."

Another surprise. One that went against his duty as a doctor. What was going on?

"You look surprised Dr. Groben. Well..."he allowed himself a wan smile, almost a sneer, "...the idea is that if Carias can be made to go over, then we can assume the Reganian's are responsible. You understand the implications?"

He did. So these religious proselytes had another agenda cooking. Things were hotting up. And what destabilized Regum was good for Prima, or so the logic went. But if they succeeded in this insane idea, the Reganian's would become a loose canon. Given their technological prowess it could backfire on the whole planet. Was this wise? No. Was it rational? Unfortunately yes. Would he agree to it? He had no choice. But he would mention it to Drach. Reading his mind Gerat said: "This is in the strictest of confidence. Should this get out prematurely, I will hold you personally responsible."

"I could say the same Gerat. No offence. Remember we have psychics amongst us. Whose to say your mind is so secure that even some involuntary entanglement might not occur. Your statement is of limited substance."

"Let me rephrase that." Gerat retreated. "If it can be proven..."

"Oh I see. How kind of you that you place such faith and trust in me. Whose to tell that someone might not be reading your resonance? Maybe a bored DV?"

"My thoughts are contained. I practice my devotions continually." Gerat asserted.

"Right now?"

"Even as we speak."

It was not impossible but Groben was not so sure. Knowing how shaky a mind could be at some unguarded moment, no one was completely secure.

"Anyway. Encourage Fehna to feed Carias's delusions."

"She hasn't got any Gerat."

"Addiction to Gaming Dr Groben. Is that not enough? She hankers after false realities. If that is not a delusion..."

Groben thought of quite a few natural delusions so called normal people had. But that might cause offence to Gerat. So he kept his peace.

"Drach. He is my executive superior. Having Carias fail will be a blot on both of us. I will have failed in my duty to do my best for Carias, Drach in not overseeing my failure as well."

"That will all be taken care of Dr Groben."

"I suppose asking for this to be in writing is out of the question."

"It is."

"So if this goes bad..."

"You and Drach will be protected."

"On your word." Groben was dismissive of the promise.

"On my word as the pontiff's representative. I think I need to state the obvious here."

"It would help."

"We have an agreement Dr Groben."

"So it appears."

"This is too important for personal agendas." Gerat warned.

"It is not I who has the agenda Gerat." Groben countered. "I understand that the nature of this experiment is not just unusual, but audacious. Maybe it would be better if this was being done by the proper authorities."

"No, not in this case. The proper authorities you mention could be infiltrated. They are the glaring target. No those who have made this decision know exactly what they are doing."

"Which you are not at liberty to reveal."

"I am not. Given the nature of the mission."

"Regum's sanity."

Gerat's face was set in a determined expression.

"Fehna already knows what she is to do, how to do it, when to do it. Carias will never suspect."

"What happens if she doesn't?"

"Doesn't what Dr Groben."

"Flip."

"Well then we will have to try another approach." Gerat said evenly.

"You mean regression."

"Progress Dr Groben, progress. Think positive." The interview over Gerat rose. "I shall see myself out."

Do that Groben thought.

Ratze

"Ratze." The voice familiar, feminine, tonal recognition. Eyes open. Out of stasis. Momentary lethargy. No not stasis, deep induced coma, the deep sleep. Hard to tell which. Nano-molecular-combinants feeding her Brain.

'Must be my turn.' She thought. The tube displayed her read outs more for the technicians monitoring her state than herself. It reassured its sleepers upon waking that they were in a controlled environment.

Alert she punched the escape button, a dot of green light above her. The oblong transparent capsule slid her out on its tray.

"Ready to proceed with insertion." The transitory sense of dislocation passed, her memory returned. As she stood slightly flexing her leg muscles she felt the reassembly of her normal self. In her jump suit, with smart-ware, inbuilt processors their energy supplied by the motions of her body, the ambient EM spectrum, solar all kept her on-line in the real-time environment. She assumed this was reality, not cached. A-OK. Everything was as it should be her Brain told her.

One other empty container. Ung's. Nervina peacefully asleep in hers. Ung the scout, the base-line, the control. She floated to C & C. The Facilitator looked familiar. The briefing. The Controller gave her a reassuring smile. Looking wise as usual. Loaded with data fields. Ratze hoped that even if she had a tenth of what this woman possessed they would succeed in unravelling the Discrepancy. Something about the fabric of space.

"All set to transfer?" the Facilitator asked. He was a little older than Ratze. Same short cropped hair. Ratze nodded. She walked into the Virtual Quantum Computer, right inside. The hum of its light driven processors reassuring. Previously scanned, her individual specific data blocks virtually in place at the other end, location classified. Located beyond the huge star field of Andromeda. No distortions.

The dozen vacuum beams engaged and isolated the cube from real-time space. A tiny singularity, its presence non existent. No EM leakage, an energy loop feeding on itself. In space the cube vanished. So did her memories except who she was but not

what she had to do. Outside the cube absolute nothingness. Absolute zero. Atoms, molecules now absent as were her two supervisors. A zero spectrum field.

The same white room, four chairs, a table.

"Ratze. Time to go."

She was ready. Mentally rearing to go, physically calm. Her Brain's enhanced state, partially reconfigured to accept at neuron active levels her supra-consciousness where her mission was configured along complex protein strands. Non localized.

"Ung as you know is already with Prima's DVs." Her controller began. Reassuring her of Ung's successful virtual jump and insertion. "It went fine. No problems. The field is clear, relatively speaking. Some activity though as expected." Not mentioning the DVs. "Subtle phase-change in progress but well below that of the detection capabilities their end. Our," she paused, then "your end. Now Reganian science is advancing rapidly. They've made the transition to quantum computing. Not only that but they have succeeded in instant matter transfer. In a way they are kin now. It won't impinge on our operations. Just letting you know their potential. Demarcating the difference regarding Prima who remain as they are. Their decision. Mars is under Primaian influence." No screens for Ratze to familiarize herself with that planet. "As you know they've made contact. Some field distortions in place which should not affect you. Your Brain primed to the as yet non-existent source, our prime objective. That much is uploaded." the Controller finished with the last briefing.

"Fine."

"Good. Any questions?"

"Direct insertion into Prima's area of activity?"

She smiled.

"No. Two agents popping up might reverberate at their end. You will be inserted at the periphery of Regum's sector of space, embedded history included. We have programmed a scenario that will get you into Primaian space."

"Not hostile."

"Not the field no. As for you they will think you're one of theirs. The Reganians need inserts into Primaian space. Given their psychic abilities the Reganians have been unsuccessful. Where they have succeeded though is in their spatially expanding Web. Completely dominant. Needless to say Prima is trying to sabotage that. You may experience some minor interference. Nothing your Brain cannot handle."

"No heavy EM flux?"

"None anticipated." Which did not mean it might not occur.

"My Brain is familiar with my history?"

"Yes. Data released depending on the environment, your phase-field."

"What they call resonance."

"Correct. Ready?"

"Ready."

The Controller and Facilitator in position. The beams on, QPWF on target. Her data-field removed along with the cube. The vacuum field switched off. For one fraction of a second Ratze was in their configured real space-time continuum. The VQCs taken over by QCs running on full power inserting Ratze into her designated arrival zone.

Drassid looked at the DV expert. The first defector using WebSpace to transition. Using their virtual jump gates to lure Primaians across. Watching Ratze's scan results. Minutely different to the DVs.

"Possibly an Enhanced Stable Volatile, with a totally new configuration. If the Primaians are experimenting with their DVs on a computational level then they are beginning to catch up." The technician cautiously aware that Primaians were possibly self boosting their own inherent potentialities .

"I'm worried about how muted they are about the disappearance of one of their own."

"Well Drassid they are active in our Web."

Drassid merely nodded. Success or a set up? After all he had suggested to his superiors they use the Web to get a DV for themselves. The Web's jump gate formed a cordon around Ratze the moment she appeared on their radar. The extraction had gone easier than anticipated. They expected a failure. Removing a real-time entity had never been tried before. But with their brand new QCs the theory worked out, the possible entropic flaws ironed out. It was possible to move anything to anywhere. Ratze instantly blacked out, removed from WebSpace, inserted via a safe containment field then transferred whilst in an induced coma into one of their secure secret establishments ready to deal with Primaian defectors. They watched Ratze's recumbent figure. Attached were fibre optic soft scanning links downloading her complete persona into an isolated computer.

Drassid aware the Primaian's were after total domination. So far none knew what the details of their plans. As DVs were their forward defence or so they claimed, they were really advance guards trying to dominate space as the Reganians were doing with their Web. The DVs tried to burrow into their heads and now it was time to return the

favour. No wonder they were muted at the loss of one of their own. In fact they were remarkably quiet. It confirmed the theory of extraction. All one needed was their full resonance, download it as a field, then move that field using QCs via the back up VQC's which prepared the ground for Ratze's presence.

Drassid looked at the readouts. Ratze an advanced instructor of which there were several levels. From the data gleaned thus far she seemed to be a free roaming DV as well. That was extremely rare. Conversed with their op heads. Mission specific. Knowing broadly what that entailed. Total domination of their Web and their planet. Only the details, the operational end, the clandestine manoeuvrings absent. For the moment all Drassid could ascertain was who Ratze had been with, not what went on. Maybe she was merely making contact, preparing the way for something. A fishing expedition amongst their own. Not Regum focussed at all. That might be deceptive. The only satisfaction Drassid got was that Ratze was some new configuration, heading into AI territory. Maybe she was what they called a Natural. Primaian's were more or less connected to their planetary resonance as Reganian's were to the Web. That the two fields clashed was common knowledge. Drassid wanted to know what the Primaian's were planning. The DVs their best lead. The Primaian's basically advertised their stubborn intent.

Then Mars appeared in her head. The analysis never lied. It somewhat confirmed what they knew. Psychic entanglement through the DVs. Maybe Ratze was the rational end of their spectrum. Imitating Regum's mind-set. That could get tricky. If they could masque themselves as Reganians a new phase in intelligence, operational directives were being planned by Prima. He gave orders for her to be treated as a patient who had had a brainstorm. Information overload, borderline burn out.

Which she was, she just didn't know it. The DVs never did when it hit them. Ratze had experienced a multispectrum fluxblast. The spike was there on the screen. The computers came up with an increase in entropy. It could mean anything. Specific regarding Mars, non-localized indicating a sudden phase-change in space. Or anywhere in between. Drassid left the control room to report to his immediate superior. They would have to wait and see how she would react to her new environment. It would also put the Primaian's in a quandary. Had she been turned? Was she still stable enough? Was she corrupted with their incessant obsession regarding the photon information from the other universe? Or had she successfully avoided all that and remained in situ? Her brains cans indicated the latter. Strange: some white noise did not

make sense. To the computers it was a spread out spike, non-localised. Their astronomical observations revealed no activity out of the usual. Most unusual.

Ratze's head felt thick. Sluggish as if drugged. Her inserted nano-bots were lying low letting the body's natural reactions do the job. Her Brain receded into her unconscious mind. Establish her active persona. All she remembered was being in space, then some confusion, rapid changing images, some sort of vortex and now she was in a hospital bed. She hoped she had not burnt out. Her mind felt alright so that was OK. Fragments of abstract patterns floated around her head but made no sense. Patterns in space. Probably the Web. Her area of operations when not training advanced DVs. Working as an Isolate to penetrate the secrets of Regum's WebSpace.

Hyper-space. Had she fallen into a Reganian trap? Had they gotten to her? She moved her head. Wires and tubes connected to silent observant machinery. A hospital. She wriggled her toes, moved her fingers, checked her body. No injuries. So it had to do with her head. Everything was fine, nothing hurt. The overhead strip lights were soft. No constraints. So not perceived as hostile or violent. They had probably scanned her head. She the first DV entrapment. Or had she been recalled? BrainDrained? She felt herself to be herself. Hard to tell, impossible really. If she had been BrainDrained what had she known that had to be removed? Nothing on the inside. Full circle. The monitors were keeping silent watch. Some drips on her left arm. Nutrients? Stabilizers? Drugs? Intentionally snatched? Regum? Prima?

An open entrance in front of her. A silhouette appeared, crackled momentarily as he walked through a sterilizing field. Maybe computer virus checked or if she had AI capabilities. Anything could be possible.

The silhouette was tall, lean, the face middle aged, easy movements. He looked at the monitors satisfied. Removed the drip feeds.

"How are you feeling?" smooth voice.

"OK." She rasped, her mouth her throat dry. He handed her a glass of water from her side table. It tasted sweet. Glucose, minerals, a touch of bitterness, maybe vitamins as well. Or just sugar and lousy water flowing into her empty stomach. That meant she had been here for hours.

"Try moving your limbs."

"Done that."

"And?"

"Nothing wrong."

"Motor coordination is fine then."

"So it appears." No point asking him what she was doing here, how she got here, where she was. Soft comfortable cotton pyjamas.

"Try getting out of bed."

She rose, no effort really, feeling completely normal.

"Have a shower." He opened a side door. A chemical shower. So she was in space. Hospitals in space? Maybe she was on her orbital. Maybe the Websnatch an illusion. Maybe. The jets of powder surrounded her in a white fog. Airblasted, the exhaust fan removed the fine particles. A quick luke-warm shower to wash off the remains. She towelled herself.

"You can get dressed now." He said from inside her room. She saw the door to her wardrobe. Jump suit and all her undergarments dry cleaned.

When she returned refreshed he was busy downloading the monitors' data into a handsized pc. Glowing optic strands. She ran a hand over her short cropped hair. Gear like that indicated Regum. Indicated. Nothing certain.

"Well doctor, what now?"

"We check you out. You're well enough to leave." No explanation as to why she was here, apart from possible scanning.

"What was wrong with me? What happened?" she bluffed.

"Nothing wrong with you Ratze. You're free to leave. Someone is waiting to pick you up at reception."

"Where am I?"

"In a hospital."

"But where?"

"Just follow me please." She shrugged. Well it was no civilian hospital then. They walked through the crackling barrier, her brain itching, a soft scan. He walked ahead of her down a more brightly lit corridor, the room behind her falling into darkness.

"So you're not going to tell me why I am here."

"I did not bring you here. My job is to make sure you are fit and healthy, which you are. The admitting doctor is currently busy."

Sounds military. But Reganian's had no military, just SpaceKorps. Maybe they had their own facilities. They entered a reception area. A nurse behind a semi circular desk, computer screens showing other patients status. The young nurse picked up a com pc and said "They're here". then gave the doctor a smile. He smiled back saying "Thank you". Then asked Ratze to take a seat at the only bench. The place smelt sterilized, the

air fresh, pristine, pure. From behind reception the doctor handed her a small sealed bag.

"Your personal stuff. Data access card which we haven't touched. All there." She could not remember what she possessed. Then familiarity returned. Credit account, ID and her com unit. All standard.

A servo-bot appeared, a cylinder on triple wheels to climb stairs, a stretcher with a patient, a net-cap on his head followed by the second servo-bot rolled passed. Next to the patient a glowing clipboard indicating his state. The data in yellow, borderline to good. Ratze wished she could remember more. In Reganian space then. Prima had none of this. None that anybody knew of. There had been others, all too vague, there and not there. Like some sub-routine with implanted memories. Remain neutral. Gaps in information.

An older woman appeared, a senior nurse with a glowing clipboard handing it to the doctor. He got his light pen out, signed it and handed it to Ratze. A release form. She signed at the bottom.

"No need to download that." She said to her meaning her embedded pc on her jump suit's sleeve. So they didn't want her to have that in her system.

A non descript business couple entered reception. Trim, neat, confident. They talked to the doctor, who signed something on their hand-held. Then walked over to Ratze introducing themselves as Nados and Kari. The doctor turned and left. They had to be agents. Nados looked bland, but observant. Kari more engaging.

"Transport's outside." Kari's voice soft.

She followed them into an airlock and straight into a shuttle. Definitely not Primaian. She was in Reganian territory. That complicated matters. She had been snatched! No ordinary shuttle. A couple of view-screens, four reclining chairs, a partition to the cockpit. No portholes. They strapped themselves in. Her escort in neutral mode, indifferent. Ratze at ease. The shuttle's doors sealed them in, disengaged from the airlock and accelerated. Well at least they did not treat her like a prisoner.

Nados had short brown hair, slightly podgy. A friendly soul, his brown eyes a complete blank. AI capable? Running through some sequence? Most likely. Soft hands, manicured fingernails, squeaky clean. Kari in a simple business suit as well. Almost identical. They certainly did not hide their professional status. Tell-tale ear studs indicating up-links. Kari a little older, skin just as smooth, sensuous lips, slight elongated nose, same dark short hair like Ratze's. No response from either of them.

"So you're my escort?" just to see if they were going to react at all.

"Correct." Kari replied.

"What was with the hospital?"

"See if you're OK. You are." Kari answered. She was probably the superior of the two.

"What happened?" not that she expected an answer.

"Don't know. We're here to make sure you get to your destination."

De-brief. Not that she could tell anybody much. She knew almost nothing. Her brain vacant, pleasantly so.

Should she tell them of her uselessness? They certainly were not venturing anything Ratze could use. Totally focussed both of them. Yet unfocussed as well. All capable, had to be.

"How do you feel?" Nados asked.

"Fine, thank you." Ratze smiled. Nados was not the smiling type. The look telling nothing.

"You remember much?"

Here goes. "One moment I'm there next thing I'm here." If you won't reveal anything neither will I. Not that she could, her mind still in some sort of free form, a non-state. Her unconscious not coming up with anything, her consciousness there, content-free.

Then silence.

For hours.

Ratze tried to rummage through her mind, her Brain but it refused to release anything at all. No memories of the past. Now that was familiar. Where had she experienced that before? Somewhere, sometime in the distant past even though it was so familiar. Not a double abduction!?

So where were her real time memories? Unless she had been reconfigured. The moment of understanding passed, receded and was gone. So she was in some sort of configured mind-set. So far so good. She sensed nothing from her two companions. Not trying anything. Three blanks in space. She thought this hilarious but suppressed the urge to smirk.

"How long?"

"Nearly there."

No sense of time. The screens read outs only revealed their cabins integrity. Nothing else regarding visuals, or if there was it was hidden from her seeing it. That set off a sudden stream of mental events. Secreted information, hers. Hidden data realms not

unlike the Web. Self isolated, pregnant with bifurcating multitudinal expansion points. Vortices. Mathematical analogies of running analogies using infinity equations, computer programmes exploring space's hidden potential. The sensation receded. Her Brain had let her know her capabilities, but not the reason why she had this installed in her. 'At the right time' the thought came to her. Well that was alright then. She felt more confident.

"So where am I going?"

"A place." Nados said evenly.

"You mean facility?" she tested. "You two would not come all this way up here for me simply for the ride. Such attention as I am receiving is rather rare I gather."

"Someone wants to talk to you."

"Hm. You know who I am?" probing.

"You're Ratze." Nados replied.

"I hope so." She joked. A momentary flicker in his eyes. "BrainDraining can reconstitute a person. Create a new persona. I might think I'm me, I am me. But am I who you think I am?"

"That is for others to decide."

Ah others. So they were an outfit, an organisation.

"I'm not in the public domain anymore."

"You're, we're in space Ratze." Nados answered.

"Real or cyber?"

"Both are real."

"Only the mind is real. I could be..." and her Brain stopped her from continuing for she nearly said 'ruse'.

"What?"

"Anything."

"Others will decide that."

"I thought I decide who I am."

"That is your right."

That reconfirmed them as Reganian agents. What will they think back on the orbital. Compromised? Polluted? Reloaded? Preloaded? Unloaded?

"You're intelligent people. What do you think. Nados? Kari?"

"What we think is irrelevant." Kari replied.

"But you will have to report something,"

"Your safe arrival."

"Protecting me from what?"

"Just making sure Ratze."

"How do I know you're not a rogue outfit?"

"You don't."

Ah. Definitely security. Giving nothing away except what they were.

"I'm surprised you did not engage me in idle chit-chat. You know get me to reveal bits of this and that, the tricks of the trade."

Blank looks. Not telling. Kari momentarily preoccupied. Data exchange.

"Entering the atmosphere, it gets bumpy now."

The shuttle did start to vibrate a little, then shuddering, shaking as it bore through the upper atmosphere of what could only be Regum. She understood why she had not been hijacked straight to her destination. To give the appearance she was still up there in space. It could be easily done. They had her persona downloaded and could fake her presence easily enough to be anywhere they wanted. Then send a cloaking capable shuttle to remove her real self. The hospital was probably similar to a habitat her Brain told her, not known to the Primaian's. If she is damaged goods they might think twice about reinstituting her as a prime DV. Then again they might have allowed this to occur so that the Reganian's were made aware just how capable their advanced DVs really were. Frighten them a little. A possibility especially with a chameleon programme inside of her.

The shuttle was really shaking them up now. Probably glowing enough for even Prima's radar to get a fix. Unless the shuttle's radiation was loaded with information making it either vanish or pretend to be something else, like a cargo vessel returning from a factory ship. Her Brain did not try too hard to unscramble the data. It was not that important.

The shaking steadied as they bored through the lower atmosphere. Then glided smoothly lowering their approach speed. Moments later a short bump, touch down, a jerk as retro rockets slowed them down. Then taxied to an apron for her transfer.

They came to a halt. A soft clang as a projecting walkway attached itself. The doors slid open and all she saw was the constantinad extension. They unstrapped Nados led the way, Kari following, passed a sealed partition. No one at the spaceport would see them, down another empty corridor and straight into a smaller compartment of a vehicle. Again they strapped in and this time lifted off vertically. No windows either. They were revealing as little as possible. For a moment the itch, another soft scan. Her Brain let it sweep through her vacant mind. She understood why she could not access her memory, so that they could not either. Whether it was her companions or remote her

Brain was not about to give away its potential. Good Brain. These two were masters at hiding themselves. That meant they suspected Ratze did have potential, she was a DV after all. An advanced one at that. Maybe the DVs were searching for her, maybe. It could well be that the intention was to loose her.

They flew on in silence. It was several hours, hard to tell isolated. Ratze aware neither Nados nor Kari felt tired, or bored, or anything. Nor she. That meant inserted molecular energy was slowly released to keep her alert enough not to be tired. The same went for them. The VAV slowed, then started its descent coming to a smooth landing.

Night, starlight, darkness, temporal substance. The silhouette of a chalet, black outline standing in a backdrop of pale mountains obscuring the glow of the galaxy. The cool air refreshing. Out of the VAV. Nados led Ratze glad to walk, Kari behind. Two vague shapes waiting in silence. No greetings no chit chat no status reports. Just the wind in the trees looming around them. A pine forest in the foothills.

The path pebbled, probably with sensors and pressure pads all around. No parking bay for ground vehicles. Secluded. Probably not on any map. The two cut out shapes moved forwards and up a few steps into the foyer as discreet wall lights came on glowing softly. Barely dissipating the gloom within. No reception. A large banistered staircase, polished to a high gloss finish. Opulent thick carpeting.

The two suited figures in front, heads shaved gleaming slightly led the way. No identifying markings, smart tags unless embedded in their clothing. Ratze's mind left alone. No probing. They probably had her down already. That meant her legend was dispersed in their system. At the foot of the stairs, the rest of the corridor unlit showed a series of doors. One man one woman, discreet in their rectitude. The place deserted, not a sound.

"This is Choss," a quick smile with slant observant deep black eyes, "and I am Scaag." Treating her like a valued guest. "Welcome and may your stay with us be a pleasant one."

"Thank you." Ratze was amused. Getting the treatment even though she was technically their prisoner. She wondered how the Primaian's treated theirs. "We will show you to your quarters, make sure you're comfortable, see to your needs. Tomorrow someone will want to talk to you. Get you sorted." As in what? She wondered. Paying her the utmost of discreet attention. Observant without undue inquisitiveness.

They made their way up the stairs the lights going out behind them and coming on in front, just enough to illuminate their immediate presence. Guide lights along the corridor.

"We're not on Prima." Ratze ventured as they walked past more closed doors.

"What do you think?" Kari asked behind her.

"I don't know." They were testing her capabilities so answering in the negative was the safest option. Her Brain withdrew. Whatever this place was it looked like a retreat, more a debriefing centre well out of sight.

Their silence did not intimidate her. Part of the scene. Intel. They stopped in front of one of the doors and opened it with a key. Surely that could not be its total security. The room was lush. Rich dark velvet curtains, drawn, ornate chairs, a writing and coffee table, a plush bed, a wardrobe though Ratze was travelling light, soft ambient wall lights, no tell tale terminal, isolation. A shower recess. Old world comfort.

They left, the door shut but was not re-locked. She sat at the table, pulling open the curtains. A window, completely sealed, air conditioning up the top. Utter darkness outside, the forest set back slightly. She was tempted to do a soft scan but thought better of it. Wait and see if they scanned her. A metal pitcher of water and one glass. She took a drink, the water tasted nice. Mountain fresh. No nano's present. No internal alerts. Plain water. The wardrobe had a suit, a gown, blouse, pants, jumpsuits for space travel, jumpers, scarves and in the cupboard underwear, socks, white beanies.

She found the light switch and turned it off. The silence cool in her head. Soothing, refreshing maybe ionizers. She could make out the trees and nothing else. The quiet absolute. She sighed not feeling sleepy but got into bed anyway.

So who am I? An advanced DV. What do I know? Not much, her memory was no help, her Brain not there. A blank. That will be fun tomorrow. At least no inserts had been implanted in the hospital. She had done a body check with her last shower. Instinctively she ran her hand over her head, the back of her neck. No lumps, minor scar tissue or patches. She was as is. So why the interest in her? Unless this went on all time. The Domimax would never admit to losing one of their own. They might have a pool of replacements, eager neophytes ready to join the cause. Prima's cause. She might not even appear on any records now that she was missing. Deleted, plausible denial. Reverse insertion perhaps. Something was going on but what?

An intercom at the door. Internal with just two buttons. One to send the other to activate? She pinched her arm. Real, no cyberspace this. So what made her so special? Unless maybe to set in motion some sort of exchange of captives. Bargaining power. Or

being subtly recruited. Not impossible. She was 'in' at the orbital. Trouble was she could not remember 'in' what? Her Brain wasn't telling.

She felt restless. Concentrate on your breath. She fell asleep after a while.

"Ratze." Scaag's voice on the intercom. Morning. Light shone through the window at a high angle. Daytime.

"Can you hear me?" she asked from her bed.

"Loud and clear."

"What?"

"Time to get up. Meet and greet. Half an hour."

"OK." She got up feeling refreshed. Showered in real water, awaking.

Half an hour later a soft knock at the door. She was in slacks and a jumper.

"Morning. Bit bored last night? Miss your stims?" a funny way to be greeted. Surprise the mind.

"And the rest." She added not sure what she was alluding to.

"Understandable. Handling it well?"

"Surviving." What had he meant? Her abduction, this sensory neutral environment, reticent minders?

"Feel like breakfast?"

"No. Coffee or tea will be fine for now."

The corridor was as dark as the night before, tiny lights on until they came to the staircase, light flooding in from the closed glass front door. They walked down into the small dining room. Choss came out with a tea tray, milk, sugar, biscuits. They let her drink her tea. Choss withdrew. Scaag was relaxed, as if they were friends. When she was finished he asked if she wanted a walk in the grounds. A burly middle aged woman was in the hallway. Scaag told her they were taking the air. She said nothing.

"Not a recuperating centre is it?" Ratze asked as they stepped out into the bright sunshine. The air crisp, the smell of pines. She felt free which didn't make sense. She felt good which was alright in itself. The VAV was still there. They walked around to the rear. The wind hummed in the trees. Bird sounds.

"It's a retreat." Scaag informed her.

"Just for me?" she smiled.

"Just for you."

"Away from Prima's prying minds."

"One never knows." He lied. The building was riddled with smart ware, dampeners, false inserting programmes, cloaking capabilities. Solar panelled rooves, generators in the basement, com-links hidden in the roof.

"So I'm your guest?"

"You could say that. Comfortable?"

"Yes. Even if a little bare. Rather depriving. No books either."

"We want you to have a well earned rest."

"I haven't done anything."

"Your journey, jet lag."

"Not me."

"Used to travel?"

"Must be." He was adept at the soft approach. Whatever they were after they weren't saying. "We are on Regum?" The thought of another planet momentarily flashed through her mind. Keep her in suspense. "If you told me I could adjust, relate." Ratze hinted.

"You're a person of interest."

"I have gathered that Scaag." They ambled over cut grass coming out the back of the chalet. Several park benches overlooking the forest now hiding the mountains. Fleecy white clouds above.

"You live here? Stationed here?" she asked.

"I follow my assignments." He answered vaguely.

"Must be interesting. Not being stuck on one place. Which means this has to be Regum."

"Why is that Ratze?"

"Because you said 'I follow my assignments'. Prima is into containment, specific zone oriented, or conversely exclusion zones denying open interchange of people. Unless for holy rituals. No signs of the Divine Mind, no religious representations. Even the orbitals have prayer rooms. None here."

"This is not such a place. It's for special guests."

"I could lodge a complaint. Denial of religious observances."

"No one is stopping you."

"So what do you know about me, and Scaag why am I here?"

"You're of interest."

"So I am beginning to understand. As a DV?" trying to probe his reaction. Her Brain remained mute.

"There is something you know yet might not be aware of." What Scaag meant but did not say was that as a DV she ought to be loaded, unconsciously at least yet the scans revealed a great emptiness. That was most unusual. She was some next level operative. Special extraction methods might have to be used. Not as severe as Prima's BrainDraining, that was too confusing, too much as it sucked out the lot, including the persona and its content which muddled up what they were after.

In the control room, Nados, Kari and Choss were monitoring the bank of surveillance screens plus Ratze's mental state. Scaag with his head-webbing was interacting with Ratze when she had slept in her room.

"Easy to get in, not getting much though." Scaag said to them.

"We'll try the next scenario." Kari replied. She was boss. "Create panic. It may get her to protect secreted data. She's smart, smarter than the average Primaian. They tend to show off. Ratze knows what is going on. She's well acquainted with debriefing methods. Either the Primaian's are getting better..."

"Or something is not quite right." Nados finished.

"Could she be one of ours?"

"No noise from any quarters. You two wouldn't be here." Choss replied. "Run the next sequence."

"Ratze." The intercom.

She was awake. Wonderful sleep. Disturbed. A conversation, it faded and was gone. Nothing from her Brain. No significance. "What?"

"Half on hour." It was Nados. What did he want. She showered, dressed in slacks and a pullover, refreshing warm shower, real water.

Nados was there just as she finished dressing. Same suit, no Kari watching over him. A one on one. Kari was a reptile compared to Nados. And she at the bottom of the food chain. Nados was all smiles, camaraderie. He didn't watch like Kari, he was merely there, a presence, a reminder only. The soft touch. 'Well that would be interesting, see what he knows.'

They got into the VAV and took off away from the mountains. Nados at the controls. Trees and undulating hills. Mid morning. After a while, passing a glistening river she saw the metropolis in the distance. Tall grey structures. Regum, nothing like this existed on Prima. They flew over the outlying suburbs, little houses squashed together, then apartment blocks, trams, traffic, people on the streets.

"So what's up?" Ratze asked.

"Slight change of plans. We've noticed a sweep. Could be them. We'll find out." As he looked over the controls. "Nothing so far. Routine probably. Happens."

The sun reflected off the glass of the tower blocks. Some had hanging gardens, breaking the monotony of stark brash designs reaching for the sky.

Ratze strangely familiar with the setting. Her Brain thought so, then receded. Secure. They approached a triple towered complex. Balconies with lush plants, vines dangling down, swaying in the breeze. Venting systems, angled solar panels jutting out between windows, very organised, very abstract. Nothing from Nados. Then: "There is a persona after you."

She knew what he meant.

"Persona?" acting dumb.

"Cyber presence or DV activity, we can't tell."

'You should.' She thought. Then again, her Brain kicked in, DVs could assume alter ego's. Their own or that of their targets. Cyber presences would only be Reganian. This looked like Regum City. Were they a Primaian cell working on Regum? Why her then? Whatever they wanted could be gotten on the orbital. Or was Prima active in the Web? They claimed to have infiltrated it.

"Prima in your Web."

"It's vague. Their scans are open spectrum. But that could be a ruse, or simply to annoy us." He explained. Made sense. Keep them occupied. They approached a landing zone on the triple complex. Below a multilevel plaza, tiny tables chairs and people. Not like the near deserted cities of the privileged on Prima. Easily observed, down there an ant heap. Her Brain revealed no scanning. They had to be good. Her Brain hiding. No response no result. Simple.

The VAV descended smoothly on the roof. A buffeting wind up here. Must be thirty stories easily. No one was waiting for them. Unannounced? A lift. Down ten floors into the guts of the building. She felt different from the retreat, so isolated. Why this feeling of abandonment. No help from inside her head. Trying not to become a beacon of activity, mental or otherwise. She felt calm on the outside and fraught with unknown concerns on the inside. The disparity was annoying.

Then she sensed, felt the danger. Like someone stalking her. Did Nados notice. He looked his usual relaxed self, but then again it was more likely a mask. He was an agent after all. How had they, whoever, got a fix on her. Unless it was him. The apprehension of immanent danger rose. It was disconcerting. Like a hunter having sighted its prey: her.

The sense of doom mounted. Keep your head together Ratze. Nados was certainly right about a persona after her. She could almost reach out to it, which could be what it wanted. Not yet.

Slowly the panicking passed. Her nano-bots. She needed to cover herself in ambiguity, feeling an adrenaline rush. Maybe some carbon copy clone trying to link. Not Prima. They barely understood basic computer language. But the enemy was out there somewhere. Or in this building and they were walking into a trap.

The lift stopped in a hallway. Then into another lift, down one floor and into reception. The dolly bird merely motioned them to walk through. What sort of an outfit was this. No nametags, nothing on the door, anonymity.

A secure room? This portion of the skyscraper non existent on any files. The office spacious. Behind a huge desk sat Kari. She smiled for the first time. Next to her a recliner, monitors behind, a skull cap. Deep scanner. So at last. They wanted her data. Momentary panic. Take a trip Brain. Anywhere, some unconscious realm. Whatever else was in her head they could have. She barely knew herself.

Kari saw Ratze looking at the recliner.

"Something has come up, is coming up Ratze. We think a persona is after you." She lied having created the adverse scenario. "Prima's using the Web as you know. It's shadowing you. We need your own persona as a back up. Use that to divert attention. When you're done your double can give it the run-around."

Ratze reclined.

It sounded plausible. But why not at the retreat? Split her persona there. Then make a run for it. This was wrong. Even if this persona got to her, then what? She could play with it instead. Ah a memory, gaming. Someone is playing games. Focus on that. Escape into the Web, leave a shadow-ghost behind. Something told her to drain her Brain. How? 'Just do it.' Not her voice or her Brain's. Extraneous. This did not add up.

"Stand by." Kari said as she placed the head-net over her cranium. This was not right. They had been talking to her with consummate ease. This change of plan was not the way, it was too forced. Were the Reganian's desperate to get at whatever she possessed?

'Go vacant.' That was her Brain. 'OK, concentrating on my breath'. She became calmer. The incessant thought processes receded though not stopping, running interference. The image of a vessel unstoppered with gas leaking out, or her essence or the contents they were after. No not her essence, otherwise she would not be feeling herself as within herself. She let go feeling porous. Entropy, random dispersal segregating

the codes from their content, then settling in their quantum state. Ha! Try and figure that! The dispersal complete, the self deletion, the escape sequence finished. She felt relieved. She might not have whatever she did once possess but neither would they. Whether in the Web or real time, the secret remained. The dispersal complete she did not feel drained, more like a fulfilled husk. Now that was strange. The image of dissipating molecules was complete. Moving through the Web, the Web? So where was this persona that was after her? This is bullshit. Some designed scenario. 'I'm out of here and if not, then I'm going to sleep. Bugger this.' And let the first REM states of sleep take over. She felt calmer, lighter, at ease, free, relaxed, indifferent, unconcerned and oddly secure. 'Let them work out whatever.' She drifted off.

"Well that didn't work at all." Kari said hiding her frustration. "I hope that what she released was the data. Well at least we know she's was in possession of something. Trouble us now it's in the Web totally deconstructed. Some job getting that back."

"All we have to do is rerun the sequence. No big deal." Choss suggested.

"Well people, I think it is hot air. The system's not getting much. More an exhalation of her unconscious. A smoke screen. But we got something of her persona's responses and defences. We will just have to keep on plugging away till we hit the lode." Kari focussed.

"Except," Nados informed them, "the more we do this the smarter she is going to get. Unless we excise her memory, dangerous at the best of times, she's gonna learn more about the Web and our role in there than we will from her."

"BrainDraining is so messy." Choss added.

"Not the way we do things. We don't want a vegetable, we want what Ratze's got, and we are going to get it."

"Right." Nados was unconvinced. Ratze could replay this escape scene continually. The unconscious was eighty per cent of brain activity. They would have to read her dreams. As a DV she was one of the best. A hard nut barely conceptualised the difficulties they faced with her. Until this part of the interrogation was called off they would have to continue with null results. Ratze was either just another higher-order DV, which meant she could self-isolate or there was really nothing much to her. Though the deep scans showed too much order. Too stable. At best a Natural. Configured but still a Natural. A stable Volatile. Either way there was something about her that was not the same as the other DV's.

Mena

A soft chime woke Mena. Her vivid dream, so real receded all too fast. The momentary glimpse of another state within left its memory of something having occurred, somewhere, in space. She could not recall exactly what. As her cabin filled with air whilst she waited in her tube, green lights and numbers scrolling across its surface she willed herself to recall what had transpired. Something stupendous, gone. An image of Niatu appeared.

"Good morning." Niatu smiled.

"Good morning. Time already?"

"Aha."

"One moment. Where are you?"

"At your door."

"That late?" Mena had always been an early riser. This dream must have been something to keep her occupied. If only she could remember. It had felt like an essence was involved, unseen, behind appearances, animating her experience. An intelligence? Certainly not the Great Mind. Maybe one of the Immortals! A guide slowly making its presence known. Not dangerous. Just potent.

The tube opened. Mena allowed Niatu to enter

"I'm sorry to be late." As Niatu entered. "I'll have a quick shower. Then I'll feel more awake." Wondering if her dream had been monitored. Most likely. Niatu though was simply there, relaxed. Her shower done she got into her white space suit.

"I'm ready."

"Breakfast? Sleep well?"

"Very." A little hesitant, it could be nothing now Niatu was here. Just a dream. An indistinct memory for a moment, like washed up debris on an ocean shore, the next wave covering it, drawing it back in. A message left in her mind. Niatu was studying her. Might be nothing, she was her tutor after all.

They made their way to the canteen. People about, some techies, a few others in two's and three's. They punched in their choice, Mena not hungry merely had some tea. Niatu fruit and water. Precious water. Out of the corner of her eye Dross appeared. She sensed his rich resonance. Calming. Niatu was more neutral. What did they make of her? She couldn't tell. She was more a loner not really caring what others thought. Maybe they sensed her self willed isolation and kept a respectful distance.

As they made their way with their selection to a table Dross joined them.

"Mena, how are you?"

"Fine thank you."

"Niatu."

"Dross."

They sat. Dross preoccupied. Had he read her dream? It was a possibility. Instead he said: "We have decided to accelerate your programme." Watching her reaction. His presence now stronger, more intent, probing. But there was nothing in her mind that resonated in response. Whatever she had experienced was gone. So she let him continue, attuned with her. With his rich resonance his presence was calming, smooth emotional waves making her at ease. Quite sensuous. Latent possibilities within him but like her dream so undefined. Had he been the source? Accidental unity? She could not tell if he had been within this realm. Were there hidden realms within space? It certainly was not the Web. Not that she had any idea never having gone in. The smooth sensation receded, disengaging. She felt lighter, relaxed sipping her tea. Niatu focussed on her fruit salad. Keeping out of the way.

"Accelerate? Sounds exciting."

"Normally," Dross said, "neophytes are acclimatized to space by a virtual programme. That surprise you? Some things Regum invented can be put to good use. You see some cannot handle the vastness of space. Too overpowering. In a controlled environment we can adjust them, or if they are not suitable then at least no damage done, to them. You though Mena seem ready. Your resonance is steady. Your attunement solid, filled with the right amplitude. It all sounds so technical I know but we do keep an eye on all our charges, have to. Part of our job to make sure your resonance is not, ahm, disturbed. The last thing we want."

So they were watching her. It made sense. Her resonance like a bubble, expanding, reaching out towards something out there. Then it dissipated. Had Dross's presence somehow dissolved it? Could be her imagination. Niatu isolated, keeping out. Dross in soft contact with her. Reassuring. Niatu must be strong being able to contain

herself. Amazing people. She was glad. They had something she never found down there. Down there. Only one day up and she felt she had been here like the others for ages. How quickly her resonance adjusted. Space was not so frightening after all. Comforting. Filled with possibilities. Dross most likely familiar with her sense of immanent fulfilment.

"That is reassuring."

"You are special Mena." glowing at being appreciated. "The programme calls for the souls expansion into the Divine Realm by degrees." He explained patiently. "Opening one's soul too quickly can lead to an overwhelming influx of too much divinity. Can there be too much divinity? You could ask yourself and the answer is yes. Each individual is unique. As are you. So we think you are ready for the next level."

"Thank you for that." she drained her cup. Niatu had finished her fruit salad and seemed to be back with them.

"You think I'm strong enough?"

"Indeed we do." The 'we' did not worry Mena. Whoever they were they thought highly of her. What Dross could not reveal though was that the pontiff himself was taking an interest in her. That could be a distraction.

"On my own?"

"No. Even expert DVs have minders in space. You are never alone. There will always be someone rightly attuned to back you up should your resonance be destabilised. Not that yours will." He added quickly. "But you know yourself that our space is somewhat corrupted."

"The Web." Mena said dutifully.

"Correct. Niatu is attuned to you. Don't worry, we have never lost anybody out there." Dross reassured her. They had but he was not about to reveal that to her. They needed Naturals like her, true mystics to read the actual state of the Cosmic Consciousness.

"To be truly united..." Mena was enamoured by the idea of cosmic union.

"Straight in?" Niatu asked.

"I can see no reason why not." Dross replied.

"I feel honoured."

"And so you should be Mena." Dross said kindly.

"Ready then?" Niatu asked Mena. Suited up. Through the last airlock and they were out. She was excited. Anticipation. But Mena knew that even from her devotions

back home, how distant it seemed now, that often, the result always was silence. Maybe the Great Soul was unvoiced. Maybe they as thinking beings projected their sense of self onto its infinite state. It would be interesting how she would go here.

The final airlock opened and all she saw was space. Prima and the orbital behind them. Then as her eyes adjusted the thin strands of outward reaching stars along their spiral arm. She would be like them, also reaching out. At first the helmet seemed to constrict her mind, enclosing her. But with the large view it was designed for seeing space in its awesome beauty it did not matter. Niatu's voice was clear. She answered she was ready.

The controls were easy to use. A handheld, attached cross design for manoeuvring, top forwards, bottom reverse as they had strap on attitude jets attached on a belt around their waist. The moment they moved out, Mena attached to Niatu with an umbilical chord as a first timer she was tugged out of the air lock floating freely in the almost zero gravity. She felt like squealing for joy it felt that good.

After a while they passed DVs hanging there in repose. The silence was wonderful. She felt so free.

"I'll only respond if you feel like saying something Mena."

"Alright."

"If you feel disoriented don't worry. It happens. My systems are monitoring your breathing, your heart rate, your metabolism."

"Fine." Could she read her mind? Did their innate abilities work out here with all the interference from the Web and the alien field now around them? Nothing. No response. Maybe she was stronger than she thought.

"You may feel being overwhelmed. If it's too much let me know."

"I will. Thank you." Niatu led the way into space.

"Any last questions?"

"I feel good. No. No questions Niatu. And thank you for being there."

"My duty to you Mena. Now nothing can physically harm you. You may accidentally sense the Web. It will come across vividly. It's only illusion."

"What about the alien field?"

"It's weaker than we all assumed. Still there but our resonance is strong Mena, never forget that."

It was reassuring.

"Anyway I've said enough."

"So I can begin my meditations?"

"Yes. Over and out."

Mena could not believe she was up here. Finally with the Cosmic Consciousness, within it.

The stars around her both distant yet wonderful close. At first she was aware of her breathing then slowly became calmer finding her inner rhythm. As familiar as back home. No don't think: be she reminded herself. Ah the mystery of the universe and she in it. And it took Reganian technology to get here. Guided by the Divine Mind so that they could benefit spiritually from that. It made sense. The reason for Regum being how it thought. By being waylaid into the technological way of thinking spared Prima from being distracted and thereby focus on what really mattered. Regum was not evil, not even heretical. Well they were but for good reason. Concentrate on your devotions Mena.

Breathe in, breath out. Breathe in, breathe out. Her mind dissolved, her thoughts less there, distant, receding. Still chattering but not distracting her. Breathe in, breathe out.

Something came through. A field. Superimposed onto space. It was heavy, filled with latent energy, unseeable, blacker than black, irradiating the universe, pregnant with its own unrevealed possibilities. A dormant sentience? Huge, vast as if it could be the Divine Mind. But Mena thought the Great Divinity as being light, not heavy or so dark.

Fascinated she managed by sheer will to continue to breath in, breathe out, letting the revelation hover around near, her resonance attuned to it. So vast, so seemingly infinite within. Then foreboding. Interesting. She really was the observer now. Completely detached from herself. Hovering. Intuitively immersed in her resonance. Such strong sensations had lasted mere moments in her dream. Now more solid even though the vast black potent darkness was both vacant and not. That the stars had vanished seemed almost normal. This was a field within space. Waves. Perturbations writhed within it, like water about to boil, in an oscillating pattern. Coalescing into some not yet apparent pattern. Nearly recognisable, even familiar. Definitely her dream! She remembered it now, pattern recognition in this vast diffuse emptiness. Momentary cohesion, like a net, a membrane with innumerable vortices, nodal points. Not threatening, revelatory. It was in unformed turmoil, trying to be calm yet agitated by inherent dark energy warped into indefinable patterns. Strange mutations, no logic to them, trying to lay some foundation. An eruption pouring out this black opaque mass, its

dark radiance. The effulgence of an alien mind unleashing its twisted, contorted, convoluted consciousness, a corrupted resonance.

Then it was gone. The sparkling spiral arm reassuring once more. Her thoughts felt oddly disembodied but eventually centred back upon and within her mind. Her breathing regular. Given this apparition, whatever it was had not directly stimulated her. The Great Architect seen darkly through her soul?

"Niatu."

"Yes Mena?"

What to say?

"How are you?"

"I'm fine Mena, yourself?"

"Good."

"You sound different."

"Just the sense of space. Humbling." For that's how the remnant memory was. Had this been the presence of evil? Full of twisted nightmare creatures, riddled with the insane babblings of riven minds. It was something else, something so completely other.

"You want to continue?"

"I had a sort of vision, but now it's gone."

"Ah. Something. Good?"

"Strange."

"That's alright. You'll adjust to that. It can get strange as you said. Nothing to worry about. A new experience will leave that impression."

"Did you feel strange?"

"At first yes."

"I meant just now."

"No. We might all be united Mena but our individual resonance, well, resonates differently. That's how we are."

"Ah." So it was her own experience.

"So what do you want to do?"

"I think the point I reached is done with me."

"I know what you mean. You had a moment of enlightenment. Might not appear as such but the soul is fulfilled for the moment. It's funny how it cannot be reached again, just like that. Takes a while until it has seeped in properly, infused itself, absorbed. Then when that process is done you will be ready again."

That was true. But what if this otherness took her over? Maybe she had projected her own hidden fears onto it? Maybe she had sensed the essence of space. From there it was just one step away from divine revelation. Maybe a quirk of her mind.

"You're right. Might as well go back." Mena admitted. Niatu manoeuvred herself around her, tiny white jet bursts, turning into crystal flakes sparkling momentarily being slowly pulled around. In front of her the orbital, a half illuminated ball, wonderful Prima a huge backdrop shining in the sun's light.

For the moment the memory of the weird sensation re-receded just like her dream had. Maybe they were the same. She hoped she was not going Volatile. No, she had felt extremely calm. Had handled it. She was proud of herself. The trouble was even if Niatu had said that she had sensed nothing, was this true? So what had it been, an ancient god? An ancient god! Were they still around? Maybe. Reaching out to those who wanted cosmic convergence with the Great Being. But then others would have mentioned that as well. A little confusing but very very interesting. In a way she could not wait to get out here again. Maybe if she practiced her devotions before going to sleep 'it' would come back. Then she was disturbed. She was after divine bliss, not this. Was she being guided or trapped? Now there was a problem. Should she tell Dross? Niatu? No, not yet, a bit premature. It had not threatened her, merely revealed an outer cloak. Niatu kept to her own self. Mena felt better. There was nothing to be done for now. She felt satisfied within herself as if she actually had achieved something.

"So tell me, how did it go?" Niatu asked Mena in her cabin. Just like hers. The sleeping tube, the tiny desk, a comlink and screen, shower cubicle and built in wardrobe, the round portal looking out at space.

"Fine. I even sensed space."

"That is something. How was it?"

"Like a substance, an invisible sense of energy." Which it was to her.

"Wow." Niatu smiled. "You are making progress. Dross was right. He will be pleased."

Mena basked in the compliment. Her interpretation could have been wrong yet the familiarity of the dream and this was more than just coincidence. She was onto something.

"Are there hidden realms in space?"

"Apart from the Web and the alien field you mean?" Niatu asked interested.

"Like where did the ancient gods go?"

"The Great Mind reabsorbed them."

"Are they dead?"

"Did you sense one?" now really alert.

"I don't know. Don't think so. I mean I did not see anything, just space filled with awe."

"That would be you being awakened Mena. When the inner soul opens it still has you with it. Often taking its images with it. That is why we always remind ourselves that spiritual visions can be our own expression, our own exaltedness. The Cosmic Mind is beyond our imagination. We see only a fraction and since it is the completeness of all we would have to be just as complete, which we are not, to perceive its totality."

"I understand."

"Good. So it went well."

Mena smiled at Niatu.

"Well, if there is anything else...?"

"No, not really. Why you throwing me out?"

"I'm sorry I didn't mean it like that. I meant your experience."

"Ah, no. Unless you want the minute details."

"That is up to you entirely."

"I'll see how I go. If there is a pattern I'll let you know."

"Good. Keep a diary. A written diary." Niatu emphasised.

"Alright."

"Nothing into your cabin's computer. That is for normal stuff. Keep everything private, even your reason for being here stays out of the system. It's not secure Mena. They will find out."

"We can't have that." She smiled back understanding.

Ung, being with her group in space had intuited the embeddedness of the field. It had materialised all around not her. Ung outside of it. Her inbuilt capabilities sensed...Mena as the source. Some neophyte. If it hadn't been so vast Ung would have concluded it was a psychic projection. But it was not. It did not seem to affect the others which was strange. Well they were still in their distracted mode even though she had been with them for months. Progress was slow. The conscious mind in some just would not let go. These DVs were hopeless. Which in its own way was good. Less interference in the grand scheme of things. Just what grand scheme, apart from the obvious she could not

tell. Not that the Domimax would reveal that. Whatever and wherever this Domimax was. Just another level in Prima's convoluted multi-layered stratification.

A field in space, interesting. At least her Brain was alert. It was enough.

Andromeda Station

Ung's Facilitator recorded her link with Mena. He noted the mental shift uploaded automatically into the computer's protected memory banks. Encased in a set of algorithmic fractal shifting matrixes to shield the data within a complex of generated confinement fields. A subsidiary layer of boosted electron shells to keep any hostile DV activity out. The upload done, he let the web of fibre optical strands detach themselves from his head. They glowed momentarily from his residual brain. After the upload was completed his EAI self deleted any real memories he might have had of the event.

Hooked into the QCs environment he would be able to remain 'out there' for the rest of his biological life. His real life did not exist, it too had been retrieved and saved. No contamination from his consciousness. Able to retrieve Ung's pure data. The glowing graphs on light-screens flowed in their wavering lines indicative of her subsumed natural idling state.

The Controller transferred from station three through the quantum jump gate to debrief the Facilitator. Make sure the data was empirically and statistically pure. The Virtual Quantum Computer which surrounded him released it's exit gates as Two rolled off the slab with practiced dexterity, awaiting the Controller. The tandem VQC was capable of tracking and downloading whatever went on in Ung's head. It always helped to have backup in place, as a double bind receptor.

"What do you remember Two?"

It was a simple enough question. Two thought for a moment then replied:
"Nothing."

The read outs confirmed his mental status. No remnant memories. He was clean. As his mind was voided regularly there was no chance of his being targeted by the DVs or any other cyber probes that might equally exist with the Reganians.

Satisfied the Controller left Two in his computer's environment. The back up VQC, creations of the real quantum computers captured PWs coming not just from Ung but the

actual space she was in. Two's data in Control's Centre. She went to the jump-gate and returned back to whence she had come.

Though instant she always inadvertently braced herself, feet apart as she materialised at the other end.

Her commander waiting. A man in late middle age, his round beaming face always pleasant.

"I've had a look at Ung's wave-patterning. Well the QCs have," he continued by way of conversation, "and it is intriguing."

Her EAI was not hooked up to receive, simply for security. During jumps there was a pico-second of exposure when her own PWs were in real space. An astute DV could sense a 'presence', then deduct sentence and the cover would be blown. But with no data that would be all they would get.

"This field," the Controller replied, "is of concern."

"Indeed it is. One of the strangest aberrations ever discovered. And the incoming mass of black matter only muddies the already almost infinite variables we have to work with. Infinity to a power of unknown potential."

He seemed relaxed. "A classic quantum conundrum."

"Is it ever. Still we got something." Then waited.

"I've done some projections, running probability and chaos equations. Chaos is winning at the moment. Dominant as expected, too dominant for my liking."

"So the PWs are still messy?"

"Messy." He laughed. His office had several light-screens running projections. "No phase-states as yet. That is disturbing in that everything is a phase-state, or would be at some time or another. It's the 'another' of course that is of concern. With Ung in place we got confirmation. Was this Mena's head generating this wave-field? It cannot at this stage be ruled out. Not until we know more. Once we get a source then one of the inserts will go in. With certain risks. Whoever does go in will have to be an Isolate."

"And we could loose whoever does go in."

"Depends on the strength of the field. What level?"

"Hope it's not a three or..."

"If it is galactic we'll barely be able to handle it. Not beyond our capabilities but anything above that..."

"Does not bare thinking about. But is it possible?"

"Controller." He mock admonished her.

"I am aware of that. Though exactly how anything above a level three can even be achieved would need either a galaxy that..."

"...is the size of the one we're studying? So far its gravity well is just that. Drawing in gravity waves. No big deal."

"Ha."

"I agree. It is a big deal, far in the future. By then we'll be at the periphery watching the fireworks."

"Three galaxies on collision course. Until then a lot can happen."

"A lot will happen. We might all be Isolates by then, independent of it all, space, time, the continuum, pure meta-consciousness, eternal in mind if not in substance, self generating."

"How are we progressing there?"

"Well there are those who think what evolution has given us had been given us as the best possible answer the universe threw up."

"You have a way with words Commander."

"Well it's true. Which brings us to the other sentients and their environments."

"Yes." Wondering exactly which ones he was referring to.

"According to projections now that the Martians are being observed by Earth means they will advance."

"Will or might? Prima's DVs are running some of them."

"The outcome is not certain. In fact it is very uncertain." He frowned.

"Uncertain?"

"One probability amongst many. Earth has a stronger field projection. Haphazard, wobbly if you will, oscillating if you prefer a more clinical analysis."

"Some certainty there." Being cynical.

"Yes. Now Regum is more or less in place as itself and Prima isn't going to vanish. Or change."

"All interconnected. Talk about entanglement."

"The data flow is rich even if the content is tainted by Prima's potent psychic capabilities. Makes one wonder..."

"Why they're there?"

"Yes. Maybe some sort of cosmic balance. Technology at one end of the spectrum and they at the other."

"Maybe we are intended as sentients to all interact."

"Without a doubt. But Prima wants dominance."

"And will they get it?" the Controller asked, concerned.

"As a possibility, yes. Probability close, actuality, too early to tell. It all depends on this annoying discrepancy, this aberration."

"So we're back to where we were. No progress."

"None what-so-ever."

"How can that be. Some sort of stasis-field?"

"Now that would be something."

"It wouldn't be natural. The VQC's...?"

"On a small scale it's a yes."

"Back to where is the source."

"Possible future meta activity. Conditions just aren't right. Although..."

"What?"

"Well space is at a low end, has been for millions of years. It can't go on for ever."

"Must be millions of years away."

"Yes."

"Something is bothering you."

"The timing."

"You mean when galaxies collide. The trigger?"

"Could be."

She relaxed. "Plenty of time."

"Time. So relative."

"Yes but there are physical constraints. The very structure of matter for starters."

"Like junk DNA we have junk matter."

"Black matter."

"The great unknown."

"You don't think it's subject to phase-changes."

"Nobody knows Controller."

"Well it will give our scientists something to do. So what are they saying?"

"Nothing yet. Anyway it's a matter of energy conversion."

"Which brings us back to the future source."

"You got it."

"Annoying isn't it?"

"Not being able to even run probable simulations on it. Yes."

"There and not there. Very quantum."

"Very."

"Someone or something ahead of us." the Controller guessing.

"Can't be ruled out."

"Another civilisation way past a quantum transitional state. Now that would be exciting. Maybe an answer to the universe itself."

"The ultimate."

"It's like that joke. If the universe is the answer, what is the question?"

"We will have to find out Controller."

"Let's hope the Inserts will."

"As long as we get them back. Otherwise..."

"Yes. You think this is some sort of end-game?"

"I hope not."

"An end-game. Fascinating and frightening."

"Why frightening?"

"You really asking?"

"I am."

"The unifying theory complex. If the final answer is revealed then it's the end. No more knowledge to be discovered, no more searching, it would all be over. With no quest, no search, no interest in finding anything out, we would be in some sort of neutral entropic state and that would mean no more evolution."

"Maybe the universe is heading that way. There is only so much information. Once that is all available Controller then perhaps the ancient mystics were right. Apotheosis."

"Eternity?"

"The very opposite Commander. The end."

"Maybe that's how this universe we're in works."

"The complete state. Yet with no information exchange, the universe would...transform. It would not be what it is now."

"Maybe it's our perception. It's never total. Well it is in a way with our understanding of PWs. All data available."

"Which becomes a `then what?'"

"It does indeed. Anything from Ratze yet?"

"Nothing like Ung, yet."

"Well there is Nervina still to go."

"When is she going in?"

"Not yet. But to more basic matters. Regum will send a mission to Mars."

"Do they know it yet?"

"Our VQCs are shadowing their QCs. Trouble is whilst we have knowledge of their mission, at their position there is a blank. A data deleted probability. Still if I was them, knowing what Prima is up to, I would go for it."

"Sounds like they have secrets just like everybody else. Say why don't we prepare the way?"

"Controller."

"I know. It's just we could get it over and done with. This is all taking so long, it's so slow."

"I understand your frustration. But slow is good. Means we can run all the possible future states. Time to prepare for all eventualities."

"And have we?"

"Too many variables at the moment."

"Ah."

"You understand."

"I do."

"Good. For now we wait, let our Inserts do their scouting, see what they stumble upon."

"Hope they don't fall over."

"So do I."

"Still a huge uncertainty factor?"

"At present, yes."

"So my task stays on course."

The commander nodded.

"And Ung is the most active right now?"

"She is. Yet Ratze is moving, stirring things up."

"And you said no interference." She laughed.

He let it pass. "Well I'd better get back then."

"I'll call you if anything develops."

"Thank you commander."

"That is all controller."

"Err..."

"What?"

"Any surprises coming up?"

"Not yet."

"Then I'm on my way."

Carias

Carias was getting bored. The regimen, if one could call it that was non-existent. She knew only of the rumours floating around about what went on in the asylums. So far no doctors had taken any interest in her. She was a guest and that was that. Out of the way. Isolated. Why? Because of her Web insertion? Was that it? So she had gone a little overboard with her room, so what?

She felt distracted. The feel good drugs had worn off never to be replaced. At least they didn't drug the food or spike the water. Not to her knowledge. But she missed, almost craved the experience inside WebWorld. Reality was so pissant, lacklustre. The vibrant colours, the amazing detail made the everyday appear banal. The characters inside left one alone, more or less. They at least had a focus in there, but outside, the inhabitants were too busy messing with each other's heads. Total tedium. Here she found, inside the asylum there was none of that. Everybody left everybody to their own devices, their own selves. In a way this place, this community of aberrant souls was refreshing. One could live one's life without constant interference. It made the outside world appear out of sync.

So mother had gotten her way. Was she some sort of hindrance? But as to what and why eluded her. Sitting at the window, staring out over the park it had lost some of its allure. Well there was Fehna. A bit strange, no very strange though enticing. How not to screw your head. Fehna was definitely paranoid. Maybe so were the others. But Carias was not interested, Fehna just a diversion that she toyed with. Maybe there was some truth to her imaginative duality complex. Were 'they' really watching, probing, searching for something deep in their psyche? Hers?

Agitated. With nothing to do she wrote in her diary not caring who saw it. No doubt the attendants would report her inner thoughts to some faceless doctor. Well she would tell them of her frustrations, the incessant insistence of social conformity according to one's status, the continual harping of living up to other's expectations. Maybe that was what irked mother. Yet dad seemed so unconcerned, so remote, so not there. He

was no help going along with whatever Droonor wanted, demanded, expected. Some life that. She was not going to get married if this is how it turned out.

How to get out of this? Become holy? A joke. She would never make a Domain Lord, no woman ever had. Breed a family? That meant being self-enclosed as a family unit. If that was the norm, forget it. There were the professions. Trouble was these types were more concerned with their status than anything else. That left WebWorld now off limits. Escape to Regum? Only priests were allowed off-planet. Some future that. No future at all. It was depressing.

So who cared that the Web was deemed anti-social, threatening to fracture the planet's resonance. If that were the case it would have happened ages ago. Society here certainly was not fracturing and she had done no wrong. She smiled at the irony. This place was totally anti-social. Removing her from society for the good of society. How many had the authorities locked away? Possibly thousands. Maybe if or hopefully when she would meet a doctor he could throw some light on all of this.

Her room's intercom announced she had a visitor. She answered she'd be down momentarily. A visitor! A diversion. Hopefully not mother. Maybe dad. She made her way downstairs and in the foyer was Ung. Ah what a relief.

"Carias."

"Ung." She hurried over and they embraced. Ung was in a smart two piece, elegant cut, no jewellery and a visitor's tag. Ung five years older, her only friend. In fact one of her few friends she could actually relate to. They got along well. No rivalry as they were never in competition for boys. And Ung was the one who had got her the headband as a birthday present last year. That had totally blown her away. Ung the survivor dating someone from SpaceKorps. Maybe that was her way out and off this stifling planet.

"Good to see you. Your mother told me so I came as soon as I could." Ung beamed.

"I missed you. I'm bored. Let's go outside for a walk."

"Sure."

They linked arms and walked into the pleasant grounds.

Ambling over the soft spongy grass, birds in the overcast sky. They sat near the large pond at an empty bench. The view serene.

"How's tricks?" Carias asked.

"Oh you know, quiet for now. I'm with the DVs."

"They let you down?"

"I have ways." She smiled.

"What did mother say about me?" Got to get the gossip.

"Well mother blames father for you being here. Not being responsible. I mean how stupid is that? She wants him to work to get ahead and maybe he is, then turns around and bitches about him. Mad I say. Accusing him of not seeing the signs."

"What, my room?" Carias laughed.

"That was neat." Ung laughed. "As to your going in. I didn't think it would end this way. I'm sorry Carias." Ung looked crestfallen.

"Don't worry, it was worth it. I mean it." But too polite to ask if she too went in. Not now if she was up there with them.

"I thought I was doing you a favour. There's more to you and well..."

"Don't let it worry you. This place ain't so bad. Boring as hell but then so was home. As for my friends, well, I don't know if they ever were. Just acquaintances really. Accept you. You came."

"When you messed your room..."

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"Oh," Carias said lightly, "for the fun of it. A reminder of that world."

"Big mistake."

"Obviously." They both laughed.

Ung put her finger to her lips giving Carias a winning smile, her dimples enlivening her deep eyes. She pulled a miniature pc out. "It's smart stuff. Scrambles the conversation into something else. What we say is modified. My visitor's tag is a transmitter. They are listening and will get nothing but banalities."

Carias did not ask where she got that piece of hardware.

Then Ung continued: "Your dad is helping you. I don't know what or how. Could be his department. Your dad's got plans for you."

"Oh goody." Not even wondering how Ung knew this.

"The idea was for you to explore WebWorld, get you used to it. Your mother of course didn't know, and if you hadn't trashed your room..."

"Oh boy. I guess I got carried away."

They laughed.

"All I know," Ung continued, "is that he must be doing something really important. I don't know if they are `watchers' or something." She added ominously.

"You know Ung there's this girl here, Fehna, who said the same thing. That `they' are listening. She's totally paranoid."

"Really? Well she's in the right place then." And they chuckled at that.

"You were tagged when you were in there." Meaning the Web.

"I was?"

"It's like an experiment or something. There are others as well..."

Carias was tempted to ask if that included Ung.

"Something is going on in there."

"Ah and I was supposed to find something out? What?" and here am I Carias thought that WebWorld was just for fun plus all of Regum's knowledge. It was that which she thought made the place off-limits.

"Maybe they don't know either. Or can't. Or haven't got what it takes."

"And I have?" Carias felt proud. She had navigated the Web with such ease it came naturally to her. Maybe normal Primaian's were clumsy or too obvious or just plain stupid.

"It's been said some of the scenario's are loaded."

"Yeah? Really. What with?"

"Well the Reganian's it is said are looking for potentials. Like you maybe."

"Oh boy. That is good. Going over to them inside. Yeah."

"Those chosen download certain stuff which one then brings back here."

"Sneaky. What though?"

"Well I bet you didn't know this. Prima has its own Domains in there."

"Shit. What? Really? So they're in there as well."

"That surprise you?"

"Of course Ung. All this hype and they're..." Carias was astounded at the duplicity of Prima. "So I was being groomed."

Ung nodded. "They got their own in there, pretending to be Reganians. They don't last long, others are more adept. Like you."

"Like me." Carias said dreamily.

"But your mother blew it."

"So why am I here?"

"It had to appear natural once she acted. If you knew why you were there, well you might have been spotted. So going in as an innocent was deemed the best way."

Carias noted how Ung did not differentiate between Regum or Prima. Just their WebWorld and Prima's substitutes. She wondered how Ung got all this. And mother

proud of having her here? Then this stuff with her father's work, being a dummy agent. Groomed, checked out, now abandoned. She sighed.

"Where's my headband now? You sure all this is safe to talk just like that?"

"Yep. 'Headband' for instance might be 'clothes' or whatever once decoded."

"Wow. Impressive."

"I removed it."

"You found the secret place?"

"Where you buried it in the garden. Obvious. Fresh dirt."

"Lucky you not her."

"So, what now?" hoping upon hope that dad might be able to do something. She was here voluntarily after all. If they found nothing wrong with her they could not keep her.

"I don't know." Ung sighed. "Interfering directly is too dangerous. It has to be done through back-channels. It may take a while. So don't do anything absurd."

Carias's head was in turmoil. Both excited and forlorn. How to convince doctors who did not take any notice of her to let her out. Maybe mother interfering, overreacting.

"Just remember, here you're under constant observation."

Carias wanted to say the opposite seemed to be the case. But then what Fehna said might be true after all.

"This is all so unreal Ung."

"That's Prima for you."

"So what do I do?" she was almost frantic. Stuck here, no way out. Asylums were run by DLs. They were supreme, a law unto themselves.

"Nothing. Be yourself. Act differently and they will get suspicious. Remember this conversation isn't happening. Now I gotta warn you. Nothing in the end is certain. This can't be pushed. It might go nowhere." Ung looked searchingly at Carias and felt sorry for her. "Let's say," seeing her mixed emotions flit across her soft pale face, "with so many variables in play I don't know just how much anyone can do."

Carias nodded solemnly at that.

"We got faith in you. You've got potential, something that shouldn't be wasted."

"Thank you for your confidence." Wondering just how connected Ung was.

"What a friend."

Ung smiled.

"Ung I am totally so off beam here."

"You too?" She said primly then laughed together.

"This all gonna be in?" nodding at her hidden little pc. How did Ung get that past them? Must have some cloaking device built into it.

Ung talked about her ex lover. Carias reflected on her experience with boys. Usually dreadful. Overheated roosters, brains totally gone, obsessed with sex. Wanting marriage, babies. Not her. So it didn't bother her that she was still a virgin. She just was not that interested. In her head yes but when she faced the reality something shrivelled up inside of her. If that was love then she was happy without it. Less complicated for starters. Then there was mothers `arrangements'. Total dorks.

"I can't handle boys. I mean," Carias added hastily, "they turn me off." getting that off her chest. Change of conversation.

Uno gave a knowing smile. "It can be the pits."

"How do you do it. I mean put up with them, never mind the sex."

"I don't know. I go for brains."

"Brains! They're so...vacant."

"You'll get lucky. It happens so fast when it's natural you don't even know it has happened. And you will be genuinely happy. Then the adventure starts. And don't forget there's a universe out there as well."

"Like SpaceKorps?"

"You got it."

"I feel like I'm stuck in a maze."

"Maze?"

"Suburbia. Where we live. And you got out." Carias said wistfully.

"Your time will come." Ung apparently certain. Carias was not too sure. Still if dad was trying to get her out, then maybe she would be able to escape this maze she felt herself trapped in.

"You know Ung, I can't even remember what was inside the Web."

"Drugs. They mindfucked you."

"They did? Those drugs had been great. But I feel so normal."

"Oh not all drugs give you highs. Not psychiatric drugs. They can create whatever state they want you to be in."

"So why wipe my memories?"

"They want the unconditioned you. See inside."

"No one's seen me yet."

"Another trick of theirs. So that by the time they get around to you, you will be relieved that they are paying attention to you, you'll tell them everything just so that you get some response."

"Shit. Mind games."

"Oh yes."

"Will I get my memories back?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Sure sure?"

"Yes Carias. And I got something for you as well."

"What?" she asked eagerly.

"Your diary."

"Shit hey?"

Ung looked around her slowly, as if taking in the scenery. She was looking for spy-cams, watching the gardeners who took an inordinately long time over the weeding near some bushes, or trimming some trees. They had to be observers.

"Get ready Carias. Those gardeners double up as watchers."

Carias pulled a face but understood. Then she slipped the little book into Carias's pants pocket.

"You look through it?"

"Couldn't resist."

"And?"

"Interesting. Sort of unique. Romantic undercurrents but more of the world, the universe, not boys oriented at all. Like a soulful longing for other spaces, other realities, other realms, other beings Carias."

"Yeah." She said mournfully, something tugging at the back of her mind.

"If they find this on you they'll definitely think you're under that influence."

Carias was tempted to look at it but given what Ung said about being watched, what Fehna said, she worried her room being under observation. She said: "Ung, take it back."

"But I brought it for you, help your mind, re-orient yourself."

"You're right in being under observation. I believe you. Say when you're ready, I'm holding it right now in my pocket."

Ung looked around her again. The gardeners had barely moved.

"Now."

Carias passed the small book back and felt relieved.

"I'm keeping a diary of my own."

"Be careful."

"I will Ung. And thank you, and thank dad. And tell mother..."

"What?"

"I don't know, that I love her. Hope that'll confuse her. Hey," she brightened, "maybe she'll think my brain's OK." She smiled wickedly.

"You're my friend. I'm proud of you. Hang in there, good things will happen."

"You hope." Carias replied knowing how precarious not just her situation was but dad's as well. If he was going to get her out of here. She smiled. She had something to look forward to. She saw Ung in a new light. She felt better.

"Well I'd better go."

"I guess you must. When you gonna be back?"

Ung did not know. Nor could she tell Carias what she was up to. She was 'in' after all.

"Soon I hope."

Carias nodded. It might be some time. She understood.

"I'll walk ya back to the entrance. Hand in that tag."

"Oh yes, can't disappoint them now can we." And they passed a conspirational smile between them.

Ung left Carias and the asylum by the frequent shuttle bus back to the city. Taking a SpaceKorps car, its insignia would have attracted undue attention. This way she had plenty of time to think. A group of visitors were waiting as well having seen their own disturbed kindred souls. They looked like all families, more or less the same. Discussing their diagnosis, their recovery, their relapses, their strangeness. The patients faking normalcy. Then again that was due to the regimen of their drug therapy. Now to see if she was being followed. In civilian gear she was just another visitor. Whatever the tag picked up would be banal, the intuitive program saw to that.

If she was being followed then whoever they were, were good. Being constantly on the alert took its toll but Ung enjoyed the game. As a DV she was extended certain privileges, allowed more freedom of movement with less surveillance. What Carias's father proposed included certain inherent dangers. Only DLs and their designated agents could access WebWorld. What the department, thinking of SpaceKorps was

considering was surreptitious as well as covert. Carias's removal might have received a setback but they would get her back in. Being in the asylum was the least of her worries. WebWorld could be accessed from anywhere and getting her in right under their noses amused Ung.

The shuttle bus came, disgorged its passengers with Ung getting on last. The ride was uneventful the bus meandering through vast parks outside the city, then the suburbs. By the time she reached the centre there were only one or two passengers left. She got out several stops before reaching her destination, walking the rest of the way. No one had gotten out with her. She was in the clear.

She walked into the low rise building marked 'Human Resources', the cover the organisation used. Officially it vetted candidates for just about everything possible as far as vocations went. Whether as priests for Regum, or technicians for the orbital, they covered it all. In the foyer were the novices with their mentor priests, workers being assigned their locations all seeing middle managers who interviewed them, soft scanned them for delinquent resonant tendencies, up or downgraded them.

Ung walked through the inner scanning device that, with her pc's access data cleared her straight through. No need to report to the front desk. She was no visitor, or a member of the public coming in for their appointment. She would not be tagged, like so many others who were of intermediate pass coded level of entry. But she saw the watchers mingling in the crowded vestibule, on the look out not for infiltrators but those with an aberrant resonance. Hers was secure, tight, steady.

She walked along the corridor passed countless offices and out through the rear into a small courtyard where the workers could relax during their breaks. An open canteen was busy, it was the lunch break, the best time not to be noticed. She saw them sitting in the pleasant courtyard. Carias's father and some functionary. Rarely the same twice. Officially Ung was now working for SpaceKorp as a human resource manager. That meant more or less to make sure everybody did their assigned duties, that they were in their place and more importantly did not deviate from their duties. A watcher. Doubling as an agent with the DVs. Resources were Watchers as well. Linked with SpaceKorps through agents such as herself, the staff unaware of her duties. Some section chiefs disliked this overview, it implied distrust which was quietly resented. But there was more to her job than just making sure everything ran smoothly. Like what was happening now.

An older man, in his sixties was with Neghar, who looked younger than his mid forties. They both rose from their seats.

"Troess meet Ung, Ung this is Troess." Ung bowed respectfully. With Neghar you never knew who you were actually dealing with. Just names, never a designation. Exuding a calm serenity in the knowledge of the power they wielded.

"Lunch?" Neghar asked. Ung nodded. They caught the attention of a waitress and placed their orders. Neghar went for a mixed salad and Ung likewise. Truss asked for the baked fish and sautéed vegetables.

"Wine?" Ung shook her head. She would have coffee after. They nodded their agreement.

They talked in general terms about Carias, her potential capabilities, hoping by assigning her a role, unsaid within WebWorld that she would have something to focus upon whilst creating an appropriate cover. 'Human Resources' an excellent organisation to hide agents.

"Neghar speaks highly of both of you." Troess remarked, his voice soft, smooth, rich, vibrant. One that commanded respect.

"Oh really?" Ung smiled back.

"Well even taking that into consideration we think Carias's role will be most useful."

"I agree. She's a Natural when it comes to it. Not easily distracted." Meaning inside WebWorld. They knew the allusion need not be stated.

"Normally they waste their time in there, get a little ahead of themselves which often leads to tendencies of self-delusions."

Ung nodded. "Not Carias."

"No." Troess said thoughtfully. The waitress arrived with their orders. When she left he continued: "Officially it's considered psychological sabotage. Your own work branches into this domain as you know yourself." Being informed about Ung's duties. "The Ecclesiastics are appalled of course. It disturbs them that this invisible field cuts right through the planet's resonance."

"I bet." Ung agreed.

"Now Ung, how is Carias?"

"She's fine Troess. I mean it. Not exactly happy, but she's handling her situation remarkably well."

Troess nodded, then remarked on the weather. After they had taken their coffee they went back inside, up one floor, entered an office which had a lift and took them down into the basement. They were heading into their secure zone. Ung was not surprised, it came with the job. In the office, bare except for a few view-screens, off-line,

a computer bank the size of a filing cabinet, a plain desk and some chairs. Troess motioned for them to be seated.

"You have her resonance?"

Ung retrieved her hand sized computer.

"Good, thank you." From his jacket pocket he took out a rolled up headband. It fed off the body's ambient energy, sunlight, powering itself with inserted ultra thin batteries as back up. "You can give this to Carias. We have doctored her file. She's allowed in, part of her therapy." He smiled pleased with his achievement. "A study in deviance. Dr. Groben, whose assigned to her case will have to go along with this. At first he was put off. But we explained that to combat the deviant states of mind WebWorld creates one has to study them. Carias's data of course bypasses his systems. Well some of it." His smile remained. Very engaging.

Ung was not totally ignorant. Her ex lover, Fertig had accessed WebWorld externally, in deep space on his ship. They had navigated within its realms as surrogates if only to find out if they were being shadowed. They weren't. Its inhabitants were too busy with their inner realms to pay any attention to them. Surrogates did not interact. There were a few others who entered remotely, tourists, who were ignored. And to see if they could uncover any Primaian inserts. They were usually more cautious, almost too self conscious of their surroundings, not handling it that well. Gamers of course played tricks on them, immersing them in their sub-realms just to freak them out and freak out they did.

"Now we don't want you to go in." Troess reminded her then continued:
"because of leakage."

"Field generation?"

"Something like that. You go in and you become a source-point, a beacon. Anyone with AI capabilities can get into your head. Trap you in their sub-domain. They'd uncover, or rather cover you. It takes a pro like Carias not to be fooled, or if so, play the game which is expected. We want Carias to be active of course, but you Ung are too important to be in there."

"I understand." Did he know she'd dabbled in it? He wasn't saying. But she heeded his warning. Anyway Ung thought she was too busy to even have time to go in. Her assignment with the DVs necessitated extra caution. Neither of the two men alluded to her current situation.

"In a way things are not as bad for Carias as they appear. Now that her file has cleared her. It's better having a patient in there than say her being a trainee operative.

Running it from one's home attracts surveillance. Droonor has actually done us a favour. Asylums do not release data. They are one of the most secure places on Prima."

"I'm happy for Carias then. When this is over, she'll be out?"

"We are working on that." Troess said reassuringly. Her father smiled encouragingly.

"What about the DLs?"

"Oh, they're busy chasing shadows." Troess said vaguely. Ung wondered whose shadows, or what that even referred to. "There is something you have to tell Carias though."

"Sure."

Troess looked at Neghar.

"There is some EM residue in there. Not active. Not yet anyway. Some enquires were made, outside that is and came up blank. We ran diagnostics of course and no contamination in our system. No alerts either, but something is in there."

"Background radiation." Ung suggested.

The two men looked at each other.

"Interesting assumption Ung."

"Well it's a strong field. It's gotta have foundation."

"Trouble is it's chaotic."

"You got me."

"Well chaos would make their system unstable, yet it is not."

"Mimicking space?"

"Good point. Or space has invaded WebWorld."

"I'm assuming this is important."

"Ung, that is the other reason why you're here. You have access to space and the DVs. You've are there for a reason."

"Aha, I see." She brightened. It was good to feel important, wanted.

"We simulated it but it didn't work."

"Hm. And Carias is to, err, probe this as well?"

"Exactly. Could be anything, could be nothing. Trouble is it's something."

"And the DLs?"

"Nothing from them. Not that they'd tell us. We're too low for that." Troess said realistically. "Anything recent?" referring to her stint in space. She thought of the strange event Menas went through but let it pass. Could be anything.

"We're on the ground here Ung. You're our best lead in space."

"So a field that shows instabilities within its domain. Interesting."

Troess nodded. "Getting astronomical data is impossible. The sacred science, for DL assigned staff only, astronomers aside. Now there was an incident at the tracking station. It may be related, it may not. We think they know something and want it to remain hidden. It might be the alien field but this chaotic field is too far away."

"And it's in, where? The Reganian end? They bothered with this?"

"Interestingly no."

"Well then it might be EM leakage. Excess power or back up data secured with chaos equations."

"My you are remarkable."

"Us spacers are Troess. Well in theory anyway. I'm not even supposed to be saying this."

"There is so much we are not told."

"Most of it is crap Troess. Believe me, it is. The DLs, Es, Ds invent a lot of stuff. More to confuse the masses, keep them guessing, keep them edgy, keep them on side with their cosmological view. Space might be a deadly environment but it is not overtly hostile."

"You know what you are saying?"

"Only to you Troess. I don't go around advertising it."

"Good, keep it that way. What Carias has to find out, what we want to find out is whether Regum is planning something big. Getting ready. Using this strange field as if laying down the foundation that might have drastic and profound consequences for all of us."

"A plot in the making." Ung said excited. She did not hate the Reganians. She was impressed by them.

"Basically what I'm saying is we want you as a go-between."

"Officially?"

"No. I mean first would you accept?"

"Anything to help" A triple agent. More access. More knowledge.

"That is understood. Unofficially you would be with us. As such we can do only so much should this come apart."

"But you said you'd arranged it at the asylum."

"We have. But there is another security department that overrides every other."

"So this is clandestine."

Troess remained silent.

"And?"

"We can cover this in that we are monitoring Web activity. Part of our brief. Anything outside is beyond our jurisdiction."

"Ah, so you are venturing beyond your domain. I like it." Ung replied reassuringly. "I'm in."

"Nothing to your boyfriend."

"He's ex. Our own secret then."

"Precisely."

"So you are recruiting me?"

"Yes."

"I see. But officially there would be nothing on file."

"Absolutely not, you have my guarantee." Troess replied solemnly.

"Which means if something goes wrong you disown me."

Troess tried not to look too despondent but it was written all over his calm face.

"I understand."

From his coat pocket Troess brought out a small flat-screen computer. "Just put your palm on it. What this means is you accepted our offer. There are benefits. Certain clearances uploaded into your pc. You've got SpaceKorps clearance anyway, but this broadens your access to certain domains. We cannot reveal them. Foreknowledge would only compromise you. But if you try and do access restricted realms at least no alerts would be triggered. It would appear as an accidental mistake. That would be logged and the intrusion sequence would reveal not you but a persona to cover you. This little gadget is now building up another you."

"That's handy."

"Well, congratulations are in order. Welcome Ung." Troess smiled as she returned the flat screen.

"We are proud of you Ung, very much so. Your persona will be in their system, not you. So if they check, well, they'll have fun trying to find the 'her'."

"No point asking who this persona is?"

"Let's say," Troess said delighted, "we have done our research. This is 'human resources' after all."

"What if I do get blown? Or confronted. What means do I have at my disposal. Like a stun gun perhaps?"

"Weapons need licenses. Just be yourself and you'll be fine. And remember, this is all unofficial."

"Thank you for the faith you bestowed in me."

"Believe me the pleasure is all ours Ung." I bet. "Now visit Carias in a week. We know you will be back on duty soon after."

Ung nodded.

"Well, that's that. We'll leave this building separately."

Troess passed Carias's file to Reno. As CEO of counter-intelligence, his severe countenance was the bane of those who trespassed into forbidden territory, showed alien tendencies which covered just about everything possible, as Carias's file revealed. Troess had decided to cover his back regarding Carias's insertion back into WebWorld. But he still let Ung run with his other idea of giving Carias a headband. If Reno accepted his proposal no one would be any the wiser. Reno scanned the basic data then left the rest to his expert aide Janon.

Reno went over the minutiae. What Reno did not know was how Troess had doctored the file. Carias was deemed a Natural. They were so rare they were accorded a StableVolatile designation, sought after by the Domain Lords down to the lowliest vicar. The bait was there to be taken.

They sat in Reno's office, an adjunct of 'Human Resource Management', which in a way Reno was. Well, Troess mused they were all doing whatever it took to harass Regum's WebWorld, influence the inhabitants and counter the alien field in space. Whatever it took by whatever means. The state of their planet's resonance had to be kept pure at all costs.

"I see." Was all Reno said. It was obvious this scheme of infiltration worked only for specific individuals and Carias was one of them. He knew where Troess was leading him: use Carias and the asylum as an insertion point amused him. Drach would have a fit. Groben would be amendable as Troess had paved the way indicating how important Carias actually was. Troess having outlined his proposal was relieved to know Reno concurred.

They got into a ground vehicle and drove over to the asylum outside the city limits. Straight past reception, watched with interest by the staff for the two of them were in civilian garb. No point announcing who they really were.

Groben alerted by Reno of the surprise visit of 'human resource managers' regarded them with a hint of reticent suspicion. Groben, with his large head looked like a school master who never realised his full potential. As such he was suspicious of anybody above him whilst demanding obedience of those below. For a doctor he acted more

the bureaucrat which was really Drach's responsibility. Moments later Drach himself arrived. He had probably done some checking about his visitors and had to accept the fact that Reno overrode them all. Drach was aligned with the Ecclesiastics. Reno knew that. They jealously guarded their domain like some ancient medieval lords. Some things had not changed since the great Calamity. Groben tried his best to make Reno and Truss feel like supplicants but they were having none of it. They sat there sure of themselves. It was best to humour them.

"Your visit is most unusual." Groben remarked in a way that hinted at obstruction. Drach was quite happy for Groben to wrestle with these two, see what he was made of. In the end as far as patients went Groben had the final say. Drach was more concerned with the political implications and its consequences. This was the pontiff's designated asylum after all. Without bringing up his exaltedness, Drach had no intention of hiding behind his holy cloak. Depending on how this went he would inform the palace accordingly. He knew the pontiff was taking an interest in this case but left no orders regarding how they handled Carias. Was the father behind this? Perhaps. As a voluntary patient she had certain rights which though vague could not discount interference of her therapy. At least Troess had not brought Neghar along. Family pressures were common enough so Drach was thankful for that.

"Unusual." Troess replied slowly as if the word seemed out of place in an asylum. "We are all working for the same end." Groben looked at Reno who merely returned the probing gaze with a hauteur that was intended to put both in their place. He had the fullest confidence in Troess. He expected full cooperation.

"I should hope so." Drach interjected as if they needed reminding.

"For starters, we all know there is nothing wrong with Carias." Troess got straight to the point. Reno smiled inwardly.

"You say this as a trained psychologist?" Groben countered, the school master coming out in him.

Troess wasn't buying it. "Dr Groben with due respect I, we," without looking at Reno for back up, "deal with operatives. You can form your own opinion but without the insight of common sense and its practical application we would not be able to run our agents. We all have psychological insights."

Groben was rankled. "Yes, that may be so, but a sense of objectivity is necessary to truly ascertain a patient's mental state."

"Well that is why we came." Troess now looked at Reno.

"It's like this. We want Carias to access WebWorld, here."

Drach hid his surprise, Groben stared at Reno dumbfounded.

"Planetary security."

"Ah, of course." Groben said cynically. "I heal heretics on a daily basis and you come at me with this."

Reno looked levelly at him. "Developments Dr Groben. You might deal with individuals but we deal with a far greater spectrum of events. Carias can enlighten us regarding these events which may be inimical to not just this planet but the universe itself. That includes the Blessed Consciousness."

"Praise be." Drach replied. Reno was not certain exactly how Drach meant that.

"So you are willing to risk Carias's sanity." Groben countered.

"She's been in before Dr Groben with no adverse affects." Troess kept his own levelling look in place.

"She has Isolate tendencies."

"All the more reason. Means she won't be in there to socialise."

"You would be prepared to sign a release form?" Drach asked.

"No." Reno replied adamantly. "Security reasons."

"Oh of course." Groben shot back. Drach gave him a look and Groben retreated into his officious mask. Displeased.

"It leaves a trail. Let us say you are broadening her therapy."

"She could destabilise the others. WebWorld is everywhere. We have cases who could be influenced merely by the field being active."

"Gives you something to study." Reno answered.

"Interesting." Drach said neutrally. "Can you guarantee this experiment will not get out?"

"How can it? Maybe some sensitives will pick up images generated in the Web but as I have to reaffirm it really is in Carias's head and nowhere else."

"It corrupts the planet's resonance."

"Dr Groben the alien field is doing this anyway." Reno explaining the obvious.

"And before I forget we are not having this conversation. Any of this leaks out both you gentlemen will be held responsible."

"It's an..."

"Order." Reno finished off. "You cooperate and our report will mirror your positive attitude at the highest of levels." The tempter was there.

"She could fracture." Groben still at it. Drach enjoyed this. He was amenable but Groben had to make the choice. "The holy pontiff is interested in her if I need to remind you. What do you think..."

"It's not what I think Dr Groben it is what I do."

"What if this affects the Immortals. It would get into the Infinity Chip, weaken the Trine Guardians..."

"Dr Groben, one singular entity will not crash the system as you well know. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm concerned for Carias's sanity."

"Really. Well I'm pleased for your concern. But as I said, this is bigger than us. Even that is privileged information." Reno surprised Groben would bring higher domains into this conversation. "We all know Regum is continually expanding their cyber-world. Carias may have found a weak link." Reno bluffed.

"If that is so Reno..." Drach interposed.

"It is." He kept up the pretence.

Groben looked lost.

"Your Domain Lord is in agreement?" Groben's last resort.

"Out of your jurisdiction. I cannot comment on that."

"So he does not."

"It is none of your business. I have my brief. It's as simple as that."

"Very well." Drach broke the deadlock. "I agree to the proposal. As long as this institution is absolved by any negative impact. If something unfortunate were to occur the responsibility is yours."

"No it is not Drach. That is why trained psychologists such as Dr Groben are here in the first place. He is the expert. He has the requisite knowledge as he made so clear. Naturally if he fails in his duties, fails to apply his understanding of Carias's mind I cannot see how I or my department is responsible. Put it this way, we can get Carias released. Well Dr Groben?" Drach looked at him.

"I cannot agree. However given your status neither can I refuse. I will do my best. But I will insist on a control."

"Without their knowledge of course." Reno underlined.

"That is what a control is." Groben replied as if to a slow student. Reno let it pass.

"Who might that be?"

"Her name is Fehna. She has befriended Carias with positive results."

"Thank you Dr Groben. Drach. Your cooperation is noted. Rest assured it wont be buried or ignored. Telafus will be notified." Reno replied without adding that Telafus might not even be advised depending on the results. One did not bother superiors with daily task. The system would be jammed with useless information. Groben looked mollified now that he had been mentioned personally.

"Her father will visit Carias. That is all."

Reno rose, Truss likewise and they walked out of the office.

Father and daughter embraced then walked over to the pond in the magnificent parkland of the asylum. Ruffled water by a light cool breeze, fluffy white clouds moving across the blue sky. Autumn was approaching.

They talked about mother, Ung sending her apologies for having been called away. Carias understood. There were no gardeners in sight. Neghar was relieved. Drach was keeping the watchers back. Reno and Troess had managed to persuade Drach and Dr Groben of their plan.

"I've got something for you." Neghar beamed.

"Thank you dad, what?"

He ceremoniously pulled out a small gift wrapped box. "Open it in your room."

"Why not now?" half puzzled half delighted.

"Because angel it's a headband."

"Really? Dad how did you do it. I'm confused. They're forbidden. I don't understand." Happy, excited, a little taken aback and relieved.

"Let's say it's compensation for being in here. Now it's chameleon configured. Looks like a thick scarf. Make sure the batteries are always charged. Solar mesh panels, picks up your body's ambient energy and any other source around."

"I am with you. Oh how can I thank you. I bet mum doesn't know."

"You're right there. Do you want to see her?"

"Hm. Not particularly. Tell her I'm not feeling up to it, just yet."

"I understand."

"How did you do it?"

"My department has its uses." He said vaguely not revealing his true intent or that of his boss. They had to find out all they could. Carias was a natural in there. Telling her what to look for would pre-empt her mind and given Regum's technical capabilities could unmask her persona's intentions in there.

"I am, I feel wonderful."

"You are wonderful."

"Does that mean I stay here...longer?"

"For the duration. But we are working on your release." He was not too sure how that would work. It depended on Dr Groben. From what Troess told him he was none too happy with the turn of events. It could make him negative towards Carias if not outright hostile.

"Your doctor knows by the way."

"Amazing. Your department has some clout. I bet he was not impressed."

"We convinced him it was part of your therapy."

"You did? Amazing. Oh I'm so happy. Reality at last. My reality, not this." She pulled a face.

Neghar frowned when she had said that. Maybe she was addicted but they needed the information, any information to turn WebWorld around or shut it down. Whatever Carias discovered would be useful.

"So how are they treating you?"

"So so. Actually I haven't even seen my doctor."

"They want to see how you adjust first. Study you remotely."

Carias thought of Fehna and how she said 'they' were watching. Now it made sense. It wasn't some strangeness in her mind, it was real. Her paranoia only rearranged that knowledge. She had guessed as much, the way the gardeners hung around except now. Ung was right as well.

"They also want to see what your natural capabilities are without their interference. Once that is established your therapy will be tailored to your needs and hopefully rehabilitation follows."

"But there is nothing wrong with me dad."

"I know that sweetheart. Hang in there, it will all work out. Now I must go."

"Already?"

"Work."

"Ah."

"Don't get into any mischief with this. Or any mischief at all."

"I promise to be on my best behaviour. Now that I got this I got something to look forwards to."

"I'm glad you're happy."

"Happy dad? Delirious with joy."

He rose. They hugged for a long time, enjoying the unspoken bond between them. Then he walked away without turning back to the car park. Carias contained her excitement. She had to pretend nothing much happened between them, looking forlorn now she was on her own again. But calmer. The breeze had dropped, the waters serene just like her.

Reno read Janon's report regarding the incident as he called it at the monastery. Varus. Infiltrated. Compromised. He had to believe it. Janon was on leave but on stand-by. The stun gun had been merely that. Not loaded with molecular distortion sequences. Scans indicated he was clean. But Heana's report was disturbing. Regum had gotten into Shach's head. It had nearly stuffed up the orbital's computers. BrainDraining Shach would have achieved what the Reganian's intended, turn their systems into an open quagmire. The death regrettable. Three now.

If anything Varus had done Reno a favour. The Kabal revealed. Roshati and Tregon's pertinent knowledge of the great Calamity. Except the information was gone. First the two astronomers and now Shach. What had they discovered that made them react with such terminal intent? This set a dangerous precedent. No one had been deleted for the greater good in centuries. Was this Regum's work? Sow dissention? So far no repercussions anywhere, including the DLs. The silence deafening. Varus had gone over. Maybe the Carias woman might stumble across something. He could not alert any of his agents anywhere regarding this. Whatever it was had to be discovered accidentally. A probe and search team was out of the question. Even Janon had no idea. All he knew was that Roshati and Tregon had accessed out of limits astronomical data. What that data was was anybody's guess which three living souls had paid with their lives. Heana had acted correctly if it was true that Shach's mind was loaded with a Reganian stealth programme. It was a close call. Now it was up to Carias.

Just as Carias was rising, one hand in her pocket making sure the headband in its box was real Fehna waltzed into view.

"I saw your visitor and thought, better wait. I see he brought you a present. Gonna open it?" she seemed bubbly, hyper, eager, on drugs.

"Not now. I want to surprise myself later."

Fehna pulled a face as if Carias was weird. "You know you gotta get it checked."

"Checked?" Carias panicked, then remembered it was a chameleon shroud.

"And cleared by your doctor."

"Fehna," Carias said walking back to their quarters "I haven't even seen my doctor. I don't even know I got one."

"You will." She said pertly. She was high on her medication courtesy of Groben. Get Carias to react. This time positively, maybe reveal something.

"I am so thirsty." Fehna was buzzing. "How come you're never at prayers?"

"I pray on my own, in my room. Can't stand all that dewy eyed spirituality."

"It's good for your soul. Us linking, being one happy resonant state."

"Happy." Carias said with disgust. "It's not what it's about Fehna."

"What then?" she asked chirpily.

"It's about being."

"Oh." Which did not seem to make sense to her. "The others disturb you."

"You got it. They're distracting. Then there's the mumbling..."

"It's called praying."

"Whatever. To me it's mumbling. I can do that myself. Don't need them."

"We all need each other." Approaching the entrance. Carias was hoping Fehna would go to her own room.

"Anyway they are crazy so how can that help? They're distorted."

"Prayer purifies the soul."

"Yeah, then why are they still here?"

"That's...awful."

"It is, isn't it?" she turned the statement around on its head.

Carias hated any group. It turned individuals into some group mind, losing their inner essence. She was hanging onto hers.

"You know if you don't attend, they know."

"Good. Gives them something to do."

"It only makes your stay longer."

"Yeah? That so?"

"Honest. You don't want to be here forever."

"How long you been here?"

Fehna's eyes clouded over, for a moment. Then they brightened again. She was high. But she did not answer Carias. Carias didn't care. Up the stairway Carias was already thinking of her expectant insertion. Glittering cities, the orbitals, the glowing data spheres like mini universes exploring them in your own designed space ships. Strange beings, fantastic shapes glowing eerily, fascinating, predatory looking serpents, dangerous reptilian animals, insectoid shapes, androids, symbiotic half machine half life

forms with hidden intent, some with amusing pets...she couldn't wait. No wonder Primaian's freaked out in there. And stopped on the landing.

The vision real, a flashback. Her memory was returning.

"Carias." Fehna's voice came through.

"What?"

"You were drifting."

"So?" someone shut her up.

"It can trap you."

"It? What it?"

"Them." Came the enigmatic reply.

"Oh them." She did not want to disabuse Fehna of her paranoia. Otherwise her ravings might be taken seriously. She wanted Fehna some distance from her head.

"Maybe they are Fehna. Be interesting to find out who exactly they are." That should get her thinking.

"It's no good."

"Well here is the perfect place then."

"So what did he bring?"

"I don't know Fehna." walking along the top floor. "So why are you here?"

"I don't know, 'cause I like you."

"I mean...never mind." She stopped at Fehna's door. "See ya." She tried to sound positive, cyber-space was calling. She felt it, her brain almost tasted it.

"Oh." Fehna looked dejected. She was not very convincing. Maybe the high made her crave company. Too bad. Fehna was not a bad person, just a little too familiar. Maybe she was a happy soul, disturbed but essentially happy underneath.

Mena

The three women, Ung, Mena and Niatu were at the airlock ready to go out. They checked their linked harnesses, rocket propellant for manoeuvring, distress beacons, auxiliary air-tanks and water. Their homing devices and com links functioning they jetted out into the vastness of space away from the main body of DVs concentrated along the western axis whilst they headed south. The huge spiral arm glowing pristine white, a somnolent glowing swathe of bright shining stars spread out in front of them, the massive orbital behind them.

Mena felt a surge of empathy. Something familiar seemed out here, enticing and loaded with unfathomable potential.

"Your metabolic rate's a bit high, try and relax Mena. I know it's exciting and that you're looking forward to your experience, so try and regulate your breathing." Niatu said over the comlink.

"I'll try." Mena replied displeased at having her thoughts, her feeling interrupted. She felt space as an ethereal substance diffused within the darkness.

"That's better. I won't interrupt you when we're in position."

"Thank you."

She was pleased she had two instructors. What she did not know was Ung could phase herself with Mena's mind. The young woman oozed resonance. Mena was open unlike most Primaions who used their resonance as a protective shell. Mena was different. Very readable.

At first her breathing disturbed her equanimity but as she closed her eyes and concentrated on her mind, her vast mind, her open mind was ready to receive the Cosmic Consciousness. Delete your thoughts. Easier said than done. Ride the rhythms within you and you will be there. As to what the 'there' was she left undefined. Breathe in breathe out.

Becoming calmer, lighter. Something trembled within and around her. A mild shudder followed making her feel disquiet. The apprehension passed. A warm glow

suffused her state of being. Something prickled in her head, not unpleasant, a minor irritation which receded soon enough. She felt as one with the cosmos, though something held her back, probably herself.

The wave passed through her, huge, oceanic as it rose and fell, deepening the sensation of illimitable vastness. Remnants remained behind but she did not wish to focus on that. Let it be itself. She a vessel containing some invisible substance, almost graspable but too vast to fathom. Like a rock pool on a beach with minor waves criss crossing each other then slowly it settled within her. She felt fulfilled

Ung sensed the wave. It was not a spike. Possibly a loaded programme. Then a deepening of the fabric of space. Indeterminate, undefinable, a non-phased probability in which embedded within this smeared wavefront the possibilities. More like probabilities. A harbinger portending monumental change in it's wake. She tried to locate its source but it was too vast, too spread out not just as a field but multidimensional, going both in and out. She the fulcrum balancing on the edge. Her EAI wanted to encompass it but Ung held back. The only way to make sense of it was to let it reveal itself. At least it had direction, extending outwards into the pure blackness of the infinite beyond, and within. Within! The thought struck her as unique. She tried to think and found she could not think. Without panicking. Brain stabilised. Effect normal, almost natural. At peace. The warmth it exuded was comforting. She could stay immersed in its wake for ever. For ever. Surely this was not Prima's Supreme Mind. It certainly was not the supposed alien incursion. Its resonance too weak, its photonic intrusion even weaker. Something.

Then Ung's mind locked, on hold. Stuck in a temporal frame. The moment seemed to loop. Shift. What was going on? Something focussed upon her, she felt the telltale itch of a scan. Something drained her mind leaving just a hint of its residue. Then the sensation stopped. Attempted download. Blocked by her Brain. It occurred so fast she could not locate its origin, then relaxed, relieved knowing it was past. Her connectedness to something else cut off. The feeling of being observed momentary. The vague memory receded into her Brain which locked it in, or conversely locked her out. Good. Something stored for a future reload. Out of her head.

Ung focussed on Mena's resonance. Mena linked, surging. Confirmation. Washing through her. A confined set of waves reverberated within her, then settled slowly under low level entropy almost neutral, subsiding, levelling out, spreading out, linking Mena to the remnant field wave-state. Mena was 'in'. Very handy. Ung had a focus without the need to insert herself into this vague phenomena. Strange that there was no information

or data blocks, no strings of codes, more like a...template! This was big, very big. Ung aligned her Brain. The rich texture of space vibrating on so many different levels overlaying this wave- field of a template. There were gaps. Darker than dark, a vortex, miniature energy wells, insertion gates and on the other side...strange singularities agitated, bubbling, then her perception blanked out. Retrieval obviated. The remaining wavelike current full of negative positives. A strange attractor. Her Brain sucked into itself an abstract version, just the barest details.

Ung checked the radiation levels doing a quick outer mutli spectrum analysis. Nothing showed up out of the ordinary, even when played back.

Mena could not concentrate anymore. Whatever happened was over, passed away, moved on, moved away. She tried to get back into her serene state but found herself too distracted. That feeling was just so good but she could not calm her mind anymore. The moment had definitely passed.

Ung thought about the strangeness. Like a substratum travelling *within* space, beyond normal detection capabilities. She checked her readings one last time. Nothing there accept the standard readouts of her Brain. Interesting.

Mena fell into thoughtful silence awed by the inner vastness of space. Her heart was racing. Niatu said nothing. Maybe she was meditating as well. She decided to just hang there until Niatu was ready. Her inner glow of placid serenity was reward enough. Her soul felt satisfied but the warm calmness was soon interrupted by her thinking mind, the spiritual harmony gone. The residue a soothing balm, a calming essence working its magic upon her. She had touched the divine. The vastness around her now appeared loaded with potentials she could not even guess at except they were there. The revelation had been real.

Niatu reached out to Mena, softly, calming her resonance back to normal. It had expanded, held its state, seemed to energize then slowly resume its natural ground distribution. Her read outs revealed nothing. Mena had had an experience. Good on her and on her second day. This young woman was a real find. Nothing in the micro frequencies either. It had been spiritual but why had she not been aware of it? Probably day dreaming, it happened often when Niatu tried to ride her resonant state. She checked the air supply. Plenty left. Mena slightly distracted now. She would not get back into her contemplative state for a while. Time to head back.

Niatu escorted Mena to the orbital. Ung felt slightly apprehensive, disturbed. She knew enough about space to comprehend that this phase-state was not normal. The

event piqued her. It's essence felt oddly enticing yet somehow corrupted as if in decay. That made no sense. Entropy was an exchange of information in the form of discreet levels of energy moving naturally from a low state to a higher state until equilibrium was reached. In a closed system. This universe was a closed system with its boundary defined by the greater universe around it. Yet 'it' seemed both high and low simultaneously. Only an artificial state could achieve that, a cyber-state. Cyber-states could be anything depending on the design constructs, the parameters, their definitions setting its internal behavioural patterns.

The regards sent to her parents Mena stared at the blank screen slumped at her desk. She felt weird, strange, disconnected, apprehensive, nervous, exhausted, indifferent and distracted. The missive did make her feel proud being up here, so far above the daily tribulations, hers more than anything else. Still she missed some of the familiarity she left behind. Then whilst engaged in conversation a part of her mind detached itself like a balloon rising into the void the deeper contents floating off within her mind. At first it was just a curious event. Her mind drifting, expanding inside her head yet seemingly appearing outside of her consciousness as well. She was barely listening to what her mother was saying, something about Carias being picked up by a stretch limousine after a VAV had landed at her house.

Mena knew Carias from college. Not intimately as friends, more as acquaintances. A part of her brain felt lighter, more relaxed given her fraught nerves and strange exhaustion though she could not fathom why. Usually she felt better having meditated or just now being remotely united with her loving parents. In the end the conversation petered out, Mena merely nodding and acknowledging at the right moment something her father was going on about. It seemed all so unreal, like some newscast where people tried to be interesting and failed to be convincing as their lines were rehearsed to make the angle more appealing.

She gave them her love and cut the link. The moment the image faded she stared through her porthole into the big black nothingness and the dim reflection on the plexi window. The mental bubble was now just a tiny circle, shrinking. She tried focussing upon it. The feeling of warmth associated with it made her feel calm and cosy, even secure, relaxed, at one with herself and her new home. Half drowsy, too lazy to move Mena relived her revelation, a vision etched into space. Etched into space the thought repeated itself. Surely not the Cosmic Mind? She could not remember if she'd told Niatu. In fact she could not remember anything prior her conversation with her parents. Except

that they were her parents, recalling some childhood memories, the trip up, father Lennox but what had occurred in space prior the vision too hazy, a blank.

Cushioned in an ethereal presence. Her heart beat a little faster. Maybe she was on the right track. That thought jolted her. She felt alive, joyously happy, delirious. She would go to the canteen and just be with some other like minded souls. She pulled down her face mask, to be carried whenever leaving one's compartment, clicked her door which rolled open being set at a slight angle, which with a spring-loaded mechanism would shut after her exit. A simple fail safe mechanical device. The corridor's inner portholes showed the central spine, the radiating support struts, lights at the central core, tiny mech-bots busy with their tasks keeping the hull secure as tiny micro particles continually bombarded the huge orbital, sealing any holes in the outer hull.

The canteen had a few off duty personnel present. Some were taking a meal, all auto serves, others sharing a drink, others looked cursorily at her as Mena made her way to the rows of dispensers. She took a cream cake and tea, still on a natural high and wanting to celebrate. As she did not drink, desert was her reward. Since she knew nobody she sat in the middle watching the door from whence she entered just in case another acolyte such as herself might appear. She had thought of getting in touch with Niatu but as she would be seeing her tomorrow and she really had nothing to tell. The tiny light blue bubble, she remembered its colour now, appeared but as a memory, not an occurrence. What on earth had left her mind? The ridiculousness of the question never occurred to her. How can a part of a brain detach itself from itself?

"Mind of I join you?" a woman's voice spoke. Where had she come from? Mena saw a smallish, slim, pale under the strip lights with slightly slanted deep black eyes look at her. It could have been a trick of the light the way those black eyes really did look at her. She must have come in as she was making her selection. A kindred soul perhaps. She oozed coolness as if her body temperature was lower than the canteen. Dressed in a white jump suit. Almost boyish except the face was feminine.

"My name is Ung. I'm an instructor here. We were out earlier." She smiled, tiny dimples showing.

"Oh? Oh yes, my training." Mena said between mouthfuls. "Please, be seated."

Ung sat slightly to one side of Mena. Ung to Mena was assuring without exerting her presence. Her mind went blank as she ate. She had wanted to tell somebody of her strange experience and now when the time was right reluctant to do so.

"How's it going?" Ung said after a while, watching Mena eat.

"Fine."

"No problems?"

"Problems?"

"Adjusting."

"Oh that." For a moment Mena thought Ung was referring to her experience. There were many Primaian's who could read minds easily without the subject knowing. Maybe Ung was one of those who did have that capability. Ung seemed to wait for an answer. Mena continued eating. Why was she so reticent now? "Better than I thought."

"Not easy. I was disappointed at first. As if getting nowhere." Ung prompted.

"I want to be with the Divine Essence. I'm a seeker I guess. Have been all my life and now here's the opportunity to live my dream." She said with certainty. To her surprise Ung appeared indifferent to her fervour. That was disconcerting.

"Giving your soul for the greater good." Probably referring to the planets overall resonance.

"If it helps, then yes."

Ung barely nodded. Mena was a little disappointed. Niatu was far more positive than this...creature. Now why did she think that? Maybe Ung was from Regum. There were Reganians on board, managing the technical side of the orbital. Yet she had said she was an instructor. Had been out with her. As if Ung could make her resonance vanish. Intriguing. Maybe with time one acquired a steadfast mind which being calmer left less of a residual aura.

"I've always wanted to do this."

"How you progressing?" Ung aware Mena did latch onto something out there and she was curious.

"I don't know. I mean," she hastened to add finishing off her cake, "I've done this down there but with so many distractions I felt I really need true solitude and the best place is in space."

"You're certainly correct there." Ung answered trying to steer the conversation her way.

"Funny isn't it? You know," she took a sip of her tea, "space is supposed to be filled with this evil yet I sense...nothing. As if it is bypassing me."

"The evil is not as strong as it's made out. One's resonance sees to that. Don't let it worry you. It will only divert your concentration Mena."

"I won't let it." Mena was determined there.

"That's good."

Feeling a little strange in Ung's presence. As if she were someone else. Maybe she had drawn that bubble out of her mind.

"The reason I'm here Mena is that next time you're out with Niatu I'll be there again. You don't mind?"

"Mind? Nice having two instructors." Mena being polite. She did not know if she wanted Ung with her. Yet she could not refuse either. Why did she bother her. Maybe one to guide and one to ascertain her spiritual state.

"To smooth over any aberrations." Ung added. "Niatu can only do so much."

"Aberrations?" Mena tried to hide her surprise. The images flooded back. Vague now. More sensation than revelation. Otherness. Was Ung aware of her thoughts? Her eyes remained steady, searching whilst holding back. Ung was checking her out.

"Space has many secrets Mena. Things that will surprise you."

Did she know then? Ung looking at her directly.

"It could put your mind into a discordant state. Derail your meditations. It's good to talk about it if it does occur. Lightens the load in a way. We're all here to help you." Ung sincerely concerned. Should she tell her? "Often," Ung continued, "the mind coming across something unusual, something it is not used to has a tendency in some to create impressionable fantasies. They're not real in themselves, more latent than actual." Ung probed. She paused when Mena did not answer then said: "The best way to handle that is to let it be Mena. It will dissolve eventually. Focus upon it and you'll only feed it, then it's got a hold on you."

Should she broach what was on her mind? After all Ung just about summed up what Mena knew for certain had occurred out there. So odd, the shadow re-run in her cabin whilst being in touch with her parents. Strange.

"I did sense something Ung. I can't explain what. It seemed like a presence without form."

"A presence." More a statement than a question.

"I told Niatu, I think. I can't remember, it now seems so long ago."

"That's good." Mena was surprised Ung did not ask her what that presence was.

"It means your resonance is strong. You'll be fine. It didn't disturb you?"

"No not at all. Distant yet close. Is that normal?" Mena had to know.

"Normal." Ung smiled. "Nothing is really normal Mena. The path to enlightenment is as diverse as the seekers themselves. Each path is unique, each experience equally so. What goes on in your head is singular in itself, a sub-set of the total. Most of the

strangeness is your own inner self. It slowly opens up, like new terrain. It's an adventure Mena."

She felt better now. What Ung said made sense. Though she never as yet experienced, apart from that momentary feeling, a terrain, an apt description. Ung knew what she was talking about. Mena was getting used to her distant and oddly focussed way.

"It is isn't it?" Mena smiled back. Ung rose.

"It's been a pleasure. Thank you for your time."

"Thank you Ung."

Ung walking back to her quarter's felt she made some progress. There was something out there. No. Something was too vague. Mena's mind indistinct regarding her experience. This whatever had the makings of a field-wave-state. Pure speculation. Remnants of a long gone physical presence, a decayed Cyber-realm or, or, one in the making? A possible future state leaking into time, its potency too intense, so packed, so dense it irradiated not just its own state but also to a lesser order of magnitude the current space-time continuum. Construed as a presence. Something other definitely. Or, she sighed as she made her way back to her quarters, just Mena hallucinating. Ung chided herself for being too focussed on Mena and Niatu. Still part of her homework. Check out who was who. Get the lay of the field. She was certain it was something from beyond, given its current opaque state there was plenty of time to investigate, surreptitiously of course.

Andromeda Station

Ung's ever observant facilitator, one of three on rotating shifts received her aligned phase state's download. Run through QCs to edit out all extraneous quantum activity the data came through in near real time. No need to use his HID since controllers and facilitators were EAI capable. The QCs tailored through the facilitator to be in tandem with their target scrubbed of any other sentient interference values which may have had similar values and thus inadvertently added to their contextual information. The incoming field-wave clean. Ung came through as a sentient virtual presence. Ung's EAI directed Mena's total state into a separate data realm. They were building up her race's profile, studying their resonance state and matching that with that of Prima's resonant envelope. The computers making sure the data was purely empirical.

With a rush of anticipation he and the Controller saw the full spectrum results on various light-screens the imagery now crystal clear. Ung's Head-in-Display linked directly to the station's QCs. The first thing they both saw was the star field broaden out as Mena's response expanded exponentially. The wave-field-front discernable though weak rushing towards her carrying embedded bits of incomplete data. The equations drawn out by the QCs garbled. Swamped by steady state junk data. Still from Mena and Ung's position that wispy field had the appearance of distinct forward movement. On another screen the quantum foam of space superimposed, the quanta represented as energy nodes of pinks, lilacs, browns, ochres, yellows, crimsons, reds and blues, all representing various intrinsic energy states. The wave contained the full spectrum of space itself. But thinly stretched, dispersed. More like a tattered net than a unitary whole.

Different sub-routines in the QCs diverted the hard data into sub-domains adding to the wealth of information of their data bases. The quanta were slightly energized agitated by the ripples caused by the wave-front like wave. Space was scalar and Mena's alignment along with Ung's the levelling agent. The wave-front unseen accept for its effects. Not a constant for the wave peaked then slowly, similar to an ocean wave reaching land, smoothened out spatially after cresting. Two occurrences entangled. First

the wave then the spread. The quanta rose and fell away not yet forming analysable geometric configured patterns. Not conclusive if it was either intelligent design or intelligence itself. Current ongoing analysis could not be certain since its origins had no insertion point, no original state, not even verifying entropic states given that that universe was a closed system. One thing the event was not was the make believe unitary cosmic consciousness the Primaians insisted was spread throughout their space.

"Remarkable." Was all the controller said. The facilitator nodded in agreement.

The discreet packets of energy were on the verge of merging into a definable self sustaining system but the parameters to achieve this phenomena were not as yet recognisable let alone subject to analysis. The QCs were floundering trying to make sense of something so unusual. The flare down continued on a smooth receding curve powering down to space's original phase-state. Accept like a fractal curve it would never reach the original state that had been disturbed. Close but not equal to. An energy state remained behind.

The sequence elongated in the wake of the wave. Mena's sentience in stationary transit. Quantum superimposition. Her body remained, as did Ung's where it was. The energy packets started to intertwine revealing convolutions caused by the wave in the quantum foam.

"Run the direction backwards." The Controller suggested. This wave had to have an origin. Energy waves could not just be dumped 'as is' unless they were as advanced as themselves. She felt a strange anticipation that this might just be so. If that was the case then they had discovered through Ung and Mena a totally new phenomenon out there. Someone was using Quantum Probability Waves. Though as yet on a much smaller scale. Anyway the whole universe was filled with an almost infinite array of continually collapsing PWs. It made reality for what it is, was, and would be.

The facilitator ran the sequence, going back in real time. Within moments the QCs had created a probable future-past state. The redesign steadied into a fuzzy smeared out white noise orb like image. Its directional outward oriented energy state with interlocking configurations as yet undefinable. To the controller it looked like same giant, unformed data domain without it's effects, wave aside. The QCs mutli-broadscale-spectrum analysis tried to hone down the excess data of the incoming frequencies exiting by all appearance from the centre of that giant galaxy with it super-huge gravity well. That was due to its massive size and had nothing to do with what they were studying through Ung's quantum entangled data stream. The QCs ran through various micro-frequencies and came up with an image of a radioactive bright lilac-blue high energy

centred mass. The blue spectrum due to the relative motion of Mena's approaching sentience thus shifting the frequencies, plus its own volition moving outward. Analysis confirmed it was both. The underlying configuration steady at last.

The QCs went through all the latent energy levels, the fuzzy vibrating orb shifting its spectrum. Within its delamination was a pulse, not dissimilar to that of some stars. Mimicking one huge mega-star being formed next to the giant black hole at the centre of that galaxy. Radio activity was normal yet these wavelengths had too many variable configurations encased within this pulsing phase-state. The pitch, the harmonics did not equal that of a star.

The QCs were processing it all, starting to reach their computational capacity. 'How much information was in that thing?' The controller thought to herself. Buffers were now in place as the data streams levelled out but continued to send its unrecognisable content into space.

"Activate the quantum security field." The controller said. They had enough.

"Activated."

"Activate deletion sequence."

"Activated."

The data kept on coming in.

"Insert previous pre-sequence parameters."

"Inserted."

The QC warned them that data loss was immanent.

"Enter accept."

"Entered."

The QC warned of immanent memory loss including analytic procedures and designated associated functions, applications, temporal memory storage, back up devices including all recent point targeted assembled data.

"Accept."

"Accepted."

The pulsing opaque orb vaporized. The stars and the quanta in space turning into long lines of multicoloured light streams, the image receding away from them.

"Computer's asking about the user log."

"Delete second last command sequences."

"Deleting." Now the QCs had no knowledge of what they had engaged in.

"Delete logging sequence."

"Deleting."

"Delete log foundational states."

"Deleting."

The QCs seemed to hesitate. This overrode all security measures. The controller erring on the side of caution. The unverifiable data which had the power to affect the quantum state of space itself could thus affect the QCs own quantum states. Not only that it could also configure their EAI capabilities. Until more was known this phase-field had to be kept at bay.

The QCs deleted the memory of its memory.

"Cycling down."

All but one of the pertinent light-screens vanished.

"Now delete remnant cache history."

"Deleting."

"Delete initial prompts." The controller moving back to the initial starting point.

"Delete back up shell files and associated architecture."

"Deleting."

The QC warned them that the associated applications of its focussed utility drive would also be deleted.

"Do it."

"Deleting."

"Now we do a systems check. Call up internal data processing logs."

"Searching and coming on screen."

A light screen re-appeared. At least she had not crashed that part of the computers internal logistics.

"Maintenance on sub folders please."

"Coming." The facilitator hoped. Ung had already vanished at some stage of the disengagement.

"Active."

"Good."

The Commander, an older man in his late age virtually appeared next to the controller, alerted by the QC shut down sequence. Normally he should have been notified first but he knew she would not have activated the emergency procedure without good reason. He merely stood there saying nothing, observant.

The maintenance log showed the initial activating point.

"Run and delete its tracking status."

"Run and deleting."

The scrolling numbers vanished off the screen.

"Now check status of the temporal quantum field. External. Light scan only."

The facilitator engaged light sensing devices duplicating their EAls.

"Steady state scan. All is normal. No signs of activity internal or external."

"Right." She said relieved. "Now the boring bit. Full diagnostics."

"Starting."

"Block all coordinates for that sector for the moment."

The commander was now intrigued. "Black list?"

"Until we know what this is, yes."

He merely nodded. Explanations could wait.

"Also do a search pattern, internal and external of any unusual quanta activity then dump them into secure containment blocks."

"Entering procedural commands. Commands inserted, local transfer in place."

"Resume normal visual and audio status only."

A moment later he said: "Done."

On a third light screen the diagnostic progress scrolled down the screen.

"What is going on Controller?" the commander asked. He had watched the feed the moment the phase-wave came through. But when the Controller went through the overriding negation sequences he knew this was no normal incoming data.

"I wish I knew commander. The QCs didn't but they were quantum entangled."

"Really?" he was surprised. There were different levels since entanglement was part of the strange mix that made up the universe. Minds, consciousness did it all the time as did EAI linkage. That's how it all worked.

"Yes. The data is unknown and seems to have, in this wave-front the capability of perturbing the phase-state of space. I thought contamination was immanent. Something huge is out there."

"So it appears. Any clues?"

"Not from the QCs"

"Too massive? Meaning the data flow."

"Yes. Some future state is out there using PW configurations which I thought were both premature and dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Alike attracts alike."

"So it's an artifice?"

"Could be. Then again, we haven't really studied this super-galaxy this close. It could be natural, giving birth to some new event unlike anything discovered in the universe."

"Well that will give our astronomers something to interest them."

"With caution Commander. There is something *within* that state of events."

"Yes I saw the quanta...fascinating."

"That's the problem. The QC's were soaking it up. Too fast and they reached their max internal memory capabilities. It would have flooded the rest of the systems..."

"Flooding. A prosaic description."

"Very real as well."

"That much data?"

"Yes."

"Unusual."

"Isn't it just. What do you make of it?"

"You kept anything at all?"

"No commander, I deleted everything. Anyway we know of its existence. We can always go back at a later stage."

"Correct. How is the agent?"

"Ung. During the deletion process she was disengaged. She should be alright."

"Let's see."

"Facilitator. Get the QCs to do a remote scan on Ung. Just the status level. No probing."

"Onto it."

Another light screen came on revealing Ung's EAI activity. "She's clear."

"That's something."

"So what's your analysis?"

"As I said commander, too early to tell. I cannot see the universe, or this galaxy doing this on its own. Something or someone is behind this trend. And that is all I can safely assume."

"With abnormally high data realms."

"I hope not. It's always been postulated that that is what our universe could be. Now we know that this universe started out as a singularity in a bigger previous universe. I know what you're getting at commander. And I shudder at the possibilities."

"Another singularity?"

"Possibly."

"I see." He was in thought. Neither dared to speculate too far, but on the face of it the evidence, what little they had made it seem as such.

"Should I run simulations?"

"Why do you ask. It's in your sphere."

"I'm worried about the QCs Commander."

"How?" not that he did not know but he wanted her opinion.

"They could all be taken over."

"That deep?"

"That deep commander."

"Do you consider this a threat."

"The scenario indicates something so massive our QCs were being pushed to their limits. This has never happened before."

"Accept once, you may not remember. It did not have the same effect, but neither was it on such an intense level." He hinted seeing if she knew.

It was before her time. He had sacrificed his mortality to become an Eternal, being downloaded at his biological limits. Then when a surrogate mother was found his memories were uploaded into the new birth. Not unusual but not common either. Most at the end of their lives seemed burdened with their accumulated knowledge. It was as if any living sentience was meant to cease, the mind actually accepting the finality, the finiteness of real life to be reborn if one's inner psyche had built up it's strength to transfer through natural birth into a new life. Deep scans had found that the vast unconscious was an amazing repository of all the knowledge acquired in one's previous life. Death was but a transitional state.

But the commander, and those like him were on a mission, one they kept secret pertaining to their continuation. Superficially they lived their configured reincarnation to gain further knowledge. They also knew that even this universe might not be permanent. Another would replace it and when that moment came they with their QCs would make sure that they could then, in the distant future transfer that knowledge into the next phase of the cosmos's sentient driven evolution. Their civilisation would thus continue unto eternity. For data was data. Independent, like consciousness of the space-time continuum. And now with this discovery the Commander was concerned that perhaps this phenomena the controller had gained via Mena through Ung hinted that the seeds of a new universe being put in place. But that was pure speculation.

She cruised through her memory but as the commander had been wonderfully obscure she could not nail down his allusion.

"Prima's great Calamity." He said at last.

"That was similar to this?"

"A wave front, less intense had moved through their universe. Some remnant high energy particles leaked into our universe all those centuries ago." What he did not say was he had been alive then as well. Eternals did not advertise the fact of their transference capabilities. They were more than just the gate keepers of their world, they were also its repository, as well as that of the QCs and Virtual QCs that backed up their accumulated wisdom. The laws of physics might reconfigure the VQCs and with hyper-inflationary expansion smear them physically across space itself. The data would be spread across light years and take thousands if not millions of years to reassemble. Thus the need for Eternals to re-re-incarnate into the possible next universe. Yet projections were so far into the future that even all possible worse case scenario's had this universe continue for over ten billion years. Accept for what they had just discovered. The commander had to gather the Eternals for a meeting at some future date.

"It was the same? Similar?"

"Similar commander. Less intense."

"And...?"

"You mean did it affect the QCs?"

She nodded.

"No, it was noted, cached, secured and restricted."

"You mean I cannot access it?"

"No one can."

"That explains the rumours then."

"Oh yes." He granted. "The Prophecies."

"The Prophecies that one day another civilisation will run the universe. And it ain't us."

"Something like that."

"Is it true?"

"Not quite. Another civilisation will arise."

"Well there's quite a few in place. Gonna reveal which one?"

"If I did that Commander we would, through foreknowledge actually create the very conditions thus restricting the advance of the others."

"Mars or Earth or Regum? Don't tell me it's Prima."

"They would like to think so." He hedged.

"Well we know they have made contact with Mars, and to a lesser degree Earth. They're not having much luck with Regum." She answered.

"That is correct. Put it this way Controller. Whilst each and every one of these worlds has the same potential it does not necessarily translate into an actuality."

"Can't they all develop, each to their own sentience?"

"That is what we are hoping they achieve."

"Hoping, I am noting that Commander."

"I'll keep myself informed of developments Controller."

"Good. As long as this doesn't get messy."

The Commander merely smiled. She searched his face for any clues but he was as inscrutable as ever.

Ratze

Ratze woke in her warm cosy bed. Relaxed, very comfortable, serene. Ah this was the life. She lazily dozed a while. No hurry, free to do nothing. Just be, drift, enjoy life's offerings. The vacation...vacation? The thought passed. No, not vacation. What then? The upload came back to her thanks to her Brain. For a moment her head expanded inwards. Independent residing deep within her consciousness. That's better. Confirmation. Of what? She knew who she was and that was the sum of her knowledge. Even the strange dream...no not a dream. More a distant domain populated by intelligences with whom she had a conversation. Detail. Think. Nothing. She another person in that embracing environment. An order given details lost in muted conversations. She had been with some higher order beings, taken into their confidence. Nado's white podgy face, the lean mean look of Kari, almost swarthy, sombre, the manipulators moving Ratze into place, moving her here.

Even what they discussed was not accessible. There were others as well. Vague adumbrations chattering in the background of her head. Yet no matter how she tried as she lay under the cover, her mind associated the abstract to the actual. A surge of realisation. Under cover the thought resurfaced. With no idea as to why, never mind the how. There had been something else. Very important, out of reach no matter how hard she tried to recall her own past. Contained within what she was now. A data field? Isolated. For the moment. By the very fact that her Brain let her remember this much must mean there was a reason for this blanketing, this blank. Blank.

Contained. It bothered her. She got up lost in thought. Thoughts which bounced around an empty skull. A vessel waiting to be filled, a prepared domain and when the right moment came, when she was in the right context, when the parameters matched she would be ready to receive something. Ahead of herself. The gap between where she ought to be, somewhere else and where she was, here, created the spatial distance in real time.

The shower refreshed her, water pouring down the drain a bit like her natural brain having been leached of pertinent data. This void natura, meant to be. She was in some chalet she remembered now. Nados and Kari looking after her. But they were not

the reason for her presence. They assumed control of her for the moment. She had gone along with that like a small stream that found the first gully to course through on the way to somewhere far broader in scope than her present situation. Situation. What situation. This? Only the beginning. To what? No idea. Not that bothered. There was a reason for her presence with the niggling annoying impossibility to ascertain the full extent of her immersion. An insert.

The place set at the foothills of the mountains as isolated as she was from reality. Prima. She flushed, the water was hot. Prima. The problem, Regum the solution. Intertwining opposite civilisations at odds with each other. Prima forceful, determined. Regum relaxed, indifferent. With discrepancies. She watched the suds eddy and swirl away, the detritus of memories, of her memory flowing into her current environment.

She indulged in the warm flowing shower. Her Brain probed her surroundings. The room, the building was chock full of scanning sensors, resonant probes not unlike the huge QCs, then that image faded, sucked deep into her head like the water gurgling down the drain. Gone gone gone. The room if not the building one vast resonance chamber. No wonder she knew nothing, it was downloading whatever her mind conjured. No joy for Kari then, or Choss or Scaag. She was as vacant as vacant could be. And understood the reason now for her vacancy. So they could not unearth what really lay embedded within her Brain. As long as that held she was safe. Involved in something big. It was enough to re-establish her mental balance.

She was finished, towelled herself, feeling fresh, pristine of body and mind. The vision of her memory flared for a moment into some heightened state of awareness. Her presence somewhere else impinging on her consciousness. Some strange realm, again undefinable, loaded with information, pregnant with strange unlimited potential. Shrouded technology elsewhere. A sun, space, background radiation spikes flaring, then subsiding, something moving through space, origin unknown. Was that what they were after? Her Brain having released this snippet of information.

She shook it off, dressed in her jump suit, woven, configured for space. Certainly not your average gear. An image of a decaying city, decrepit buildings covered in grime, low rise, washed out dirt smeared colours, faded brown facades under a sulphurous pungent sky. Then it was gone. A future glimpse, a threat accomplished, its purpose as a city negated. Huge grey almost black skyscrapers in the background, now empty, their functions utterly destroyed. A vision of Regum. Regum...a knock on her door.

She touched with her foot the pressure pad and the door rolled open. Nados in an immaculate cut suit. She looked searchingly at him making sure she was in the real

world and not some cyber-realm. The image seamless. He appeared as did her surroundings real enough. No analysis from her Brain. Real was real.

"Why didn't you say I was being monitored?" Ratze said by way of greeting, surprised at the question her Brain inserted.

"For your protection. May I come in?" she stood aside as he entered and stood in the middle of the room.

"Protection? From what?"

"Good morning Ratze, slept well?"

"Yes thank you."

"You see? Protected."

"You still haven't said what Nados."

He sighed. "During sleep the mind opens. Anything could be inserted. WebWorld is everywhere, even expanding into space as we speak. There are programmes hunting for specific minds, such as yourself. This building, this room shields you from cyber-hacking, alien insertions."

"I guess I should be thankful."

He let that pass and accepted it as a compliment.

"Breakfast?"

"No, not hungry. You?"

"Later then, we are expected."

"We are?" Ratze was amused. Nados excited. This visit something to look forward to. For Ratze it was a diversion maybe a useful one. She could not imagine, given her blankness, who would be interested in her. Did they think she was an unspecified agent? Maybe. She certainly had no memories...when the crumbling buildings under that bleak sky momentarily reappeared. A future with a calamity that had the power to take out a whole city. Prima was planning something. So that is what I'm here for. Her Brain though did not run with her thoughts. Rather it quickly shrouded them before they could be picked up by the resonant scanners.

"Who would be interested in me." Ratze coaxed. Nados remained silent.

"Those who are."

They walked down the empty corridor, past deserted reception and into the bright light of day. The mountain air refreshing, bracing, invigorating. Her thermal protection barely noticed the temperature difference. The majestic trees of the estate, a soft cool breeze coming down ice capped mountains behind her. It was picturesque serenity itself.

Ratze heard the whine of an approaching ground vehicle which pulled up smoothly in front of them. The engine idling the passenger doors gulled open. They got in the rear, Kari greeting them both. The car moved off.

"How are you Ratze?" Kari asked. More of an examination than a friendly question.

"So so." She answered indifferently. Kari probably wanted to know how she slept, whether she noticed her being scanned her Brain thought. Yet there were no alerts coming from it. All was well. It made her feel comfortable for she understood why she was so vacant. Her Brain wanted it this way.

Ratze in the middle sensed Kari's inquisitiveness.

"Slept well?"

"Wonderful."

Kari resumed her neutral role giving nothing away. Nados was watching the trees, the forest slip by. He too was attuned, just feigning indifference unless he let Kari do the talking. He the junior partner.

They were deep in the forest now, the road starting to wind up and through a series of low wooded hills. Ratze wondered what they wanted from her. She was tempted to ask but knew instinctively Kari would certainly not enlighten her and Nados probably knew nothing much that would help her. Maybe they were going to interrogate her, using deep scanning techniques. They had her isolated after all.

It happened so quickly Ratze had no time to react. Kari whipped out a stun gun and jabbed Ratze. She passed out. The vehicle continued on its way.

Ratze was sitting in an empty room. Her head felt thick, her mouth dry yet she was relaxed, drifting in and out of sleep. She was comfortable, she even felt good. Drugs. She nearly laughed. Why this circumlocution? Oh yes, the stay over at the chalet. They must have scanned her, assembled the data and now it was time for verification. Her Brain focussing in and out of inner reality. Never quite getting there as if either trying to get her attention then recede from her consciousness.

Strangely enough she felt like an observer, a third party. The room was empty, blank walls, just like...but the memory of something similar, almost graspable like some wisp of fog too immaterial to grasp, to focus. Don't focus her Brain told her. Saying, 'let it be'. Her Brain reconfiguring itself, turning opaque, self draining its data deep into her unconscious. When done her subconscious wrapped itself around totally isolating both it and its content.

She was ready. The effect of the drugs good. She looked lazily around the blank walls, the empty table and the few chairs. She knew about the waiting game. Almost like sensory deprivation. Unnerve her by deleting as much as possible for the incessant surface mind to latch onto something. So by the time her interrogator appeared she would be only too happy and relieved to engage in conversation. Get her to worry what it was they wanted. She could tell now, just, being soft scanned. The room was loaded. Not deep penetration, just running a surface scan whilst they had to be watching. No tell tale one way portals such as mirrors, pictures or even cameras. But then walls could be cloaked giving them the appearance of solidity when they were merely camouflage making them look solid. 'Let them', accepting her situation.

The drug potent. Waves of euphoria basking in its soft, smooth mind enhancing realm. She felt heroic like some mythological being. Were they real then? Or did the ancients use drugs to be gods? To be the heroes and heroines of distant lore? Well they had resurrected that mind state by infusing her with some molecular equation which locked in nicely with her physical brain, tailor made to be brilliant, fantastic, cool, calm and very together.

Her essence a third person and at the same time she was that third person. Her true persona, whilst it lasted. The drug gave her so much confidence as to be so on top, both mentally and physically that whatever they came up with would be of no consequence, to her. To them. A game she understood. Start with the individual. Any piece of information had ramifications. Pieces of a puzzle, with no puzzle about. Not that she of knew anyway.

"Ratze." The disembodied voice said at last. So no face to face. Ah well.

"What?" she countered more amused than disconcerted.

"Good of you to be here."

"Here as in here? This planet? This universe?" she was amused.

"Just here will do. Tell me what are you hiding?"

"Hiding? Ha. I'm vacant buster." She countered feeling emboldened, throwing care to the breeze.

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"No one is vacant Ratze." The voice said patiently.

"Well I am."

"If you are then you have been tampered with."

That stopped her. 'Tampered'. Interesting.

"Well then you'd better untamper me." She joked.

"We can BrainDrain you."

"I think you missed that session. So you gonna keep me here until my insides are out?"

"As long as it takes Ratze."

"Hope you brought your lunch."

"Do you think this is the real you?"

"I know."

The room vanished. She was in some village. It looked very familiar even though she was not surprised at the change of imagery or the location. Her past, so distant, almost another life. Another life. Was the voice saying that was real and this was not.

"Well?" Ratze got in first.

The room came back.

"Perception is so fragile." It said.

"Maybe reality is and perception isn't." Ratze on top of this.

Silence. Ah, scored a point here. Though how reality could be fragile escaped her. She knew reality was a matter of perception. The universe was what it was, only the interpretation changed the image, not the substance. And there were as many answers, as many perceptions as the mind, any mind, all minds could think of.

"Shit for brains." Ratze said when the silence continued.

"A bit prosaic."

"Isn't it just. What do you want?"

"The truth about you."

"Me?" she knew where this was heading. Law enforcement did it all the time when unsure about a suspect. Make them feel guilty about something, anything. In this day of uploaded persona's, reconfigured resonance states, BrainDraining anybody could be anybody. The soul's core restructured, a new persona inserted. They must think she was one such being. Still Ratze felt as certain as could be she was herself. Definitely so. No doubt about it. None whatsoever.

"Yes Ratze you." It said patiently.

Maybe by inserting that image of the village, the thatched rooves, the mundane scenery, the bucolic setting, the verdant fields, placid grazing cows, the slow change of seasons, the squawking chickens, barking dogs, crowing roosters, all so familiar yet so disassociated sparked something in her memory. She told her life story, born a Volatile, discovered, uncovered by a priest who saw her potential, technical college, failed. Then

as she became older, a teenager latent psychic possibilities developed, the seminary and then a DV potentiate, moving up to the Orbital to become an instructor. Then something happened, a blank, a surge, something big, which she suspected they drained out of her. Yet it was not a real BrainDrain or otherwise she would not be here. Either they missed something, wanted something, sought something she was supposed to know and yet had no idea.

There, she had revealed all. Accept for the gap. Well DVs had all sorts of strange experiences. They did not deal with reality as such, more with potential states of mind and their perception of reality.

"Satisfied?" Ratze smirked. "Really eventful wasn't it?" she added jovially.

Everything flickered as if the lights were playing up. The room morphed into a lounge. Brown panelled walls, paintings of mountains and rivers, lakes and streams. Soft wall lights, an office desk and herself on a cosy armchair, Scaag looking at her, with a bemused smile. Dressed in a business suit. Behind the glare of daylight, some trees and grey low rise buildings behind her.

Ratze still under the influence of the drug took it in her stride. She would have anyway. Such sudden changes of scenery occurred in WebWorld all the time. Being in there until... Or was she mixing this up with something else. No matter.

"Impressive Scaag." Ratze replied.

She gave her a wan smile as Ratze took in her surroundings once more. Plush carpet, ornate lamps, Scaag giving her a thin smile.

"You're a bit of a problem Ratze." Scaag now focused business like.

"Oh I don't know. I'm not a problem to me Scaag."

"Exactly. Something happened to you up there."

"The blank you mean."

Scaag just looked at her.

"You tried at the chalet, the room's loaded you know, if not the whole building, then the feel-good drug, good shit by the way, and now this. Something tells me you're not having much luck. Maybe because there's nothing there that is of interest."

"That is for us to decide. You certainly have not regressed to your volatile state so that is something. However we think you picked up something as a DV up there which was then transferred instantly elsewhere. The trouble is it was transferred across space in an unconventional manner, more like *into or out of space*".

"Meaning?" she was impressed.

"You linked up with either, directly, WebSpace, WebWorld, the same really."

"No third alternative?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know. Maybe the aliens got to me." Ratze said dismissively. That should give her something to consider.

"Maybe they did. What do you think?"

"I thought you knew that by now Scaag." She loved being so familiar with her.

"At least your history is as is. By remembering it convinces me I'm here with the real Ratze."

"Glad to know that."

A view screen came on, replacing one of the pictures. Space, the DVs in place. Three in the foreground. Obviously her and two others.

"Me I suppose."

Scaag nodded. "Just watch."

"I'm watching." And saw nothing untoward. Her Brain was in the background of her head now, interested yet subdued, like some discreet butler awaiting a signal to act, or not.

"You didn't notice it?"

No point asking `what'. Ratze waited.

"Replay."

For one moment Ratze went slightly blurry, vibrating. One pixellated frame.

"Hm. Space is full of radiation, and," she nearly said `your', "the alien stuff. It happens." She shrugged it off even though her Brain went into alert mode.

"Could be. By why just you and not your charges? You were targeted Ratze."

"So that is what all this is about." She felt better. She knew that somehow she was connected to something, but her Brain was not saying, not even hinting.

"It is. And it's my job to find out."

"And what have you found out?"

"An energy flux."

"My my." Yet Ratze's mind fully alert. Her Brain self-dumped into an explanation.

"Tell me Scaag, this place is secure?"

"Of course."

"But you're recording, scanning."

No answer. Not that she expected one.

"I've got a hunch. If it is true then I want immunity."

"The best I can do is say you are a protected source."

"Good enough. Right. The orbital was shut down. All systems went off-line. So yes you're right something did occur. Don't ask me how I know. Us DVs are not normal, you have to remember that."

Scaag nodded.

"What does that tell you? Or rather were you told?"

An indifferent look from Scaag. A mask of discretion.

"A wave front moved through space Scaag, origins unknown. Now why would a wave front be so important? Anyway," Ratze continued, "the orbital's computers go off-line which means that probably that data was deleted. So what is the big secret? I don't know." And she didn't for this was coming from her Brain. "All I do know is that maybe my own capabilities picked it up. It may well be that since as DVs we're under constant observation that someone deleted whatever I uncovered. Thus my vacancy regarding whatever it is you are chasing Scaag."

She had listened attentively saying nothing. Ratze had covered herself.

"As for the others, I got no idea. I was yanked out obviously and here I am. Body snatched." She was amused the attention she was receiving.

"From what we have discovered about you, at that moment, your psyche went volatile."

"Not good?"

"Not unexpected. You did not burn out. Others would have."

"That close?" her Brain feigned concern.

"That close Ratze. The burn out was horrendous. Lost quite a few DVs. Yet you were the only one unaffected by this surge."

"Another reason for your interest in me?"

"Correct. You're stable again, very much so. Very rare, very unusual. Your profile is tight as is your resonance. It's as if..." Scaag paused, "...you are a new breed."

"Well please don't let this get about. I mean the attention is fine, I feel like, well up to today that I'm on vacation. But I can see..." And she stopped before she said too much. The drug influencing her relaxed candour.

"What Ratze?"

"Oh nothing, I thought I had something but it's gone." She said slowly nearly panicking inside. She knew she was not average even at DV levels. The dead city had come into view once more. This cross feeding of information could only be due to the drug she was influenced by. The image not some relic of an ancient past. The skyscrapers saw to that. On Regum. A future state. Not just a possibility but an actuality.

Prima was going to destroy Regum Central and get away with it. If she knew that then maybe her mission was to give them warning. But if she did that her DV status she could kiss good bye. Worse she would be seen as a traitor and they might send a hit-squad after her. Not a good position to be in for there was something else she had to do. Except her Brain was not releasing that information.

"Maybe it was this?" Scaag changed the view of space. What appeared astounded Ratze. The very image within her head. There under a dark threatening sky, the dark outlines of non functioning sky scrapers. On the ground abandoned cars, tram wrecks, others stalled, burning buildings, wreckage and debris everywhere, a pall of smoke pouring into the sky blotting out the sun.

"Shit. My vision!"

"You kept that to yourself."

"It was too weird Scaag. And too momentary. Too fleeting. You know us DVs are volatiles and our imaginations do play tricks on us."

"You know that everything has to be collated."

"I know, that one slipped past me. I totally forgot about it."

"You had it here Ratze." Scaag admonished.

"That's the drugs. As such I held not much store in it."

Scaag accepted her explanation reluctantly. Then continued: "Your status is under review. First you don't burn out..."

"Neither did many others Scaag." Ratze reminded her.

"...and now this. You know where that is?"

"Regum."

"If this calamity is real you know what that means?"

"I really haven't thought about it. Honest." She was telling the truth.

"It means," Scaag smiled, "certain victory. But perhaps someone else can explain this." And a side door within the panels opened. A middle aged man walked in briskly motioning for the two women to remain seated. He pulled up another armchair next to Ratze. Dressed in a non descript charcoal grey suit, black tie, short white stubby hair and soft brown eyes which belied his chiselled granite face.

"General, meet Ratze." Is all Scaag said.

"A pleasure to meet you. How would you like to work for us." It was a statement.

"You certainly don't waste words or time."

"Time is of the essence." Ignoring the appalling destruction on the screen. Scaag voided it. Pleasant mountain scenery replaced the dreadful vision.

"I see. No more DV activity?"

"They have plenty of others." He said lightly.

"Err, doing what?"

"First please answer the question." He held her gaze.

"Who is `us'?"

"Let's just say we have certain privileges."

"Ah, like that?"

"Like what Ratze?"

"Undefined."

"Precisely."

"Privileges. That include immunity?"

"To a degree. Ratze your progress is noted with interest. You have shown aptitude in the field out there, your resonance is remarkably steady given you're a V, you've got more potential than you realise. Your scan results are near perfect. You are also almost immutable to interdiction on the psychic level. But that is not what you will be doing if you accept."

"I dare not even ask if I refuse."

"No better not." He said his face changing into a hard mask.

"It's to do with that vision."

"It is."

"Let me guess. You want me to find out if they know what is coming at them."

"Ratze you have just signed up."

"I have?"

"This cannot get out. The only alternative is..." without elucidating. "Take your pick."

"I'm in general."

"See Scaag? Easy."

"Yes general." She answered dutiful.

"Ratze, you are now a colonel. Congratulations. It will never be official of course but you have our resources at your disposal. You're mission is to find out what you can. Unlimited access all areas. Welcome on board colonel Ratze. A drink perhaps?" his eyes twinkled.

Scaag must have pressed a button for a flat topped servo-bot trundled in with three glasses of a clear liquid filled to the brim. The tiny glasses reflecting the wall lights like miniature distant stars. They helped themselves.

"To colonel Ratze." The general beamed.

"To colonel Ratze." Scaag looked proudly at her.

"Thank you." Ratze replied and they downed the smooth alcohol. It instantly warmed her insides, making her feel mellow, even though the drug was still having some effect on her. She felt jubilant. Get a grip she reminded herself.

"Am I SpaceKorps Intelligence?" Ratze asked as she replaced her empty glass on to the burnished silver servo-bot's top.

"Not bad. But that will remain classified. Your ID has already been upgraded." and from his coat pocket he retrieved a small insertion gun that would micro-chip her, her status upgraded. "You will have no cut-outs, no minders, no controllers. Otherwise the enemy would be all over you. You will go in as a civilian. That way you will arouse minimum attention."

"I'm still Ratze, right?" Wondering who this general represented. They felt Reganian yet spoke in general terms regarding both her status and her new mission. Primaian black op on Regum or Reganian black op targeting Prima. Or more pertinent finding leads for the coming calamity. If it was real and not an active hostile DV insertion. Prima stirring the pot.

"Oh yes. Your persona remains the same. Now bare me your neck please."

The insertion pricked a little. She was tagged. She wondered what her Brain made of that but it was mute, accepting her upgrading. It was like two worlds on this planet.

"Now for some explanations Ratze. We are a stand-alone operation. You are familiar with that?"

As vague as he was she nodded.

"Correct. We are independent advisors. We also liaise with SpaceKorps. But we do not take orders from them. Your orders colonel come from me or colonel-major Scaag. Understood?"

"Can I be hacked?"

The general smiled. "This implant is the best. If something better is created you will be upgraded."

"How do I know my orders, or whatever comes through is secure?"

"Good point. Encryption, fractal motion algorithms."

"Sounds neat."

"It is colonel. Rest assured the enemy will try and hack you. They may even try and turn you, recruit you."

"What do I do then general."

"Play along. As long as you remain with us being a double agent, should that scenario arise, is not altogether counter-productive. They will feed lies but to make lies palatable and appealing a kernel of truth has to be there as well. It works both ways of course. The requisite data your chip possesses will release what is necessary when applicable. It is resonant attuned. Even if it were to be removed it could only be pried open with your resonance. And since each resonance is unique...which by the way cannot be downloaded from you. The chip is your private fortress. Any questions?"

"So I am to find out regarding this future calamity."

"Correct."

"That it?"

"Primarily yes. So apart from that, anything else you come across that is of interest to us you check it out as well. Conversations, attitudes, orientations amongst the elite. Scientific and technological developments, even discoveries, their knowledge of space for instance."

"A broad brief."

"Essential. Too narrow a focus would give the game away." He thought for a moment. "Which brings me to my last point. The alien planet."

"Oh?" her Brain mute.

"As you know the DVs are in contact. It will only be a matter of time that others will, unless they have already not done so, take an interest. We must be prepared for all eventualities."

"Forgive me general but I thought the DVs are handling that."

"They are colonel but verification on the ground adds to the substance."

"Understood."

"Can I return when my mission is accomplished."

"But of course." The general lied. Maybe when they were in control, but until then Ratze's trip was strictly one way.

A silence between them.

"To your success colonel Ratze."

"Thank you general."

"Good luck Ratze." Scaag smiled.

"When do I leave?" Ratze tried to call up their `reality' but her Brain remained mute.

"After lunch."

Mars

Riding the configured probability wave, generated by QCs at a secure research laboratory on Regum, the space cruiser *Explorer I* materialised in geostationary orbit over the pink planet. Dark pools of oceans rimmed by green vegetation, huge brown snow capped mountains fed rivers into smaller lakes, wispy white clouds moving below, sunlight glittering on water. Huge glaring white ice caps at the poles.

"The insertion worked." Perdus, captain and team leader announced in his dry academic manner. A mop of white hair, his usual serious expression tinged with the slightest hint of satisfaction. "Everybody fine?"

Nuhan the scientific officer was checking the screens for possible malfunctions regarding the insertion. The system was steady as an embedded state. He noted they were real, the ship was real and over the planet. One moment they had been in place in Reganian space, then the laboratory's QCs powered up inserted the coordinates ahead of their arrival. The Probability Waves containing the complete data of themselves and the ship, the transfer, en-phased and successful. As long as the PWs remained in place so would they. What Prima's DVs accomplished in the psychic sphere of forward remote viewing they managed to do in real space.

Jez a diminutive figure who was their parapsychological expert was calm as she had known it would work. She was there to read the inhabitant's state of mind below and whatever influence Prima's DVs exerted on them. She said she was fine.

Los, the technician whose duty was to maintain the overall ships integrity was busy looking at internal diagnostics. All systems steady, satisfied as she nodded at the read outs. Her wiry frame brimming with latent energy.

Mirn like Perdus was an EAI. She ran back-up, linked to the onboard QCs, the mind of the ship as head EAI in the Probability Field Wave environment. Making sure the waves stayed put. On the alert should the quanta fluctuate due to potential DV or possible real time interference from Prima. Now that the deed was done Prima would in due time discover their achievement to emplace a ship and its crew anywhere in the

universe. Time was precious. A simple matter of coordinates, the data of their scanned bodies and mind plus that of the ship and by merely inserting that data onto the configured PFWs, they created their own reality in real space time.

Perdus satisfied all was well, made sure just the same that everything was a-ok. "No aberrations?"

"Well the weak sentient resonances match with those below." Jez replied. "But yes there are aberrations. Of lesser content, though not in intensity."

"Please explain." Perdus said watching the status of the ship's systems, its integrity and the stability of the PW field-state.

"The resonant components match, but there is a weaker internal density of data. What had indicated technical capabilities which the equations confirmed are completely absent."

"Interference perhaps from our end?" Perdus asked. It was not serious yet was important. They had expected a stage two civilisation, technologically capable yet Jez informed them this was not so. "Could the carrier wave have picked up our own data? After all the Web and our own expanding EM field might have become entangled."

"Possibly Perdus. Either way they appear a stage one world."

"Understood. Everybody got that?"

The others, assembled in the lounge of the ship nodded..

"We adjust accordingly. So no techno-dazzling on our part. We don't want these sentients to see us for what we are not."

"Magicians or gods." Jez added.

"Exactly. We all know why we're here. Make contact and find out just how potent the DVs influence is, who is targeted, the effects of course and to disabuse them of any incorrect assumptions. We're here to clarify the situation they find themselves in. And not forgetting of course to see if they are amendable to our friendship. Give them whatever help they require. We are not here to dictate what is good for them, that is their decision and not ours. Nor are we here to change their history but rather advance their natural evolution. If they are destined," Perdus looking at Jez, "to become techno-savvy then so be it. If they are meant to become a race such as the Primaian's then so be it as well. We are not here to change them, merely to guide them. I know we all know this. Just be aware of this at all times."

They understood.

"Have they sensed our arrival yet?"

"No Perdus." Jez answered.

"Not yet. The ship is cloaked." Perdus looked at Los. She nodded.

"Good, this is more for our protection against DV activity. Jez of course will inform us the moment they make any contact, or merely a lucky broad scale sweep. After all they are focussed on certain intervals below. They are our primary concern."

"I'm surprised the DVs are so open about this." Jez remarked.

"They are feeling supremely confident. They know our Web extends this far. Our EAI capabilities have been kept under cover since we started using them. All the Primaian's know is that we suspect there is an alien civilisation somewhere and that is that. Even though we are here now we must keep as low a profile as possible. So try not to use the E component of your AIs if it can be avoided. That includes me of course." He allowed himself a reticent smile.

"Perdus. From what I'm sensing, the alien field does not match the resonant states below. The field is there but this planet is not the source."

"It could be a remnant civilisation elsewhere." Nuhan suggested. "All electronic data fills space from wherever the source is. It's direction indicates this quadrant of space but it really could be anywhere. It could well be in another galaxy. They might still exist so I guess I got something to do in finding its source. But if they have moved on to stage three and maybe like us using PWs to forge their own future, unless we lock in, then this stage two phenomena might be really an ancient remnant that took light years to reach us. A lot can happen once a civilisation makes the transition to stage three."

"I understand Nuhan." Perdus replied. "So to recap these beings below are for the moment our primary concern. What has the ship made of this field Mirn?"

"The field is there that is all I can say."

"But no effect. Los?"

"None what-so-ever."

"Good."

"Any DV activity?" Jez shook his head.

"So far so good. Meaning no change."

"So our integrity is in place?"

"It is." Los replied, Mirn confirmed it.

"Then let us proceed. Ship systems to go active. Just in case we become a primary target." Perdus cautious.

With geostationary orbit achieved the ship's gravity drives were on stand-by, shielded to not leak any gravity waves which might alert Prima's orbital. The outer sensor arrayed radars, passive detectors both audio and visual came on line, internal

computers analysing the incoming data and broad spectrum EMFs. Detectors to monitor their position and study what was in this universe. Looking both into the centre of this galaxy and out, reading the complete environment. They watched fascinated the rich band of stars as the systems looked into the centre. At least the structure was familiar, almost like its neighbouring galaxy.

A fried egg shape galaxy with this solar system near its edge.

"Everything steady." Los said.

"PW field holding." Mirn confirmed. The virtual real.

"Time to seed our target area with our passive probes. Nuhan?"

"Activating launch sequence." starting the 'go' code. "Launching T minus ten and counting." As he entered the release codes. The ship's recessed mini bays opened up and by explosive charges sent three probes off towards the planet below. "It will be night by the time they land. If detected, seen I should say they may look like meteors for a moment."

Perdus nodded. He was happy with the group. The mix of personalities a right blend. Enough individuality so necessary in space when contained at close quarters to stop the group from forming into two distinct camps of thought causing unnecessary politicking later. Nuhan their science officer relaxed, open, easy going. Jez very self contained, almost his opposite yet not so far apart as to break their common bond between the purely psychical and the determined empiricist. Los, the technician uninvolved with personalities, though a little cynical which should keep things interesting whilst Mirn was often sceptical, taking nothing for granted. Perdus hoped that he would not have to get into conflict management.

They watched the tiny probes drop down. Below the pink planet. Swirling clouds, open spaces, blue waters, green vegetation. Thick cloud cover to the west, flashing strobe lightning of a huge thunderstorm. A new world.

"No activity below." Jez informed. "Given the position of the sun let us hope the chameleon envelope absorbs any reflecting light."

"It will. No reflection anticipated." Perdus said calmly. "We won't be seen. Anyway there are enough stars in the background even if a stray photon beam does reflect."

"Let's just hope the PW field remains undetected." Nuhan thought out aloud.

"Yes, the big one. Luckily its projected away from Prima. And given its distant position unless something unusual were to occur the projections indicate it could be months at worst, years at best until the field is discovered. By then we should be done.

This is an initial contact mission, nothing permanent. Anyway now that we know it's working on the macro scale, inserting individuals will be the future scenario. The only reason we're in a space ship is for our own safety. They might not like intruders below. We know nothing of their belief system. We know the so-called alien field has certain hostile tendencies encased within it which may have influenced those below." Perdus reiterated.

"So you're running with Prima's view." Nuhan observed.

"Until we know for certain of their predisposition, yes."

Nuhan was satisfied.

"As long as we don't get entangled." Mirn suggested.

"I'll be there." Jez easing their fears. "I'd know if there was a change in anyone's psyche."

"Including your own I hope." Los added. "I mean you being a sensitive and all that, you might go under first and not know it."

"Los," Perdus replied, "our EAls aren't exactly dormant. You should know."

"Yes but I also know about entanglement. The ultimate superimposition, and once the wave collapses who would know any better?"

"The ship's system is the control." Mirn reminded Los.

"What about entrapment from below? What if they're even more potent than the Primaian's. What if they already know we're here, waiting for us to come down and be well, entangled? We'd be in their control." Los continued with her worries.

"If they were I'd have known." Jez said with her usual certainty.

"You might be under their influence right now."

"Los, don't worry. The ship would have alerted us that we were being targeted. Whatever comes in, at whatever phase, frequency, superimposition has to get past the ship to get to us."

"I know I know. I just don't trust anyone with potent psychic abilities. The temptation to impose one's will, one's certainty about whatever, the urge to reform, reconfigure reality to one's individual wants is there in any sentient being. I mean that's how we achieved what we have."

"Los, your concern is of course your primary focus. Remember, future case scenarios, probabilities, it's all been run through, we're gonna be fine." Perdus assured her, assured them. "And Jez is one of the best, an alpha. Aligned with EAI capabilities. If she were unduly influenced she would be as one with the alien field and as far as I can

tell by the very fact that the alien field is still outside and not within her head means it isn't in ours either Los."

She nodded reluctantly. Perdus was right.

"Now back to our briefing. We may as well be seated now that the excitement has abated."

They had remained standing because the transfer having been a success was exciting, amazing, stupendous. Unbelievable. The quantum laws of physics were now not just a phenomena, they had become a tool in itself. Using its inherent a-logical states to be anywhere in the universe. All that was needed was the requisite energy and a lot of data.

"Now we use fibre optic links, as opposed to wireless for security purposes to connect with the ship's EAI capabilities. That way we know if we're entangled."

"Why didn't..." Los started, then shut up. Mission control really did think of their mental welfare. Perdus merely reminding them.

"And symbiotic links. Some of the ship's processors are bio based. Nothing beats a sentient brain, still it's the ultimate computer. It's its own coherent processor. Not only that but if the ship, or the environment does show signs of intrusion the ships bio-capabilities can reconfigure. In other words it can think itself out of its own design parameters, think itself out of the box."

Los was impressed. They had not told her that at their last briefing.

"It's ceramically constructed in part, so it can handle high energy states both within and without, uses photonic pathways, more like our brain's moving constantly between reconfigurations so that even if targeted it will have changed it's internal architecture so that the lock-on effect is negated."

"Neat." Los was pleased.

"Not only that but it's data domains are e-bubbles, micro-domains swimming in a sea of probable quantum fields, which also phase-change. So Los a secondary protective layer is there as well. All powered by nano sub-atomics, dimensionally squeezed generators. And the crowning achievement, our E end can therefore become an encapsulation of these chaos equation driven protective fields, which due to the constant changing outer layered shield, its quantum fluctuating characteristics makes intrusion virtually impossible."

"I stand, sit I mean," Los allowed herself a smile, "corrected."

"It was fine what you brought up. It had to remain under wraps until we were safely deposited. This defensive set is the first working model. If it works as intended then

the go-ahead will begin so that all our systems will have this security level and its counter interdiction response capability."

Los monitored the descent vectors of the probes.

"Modes holding, dormant until landed. Then we'll really know why the differential between the fields is there. Confirmation is expected in around six hours." Nuhan explained.

"So when do we go into E status?" Los asked.

"We already are." Perdus replied.

"Trying my best team leader. I am still getting over the success of the transfer. To have the universe as our back-yard, how many civilisations can boast that?"

"We seem to have made history. This is true."

"Free from the DVs."

"Err, I wouldn't count on that Nuham." Los said. "Distance means nothing. Just a dimensional construct. You should know how multi-dimensional the universe really is."

"On the Plank scale, yes. So my EAI is running? I expected some sort of inner sensation."

"Ah, a common misconception Nuhan." Perdus said easily. "In fact the reverse is true. Completely seamless."

"I expected a surge of some sort, like some drug." Mirn suggested.

"Or data bursts." Los wondered.

Nuhan zoomed in visually on the three probes slowly falling planetward. A tiny degree off the vector and they could be deflected by the atmosphere's envelope bouncing off or being forced into a steeper descent vector. All was fine. The ships computers kept them within their trajectories. Now and then the data flickered yellow which the probes self adjusted returning to green moments later. On the far right the thunderstorms continued with its light show, flashing brilliant bursts of crimson, lilac flickering, momentary purple afterglows within the broiling clouds. It was majestic.

"Phase two approaching." Nuhan said as his E algorithms united at equivalent logic gates within his AI routines. Multiple architectural fail-safes sub neural pathways engaged so that his now multi-functional brain's command sequenced patterns ran control without interfering with his overall mind set. All systems steady and holding he thought. This was great. He was happy.

"And counting, three, two, one, dispersion." Nuhan announced. The three probes spread out. The numbers expanded out on the screen accordingly. The three probes were heating up but not enough to make them glow too brightly as the energy was

absorbed by their cells storing it. Yet they shone yellow and a lucky observer below would see three meteors as they continued in their graceful arc. They were into cloud cover now, visuals lost. Radar continued to monitor the final run-down.

"I'm getting something." Jez said. "It's sentient, extremely powerful, reaching out, non-specific. Must have been the probes. Someone is watching and intently at that."

The ships interior went black. No screens, no status lights, absolute darkness. Yet with their E capabilities they still were aware of each other's presence. The air ducts were hissing. So not an EM attack.

"Why aren't I panicking." Los said being on-line with Perdus, Nuhan and Mirn.

"It seems like a ramped up version of the alien field. Similar configuration, but intense, broad sweep with dormant focus standing by. More line of sight oriented, guessing. It's not value neutral either, cautious though not intently hostile. Searching." Jez said calmly. "It can't do anything."

"It's blacked us out Jez." Mirn answered.

"Headspace only. Some sort of inversion in our heads."

"I thought the ship is protecting us." Los replied though the ship had nothing to give her.

"The presence is rather calm."

"That's nice of it." Los cynical. "We arrive and before you know it, we're on notice. What's it saying?"

"Nothing Los," Jez replied calmly, "just a search."

"Potent though." Los added.

"Probably after our resonance. Can it lock in?" Perdus asked calmly.

"Not if your EAI is reconfiguring itself, going stealth."

"What about you?" Perdus asked Jez.

"I'm not responding. That would be a big mistake. It'd get a lock-on."

"Is it sentient, artificial or DV active?"

"Since we cannot see anything and the ship's still here meaning the PWs aren't being affected, indicates this darkness is psychic. In other words a blanket's been thrown over our perception."

"Effective." Mirn said. She tried to scan the space around the ship and found the same darkness outside going right back like an expanding cone down to the planet.

"Well it's definitely from down there folks."

"That's good." Perdus said at last.

"It is?" Los nearly laughed.

"If it is sentient then we have just had a taste of their capabilities. My E end is saying the ship's still functioning. So no targeting please. We remain mute. It can't get a fix. By the fact that the ship let this through Los means there is no flash-back, no signature."

"Good ship."

"Good design parameters." Nuhan added.

"That's nice to know." Mirn smirked. "Our interested friend might have discovered the meteors were not meteors."

"A long shot Mirn." Jez answered her. "You have to remember that the ancients thought meteors were messages from the heavens. A falling star was a sacred event. The god's sending information to their believers. So it's only natural that some powerful magus would scan the heavens for an answer."

"And we're the answer." Mirn said off handed. "So let's be gods then, don't want to disappoint them."

"Mirn." Perdus said sternly.

"I know, just thinking of the possibility."

"Perdus should I patch myself into the ship?" Los asked.

"Do that, but detached, go in as a third party meaning your EAI goes in, not you."

Los switched to HID capability. A cyber flash illuminated four dark shapes as Los found one of many ports to hook in to. Pulling an optical fibre from her sleeve she inserted it into the ship. Then synchronised. The ship revealed a broad resonance not unlike Prima's DVs, psychic's or Naturals. The ship opted for the latter. Los informed them.

"That's heavy stuff." Mirn replied.

"Well at least we know what they are capable of. No one take a hit from the DVs?"

"Jez." Perdus admonished.

Vision returned.

"It's gone. Los got the ship to do it."

"Be interesting what it found out." Nuham thought for them. "Los?"

She disconnected. "Ship was neutral, no return search pattern. Only Jez might know and she remained mute. At least we can handle it. No real threat implications."

"Not yet." Mirn reminded them.

"No hostile intent. Just a broad resonance spectrum." Los informed them.

"Good ship." Mirn repeated. She thought of it as an entity in itself.

"No infection, no remnant anything." Los concluded.

"So it was sentient."

"Assume so." Los reeled in the milky white fibres.

"Nuhan?"

Los sat down with the others then chuckled.

"What?" Mirn asked.

"Oh, us. I mean here we are in this probability field, over a strange planet, in a weird field trip with a powerful psychic entity below sitting around as if all this is so normal." Los answered stretching her arms behind her head.

"The way it should be Mirn." Perdus reassured her.

"Los get an e-bubble going. See what the ship comes up with."

She rose again, shooting a wicked smile at Mirn and re-ran the sequence. In an instant the answer was there, a Natural in anyone's parlance.

"I assume we still go down Perdus." Nuhan queried. "I mean," he continued, "if they can blank out our minds, catch us unawares, how safe are we from committing self harm for instance?"

"Well Nuhan, our E component could easily block any attempt to interfere with our minds. Jez has her own protection. We had to let this run to see what it wanted. Us of course, by default though. Maybe it sensed us, maybe it did not. If it did, it would think us as powerful magicians. Of course it could have been a re-route. From Prima through them to us."

"Remote viewing via a second party." Jez said uncomfortably.

"That too. It cannot be discounted. We may have been discovered. That remains to be seen if it occurs again. If not then I think we are in the clear for the moment. But that was always calculated into the probabilities."

"What if they have our capabilities? You know some fusion of Primaian psychic abilities and our E capabilities? They might not even need technology then. They could be an alpha level world. Jez?" Mirn asked.

"Everything is possible until we get down there and know for sure. Remember Mirn I'm still in value neutral mode."

She nodded at that.

"Remember too everybody that our active E processors can come up with answers before we have thought of them. We'll be fine." Perdus said reassuringly.

"I hope the ship can think as well." Jez remarked.

"Have no fear Jez." Los answered.

"Do you think this presence could have picked up anything?"

"Doubt it. No one reacted, right?"

They all affirmed.

"Remember any probing or scanning and we get the telltale itch." Nuhan reminded them.

"Well that is that out of the way. Now Jez, you can go active. You others, engage your EAls, we are going down once the probes start transmission."

The ship's AI system was scanning the surface. The information came through thick and fast. Atmosphere breathable if a little thin, vegetation similar to their own, photosynthesis, iron rich ground but as yet no sign of life. Oceans were salt water, ice caps as expected, temperature cold, near zero. A fairly dry planet, low humidity, earth tremors meaning shifting tectonic plates, volcanic activity, slower rotation than Regum and a longer solar year given its distance from its sun.

Hours later the three dispersed pods landed. Tiny chemical rockets assured a soft landing. Upcoming data matched with that of the ship.

"There is one thing we must and the ship is looking out for. Centuries ago there was the Great Calamity. Source unknown." As Perdus waited for that to sink in. Then continued. "Some sort of carrier wave had moved through space. We think it was some sort of black-hole radiation or strange gravity assisted phase-wave. All we do know is that as black matter is being sucked into our galaxy, which is huge that when saturation is reached there is a discharge which caused the Calamity. It was seen by Prima as divine retribution. The rest is history. You all know the revision involved regarding this astronomical event. So what our scientists are on the alert for is a repeat of that discharge. It could come now it could come in a thousand years. Astronomically it's soon. Our ship is on the alert. If it does reoccur then all systems including our EAI's will automatically shut down until the wave front has passed. Just thought I'd let you know if everything goes off line. You Jez of course won't be aware of this. So if we all go into down-time you will know why."

An image of the front of a small pyramid appeared on one of the screens built into a small mountain range. Two sided. Dust billowing up where one of the probes had landed.

"Now that is something. Confirmation of civilisation. Weird design." Los said.

"Could be symbolic." Jez suggested, "Crypto-religious."

A fuzzy image appeared of it's interior. A vacant space and a raised platform. An entrance chiselled out of it's rocky facade. No sentient activity.

"Abandoned?" Nuhan asked himself.

"Architecture implies mathematics, the universe's decryption content. So is it outer or inner oriented?" Perdus asked rhetorically.

"Or both." Nuhan suggested.

Perdus concurred. "Fascinating though."

"With a priesthood perhaps." Jez added.

"Looks empty." Mirn was thinking.

At the laboratory on Regum the team was delighted with their success in not just inserting the ship and its crew but maintaining it within their designated PWF as well. Having confirmed that sentient life did exist on that distant planet with the probes feeding data directly back in the PW field-state the need to study this civilisation became paramount. The broad spectrum psychic scan had nearly panicked their mission head to create a decoherence to recall both ship and crew but the ship's systems remained steady. Water through a sieve. For now they were to hold off contact. That way the probes could gather enough data, upload it to the ship. Then let the wave continue its information target specific phase with the collected data available to them. The darkness that had enveloped them had also alerted mission control of new and possibly disturbing variables. That would need to be checked out. Was it a DV attack or curiosity below seeing the probes float like some star down from the sky. MC discovered it was not hostile. Definitely not Primaian snooping. On board everything normal. For the moment they were being contained in near zero time. As the probability wave continued to hold, so did they. Data banks full of useful information regarding Mars. The inserted missions thousands of years in the past having homed in on the ancient resonance frequencies.

Mars – circa 20000 BP

Nada and Amos were snug in each others arms. The sweet warm glow of their bodies satiated from their lovemaking, basking in mutual bliss. He pulled the soft sheep skins over them as they began to cool from their tumultuous lusting indulgence. A slight breeze entered the sturdy canvas tent's flaps. Outside the horses and camels were at ease having been fed and watered prior their urge to satisfy their love for each other. A whiff of rich dung wafted in the breeze. Outside the servants laughing preparing the evening meal. Potatoes and goats meat swimming in a rich succulent sauce followed by dried fruits and nuts washed down with cool white wine under a canopy of stars. The heat of the sun was slowly dissipating as it started to set, long purple shadows from the nearby mountains falling onto the tents.

Amos was lazily watching the small flicker of flames in the small brazier at the foot of their bed. The brass work held the glowing embers of hardwood, scented with herbs to sweeten the air and keep at bay the usual hordes of flies that always materialised out of nowhere, the air god Oebell's scouts it was said by some. To Amos flies were flies, it was the breeze which listened and carried their thoughts to the god.

Nada was playing with Amos's long black hair, twining and untwining it as if weaving her own dream around him as he looked up at the hole at the apex of the tent. Watching curlicues of smoke waft up and out. When the smoke was absent she saw the first sparkling stars. Nada worshipped Bahlir queen of the stars. Her starry eyes glowing eternal. Protectress of all life. Above her Urus empress of the empyrium, all knowing. She had paid obescience prior their love tryst offering prayers to Astralon, ensconced in the holy city and Jaffir their king to vouchsafe him long life and keep the city eternal.

Amos turned his gaze upon his love, her deep brown eyes revealing her beautiful soul, her steadfast companionship radiating inner contentment.

"You know we are lucky that our parents have accepted our prenuptial union given my father's, ahm, reticence." She murmured half in admiration of his gracious attitude towards Amos.

"You are precious, an only child. He probably indulges you and," he paused smiling, "I have my uses." She laughed and pushed his face gently away. "And my family whilst not as exalted seem acceptable to him."

"Just." She mocked.

"Oh yes. My father." Amos said slowly. "The older I get, the more I think I know him, the more I find him a mystery shrouded in some secret design of his or his gods making."

"The bond is strong." Nada said with certainty. "Now me I rarely see my father. Like all merchants, for ever on the move. Even staying in that circle, charmed some say by the will of the gods, sometimes surprising the earth goddess Rena to be granted favours. Reaping benefits with chests full of precious stones, and other riches." She frowned. "Sometimes I think it is all so transient. That it could all be whisked away by some capricious god who thinks both our families are just too lucky."

"Luck and politics." Amos added darkly.

"It's the way to overcome tribulations. Connections at court."

Amos staring up at the tent's slightly moving canopy. A slight breeze stirring.

"Whilst my family has to use servants to get introductions, written supplications and submissions from priests even. And my father a humble distiller of spirits and brewer of beer."

"A worthy task. To gladden the heart and free the spirit from its cares. He makes the best and thus is in Jaffir's favour." Nada reminded him.

"Sometimes."

"He has chosen a worthy profession. When times are good people drink to celebrate and offer libations to the gods. When times are bad people drink to forget what fate has decreed and accept their change of fortune soothed by the spiritual essence of his brews. And what, pray will you do?"

The sweat was drying on his body. He rose, Nada admiring his physique, his taut muscles, his cute bum as he walked over to the water urn and using the ladle washed himself, then with a handy cloth wiped himself dry.

"I honestly don't know. It's not an automatic guarantee that I follow my father or my mother. Brewing is precarious, the imps play tricks and can make beer sour. As for being a presenter at court, I don't know if I have the patience to listen to people's wants, their supplications be it to the priests or the king."

"You have graduated. You have the makings of an interpreter of dreams, gifted by lambar seeing the future in the flames. Your mind searches and finds obtuse answers

in the simplest of questions. Interpreters of the world, the sky, the messages hidden in nature are your gift. There can be profit in words as the priests well know."

"Yes but which priests? Those at court barely acknowledge my presence. The black priests seem to think I am one of them." He paused. Then: "They are the dregs. Sure they claim direct lineage and descent from our older elemental gods, vagabonds among the great empyrium..." And stopped as he held out his hand. But he was only balancing to put on his trousers and she laughed thinking it had been a sign. "And they want favours as well, which I cannot give them."

"Yes being at court has its price. The new faction of priests have Jaffir's ear, mind and probably his soul. Belonging to the Blacks even if the kings' favour is still precarious."

'Precarious' Amos thought. The new priests, who left the desert retreats, walked away from the monasteries and straight into court. Instantly accepted as a sign by the gods of a new age of enlightenment. The earth gods, the elementals were deemed dark, subterranean coming from a past that no longer synchronised with the new way of thinking. The very basis of their belief system was undergoing a change. To them for the better. The kingdom was flourishing, there was peace, the nomads at rest, trade flourishing with those distant hamlets and villages. Even the ancient holy centres seemed to acquiesce in the comfort of the burgeoning prosperity.

Amos though was waiting for a sign to show the way, which way he would orient himself. Until then he held his peace. Ideally he wanted both, the mysteries of nature and the empyrium of the stars. Maybe it was his mission to combine both. Maybe. It was in the hands of the gods to bestow their favour and enlighten him. Until then he remained in limbo.

"Well at least your father gives those who annoy him the worst of his brews claiming the mercurial gods have changed the wine or the ale. They grudgingly accept this as deemed by the will of the gods."

"And always there is Castari. Pretending to be some vice-regent." Amos complained.

"He is the wealthiest of merchants. His sons are working the bazaar."

"I know. Not easy for your family."

"Not easy for any family. But we're doing alright."

"Then there is Verhart at odds with this Efhan who claims the gods are really silent. Does not the thunder and wind speak their essence? Then there is this Bohlum, who claims everything is in the mind and that is that. Strange signs everywhere Nada."

"The strangeness is within them, not out there. Everything is as it should be Amos." She snuggled comfortably under the covers. "Your concern I can understand. You are of age and have not pledged yourself to any one god or gods. You are waiting for the sign that determines your fate and our destiny. Myself I will commit myself to Urus Empress over all, the sky, the stars, ruler of the universe. Might as well go to the top." She said delighted. "Then these priests will be her subjects, black or white. And Vehrat is merely deluded to think he is master of all. He will fall, the gods will not let him rise above his station."

"Except he has his spies. He is a dealer, accruing wealth as we speak."

"Yes his star seems on the ascendant. But stars also fall Amon."

"Oh yes."

Distant thunder rolled across the sky as the sun disappeared behind the volumous clouds. Adur the water god making his presence felt to remind them that the Elementals give their essence to nourish life, and withhold it if Nurdass goddess of the Sun wished it so to parch the land. The lightning flashed, lambar god of fire joining in the interplay of nature's forces. The gods were alive no matter what Efhan and Bohlus said in that desert school of theirs. Outside the horses were restless, the odd camel braying, in communion with the gods or those entities that were not-gods but still potent to cause mischief, even death. She felt their presence, their immanence. Out there hovering between the realm of the gods and that of earth. Exploring every crack to gain entry and cause havoc, master to none, controlled by none, answering to none.

The air was moist now, some of the servants offering prayers for the elemental gods to fructify the earth goddess.

"You know I went to see the king to receive his blessings as a teacher." Amos finally revealed.

"You? That is wonderful, if it is what your heart desires. I hope you receive the bounty you deserve. I can see why the black priests take an interest in you."

"Yes. But until I really know where my destiny lies, I refuse their advances."

"Ah a foot in several camps. Very wise. Learn you father's business whilst collecting paying students and be a prime philosopher. Give those muddled headed teachers out there a run for their money. Well the student's money." She content with his decision, or lack of for now.

Nada rose gracefully, her lean naked body reflecting the flames on her ochre skin, radiating it's light, a sign of lambar endowing her with his light. Then the dark thought of Verhart claiming no allegiance to any god, unpunished so far even though

an apostate. Yet he held the riff raff, the beggars and thieves at bay. As such Jaffir tolerated him. Amos had learnt much from his last visit at court. The servants for ever gossiping and receiving rewards for their information which everybody sought. It saved the royal treasury on spies. Verhat knew the pulse on the street, which meant he had the king's ear as informant. Even Nohrat, the military commander listened to him.

The distant thunder rumbled like his thoughts. The court was becoming more and more enmeshed in intrigue. Whether by design or the will of the gods Amos could not tell. A gust of wind shook the tent, just like his thoughts. Oebell was listening, carrying the thoughts of mortals to the gods. He hoped they sent his troubled mind to them so that they could show him the way. It was like a labyrinth in the holy city, so convoluted as to be confusing.

Nada dressed in warm pants and leather jacket, warm boots and a skull cap for the coming night. "Let us watch the storm. I don't think we will be moving any time soon."

"I thought we were going to meet one of the caravans."

"They will meet us on their way through."

"You're well informed." Amos said admiringly.

"Coming out? I got to relieve myself."

They came out of their tent. There were several others though not as grandiose for her servants. Her parents' caravan was on its way. Nada had been to the nomads on the desert fringe bargaining for camels and was waiting here at the oasis for her father. Nada now of age and a trader in her own right.

The air was surprisingly balmy. The wind gusted around them, to the west the hidden rays of the setting sun lit the thunderheads flashing with bright lightning, followed by a sonorous thunder. The air smelt moist, fresh. Nada went over to the dug out latrine, pulled down her pants and squatted, giving him a cheerful smile. Amos turned and surveyed the makeshift stockade which held the horses, camels and goats.

"Look at that." Nada exclaimed, "Behind you."

Three white streaks, three falling stars.

"A message from Bahlir. The goddess's messengers. Three, how divine." She said pleased.

"I sometimes wonder at the fire in the sky." One of the meteors came down close disappearing behind the low rise towards the dark hills.

"A gift for the earth goddess Rena. We," she continued, "should be thankful the gods communicate with us."

Amos was watching the other two meteors spread further away from them.

"They are precious ores, gifts. Don't belittle the wonders of the heavens Amos."

"The gods know best. Maybe they are displeased. Yet no auguries."

"Reminding us of their eternal presence Amos."

The sun was setting behind the bank of clouds, a rumble, a soft earth tremor, the stars coming out.

"It is a propitious sign Amos." As she looked to the west. "Shall we look?"

The others in the camp were excited, their voices carried by the wind, their words swept away in the presence of divine powers.

"You seem enraptured Nada." Walking over the hard ground. Tufts of grass and thorny bushes was all that grew in the semi desert.

"It is a confirmation."

"A dream?" he asked curious.

She was searching for the right words. The breeze dropped, the silence reassuring, creating it's space around them. The gods were at peace. Nada felt both something immanent, disturbing, as if warning signs were present yet still hidden from her.

"I felt alone in a barren landscape, nothing like this." Walking slowly into a dry gully. "A world devoid of everything, abandoned by the gods. No life, no trees, no shrubs just the desert and the mountains. No life Amos, you know how that feels?"

"Maybe...no, I don't know. Perhaps," he brightened, "you were on another world."

"Another world?" that thought had not occurred to her.

"You might have seen this place before the beginning. When there was nothing. To show you how it was before the coming of the gods, before we were created." Thinking it made sense. He dared not consider this could be the distant future. He gave her a reassuring smile. "Anyway no one else had this vision. It was just a dream Nada."

"Yes but dreams..."

"Not all Nada."

"No not all Amos." She tried to reassure herself.

"A time before the gods. Interesting. Never thought of it."

"It just felt both familiar and alien. For everything was gone." She shuddered.

"Yet you were there Nada. Maybe the gods have shown you a secret place that is yours."

"You think so? Hm." What was the point? What could she do with an empty world? Still she had been so serene. No sense of danger. "The vast emptiness seemed natural."

"A priest or a seer might know. Another world. Look at the sky, countless stars. Maybe you were up there. This world has a sun, so there could be others. It could be," he said vaguely, "this is where your soul will sojourn when the passing of life comes. Your future realm. To create as you please. A goddess."

"Ah Amos my love, you could be right you know." Though a little far fetched. But it was nice he thought of her. "Thank you, I feel better now."

They crossed the gully, a trickle of a stream two hands wide and clambered up the other side of the bank. The clouds flickered crimson in the evening sky. The gods returning to their own realm. All was as it should be. Otherwise the meteors would not have come. And three at that.

Amos wondered if the message was for him, a sign. The fall of three lives perhaps. Their lofty aims brought down to earth. The magus Verhat who was in league with the black priests, the white priests still had the ear of Jaffir. Then there was Nohrat, the king's military commander. Were these three doomed? Or the merchant families with everybody else spying on each other. Castari was the king's financial advisor. Then there were the gods in groups of three's. Nohrat suspicious of all the priests. Castari, down to earth, good natured. He kept an eye on the doings of the merchants. Seeing who was in or out with whoever. Another trinity counting Castari. It might be that they were predestined to be united. He let it go. Let the gods reveal what they will when the time came.

They reached the top of the rise, the valley spreading out below. The large black waters of the lake, reflecting in liquid silver the lightning, the clouds blossoming lilac momentarily, the air fresh, the silence once the thunder had rolled away complete. The animals of the night would soon come out to the lake. They both had their knives but Amos wished he'd brought his hunting spear, or even his bow and arrow. Feeling drawn to where the meteor had landed hoping to find some answers and getting some peace.

They stopped at the ridge. Amos scouting for the heavenly rocks. His mind felt like the wind, agitated, disturbing his concentration. Some dark shapes were at the water's edge. The first nightly visitors.

"When we are all back amongst the stars this is what this will look like."

Amos took a second to realise Nada was still with her vision.

"Possibly." He concurred. He could not imagine life ceasing as long as the gods were there. As they were eternal so was life. Could there be a future end?

"As long as we have visions and dreams, all is well Nada no matter how strange that vision. After all the insane have their dreams whilst fully awake."

"Vessels of the gods overfilled with their power. It could be that when we are gone in some distant future the gods have no need of this place."

"It is all speculation Nada. Wait and see." He reassured her scouring the landscape for the fallen stars.

Another flash of lightning. Then he saw something silver. A strange shape.

"There." He had been looking too far, it was before the lake. For a moment it flashed brilliantly, then darkness resumed its mantle of night. The object a silhouette looked like a panelled ball, shape shifting whilst remaining the same. Nada was walking towards it, her tread light, cautious as if on a hunt.

He followed her down, lightning lit the sky and way beyond her at the foot of the mountains past the black lake the triangular entrance of the ancient temple. Night threw her cloak over the landscape. He had sensed hoary malice, an ominous presence shrouded in preternatural gloom. Then it was swallowed by the night. Amos blinked to make sure he was awake and not dreaming. The darkness at the base of the mountain exuded a brooding palpitating ethereal recumbent sinister intelligence. Awake, no, more like a dim heartbeat. Each thump pulsed through the air, through his body, vibrating within him. Its vibrations ghastly, surging around him, drawing him into its void like realm. The presence of an unknown god.

Nada felt it too but thought it came from the weird shape some distance down the hill they were standing on. She had seen visions of outlandish buildings, cowled priests paying obeisance to a monstrous sky god who as giver of their lives demanded total and complete obedience. One god and one god only. Those who clung to the past were driven insane as divine punishment. Maybe it was this god that had emptied the land of life! She shook with barely suppressed emotions at the monumental threat. The vision made sense now. Their gods were to be destroyed!

Dark waves pulsed through her. She saw cities fallen into decay, people dying, the heavens on fire. Dark cracks of night the sky fracturing, the ingress of the wrathful deity supreme. Those who did not bow to its will were doomed. No afterlife, just ashes blown away by the winds. Dispersed and their souls captured, ensnared, ambushed into its fearsome region of malignant hate. His acolytes lived in its thrall dominating the fear

stricken who wished to remain alive. Enslaved to its monstrous demands of complete obeisance and doomed like the serfs of old to toil for their hard task master.

They heard the snorting of horses, the jingle of stirrups, the spell broken, a mist wafted away by the breeze. Or absorbed by whoever was behind this horror, dispelled, the voice familiar: Verhat.

"Ah the beautiful daughter of Ramradi, Nada and Amos, son of Krahtus." He said amused. Turning they saw he was with two companions.

He dismounted throwing the reins to one of his aides. "Surprised?" his levity suffused with his cock-sure barely contained hauteur. "Lady Nada." He bowed, almost mockingly so.

"Verhat." She answered graciously her gaze holding his. Most people avoided eye contact for fear of being possessed by his powerful personality.

"Seeing what the gods have delivered unto us?" he purred.

He too must have seen the falling stars. Or was he connected to the strange temple? Amos thought. His father a court astrologer as well. Amos familiar with that families machinations in the temporal and spiritual world his father shared. To know the secrets of the stars. Verhat barely tolerated his father seeing him as a competitor for the kings ear rather than both being complementary. The overweening pride of Verhat jockeying at court to be the kings most trusted advisor.

"To seek celestial answers and to walk with the gods on a divine night such as this. So many revelations Verhat." Nada replied with deliberate mystery. Amos understood she too had sensed this obsidian outpouring, this dangerous void like elemental force.

"So the gods have spoken." He said as if commenting on something mundane.

"They bring the gifts of prophesy Verhat." Nada held her gaze as the two were now locked in some mock battle of who would disengage first.

"Oh yes, the minor powers of the cosmos." Verhat could not help but trumpet his heretical view that individuals, such as himself, were the measure of all things. That he controlled his destiny and forged his own fate using the gods for his aims. "Useful creatures." He mocked.

He told his men they could return to camp. Custom dictated any traveller be accommodated when in the distant lands and semi deserts between the isolated settlements at the edge of the kingdom. They grunted and veered round, trotting of leisurely.

"Shall we see what the gods have bequeathed us?" and walked slowly towards the strange glistening object. They followed Amos keeping alert. Wondering whether the

ancient temple had anything to do with Vehrat's presence. But he seemed focused on the odd looking heavenly stone. Nada and Amos exchanged glances as if saying: you sensed it as well.

"Oh yes," Verhat in his long flowing black cloak, "Bohlum's school of Natural Philosophy. Denying the gods. Not good. Corrupting young minds. The king has let him live. So we agreed to banish him. He is now on his way out of the holy city and banned from setting foot even in Kahleff. We'll see if his nature philosophy will see him survive with the nomads." Vehrat said dismissively, letting Nada know just how much influence he pretended to have at court.

Bohlum Amos knew was an old man, and his nature philosophy both simple and confusing. To Bohlum, if the gods did exist they were in the cosmos, their powers secondary. Nature was suffused with energy, and that was that. It was impertinent to think they would be behind every falling apple, every sneeze, the voiding of bowels. For if they were they would have no time to keep order in the cosmos. It was an intriguing idea one of course denied by the priests and priestesses.

"Soon the revelation will reveal all." Verhat continued as always, preaching a new spiritual age when some supreme divine revelation would usher in a new age of spiritual redemption by an as yet unseen manifestation of the gods who accordingly were in council to combine their strength into one supreme unitary wholeness. The chaff would be weened out, a great divine cleansing where the fallen, the weak, the misguided separated from the divinely chosen: the making, the coming of a divine race and most likely Verhat as it's undisputed leader in this cosmic revelation. Naturally Jaffir would rule over this kingdom

"The splendour ours to behold, or whom the gods deem worthy to embrace. Even the stars are in agreement. A great alignment is slowly being assembled. Yes," he said looking straight ahead, "no one can deny that the gods will be as one. Our redemption."

What worried Amos was the calmness with which Vehrat declaimed all this. He was no fanatic like some hermits in the desert or some devotional priest who shut himself off from the world to seek divine guidance. Then more often than not becoming unhinged. To Vehrat they were the blessed, overflowing with spiritual power even if the vessel was flawed. Worse was that both the black and white priests were not denying Vehrat's strange prognostication. He had a way of convincing those around him of the righteousness of his vision claiming merely to be the gods messengers, not even their apostle.

The walk down the hill seemed to take forever in Verhat's presence. Time slowing not dissimilar when under the influence of the sacred mushroom.

"Status will mean nothing Nada. The Exalted will be chosen by the combined strength of the gods. From the obscure to the most wealthy, united in a new cosmic harmony. Only those who have felt this cosmic unity can understand this."

Amos was well aware of what Verhat was going on about. But it came from within not without.

They arrived at the oddly shaped almost round thing. Small flat reflecting surfaces, tiny holes below, small protrusions on top. A discernable hum emanating from within. It was alive. Verhat drew out his dagger and prodded it. The clunk sounded metallic but softer. Tiny honeycomb patterns were engraved on it. Not everywhere but nearly over the small flat surface that formed it into the odd shaped ball.

"Maybe the king should see this." Verhat thought for he wanted to study this at his sumptuous accommodation at the palace.

"If the gods had wished this they would have placed it there." Nada replied.

"Yes of course." Verhat hastened to agree. He was annoyed. This odd looking ball was so close to the temple! Were the gods mocking him? Denying his dream? The moving stars were aligning and when that occurred they not only would know where the gods dwelt but the gods would pour their divine libation onto this world. Maybe it was the eye of a god. To protect his temple and keep its strange mystery from the profane. Or a gateway to other realms. He kept his thoughts to himself. Those other realms had powerful beings not unlike himself. Glittering cities of magical proportions, strange devices of which this could be one. One thing was sure. This was no desert mirage. The eye of a god. Which one? Hm. The coming unitary god?. Sending strange signs. Powerful with extraordinary magics. He had to make sure that he was on the right path. Otherwise they would remain in this situation for all eternity. He had no wish to remain in this primitive state.

Nada was worried. If the gods were aligning themselves with this unknown hidden god what then? Maybe they would all be called? Was that the vision? All one with the gods on this sacred planet and its life giving Sun, the power of Nurdess. Then she got a fright. What if she were left behind? Again the desolation of just herself and one dead earth. The anxiety passed quickly for in her dream she had felt at ease, not lost, not left behind, not denied but whole, complete, transcendent. The gods were surely puzzling.

"The eye of Bahlir." Nada mused. "I wonder what it thinks of you Verhat."

"It will see me as I am." He was surefooted.

"And your dark secrets." Amos could not help himself for Verhat was a master of the occult arts.

"Dark to the unenlightened Amos. The fear of the blind, the trembling of the deaf, the apprehension of the ignorant, the jealousy of the arrogant who think only they are blessed by the gods. When instead they were short changed due to their flawed soul. It is of no matter." He said assured of his own powers. "Even unto my enemies." He sneered.

"Yes quite the success. So why the priests? Not as erudite as yourself." Nada remarked calmly hiding, just, her cynicism. More like flies to a piece of shit.

"Drawing out the poison." He answered easily walking around the humming object.

"Careful that it's vapours do not unhinge you." Nada said with relish.

"When the cleansing comes they will be seen too." Studying the strange object. "You think the gods favour the dismal sniping of yapping mongrels. Deceived by their own deception." Having circumnavigated the odd shaped artefact. "I am only the instrument by which the divine plan unfolds. And even were I to ascend to my rightful place amongst the stars, others will follow the divine plan. No one can pre-configure my demise." Stopping in front of Nadar. "You see I am meant to be."

Verhat certain of his powers. His determined presence his shrouded mind, his careless indifference regarding his opponents and there were many, who put it to the king that Verhat was using demonic spells, crafting spirit essences to confuse and delude those he came into contact with. To no avail. Jaffir was impressed with Verhat. The man could save souls, cure the insane, create fortuitous situations whereby Jaffir profited both in power and wealth. Soothe his worries with charms, have women fall in love with him through spells, Jaffir had it all. Even the priests could not compete. And as long as he stayed out of Nohrat's way Verhat was the second most powerful person in the kingdom. Amos also heard from his father how unassuming Verhat was at court. Nearly invisible. He knew the rumours in the market, the attitudes of the merchant families, even that of the troops, giving sage advice to all who sought him out, often profiting from his preternatural knowledge.

"Well blessed Urus, Empress of the Sky, ruler of Bahlir's realm of the all seeing stars, what do you see?" Verhat asked the object.

The hum continued. No reaction.

"See all there is in my soul, reveal then to all the vision granted me." He challenged it. 'Or keep my vision from those not aligned to the force I harbour within me.' He thought, his mind ablaze in the knowledge that he was not chosen but had chosen himself. To be the First among their race. Create the conditions necessary for the Coming Age with himself at the apex.

Silence. A slight breeze, splashing in the lake. Cautious animals in the distance, the calm night sky above. The thunderstorm subdued into recumbency.

"There. Bahlir is silent. " 'I feel all is well.' He thought determined to fulfil his destiny. The gods could do as they wished. He was in control not they.

Orbital: Prima

Displacement of the spatial domain over Mars. Scouting DVs fed back to their controllers the moment the `Explorer I' inserted itself riding the collapsing PW. Kroena running the DVs forward reconnaissance saw the sleek white spaceship above the light brown planet. As the remote viewers locked on, holding the inserted field Kroena was jubilant. They were not simply getting the effect but also the cause. These DVs, were inside the articulated resonance, getting the numbers, the location, the method of application within their data sets of equations transforming energy into real time matter. They were reading the methodology of the Reganian insertion techniques. Kroena downloaded the data into a separate file. This was simply too good to miss.

"We have contact. Thanks to Regum." She linked up with her superior Elentra. She came over straight away.

"What you got?" standing legs akimbo, arms folded her auburn hair glowing under the overhead strip lights. Her face pale almost gaunt. The orbital had just returned to normal after that spike that had hit them. The last routers adjusted, the nodal intersections connected, the system brought back on line.

Elentra looked at the Reganians out there. She checked the status of the alien field and found no aberrations. Though Kroena didn't know it Elentra had been aware of the first test run on Regum regarding their PW insertion field. Then waited patiently for Regum to make their next move. Vigilance paid off. This insertion field was exactly the same as that of their initial run. Except on a larger scale. Denser codes due to the extra energy, the massive wave itself collapsing according to their design.

"If they can do it," Elentra watching the codes stream down the screen and into safe files, "then so can we. So let's see how good you are. Group three. Disengage your back up and seek the source." The team leader Khral of group three acknowledged the order and had his DVs scout immediate space to locate the source of Regum's PWF.

"Acknowledged Kroena." Came the instant reply. "Refocussing and searching."

"Good luck." Though luck played its part it was determination that reaped results. "So they initiated contact." Kroena said to Elentra. Her second in command. Risea had just arrived as well. "So far the sweep of their space found nothing. The field is being generated elsewhere." Which Elentra knew but was keeping to herself. They had to find this for themselves. By deduction. It might not always be this easy. "Distant, light years away." Khral said as he worked the console. "Ah Regum's space not so vacant. A self contained bubble further out, along the spiral arm." Khral had it. Along with a strange ghostlike presence momentarily glowing dimly. Perhaps some after effect she assumed until further verification came in.

"Rerun the current sequence back to..." looking at the counter, " two nine one to two nine five."

Khral reran the sequence.

What had that misty flaring gossamer thread been? Radiation leaking out from these inserted PWF? Maybe.

"Log that and separate it from the rest, new file."

"Done."

"Study it later. This is really good." Elentra allowing herself a smile.

Khral had forgotten to disengage from the rerun Elentra had asked for.

She noted a constant reconfiguration. Separate from what was over that planet. Unrelated. A chameleon cover camouflaging its origin. Trying to capture an ethereal phenomena. The Reganian's were smart. Running two sequences at once. The ship remained in view. So were these strands of coruscating energy. There seemed to be no source. With its shifting spatial coordinates it made tracing impossible.

The ship was shielded. All they got was it's mass, it's content immutable from probing DVs. Kroena not happy but there was nothing to be done. At least they had a fix on the alien planet, the ship, the crew.

As for the lambent wisps of remnant matter, Kroena shrugged. Let the computer analyse it. Could be anything. Space was strangeness ever since the alien field had appeared. Could be some wash back like a wave receding into the ocean leaving detritus behind.

"Khral, when you and your DVs got time study that sequence I just asked you to store. When you have time. This takes precedence."

"Understood Kroena."

Kroena's second thought was whether to inform Lord Qatus or wait. How he would take this development would be interesting. With their resonant signatures the ship was manned not a mere probe. To give herself extra time she consulted with Elentra.

"Assimilate more data. Might get our DV assault teams to dive in and crash them. Tempted?" Kroena smiled.

Elentra noted. Good. Kroena solid, an excellent second-in-command.

"It's real time, active. Successful physical insertion." Risea looking at Elentra who was looking at the gossamer strands of pale lilac webbing.

"The DVs have the ship. Their team sent down some probes. No other activity. All under control. So I thought I'd follow up your secondary instructions."

"Just don't lose sight of the primary objective."

"Of course not Elentra. I've got some DVs scouting for this source. Barely noticeable. Bits of data, incomplete. In tatters." Without going into the details of the implications. Not their concern. Regum had mastered the tyranny of distance. The universe was theirs now as well. What they had done using their DVs Regum, no surprise, achieved physically.

"OK. Store it. Let the computers analyse it. Might have been blown during the insertion. Curious." Elentra more talking to herself.

"Look Risea. Three resonance levels. Three. One is the base-line though they are all intertwined. Then there is the boosted resonance field throwing it's mantle around the inner shifting fields and the enhanced fluctuations giving the real appearance of being there and somewhere else simultaneously."

"Advanced." Risea noted. "Getting closer to the inserts."

"Very."

"What now?"

"We hang in there. We don't want to alert them just yet meaning that we're onto them. Depends on Qatus." Kroena explained looking at Elentra who nodded slightly. "Plus we have to find out if this camouflage is sentient generated as well. Until then it would be foolish for us to reveal ourselves."

"Of course." Elentra agreed with her matter of fact attitude. The three women thought alike, their resonance's synchronous. The perfect team, even if Khral the fourth member was a man..

"They must feel pretty certain doing this."

"And don't seem to care either. Still we got eyes on the planet."

"Ride in on the DVs resonant waves."

"You got it Risea."

"Insertion next?"

"Anyone in mind?"

"Several Kroena."

"One will do for the moment. Test the field, the inhabitants. As you can see we're starting to upload their race's resonance fields. Sentient leakage." viewing the other screens linked to the DVs "Create a composite so that whoever we choose will fit in down there. So who have you got in mind?"

"A bit ahead of ourselves." Kroena suggested politely.

"Not doing anything just yet. Just planning ahead. You watch, the DL will want some action down there. So who would you choose?"

"One with a particular, extremely dense resonance. Very stable, unfazed."

"Yes. The right profile."

Risea having listened, approached a console and called up her choice. A brown skinned black haired mature man. The figures confirmed Risea's information. Stable, secure, mentally tight, focussed, unperturbed, relaxed.

"Kohr's profile. What do you think?" Elentra asked. She did not have to ask, she ran the DV section. That included forward targeting.

"Computer's choice."

"Alright Risea. Tell him to start immersing himself in the planet's resonance field. Then when he's familiar enough to feel comfortable with the field he can go, remote. The DVs covering his insertion. Distract them a little."

Risea typed in the order. Hovering in space Kohr received the order to focus on the planet. He started remote imaging from the data he received from the orbital acknowledging Risea's order.

"Right we got that done. This could be easy for us Risea."

"Yes, they could have used remote devices. In and out before we even knew it. Instead, this."

"Well they must feel secure given their approach."

"All we have to make sure there is no feed back. Otherwise they'll know we know."

"Time for an update Risea. Kroena you're in charge. Don't let Kohr get too excited. He's a remote observer for the time being."

"Understood."

The two women left the control centre and walked into the shielded secure room. Just a desk and several chairs. Risea waited until Elentra was seated then sat herself opposite her.

"No need to go into the background. We're both familiar with the overall situation."

Risea nodded. "The information within the alien field. The psycho's..."

"Correct. Your assault targeting group feeds info directly to my domain. No one else. Except Lord Qatus. And even then," she allowed herself a crooked smile, "it is sanitized. No need to belabour him with unnecessary details."

Risea returned the smile. She understood. Information was power and Elentra along with Kroena wished to remain where she was. So did Risea. They had an unspoken bond between the three of them.

"For some time now your DVs have some of these sentients under our influence. Remotely. Not that they know it. Well they do sense something other and think it's their god's talking to them. Give them a glimpse of the bigger picture, tailored to their mind set. Now conversion is not on the agenda as such. This is important Risea. No matter what the relevant DLs or even the pontiff may wish it would not be in the mission's interest to go barging in with our cosmic view. Let them come around slowly."

"Agreed."

"Now to the Reganian's. Ever since their initial successful test it was only a matter of time."

"You mean you knew?"

"Hey I'm not the top pinhead here for nothing. At least once the success was theirs we knew they'd follow it up. So what is their real intent? We can't get to them just yet. Are they exploring? Curiosity for its own sake? Yes. That much is obvious. So, will they go down? Perhaps. They managed to get this far so that is a real possibility. If they go down as scouts with no intent to unduly influence them then we leave them alone. No need for us to reveal ourselves. Let the dogs run."

Risea guessed this was Kroena's approach. The DLs would want instant and total domination. Come in full on. Blow their brains away, overwhelm them. Instant transformation. And leave a mess. Elentra, Risea and Kroena wanted more. Find out about the race below, then act. Not come barging in with the DVs as sledgehammers.

"Contingencies."

"Precisely. Who knows what they know. If we dominate we wipe too much out."

"Not forgetting how they'll react to the Reganian's if they go down."

"Right on the button Risea. There is something else to consider."

"Isn't there always."

"Not according to the Divines, the Exalted, the Domimax and the rest."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know." For Risea did not like their insistence of always pushing the same religious theme. Delete the alien field, subsume their consciousness. Replace it with their divine vision.

"As the Reganians seem so secure having achieved this we can safely assume this is not an end in itself."

"Aha."

"Regum has broken out. Naturally we are scanning their planet. But given this technological master move you can see the implications."

"Oh yes Elentra. They could insert anything."

"That is bad enough. But there is a subtle angle to this as well." She teased letting Risea wait a little. "Remote programmes. Pure data, information."

"Now that I did not think of."

"You would have sooner or later Risea."

"I'm beginning to understand. Information is everything. The official attitude by our exalted superiors," she mocked slightly, "is sort of self defeating. You have to know what you're up against."

"Glad you agree. There is something else."

"Why am I not surprised."

"Now that they have been successful they can target Prima. Right through our resonant barrier. We have been shielding ourselves from their psychic probing AI's for just about for ever. We are the same race. They know us as we know them. In other words they can insert their own operatives onto our planet and we would be hard put trying to uncover them. Inserting ships is one thing, inserting configured agents something else again."

"Well we'll have to alert those DVs who are with planetary security."

"Correct. Who knows what we will discover in the process." Another sneaky smile from Elentra.

Risea waited. She had her own idea but let her do the thinking.

"By re-focussing on our home planet we also focus on our own. That includes the DLs. Soft scan's only. And that data Risea stays with us. You got that?"

"Elentra. I'm with you. Fantastic. We'll be the data-lords."

"Something like that. Not to be revealed of course."

"Naturally, you have my word."

"Glad to know. Not that I doubted you."

"Thank you for your confidence."

"Hey, it works both ways now. We're in this together."

"Together it is then."

"So you wanna go down and give them the good news or shall I?"

"Given what their take will be on this...I'm assuming you'd prefer me to see the DLs."

"Let's hope it remains with Qatus. Who knows what he might get up to. But if the other two know, then, well, no one will be in total control. Except us. So I'm gonna give as little as possible."

"Great Elentra. You going?"

"Hm. Maybe you or Kroena. Doesn't have to be me."

"If Kroena doesn't want to I'll volunteer, with pleasure." Her eyes twinkling.

"Right, you can catch the next shuttle down."

It took another day for Risea to get an appointment with Lord Qatus. He suggested they meet at his asylum. With constant visitors her presence would not be noted. As one belonging to the order of the Domimax she had clearance to be almost anywhere. Her sensitive mental state might be borderline Volatile but that would not be a problem where they were to meet. Her resonance would barely be noted by the containment fields. She was well within the parameters.

Qatus sent his own plane from the space port. The cordon of security in place was nothing like she remembered. Did they know what she was relaying? Or had she been away so long she'd forgotten just how paranoid ground control was. Or was there something else going on down here. All she did discover was an incident, of some staff going rogue, reverting to unstable volatile status. The alien field was blamed. Pity for the fallen. It happened even to the best.

The VAV lifted off blowing a cloud of dust around it, heading out to Qatus's asylum. Risea felt out of place. Before, when studying as a prospective candidate to serve on the orbital either with SpaceKorps or the heroic DVs, an abnormal psychological state was not so disturbing to her inner balance. If the unwashed masses in the outlands knew, or the elite families to which Risea could make no claim, that the front line was manned by stable volatiles there'd be probably a riot given the pretexts of the priests laying down the law. Certainly disquiet. Not that the SVs were on the forefront

themselves. Rather than being a V was not the inner disgrace which the priests made out. The Families would probably splutter into their cocktails their consternation that the impure Vs had any use at all. Being saved by them from the alien threat seemed counterintuitive to their strict adherence to the spiritual come social pecking order in which they found themselves somewhat marginalised.

The desert passed rapidly below. In the distance the dim misty outline of the rich green forest surrounding the holy city. Whilst the lesser DLs asylums were in the provinces then by rights only the pontiff's was at the centre. Qatus managed to have his domain set at the edge of the suburban fringe. Given his aloof disdain for the outlands the suggestion he ought to minister to the fallen in his domain he dismissed with disdain. As Outer Guardian he reasoned it was his duty to be at the centre as often as possible. Gharbel the highest of them all did not even bother with his assigned duties. He had a surrogate spiritual advisor to fulfil his duties which the pontiff accepted. It released Gharbel from the tedium of looking after the Fallen so that he could concentrate on the more important political aspects regarding the other DLs who all wanted more access to the holy city. To them the provinces, their domains, were the pits.

The reason Risea was only too glad to get out. Up in near space the pecking order was less obvious. They all worked together irrespective of their resonant states. Since it took a specially focussed person to make the grade an unspoken camaraderie meshed them into a community of their own. Even the division between themselves and SpaceKorps who secured the orbital was somewhat underlined.

They were flying over the thick wooded forest below. Then the sprawling suburbs of the elite and their servants. All vetted so as to be of the appropriate resonance; simply pure snobbery. By surrounding themselves with their own kind they were far more isolated mentally than the community spirit in the outlands where everybody was more or less equal. The feeling of being a V Risea never wore on her mental sleeve but kept her mind open to those she worked with. Dismissing the suffocating rigid social stratification of Prima's society. She took individuals as they came, one reason why she gelled so well with Kroena and Elentra.

The pilot was approaching Qatus's asylum the LZ set in spacious gardens. She doubted it was for the benefit of the inmates to create a bucolic setting. More for the DLs and their staff so that they could pretend to be in touch with nature which in the outland's was often a struggle keeping wild animals at bay from preying on their flock of sheep or cattle, fighting summer forest fires, suffering the hordes of flies, dispersing flocks

of birds that fed off their fields of wheat or barley, keeping incessant nature at bay. Not to mention hailstorms, floods, frost.

She saw the asylum, it's administrative block, the dormitory for the staff and the patient's quarters all dispersed among verdurous gardens. They landed smoothly at the front of the admin block. Happy to stretch her legs, her report in her head, no notes for the information was too important to leave any trace of Regum's astounding move. By now she had accepted their scientific and technical triumph, almost in awe at their audacity and their nerve to not so much challenge Prima but ignore them without the least concern of how they would react. Obviously the DVs were of limited use. They had neither foreseen this momentous event, nor been able to obviate the astonishing move for them to be completely dominant in space. Knowing the Reganians their WebSpace probably had expanded as well. It seemed there was no stopping them. That should please his lordship.

As she walked up the broad stairs she sensed the inner repressed turmoil of the patients. Hyped or docile through drugs. This heightened activity, sometimes coming to the fore amongst the DVs now vibrated at a level of the mentally distraught. She had been away too long to notice just how potent their minds were. If only they were focussed. Up there they were more adjusted, having been stabilised by moving through the ranks of the various domains. Until constant enough to focus on their holy mission. Risea realised, being too busy with her duties, that she barely contended with the spiritual side of their divine objectives. She had not prayed since first coming onto the orbital. She had never been in communion with the divine, never felt it, never connected with the Divine Consciousness which was probably a plus, leaving her to concentrate on her function as second in command to Kroena and the forward assault DVs. At least their section was making progress in holding some classified individuals on that distant planet in their thrall.

An aide, a young priest in his black gown was waiting for her in the foyer. Doctors passed her, nurses with their aberrant charges, support staff going about their duties, the gardeners, policing security details ever watchful of not just the patients but even visitors such as herself. At least she was not given a visitors badge. She was too high in rank to be classified with those who wished to be with their fallen ones.

He gave her a momentary smile, the same age as her, mid thirties. She wondered, unless he wanted to move up in the Ecclesiastical Orders why anyone would be a minister to the masses. They accepted their lot irrespective of the priests who constantly reminded them of their sacred duty to the social order of the planet. Well at

least he was starting the slow climb out of the sludge. Serving Qatus was a coup in itself. She wondered what he had to accomplish to get even this far.

They walked down blank corridors, out through the back into an inner courtyard and into Qatus's own retreat, a small bungalow set well away from the bustle of the asylum. Onto the veranda surrounding the tiny but opulent house. He knocked on the front door. A servant in the garb of one of the many spiritual orders, in mauve answered the door and the priest left her in his care. Down a corridor and out the back where Qatus kept his study.

He was reading some reports. Bookshelves to one side, forbidden knowledge for the masses. Dealing in their ancient folklore deemed tainted by the old gods, tomes of history classified, restricted. Not that Prima had any history. The planet had been as it was for centuries, eternal in its present, aligned to the will of the Cosmic Consciousness.

He looked up, clad in his magnificent royal magenta gold crested robes, a ring with a glowing ruby glowing in the light coming in from behind the open windows, all set in a pleasant garden. To her right a decanter of an exquisite liqueur, a bubbling coffee pot on a sideboard, two reclining chairs around a fire place now empty, paintings of mountain streams and wooded hills under white towering banks of white glowing clouds. All very earthy as if Qatus had to remind himself what the planet looked like living in the city.

He welcomed her, rose from his desk after having removed the papers he was studying depositing them in a drawer and magisterially walked over to one of the reclining chairs and offered her a seat.

Social niceties over she reported what the Reganian's had achieved. She gave an analysis of the technical feat, though no one on Prima would have a clue just how they had moved a whole space ship and its crew through space just like that. Implications were broached and an update on the situation on Mars itself through what the DVs continually uncovered. Qatus remained silent, absorbed, attentive, staring into the empty grate, now and then rubbing his jowls. A sign of the good life no doubt. Occasionally looking at her with his coal black eyes. Risea was used to that look. She was familiar when the DVs were in their 'state'. It revealed a potent soul, a strong determined will, a sense of inner supremacy. Being focused on her report the look was more of interest than a probing attempt to get into her head. Her resonance was in place letting his reflect off hers. No one ever got inside her head. Not yet.

She was done and waited.

"So, they have mastered space." He repeated. She said nothing about that. He seemed to await further information. She broached the possibility of how they could insert possible agents of influence onto Prima itself.

"The containment fields would pick them up."

"Not if they faked their RS Lord Qatus."

He considered that wondering how they managed to keep their move so secret. The priests and their agents on the planet, their scouts in their WebWorld not even the DVs had foreseen this. Disturbing.

"What about the system's used, their computers."

"Probably isolated." Understanding his orientation. Meddle with it once it was located. Prima had this belief that somehow psychic minds could actually influence the processing end of computers, scramble their memory. From what she knew of computers there was no chance. Computers were too basic, they were machines nothing more. Of course manipulating the operators was something else entirely yet the DVs had not infiltrated whatever base the Reganians used. He would have to ask for that himself.

Qatus was thinking of how to shut down their control centre. Something had to be done. The Reganian's would be on the alert for Prima's reaction. Then again being so sure of themselves, given their success, Prima might not be able to do anything.

He thanked Risea, asked if she wanted some refreshment. It was a way of engaging her. Risea was not inclined for chit chat and thanked him for his consideration. He accepted her declination and had his butler escort her back to the VAV he had made available for her.

When she was gone he placed a secure call through to Lord Pentham. By rights, given the uniqueness of the event he ought to inform Gharbel as well. But Gharbel was the Inner Guardian. Not until the Reganian's penetrated their space would he inform Gharbel. He smiled at that.

When the VAV returned Qatus flew off to Pentham's domicile. His estate too was at the edge of the city but at it's opposite end. He with his pilot flew around the city for unless heading for the pontifical palace no air traffic was allowed to broach the sanctum of sanctums. Pentham. Good natured considered a lightweight amongst the Domain Lords. A bit like himself. Barely focussing on his domain without ever losing control of what was going on. Pentham, usually indifferent to the gravity of the situation regarding the state of the universe, pliable and suggestive to political influence Qatus knew he was playing his own game. Telling whoever he was with what they wanted to

hear without giving anything away of what he thought or considered. As such he was a wealth of information, mostly gossip. His indifference useful in gaining insights about minor indiscretions, or the state of palatial politics. Pentham let the others do the talking who sought favours or influence from him. Not that he delivered.

The two of them were sitting on his back patio overlooking the forest stretching away from the suburbs behind them. The sky cloudy, a chill in the breeze. Autumn in the air. Pentham, his demeanour always correct, looking every bit the landed gentry tempted him with one of his excellent wines. Qatus rarely refusing declined, wishing to keep a clear head. Pentham said nothing and had his servant bring some coffee. Qatus was considering how to formulate a response to Regum's move. The bar had been raised considerably. An understatement, it had been moved beyond the limits of space itself.

Qatus laid out the bare statement of facts. Pentham listened, neither surprised or even taken aback. Well he was the technical advisor dealing with Regum's WebWorld. Probably familiar with its strange scenarios. Even if only as cyber-fantasies. The fact they had successfully inserted a space ship at that distant planet got his attention. Delighted which confused Qatus momentarily. Anyone else would have been concerned, surprised or even appalled. He found Pentham's attitude a little disconcerting. It was a way with Pentham. He had the knack of keeping others off balance. Pentham was beaming. Anyone else responding like this would make them suspect. He would have to wait what Pentham really thought.

"Science." He radiated with unsuppressed pleasure.

"A worry." Qatus tried to remind him of the gravity of the situation.

"It will be, for them."

What was he thinking?

"All we have to find out is how they did it. The DVs seemed to have been circumvented."

"Is that the reason for your levity?" for the DVs had been obviated. The implications of this intelligence failure alone...Qatus reminded himself he would have to go over this, foreseeing possible discomfiting consequences. The DVs were a sacred institution. With some success on Mars. The planet finally had a name, and names contained the essence, the spirit of the place.

"They played their trump card. It's all in the open now Qatus."

"That much is true. But that is not what concerns me."

"Oh?" Pentham asked. Fishing for information.

"They can be anywhere now, at any time, in any space. Masters of the physical universe."

"Physical universe. Correct assumption. Or put another way, on the outside. We are masters of the real domains, the inner reality that processes the outer data. We are the masters of inner space."

"Of course. But they are enhanced now, the DVs never had a fix on their team."

"Even so. Physical enhancements are limited relative to the system in use."

"Lord Pentham," he waited as the butler rolled in a trolley of coffee, milk, sugar and a plate of delicious biscuits. When he had retreated Qatus continued: "They already create false realities in the Web. They could insert false realities into space. Like the ship. We have barely scratched the surfaces within the Web. There is no reason why they cannot do this in the real world."

"So what."

"So what? Do you realise...yes I think you do." And probably did as well.

"A minor blip. Consider. We have that distant planet under our sway. Controlling the Reganians just now would be presumptuous. So they are there. They may even fall, once the DVs have an image, under our sway."

"You think it's that simple. That nothing much has changed."

"Technology, no matter how dazzling is still technology. Gadgetry. Impressive yes. Maybe mind boggling but always delimited by the mind which created it. Remember they are of a lesser resonance. We'll get on top of this." Certain.

"Well given you're the technical expert..."

"What would I do?" as he poured a cup for himself, adding sugar and milk and handing it to Qatus. Then he served himself. He took a sip, tasting it, was satisfied and answered: "If we can penetrate their control centre then it's just a matter of reconfiguring their thoughts. Or we could come in as supplicants."

"Supplicants to Regum?" Qatus was surprised. What did he mean?

"Get in on the ground floor to use a metaphor. Join their team. It's worked on the orbital. I mean they came to us because we willed it. They might have expanded their extent in how they use space but as I said...So if we join them they will fall under our domain, our resonance."

"Interesting." If not disturbing. Getting into their science was the very opposite of their spiritual direction. It would contaminate those who worked with them. It looked as if Regum was drawing them in, first through their WebWorld and now this.

"We get their secrets and then we'll have the best of both worlds. Theirs and ours. Actually both ours. It's not even a challenge, it's a gift." Pentham radiant.

"Not a trap?"

"How? What can they do, to us? Certainly not convert us Qatus." Thinking the idea hilarious.

"I am told they have enhanced capabilities now."

"And we have ours."

"You think we can influence their scientists?"

"We've been doing this since day one."

"True but these people on this project will be secure Pentham."

He took another sip.

"They might be isolates, they might be enhanced, but they still got a brain we can focus on."

"Yes." Qatus considered. Pentham's perspective helped resolve his concerns.

"What about the Pontiff?"

"I never bother him with technical details. Just results Qatus."

"Up to you of course." He tasted the coffee, it was rich, aromatic, delicious.

"And you." Pentham hinted. "After all there is no threat to this planet, correct?"

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

"You do seem certain. Why is that?"

"I just am."

"Were you aware of their progress?" it was a possibility.

"Well we knew of the initial test run. The DVs sensed the field insertion."

"Reality insertion Pentham." Qatus reminded him. "It's a frightening concept. Tell me, what is to stop them inserting their reality into ours? Making the Web the reality, locking us in..." or he considered, "...or out?"

"Have you any idea how much energy that takes?"

"A lot."

"More than a lot. You should acquaint yourself with their science." He added glibly. Qatus let that pass.

"We get our feeds."

"Well then..."

"Are you saying their, err, bubble realities could never encompass, say, a planet?"

"Even their generating capabilities cannot achieve that. If they could we would not be on the real Regum. They would have encloaked their planet as a primary objective to keep us out."

"Or entrap us. It might already be in place."

"No Qatus. You know that yourself. We know the situation on the ground." He smiled. "Let them do their research for us. Remember this is an extension not a progression."

"You are right there." And took another sip of Pentham's excellent brew.

"There is nothing we don't know." He said assured.

"True."

"Remember the DVs are also searching the future, the possible future." Pentham underlined. "Now if there was a dangerous scenario you think they would not have alerted us? Say Prima being locked out of real reality, squeezed into insignificance. Yes? No?" at ease.

"To move along, if their computers became an extension of their minds? What if they created a scenario that made us only appear supreme whilst the opposite was the case."

"Now you're talking." Interested in the thought experiment.

"This does not bother you."

"Not as such. No. The universe is a big place, even bigger now. It just cannot be done on such a large scale."

"You seem pretty certain."

"I agree they could try and fool us. But even we know the Web is a construct, not a real reality. We have the big picture in our heads. Our resonance secures that for us. The mind is the dominant factor, not an artificial thinking machine. Sure they could create false realities but it has to begin somewhere. And that's where our DVs come in. You see what I'm getting at?"

"No surprises."

"Except for their insertion Pentham."

"An extension as I said. Not a development."

"So they cannot overwhelm us."

"Or underwhelm us." Pentham smiled.

"No chance?"

"None."

"I think I will have a glass of your excellent liqueur then."

"A pleasure to be your host. I thought you would never ask."

Risea looked down below. The luscious forests, the silver reflecting waters of the rivers, lakes gleaming in the sunlight, fluffy clouds. She forgot how rich the planet looked having been in space so long, seeing it all with pristine eyes. The plane started its descent as they tore through the sky over the desert heading back to the space port. They hit some minor turbulence.

She thought the debrief had gone well. She had stuck to facts, not speculation. The clouds were higher as they began their approach descent. The plane shuddered momentarily the pilot conversing with air traffic.

Regum dominating space. It fascinated her. Unconcerned with any spirituality the Reganians always surprised them, surprised her. Unpunished for their apostasy, their blasphemies, their unbelief. Were they really crowding out with their WebSpace the divine within this universe? Did the Great Mind extend into the other universe? The Martians believed in the equivalent of Prima's own remote past. Memories of their gods. At least they were correctly aligned. It would be interesting to see, if these Reganian's did make contact. If it would have any effect on their belief system, their spirituality. The ultimate test case. She should have broached this with Lord Qatus. Well it was up to the higher orders to deal with that conundrum.

Her ears popped. Space was so reassuring, eternal, soothing. Her mind always expanded when she saw the vast pure blackness reaching further than the stars and now coupled with an even larger universe around them. How far did that go? How far infinity? The ultimate puzzle. How small the old gods were compared to what they knew now. Not that the masses had any clue.

The plane wobbled a bit as the pilot adjusted the final descent. Then they were over the base landing the VAV skilfully. She got out and made her way to the gantries of the launch towers, her shuttle refuelled and waiting. Taking supplies up to the orbital and a few replacement DVs, new recruits. They were all strapped in, the astronauts waiting for her arrival. Final checks completed they were ready to go. She strapped in behind the cockpit, getting a great view. Then booster ignition, a tense moment as the towers released their metallic grip and the shuttle shuddered with latent power slowly lifting off, accelerating leaving a huge vapour trail behind them in their wake. It felt good, leaving the cares of the planet behind her. At home in space. They passed through the clouds and slowly the bright blue sky changed into pink, lilac, purple the stars appearing, eternally present, reassuring. She was returning to her realm.

Mena

Ung came to the conclusion Mena was a unique Natural. Without using her psychic abilities to further her own aim apart from being in space. It was too early to tell which group she would be placed with, if any. Some were exceptional and used judiciously for target specific assignments. What Mena perceived out there was most unusual. Non-specific yet latent. Was she attracted or attracting this thinly spread field, a viscous film spread throughout space. Ung's Brain was cautious holding back from probing it further. Mena could do that for her and run the risk of being aligned with something not really understood. Unless it was an aspect of the alien field. For the moment Ung let it ride. Let the Domimax deal with it. The Domimax she thought. Present unseen in that no one knew who they really were. A secret conclave or more an executive branch responsible for the Dominus who watched and guided the DVs. They could well be a programme inserted in specific individuals or a branch of the Ecclesiastics or the Divines. No one knew and no one asked. They were accepted as factually real in the convoluted and interspersed Primaian Orders.

Mena entered the first of the two airlocks. Ung with her. Fast scanned for aberrant false memories, the great fear of being alienly subverted. They were both in the clear. The initial download complete the inner locks irised open. In the change room they got out of their space suits feeling the freedom of unencumbered movement. The downloaded data went through the security filters. Once inside the orbital short fast bursts of data transfer went to systems control as they progressed through the second air lock which read their resonant state prior leaving and upon returning, matching the two patterns and searching for non-aligned outside interferences. Ever watchful of the alien incursion.

The initial scan over they left the change-room and were logged back in. Mena watched Ung. Her deep black eyes expressionless as was her face. Mena felt a little light headed. The memory of the event now somewhat vague, undefinable, resisting rationalisation.

"Time for your debrief Mena. How did it go?" Ung asked at last.

"Fine. Great. I think, I don't know, I sensed something." Excited having experienced what...? Ung felt the tangible exudence of Mena's resonance. An event did happen to Mena out there. Ung stopped herself from focussing upon whatever Mena experienced. She wanted her Brain to remain mute.

Ung returned a quick smile as she lead Mena to the debrief room. Through corridors, technicians rewiring conduits, small tools laying around them. Relining the com-channels, the data flows and sensor devices reading not just the inhabitants states of mind but also the condition of the orbital at all points throughout. Ung's Brain went into chameleon mode, blending into her mind's configuration so that no deep scanning sensors ever latched onto her enhanced state. She would be taken for a Reganian infiltrator which at worst would have her being removed and sent back to Regum. Even though her legend made sure she had never been there as far as the Primaian's were concerned.

"You can have a meal after Mena." Niatu said having joined the two women in the debrief room. She too had been aligned with Mena remotely but put her experience down to the superimposed field. At least Mena was sensitive enough to be cognizant in that regard. She would make a good 'watcher', knowing inherently the difference between the actual and the superimposed. Nearly eighty percent of the initiated DVs could not disentangle the real state of space from what was loaded into it.

Dross was waiting for them. The room as always was bare, except for a few chairs and an empty table. With a secure terminal and com-link. Dross asked them all to download their session. They attached their fibre optic links to the ready ports embedded in the table. The computer, it's screen blank, the data not processed, just uploaded and searched for aberrations.

Mena was relaxed. The sensation receded, drained out during the upload. Her destiny to be at one with the Divine Mind back in her thoughts. Even though she had come across this infusion she too was convinced it to be the alien insertion. A niggling conceptualisation told her that it's origins were closer, immanent. Like being in a house and aware of other rooms even though they could not be seen. There and not there.

For a moment she thought of Ung so different from her. The feeling of a completely different mind guiding her vanished as quickly as it had surfaced.

Three consecutive bleeps. The upload done they retracted their sleeves connections. A screen came on the table split in three. Dross studied it for a moment, then looked up.

"Well at least it didn't get into any of you. Niatu, Ung you may leave. Write up your reports and forward them as per usual." The two women rose and left.

"You know we are surrounded by enemies." Dross began. Mena was a little surprised at that opening remark. She nodded in agreement.

"In a way it is destined. Our purity makes it so." Dross explained. "As such we harbour no resentment towards them. Their resonance is mis-aligned, flawed if you will."

Was he referring to Regum or the alien field? Were they connected?

"They want domination Mena and will use any means to achieve their purpose."

"Their purpose?" she asked puzzled at this oblique references.

"To deny us, to evict us from inner space, neutralise us at best."

"Like a struggle?"

"Yes. Which includes you."

"Me?" surprised. She was not here to do battle but to align spirituality.

"All of us Mena." He said patiently.

"I just want to be."

"I know that Mena, but that is not how they think. Every seeker is another addition to our resonance. Your strengthen through your devotions. What I'm trying to make you aware of is that you may be targeted if they choose to do so."

"Me targeted?" she was stunned they would go this far. She assumed he was talking about the Reganians.

"The problem we face Mena is that the alien field is somewhat similar to that of Regum's WebWorld. Now your results indicate you have sensed the field. Without any negative impact on your overall resonance. You are indeed a Natural." Very pleased. She could tell. "They target the innocent so that the enemy thinks itself righteous. Your inner strength will prevail. This spiritual potency you carry within you will see to it that you will triumph, I am certain of that much."

"Thank you Dross."

"The longer you are with us the stronger your spirit will become. It may also attract those who would wish to deny your spiritual destiny." Dross paused. "What I'm saying is you might be specifically targeted, even as a DV if you choose to become one." He dangled in front of her. She would make a great backup. One step at a time. As she did not react he continued: "Simply as a devotee is enough to attract their wrath. You may experience abnormal psychological states. If that ever occurs you must tell Niatu or Ung or even me. I am always available, you know that."

Was he hinting at what occurred out there? What could she say? It was too vague and anyway she was not interested. She wanted to be in confluence with the Divine Mind, nothing else mattered.

"I am here to unite with the Great Mind, creator of everything. It is what I live for Dross. With our divine power, what are they? What can they do? What does it matter? They are but tiny meddling jealous minds. Because we have the true vision, not they."

"Well spoken Mena." He beamed. "That's the spirit."

"I made up my mind long before coming here."

"So you told father Lennox."

"Yes I did. Now that you told me of this, I feel it my duty to continue on my chosen path. To strengthen our resonance so it may irradiate the whole universe."

"Very noble Mena." He was impressed with this determined young woman. Her being so shy, withdrawn he had been concerned the challenge they all faced might crush her a little. The opposite occurred instead. He was relieved.

"I will pursue the righteous path as long as it takes."

"I intend to recommend you to my superiors. Who knows what benefits may flow from this." Dross saw a future in Mena. Apart as a DV backup she would make an excellent instructor as well. A pure example to those seeking their redemption and hopefully overcome the burden they collectively faced. "It may even reach the pontiff." He purred.

Mena sat there stunned at the faith Dross had in her. She had been with her doubts ever since she could remember. Maybe she was destined for great things. But would not let that distract her from her primary objective. If good things came of this, then it was due to the Great Mind and she would accept whatever was divinely chosen for her. She was blushing, her face warm, her body quivering with excitement.

"Oh Dross, I am so happy."

"That is good Mena. Now the path is not easy. Often we are our own enemy. The natural mind is used to distractions, it seeks them out. You will struggle with this but I have confidence in you. Just don't expect an instant revelation. Not that this has not occurred. It might happen to you tomorrow or in ten years, you understand?"

She nodded. "I want the Cosmic Consciousness to cleanse our universe." She was determined.

"Riding us of a bad dream."

A bad dream. Remembering the sensation out there. Very apt. A false veil. To either overcome or ignore. Focusing on what she was really after. She would succeed.

"Dreams are illusions."

"Correct Mena. Study them well but be mistress of your soul."

"With all my energy I will dispel whatever darkness, whatever foul incantations, whatever delusive temptations come my way."

"Mena you are truly gifted. You are also stronger than you think." Dross delighted with her attitude. "You might be the cleansing glory, dissipating the darkness. Enhanced by the divine in the cosmos. Born to curtail the incursion, deny it's existence and thus obliterate it's presence for it is but a powerful illusion. Mena the illusion appears real, and may overwhelm you. So always remember your inner state of grace. It will overcome all obstacles." He waxed lyrically.

"I'm glad you have faith in me."

"Only because the faith is in you. Well," Dross relaxed and voided the screen on the table, "if there is anything else?"

"No Dross. You have made me feel better."

He smiled engagingly. If Mena really was so powerfully attuned she might be the first of many of a new generation. The Divine Mind was creating some very potent souls. All was well in the universe.

In the canteen she was on her own. Niatu and Ung had disappeared. She felt so good she wanted to see them, to tell them how she felt and ask them how they felt. After all they were ahead of her. Even though they were so matter-of-fact in their demeanour, almost spiritually not there. Maybe it was the DV training, being mentally not spiritually focussed. It could be they tuned in through the inner control of their resonance. Ung oozed inner calmness whilst Niatu's patience, watching her with benevolent interest was reassuring, having her interest at heart.

She finished her salad and fruit juice and returned to her quarters. Sent a message home saying all was well, she was happy. She considered her somewhat churning emotional state but thought it best to keep that to herself. With a happy sigh she got ready to sleep in her tube.

It adjusted to her biorhythms, her quarters airless, the tube her life support. Feeling positive she offered a mental prayer to the Great Mind to guide her to its presence.

She could not make out the shapes at first. She only noticed them amongst a tapestry of abstractions with varied colours. Detaching themselves, moving about stirred from recumbent slumber. The realm she was in made no sense. Nothing like her dreams

at all. Sporadic images of different worlds, similar, familiar, behind the facade something inimical. Different. She tried to turn and see where she really was. It took forever but finally the abstract shapes were all around her, some detaching like leaves from a tree, moving about, her presence having brought them to life. Grotesque, misshapen, twisted, distorted they moved with ease in no particular direction. A spectacle of freaks. They had their own intensity about them whilst restricted in their movements.

She was feeding them energy! They were leeching her soul. How could this be? What was this strange place the shape of an orb, each screen, screen? a tableau in itself. Strange barely explained this realm. Contained and vast, each abstract image a portal into another world, another reality.

The detached shapes started to be aware of her presence. No this cannot be. She was trapped! But where was this place? She remembered Dross saying a bad dream. This was too real, too complete, too powerful. Well she had gotten in somehow so there must be an out. Must there? The confinement too real. Think Mena, think. Of what? The universe. This was just some realm which you have entered. The orb was closing in on her. She saw movement in every abstract, crazy interlocking image, strange cut-out screens and a powerful presence behind them. Within them? Within this orb? She concentrated on the universe, imagining the glorious galaxy, the glowing bright burning stars, the cool vastness of black space.

The image collapsed outside of her then receded. The glorious glowing galaxy in front of her. The same place the vision in space had come from. Something awful was in the galaxy, something malignant that twisted life into demented shapes reflecting their equally twisted spiritual souls, a madhouse.

She woke within her sleeping tube. She had seen the enemy. Maybe not the enemy but something not belonging to this universe. Yet there it was, gestating deformed dreams, nightmare beings, eviscerated life with a craving for her soul or that of anybody else enticed into its twisted realm, its deformed presence all too real. An evil strangeness. Life conformed to a divine plan. That had not been divine. It could not be a spiritual repository but an ugly artifice reflecting the mischievous soul of its creator.

Before this frightful memory would recede she connected her sleeve's optic fibre and patched it to a virtual displayed portal on the perspex covering, using its HUD menu, then voice-transfer to relate her disturbing dream. When done she scrolled back and re-read her statement. She sent the deposition to Ung, Niatu and Dross. Satisfied, feeling relieved she disconnected herself. The HUD glowing menu disappeared and she was

cocooned once more in welcoming darkness devoid of latent presences, nightmare scenarios or bad dreams. She fell into welcome calming sleep, the disturbing images slowly disintegrating, memory falling apart, becoming less intense then dissipated like a wisp of an idea that found no attachment in her brain.

Carias

For the next few days Carias was on tenterhooks. With the headband in her possession she could finally get back into WebWorld. Procrastinating. Savouring the anticipation. Later.

Fehna did not always seek her out. Though withdrawn Carias saw her sometimes chatting with the gardeners. Now that Carias knew their primary function to keep an eye on the inmates, even guests she became extra cautious. Since she was voluntarily admitted, and still had not seen one doctor take the slightest interest in her it occurred to her she might be remotely observed, not just by the gardeners but via hidden cameras or soft scanning devices which had to include her room. But with no gadgets to locate them the task was hopeless. So instead she adjusted her mind to the fact she was under observation. Sitting as was becoming a habit now at her window's table, she presumed to being observed. 'They' as Fehna called them were paranoid about WebWorld. That amused her. Here she was in an asylum because of her adventures in there, and there 'they' were outside freaking out. Alternative realities, not advisable to pursue. One reality to fit all. Well it did not fit hers. What was this reality anyway? A social construct. Big deal. One lousy construct for all the planet's inhabitants.

She made her decision to go in after dinner. During the meal she kept her anticipation and vibrant excitement as much as possible in check. Fehna wanted to sit next to her. She was of two minds about her. She welcomed Fehna's flighty distraction and got bored just as soon with her incessant vacuous meanderings. Probably craving some communion repulsing the advances of the others. Jong was schizoid interesting, impossible, self absorbed, worse than Fehna. Drus cool, aloof, full of potential but showed a distinct distaste to even relate to anything or anybody.

Destined to be alone. So be it. The Web thus became ever more intrinsic for her to maintain some sort of inner equilibrium. Seeking the Divine Mind was no answer, literally. It was all silence on the other side, the only response that of her consciousness.

Time to go in. It was the middle of the night. All was quiet within the compound, the grounds empty, patrolled by security guards who moved ostentatiously in two's across the barely lit grounds. The trees massive black shapes.

She put on the headband and felt it's comforting warmth. Her brain reacting immediately, recognising familiarity.

And there was the grungy alley she remembered as the portal into one of her subdomains she considered her turf. Refuse blown by a breeze into small piles on corners. The old factory run down, desolation created by intent. To make the area look as unappealing as possible. Grime streaked down cracked grey concrete walls, windows painted over, chipped, thin fracture lines running crazily over them, dented metal conduits, clamped thick wiring and the entry point a thick rusted steel door, paint peeling off showing water stains. Home. She felt the tiny resistance of the headband's optic strands extending into the base of her neck. Locked in, locked on. Reality locked out.

Web reality always boosted her perception. It also increased her inserted isolation underlining her cyber-persona. Above a wan moon, pale, washed out. She checked her gear. Even the pores were visible with her visual zoom capabilities. Her skin deathly pale in the moon's weak light. Her smart gloves and composite woven, blended, moulded body armour all in place. No weapons. She was not some warrior here to blast away at configured enemies or real ones, even if they were moronic Primaians. No. She was a scout absorbed in her own cyber-realm. Ideally she was after the Source that made the Web what it was knowing full well she had no chance in even penetrating it's most basic outer sentinel embedded barriers.

So she invented her persona as part of SpaceKorps. In real time they were neutral, non-aligned so others would barely bother with her. They were too busy being hero's in their own drama. Carias had other ideas. Making contact with like minded unaffiliated personas. The problem was they, like her, avoided contact moving through this brilliant world on their own, by themselves without help or persona back-ups.

Self isolates engaged in their own trip.

When she did sense a presence she usually held back. She still considered herself a novice and it was very possible to be blown out of this world. Primaian's were hunted just for fun. Reganian's rightly considered them intruders for the DLs ran their protégées here, which gave the cyber-warriors a lot of fun. And being blasted lost energy-credits. In

fact being blasted gained the attacker more power. She made sure she kept hers at max.

There was in this world energy out-points, camouflaged. Crack the code and one could recharge. It was stealing and that Carias enjoyed though she never completely siphoned them dry. That would set off major alerts with whomever it belonged to. And they could be there in a flash. She preferred slow leakage. That way she could study the environment not just surrounding her but the cyber-construct of its owner. Carias had her own outage points which the Reganian's must have inserted to extend one's life. Or to locate dumb Primaians new to this world. Easy to fit into their predetermined parameters. Too nosey, too smug, too pugnacious. These were the faces of the Primaian inserts who lumbered clumsily around WebWorld. Asking stupid questions or blathering on about their vomitory verbose exculpation of the Grand Design and how they would bring it down. To join their crusade. But when cornered or indulged the actual vision envisaged lacked detail, substance, embellishment or coherence, never mind an alternative reality except vague bland assurances that got them instantly obliterated which set off a train of vengeance hit squads. Relished by gamers. Primaian's were suckers, there for the taking.

Carias's energy points had as yet not been discovered. Who would think a lavatory was supercharged. So far most considered it corny realism. Just for fun. And even if one pretended to use it, slow leakage siphoning programmes recharged the bogpoint when actually used. She made sure there was toilet paper. Detail was important. So anyone pretending to relieve themselves were depositing more energy. So far no one had ever used them in this section. Nor had an enterprising soul gone into the waste management business. Accept her.

Not much shit around. Still it created a cover to traverse all the cyber realms within. She added realism. No one paid her dumpster's much attention. Carias had created sewerage farms, innocent enough. She grew exotic plants purely to see them manifest amazing fractal patterns. Purely decorative on the outside but energy extracting within. However they were also for sale and anyone acquiring one was tagged by the plant, becoming her eyes and ears. Eventually though they discovered the ruse and only newbies and the odd Primaian fell for them.

With her headband she had outside back up energy as long as the batteries lasted. The Web though chock full of energy if you knew where to look. She used as little as possible within, unless running across some Primaian flat brained dithering piece of decaying dementia. It saved the batteries. Those who like her were charged up sometimes crackled with pixelated energy, giving off an aura of hyper charged power.

That attracted Mashers. Boneheads who grunted a lot. Carnage for the pleasure of sheer violence. Retarded evolutionary. Reborn rejects. Luckily she had only seen the chaos they left behind in their blind rage. Often blindsided, reality removed from beneath their perceptions. Turned into self destroying meat grinders, feeding off their own violence in quantum Goedel loops until they turned into piles of trashed cyber junk. Now if the Gamers would only take it a step further and apply it to the conniving converts, the misbegotten marauding priests offering their spiritual wasteland, their *prison* as some sort of answer to a reality they denied: cyber reality. Get used to it. It's real, it packs a punch in the head. A blast that lasts.

She pretended, apart from her body armour and smart gloves to be techno-poor. If she crackled she let it sparkle around her head. After all she was after the *ultimate* here. Not sure what it was, how it was configured, whether spread throughout data realms, contained, confined or secreted in some cyber dump pretending to be something else. Sometimes she was just a wandering soul minding her own business. A drifter. That pretence had it's own shortcomings. Less realms available less players to interact along with their subdomains. Even here there was some snob value. Unless at a purely disintegrating psycho level, literally tearing a domain down to get access she was often not let in. The opposite to a Masher that just wanted to destroy going full on Mental opened domains as it scared the shit out of the more adjusted who were the social glue holding the Web together.

Her psychosis was all her own. Dark, brooding, radiating pure malice, a threatening obsession so tightly wound up it was ready to unravel, right down to the submolecular level. And that spelt doom to the gamer's persona for her DNA was too corrosive, too toxic to neutralise. If deflected the alien dementedness which insinuated itself into the data domain, being one with it like a chameleon virus. Eating it up and spitting out the pieces that didn't enhance her mentally disturbed state of unbeing. Still the plus was that she knew where the more advanced-guarded realms were and at some future time she would be able to configure herself to gain admittance. So her current techno poor bum was so low status the camouflage attracted a zero response. So far. Within she was just short of going psycho. A great feeling being on the edge of madness, playing with insanity's follies. Maybe even trip up the odd Primaian goon.

Her energy status was high as she checked herself with an antique watch which did not tell the time but her level. Ung must have gotten some new sort of cells embedded into the headband. She had never been this charged up before. Possibly nano-generators in the headband. The difference between black market gear and the

real thing from which others were cloned. Ghosting possible. Splitting oneself up so one could be in several places at once. But that took processing power and energy. Carias knew that that level was of a very high persona something she held back, even stayed away from. She wanted to keep low for now. Away even from WebGuardians who dived in if the Primaian's were getting too cheeky.

She entered through the creaking steel door. Her realism delighted her. She spent some energy on the scene in not oiling the hinges. Otherwise if someone else used this portal she might not hear it. The sound localized but really transmitted to her wherever she was. But only to her not the Web.

She was in a disused factory, several stories high, the zigzag roof glowing dim under the moon's pale light. Dormant overhead cranes, disused rusting machinery, old world technology. No one about. No one ever having tampered with her construct either. She had gotten the plans from old historic files prior the nano-revolution. Historic trash, museum pieces as curios, forgotten remnants of the past. Of possible interest to Primaian's but even those astute enough to be techno-savvy saw nothing useful in her wrecked realm. Loaded with access programmes below the surface, underground. In the cavernous basement were obsolete computers, the size of small houses that aligned the rolling mill's rolls to be in synch when processing white hot coils of steel. Now abandoned, defunct, technologically superseded. The place was useful to others only if you wanted to run a steel mill which was neither exiting or sexy.

She moved along the rusted decrepit rolling mill, its tall take-up and receiving towers before the finished products were rolled up at the other end were deserted. She had thought of adding nesting birds to give it more of an abandoned flavour but thought total lifelessness more perfect. The furnaces were black empty holes, broken pipes, some half falling off as she came out of the factory under the night sky. Night in the Web had its own latent energy since it was inserted into the overall construct, a hardened shell against any overt military attack. Warfare another game started courtesy of Prima. Anything to disorient, waylay, disturb the peace in WebWorld. So they played out their ancient primitive murderous remnant instincts until satiated, fulfilled though the Weblords as she thought of them usually disintegrated the upstart Primaians if they became too pesky. No cybersense.

She had even discovered that space travel existed in this meta-vast realm. Just a matter of enough energy credits. One could rent attack cruisers, scouting craft, orbitals, it was all there to be used. The idea was to explore space as a scientist or tourist, not as

the deliverer of mayhem. Primaians were really here as spoilers and spies. The games meant nothing to them unless used for their own disturbing monomaniacal obsession.

The path she took now familiar. Ung had laid it out for her so that she could navigate this multi-dimensional maze more easily. Even now Carias remained on the surface. There was enough there to keep her interested, intrigued and satisfied with her progress. The platforms and templates all in place in her headband. The odd guide light winking within the context of the visual construct to lead her where her head directed her to go.

Ung had another domain. A small town on a beautiful headland, its main industry a recording studio. Here virtual music could be downloaded into the real world, paid with energy credits. Along with visual streaming the energy credits were there for Carias to use. Ung the other partner. Targeted by Primaian spoilers. Some pretended to be musicians but were really hostiles intent on wrecking the studios. Ung created protection using inbuilt scanners. Their brains suffering a massive cyber-fry up. Still they came, and ended up burnt out husks. Music was a sore point with Prima. It distorted their resonance they claimed, twisted the mind into false image realities, rather than seeing music as enriching one's inner dimensionalities. Imagination soared with the music. Movies were even worse, total false realities, abhorred, recreating the overwhelming imagery of the insane.

The abandoned steel mill was now the backdrop to the small coastal village in front of her. The art-deco recording studio had a few interested persona's hanging about. She walked past them to a small bank next door where the proceeds from the studio were deposited. It had even attracted bank robbers, probably Primaian's who were the most violent crims here. Of course the primary vault was a trap and using containment fields draining the would be crims of their energy thus increasing the energy credit in the real hidden vault. She walked into the vault in the basement, then through a secret door into her and Ung's office. Then through another hidden entrance a portal. One had to clamber on top of the desk and it lowered one through the floor into the real vault. The place had enough cyber-bullion to super-charge her for many visits. The recording studio was doing well.

Next to the vault was the automated security system, another ambush if an intruder even got this far. Carias went to the lavatory another portal. The toilet paper was the console which lit up recognising Carias's persona. She was off into space and searched for an available launch window. The Reganians were big on space travel. As such WebWorld was also WebSpace. There both for fun and educational purposes.

Vetting was necessary to screen out Prima's hostiles. She decided to approach one of the many space ports in cyber-mode, from within. Charged up she walked back through the outer bank and into the sunny street. Night might be enshrouding her abandoned steel mill but here daylight painted a picture perfect scenario.

Some heads turned her way then sensed her negative attitude given the gear, the armour she was wearing. With outrageous haircuts, brilliant pinks, electric blues, vibrant lime greens, sparkling face jewellery, glowing tattoos, the usual indie muso's, what the record company specialised in. Some muttered at her attitude not realising she was co-director of the place they sought out.

She hailed a yellow cab deposited her credits and told the dummy driver, probably some enterprising individual to make some credits to take her to the space port she had accessed in the toilet announcing the wish to rent a small operable light-speed cruiser. Relative time travel. Carias knew enough now that time was of no consequence as far as the past went whilst the future was configured to the whim of the user. No doubt stored in Regum's real-time memory banks as possible alternative scenarios.

The cabbie asked her if she wanted to be driven there or just jump. She paid the extra to jump and was deposited at the gate. Her manufactured pass got her past security, robots pretending to be personas. In front of her the large launch towers of massive rockets going up to supply virtual space stations, all to enhance the experience of cyber-realism. Used to train astronauts. She walked over to admin and the assignment – despatch officer. In an immaculate office, a middle aged woman checked her credentials, asked for the requisite energy or real credits. Carias super-charged paid energy credits. It was more expensive than real credit but she reasoned it helped strengthen their shields from Prima's cyber-attacks. The woman smiled graciously. Carias was helping keeping WebWorld and WebSpace secure.

"On a mission or just exploring?" she asked deferentially.

"Exploring."

"Destination, sector."

"The so-called alien world in that other universe." She wanted to know why Prima was so obsessed with these other sentients.

"I'm going to have to scan you. Security, you understand."

"Primaian spoilers."

"Exactly young woman."

Carias felt a warm itch in her head. The office was loaded with scanners.

"Good. No viruses, hidden threats, secreted programmes. You're clear. Space-time coordinates, or real time?"

"Real time, their future, say five years from now. Including space." Carias smiled.

"You expecting trouble?" the woman asked seeing Caria's protection.

"Only from Primaians." she answered outright.

"Ain't that the truth."

"Are they out there, any of them?"

"Not anymore. We ban them. Unless they're the likes of you."

"How can you tell?" Carias not too surprised.

"Character recognition programmes. Nothing that can be nailed down. It's intuitive. Your constrained resonance."

"Ah."

"Type of vessel."

"Research, the best, please."

The woman entered the data onto a light-pad

"Nature of research."

"Stars, the galaxy, the planet, supernovas, dust clouds, asteroids, exotic particles, suns..."

"Total spectrum."

"I want it all."

"No surprise. Prima tells you nothing."

"Secure from Prima's probing."

"That will be extra sending you in in stealth mode."

"Done." And she handed her her e-credit card, swiped, returned.

"You know that your stealth mode will be logged. Ultra secure of course. Your kind won't be able to crack it. They haven't got the means if you want to know. They're not even cognisant of our real capabilities."

"I am relieved. No way I want this to get out."

"You realise of course once you leave this domain even your headband won't have any memory left of your trip. Only your real memories." What she did not tell Carias was that during the cyber-scan, the real processors on Regum had searched their data bases regarding the real Carias. Then scanned Prima from the orbital, piggy backing their containment fields to re-read the real Carias. In an asylum, a positive-neutral user of their WebWorld. Then to the dispatcher via hyper-link giving the clearance for Carias to be off on her journey into the future. According to probability configurations. The

moment she launched the uploading programme would shadow her journey. Saved them using their own operatives.

"Straight insertion or launch sequence?"

"How about time compressed, super fast, for the buzz."

"Done. Now you will be assigned a pilot given the nature of your request."

"A minder."

"Check. Whilst the future is not off limits, it might reveal something sensitive which we would not want Prima to discover."

"Understood. Totally with you there." Carias agreed.

"Let's see whose available, as a persona. Any particular type?"

"Nah, you choose."

"The person will be nameless, unless they want to reveal their ID. Right then...'" and she tapped in her commands. Next to them a young woman appeared in classical jump-suit mode. Glowing light-pad computers on her arms, wired at the neck, direct feed into her head from her headband.

"Pleased to meet you Carias."

"Likewise."

"Looking into the future hey?"

"Too right."

"Your own?"

"Nah, this alien planet's. See who wins that one given the propaganda we're being fed."

"Hm. Good choice."

"Yep. I just hope it ain't them."

"You mean Prima?"

"Yes. For the alien planet's sake."

The astronaut nodded.

"Right you two." The dispatcher said. "Stand in this green circle and you'll be whisked into the cockpit. Ship's been programmed so you should be there in minutes." She smiled. "Have fun ladies."

They stood in the glowing green circle and found themselves in the cockpit, Carias in the co-pilot's seat. Strapped in. No detail of realism overlooked.

"My name is Jorna by the way." As she busied herself with final pre-flight checks, for the realism.

After Carias and Jorna checked out, Jorna's sensors fed a link into a sub-master programme The future. Name specific tags self-activated back at Regum's central cores. Running empty, letting Jorna fill in the future along with Caria's headspace. Getting a psyche profile. Letting the system plan probable future states. Narrowing the potentialities down to actualities the closer one came to the present.

Carias, linked into WebWorld and now WebSpace waited patiently as Jorna went through the motions of the launch sequence. She had no idea that even with the magic of computers certain instructions still had to be made preparatory for the system to configure the realm she wanted to explore. Especially as they were tagged. Her head itched a little which she put down to the intensity of the cyber-reality, its solidness, its reality.

"OK. Ready." Jorna said to Carias whilst continuing the last checks making sure the ship was on-line with Regum's master programme. Then she added: "Given the ramped up speed I hope you got an empty stomach."

Carias laughed. "That intense?"

"You bet. You'll think you're suffocating as well, as if the air was being sucked out of you. You did ask for a light-ship. I also assume this isn't your first time in the Web." For systems checks confirmed Carias's previous entries. She was considered benign, her involvement with the recording studio confirmed that. Amendable to their culture as opposed to the morbid attitude of Primaian spoilers.

"Hang on to your head then or stomach. Taxing to the runway now." She said to the control tower.

"Clear to go." Came the dispatchers reply.

The ship rolled slowly forward from the apron and onto the runway. Guide lights strobed forwards both in the centre and along its edges, the whine of the fusion generators powering up the hydrogen boosters, the ship shuddering slightly as Jorna held the dampeners in check.

Then they were off. The speed was phenomenal as they blasted up at a steep ascent angle. Carias's brain translated the impression all very realistically as she grasped the armrests hanging on for dear life. Straight through the atmosphere and into space, the spiral arm flashing past them, elongated, stretches, streaks, brilliant white light, approaching light speed. Then for one moment everything went white as they were at the speed of light, then still accelerating they were immersed in utter darkness. At faster than light the normal interchange of the universe's information mechanism relying on

entropy was surpassed. They were in a quantum state and glowing data-fields, soft lilac, eerie greens, translucent blues and milky whites cutting through quantum entanglement.

Carias wondered if this was the physical essence of the Divine Mind. Jorna watched the HUD there more for Carias's enjoyment. A dark sombre purple haze surrounded them. The ships systems read it all then took a sample reading for this entangled quantum state, not noticed by Regum's astrophysicists.

Back on Regum the analysts were surprised at the discovery of this new phase state spread across space. With just a few degrees above absolute zero it posed no threat but was there just the same. Configured as some sort of base state with no detectable point of origin. It's location hovering in their universe as a quantum state, exponentially expanding at a remarkable rate. A mystery. Well the universe was the ultimate puzzle. A new phenomena.

Jorna was aware of the mysterious haze overlying or underlying space itself. Then as they continued to accelerate they outran it and it vanished. Back into black.

"We're so fast now no informational content can reach us Carias."

She nodded grasping the idea though not really understanding just how it all worked. The Reganian's thought the universe was information rich. Prima compulsively driven to conclude the existence of the all knowing Cosmic Consciousness. Maybe the two were the same. Just different perspectives.

Then fuzzy red glowing areas appeared.

"That is light travelling backwards. The faster we move the slower relative time is. Every minute years are flashing by in the universe. In a way this is time travel at it's most basic."

Basic Carias thought. That meant they had other means as well. Remarkable. Prima was so constrained. No wonder she felt alienated. And sad. So many possibilities denied to them all because of their persistence in their mono directed attitude of one answer and one answer only. The sadness flooded through her, she felt like crying. But she pulled herself together to enjoy the wonder around her. The emotional wave passed.

"OK approaching your destination. The ship's calculated how far ahead we are, oops, I hope you don't mind but we overshoot your immediate future by a factor of ten."

Ten did not seem much to Carias. Except it was an exponential ten. They were getting decades by the counter.

She slowed the ship down. The light travelling away from them blue shifted, slowly turned white, became points again, stars and in front two massive galaxies spread out in

beautiful shining splendour as the ship headed towards the one on their left. A jewelled spread of stars, travelling at sub-light speed.

The first stars whisked by like street lamps. They were now in an empty pocket of space. The computer's navigational visuals portrayed a planetary system. Past two huge blue liquid gas planets, one large orange swirling monster, then a beautiful golden white ice crusted with disk like rings. The ship moved up over a band of rubble towards a pink-light brown planet with two polar ice caps.

"There you are. The alien planet."

The ship came to an abrupt stop. Jorna engaged multi-spectrum scans. Thin carbon dioxide rich atmosphere with some trace elements. Not enough to sustain life. A planet that might have had some life aeons ago. Might have. Maybe microbes at best or lichen but certainly nothing more complex.

Carias saw the wonder of another world. There were huge mountains given the long shadows they threw, deep dry river valleys, fault lines, sandstorms.

Jorna let Carias take in the view. Then she noticed three other inner planets. One pearly blue and white, it too had ice caps. Further in a white planet with thick cloud cover, acid rain, deadly atmosphere, further in a smaller planet baked by its proximity to the sun.

"Want to check out the other planet? Looks more interesting."

"In a moment Jorna. This is the alien planet Prima has been going on about?"

"Must be."

"Anyone down there?"

"Ship says no. No EM signatures, no apparent technology. Unless they are in the stone age. We'll do a sweep."

The ship dived down skimming over the top of its thin atmosphere. No clouds. Just valleys, mountains and deserts. No rivers, no forests, no roads, no rail lines, no canals, no lakes, nothing. Dry, barren and dead.

"I don't understand."

"What is that Carias?"

"Well we are told it is peopled. Their inimical mind set flooding our universe with their alienness. Supposedly evil, mucking up our universe."

"Well we are light years ahead of ourselves." Jorna did not say this was only one possible future scenario. Regum had insisted on a 'worse-case scenario' and this was it. No life. An icy shudder went through her.

Carias, like all Primaian's had no idea about the real universe, only what they were told. Jorna knew that their astronomers were isolated from the rest of their race, their information curtailed, secreted, buried. Maybe below the inhabitants knowing their planet was dying for whatever reason emigrated. It was a possibility. Yet there was no sign of habitats, travelling space ships, probing satellites. She slowed the ship down looking for ancient ruins, some signs of previous settlements. Nothing. Since water was precious to life she headed for one of the polar ice caps. Maybe they were there. It was frozen carbon dioxide. Some ecological disaster had overtaken the planet. Unless, in this future state, there had never been life there in the first place. It was possible.

"Well since we're here might as well check out the other planet. Unless you want to see more."

"No." Carias was perplexed. "Maybe they got their planets wrong."

Jorna understood immediately. It just might be that. The two ice capped planets, given the huge distance were almost next to each other. She typed in on her glowing light-pad the next set of coordinates. The ship accelerated away from Mars racing through space and parked over the vibrant blue, green, white clouded huge ice capped world below. It looked like an ice age. Maybe that's what caused the other planets demise. Loss of heat. But that would not explain the thin atmosphere. It was a smaller planet though compared to this blue jewel. Had the atmosphere dissipated during it's creation. Had that ecosystem begun to run down before it could be biologically built up? It could not be discounted.

They were over the colourful mosaic below. Even with the ice caps covering nearly a third of the planet if not a quarter there were still huge oceans below. The atmosphere was more balanced, oxygen rich, plus trace elements of nitrogen indicating at least plant life. Sure enough the green patches below designated forests, vast areas of them. This planet had to have life. Whether it was advanced remained to be seen. Again no EM activity.

"Let's have a closer look then."

Carias nodded. More beautiful then Prima. Similar but richer from the patches of forests, grasslands, towering white capped mountains, rivers, thunderstorms, volcanic activity, their smoke plumes visible even from up here. A living planet. With all this turbulence it looked peaceful, nature going about her business.

The ship dived down through thick fluffy white clouds as they headed for the night side. Complete darkness.

"If there are lights then there is civilisation Carias."

"Ah, good point Jorna."

"Hm, nothing. So let's see what daylight reveals."

They were skimming over the surface, over an ocean looking for maritime activity. Nothing but ruffled waters, winds creating heaving waves. Volcanic islands spewing out molten lava and thick sulphurous billowing clouds spreading thin grey ash into the upper atmosphere.

Then Jorna saw it. Ruins. Charred, burnt rubble. Twisted girders. The remnants of a technological city. The centre glassy. Holy shit. Atomic warfare. Maybe Prima was right, maybe they were homicidal. Given the light-distance, about two hundred years it would take that long to get to their universe. They were two hundred years too late to have witnessed the cataclysm of some catastrophic war. Why would anyone do this? Destroy their own world? Below deserted townships, crumbling to dust and ruin as nature reasserted herself. At least the biosphere was in order. Radiation levels were low. On every continent it was the same. Blasted cities, molten rubble, rusting ships in mangled harbours, twisted cranes, wrecked debris. The forests had reclaimed what might have been farms for tiny dotted hamlets were untouched by the awful calamity they had visited upon themselves. If they had done this to themselves. They might have been blasted by an extra-terrestrial warlike race. If so what was the reason to obliterate a whole civilisation? Jorna glad Regum was getting all this.

Carias said nothing. Awestruck by the fascination of the horror that had occurred centuries ago. Jorna flew towards the edge of the upper northern ice cap. Huge screes and monumental boulders as the ice expanded shoving mountains out of the way. Streams of melted ice becoming rivers. Hamlets! Life! Wisps of smoke! Survivors! Hope.

Jorna reminded herself this was virtual. No point making contact. They saw enclosures of cattle, horses, sheep or goats, yellow fields indicating agriculture, a nascent civilisation. Could this have been the planet Prima was obsessed with? Having mistaken one for the other? Very likely. It would be important to let them continue to focus on the possibly wrong planet. Let Regum decide how to deal with this discovery.

Jorna checked Carias's credit status. They were approaching her time limit.

"Time to head back Carias."

"Oh? So soon?" she was lost in thought. Surely these peaceful people, no matter what had occurred could not have any evil intent. They were too basic for that. Unless their ancestors had been homicidal maniacs. Maybe the Ecclesiastics and Divines had been right all the time. But whatever had occurred was over. Gone, blasted out of existence. It was all too sad. She felt herself getting emotional again.

"I hope all this is going your way." Carias sighed.

Jorna merely nodded saying nothing. Her passenger might be compassionate but she was still Primaian.

"One last circumnavigation." More for data collection than Caria's joy ride. They flew over the various undulating landscapes. Broad steppes teeming with herds, thick forests densely packed trees, the towering ice caps, wisps of clouds streaming down, roaring water falls blue tinted chunks of ice cascading down into boulder strewn valleys, the rubble of the scree, over glittering sun lit oceans and back through the cloud cover into space. As the ship's speed increased the light stretched then flared at light speed and vanished as they travelled faster than light. Through the strange purple haze leaving the galaxies behind. Through the blackness of intervening space, the red, white and blue light shift of their spiral armed galaxy, welcoming them home to their universe.

Regum appeared, now familiar having seen the blue white pearl of that distant planet, almost like home. Almost. Jorna seemed perturbed, or the programme was faltering due to some disturbance. Carias looked at Jorna. She was mute, fixed into frozen pixellated immobility, yet the space craft seemed functional. Something going wrong. Well she was no programme.

"Jorna."

No reply. The image breaking up, the details going askew. It was as if the whole control centre was running crazy. Glimpses of dead cities, not the ones on the distant planet. Carias dropped the term alien from her vocabulary. A blasted civilisation. The images around her now, for the ship was blended, meshed, then unmeshed and remeshed into the overall view of Regum. Glimpses of ruined skyscrapers, abandoned, forlorn, deserted. Rubbish strewn streets, abandoned trams, halted monorails, burnt out wreckage of crashed planes, charred mangled grotesquely twisted bodies strewn about, smaller buildings burnt out. A momentary scene of the spaceport, the burnt out hull of a chemically powered rocket that must have lifted off then crashed for some reason. Remnant charred blackened ground and the cowed presence of SpaceKorps looking guards. Yet no insignia, just their black body suits guarding the base. Then the complete picture frozen into a crazy tapestry of truncated abstractions barely recognisable amongst the surround-imagery of her insertion.

Had the whole system crashed or just hers? Her headband's AI component unable to log in to anything! Or conversely Carias logged out. Had 'they' gotten to her? Fehna's obsession. Bastards, wrecking her joy ride. She thought of her dad, of being found out. Someone had wrecked not just her link, but trashed the whole scenario.

She remembered what Jorna had said about relative time travel. Or had that knowledge been somehow transferred? No matter. The faster the speed the slower the time or was that faster? Or both? Oh yes, her time slowed, outside time sped up. So this was a possible future of a possible future. Her head reeled. Science was not taught to the average Primaian, even if she belonged to the tight knit group of Families harking back to the old days.

Had they duplicated this in Reganian WebSpace? It was one possibility. So how had they wrecked the complete Web? They, the Primaian's didn't have the know-how to run anything accept basic data files. Crashing them would take an amazing leap of acquired knowledge. She could not see Regum wrecking its own future unless the DVs had gotten them to do it for them. Herself not included even though she was in. It did not make sense unless WebSpace was separate from WebWorld.

She thought of reversing her trajectory, going backwards to get out. Could her headband override the ship's system for it was still there with the immobile Jorna. The outside flashing crazy colours, disjointed bits and pieces of decaying data files. She searched the consoles spread. Let's try reverse then. She punched the button. Sure enough. Back went the ship. How strange. The fragmented pictures uncollapsed and they were above Regum again, the planet whole. Stop. They stopped. Jorna animated once more except she was talking backwards. It sounded weird. In the distance Prima at the opposite of its orbit around their sun. She certainly was not going in that direction.

"Ship. Search for any other inhabited planet." Thinking that just maybe a third force was playing, or a proxy of Prima extending their dark design. "Scan the other spiral arms." When nothing showed along theirs, Carias congratulated herself when another pink-yellow planet appeared. She reminded herself she was in the future but had no idea how far. She searched the console tracking sets of numbers. They were in the millions. At least there was a plus sign in front of it.

"Zoom in please." She always talked to programmes politely considering herself a guest in their system. The Reganian's had as many different attitudes as their users. Some non-challant, some aggressive, some awed like her happy to just be there.

The planet's disk expanded. Wow. It looked a bit like the dead world she had seen. Cloud cover, some dark tinted vegetation along rims of lakes, a vast ocean and a city! Towering skyscrapers, several space ports. Had the Reganian's abandoned their world and successfully emigrated to this new world? She hoped so. A rocket blasted off, it's white ball of light unmistakable like a tiny sun at its exhausts billowing bright white clouds of condensation. A liveable atmosphere then.

Maybe they knew what happened back on Regum.

"Ship, can you access a public domain data base?"

The ship remained mute.

"Let me."

"Jorna, you're back." Carias was pleased.

"Back?" she looked puzzled. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. But look another planet on the next spiral arm."

"How'd you get here?" she looked intrigued and a little suspicious of Carias having taken over.

"Short story. I asked the ship to look for another planet. And there it is."

"We're supposed to be landing. I hope your credit's good."

"Must be. There is something else..." and Carias told her of the crashed programme.

Jorna remained silent. Having considered her predicament she said: "So if I go back I get deleted."

"Yes. I stopped the ship the moment you froze up. Then it all fell apart around us as I said."

"I have to find out what went wrong."

"They destroyed everything Jorna."

"So as long as I remain in space I'm fine."

"As long as you remain before the time of the disaster you will be fine."

"Of course. Thank you Carias."

"Pleasure. I hate Primaian's. Planet's nice though." She smirked.

"Ye-e-e-s." Jorna understanding Carias's distinction. "What are you going to do?"

"Well I can exit right here. Bit abrupt but it shouldn't have any effect apart from freeing up computational space for you."

"You're right there."

"I have to get this information out."

"I'm thinking the same thing Carias."

"You know I can't believe this."

"Neither can I but we must."

"No." Carias shook her head, "I meant here I am talking to a programme in virtual reality."

"There is a user behind me. I'm not autonomous. Many are but Primaian's get assigned a user, not just a persona. It's supposed to be a secret of course but well you

saved my programme, and alerted my user. So whatever Prima did in this one future will at least be on file. So the data was wiped at the End of the Programme Carias." As Jorna accessed a light screen. Red numbers. Carias guessed worse was to follow. The orbital over Prima linked onto Caria's cyber-presence, traced the link to the Reganian user, crashed and wiped the data. The lights went out.

Carias was back in her room. The whole event a future nightmare. She was stunned. She hoped the user on Regum remembered the dark future.

At 'Human Resources' the on duty surveillance agent secured the data from Carias's headband, clamped-down the file with encryption, then deposited it in a lock-down cyber vault. Now even he could not access it.

Delira's cyber-presence was alerted to the presence of a ship, two persona's, real-time users. She was overseeing the construction of their new virtual world of Novus. The actual planet at the tip of the closest spiral arm, a freak really with a breathable atmosphere, mostly desert probably due to some solar cycle of it's sun and devoid of any inhabitants, it was the perfect place for Regum to experiment. The cover: factory ships to build the infrastructure, a super multi-nodal processor used nano bots to build the infrastructure, living quarters and office blocks, support factories, maintenance hubs. Bio-engineering transformed the pristine landscape with thousands of seedlings to reafforest the desert. When done conventional methods would take over. The idea that Novus was not a show piece. If anything it was retro-designed. It would be a place for tourists, gamblers and high flyers. A spaceport and heavy industry guaranteed a manufacturing base. And most importantly, a-political.

Delira's task was to map Prima's anticipated interaction, for Regum was going to declare it an open planet. Given the political stand-off's and Prima's entrenched view that they were for ever right in all things, having a neutral political zone might get their more moderate elements on side.

The sudden appearance of a light-ship having gone off course in WebSpace now took her attention. The two crew members, Carias and the Jorna persona. Yet something was at odds there. The ship's programme had frozen when attempting their re-entry into Regum's spatial environment. The whole scenario collapsed, had been messed with, hacked and trashed. They then had reversed out and come here. They or their ship not the cause. The incident was flagged. She would wait and see what they wanted here.

Novus was no secret even if Prima was in the dark about Regum's expansion and colonisation of their new planet. Or if they knew they did not care. Moments later the light ship retraced its time line. Sure enough Regum's relative future was there as the two of them headed back to the Regum of their cyber-space-time continuum. Most unusual. The processors mute. The run sequence simply ended and that was that. Carias was unceremoniously dumped whilst Jorna was wrapped within a probing data sphere utterly shut off and out from the rest of the Web. Obviously a glitch that ought not have to developed. Delira checked their programme, future state scenarios going hundreds of years in the future. Blank. Not even white noise or any other. Just nothingness. The programme's limits had probably been reached. But this close? No Primaian presence noted. So the cause could be internal not external. Part of her brief, as was anybody patrolling WebWorld and WebSpace was to keep tabs on Prima's inserted spoilers. Activity was at a minimum. It let off steam, venting their frustrations and Primaians were loaded with these, to let loose in the Web. It revealed more about them than they realised and did minimum damage in the system itself. It was self-reconfiguring anyway so whatever they did was usually undone. This time the system went frantic then re-establishing prior norms. No actual damage. The Primaians simply had neither resources or know-how to cause this chaos. Systems control even gave them some leeway so that their pathological traits when raging were mapped with ease. Religion certainly spawned some very unusual psychological behavioural patterns. Delira was learning fast. They were usually impressive types filled with an overriding ideologically bent, blind-siding most of their rational parts of their brains. It was all collected and collated, the files mounting up to give Regum a psychological profile of their cyber-wreckers. Classic ego-driven domination of the environment and those populated within it, be it in cyber or real space.

She looked once more at the future mess, isolating the pixellated mayhem, storing it in a general dump of pretended useless information. She rechecked Caria's persona. Highly intelligent for a Primaian, a Natural. She'd been in plenty of times with some enhanced capabilities. Obviously Carias more mentally balanced than the rest of her kind. Neither did she engage the spoilers which gamers delighted in bringing down. The Primaian's had no chance in the Web. They were sitting ducks. They tried to subvert other personas with some luck but one could simply pretend to be floored and reboot so that the attempted sabotage was of no consequence. Nor had Carias sought out information banks, data-spheres, even if it was in the public domain. Nor following architectural foundation streams, create viruses or camouflaged any active hostile

malware. In there to enjoy herself. If only the rest of her race could appreciate the inner beauty of the Web, use it for what it was, relaxation, fun or learning.

Hyper- technology was the future, the present which to Prima was considered some sort of invasion of pure space. Real space was anything but pure. It might be pure in the cyber realm but in reality it was awash with energy. From long to short EM waves, add to that mix all the possible PWs. Space loaded. No wonder most of the universe was filtered out of their heads. Only a vastly superior EAI, like QCs and in the Web VQCs could see the whole picture. Naming it something mystical changed nothing.

The end of her shift was approaching. Things were progressing regarding Novus, the place would be open within a few weeks. It would be months yet before the first real émigrés began to make the real time journey there. But at least they could familiarise themselves in WebSpace, Primaian's included. The casino beckoned. The idea was to get them onboard, not isolate them. Inclusion dispelling unfamiliarity. Each adjusting to the other.

Kythus walked in just as Delira bailed out, removing her helmet, her eyes adjusting to the normal lighting of the control room. He was double her age, the first character lines forming around his dark yes. His skin smooth, mild mannered, hard headed. He sometimes went into the Web to destroy spoilers blowing them into pixellated dust. He took no prisoners.

"Anything?"

"They hit a no-go zone." Calling up Carias's journey. Whilst Delira was with master control Jorna was in the basement as an active operative. She had already downloaded her report and signed off. Kythus watched the holographic replay.

"Ah."

"Just exploring. Went to have a look-see at Mars and Earth. Future state light years ahead of themselves. Earth's cities wrecked, blasted. Probable atomic warfare. Mars dead and when they came back even further ahead of themselves the programme gave out. So they just bailed out. Oh yes, they had a quick look at Novus as well."

"So the disaster scenario's bear out."

"One possibility Kythus." She said matter of fact.

"Earth will have many wars but they always bounce back. Remarkable race. A combination of Primaian psychic abilities and our technological mind set. And you said Mars was dead? Their eco-system was always fragile, balancing just above the threshold of immanent collapse. Just a slight change in solar activity enough for it to run down."

"Earth in an ice age."

"That would explain it then." Watching their journey. "So what did they do on Novus?" as the planet appeared with the lightship hovering over it.

"Absolute nothing. Just had a look as you can see. How's the dissemination going regarding that?"

"Slowly. The Primaian's momentarily unconcerned."

The view changed to the end run of their return, the images breaking up and collapsing. Momentary glimpses of dead skyscrapers, the wreckage of crashed planes, abandoned trams, litter, burnt out buildings.

"This is our future?" he pulled a face.

"I don't think the Web's been configured this far. I've routed it into the dump."

"Yes, the probabilities expand exponentially over time. I guess we'll get around to exploring the future if we get extra computational power. But not in the immediate future." Kythus was aware their resources were being channelled into the distant Solar Station. The QC and cloned dummy, to confuse Prima which one was what, as the real one was self assembling in far space was running a constant potential threat analysis regarding Prima's reactions and intent. If they discovered it. No one gave Regum any thought. The Solar Station was a priority one project. The cyber-clone an engineering exercise for students. No one here had an inkling of its real functions. Everyone assumed it was to explore space. In a way that was true. The difference was in how. That would remain the dominant secret.

"DVs?"

"Nothing. They're busy with Mars. Some entangled with Earth. They got their resonances mixed up focussing on two planets. You'd think they were smarter than that."

"Over focussed with their success."

"Too right there. Plus targeting us, and themselves, they certainly got their heads full."

"How aware of our mission there?"

"Well, with Carias's future scenario over Mars devoid of anything it might lull them into the idea that Mars won't be a threat to them. As for our remote inserts we're still downloading, sequencing their mind sets. Looking good."

"At the moment." Delira replied cautiously.

"At the moment." Kythus concurred. He opened a light console and called up Carias's downloaded data. Her brain scan showed lit up patches. Balanced. No overriding emotional responses. A rare Primaian.

"Well keep an eye out for her. This wrecked Earth. Make sure the Primaian's stumble across it if they ever get that far. Let them think they are dominant."

"Good idea. It'll boost their sense of importance."

"Precisely. A future where they gain the upper hand. Better not disabuse them of that illusion."

"Kythus, any chance it could be real?"

"Could be. One in a million." He replied unconcerned. "Can't see how though. Unless it's some cosmic catastrophe like a supernova going off in near space, irradiating the planet. But that wouldn't trigger an ice age. Could be cyclical. None projected in the immediate future, but well..."

"I meant the dead end."

"Oh that. We can future scan to make sure if it were to occur we can secure the mainframes, the data bases. The orbitals are protected so they'll be fine."

The hologram was stuck at the moment of fracture.

Prima's cultural attaché on Regum sent out an alert. They had the identity of the user who had been with Carias: Jorna. These people were so naïve. So sure of themselves that they thought by having everything in the open data realm as cyber constructs they were thus secure. The attaché was of course not appraised of what Prima's Ecclesiastics had in mind when he received his orders sent flash encrypted.

He assembled a team of extreme volatiles. There were a few around in their open society. Psychopaths had their uses.

Four masked women, they seemed far better focussed and secretive than their male counterparts, appeared at the user's apartment and blew her away. Then they burnt the computers using portable blow torches knowing there would be downloaded files regarding the trip which was deposited in the user's system. Those on sensitive missions as isolates who later would transfer whatever they gathered physically. Not this one. Parts of her brain an abstract pattern splattered on the wall of her private unit.

Upon returning to the cultural attaché to report they shot him as well. The plan, whatever it was, for they didn't know themselves had to be kept secret. The resultant political fall-out would help obscure further the reason for the attaché's cold blooded murder. The Reganian's would be in a spot. Then they accessed the domain and deleted the assassination planet wide claiming cyber pollution of psycho-pathological content loaded with malware, psychotronic boosted invasive viral infections. Creating the perfect psychopaths. Smart hackers would finally arrive as the hit squad taking out

Kythus, destroying all files regarding the end run. They then launched their aggressive data hungry nano bots to delete everything regarding Regum's end-run. One possible future the Primaian did not wish to reveal. Curious. Murdering a cyber construct. For what the hit squad did not know was that the real Kythus was secure in a research laboratory deep underneath the City. Delira his counterpart had her double, her second gestalt in a cyber station, testing it's virtual computers by going into the Web to check its guts. Have its logic gates tested via virtual realities. Delira was informed of Kythus's cyber death. He would transform, persona as yet undecided. Underground in a separate cell her cyber personality in space started a run sequence to trace the hit squad. It looked Primaian. Others would take over whilst securing her cyber and real presence.

Once outside Kythos's building, attuned to get past the indifferent inner security, a token presence she saw four young black clad, sexy looking women walk in and out. With no idea that this group was walking into a cyber diversion. Thus security's indifference. Gamers. What the women did not know was four priests assigned to them followed them as they dispersed after Jorna's deletion, following their orders. Each one on their way home executed. The priests then informed the police of their action. Given their diplomatic status and having rid Regum of four psychopaths they were merely expelled, the whole sorry saga quickly brushed under the carpet. Diplomatically dealt with. The culprits of this most embarrassing violence removed extra-judicially back to Prima, all loose ends quickly tied up. The job for the police done. Why these misguided gamers wanted to murder Kythos's secondary persona, unless sending a message remained a mystery. More so as Prima then had the Gamers assassinated and the culprits enveloped in diplomatic immunity. As they had done Reganian society a favour, getting rid of four misguided souls the Reganians did not probe too deeply into the affair. Four deranged young women deleted. Kythos's private domains wiped. But not the deeper contents regarding his official duties. His secret life. The murdered cultural attaché, the authorities reasoned had gone rogue. Officially. Unofficially investigations were stonewalled by Primaian delegates. The Reganians gave up.

However, it became a cause celebre for a while for these murders were sensational. Not that many worried. Prima's presence was tolerated, just. Why the cultural attaché was shot by four very unbalanced minds just showed how dangerous they were. Their demise, his demise caused no embarrassing questions. Rather it was received by the public with relief. Prima might tread more cautiously when dealing with Reganian's, aware of their cultural sensitivity. One did not murder murderers. Prima's embassy staff were chastised and they accepted the admonition to go through proper channels next

time. The psychopaths should have been helped. Just goes to show, when under the influence of their religious mind-set the cold blooded viciousness displayed by the priests a potent reminder just what atrocities were executed in the name of their belief system.

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Prima

Lord Pentham smiled graciously at Lady Lehra, dressed in a suave minimalist subtle design of her one piece flowing couture. Muted soft grey, it covered in one graceful sweep her lithe body. On her sandalled feet flashed studded jewels, sparkling with her matching diamond necklace. Her rich auburn hair flowed in waves to pale shoulders. Her sensuous lips parted as she looked admiringly at Lord Pentham who took her proffered delicate hand and kissed it as if she were the pontiff herself.

"You are as radiant as ever. Your humble admirer is pleased to be graced by your magnanimous company." He purred with a twinkle in his eyes. She responded radiantly exuding her familiar warmth at the compliment. Pentham was in love with her, a love that would never be satisfied. Lehra was too smart to get involved with any of her suitors. Something volatiles might indulge in. She preferred secret assignations.

They were standing in her delightful garden. Bushes displayed their blossoming flowers, cool tall trees afforded welcoming shade. A vine covered latticed patio was set for her other guests. Cushioned seats around a low table where delicious bon mots, exotic fruits, chilled wines in glistening silver coolers were awaiting their pleasure, bottles of cordials alongside sparkling in the sun.

Pentham saw Jor, well groomed as always in a white two piece and his podgy ruddy faced friend Gorf, an unfortunate name who exuded his usual bon homie as they discreetly avoided eye contact whilst Pentham and Lehra exchanged pleasantries. A retainer hovered inconspicuously in the background having seen to the wants of her guests whom she dismissed now they were all here. They made great spies, listening to the conversations, informing Lady Lehra later as to who said what to whom. But not today. Not this afternoon.

"Where have you been you gavalant?" she teased Pentham who had not seen Lehra for a while. She took his arm into hers, snuggling up to him, her soft perfume just noticeable, reminiscent of spring's blossoming fragrance. Jor was his usual distant self feigning boredom, making a show of an effort to bother to deign himself, like a time

stressed executive to tear himself away from his busy schedule to make his presence available to her like some reluctant sacrifice. Gorf of course was anybody's, naïve, pleasant, vacant. The young idle rich basking in the shadows of their elders. Pentham knew of course she used them to drain information out of them. Jor by what he did not say and Gorf through his volubility especially when relaxed and drinking.

Lehra's intimacy with Lord Pentham would not go unnoticed, her intention. It would spread through the elite's idle time servers which amused Pentham. Lehra was a good friend and they got along extremely well. Their resonance's clicked. Lehra of course was too discreet to ever engage Pentham in any real or meaningful conversation knowing full well the best way to get any information was by being patient. He was her highest catch and as such treated him with coy reverence. Everybody of course in these rarefied and highly stratified circles wanted to know what Telafus was thinking, planning, engaged in. Since Gharbel and Qatus remained more outside these chattering circles only created a greater interest in Pentham who was one of the three most powerful domain lords on the planet.

Jor chaffing at the bit for having to live in the shadow of his esteemed father, a diplomat of high standing who had no intention of letting his wastrel son near any of his tight circle of acquaintances. So Jor pretended to be more important and more connected than he really was. Gorf was the opposite, an extension of his families entrepreneurial activities was good for information regarding Regum's commercial activities. These two families barely deigned to recognize Lehra's standing amongst the Families. Her husband had passed away years ago and everybody considered that her doing. Nothing of course was said to her face but behind her back, of which she was aware. Dark mutterings regarding her wealthy status, how she had acquired that wealth as she was now one of the largest landholders on Prima. Mainly in the outlands which lowered the social elite's esteem of her but her wealth was phenomenal and that could not be denied.

Lehra had no problem with not just keeping up appearances but being almost exaltedly so amongst them. Her string of male friends and lovers caused tongues to wag which amused Pentham. It had its shock value. Probably her very intention all along. Loose lips and all that. She accepted the gossip with amused grace as the two of them, giving the impression of secret intimacies approached in one fluid movement of relaxed grace the languidly seated Jor and his eager friend Gorf who looked almost longingly at the two of them.

"You have met Jor?" she asked Pentham as she studied Jor with repressed resignation. Jor's family saw themselves as some powerful presence, kept their standing by initiating and orchestrating whispering campaigns to lord it over their equals. They leaked information like a sieve, most of it half cocked, off track, misinformed. It really revealed their impotence beyond their immediate social circles. Through Lady Lehra Pentham could filter out the gossip, reveal their frustrations. Jor was the weakling, sullen, resentful for he really had no place at all even in his family. An appendage at best who was barely tolerated. His vapid demeanour did not help him yet for Lehra he was a conduit into the isolated world of some families. She hoped he would vent his spleen, making sure the wine kept on flowing.

Pentham neither cared nor bothered with Jor. The pontiff's palatial courtiers put it about that Pentham was barely favoured by His Grace which suited him fine. So Lady Lehra even being seen with Pentham whose star was supposedly waning, by letting him grace her presence in her own sanctum, and she had several, would throw the gossip mongers into a tizz. Others of course hinted she would go down with him and were waiting for a sign from above for that to occur. Lehra knew better. She as well as Pentham barely deigned to acknowledge the rumour mill, since the hangers on only just held their own in Prima's hothouse of power hungry families.

Even so Lehra was still a wealth of information. Except for her jaunts into space. No one knew of that. When she vanished everybody assumed she was distracting herself with a new lover. So far the cover held. Then when she returned she made a grand entrance in her saloon, a coffee shop where the lower artists, raconteurs, those with literary aspirations and off beat musicians congregated. Some of the family's younger offspring mingled there, getting a taste of the street, a whiff of the gutter, an inkling of dark things gestating in the sewers below.

Pentham never visited her saloon at the edge of the holy city where during the day, the idle rich, the pretentious thinkers and the bored heretics preened themselves in the open. Night was reserved for the creative, creatures of their own fermenting imaginations, dabbling in forbidden lore, strange drugs, exotic potions, the dark arts. Or so it was rumoured. For Pentham her saloon revealed the attitude's of the families, their resonant state and their solidity or lack of, politically. The authorities allowed its existence. The disgruntled let off steam, the spies amongst them kept Pentham informed just as Qatus and Gharbel were through the use of renegades trawling the street.

A young woman appeared who to Pentham's astute mind did not fit the standard. She must have been inside the house as she stopped in her tracks seeing Lehra

with Pentham. Short cropped hair, obviously a spacer which instantly intrigued him. They were a rarity on the planet. Only those with special clearance were allowed under the 'law of return'. They were almost a chosen race in themselves. She had to have a tight resonance, uncontaminated by the alien influx to be allowed down. Jor was staring at her with that snide look when he felt outdone by a more intelligent presence. It was probably the reason he kept Gorf with him, someone he could lord it over.

Lady Lehra introduced Ratze.

"I have heard good things about you Lord Pentham." She said easily. He was relieved at her pleasant straight forwardness. Her smile seemed cheeky as if the setting amused her as well. He kissed her outstretched hand. Jor made a pretence of being bored. Ratze a nobody.

Pentham murmured his delight at meeting her. She had lively grey eyes. If she was a spacer, who else sported short hair, then she had to be smart as well. A nice change. If she was with the DVs she would have psychic capabilities. Yet his mind felt nothing. She was being her natural self. He welcomed that. But he would remain just a little on his guard.

A houseboy appeared and waited behind them ready to serve. Lehra dismissed him saying that the staff could have a rest. They would serve themselves.

Lehra motioned them to be seated. Pentham sat next to her, Ratze on his other side facing Jor and Gorf. Lehra poured Pentham some white wine then passed the bottle to Ratze who refilled her glass and returned it to the silver ice bucket.

"I think you know Jor." Lehra playing the good hostess. Jor extremely well groomed pretended to be suitably impressed at Lord Pentham's presence. He moved with a show of languid interruption as if in deep thought only to be distracted. It did not work with Pentham who studied him like some unusual and distasteful specimen.

"Your lordship." Was all he said

"Thinking were we?" Pentham laughed lightly. Jor returned a blank look knowing full well the hidden barb intended his way.

"I'm Gorf" his ruddy face flushed a warm ambience.

"Pleased to meet you young man." Pentham said more softly.

"No the pleasure is all mine sir." Gorf replied solicitously.

Jor was not pleased, his posture tight. Jor's pretentious demeanour did not wash yet Lehra would not have invited him merely for his company. Obviously his family or their circle were of interest to her.

Gorf's eyes were a little hazy from the wine, amendable as Jor withdrew back into himself. Ratze simply enjoyed herself letting the men establish their pecking order. She was here to learn, acquaint herself with the social milieu for future reference. She had waltzed into Lehra's saloon a while back and slowly by engaging in witty if brainless conversation leisurely attract the attention of Lehra who liked her no nonsense approach, once she allowed herself to open up a little. So here she was.

Lehra nibbled on a piece of fruit.

"So what do you make of Caria's incarceration?" Jor blurted bluntly. "Some families are cracking up." Whilst not asking anybody Pentham knew the question was directed at him. Pentham was not about to reveal his work to this stropky puppy.

"No one is perfect." He said dismissively. It was an event in itself, rare but not completely unusual.

"Sad really." Lehra diffusing Jor's acidic comment. Probing into other people's realms. Ratze interested, Pentham could tell. Well she was off-world and probably missed some real social interaction.

"Cracking up?" Ratze asked.

"Yes cracking up." Jor eyeballed her as if she were dense.

"I heard that..." Gorf began but Jor cut him off and finished with "...she regressed."

"You know her then." Ratze challenged, intrigued how Primaian's dealt with their fallen.

"Know of her." as if that decided it.

"It's your assumption." Lehra said decidedly. Pentham wondered if that was why he had been invited. When families fall the planet's resonance is under threat from within. Caria's a difficult case. The gossip alone saw to it. For that alone Pentham staid out of it.

"And don't believe," Lehra continued, "what her mother has put about. All we know is Carias is there voluntarily. A retreat, a rest. Youth can exhaust itself Jor." She looked at him.

"Well then if the word 'regressed' is offensive, how about 'contaminated'. Same thing. The whole family should be quarantined." Jor expostulated. Gorf helped himself to some bon mots, Ratze followed suit.

"Sounds like Lord Dhekan Jor." Gorf said lightly. "And he should know, he deals with them. So should he be isolated as well?" Jor looked hard at him as if some act of betrayal occurred with that declamation.

"The day will come when the scum will be cleaned out Gorf." Jor replied pointedly. "Sympathisers are next. For the simple reason of cross contamination. We need to purify ourselves."

'Don't we just.' Pentham thought cynically. Jor's kind he was familiar with. More of a nuisance, urged on by the priests. He felt Ratze's presence. Was she reading Jor? Hope so, see what she came up with.

"The resonance Jor self rectifies." Pentham said pleasantly meaning Carias's case was of no major consequence. "The scum you refer to is there by divine will. The system needs diversity which, to remind you, strengthens not the other way round."

"We are heading for another calamity." Jor would not back off. "Thanks to the heresies." Changing tack. "If the elite are infected then the poison is already within us. There will have to be a reckoning."

"You could also be infected." Ratze said evenly.

Jor stared at her.

"Me? Ha! You yourself expose yourself for the greater good. We appreciate that of course..."

"So we would know firsthand how this distortion manifests. Clinically speaking your emotional outburst seems volatile Jor. Maybe an intense scan to make sure you are stable..." Ratze trailed off, not caring what Jor thought helping herself to some more wine. Very tasty.

Lehra must be after something Pentham thought. Jor really was a nobody, one among many. Yet if that is what his generation thought, excluding themselves from the accusation then an ill wind was indeed blowing through them all. Maybe these outbursts were signs of infection Pentham thought.

Jor tore his gaze away from Ratze, drained his glass then petulantly held it out to be refilled. Lehra did the honours. She was used to the company of drinkers.

"Jor," Lehra said as she poured, "we are at peace with ourselves. The divine reality is as is and we are grateful to be in a state of grace. The heretics of course are not, and funnily enough you are not either. As such where is the difference then? The clinical symptoms appear no different." Lehra said reasonably.

Jor was struggling with his wine driven demon, creating inner havoc Ratze realised delightedly. Drunks could be interesting even if boring.

"Blinded. That's how the great deception starts." Jor was breathing quickly his eyes blazing, the fever of the fanatic. "Through indifference, accepting the unacceptable. That's how the heretics and unbelievers will destroy us."

"Why would they do that?" Ratze asked.

"Why? Why?" Jor worked himself up. "Why does any heretic, apostate or atheist want to destroy anything. Because they are unstable, reverting to true form. They want to regress our supreme evolution. They want to usurp the divine mind. Maybe they want to be the divine mind."

Jor was certainly affected. It was always said a drunk reveals himself Pentham thought. He was certainly borderline, but amongst the families it was brushed aside, indulged even. Except for Carias. If everybody who was borderline was removed then there would not be many family members left if Jor was a typical case. Luckily Pentham hoped he was not.

"The divine mind knows all, creates all right Jor?" Ratze asked reasonably.

"What?" he looked at Ratze suspiciously then took a generous drink. Gorf made himself a plate of savouries. Lehra was enjoying the show as was Pentham. If this was a reflection of the microcosm then they were in trouble.

Jor sat down the glass with exaggerated care. "So?"

"So the fallen, the volatiles, the mentally ill are all part of the design."

Pentham smiled a little. Nice one. The School of Absolute Thought. Everything that is, is. Simple, direct, irreproachable if uncomfortable with mystics, the priesthood, the Ecclesiastics, or the Divines Pentham's mind perambulated. Jor seemed stumped.

"It's a test." Gorf said with his mouth full.

"See? Even Gorf can figure that out." Jor said pleased with his friend's lifeline. Gorf frowned. His happy expression remained in place but something passed through his mind. Jorf's dismissal of Gorf by that statement stuck, his civilised expression remained for the sake of the company. Jor of course was oblivious to anything but himself. The rest were his audience there for his amusement. If they could not see what was going on around them, within them then it was up to him and others to set things straight, for the good of the planet

"So," Ratze said at last, since nobody was going to challenge Jor, "that heretics were created for the sole purpose of you reforming them? Isn't that rather a waste of time? Or worse a sign of imperfection within the perfect?" she asked without rancour.

"Oh it's much worse than that." Not even considering Ratze's reasoning. "The cracks in space are already there, the alien poison destroying our souls which you think is nothing, excepting everything, anything to keep the peace. Do nothing, it is the divine will. Well it is not the divine will but an evil intelligence that is confounding us all."

"I think the confusion is a matter of perspective Jor."

"That is right..." Having forgotten her name. "The only standard acceptable is that of the divine mind. Anything less is false. If you knew what I know in my heart, what is festering in my soul thanks to the fallen..." he broke off dramatically, truly suffering. They were all surprised at his emotional turn.

"What do you know then?" Lehra chipped in.

"The disturbances came by degrees to fool us all. Infecting us slowly. I am at least wrestling with that. I refuse to let it take me over. The divine will is my saviour, my bedrock, my strength and my victory. The great battle has begun. We must arise as one. Remove the fallen so we can be supreme, to do his will as intended since the beginning of time right unto eternity. You should know." He looked at Ratze.

When she said nothing Jor continued: "The divine mind has lost confidence in us. That is why there are doubters, the degenerates who are drawn into the Web and the rest. We are being abandoned for we have sinned in our hearts, our minds. And we will all go down if we continue in this manner. That is what is plaguing me, for I have seen the truth."

"You're obsessed." Was all Ratze said.

"I am not. Yes maybe I am. Obsessed to reclaim the universe from the enemy. For if we do not lift ourselves to the great mind then we are doomed for I have seen the final revelation and the terrible future it harbours..." he trailed off exhausted.

They were all a little stunned. What had begun as a pleasant afternoon had turned into mental mayhem. Pentham took careful note of Jor's mental state. Disturbing if he was not the only one. Lehra paid attention because if that was what the young thought then if they grew up and assumed positions of influence a dark religious age awaited them. Ratze focussed on Jor because here was a study of a psycho-pathological state of mind. If Jor's kind was the future...her mind recoiled at the thought. These fanatics had to be isolated before they could weave their way into the power structure.

"Want to know who these aliens are? Hey?" Jor seemed to have resurfaced out of his alcoholic daze. They humoured him and waited.

"We. Us. We created them." Jor was certain of that.

"What?" Ratze said for all of them. Her Brain staying out of this. It was too close to the truth. If she agreed it might blow her cover.

"Didn't know that did you? And if the DVs know, they're not saying. Any who know are BrainDrained so that we don't know of our own terrible future." When no one replied he continued even forgetting his wine. "They know our future. And knowing our

past are manipulating it, through the Reganians, through their insidious web to create us in their horrific image." Jor was rambling but to Ratze within those convulsions a glimpse of another reality, gestating behind the scenes. Her Brain certain.

"Those that do not comply are preyed upon by soul vampires. They are engineering Prima's downfall by any means available in the cosmos and they are winning. We have more fallen every day. Like Carias it has now seeped into the ancient revered families. It has risen right to the top. So we have to exterminate them, cut out the cancer so they cannot grow and mutate, cannot physically escape by going into space to plan their evil deed." He breathed heavily. "There. Satisfied? Now who is insane?"

"Why doesn't the great cosmic mind stop them?" Ratze was puzzled as she always was when dealing with religious logic.

"Because, they are beyond space and time, beyond our universe. They created their own evil universe and it is all around us now. Filled with their insipid intelligence. And if we even have the slightest intercourse with them, short of wiping them out then we are lost, forever."

"That would mean the great mind is impotent Jor."

"So," Gorf began, having finished his platter, "this dark future is drawing on our souls right now. Our heretic thoughts are like nourishment to them so that we are creating our future malformations in a sinister resonance that will eventually destroy us as we are, using Regum and that other planet as their power?"

"At least you seem to understand Gorf." Jor said relieved.

"I don't understand Jor. Because if they destroy us they'll destroy the very base they are using to be their future selves."

"Not physically, oh boy. Why are you so...it's...mentally present, its, spiritually empowered by us and it feeds off us psychically."

Ratze sighed. This could go on for ever. Alcohol did that. She knew enough for the moment. Lehra and Pentham had exchanged looks which could only mean they wanted to be alone, later. As for Gorf he had seen his friend in a new light. His real resonance had come through. Their friendship she sensed was about to disengage.

Jor's crazy talk though was interesting if a little beyond the credible. Yet a future Primaian race that had grown out of their old religious mind set could, if mastering time somehow influence their relative past to lead and guide them into a mentally disturbed, religiously burdened future, totally unlike Regum. With their future capabilities technologically on one planet and natural psychic abilities on the other, then AI systems could develop if these two aspects were to be united. It could really supercharge

Regum into a great future. Whilst Prima remained fixated with this monomania Regum had the chance to break out of all the alternatives they were facing. It was an interesting possibility.

Ratze knew enough for the moment. Jor's mind had splashed out as liberally as spilt wine. Her Brain was satisfied. Primaian's were through their religion becoming more Volatile. That meant social dysfunctionality. The best place to ride out the rising brainstorms was up there.

She rose and said her goodbyes. She made the quick rounds, saying Pentham could remain seated as could Lehra, acknowledged Gorf who seemed a little disappointed that she was leaving so soon, nodded at Jor and made her own way out.

Prima could be disintegrating mentally. The only problem was that the mad, the insane were unpredictable. She hoped those up there were not so susceptible to those fervent believers who would turn over their whole social structure to achieve ends that were nothing but hallucinations within in a convoluted evolutionary challenged mind.

Mars

Verhat dismissed his two companions for good reason. Not letting them notice his interest in the ancient temple at the other side of the lake. Folklore claimed it held hoary secrets going back to distant mythology, predating all the gods. The priests claiming it was no longer a sacred fane. Devoid of gods. The shaman's reckoned it was a cavernous emptiness hungering for souls. Once a place of worship when nomads still roamed this part of the land. Then the seasons changed turning the area into a semi-desert. Abandoned by gods and priests alike. Now of no particular interest to anybody. A shell, a remnant, a husk. The nomads moved on, further out. The temple hewn into the mountain, really an ornate cave left Verhat intrigued. The gods, for Verhat was one of those rare individuals who whilst not denying the forces the gods were, be they the wind or lightning, were the result of an active imagination. But he was curious about this nameless god's past at the abandoned temple. Not that anybody took an interest. The philosophers were more concerned with people than with sacred objects. The priests concerned with the condition of the people's spiritual state whilst commendable missed a salient point which intrigued him: how it all began, how they came to be, how it all continued. Whatever the ancestors believed had been subsumed by the priesthood.

Verhat was well aware how the later priests had rewritten the sacred laws thus obviating and occluding whatever had been present here. Even if it appeared to be devoid of sacred power. Verhat did not think so. This temple contained not just the planet's power itself but something more. Not so much animated by the gods but by some mighty force predating the gods. A potent primeval essence that even bound the gods unto it. It nurtured them, sustained their energy. In the secret laws, for the priests never found everything pertaining to their hoary past it was written the ancestors never had had a god or any gods in themselves, just the belief in an unknowable force, a presence that was everywhere, diffused in everything. An invisible godlike cosmic force. Worshipped in this ancient temple. No written laws, no sacred votive offerings, a nothing, a persuasive absence. The opposite to everything that existed. Keeping the universe in

balance. With the gods, the priests in the ascendant this equilibrium was being destroyed. The harmony unhinged. Souls desecrated, the gods turning into abominations as were the priests and their progenitors. The ancients had worshipped in silence whatever it was they believed animated everything in the universe. Whatever they had known was lost for as later generations accepted the new beliefs they forgot the old, the original attempts to commune with what they considered more than merely divine. Verhat wanted to know what that was. Nobody else cared much. What did not exist could not be. It was logical. It was simplicity itself. One could not worship nothing.

He rode around the black lake under the brilliant canopy of stars, being drawn towards this distant remnant, a vestige of a past no longer pertinent to the present. He dismounted patting his horse which snorted, shook its mane and simply stood there. Horses were such strange beings. When left to themselves they went into a vacant trance. He sometimes wondered if they communed with higher entities or were lulled into complacency in just being. Given their tiny brains maybe not much was going on there. Like some men or dogs who when nothing caught their attention simply went to sleep. Horses seemed to do that standing up. Animals.

Under the black sky the lights of the heavens tiny yet so close he observed the two chiselled black columns designating the portal. Verhat considered back then their ancestors had roamed the planet until the climate changed and everything became drier. The other side abandoned. Fearful myths relating to the calamitous catastrophe which overwhelmed their glittering cities. Now abandoned. Ruined catafalques entombing the ancestors who had strayed, who had discovered something beyond all reason, beyond the gods, beyond the universe. It had all started here.

Now he was in front of it. He walked steadily through the chiselled gate, black monolithic rocks testament to their craftsmanship, entering the familiar interior. Semi columns lined the walls, the darkness an essence in itself. Here Verhat had his dreams, here he felt in touch with something knowable yet unknowable. A nothingness which was something. He had felt this surge of power, of latent energy. He had seen golden letters which could not be deciphered, glowing glyphs, seemingly alive on the raised dark slab. Sometimes strange mutations appeared in dark glowing sculpted forms, beings with the heads of strange animals. Some large round, others radiating a golden aura, or green, blue, the colours of the rainbow. Sky gods he reasoned but nothing like what the priests envisaged.

In the centre of this hall a raised altar of obsidian blackness. The slab with the images. There he would lay himself down to sleep and commune with whatever it was

that still resonated weakly. The past continuous. With an invisible guide, never revealing itself except for the strange attendants around it. Nor did Verhat seek with obsequiousness the face of this presence. It was more than a god or maybe the god of gods. Wrapping as a circumference around the planet a shroud imbued with its subtle energy. He was onto something. Others held the place in fear claiming it was an evil daemon from a distant past better left to decay. The myth of The Destroyer of Life draining the living spirit from its supplicant so it could live. Granting false visions to entrap the unsuspecting. Instead Verhat felt its infusion. He was being filled with its enigmatic presence, not drained.

He clambered on top of the raised altar and made himself as comfortable as he could having taken off his cloak to cover him and his vest half rolled into a pillow. He laid himself down to sleep and hoped to be granted a vision. It took a while, his thinking brain calming itself then slowly sleep embraced him. His mind still alert. Asleep and awake at the same time. Not unpleasant, intriguing for the rampant images always returned.

He saw a dull glowing purple sun amongst millions of stars. An intelligence connected to it. Within this translucent orb many souls, maybe millions, wriggling within their confines, in motion. Each in their own world. Maybe this was the place where the soul went when one passed on. The keeper of the dead. It made sense.

He even heard their voices but since there were so many it was like the babble of the marketplace. Incessant jabbering. Some content, others railed against their fate. The land of the passed-on. It was wise to familiarise oneself with one's future state. Maybe there was a choice. He wondered what Kahl would make of this. The priests were afraid of this place and that was enough for the others to avoid this doom blasted gate to a realm bigger than their world or that of their gods.

Each soul preoccupied with itself. The pulsing frenetic activity intriguing. As was the master of this realm who never revealed himself. Present yet invisible. He understood why the temple was black. Black attracted warmth, white repelled. So did this temple. Yet the black priests avoided this ancient fane. Were they afraid of their future state? Their souls were to return to the stars, looking differently from within. Maybe not all returned to the glittering realm above. Were these then sinners who had let their soul be corrupted? Some were insane, ranting and railing, caught in their own demented mental web, some exultant and exuberant, others relaxed, a few happy to have found this distant domain.

All a part of the great orb and behind it a huge black sun. He had not seen that before. It was much bigger than the hazy orb with its countless minor colourful separate

bubbles. A black sun so large it seemed impossible. Yet there it was. Silent, powerful, steady. Black light. Fascinating.

Obviously his time was not due to pass on. Verhat in his middle years. The enormous black sun intrigued him. More than just the darkness of space. So was the mind within the purple domain. Many realms. A dark master in control who would not reveal himself. No wonder the predecessors had given up. What use was a god who would neither reveal itself or be of any use as their current gods were? But irrevocably endowed with a dark intelligence. Could it be a pure mind as the philosophers claimed? Maybe.

For a moment Verhat connected. Everything within the colourful vibrant mini worlds was attached to every future. All contained within that purple orb. What was to be, what had been, what is!

Now some of Kahl's enigmatic statements made sense. The only one he knew who was interested, without the philosophical meanderings of convoluted logic to shoot like an arrow straight forward to answers that went beyond the obvious. To fathom the basic state of their gods.

Black and white. Two seemingly opposites yet one in the majestyrium. Verhat had found the invisible god. He was not about to reveal what he knew. That that place was both past, present and future. He was sorely tempted to find his own future yet knew once in there he would have to await the pleasure of the being to be released back into his universe. If his future soul was there then it did not matter. But what if it was not? Then he would have to wait until he passed on. Plenty of time. Was this the coming future? The priests were silent there, the gods not much help. At least he was ready. He would bring up the concept with Kahl. With him one could have a decent conversation. The priests merely recited their liturgies again and again. This was something entirely different.

'A remarkable place.' Verhat thought. The spell broken. He felt stiff, uncomfortable. Outside the first light was dawning. He rolled off the dark slab, stretched, put on his vest and his cloak.

Outside the grey sky. To the west the last remaining light of Bahlir shining steadily. A slight breeze icy cold moved through him even with his thick cloak. His horse had wandered off. There were other hoof marks. Nomads still worshiping here? Had they glimpsed the distant god with his entourage of living beings? Was his secret no longer one? Had Amos and Nada followed him? Maybe seeing him asleep, and wide awake

within the portal open to see him commune with this unknown god? Or had Khal come out here? He was travelling with him.

Verhat hated unanswerable questions. They more often than not led to complications. Yet his mind felt both strange and serene. Sure there was a fathomable potency in that vision. That black sun alone testified to this gods potent domain. He caught up with his horse which seemed to welcome him back, ready for a jaunt. Up over the rise they ambled near Amos's camp. It really was Nada's. What she saw in him defied logic. Well love was like that. She would tire of him eventually and seek a more worthy companion.

The camp bustling with activity. Water drawn from the oasis's well, food prepared, horses shod, though not breaking camp. Nada was waiting for her father. At the edge his tents. Colourfully patched, smoke curling from the largest, his. One of his servants took his horse as Verhat entered through a half open flap. Kahl was taking some tea. He looked up and was about to rise but Verhat sat down next to him on several cushions, squatting.

A servant entered and waited. He dismissed him saying they were not to be disturbed for a while. He left.

"Kahl, you're knowledgeable." For he was. One of the few who understood. Sure the gods moved amongst them but now that he had discovered this other god something latent stirred within him. The possible dawning of a new life. Still he was cautious. Kahl was like him, self contained, keeping his wisdom to himself. No disputation with priests or philosophers, more like subtle interrogations. Kahl Verhat thought was after something and like him did not reveal his intent either. They were very alike.

Kahl waited. A man of independent means, a little older than him yet wealthy enough not to be in anybodies debt.

"You have been to the ancient temple cave." It was a guess. The place was a curio in itself. Rumours abounded that it still attracted the ghosts of disturbed souls who died a violent or sudden death, not ready yet spiritually to join their chosen god's realm. Haunting the place. Neither had noticed any. The idea occurred to Verhat that since he thought along different lines, trod his own destined path, indifferent to folklore, gossip, superstitious fears then neither would that reality have any validity to his perception. In a way the philosophers were right, the mind perceived according to its own inner makeup. Believers saw things in the invisible realm. To Verhat reality was what mattered. Sure he had dreams, the connection was there but it belonged to dreams and dreams were not the same as the waking state. There the real was exactly that. And yet the vision, the

connection he had been granted did not perturb him as such. He had never seen a living god except in his dreams. And now he had seen something far more potent than he could ever have imagined. If Kahl knew anything now was the time.

Kahl studied Verhat then nodded.

"And?"

"And what my friend."

Verhat did not like being called 'friend'. It meant obligations and he had no wish to be obligated to anybody. Rather the reverse. But he needed to know. Kahl had travelled to the furthest ends of the kingdom and perhaps beyond. The other side of the planet might have been the cradle of their fallen world back then when the climate had been more lush. Then the fire belching volcanoes vomiting forth too many catastrophes upon them. It was rumoured that there were still the ancient ones, the hyperborean aborigines worshipping their equally ancient gods. The names might have changed but the power was still the same. There had been no contact for generations. They believed in the eternal presence, like the nomads. They claimed to be keepers of the planet which was all well and good. With no need to build cities, use the knowledge of numbers...why was he thinking all this now? No one had seen them for aeons.

"Was anything revealed to you." More a statement than a question.

"Tea?" Kahl asked. "Yes." As he stared into the central hearth's fire. A small round stone enclosure where the wood crackled with the warmth of lambar's fire. Kahl poured some tea into Verhat's clay cup. He drank it feeling a little rejuvenated. He knew what his companion was alluding to.

"That place." Kahl said at last. "Ancient memories cling to it. Whoever had chosen the sacred mountain for its location had been aware of the latent power of that massive range. The gateway to eternity."

"Yes, I've had that feeling as well."

"You have?" Kahl alert.

"Well it is said that the mountains are the border, beyond that sacred ground, sacred space. Those who venture beyond never return."

"Like the ancient ones."

"Keepers of the divine maintaining the link."

"So it is believed." As usual Kahl never committed himself personally. Like Verhat. Sure the gods were real. But there was something other behind or around the gods. It was that which he sought to discover. The power itself. Of which the gods were but a

manifestation. Maybe what he had seen in his sleep was the answer. The next step in his quest.

Kahl's stringent use of words was what seem to draw him to this stranger. A new breed, a new mind, a new way of seeing things was stirring in both of them. They astute and attuned souls.

Kahl had claimed to have left the ancient ones behind. This force pregenital, the bedrock of a future belief. As long as it existed so would the planet, the stars. If the power vanished then it was all over. The gods would claim their devotees souls and their world would pass away. Both had found something completely different to what the holy writings claimed was the realm of the gods. Another god was self creating its realm and Verhat had seen it.

Had Kahl?

"You make no claim to divine knowledge, even whilst having forged a link."

Meaning the void beyond the universe

"The past is not without its secrets."

Typical Kahl.

"So what secrets did you discover." Verhat hated having to draw Kahl out.

"Secrets." He said laconically and left it at that.

"A secret is a strange concept. Like infinity. There and not there. A secret can only be a secret if it is a secret. If more than one person knows of it it cannot be a secret and yet it can be if these two people keep it to themselves. Infinity on the other hand is real yet unreachable. A secret is reachable." Verhat hinted.

Kahl looked at him evenly.

"Well?" Verhat prompted.

"It is a gateway. And by your rather esoteric conversation I can assume you have communed." Yet he did not say or ask with what or whom.

"Yes." This was going nowhere. Verhat drained his cup feeling better.

"Let's stop this circumnutation Kahl. You know as I do that there is more to that temple than just old tales."

"As in new tales?" Kahl half smiled.

"Revelations."

The ground shook. The animals outside panicked. The rumble ominous. The tent swayed as an invisible wave moved beneath them. In the distance cracking sounds of boulders splitting, then the sonorous vibrations of an earthquake. Rena the earth goddess making herself known. Outside the yabbering of protective prayers seeking imprecations

to be spared and not swallowed up by the cleaved earth just yet. Kahl though alert was not panicking. Neither was Verhat. They were safe here. They both rose, a little shakily and went outside to see where Rena had revealed herself.

A part of the distant mountain was covered in boulders cascading down the mountainside. The power of Rena could be awesome. Billowing clouds of dust spread down, out and upwards in rich soft textured browns as the first rays of the sun edged over the horizon. The distant rumble continued resonating across the land, within their bodies.

The avalanche of rocks had buried the temple. A divine sign. The ancient secret was not meant for any of them. Rena had enclosed her sacred fane. The inner gateway not for mere mortals. Verhat did not feel cheated. He had been granted the vision, maybe even Kahl who had avoided his probing question. Allowed a glimpse of some future god. Had Rena acted on its behalf or had the gods decided she was to do this? Shut the gate to this distant realm deep in space with its huge black sun, larger than any other?

The avalanche was over. Smaller rocks still tumbled down the mountainside. A clean break showed a light brown and soft grey cleaven section where that part of the mountain had sheered off. The animals were calm again, the others stopped their prostrations now that they knew they were safe. The camp all excitement. Rena's reminder of her power and more importantly the sealing of the temple. It was a sign.

Kahl and Nada's eyes locked for she had come out of her main tent. Nada's eyes loaded with secret knowledge. Amos was standing next to her of course watching like some hunter intent on his prey. Taking in the larger picture not just the avalanche itself. Linked with Rena's intent. The goddess had acted, divine intervention. The temple might still be there but the entrance blocked by a small mountain of rubble. This was no fluke, no capricious act. Verhat could have been buried in that yet he was here, not there. It's secret was now hidden. Was this coming god then from the past, to be closed off or from the future to be denied access to not just himself but whoever felt drawn to its mysteries?

Verhat went back inside the tent, Kahl followed.

"A divine sign Kahl." He sat down on the colourful embroidered cushions. The fire crackled, sparks moving upward before going out. Verhat remembered the falling stars. Had they been a sign in itself? They had vanished close by. Maybe near the camp. They eyes of Bahlir guiding Rena?

Verhat rose again motioning for Kahl to remain where he was. He called over a servant and asked him to see if the eye was still there. The man obeyed and hurried off. Verhat resumed his seat.

"Kahl, tell me what did you see in that temple?" A direct question was always considered rude but he had circled around that and been answered with obliqueness. This was too important to stand on ceremony.

"I wish I could explain that myself. A vast distant presence, a feeling of immensity." Kahl had been there but he had not even thought of lying on that black altar. Something held him back. It had seemed dangerous. Maybe not dangerous but inimical. Too heady. That was it. A colossal potency and he had held back. Now he wished he had not. He had sat there in silent prayer. After a while he had felt what he just admitted to Verhat. It was obvious now that Verhat had gotten further than he had. He would have to draw out Verhat who, having referred to the nature of secrets was in possession of one. Kahl allowing the direct question. Not rude amongst friends. Just the uncultured, offensive to good taste and manners.

Verhat considered Kahl. The man could be dissembling. The description always vague. All gods had that immanence about them. Yet he admitted to some god's presence. It could be Rena for all Verhat knew. Maybe he was the only one who knew! Now what to do with this intelligence? For the moment nothing.

Kahl was waiting for Verhat to reply.

A realm with many beings, maybe many worlds was all Verhat came up with.

A discreet rustling, the servant had returned. Verhat turned to him.

"The eye of Bahlir has rolled into the lake."

"Thank you, that is all."

The servant bowed and left.

"Ah yes I had forgotten about that. So many signs. Portents." Kahl said.

"Indeed. Rather fortuitous don't you think?"

Kahl considered this. He was at a loss. This planet's resonance was unlike the alien presence he had come to seek, his only reason for being here. The DVs were maintaining their wraithlike presence distant from his other inner self. A remote possession. He walking with a ghostlike ancestor, a substantial one at that. Kohr. There and not there, here and not here. This eye of Bahlir had to be a powerful magician's heretical eye. At least it lay under the water of the lake. Was the Divine Mind, the coming god acting now? Had to be. This was more than luck. The sign was miraculous indeed. He felt fortified. Now for Verhat to inform him what had transpired at the buried temple. Kahl felt potent. More

than a mere spiritual surge. This was deeper, broader, wider, going beyond the stars, beyond the gods themselves. He felt immortal. Revealing a new world, powerful beings in touch with the ultimate. The promise of eternity beckoned.

"A new beginning, the first signs Verhat."

"Yes I have that impression as well." Wondering if he really should confide in Kahl. As Rena had buried the temple maybe that too was a sign that he should keep this secret to himself. It would depend what Jaffir and his advisors thought. By rights a messenger should be despatched to the king but he thought it best if he were to bring the tidings. Auguries but of what? A god curtailed or secreted so it could continue, gestating out there in deep space? To thwart or throw a cloak around it so it could do its will? Would it, could it influence others through its dreams? He would have to be alert to that. Would there be signs? Portents? Visions? Were the priests attuned or not? Or the sun goddesses? Or was this god to usurp them all? Well at least he was ready. Would it enter spiritually gifted souls to do its bidding?

"So does this new beginning imply a new god as well?" Verhat asked.

Kahl was momentarily taken aback even though he knew this question would arise eventually. No wonder his mind was attuned with Verhat, in resonance. Verhat was not like the others whose minds were more or less open to his psychic suggestabilities. Not Verhat's. An extremely strong presence of mind. He wondered if Verhat was another 'traveller', one sent by these distant star dwellers. Then there was the enemy: Regum. If they could land a god's eye here why not a person? Guiding certain minds here. The secret guides guiding the priests, both black and white. Their creatures, doing their will, preparing the way for them to accept with divine grace the supreme deity. The heretics had no chance. Worshiping their own delusions.

"The realm of the gods is real." Kahl ventured sounding trite. "And I have pondered the divine energy they use. Bear with me. The energy is being used by the gods. I sometimes think that that energy is god-like in itself."

"An interesting concept Kahl." As he thought back on his vision. Could it be that a master god was behind their gods? Yesterday that thought would never have occurred to him. Now it did. Kahl was astute to say the least.

"It is a possibility."

"Yes. A supreme power animating the gods." Verhat's mind ahead of his own consciousness. It might just be so. In that case he would need to study this cosmic presence. Momentarily cut off. At least he had its memory. Maybe enough to maintain the link. Verhat wanted to break the hold of the priests, in fact he wanted to usurp them

and be the supreme spiritual head here. Except that the king's spiritual head was in the road.

"The power of the gods is what matters." Kahl said at last. "Self sustaining, self creating, self being. Everything around us their manifestation. We live within but cannot see it as we cannot see the air around us or feel it like the wind. So too this power is everywhere and around us. We are its projection, we live in its dreams, portals to its presence, in its reality Verhat."

"You think this too?" Verhat relaxed. He was convinced of a universal power but he had never envisaged a new god. His view was more occult. The power was everything, the gods a chimera made real through the devotions of its believers, feeding them right unto their last breath. All distractions. The priests kept the confusion alive. He was going beyond the veil. Let the dreaming sleepers think what they liked, he at least knew the great secret. Pure energy way beyond the gods. Trouble was that vision in that temple seemed to confirm Kahl's view of a god behind all gods. What if that too was another dream realm, another visage? Verhat would keep his options open. Let the others delude themselves with their charades. He would draw upon the power direct and become his own god!

"The supreme god, the ultimate mind, true eternity. It is our limitations that create the gods. Manifestations of power. By being with the gods, the mind, the soul is in contact with the living power."

"Only one?" testing.

"All from and within the Great Architect of the Universe Verhat."

So, Verhat thought, there is a grand design. The universe is testament to that. Which I shall tap. A god by definition is self limiting, just as is life. The mysterious effluvium that is life is greater than any god. Or rather, one can become as great. The last few hours had been very profitable indeed. He was not about to offend or contradict Kahl. Let him believe what he wants. The priests might consider him a heretic. Kahl his scout. If Kahl's dangerous concept was accepted fine, if not then at least he knew how to proceed, in secret. His revelation was meant to be. Otherwise it would not have occurred. Had his view been blasphemous he would have been buried in that avalanche, but he had not. Obviously he had been spared. It was enough to fortify his resolve. He felt great yet pretended to Kahl to be thoughtful, not quite convinced. Interested yes but no more than that.

"So why bother with the gods?"

"Ah they are creations of our limited minds, our blinded souls."

"Don't let the priests hear you say that." Verhat half smiled.

"Oh I am not about to challenge accepted belief systems. The revelations will come even without me. I am but one tiny soul. What could I do?" Kahl said innocently.

"Join the philosophers?" Verhat quipped.

"It is enough to know." Was all Kahl said.

He was thinking of the presence of the DVs who would only communicate with him during his sleep. Going into a trance state during his wakefulness would only attract attention.

He was there as forward intelligence checking on Prima's overall progress. Society at some future date fracturing. With the philosophical schools located in distant hamlets enough suspicion was aroused concerning their ungodlike enquiries into the world, the whole universe around them. Led by Ephan the Silent, a joke really for all the talking he did. Worse maintaining the gods to be a figment of their imagination. Simple answers to complex questions. Priests were on their way to re-establish order. They would be arriving any day now at the camp. Dissention was good. It would drive those who resented having their gods being questioned to seek answers. His progenitors were ready to provide enlightenment.

Verhat was amendable, or appeared so. He had no following yet was accepted at court as a magus in his own right. The power that seemed to enliven him interested Kahleff of course who wanted to become ever more powerful hoping to learn of Verhat how to use one's will to rule over one's subjects. In a way Kahl was preparing the king in his own way so when the great revelation came all would be in place.

That a calamity would strike, the wrath of the supreme deity to warn the people worshipping false divinities was unfortunate but necessary. They would come around when the holy spirit infused them. They would consider themselves chosen. It had worked on Prima after its Calamity and the Ecclesiastics saw no reason why it would not work here as well. But there were enemies. Except they just did not know the role assigned to them as such. Nada was one of them. If she could not be brought around then divine intervention would see to her being either contained or disposed of. The only problem was her influence. One of the richest merchant families in the kingdom. Maybe by bringing down the mighty would be deemed a sign of divine wrath. A sign for the downtrodden that they would be exalted whilst the rich who oppressed them would receive holy justice. Kahl looked forward to the day of reckoning.

The military under Norhat were busy keeping an eye on the nomads so they were away from the capital, the centre. Once with their aims achieved the soldiers would fall

in line. They were pledged to the kingdom not the king. He only ruled by their gods grace and once the gods fell so would Kahleff, unless he accepted the new order. All the priests knew was that a new age was coming. The divine splendour irradiate them with the glory of supreme power. There was no opposition to that. Things were going according to plan.

Nada disturbed him. There was something deep within her eyes that seemed illimitable, without end. Not like the others. Different. Maybe an avatar but similar in a way to Verhat. Another unique individual, not like the rest at all. Harbours her own destiny. Perhaps not even in resonance with what was being planned. If she could not be turned it would be enough to convince the other merchants to accept the divine will. Well the priests were on their way ready to follow his orders. The material rewards promised them was enough to have them on side. To actually convince them of their righteous path would have been an insult to their divine status amongst the people. Action spoke for itself, words could follow. The priests were good at that.

Nada returned to her tent after the avalanche was over. Amos had run out more to see that the horses or sheep did not break loose out of their makeshift corral. When she had locked eyes with Kahl she was struck by something unholy, something tainted, impregnated with a darkness that froze her soul. Not fear but danger. She had thought Verhat was the one to watch. Kahl merely one of those like minded types who were masters of their own destiny. They were probably the eyes and ears of Jaffir keeping an eye on not just the unruly nomads but also the morale of the troops or even Ephan's influence on his students, as well as the gossip of the marketplace, maybe even herself and by extension her father.

Verhat was only interested in himself. Did Kahl have designs on him? Using him to get to the king. Well he would learn nothing from her. She regretted the way she looked at him just now. A little defiant perhaps but it was rude to stare. She had let him see into her soul and show him that he was no match for her. She didn't know where the power had come from. Maybe that was Rena's doing. Well she hoped he would keep his distance. After all he, like Verhat and his servants were guests in her camp. The stance Kahl had taken had given him away. He was possessed by something deeper and mysterious than just the influence of some god. There was an unholiness about him. She shuddered. Ice cold and determined. To do what? That man was dangerous in the extreme sense of the word. She would have to tell her father. Of his brutish servants, all brawn and muscle. Word had it he had some influence with both the black and white

priests. White. Why this differentiation? The whites were preaching submission to the gods, the blacks active engagement. Both parties in agreement regarding their bifurcation. Dividing the populace between them. The meek went with the whites, the assertive types with the blacks. Something was being fomented and she was certain Kahl if not Verhat were behind this. The days of benign indifference as to how one approached the gods receding. Their fervour disturbed her. For the moment the only one profiting from this new insistence was Eghan's philosophical school. People were seeking answers to questions the priests could not assuage with their platitudes and self importance of having the keys to the gods kingdom. Maybe this was a change for the better.

She entered the tent concerned about the foulness that was Kahl. It hovered in her memory like liquid air impregnated with a cloying decay. A living death with its preternatural force infesting any living being falling into its orbit. A living putrescence. She would bide her time hoping to unmask him for what he was, a foulness in rotting flesh.

A rider approached the camp heading straight for Nada's tent. One of her father's messengers. The horse was sweating having been ridden hard but not too hard. The servants got busy washing it down, letting it drink and giving it its well deserved rest.

"My lady." He bowed to her having been shown in. He handed from his travelling pouch a roll of parchment with her father's seal and waited. Amos was of no consequence to him. She broke the first seal and the message read that she was to read it's content's later, the second envelope alone. But before nightfall. No return answer required.

She offered him some tea asking if he had eaten. He said he had provisions and was to return with her reservoir of gold coins. He was one of the trusted which she recognised by the star ruby he wore on his left hand. Their sign to receive as well as being trusted.

She asked him to be seated. He smiled and said after sitting for hours in the saddle standing was a relief. She returned the smile. Amos excused himself and left the tent. The messenger barely looked at him.

"So what news?"

"The priests are on their way. They will most likely stop off here..."

"Probably making a show." Meaning letting Eghan know of their presence, a reminder of their assumed supremacy to look after the town's souls.

"Anything regarding Norhat?"

"Not to interfere."

"A missionary expedition then."

"Most likely. Last night, when I stopped over they were excited by three falling stars."

"Yes." But she did not expand on the eye that had fallen close to the lake. Where the other two were was anybody's guess. Had they known of the portent or was it just luck?

"They saw it as a sign of divine favour my lady."

"For them no doubt."

He wanted to agree with that but remained in his place. City bred. Out in the desert Nada was less insistent on ceremony. Without encouraging familiarity. Certain standards had to remain. "Please continue."

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Your impressions man, of the priests."

"Oh, yes, of course, as you wish. Rather quiet. Not their usual vocal selves. Holding back I thought. Under orders perhaps. Secretive. They even had look outs at their camp."

"They have auxiliaries?"

"A few. Armed."

"Armed. Maybe they have a full pouch of gold with them. To dispense amongst the people. Certainly not the king's money. Interesting."

He agreed merely by the expression of his open warm brown eyes.

"How long till they get here?"

"They said they would break camp this morning. If they continue through the night they should arrive tomorrow. There are about a dozen."

"That many. Well well well." Then she sighed. "Well I'd better get the servants to prepare a repast for them. Slaughter a sheep or two. You will stay?"

"No my lady. I am to return to your father."

"For the best. We don't want them to think I am loaded."

"Security."

"And smart using you. No one will suspect you to be carrying such an amount." She went over to the chest, took a key from her inside pocket and opened the requisite solid drawer then took out a pouch of gold coins. She handed it to him. By rights they should have both counted it and signed a receipt. But she knew him by sight, he had often been in her father's presence. He was more than just a messenger. Maybe an advisor. Keeping to his cover as a messenger well in place.

"Since my father has his trust in you, here it is."

He secreted it in one of his inside pockets. She saw for a moment his vicious looking daggers that shone wickedly from the hearth's fire.

"Any message my lady?"

"I shall keep the priests under observation. Make sure their camp is opposite Verhat's. If they want to commune they will have to pass my camp or go around it. Either way I shall know if they wish to parley. And I shall post a full complement of guards the moment they arrive. How many auxiliaries?"

"Eight that I saw."

"Well that could mean sixteen then. Four ahead and four behind as well. That's what I would do."

He acknowledged that then hesitated. He was thirsty.

"You may speak freely."

"Another cup of tea please."

"But of course."

"One thing I forgot to mention regarding the priests. Whilst sharing an evening meal with them they mentioned the coming of signs."

"This is before or after the falling stars?"

"Before my lady." As she handed him a fresh cup of tea. "I tried to draw them out, being naturally inquisitive. But all they said was signs were coming. When I asked which god would favour us with pre-ordained knowledge they grew silent, odd, saying the gods were hiding but they would make their presence known just the same."

"Well you know these priests. Talking in riddles to which they are only privy to. Did they say what these portents meant?"

"That was the weird part. Some mentioned an end of days, others of a new beginning, others of a coming spiritual cleansing where the chosen shall shine in beatific splendour and some of a new godlike quality in the heavens."

"Confusing as always." She smirked. He tried not to react to that.

"And some of a new kingdom, a new spiritual divinity to be revealed."

"That should impress Jaffir if not Kahleff." She said amused. "Did they say when this was to happen?" as if they really knew.

"Soon. We were all to prepare ourselves for the coming moment. Cleanse our souls and accept the divine decree."

"And if we don't?"

"Suffering. Spiritual banishment."

"Did they now?" what an arrogant assumption.

"And those that accept?"

"Eternal bliss, immense joy, everlasting life, saved from the perdition awaiting those who refuse to accept the divine judgement."

"Is that all." She smiled wryly. They were becoming intolerable. He kept a steady face. Not surprised at Nada's view. Dealing with people on all levels he found the merchant class far less inclined to take the priests at face value. They believed the gods to be more capricious extensions of their own selves rather than overweening powers holding their lives in thrall. That was for the masses who sought redemption for their imagined sins, acts of omission or careless thoughts regarding the divine state they considered themselves in. The soldiers even more sanguine probably because they acted and saw that results were achieved through clear minded stratagems. He was equivocal. The gods were there and that was that. He doubted they listened to his prayers but it did not hurt to seek supplication now and then. Lady Nada probably prayed to lambar for she never let the fire in the hearth go out.

"Before you go, tell me do you believe in our ancestors gods," she thought she had chosen those words well, "or the babblings." She tried not to look too displeased, "of these converted", now that was inspirational, "priests?"

He seemed to grow in stature: "Priests who claim divinity I find suspect. Especially when they claim divine favour for themselves, my lady."

"So do I."

"Of course. The priests, I mean these priests, from what I know, it's as if there is something in the wind."

"I feel it too." She encouraged him.

"We are all equal. If these priests are going to cause dissention it will affect the markets. We have to be prepared for all contingencies. Not just for our material well being, but our souls as well. I certainly am not going to change my allegiance on the say-so of these priests. If we can find out, and I mean not just me or you but your family, your contacts, your observations to see if there is some hidden sage, holy man, magus," he was thinking of Verhat or Kahl even if there was something clandestine about those two, "behind this movement then I think our king or his advisors ought to be informed. So I keep my ears to the wind Lady Nada. As instructed." He added quietly.

"Shrewd. As always. That is good. Yes there are machinations at work. When you have rested, take a fresh horse unless it's your own and continue your return journey."

"Thank you." He bowed finished his tea. She gave him a blessing on behalf of all the gods.

After he left Amos returned. He was civilised enough not to ask any questions.

"Want to check out the landslide?" was all she asked.

"What? Why?"

"See if the temple is really buried. But first I must call Nisa."

She went outside the tent and called for her. Moments later an older woman, weather beaten face with remarkably smooth skin, lively eyes, a lucky charm around her neck of a semi-precious stone, the eye of Bahlir appeared.

"Nisa I am going to check out the landslide. See if Rena really buried that temple. As you know the eye of Bahlir, and I see you are wearing her invocative charm, has graced this patch with her all seeing all knowing intelligence. The stars miss nothing, they see all. And she wants to keep an eye on us. The gods act for a reason often unfathomable to us. As she has graced us with her presence I too am curious. But for a different reason. A group of priests are coming this way. They might arrive tomorrow which means scouts might appear any moment. Do not trust them. Have them make their camp opposite to Verhat's, and away from our animals. Naturally we shall have to offer them our hospitality. Two sheep will have to be slaughtered. Choose some older ones. And have a full contingent of guards on watch day and night. Give the visitors plenty of wine. We need to know what they are up to."

"Yes Nada, it will be as you wish."

"Wish Nisa. I wish they would by-pass us but guests cannot be refused succour in the desert. No one is to enter my tent."

Nisa merely nodded. As second in command she knew her duties.

"Call Joch, he will accompany us. And please keep the fire going."

Nisa bowed slightly and left.

"Right my love. Let's get some rations together."

She went to one corner and rummaged around her provisions. In her travelling pouch she stuffed nuts, dried fruits, smoked goats meat. Amos went outside and saw to the chaff bags for their horses. He took some bladders of water in case they ventured beyond the lake.

"I am going to take some slices of mushrooms. Not much, just a little to perk the brain, open the soul." She said to Amos when he returned saying they were ready to go.

"Want some?"

"No Nada, Joch and I will keep our heads in place. You obviously want to commune with the goddess."

"Oh I nearly forgot. Can you quickly go outside and tell Nisa to send a patrol out. No make that two. One to check out the pass. My father is coming this way from Orst. Bandits have been known..."

"I'm sure he's taking the necessary precautions."

"Still, and one to keep an eye on these priests. It will be interesting to know if Kahleff or Jaffir sent them officially or if it is their idea. The pennants should make that plain, if they are flying them."

Amos nodded and left the tent to inform Nisa. Nada was ready, riding boots, an extra layer of undergarments in case they were out during the night, a travelling jacket lined with sheep skin and a woollen cap. Autumn was coming and the weather could change any moment. Last night's thunderstorm had cleared the air for now. Amos returned and said he was ready, Joch waiting outside. Nada quickly retrieved from her pouch a mixture of dried herbs, sprinkled them onto the fire, they sparked, Nada saying a silent prayer to Iambar, letting her know she was thinking of her. Swallowed the slivers of mushrooms washed down with water. Then she turned and along with Joch and Amos rode out of the camp.

Joch observed fresh tracks heading away. Nada said that would have been Verhat's. The slivers of mushrooms were beginning to have their effect. The desert more vibrant as if Rena was present. Soft auras of lilac imbued the mountain range, crimson radiating from their massive jagged walls, an aura of purple over them. In the bright sky the odd flashing light as if she caught Bahlir watching them.

First they headed to where the eye of Bahlir had landed. It had rolled into the lake after the earth tremor. Nada could see through the water visible under the placid lake. She dismounted, waded knee deep in, having taken off her boots and socks, rolled up her riding pants and found the strange object with its flat lower surface, silver coated, golden inserts, strange geometry, some dark cover honeycombed and rather light for its size. She walked back out and placed it where it had originally fallen. She then offered a quick salutation to Bahlir, dried herself with her vest.

Done they continued. Her soul was pulsing. With every breath the landscape seemed to breathe with her. She felt wonderfully alive, expectant. She was used to it. Always at the edge of creation, of something sublime about to happen, filling her soul with awe. The slight breeze caressed her it was that sensual. She was being embraced by the gods.

Instead of taking the short way around the lake to their right Nada chose left. The waterfall from the mountain feeding the lake sparkled on the morning light. It's soft roar refreshing. She wondered if Verhat or Kahl could be in league with the priests. But why were they coming here? Why not make their own camp? Why with her? Unless it had to do with the eye. Now that she was gone they might try and commune with Bahlir, invoking their dark designs.

They rode on in silence, enjoying the day, the outing. It was good to be alone, away from the daily activities. The landscape self illuminating. The colours clearer, sharper, the sky closer reaching down to her, the mountains filled with residual power. The odd fish splashed in the water. High above an eagle rode the thermals, the air god Oebell's creature watching them.

After some hours of riding they let the horses drink. They had dismounted, Joach walked off further away from them squatting near the lake and relieved himself. The water vibrant with energy, the life giving essence of Adur. Some of the rocks glowing. She saw patterns on them, the secret writing of Rena. Then as if somebody was watching them, though in the silence they were the only one's here Nada's attention focussed towards the north, along the mountain range which stretched as far as the horizon. A strange hill amongst spread out small crevices stretching out like fingers into the desert. The hill brighter, washed clean by last night's storm. Her vision telescoped out. A cairn. Someone buried out there. A perfect place, under the sky and stars. With no trees around cremation was not possible and the hard earth might have made burial too difficult. Rocks there were a plenty. Her vision receded.

"See that cairn further up? Let's check that out."

They remounted and made their way slowly onward.

"Maybe we should not get too close and disturb the corpse." Joach said.

"Its spirit is long gone." Nada replied softly. He was mollified. Clouds scurried across the sun, the temperature dropped momentarily.

"You know that some sages claim that persons who were close to the gods have the gods residing in their graves." Amos suggested,

"There are those who pray with the dead. Some seek an answer to their troubles, others wish to see the future. Who knows what we will be blessed with." Nada's mind was doing the talking. She a mere vessel of its intelligence.

A while later they did see ancient tracks definitely not recent. Ah the open desert, the unlimited freedom to expand one's soul into it. It was invigorating. The ground rippled with energy, the rocks quivered momentarily the sky above pulsed. Divine.

Then she freaked. The vision, how long ago? A lifetime. This place without life, their lives. Abandoned. The gods gone, a universe devoid of life struck her as all too real. She looked around her, Joch a little ahead, Amos enjoying the scenery, looking about him, relaxed. The ice cold grip of fear remained but less potent. Maybe the priests would undo them all. Or she sighed, feeling tragic, this was to be when the last of their race had passed onto the stars. The realm of the gods who had withdrawn their favour or their need to remain here. Maybe they had moved on to another world! Was their planet dying? It had too much energy. She felt it resonate within her, connected to the living earth. Not dead yet.

Nada tried to open her head. Maybe she should have eaten more slivers. She had not brought any. For a moment she thought night was around her. Starless black, a shroud blocking everything out. Souls within this nighted realm. She was inside some dark space. It was a trap! She recalled where she really was, the encompassing blackness receded, turned into a tiny black orb that vanished as quickly as it had come. The effulgent colours of the desert returned. Maybe she had entered into her own dark realm. Maybe it lingered within her, not out there. The confusion of thoughts, voices or beings passed. Unless it was the realm of some unknown alien god, drawing up souls to feed its black domain. A vision of the priest's sinister realm? Had she seen what they had in store for them? Now that it was over she felt strengthened with preternatural insights. She thanked Urus the sky goddess for this chilling glimpse of that constricted enclosure, cut off from everything. Unless it was a realm where those who had an empty soul were destined to go when their time had come to be collected, and set aside from the gods empyrium. Too many answers. The gods would guide her. Either way an insight had been granted to her. A revelation.

They left the lake behind them. As usual in the desert distances could be deceptive. The cairn was still ahead of them, seemingly no closer. She looked about. Amos and Joach were there, serene, content. So they had not noticed her momentarily slip into this strange god's dimension.

By midday they reached the cairn. A breeze had sprung up keeping the temperature down. No flies so the body must have decomposed ages ago. They dismounted glad to stretch their legs and relieve the pressure on their rear end.

The cairn was too small for a fully grown adult. Maybe a child's. Who would be so far out, so far distant from the trade route to Orst. Unless some holy sage had gone into the desert to find solace. But that could not be it either. Unless he or she had had a companion to bury them then left. Yet there were no ruins, no remnant habitation.

"Let's see what's inside this." Nada said at last as Joach and Amon looked about. Desert on all sides, dried gullies, some trickling with water from the mountains. No oasis here. Just vastness to the ends of the earth. Total silence except for the breeze and the snorting of their horses which were munching in their chaff bags.

"Maybe we should first say a prayer to Rena if we are to disturb this." Joach suggested. They all said a prayer to their chosen god. Amon invoked Urus for the sky was just as dominant here as Rena the earth goddess below. Joach prayed to Oebell god of the moving air, the messenger of the gods who knew all thoughts.

Then they set to work. Amon thought Nada a little crazy. Well she had imbibed the sacred mushroom so who knows what odd powers moved her to do this. There was no skeleton, no ragged shroud, just a box with a golden clasp so that it would not rust. They looked at it in puzzlement. Nada was the first to touch it. No signs of any of the gods displeasure. Nada felt her excitement mount. The breeze dropped as if Oebell lost interest in them. The rocky expanse still impregnated with Rena's presence. A good sign.

The clasp was just a clasp. No lock. The hinges gold as well. She pulled it out of the remaining rocks. It was remarkably light, of a grey dull metal. She squatted down and opened it. Inside was a grey pouch of a strange material. Neither metal nor cloth, like cloth, warm to the touch. A thin impregnated line ran along one side of it. Nada felt her fingers along it trying to pick it open. No result. She saw two slightly protruding edges and pulled them apart. It opened to revealed a book in a see through pouch which she opened.

The cover had a disc on it. Light brown, mottled darker colours, darker green patches, white on top and bottom. Dark green lines criss crossed the light brown circle. Nada struck that the colours were similar to those around her. This was their planet! This is what it must look like from the sky. A message from either Urus or Bahlir! She looked at the book in awe.

"The gods had chosen someone to bury this in a cairn." Amos said at last when they had gotten over their surprise. Joach was fascinated.

"I prayed for guidance..." is all he said.

"And guided we were." Nada replied.

"You were chosen, so by rights you should open it." Amos said reverently.

She did. The pages were soft but not paper. Again it felt warm when touched as she fingered the pages. Half the page had a picture and writing underneath. The writing was not unfamiliar but many of the words were. But the pictures were strange. They made no sense.

Large buildings with golden lights in tight geometric patterns, many of them reaching to the skies. Beneath she could barely hold the letters in place due to the effect of the mushrooms.

"You read it Amos. My mind is too taken." And handed the book to him.

They squatted on the ground around this fascinating discovery looking at the soft textured yet tough pages. Strange objects in the sky, both frightening in their massiveness, yet gleaming white amongst the stars. Apparently these huge glittering buildings their new home. Odd elongated objects spewing fire and smoke. Their means of travel to a new world. Somewhere. Ah, tiny pearls of different colours around a sun. Their planet, like the cover, pink and the other mostly blue, white with clouds and green. Others were yellow, one azure and orange, two blue and two tiny outer ones dark. So they were amongst ten others. Yet only two had life. But where was the realm of the gods? Had they withdrawn? Were these other beings who looked similar to them on subsequent pages, dressed in strange slim lines then the gods themselves?

Further on the stark reality. Their planet was dying. Dying? Nada looked around her. Empty yes but along the rivers life flourished. To the east orchards laden with succulent fruit, vegetable gardens, fields of wheat, forests to the north for wood, lakes teeming with fish. It made no sense. The frightening memory of desolation resurfaced in Nada's mind. Maybe their future was limited. But only if the gods withdrew their life giving essence. Was this to be? Were these new priests involved? Why would they destroy this paradise? Nada felt how precious not just life was but the planet that fostered them. Then came the crunch towards the last pages. War. Beware of those who claim divine power. They saw their achievements, these beings almost like themselves having chosen the wrong path. Was this some divine punishment? Their due for turning their back, denying the supreme deity? There. A warlike priesthood insisting on the true meaning of the universe. To regain their fallen souls. Their evil machines making them think they had strength and knowledge of the god and of the preceding ancient gods. Claiming to be the advance guard more potent than the supreme deity. Thinking themselves not just equal but beyond the holy domain of all creation. And then vanished.

Many of their race had gone with them, free, willingly to make a new life. So were they visitors? Coming here! The reason their planet was doomed was due to the cycles of their star. Further out from the central sun so they received less warmth. As the star went cooler their home under an ice age. Yet Mars, the name of their planet had less water, less plants, a precarious balance, broken. The sun then, not the gods. Maybe. With less of everything the air would thin out as well. Something to do with gravity, their air leaking

away. But they would return one day and save them as they had saved their ancestors. Before the war. Before the pulverized cities on the other side.

This their last message as their cities erupted in flames, huge billowing thunderous clouds rising into the sky obliterating all, turning all into ash. The pictures were horrific. Here or there? She couldn't tell. The angry god had put the usurpers in their place. The dark path of knowledge bred pride, overweeningly so, denying the master and creator of the universe total compliance, or complete devotion to do his will. Only through its power could the soul be saved, otherwise damnation. Was that the dark image Nada had seen? Where the fallen, the proud were destined when passing on? To remain behind on a dead planet. The vanquished cities the evidence of esurient minds denying the divine truth unto their race. A race that was annihilated. The hidden myth of their ancestors. So they had been real. As were their dream machines.

Their once great cities. Millenia ago until the priests arose. Powerless at first to stop these star travelling heretics and apostates and worse. Unbelievers. Corrupting their race they had herded their ancestors to this side of the planet then invoked the supreme god to do his justice. There were images of fire from the sky obliterating their haughty edifices. Then they, the priests with weapons spitting fire and destruction scoured the planet and annihilated everything of their past, making sure all their knowledge wiped off the face of the planet. With the supreme wrath hidden and their ancient gods resurrected, they were ready spiritually to accept on bended knees the divine favour of this mighty victorious war god. There was only one choice, accept or suffer by being denied eternal life after passing on. So the black realm was real! Nada stared in disbelief at this insane god who would enthrall its believers to act in such a heinous murderous act against one's fellow beings and everything they had created. The death of the dream machines.

Resonating unto the present.

So the rumours were true then about the priests. They were preparing the way for this jealous wrathful insane god to enslave or destroy them. As it had destroyed the wonderful cities and its strange things. There was a further message: the priests claimed the machines would one day destroy those who had created them. It was for that reason alone that all machines, whatever they were, had to be shattered and their enslaved servants with them. This could not be allowed to happen anywhere in the universe. The master god would send his chosen to make sure this did not happen on any planet in the universe where living beings built their homes. The soul imperilled by the delusion of machine power which thought itself supreme when the only supremacy was this powerful singular god. His chosen acolytes would see his will done.

They sat there stunned. Appalled at the destruction. Lives lost to save them from the evil machines, the very one's that had transported their ancestors to that world. Only to have their cities turned into charnel houses. Their brilliantly illuminated past obliterated.

Nada thought of the eye of Bahlir. Maybe it was one of those machines! She looked over the soft textured pages. Only the priests, and they looked so familiar, the same cowl, the same long flowing robes said these machines would one day take a life of their own, created by forbidden knowledge to destroy the lives of those who had created them. So they were like gods, but did not claim that sacred privilege. Yet the priests used the machines to destroy their own kind. Horrible. Then claimed this to be divine justice. Duplicity. The fate befallen on their ancestors.

"What are we going to do?" Nada asked at last.

"We could bury it again." Amon replied after collecting his thoughts. His head reeling from the atrocious revelation, committed on both planets.

"Or hide it somewhere else." Joach suggested.

"Who can we trust?" Nada asked.

"Ourselves." Amon replied. "Are we agreed that the new priests are our enemies? If only by denying our gods."

"Yes." Nada was adamant. "Because of that. The king must be told."

"What if he has accepted the priests? He gives them free reign."

"Yes but they as yet haven't mentioned this monstrous god."

"No, that is true Nada. There is Ephan." Joach replied.

"A good idea. He would make it public. But let us wait." Nada considered. "Let us swear by all the gods that this remains our secret." She looked at Amon and Joach. They swore to their secret.

"Good. If say I were to gallop off to Orst that would arouse suspicion. Let us return passing the buried temple. Of obvious interest, especially since the avalanche. After all not everyday something like this occurs."

"What about the eye, this machine? Maybe the machines are what we think of as gods. Or the gods are the machines. But why would they want to destroy those who created them? It makes no sense." Joach reasoned.

"Truly perplexing. The gods will enlighten us." Nada said.

"Be interesting what the priests make of Bahlir's eye." Amon mused.

"Oh yes. See how they react. So shall we journey to the avalanche then?"

"Yes, let's." Amon swung easily onto his horse.

They secured the box in Nada's saddle bag, rebuilt the cairn and sauntered off, skirting the mountain side of the lake. Hours later, Nada's head still brimming but now with apocalyptic visions. She was glad she'd eaten some of the mushroom for the images were both close and remote. Coping with this disturbing intelligence. They rode in silence, each of them troubled by these revelations. Except` they' had sent a sign, the machine eye. That could not be denied. Maybe` they' were acting on behalf of the ancient gods, returning after centuries, having risen from the ashes of their blasted past. Usurped the divinely maddened priests and their monster of a god. She hoped so.

As they got closer to the boulder strewn base of the mountain Nada sensed a change in the air. She thought of Oebell. The sagacity of the divine still heavy. The gods literally en-lightened one, not burdening the supplicant. And as god of the air, true, sometimes the air was laden with mystery like before a thunderstorm. Or Adur the water god infusing his presence to form a natural union to fructify Rena, the sign of promise of good things to come. This was different. Had the old gods been disturbed from their eternal sleep? Those enigmatic beings who had created the universe, the stars, the sun, the two tiny moons watching over them. Then when they had created the paradise on this planet, and perhaps the other planet as well they had withdrawn to give leeway to their offspring. The gods worshiped, who kept creation going, made sure all was well in their paradise. Gods, imbued with the secrets of the universe would not feel like a burden upon the soul. No something other was present around them. The sensation was unmistakable. Unless, unless...

"Can you feel something in the air?" she asked riding slowly around some of the rubble strewn across the plain.

As Joach did not answer Amor said: "No, why?"

"I have this feeling...really strange...something in the air. And no it is not Oebell, it's like an invisible mist hovering around us, sort of clammy as when the air is sticky with Adur's moisture. A probing essence." She concluded. The remains of the mushrooms were still noticeable if less potent. Her mind was less open now, less conducive to the magnificence that imbued the mountain, the rocks, the water, the wind, the sky, the clouds, themselves, her soul to its own inner resonance.

Then the thought struck her. It could be Verhat. He was an occultist claiming to use the power of the gods to attain perfect knowledge. Maybe he was searching, seeking what was in the buried temple. Then there was Kahl who claimed Urus herself, empress of the sky, of the majestyrium. The two were definitely in league, but aiming for what? Power? Perhaps. If there was a unitary god...Nada was perplexed now she had

read in this outlandish book, this ancient testament to evil times. Times of wrath that had destroyed worlds, destroyed their pre-decessors who had used the knowledge of the divine to create a fabulous culture. All destroyed. Maybe the wrathful deity, if it existed, was searching out those who would harbour a resentment against its dark demented vision. For Nada as sure as the stars circled the nightly heaven to make sure that at least Kahleff would be told of this divine blasphemy. A counterfeit god who dared to presume total control.

She was growing tired. That sometimes happened with mushrooms but it would pass. A transition stage when some elemental god was attracted to the uplifted soul leaving vivid impressions of their visitation. She fought against sleep worried that she might then be possessed by something that did not feel wholesome. Like a pestilent wind carrying its diseased spawn, spreading illness amongst the people, striking down the holy, the powerful and the meek alike.

"Amos."

"Yes my love?"

"Joach."

"Yes Nada?"

"Someone has to bring this book to the attention of Kahleff, if not the king."

"The king Nada," Joach answered, often a courier for Castari, relaying messages verbally they were that sensitive, "seems not displeased with the priests. Kahleff would be more suitable given its frightening contents."

"I agree Nada." Amos added. "Maybe even Norhat."

"Norhat? He's the military chief."

"Yes but look at what happened to that other world. What happened in our ancient history. A war amongst the stars."

It made sense. Maybe they should make copies. This was dangerous intelligence.

"And neither of you sense something...now?"

They both replied in the negative.

"You are more attuned right now than us." Amos said at last after he considered Nada's question. "This is good. You are our spiritual look-out." He smiled at her encouragingly. She returned the gesture.

"I think it's Verhat probing. Or his companion Kahl. I tell you they are up to something. They know more than they let on."

"Not surprised." Amos answered.

"You know what?" she just thought of it. Thanking Oebell for her inspiration. "They are letting the priests prepare the way. Then when they have control over the people they will step in and become some divine head with Kahl as second in command."

"You think they want to usurp our gods?"

"Oh no. Just control the people through the priests. Become a force unto themselves."

"I'm sure Kahleff and Jaffir are aware of Verhat." Amos assured her.

"I hope so."

Towards afternoon they arrived at the rubble from the avalanche. It was so large there was no way unless it was all removed to get back in. A minor mountain in front of it. They climbed over it to see if there were any fissures, or cracks large enough to slip through amongst the huge boulders that had settled in front of the temple. It would take an army to remove all this. The temple was well and truly sealed up.

They decided to return to their camp.

"I guess we had to find out if any one had visited this place." Nada said .

"Good point. But if Rena closed off the temple, maybe it harboured something evil within it." Amos said.

"Like the mad god?" Joach asked.

"Maybe this murderous god created a gate towards its demented realm and Rena made sure this fissure in the heavens remained shut." Nada replied.

"So it could be. Well at least it is sealed. The old gods of creation are in their realm. Rena has acted. It is enough." Amos satisfied. Nada was not so sure. Just because the temple itself was buried did not mean it was dead. Maybe what she felt exuded from there, escaped and was either searching for a new place of power or seek out like minded souls to resurrect itself through living beings. If the gods could enter their souls then so could this dangerous divinity.

They saw Castari's men manning the extended camp coming over the last rise. Excited at the arrival of her father Nada failed to notice that the eye of Bahlir was no longer laying where she had deposited it after retrieving it from the lake. Pennants were flying, the guards fully armed with long attack lances, their hooks gleaming in the afternoon sun, shields at their side, two swords each. She saluted them as they entered the camp, the size of a small settlement now. The priests had not yet arrived. Castari's people had finished setting up their tents. She smelt the roasting lamb cooking in an earthen oven. The crackling wood embers wafting

tendrils of aromatic smoke as the entourage relaxed around, drinking from wine skins, enjoying their rest from the long ride. At the other end Verahts encampment, nearly deserted. Quiet.

Two of her servants approached once they were in camp. They dismounted, took their gear to their quarters. Joach and Amos went leaving Nada to see her father. She could tell which was his tent, the largest. With six fully equipped guards surrounding it.

They smiled at her as she passed graciously acknowledged. She almost ran but that would have been unbecoming of one of her station.

She hoped Amos would hide the book. Bring that up later. But first the welcome greeting. Going through the flap she ran over and embraced him. Castari had risen, a man of considerable girth, though not flabby, his face brimming with joy at seeing his only daughter. His bald head reflected the light of the overhead oil lamps.

They greeted each other, holding themselves slightly apart, looking into each others eyes, glad to be reunited. It was then she saw Verhat and Kahl having risen slowly to show due respect. The book would definitely have to wait.

Kahl asked to be excused, permission was granted. bowing slightly, dressed in black as always, like Verhat, two ravens, two of a kind. They must have tried to remotely read her mind. She was sure of it.

They seated themselves amongst the many cushions strewn over the carpeted hard ground. He too had lit the fire for lambar. Castari as host offered more wine to Verhat who was reluctant to accept yet dared not refuse. Nada nodded and found a spare clay cup. Less chance of spillage.

Nada now in close company felt the remnant mushroom sparking her mind. The wine would level it out. It was time for conversation, for happiness, not introspection. Verhat vibrating a little. Strange invisible eddies swirled about him, like wisps of smoke, shimmering. He was exuding energy. Had he taken some mushrooms as well? Or did he prepare his own concoction?

When Castari had finished with the market gossip at Orst, having spoken with Norhat himself, even taken time to visit Efhan regarding supplies for his school Castari fell silent. He was only sipping his wine, as was Verhat. The two of them eyeing each other, neither wishing to relent in front of the other.

"One of my scouts saw Verhat and Kahl trying to make off with what the camp tells me you call the eye of Bahlir Nada. As Verhat is a guest he can make no claim to this divine object. It is now in my protection. So as not to offend the goddess I have safely put it away and covered it with a prayer shawl. So that our profanities will not offend

her." He was about to say or thieves steal it but that would have been a gross insult. "Never mind. It shall be presented to the king. I have sent a messenger to the palace. Since we are returning to the city anyway it depends on the king's wishes as to what to do with the sacred eye." Castari explained pleasantly watching Verhat. Nada preferred the eye remained here.

Verhat's body was shifting within itself, animated by some power. But then he did claim occult knowledge without ever revealing exactly what that knowledge was, or to what it pertained. Just saying it resided in the realm of Urus and Bahlir. The air liquefied around him.

"Our guest," Castari continued, "thinks the object an abomination. It is not like the other sacred stones that fall from the sky. He does not even think it is the eye of Bahlir, but one that harbours evil intent."

Verhat to Nada's surprise did not take umbrage that Castari thought his idea preposterous. It suited him that his explanation would suit his needs. He had the priests on side. They were his mouthpiece getting the people ready, the whole kingdom hopefully to accept his new spiritual vision. He was merely this new god's messenger. Nada kept her peace.

"It is a warning Castari." Was all Verhat said.

"So you keep in saying. Unless we cleanse our souls, accept this new divine grace administered by these priests, we will be as doomed as were our ancestors."

Nada was surprised that her father knew of their ancient history. She had just discovered it. Had it always been known to those like Verhat who had never revealed it to the people?

"Ancestors father?" Nada played her own game now.

"Yes Nada. A long time ago, in the distant past way before the coming of our gods there had been another world. The people then had been godless, blind. Whether by intent and design or through ignorance no one knows. They were destroyed. Then came the revelations and here we are."

"Destroyed?"

"The ruins are on the other side of the planet."

"Really? Interesting. So we are the survivors."

"Indeed."

"Why were they destroyed?" time to find out.

"Dark artifices Nada." Verhat answered. "Abominable creations that turned on their creators. The artifices had to be destroyed. These things were running the kingdom.

Drastic measures were then taken. To end that spawned excrescence and those who so willingly served it. And now it has come back. That thing," he said with a sneer, "is one of those artifices. The Fallen One's are returning."

"But if they were destroyed...?"

Verhat smiled with preternatural pretence. He took a sip of wine. "Ah Nada," and looking at Castari as if they shared a secret, "they used their extravagant artifices to escape from our world to another one. Now they are returning to reclaim this holy, this divine paradise for themselves. To be sure, it is an eye but not of Bahlir Nada. It is they eye of the godless."

'So,' Nada thought, 'they were not completely destroyed. Yet their cities looked so beautiful, their glowing gem encrusted buildings, their flying houses, in the sky, in the night, between planets, out there in space. As to whether they were godless remained unproven. Yes there had been a war and maybe these things had a life of their own. But if they destroyed their creators how could they continue to live? Something was not right here. The book said nothing of religion, or gods, just an enemy. A war amongst themselves.' She thought.

"And this knowledge has been granted to you Verhat?" Nada acting appropriately surprised.

"Through the divine essence which permeates all, including the gods."

"So are we doomed then?" she drained half the cup. The wine delicious, refreshing, making her feel more her sociable as the mushroom wore off.

"Not unless we cleanse our souls. A great revelation is in the heavens. We can save ourselves by opening our hearts, our minds, our divine essence to its coming power. That is what the priests say..."

"And you believe them rather than seek divine guidance through our gods?"

"The gods are but a manifestation of the cosmic power Nada."

"The gods are the second generation of the original gods Verhat."

"They too are a manifestation of the ultimate power of the universe."

It sounded so simple. She could see how it could turn people towards the priests and thus to Verhat. She was not comfortable with this new vision. There simply was too much diversity around, obvious to all that one power could not do it all. It was simply too much. A king needed his servants to till the land, grow the fruits of the earth, water the gardens. No there was something wrong with Verhat's vision.

"Do you believe this father?"

Castari looked serious. "There are the gods, yes. Now Verhat tells us there is a controlling cosmic power. There is Efhan who claims it's all in our minds. Until proven otherwise I'm sticking with the gods Nada."

"What about this artifice." Looking at her father in a new light.

"Maybe it is from another world."

"A godless world." Verhat insisted.

"No one knows that. Even the existence of that other world." Nada countered.

"It is written in the ancient texts. Only Kahleff knows. Not even the king. Not everything anyway. That is one of the conditions of being the spiritual head of our world. The dark and dangerous secret history of our planet. The king is told as much as is necessary to rule. But Kahleff has to make sure the balance is kept. Now that has all changed with this artifice. It must be destroyed." Verhat declaimed. Pretending to know revelations no one else did.

"Maybe it should be shown to Kahleff Verhat. If he knows of this secret history..." Nada probed.

"Once it has been dissected like a doctor dissects a corpse. However as long as even one remnant remains, it is said they can recreate themselves from any of its parts."

"You seem to know a lot Verhat."

"I have studied the secrets of the heavens, of the night sky, of the stars Nada." Verhat said with certainty.

"Who else knows of this?" Nada was thinking furiously. She had no wish to aid Verhat in becoming stronger than he already was. That feeling she had near the ancient temple had to be him or Kahl searching her mind, trying to probe into her soul, as if they sensed she knew more than she herself let on. Yet they could not know of the book she had found at the cairn.

"You mean the artifice?"

"Yes Verhat."

"The whole camp."

"Are you going to swear all to secrecy?"

"A possibility. No it is better for them to believe it is the eye of Bahlir. Only you, Castari, Kahl and myself know that this is not so."

Their lives were in danger if she did not agree to Verhat's manipulations.

"How can I be sure this is the truth you speak?" and wished she had phrased it differently for he replied: "I do."

"Granted by Urus or Bahlir?"

"As I said, by the power of the gods themselves, by the supreme power of the universe."

"Then why has it not revealed itself to us, to the goddesses of the solar temple?"

"It has, to the priests, both black and white."

"But would not the people themselves be aware of this...?"

"They are immersed in the minor realms of the gods."

"Our dreams do not reveal this ultimate power you claim exists."

"Our spiritual vision is limited Nada. The priests will open our minds, our hearts, our souls. Then we will be ready to accept this divine revelation."

"And what of our gods? You think they will stand idly by to be replaced by what your priests say?"

"Nada." He said patiently, "there will be signs. One has already occurred."

"One swallow does not make spring."

"Oh yes it does. But you cannot deny the existence of this artefact."

That was true.

"Then I will wait for the true signs Verhat."

"As you wish." He conceded.

"Tell me Verhat." Castari cut in. "At Efhan's school they have invented a tube with lenses that makes the distant come closer. It is an artefact. It cannot be evil. It is pure magic. Is that the same thing?"

"It is a sign that these things are entering our minds from afar. The warlocks of that other planet are influencing our minds, getting us to do their will." Slightly misquoting what Kahl had explained of divine beings who were guiding their destiny since they claimed to have direct knowledge of the Cosmic Mind. Their ancient history spoke the truth. The priests would guide them all towards the ultimate of divine revelations.

"So it is like a progeny?" Nada asked. A tube where the distant came closer. Efhan's school was remarkable indeed. Not just philosophising but creating as well. How could a simple magical object like that be evil? Verhat was twisted.

"It is Nada. An alien influence. Why would this thing be made now? It is a sign no doubt about it."

She looked towards her father. The obliging host, a half smile on his ruddy face, an expression of good natured humour putting his guest at ease. Plentiful libations of wine to loosen tongues and set the visitor at ease. Castari diplomatic as always.

He was well aware that the priests were gaining in dominance, preaching of the divine realm to come. Social change was always inherent with risks. In fact what these

proselytes were putting about was revolutionary. Their society had been growing in numbers which reaped profits. If the masses accepted this supposedly new divine orientation, focussing inwards then the need for many of his goods might not sell as well. Not just his but all the traders. The merchants were not as organised as were the priests. They kept their intelligence close to their chests for fear of revealing an advantage to their competitors. Castari was already calculating his position. Wine and grain, meat and cattle, horses for the military and the noble families, wood for spears, bows and arrows, metals for knives and swords. All diminished if Verhart got his way. Verhart behind the push to make the priests dominant. His informants were watching surreptitiously their growing base of adherents.

Thus this mission of the priests at Orst was disturbing. Normally the priests were singular, preaching in the marketplace the new kingdom of the soul. It struck a resonant chord with the dissatisfied, the troubled, since all were deemed equal. If people were meant to be equal the gods would have made them so. That some were destined to be the hewers of wood, or shepherds, labourers was the gods way of ordering society. All that was to be overridden. Jaffir waiting to see what sort of an impression the priests really made on the people. He intuited that the priests wanted to rule spiritually over them. Only they had the keys to the kingdom. Only they could guide the searching and seeking soul to unite with the divine around them. If they gained more than a foothold they would be a powerful force. So far Jaffir did nothing probably because Kahleff believed the priests were releasing an inner pressure, creating a satisfaction rather than a perturbation of their spiritual needs to long for something else entirely, something their gods were indifferent to. Or so it appeared.

Nada realized she too had a mission to fulfil. Not that she was sure exactly what. She felt an immanence around her. Verhart of course answered with mere husks for words, never revealing the true content of his mind. Then there was Kahl. An outsider, a nomad who had made his way to the city like Verhart. Were they sent by the nomads to cause dissention? Norhat keeping a wary eye on them. There was a restlessness in the spiritual ether, that strange combination of all the elemental gods not unlike what Verhart reckoned as the ultimate cosmic power. The shamans of the nomads had as many gods as they could think of. Subservient to the gods according to them, lesser elementals they posed no threat to the divine order or the social structure. Sure there were rumours even amongst the aristocratic families who had their personal seers, foretelling the future. Whether these gifted individuals would side with the priests was as yet an unknown. Luckily the priests eyed them with barely suppressed suspicion.

Change was in the air Castari concluded having followed Nada's exchange with Verhat. She was not usually so intent. He had certainly underestimated her. She was truly becoming an adult, with her own thoughts and was pleased to note she was certainly not impressed with Verhat.

Then there was the armed escort of the priest's caravan. What did they need soldiers of fortune for? Essentially rejects of the army they were at best thugs or thieves. The trouble makers were being harnessed. Since when though did divines have need of armed protection. Unless they had some hidden intent. Castari's spies replied with rumours. That they were escorts. True some banditry did exist. Caravans were sometimes plundered, not completely just some fodder for their horses, some jewellery to barter with and never any loss of life. Mere marauders. Engaging in cattle theft, stealing horses and like all nomads quarrelsome.

That there was a restlessness was beyond dispute. Add the unknown quantity of the priests, it bore an ill wind. Whilst the gods did nothing. They watched with serene indifference the machinations of men. If only they gave a sign as to which way this strange spiritual manifestation's true intent was. Unless, he sighed, as Verhat fenced with Nada's probing mind, they were, like so many in the kingdom waiting for all these perturbations to resolve themselves.

Normally he would agree. But this eye of Bahlir, the evil sign Verhat made out spelt trouble. He sensed it deep in his gut frightening him with intuitive horror. Not the object itself, but what Verhat claimed it to be. The return of an alien death, dooming them in cataclysmic catastrophe. This secret history Verhat alluded to about to awaken and replay its coming doom annoyed him.

For as long as anybody could remember all was well in this paradise of theirs. Monumental changes for the worse were written not just in the heavens, though there was no indication of any conflict amongst the gods. Only the priests could allay the coming catastrophe. He wondered if they had not arranged it all. To be rid of Verhat or Kahl or both would be indeed a divine sign that the gods were not pleased. But when? Kahleff merely watched, either impotent or sure in his foreknowledge that maybe this would resolve itself.

What happened next was so unexpected it had to be a sign from the gods.

"The gods have thrown a veil over their intentions." Verhat said. Castari sensed Nada's rising anger. She was certainly agitated, her voice tighter, her body tense which she controlled admirably given the way Verhat's assuming superior mien lorded it over

her like he was some supreme intelligencer. How different to Eghan. He doubted if Verhat knew what humble meant.

"Yet they cannot deny that they exist by the sufferance of the divine power. They would have you believe they are mighty but it is all illusion. The priests will strip them of that trick and reveal to all equally the real truth. Those who resist will fall. Not because the divine will has that intent but by the darkness of their own misguided souls, their overweening pride, their arrogant assurance..."

A white heat consumed Nada. The mordant ramblings of Verhat was more than intolerable. A ferocious hatred of Verhat fired her determination, seething with wrathful intent. Nada felt lambar, the god of fire flaring inside of her. For Verhat had by implication insulted the gods, those who believed in them, those who denied the assumed supreme divine wisdom of the priests.

As the fire filled her with divine wrath, after all Verhat had gone on about how the cosmic will would act against those who denied its existence she felt like a roaring fire, pent up energy about to explode like a volcano.

Without really knowing what she was about to do she pretended to tip over. Her left hand moving rapidly to her knife. It looked as if the wine had gotten to her as she rolled onto the floor. But instead of lying there she rolled around driven by an inner strength she had not felt in ages. As she completed the rotation her left hand shot up with her knife moving up swiftly and pinioning his chin through his mouth. Verhat was completely caught by surprise. If he struck back she would rip his jaw open and that momentary hesitation was to cost him dearly. With her free right hand she struck her two fingers onto his eyes. The soft squelching orbs turned to mush as Verhat was blinded, but with the knife firmly entrenched he could not scream from the excruciating pain exploding in his head.

Nada's violent attack went against all the notions of desert hospitality. Nor was she done yet. Verhat's left arm struck at Nada's head but she handled the painful blow as stars and pain flashed in her head, absorbed somewhat by the wine and the last remnants of the mushroom that isolated the excruciating agony. Twisting herself upward for Verhat had half risen trying to get the blade out of his chin and mouth, blood pouring down Nada's left arm she wrenched the knife out and slit the jugular at his throat in one fell sweep. With delicious joy she felt the blade sink deep into soft flesh. For a moment Verhat flailed about like some cataleptic dummy, then he fell forward headfirst into the circle of the fire. Sparks crackled upwards, the smell of singing flesh satisfying to Nada's heightened senses.

It happened so quickly Castari automatically had held onto his cup of wine not wishing to have it spilt. She quickly pulled the carcass out of the fire. Awful blisters and charred peeling skin certified to his death.

"The will of lambar has been done." Nada intoned darkly. Her inner fire receded, she felt immensely satisfied. Retrieved her knife and wiped it on Verhat's cloak.

Castari stared at her now that the deed had sunk in. He saw the venom in Nada's huge black eyes, the fire reflecting like tiny fires within her.

She looked at the blood on her left arm and went to a pitcher of water and washed it off.

The blood from Verhat's torn neck flowed copiously onto the carpet.

"We can bury him here or dump him somewhere. Maybe ride out to the pass and drop him in some canyon, make it look like he was attacked by bandits' father."

"Do you...we are...I am...you..."

"Yes father. Verhat was going to usurp Kahleff through the priests. The priests were going to negate our gods. They are the harbingers of doom."

"We are murderers, outcasts Nada."

"No we have begun to save the kingdom. Think. Priests with soldiers, does that look peaceful? It is a statement. They are on the move and we must stop them. I will present my case to Kahleff and the king. There is something else." She walked over to her saddle bag and retrieved the book. She deposited it in front of him.

Barely overcoming the shock, shocked into sobriety he stared at the strange object. Then in trance opened it and began to peruse the pictures and read the text.

While he was engrossed in the revelation of their distant past Nada called over Joach whom she trusted. She asked him to bring two spades. Inside the tent he stared in disbelief at Verhat's prostrate body. Then merely looked at Nada as if saying 'so be it'. He was certainly not going to lose any sleep over Verhat's demise.

Hours later Verhat was buried in a mound of dirt inside the tent. The only evidence of Nada's deed. Let the jackals devour his carcass later. She then knelt in front of the fire and thanked lambar for having given her the determination to rid the kingdom of the usurper. Joach looked at Castari who, though shaken had regained his senses. But Nada was not done yet.

"We have to finish off the priests and Kahl."

"This is going too far." Castar whispered.

"It will make an end of it father. Others will be inspired by my deed. The priests will have to tread warily. I will reveal all to the king and Kahleff. If need be father I will join the

nomads so that there is no dishonour. I am glad I have done this. Should have been done a long time ago. We need to secure the camp. Allow the priests in, then finish them off. We have more men than them and surprise on our side. Their overweening pride makes them think they are invincible. So much for this cosmic force protecting Verhat." She spat out the words.

She told Joach to assemble their guards and tell them of their plan. She revealed she had finished off Verhat and made sure they knew of not just his treason but that of the priests. She sweetened the deal by promising them gold. Some women would distract the priests with generous platters of food and wine. Then when they were satiated they would strike at the guards having been feasted like lords. The idea was that they would seem in awe of them, a little frightened perhaps at their divine status making sure they were suitably submissive. The assembled guards nodded. The fire of revenge glowing in their souls. To replace the gods was an affront to everything they held sacred.

Well into the night, when the feasting was done and the serious bout of drinking well under way Nada's guards struck. First some inebriated women engaged the outer guards in conversation whilst her men snuck up and quickly slit their throats. They never had time to raise the alarm. The priests were in Kahl's tent. He had made enquiries as to Verhat's presence and was told he had gone to examine the eye of Bahlir and was seeking divine guidance, meaning he was not to be disturbed. Kahl pulled a face but accepted the lie.

Then it was time to move onto the remaining guards stationed around the priests and Kahl's tents. The same ruse was used. The women acted voluptuously, some encouraged by their success used their own knives to despatch the surprised soldiers. Well they weren't real soldiers but scum who could not handle the discipline Norhat required of professional soldiers. Bones splintered, teeth and jaws broken, heads cracked, necks sliced, groans emitted from dying men. It sounded like sexual ecstasy. The wine befuddled priests had no idea of the carnage outside.

Nada saw the dead all about her. The women and some men had also brought platters of freshly baked lamb and wine to Kahl's tent and entertained them whilst the murderous carnage was being executed outside.

Nada and Joach went through the camp, past the smaller fires and made sure all the mercenaries had met their fate. They heard the gallop of a horse or two. So some had escaped. Joach looked questioningly at Nada.

Castari had remained in his tent. His daughter was possessed by lambar. Feeling calm, having read their planet's history. He was confused. It made sense so why was it a secret? Unless dark forces were at work to deny them the truth, or protect them from this alien evil? If it was so surely it is better to see the enemy. One thing he was certain of: the message of the priests was a monstrous lie. They would be well served to be rid of them. Maybe once this got out the priests would retreat and see the error of their ways. He sighed. Did it have to be like this? Sometimes dreadful deeds had to be done for the greater good to allay an even worse fate.

Then he heard the moans and lamentations of the priests. He rose reluctantly and looked about him. The stars shone above, the air still, expectant of portents. The gods calm, reposing in their divine state. It all looked so normal. Dark shapes were moving about amongst the fires, their servants stripping the fallen of their wealth, taking rings, going through their pouches searching for coins. Taking their knives. Even his guards were busy stripping the dead.

The sound of the fear stricken priests. Some were on the ground kneeling in prayer, others shouted curses at the affront, the breaking of the sacred laws of succour in the desert.

"It would be wise," Nada speaking with determination, resolute in expression "for you to accept that the gods have acted. Your blasphemy has been noted. But we are not murderers just for the sake of it. Your very act in coming armed is an affront to all that is divine and sacred. It is you that came with evil intent. The thugs in your employ reveal the darkness of your hearts, the violence you harbour through your demented vision. If you persist in poisoning the minds of the people a similar fate will befall you. The gods will be avenged. You have a choice, repent and live or take the consequences."

A babble of voices rose around her. Angry declamations, horrified fear stricken prayers, desperate supplications, whimpering terror, mind numbed horror for they were done. They knew it.

"If you persist..." Kahl came out at last and surveyed the massacre as one of extreme bad taste. He merely looked about and accepted the fact that he and Verhat had been bested. They had come here to make an example of Castari, aiming at the heart of the merchant class, intent on weakening them or converting them, possibly holding him in their thrall. Offering him a subordinate place in their new holy order. Instead they had walked into a trap. Verhat had thought a show of strength would be enough to intimidate Castari to accept that changes were in place and irreversible, or so his informants told him.

But Castari had gained a snippet of information here, a loose phrase there, an unguarded declamation from the priests who certainly did not hide their intent to bring everyone down below their level. His heart lightened at the indisputable logic. He could even accuse Kahl of thieving intent. He felt better. And Nada had rid them all of the scum the priests or Kahl or Verhat had hired. He not only felt better, he felt relieved.

He heard Nada give a speech. She was rallying the camp to assuage any guilt they might have felt in this treacherous act. She spoke of the evil intent of Verhat, eyeing Kahl who acted as if this did not concern him. She spoke of the false god the priests, venom in her voice, who would destroy by poisonous words not just all that was just and divine, but twist their very souls into this unholy communion with a presence that had never revealed itself and therefore could not exist. As such the priests were disseminating blasphemous lies to sow inner seeds of unrealisable goals and flare the fires of discontent. For the priests intended to unleash a Cleansing, and those who refused to be baptised by this insane wrathful non existent deity would fall, become slaves, worse prisoners in their horrific twisted religious tomb. She thanked lambar for guiding her, thanked Bahlir for the protection offered during the righteous removal of the danger the priests brought with them, then prayed to Urus, queen of the universe.

One priest cracked and with a demented howl threw himself at Nada. But Nada was quicker and threw her knife right at him. It pierced his left eye and he fell to the ground with a sickening thump.

"You have a choice." She said as she retrieved her knife and wiped it on the garb of the dead priest. "Repent or die." To those still alive.

They mumbled amongst themselves. Dissention broke out, some starting to argue, others declaiming divine vengeance, others still praying for guidance.

"I am not giving you all night. Reform, ask humble forgiveness from the gods of your choice or die. This is your last warning. lambar has spoken."

"They submit." Was all Kahl said. The priests stopped jabbering amongst themselves, most confused as to what to do. Since they had been bested, Verhat had disappeared no doubt murdered as well, they had to accept the reality that their divine cosmic god allowed this to happen. It was a sign. Their god had not acted whilst the gods of the people had. The evidence was obvious. Reluctantly they all mumbled 'we submit'.

"To the gods not to me." Nada reminded them.

"To the gods." They cried some piteously, some resentfully, some fervently, some desperate to save themselves. It was enough. By tomorrow the nightmare would be a bad dream.

"And you Kahl?" Nada challenged.

"As you said, the gods have spoken." He replied evenly.

"Yes but do you submit?"

"I never denied the gods."

"Your friend Verhat has met his fate." Nada said. Whisperings amongst the defeated priests.

"Really. That is unfortunate." For Kahl was now Verhat's inheritor. He would bide his time, withdraw and await portents. This was a setback, it was not the end.

"Remember," Nada's voice rose, "the priests told you lies. Deliberately fermented by Verhat and those he held in his thrall. This power he claims usurping the gods would have been a nightmare, one from which once accepted there is no escape. It destroyed our ancient world, it destroyed another world and it would have destroyed us. I through lambar could not let this paradise of ours be consumed so that the dark nightmare might live." She said alluding to what she had read in the book. Murmurs of surprise.

To Kahl the hidden subtleties of Verhat's occluded spectral inhabited chimeras now made sense! The mystery of their ancient race's enslavement to the artifices. The dark esurient power by Verhat's magical arts had revealed their ancestors glorious cities brought down, destroyed. Heavenly fires of divine wrath seeking retribution against a godless civilisation who in their pride had created the seeds of their own destruction by creating monstrous inventions that would not just devour them but all life in the universe. Only the Divine Power according to Verhat which he could barely grasp in his soul could stop the coming abomination. The eye of Bahlir was a presentiment.

For now he would accept Nada's reality. Deep in his soul he knew this was not over.

Orbital:Prima

Khral's mind felt drained. As a specific target oriented DV linked to his counterpart on Mars he was aware just as much as Kahl's sensory inputs, his resonance, his very being which he focussed upon. When Verhat's psychic envelope collapsed Khral knew the worst had occurred. With no hostility directed at his target he could only watch, totally surprised at Nada's murderous assault. He the fascinated observer with steely determination not to react, not to influence Kahl at this delicate moment.

When the mission began the similar name for his chosen individual, a highly alert Natural whose psychic abilities made him open to their suggestion was deemed as predestined. Considered more than just luck as well as divinely ordained. The psychic linkage extremely stable. Khral could not be with him constantly nor was it intended he should be. The pretence of individual freedom, giving Kahl room to be himself was pertinent to hide their ruse.

So that events did not overtake the overall intent of the DVs controlling key figures on Mars Khral disengaged once he knew that Kahl was not in any immanent danger. He was tempted to turn on his full psychic powers rather than just be the guiding observer. To let his link think the god was guiding him.

He shut himself off, relieving the inner tension now he was disengaged.

"Risea" the com-link relaying his words to his controller.

She was there a few minutes later having been in conference with Kroena regarding Regum's ship over the desert planet. Kroena was running a group of DVs to ascertain how Regum managed this feat. So far the ship was in place but orders through Elentra came to stay back regarding the ship's crew. When Khral called, Risea's primary duty made it imperative she find out what he wanted.

"Yes Khral?" quickly looking at the monitors.

Kahl informed her that his target was in a heightened state of alert, but not panicking. Since Khral had invaded his mind Kahl felt invincible, thinking he had been chosen by the god to follow Verhat's rising star. Verhat was a potent Natural. His claim to

occult power was not an illusion. Verhat instinctively thought that the universe was filled with the Divine Mind. Other DVs cautiously constructing an image of pure power. They made sure Kahl attached himself to Verhat now dead.

"Kahl is secure?" Risea asked.

"For the moment. This Nada woman simply went bezerk and murdered him."

"Holy shit. And the back up DVs," she glanced at the bank of monitors again, "sensed nothing?"

"It happened too quickly Risea."

"Too quickly in the normal sense. But if the catastrophe was to be, surely they would have detected dark perturbations in the field, tiny vortices or simply a single vortex." She expanded. These people were even further advanced mentally than she thought. It would create difficulties in maintaining their influence which now looked precarious. The DVs had lesser minds under control. Not good considering what this Nada woman had just done.

"Just goes to show their individuality can override determined events." Khral was learning about psychic fields. Mars was more an open set of possibilities. They had a long way to go.

"Well at least there is no overall shift in the total field resonance. Loosing Verhat might not be the end of it. Even if Kahl is taken out, and let's make sure he is not, you can always find another suitable candidate. He is still aligned?"

"Yes Risea." Khral turned to her on his swivel chair. "Would me being in space strengthen the link?"

"No, working as an Isolate keeps you from having to deal with their psychic projections and the assault DVs insertions."

He nodded. having been briefed, chosen from a group of Lord Acht's cream of Stable Volatiles.

"Let's see what effect Verhat's demise is doing to Kahl. See if he is next."

Khral concentrated once more. It was always much harder to re-establish a link just after breaking it than maintaining it. It took nearly half an hour to reconnect. What he saw, what came across almost destabilised the connection.

The dead bodies of the guards were strewn everywhere. The corpses ransacked by the murderers. Then relief as the priests huddled in a frightened confused mass. They were safe. That was something. For now.

'What is going on? Is this Regum's doing?' Risea thought. But the field concerning the inserted ship showed nothing more than a steady state. So Nada acted

independently. Their control looked shaky. She left Khral to continue monitoring and guiding Kahl and made her way back to Kroena.

When she met her in her control centre, for she too was watching the monitors a questioning look was directed at her. Risea explained what had transpired on the planet.

"At least we know whom to contain."

"Nada." Risea replied.

Internal monitors came on line, on hold.

"Ah the technicians have finally finished reinstalling the connections and all the rest of it. The systems are clean. The infection deleted, voided."

"Yes, that was a close call. You know Kroena, things are shifting in all directions."

Kroena waited for Risea to continue.

"First the orbital nearly got compromised, taken over. A one off. I assume the system's now on full alert so that it can shut down in case an infection is about to occur. I would have thought that was the case but I guess the attempt was far more dangerous than we considered."

"As we found out." Kroena remarked dryly.

"Then Regum pulls their stunt."

"Sure did."

"Which the DVs did not foresee. I mean the perturbations should have been there."

"The perturbations were there, but there is this underlying haze, a non localised interference pattern that has nothing to do with Regum."

"Maybe it has Kroena. You did say it's non-localised."

"Elentra is not ruling it out. We are searching for the source of course." And for the moment kept to herself Mena's strange experience. That young woman was onto something even if she did not know exactly what. Risea was smart. She too felt things were shifting. Kroena though was far more hard headed like Elentra and Risea. They were three of the same mould. Not so easily influenced. Not DV material either. Just observers into system analysis, thinking like the machines, more attuned to Reganian logic which the Ecclesiastics accepted with bad grace. Being spiritually aligned was all well and good but it could catch one unaware, and the DVs were being caught out more and more. Risea was right, paradigms were shifting. And not in their favour.

"Something is going on that we are not told about."

"We're here Risea to watch and observe and act on those observations."

"True. Yet the DVs...I don't know, it is as if they are misdirected."

"You are questioning the overall plan?"

"No Kroena, just their application."

"The Es, the Domimax know what they are doing."

"I'm sure they do. So why are the DVs missing so much? They are supposedly aligned with the Great Architect, filled with it's divine knowledge, infused with it's cosmic power and yet it's like they are watching a sideshow. Whilst things are going on that have future repercussions we are not aware of. They are not aware of." Risea corrected herself.

"It will all pan out." Kroena assured her. Except she was not that certain. Risea had a point. Still it served no purpose to speculate without knowing the facts. Yet facts were being missed, events occurred that should have been foreseen. It seemed Regum was getting ahead of them. She took solace in the supposition that their machine minds, correctly called Artificial, had no real Intelligence. They would have to be conscious to claim that designation. Just more proof regarding Regum's blindness thinking their clever tricks could outsmart them. So long as they denied the existence of the All Knowing Mind they would never catch up. There was no point reiterating all this. They all knew it anyway.

"I'm surprised the Reganians have not gone down." Risea suggested.

Kroena was aware of the strange time-dilation affecting the ship. They were essentially on hold, not involved. Yet their presence did involve them. Perplexing yes, but not threatening. Firmly in control. Furthermore the data collected from Carias's little jaunt into cyberspace gave her hope. That Regum's programme did not reach very far into the future which was one explanation for the sudden wall she hit. Regum's artificial future would come to an end. If that was the case they didn't really have much to worry about. Her projections regarding Mars still held, with or without Verhat. If this Nada was one extremely unstable natural volatile Kroena had to make sure that if not Kahl then someone else would have to be converted to their cause to keep an eye on her. If she continued to prove dangerous, then she too would have to be terminated. Put it down to divine retribution.

"I appreciate your concerns Risea. From where we currently stand it does appear that we are out of synchronicity. Always remember, we have the bigger picture in mind. Let us not get too distracted by unrelated flare ups. Verhat was not one of us. He might have come around in the end, his orientation was promising. But what if he had gone the other way? Nada might have done us a favour. So in that sense by concentrating on Kahl we have chosen the right target."

Risea saw it made sense. She just hoped they would not miss the trees for the forest. A conflagration could wipe out the forest if they ignored the brush fires that were flaring around them. She liked the imagery and made sure she remembered it. For the moment all they could do was observe, guide, calculate possible scenario's and hope the DVs managed to anticipate future states to prepare the right conditions so that their will would be done.

Mars

The next morning Nada organised details to bury the dead. Her men, Castari's soldiers, hung over, worked slowly using their spears to break up the earth and dig shallow graves. Whilst they were busy Nada returned to her father's tent. Amos was helping the men as well. Castari appeared withdrawn which Nada put down to the night's carnage.

"How many are dead?" he asked subdued. He had barely slept. Nada's explanation or rationalisation made sense. Understood Nada was no longer the daughter he knew. No longer his girl. Maybe because her mother had died so many years ago Nada had slowly developed her own personality which turned out to be totally unexpected. If she could organise last night's blow, he had to admit, it made her formidable back up. He would have tried to reason with Verhat or Kahl or the priests. Nada though was right. Why would priests need an armed escort? Were they expecting trouble or intent on causing it?

"Only the thugs, twelve in all. We can assume the rear guard would have scampered back to the palace, telling all sorts of lies."

"We will have to defend ourselves."

"We just have. And we have rid ourselves of some very unsavoury characters. They wanted a cleansing and we obliged." She smiled. "The king might thank us. Now father, what did you make of the book?"

"Oh yes, that."

Nada was a little disappointed at the way he answered her question. Merely of minor importance.

"You know Nada," not even interested, "Jea is assembling the nomads at Orst. The autumn feast, celebrating the harvest. One of the reasons Norhat is there as every year. It is no coincidence the priests were on their way there. Are you going to let them go or are they coming with us?" Castari felt he was losing control to Nada. Maybe it was meant to be. The gods moved in mysterious ways.

"They can go father. If you think it right." She added.

"I am worried what will happen Nada." He seemed deflated not his usual ebullient self.

"I will take full responsibility. Now the book."

"Oh that. It happened so long ago. It could be all mythology Nada. Dreams, future visions."

"Future visions?" that was a surprise. She had not thought of that.

"Maybe it is to be. Maybe it is on another planet. Who can tell?"

"Kahl?"

"Well certainly not Verhat."

Nada laughed at that. "I just hope I haven't ruined your business."

"That remains to be seen. My love for you is undiminished. In a way I blame myself for being gone too often. I thought that if you had a companion, like Amos you would be happy. Are you happy?"

"Yes father. I still think they meant to rob us, or worse."

"Yes I shall accept that. Anything else would be disastrous. We have enough wealth to get by. I just hope there is no judgement against you."

"Not with that book."

"You mean to use that in your defence?" surprised.

"As a last resort. I intend to keep it with us father. First we have to find out what is in the wind."

"Most definitely. The gods will guide us. Just make sure the camp is well guarded. This may not go unavenged."

"Yes father."

"Now that we have spoken I feel better. I think I shall go to sleep now. Tomorrow we can leave."

"Sleep will do you good. Maybe a god will pity your troubled soul and soothe you with their divine balm."

"Thank you for the kind thoughts Nada."

The commotion of the camp was rising like an audible wave. Nada left her father in his tent. After last night's speech when they had saved themselves from the overtly evil intent of being robbed if not murdered, Nada had strengthened and reinforced the bond that united them as a group. Castari paid well, made no demands in following his chosen gods. Letting them practice their magical rites. One such shaman amongst Castari's entourage was Jamos. His skin dark brown, weathered, creased, brown

animated eyes, long black hair he had fought like one possessed, taking down two of the priest's thugs.

Nada went over to him as he was squatting with some men around one of the camp fires. He was about to rise but she motioned him to remain seated. There was admiration in his eyes for her decisive act to rid them of the scum. He would have taken down the priests themselves and at first was a little resentful that this was not to be.

'Let them know of our god's and your spirits displeasure.' Nada pointed out prior their move against them. 'They will remember this holy retribution for the poison they spread amongst the people. They are under the king's protection as we all are. The priests are deluded but that is for Kahleff to sort out. If they prove Adamite in their refusal to acknowledge the gods then it is up to both the king and his spiritual advisor to take appropriate steps.' And so they were spared.

The dead buried it was time to rest. Maybe even pray to one's god of choice to accept their rotten souls. It was out of their hands now. They had acted and that was that. Jamos understood her reasoning.

For the moment the conflict over now that the fire of the gods receded from the bosom of their souls. Cleansed of the foulness of the deluded miscreant servants. For the priests no help from their nameless god. Clinging in their glowering resentment to their dark belief. No one was under the illusion that they would with vicious intent and inflict by force, by the sword, by fire if need be the need to protect their honour, their prestige and maybe avenge themselves. So much for their invisible god. Luckily in the camp there were many amongst Castari's guards and servants who were seers. Quite a few recruited from the nomads who by shamanistic means and the infusion of the sacred mushroom aligned themselves to their god's own forces which sustained their lives as that of all living beings. The eagle that soared high in the sky could be a god's scout, the stealthy jaguar of the eastern jungle some god's eyes on the ground, the caressing wind a holy visitation. To loose this rich tapestry, subtly interwoven with their souls, interconnected with their minds to some pretentious overweening usurper was a blasphemy in itself. So far the priests were tolerated. The king, who really did not hold much sway in the distant lands was accepted as ruling over his domain. The nomads claimed all other lands as theirs. The priests had no right to spread their foul lies amongst these independent clans and tribes.

Jamos agreed. A servant ran up and informed them Kahl was not in his tent. A quick count of the horses and sure enough he had made his escape. One of the men asked if they should go after him. Nada shook her head.

"He was in Verhat's thrall. At best he can weave some lie. Who will miss the scum we got rid of? Not the king. Kahleff would not even bother to waste his time unless Kahl insinuates some divine transgression. As the priests are alive no affront was caused. Once we are in the city my father's first duty will be to report to the palace. From there it is in the hands of Jaffir."

"That is so." Jamos replied. "My visions now make sense. I had been troubled by restless ghosts, foreordaining trouble. Last night I slept peacefully." He smiled, his missing teeth giving him a crooked smile. Nada felt enlivened by his presence. They were lucky to have one such as him amongst them.

"Tonight we will all continue to feast. There is much meat left over, fresh fruit and plenty of wine now that there are less of them. As for the priests they are not to be denied their share. We may not like them but by extending our hospitality towards them they will have no reason to gripe about their treatment."

"Bread and water." One of the men mumbled.

"Yes, well you have a point. But by extending our curtesy they will be in our debt. Then they will have no case at all. We have not harmed them, we let them live by the divine guidance of the gods. Then they will see our benevolence extended to them. Though hatred does have its uses." Nada continued as she squatted amongst them. A few others had wondered over to listen in.

"Hatred clouds the soul, hammers the mind even if it fires the soul." She said sagely. "But now that the force is spent we must have our wits about us. The priests no doubt will be praying to their strange god. It would seem wise for us to know the secrets festering in their misbegotten hearts."

"I think I understand Nada." Jamos agreed. "If we force the issue with them they may resort to subterfuge. By letting them know their lives are in no danger they will relax and who knows what secrets may escape their riven souls."

"Indeed Jamos. Well the gods certainly showed their mettle." She laughed.

"That is true Nada. But this is not the end."

"I have no illusions there either. They may act with more circumspection though. This is not the first time that they have come amongst you?" Nada asked.

"There was the odd proselyte. Maybe one or two might have taken to their simplistic reasoning but in general our people know what is true and what is false." Gammon replied.

"Your spiritual strength is well known. Even the sacred priestesses of the solar temple say the occasional prayer for your people."

"And we likewise. Our bonds are strong. United in the visible and invisible worlds we both share." Jaman was pleased.

"Tell me, was anything incriminating found on the thugs?"

"No Nada."

"Maybe we should search the priests."

"A good idea. Now?" Jamos asked.

"We wait while they feast. Let them think we have no further interest in them. The trouble with the priests is that there is never a real leader amongst them. This levelling they practice is ingenious. Remove one and it makes no difference to them. A many headed poisonous snake."

Jamos liked the allusion.

"Well I leave you at your leisure. Organise a search of their tent tonight then. Say five men, armed of course. And the camp remains on full alert. Unfortunate for those who's turn it is to perform that duty but with Kahl gone who knows what outrageous lies he may spread about us."

Jamos nodded.

During the feasting five servants walked brazenly into the tent of the priests who had with some cautious reluctance accepted the invitation to share in the common meal. As guests they could not refuse. The servants found two priests caught preparing for a journey. They were stuffing their bags as they entered and immediately unsheathed their knives. Startled the priests looked horror stricken at the intruders. They were told their lives were not in danger if they emptied their bags and that of their brethren.

With a show of reluctance they did so. One of the servants called for Jamos and Nada so they could see for themselves what the priests had carried with them. Many small prayer books. Nada kept a copy for herself, saying with honeyed words that she wished to understand their message. One of them actually believed her and said 'May the spirit of the universe enlighten you.' She wanted to scoff but gave him a disarming smile instead. Nothing unusual was found. No secret compartments, hidden slivers where secret messages could be hidden.

"Search them." Nada said.

With one smooth rapid motion two servants each held the two priests. They were duly searched and sure enough, in the folds of one black cowl a stitched in cavity that contained a message. With her knife she delicately, for she had not yet imbibed enough wine to affect her concentration undid the sown in compartment and extricated a

parchment. It was in code. A prayer which seemed innocent enough but one did not secrete a simple prayer. The parchment was exceedingly thin. Upon closer inspection she saw it was not parchment at all but paper. Paper was rare indeed. Only the king's workshop and that of Ephan's school knew how to boil and process the wood to create this valuable paper. She inserted the tip of the knife's tip and took her time prying the thicker sheets around it apart. Slowly it came away. Three faces. She recognised them and was glad Jamos was there. The face of Jea, the head of the nomadic tribes chosen by council, Fehz spokesman of the council and Ephan, the teacher of the philosophical school at Orst.

"Either they were to be contacted, turned, or assassinated." Nada guessed and handed the drawings to Jamos.

"I am disappointed." He pouted.

"Oh?"

"I am not amongst them." He joked.

"Keep on searching the tent." Nada said to the servants. "Every cushion, every garment." It took some time but they found three daggers hidden in the dirty laundry. They were tiny knives which made Nada wonder.

"Look for a pouch of herbs or a paste."

Jamos looked at her.

"An expert assassin could use these but I think they were meant merely to prick the skin. That means some poison was to be used against these three."

One of the priests struggled to get free but he was safely pinioned.

With Jamos and Nada absent from the feast both Castari and Amos appeared to make sure all was well. When they were informed regarding the duplicity of the priests Castari looked disappointed, Amos barely containing his displeasure. Jamos looked evilly upon them. The servants determined their prisoners would not get loose.

"Let us talk outside." Nada said. The noise of the revelry was rising, the wine flowing. The priests amongst them, dispersed so as not to form a group along with the women and servants all enjoying their sumptuous repast.

"This must get the king's attention." Nada said.

"Or my people." Jamos added.

"Both then. Your people of course will believe what you have seen Jamos. So I suggest we despatch an escort to the king with these two priests who were making their escape. Though how they were going to get past the guards..."

"The poisoned knives."

"Yes Jamos. A desperate ruse."

"Filthy carrion. We could rid ourselves..."

"No. The others might not have known Jamos."

He shrugged. "I could go with them. It will give weight to the evidence. Or I will make my way back to Orst with your permission."

"Of course. And do warn Ephan as well. I know you have your suspicions of him given his philosophy..."

"Yes. But at least he only has students who come to him. He does not go out amongst the people to preach his...knowledge."

"He did invent the seeing tube." Amos said who had stood back..

"He did that. It will come in useful. Should Norhat be informed?" Jamos asked.

"Most definitely. All priests will be suspect now." Nada said with relish. "We finally have them."

"A sad day." Castari said crestfallen. "What is becoming of us that this is happening."

"An evil is amongst us. Not that whispered by Verhat or Kahl, but by the priestly scum. They are traitors to the gods and assassins as well. By focussing on us I am thinking, was it their intention to cause dissent between our two peoples? Pit ourselves against each other." Jamon suggested.

The fifth servant came out holding some clothes.

"Look what I found."

"What?" Amon asked.

He pushed the bundle almost into Nada's face.

"Normal clothing." Amon stating the obvious.

"Don't you see?" Jamon said. "After the deed they were going to change clothes, or vice versa. A disguise. Two normal travellers arrive, do their evil deed or have others do it for them, then change their garb. Either way it seals their fate." Jamon said with satisfaction. "You have plenty of proof that the priests are not just a holy order as they pretend. They are cowards, murderers, usurpers, apostates, liars, manipulators of the people, disturbing not just the peace of one's soul but disturbing the peace of the realm. Traitors all." Jamon spat.

Castari sighed. "This is so." He shook his head.

"Look on the bright side father. With the priests discredited, so are their plans. The so called coming kingdom just so much smoke in the wind. Their decrepit social order exposed for the sham that it always was. Their equality one of the spiritual slave, goods

and houses destined for the priests coffers who with humble pretence would have taken all the wealth for their own evil designs. I never trusted their smooth words of every one being equally exalted."

"Neither did I. Even in the spirit world there are various levels, as is mirrored amongst us." Jamon added. "Maybe all the priests should be searched."

"Well let them drink their fill first." Nada smiled.

"Why not put a sleeping draft in their wine. Easily done."

"You have such medicine Jamos?"

"No, but there are wise women here who know their herbs."

"Excellent. But would it not..."

"You have spiced wine have you not?"

"Yes, we will use that." Nada said then turned to her father.

He had collected himself. Sadness turning to righteous anger. That his camp had been so misused, that the charity offered to their guests insulted and their gods profaned. It was enough.

"Our people are with us. You gave a good speech last night Nada. I will get some fine men to ride to the king, right now. Follow tomorrow. And if any of the priests cause trouble, kill them." Castari ordered.

Jamon was relieved. Castari had recovered. He had never seen the other side of this merchant. His ruthlessness and assiduity in furthering his wealth tempered by the gods.

"Now should we tell the others?" Amon asked.

"It might cause a massacre." Castari replied.

"So what? They are all in league."

"I have a better plan. Once they are suitably drunk tie each of them up and when well trussed, give them some water on the journey back." Castari ordered.

"Yes father. You may as well take the book."

"Oh yes. Kahleff will be most interested."

Nada looked at the sky. Pitch black, overcast. Even Uris and Bahlir were ashamed at what they had seen here Nada thought. She looked at her father lovingly who burdened at the betrayal in his camp, suffering the grief of having been misused, if not threatened with the loss of not just his but other lives as well, if not merely robbed had recovered sufficiently to bear the burden of his sadness. She walked over and hugged him, both standing still in each others embrace. They felt their hearts beat in unison.

Kahl's spiritual loyalty was on a cusp. About to address Jaffir in the public courtyard, ceremonial guards stock still, rich woven tapestries along the walls, the sun reflecting off the amulets and rings of the king Kahl addressed Jaffir by calling him lord, protector of all the races, the promulgator of the life giving earth, slayer of enemies and added for good measure subjugator of chaos. Then launched straight into his supplication and reason for the audience: "Portends Jaffir, disturbing signs everywhere." Tempted to look accusingly at Castari seated behind him.

Jaffir sat upon his golden throne, his robes glittering with jewels representing the stars and souls of the eternally living departed in his open public courtyard where the people could approach their ruler. Massive stone columns more for effect than necessity led the eye to the blue sky above. Jaffir was dressed in his ceremonial robes, having been advised by Kahleff that Kahl's humble message was one dealing with divine matters. The sun nearing its zenith shone upon them all. Jaffir's light woollen coat embellished with light blue swirling dragons, signifying the wind god Oebell, brown trousers the solid tree trunks firmly rooted in the earth white sheepskin boots, the purity of Rena's ever giving of life and instead of the golden circlet signifying the journey of the sun wore the more mystical skull cap half black at the rear revealing the infinity of space dotted with diamonds of Urus's starry realm. The front light blue with its golden orb the ever present sun shining within Jaffir since that orb was the supreme guardian sustaining all life.

At the edge of the inner courtyard the ceremonial palace guards present, chosen from the many tribes thus uniting the people by this significant gesture. Their golden tipped spears glinting. On the walls murals of rich harvests with sheaves of wheat, fishermen on the coast with their bulging catch of fish, toiling carpenters, stone masons building temples, the valiant soldiers maintaining the peace throughout the kingdom all emblazoned in rich vibrancy along the courtyards inner walls. Opposite the realm of the sky goddess Urus in her empyrean splendour, Bahlir in a sea of stars, Nurdass the golden goddess of the Sun, Oebell like wispy smoke moving amongst them, Adur god of water in gently flowing streams and lambar god of fire maintained in the hearths of many homes. The kingdom both spiritually and realistically portrayed and united within this one of many halls of Jaffir's palace.

Kahl spoke solemnly, his voice filled with emotive evocation, which Castari saw as an act or one actually taken by perhaps Oebell though for one who claimed a singular unitary god the dichotomy seemed rather false. Kahl recited the usual tribulations of the

farmer. How the rains were lessening, how the earth was parched, suffering due to the evil within the land without mentioning just who or what that evil was. The failure of crops withering under a blasting sun, the restlessness of the tribes, unproven Castari thought. Then on to the hunger of the people, undefined as far as Castari was concerned for Kahl left that open whether it was an unassuaged spiritual hunger or merely a growling stomach.

Kahl spoke of the boldness of bandits, the weakening of the social and religious bonds to which Castari scoffed inwardly thinking of the almost heretical messages of the priests who were absent from this royal audience. Only Kahleff was present standing on the left of Jaffir indicating his spiritual capacity, by rights reserved for a military commander to balance the innate energies of the king. Today it concerned spiritual matters. Since an incident had occurred in the desert Jaffir saw fit to hear his subjects declamation in the public audience hall considering it a minor infraction. The public had been cleared. It would not do well to familiarise the people with the conflicts occupying his more exalted subjects. The semblance of unity was primary.

Jaffir of course had heard through Kahleff Kahl's accusation of bloody murder. With Verhat removed Kahleff hinted this was the will of the gods. From his military spies even Kahleff knew of the priests sponging off the people. So when Kahl had come with accusations against Castari's camp, saying Nada was possessed by some invisible evil Kahleff listened dutifully, made all the right noises but was inwardly delighted Nada had acted with determination. The Eye of Bahlir intrigued him given its unique shape. He was aware of the secret history. Castari had given Kahleff the book Nada found inside the cairn in the desert.

Kahleff questioned Kahl who basically confirmed the accepted mythology of the evil machine destroying their ancient cities. Castari by contrast was totally ignorant and could offer no comprehensive explanation of what he thought this possible false eye indicated. Nada's deposition was deflatingly prosaic. A civil war had erupted between the religious sects who had formed a cabal and using the abominable machines destroyed those who wanted to re-create their world surrounded by magical devices that would serve them. Running their cities, the land. The people freed from eternal toil. Maybe even the priests would become irrelevant for the bourn the ancient gods imposed on the people to toil unto their passing would be lifted. Their power base threatened the priests acted, wove their lies around the whole strange development to blast them back into their previous primitive state.

Kahleff asked if the gods themselves would be usurped. Castari remembered how she had scoffed at that. The gods were far more potent than these tiny devices. She had alluded to the fact of how vast the universe was and how tiny these things by comparison. It was pure egoism for the priests to see them as an affront for all they stood for.

Kahleff surmised this return of the artefact posed no threat. If anything it might save them. The gods would remain, but the priest's message of total submission to this non-existent all-encompassing divine presence were mere ramblings of distorted minds.

It always came back to the priests. They might keep the rabble in control yet their insistence that the gods, even their ancient progenitors were themselves projections of this unitary supremacy was relentlessly driven home. Interesting as a concept but it did not match the reality of the world, the cosmos, even how the soul interacted with the rich diversity of reality. All Kahl had left, now that Verhat was removed was to recite the usual lamentations. Given that Nada had disposed of his mentor, what this boiled down to was revenge. Lives had been lost and it was up to Jaffir to see if justice needed to be done or if justice had actually been done.

Kahleff's at Jaffir's urging considered reply was the gods had acted. There was nothing more to be said or done. Extend the courtesy to Kahl of venting his spleen and watch him carefully. There could be followers of Verhat amongst the priests. The outer distinction of black or white was irrelevant. The whites preached acceptance of the coming social order where all were equal, the blacks dealt with their souls cleansing.

Jaffir had his own intelligence. Many in the bazaar resented this levelling the priests proclaimed in the new holy kingdom. What they meant was toiling in the fields, husbanding of animals, luxury goods a distraction. A society of peasants, kept ignorant, the closing of Ephan's school, the unnecessary supplications of the gods lifted, pure simplicity of life the goal. Seek not answers but pray for redemption. No more, no less. With the priests supreme.

Jaffir had waited for signs and when Kahl's excited breathless accusation of foul murder was revealed he sighed, inwardly. The gods had moved Nada and Castari's servants to rid them of this meddling self-important bunch of troublemakers.

Yet crops were failing, summers were getting cooler, less rain nourished the earth. That could not be ignored. Jaffir put that down to the presence of the priests and their unholy declamations. Yet he balked at removing them to some distant location where they could do untold harm in strengthening their belief. They had to be kept under observation. But that exposed the people to their dangerous vision.

A cool breeze wafted through the assembly. Jaffir listened whilst all these thoughts coursed through him. Kahl was calling on divine guidance to see Verhat's loss of life for what it was: murder. Kahl spoke of an evil possessing the instigators blaming the false eye thus moving the accusation from wilful murder to one of malignant possession. The judgement should be divine. If an example was not made who knew who else would be possessed. The eye had to be destroyed as well.

Rena had during the earthquake moved it into the lake to drown but Nada had taken it out. If that was not a sign of being possessed...he let the words hang in the air, the unspoken accusation obvious. Then drawing breath added the priests would have cleansed this befouled place thus actually helping their gods. Was not the sinister temple buried? Only for Nada to do the will of the evil eye's intelligence. He went on alluding to duplicitous beings, demonic manifestations inherent in the thing threatening the stability of the kingdom. Kahl had said all there was to say. It was now in the realm of the gods.

Jaffir was aware through Kahleff that the people were plagued by discordant dreams. Subtle changes manifest, revealed within their troubled souls. It was natural for people to complain when they never had had it so good. Certainly the crop failures drove up the price but there was no danger of starvation. It was a matter of less abundance. Jaffir was more concerned about the rantings of the priests. They were the likely source of the people's spiritual affliction. Jaffir did not feel this contamination himself. But then his soul was resolute, strong, supreme. With Kahlef's guidance it would remain so. Nor was Kahleff perturbed about malignant spirits let loose. No signs of impending chaos in the skies. Jaffir wondered just how deluded the priests or Kahl actually were.

It was now up to Jaffir to summon Castari. He had sat there in barely suppressed silence. Kahl's ramblings, the hint of some alien evil possessing Nada was ridiculous. Even implying his servants were deviating from their god's intention outrageous. It was obvious Kahl was the mouthpiece of the priests, who seemed to have vanished when Castari entered the city. Word travelled quickly. The priests who had been with Castari were on second thoughts let go. Let Norhat deal with them.

Jaffir motioned for Castari to come closer. As a sign of his position a servant brought a low stool. Kahl had had to stand, Castari was allowed to be seated. He was tempted to look at Kahl's reaction but kept his gaze firmly on his ruler. He even avoided eye contact with Kahleff.

The first words that came out of Jaffir's mouth were unexpected. Instead of asking him how he would plead his case Jaffir said instead: "You move amongst the

people Castari, tell me, are they disturbed by strange dreams. In your camp where this eye fell, were there any aberrations?"

"No my lord. No strange dreams in the camp. We have a shaman, Jamos and he said nothing. As for the people, well," he allowed himself a hint of a smile, "there will always be some dissatisfaction. It is the will of the gods. Some they trick due to hubris, some to lower pride, others they reward for no other reason except by their whim, some they afflict with disease if perhaps to remind them that they are the givers of life. But in general, everything is as it has always been. I do know this years crops have been less, but I think the gods have been extremely bountiful to us. No one will starve my lord."

"So Kahleff advises me Castari." Jaffir said at last. The merchants were more level headed and less prone to see the gods in every move, every act, than simpler folk in the villages. The same went for Norhat and his military advisers. It was the priests who preached constant surveillance as if the gods were spies, making sure every moment was immersed in holy devotion. Fundamental fools, obsessive, instilling a spiritual fear where none existed.

"The bandits you disposed of. You are not guilty of murder. It was the gods who decided this. You did well to inform me why the priest would carry in secret the faces of Jea, Fehz and Ehir. To make contact, to rob or to murder? We shall never know." Jaffir was not about to reveal what he thought of the priests and what he intended to do about them, or Kahl for that matter.

"Come closer merchant." Jaffir ordered.

Castari rose humbly and approached deferentially the golden throne. Kahleff remained by the king's side.

Jaffir whispered: "Keep me informed about the priests. Many of my office holders are told what they want to hear. It is merchants such as yourself who trade in intelligence. I know your seal and some of your secret signs." Jaffir's eyes sparkled triumphantly. Castari hid his shock that his secret coding in parts was now in the king's mind. "Rest assured this will not come to your competitors' attention. My intelligence service as you now know is extremely well geared. Don't even try to find out who is in my employ. They are well trained in the art of subterfuge. Revealing their presence would jeopardise them. And I must know of course that the messages I will receive from you are warranted as genuine."

Castari merely nodded.

"Now stand in front of me to finish this."

Castari walked backwards, bowed and waited.

"I king of the realm, guided by the gods declare Castari, his daughter Nada, their servants are innocent of both the demise of Verhat and the priests minions who came to the camp with evil intent. They are absolved, unless the gods deem otherwise of any crime. You are free to leave us Castari."

Castari bowed, thanked the king and without even looking at Kahl made his way out of the hall. As he left the inner courtyard he heard Jaffir exclaim that until further notice Kahl was to be placed under house arrest. Nothing was mentioned about the priests.

Kahl's initial reaction was one of fear for his life. He was confused as the palace guards surrounded him. The menace obvious their expression neutral. The fall from grace, the kings displeasure would be common knowledge in the streets before the sun was down. Then confusion set in. How had it come to this? He tried to think back. His life akin to a potent dream.

"Step forward Kahl." With the guards around him he moved with leaden feet. His body felt emaciated, gutted. Almost trembling, nervous with apprehension of having attracted the kings displeasure he waited for fate to fell him. What had he done? Verhat! It came back to him. But that was after, after the transformation of his soul, when his inner essence had expanded, when he had been fulfilled with preternatural wisdom, how the universe...

"You have been found wanting in the devotion to the gods." Kahl stood there humbly if only due to the shock of the curtailment of his freedom. This accusation was standard when no real evidence could be produced to one accused. He had come to the king willingly, informing him of the bloody deeds at Castari's camp.

"You did come freely to the royal throne," Jaffir spoke in the third person, as lawmaker and supreme judge, "but you have been misguided. You shall be examined and for that reason alone I am willing, for the moment, to spare your life. Enough blood has been shed. We will decide once we know the truth of your soul how you can redeem yourself."

Was he to be forcibly questioned? He was too numb to think this through. One moment he was a free citizen, a man of some social standing and now this.

"Your association with Verhat, a viper amongst us whose overweening pride saw himself above all," which meant Jaffir and his enigmatic spiritual head Kahleff as immutable. Silent, powerful, the kings intelligencer. What had Verhat done? Whatever, he was paying for it. Now that Verhat was dead he was on his own. Then images of three

dark figures floated like manipulative ghosts in his memory. His mind suddenly clouded. They were making their presence felt. To give succour or gloat over his fallen state? Were they planning some outrage, plotting some evil deed, sowing dissension amongst the people through the priests? He was confused. It was as if he were living more than one life and did not know which one was more real.

"Until we know more as to what actually transpired you shall be removed to your confinement. Given your status, you will for now be accommodated in one of the apartments in the palace. Cooperate and you shall be treated well. Otherwise if you are lucky and the gods deem it as such you may end up in the dungeon, if your soul's fallen state deserves it. Prove yourself stubborn and your life can easily be aborted. Take him to the secure eastern wing guards." Kahl felt himself removed from this whole scene. As if someone else was listening and he would wake from this sudden change. His real self elsewhere. He could not even recall what his real status was. Was he married? Did he have a family? Was he engaged in any business? Did he belong to an association with which he shared their wealth? His past wiped out. He could not even recall with any certainty just who he really was. The only memory he did have was of inner fulfilment, a sense of the infinite, then nothing.

The guards marched him out of the open courtyard.

In his room, his cell Kahl sat dejected. He should be glad of the king's tender mercy. It could have been much worse. There was a bed, a desk and two plain chairs, a view over the bustling city below. He could see the tiny figures moving in the bazaar, colourful tarpaulins providing shade, the hodge-podge buildings with their uneven roofs, some flat, some at angles to add an extra storey, wisps of smoke rising from chimneys as people cooked or warmed their houses, in the distance the market gardens, the sun reflecting off irrigation channels, then the soft pink desert and further the mountains.

He noticed a pitcher of weak wine, paper, quill and ink. He knew what he wrote would be shown to the king. A confession? Expected. Rationalize his actions? But what had he done? Nothing. Except the strangeness he was suffused with. Of something stupendous, awesome, inspiring, momentous quivering at the edge of creation itself. A sign of the power of the cosmos as Verhat had hinted at. Was that it? For in that indeterminate vision there were no gods, just this presence, both close and yet so far, immanent, almost graspable. The soul flaring up, energized, the mind excited, filled with innumerable potentialities of the future, of a present undergoing subtle changes. Were

the priests attuned to this as well as they preached their message of the coming kingdom. Whose kingdom? Not Jaffir's. Maybe that was it? He did seek power in this world or the transient invisible world of the gods. The gods. It always come back to them. Chimeras. He was shocked at the heresy but only momentarily. He was infused with some of their ichor. Destined for great things yet brought low, for now.

He decided to drink the weak wine. There was nothing to be done. Later when the large pitcher was nearly empty he started to write. Automatic, the thoughts and words pouring out of him. He barely knew what he was putting to paper, then fell asleep. During the night he woke and crawled in a haze into his bed.

The next morning the pages he had written were gone.

Jaffir listened to the supplications of his subjects. The usual trivial inconveniences of their lives. The merchants accusing each other of underhanded methods, the cost of maintaining the military when the kingdom was at peace, bandits preying on their caravans, their fearsome shamans jinxing their fortunes. Others complained of bewitchment, of unnatural bad luck for which the priests were blamed. The priests. They held the riff raff in place. Thieving pickpockets were less now as they fed them and gave them shelter in their dormitories, setting them to work mending clothes, sweeping the streets, removing rubbish.

Preaching their strange religion. They did not deny the gods but spoke of a new dawn. Jaffir could not fault them. But he wondered if they were gathering the people around them. They spoke of an equality of everyone's soul which might be true. Kahleff knew more of this whilst Jaffir prayed to Nurdass the sun goddess. Her holy precinct within the palatial grounds. She was the ultimate goddess of life and death. For each morning she reminded them all of her power. It could easily be withdrawn spreading eternal night over the world. Then what? Urus might look down upon the nighted planet yet she could not make the crops grow. Bahlir might see but that was about all. But it was Nurdass who returned in the morning to brighten their lives once more.

After passing judgement on Kahl, containing him which Kahleff thought appropriate Jaffir decided to have an audience with his astute sage and intelligencer in his chambers. It made for a change. Kahleff lived simply yet comfortably.

In his quarters, several rooms, in Kahlef's study Jaffir relaxed. An astrolabe, glinting, it's metal bands engraven with the signs of the skies, the stars which fascinated them both. Many celestial orbs in the great empyrium that surrounded them, the realm of the gods.

The two most powerful men in the kingdom sat on comfortable cushioned chairs overlooking the city below. The murmur of the market place comforting as people went about their business. Kahleff offered the king some of his excellent wine donated by grateful merchants. Jaffir considered his business with his people finished for the day. He wanted to know what Kahleff thought not just regarding Kahl and the bloody deed done at Castari's camp, but the state of the kingdom itself.

They were about to start when a discreet knock interrupted them. Kahleff rose puzzled, for he had dismissed his servants. Prevent gossip. A messenger handed him a sealed container, bowed and left. Kahleff handed the copper object to Jaffir and a small hammer with which to break the soldered seal.

On the larger table, covered with astronomical charts, scrolls, parchment written in the old language the two men moved from the window where they had enjoyed the view. The hammer broke the outer enclosure. It contained a second smaller copper tube. Nohrat. He broke the second seal.

Kahleff withdrew to the window table not wishing to pry into the king's secret messages. It was an intermediate report. Information that the priests were meeting in specific houses at Orst. All detailed. It was well that the king had ordered Nohrat to Orst, the main trading post of the northern nomads. On his tour of inspection to check on the tribes it was the priests that now attracted Nohrat and Jaffir's attention. By default Kahleff as well.

The report went on to state the tribes unusual restlessness. Their shamans a little excited, their spirit guides full of puzzling portents. Their sacred domain under some cosmic influence according to Nohrat's informants. It always was. The priests had their converts everywhere. Each group spying on the other.

More disturbing the body of a murdered teacher had been found at Eghan's school. Eghan had the blessing of Jaffir for they had invented some time back the water wheel from which many benefits flowed. Flour could be ground without treadmills or the use of beasts of burden rotating the grindstones. Water scooped from mountain streams. Eghan's school also taught metallurgy, casting better swords of steel, their furnaces blazing day and night fuelled by a black rock that gave off more heat than precious wood that had to be transported over vast distances from the receding forests. They studied herbs and medicine. The man was an inspiring genius. And now one of his teachers had been murdered. Was it an individual act or was this part of a greater plot? Were the priests hostile to the school? Had the teacher transgressed regarding the holy gods? Was this divine retribution or a momentary act of blind rage?

Jaffir mentioned the murder to Kahleff.

"There is always a brawl in the taverns at Orst Jaffir." In private conversation with the king Kahleff allowed to call Jaffir by his name.

"Yes. The nomads do get pretty wild. Maybe a priest Kahleff."

"I agree. Yet the intelligence Kahl offered is disturbing. Using their own guards does not augur well. Had they designs on Castari's wealth? Were they plotting?" Kahleff brought up.

"The peace of the kingdom imperilled."

"Nohrat is an excellent commander king."

"He has my fullest confidence. Yet to murder a teacher..."

Kahleff waited for the king to collect his thoughts. "...that school is invaluable to the benefit of the kingdom. It could be a random act. We shall see Kahleff."

"Divine justice or human folly."

"Indeed. It is said some at the school believe the gods a hallucination just like the shaman spirit world. That it is us who have created them."

Kahleff avoided the philosophical. He was more concerned with the signs he was seeing everywhere. A disturbance amongst the people. The obvious choice were the priests. They hedged about the nature of the gods making them appear of lesser importance, hinting at some unseen power behind them, behind the gods of creation who resided somewhere deep in their own recessed realms. Were they causing the changes? Kahleff himself felt this perturbation but could not get any closer to its source. Changes. And now foul bloody murder.

The priests uncovered unbelievers. Outed them. Fearing for their lives they quickly recanted. To deny the gods unthinkable. Was it all connected? Kahleff did not bother Jaffir with these minutiae. Overall things were in good shape. There would always be conflict. Even the gods were at odds now and then. Storms that caused havoc and destroyed crops, tempests that sank fishing boats, earthquakes levelling villages, lightning that killed cattle, floods or droughts parching the land. Still the gods never really abandoned them. So had this murder been some divine disturbance Kahleff thought. The poor of course blamed the rich for their misfortune, blamed them for not being devoted enough to the gods, or worse using the gods for their own gain. The priests manipulating events. Their pesky insistence of this universal power there for all in equal measure. Then the thought subsided. If everything was equal then there would be nothing to distinguish the sky from the earth, the sun from the distant stars...no that could not be the answer no matter how ingenious the priests presented their case.

He was watching the king write his commands for Norhat. Jaffir called the guards outside, then rose with the order holding the two copper vessels, informing Kahleff he would return. He would personally go to the workshops so his tradesmen would seal the containers in his presence then despatch a courier to Orst.

Kahleff had some precious moments to himself. There was an alien essence amongst the stars that he could not nail down. Once an apprentice shaman himself, nearly five decades ago he had risen with Eghan through the royal system of tutelage. Of having assigned individual teachers chosen by the king's agents searching the land for prospective candidates to serve in the school. Of course being chosen was guarantee one would actually serve the king in whatever capacity the then old king saw fit. Troah in his dotage had been rather aberrant in the last years of his reign, appointing his royal servants more on their personality than their capabilities. Somehow Kahlef's reticence, for then he was not so sure of himself had pleased Troah in not badgering the old king with his insights or preening in verbose obtuseness in his knowledge of the divine state of the gods. It had pleased Troah that Kahleff merely performed his duties, wrote his reports which were assiduously studied.

Then the priests appeared. These creatures were focussed. They spoke much yet revealed little. Unlike the shamans they were extremely vague about the gods themselves as if merely repeating what the people knew, what the people wanted to hear as opposed to what the gods actually had in mind. Kahleff knew his limitations though he felt the divine both within and around him. Now having some time to himself he focussed on Kahl, an enigma if ever there was one.

All because of Verhat. Another arrival out of nowhere. Supremely serene, definitely attuned to the realm of night, praying to Urus and Bahlir he had hinted that the stars themselves, the many souls of the departed called into the realm at the great passing of life to the eternal beyond, harboured signs a calamitous future. He hinted, like the shamans that hidden knowledge could be revealed. The priests gravitated towards him as if he were some spiritual loadstone. For a while Kahleff was under the impression Verhat was after his station at court. If not directly challenging him he certainly made his presence known by unremittingly avoiding the palace. Verhat pretending disdain to be entangled in the politics swirling around Jaffir once he had been anointed by the priestly caste on behalf of all the gods. Verhat was building his powerbase outside of the spiritual hierarchy. There were hints he was in league with certain individuals who gave themselves totally to specific gods, even assuming their names instead of their own.

Having shed the husk of their born ancestry to be at one, infused by the gods, becoming Verhat's mouthpiece.

Kahleff could never identify them. Perhaps a new breed of the celestial ordained had been created. He had thought Kahl one of them. Well the king had him now. Kahleff was going to do a little soul searching whilst Jaffir was gone.

He made himself comfortable. Unlike these new priests he did not kneel as a sign of humble submission. Not that the priests were humble, they only acted so making the people think they too were being revered. The shamans of course lay on the graves of their teachers and spiritual masters to invoke their divine essence to facilitate crossing over into the ephemeral realm which was interwoven into reality itself. One step away from the gods.

Kahl. Nothing much was known about him. A solidary figure who had gravitated to Verhat. A vague image behind Verhat. With Verhat gone it would be interesting to see how Kahl would react. Time to search his soul.

Kahleff closed his eyes and slowly emptied his mind of all the thoughts flitting through his brain. He sensed confusion, that was natural. The priests did acknowledge him as a man of spiritual wisdom yet Kahl unlike Verhat said very little, hinting merely at some cosmic power energising the gods themselves. It was pure magic, both claiming if not pretending to be one level deeper than that of the shamans.

Kahl accepting this turn of events. Nor was he reaching out to any gods for divine guidance, seeking spirits to help him out of his curtailed situation. Brooding was more like it. A sense of desolation at having been abandoned but not without hope. Interesting. Kahl to all appearances innocent of any evil intent. Yet by being in Verhat's orbit he was suspect for Verhat had not been altogether trusted by Jaffir. Guilt by association. This cosmic power Kahl aligned to intrigued Kahleff. Were the gods within a tapestry of interwoven power? Was that the ancient resonance of the elder gods? Kahl believed, was certain almost that they too were linked to this universal web. Kahleff had always thought the gods were drawing on their own power, being gods in the ultimate shaman sense but what if Verhat and Kahl were right? What if this mysterious brotherhood merely pretended to be avatars were drawing on the gods power for some dark design?

Kahlef's mind was so restless the link to Kahl was tenuous even though he was now fast asleep, the perfect time to gauge the condition of his soul.

Jaffir returned, the guards calling out the king's approach. Kahleff opened his eyes. Remarkably calm after having searched Kahl's mind.

He rose but Jaffir indicated he should remain seated. This was a private audience.

"What do you make of Kahl? What do you make of the incident at Castari's camp. Is he guilty of homicide?" Jaffir sat opposite and poured himself some wine. He offered some to Kahleff who declined. Normally that would have been an affront. Jaffir respected his advisor knowing that keeping one's wits about one was extremely important.

"To the best of my knowledge, Verhat was probably planning something. Working by degrees. Whether the priests were an extension of Verhat or whether it was mutual attraction we shall never know."

"I asked about Kahl and Castari." Jaffir reminded him.

"I was coming to that my king. In short, the priests and Verhat would have come to some sort of understanding. Then their obscure message would have gained a foothold amongst the people. Kahl by the way is of lesser importance. Attracted as a kindred soul. Possibly a second in command had it come to that. Castari thus removed the formation of a new power base Jaffir."

"Nipping it in the bud."

"Precisely. I am puzzled at the use of an armed escort. Why?"

"Indeed Kahleff. And?"

"A show of strength. A challenge to Norhat. Who knows to what evil they might have gotten up to? But a show of strength it was. A statement almost that they, meaning the priests were a force unto themselves."

"Castari did us and Norhat a favour."

"Definitely."

"Kahl."

"I have a strange feeling about him. Not unlike Verhat but less so. Or maybe using some dark unseen force Verhat knew of to prepare the way."

"You mean spiritually."

"It looks like the demarcations are getting blurred. The priests are active amongst the people. Their message vague by intent. Make the people think the gods are wanting. Hinting at a deeper mystery. Sowing seeds of doubt. If not dangerous then troubling at least for the peace of the kingdom Jaffir."

"Serious accusations. But nothing said directly against the gods."

"They would not dare."

"They had better not."

"There is something else."

"There would be." Jaffir drank some wine. He was listening.

"This is only a supposition, a feeling, a guess. There are rumours of another group of individuals who are assuming the mantle of the gods. Divine avatars completely devoted to a god."

"So?"

"Ah, not in the usual sense of humble devotion Jaffir. I feel it within, and without. Drawing upon dark essences and using their power not unlike the shamans."

"They are priests?"

"No. This is completely separate. Using shamanistic techniques whilst focussing on the gods. Affecting their own inner transformation to become more Jaffir. After cosmic power."

"To do what." He drained the silver goblet.

"Yes."

"Yes what Kahleff."

"Your statement I noticed was not a question. Gaining power. There is so much going on and yet on the surface everything appears normal."

"Implying that these individuals are planning to what?"

"The priests are not totally lying when they are saying there are changes in the cosmos, a time of revelation, a change of spiritual circumstances, a new age."

"This will affect me how?"

"I have thought deeply on this. Taken to its conclusion it could well be that the priests, their leaders, hidden as of yet will be the true rulers of the people. The position of the king becoming merely ceremonial."

"That is treason Kahleff."

"It is Jaffir."

"And Kahl?"

"He could be connected. Then again he might have been attracted to Verhat purely for his own spiritual edification."

"But you don't think so."

"Kahl is too serene. Whilst you were gone I tried to assuage his soul. He is troubled..."

"As he should be."

"Yet serene at the same time. I think he believes that this change in the cosmos somehow protects him from the vastitudes of life."

"Like the priests."

"But without moving into Verhat's shoes. Merely an observer, one who is imbued with inner certainty that he is divinely protected."

"It didn't help Verhat." Jaffir scoffed, then smiled helping himself to more wine.

"Indeed, the gods certainly abandoned him."

"Or called him."

"Or re-called him, neutralised him. But that is speculation on my part Jaffir. I don't think you would get much out of Kahl. He would ramble on about whatever he believed without giving anything away. And if he is an observer, watching developments it might be just that."

"If he is an observer, for whom is he observing?"

"At a guess this strange enigmatic brotherhood. If they are arranging the positioning of the priests then it would be best to see if Kahl is connected or not."

"All I have to do is ask."

"True Jaffir. What if you were to let him go."

"Now that I have him why would I want to do that?"

"See if he does lead us..."

"I was rather thinking the opposite Kahleff. See who would miss him."

"You mean take note of those who might plead in his favour. Or present a petition? Or move their plans forward?"

"Ah Kahleff I have chosen well in you. You, unlike your predecessor can think both in this world as well as the other, the divine realm of the gods."

Kahleff remained suitably reserved.

"My intuition," Jaffir continued, "is to keep him indefinitely. You know how it works. Keep him isolated, for weeks if need be and soon he will be eager to talk to anybody. Then a simple question can reveal much."

"That is indeed true. Torture never worked unless one knew the party was guilty. But Kahl appears, and I mean appears Jaffir, innocent."

"As the law stands he is that. Yet as you said, there are signs of dissention brewing if the priests continue unhampered. They do not openly defy the gods. I know they do not say this. Their silence though implies as much."

"I tend to agree."

"I am tempted to let Kahl make his excuses."

"You should, if I may suggest..." Jaffir nodded his royal ascent, "...go through the motions of an interview. With one of your legal servants. It would give him the impression

that he is of supreme importance. That would make him cautious at least. If on the other hand a legal servant merely questioned him he would know that this is a preliminary interview. Actually I don't think Kahl knows much at all. Yet if we, you Jaffir, wish to find out for whom he is observing then letting him free would be easier. See where he would lead us. Of course he might not do anything. Having had such a close escape might have taught him a lesson. Withdraw back into his own life."

"Yet something tells me you don't think so."

"No Jaffir."

Jaffir laughed. "You know Kahleff, I might just let him go. That way he might think he is of no importance at all."

"Now that is something else. Why not? Kept in an apartment, no duress and then with no explanation let go. That somebody had interceded on his behalf. Embolden him in that there was nothing of which he could be accused of. That then, if he is in league with others may let them think, if my hunch is right that they are stronger than they really are."

"You have a point there Kahleff. Let us detain him for some days. The wine by the way he drank, weak though it was, was drugged. Not much. He did write a confession you know."

Kahleff was discreet enough not to ask what its contents were.

"He rambled on about Verhat's occult belief and if he, meaning Kahl, had caused offence against the gods, or due to being misguided. Attracted by the force of Verhat's personality. As to the priests that was Verhat's idea. He himself did not hold them in high esteem and the use of an escort a mistake. What do you make of that?" Jaffir seemed pleased.

"Definitely a cover, an excuse. Embellished with half truths. He might even be convinced by his own thoughts. So if he is let go, it would be interesting where the bird will fly. Go in hiding? Seek solace amongst friends? Think himself under powerful protection? Decide to act decisively? Or do nothing and wash his hands of this sorry affair."

"As usual you have covered my concerns admirably Kahleff."

"I am always pleased to serve, my king."

"We shall wait several days. However if he continues to write, claiming to be innocent then, well, he will remain as long as he pours out his heart and soul."

Kahleff nodded.

"What do Jea, Fehz and Efhir have in common Kahl?" Jaffir and Kahleff had gone to Kahl's quarters and woken him. Got him when least expected, in the middle of the night.

Kahl, in his undergarments was confused. Honoured by the king's attention he bowed, his mind groggy from sleep, and the effect of the mildly drugged wine. Pliable.

"Efhir is the master of his philosophical school. Fehz is the practical philosopher. As for Jea, I have no idea. A teacher perhaps?"

"Their likeness was discovered on a spy at Castari's camp. Verhat could have been involved, or you."

"My lord I know not of this."

"You were closest to Verhat."

"Only physically." Trying to clear the sleep out of his head. He felt sluggish. Maybe the king's advisor, in his black robe standing there like a solid citadel, was muddling his thoughts. He was the king's repository of occult knowledge similar to that of Verhat's. The similarities of character unmistakeable. Inwardly he sighed. There was no point dissembling. They had him at their tender mercy. Jaffir was no tyrant but if displeased the outcome could be anything but pleasant if he suspected even a hint of secret designs be it spiritually or political jockeying.

His whole life had been turned around. He could barely remember his past. Vague images at best, nothing concrete in place. The transformation, so sudden yet so impregnated into the depths of his soul did expand his comprehension, broadened his outlook, inflating his inner self making him aware of the vast untapped realm within him, empowering, enlightening as destiny's wings touched him directly. Fated for great things to come. Instead he was a prisoner at the palace. If he did not cooperate he shuddered at the alternative.

"Come now, do not try my patience."

"What can I say? Verhat spoke of a mighty power." He had wanted to say occult yet refrained from revealing even that. He felt he, like Verhat was onto something big, something so obvious that it defied analysis for it was all around them like the air they breathed. It infused reality, permeated both matter and spirit, animated the universe. The gods mere projections of a convoluted imagery within the mind. Substrata of their sleeping personality that only revealed itself in dreams, under the influence of mind expanding drugs, or to the 'chosen'. Part of their make up, interwoven into the very essence of one's soul. Kahl felt 'chosen'. Now in the presence of the king and his advisor

he was small. Shrunk into a tiny ball deep inside his mind, the power withdrawing under the patient searching gaze of Kahleff.

Outside deathly quiet. Only the occasional clink of the guards accoutrements, muffled snatches of conversation, the odd bellow of a cow or the snorting of a horse absorbed by the mantle of night.

"So these three mean nothing to you."

"No sire. I sometimes wonder what has befallen me."

"You associated with persons whose intent is dubious at best." Jaffir warned Kahl, and hinted that he wished to know more.

Jaffir sat, Kahleff remained standing. The king's presence filling the room. Kahl was shivering but the king kept him standing.

"The priests are a mystery to me."

"I find that hard to believe. You travelled with them."

"No my lord. I caught up with them a days ride from Castari's camp."

"What were you doing there?"

"I was to meet with Verhat at Orst. He had summoned me."

"So you were at his call?"

"Yes. So it appears."

"Appears?"

"It's like I was drawn to him, as if fate decreed it as such."

"By fate you mean a god, or gods?"

"More vague than that. Like a force possessed me."

"So Verhat was a wizard, a warlock?"

"I hope not my king."

"You were his confidant." The threat hung in the room enclosing him. The king the gatekeeper.

"Not in the usual sense. He hinted at things to come, events setting themselves in motion, changes written in the stars."

"Urus or Bahlir?"

"Verhat only ever mentioned the stars, the mysterium of space..." And held back from revealing how he felt the universe impregnated with pure power, adulterated by smaller minds.

"So he denied the gods."

"I don't know..."

"Did he ever give thanks to their blessings?"

Kahl suddenly saw Verhat in a new light. The king's supposition was right. Verhat prayed to no god. Neither did Kahl. In another life, so distant, so other, he had believed. Now certain Verhat had been right and paid with his life.

"Not in my presence." He answered honestly.

"And what god or gods do you pray to?"

"Urus." The memory was vague but in that other life, separated by a dark fog truncating and shutting out his past, this remnant memory remained.

"What was the reason for your visit to Orst?"

"Verhat wished me to attend him there."

"For what reason?"

Kahleff seemed to bore into his mind. He felt transfixed, his mind immobile, his many thoughts rampant confusion now subdued, suppressed unable to help him focus and articulate his words.

"I have no idea."

"So you are saying you dropped everything, without knowing as to why or what and like some minor disciple follow the orders of your master? You, a fully grown man in his prime?"

"It felt natural my king."

"There was nothing natural about Verhat Kahl. We know," Jaffir guessed, "that Verhat was in league with the priests."

Kahl pondered that. He did receive the odd priest at his home. His home. Where was his own home? He had one, everyone had a home. That memory was vague, less than transparent, lost in the mists of time.

"That could well be."

"You are not certain?" Jaffir said in disbelief.

"There were some. They all look the same in that garb of theirs."

"I ask again, who is Jea?"

"No idea my lord. Maybe we were to meet him at Orst."

"And the purpose was not revealed to you?"

"No my lord." He was speaking the truth.

"We have ways of jolting your memory."

"My lord I speak the truth. What little I know. It's all like a dream in which I move. Even now I feel a sense of otherness I cannot explain."

"You are enthralled?"

"That would be the best way of putting it, my lord."

"Even with Verhat's demise?"

"Yes."

"And you cannot ascertain it's source?"

"No. I have visions of other presences. Not the gods. Beings. Like us."

"Other wizards?"

"Must be."

"And their location?"

"Somewhere. All I see is darkness."

"Enshrouded?"

"Possibly." He felt lost. Why had he been chosen? He wished to be free yet the infusion of potential power residing in his soul was too fascinating. To be chosen for the uniqueness of his inner essence, the promise of great power too enticing to abandon. To acquire it's fountainhead, to drink of it's latent potential. To be one with the universe itself more than tempting. He was fated for great things. Even this setback was more a passing encumbrance. He would survive this.

Then a flicker of remembering. "My king I think Verhat was using the priests to seek out heresies. There are those at Orst, possibly Efhan's school who are using the gods for their own designs." The words poured out. He had no idea where they had come from.

"Tell me Kahl, how can one use a god for one's design? That is an impossibility. The gods are not just above us, their intelligence is supreme, we are mere minor reflections, beings with a lesser endowed spirituality. You mean the gods had chosen perhaps Jea, Fehz and Efhan for their design."

"I am sure Verhat wanted to discover this for himself my lord."

"To use the gods..." Jaffir pondered. Then turning to Kahleff: "Is that possible?"

"It would take a mind much greater than that of a god. I am not aware of such individuals who would dare to assume such a role. It would not only go against the very nature of the gods but the whole hierarchy of their great empyrium." Kahleff explained.

"What if these minds combined as one?" Jaffir surprised at his own brilliance.

"That is a possibility. If that were to occur..." Kahleff held himself in check. He was not about to reveal his knowledge in front of Kahl. The king yes but not his subjects. Jaffir sensed Kahlef's reticence, understanding that even the unspoken implications harboured a new development. Maybe these three were involved. Then again maybe they were there to thwart Verhat's or the priests designs. Another thought struck Jaffir. What if the priests all combined their minds onto one, assembling in tandem their spiritual

power? They could then force their will, usurp the gods as such. Through this investment of power do their secret will and possess the people. It made sense. It was so clear. He had to find out more. By rights he should send Kahleff to Orst to investigate. But that would only alert the priests if indeed they were planning this coup. He had a better idea. With this murder there was good reason to activate his and Norhat's spies. He had learned enough. It was time to sleep on it. He rose from the chair, looked about the room, found it to his satisfaction then with Kahleff in his wake left Kahl.

Along darkened corridors, oil lamps sending a small pool of warm light into night, two guards at long intervals making sure their guest remained where he was.

Kahleff walked just a little behind Jaffir out of respect. Jaffir was one of the least pretentious kings in ages. Little pomp, even less ceremony, it bored them both. He let the priests and priestesses officiate at the many public temples dispersed throughout the city, forming the centrepiece at market squares. Some small shrines set in parks devoted to the gods of the earth, simple square designs, temples in inner courtyards open to the sky to allow the elements the gods presented free leeway to move amongst their devotees.

The priests had none of that. They moved like the breeze amongst the people, like flotsam in a swollen river, another eddy within the populace.

"Tell me, what of this eye of Bahlir near the lake? The priests claim it a sign, a coming evil, a return of the ancestors."

Kahleff had read the books in the secret library beneath a small disused temple of Urus in the old city. Known to no one except Kahleff. At Ephan's school his library had a secret cache. Edited versions of their past. The real library was in the old temple near the lake which according to Castari was now sealed under a mountain of rocks following Rena's earthquake. A sign that its knowledge was to remain sealed from prying eyes. Kahleff had not been there for nearly a decade. The visions of the tomb where the ancient archimage Saurus was buried, the last of the wizard kings who when nearing their end withdrew from public life to re-unite their soul with the mystic essences of the universe. Before the gods revealed themselves millennia ago. The eye of Bahlir had seen that the temple had to be sealed so that the predictions of the future would not come to pass: the return of their distant ancestors who had nearly brought about their end, in league with a strange race from the stars. A godless race who had taken the Chosen and left the rest behind. Their glittering cities, aglow with strange lights and weird artifices holding the people in its thrall, strange wizardry indeed. Now the priests put it about the bad days were to return. That this eye was one of those threatening objects, mimicking the gods powers yet not of them.

Kahleff dearly wished to inform Jaffir of the truth. Kings though were manipulative by nature, they had to be to be supreme rulers. In a way kings were realists and the danger of being tempted to use these alien artifices for their own ends too dangerous in their hands. The real knowledge behind their manifestation had to remain hidden from profane minds. Denying the gods powers would deny their life giving essence. The planet nearly died back then. It had never fully recovered the Great Calamity. But slowly nature healed it over the centuries until this current paradise was restored. If the ancient ones were indeed coming back it could well harbour their unholy intent to reclaim the planet as theirs. Kahleff sometimes wondered if the priests had something to do with that. Acting as a combined force like a lodestone to attract the star travelling race. In a way it was only a matter of time now that Jaffir would pose the ultimate question regarding their fate, their future, their destiny.

They made their way out of the guests quarters, down the watch tower's stairs, guards keeping a lookout as they had always done. For in olden times the nomads had raided the wealth of the city. Now with a standing army that threat was no longer pending. The nomads were getting wealthy through trade. Breeding swift or strong horses, herding sheep, dealing in precious stones dug out or mined in the distant mountains. Some even sending their sons to serve in the army, others actually studying the craft of metallurgy, the art of stonemasonry so they could build their solid forts in the ever shifting alliances between the many tribes. So far no rumours reached Kahlef's ears that they were concerned with any object that fell from the sky. It was just as well that the priests had not laid their greedy hands on it. Who knows what twisted logic they would use for their own benefit. Maybe they had known it was to fall there.

They made their way through an inner courtyard. More guards, barely illuminated by the torches in their wall clasps. Jaffir did not demand instant answers. He too was aware, if rather dimly of their ancient history. So he let Kahleff formulate his thoughts as they walked in silence back to their respective apartments.

"They are guessing. As in all things they make things up as events necessitate." Kahleff said at last meaning the priests.

"All things to all men."

"Precisely. They will say anything to ingratiate themselves. To the people they espouse a commonality which goes against everything we hold dear. To the wealthy they promise wealth, to those who have power, even more. They would use this eye to insert the idea that due to the sin of some, always couched in vagueness to unsettle their souls so that they can infuse their hazy generalities masquerading as profound insights. It

is best to keep a watch on them. I don't think the eye means anything other than what it is. Bahlir burying the temple. The deed done they eye has finished its job. Bahlir is satisfied and that my king is that. Whatever the priests impugn is deceit."

"Lies you mean."

"Indeed Jaffir."

"So it is no portent of doom."

"I think not. The skies are serene, the stars in their place. No strangers have appeared amongst us..."

"Except the priests."

"Except the priests."

"What do you think should be done about them?"

They were at the northern tower and slowly climbed the circular stairs winding it's way up to their rooms. Kahlef's right next to one of the kings many chambers.

"Keep them under observation. One wrong move, one treacherous word is enough to round them up and expel them Jaffir."

They reached the fourth level and made their way along the barely lit corridor. Guards acknowledged their presence.

"Oh?" not that Jaffir had not thought of various alternatives.

"Move them into the desert. Build a monastery. Then those who are taken by their message will have to make the trek. That costs. Out of reach to most. It would reveal who is with them. This coming new age is a ruse for them to acquire power unto themselves. In a way it is spiritual treason Jaffir."

"They are too clever to come out with that."

"As expected. But they are sowing seeds of dissention amongst the people. Make them feel empowered."

"Do not the gods do this?" Jaffir asked rhetorically.

"Well they claim this cosmic force that unites us all equally also empowers."

They had stopped in front of Kahlef's door.

"Not much to go on. Some shamans think that as well Kahleff."

"I know. There is some truth to it. All living things have that divine spark within them. But they don't turn that into a message, a reformulation of the social order. The priests want to level us all below them of course. In a way we are all similar but the gods decree our station in life. Some they uplift, others they lay low, others still they leave in peace and so forth."

"So I should continue to gather intelligence from them."

"Let them think they are secure. But always have the army ready to act against them at a moment's notice." Jaffir nodded. It was exactly so. The orders were already in place. Sending Norhat to Orst, removing him from the city gave the priests the impression that Jaffir had other concerns and the priests were not included.

"You as always Kahleff give me good advice. Until tomorrow then."

"As you command."

"Oh yes. I shall release Kahl. Either he knows little if anything or conversely he pretends to be ignorant. We shall see where this rabbit runs."

"Yes, it could reveal something about the priests who had gravitated around Verhat. Whether that was his doing or theirs we shall never know. So it would be interesting how they react to Kahl should he make his way amongst them."

Jaffir nodded and bade him good night

Kahleff bowed. Jaffir made his way to his royal chamber. Merla, one of his chosen priestess serving Nurdass had warmed up his bed. A little sleepy she woke and gave him a sweet smile.

Three revellers left 'The Open Hearth' tavern whilst it was most boisterous. With everyone getting merry inside, they made their way a little unsteadily into the cool night. The stars resplendend above, a canopy of lights, the souls of the departed and those to be born residing in perpetual splendour of a life well lived, born in this paradise. Outside were tethered horses and camels squatting whilst their owners imbibed the excellent draft beer, the landlords decent wines and his own potent pottage, an elixir from his own recipe. The fare was good solid food, the best Orst provided. There were a few other more seedy establishment. For though the nomads and more sedate inhabitants living in Orst considered each other more or less equals when it came to socialising they self stratified into various taverns. Some attracted shady characters at 'The Perfect Brew' which was anything but. Except it was cheap, the beer almost sour, the wine more like vinegar and the spirits gut burning. 'The King's Arms' attracted merchants and their representatives, heads of clans making deals, planning minor plots. Alliances shifted continually amongst the tribes, sometimes within days. The students of Ephan's school and some of their teachers frequented 'The Old Boot' a less pretentious establishment which had decent fare but attracted strangers who most knew were the eyes and ears if not just Nohrat's men who frequented 'The Golden Arms' but also those of the king. The priests drank in all of them. The three men keeping to themselves knew that to meet at the 'Hearth' attracted the least attention to themselves. Or so they thought.

The breeze mild, the air crisp. Once clear of the tavern district, where women were to be found a-plenty, for a price, now either with their temporary lovers or some of the soldiers, they made their way to a house on the western outskirts.

Following them were two ragged figures, looking like farmers. Priests in mufti. Getting rid of Eghan was out of the question. But there were, the spy smiled deliciously at the thought, weaker links. The leader nodded at his companion who went to the other taverns and certain individuals left casually to make their way out. They knew how to keep their distance strung out far enough not to attract any attention. The women of the night were no where to be seen. Just the odd revellers going about at their leisure. Barely registering these farmers slowly making their way home. Except home was not their intent. The three men who had left the 'Hearth' were.

In the tavern these furtives had bitched about the priests, not too loudly, just mildly despairingly for nobody really liked their proselysing ways when sober though some were good natured once in their cups. The priests to them were the dregs of society, those with no prospects, the incompetent.

The furnaces glowed eerily throwing shadows from their roaring fires into the night. The blacksmiths working around the clock crafting weapons for the kings army, even the carpenters were busy hammering together chariots, bows, arrows tipped with hard steel. Guarded by the military. The foot patrols had done their rounds. All was well. They were now keeping an eye in the taverns, less attentive than they should be.

The three sojourners of the night left blissfully unaware of all that went on around them. Jea, thin lank, nervous, his mind always racing ahead of the conversation was not quiet. Rallying against the uselessness of philosophising for it's own sake. Eghan happy to counter that proposition. Fehz, solid, corpulent good natured, his ruddy face beaming, flushed from drink was happy for the two of them to engage in their wine fuelled discourse. Eghan wrapped his cowl around him not wishing to be recognised in the street.

The death of Verhat had excited the whole town. The priests remained unusually quiet whilst pretending that the wizard probably deserved it. Planning some dark deed and having been found out, paid with his life. It pushed into the background the other murder of one of the teachers from the school. Rumours were rife, from a love tryst gone wrong to high treason.

. All this the three of them discussed in the tavern along with most of the other happy drinkers. One farmer, sipping his ale, whilst acting with heartiness at those around him kept an ear peeled to the three boon companions. Now having sent for more men they followed them down the main road.

Arriving at Jea's house. It was a humble cottage of sun dried clay bricks, not like the wealthy merchants whose two storey houses, part warehouse part living quarters, with a courtyard for their stable and garage of drays and carts built their houses from kiln fired bricks. A testament of their wealth displaying a reassuring solidness not just of their success in business but having the surplus to make a statement regarding their standing in the community.

The three entered Jea's house.

The others remained well back.

Making themselves comfortable in the innermost chamber, where on a pedestal resided Nurdass the sun goddess covered in a thin coating of gold now glowing under the overhead oil lamps Jea lit. All three of them were bachelors.

Jea was a trader who speculated in the grain market. With ever recurring lesser yields he was growing richer by the year. Fehz dealt in horses and camels and Efhan as head of his school survived on fee paying students, most coming from elite families as far away as the king's city. They were all doing well, respected members of the community. They gave generously to the temple, the priests and priestesses offering votive prayers for the safety of their souls.

The three of them offered silent invocations to Nurdass as a sign of respect to their host. Jea went to the clay pitcher immersed in a vessel of water to keep the golden amber wine cool. They accepted their goblets of clay for Jea was not one to flaunt his wealth. In the old days before the king decided to send Norhat and his troops to this outpost the display of wealth had been a target to be plundered almost on a yearly basis. Jea's unpretentious dwelling escaping notice. Even now he preferred to spend his money on simple yet well woven quality cloaks, cowls, robes, soft woollen scarves and always the best wines. To a visitor Jea was an excellent host. As they had eaten at the 'Hearth' they were satisfied with just the wine.

Once settled on divans of embroidered tapestry they got down to business.

"The priests are a curse." Fehz said. A mask of concentration in the soft light his pleasant expression hiding his true inner feelings. He had no enemies for his joviality was infectious. It hid his sometimes excited rage which could burst like a volcano. Jea was the opposite. Suspicious, cynical, a little bitter at the stupidity of those who believed the priest's vacant message of divine redemption agreed. Efhan, the eldest amongst them was for ever cautious to the despair of his two fellow companions.

"I bet they were behind the murder of Nagor." Jea spat.

"Until Nohrat has finished his investigation we cannot be certain." Eghan as ever the voice of reason.

"Yet the gods let this outrage occur." Jea stated dissatisfied that an innocent life was so cruelly extinguished. "There are provocateurs amongst us."

"Amongst the kingdom Jea." Fehz added.

Jea grunted and took a generous swig of wine, smacking his lips. "This is a good vintage."

"I'm surprised you don't deal in wine." Eghan sidetracked. They needed to do something. Eghan thought his school a bastion against superstitious ignorance enlightening the next generation. He believed in the gods but more as mental abstractions than concrete reality. More representative forces of nature. The death of Verhat and Nagar were portents indeed. Eghan had been in secret communion with Verhat if only to ascertain what this dark sage knew. At least Kahl was still alive though held at the king's pleasure. He had excellent informers. He was wondering if Nagor's foul end was meant as a message to him. If that proved to be so Eghan was ready to reveal what he knew of the priests preaching. He was wily enough to twist their words into heresy if need be. Nagor's demise had to be avenged.

"Oh, I have my cellar. If I am ever short of lucre I can sell the odd dozen." Jea replied. "But back to the priests. We have to expose them, to bring them down."

"That would attract the attention of the king."

"The king, the king." Jea said distracted, "Always the king."

"He makes sure they do not overstep the mark." Eghan said softly. "I think he is gathering intelligence about them Jea."

"Maybe. But I think it is arrogant of them to claim we are all in need of cleansing, to redeem ourselves as if we were sinners."

"Jea is right." Fehz said savouring the delicious wine. "There has to be more to this than just their distorted ranting. They are harbingers of doom."

Eghan was slightly surprised. He expected that from Jea. For Fehz to be so adamant was a sign that emotions ran deep. Nor were his two companions the only ones who were thinking like this.

"If I had my way I would expel them all. Let them build a monastery in the desert so those who are deluded by their pretentious crap can go and wallow in their pathetic attempt at being imbued by...what? Which gods do they claim inspires them? They do not say. They dissemble, waffle, worse than your philosophies Eghan. No disrespect. You and your teachers do not claim to replace the gods but neither do the priests proclaim

their power. If they have their way, and believe me that is what they want, then when the gods have been usurped by their heinous design then the calamities that befall us make the old raids seem a mere trifle. The skies will fall in on us. Why should the gods offer their protection if we do not acknowledge their divine splendour?" Jea looked challengingly at them. He drained his goblet and refilled it.

"I am sure the gods in their wisdom know what is going on Jea. They will see divine justice is done. Have they not removed Verhat and the priests thugs?"

"Well that is true. But there still remains the unavenged death of Nagor."

"The gods will act at the right moment. Maybe Verhat was behind the murder so that justice has already been done."

"Yes, well, maybe you are right Ephan. But I do not think this is the end."

"More like a beginning." Fehz said darkly. "These priests are poison. They infect everything around them, like a plague. They want to weaken our souls so that at some precise moment they can infuse their lies into the desperate seeking spiritual blessings. All this talk of equality is just a ruse. There is no such thing. Otherwise we would all be equal. The gods allot our stations in life. Otherwise it would not be as it is. That is obvious. Any fool can see that. Even the gods have their ranks. Co-equals but still not level with each other. This talk of some supreme divine essence...bah. I'm sick of all this nonsense and our endless talks. We must act. Do something. Uncover their lair. Find out what evil forces they are drawing upon to spread this spiritual pestilence amongst us."

"I agree." Jea looked for support to Fehz. He had never seen him make such a long declamation. "It's like they are from another realm. Where did they come from, who is their leader, what guides them? Verhat? Now that he is gone it made not the slightest difference." Then with alcoholic logic continued: "Well it has, the priests more furtive, but that could be because Castari's people disposed of their escort. Still they made their way here just the same. And why are they gathering here?"

"To get at Ephan's school." Fehz replied.

"You know this?" Jea asked.

"Why else?"

"A show of strength regarding Norhat perhaps." Ephan considered.

"Norhat?" Jea not believing it for one moment.

"That they are some ultimate power which even Norhat cannot counter."

"A challenge then? Sounds like treason." Jea smiled. "I am looking forward to that."

"What disturbs me is the converts." Fehz lead them back to their whole reason of meeting. "We must counter that. You Ephan must counter that."

"I try my best for my students to see reason."

"There is nothing reasonable about this carrion." Jea spat. As if cleansing his mouth drinking some more wine.

"Slowly by degrees they are turning many away from the gods. It can only spell disaster. Audacious as well. They want everyone in their thrall, using sheer numbers. I tell you they are planning a revolution, from below. Tomorrow, " Fehz said "I am going to Norhat and tell him what I think. You two can come with me if you want or not. But I have had enough of this masquerade."

"Without any proof, without any suspects what will you say Fehz?"

"That's not the point. They are all equally guilty." He smirked. "Yes equally so, since that is what they preach." He rose. "I am done talking. It was enjoyable at the tavern but this is getting us nowhere. And if I see them I've a good mind to slip something cold and hard between their ribs. I've had enough of them."

"Fehz!." Ephan was shocked.

"Well somebody has to show them they are not wanted. Reason certainly is not working. It is as if they are from another world. Anyway I'm off."

"I'll see you to the door then." Jea rose.

As he opened the front door a fist slammed into it keeping it open. A flash of steel and Fehz too surprised and relaxed by the wine merely groaned and slumped in front of Jez. He quickly sobered up but the three ruffians barged in and slit his throat. As Jez lay dying on the porch he heard the neighing of a horse.

Ephan heard the commotion and knew something was wrong. He wished he was armed and quickly grabbed the pitcher of wine. He was thinking of burglars when three men, their cowls hiding their face stopped, only their sinister smile showing broken teeth left a hideous impression. He heard the dragging of something heavy in the front hallway. They had him quickly surrounded. The one behind knocked Ephan out stone cold. Then they ransacked the house, taking the gold Jez kept in a strong box, quickly opened with tough blades that pried open the basic clasped lock. They tore down the tapestries on the walls, gathered some clothes, poured the oil from the lamps over it and lit the bundle. Ephan they dragged into the small courtyard, gave him a kick to make sure he was still unconscious.

The deed had been done so fast the sleeping neighbours barely stirred in their warm beds. Then the three murderers got onto the ready horses and trotted serenely into

the night. The other two accomplices had removed their garb, threw it onto the beginnings of the small conflagration. Then as priests they walked calmly out shutting the door behind them.

The flames flickered for a while then went out. The tapestry had smothered the fire, it's weave too tight to burn even soaked in patches of oil. All it did was give off an acrid stench.

Later neighbours woke by the smell of the smouldering fire, giving off volumous smoke, alerted, raced to Jea's house and found the two slain men in the hallway. Some raced to the taverns looking for soldiers who were soon at the scene of the carnage. They saw the wrecked rear room, the disarray of the bedroom and rightly guessed in their estimation it was a burglary gone horribly wrong. They found a third body out the back still out. Once they rolled him over they saw it was Efhan. A splash of cold wine over his face brought him around. He groaned then vomited forth the contents of his stomach. The soldiers grimaced, realising he was suffering from a very broken skull.

Waiting for him to regain his composure they queried him. He could not tell them much. They slowly lifted him off the ground. Efhan dry retched then passed out. Trying to revive him they found they had a third corpse on their hands.

Kahl, having imbibed more of the slightly drugged wine slept peacefully through the night. In the morning the guards announced brusquely reading from a royal command written and sealed by Jaffir that he was banned from the city. He had until sundown to leave the precincts. They waited as he signed the order then left him to gather his belongings. There was nothing to gather. A part of his brain seemed at odds with itself. He could not remember whether he had a house, whether he even lived in the city. Did he have a wife and children? His past vanished, never had been. Immersed in the present. Totally so. Feeling oddly complete, satisfied in this condition. Another part of his mind deeper, profound, containing as yet untapped resources of which he was only dimly aware of as he looked around the room. There was nothing that was his except the clothes he wore, and his travelling cloak. All in black. Like Verhat.

Verhat was dead and he was not. A sign from the gods. The gods. Minor players. More like irritants to the feeling of immense vastness he sensed harbouring within him. He was destined for something great but could not get any clarity as to exactly what.

Where was he to go? Orst was all he could think of. There was the coast of course but then what. All around the city the semi-desert. Orst was the only other major settlement. Somehow his future lay there.

He searched through his travelling coat's inner pockets. Felt the solidness of gold, silver, copper coins. Where that money had come from was as much a mystery as his non-existent past. He knew who he was and that was about it. He also understood that he and Verhat were cut from the same cloth. Whereas Verhat exuded power his was much more latent. Inactive but there just the same. Then there were these priests. A sign unto themselves. A projection like migrating birds having travelled from distant lands. He drawn to them, or they to him. But not of them. Barely registering their divine message. Meant for others, not for his kind. His kind. If he just knew that it might explain a lot.

So Orst it would be. To facilitate the journey he would need a decent horse. If he acquired one in the city the news would get out. Luckily there were relay stations along the king's way. He would get one there. The palace spies, the king's men, or Nohrat's, even the priest's would take just that little longer to make that intelligence known to Jaffir. And the king had treated him well. It could have been much worse. Maybe he did know nothing. Maybe he was nothing, he certainly felt like it now.

He walked out of the room, the guards merely watching him making his way down the corridor, through one courtyard now busy with servants cooking, looking after the stables, blacksmiths at their bellows, carpenters banging away, servants scurrying about. Through an archway into a larger courtyard with more stables where the guards were stationed then through the massive gate of the palatial fortress.

He was not inspected where drays and carts were waiting to be let in bringing supplies from the surrounding market gardens. Fodder for the horses, kegs of beer, barrels of wine, food and implements not manufactured within the compound. People everywhere going about their business.

The day was cool as he walked down the main thoroughfare. Past bustling market stalls in front of the towering palatial spread he was leaving behind. Into the dense bazaar, where spices, copper pots, knives, cloth, scarves, clothing, jewellery, taverns all jostled next to each other. He deftly stepped around animal droppings, avoided more carts pulled by donkeys, past merchant houses three stories high, tenements and assorted living quarters. It was all so familiar. Except he no longer belonged. The juxtaposition strange. He must have lived here at some time yet nothing came back to remind him of anything. His abode if he had one he could not recall. Maybe he was not a citizen here after all. He shook his head. Some street urchins begged for some coppers and he shooed them away. Ahead a group of priests. He wanted to avoid them and pulled his cape over his head. Not wanting to be seen with

them. They passed him without a second glance. Relief. Did they know of him and pretended not to do so as not to alert the king? No matter.

The street gave way to suburban houses. Further out they became larger, set in their own grounds, surrounded by high walls. Trees mushrooming in golden amber and red tinted leaves as autumn approached. The sun warm, cheerful. For a moment he wanted to give thanks to Nurdass but the moment passed. A memory of the gods. Irrelevant. The houses petered out and the market gardens began. To his right the river with its banks of trees, glittering water coursing slowly past the city onwards towards the distant ocean.

There were less people about. Mostly farmers going to the city or returning, a huge four wheeled cart drawn by four oxen piled high with bales. A rich merchant with his sturdy escort of solid young men and their lances, stout fighting spears, metal shards embedded at the top. Nasty.

Then the open road. It would be several hours until he reached the first relay post. Kahl thought about everything and nothing. Just a traveller on the road. He had no idea what he was going to do, no intention, no plans. Destiny would guide him. Fate protect him, the force shroud him. That had not helped Verhat. Verhat. Another mystery. He walked at an easy pace. There was no hurry.

Hours later he arrived at the first staging post. There were several stables, one reserved for the military, one for the king and three others for travellers. A dozen thatched mud huts, their backyards growing vegetables, near the river fruit trees. A small village, with three taverns. Lunch time the place deserted. Boisterous voices from the taverns, laughter, shouting, merriment. He was tempted to go into one of them, drink the day away and sleep off the beer and wine then continue tomorrow. Tempting yes but something drove him on.

As he was deciding which stable to approach astute observers saw him before he saw them. Young lads seemed to know he was looking for a horse and made him offers. In the end he had three around him, all underbidding each other for his custom. They enjoyed the challenge, probably knew each other well. He decided on the middle bid. The other two ribbed each other and their successful companion leered at them leading him to his establishment.

Kahl did not know much about horses accept to make sure they were well shod. The young lad took him to the rear of the free standing mud brick house. The smell of dung and hay surprisingly refreshing recalling memories. And familiarity. The lad let him

take his time at the front of the stables. Kahl really had no idea about animals at all. They had four legs, a head and a rear end that was forever dropping dollops. A stolid tanned tower of a man, strong biceps, full bushy beard came out sizing Kahl's rather slender frame up. Even in his brown gear the owner he presumed was stained in mud. Bits of straw and hay were strewn across the hard ground, hoof imprints everywhere. He heard the grunting of pigs, the clucking of chickens, the crow of a rooster, the distant bellowing of cows, crows squawking overhead, serene bucolic bliss. It was another world. Or rather the world passed through this tiny patch of civilisation. Laughter from one of the taverns.

He felt like staying, forgetting it all. Being at peace. Peace. Why was he not at peace with himself. What was driving him, what was so incessant he had to do? Nothing. Not quite a blank, less then that yet more. Destined for something, but what? Should he get drunk, drink with the locals purely for the diversion. The idea was sorely tempting. These people, from what he had seen in the street and there hadn't been many were courteous enough. At least they didn't gawk. Gawk. He must have travelled in another life. That is how he felt. Something changed him, removed his past and dumped him in the present.

It could not have been Verhat, he was dead now. The shamans claimed the dead never left as long as one thought of them. So stop thinking about Verhat!

The massive owner stood next to him as Kahl stared into the dark of the open stable, looking absently at a filly. He assumed it was a she for the horse was slightly smaller, or younger. The coat shiny, well brushed, the stable relatively clean. A horse was a horse.

"On loan or purchase sir?" the burly man said at last. His son, or apprentice stood a little back, interested, taking Kahl in. In his unsoiled clothes, a little dusty from the walk, his knee high walking boots coated with fine soil about the only dirt on him.

"Yes, I'm thinking that myself." Ideally the further out from the city the lower the price. He wondered if he had enough on him for an outright purchase. It would be less complicated. Loaning a horse meant a contract of some kind, a stable that worked with the seller meaning a trail that could be followed. But it was cheaper. He had no idea what he was going to do once he got to Orst. An image of mountains in the desert, a fallen rock face, the dumped rubble strewn across the plain and a light brown scar where that part had collapsed. The image passed.

"How much for her?"

The owner was impressed. Kahl had guessed right.

"Buying sir?"

"Sorry, well depends. Buy." Kahl said vaguely. It was best not to be too eager. That only drove up the price. Then there was the first offer, always marked up.

"Four hundred."

Kahl did not feel for his inside pocket to check how much he had on him. He really didn't know but felt that could be covered. He remembered a small pile of gold coins, worth a hundred, silver fifty, assorted coppers less. He must have around two thousand on him. Where had that wealth come from? No idea.

"Four hundred." He said laconically. Then smiled. "Good try."

The giant looked at him, his eyes radiant with pleasure, hoping for a good sale.

"Two." Came his disinterested reply. "Buying."

"Two sir and I would be making a loss."

He might be right. But two was better than nothing Kahl mused.

"Two twenty."

"Sir, even that barely covers the cost of stabling her. She has been recently shod. Then there is the saddle to consider, the stirrups, a chaff bag, water bags on top unless..." you wish to go elsewhere he implied. Smart man. Obviously business was not bad. Probably had a share in the inn next door. taking travellers as well. "I can throw in victuals, dried goats meat and fruit, a pottage that would last for several days, including the pot." sweetening the deal. It was not much but he was not accepting Kahl's offer nor did Kahl expect him to accept his either.

"Two fifty."

"For that you might get a donkey."

Kahl laughed. "I hadn't considered that." Kahl was in no hurry. Whatever was transpiring at Orst would keep. Another blank. He was getting used to coming up with blanks. Had Verhat put some block in his mind? Been hypnotised so that some innocent word or phrase locked out what he knew. Maybe he should consult a shaman when he got to Orst.

"Three eighty. That includes the lot."

"Two eighty."

"Sir knows the market. To tell the truth it would still be a loss sir. That price is bulk, wholesale as sir knows."

Well at least I know something Kahl thought. The man looked at him without any expression. Not neutral but sure of his ground.

"Three twenty then."

"Three sixty."

They were getting somewhere. The young lad came back and offered the filly an apple. She sniffed it then chomped at it. Then wanted more.

"I could go further out and get a better bargain."

"Sir might get a better bargain but would he get a better horse?"

He was right there. Some memory jolted him. Quality did go down further out. Here, close enough to the city there was more on offer. The market more healthy.

"Three fifty."

"Sixty."

"Ah what is ten for a horse such as this? Three sixty it is then. Including the victuals."

"Enough for a day for you maybe two."

"Make it three eighty then to cover me to Orst."

"Done." And he held out his huge hands. Kahl almost hesitated to shake it fearing his hand would be squashed into a pulp. But the grip was not excessive.

"Go get the contract." He said to the young lad. He scurried off inside the rear of the house. "Would you like a light beer to close our agreement?"

"Once I start I would not stop. In fact I feel like staying the night anyway."

"That too can be arranged. The inn 'The Lazy Nag', I know a rather unusual name, a bit of a joke is as good as the others. Have to be otherwise we would have no customers at all. Some fine gentlemen and ladies have graced the establishment. My good wife is an excellent cook, the fare as any that can be found in the city sir."

"How much for the night?"

"Well someone such as your good self would not rough it in a dormitory. Could have some unsavoury characters, a good room plus meals can be had for thirty"

"I was going to suggest twenty."

"That is for the room only. Fresh linen, good straw pallet, a window for fresh air, pitcher of wine with the room. Not the best wine of course, but not the worst either. Even a privy attached."

"A privy. Now that is class."

The owner laughed, even Kahl amused at his little jest.

"And water?"

"Of course. The inn has it's own well. Good water too. The other inns fetch theirs from the river. And charge five coppers for a small bucket."

"Well then, I don't want to call you 'my good man' for I see you are master of your own establishment."

His pride swelled a little at the compliment. " `Artus'."

The young man returned with a portable board, ink well and quill and thick paper.

"Oh yes, five coppers for the contract."

"Fine." The lad offered the board. Khal looked at the simple deed of sale. The horseshoes were good for one week and could be replaced at any stable.

"Oh I forgot, if sir wants spare horseshoes they are fifteen for the highest grade down to five. Of course the good shoes last much longer. Pure good hard quenched steel. No tin."

"Your honesty serves you well."

Artus kept his demeanour.

"I suppose you would dearly love to charge a night for the stabling."

"Normally I would. But as sir..." but Kahl kept his identity to himself then thought he would be remembered anyway, then thought why should he be remembered? Oh yes, residing at the king's pleasure and decided that if the king's agents were on the lookout to make sure he was leaving the city he might as well let it be known.

"Kahl."

"An unusual name if I may say so,"

"I had unusual parents. They had ideas about me and thought with a name like that it might help me along the way." Having no idea what he was talking about.

"Not many name their children with the old names. A noble family perhaps?"

"My family is no longer..."

"I'm sorry. My apologies."

Kahl had no idea about his family. Total blank, again.

"No matter. The gods deem what is best."

"That is the truth. Now Kahl shall I take you to your room?"

"Please."

The room was everything Artus said it was. Airy, fresh linen, woollen blankets, fairly clean. The manager watching, solid, more brawn than fat, but bulging a little at his midriff treated Kahl with circumspection. The privy set next to his abode, pitcher of water, the wine would be served at a moments notice. Kahl said that he would take his leisure downstairs so that the pitcher could be filled after he had taken his repast. The landlord nodded then rattled off the menu. Hare or beef stew, a rich vegetable soup, generous platter of cheese, apples, oranges, cherries, strawberries, tea and three choices of good beer. A rich dark ale, strong, a medium lager, though Kahl knew that only in the

mountains and colder climes was true lager brewed in winter, and a light draught beer for health. There was arak for something stronger and his own herb liqueur, for good health. Kahl thanked him and paid in advance. The manager bowed and left.

There was a bolt on the door. A somewhat rickety chair and small table at the window overlooking the western part of the village. Steep rooves so that the snow did not weigh too heavily, a village at peace. He felt comfortable, at home. He could stay here for ever. The calmness soothing his troubled soul. Now why was that? What did he know that seemed to plague him? Or rather not plague him. Damn. It was as if his mind was locked, as if he was barred from his own memories. Did they not define who he was? Praying to the gods was of no use. They did what pleased them, it was up to him, anybody really to make sense of their impenetrable ways. What he needed was a soothsayer, or a wise woman, usually herbalists and druggists that could make a concoction to access the void recesses in his mind. Or better still a shaman. They could get into the inner realm one carried with oneself. Seek out the hidden mysteries of the soul, that entity that defined one's life. Maybe there was one such person, any would do in the village.

He heard the boisterousness from the tavern below. A part of him wanted to stay up here and be left in peace. For the bucolic scene outside, the bright sky, the slight breeze rich with manure of the stables of the village, in the distance grazing cows, the patchwork of small plots of land, some already fallow, further out the harvest bundled ready to be sold to the merchants from the city.

No, this brooding was not helping. He would enjoy the company below, be they farmers, itinerant travellers such as himself, maybe a trader, soldiers always good for information, as was anybody who travelled really. There were of course as in any tavern, marks, shady characters who would easily pick your pocket or those engaging individuals who would make for merry company as long as you picked up the tab. He sorted through his money. Taking one silver coin which would more than cover a days feasting and drinking plus some coppers of course, the common mans lucre. On the door was a key. Big for a large lock. Ah, Artus had certainly shown him to the right inn. He could thus leave his travelling coat, worth at least thirty, safely here. He transferred his wealth, for he really did have two thousand on him, less the cost of hiring the filly, spread around his cloak, his vest, his trousers. Fifteen gold coins, eight silver coins and the rest in copper coins. He separated his money into his little purse, as everybody else did, hide one's real amount. Kahl wore no rings of any kind. Not the ostentatious kind. No pendants or earrings, bracelets, expensive silver studded belt, just plain leather, nor

pretentious buckles on his boots. Plain simple gear. He was satisfied. He looked a man of means but not extravagantly rich to the eye of a sneaky stranger.

He made his way down the solid staircase, no creaks under his boots, through the dark foyer and into the public room. It took up most of the floor. The solid packed earth stained with spilled beer and wine of course, some scraps of food around the tables as it was just after lunch time. The kitchen next to the tavern itself adding a rich aroma of the stew the landlord had mentioned. His wife a buxom woman greeted him with a well practiced genuine welcome, not overly imposing and simultaneously searched among the long wooden tables, or smaller intimate ones, to see where he would like to take his rest.

It was common courtesy to announce one's presence with a cheery hello so all Kahl said was "Greetings, I wish you all well and a merry afternoon." Not too loud, or timid either. A group of six soldiers turned, sizing him up, working for the king and Norhat. Soldiers being soldiers, that is strangers were always glad of company. One for amusement, the other for information. Kahl nodded affably at them, seeing empty platters of their finished lunch, large clay beer mugs in front of them. Some farmers at other tables looked at him indifferently, they were used to travellers here which helped. In tiny isolated villages strangers were either inundated with good will just for the change or ignored, a sort of brooding indifference that they had no wish to be disturbed from their bosom company. Some were with their wives. Then the surprise of his life. A group of men and women who had been with Castari's camp. Now that was a revelation. They saw him of course, recognition on their faces though nothing overt to indicate hostility. One even had the temerity to lift his beer jug at him.

No point pretending, he waved lamely at them but decided to join the soldiers. He needed information given the vagueness within his mind, for he had no idea what exactly he was after. He hoped the beer would lighten his mind and get him to be himself, whoever he was.

He sat with the soldiers. They were a mixed group. In their leather outfits, not fully geared up they were no doubt on leave, or off duty. Every large town had a contingent but this small place, well the king and Norhat had their reasons why it should be watched. Probably for his kind. .

The hare stew arrived. Kahl tucked into it's flavoursome delight.

What Kahl did not know was that he was being followed by two men. Unbeknown they looked like merchants or traders. Plain garb, unnoticeable. They barely glanced at him having arrived whilst Kahl was negotiating with Artus.

So Kahl sat with the soldiers at the end of their long table. They plied him with questions. Kahl even mentioned, between mouthfuls that he had been with Castari's camp. They heard the news by now of how Nada had finished off the mysterious Verhat. Then recognition that Kahl was his travelling companion. After a few beers, a rich frothy brew for he had chosen the lager, he pointed out the group that had recognised him. They were duly invited to join them. They pulled their table over and talked of the minor battle that had occurred. Kahl hid nothing. He knew so little it did not matter. And was smart enough to agree that the thugs Castari's people disposed of rid the place of unsavoury cutthroats. As to what happened to the priests well they all thought they made their way to Orst.

The priests were derided. No one thought highly of them. Meddlers they were called. What was Verhat doing with these black crows? To the best of his ability he said they gravitated towards Verhat not the reverse. Verhat he suggested wanted to know more about them. 'Don't we all.' One soldier replied. What did Kahl know?

"Absolutely nothing. That is the truth, which I swear by Urus and Bahlir."

They were satisfied that he did not reject the gods as the priests implied, hedged even.

"An evil sign." Another older soldier said. He had the highest ranking amongst them, a captain, or their captain.

Kahl replied. "Came out of nowhere." Just like himself he thought.

"Nowhere. Now there is a concept." One of Castari's men said. Kahl saw that the four of them were with two women. Dressed like the men in riding vests, trousers, boots. Not unusual. The more domiciled women wore dresses but like the tribes pants were warmer for the outside life. He saw they had sheathed knives. Ready to look after themselves.

"What's this nowhere?" One of the younger soldiers laughed taking a healthy swig.

"Nowhere is when you're vacant," One of his companions laughed, "like your brain."

"Ha ha." He mocked. "At least I got one."

"Pity you don't use it." came the merry retort.

"Yes the priests. Trouble." Is all Kahl said, seeing where that would lead.

"No wonder the eye of Bahlir fell where it did." One of Castari's women said.

"Yes the eye. At least the gods are watching them."

"I wish they would rid us of them." One of the soldiers replied.

"I'll drink to that. They will be trouble, I can feel it."

"As long as it's not in your groin." His companion jested. Guffaws all around.

"So what do you think..." the captain looked at Kahl.

"Kahl."

A momentary silence. Not hostile. So they had heard of him. Well he had been obvious at the camp.

"You were with Verhat. Why was he disposed of? He must have deserved it for the king has taken no action against Castari." The captain said. Well informed even in this little outpost.

"Who knows?" Kahl answered honestly. "It's not that he exactly confided in me. I was gathering what I could..." He suggested.

Another moment of studied silence. The captain gave him a knowledgeable look implying he at least understood that Kahl was his own man. Castari's group thought the same. They all visibly relaxed a little.

"...not just about, as you said the 'mysterious Verhat' but also why the priests should find him of interest."

"You were a guest at the king's palace." The captain probed.

"Indeed that is so."

"So what do you think?" Kahl understood the question.

"The priests are up to something."

"The cleansing." One of the woman said distastefully.

"Yes and that."

"And that?" she looked enquiringly at him.

"There seems to be more to them than just this rubbish of salvation."

They nodded at that.

"It could be treason." Might as well sow some seeds. "I think they want to convert the people, hold them in their thrall. Probably one of the reasons why they are going to Orst. Learn from the shamans or convert them."

"Convert them to what?" one of the soldiers curious.

"You said it, 'what'." Kahl just as interested.

"I have heard that they prey on the weak, that is how they convert them. Not physically weak, mentally, spiritually." One of the soldiers suggested.

"Who else?" the captain concurred.

"Why would anybody want to abandon the gods, jeopardise this paradise." The other woman said. Puzzled as they all were.

"That's the nub of it. The king, blessed be his reign, is waiting for some sort of revelation."

"You mean a sign from the gods." One of his men asked.

"What else?"

"Maybe the gods are waiting to see what we do, how we deal with this scourge. The priests beg food from hard working people, as if that is what they are there for, as if they are owed a living. And what do they do? Preach this nonsense of a coming holy kingdom. We have all this, so what are they going on about?" the first woman asked them. Not convinced of their vague promise of this kingdom of theirs.

"I bet they are waiting for some sort of leader." The captain suggested. "It makes sense. First Verhat. Well he's gone. Obviously not you." He looked at Kahl. "Otherwise they'd be flocking to you. Since you were with Verhat you'd know more about what he was on about than anybody else."

They looked expectantly at him.

"Well from what I could gather, he believed in some sort of cosmic force of which the gods were a part. He wanted to align himself with that force, learn the secret of the gods powers. Even the ancient ones who he thought held the key. Masters of creation. That's what he was after."

"No shit." One of the soldiers said astounded. "How would one do that?"

"Well we'll never know with Verhat disposed of. Yet as said, the king had let that minor transgression pass. Of course Jaffir knows more than we ever will. Still it would have been interesting just the same." One of the men proposed.

"And what about you Kahl? Do you believe all this?" the captain asked good naturedly.

"The priests or Verhat? Well, the priests are spinning a yarn. Verhat's idea is enticing of course. But as to the 'how', meaning Verhat, well he just mentioned the 'what'. Now, the priests, they claim one just has to accept their message of redemption, admitting to one's sins, purify one's soul and that is that."

"That's bullshit." The soldier who said 'no shit' added. "Because," he took a good pull at his beer, then satisfied continued: "most of us would feel this so called kingdom of theirs. Anyway what's this sin crap? Just to make us feel guilty, that's all. Make us think we are worse than we are. Sin, what a lot of bull dung."

"It's subtler than that." Kahl heard himself say. "They claim we all are inherently flawed. Since we are not gods we are lesser beings. That is the flaw. And they claim they

have the knowledge to purify us, make us divine. That's their catch." Kahl surprised he had read the priests that well. It made sense, even if it was twisted all out of proportion.

"You have something there." The earthy soldier nodded. "Well," he smiled, "if it is as simple as that, then I can purify myself. Starting with drinking more beer. Enough of that and I'm cleansed, at the privy!" and they all laughed.

"Well we were going to ask what you are doing Kahl." The captain changed the conversation. "But given what you have said, we'll leave it at that." The captain turning to his men. Kahl was on a mission, and since it concerned the priests then it was best to let him go about his business as best as he could. The hint was taken.

For the rest of the passing afternoon they drank, talked, joked, leered at the odd woman, who in this village were used to the soldier's ways and sometimes pulled a face back at them which meant the jeerer got a ribbing from his mates. Castari's people dropped the subject as well.

It was then that a recent arrival announced the triple murder at Orst. That got the whole tavern excited. Ephan, Fehz and Jea. They all had heard of Ephan of course and were surprised. After all he was the philosopher in the kingdom. Some blamed the priests, others some psycho from the tribes who took affront at the gods being a figment of their minds, maybe the priests stirring up trouble or, hushed, the king himself. For if the gods according to Ephan were figments that really was sailing into dangerous waters. One teacher had already been disposed of. Ephan had not taken the hint. The excitement subsided.

The two `travellers' kept to themselves in the tavern, watching Kahl. They did note though that he was no heretic. When they picked up the snippet that Kahl was on a mission they became more circumspect. Maybe he was under the king's protection. But they puzzled, why watch him? His companion suggested to see what he would discover of the priests' real intentions and perchance to see who else had any designs upon him. With murder afoot they were under orders to make sure no harm came to him in case his companion had forgotten. His erstwhile companion complained that their brief was to watch him, find out who reacted positively or negatively to Kahl. Knowing that Kahl was off to Orst they made arrangements to hire some horses.

Back on the king's road he passed other caravans, now secured with extra able bodied men and women. But no priests. Not in the open.

He did not ride fast, just at a jaunty pace. Sleeping during the day off the beaten track, behind outcrops of rocks. Once a day he led his mare to the river, let her drink and would catch up with some sleep, the flies annoying. Riding at night under the glittering canopy of stars, wondering if there really were other souls, not the departed but real life, flesh and blood residing out there. Verhat had suggested myriad worlds, other civilisations, higher minds who had visited the planet in the misty past. Leaving caches of their wisdom, remnant left-overs which would reveal to the pure seeker their superior knowledge. Records of the past on the other side of the planet. No king ever launched an expedition to find the lost cities destroyed by a warlike race in some forgotten cosmic war. Denying their then future. Destroying their power. Power. Verhat's fixed idea. Yet for all that he was dead. It had to be fate decreed by the gods. Kahl spared. Destiny. With an uncanny presence within him, some guiding light that did not shine so much as resonate deep in his mind. The gods would decide the moment of revelation. The priests meant nothing. They were on about something far more prosaic.

Into the pass. Towering cliffs where armies once fought for possession of the strategic route. It would be so easy to ambush him. Those who did pass him merely nodded each going in opposite directions. Travelling at night had its advantages. He was barely noticed. The path wended its way through canyons, the river now a waterfall, collecting in deep pools as it poured down the ice capped mountains, the ground barren, hard, immutable. The odd eagle overhead searching for prey. Then down the other side through huge clefts. With the morning sun, a quick prayer of thanks to Nurdass then seeking shelter once more. A few days more and he would be at Orst.

The closer he came the more patrols he encountered. He had his 'release papers' from Jaffir, banished from his city but free to roam at his leisure. The soldiers merely grunted. Another outcast. Orst the logical place to start anew. As to what Kahl was going to do there escaped his searching mind. Make contact? With whom? For what purpose? He continued his journey. Then the first outlying farmsteads. Cattle country. Dogs barked as he passed closer settlements, huddled cottages or the sprawling tents of the nomadic tribes. Their people looked different. The eyes slightly slanted, looked cunning, studying him in silent appraisal.

The final night. At dawn the jumbled houses of Orst. Even from a days ride on the plain with another line of distant mountains towering into the sky, clouds hanging over them, hiding their peaks the white temple radiant in the morning sun. His last rest stop. One more ride in the night for he wanted to enter the town during the morning.

The gated entrance was manned by a squad of soldiers. Once more he showed them his 'release papers', his name noted on a register. Carts blocked the way as their goods were inspected, searching for secreted assassins going both in or out. Or undeclared contraband. He was finally waved through.

The bazaar offered rich woven carpets, tents, stables for horses, donkeys, camels, bullocks, sheepdogs, chickens, ducks, geese, rich shining silks, scarves, woollen cloth, jewellery, goldsmiths, silversmith's, copper workshops making kitchen utensils, knives of all shapes and sizes, blacksmiths, statues of the gods and goddesses, fruit, butchers, grain sellers all jostling for attention. In front the white edifice of the public temple and several taverns, eating houses, tea stalls, street vendors selling just about everything imaginable taking their wares to the outlying houses of the wealthier who hid behind high walls. Purveyors of wines, distillers of strong liquors, herbalists, druggists, servants on some errand, children playing tag, running amongst the adults, women in shawls, itinerant travellers such as himself, the odd garbed teacher, and soldiers everywhere. Four murders in one month. Unspeakable, outrageous which he picked up from snatches of conversation. Around the white columned temple, a raised edifice set in an open market square where more wares were displayed on the ground, the poorer sellers, not quite the merchant class, more enterprising farmers, their quality less than that of the shops and cheaper no doubt. Several inns spread along the market's perimeter.

Carriages passed him, curtains drawn as the more affluent went to their assignations. Some priests were about, now in small groups, silent, looking alien, inserted into the milieu but not of it. Seeing one thoroughfare to his right signs announced more stables. In the distance some long buildings. The famous school with its murdered head and that of his friends. Next to it smoke rising from the furnaces, flames sending a glow around them even in daylight. Now protected by more soldiers. Bordellos, the women dressed in tight fitting sarongs, rich reds, deep purples, smooth lilacs, light blues, some with glinting ankle jewellery, coloured hair, some green, some blue, dark red, bright blonde, swarthy black. Kahl was momentarily tempted but first to resell his horse, find accommodation and wait. For what? Search for hidden knowledge? Go to the school? Seek information on the murderers? Find out what had made Castari's people rid them of the priests hired mercenaries?

He found the cleanest looking stable after a while and sold his horse for half of what he had paid. Kahl had been in no mood to haggle too long. They reached their agreement, saddle and other accoutrements included. Now back on foot he felt relieved, more free and searched for a decent tavern. Five establishments later he

decided to rent a double room at the best kept inn 'The Golden Orb'. Used to prices at the king's city this place was relatively cheap. The rooms were clean, fresh linen as expected, airy with a tiny balcony overlooking the square and the temple. People moving up and down its steps. Two glowing bowls of fire to lamper, the front flanked with carven statues of marble: Adur holding a pitcher of water, Nurdass a halo of the sun around her head painted in gold, Rena slightly raised on a mound of earth, Bahlir with a headband of stars, twinkling with diamonds and Urus, arms outstretched with open hands indicating her realm, the whole empyrium. Soldiers everywhere. Nohrat was taking no chances. He assumed their quarters were at the edge of town, his headquarters easily defended rather than contained in the town itself. Even in his hotel soldiers were posted, peace maintained.

Smoke wafted up from the many houses. A shiver rippled through him though he could not detect any breeze. For a moment everything flickered, shuddering from an invisible earthquake. Even the shadows shook. Then gaps between the shaking imagery. A barren landscape. Orst just an image, a hallucination of his mind. Parched desolation, no remnants of life. Not death. More like *nothingness*. The gods having abandoned the world, their paradise.

Then the richness of the colours, the texture deep and solid returned, the ephemeral concrete. Kahl had grabbed the railing, his knuckles white. The very opposite of what Verhat had been on about! Instinctive, instant, graspable in his mind, the absence of life. A sign of the past as this place had been long before or the future? Some awesome act of utter desecration? An evil hiding within reality? Verhat did hint of unseen but knowable forces coursing like some tentacled probing essence finding cracks in this world to undo it, refashion it to it's energy draining intent! Who or what was behind this?

All was solid once more. Reassuring for the moment. Were there other gods they did not know of? But why waste this world? Surely the priests could not be right that they were flawed and thus creation flawed itself. Feeding back into the cauldron of life their spawning malignancy in need of redemption. Maybe a shaman or even the priests had reached into his mind. Sending this hallucination to soften him up for their message of impending doom.

He could not remember even conversing with the priests, ever. The past, the present and the future were getting jumbled in his brain. Somewhere below, close, a wail rose up. From the temple? Had someone else seen this frightful vision? Then the groan of a soul in torment followed by others. An invisible spectre haunting the people. The sounds

of agony followed like a rising tide washing over the multitude. Dogs started to bark, hundreds of them by the sound of their pitiful yapping. Birds rose into the sky, flying in all directions disoriented, not as a flock. Darting about with no particular direction.

Then the moment passed and they reassembled as one, flying out into the desert. Camels brayed, horses skittish barely held in check by their riders. Below a cat made eye contact with him, resentful, imbued with an essence barely containing its wrath. That moment too passed and the black sleek animal moved back out of sight. The bustling scene of moments before silenced, a veil thrown over the square. People disoriented not quite believing what had transpired. Having witnessed this weird premonition. Then all seemed normal. Seemed. The silence still hovering for a while. Slowly a murmur rose as people tried to explain to each other what they experienced. Many were moving to the temple to seek succour from the gods. Others packed up their wares and left. The soldiers attentive without seeing anything extraordinary. Some were praying to their gods with determined fervency, others sitting there wrapped in an inner silence trying to make sense of it all.

Kahl knew some power was immanent, manifested for long enough to make itself felt. Utterly alien. A threatening vision. Was this some priestly magic? Thinking the gods as some sort of interference to the true revelation awaiting them, distorting and clouding the soul. Where did all this come from? Kahl both disturbed, slightly anxious and now angry at who or whatever caused this disturbance. Maybe Verhat had been right. To access the true power of the universe. Obviate the coming calamity. He was perplexed. Both at what was coming out from within him and what he had seen without. Evil attracts evil, so evil must be rooted out. Were the priests then half right? Or was some sinister cosmic force manifesting itself, sending the first shockwaves of its coming advance. Written in the stars. Etched into time, warping their world.

There was only one thing for it. Seek out a temple priest or priestess.

Then the priests came. Appearing out of nowhere. In one's and two's, others in larger groups. Moving amongst the people, appearing magically having uncloaked their invisibility. They talked to whoever would listen, nodding, saying kind words. Kahl watched fascinated as they worked the public square like travelling showmen. The soldiers watched warily. Then whispers, quiet assurance or seeds of doubt? No not doubt. Far more pernicious. Messages. Sowing suspicion. Hinting at forbidden things practiced by whom? Sorcerers? Shamans? Priestesses? Teachers? Philosophers? Kahl heard it all. The insinuations, barely hinted at, the intent there. Stirring latent hatred, prodding at their

wracked souls after the visitation, implying dark designs against them. Then they left leaving the populace more disturbed then ever.

They were moving off to the left, slowly in small groups some of the people following. To the school, where else? With Ephan dead who was to hold that academy together? Maybe there were astute minds gifted enough to continue Ephan's mission to clarify the mind. To uncover the wayward logic of clouded souls, to see through convoluted logic for what it was. The priest's doubts had no foundation, no substance except the fevered imagination conjuring up demons where none existed. No wonder Ephan had been murdered. He was laying bare their insidious machinations. Showing the vacuousness of their self-styled holiness. Bringing to light the sham, the con, denying the truth through simplified logic the basis their riven minds. Yet who was behind them? Not Verhat. Certainly not himself. Had they tapped into this pure energy Verhat hinted at?

At last Kahl managed to orient himself. A focus. They thought like a group mind, that much was certain. Determined now he would uncover their dark secret, undo them, reveal the falseness of their spiritual certainty.

He walked up the temple steps, looked at the goddesses for reassurance though strangely devoid of life, their holy presence seemingly abandoned leaving only the shell of their memory behind. Through the large portal and into the first open inner courtyard. People were praying some ministered by the priestesses, others having lost their inner equilibrium. Seeking answers to a barely known question except 'what had happened?' 'Why?' 'What did it mean?'

He wandered through the disturbed multitude towards the inner chamber where the actual rites were practiced. The soldiers did not impede his progress. It was obvious Kahl would not be here if he was somehow connected with this fearful display. A temple servant asked what he wished. Kahl asked him if the head priest or priestess, for he knew there were several were available. He was told to wait, the servant vanishing into the dark entrance. Sibilant chanting re-establishing contact with the gods. Seeking their presence. Imploring their aid. Revealing the truth of the matter. Trying to understand.

The young man returned promptly but said he would have to wait. Would he care to enlighten him as to the nature of the interview? Kahl hinted that he might know something concerning the strange phenomena which had fallen over them all. Impressed the young lad vanished. After some time he returned and said a high priestess was ready to see him. Would he kindly follow. Kahl certainly said he would that. Into the inner chamber of the temple. Along open corridors three levels up where the priests and

priestesses resided. In the central courtyard the cauldron's fire burned brightly casting moving shadows of those who sought guidance within this inner sanctuary. The young man stopped at one of many doors. He knocked and was bidden to enter. He allowed Kahl through.

The room was a simple cell. A bed, a desk, quill and paper. A small upright wardrobe, a cupboard, a statue of Urus and Bahlir and a lit candle on the desk. A small window looking west, the way he had come. A view of the bazaar, the town's gate and the sinewy road stretching north towards the distant ice capped mountains.

A silhouette rose from the desk as Kahl's eyes adjusted to the room's darkness. A woman wrapped in several layers of white linen rose gracefully from her seat and welcomed him with a blessing by Urus. Go for the top goddess in times of trouble.

"Thank you for coming." She said. Her voice lilted pleasantly, of later age her skin remarkably smooth, a sign of a life spent indoors.

"I should be thanking you priestess."

"Call me Grena."

"Grena. I am Kahl."

"I know who you are Kahl."

"You do?" It could be for any number of reasons. The king's banishment from the city, the trouble at Castari's camp, Verhat's demise, his association or simply good intelligence from the guarded gate, maybe even the inn.

"Your reputation precedes you."

"I had no idea I had one." He said lightly. "In fact I don't even know much about myself."

"Please take a seat."

He looked about and saw a chair, of plain solid wood and sat. She flowed back to her window seat.

"My mind is so vacant."

"Ah, a vessel waiting to be filled."

"Well it was just now. No doubt you felt it too?"

"I sensed a psychic force move through me. Many minds as one. Distant. Very very far. But present just the same. I know you felt it too."

"The whole town did. And now the priests are working the crowd. Not good."

"They are merely tools. They are not the instigators."

"That is something. Orst seems to have its share of troubles."

"Yes. Sad really. All signs Kahl."

"Signs. Images. Manifestations...."

"Verhat."

"Yes Grena."

"You believed him."

"Not so much believe Grena, more like interested."

"It doesn't bother you that the gods are somewhat lowered?"

"Not at all. One man's perception does not change reality."

"That is true in itself. But one person's vision can influence thousands, a whole land, this planet."

"You are right of course. I was speaking more in the abstract. The universe is a large place. It is our impertinence that thinks our mind can override everything by merely exclaiming our subjective vision."

"It works."

"Yes, strange isn't it?"

"What is strange is what just occurred. Had not others felt it I would have come to the conclusion this is my hallucination. But sadly I am not alone."

"At least we are united now."

"Really?"

"Consider. All felt it, so we are all one. That will give us strength."

"Hope yet."

"Always. But please, tell me your reason for being here."

"Something led me here. I know not what. The gods no doubt have plans for me. That I can understand. I just wish they would enlighten me. That is my problem. In short, some sort of energy, like a cloak, or an invisible hidden eddy has come forth. Infecting us all. My problem is, is it the past or the future? It certainly cannot be the present."

"You do have a problem."

"Don't I know it."

"You are gifted with prescience."

"Nice to know. If my mind were not so vacant..."

"Most unusual."

"Tell me about it. Something or someone, maybe that is not the right way to explain it. A force is residing within. I know it sounds trite but that is the simplest way I can put it. Linked to something or someone. Am I being controlled?"

"If you were you would know. Your vacancy is to obliterate your past, your memories, your understanding of yourself."

"Why? I mean, I don't get it. Verhat had the mind and he was disposed of."

"Yes. The plan is unfolding."

"The plan? Whose?"

"When this psychic power moved through us as I just indicated I sensed many minds working as one. We are being targeted. You have been targeted."

"Why?"

"Why indeed? You may know something or, you are destined to do something and those behind you do not want this to happen."

"Can't the gods do anything?"

"Ah, the gods."

"What do you mean?"

"Destiny is larger than any mind, godlike or humble."

"Yet great minds have achieved great things. Am I to be thwarted? I don't even know what I am doing Grena."

"That is the control."

"Control. Like the priests?"

"They are but a symptom."

"Well that is something. Is that why Efhan was murdered?"

"Yes. Someone is acting against our interests. I don't mean the temple, I mean the whole planet, everybody on it. The signs are everywhere. Building up Kahl."

"Well we all felt it just now. I suppose it isn't going to get better."

"That depends on you."

"Me?"

"If you can vacate your mind, the idea that is residing within you will be revealed, as will your destiny. However the longer you remain in this state the weaker the original idea will be, or knowledge, whatever it may be."

"Can you unravel this?"

"We are outward directed Kahl. We commune with the gods when they see fit to be with us. You need to seek a shaman."

"And here I was thinking Efhan's school might have the answer."

"Oh they have answers alright. As many as the mind can think of. They are ahead of their times. Philosophical speculation has its uses. See through logic. Just because something appears to make sense does not make it so."

"That's good to know." Kahl quipped. "My apologies Grena."

"No, it is good you think like this."

Silence.

"You were drawn to Verhat because your minds were similar. His death was not the gods doing, but those on the ground. Some are being led by psychic forces who are united in their minds to accomplish their will."

"We are being manipulated?"

She nodded.

"And the gods allow this?"

"To see if we are worthy to survive. If we fall it will be by our own actions."

"Fall? Like the priests indicate?"

"They have garbled the message."

"You can say that again."

She smiled.

"It is not that we are flawed, but will be if we let this happen."

"Let what happen?"

"The psychic group mind."

"The what? Where are these minds? The priests in their secret conclaves?"

"They are a focus. You are a focus."

"I'm on their level?"

"Not quite. Otherwise you would be with them or one of them. As you are not you cannot be."

"Now that is logic." He smiled.

"We must fight this. Not by the sword but through our inner strength. But first the threat must be identified."

"Which you are close to."

"They are stronger than us."

"Who is they?"

"Other intelligences."

"Other, as in...?"

"All I know is that they are there."

"Where is there?"

"Good question. Either they exist in the future and want to make sure we follow their predetermined path or they are distant in the present with the same intent."

"They want to guide us you mean?"

"That is so."

"Like the gods?"

"The gods offer us the opportunity to choose our paths. These beings do not."

Kahl sighed. Somehow it made sense. The trouble was his vacant mind. So he knew something only a shaman could extricate. Inner directed. He would remember that. Like Verhat he too was outward directed.

"Why this interest by them in us?"

"Because we have our own intelligence."

"And they don't like it?"

"They want to align us with them."

"If you are so familiar, then obviously you know. If you can reveal this surely we could do something about it."

"It has only just come to me."

"Oh, you mean this vision?"

"Yes."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Spread the word. But the priests will resist. I can feel it. They are in their element, they are doing their will, preparing the way."

"For what?"

"To take over our minds of course. To follow their way."

"So how do we, or I stop them? I mean would we, you, me be believed?"

"The priests will say you are making this up to undermine their message. This kingdom to come of which they speak is the will of the group mind."

"Is that so bad? I mean maybe the kingdom is our future. A state of divine grace."

"A state of divine submission with no free will."

"Enslaved."

"Exactly."

"So we, you, anybody must get this out. To Jaffir for instance."

"Why do you think he lets the priests roam freely? Why the murderers have not been accounted for. Or those who got rid of Jez, Fehz and Efhan? Sure the troops are there to ensure the peace, the king's peace."

Kahl knew there was no point in posing the obvious question. Jaffir was under their influence. Short of a palace revolution there was little anybody could do. The priestesses yes. Unless Norhat was offered the kingdom.

"And Norhat?"

"He is military. He follows orders. In this new kingdom according to the priest they will have the role of keeping the people in line. Remember they preach equality. To be equal to their superiors. You think they will cut themselves out of that possibility?"

"The priests have it all worked out."

"Those behind them do."

"So we can only do our best to dissuade them."

"You don't think Eghan has not tried? That was the whole purpose of his philosophical classes. To get people to see through the magic of logic. What is logical is not necessarily real or the truth. The idea was to question by analogy the logic of the priests. And now he is dead. The school is in mourning of course. Many have left. They saw the murder not as murder but divine intervention. Whether the gods doing or this unitary force the priests hint at."

"Unitary force. Verhat claimed it was everywhere."

"The universe is it's own power, the gods it's projection. What the priests have done is twist it into a singular god overriding everything."

"One god for all gods? It does not make sense. If this singular god exists where is it? Why has no priest shown us this entity? Why have not the shamans alluded to it? Why is it hidden if it is real? I can see Verhat's logic in that the life force is perhaps everywhere, to believe it to be one being. Then why the gods? Surely they would not exist then? And if we are all equal then how come we are not? Even in nature not everything is at the same level. There are the hunters and the hunted, beast of prey and their prey. Same with our society. Not every person has the same gifts, talents..."

She held up a hand.

"Apologies for preaching. I have thought about this and my doubts remain."

"That is wise Kahl. You perceive the gradations in reality. Just as there are larger and smaller stars, so there are larger and smaller souls. A mouse is not a lion. I agree. However the priest's case is compelling."

"Logically."

"Logically." Grena repeated.

"Imputed by this group mind you speak of."

"Know of Kahl."

"Well at least we are aware of what we are dealing with."

"So it is. They must feel strong. Certain of their objective otherwise they would not have created this terrible vision."

"You mean if we do not obey the priests then our world is doomed?"

"That is the message."

"I am back to why Grena."

"Maybe our destiny is different. One they cannot allow for some reason. Maybe in the distant future we, through our psychic abilities will come into conflict with them and in that future we are victorious." Hope in her voice.

"Then," Kahl feeling his inner self asserting itself, "I finally know what I must do."

"That is something at least."

"Unlock my mind. Find this group mind. Destroy them before they rule us."

"And see our real future. The shamans will be invaluable there."

"The shamans. Not exactly easy. Only the folk out there know exactly who they are. They hide themselves. Could be a farmer in the field, a hewer of wood in the distant forests, a miller, nobody knows."

"The tribes, the clans keep their holy people out of sight. They do not reveal to us exactly who they are. Unless one makes psychic contact with them. Let's say you dream of one. Then you are lucky. Seeking that particular person out. It could be anybody, man or woman. They won't seek you. However if you are psychically attuned you might gain insights via that connection. One problem though. The group mind would also be aware for they are powerful psychics themselves. Who have blocked your mind. Quite a challenge Kahl."

"Worthy."

"Daunting. First to break the barrier..."

"Which they will sense. Doomed to a quick end. I would need to cover my intent."

"That is one way. Extremely hard, hiding something from yourself."

"Hm."

"I will do what I can. Maybe I can prepare the way. Search out a mind for you so that you can be unlocked, then to do to them what they do to us. Find out if they really want to take us over as a whole race. Not forgetting what our true destiny is."

"Wouldn't the gods know?"

"They should."

"Should? Not would?"

"Even if we were to disappear, you think that would make any difference to them? Their whole universe is their playground Kahl."

"You make it sound so, ahm, prosaic Grena."

"From their point of view it is. Maybe there are other races, other minds. Apart from this group mind I mean. Since the gods created the conditions for life to be born here, then the gods can do this anywhere, anytime they please. So if we fail in our duty to survive..."

"You don't think they would help us?"

"Oh help us they will. But will we help ourselves?"

"I don't understand."

"The gods show us the way. It is for us to act accordingly."

"So they would let us fail? Even when faced with an adversary far in advance of us? That would mean this group mind is stronger than them." Surprised at the logic behind that train of thought.

"The universe is stranger than it looks."

"And latent with dangerous minds as well. Maybe the gods do have limited power. No wonder Verhat was after the ultimate force. The one that gives life to the gods as well."

"Like what the priests are hinting at?" Grena tested Kahl.

"We're back to where we started. In a way you make it sound inevitable."

"I hope it is not. Just remember we, as individuals are masters of our own destiny."

"Grena, you have given me direction, you have given me hope. I can barely express words enough to thank you for your divine revelation. The gods have guided me through you." Khal went through his inner pockets and felt for a gold coin. A hundred was a minor fortune. What he had learnt just now was worth everything. Priceless. He retrieved the coin and put it on her desk. For Gena to actually take it would have been an insult, making her the supplicant.

She looked at it momentarily as if saying he had no need to be so generous.

"May the gods be with you Kahl."

"As they are with you." The interview over.

"I shall try and see what I can do. I am glad you came. Now we both have a focus. But always remember, this group mind, wherever they are, are."

"So if I sense them they are not a figment of the priests mind."

"Rather the reverse."

"Thank you again Grena. See what fate has in store for me. If I have any news I will get in touch with you. Do you reside here permanently?"

"Generally yes. But if the gods decide they have something else in store for me then of course I shall follow that path. But I would leave word with the temple administrators if I am called elsewhere."

"You know Grena," Kahl remaining standing, "I felt drawn to Orst. Maybe it was you."

"Maybe."

He sighed wanting to thank her once more. He felt great. He felt good. He felt potent, dangerous and focussed. Even the disturbing vision paled into insignificance. Neither had not as yet been deserted by the gods.

Outside the temple the square was now nearly deserted. Some traders were still squatting with their meagre wares. Small shrivelled apples, good for horses Kahl thought, oranges the size of mandarins, small sugar bananas, cheap trinkets, some rough woven scarves and shawls, a few dazed locals. The atmosphere subdued having lost its former vibrancy. At the edge, near one of the thoroughfares two men dressed in dark brown travelling coats were conversing, one gave him a passing glance.

Kahl needed to make a decision. Sure of Grena's advice, being sought out by a shaman was no easy thing to accomplish. It was a case of who needed whom the most. Instead four soldiers marched up to him.

"Kahl, please come with us." The squad leader suggested politely. Kahl shrugged his shoulders as they surrounded him. They were not drawing their side arms. Too many soldiers to contemplate flight.

"If these are your orders. You have some documentation?" meaning was he under arrest. Their leader gave him a look to say 'as if'. He was escorted at an unhurried pace away from the market place. In the distance he heard the clamour of voices and turned to look back. With the broad street a straight line to the east he saw a multitude of people near the school on the outskirts. A line of soldiers were keeping them back. Another cordon was thrown around the furnaces, spewing fire and black smoke into the air, a dark haze hanging in the air.

"What's going on down there?"

"The people think bad magic is in the air."

"And the school is responsible?"

"Some unsavoury types take refuge there, as in the temple."

"What do you think happened?" Kahl asked having to fall in step.

"Happened? A warning from Urus or Rena. The premonition...very unusual." determining the event did occur. He appeared untroubled. A good sign. The soldiers not panicked unlike many of the townsfolk. He noted some riders heading north out of Orst.

"The nomads are leaving." Kahl guessed.

"Probably spooked."

The two watchers followed at a distance. They could guess where Kahl was being taken to: the barracks.

Along the outer perimeter wall and guarded entrance, then past a second palisade and into the first compound. Kahl saw a hive of activity as men readied horses to ride out and keep the peace. Others returning. The guards on duty saluted. Kahl was signed in on a log sheet then across hard packed dirt to the fort within the compound. Surrounded by a much higher wall the upper section of the observation tower only visible. Another guard post, it's massive gate drawn high on chains that could be dropped at a moment's notice. Past patrolling guards as Kahl was escorted into the fort itself. His two shadows remained well back from the first outer gate. For them the problem was which gate he would leave by for the compound had four. If he was arrested then that was that. If he was spirited away it might take some time to ascertain where he would be taken to.

The clanging of blacksmiths, a small furnace to rework swords, knives, spear points and arrow heads, woodworkers making long and short bows, archers practicing to one side, others throwing knives at sandbags. On the ramparts lookouts stationed at close intervals. Norhat was taking no chances.

Arriving at the command centre of several stories before the tower rose high into the sky. Into the relative gloom. A sergeant signed Kahl in once more and the escort departed. There were several doors, some open, people busy with the minutiae of running the base. The smell of horse dung and damp hay from the stables hung in the air.

At an unmarked door the sergeant knocked then was called to enter. The sergeant opened it letting Kahl through. A bright office. Norhat in full battle gear, thick leather cover, riding boots, knives at his belt, his broadsword within easy reach, sheathed, a long bow and arrows at the ready. He was alone sitting behind a paper strewn desk.

Norhat in his fifties looked fit. Short cropped dull grey hair, a scar down his cheek, a cauliflower ear, and a broken nose slightly out of joint. He motioned for Kahl to be seated.

"You're creating quite an interest Kahl." The tone suggestive of some hidden agenda. Not that Kahl knew. He had no idea what he was doing himself. As such his conscience was clear. Or to be precise, his mind was vacant.

"My clothes no doubt. And having been a, err, guest at the kings pleasure."

"Yes, I am sure Jaffir has his reasons." Norhat aware that Kahl was being watched. By the kings intelligence service. Norhat of course ran one himself. The king did inform him of who his people were, meaning not to run over each others observers. They would only get in the way.

"Your reason for being here." It was a statement that demanded an answer. Kahl was tempted to say, after speaking with Grena that he was seeking a shaman. But that would suggest an occult intent. With Verhat having been a magus that might not be in his interest to reveal directly.

"Well I am banished from the city. I have the freedom to make a new start and Orst is the obvious choice. I had thought of meeting with Eghan, but..."

"Yes indeed. Why?"

"Why?" Kahl asked stupidly. "To seek answers."

"To what?"

"My mental condition."

"Your what?" Norhat was surprised. That he had not expected.

"My brain is a blank. I'm stuffed if I know what happened." Kahl answered directly. Norhat nearly laughed, hiding his smile looking at a sheet on his table. The king's report sent ahead by fast courier. He knew Jaffir had let Kahl go to see where he would run to. Eghan was not the highest priority. Now that he was dead. The priests watched, officially. So far Kahl had made no move to even consider them or seek shelter with them. But then, with his close shave at the palace Norhat did not expect Kahl to be so unjudicious as to run to them. If there was a connection. Unlike Verhat who though not exactly courting them had not rejected them either. Norhat's job was to make sure no cabal formed under his jurisdiction.

"I'm sure your memory will come back, if jogged." Norhat hinted.

Back to that again Kahl thought.

"It would be nice. Might get me some answers."

"So you know nothing."

"Not even whether I have a wife, children, what I did for a living."

The king of course was searching for answers as well. So far no one remembered Kahl, knew who he was, what he did. Except that he was with Verhat. Had he been alive

he might have been able to solve this mystery. Norhat wondered whether Verhat's removal was meant to silence Kahl. It was a double edged sword. Verhat had exuded power, might have become a force to be reckoned with so that his demise was both good and bad news. Maybe Kahl arranged it so that he could become the one destined to further his aims. Yet he claimed to know nothing. Norhat did not believe him.

"So it appears. You have covered, no, obliterated your past extremely well."

"Or someone for me."

"Oh? Who might that be then?"

"Yes. The question to which an answer would be enlightening."

"I can keep you here as long as it takes Kahl."

"I'm sure you can."

"You seem to take this rather lightly." Norhat's voice steely.

"What can I do? As I said, it's all a blank to me."

"Rather convenient. Maybe you were hypnotised, or under Verhat's influence or the priests."

"The priests. They mean nothing to me."

What Norhat expected Kahl to say.

"So you're not here to make contact with anybody."

Kahl thought of the conversation he had with Grena. But what was said between a high priestess and a supplicant remained sacred between them. Of course they were encouraged to reveal those with traitorous and now on the king's orders, heretical intent. To fight the priests or aide them? Norhat pondered that. He knew the priest's underlying message and wondered if Jaffir had some designs regarding this black cowed spawn.

If he kept Kahl locked up then it might be interesting who might miss him.

"No. I did speak with a priestess who suggested a shaman."

"Did she now?" at least he was not hiding that. He had been seen leaving the temple. "So you sought guidance?"

"It seemed the obvious choice."

"And not the priests."

"The priests the priests the priests." Kahl replied a little exasperated. "They hung around Verhat like pigeons. I don't know why he thought them of any value. Given Verhat's outlook I could not understand what he saw in them."

"Neither can I. They are after the people, sowing dissent. Verhat was involved with something, he was planning something." It was as good a guess as any.

"Yes. I see what you mean."

"So you had nothing to do with this vision?"

"You saw it too?"

"I did. Powerful magic."

"Maybe the shamans warning us."

"Maybe." Norhat had not thought that far. He was concerned with the priests. He suspected them behind the triple murder the other night and the assassination of the teacher. With the school being targeted indicated that at least Eghan had not been behind the priest's influence. Rather the converse. They saw his philosophy as a threat. He followed orders. But he did have to know how those who were suspect thought. Know your enemy. Think like your enemy and defeat your enemy by whatever means. And the enemy had struck, twice. The vision was something else entirely.

"There is one thing the priestess said. She claimed, as she too experienced the vision that there is this group mind, somewhere. She was vague about that."

"A group mind?" Norhat attentive. So a secret society. Making it's presence known. But through bloody murder?

"So she said. With me the target." The words came out before Kahl could stop himself. How had he known that? Then the thought vanished. All he remembered was...no...that was gone too.

"What makes you so special Kahl?"

"We're back to square one."

"Maybe other means are required to loosen your mind."

"What the priestess implied as well."

Norhat was puzzled. Under normal circumstances suspects such as Kahl would be defensive, disarmingly charming, evasive, dissemble, obfuscate, be ingratiating, suggestive of pertinent information, lies usually, or trembling with fear. Kahl was displaying none of these reactions. That in itself was new to Norhat. Kahl treating him on an equal basis. Unconcerned about his immediate fate, genuinely puzzled at his state, seeking answers not through the priests but a high priestess and volunteering the information.

Yet his being tied in with Verhat indicated some design in place. One neither he Kahleff or Jaffir could unearth. Maybe a shaman was the answer. He thought if any of his men or women had the talent. There were those more attuned to the gods resonance than others, sometimes taken by the gods in their embrace, talking strangely when possessed.

"Wait here." Norhat said as he rose, looking at his battle gear thinking Kahl might use that in some way. At the door he spoke to the sergeant to watch Kahl then got one

of the guards to search the base for any who communicated with the gods, even a shaman if they were lucky enough. The sergeant understood called some spare guards to watch Kahl and the two went out into the compound to find someone attuned to the gods.

They found to their dismay no one at the base who matched their criterion. But Norhat was not one to give up so easily. He could keep Kahl locked up until he got the answers Jaffir wanted. He knew his patrols were familiar with the tribes. Though not exactly welcomed as they rode far and wide to ensure the king's peace was kept understanding that as long as their women were not molested, their goods confiscated or harassed all was well. Maybe Norhat should send out some patrols and see if a shaman could be found that could get into Kahl's vacant mind. He believed the man for some reason simply because he was experienced enough to know when someone was hiding something. Kahl was not so much hiding something. Rather he admitted he too wanted to solve the problem puzzling him.

After talking to several soldiers, some did suggest this or that person but upon closer enquiry found that being spiritual was one thing, shamans were of a different mettle. So Norhat ordered two patrols to go out for a few days and seek a shaman in the Outlands. It might end in complete failure knowing how secretive they were when it came to strangers seeking them out. Still it was worth a try.

Norhat returned with his sergeant, the guards relieved.

"I can do one of two things. I mean I can do anything I like within reason Kahl. But you are a problem even if you aren't aware of it yourself. So here it is. I can keep you for as long as I like. Or I can let you return to your inn." And waited to see how he took it. Rather indifferently, more like amendable.

"If I let you return you will be under orders not to leave Orst. Do I make myself clear?"

"You have."

"I can even have you executed." He thought he better throw that in. "You might even be implicated in these murders."

"I hope not. I wasn't there. I didn't even know until I came here."

"Someone of your standing would not do the deed himself. Verhat might have been behind this and you an accomplice. You do understand?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"Good. Do I have your word then that you will remain in Orst?"

"You have."

"I am...I will be in touch." He nearly revealed his search for a shaman. That might make Kahl seek one out before he could get at his head.

"If you are approached by one who might unlock your vacancy," he was amused at the expression "then it is in your interest to inform me. I would like to be present at the sitting. If for some reason such a person is secretive I trust you will reveal whatever you know."

Kahl nodded.

"This is too important to be treated lightly. Especially given the power of the vision to effect us all. Sinister forces are present. Bigger than all of us. This might not be just about you. There has to be a reason why you are in the state you are. You follow me?" Norhat's cold grey eyes bored into him. The man meant what he said.

"It would be a relief."

"It might be much worse."

"Worse." Kahl said slowly. "How worse can it get?"

"You might know things you wish you did not."

Kahleff was conversant with the king's wishes in letting Kahl go hoping to ascertain how involved he was with the priests or the accomplices Verhat had been in league with. The courier he despatched informed Norhat to keep Kahl under observation. If Kahl was in league with whatever designs Verhat may have planned needed to be known. Since the disturbing vision so incisive yet, so vague, a warning by the gods no doubt showing the people what lay in store if they abandoned them for the beguiling promise of the priests.

He would seek the guidance of Nurdass. As high priestess she shed her earthly name becoming the vessel of the sun itself. Kahleff sent word that he wished to see her. A temple servant returned and informed him Nurdass was ready to receive him. He left his chamber and walked through the open space to the temple of the sun. Like all temples there was the unroofed public area where Nurdass's servants, dressed in white with golden strands interwoven gave spiritual succour to the seekers. Nurdass of course dealt only with the king, kindred servants of the other high priestesses from the temples who might seek or give advice during the day. Then with the setting of the sun Bahlir and Urus replaced her.

Now Kahleff wished to see her. His special position allowed him access to all the high priestesses at any time. What she had not expected was a visit by Grena. What Grena told her of the group mind was perplexing. She sought guidance finding none. So

when the message came that Kahleff was on his way she asked Grena to remain with her.

Nurdass was perplexed by Grena's intelligence and Kahl's need for answers, answers she now sought as well. Later tonight she would engage in her meditations to try and understand the premonitions all around her. The power of the sun's rays were lessening year by year. Whether Urus was claiming supreme power with the aid of Bahlir she could not ascertain. She too felt the cosmic shift. The presence of the priests confirmed her worst fears that the changes might be permanent. Kahlef's opinion was timely. He knew more than any other mortal. Unaligned so as to converse with them equally to advise the king on the true state of affairs. Putting events into context for the king, Norhat and herself at times. That Kahleff and Grena wanted to see her was opportune. Signs of some alignment at work. The sun goddess saw everything. Once she had sojourned below the horizon she dwelt in the land of night, allowing the queen of the universe her due to watch over this inhabited part of the world. For they lived on a planet, the sun never set. If one were fast enough one could remain with her for ever. Nurdass did not sleep as they had initially thought. The secret books of the past revealed worlds circling around her, satellites paying continual obeisance to her, for ever travelling magisterially around her.

She retreated with Grena to her private chambers. Not one for ostentation it was furnished in simple comfort. Padded chairs of plain solid wood, her special library of books, excerpts of the knowledge of their vanished predecessors before their cities had been razed, having either invoked dark forces way beyond their control or been victims of some mad race of beings who brought them down for some unknown reason. No one knew for sure. All ancient lore, suppositions mixed with fear felt superstitions. Now the priests were resurrecting these ancient fears.

Grena and Nurdass were taking tea, discussing the aberrant vision. The past, the hidden present or a glimpse of the future. It could be any of the three. One thing was certain, it was disturbing. More so for the group mind Grena sensed. Her antechamber, wood panelled once served Rena during the previous reign. The outer temple refurbished according to the sacred decrees pertaining to her station but her private chambers she kept as is. The only change, golden glowing tapestries showing the radiant sun bequeathing her warmth onto the world below. Scenes of farmers tilling the soil, vintners in their vineyards growing the grapes that gave joy to the soul, their city, the desert in bloom, the pink brown snow capped mountains, the starry mantle of Bahlir above. The open window looked over the temple compound, then the palatial precinct

squaring off the city stretching out beyond and finally the distant market gardens, the river, the mountains covered in snow laden clouds.

A knock as a temple servant was bid to enter announcing the arrival of Kahleff. Grena rose but Nurdass remained seated. He was in her domain after all. He smiled graciously, a little surprised at Grena whom he vaguely knew from Orst.

Having greeted the two women and bidden a seat he was offered tea which Grena poured for him from a large pot. Sugar and milk added Kahleff drank the refreshing beverage exchanging pleasantries. Nurdass informed him of the reason for Grena's presence. Listening to Nurdass he relaxed. There was good reason for her to be here then.

"Yes," Kahleff said at last, "the signs." Without venturing further.

"The priests." Nurdass said.

Kahleff agreed. "That is so. What you have revealed to us Grena is news indeed. Not welcome news. Intelligence might be a better word. Distant minds plotting against us. Using the priests as their method of creating a reality that is unholy whilst pretending to be the holiest of all."

"I have searched my soul on my journey here Kahleff," Grena continued, "and find nothing but restlessness. It is only when priests are near, when Kahl came to me that I sensed them. But I have gone no further. It is good that you came Kahleff for I need advice."

"I am honoured Grena. I will do all I can to the best of my abilities. It is both revealing and disturbing. At least we know the face of the enemy."

"You don't think it is the gods doing?" Grena asked

"It might be. Or it is the lost race."

"The past coming back to haunt us." Nurdass said.

"Or the future."

"Or that."

"Using the priests. Then there is Kahl."

"With a nimbus around him, one of which he was not aware. A pity Verhat is dead."

"That is tricky Grena, Nurdass. A danger as a conduit whilst alive. Maybe Kahl arranged it so he could take over."

"To foment restlessness."

"He may not know he is being used. It is said," Kahleff put his cup down on the small table in front of them, "that shamans can see into minds like the gods. Some even manipulate the minds of others. This group mind might be like them." Kahleff ventured.

"A frightening thought."

"Dangerous."

"Wicked." Nurdass added.

"Malicious." Kahleff concurred. "In this we seem united."

"It might explain my waning power. The stronger they grow the weaker I become."

"If that is so then they are extremely potent spirits."

"I fear the worst." Grena said calmly. "The group mind is not evil in itself. Rather focussed with relentless determination. Does the king know yet?"

"We have not discussed the vision. I await his majesty there. If he is not perturbed then there may not be anything to worry about. The vision could be a potent hallucination, to make us think all will be lost if we do not accept the message of the priests."

Nurdass set her cup down. "With their design upon us."

"The priests their mouthpiece."

"What fascinates me is how they do it."

"As I suggested. They may be shaman minds."

"The..." Nurdass was about to mention their ancient race but with Grena present, the decree that that knowledge was to remain hidden prevailed. "...thought of it makes me angry. We should combine our forces, unite the avatars as one and fight back. Either confront them directly, head to head or weaken the priests by any means at our disposal."

"I think Jaffir is waiting for a sign himself."

"I hope he is granted one soon."

"Kahl may be the key."

"If he is, then why cannot he remember anything?" Grena asked.

"That is a mystery."

"You have met him?" Nurdass enquired.

"I have. Maybe his vacancy was Verhat's doing. But then," Kahleff thought, "the bourn he is under would have dissipated at his passing. So it has to be something else. This group mind you speak of Grena. It means there are others in this universe. Were they created by the gods as well? This must be kept between us." He added.

"Would not the opposite be more in our favour Kahleff? Let the people know the priests are being used, may even be their creatures? Then with the truth out we can reclaim the land, the people, our future." Grena suggested.

Kahleff thought on this and of the king. Temporal rulers had the annoying habit of using any means to remain in power. He did not put it past Jaffir to use the priests if it secured his throne. The priests as such did not deny the gods, they merely spoke of a coming kingdom of the soul. Very clever. Unassailable. Brazen. Not even conspiratione for they were in the open. Nor treasonable since they merely preached of a vision to be. No suggestion of usurping priests or rulers. It was ingenious.

"What of the disturbances at Orst?" Nurdass asked.

"Oh yes, that. I'm sure Norhat will see justice done. Why do you ask?"

"It sends a message. Against the school."

"It has been said that Efhan taught the gods were of our making."

"So if we created them," Grena's mind racing, "means we are godlike."

"That is something I never considered." Kahleff answered quickly. "Do you feel like you are creating the true Nurdass?" he asked the priestess of the sun.

"I feel at one with her." came her easy reply.

"Maybe Efhan and his teachers are being manipulated as well. In opposition to the priests." Grena put forward.

"They came after."

"Yes true. Unless it is a game we are subjected to. Create strife."

"That cannot be discounted Grena."

"Norhat certainly has his hands full." Nurdass sighed.

"What of the other priestesses?"

"Nothing Kahleff. Or rather the discord is that of the people. The gods can advise, can show, maybe even compel us to act. It could be the strife shows we are losing our way. Our salvation through the priests."

"You know what you are saying?"

"That a passing is underway, yes."

"I would agree if not for the vision."

"I know Grena." Nurdass said to her. "If not for that and what you saw thanks to Kahl coming to you."

"Kahl. He seems to come up in this and yet one would think he would be a fountainhead of revelations." She said.

"Maybe when his mind is unlocked we will know the answers."

"Could you not do this?" Nurdass asked Kahleff.

"I could. But the king has not given the order. He wants to see what Kahl gets up to at Orst."

"Can't you probe him on the sly?" Nurdass looked at him. "Sort of keep an eye on him. In that way you would not be transgressing Jaffir's wishes."

"The thought did occur. It might be best if you tried. Unless the king has spoken to you..."

"Let the gods decide." Grena answered for them.

"The gods may be waiting for us to grasp the mettle. Prove our worth to them."

"I agree Nurdass. If I had my way I would advise the king to round them up. Put them in their own monastery somewhere in the desert. Then those who think their message is of any worth can make their way there. The gods allow them to be, moving freely, that must mean something. If for instance, even invoking divine guidance the perpetrators of the crimes committed at Orst are not found then that is a sign itself that it was meant to be. Not satisfactory for one with a conscience but who are we to judge if no judgement is called for?"

"I can see why the king has chosen you as his spiritual advisor Kahleff." Nurdass said graciously. "You see, you think, you ascertain all angles."

"That is my duty."

"So we do nothing." Grena disappointed.

"We act according to divine guidance."

"What if my guidance is to seek out this group mind?"

"It could be your undoing. Maybe that is what they want. To draw you in. If they exist." Kahleff added cautiously.

"You think I am mistaken?" more surprised than offended.

"Not mistaken as such Grena."

"We are not divine. We can share the gods divinity yes, yet we are not as complete. Thus our perception is not whole either. If this group mind," Nurdass had thought on this, "exists maybe our understanding there is limited. It might be one mind with many thoughts. It might be Urus or Bahlir. We try to comprehend the gods. As they are supreme compared to us mortals, we may easily misinterpret their designs. Whilst this world exists, our paradise, as long as that is not threatened, as long as we do not misuse what the gods have given us..." Kahleff listening to Nurdass thought of the ancient ones who may have put their paradise in danger and were obliterated for being too much like the gods, maybe even usurping them with secret knowledge which ended with their

destruction. For this history, these fated events had to have a reason. Maybe the priest were realigning their souls after all, to stop, as in the school's godless teachings their straying from the path. The vision a warning of what was to be if they did not return to the spiritual path to stay aligned with the cosmic forces that bestowed through the gods, their lives. His mind was clearer now. The threat less immanent.

"...if we misuse the gifts the gods bestowed on us we will loose this paradise. This group mind might be the collected wisdom of the passed on souls. You did say Grena that they were out there. We cannot allow the past to be resurrected, we cannot go down that path to destruction. I have no wish for that scenario to be revisited if only because the delusions of some who think they are more than gods or have no need of them. Did you uncover any hostility when you felt this group mind Grena?"

"No, just potency."

"There you have it. Until I am disproven I think the gods have brought to life the soul's wisdom of the passed on to guide us back to the way of the divine."

"Nurdass," Kahleff exhaled, relieved, "your words have soothed my soul."

"I am indebted to you Nurdass." Grena added humbly.

Nurdass took it with good grace. She was high priestess after all.

"Then all I have to do is watch the priests and make sure they do not stray either. Think themselves more than what they are."

"I think now I might know why Kahl's mind is so vacant and Verhat is dead." Then not waiting how they would react Grena continued: "Verhat may have thought himself better or higher than the gods. For that he was disposed of, the gods removing him by their means of animating the doer of the deed. Kahl may not be so ambitious. So to protect him and us from whatever secret designs he may have harboured the gods struck his mind numb. So that he could not put in place whatever heresies he hungered for. His mind a void for that alone. The death of Ephan and that teacher divine retribution. It all makes sense now."

"Grena your goddess has spoken." Nurdass was pleased.

"Yes, wise words indeed." Kahleff concurred. It all fell into place.

Nurdass agreed. "The gods are still with us. They have given us many signs. Repeatedly. It is up to us to follow their guidance."

"It will be good news to the king as well Nurdass, Grena. You are two very wise women. It is us who are creating the conflict. So we must unite ourselves as one, be as one, reconfirm our faith in the divine."

Grena felt easier knowing the group mind was not hostile, guiding those souls who were receptive to their guidance. Kahleff relieved that the priests in their own way were now in context. Nurdass uplifted that the gods had united them here. They were moving within the realm of the gods to see what they could not see. Peace would be restored. There was no threat except what their fevered imagination construed. All would be well.

"This land, the parched earth abandoned, the sky empty of the gods who gave us all life, who created this paradise for us to enjoy and give thanks to is being imperilled by corrupt souls." The black caped priest intoned with somnolent grace as he looked around the hundreds of tribal nomads. They were assembled in front of the school. Inamus had chosen this particular locale on the outskirts of Orst. There was plenty of room for an assembly which the teachers themselves used to hold, in public view their classes in the open air. Trees gave shade, the stream was nearby for parched throats. Behind the dormitory a small garden to supplement their needs. There was no doubt as to whom Inamus and the other brethren meant.

He stood there with them, not above them. He did not hector, he explained the reason for the dry seasons, their crops burnt under the relentless sun which though weaker still wreaked havoc amongst their need to feed their cattle, their horses and camels, ultimately themselves. Not that it signalled a famine. The assembled multitude were curious. Their shamans themselves hinted of changes in the realm of the spirit world subtly interwoven into the real world. Spirits that moved amongst them, some to enlighten, others to unburden their worries, giving obscure hints when dreaming or meditating. A cool breeze wafted among them.

Next to the school the bank of furnaces poured black smoke into the sky. Groups of soldiers watching warily with swords sheathed. They were there to protect these fire spewing constructions. Norhat had ordered the men and women serving the military to keep order but not to fight them should the rabble turn ugly. Unless they had designs on Orst. Other soldiers, learning that Inamus was rallying the crowd stood well back so as not to give a threatening impression. Just a sign of their presence and keep the peace.

"There is hunger amongst you because Rena, goddess of the earth cannot mature some of your crops. The gods are showing their disfavour. But the fault lies not with you. It is those who deny the gods, who work against them, who whisper in secret conclaves their dark vision and by stealth poison the minds of holy men and women. They want this calamity to teach all a lesson. To make you bow down in front of them, not the gods themselves. They are usurpers of all that is holy for they want the power for

themselves." It was as good a version as any other. By not naming any particular shamans, or priestess, clan leaders, tribal chiefs or even Jaffir and his shadow Kahleff, the seeds of distrust were sown to make them ready for the priest's message of the coming revelation.

There were murmurs of agreement.

"You humbly sacrifice to your chosen gods and guiding spirits your newborn calves. Many are born weakened thus reducing the effaciousness of the holy sacrifice. I know many are still born, an evil sign in itself. Even the waters from the mighty mountains lessen, most diverted to the city of Jaffir leaving you with a trickle. They live in splendour and wealth while you are wanting, seeing the precious waters pass you by."

There were a few priests among the crowd, mingling with them, being at one with them. Inamus spotted Oenah one of his lieutenants, an organiser, from one of the old families who had some influence amongst the wealthier landed gentry. His becoming a priest had caused tongues to wag. Oenah too was convinced of the 'coming' having withdrawn from his estate to join the priests at Orst.

Inamus never belaboured his mission. The idea was to bring them around by hints here, the promise of a better world if they aligned their souls to the true overriding majesty of the most powerful god of gods. His face still hidden yet his presence felt. For now it was pertinent to make sure they understood the danger that was immanent. To make them feel affronted at the divine injustice they suffered and would continue to suffer if things were to remain the same. He saw his third companion, Agram the mystic. Once a priest serving Adur he now served the higher power.

"There is a potent evil in the universe. They sought to be like gods and vengeance was visited upon them. The signs are coming back. The eye of Bahlir that fell from the sky a few days ago is really not her eye at all. It is a sign that retribution will be visited upon us if we do not cleanse our inner souls of the mistaken vision. For the gods are a hallucination of a sick entity that had brought down the ancient ones."

Since no one knew the truth and Inamus would make sure none ever would he had history on his side. "But if we unite as one, believe in the one supreme god we shall be saved and a new kingdom present itself. We will be saved if we save ourselves. If we do not show our worth, if we do not act accordingly, humbly asking for forgiveness we shall be doomed. Is that what you want so that those in power remain there, taking your precious water, insisting on their false vision born of overweening pride whilst keeping you ignorant of the true state of the great cosmos around us? Your soul a unique link to the great god. You are closer to the ultimate truth than those in the city and their adoring

priestesses who will say anything to remain in the rulers favour. For Jaffir is being deceived and given his exalted status that of the people who follow blindly, with false visions to mask the truth from those who seek the answer, to feel and experience the revelation residing within your souls."

The crowd intent, soaking up his message of divine redemption. By not attacking their spirit world, their holy men, they would be converted in due time. Inamus and the priests would slowly turn them around.

"Your children cry from both a real hunger and a spiritual hunger. Their innocent souls know but cannot articulate in their pristine state the truth they feel. Your womenfolk suffer in silence, bereft of an answer to the spiritual hunger you new born feel deep within them. Your traders receive less and less for their breed of horses or cattle when they should be receiving more. The soldiers here to keep the peace are aware of the coming anarchy being used by those in power to keep their masters secure."

Some shouted just what this evil was for Inamus kept things deliberately vague. Why had it come and why did the gods remain aloof?

"The corruption of the empyrium of fallen souls who upon the great passing took that corruption with them to infest like a disease the once healthy heavens. So the gods withdrew wishing to keep themselves unsullied." He thought that was clever of him. The priests amongst the crowd were equally attentive. The idea was not to convince them directly of the coming revelation but to make them think the reason why the heavens were in discord. They had all felt the vision, the moment of utter desolation.

Inamus was patient, used reason and imbued his voice with a steadfast determination. The vision had been the first sign. They could not dispute that, nobody could. Inamus felt the impact of that divine warning waning like a bad dream. In the background the braying of a camel, the whinnying of a horse. The gathered attentive. He thought they might hunger for more. Well it would take time. In the distant south a dust storm sent up a pink brown plume emphasising the dryness of the season.

"The gods are showing themselves. They do not bring gladness but a parching of the soul. We will all be wasted if we do not align ourselves. The future is in your hands." Pay them due respect, empower them like a roaring river in flood to sweep all before them. Promise them power, for power was everything.

Oenah and Astram slowly moved to the front to Inamus.

"We," Astram said, his voice reedy, smooth, "are here for you all. Unlike the priestesses we do not ask for sacrifices, nor do we seek alms or even donations. We are here to offer guidance for those who seek. Those who feel spiritually fulfilled we bless you,

those who seek succour we will do our best to uplift you, those who are troubled we shall offer guidance. The truth is out there for all. Not just the privileged, the wealthy, the strong, but each and everyone of us." Astram like Oenah and Inamus knew these nomads and occasional bandits were not stupid. They had their lore, their customs, their entrenched way of life. That would not change. It was their souls they were after. Nor would they bribe them with golden promises, inveigle themselves with smooth words or pretend to be spiritually exalted. Humbleness would do the trick. The tenor was of an equality they could relate to.

The meeting was over. They dispersed among themselves. Some made ready to ride back to their distant camps, others returning to their tents at the edge of town. The soldiers relieved there was no trouble. Inamus satisfied enough was said. No point belabouring or embellishing the core of the message. They too had their tent where those who wished to know more were welcome to speak to any of the priests amongst them.

For the rest of the afternoon, Inamus, Oennah and Astram answered the questions of the tribal elders. Copious amounts of tea were served, dried fruits and nuts offered as their aroused spirits animated them. The priest dealt with the people in the other tent. One thing was clear, they were taken by Inamus hinting at a supreme power. Given their shamanistic outlook they saw this divine being as the ultimate spiritual guide and residing power. Even the odd soldier sought an explanation. Astram assured them that they were not interested in temporal power. The days of the priestesses were numbered. In days, weeks, months at most. The immanence of the supreme god having through his concern for them shown the future if they remained set in their ways. Messengers were sent out to inform both Jaffir and Norhat through the priests of the intent of their message. Lest their informers twist it to mould it into something it was not. It was spiritual in content, no more, no less.

They were not here to abuse their power but to share it. Of course the three of them realised there would always be some resistance. That was normal. To deny the gods as supreme arbiters was one thing they avoided so merely stating the gods were withdrawing was an interpretation. They were not against them, just that the gods were not for them anymore. So the priests would fill the vacuum. Simple really. The vision could not have come at a better time.

Towards evening Kahl made his appearance. Given he too wore black Inamus busy talking to the assembled missed him, yet Oenah and Astram could not believe Kahl

would be interested. Unless his presence was there to gather information. They knew he had been taken to see Norhat who had spoken with him. They were more concerned with the disposal of Jea, Fehz and Efham. The culprits were long gone, back into the desert with their people, amply rewarded. Even the murder of the teacher got Norhat nowhere. There were simply no witnesses. Thus his reasoned, balanced speech should arouse no suspicion. So Kahl ventured amongst them. Must be feeling certain of himself. That Nada had rid them of Verhat was in itself a sign of their god disposing of possible opposition. For Verhat claimed the power itself as an end, not the god who created it. Kahl was like his shadow, quiet, reserved, keeping his true thoughts to himself. The priests who had been in attendance were there to keep an eye on him.

Kahl shown in as the sun was setting. Not to be ignored. In fact Astram was already thinking of how to deal with him. He would let Inamus do the talking as they agreed. Oenah coming from a wealthy family was their connection to Jaffir's city, Astram got things done, Inamus their spokesman. The public face of their priesthood.

Kahl was announced in respectful tones. Astram was at the kitchen they had set up for the evening feast where all were invited. The sheep slaughtered roasting slowly in an earthen oven since morning. Copious barrels of wine for special guests, beer for the rest. A jovial atmosphere for such a serious event. Now and then a priest would come in and pass some message as to who was amendable, who was cautious, who were the sceptics, who stuck to their beliefs. Inamus was getting the picture of how they reacted to their message.

Astram spoke to one of the women at the kitchen. She was a herbalist and druggist. They needed to know what Kahl knew. Verhat's prodigy, one imbued with knowledge he pretended to not be of in possession of. Someone could have put a spell on him, closed his mind for good reason. They needed to know what Kahl knew and the last recourse was the use of hallucinogenic drugs. The shamans used mushrooms to attain a state of divinity and walk with their spirits. Drugs did delude but they had their uses. The immaculate could not be denied. Nor would they be denied Kahl's inner mysteries. Unless he was being kept in check by other powers. If so who were they? Someone who could affect a mind so directly was worth knowing about. He was satisfied that the woman understood what he required. He did not return to the main tent. He was content to mingle with the multitude around him who were squatting on their haunches awaiting the free meal. Beer was already being served, a cheery air enjoyed by all. Some brought out their primitive stringed instruments and played various tunes of love, of

love denied, of love absent, of longing for love, of their heroic deeds of the past and deeds to come.

Inside the tent Inamus greeted Kahl impressed that he sought them out. Oenah sat there on his haunches relaxed amongst the colourful embroidered cushions strewn over the hard earth.

Kahl felt a little uncomfortable. He was not here for the message, did not believe a word of what had been said, but showed enough respect because he was waiting to be approached by a shaman, a spiritual guide to unlock his mind. Whilst among the crowd no one paid any particular attention to him. So if they were not interested maybe these leaders were. Kahl certainly did not feel as one with the people. Maybe he was from some ancient family yet even if they did exist they showed no interest in him. He really needed to know what was going on. He considered he might have transgressed and been ostracised for what he had done. The affinity with Verhat had something to do with it. Even then he only was vaguely aware of what Verhat said to him. An overriding power in the universe and that one's inner spirit when aligned would be as one with it. Then all of life's mysteries, even the great passing back to the stars, revealed. If he remembered correctly. As such Inamus preaching of a supreme god of gods was not that far removed. Accept Verhat denied the gods, or thought them of no consequences. More like stumbling blocks, diversions. So if this supreme god was all, then so must be its power. Maybe one of the priest's leaders knew what he sought. As such Kahl decided to be circumspect.

Inamus's coat, black was cleverly interwoven with threads of yellow, orange and red. Like thin flames here and there almost touching each other but not quite. Oenah wearing a cloak of light blue looking like one of the priestesses of the god of air.

"So Kahl, welcome indeed an honour." Inamus extended an open arm for him to make himself comfortable amongst the cushions. Oenah made some room, his smooth face betraying the city life. "My condolence at the loss of your friend." Inamus added thoughtfully.

"Thank you. Friend might be too strong a word. I knew him but not for long. The gods removed him. Fate. Destiny."

Inamus was smart enough not to counter the fact that Kahl still believed in the gods. Kahl coming here was a portent he was thankful for.

"Verhat did have a dark vision, an occult vision." Inamus hinted.

"That he did."

"One you shared."

"One that interested me."

Inamus rang a bell. A priest entered.

"What would you like? Wine? Beer? Tea?"

"Wine."

"So it shall be." Then turning to the priest. "Three pitchers please." The priest bowed and left. Turning behind him Inamus managed to pick up a low table, helped by Oenah and moved it in front of them. Bowls of fruit and nuts. Small pieces of flat dried bread. They waited for Kahl as their guest to begin. So he nibbled some dates with a small piece of flat bread.

Moments later the priest returned with three pitchers of cool wine with three goblets each in front of them.

"We shall serve ourselves." Oenah said. The priest bowed and left. The wine Kahl tasted was mixed with herbs and spices. A little bitter sweet, smooth with a lingering roughness but tasty enough. He sipped his wine and ate some more mixed nuts.

"Is this a social visit?" Inamur asked pleasantly.

"In a way. The gods have cut me loose. So I seek signs, guidance..."

"Well you have come to the right place." But he was not going to ask what he thought of his little speech.

"Yes." Kahl said thoughtfully.

"You know Verhat's passing will go unpunished. Maybe even Ephan's."

"If that is the gods will that they were to pass on, who can deny them?"

"Indeed. Who can deny them?" Inamus hinted.

"You seem to have an answer."

"Not my answer Kahl. Divinely inspired."

"You are lucky then." Reflecting on his abandonment.

"It can come to us all. You heard me speak of the need to align one's soul."

"I have that. Not unlike Verhat."

"Yes, Verhat, and Ephan. They had one thing in common."

"They did?" he sipped some more wine as did Oenah.

"Soulless."

"Just as I feel. Maybe we, as individuals are the future."

Inamus tried not to be surprised at the casual way in which Kahl exclaimed his position. It was not one he had expected. What if Kahl was right?

A priest asked to be allowed to pass a message. Inamus nodded. The priest whispered that Kahl's wine was drugged. Not in so many words, saying obliquely that the

wine was special, more herbs and spices reserved for special guests. Inamus understood without betraying anything. He merely nodded then turned to Kahl and said that he had to apologize but that was the best wine they had.

"Piquant." Kahl agreed. "I've had much worse."

"Haven't we all." Oenah allowed himself a smile.

"So you are the future then?"

"I said this is what I feel. It is not the truth. I may be mistaken. Yet the gods make us in many different ways. This is just one of them."

"Like a rock in flowing waters." Oenah suggested.

"Not bad. To demark the true spiritual state of those who are blessed."

"I see your logic Kahl." Inamus agreed. "Did you experience the vision?"

"Oh yes."

They looked at him expectantly.

"Rather terrible."

"Soulless?"

"Lifeless."

"A premonition?"

"Definitely."

"Unless...?" Inamus asked.

"Unless what?"

"We align ourselves."

"Maybe. There are many futures in the realm of the gods. It is our actions that decide which one's come into being." Kahl's words tumbled out. He certainly had not thought of it. His mind felt wonderfully warm, smoother, smarter.

"How can there be many futures when there is only one present and one past Kahl?" Inamus astounded at Kahl's revelation.

"Don't ask me. It must have been a god's insight." he felt the warmth spread to his stomach, slowing radiating through him. Immensely satisfied.

"Perhaps the divine mind is really within you." Oenah suggested. His face looked lustrous in the half gloom of the tent.

"Funny way of showing it, voiding me."

"A vessel in preparation." Inamus ventured.

Kahl thought on that. He could be right. Though exactly what he was being prepared for was beyond his ken.

"Efhan tried to prepare the way and was passed on. Verhat was onto something, passed on. There seems to be a pattern here." In fact he saw patterns in the cushions, the inlaid glass glowing like huge silver stars. Oenah's threads shimmered lambent flames. His perception acute. He could discern the voices outside, then they receded and he was in the tent again.

"Yes." Inamus concurred.

"Some god is moving against them. Maybe a powerful shaman." Kahl's brain thought for him. He knew it was one of these three or perhaps a misguided priest. Though none were spiritually attuned the way Inamus hinted at. Verhat undone by Nada and she was no believer in the priests message. Or...? He decided to let his racing mind void Nada's involvement. The king was taking no action. Which led back to why now? Something was going on. He felt it in the very air, pregnant with unspoken thoughts. Inamus's mind filling the space or Oeneah or both. Powerful men but not as powerful as he was. What he was feeling now was not vacancy, but an immense vastness. Yes he was a vessel, not awaiting fulfilment but already filled. With the essence Verhat had spoken of. A totality within him, beyond thoughts, beyond words, beyond expression. Vast and pure, uncontaminated by...the words of the priests...the images of the gods...what gods?...this was much bigger than them. Verhat was right after all. No wonder they had been attracted to each other.

"Nice wine." Kahl felt like grinning knowing what he knew. Which was not much, it was more a sensation, complete, unformed, filled with potential. He felt the warmth now ebbing with his breath, radiating outwards pushing their unspoken thoughts back into their heads. Comfortable, embracing, fulfilling, overflowing. He looked at Oenah. His eyes hid something, a secret as he looked away taking some nuts in his hands. Pure diversion. Hiding something. Kahl felt Inamus's presence, a different person entirely. Smart, astute, a vessel like himself but filled with his message that swam in his head. Very in control, his real self removed from what he wished to project. His eyes blank dark orbs, flat, dimensionless.

Kahl was beginning to feel hot. His clothes strangely light. A shield keeping the heat in, which was now pouring out of his head. Shadows moved amongst them, spirits of the dead from the stars. Or dead gods banished, the ancient forces still amongst them. Or the void brimming within him. His skull, his mind so open it was more than emptiness, it was a substantial field of immense potentialities. He tried to remember what he had said but his thoughts would not form into any coherent pattern.

Inamus and Oenah jumped in and out between the shadows quivering around

them. The cushions abstract patterns, the silver orbs radiant with energy. In a field of stars come down to him, surrounding him. On the verge of some great release. The depth within overwhelming, dazzling, resplendent on the brink of completion. He was about to find out what was locked out. No not locked out, removed. Removed? By Verhat? Verhat. Betrayed. Instead this vastness full of unrealised promise. They could keep their gods, they could keep this god of gods. All illusions, created and designed by minds because they would not or could not take in the truth; that all this was so irrelevant to what was both out there and within them all. Twisted deceit, malformed intelligence, tainted souls.

Kahl's mind, his soul, his divinenes pouring out of him. That would teach them. His breath was slowing, taking longer to breathe in and out. The tent and its two occupants heaving with his breath, getting smaller, more distant with every long and longer breath. Time slowed as Kahl experienced the expanding vastness. They had spoken of aligning the soul or was that Verhat? No matter. It was true and he knew he had the power. Not as some simple mindlessness insisting on answers that plainly were not there, did not exist, never had and never would.

He seemed to have forgotten to breathe, not that it mattered. As time slowed the darkness began to coalesce around him like mist materializing out of nowhere. Or had it been there all the time? Irrelevant. An intelligence. No, don't tell me the priests were right, Inamus's message containing the shadow of truth dimly grasped by a limited mind?

An intelligence with intent. Not godlike but extremely powerful. Surely not. Residing in space? Grena had spoken of a group mind. This entity was far more than that. It had it's own design, a pattern that was slowly emerging when Kahl stopped breathing. In that final moment the last remnant energy of his soul transpired towards a glowing dim radiance in the galaxy. He was with the passed on, nearer to the gods who were uncannily absent. Instead a monstrous black star and near it a glowing pale lilac misty orb, patterns sparkling and forming in quick succession on it's outer shell, a shell that was expanding with lightning rapidity towards him, through space leaving it's design upon the essence of the universe. The pattern filled him. Enmeshed, entrapped, drowning in it's invisible substance, expiring his life but not without extracting his essence which fractured. Absorbed into its heaving cosmic pattern, almost recognisable, near enough to grasp yet beyond reach.

Inamus did not think Kahl would pass out. The dosage in the wine may have been too strong. Astram thought this was the opportunity to get into Kahl's head. Oenah

closest shook Kahl. He was out cold. His legs at an odd angle, certainly not comfortable. He called out to Kahl but there was no answer. It was then he noticed Kahl was not breathing. He stared at the prostrate body.

Inamus sensing the worst rose reluctantly, the wine was making him feel good and he was in no mood for his state of happiness to be interfered with. What they both suspected had come to pass.

Kahl was dead.

"It seems our guest is beyond us." Oenah said.

"Pity. We were getting somewhere. Better call the guards. They won't be able to pin this one on us. The gods do move in mysterious ways."

"The gods Inamus?" Oenah queried.

"Well he did still believe in them." Inamus said indifferently.

"Maybe some shaman can trace his soul's journey."

"Not easily done Oenah. No one knows who they are."

"And none of our priests..."

"Alas they are not ready...yet."

"Maybe. Get a priest to call the guards over. Full burial rites."

"Kahl was a mystery." Astrah, the eldest of the three said as the priests gathered around the cemetery outside the northern gate. In the distance towering impenetrable reddish brown mountains radiant in the morning sun. Some curious onlookers stood back from the dug out grave. Small poles with symbolic pennants to identify those resting in the earth. Once the pennants had finally succumbed to the elements they were then forgotten for they were amongst the stars and with their god if they were worthy of that holy privilege. As Kahl had no god to call his own, no priestesses from the temple were expected. Then when an older white robed priestess appeared, walking up to the grave site Astrah, Oenah and Inamu were surprised.

The priests had finished digging prior their arrival. A little hung over from last night's festivities. It was not that unusual for someone to die from either drinking too much or in Kahl's case being poisoned by the mushrooms. Tricky, not recommended by the priests, but for other reasons than just their dubious effects.

"Yes." Grena said as she saw Kahl in a makeshift shroud. "He had sought solace and I was found wanting. I had no idea his time had come." Curious if either of these three strangers, there were so many about now had been his friends or companions. Or his terminators. She could tell they were not from the tribes, their skin, even Astrah's

though old and lined was smooth. Oenah and Inamus introduced themselves out of deference to her position.

"Only the great divinity knows." Oenah, a little corpulent said. No matter, in death all are equal. It was what happened after the passing on which was important. The priests were vague claiming the soul returned to the hidden kingdom that was about to manifest itself in their paradise. She felt like countering this statement but let it go. This was no time to get theological. Let them believe what they wanted. It was all in the hands of the gods anyway.

The priests were ready to lower the body of Kahl into the grave, standing next to the mound of earth excavated at first light. Ready no doubt to claim his soul as belonging to their god of gods.

"Shall we?" Inamu asked wanting to get the burial over with. He was slightly annoyed with Astram for having misjudged the dosage unless he wanted to be rid of Kahl and whatever secret he now took to his grave.

The priests were about to start. Instead Grena was intoning Urus and Bahlir along with Rena to accept his travelling soul. Then she nodded at the three men and left. They watched her leave in silence.

"Proceed." Inamu said to the priests.

They invoked the holy of holies, asking him to receive the recently departed, then the group said in unison "So be it." The priests started to shovel the earth back into the gaping hole and merely placed a pole to mark Kahl's gravesite, the pennant hanging limp. A sign of his soul's state. Listless.

They walked in silence back to their tent, each in his own thoughts. Inamu dissatisfied with not being able to ascertain why Kahl's mind was so vacant. Not even his family known to him. Had he been a waiting vessel ready to be filled with the divine grace of their coming god? If so why then see him as a threat unless Astram wanted to be the one, the messenger of the supreme deity. Inamu had no such designs. He was perfectly content with being the spokesperson of the priests with Oenah the facilitator between the priests and the people whilst Astram took it upon himself, coming from an ancient family which meant connections to the court to slowly spread the divine message there. First Verhat and now Kahl. Both occultists. They might have been useful. But apparently that was not to be.

"He could have disturbed the divine manifestation." Astram said at last.

"That powerful?" Oenah genuinely surprised.

"Yes. And using our power for his own ends."

"Which was?" Inamus asked.

"Total control. No gods or god, just himself. Usurping us."

"Really." Inamus said disbelieving Astram's explanation. "How?"

"Kahl was the vessel, Verhat his own focal point. Drawing down the power of the universe into themselves. Then whoever they met would be drawn into their orbit. They would have succeeded too. Not by converting the masses as we intend, but influencing the elite, the families, countering our objectives."

Astram might be right Inamus conceded. Oenah was suitably impressed. But then he did have the tendency to agree with just about anything. A good diplomat but one easily swayed, or appearing so. Useful especially now. For soon the revelation would occur. Many would misconstrue it clinging to their old, useless, spiritually depleted beliefs. Oenah would smoothen the way, encouraging the priests in their work of converting the families and most importantly Kahleff. Kahleff. Maybe he would be next Inamus thought with relish. If their god decreed this they could move in. Jaffir of course had to be recognised as the final arbiter so leaving him alone was important. If the people accepted the divine kingdom in this paradise then there was not much Jaffir could do about it.

Things were moving in the right direction.

When they reached the camp they were surprised to see one of Norhat's senior ranking officers waiting outside their tent. He rose having been offered tea whilst waiting their return. A strong man in his prime, unshielded wearing merely his riding clothes.

"I am Haeram come here by Norhat's orders."

"An honour and a privilege to meet you Haeram." Oenah replied pleasantly. They had nothing to hide. Astram was cautious, Inamus curious.

"Shall we go inside?" Oenah suggested.

They made themselves comfortable inside the tent rearranging the colourful ground cushions to suit themselves.

"Would you like some wine?" Oenah enquired.

"Thank you no. The tea was adequate."

They sat in a semicircle facing Haeram.

"Since the arrival of the priests there have been too many deaths." He came out with it. They were not fazed. "The coincidences are obvious." Keeping his voice even, his statement factual.

"They are...signs." Oenah replied.

"Signs." Haeram repeated. Too easy an explanation for him.

"Consider. Have you ever met Eghan?" Inamus asked.

"No."

"Denying the gods. What a person believes is between themselves and the...divine realm." Inamus was not going to mention their belief. Now was not the time to even drop a hint in that direction. "But Eghan was leading his students astray with his sophistry. That the mind could answer all questions it posed. It lead to aposty and atheism. The gods sent the first sign with the passing of the teacher. In a way they recalled his soul. Eghan did not interpret the true meaning of that. Thus he and his cohorts paid the ultimate price, or sacrifice depending on your view." Oenah replied smoothly. "As to Verhat, well something was going on at Castari's camp. He probably posed a threat. And in case you're wondering what those priests were doing with an escort it was none of our doing. They were certainly not the priests you see here. They could have been, most probably were from the city. We have no knowledge of them. As for Kahl's sudden demise that was most likely accidental poisoning. He had ingested the divine mushroom. Maybe the brew was too strong, maybe they were off. If others imbibed them they are still alive Haeram."

Norhat had sent Haeram because his scouts had had no success in recruiting any shaman with the outer roving tribes and clans. They were not interested in this Kahl. If he was of no consequence then maybe Norhat reasoned with Haeram Kahl was not. Thus Norhat suggested, find out what you can from the camp. Talk to either Inamus, Oenah or Astram. So here he was fulfilling his duty.

"Hm." Haeram could not argue with that. He was a soldier not a priest.

"Verhat and Kahl were exceptionally different."

"How so?"

"Occultists."

Haeram was only vaguely familiar with that expression.

"They both, we think," Oenah suggested cautiously "were going to be powers unto themselves. A divine transgression. Wanting to become like gods. Now that is not so unnatural in itself. But taking on such an undertaking obviously has risks." He let the officer draw his own conclusion.

"Those who wish to disturb the realm of the divine invoke divine wrath." Astrah added for good measure.

"So as I understand it, these six deaths were ordained."

"Tempting destiny at the least." Oenah explained.

"Given we are surrounded by the divine all our actions do have an effect. Those who overstep their limitations attract a reaction. In a way all six, in their own way must have transgressed in what they dealt with."

"So the priests had nothing to do with this." Haeram was not about to accuse these three ringleaders of being complicit. That would only alert them. Norhat wanted information and accusing people of murder had certain unpredictable and predictable consequences. Going to ground was the last thing Norhat wanted. Treat them with circumspection. Let them think suspicion rested with the priests. Then their influence might be curtailed. But Norhat warned, one more suspicious death, he had allowed himself a frosty smile, then I shall move against them. Remove them from Orst. Haeram understood his orders.

"I certainly hope not." Inamus not wishing to be too cocksure. "But let's say we have some rogues amongst us. And there are some who might fit that description, how would they organise it? We are strangers here. Who would we contact to do this foul deed? There are, as yet, no witnesses. So either it is divine intervention, or it was planned. If planned it needs people. To be informed, organised, paid. Maybe one of the tribe's were affronted or that of a priestess. Maybe they prayed to their gods to intervene. To us," Inamus paused, "it is indeed a mystery."

"For a religion which promises equality and harmony there seems to be a lot of disharmony about." Haeram countered.

"The disharmony you speak of is in the realm of the divine. The disturbance manifest in this paradise. A sign of troubles indeed." Astram admitted.

"And our duty is to keep the peace. Those deliberately disturbing it will be punished to the full extent of the law." Haeram reminded them.

"The gods brought to account?" Astram asked.

"No just the perpetrators."

"Even if they were divinely moved?"

"The gods do not resort to murder. They take those whose time has come, for whatever reason by illness, in their sleep, an accident. Sometimes, one has to admit, a drunken brawl may lead to unfortunate consequences. But that is in the heat of the moment when some god's intent is overstepped, I agree. But cold blooded murder is something else."

"As we said," Oenah replied, "the divine moves in mysterious ways. Even I would not presume to fully comprehend its true intent."

"Keep your priests in line. If they even dare to question people's true beliefs then that could be seen as causing conflict."

"Rest assured Haeram the priests only converse with those who come to them. We let the divine guide each soul, we do not guide." Inamus explained.

They knew they were on notice. So far they had gotten away with it. But it did not matter now. The thorns removed, the soulless infestation contained, the threat to their mission obviated. Ephan's school in jeopardy, Verhat and Kahl no more. It was enough for the moment.

"That'd better be the case."

"Rest assured the last thing we want is to disturb the serenity of the people. It would serve no purpose." Oenah deflected the warning.

Haeram rose. "Thank you for your time and your candidness."

"It was an honour to have you visit us." Oenah thanking Haeram.

The three of them escorted Norhat's emissary back out of the tent. There were still many tribesmen milling around with yesterday's roasted meat plentiful today. There was even some beer and wine left. A scene of merriment. Just as they intended.

"I think it is time for our kindred brothers to make their preparations." Astran said after Norhat's inquisitive visitor had left.

"You think he suspects?" Oenah frowned.

"They always suspect. They are military. Six people in extreme circumstances passed on. You know yourself there has not been something like this," for even Inamus could not bring himself to use the word 'murder', "for generations. The penalty, banishment, loss of goods or years of penance at some temple as a mere servant is enough to make anyone reluctant to resort to such extreme measures."

"Don't forget the military." Astram added for good measure.

"Yes, to perpetually serve in the army at the lowest rank for decades if so decreed. I hear they hate rogues and bandits with barely subdued distaste." Oenah said.

"And make them pay for it. Cleaning out stables, waxing bridles, polishing, being washers, all with the intent to demean them at every possible moment. Then locked in their cells away from the others. Outcasts amongst them."

"Fed left overs, eating gruel, drinking foul water..."

"To waste them away, until disease strikes...."

"Locked up, isolated to die a miserable death." Astram smiled darkly. "Now what about this eye of Bahlir."

"Yes. Castari has it now."

"Inamus, you think Kahleff knows what that means?"

"Oh yes. Jaffir's archimage. Inducted into the secrets of the past."

"Are they coming back? This a sign?"

"A sign Oenah. But if I were them I would not make my coming known. So it is not the race who destroyed the unbelievers."

"It could be their eye. See where we are, what we are, what we have become in the millennia since the ancestors were destroyed."

"We have kept to the path. We have not strayed. Even the priestesses, deluded into thinking their puny gods are of divine worth have not deviated in that regard. The eye is a puzzle indeed. A warning or..."

"Astram. We should talk with the king." Oenah interrupted. They knew the secret lore for they themselves, were inductees, sworn to secrecy. Now with the source of that lore covered in the rubble burying the temple the link to the past was severed. Removing the fallen mountainside would only attract attention. They knew this. Astram did not think it was the gods doing. If so it was too little too late. Whatever secret writings were with Kahleff was but a fraction of the historical truth. Not that it mattered. Their god was coming, a new millennial age on the cusp. The signs everywhere in the form of more priests, more converts giving their soul to the great coming.

"Reveal to him what has been revealed to us?" Oenah queried.

"Perhaps." Inamus looked at Astram. Astram was their 'seer'. Inamus knew his inner shortcomings. A bit like Kahl he thought with the exception that he too had been shown the way whereas Kahl had been taken out of the outer realm where their god dwelt. Verhat aware of the impending power. It was good Nada had finished him off. He could have united the shamans into a potent force twisting the divine revelation into something else entirely. Yes Astram thought it was time the king knew the truth.

Oenah was thus chosen to speak to Jaffir. He rode furiously changing horses at relay stations. Passing lumbering convoys of merchant carts bringing in the wheat and barley, casks of wine, herds of sheep and cattle, horses for the wealthy. Around him the fields fallow under a pink sky. Dust storms in the distance often blotting out the sun, at night the stars hidden. The gods he smiled were retreating leaving the field open for their god, the ultimate power and final arbiter of all in the universe. It felt good to be in touch with the immaculate, the divine, to be chosen, to have the strength and knowledge of the ultimate. Nothing could stop the cosmic manifestation.

The king's city was a hive of activity. With the last of the grain arriving deals were made, contracts signed for the next season, advance orders placed. Jaffir of course was well stocked. His palace a citadel, in the centre of the city, of the kingdom. Oenah saw the priests everywhere. More converts by the day. The temple's smouldering braziers still pretended to have some sort of hold on this world but not for much longer. Soon these places would be their houses of worship. Out with the old in with the new. Oenah felt the energy crackling in the air. Not many soldiers about. Norhat was gathering his forces at Orst. It was all working out.

Before Oenah could see Jaffir he had to go through Kahleff. Where he stood was a mystery. Shamanistically inclined, accepting the gods as more or less given, not unlike Verhat it occurred to Oenah as he rode slowly down the main thoroughfare that the similarities were striking. Maybe Kahleff had his own plan. Well whatever it was it would be of no consequence.

He found an inn for the night after returning his horse at a depot then sent word to see both king and his spiritual adviser. The nature of the message merely stating it concerned the peace of the kingdom. Nothing too overt. Messengers might pretend to be illiterate but some could read. Even open the sealed messages. If only to inform themselves, become dealers in information. What merchants were up to, mainly manipulating the market, now of course what the priests were up to, who ran the various cells, their methods of communication, the routes of caravans, what they carried with them, the tribes, bandit activity and sometimes military manoeuvres. Of course if they were caught, fingered, informed on they ended up as servants of the lowest rank to be auctioned off.

Kahleff welcomed Oenah with due curtesy and respect. His message lying opened at his writing desk in his apartments at the palace. A sign the king allowed him access even when messages were addressed to his lord. Or the king was already acquainted with its content.

Kahleff did not offer him any wine, just tea. Obviously a short interview. They discussed the situation at Orst in general terms. Kahleff after their true intent. He used the term 'brethren' which was not too far off the mark.

"I might as well come out with it." Oenah finally admitted. "In a way, Astram, Inamus and myself are what you might call both executive and spiritual guides."

Kahleff merely looked at him. No revelation there. He was informed both by his spies, sometimes even Jaffir's and at rarer moments Norhat's. Kahleff was more than the

king's spiritual adviser he was also his spymaster. For whilst the king inherited the system of gathering intelligence Kahleff worked hard to expand it. He trusted no one. Now with the priests spreading their message all were suspect. Many seemed amenable to their influence, uplifting the low, the fallen, the misguided who if they cleansed their souls, their past mistakes, their blinded faith, their deviously acquired wealth, would all be forgiven.

Kahleff prior meeting with Oenah had spoken with Gheros, the king's administrator. Old, the man well beyond his prime, but knowledgeable in the way a kingdom was run spoke of his concerns if the priests were to rule over the people. If all were equal, how would society function? What would become of the merchants? How would they be able to feed the cities? If the high were brought low, what role of the priestesses? Gheros was concerned with the functional aspect of the kingdom's lifelines. The priests hinted the vast estates would belong to the people. Wealth a sign of greed not business acumen. Then there was the military. Their role diminished for if peace did reign supreme, what to do with the thousands of disbanded soldiers? Gheros feared anarchy. Kahleff concurred. They both made this known to the king. So what to do with the priests? They seemed to multiply daily. So when Oenah sent himself as messenger the king's highest advisers were informed how to deal with him. 'Find out by any means' Jaffir ordered what their true intent was. Jaffir of course knew Norhat was making his own enquiries. The disposal of Eghan and the others a challenge to his rule. If the priests were behind it he would act with the ruthlessness necessary to contain them at a minimum, remove them if need be, send them out into the desert where they could do no harm. The other alternative was to infiltrate them, take over, remove their leaders if they proved recalcitrant or dispose of them if need be.

That suited Kahleff and calmed Gheros. And now Oenah was at the centre in their grasp. Then the king surprised them with an idea. He announced a public feast for the citizens. Three days of celebration and rejoicing. Kahleff asked the reason and Jaffir answered, 'pure benevolence. That I think of their welfare. The priests have done this at Orst, so we do it here. Show them our goodwill. Strengthen their belief in us and thus the gods. The priests whilst promising them a kingdom can only do this by taking everything away from them. The ruling families are suspicious enough as it is, so if word got out that even those with nothing were there to serve the priests, basically becoming their servants then we can nip this insidiousness in the bud.'

Khalef returned to his opulent guest.

"Your candidness is appreciated Oenah. So tell me, what of the peace you mention."

"To assure the king we mean what we say. Eternal peace, social harmony. Hope for all, divine blessings. With a reduced military manpower freed up to till the soil, or have more craftsmen. With more goods available it is only natural the prices will come down. That will benefit the masses. More wealth distribution. With more wealth, more can be gainfully employed. More irrigation projects, the potential is limitless."

"Fine words indeed Oenah. You think the merchants will stand idly by as their wealth is reduced? Or the military give up their honourable calling? What of the outer tribes and clans? Seeing so much temptation around them you think they will stand casually by?"

"They are welcome to join our happy communities."

"Tilling the soil?" Kahleff replied in disbelief.

"No. With more wealth, the new farmers will be buying more beasts of burden from them. They gain as well. If they were to destroy or rob them then how can they profit from them?"

Kahleff had to admit the idea made some sense.

"What of the temples, the priestesses, the gods?"

Crunch time.

"They will not be touched. As people see the truth the temples will become public houses of worship."

"Manned by your priests."

Oenah remained silent. Of course.

"And what of the king?" meaning by default himself Oenah smiled to himself.

"The king is the temporal ruler of the kingdom. We guide his subjects to the true spirituality within us. Keeping the peace by the will of the divine. With the cleansing of souls, their inner essence aligned to the cosmic will. Thus the king's rule will be easier. The people will be content, discord and strife will vanish, complete harmony all around."

"And what if the king remains true to the gods?" again thinking of himself Oenah realised.

"The king is the king. If that is how the divine will guides him, so be it." Oenah answered easily.

Kahleff understood just how far they had thought this through. It was a tempting vision.

"You think the gods will simply stand by?"

"The gods are a manifestation. They were the initial guides to open one's soul to the cosmic both out there and within us. Messengers of the divine."

"But not the divine itself."

"Of the divine, not separate Kahleff. Messengers preparing the way."

"The gods never spoke of a greater power whom they serve. Accept for the creators, the original gods who made this universe. If what you say is true surely you can see messages, visions as you claim that would have been revealed."

"But they have Kahleff."

"Oh?" he arched his brows.

"The priests. They are the messengers. If the gods did not wish them amongst us then they would not be amongst us."

"What if they are misguided, deluded."

Now Oenah looked surprised.

"What if this power you claim is supreme in the universe, is, let's say for the moment there. But what if it was something else?"

"Something else?"

"Yes Oenah, something else." For Kahleff was thinking of the ancient lore.

"It is what it is." He answered lamely. His tea was cold.

"And I say it is not."

"What then?" turn the tables.

"An alien power. You know of the secret books, the gate at the buried temple. Our past civilisation utterly destroyed."

"They wanted to usurp the gods. We only do his will. We serve, Kahleff." That should do it.

"So your story goes Oenah. There is much you do not know."

"The great divine mind will enlighten."

"The great mind as you say has designs of its own."

"Spiritual revelation."

"The promise. What if it is a trap." Kahleff stated.

"To what aim?" answer that one.

"To usurp the gods of course. A rogue god if you will." Kahleff's brain racing ahead of itself.

"That's an impossibility. Gods are supreme, the unitary god behind them. Nothing rogue about that. If it were as you suggest then surely there would be discord. Evil signs, dangerous revelations, discordant portents, nature in chaos, people at odds with each other..."

"And the murder of six people are not signs of discord? Or the priests inherent attitude at odds with everything we have believed since the beginning of our world?"

"The gods move in mysterious ways."

"Or your god disposing of those who know the truth perhaps?"

"Then punish the guilty." Oenah knew even the king's informants would never find the culprits. The only one who was seen to remove Verhat, Nada was pardoned. Castari having met the king was not even discomfited by that unfortunate event. What Kahleff hinted at sounded dangerous indeed. A rogue god. Was such a thing possible? The idea annoyed him. Mere sophistry.

"We shall in good time." Kahleff countered.

This was not good. Did he or Jaffir know then? Letting the culprits fly to see where they would lead them to. The tribes would be held responsible for the deed. If they said the priests were responsible, well, who would believe a murderer to speak the truth. All six were apostates. Retribution was divine. Not punished. Chastised at worst. They were in the clear. It might also be time to move their timetable forward.

"I think it is time to explain yourself to the king." This interview was over.

Oenah nodded.

The king was feasting with his court in front of the temple of the sun goddess Nurdass. Long trestle tables groaned with roasted meats, suckling pigs, marinated fish, spiced vegetables, barrels of wine and beer. The tables stretched down the main thoroughfare. Candles on the tables and burning torches sending up sparks into the still night. The revellers were noisy, boisterous, exuberant, content. Behind the towering edifice of the temple glowing rosily from the many flames around it. Minstrels played jolly tunes, people caroused, sang, danced, drank more, passed out even though it was only early evening. Servants on duty moved those overcome by drink to one side making room for others less inebriated. The city in merry uproar.

At the high table, the only one with a richly embroidered red cloth, golden threads woven through it designating it to Nurdass, Jaffir was flanked by Nurdass to his left Kahleff to his right, Oenah next to him. Alongside Nurdass the king's military governor Stroem. Jaffir had plenty of visitors to thank him for the feast. Not just the merchants who supplied most of the fare though Jaffir contributed from his warehouse as well, feeling generous. If the priests could do it they would on a royal scale. At the lower table were his court advisors, his astronomer Arbour, servant and messenger of Bahlir. Another powerful advisor in the king's entourage. And Oenah noted an absence of priests. The

feast in honour of the gods. A smart move. Soldiers were stationed all around to make sure they did not get even near a table. Some of course discarded their garb and came as citizens. Oenah's eyes and ears. Nor stupid enough to go anywhere near him.

A tent was set up behind the high table. Guards posted around it. Hours later, stuffed with food, satiated with wine Jaffir rose as did the table out of curtesy. Some wobbled on their feet, others had to be nudged not having seen the king rise. The king stood, resplendent in his wine and food stained blue shirt, glittering with stars and the sun in honour of Nurdass. A hush fell over the gathered multitude. The minstrels stopped playing.

Jaffir thanked them for their attendance. A series of huzzah's were shouted in return cheering the king, the kingdom, the gods. With no prompting Oenah found to his surprise. Take the priests away and the old ways came through as strong as ever. Maybe stronger measures were needed to convince the people of his god's pleasure or displeasure. A statement, an act would be necessary and quickly at that.

Jaffir waited for the adulation to cease. It took a while. He spoke with remarkable soberness. The kingdom was secure, the harvest in, winter approaching but no one would be found wanting. The granaries full. Those in need could apply for relief and another round of huzzah's filled the air. Then he told them to continue their revelry. Matters of state Jaffir intoned, the burden of high office never ceased. Reminding all Jaffir was doing his duty even when his subjects could enjoy their leisure. Another chorus of cheers rose all around. Oenah did his best to wish the king well. He had to.

As Jaffir made his way to the tent behind him he motioned for Oenah to accompany him. Inside a table, sweetmeats, dried food, cheese, bread and wine awaited them. Along with Oenah came Kahleff, then Stroem and Arbour the court astronomer.

They waited for Jaffir to seat himself at the high chair, then took their places around the square table.

"Please serve yourselves. Enjoy the offerings of the gods."

They thanked Jaffir and sat, pouring the tasty white wine into clay goblets. Rare glass was too precious for a night of feasting. Accidents will happen.

They sat and waited courteously. The torches burnt steadily, the smoke escaping through an opening at a small apex above them. Two soldiers came in which surprised Oenah. It did not bode well. Oenah felt trapped but he put on a brave face. At worst he would be detained just as Kahl had been. The king had his own pitcher of wine, the others shared theirs. Having filled their goblets they waited for the king to take his first

drink which he did. Relieved they thanked their host once more and drank his health, then one to Nurdass and finally to the peace and prosperity of the kingdom.

"It seems Oenah you have plans for my kingdom." Jaffir looked sober even though in the light of the torches his face was slightly flushed. Kahleff no doubt making the king acquainted with his interview.

"To bring peace and prosperity king." Stroem was watching him with suspicion, Arbour with interest.

"No doubt that is what you say. Disband the army, turn swords into ploughshares, enrich all, peace and goodwill."

"Yes my liege."

"So you don't think we are doing enough?" the threat implacable. Oenah nor Agram or Inamus had even considered this retort. Oenah thought by improving the kingdom he would have the king, and Gheros on side. If not Kahleff then maybe Arbour who really was more a second to Kahleff's advice.

"Your majesty can only work with what he has. We offer more for his majesty. With more wealth created, your subjects will love you, as I do..."

"You only love the power your priests will bring you, to rule over my subjects by filling their heads with this delusional hallucination."

The silence frosty.

"Your lands will expand my lord, your realm even greater." Who could argue with that?

"At the beck and call of your carrion ravens."

The priests.

"Who seem to attract the dregs, the miscreants, the wastrels, the affronted and jealous lusting after easy gotten gains. In a way your kind have been of service. At least we now know who they are."

What had occurred? What had turned the king's mind? Even Kahleff had come to understand this momentous change was written in the stars. Ah thus the presence of Arbour. Or was Jaffir merely testing him. Had Kahl revealed something after all, or Verhat? They were dead so whatever they did know was now passed on as were their souls. Unless Kahleff or some other shaman had communed with their departed souls. It could not be discounted. Most unlikely but not impossible.

"The idea is to bring out what is good in them majesty."

"Which the priestess's are unable to achieve?"

"They are messengers of the gods." Oenah obfuscated.

"As we are aware. Yet your kind want to do away with what is divinely ordained."

"We, ah, seem to be labouring under a divine vision." Oenah collected himself. The wine was not helping, slowing his reasoning. He had managed to just hold his own with Kahleff. Jaffir was even more astute than his advisor.

"Arbour." Jaffir nodded at the black clad astronomer. Kahleff watched him as well. Anticipating.

"The stars are divine. Millions of them. For one combined god to be master of all is impossible. Now one's mind can create any thought possible, but thinking something does not make it so. People once thought the sun vanished at the horizon and so it appears. But we know it travels around our globe. So if this god of gods exists, where does it reside? It cannot be the stars. Even the river of stars that stretch across the sky are teeming with more stars. Then there are the aberrant stars that move according to their own rules. That means there is more than one rule. That is the way of the universe, the proof is there for all to see." Arbour replied easily.

"The seasons change," Kahleff added, "rivers change their course, some animals are hunted others hunt. Different manifestations of diversity, not overarching unity."

"The unity is life."

"In life, some are farmers, others merchants. If we were meant to be similar if not equal we would be. But we are not. Many labour and live adequately, others labour little and gain rewards. It has always been so." Kahleff expanded on Arbour's opening statement.

"_"

"Well priest?" Jaffir prompted.

"Our minds are not completely divine. Our knowledge limited. We see reality each according to our own. It is that that creates differences." Having time to fashion an answer.

"So my mind is limited priest?" Jaffir's expression pure ice.

"No, the divine power in the universe has chosen you as the supreme being amongst us lesser mortals."

"Words priest, mere words but of a lesser mind, a limited mind as you said yourself. And if you are one of their leaders how more limited that of your priests. So I say they are deluded."

"We do not claim they are perfect my lord."

"No but you claim to be in touch with something that is."

"It has come to us. We did not seek it. We did not even know it was there." He said humbly.

"Arbour." Jaffir commanded.

"If that is so, then why was not this so-called supreme god made manifest? If it has always been there why has no one ever known?"

"It sent the gods as messengers as I explained to Kahleff." Hoping for support though not expecting any.

"Why would it do that?" Arbour asked.

"To prepare our souls. Children learn by stages and so do we."

"If this entity is so complete it would not need to complicate the simple. Since the gods created this paradise for us to enjoy and give thanks to, blessed be they in the starry realms and here with us, then this entity cannot perfect it. It sends less than perfect deities to do its will. Or conversely it is not able to achieve its perfection by itself. And why would there be so many natural laws if all is unitary. Unitary as you claim means exactly that. The cosmos is diverse. The very opposite, as is life. You have it all wrong." Arbour said with certainty.

"Our minds see it as diversity, true. But the underlying force is one."

"No no no no no. Experience, knowledge, the study of everything around us tells us otherwise. There are six elements. Why would that be if there is only one force. You are labouring under a misconception." Arbour replied.

"The eye of Bahlir." Jaffir changed the conversation satisfied the obvious was made plain to Oenah. "It is a sign, a portent. It could mean the ancient ones are returning. They did not believe in any gods. Oh everybody thinks they were destroyed. The ruins on the other side of this planet do testify to a cosmic war. Maybe your god of gods destroyed our ancestors and now wants either submission or destruction." Jaffir hissed.

"It wants redemption and enlightenment. Not destruction. It created the energy in the universe to make life possible. To destroy life would go against the very essence of its imminence."

"Redemption from what?" Jaffir asked. He broke off some bread and cheese and nibbled.

"Our fractured state of mind." Oenah replied. He could not really say what they thought as the truth. That would imply even the king and the gods were less than perfect which they were. The great coming would remove the scales from their souls. True revelation was at hand.

"The ancient ones were destroyed by a wrathful race who believed they were doing the will of the divine. They destroyed our future priest. We could be living like them, they were supreme magicians. We were denied. Some in case you didn't know did escape. The secret lore tells us this. It may well be that this eye is theirs, is announcing their return. To bring back what is rightfully ours by fated destiny priest." Jaffir exclaimed. Oenah knew nothing of the secret lore except it existed. If this was indeed true it complicated matters. Was there then a magical race that was as powerful as the gods? Would the supreme deity allow this? If so how should he react? Was it ordained or a challenge? He was speechless. This could change everything. Maybe they had to act quickly to make sure their plan, the supreme god's plan was in place before this long lost magician race returned and once more incur divine wrath.

"It seems the priest is a little lost for words." Jaffir joked. Smiles from Stroem and Arbour. The guards tried not to show any expression.

"I am not exalted enough to know of the secret's destined only for you."

"Perhaps you would like to think on it?"

It was best to concur. He did.

"Guards, make this priest comfortable in the quarters we have prepared for him. He has much to think about. It may also open his memory as to what exactly their intentions are for this kingdom of theirs."

The guards saluted and stood behind Oenah.

He looked quizzically at Jaffir.

"Remove him. Let him ponder the situation. If he wants to speak to me he will do so, soon I hope." The guards lifted Oenah off his chair which fell back.

"I would advise you priest to tell us what your intentions are regarding the kingdom. Not the sweet words you try to befuddle my subjects or myself and my advisors with. Your freedom if not your life is in balance, depending on what the gods have in mind for your fallen corrupted soul, or have in mind regarding your fate and destiny." Jaffir bored glacially into him. "Take him away."

Unceremoniously they dragged Oenah out of the king's presence and into a cell at his dungeon.

"Well that's one down. Now we shall see..." Jaffir said pleased. "Kahleff you did well in acquainting me with our ancient history." Kahleff merely nodded. He had interpreted it completely differently. Thought the gods had punished them for not believing. Jaffir amendable. Verhat had hinted at that without mentioning the past. Arbour had conversed with him often enough. Kahl knew something but now he was

dead. Suspected the priests for the goddesses were never vindictive. The tribes believed in their spirit worlds and the gods let them be. Maybe he was right. They had been a great race destroyed not by the gods and their servants but by a race who took offence at their disbelief in *their* god of gods. He would need to think on this.

"Well gentlemen. A profitable conversation. Shall we return?" Stroem and Arbour agreed. The merriment outside was getting louder amongst the music, the singing, the carousing. Life was good.

"We celebrate with the people for the next three days. Tomorrow afternoon, near sun down come and see me. Think upon what was said here. But think amongst yourselves. What transpired here remains amongst us. I think there is no need for me to make you swear an oath." Jaffir said as he rose.

"No my lord." They replied in unison.

Orbital: Prima

Risea listened to Khral's report with rising concern. As an Enhanced Natural she managed to keep her reactions in check. The emotive response was there but it did not overwhelm the calculating part of her brain. The news was not good, it was awful. In fact it appeared from what he said disastrous. With the Domain Lord's focused on Regum's inserted spaceship they let Kroena and Elentra continue with their specific targeting of the individuals the DVs accessed through their remote viewing capabilities on Mars.

She looked at the status screens for Verhat and Kahl. They were completely off-line. Two things were possible. Maybe they managed to cloak themselves given their natural resonance states. What attracted the DV sweep and search probing was their powerful minds. Veritable beacons now out. Still, if this was a case of cloaking then some sort of shadow echo ought to be discernable. It was not. She hoped they had not lost them completely. One could only hide oneself for so long and everybody had to sleep sometimes.

The second possibility she thought branched off into two more possibilities. Her brain balked at the bifurcations. Primaian's were naturally focussed unlike their kindred race on Regum who could juggle concurrent lines of thought with consummate ease. Not very focussed but effective. Weaker as a psychic presence which did not necessarily translate into being dominated by the DVs. To the Martians the incoming input states by the DVs were there, in place. More akin to themselves, but as yet not smart enough to fully comprehend the nature of what they received putting it down, she smiled at that, to the influence of their gods.

Verhat and Kahl were unitary in outlook. Which made them so attractive to the DVs and their mission to guide, to position them and their race to where Prima wanted them. Accept according to the read outs they had vanished. Either the Reganians hovering over Mars like a blot in the sky had created some sort of protective envelope around them, hijacked them out of the DVs psychic embrace or worse, they were no

longer living. She found the latter hard to believe. Try not think of the worst. The Martian's showed no homicidal tendencies.

Broad spectrum sweeps did indicate individual mental patterns tending towards the murderous. Perplexing. This whole operation was getting messier and messier. The incoming data did not add up. It was not the parameter settings. She checked them regularly as required so it had to be something else. Some future state of what was to be. After all psychic phenomena existed in a field of their own, independent of space and time. Subjective relativism. It could even be assumed that the Martians were heading into a downward spiral of basic animal aggression coupled with an elevated consciousness. The only thing Risea could think of was that at least they knew where, overall, the Martians were heading.

Psychic decay towards a mental bloodbath.

So the question remained: were they themselves responsible or had the Reganians interfered? The weird thing about the inserted field of the Reganians was that it was like a huge elongated teardrop shape, the bulge encompassing that distant planet. Psychic activity near zero. Soft scanning indicated extremely sluggish minds working with a minimum of activity. Not asleep, REM states non-existent. Some form of artificial hibernation. Waiting. For what? Their own activity up here? Questions with too many possible answers. Risea sometimes wished she were Reganian. A heresy in itself. It would make her suspect to the Divines and Ecclesiastics. She would be removed, BrainDrained at worst including reconfiguring, a zombie at best. She was not about to lay her life on the line even if it uncovered a worse truth, independent self-centred realignment.

Risea needed answers. Khral continued to brief her. Prior going off-line Verhat's resonant signature had been getting stronger. Khral focussing on Kahl had easily subdued him, an open mind really with an unfortunate side effect. His total mind withdrawing into its unconscious state. Interesting in itself. It made remote viewing so much easier. Still the latter showed no signs of temporal aberrations unlike Verhat. Both a perfect match. No more. Kahl had understood the concept but could not make that last mental jump to see where it led to: the Great Cosmic Mind. But with the essentials in place it was only a matter of time. And now they both had vanished. Not consecutively. First Verhat, then Kahl.

Verhat resonance upon playback went into instant extinction. With the collapse of his psychic field the baseline data, the environment which caused the deletion went void. These things happened. For one of such astuteness of perceptive mindfulness it

should not have occurred. It certainly was not illness so the only other possibility was murder. However the overall resonant state of the homicidal event-field had not flared in any specific way. If it was murder and Risea came around to that possibility with the utmost of reluctance than the perpetrator possessed an amazing mind. That could spell more trouble. If the Martians could cloak their homicidal intent then there was nothing they could do about it.

To have the special unit of DVs go back over the event exposed them to the resonant field which effected Verhat's demise and could easily affect the DVs as well. The attrition rate was already high enough and she did not want to risk further burn outs. The decision luckily rested not with her. Kroena or Elenra would have to decide. One advantage of being lower down the command chain.

Kahl's demise was weirder though. His brain overheated, gone hyper then burnt out, literally. Mental activity so high it nearly went off the pre-sets. Super psychic. Now there was a revelation. With no focus. The system's memory banks merely indicated heightened activity. Enhanced Natural. What enhancement though. An aberration but on what a scale. If they ever harnessed that mental state it could turn this whole operation around and they become the targets. It was lucky that Khral instantly disengaged his contact for otherwise he might have suffered a searing flash attack.

Khral stopped the run sequences.

"So we lost two valuable contacts." There was no blame assigned.

"Yes."

"Certain. Not even the slightest reverberations?"

"None."

"What did you make of it?"

Not that Khral could tell her anything which might surprise her.

"Loss of contact could be due to my end. Lack of concentration though to be honest I was holding him. Verhat's vanishing was instant. Could be anything. Maybe a heart attack, brain seizure or a psychic attack. With no other resonant states of that magnitude. Instant death. With Kahl no overt homicidal surge. The overall field, more like a fog than a presence remained unchanged. The target though as I told you burnt out. When I felt it coming on I disengaged and let the system take over to shadow Kahl. It would have taken too many DVs to counter his demise. What made it so dangerous was its sudden onset. Normally," he paused, "normal as in such heightened consciousness, extreme activity has advance shock waves to put it figuratively. The brain charges up in

quick but discernable stages sort of boosting itself. But in this case it was sudden and overwhelming."

"You did right in disengaging. Who knows what might have happened to you. A less experienced operative might have hung in there to the grim end and gone down with the target. Good thinking given the circumstances."

Krahl was relieved. Usually the loss of a target did not reflect too well on a DV.

"There was something else Risea."

She waited for the bad news.

"Other deletions. As you know my target was in touch with pertinent minds. Lesser potencies but above average. Amendable to our way of thinking. Far from ready but along the way. They are gone as well. This I checked out from the general field resonance the DVs picked up. Someone down there suspects something and is removing exactly those who are of interest to us."

"You are observant. I may have to recommend you for a promotion."

That was the last he expected.

"True. You not only focus on your target but keep the big picture in mind as well. Very commendable. Can't guarantee anything of course, but I shall certainly mention this to Kroena."

"Thank you controller."

"I'll get the data and give my superior the unwelcome news. She won't be pleased. I guess I'll get some heat over this."

"Hope not. What do I do now?"

"Oh yes. Your target's gone. Do a general soft scan. You've concentrated enough. Same for the relief ops. Scout for other possibilities, find attractors."

"Will do."

Risea went over to the console, downloaded the data, sent the original files into a secure memory bank, encrypted then locked that down and shrouded it with a chameleon programme so it looked like mere superficial data. If the locals down there could burn out one of their own, one enhanced from her view then they had a potent psychic weapon available. If they could do that to one of their own they could do it over here if they ever discovered the truth of what exactly was going on.

The download complete Risea took the data disk and announced herself to Kroena.

Kroena listened to Risea's report without interruption, including her explanations of what might have caused both targets demise.

"So a homicidal attack executed psychically." Kroena said referring to Kahl.

"By all indications, yes."

"And Verhat snuffed out just like that."

"Ditto that."

"Not good."

"I know."

"What are you doing about it?"

"I got Khral on light duties. He's put a lot of energy, as has his team, into this. Plus the additional info."

"That they suspect something but haven't gotten this far."

"Indeed. I think we are secure."

Kroena opened the monitors. Overall readings were as they ought to be. The priests were multiplying which was good news. Having lost one definite leader, Verhat and their eyes on the ground Kahl. With Khral's suggestion she punched in a rerun of the other deletions. Kroena brightened in the glow of the screen. Risea waited.

"Hm. Two of the four deletions mimicked a Reganian imprint. Could be natural, has to be expected given the diversity of their minds down there. So Risea it's not all bad news after all. Win some loose some."

Risea was relieved at Kroena's stance. She hoped her superior was as philosophical. It had to be expected but losing high value targets never went down well.

Kroena called up Elentra. Elentra said she would come over. Until then Kroena and Risea studied the data. Looked at the relevant fields, compared them to the overall state, focussed on the thinly dispersed psychic negativity field which had reached into their universe. And the Reganian insertion field. Elentra swept into Kroena's office.

"So what you got?" she asked pleasantly. If Elentra was displeased she did not show it. Totally professional she watched the unfolding events, first Verhat being extinguished then Kahl's hyper state being the end of him.

"Drugs."

"What?" Risea a little surprised. Why had she not thought of that.

"Has to be. No other psychic activity around. Unless Kahl self boosted himself and flipped. But that would be suicidal and he does not seem the kind. Admittedly having his

mind contained might have caused him some worry, after all it was necessary so that Khral could guide. It certainly was not Khral's doing. So what else?" Elentra was satisfied.

"They knocked him off." Risea comprehending Elentra's explanation.

"Could be accidental, then again...well speculation has its uses. At least we got the psychic signatures of those who were with him. Inamus and Oenah. We continue. Check these two out Risea. Make sure they don't suspect undue influence. Tell the DVs, all of them to hold back for a while"

"I already have." Risea informed her.

"Good call. They might be onto something. Trouble is when dealing with primitives their orientation is so annoyingly unstable. One moment they think like us, the next moment they show signs of Reganian influence. I'll check out the Reganian end. That ship of theirs by the way is in lock-down mode. What that means is they are there and not there. Tricky for the mind to get around that concept. It's their resonance that gives it away. Not your brief so you couldn't know. But look," and Elentra zoomed in on their RS. "hardly any activity. As a presence yes, but the activity is barely noticeable. That counts them out. For some reason Regum is holding them back. They know of course of our DVs so that might be the reason they're being shy not to reveal themselves. Risea you did well to call the DVs back and of course your team. Good work there."

Risea said nothing, Kroena all attention.

"There is something else to consider."

They waited.

"Regum's insertion field."

All ears all mind.

"It is obvious that Regum has made a move. They must feel extremely confident to reveal their capabilities."

"I've been looking at their RS." Kroena mentioned.

"Yes so have I." Elentra said encouragingly.

"They got extremely enhanced natural's on board."

"You considered the alternative?" Elentra replied pleasantly.

"Their infernal machines?"

"Apt. Yes."

"Look at the field. Too steady."

"That might be the suspended state they are in."

"True. But very revealing. They are virtually letting us see into their heads and their complete field state."

"You think it's intentional?"

"They must be feeling very secure." She repeated.

"Cocky." Risea added.

"Maybe they know the outcome." Kroena suggested.

"Now that would outdo our DVs. We cannot discount Regum's capabilities. They may have ideas we never even considered."

"Let's hope not Elentra." Kroena quickly added.

"It's a window of opportunity."

"I was thinking that myself." Risea said. "We have to get at exactly how they can insert, in real time, a ship and its crew. The longer they remain in place the better we are in a position to understand this feat of theirs."

"It's as if they copied the capabilities of our DVs and somehow transformed that into a physical event. The other question is do they know we are active on that planet or is it pure curiosity?" Elentra considered.

"I'm glad I'm only a controller." Risea quipped.

"It's a great challenge. The more they reveal themselves the more we find out about them as well. Runs both ways for us. They can't crack into our DV field insertions, they can't stop our target acquisition, cannot deflect remote viewing. So the best they have come up with so far is boost their brains with their computers and extend their grasp in physical space. But what is that compared to our mental powers?"

"Almost irrelevant."

"Not quite Kroena. What if their minds and their machine intelligence merge? Or has?"

"Then why aren't they doing it? Because I suspect they can't."

"Not at this stage. Never forget the future."

"The future is ours." Risea certain in response to Regum's challenge.

"As it stands now." Elentra replied with some reservation. The mantra was of course Prima was supreme. But the universe kept on throwing up surprises. First the alien field, then the revelation of a distant world at an early stage of evolutionary development and now Regum's continual conquest of space. Plus a possible blending of their machines with their minds. Elentra was confident they would surmount it all. Just a matter of getting into their heads, see it their way. Then their machines, their intelligence would be in Prima's control. But they would have to work at it. Once they knew exactly how Regum achieved this massive experiment then she considered, not only could they duplicate that, but convince them of their pacific intentions. Cosmic harmony. Of course

there was the counter move to be considered as well. If need be shut down, sabotage the Reganian insertion.

Mars

The next day Jaffir along with Kahleff decided to pay Oenah a visit. The dungeon was directly beneath the royal apartments making for easy and surreptitious access to the incarcerated. There was another subterranean goal for treasonous offences which was filling up rapidly during the festivities. Brawls, fights, heated words exchanged, threats made, libellous accusations thrown about were in some instances deemed serious enough to constitute a sombre breach of the peace. The soldiers were busy bringing the often violent and abusive drunks in. What surprised the struggling soldiers was not just the viciousness of the distempered revellers but also their vindictiveness towards them. All they were doing was removing foul mouthed and raging uncontrollable citizens who had turned into beasts as the festivities progressed.

Most were men some known to the sweating constabulary. A few women who screeched like hyenas whilst the men screamed themselves hoarse. Indicating possession. Many did indeed curse the peace keepers who were merely removing the bad tempered. What made this festive gathering so horrendous was the sheer number of the demented who exhibited such a paroxysm of rage. Rested from their labours they were puzzled at this aberrant behaviour in how these normally family loving, peacefully abiding citizens could turn into brutal, intemperate, fuming, screaming frenzied beings. Not even the bandits in the outer reaches of the kingdom acted with such sudden savagery against those around them.

Then there were the injured. With fights breaking out, noses out of joint, lips cut, teeth knocked out, heads cracked, arms broken, knives and forks used to stab, gouge and threaten those who were deemed to have given or caused offence. At first it was thought the copious amount of wine was responsible but festivities were not so rare that people were not used to several days drinking. Harvest time was the high time of the year to celebrate, revellers known to continue for a week. Winter brought out festive cheer as well. To lighten the gloom, then spring revived the spirit which put people in a jovial mood and summer of course was perfect for drinking copious amount of beer.

Jaffir listened to the magistrate's representative. Arbour his court astronomer had toured the holding cells, seen the mayhem of the wine sodden, food and blood splattered culprits. What surprised Arbour was the fact even when sobering up they were still under some mental contagion. Foaming, frothing, fuming with angry inflamed invective against their goalers, their neighbours who were responsible for causing the grievance in the first place. Or railed against the tyranny of fate and destiny threatening to sort out those who were causing the real, to them imagined trouble.

"Any ringleaders?" Jaffir asked as he sat with Arbour in his underground office hearing the shouts of affronted men who thought they had been wronged by being held as common criminals.

"That your majesty is the mystery. We all know how wine and beer along with good cheer loosens tongues. But..." he gestured helplessly.

Jaffir was nursing a mild hangover and was in no mood to be burdened with unnecessary diversions. He felt worn out, indifferent but still focussed. So it could not be the wine itself for they all drank from the same kegs.

"Nor can we blame the priests."

"Those black carrion birds." Jaffir half mumbled, his displeasure unmistakable.

"Yes my lord. Did you ban them from attending?"

"Only them Arbour. It was not my intention to ban anybody else. Except the guards on duty, the servants preparing the food and those engaged in running the kingdom. They too could come when done with their labours."

"Turning into animals my lord."

"Cut the my lord for now Arbour. Makes me remind myself of my responsibilities. You are advising me so just advise, and speak freely. This is too unusual to be taken lightly."

"As you wish. Nothing like it in living memory. Folklore has some songs about quarrels leading to tragedy and thus the memory of the violence deeply etched upon those whom it so sadly affected. It would be easy to blame the gods for these outbreaks of violence. Maybe it's lucky I'm an astronomer as well, but there is nothing in the heavens to indicate discord below."

"It's the priests."

"I cannot see how my lord."

"I can and I don't like it."

Arbour whose other duties doubled as an examining magistrate sat there with his sheets relating their uncivilised deeds of discord towards their neighbours, companions,

friends, even strangers. Truth be he was not feeling up to it. Enervated. Either more wine or sleep or some time with a good woman. He smiled for a moment then voided the latter. Too much energy involved, unless he wanted to be pampered but even then it required him to walk all the way back to his apartment. Not yet.

"If you could elucidate Jaffir."

"What?" he sighed, "Yes, the rabble going bezerk. Something has stirred them up. Or someone put them up to it. Anybody would think this is the first time they touched drink. And for so many to be bad tempered at the same time..."

"More than bad tempered." Arbour suggested.

"Maybe the tribes sent provocateurs amongst the people."

"Nothing from Norhat."

"Norhat is not here. Patrols have spotted nothing. The only thing occurring is the multiplication of priests. Spawning, crawling out from some hidden realm which we seem to be missing Arbour."

The astrologer come magistrate looked shocked.

"You look surprised Arbour."

"Your expression."

"Spawn. Can you think of something more apt?" Jaffir half joked. "They multiply like cockroaches. So I have to ask where and why and what for?"

"Of course."

"Now we all know that some shamans can meet with the soul's of the departed."

Arbour was a little mystified where Jaffir was heading.

"What if these priests had learnt the same trick from them? Or if some had been shamans before converting? Stir up trouble. And worse Arbour. Putting a curse on the people. Shocking enough I would think."

"Most definitely."

"Well if it is all connected then you would have your answer as to where the priests came from or what is creating them and why anybody would want to follow their path in the first place. Tell me Arbour, what do they believe in?"

Arbour was surprised at the question. Given Jaffir's intelligence he was surprised unless he was asking Arbour directly for his opinion. Ever since having been in touch with Verhat he had been thinking about that tenacious mind venturing so far into something vast, beyond the gods, frightening. Then there had been Kahl. Equanimous, blasé, relaxed with this knowledge of his. No wonder the priests had gravitated towards these two possible archimages. Then Astrah the shaman, Inamus and oily Oenah a member of

an ancient family who finally showed themselves at the festivities at Orst. Had the priests all left the city? Is that why they were so absent from the king's feast? He was getting sidetracked.

"A supreme god Jaffir. The days of the gods, even the ancient ones are numbered. Even a drug addled brain couldn't come up with that. Too simple, too puerile, too pathetic, too impossible."

"So I gather you don't agree Arbour?"

"If I thought it had any merit I would have informed your majesty."

"So how can a person be convinced of its merits?"

"You are asking me?"

"Yes Arbour, though my head wants me to leave it alone. When you have answered that question I shall know more about what I may need to do."

"I see my lord. Well, from what little I know, the promise of more wealth, freedom and with all the gods rolled into one."

"Hm. Oenah sweated that one out yesterday. Which still leaves these howling brawling animals around me. The priests vanish, violence erupts." His head hurt his mind racing. "Arbour. Make sense to you? Honestly now, I need real opinions not court flattery."

"Very much so. No doubt the priests want in. By any means." Shuffling some papers.

"Not to be trusted?"

"With such an unprovable heresy..."

"Arbour. Go and talk with Oenah. Not now. Let him cool his heels. Food might not be the best, straw full of vermin, but he's lucky to have straw in the first place. After a few days he may be eager for some company. But do not quiz him. You'll only get what he wants you to hear. That we know. He may protest his loyalty, who knows he may attempt to bribe you. If so be amendable. Consider it a bonus." Jaffir smiled. "Not that it will do him much good." He reminded Arbour. "And finally we shall know just how important he may be in the scheme of things. Will they abandon him? Make moves to get in contact? Attempt his release by legal or other means. You and Stroem were there, witnesses beyond reproach. No one accuses me of not running the kingdom to the best of my and by the gods will ability. The wanton arrogance..."

"Yes my lord."

"Arbour, it is only the two of us here."

"I know. It's they way I've been brought up."

"It's like a receding tide that will be back."

"My lord?" and bit his tongue.

"The priests. Abandoned the royal city. They may have gone to ground which given the public feast makes it all the more obvious they are planning something. I must be prepared for the worst. So Arbour, alert the constabulary to be on the lookout for not just priests but anybody coming and going out of this city. So that there is coordination I shall also inform Stroem of instigating a search of houses where the priests were seen or where they lived. The neighbours might be of help there, unless they are protecting the priests. Why why why?" Jaffir complained. He was in no mood for so much thinking. Still there was no way out. He smelt a rat. Several. A whole horde of them.

"So alert the constabulary. Stroem's guards will assist you if need be. Now if there is something on your mind..."

"Just the apprehended. Disturbing the peace for those who resisted to be arrested?"

"Yes. A week in the cells so they can come to their senses. No special privileges."

Arbour nodded. He understood. The cells were overcrowded. Bad luck. Next time they might think before being such idiots.

The preternatural prescience feeling of being shadowed by a hidden intelligencer grew stronger moment to moment. Astram knew he was asleep and within its domain wide awake. He really did want to sleep, his bodily mind certainly craving rest. The demands of physical existence. To be like the beings dwelling between the dimensional space that imaged itself as reality was far more relevant than his normal self. Normal. More a constricted oddity. The mind flooded with continual sensory visuals, the mosaic weaving its forced landscape around the true nature of what really is. Those who took the waking reality as the defining moment trying to make sense if they ever thought that far, barely penetrated the cloak woven around the posited realms stretching off in a million directions.

He was in an ancient temple. Underground, deep in its cavernous precinct. The gods present. At best supernatural beings. There in essence but not revealing themselves. A sign that his mind carried itself across his outer shell into an expanding vista. Moving rapidly outward. Or rather flooding into him. One part wanted to let go and let it infuse its horizonless realm so that he was truly connected to the multidimensionality of its magical environment. His normal self clinging to what it knew which compared to what could be rather than what is. The constant battle reminding him of his limited corporeal life. Like

moving through thick mud. Every effort to progress further into this expanse needing all the energy he could muster. Like someone dragging him back.

Oenah. No wonder. Astram immersed in sleep in the world beyond the grave, the intermediate realm between where the spirit intelligences originated and those clinging to the other side still maintained a weak grasp on his released soul. How often had he been so close to some divine revelation, his mind tasting its revolutionary essence and thereby a path to its source. One of many vortices which allowed those with unshakable will and focussed determination to make it through to the other side. He had been there many times, returning during sleep or whilst in a trance state that felt like home, where his true self was centred. The beings which populated these multidimensional spaces were endowed with the knowledge of the future. One he sought given the complexities of the world in which he was incarnated.

Oenah. A trapped soul in more ways than one. His true essence simply not made of the stuff to transmigrate out of physical existence. Useful due to his connections, the ancient families whose bloodline ran like a river to the fountainhead of their race.

It was no use. The columned hall he was in, sometimes filled with statuesque beings, frozen in time, more timeless really, ready to be questioned to reveal their own cosmic knowledge were not materialising. He did not have the requisite attunement due to this belabouring mental sludge that weighed on his mind. Oenah was reaching out. Could he not wait? Still he was at the centre of the real world. That centre of power trying to shift out from there to weaken Jaffir and Kahlef's hold along with Nurdas's presence, a minor link to the outer realms. The layers of the rest of the gods, their progenitors and then, and then, the undefinable realm of the source of it all. That essence a permanent sensation in his memory. Every time he came close something, someone would interfere. Be it in the spiritual realm demanding his attention with some minor revelation or given their project the demands of some interfering person whose own idea of what they wanted to be always created powerful disturbances denying him the final link to the ultimate centre. A limitless, potential which would make it possible for Astram to seize power.

Thwarted. So close yet so far. He might as well give up, let his weary mind rest. The ultimate would always be there. Or would it? He was not certain that even that was permanent as a pure state. Other beings, other minds were also aware of its existence. He wanted to be the first, beat them too it, take control and thus be the arbiter of their world.

Oenah's presence remained persistent. Desperate. Which annoyed Astram. An insistent child demanding attention, right now. Nothing much was going on that was of interest. The priests were slowly consolidating their power. True the magnetic influence of Verhat and Kahl were no longer present which meant he and Inamus had to step into their shoes, become the attractor to unfold and keep the outer realms open. For the moment no overt active psychic activity present. With the priests throwing a cordon around the city, the lesser shamans of the tribes in their own realms, he and Inamus had an open field. Inamus was busy preparing the ground for the coming revelation at Orst. That left him free to forge the final link.

What did Oenah want that was so important, now? Could he not escape into his own dream realm and meet him here? Unless he was magically entrapped. The priestesses of Nurdass? Her ethereal presence was not palpable. Kahleff? His brooding resonance absent as well. There was a total deficiency of anything but himself. Stumbled into a deserted perhaps forgotten dimensionality. Unless, unless it was his own domain. Well at least it was there. His own retreat. A secure haven between other realities. Here he could have rested and waited as a sentinel to see what was going on elsewhere. For a moment the feeling of being watched, probed flooded through him. A powerful being far more than he expected. A vast mind. Or he was so close it only appeared so, just beyond these walls. He sighed. Next time.

Oenah's insistence annoyed him. Why could he not exert such power when needed? Instead he wasted it on trivialities. What did he want? With the interference the vision shook, the hall grew diffuse, out of focus, a fog pouring out of it's walls. Then it was gone. Oenah in a cell, a dungeon. Was that all? So Jaffir locked him away. No big deal. He was not being harmed, under no duress. Oenah demanded attention.

'What?' Astram asked brusquely.

The sense of Oenah's relief that of a child having been found after being lost. The receding panic made Astram realise Oenah would never make the grade. Not if these minor setbacks had such a powerful influence on him. Truly ensnared in the web of reality. At least Oenah could navigate within that with ease. Useful in the outer realm,

'Jaffir has thrown me into his dungeon.'

Astram did not even bother to answer. It was of no importance. The priests were doing the real work now, weaving their plans into the matrix that was reality. Crafting it to their will. The great coming, the cleansing, the redemption, the opening, the infusion of their power, a front for his power. Why did not Oenah concentrate on that. Instead he complained of his incarceration. Did he expect him to aid his escape? Astram was not

that stupid to fall for the trap. Jaffir was no fool. He had locked Oenah up for a good reason. Or several. Oenah might have offended the king, blurted something out. Or through Kahleff, one very unassailable character, knowing Oenah was their weak link. Maybe Jaffir suspected their involvement with Eghan's demise. That in itself was no problem. It would be next to impossible to trace the now vanished culprits back to him. Anyway Eghan was suspect of being an apostate if not worse, an unbeliever. Those who denied the gods were expelled. Became outcasts. There were not many who strayed down that path of spiritual perdition. Abandon the gods and they abandoned you. Then when the passing came the soul would disintegrate for ever. Not a pleasant prospect. Nothing to live for.

Oenah abandoned. What did he expect? Astram arrange his release? That would alert Kahleff. Astram was not about to use his influence, nor would Inamus. No need to make it easy for Kahleff. For ever waiting, looking for flaws to manipulate. They were too close now to slip up.

As Astram lay there, both asleep and awake a thought occurred to him. Oenah was with them purely for the power they would wield after the great revelation. The priests were readying themselves to become the conduits. They had withdrawn to prepare their souls to irradiate the power of the ultimate deity. The elite families would be in a quandary. There Oenah was useful. Once the revelation would resonate in the collective soul of the planet, once all saw the power which was equal to all and feeling it directly thanks to the presence of the priests who would amplify the kingdom of the new eternity the opportunists would quickly realign themselves to the new status quo. Those who would join them would be privileged. Astram's thoughts made sure Oenah understood this. He needed reminding.

'Make that offer to Jaffir. Don't worry about Kahleff. Concentrate on Jaffir. Let him know that he remains undisputed ruler whatever happens. Remember also that as our strength grows that of the gods will diminish. They were the messengers. Their work done. A new age is dawning. Take your strength from that.'

Oenah's terrified state receded. He was drawing strength from Astram's infusing presence in his mind. His disturbed sense of forlornness dissipated. Astram acknowledged how unfounded his sense of isolation really was. Was not Astram with him in his moment of need?

For a moment an image of carnage, of blood flowing in the streets, of resistance and resentment overwhelmed Astram. It was so sudden it cut his contact with Oenah. What if things went wrong? What if Jaffir went after the priests instead? Could the

ultimate vision vouchsafed by the ultra god be somehow flawed. Surely not. His coming was certain. Was this initial attempt abortive? Were the gods resisting? Astram did not feel their implacable presence. Indifferent. So many possibilities were still intertwined in the outer realms, the power being forged by their indomitable will. Or was another power making itself felt? An essence unaccounted for? Or perhaps a darker side of the supreme god if it were resisted?

The images of bloodshed, of murder, of conflict unclear in the mayhem as to who was resisting whom. Was Jaffir planning something? Should the priests be armed? Ready to defend the faith by whatever means to achieve the ultimate aim? Smuggling in arms would be impossible. Astram would trust in the god's power to do his will. Oenah would have to remain where he was. If there was to be strife being safely locked away in the dungeon could be a blessing. Keeping him safe from the coming conflict.

Astram felt exhausted. His disparate thoughts draining him. He decided to void it all, let go and get some sleep. He felt drained. Somnolence embraced his agitated soul.

"Nada's been informed Castari." Protas told his master as he reported his intelligence whilst Castari fumbled with his sleeve. There was something he was missing, which he could not put his finger on. Disturbing. Focus. The bulk of the trading season was over. He had placed next year's investments with solid partners. Protas one of his most trusted lieutenants, having enjoyed Castari's hospitality now that the king's feast was over was relaxed, bursting with information which he wanted to repeat the moment he had ridden into the city.

Castari's warehouse, where he lived on the ground floor along with boxed tea, dried coffee beans, salted meat for winter. Upstairs the strong room where he kept the semiprecious stones which were cut for the jewellery trade along with ingots of silver, copper and tin whilst on the third floor were finished woven scarves, embroidered, interwoven with strands of gold and silver, silks, cotton for the rag trade. Castari believed in diversification. Bales of raw shorn wool and hops stored in the secure warehouse behind his house along the 'merchant quarter', protected by Jaffir's guards who patrolled the area day and night for a fee. Castari paid in cut precious stones as his craftsmen readied the finished product for the jewellers who had their own street. .

Protas, now with a meal in him, having drunk some light wine told Castari how Inamus and Astrah were getting the tribes on side with the two day feast. As to what exactly transpired remained somewhat obscure. Norhat had interviewed Kahl who had conveniently passed on which made Castari think: innate power and death, for Castari

could not discount the occult capabilities of shamans and magicians. Astram once a shaman would remain one Castari thought. The power to influence amendable souls could not be discounted. With somebody giving the order for the priests to go to ground in the city. During the feast which he attended rumours flew thick and fast as the wine made people more loquacious that either they had given up, retreating to make it appear they had no intentions of converting the citizens wholesale or were contained by the actions of either Kahleff or Nurdass or both.

"The thing is Castari," Protas fixing his steady gaze of his weather-beaten face, showing all the signs of age for he was relatively old, in his sixties, "the inhabitants of Orst are restless. Waiting for something to happen though nobody knows what, priests aside with their vision of the coming kingdom..."

"Same here." Castari concurred. "This anticipation is a trick on their behalf. Make them feel the priests can somehow assuage their restlessness which implies the gods are found wanting. Now Nada?"

"Their camp is secure Castari. They are waiting for you to decide whether they should move back here or to Orst or to remain."

"Remain until we really know. Personally I think the priests are up to something."

"They always are." Protus shooed some flies away from the leftovers of his meal. A servant came and removed the plates, the flies followed.

"Yes, true. But I think something much bigger is in store for the city. Their withdrawal is not one of retreat. More consolidation. What about Orst?"

"The school is closed for the moment. The death of Ephan has hit them hard, along with his companions and that teacher. The students are still there but the classes have been cancelled. That of course is causing a certain amount of resentment. In general as long as the students and the remaining staff, who have withdrawn into their lodgings, remain their custom is still welcome in the bazaar. If they were to leave I think the townspeople, the small traders would take their resentment out on the priests. Norhat is doing all he can to maintain the peace which is fragile though holding. Now with Ephan gone the priests are proselysing..."

"How is that going?"

"Oh the people listen. As to whether they believe..."

"Yes, tricky. Unless the priests show themselves as to what they really are we are in the dark. Therefore it is best if Nada remains for now. I need them out there as a secure base. When I am done here and we know the city is secure they can return. A pity I'm no

shaman. I could get into Astram's head. You know Oenah's been removed to the king's dungeon."

"Really? That's a plus."

"Indeed so it is. I think the king is trying to force their hand. Get them to act. That's why I sent you to Orst. Without specific instructions of course. Astrah as a shaman can invade even your dreams, your mind, your soul. Has he?"

"No Castari. Nothing unusual happened to me."

"Good. No priest take an interest in you?"

"Nor that Castari. A priest will give his speech in the market and as I said, they listen but more out of curiosity than with the intent of being converted. More like a casual interest. Some of course try to find them out, asking tricky questions to try and trip them up. So in general I don't think they are abandoning their belief in the gods. The tribes and clans basically ignore them. Who knows, with the soldiers present everywhere the priests might be holding back. There may be converts but if so they are reticent to show their new devotions publicly. Of course they could be meeting in houses planning for the big day."

"If my guess is right they could have seditious intentions. Yet what can the priests actually do? They can't take on the constabulary here, or the soldiers at Orst. It's all too disconcerting....Protas what do you really think?"

"I master?"

Castari looked good naturedly at his wizened intelligencer.

"Ramblings. If there is to be a new order then the priests will want to be the one's in control. If anything they are trying to take over the citizenry, the streets. The only question remains, then what?"

"To rob the merchants."

"That has to be considered. Take over the trade."

"Jaffir would never allow that."

"Unless they bribe him. Who could resist the extra wealth?"

"You think they have the king's ear?"

Protas looked at Castari surprised at the question.

"Jaffir accepted whatever you told him regarding Verhat's passing on."

"Correct."

"Maybe if the merchants got together and removed the priests from the city. It would show Jaffir where their loyalty lay. Solidly behind Jaffir."

"You have an excellent point."

Protas remained silent.

"If the priests are behind the murders at Orst then maybe someone should question Oenah."

"He might not know much Castari. Astrah is the centre, Inamus there for the power and Oenah the link to the king. How have the families reacted to Oenah's incarceration?"

"I don't think they care."

"So they have basically abandoned him to his fate."

"Yes Protas. During the festivities he was mentioned but more as a fool for showing his colours. No one is decrying his fate."

"All seems well. Except for the priests."

"It always comes back to them. What power is animating them? Not the gods surely. Nor the ancient ones who gave their birth. It's all so seriously flawed Protas."

"It has a certain arrogance about it Castari."

"In the face of the gods and by implication Jaffir. Yet he does nothing."

"Could be on the advice of Kahleff."

"Nada. Did she report of any unusual travellers?"

"With feasts in both cities the road is unusually quiet."

"I assume with the festivities over the tribes are returning to their winter quarters, for trading is over."

"They are hanging around Orst. A little unusual. Nohrat is watching them all, priests, nomads, the populace. One false move and I am certain he will act decisively against whoever disturbs the peace."

"You know this?"

"The soldiers are alert, watchful. Of course the furnaces are guarded so they have their priorities right. The smithies are busy making swords which means Norhat maybe gathering a militia. Orst is secure. Of course the arms hammered out by the blacksmiths could also be destined here. As long as it does not fall into the hands of the priests."

"Most are rabble. Even if they did lay their hands on arms they would be no match for the discipline and training of the military."

"Still the priests incessant insistence of this coming has stirred many up."

"Keep the people on edge. Why does not Jaffir act?"

Protas was beginning to see just how effective the priests were. Without crossing the line towards sedition. The soldiers at Orst vigilant.

"The priests really should be rounded up." Protas said at last.

"It would resolve the issue."

They heard horses approach, tethered to the hitching post outside Castari's domicile. A loud knock on the door asking to be admitted in the name of the king. A servant hurried past them but Castari said he would answer it himself. The servant returned to the kitchen.

At the door stood a liveried royal messenger with two guards of the royal household. The messenger in the name of the king delivered the communication then waited. Castari took the sealed copper cylinder and went past the living room into his office to break the soldered seal with his little hammer. It stated that Castari was requested to make his presence with his intelligencer available to the king.

Returning into the front living room he said to Protas "We are called into the king's presence."

At last thought Protas. Two spare horses were ready to convey them to the palace. Castari advised his servants that he had business there, then collecting his riding coat left along with Protas and the escort. It was early afternoon, a little chill in the air, the streets unusually deserted. The feast might have finished two nights ago but people's hangovers still lingered. The few townsfolk who had not indulged as much were out and about but many of the shopfronts were still shuttered up. The bakers, fruit and vegetable vendors, butchers, herb and spice sellers were there of course but those trading in luxury goods were still recovering.

Jaffir listened to Protas as the situation at Orst was clarified. In the king's sumptuous private chamber, just the four of them. Castari declined the offer of wine. Protas followed suit. Jaffir shrugged, smiled and poured himself some light wine and listened. It tallied with what he knew but independent confirmation was still deemed essential. Oenah had been next to useless. Kahleff his presence essential in the king's private chambers listened attentively as the picture unfolded.

The priests were becoming a pest. It appeared that some of the tribal elders actually accepted, accepted! Jaffir was hiding his apprehension that they could be taken in so easily in being agreeable. Converted to this invisible god of gods. The tribe's beliefs had always been both complex and simplistic. At one level reality was populated with countless spirit beings. They could be in the form of an eagle or a lizard, a ghost of the passed on or a celestial presence living amongst the stars. Beneath these

interweaving presences resided the power that animated all and everything in the universe. Or so the priests claimed.

Jaffir called a servant and asked the sun-goddess to come to his quarters. The man left hurriedly whilst they discussed the situation. Jaffir did not like his hand being forced. Oenah abandoned. It was obvious they could do without him. His influence was one of a courtier. The city knew of Oenah's incarceration. Not one of the aristocratic families batted an eyelid. Waiting for a sign which might indicate whether Oenah had real power behind him or whether he was a sacrifice for higher aims. Kahleff thought him worthless in the greater scheme but should remain under lock and key to send a message to Astram and Inamus. That these two remained at Orst was significant in itself. Kahleff informed Jaffir that the removal of the priests was not one of withdrawal but consolidation.

"They are probably praying to this invisible god of theirs. Strengthening their souls for the coming struggle."

"Struggle?" Jaffir asked.

"My lord. They speak of a 'cleansing' of the soul. Scouring is more like it. Whatever it really is, or will be, it certainly is not some peaceful transition even though they preach a new serenity encompassing us all. Not even a choice in the matter. Not as things now stand." Kahleff said solemnly.

"Is this your impression?" Jaffir asked.

"There is always a choice my lord. It would be interesting to see how the priests react to us ignoring their injunctions. If Protus is correct," quickly acknowledging his information, "your soldiers and Norhat are remaining aloof from this spiritual struggle. Being promised land, become farmers, even traders might not be so appealing. There are benefits in serving. A roof over their heads, meals, order within the ranks and power of course. And there my lord is the rub. The priests under the auspices of Astrah and Inamus want it all. I think you should round them up and isolate them. This world is big enough to accommodate them somewhere far out in the desert. There are many rivers which flow into the desert. It's not as if we are holding them to a death sentence. Then suitably isolated they can do what they will. An invisible god." Kahleff scoffed.

"Yes it always comes back to this."

A peremptory knock on the solid door. The guards opened it on Jaffir's order and Nurdass appeared, cloaked all in black. Had she become one of them? Nurdass did not always wear the apparel of the goddess when at night.

She bowed before them. Her hair tucked into her cowl, a figure in black. The colour of the priests. Perhaps Jaffir thought it was camouflage. Let the priests think she was amenable to their strange future visions.

"Please Nurdass, be seated." Jaffir had actually stood, the others following suit. Protas moved a chair over to the table they were sitting around. The wizened woman, in her later years, her sky blue eyes blazing thanked her king, acknowledged the others, sat and waited.

"The sun sees all on what transpires on this world." Jaffir began. "We always thank her presence at the rising dawn and wish her well as she descends to let Bahlir and Urus watch over us."

"She is grateful."

"So what is it you see?" Jaffir probed.

Nurdass was of course aware of Kahl's visit to the temple at Orst where all the gods were present. What disturbed her was the notion of the group mind which Grena relayed to the other supreme priestesses. Nurdass had searched in the realm of the sun, as the living goddesses Bahlir and Urus had done. If anything there seemed to be too many minds, recumbent intelligences dwelling amongst them in the total empyrium. The skies awakening in response to the priests presence which she could not completely clarify and thus satisfy herself to the veracity of the visions. Jaffir listened without exhibiting what he really felt. As she spoke a thought occurred to Jaffir. When Nurdass was finished he called his servant who waited in the antechamber and asked that Arbour have a little chat with Oenah. No direct order was necessary for Arbour knew what the king wished to know. The servant left to fulfil the kings command.

"And the people Nurdass, how are they?"

"Nursing a monumental hangover." Nurdass smiled.

The others smiled nodding at that. The city was remarkably quiet after the festivities. Some of the taverns were busy for there were those who needed to recover by imbibing some more to remove the fog in their brain and energize their souls by indulging in some more festive cheer.

"As to the spiritual, disturbed, agitated, nervous, apprehensive even..."

"Of what?" Jaffir enquired.

"This coming."

"Are they less engaged in the temple's devotions?"

"Yes my lord. The harvest season usually fills all the temples, giving thanks to the goddesses for the bounty bestowed. Either they are holding back or," she paused for a

moment, wondering how to frame her next words, "have given up. There is," she continued quickly, "a feeling of forlornness in the air, that it really does not matter what they do. By that I mean their actual engagement with the gods. Having lost the will to believe."

"Gone over?"

"No my king. Not openly. More withdrawn into themselves. Under some unspoken bourn..."

"The priests." Jaffir added.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" he asked surprised.

"Yes my lord. They are not just releasing themselves from their chosen gods, but all belief. Some may be accepting this creed of the priests but the general feeling I get, and from what I hear at the other temples is they are not so much rejecting as being indifferent to the divine itself."

A knock at the door. The servant announced Arbour. He was welcomed, payed obeisance to Jaffir then Nurdass and greeted the others. Though there was wine for all they were too concerned with the state of the kingdom to imbibe. Focussed. Jaffir welcomed that. Good people.

"Please Arbour."

"Oenah is nothing. A mouthpiece for Astram."

"Nothing?"

"Yes my lord." Arbour replied confidently. "Or pretending to." He added for good measure.

"Should we let him go?"

Arbour was surprised he was being asked.

"No. They should all be locked up. Astram, Inamus, any of their spawn."

"An unusual expression Arbour." Jaffir smiled wryly.

"These priests my lord. They might appear normal but there is something about them that seems wrong."

"Wrong?"

Nurdass picked up on that. Arbour was right. She felt it too. In this world but not of this world. That worried her. Whether this invisible god really existed was really of no consequence to her. She knew what she knew which was good enough for her. The sun gave life. It was so obvious it did not bear any need for deep reflection. As to what occurred, some claimed like Arbour, it was written in the stars. The wandering stars

changed as did people's emotions and outlook. Subtle influences of cosmic proportions. For the soul was different at night. During dreams magnificent realms opened up. There was some truth in that the night sky, its vast domain was not insignificant. There were many who were troubled by their dreams she recalled. Images of horrific entities plaguing their well being, influencing their soul, invading their minds, disturbing their peace.

She explained this to Jaffir.

Kahleff agreed: "Nurdass and Arbour are right. I too have had strange dreams. Beings that seem familiar but are not. Sentient entities with immense power which they are using to influence us. I have tried to discover more but am resisted." Kahleff looked at Arbour and Nurdass.

They nodded in acknowledgement.

"I have always had strange dreams." Protas said at last. Now they looked at him.

"You mentioned this to your priestess?"

Protas sighed. "I have a confession to make. I accept the cosmos as is, but I am somewhere between Ephan's school of thought, Verhat's concept of the divine and what the shamans believe."

"You did originate with the tribes." Castari said gently.

"I did indeed master." Protas replied.

"And what do you make of this then?" Jaffir asked him.

"Confusion. The priests are a sign of transition."

"You sense it too?" Arbour said eagerly. Though it was impolite to interrupt the king this was too important to stand on ceremony. Jaffir was not offended. He needed answers.

Kahleff was in deep thought. Other intelligences in the universe. Not gods but beings. Could they have done this? Was their planet under duress? The priests the advance guards?

Kahleff revealed his thoughts. They fell silent given the profound implications. Nurdass and Arbour agreed it was not impossible.

"Why would the gods allow this?" Jaffir asked perplexed.

"Indeed." Kahleff answered. "Maybe it is not relevant. There is of course the old lore..." he trailed off. He had familiarised Jaffir as to their secret history. Were the ancient one's coming back or their enemies? He feared the worst.

"You may continue."

"Thank you my lord." And Kahleff gave them a quick outline of their lost civilisation, how at one stage they had been almost like gods themselves. Powerful magic to fly through the sky, to live at ease without the need to work. Using strange artifices to till the fields, bring in the crops, bring water to their glittering homes in huge buildings until the revenge when all had been destroyed. The few holy priests...the priests again...had written down the calamity as having attracted the wrath of divine beings serving their god of gods to punish them for the affront of wishing to usurp the true divine order. The others listened in awe. But, Kahleff continued there were yet other writings that hinted that this calamity was more ordinary. Another race of beings saw them as a threat to their own domination and since their ancestors had not bowed down to these alien beings, they had paid the supreme sacrifice to remain free of them: and lost. These alien beings had then rewritten their history and were going to make sure they would never pursue that path again.

For a moment they all sat in silence.

Jaffir composed himself first. "What has that to do with now? We are nothing like our ancestors Kahleff."

"True my lord. But some started to think along similar lines. Verhat and Kahl believed we could use the cosmic force to use for our will. Eghan taught that all the secrets of the universe were in our own divine minds. This does not negate our gods. We already possess the arts of forging metals. We use water wheels to grind flour, draw water from wells by using animals that use contraptions."

"That is one thing Kahleff but nowhere near what our ancestors achieved."

"My lord. If Eghan is right, was right, blessed be his soul that we are the repository of everything that is in the universe and will be. Then surely it is only a matter of time until we rediscover what our ancestors knew."

"It is said the ancient kingdom on the other side of the planet is cursed. That any who venture there will have their souls destroyed."

"Maybe those hoary priests have cursed the ruins. It certainly kept us away."

"Let alone that no expedition could cover the deserts to make it there."

"Our ancestors made it here."

Kahleff Jaffir realised was right.

"I apologize for something I left out. The climate changed since then. Our planet was once an even greater paradise than it is now. There were more forests, so thick the sun did not penetrate the ground. Greater oceans. Now the planet is much drier. Sure the mountains still have rivers nourishing the land. But..."

"And for the last few years our yields have been less and less. Still enough surplus to see us through winter. Maybe it is a sign of divine disfavour." Jaffir said with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"If I may?" Arbour asked.

"You may."

"This might sound crazy but I just had a thought. Actually not just now. I too know something of our ancient past."

Kahleff was surprised Arbour knew anything relating to the secret history. The spiritual head, Kahleff knew and when his time came his successor would be Arbour. In a way it pleased him that he would make a worthy progenitor but that he claimed to know something at all surprised him.

"Like Protas I too have had strange dreams. I even encourage them."

"You follow a strange path." Nurdass said.

"I do, I do. The gods do belong within the universe. As do these alien beings. My dreams are full of them. The priests are here to destroy those dreams."

"Makes sense." Jaffir replied. He was interested. There was hope yet.

Arbour continued. "There is no reason why we cannot pay obeisance to the gods and pursue our dreams of greatness. Use the knowledge we once possessed to make this world our paradise."

"The priests are promising that." Kahleff said.

"Yes. Smart of them. But why let them lead when it is up to us to lead ourselves back to paradise?"

"How?" Jaffir asked.

"By reclaiming the old knowledge."

"If it exists." Kahleff wondered aloud.

"It might, in the ruins. Thus the curse. To stop us from remembering." Arbour triumphant.

"But how to get there?" Jaffir asked.

"Yes my lord, that is the problem. The requirements for such a mission is daunting indeed. The great ocean. Maybe not as great as it once was. Then the desert in between. There is a possible way though. It can be done. It would be a task. "But," he brightened, "we don't have to go through the desert"

"How then?" Kahleff asked.

"Across the ice caps."

"We'd freeze to death."

"Not colder than our winters." He found his groove.

"Crossing the mountains?" Kahleff ever the pragmatist.

"Yes, it would have to be in summer."

"No one has ever attempted that." Kahleff reminded him.

"He has a point. An excellent point." Jaffir agreed with Arbour.

They sensed hope.

"What if the knowledge is not there anymore? You think our ancient enemies would have left that behind? They destroyed everything Arbour. Everything."

"I'm not too sure. Anyway the point I was trying to make was that maybe the gods want us to resurrect that knowledge. Maybe it is the only way of saving our planet. Irrigate the desert using the icecaps as they melt in summer. We can resurrect the land. It is by using our innate intelligence the gods gave us that we can save ourselves. Build a better future. All the priests are promising is more of the same. They want us to remain in this state of spiritual bondage to them."

"Which still does not explain their presence." Khalef reminded Arbour. He had his own dark imaginings cloaked in dreams. But whose? The gods? The priests? This group mind? Or the ancient ones? Or equally the ancient enemy. Even if they did succeed would they attract them once more and be completely destroyed? Was that how it would end? A planet without life?

At last Kahleff unburdened his thoughts. When he was done Castari wished to add something.

"Nada had a dream like that."

"Of...?"

"Paradise lost. Nothing. No life. No rivers, no trees, no animals, nothing at all accept desert and mountains." Castari related. "She did say this is how things might have been before our coming. But that could be a hope. I fear the future is bleak if things do continue this way. I sometimes wonder if this is really what the priests intent is. Keep us ignorant of our past achievements, have us remain subdued so that this race that did spawn them..." he looked at Arbour, "...can remain supreme. And vanquish our gods."

"The gods cannot be vanquished Castari. They might withdraw their favours, but something eternal is eternal."

"Yes my lord. I agree that in the end this life is in part a stage for the passing on. Maybe," Kahleff said a little sadly, "the end is coming and the priests the final revelation. Maybe all this is meant to be. Who are we to question fated destiny?"

"Indeed. But I feel we should avenge our ancestors and vanquish our enemies, if they still exist."

"Something does, is." Arbour replied.

"True. So we must be careful and not arouse suspicions." Jaffir spoke. "And we are all sworn to secrecy. Is that understood?"

They readily accepted.

"The first thing we must do is collect whatever Eghan knew. From what I gather it was his students who wrote down his teachings. We acquire that first. If the priests resist, then they are defying a royal order. And since they say that the power of the king is unassailable they cannot defy me or my successor. Kahleff go through the secret books and search them well. Arbour has a point. Going over the roof of the world might seem impossible but there must be rivers flowing in the other direction from the mountains. And where there is water there is grazing land, pastures, trees. Remember all, not a word. You too Nurdass. I normally do not give orders to one as exalted as you, but your fellow priestess must not know of this. It might be several years before we can mount an expedition at all. It need not be large. First we scout for a way over the mountains and see what really lays beyond. I think we have been too content, too relaxed in remaining in our little realm. I think it is time to discover our own world."

"My king." Castari said, as they contemplated this development. "I will put what I can spare at your disposal. Pack animals, feed, provisions. I may end up poorer but the quest to regain our past has fired my soul. The gods are not adverse to our plan. I pray to Iambar the goddess of fire to keep both body and soul warm. Be guided by Bahlir in the night, Nurdass," he looked at her, "during the day, whilst Urus the celestial queen watches over all. I am content if we succeed. And of course if the land is as it is on this side of the mountains we can create more settlements."

"Thank you Castari." The king grateful.

"I think, if I may interrupt..." Arbour again, Jaffir in a good mood now assented graciously, "...we should have a feint. Send a scouting expedition to the ocean just the same. Build great ships and sail east and see what is on the other side. See how the priests react to that! And as far as the northern expedition goes, we could convince the tribes that maybe they would be interested in finding more land for their beasts."

"For an astronomer you certainly have your feet firmly on the ground." Jaffir was pleased with Arbours reasoning. "The priests will have to be duped. Let them do what they want. The king's mission they would not dare interfere with."

Relieved at last that their future was not so bleak Jaffir rose and walked over to the side table.

"I think a celebratory drink is in order."

Orbital: Prima

Elentra along with Kroena and Risea studied the simulated resonance field that embraced the time constrained space ship over the dark planet below. Without the DVs now in full control of the priests they would never have suspected that there was sentient life below. Or Regum's inserted ship.

"Look at that." Elentra was pleased with the resonance state in which the spaceship hung. "The DVs have cracked it."

The others looked at the monitors. One bank for the planet, one for the priests, one for the ship's insertion field. Though the linear spikes varied one subtle underlying spatial field was apparent concerning the ship.

"Don't you see it?" Elentra looked at them, her brain fired up. "It's been there all the time. We just didn't adjust the specs. The DVs have been feeding us their insertion field all the time. It was constant so the computers kept that in the background because," she paused relishing the moment, "it had nothing to do with the psychic end. Just background interference, much like the alien field. It was automatically filtered out, irrelevant to our primary objective."

"The Reganian's amaze me. So open, so indifferent..." Kroena thought out aloud.

"So sure of themselves." Risea beamed. "Now we have the codes. You are routing them into a subdomain?"

"Am now." Elentra was triumphant. "Might come in handy."

"Might." Kroena smiled. "Will."

"Oh yes." Elentra replied. "We go forwards from here on. The field is both localised and universal. Their people in that ship are a part of the whole. They are in some sort of near zero time sequence. On hold if you like. We should have done this right away. Kroena, get a group of DVs, a fresh shift and get them into their resonant state. Broad search field. That is imperative. That ought to lead back, instantaneously to the source. The two will be one, connected. Then once the data's in we tune the DVs and crash it. Bring it all down. Then the planet will be ours."

"Won't they reboot?" Kroena asked.

"Not if we hit them at the source. We'll effectively block them. They may find a way around that. From the resonant signatures they radiate we know they got some sort of enhanced capabilities. So Kroena, a back up team to deal with that. Run interference. Anything will do. What do they fear the most? Chaos of course. So chaos we create in their minds. The imagery is everything. The trick is that with the DVs in their field they become part of it, dominate it and shut it down. Then we act down there. Activate the priests. The DVs are charging them up. I'm not anticipating any feedback or flash strikes. I know what you're thinking, the shamans. They think the DVs presence belong to their spirit world. The priestess Grena has sensed us. But there is little she can do, or the others. I believe we are in control." Elentra was satisfied. The read outs on the monitors confirmed her analysis.

Kroena and Risea looked closely at the spikes, the wave fronts, the overall fields. Elentra was right. It was all there.

Risea organised the DVs as they started their shift. One group was designated to the ships entities as a whole, another to align with the insertion field whilst the others concentrated on the priests.

"Easy once you know." Elentra said to them. They nodded.

As the ships crew was in near time stasis their minds were like an open book. Jamming their mental activity by having them in a time constrained space time frame actually left them wide open to run interference. The first group of DVs were onto them. The second group aligned with the insertion field resonating their inserted data field into their processors.

"Got it." indicating the field. Elentra impressed at the DVs success. How was another matter. The computers could look after that. The DVs were in and in control.

"So I guess it's up to me." Elentra continued. Whilst Risea and Kroena had some knowledge of physics, Elentra, being the enhanced stable volatile she was had been taught the esoteric end. Basically it was that every state in the universe, including but not openly revealed, that the cosmic consciousness was a field state. So was the insertion field. It was all a matter of resonant projections. *The reality was that whilst the various states were probables, sentience somehow converted them into actuality.* It was merely a matter as to who would dominate in the end. Regum might be winning at the material end though with enhanced capabilities, Prima was catching up.

They had to move quickly before their window of opportunity would be shut out to them. By rights Elentra should clear it with Gharbel, Qatus or Lord Pentham. She knew

she was breaking the rules going it alone. But time, that strange phenomenon which Regum had actually bypassed, was still of the essence. Very much so. Reality was not all it appeared to be. It was much more, depended on their consciousness. So rearrange the crews consciousness and lock them out. Lock into the field and shut it down. Energy which had stumped them was immaterial if the DVs could insert their reality. And it was not a matter of countering it with a more potent reality, Elentra working furiously at the console, uploading the DVs with a brilliant hunch. Instead of countering the reality of the insertion field, negate it. Insert nothing. Clear the minds of the DVs. This was no countermove in the classical sense. That was what the Reganians counted on and thus felt secure. But voiding it was something else entirely. The probable became the actual by negation.

"Game theory." Elentra said when she had finished uploading the new group of DVs telling them that they were aligned to void their inserted minds in unison. Elentra took another gamble. She made a general announcement that all DVs not concerned with the priests and any other target they acquired below, meaning for a moment they would disengage from trying to block the alien field to all void their heads and align with the core group of DVs.

"Meaning?" Kroena asked.

"One winner. Us. Games are linear more or less. So we shift that precept. Negate the inherent probabilities becoming possibilities and end up as actualities."

"Elentra you make it sound so simple." Risea said taken by the idea.

"The ship's field and it's crew are all aligned. The DVs are going to void that. As you can see on the sub-monitors their void state is slowly starting to meld. It takes a while and long practice to not just calm the mind, but actually stop it from being it's own resonance. The Reganians have created a positive state, we a negative one. It's like taking away the foundation. Not the energy itself, but the informational content of that energy field wave state. Simultaneously."

"How do you know all this? How can you be certain?"

Elentra merely said: "The stuff I was taught. The esoteric sciences."

"Yes, we got some basic physics, field states...yes I see what you mean." Kroena replied. The divine mind was the supreme apex of it all. The universe full of energy projections defined by information. The supreme architect the full repository. What Elentra was doing was going against everything she, they, were taught. It might just work.

"But by creating a vacuum..."

"Exactly Kroena."

"Something will fill it."

"That's what the other DVs are there for. Run interference. Whatever comes in, if anything will get garbled. Enough for us to insert our reality." Elentra was certain. If not they had nothing to loose. "We deconfigure." It was the most obvious path to take. "With a zero field, to call it something, there is no past, no future. Thus no present. Their insertion field ought to collapse."

"It might get messy." Risea added.

"It might."

"And rebooting won't work because of the interference that the other DVs are getting ready for. Letting their minds run at random, their normal state not actually engaged in the target acquisition. You can see it on the monitors."

One particular screen was turning into white noise. Elentra was right. Those DVs were ready. The others voiding their minds were taking longer. But slowly the active spikes were declining, loosing their resonance, heading towards zero.

"What about a back up resonance state?" Risea asked. "In case..."

"The interference does not work. Good point."

Elentra tapped in some more commands detaching a group of DVs to beam the planet's environment into that space prior the ships insertion.

"There that should do it."

The monitors confirmed the scenario.

"Now we wait."

Mars

Protas was riding out towards Nada's camp. Though Jaffir and Kahleff having made up their minds as to what action to take on the long run, Castari was still concerned about the priests. Given the murders at Orst, taking into account the volatility of the tribes, it might be best if she and her paramour Amos remained for the moment where they were. They had enough provisions to keep them there for some time yet. With their flock of sheep, grazing was adequate, water plentiful and it was on the main road. They would pick up information from travellers as well.

Protas was sent by Castari to not just check up on his daughter but ride to Orst as well and see what the priests were up to there. No good was the general feeling.

As he rode slowly, not wishing to put a strain on his charger he sauntered along the near deserted road to Orst. A thin layer of clouds was enough to turn the air a little chilly. Better than the relentless sun.

A patrol was approaching. The king's soldiers he hoped. Lances, one with Jaffir's pendant of the sun, unmistakable, Protas relaxed. They would question him, or merely exchange some words so he stopped and waited whilst they approached. They were not riding fast. Making sure all was well. Their leader approached, the other mounted soldiers at the ready, hands free from their reigns ready to arm themselves. Professional.

They exchanged greetings, hailed the king, offered thanks to Nurdass for her divine protection. From his travelling coat Protas extracted his reason for travelling. It was not necessary but it helped being open. Jaffir having taken Castari into his confidence had given his master passports for his servants on official business to carry the sealed order for Protas to travel freely and be assisted in any way if need be. Their captain acknowledged the document looking at it intently in case of forgery. He was satisfied.

"Travelling alone?"

"My life is in Nurdas's hands."

"Orst?"

"Yes, after stopping at Nada's camp. Everything alright there?"

"They are doing fine. Woe to those who would disturb the king's peace." The captain said for Nada's precipitate action in dealing with Verhat and the priests thugs was now common knowledge. It earned her respect amongst the soldiers.

"And Orst?"

"Norhat is battle ready."

"That is good to hear. The tribes?"

"Drifting back to their winter camps. Others are staying where they can. The town is patrolled day and night. We do not anticipate any more suspicious moves by the priests."

"And what of Astram?"

"Astram." The captain said with a hint of distaste, "is under constant observation Protas."

"Good. And the people in general?"

"A little restless. They don't know what to make of the priests. Of course there are always fools, the gullible who lend an ear, but most pay no heed. As long as the priests leave them alone, the peace will be kept."

"Thank you captain."

"Safe journey Protas."

"May the gods protect you and your men."

The captain acknowledged the blessing and motioned his squad to continue.

So thought Protas all is well at Orst. The calm before the storm. This so called 'coming' bothered him as it bothered his master and the king. They were ready to deal with any rebellion but it was the waiting that hung over them like a dark cloud that would not dissipate. It might be all a ruse on the part of the priests. Create an anticipation which they had to fill. But the nagging doubt remained, as to what? Insurrection? Now less likely. Some mass prayer meetings? Probably. Whip up the populace? Could not be ignored. They were brewing trouble by giving the semblance of doing nothing overt.

Protas rode into Nada's encampment. The sheep and horses grazed where they would, the goats already slaughtered for Castari might deal in animals but he kept no herds himself. Just enough meat to see them through winter. The camp was quiet until he came. A servant looked after his horse whilst Protas made his way past the smaller tents into the bright patchwork of Nada's central abode, smoke wisping out of its raised roof.

Glad to see one of her father's most trusted aides he was made welcome, dried fruits and nuts ready as always, a servant quickly moulding flat breads to bake on the hot

rocks of the hearth's fire in the centre of the tent. Amos roused himself, Protas smiling. Young lovers. Amos smiled sheepishly at Protas who merely grinned. He too had been young once.

Though he could not relate everything which transpired he informed her Castari was watching his goods and property in the king's city. The feast had gone well, the people there content. It was a timely gesture Jaffir thinking of his subjects. It would dampen the enthusiasm for the black cowled scourges.

Then Nada came out with it.

"That ancient book. It said things which made me think."

Protas sipped his offered tea. He would not reveal the king's intentions.

"What book?" Protas not aware of Nada's find.

"Oh." Too late. "I thought you knew." And she told him what they found at the cairn.

"Interesting. And this is..."

"With my father." She got up gracefully, Amos merely smiling at Protas. A young man of few words. Strange how such opposites could and did attract. Castari had been vague about the need to find a path through the mountains. That was all Protas knew for he was going to Orst to parley with tribesmen who might be interested in forging a way through what seemed like an impenetrable wall. To be pursued meticulously and cautiously. According to Nada their ancient history told of a blasted city on the other side of their world. It was all so long ago. If they did venture beyond the mountains, if he acted quickly and staked out a claim he could run cattle, prospect for gold, precious stones. With Castari as his backer, the possibilities were there.

"What do you think?" she asked. The flat breads were ready, piping hot they tore into them, for the servant had brought them cuts of lamb reheated in the fire.

"Fascinating what you said."

"Is that all?"

"It's ancient. Something for the school at Orst."

"But what has the school to do with anything?" Protas asked aware it may harbour hoary secrets.

"I think Eghan knew more than he let on. You know of the ancient temple now buried under rocks."

"Vaguely."

"Our past is not what we think it was."

"So, does that surprise you?"

"Doesn't it you?" Nada a little disappointed.

"It's the present that counts."

"True Protas. But the past leads to the future."

"And?"

"The past can be resurrected."

"You speak like an...occultist."

"Maybe I am. After all, the word means 'hidden'. I am not Verhat or Kahl. I believe in the gods. But if we once had this glorious past then what is to stop us from regaining that past once more? Even if this is a little embellished, even if only a fraction of this is true..."

"Well you certainly have found an interest. Maybe you should talk to someone at the school. If they can be found."

"You mean the teachers, the sages have left?" Nada was shocked.

"Well I am off to Orst. Maybe you wish to come with me. Amos here can look after the camp."

"Maybe Joach. It would only be a few days at most." Amos eager.

"The decision is yours of course." Protas not comfortable. He worked better alone.

"We can discuss this later. There is another way though."

They waited.

"Given that Protas here is not exactly taken by our history..." she sat once more on a pile of cushions in front of warming fire. Then resumed her sentence: "his casual interest would be a better cover than one who eagerly sought something which might attract the attention of Astram."

Amos nodded. Protas saw the sense in that.

"What am I looking for then?" aware of his orders.

"Anything Protas anything to do with our ancient past. Maybe even before the coming of the gods."

"But the gods are eternal." Amos exclaimed.

"To be sure. Alright, before they revealed themselves to us. Better?"

"What would I be looking for?"

"Books with strange pictures. Writings, documents. Maybe some of Efhan's best teachers know something. Talk to them."

"If I can find them."

"They are in hiding?"

"If they are still there. They may have left."

"The obvious place would be the king's city."

"They might have gone to the coast, back to their hamlets, anywhere Nada."

"Well do what you can, if you can spare the time."

"I will try Nada."

"Thank you Protas." She said brightly. "Now you are staying the night."

"That was part of the plan."

"Good, we can slaughter a sheep in your honour. And drink wine."

Astram woke determined to act, to do something about that festering spiritual sickness: the school. His agents, handpicked long ago as students kept him informed of the tenor and nature of their mind numbing philosophy of Ephan's, and Jea. Words words words. In the end unless they translated into power, into attaining the divine which even the shamans knew, this questioning of how one thought, why one thought – as if that was not obvious – or where thought would lead to – one out of three right, it merely confused what was always there in the first place. To cleanse, to align one's soul with the divine majesty of the supreme god. The ultimate revelation was there for all, to a greater and lesser degree according to one's given spirit. What Ephan had taught were a series of dead ends. What was the nature of nature? Really! What were the heavens composed of? The divine effluvium, the essence of the supreme being. Ephan demanded proof. As if they could simply fly there like the birds. Well they were not birds but the soul did ascend into spiritual realms, something the shamans achieved naturally.

As Astram lay in his woollen covers in the large tent pitched in the public square outside the school buildings, listening to the voices outside, laughing, jesting, busy with the day's affairs, mules braying, the sound of horses hooves on the hard ground, squeaking carts. Astram lay restlessly. Since going through some of the notes of his infiltrators even his mind's natural equilibrium was out of kilter. He understood the pernicious influence Ephan's reasoning had on him. Sure thoughts came and went. Some were divine, some pertaining to the self, some just thoughts. The trouble was having imbibed Ephan's philosophies now had him thinking. If it were not for his knowledge of the supreme being which made it all happen, giving them the sense of the divine to communicate with it he might have gone crazy. Was the basic effluvium, the stuff of life made of breath, driven by the elemental fire of the spirit, or water nourishing life, earth the essential substance they needed to live, or that mysterious fifth element, the unitary invisible energy which branched out into the world as different elements? If not for the unitary god his mind might have fractured. Instead of enlightening one's being Ephan

threw all into confusion. Yes! That was it! Confusion! Which lead to discontent, the need to find answers Eghan purported to possess. The hook by which he kept them in his orbit. Well the nexus was broken like an old clay vessel. It's hollowness revealed to all.

Laying warm and cosy, his mind ruminating, listening to the noises of the people in the square Astram decided instead of destroying the school, preferably burning it to the ground it would be smarter to take it over. It would be a home for the priests. They could then teach the truth to the people. Those teachers who were not amendable to their way of thinking would be evicted. They could return to wherever they came from. What a simple solution. All he needed was Norhat's permission. Most of the students were gone now, frightened by the violence done to their teachers. The school would become a beacon for the kingdom.

Destiny was on his side. Inamus would be useful now that Oenah was being detained at Jaffir's pleasure. Luckily he did not know much. His mere presence originally useful as a representative of the noble families. Enough for them to take note of Astram's power. Knowing the attitude of the Families, survival at any cost, maintaining their status with the incessant jostling for power at the palace they would soon come around to his way of thinking. They even sent their creatures, their servants to check out his message. Tailored to their needs. With more lands open for grazing and cultivation they would be there in a flash to stake out their claims. They might be all equal spiritually, yet as nature was ordered between the hunted and the hunters, or the passive nature of the plants, nurtured to sustain life so the divinely ordained order of the people was in place. The only time these distinctions were held in abeyance was in their houses of worship, hopefully the temples once the goddesses saw that he had the power. Reduced to only a fraction given the gods were mere emissaries of the greater being who ruled over all. In the holy places of worship the elite would be up front and then in descending order of social importance the rest. Here Inamus was indeed useful explaining patiently to their stewards that their social status would actually be enhanced, not diminished as they currently were in the temples, where anybody had access to the incarnate goddesses. Those women who accepted his message would have their own order. They could minister to the daily needs of the spirit leaving the priests free to maintain order, make sure the divine injunctions, he was still working on that, were kept.

Ah he felt better. He had already achieved much simply by laying in his soft woollen covers. All it took was brains. Rising, now that he felt full of energy, quickly washing himself, shivering a little in the cool morning air, the central hearth's glowing

ambers flickering tiny flames whilst he had some tea. He was not hungry. Inambar had his own tent.

With a change of clothes Astram felt refreshed, ready to continue the great work. Outside the open air kitchen still had some meat and bread left for those who were hungry. Later a small tax would be levied on the believers to keep these going, every place of worship feeding the needy. Hopefully they would rely on their benevolent nature, seeing the goodness of their intent. To convert, both by word and deed. The more one gave the more divinely exalted one would be, assured a place in the divine kingdom when the great passing came to be.

He saw Inamus eating his morning repast with some locals. Just ordinary people. The traders and merchants had indeed sent some victuals. It was insurance in a way. By keeping the beggars away from their doors Astram's priests were really doing them a favour. Nor could Norahat complain as to their good intent. He would send Inamus to the military commander regarding the future of the school. He saw no difficulty in taking possession of the buildings. Evict the unbelievers. The dormitory would house the common priests and the social outcasts. They would be agreeable if only because they were being cared for. He had to be careful not to indulge them too much. He ventured outside. Inamus stopped chewing, swallowed and greeted Astram.

"When you have finished go and see Norhat. The school's future."

"At last. Things are looking good."

"They are that."

"Some of the teachers along with the odd student are holding open air lectures."

"They think they are protected."

"Little do they know..."

"They do know Inamus, they just will never be able to prove it. Norhat's soldiers have questioned many and came away with nothing." Others were drifting towards the open air kitchen, awaiting their morning meal of recooked lamb and fresh bread. The wine and beer had run out but there was still plenty of tea. Some acknowledged Astram and Inamus who nodded back.

"A few actually agree with you in razing the school. Get rid of this pestilence. Others, mainly the itinerants, even some of the clans want to move in for the coming winter. You know their common grazing grounds stretch as far as the river for their goats and sheep."

Keeping his mind focussed he said: "You will present our case to Norhat. It will make his job of keeping the peace easier. We will control the people." Astram smiled,

satisfied things were indeed working in their favour. "But tell the priests that they are not to go on a rampage. There will always be troublemakers, the bored or the greedy looting for their own pleasure. So get them to patrol the grounds. We also have to find out what their insipid and insidious teachings are all about. There might be more than just mere word games here. Who knows what Ephan and his dead successor Nagor had up their sleeve. Whilst you are parleying with Norhat I will have a look. They have a library."

"Very good. What if Norhat says no? He may want the buildings for himself, his people."

"Then we share."

"And if not?"

"Simple. If we can't have it nobody can."

Inamus understood but remained silent.

"The wrath of the people. Nothing we can do about that." Atram smiled crookedly.

"Raze it?"

"Unfortunate isn't it?" he suppressed a chuckle. "Finish your tea, then go."

Inamus nodded.

Atram rose, dusted himself off then walked towards the priest's tent. He knew that the lower ranks were already up, wanting to be noticed that they were no slackers. Those who had come over from the higher families kept to their lazy ways. There were some who were smart, having received their own education through private tutors. Mainly husbandry, martial arts, some book keeping for they had to learn how to run their estates, though their own stewards and marshals saw to that, rudimentary science, different soils, what wood was good for what, riding skills, architecture so that they could understand the art of stone masonry, and the necessary need to fulfil their spirituality. Soon every estate would have a representative priest. Then he would have knowledge to be used to keep a firm hold of the rich and elite. He would create special orders of priests. That would motivate them, many called and few chosen. It was all working out.

Inamus rose saying: "I think I will walk. Keep my ears peeled to the ground."

"The priests can do that. Not today. You ride there."

"As you wish." Inamus went to make one of the horses in the outer corral ready.

"If I am not here, I will be at the school."

Inamus merely waved and galloped off.

Astram walked to the priests tent and found those of the nobler families taking breakfast. He told them to remain seated and asked who could read and write. Nearly all of them.

"Good. I need only one for now. I need someone worthy to impress the left overs. I know we are all equal but impressions count. No point having some clod."

They snickered at that. He searched their faces. Most were young. So Astram decided to take the oldest.

"When you have finished, work the merchants. Promise them the keys to the kingdom, an exalted status after the nobility of course in the new divine order. You know what to do. Any alms go to the secretary. He will note the contribution and your part in it. When we become richer, your good works will not be forgotten."

They accepted this gladly.

The black clad, cowed man waited. Astram nodded to him and they left the tent.

"And you are?" as they walked around the crude stockade made of young tree trunks and solid branches held together by hempen rope, the smell of the animals and their dung wafting in the still morning air.

"Joach my lord. From the family of Urnaf. Traders in wines, beer, spirits."

"Ah yes. A worthy family."

What Joach did not say was that he was sent by Nada with Castari's blessing to glean whatever he could from Astram's camp. Joach surprised how open they were. Surely they would be on the look out for infiltrators. Maybe Astram did not care. Certain of his divine mission. Joach intrigued. There was talk of forming different orders, Inamus had said so. If that was the case and he could get appointed in some prominent position he might just stay. A foot in each camp. Nada and Castari were smart enough not to send any messengers to him. As long as there were no designs that would affect them then there was no need to make contact. In fact he would suggest that he become a volunteer to minister to their needs. If Inamus accepted that he could not see why Astram would reject the request. He would wait. Plenty of time.

"Humble really my lord."

"Call me Astram Joach, we are all equal in the eyes of the supreme deity,"

"Of course."

Astram had seen Joach with the others. He was respected, less ebullient than the rest. Holding back. A good sign in one way. Those who were too eager could be a

liability. He would need cool heads as the orders expanded. There might be a special position for him.

"What have you studied then Joach?" they passed the coral and were closer to the school now. The main building, three stories, long, behind it a similar building housing the students looked deserted. Some were sitting outside under a broad old tree listening to a lecture. They eyed the two priests warily, the teacher, animated fell silent.

Astram knew the layout of the buildings. Downstairs a few offices to manage the school. Then upstairs the attendees, the staff assigned to maintain and clean the buildings and all that was necessary to run the place. Next floor lecture rooms and the top living quarters of the teachers. The library was downstairs.

They walked into the foyer where a nervous looking office bearer greeted them reluctantly.

"I have come to see your famous library." Astram announced.

"I shall get an attendant." And the old man pulled a chord. In the interior a bell rang. The office contained along its walls hundreds of scrolls. If Astram was to bring down the school, the records would come in useful as to who was here, either as teacher or student. Benefactors who might be persuaded to shift allegiances. Who knows, he might convert this place into a seminary.

An even older man, dressed in brown robes, some rustic, gnarled hands, weather beaten face, deep sunken brown eyes, crooked nose and strands of unruly white hair greeted them effusively.

"Normally one can only be a student or staff or an invitee to see the library but one such as yourself and your worthy companion, well, it is an honour indeed to have such a presence amongst us." He chatted.

"Just lead the way." Astram answered peremptorily as if he owned the place. He soon would. Joach stood a little behind him, thus indicating Astram's importance. Joach could not believe his luck that Astram had chosen him. Now he too would find out what the school was all about. The taverns had been of little use, though not altogether useless. Now he would find out what really went on here.

They walked down the gloomy hallway through a rude wooden door with a huge solid steel lock. Interesting securing the library. Inside they found themselves in a large room, well lit with a huge open window, the shutters thrown open to the morning light. Along its walls countless scrolls, along the centre an equally large back to back bookcase crammed with leather bound tomes. This had to be the largest library in the kingdom. On top of each row the various subjects, subdivided into different groupings.

Astram walked down the rows, looking intently at the subjects. Mainly philosophy, the nature of the elements, the heavens, the stars, wandering stars, subjects on divinity, the goddesses, geography, he pulled out a scroll and undid it's ribbon, the old man hovering nervously around them. A map of Orst, the building marked, the roads, river, the parcelled out land, it's owners. So it was more than just a philosophical library.

Astram turned about and looked along the central bookcase. Thick velum bound tomes. The mystics, the ancients, ah, he took that down, a small step ladder handy to reach it. The clasp was locked. The librarian was not about to give him the key.

"That is only for initiates..." he apologised.

"I can break this open or you can open it for me." Astram demanded.

Along the window several desks. All empty.

"Joach, you look at the mystics whilst I peruse this."

Reluctantly the old man retrieved a set of keys on a large ring from within his robe and with some ceremony opened the dusty book. Not much in use then.

They both sat near the window. The ancients. Here was the old history! The fallen city, their fallen race destroyed by angered divines! This was precious. In this Astram could build on a foundation. They harked right back to the beginning, before the coming of the lesser gods. An idea germinated in his excited mind. He would get those, like Joach to use these records to write the real history of their belief. How their ancestor's had lost the true spiritual past, were punished and condemned to live the life they lead now. With the resurrection at hand. Their path to inner glory redeeming their ancient heritage. They had wandered in the spiritual wilderness and he would lead them out of it. It would need specially chosen Visionaries, prophets even. Invent them if need be.

Joach looked through the mystics. Everyone had their own view. All agreed that the universe was filled with a magical substance, the stuff of life. All sought divine knowledge and claimed to have found it.

Astram for the moment had seen enough. No point getting excited. They might hide the books. He walked over to the table where Joach was studying his book. What divine guidance. To walk in and find exactly what they needed. The mystics could become the prophets! They were the initiates, the chosen. The progeny though given they were not that could be easily remedied, cobbled together. Create lineages, his included. Then knowing the elite families incorporate those most useful to the cause.

"Old man. We're taking these. Don't worry they will be returned."

"You...may...study these here..."

"I will study them where I see fit. You forget yourself. If it were not for me this place would be ashes. The people do not take kindly to apostates and unbelievers. If you have a complaint go and see Norhat."

"I...ahm...this is most unusual."

"So are the lies being put about by your teachers."

"Lies?" he looked agog.

"The philosophies man. You think I'm stupid." Atram feeling his own wrath and it felt good.

"No...err...no." he mumbled forlornly.

"That is settled then. Come." Atram said to Joach. They headed with the two books out of the library leaving the librarian standing there with tears in his eyes.

The office was still manned by the attendant. He too looked surprised as they walked out with the two huge books. Atram thanked him throwing the words in his face.

Outside the group which had been listening to their teacher saw the two black clad priests with their precious tomes. They rose as one body but made no move to stop them. Atram had not expected resistance. They moved cautiously forward keeping their distance.

"You want this place to burn?" Atram challenged them.

"Norhat would never allow it." someone called back. Atram searched for the cocky young man. They stared, about twenty of them sullenly at him. The teacher told them to let them leave adding: "They are only books." That surprised Atram. Did that mean there were others hidden somewhere? The place would have to be searched. It would also have to be watched in case they tried to smuggle out their precious tomes, keeping them out of his reach.

The group resentful, their teacher looking almost indifferently at him. It could be an act. He certainly was not going to stop him. Either he was weak or saw the sense of mollifying Atram. At least he was not hostile.

"Thank you." Atram tried not to sound too facetious.

Back at their camp Inamus was waiting for their return. About to report but Atram cut him short. "I need some private quarters. I mean a house we can use."

"Oh, let me think. Several really. There is the abandoned house where Ephan was undone. But it is cursed, no one will go near it. If we use that we too will be cursed. There is always my house."

"Too far but thank you. No merchant or trader?"

"They are all waiting to see what will happen. I could make enquires."

"Well later."

"There is Nada's camp." Joach suggested. Get the books into his hands.

"Or the fort."

"Yes maybe. Any scholars about?"

"They are in hiding Astram."

"Surely someone..."

"I will ask around the camp."

"Do that. In the meantime I shall retire with Joach. Oh yes before you do that Inamus, what did Norhat say?"

"Great news. He's got nothing against it."

"We have the school?"

"He's not stopping you but said you have to work it out with them."

"And if they say no? You did mention it?"

"Yes I did. Basically it is a civil matter."

"Civil. What if there was to be a disturbance, it would not be very civil then. You did point that out."

"I alluded to it. He would be forced to keep the peace."

"So not taking any sides."

"No Astram."

"He will. When the cleansing is done his opinion will change."

"Yes Astram."

"That still leaves us with a need for a quiet place, where we will not be noticed."

"The taverns maybe?"

"Yes Inamus, two priests taking rooms, very good." He said sarcastically.

"Not if you change your garb."

"Now that is an idea worthy of you. We will need writing material, lots of it. Can you acquire that?"

"I do have some resources available."

"Good. Find me the most trustworthy Inamus. Those who can keep their mouths shut especially when drinking. I need several scribes. No I have a better idea. Joach has a point. Thank you for the suggestion. But tell me Joach why did you choose Nada's camp?"

"It is the closest." Joach said easily.

"I have a better idea. We go into the desert with our own camp. Near the lake at the other side. A retreat, for divine inspiration. Given that when the coming is at hand, there might be trouble initially. Things could get out of hand. Yes. We will choose those who can be trusted. I have a plan. Simplicity itself. Then when done, we shall have a firm foundation for the faith."

Inamus nodded.

"In fact Inamus you could lead it. Come let us go into my tent. I will explain. You too Joach. I make you first overseer of this project." They entered and sat around the warm hearth. A priestly servant bowed and Astram asked him kindly to leave and not disturb them.

When he was gone Astram outlined what he had in mind.

"You will have noted we have two books. One dealing with our ancient lore, the other the line of mystics prior the revelation of the gods. It is time I think we have our own lore. Our own divine pedigree. The ancients had fallen due to their straying from what was divinely ordained. And were duly punished. The mystics though rambling on somewhat are our progenitors. That way we have continuity. We just rewrite it according to the revealed truth. Slightly edited of course. We will make it so clear to all that our belief was, is," Astram emphasized, "predestined. The fulfilling of their visions, a little clouded perhaps but well they were being led without seeing it all. We will make sure they saw all. The divine plan, the necessary rituals, the gods the initial divine messengers. They led the way, as did the divines, meaning the mystics, and with a little embellishment here and there we have the final testament." He looked pleased.

"Audacious." Inamus said.

Astram let that pass. He had hardly begun. "By using different scribes we have the different authors at different times, living witnesses revealing the truth."

"We will need old parchment. Age the ink."

"Good. Heat ages. We bake the written word slowly. It will then be old."

Inamus was impressed. Joach astounded. Rewriting history. Never in living memory, he was lost for words and understood he had to agree to this ruse.

"And all are sworn to secrecy. Those who talk will meet their maker." He said it as of throwing scraps to the dogs.

"Fine by me." Inamus said.

"I will gladly help Astram." Joach not too eager, as if mulling it over.

"Good. Joach, you know your fellow priests. Broach the subject obliquely. It is a holy project. The divine cannot be revealed too quickly. Thus the need for secrecy. So for

the moment we are engaged by the will of the divine in this most holy of undertakings. We shall create the final testament, the true revelation, all in historical context. Tell me Joach how familiar are you with the philosophies?"

"Not very."

"Well that cannot be helped. Any of the priests in your group...?"

"Some are natural speculators."

"Excellent. We need sharp minds to mould their godless philosophy into an initial groping towards the unitary divine. So any writings even hinting in whatever form, vague even, at some underlying principle will be used. We shall triumph yet. Then when done, we can disseminate the truth. You see the doubters will bring up counter arguments. With our knowledge of their misguided reasonings they will be no match. We need an answer for every counter argument. Use the heretical writings as bait and prove them wrong. You do understand what we are about?"

The idea was heinous to Joach. But at least he was in. Witness to this spiritual and intellectual crime. Forging the past, twisting the present for an unprovable and as yet unproven deity. For organisational abilities both Inamus and Astram knew exactly what to do. What drove them to this? Why this incessant need for a unitary god? Things were, well, there was peace in the kingdom and the heavens majestic unto eternity. They were driven. But not possessed. More rational if misguided. He certainly had no sense of their definition of the divine. So why change it all? Power? Until proven otherwise that could be the main guiding principle. Possess the masses. That was their real kingdom of the future, with the priests at the apex. For now there was little he could do. They were not challenging Jaffir, or Norhat, or even the social order. It was a naked grab for power based it would appear on monumental lies. Joach would need to find out how Kahleff would react. If Astram was smart he would offer the king's spiritual advisor...

"Astram."

"Yes Joach."

"Kahleff."

"You have been thinking. That is welcome. He will have his own station. I know what you're getting at. This all has to get past him. He won't live forever you know. Nor will Jaffir. So for the moment we are amendable. Naturally. Kahlef's exalted position remains. As does Jaffir's. We have eternity in front of us. What are mere mortals then?"

'Eternity.' Joach pondered. 'Without the living what were the gods?' the thought came to him. 'If they were not there they would have been created. For the gods

pleasure?’ He had never considered the true state of his being. And now he was in the thick of some very dodgy theological shenanigans.

Joach entered the tent of the others. Though they pledged their soul as priests to spread the word they were a disconsolate group. Coming from wealthy families it did not take long for the group to think themselves above the need to preach to the masses. Perhaps considering the power trip delegating to the lesser, including himself to travel the stony road of saving lost souls. Astram Joach made plain was bent on having his own way. That much these acolytes accepted.

He talked of the divine mission. They listened in their bored attitude. Indifferent. But when Joach broached the need for learned minds they became attentive.

“Astram needs intelligent volunteers. How many he did not say. But those who have had a broader education should see him. He will probably,” he was guessing here, but knew how things were organised, “form a group responsible only to him.”

“He has certainly confided in you.” One of the young bucks challenged. That one such as he took precedence over them irked him. Bad luck. Stay alert.

“His decision.” Joach replied with the some indifference. “So who has any qualifications. Able to read and write?”

Most did.

“Well since you are all possible candidates it will be up to Astram to decide who will undertake this worthy task.”

Some snickered.

“We know about the library.” Another said. It sounded like an accusation.

“Yeah, the library.” Another scoffed.

“Detritus.” A third said.

“Shit from shitty minds.” Someone else put in.

“Up to you.” Joach unfazed. “Astram has many who would be glad to engage in this holy work.” He was holding up well. What was it with their resentment? Joach considered them wastrels, probably never cut it with their teachers. Rejects, like so many of the priests. If they were inept which he seriously considered to be the case then the project would perhaps fail. So he talked them up, paid compliments to their innate intelligence seeing through the empty rhetoric which was the husk of their minds, not Ephan's philosophy. Some comprehended his reasoning and actually showed an interest. Not much, but at least they were focused now. Having had enough of them he rose and left the tent.

Joach was restless. He felt like leaving. He had the information of what Astram intended. His heart was rebelling. Having been curious, knowing Castari needed to know which way the wind was blowing Joach came to a decision. A little premature yet knowing what he knew it was enough.

All this time whilst amongst them he had merely worn the cloak of a priest over his own clothes. Discarding it now would draw attention. But he had made up his mind to leave. Astram had to accept there would be defectors. Or in his case informants. Since the coming of the priests and Astram's arrival the town was simply not the same. Their religious attitude which infected the people. Subdued around the priests. Reserved, cautious, apprehensive. Maybe that is what Astram wanted. A show of spiritual submission.

"I have things to do." Which gave him an air of mystery, of being in with Astram and they were not.

He left them there and then. Outside the camp all was activity. Food being prepared, a sheep's throat slit, the blood collected in a bowl to be mixed into broth. There were the usual hangers about. Joach wondered how many were informers like him. Watching laconically those around them. One thing was certain he hoped. That the families might consolidate against them. The knowledge of more land being parcelled out to the masses would certainly not appeal to them. With more producers on the market prices would decrease. Astram was sure to know the effect that would have. It might even disturb the families, the traders and dealers in staying Astram's hand. He made no secret as to his social reformation.

It was time to leave. He had his horse. The saddles were with a group of priests guarding the coral. They might inform Astram that he had ridden out. But what could they say? Not much. Anyway no one could force him to remain. The oath administered upon being accepted in the ranks was to be true to the divine deity and to accept the decrees handed from on high by Astram, Inamus and in some cases Oenah. One he was dismissing.

"Off on a mission?" one of them asked. Joach had his answer.

"Oh yes." He beamed. "Astram's orders. I cannot say much except," he winked conspiratorially, it would relax him and his fellow guards, "Astram needs certain individuals for his great work he is engaged in. It is an honour for me to undertake this valuable task. He has entrusted in me I suppose a secret mission. So say nothing to anyone who is inquisitive. Only Astram is to know if he asks. If Inamus asks refer him to Astram. I cannot say more."

"We understand. Good luck."

"May the divinity be with you."

"And you." The priest replied.

Nothing was said of swearing an allegiance that made Astram own his soul let alone his presence. He saddled his horse, the priests not asking where he was going, then merely watched as he rode out towards the school. No point in making it too obvious, the eastern road which led to the coast travelled often by townsfolk. And traders coming in with their loads of salted dried fish, kelp, and timber. The road north were for the tribes and clans who stocked up provisions, trading their semi precious stones from their guarded mines. Property which they would defend at all costs. South the king's highway was the only well travelled road, towards the west the desert.

The school was a hive of activity. Joach was surprised. Whilst still in sight from Astram's camp Joach was far enough to make his identification difficult. Just another rider. Seeing his black garb the students stopped what they were doing. They were carrying parchments and books, piles of them. Carts being loaded. Joach smiled to himself. They were secreting their treasure, the library. It must contain knowledge the teachers did not wish Astram's kind to gain a hold of.

"What do you want." One of the students spat at him. An older man, one of the teachers gave the student a look though glowered at Joach. He removed his cloak and threw it to one of those standing near him: "Take it. Someone may find a use for it."

At that the teacher, a man in middling years took it from a student who had caught it.

"A gift?"

"A resource." The teacher looked puzzled for a moment. "Use it. Walk amongst them."

The teachers face brightened.

"Thank you..."

"No names."

"Of course."

"I see you are saving your treasures. Disperse them well. Astram will not be satisfied until he has uncovered, or more likely discovered your true knowledge and enlightened wisdom. I will see if maybe some of my people might ride with you for protection." The decision was not his to make but he would put that to Nada.

"I just hope there are more of you." The teacher said. Other students were busy tying down the first cart, two mules standing docile. Another cart came creaking around

ready to be loaded. The activity was frantic. Agram's visit and the taking of their books galvanised them into action. It made sense not to be a target. Having all these scrolls in one place made for temptation now that Joach knew Agram's true intent.

"So do I. The desert would make a great repository. Dry soil, dry air."

"We understand you. Rest assured we are doing our best."

"Let's hope you succeed. Oh yes. Agram is looking for scholars. I leave it up to you if you intend to satisfy his request. Still having someone on the inside..." he smiled cheekily.

Joach spurred his horse travelling first east then when out of sight from Orst headed south to Nada's camp.

He expected to be followed but was not. Having been taken into Agram's confidence to seek out more scholars and discovering real brains were thin on the ground. It made sense to search further afar. He hoped that reasoning would help his departure.

He rode slowly through the night. Passed a patrol and informed them that he had left Agram's camp. The reason he explained was confidential but the important thing was for them not to tell any of his people they had seen him. Norhat was another matter.

"Are any of you believers in this unitary deity?"

They looked at him askance.

"Please, I have to know."

"Why?" their captain enquired.

"Because of the knowledge I possess."

"I think it might be useful if you told us anyway."

"Agram is trouble." Joach ventured.

"That is possible." The captain admitted.

"He has certain designs. If you are with the priests then I am sworn to secrecy." He held out temptingly.

"We are true to the gods."

"Thank you, as am I. I am actually with Castari and off to Nada's camp with important information. In fact, you can tell Norhat that Agram is writing a divine book. He's using the library at the school to rewrite our history. So he will have designs on the library. You may have to beef up security there."

"We are informed."

"I was taken into Agram's confidence."

"What is his intention..."

"His intentions. To become defacto ruler of the people. Have the priests convert them to his false religion. You know the rest."

"We might. But we would like to hear it from you, if as you say you are in his confidence."

"Well," Joach sighed, "to give his followers land. Enrich and empower them. That offer even extends to you, if you accept his message of course."

"Me a farmer?" one of the soldiers laughed. "Tilling the soil under the scorching sun from morning to night. I would rather risk my life cleaning out bandits. Not that farming is dishonourable, but keeping the peace is also necessary."

The captain held up his hand for his soldier to remain silent.

"What Astram intends is close to treason. One could consider him a usurper."

"He's too clever for that captain. It's the rest he is after."

"I understand what you are saying, what Astram is about. We thank you for what you have freely told us. A safe journey then. The road is clear ahead of you."

"Thank you captain."

"May the gods be with you."

"And you."

They parted. The next day he rested his horse for a while. There was sparse grass around. The king had sunk wells along the way where Joach was taking his rest. Not a soul in sight. The land deserted. He felt the freedom of the open spaces. One could get inspired out here. No incessant priests jabbering on about their mission, no gossip. Just nothing. It took a special person to be completely free out here. At least freedom was to be had if one had the means and knowledge of surviving the elements.

Towards the river further east, more a ravine with a rough trail this road was the shortest route to the king's city for the river meandered east before resuming its southern course. Having let his charger recuperate Joach resumed his journey. By morning he saw Nada's camp near the lake. He saw the rubble from the earthquake having buried the entrance to the old temple. The only reason he thought of it now was Astram's interest in their ancient history. There were also caves where devotees had once lived. Growing crops at the lakes edge they had been self sufficient until abandoned so many lifetimes ago. As to what gods they worshipped none could remember.

They saw his approach and welcomed him back. Nada and Amos came out of their tent to greet him.

"Back so soon?"

"Oh yes." And slid off his horse to let one of the servants take care of it. "And sore. Passed a patrol and that was about it."

"Yes the road is deserted. Well I am sure you have much to tell."

"Indeed Nada. I must also go to Castari, unless he is coming here."

"He is as far as I know staying at our house. But come, eat, drink, relax, then we can talk. If of course I am to be privy to what you know."

"You are his second, so I can talk freely."

They went inside the tent. The smell of fresh roast lamb made him hungry. He had not eaten for nearly two days, surviving by drinking water and nibbling some nuts. After having filled his needs, and drunk some wine Joach relayed everything to Nada. She listened focussing her utmost concentration, hanging on every word, taking in the nuances, keeping her own thoughts in check.

What Joach revealed astounded her. Amos, reticent as ever merely sat there. Not surprised what Astram was doing. Maybe given the priests self acclaimed mission the logical sequence made sense. In a way it did. Nada though given her position needed to think further than just running this camp. What she saw in Amos Joach could guess. A good lover, devoted to her. Amos asked for nothing which was good. He accepted his secondary position and never talked across Nada. In a way he would make the ideal husband for her. Accepting her superior status without complaint, there for her. What more could a woman want? From a humble family Joach might have expected Amos to connive something out of her. Castari was extremely wealthy. If Astram's scheme of expanding the farms succeeded the market would be sorely tested. Nada understood this especially after Joach had put that to her.

"Not that we can stop him. Only Jaffir can. A lot also depends on Kahleff. Up to now they seem to let things run their course. If I had my way," she poured them all more wine, "I would round them up. They contribute nothing, inveigle themselves into people's homes and the gullible accept their words of holy redemption. It really is too much."

"It isn't it?" Joach agreed.

"Well now that we know more regarding Astram's true intent I think it might be wise of someone else passed that information on. If Astram thinks you have defected..."

"Remember I'm seeking scholars Nada."

"Yes I know, but the city is full of priests. I will tell my guards to keep a sharp look out as to who passes."

"There is the longer track along the ravine. They might use that if they are following me. I did say I was seeking the right minds Nada. It's only when I fail to return

and that will be days from now might he suspect that I have left for good. Then he still has to get word out, more time wasted. I think I am safe for now."

"Then you should not travel alone."

"You need your people here."

"You think we are not safe?" she asked. "After all, our reputation is very much enhanced after we dealt with Verhat and his thugs. I think even Norhat was impressed. And speaking of Norhat it is a pity you did not see him before leaving or getting a message to him."

"I am sure he has his agents amongst them. It may even be that the group I was with was infiltrated. Some were not exactly eager to embrace Astram's vision of his holy kingdom."

"You think so?"

"Think yes. Certain? No."

"Well it's not exactly that they would reveal that fact."

"No. You are right there. It would be nice though if it was so."

"I'm sure it is. I just cannot imagine Jaffir or Kahleff just standing by. What is the situation in Orst then, meaning Norhat."

"Ever since the murders there are more patrols, more soldiers on the streets Nada."

"That at least is something."

"Well I think I've covered all I know."

"You have done well. It was indeed extremely lucky that he took you in his confidence. We thank the gods for the revelation. It is our duty to act. But I can see you are tired. Must be the food and wine. If you do wish to rest..."

"I am feeling sleepy. You will forgive me?"

"But of course. You can sleep here or in the guests tent."

"The guests tent will be fine. You have things to consider no doubt."

"And plan ahead. We will see you tomorrow then."

"You will indeed."

Mission control came through as the 'Explorer' came out of her statis induced time compression. A simple matter of holding their particular probability waves whilst the environment around them, including the surface of the planet was scanned, analysed, observed, regarding developments amongst the inhabitants. As a first contact scenario, going in blind would have been premature. Observe first, then act.

"You are ready to go." The command came.

"Perdus receiving."

"Prior contact...your data we collected is coming through...now. When you have digested that with your team let us know which scenario is in play."

"Understood."

The link was cut. Not a link in the classical sense for being quantum entangled they were with mission control in real time.

The data they had at Regum was now in the ship's com-system then re-routed into a secure contained area cleared from its initial receiving buffers.

They were all together in the lounge, the cockpit up front on auto for the ship could easily be run from where they were gathered. The slow down effect of their near zero stasis negligible to their bio rhythms since time really had crawled at a snail's pace inside the quantum insertion field.

The team looked at the readouts, the graphs of the sentients below, all in glorious real time vision. The first thing they concentrated on was the intense DV activity. Remote viewers targeting specific individuals who suddenly vanished. Verhat and Kahl. The worst case scenario in effect. They watched the ground base state to run and ascertain improbables. The DVs targets deleted. Death induced, meaning homicide on the ground or through DV interference.

"Prima." Los spat out. "Can't help themselves. Have to get involved."

"Yeah." Mirn said herself. "Bunch of shits."

"Please concentrate on the data." Perdus got them back on track.

"My E end is handling it." Mirn advised. "I'll let it rummage through the data then make up my mind. Know yet whose going down?"

"Not until we've digested this." Perdus answered.

They watched Nada discover the book in the desert and zoomed in on it.

"Now that is revealing." Nuhan as usual understating the immensity and implications of the planets early history. His mind totally focussed now.

"Looks like these people may have, a long time ago emigrated from another planet. Or the reverse. Tricky. Either way they were a stage two world." Nuhan said.

Jez's natural abilities to enphase her mind was locking into the data, trying to get the feel of the authors of this little segment of history. "Something went terribly wrong. Cataclysmic. Some survived. They're the ones below. Everything forgotten..."

"Or hidden." Perdus advised.

"Or that. That will mean factions. Bit like Prima."

"So...?" Mirn asked. Her primary concern space itself and now, who else might be there. Jez's department. Mirn's E capabilities only aware of the remnant alien field, which she advised them was non-localised.

"It must have a source." Nuhan interested that it obviously did not originate below.

"Well we now know there is a space-faring civilisation around." Jez organising her thoughts.

"Or was. Might have moved on or abandoned the planet. Maybe the war spread to them as well and I hate to say this, got wasted." Mirn muted. "We should get base to do a search for them."

"After we're done here." Nuhan said. "Only one insertion at this time is possible. When we have more stations..."

"Yeah, let's hope so. Prima. They really..." Mirn was disgusted with what transpired regarding DV incursions. "Wouldn't be surprised if they had a hand in this."

"Hard to say. It happened so long ago. Prima would have trumpeted their victory. Asserting themselves." Perdus reasoned.

"Can't rule it out." Los added.

"Which means they could do it again. Stir the pot." Mirn in a foul mood.

Their scanners riding the data observed Jaffir's city, Nada's camp and Orst. Gaining data similar to the DVs, through their heads but via quantum entanglement.

At Orst people were milling about like angry wasps. Jez felt the psychic tension. They saw the priests moving enmasse towards several buildings to the east of the town.

"That'd be the school according to the data. Looks like they're taking it over. The staff emptied the library. Taken to who knows where. If they're smart they'll disperse it, hide it, dig it into the ground, use caves. One thing I found interesting is how their king and his advisors are interested in their ruins. According to the ship's log there are traces of exotic materials in clusters. All that's left of their once high-tech cities. The desert reclaimed them, the wind piling on the sand building hills. Luckily our x-ray lasers penetrated the ground. But whatever was there is long gone. The launch pads would have decayed as well. But we do have pockets of plastic type polymers. Buried deep in the ground." Perdus explained.

"You think we're too late?" Jez asked.

"Millions of years. Figure of speech. Millennia for sure." Nuhan told them.

"Well at least we know the alien field's not from where we are. It's no denser here." Mirn said authoritatively. "So where did you come from?" she asked the bank of screens.

"Our problem is being in the insertion field. We cannot probe beyond it. Only what it encompasses. Up to base really. We'll have to tell them."

"Of course." Perdus agreed. "But let's get as much as we can before we decide who goes down. Since this is a friendly mission and we're here to learn Nuhan is definite to go. Los you of course have to stay with the ship."

She knew this.

"Mirn you'll get the sense of place down there. Jez might even be able to phase in with them."

"I certainly hope so."

"As team leader I of course can go myself but whether that is necessary is another matter. In a way this is also a diplomatic mission. But only having one of us on the ship makes me feel uncomfortable."

"The ship's got its own brain Perdus." Los reminded him. "We'll be fine."

They watched the priests flooding into the buildings.

"So are the DVs stirring them up or are they doing this of their own accord?"

"I'm trying Perdus." Jez answered. The danger was that if it was DV activity she could be located and traced back to the ship. So she had to hover without making direct sensory contact. From the scurrying priests below that would not matter so much but the DVs would know there was another presence. Once down there she'd be one of the locals.

"Well, the priest's mental activity is suppressed hostility. I think they're none too pleased that most of the library and the inhabitants are gone. But I get the impression they wanted the school for themselves either way. The military very much in control of their own mental faculties. So they at least are still their own masters. Some of the locals mingling amongst them, probably out of curiosity or after loot." Jez informed them.

"Preliminary conclusion: DV activity focussed on the priests."

"We should also ascertain what's happening at their capital." Nuhan wanted to know. Whether the priests were in some sort of total push to assert themselves over the whole kingdom.

"Gotcha." Jez smiled. They looked at her. "Astram's the ring leader." The scanners zoomed in on a black cowed figure, no different to the priests. But he had a group around him. Giving orders, receiving information, walking slowly at the rear of the

mass of priests. Soldiers were there as well as a show of force. Since no one was coming out it appeared the school was deserted, abandoned by the original inhabitants.

Whether Astram was under DV control was hard to ascertain for Jez. He would be a Natural with potent mental capabilities. Astram was not even trying to hide his attitude. Either he felt so certain of his move secure in the knowledge he would get away with it, or the DVs were powering him up.

"Given their stratified society, can you Jez find the military commander. We may need to speak to him." Perdus requested.

"Aren't we going to the capital?"

"The ship indicates all is at peace there. Some mental agitation but nothing like at Orst. And visuals indicated an absence of priests." Mirn watching intently events spinning out of control below.

"Their king, ahm, one called Jaffir should be told Prima is interfering." Jez suggested.

"Not if he is taken over. We need neutrals Jez. In a way it changes everything now that they've gone hyper. Control gave me several scenario's and courses of action. Can't have the DVs become aware of us digging up whatever I may be thinking." Perdus explained.

"But you got E capabilities."

"I know but I don't want even that to be known to them. If they slide around me then that's enough for them to know I am enhanced. As you two are." Meaning Los and Mirn. Nuhan his scientific officer was merely augmented. He wanted it that way.

"So, when are we going down?" Mirn asked eagerly.

They saw as several priests mounted horses and started of east. They knew the library had been emptied and were searching for its precious information.

"What a mess." Los said.

"Isn't it just?" Mirn agreed.

"If they have their way, this planet will go like Prima." Nuham warned. He was wondering what their overall mission objectives really were. It was more than just to find the source of the alien field. Nuhan was under the impression they were there to explain some basic truths and then let them make up their mind. Give them a choice.

"Well well well."

They looked at Jez.

"One of the king's advisors. Kahleff. Talk about a powerful mind. He is amazingly apt at cloaking himself. Don't worry I'm not homing in on him. The vacancy he has

surrounded his mind with itself is a mental field. So calm he's in a controlled meditative state. He knows something is happening and is doing his best to remain invisible. Whether he is in on this or not I won't know unless I go in myself."

"Later Jez. I think we should concentrate on Orst. That's where it's all happening."

"I concur Perdus." Nuhan agreed. "Maybe we go in two stages. First acquaint Norhat that certain agents of influence are driving the priests. We cannot be certain he knows of the ancient battle they lost. You'd think the military were acquainted at least with the knowledge of their defeat."

"Unless it's too distant." Jez explained. "A bit like our history. Or Prima's. Take the great calamity. It's so remote even we only remember its occurrence. No one really studies it."

"Yes you are correct in your assumption." Nuhan readily agreed. Though he did not venture to reveal he and a handful of scholars were devoted to that occurrence. It was all in the Web anyway. Gamers played with it as a backdrop without ascertaining the real facts behind it. Most of it was reconstructed from their own information for Prima as unusual had rewritten that history. Regum had the only real data. Whether the truth existed academically somewhere in Prima's libraries was anybody's guess.

"Nuhan, you've studied the military."

That surprised the rest of the crew. They knew he was one of their most eminent scientists yet should not have been surprised that his education did not limit itself to his immediate studies.

"Well of course. One of the other reasons I'm here."

"You done military history?"

"As a social phenomena Jez."

"Right everybody." Perdus refocussing the group. "Let's all go over what the ship picked up whilst we were in stasis. Then tomorrow we decide who goes down and what our objectives are. I can say this. One diplomacy. Two to ascertain if they were being unduly influenced. If not then our mere presence and that of Prima's DVs will be revealed to them either way. Three our own interest in being here. Four the alien field. Now that we know it's not from here leaves them out of the equation. Five. They are the survivors of some past off planet contact. It's obvious that whoever they were we got nothing to indicate where or who they are, now. They could have been travellers exploring, or their home world was dying, their star in its end phase looking for an inhabitable world. So what's their state of astronomy? We show them the vastness of the universe. So that brings me to number six. If under Prima's influence, well we'd be noted

and reported on. That is the risk we have to take. If it is the sixth scenario we leave without further interaction. Remember we are primarily a scouting expedition. The follow up depends on what we find out down there."

They comprehended the scenarios Perdus outlined.

"Now there are two ways of going down. Conventional or insertion. I prefer conventional. Less activity in the insertion field. Takes a while but we got three shuttles. With nano packaged bikes. Configured in a mass that looks like a box. Just activate it and it self assembles."

"Clever." Los was impressed. Being the ship's tech back up.

"I've got an idea. Why don't we make contact with Nada? She knows the contents of the book. She's aware of what occurred. Her encampment is outside of Orst. Admittedly going straight to the military fort is the most secure place."

"It would send a message to the priests. Do we want them to know of our presence?" Nuhan asked.

"Indeed. Good point Jez, Nuhan." Perdus considered. "The shuttles have three ground bikes. They got gyroscopes so anyone can ride them. Extremely fuel efficient. Pressurised hydrogen gas. It would be a shortish ride to Orst from their camp. If we can convince Nada to come with us and see Noraht, rather than just appear..."

"Your call Perdus." Nuhan said.

"I know. Well we got till tomorrow. We'll decide then. Oh yes for obvious reasons we'll go down nigh time. Hopefully there may be another thunderstorm. The pods are g drives anyway. Only the bikes might be heard."

"I'll hook up and check systems." Los said.

Joach rode out of Nada's camp the next day on his way to report to Castari. Given the priests activities, given Astram finally revealing his true intent Nada worried about his designs regarding the king's city: Jaffir. The granaries, the bulging warehouses would make tempting targets. There might not be enough soldiers to keep all the merchants safe. The kingdom had been at peace so long now, that only a military presence was really necessary at Orst just to let the tribes know that raiding the caravans was a risky business as they traversed the mountain pass between Orst and Jaffir. Then there were the farms and orchards along the river that needed protection from thieves. The tribes finally understood that by trading their precious stones for goods was far more beneficial and less messy then raiding traders and merchants. It worked.

Astram by staging his show of strength at Orst sent a message to the king. Pretending to follow the will of his followers made him appear the reluctant messenger of spiritual change. Clever in his brazenness. His priest's intent in the open for all to see and choose accordingly. The old gods of eternity or this new unitary confabulation. Nada knew where she stood and Amos agreed with her. Astram was trying to stir discontent. Jaffir would have to act. How would the priests react. Accept the king's will? That remained to be seen. Would they be rounded up and removed? They both hoped so, the sooner the better.

Astram's little talk with his chosen got them going. The more affluent were causing some difficulties as they were used to being obeyed. So he allowed them their special tent, two priests as guards purely for privacy, not to be bothered. Then he waited for boredom to set in. As they were all well off, or at least self sufficient Astram promised much, telling them to be patient. His army of priests walked the streets, preached at the market place where there would always be the curious. More audacious boys would throw small rocks at them, darting between the crowds, the soldiers merely watching.

Over time Astram along with Inamus gathered enough information to gauge the mood of the town. Even some of the tribes listened so that over the days the itinerant came to him. With the harvests in many were now out of work. That did not mean they were destitute. Merely free from labouring in the fields and the farms along the river. The rag trade did well in sowing up the priests garb so they were happy. Whilst the priests accepted alms they did not solicit the people directly. Takings were few but Astram and Inamus's wealth saw to their survival. Soon Astram knew they would have land, to be held in common. They would thus equal the rich and influential families.

Reading the revealed history of their world was a new experience. What slim books existed on the gods would be as nothing compared to what Astram was envisaging. Nor would they be so convoluted as what the school had churned out. There was only one independent printer outside the temple and he was interested in Astram's contract. His main work was essentially printing up contracts, bills of sales, declamations by traders which diminished in orders at the end of the season. The owner Horm was delighted to be of service. If he heavily discounted Astram's order he would be remembered and could possibly be the printer of choice once Astram was in control as the spiritual head of their order of the unitary god.

He liked the sound of 'unitary'. So inclusive. Not the threat it was to their doomed religion. Once their history was explained in clear and concise examples the people would come around. A two pronged approach.

The town's councillors representing the king kept away from Astram until Jaffir would finally make up his mind concerning them. That was one of the reasons Astram had withdrawn the priests from there. When the moment came they would be in possession of the city. Jaffir and Kahleff isolated.

His intelligences reported regarding the activity at the school. They had seen wagons leaving with baggage. They could not see what was being loaded being sheathed in Hessian bags.

"So are they abandoning the buildings?" Astram asked one of them.

"Looks like it."

"Well go back and find out what you can. Remain in your civilian garb. Be curious yet disinterested. You two should manage that."

They nodded.

"You see, if they are leaving, we move in. No more tents. Winter is coming. I must say it is obliging of them. Praise be the great god."

"Praise be." They mumbled dutifully.

Arriving they were shocked to see what the remaining teachers and their students envisaged for the school. Knowing they could not remove all the precious volumes, the notes of their teachers and better students, Astram's intelligencers were appalled to see to what lengths they went.

They were wrecking the place. They heard the splintering of wood as furniture was being broken up. Wood was precious thinking they were making firewood for the coming winter. The crashing was coming from nearly every room. The carts had left hours ago, already out of sight.

Jamu and Onos, both from the city could not comprehend the wanton destruction. Unthinkable. An affront to their sensibilities. Furniture fetched a good price yet these scholastics were smashing up their belongings. They shook their head at the violence. A group of young students approached them at the outer open field where once tutorials took place under the huge trees. They carried planks of wood, broken off legs which they swung jauntily about. Were they about to be beaten up? They were in their own clothes. Had they been recognised from their first visit mere moments ago?

"There is nothing for you here." A crash upstairs as a huge piece of furniture fell over. A resounding thump. The sound of axes smashing into whatever they were breaking up.

"We wanted to speak to..." but Jamu was cut off.

"You're with them."

"With whom?" Onus asked in all innocence.

"We know Astram sends his spies."

"How do you know we're not from the fort?"

"Your hands for starters."

They looked at them puzzled.

"White, uncaloused, thin. You're Astram's lackeys."

"We are authorised to deal with your master. Take us to him." Jamu tried to sound authoritative, taking the lead. They were not impressed.

"He's busy." One of them said. As if that settled it.

"So send word. I assume he can make his own decision."

"We want nothing from you."

Then they smelt it. Fire. Wisps of smoke wafted out of the windows below. The students not alarmed. Now pouring out of the main building. The same thing was happening at the dormitory. At the edge of the open space some soldiers were watching from the distance. Behind them the furnaces of the metal workshops further away. Most of the soldiers were guarding the fire belching ovens.

Others were exiting the three storied brick structure. The first orange glimmerings of flames. Jamus and Onos stood transfixed. They were burning down their school and dormitory. Flames were already flaring out of the dormitory. Grey smoke billowing out rich thick, flames illuminating the spreading conflagration. The soldiers became interested and sauntered over. Further away two soldiers got on their horses and rode towards the fort to report the fire.

Behind Jamu and Onus the murmur of a forming crowd of town dwellers. People were coming to see what was happening. Jamu and Onus felt helpless and cheated. Astram had promised them the place was theirs. It was not to be. Behind excited voices. The two buildings were far enough from the town to be no threat regarding the fire.

Flames were shooting out of the ground floor, smoke edging out at the top of the entrance, sparks and cinders sparking in the air momentarily. It dawned on Jamu and Onus, regaining their mental balance now that the first shock of what they were doing passed. That the library was being destroyed as well. They were actually annihilating their

knowledge, their wisdom, all they knew. What had these people learnt that they would do anything to stop Astram acquiring their accumulated teachings?

"Surprised?" one of them said, still brandishing his wooden leg. Jamu and Onus had their knives of course, hidden but both grasping them ready to defend themselves. The two soldiers were closer now, listening in on the little group. The flames were taking possession of the burning dormitory. Bright orange red flames shot out as it took hold. The thatched roof smoking, then starting to glow from the fire exploding into flames.

No one was doing anything to save it. Behind more townspeople flooded into the open square. All were excited.

They could feel the heat of the conflagration. The two of them were affronted at being denied the building, the library, the beds, the school's belongings. Deliberately denied in a wanton act of sabotage.

The sound of horses hooves. More soldiers. The two soldiers near the group drifted away to converse with the reinforcements. The crowd was not dispersed. They had been ready to make a run for it. The students too many to take on.

Something crashed in the main building. A floor had given way. Flames shot out, the crowd 'ahhed' at the sight. Smoke wafted their way moving instinctively back. There was nothing anyone could do. Jamus and Onus moved away from the students and had to push their way through the gathered crowd that barely moved out of their way. They were being jostled. Nothing too overt. Just haughty resistance. So the people were not entirely on their side. Rumours abounded from snatches of conversation they picked up. Some suggested they hoped to find priests in there being offered to lambar the god of fire. Laughter. Did these people know they were with Astram? This did not look good.

A platoon of soldiers rode at speed down the wide street. Then veered off right to the furnaces. Behind them trundling more slowly three bullock drawn water carts. As Jamus and Onus made their way through the thick crowd, still being elbowed, the soldiers organised themselves to keep the furnaces and the workers cottages safe from the raging fire. Flames crackled, masonry fell, the crash of the library's roof collapsing into the conflagration.

When they finally returned to their camp they found confusion. The priests were running around but doing little. Their tent was empty. The others gone to see the fire in their own clothes for the priests garb was strewn around the floor. Abandoning the faith, their future to be the elite now less attractive.

"If we stay with Astram it will stand in our favour Onus. What do you say?"

"I agree." His companion answered. "Unless they are mingling with the crowd and people. See what really is going on. I mean this could be a sign."

"Oh that it is Onus."

"I meant something larger. News will reach Jaffir. Since we were there and they basically admitted to destroying their own school I think we should inform the king of the truth. There will be some who will turn this to their own advantage. We must find Astram or Inamus."

"I see what you mean. Well at least our camp is not being molested. There are still guards around." They left their tent. Searched for Astram not finding him. Nor was Inamus present. They were a little disappointed. Now was the time for leadership. Jamus was tempted to take charge. He did.

"Listen." He shouted. Some of the distracted priests turned to them. Confusion on their faces.

"The heretics," why not start at the deep end Jamus reasoned, "are burning their own school and dormitory to the ground. The soldiers are doing nothing. Some may blame us. We had nothing to do with it. They did it of their own accord. Even burning the library. What they could save they removed. Who knows where they went, where their misbegotten parchments, scrolls or books were squirreled."

"Where is Astram?" one of them shouted.

"Here." Came the answer. "Thank you Jamus." Astram made his way through the gathered priests. In the distance more people going to the fire. The thick black clouds of smoke pouring like an angry volcano staining the sky.

Astram was at the front of the gathered.

"I have sent some brethren," Astram began, looking at Jamus and Onus, "to the city, to the tribes. The teachers are gone, but so are their lies. They in fact have copied our ways, to disseminate their aposty amongst the people. In a way it is a declaration of war. So we shall rise to the occasion. Let them burn their school. Though I promised we would inherit it our god decided against it." he paused for a moment as they reflected on that. Higher powers were at play.

"This is not a defeat but the beginning of our victory. We can always build our own seminary when the time is right. We were too early too ahead of ourselves. We must disperse. Enlighten the distant farmers, the fishermen on the coast, live amongst the tribes, journey with the clans, be everywhere at once. This is the beginning of our great mission."

They cheered Astram.

"some are already journeying north to talk to the shamans, the elders. Our aim is to capture Jaffir's city. I need some volunteers."

For a moment they fell silent. They knew of Oenah's arrest and were reluctant to share that fate. Astram had an idea. It was insane, but when people acted as if crazed by the gods then only an equal counter measure would suffice. But he needed some he could trust.

"Why not us." Jamus said.

"Gather your belongings. Return to your homes. Travel in two's or four's. Arm yourselves with stout sticks to defend yourselves against the blind of faith. We break this camp now. I know it is already the middle of the day. By tomorrow only those who are from Orst are to remain. You are all well versed in the knowledge, the ultimate mysterium of the god of gods. Be the seeds that will grow into the spiritual harvest. The future is ours."

More hearty cheers.

"Your tent is empty?" Astram asked.

"It is." Onus answered.

"Good. I will acquaint you with your mission."

Astram had an audacious plan to weaken Jaffir. Kahleff would equally be helpless. It was a ruse in his dark design to thwart the coming of the divine light that would burn away the dross leaving the pure to finish his designs.

The camp was astir. They all saw the rising plume of smoke slowly rising into the sky.

"Looks like a funeral pyre." Amos said to Nada after one of their servants came excitedly into their tent. Joach was still sleeping. They let him.

"This is bad." Nada felt the heavy vibes. How volatile everything was since the arrival of the priests. A warning by the gods of what was in store if this pestilential scourge was not contained. Whether the gods were displeased to have moved the people to this wanton act of destruction or it had been whipped up by the priests themselves, which she assumed, remained to be seen.

The black plume rose defiantly into the sky. Its dark crown smeared outward as it poured maliciously up. Its smudge pointing south. A bad omen.

"If there are refugees on the road we know the worst is happening. I really should be with my father."

"Nada, if the priests have some dark design, it may be best for you to stay here. I could go with Joach to make sure your father and his belongings, his home, your home, is safe." Nada appreciated that. Especially as Amos had said 'your home', not 'our'. He had no designs on her fortune and loved him for that.

"If we see soldiers then we must find out what they know. They will be sending at least one messenger." Nada reasoned.

"Shall we send some scouts?" Amos asked.

"Good idea." Nada walked over to the gathered who were all watching the black smoke, thick, heavy, illuminated by the glow of the fire.

"Kerach, Retan."

"Yes my lady?" two solid built men answered.

"Ride to Orst and see what you can find out. Arm yourselves. Any priest offers resistance..." She smiled, her eyes glinting with hatred.

"We understand."

"If you can speak with the soldiers even better. If Orst is safe see what is going on at Norhat's fort. See if he needs help in any way."

"Yes my lady." Kerach obeyed.

"If the situation is unclear, spend some time in the taverns. The best place for news, gossip, conspiracies, anything. One night should suffice. Unless you get some leads. Our main concern is not just our and your safety but that of Jaffir. See if the priests have designs upon our glorious city. If it is only a fire, though it's a big fire, then of course return."

"Yes my lady." Kerach repeated.

"Go then, and travel well."

"May the gods be with you."

"And you."

She watched as they chose two good chargers, saddled them, took some feed and water pouches, went to their tents to get their broad swords, then with one easy move were in the saddle and galloped off towards Orst.

A squad of soldiers were galloping from Jaffir halting at Nada's camp. She offered the horses water as well as for the men.

"Any news?" their captain asked.

"No. It just started. I have sent two of my men, Kerach and Retan to find out. They just left. You might catch up with them. They aren't riding too fast."

They watched the plume of smoke, terrifying in its violence.

"Could be anything." Amos tried to sound calm.

"Let's hope Orst is not burning." The captain said.

"Or your fort." Nada cautiously added.

"Don't think so. It is a way out of the town. Self sufficient." The captain said.

"Any news from Jaffir?" Nada asked at last. The horses were drinking from wooden buckets her servants had placed in front of them.

"All is quiet. The priests seem to have vanished. In hiding no doubt. Ready for some treachery."

"That at least is something. I have Joach here. He was riding all through the night and is resting. Later I will wake him and send him to Jaffir to tell the king of the fire. At least he will know until further news arrives."

"We thank you for that my lady."

"Nada."

"I am honoured." The captain smiled. She returned the gesture.

"You know captain, the priests talk of a cleansing. I assumed it was spiritual. Maybe they meant something else."

"Burning Orst?" he asked surprised.

"Something." Nada indecisive. "But they are planning something."

"We know and watch them well."

"And they are completely gone from the streets?"

"Yes. Jaffir is thinking of doing a house to house search."

"Good idea. Flush them out, remove them, send them into the desert. Let them rot." Amos said.

The captain nodded at the sentiment.

The horses stopped drinking.

"Well, we'd better be on our way. Kerach and Retan?"

"Yes captain."

They rode out.

"Nada, there is treachery afoot."

"Do tell Amos."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

"You know it could be something else entirely."

"Oh?" as she watched the dark plume of smoke.

"Maybe the townsfolk are burning the priest's camp."

"Now that would be something. Dangerous of course. It might make them act foolishly at Jaffir."

"Maybe that is the intent. Flush them out. Show them their false god is nothing."

"Nothing. Yes. Well until we know..."

"Nada we must be prepared for all contingencies."

"I am aware of that Amos. Thank you for the thought. The camp is always guarded. I have good people. If the priests do go on a rampage, we will be ready. After all we do have a reputation."

"That is true." Amos was satisfied. Nada conversant regarding the different possibilities which might affect them.

Joach came out of the tent, looking sleepy. Then he saw the smoke and was instantly awake. He greeted Nada and Amos, lifting a ladle out of one of the buckets to drink some water.

"Orst in flames?"

"We hope not. Something anyway. I have sent two men to find out. A patrol just came past. We will know soon. Can you ride to Jaffir?"

"Of course my lady."

"Slept enough?"

He smiled meaning 'no'. "This might be too important." He offered.

"We are pleased. Listen to me Joach. We will make it up to you when you have delivered the news. See Castari. Does he need more men? Has he enough to secure the warehouse? Do we shift our goods somewhere else?"

"I understand."

"Find out if possible what Kahleff knows. The captain said the priests have all vanished. Are they up to something or merely hiding?"

"Maybe if I collar one."

"Use whatever means. And arm yourself."

"I will. I'll take some dried meat and bread, a few water bags as well."

Nada agreed. Joach was intending to ride right through.

"Take one of our disposable horses. Swap them at the way stations. You'll need some money for the difference."

She walked back into her tent and from the secure box made up a purse for Joach which she handed to him. He was already in the saddle.

"May the gods be with you and a safe journey."

Joach waved riding out of the camp.

"How to bring Agram down." Nada mused.

"That conflagration may do the trick. Of course he would not be so stupid in actually having a hand in it." Amos suggested.

"Like the murders."

"Let's hope he overplayed his hand."

"I wish some devious mind convinces Jaffir of that."

"I gladly would."

"Tell a lie? Amos, I'm shocked." She joked. "If only I could be with my father."

"We may be safest here."

"I know. But I'm worried."

"I'm sure if he wants you with him he'll let you know."

"I cannot help but worry."

"It was good of you to send Joach. In a few days we'll know what your father intends to do."

"By then we will also know what happened at Orst."

The smoke was spreading fast, thick and menacing.

"We got our three eyes on the ground." Nuhan had the screens on line. Two showed the barren desert landscape. One of the eyes detected trees along a sunken river bed. Farms on both sides using water wheels to irrigate small channels. Simple mud huts, thatched reed rooves. To the north grazing lands which the second eye confirmed being to the right, the east. The third eye showed a crude woollen weave. Someone had thrown a cover over it. Its penetrating laser probe to study its environment was instantly deactivated. Perdus reasoned that there was a reason for it being cloaked literally.

"Talking of cloaked, we are I assume going in without overawing the locals."

Nuhan asked Perdus. The three of them were in the g-drive shuttle on their way to the pink blotchy brown mountain strewn planet. Cloud cover was negligible.

"Yes."

"And the ship's system analysed their language?" Nuhan asked again. A little nervous now that the moment had come. The covered probe uploaded the conversations around it. Jez, the third crew member had an external com link feeding into her head. She was there to 'read' the locals state of mind. Perdus was the only one going down totally enhanced. Los the head tech for the ship was always destined to remain on board whilst Mirn, the empirical end of ascertaining their spatial environment kept the probability field under observation. Alerting them to any spikes or variations

should they occur. She had enough computational power to boost the difference if it should fall too far away from sustainable parameters. Using the ship's fusion reactor to patch up the probability field should the Primaian's try to counteract their presence. So far they had gotten away with it. General DV surveillance concentrating on the total environment was steady. In fact over the last few hours their inserted resonances were diminishing. Probably reassigned to some other target. Hopefully not here.

"Yes Nuhan." Perdus replied not put out by Nuhan's nervous excitement. Since he was not enhanced, it was only to be expected that his emotions would come through.

"This your first trip in space?"

"You know that this is so."

"I'm not told everything. You might have been on missions which are beyond my brief concerning our contact."

"What about the ruins? Do we tell them, whoever?"

"Well you saw the remnant history. From what it picked up they found some ancient artefact. Being sentient attuned our probe read their overall headspace. Once their world was not unlike ours. Then something went horribly wrong, a war of annihilation."

"You think it started again?" they were watching one screen showing the two blazing buildings. The plume could be seen even from space.

"Fires were not uncommon in the old days. Best not to make an appearance there until we retrieved the probe."

"I thought they had enough juice to make it back."

"They do Jez but I think it best if we talk to the people who have hidden it. Now remember they did not try to damage it or take it to some higher authority or even use it. They are keeping it to themselves. There must be a reason. One we have to find out."

"I agree."

"Thank you Nuhan." Perdus studied the uploads. "You getting anything?"

"Matter of fact yes. Overall the picture is of heightened mental activity. As a sub group, sub groups I should say. Given that it's been coming in all at once I tried to focus on some loci. They exist, several in fact." Jez explained, all concentration. "Could be DVs. Courtesy of Prima or they are naturally endowed. I cannot tell. I do know the DVs are less intense yet their signatures remain the same. So my guess..."

"Guess?" Perdus interrupted.

"Figure of speech. The locals got what it takes. In general they are at the beginning of the first transition. The water wheels prove it."

"I concur." Nuhan agreed.

"If their past ever becomes known, given the excitement around the burning buildings would indicate we have come at a historical moment. So how we deal with the inhabitants is over to you Perdus." Jez watching the read outs.

"I know. I've been thinking this myself. Explaining we're from another planet I thought would be enough."

"And warn them about Prima's meddling."

"Trouble is can we prove it?"

"Well the ship thinks so. So do I." Jez added hastily.

"Since it's been confirmed several times we have to decide who to tell."

"You think they might be hostile?"

"You never know."

Nuhan added, "It may be expeditious if we contact their military commander. They usually have clout in these societies."

"Why not their leader?"

"Because Jez, kings are unpredictable by nature and usually get their own way."

"You mean we could be in trouble?"

"Yes."

"But isn't part of your inserted programming also self defence?"

"That I'm not supposed to reveal but the answer is yes."

"Let's hope we don't have to use it."

"Thus us coming in at the periphery."

Jez and Nuhan were satisfied with that. "Let's hope we get a chance to ride our bikes." She smiled.

"Let's wait and see." Perdus studied the approach vector. They were hitting the thin upper atmosphere using the correct insertion angle to glide smoothly into the atmosphere. At this speed even the thin air was a solid substance.

They landed in the middle of the night near the western end of the camp, the black lake between them. The ship's auto system touched down with the barest of shudders. The engines went on stand-by.

"First thing is to call in the two probes." Perdus said to Nuhan. He activated the sequences. Out in the desert the satellites hummed into life using simple dry chemical propulsion systems. Some of the horses were spooked, dogs started to bark. On the screens they saw the tell tale exhaust plume dirty white, dust billowing out obscuring direct visuals. The computers adjusted their reception editing out the minor dust storm the

sats created as they skipped across the ground to the shuttle. The side loading bay doors opened and the two satellites were secured, the doors shut.

"We're cloaked now."

"You mean Perdus someone could have seen us?" Nuhan feeling uncomfortable. Uneasy but didn't know why. He looked searchingly at Jez who had her eyes closed, inwardly focussed on their surroundings. None of them knew the full status of her head. Whether she was a natural, boosted, configured or enhanced. From her general reactions on board with the others, the minute time lags indicated she was unconfigured. But that could easily be programmed as well. Not that it mattered. She was the best psychic the planet had.

Nuhan went to the small cargo bay. First he made sure the sats were securely locked to the floor. They were. Magnetic and physical clamps in place. Downloading their data to the ships computers. He checked the three dark oblong boxes, the bikes. Activating a light pad he punched in the 'assemble' button. In a few hours the bikes would be built by the tiny nano-bots within them who would reconfigure the mass into its design details. With the help of the shuttle's fusion generator the task would be easy.

"Last instructions?" Nuhan asked, apprehensive and excited. Jez came out of her internal focus.

"Not all are asleep. They got guards. Wide awake, alert, some psychic activity. Images of the location of the nearby burnt out buildings. Images of their homes," then she smiled, "Nuhan can you jack me in?"

Nuhan nodded. From the wall he pulled out an optic fibre feed and inserted it at the base of her neck. She was uploading her brain's sensory impressions feeling a warm surge. The computer was activating her endomorphism to relax her. The mind-machine nexus always created some emotional excitement which could muddy the information. This way her mental field state remained more neutral. She felt brilliant, great, fantastic, supremely confident. What a few molecules could do to one's sense of being. Her mind clean as well, cool, calm, mentally on top of it all. The multispectrum imagery flashed in fast visionary splendour, super fast run-time. Then the images of her memory stopped. The endomorphin activity subsided, the warm inner mental afterglow remained.

"Done. All there." Jez unplugged herself. The creamy white link not glowing white anymore. It self retrieved itself back into the console.

"Since I am trained in contact procedure I shall be our spokesperson."

They agreed to Perdus's order.

"You Nuhan will observe of course. We'll explain the sat, which they retrieved."

"The eye of Bahlir. A god of theirs." Jez informed them. She then told them of the other gods.

"Excellent work Jez. We can now be on familiar ground. So for appearance sake we have to pretend to believe, or at least not give offence."

They nodded dutifully at that. "Real explanations depend on them."

More nods. They had gone over this before but it was useful to be reminded. So easy to slip into one's own conceptual thinking.

"Jez you focus not on them but ascertain DV activity. We know their resonance so that should be no problem for you. As I'm enhanced I'll be your back up. I'll focus on our contactees."

"That'll make things easier for me."

"So do we wake them?" Nuhan barely suppressing his excitement, his anticipation of meeting new minds, on a new world two hundred light years from home.

"Base is staying out as of now. They've disconnected themselves. Less clutter for us."

"But they can retrieve us if things go belly up." Jez a little unsure.

"That is the beauty of the probability field. Both virtual and real. They can uncollapse it and we're back at base, ship and all."

"So why the long way round?"

"Training Jez."

"But we can simulate."

"True. The visceral experience is irreplaceable."

"Maybe we should have come enmasse."

"Our capabilities are not that advanced as yet."

"And Jez," Nuhan chimed in, "this way is safer. It's the mass involved. The power needed is phenomenal."

"I believe that."

"So let us rest. I'm going to study the data." Perdus related. "Sunrise is still some time away."

"I'll do the same." Nuhan agreed.

"Then I shall do a sweep. Get a feel for them."

"Good. At sunrise we move out."

"We should have had an extra body to watch over the shuttle."

"It's invisible Jez."

"Yeah right, forgot. What if someone throws a pebble in it's direction. It's gonna bounce isn't it?"

"There our computer engineers created a unique programme. Even though it bounces, there will be an image generated that makes it appear as if the pebble is continuing in it's arc. The original pebble will actual fracture and be absorbed by the ships outer shell. It absorbs matter and the excess energy fed into stand by batteries layered beneath the outer skin."

"Nice."

"So let's get our orientation together. Nuhan you know what to look for. I will read the overall picture and you Jez the feel of the people. Those with heightened mental capabilities. I know I'm repeating myself but we have to stay focused now and even more so once amongst them. Nothing is to go wrong. So no dissention. No contradictions either. We are on an alien planet. Let them be, we are primarily observers. And checking on DV activity. Our real purpose here. We have to know how much free will they have."

"It's OK Perdus. As mission head some things have to be said." Jez making him feel comfortable in his job.

"I'll link you up," Nuhan said, "and then you can plug me in." He rose and extracted another fibre optic link and hooked Jez up. She did the same. Nuhan hit the run programme. Their heads were now 'in place' in the sats. The programmes configured so that they could move with ease amongst the downloaded data, just like WebWorld.

For the next several hours Perdus watched the imagery their satellites acquired. Studied the farms, the inhabitants going about their laborious tasks. He saw riders on horses on the road, itinerant travellers, pictures from their past. Living history. The priests. Perdus hoped Jez could extract something there. He replayed that several times. Then told the computer to feed that to Jez.

Jez picked it up. Ran the DV signatures. There were similarities with Verhat and Kahl but not the same. Natural psychics, very close to Primaian's. The priests aligned. She fed that back to Nuhan. The priests were the one's to watch. She was horrified at the murder of Verhat. The mental signatures between Nada, a volatile natural and Verhat could not be more diametrically opposed. Kahl kept himself very much in control. The accompanying violence stunned her. How far Regum and even Prima had come since those distant days when murder and homicide, whilst not the norm were not uncommon

either. That was millennia ago. This race was just starting out on the long trajectory that was civilisation. Not a murderous race by nature.

Something in the air. DVs of course. Moving their pawns about. The priests held back. Maybe this Verhat would have been a problem for them later on. The DVs looking into the future. Now that she knew how quantum probability fields worked the possibility of homing in on a specific future had to be taken into consideration. Perhaps somewhere down the track Verhat might have become a powerful archimage and a challenge to Prima's intent. Then moving in on Kahl's glowing mind. He'd been drugged. Psychotropics. Mushrooms. The food of the gods. After a while he had a heart attack from his brainstorm.

Calculating all possibilities. This one was the most secure. Not exactly benign though. Maybe she could use her powers to sabotage the DVs meddling. It was part of her brief. Either find powerful psychics to move against them, build up their own resonance to stonewall their presence or use the ships computers to generate a distortion field to blank them out. Released from their hold the locals would come to their senses. It would also neutralise the priests. She was looking forward to this. With Perdus, once outside, backing her up she relished the challenge.

Nuhan moved through the kings city, studied the workshops, the water wheels, the windmills and the crude transport. At Orst he studied the basic blast furnaces happy that the rudiments of science were in place. Technology would follow. Ships still used oars and sails. Their astronomy was rudimentary, the stars both gods and destinations of the departed.

Jez latched onto the shamans. She was delighted. They could move through different realities with practiced ease. Here the DVs were having no effect on them. That was something important. Prima's grip tenuous. If she could make them aware of the outside influence the DVs were having...then Grena appeared. Who sensed in the confines of her temple a group mind. It had to be the DVs. Onto them. Things were looking up.

The book appeared in her head. A high tech city under attack. Powerful lasers searing through the air, massive plasma pulse-bombs obliterating the buildings, targeting scrambled jets that exploded in dull orange fireballs in the sky. A massive attack from space. Utter destruction. Since the book itself was value neutral Jez could not fathom the intent or purpose behind this monstrous attack. A very technologically advanced and very homicidal race wreaking their revenge. The way the pages folded it was some sort of polymer. This had to have happened in the past. Nada certainly had no knowledge of

their history. The parks that were also incinerated indicated a healthier ecosystem. Forests surrounded the city now in flames. The tragedy occurred millennia ago. She read with Nada the awful truth. The locals considered a threat. Or had they started it? Jez ahead of herself. No this was unprovoked. Then it made sense. This planet was a colony. So that was it. They had deviated, evolved, maybe genetic drift was at work fashioning the next step in these beings evolution. Considered a threat so much so that the attackers did their best to sear them back into the stone age. Simply because they would not accept, or rather seemed indifferent to their home world's belief system. A religious or an ideological war. The ultimate tragedy. A war over interpretation.

Then she stumbled mentally. Her mind still linked to Nada. From that locus Jez expanded momentarily into thousands of minds with one vision: desolation. Absolute absence of life. Total nothing. The planet one vast desert. Linked to Nada's vision Jez was as puzzled as Nada. The sats showed nothing. Mass psychosis. What did it mean? The past prior life evolving here or the future of a doomed race? She held the image and searched. With no life present there was not much that could be done. The colours paler. The sun was weaker. Global ecocollapse. If it was the future. She fed the image to Nuhan. Then her and Nada's quandary. Past or future?

Linked Nuhan was more dispassionate concerning the vision. An intriguing phenomenon. How to ascertain the moment in time. Had some probability field impinged somehow collapsing into the current reality ? It vanished. This scenario out of sequence. He passed it on to Perdus.

Perdus was concerned the effect the priests had on the population. They were changing the equilibrium. Moving the mind set. The people not so much resisted rather they were indifferent. At least that meant there would be no negative effects on their society at large. The priests presence trying to disturb their inherent serenity. Manipulators. Their little group would have to be careful. As to what the vision meant he left that to Jez and Nuhan. Perdus was focussed on the present.

Sunrise. The sky glowed crimson, then pink, wisps of white clouds high up in the sky. The lake shimmered in the morning light. Dew on the ground slowly dissipating. Time to make contact.

Jez felt Nuhan's excitement.

"Any last thoughts?" Perdus asked.

"Stage one civilisation. Water and wind power. Crude but fully functional blast furnaces. Just add a steam engine..." Nuhan quipped.

"That close?"

"Yes."

"What about the war?" Jez was uncomfortable with that.

"From what I can gather, the ship did pick up remains of some exotic elements on the other side of the planet. If that is the destroyed city it happened more than just centuries ago. Maybe ten thousand years."

"Certain?" Jez queried.

"Give or take."

"So it doesn't impinge on the present?" Perdus looking concerned.

"From what I can gather, Nada, the woman we are about to meet found it in a cairn to the west."

"Has she still got it?"

"I don't know."

"Anything else Jez?"

"You got all my uploads?"

"We did." Nuhan replied.

"Well, we're about to walk into the annals of history." Perdus smiled benevolently.

"Let's hope it's a good ending." Jez joked.

Nuhan looked spooked.

"Don't worry. You as our primary scientist ought to know that we can be extracted just like that if things turn ugly."

"I know the theory."

"Then you should feel reassured. After all we're here aren't we?" Jez encouraged him to think positive.

"I think Jez," Perdus said, "Nuhan is running through more probabilities than we are. And there is that one in a million chance that things can, I won't say go wrong because we are dealing with probability insertion fields, field I mean. Probabilities impinging on possibilities. Quantum that is."

"Like a power failure?" Jez understood the remote precariousness they found themselves in.

"That's just one of them." Nuhan seemed worried.

"What are the others then. Get it off your chest." Jez in control.

"A more potent PWF."

"As in real time?"

"The DVs."

"No chance Nuhan. Mere candle power. Oh they could screw your mind if they got through, but that's what I'm here for, remember?" she coaxed.

"You're right of course." He pulled himself together. "Let's go then. After you Perdus. You being the leader."

Jez felt a momentary void in her mind. A tiny nothingness. Lots of them. Then the vacancies receded into her unconscious. The absence instantaneous as they were walking towards the camp three abreast. She put it down to a localized event. Her awareness more acute on the lookout for any probing from the locals at the camp or anyone on this planet. Unlike Perdus she was not directly link-boosted by an enhanced state.

Perdus felt a momentary fracture inside his head. Several. Singular, unrelated to each other but from the same data rich realm somewhere. But where? His brain's E capabilities searched and found...nothing. Then it was gone, not receding, just disappeared. Nothing could disappear. Involuntarily he shook his head as if adjusting reception. His cognitive intuition tried to focus but it was like grasping at something ephemeral. Local interference. His AI core tagged the event. Nothing in his contained inserted data realm came up with anything. At best environmental, a condition either of or in space. Near yet far. He let it go. They had to concentrate on their immediate task to meet the locals.

The guards saw them coming. One went into Nada's tent to announce the arrival of these strangers. Black like the priests, skull caps. No visible knives. Not armed. Two men and one woman. Not threatening, curious.

To them a tall woman appeared outside her tent. Black hair, brown skin, amulets glinting in the morning sun. The aroma of fresh bread and a stew, the smell of the animals in the corral, the whiff of dung drying in the air. Flies.

"Welcome strangers." Nada spoke firmly. No fear, no surprise either.

Nada watched these strange clad persons. All in black yet not looking like priests. Tight fitting clothes. No dirt or dust on them. They must have walked from wherever they had come from.

Nuhan was relieved that his internal AI understood her speech. So would Perdus. Jez had a language programme as well. Now to find out if it worked.

"Greetings to you." Perdus replied. The tiny time lag in translation was a mere instant. At least they could communicate.

"Some tea?"

This was great Jez smiled. At least they won't be poisoned by some local concoction. She felt at home. Some ancient instinctual residue kicking in from her distant evolutionary memory. She knew now why she was chosen for this mission. The basic connection that, hopefully, any society shared.

"You are most kind." Perdus answered. "We bring news."

"That is always welcome. Please enter my humble tent." Nada holding open the flap. Wisps of smoke coming out of its pointed top. Perdus and Nuhan's embedded information uploaded the knowledge they had of this ancient past. The similarities uncanny and a relief. They could relate with these inhabitants. And the language system worked. Data added as they took in all they saw. Nada was looking into the distance. Jez turned and saw a thin pale column of smoke drift skywards. The buildings ashes and tinder now.

They entered the dark tent. Several oil lamps shone meagre though sufficient light about. Richly embroidered cushions strewn across the floor. A wooden chest to one side, sheep skins near the central hearth, a round collection of stones with a fire flickering amongst burning chunks of wood mixed with dry dung. The aroma potent which they soon got used to.

One a young man, long black hair, belt and sheathed knives, and a servant busy making the tea. Five clay cups. The remnants of last night's meal, a leather wine flask deflated next to it.

"I am Nada, daughter of Castari, this is Amos, son of Trum."

"I am Perdus, Nuhan our brains and Jez, a seer, a sort of guide."

"We are honoured to be your host."

The water was starting to simmer as the servant prepared the tea.

"You have eaten?"

"We are fine thank you."

"As you wish. So Perdus, Nuhan and Jez, the seer. Anything to enlighten us with. There is much that is happening and we are curious."

"So are we Nada, Amos."

"You have travelled far?"

"Very." Perdus answered honestly. "Our reason being here is a little complex. It is both of a secret nature and not. We come from another land and are unfamiliar here. We chose to come here first. Something is going on at Orst and want to make sure it is safe to be there."

"We too await developments. You dress like priests."

Their brains recalled the imagery they gathered whilst observing the planet.

"I assure you we are not their kind. Rather the opposite. Well not exactly opposite. Put it this way, we don't trust them."

"Yet you dress like them. Maybe there is a reason for this." Nada hoping they could be agents sent by Kahleff.

Perdus wanted to explain that black absorbs light and energy feeding their inbuilt microprocessors, augmenting the necessary power to run them. But the words would be meaningless. They had to keep it simple.

"Warmth."

"Indeed that is so."

The tea was ready. Nada dismissed the servant who left them.

"Now we can talk. I trust my people but gossip is gossip. And in these changing times even misconstrued information can lead to unfortunate events."

"We too are aware of the changes Nada. That is the sole reason we are here."

Amos poured the tea for them. Jez first, then Perdus and Nuhan. Nada poured herself then Amos. Bitter and sweet. It felt good, for though the hearth warmed them in front there was still a chill in the air which they felt at their backs.

"Yes, changes. Not necessarily in our best interest." Nada broached.

"The priests." Perdus guessed. Given the link to the DVs it seemed obvious.

"Correct. A puzzle, like yourselves." She watched them acutely.

"How are the priests a puzzle?"

"Like yourselves, appearing out of nowhere. A brotherhood. No women. That is strange as it is the women who are more inclined, like you Jez, to have the gift."

"If that is the case then the use of men has social implications."

"They claim a communion with all. A revelation to be uniting us all."

"But you are united."

"We fear the priests have a hidden agenda."

Perdus paused, linking with Nuhan.

"No time like the present."

"We really came to speak to one with authority Nada. Ideally the king should be our destined embassy. However before approaching your exalted ruler it would be wise for us to know more so as to acquaint him with our information."

"You are certainly no spies then." She said relieved. "Or if you are, and what embassy is not, may I ask whom you represent? You clothes are unlike anything we have

seen." Thinking whether these three were representatives from the other side of the planet. Or perhaps star farers returning after all this time. Carrying no weapons. So they could not be the avengers who had destroyed their ancient world. Unless they were and having studied them only pretended to have peaceful intentions. Nothing could be ruled out.

"We represent a people who have your best intentions at heart."

"That is good to hear Perdus."

"We mean it. Nuhan our brains has knowledge that could be beneficial for your future. Jez, our seer as you know is our eyes and ears. Some priests may have certain capabilities. We need to be prepared regarding them. Needless to say I am authorised to represent our kind."

"You are from the stars." Nada tried a long shot. They were courteous and civilised, not like the scum who attended the priests with Verhat.

Silence. They weren't uncomfortable with Nada's guess.

"What makes you think that?" Perdus smiled.

"Your clothes. Your coming as if out of nowhere. Though we neither saw nor heard your flying house. Your self assurance. A sign of superior demeanour. I too have knowledge." Maybe she should not have said that but she felt comfortable with these three visitors.

"You think it will attract undue attention?"

"Only to the observant."

"Ah."

"Are you?"

"In a way everyone is from the stars Nada."

"You are from the gods?"

"Your gods we are aware of. We are acquainted with that knowledge."

Nada looked seriously at him.

The moment of truth. Even with his E capabilities able to dampen heightened emotional states that could interfere clear thinking he still was excited.

"What we are about to reveal is in the strictest of confidence. When we have explained all we wish to be taken to your military commander, Norhat. We know, suspect rather what the real intentions of the priests are. In return neither will we mention that we spoke with you or what you wish to reveal to us."

"That is accommodating. Any news regarding the priest is precious. As you may be aware a large conflagration occurred at Orst. We are waiting for news which as yet has not arrived. Anything you know is appreciated."

Perdus gathered his thoughts. Rather than explain reality, themselves, the politics of Prima and Regum top down he reasoned it was better to begin with what Nada and her people knew and work back to the source, the DVs.

He informed her of the priests mission to convert all the people, or as many as possible. And that they were not their own masters. Nada mentioned Astram. If not Astram Perdus replied someone else. It mattered not. They were all in thrall. He hinted at the group mind Grena, one of the priestesses Nada interjected, discovered. They were behind the priests power.

"Power?" Nada asked discomfited.

"The group mind focuses on them all. Doing their will."

"Who are these beings?"

"Like Jez. They are seers. With intent. To get your people to believe their belief system. Negate your gods Nada."

"That they make no secret of Perdus. At least we know who is behind this. The trick is how to stop them. To leave us alone. They preach of a coming kingdom. I can now assume it is the design of this group mind."

"Correct Nada."

"Can we stop them?"

"Of course." Even though that was not a certainty.

"How?"

"Don't believe them. Ignore them. It is that simple. Believe in your own selves. Figure out the universe according to you own wishes. Learn from the laws of nature and the universe. Be your own destiny."

"Noble thoughts Perdus. Yet if this group mind is behind this then maybe if we know where they are we can confront them, seers or not. We have many shamans amongst us. We are not without our own resources. Storm them. But somehow I have a feeling it is not as simple as that. If it were you would not be here for your people could have stopped them. Why haven't you?"

Perdus explained that they came from a planet called Regum colonised by their distant kind who over time started to see the universe differently. Perdus explained that he, they, were not here to dictate the right or wrong way of interpreting reality. Just that Prima had a different view one they wished to convince as being the *only* belief system.

Any deviation was seen as a heretical deviation. He explained the struggle between their two worlds. Regum had no trouble with other belief systems, Prima did. Using the Deep Visionaries in influencing not just their world but this world as well.

"And how are your people coping?"

"We ignore them. True there are some who are taken by their vision of a unitary god. But they are few. Anyway it is just a mental projection of the unitary nature of the universe. The big difference is that to the Primaian's and by extension the priests they want their vision to be accepted."

"What if they are denied?"

"Both our worlds eschew weapons and war. We have not engaged in this psychotic homicidal madness for millennia. So they use DVs. The battle ground is the mind. We do our best to enlighten."

"Are you succeeding?"

"No."

"So your people sent you here to warn us."

"That is the aim."

"Then you are right in being here. We shall take you to Norhat for somehow I believe you. What about you Amos?"

"Life amongst the stars. It gives one hope. We are not alone. And if these visitors speak the truth, or their version, it makes sense in what is happening here. But what I fear is that if we resist we may be destroyed like our ancestors."

"What price life?" Nada replied. "Death or freedom. A hard choice. I know when we pass on we are back in eternity with the gods who gave us life. I want us to continue, to forge our own destiny and not that of what others wish us to be. No matter how benevolent it seems. To say that we must accept a unitary god and forget about our gods is wrong. But let us say we accept Prima's vision, what then?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"What I meant was you remain in your state."

"Our state?"

"Your ancestors achieved great things. Learnt a lot, used that knowledge to build a magnificent civilisation. We do not know what happened or why. But whoever wreaked their vengeance upon your world never returned either. We can only hope that they either learnt from their heinous mistake and mended their ways or they are no more. We certainly have no knowledge of any other world as yet." Perdu added as an

afterthought. It was troubling to have a people who had such awesome technology so close.

"You haven't answered my question Perdus. Our state."

"My apologies. You remain as you are."

"That cannot be so bad. We have a good life. The earth gives us nourishment, the skies water, we have plenty. Even if only one god instead of many."

"We are not here to tell you what you wish to believe Nada. But Prima itself is not so dissimilar to your planet. Yet they have accepted our machine worlds, our technology. The rest toil in the fields just like here. Prima would make sure you remain at this level of your development."

"How far can one develop?"

"Ah." Perdus beamed looking at Nuhan.

"You build your cities. Once you may have been nomads. But you progressed. Irrigation channels, wind and water mills. These are all developments. As you study nature, knowledge is revealed. As you watch the stars understanding broadens. The limits of your natural horizon expand. And with that expansion your mind as well. The more you see the more you learn, the more you know. You will be able to cure sicknesses that afflict you now. Maybe less children will die at birth, many things are possible for any thinking living being. Prima would restrict all that. Or if they passed it on it would be at their choosing not yours."

"To cure sickness. That would be a blessing. We have knowledge of herbs that heal."

"You see that is development Nada." Nuhan encouraging her.

"Some priests say, illness comes as punishment for denying the divine." Amos said.

"Illness is like an infection. Nothing divine about it. You have sickness, do you not try and heal? Or do you see that is divine punishment?" Nuhan asked.

"I see what you mean." Amos was relieved.

"We thank you for your frankness. At least we know now the priests are under the group minds influence. Their thoughts not their own, not our own. That is enough for me. I think it is pertinent we see Norhat. Time to saddle some horses. Get some provisions."

"We may be able to assist you there." Perdus said proudly.

"Off all people to send." Norhat both incredulous and surprised to see the king's astronomer Arbour stand in front of him. The king's investigator pertaining to the trouble stirring at Orst.

Norhat offering tea for his esteemed guest related how just yesterday it had been reported by a very tense angry young man, Hutyen, who breathless, looking over his shoulder reported to the sentries the theft of two books by Astram. Astram and Inamus. It was recorded in the daily report.

Arbour, riding post haste along the kings highway in four days flat. Last night he deviated to approach Orst along the river further east to find out what the farmers knew. The priests were making the usual nuisance of themselves, accosting all and sundry regarding their divine message of some promised spiritual redemption. The rising plume of smoke made him hesitant. If Orst was in uproar he deemed it safer to wait for the commotion to run its course. In the meantime, whilst checking out Hutyen's allegations Norhat sent two guards who could read and write to investigate. They came back with the news that the school was being burnt to the ground.

"Yes I too saw the smoke churning. Lot's of people milling about, more out of curiosity. It seems the teachers decided on this desperate act of defiance." Arbour said drinking his tea. He was slightly saddle sore from the ride. Staying the night at the last farmstead helped soothe his aching body from the fast ride.

"The king detained one of the ring leaders."

"Does that mean I detain Astram and Inamus?"

"I was only told to gather whatever intelligence you have regarding the priests intentions, which includes the instigators of this new religion of theirs. You know we have no laws or decrees as to what anybody wishes to believe."

"Maybe that ought to be changed."

"It wouldn't work. Pry into every soul?"

"Yes the difficulties would be...more work."

"So the people aren't exactly endeared to the priests?"

"Tolerated. Now with the school in ashes, a point has been made. Nothing legally to stop them engaging in this act of defiance. I hear they took their most precious books and scrolls away from there. Many have headed for the coast with their cargo. The students, most anyway have returned to their homes. Nothing for them here now."

"So by accident, by mere whim the priests have won."

"You mean the school."

"I do Norhat. Otherwise the town is as always?"

"Subtracting the priests, yes. They have made Orst their home. How goes it in the capital?"

"Vanished. Hiding. Or waiting. Thus my reason for being here. So the priests remain in the open?"

"Yes. A bit of a pain."

"There are still the unresolved murders."

"I know. The culprits have long gone. Could have been the nomads."

"Why would they? It would only reflect badly on them."

"They were probably put up to this foul deed."

"You think Agram's orders?"

"Perhaps."

"Maybe you should call him in, for a little chat?"

"Arbour. I have him watched. Alerting that fiend to the fact that I, as an officer of the king would deem to question him would only make him even more cautious. Unless you bring specific orders."

"None whatsoever. Just a fact finding visit Norhat."

"Well as I said, murder aside, the theft of two books. Then again they might have been, even if reluctantly handed over. Since the librarian is gone, the acolytes, unless we track them down, more resources needed for that, we won't know even if it was theft. More likely under duress. But they could have alerted us. The furnaces are under constant guard. No one approached them. Until I hear otherwise, this alleged theft is a mere incident."

"Well at least it shows how sure Agram is. Being obeyed."

For a moment both Norhat and Arbour saw a flicker. Everything was vibrating. An earthquake yet no shock, the shaking sensation purely visual. Even their brains felt momentarily affected. A transitory nothingness, an utter absence of all sensation. Then it was over.

"Did you feel that?" Norhat asked puzzled.

"I did."

Murmurs outside. Tension in the air. Stillness pervading everything. Norhat remembered the strange vision when the land looked devoid of all life.

"You think this is the priests doing?" Norhat trying to contain his apprehension. He had to remain on top of things. Any sign of weakness would be exploited by the priests. Norhat was sure of it.

Arbour thought deep and hard. This was the second time something strange occurred. There was nothing in the books, in their records of these odd phenomena. He didn't like it. Were the priests truly avatars of this unitary god? So why then the sense of

desolation? It did not add up. Gods revealed, they did not destroy. They did not send visions of potential calamity. Unless the gods did send this vision to warn them that the priests were jeopardising everything, even life itself. He the foremost astronomer, watching Urus's realm, along with her co-ruler of the stars, Bahlir. Like that first vision, the empyrium was still there. Just no one in the land. Of course it could also have been a hint of what the other side of their planet looked like. Pointing the way there? To the desolation of long gone ruins? He was perplexed. Tonight, when he was done with his work here he would concentrate on the changes manifesting themselves in such concrete visions. Talk to the priestesses at the temple of Nurdass, the sun goddess. Even though the voidness all too real, there was still light. The sun still there.

Norhat was thinking along similar lines. Someone was dabbling with powerful forces.

Grena was in her cell when this strangeness manifested. It's short duration an eternity. Deep, receding into infinity, as broad and vast as the blackness of the night sky. A darkness trying to replace the stars themselves. But there was something else which made her ponder. The group mind which she imagined to be a hive. Working behind the scenes in unison. Then it struck her. The coming deity. It would, if they had their way, usurp everything everybody believed in. Was this then a sign of the coming? their promise? Then why this sense of extreme loss? Of an absence rather than a presence? Was this being rather unconvincingly she thought in her small room, real then? She would meditate on Bahlur and Urus even if she was a servant of Nurdass. Grena needed answers.

She listened. All was quiet. It may have affected them all. The murmur of the market place subdued. It had only been a fraction of time. It's portent was immense, vast, powered by a relentless force. She would consult the annals of their temple. She was well acquainted with their collective wisdom. Fearing the worst. This was something new, something else entirely. If this was indeed a momentary vision of the coming god then it was a god of destruction not creation. What could the priests gain by that? Was Astram in league, or Inamus?

As evening was approaching Grena decided to go on a fast. She was going to concentrate on what just passed. But only the memory of a memory remained. Like waking from a dream which so uncannily vanished from the mind's eye so too this, whatever it was, was gone. At least she remembered. Try as she might she could not recall what it was. Something. Now nothing.

Stroem came back from routine duties in town. Seeing Norhat was with Arbour he apologized for the intrusion. Stroem reported his impression of the people, already having forgotten that weird sense of oddness in his head. As if he were in another place and here as well. For a moment he feared the gods had withdrawn their presence, the absence palpable, then everything was back to normal. The gods would reveal everything in good time.

Having acquainted Norhat and Arbour regarding the daily events Norhat dismissed him. As he was walking out, excited voices. Another visitor. On the way out he saw Nada with three very strangely dressed men and a woman. At first glance they looked like priests, just as black with tight fitting skull caps. A tiny glowing stone on their arms, a penetrating green. Probably Astram's kind.

There was a presence about them. An assurance of self control unlike the priests who were both withdrawn and had a barely suppressed eagerness ready to pour their words in a torrent of fervour over anyone willing to listen to their message of redemption. These three, accompanied by two guards were unlike them. Well Stroem was glad Norhat had to deal with them. He just wanted to go to the tavern with other off duty soldiers and partake of many ales then retire and sleep. Tomorrow was another day. Norhat had given him no orders so he was free until then. With a sprightly step he walked off into town.

The visitors told Norhat what they wished him to know. Norhat understood that any embassy was always two sided. What was meant to be known and the real reason if that. Arbour sat there completely intrigued. Star farers. Were they behind the odd feeling he had felt? Thinking back on it he could not even remember what that had been. A message from the gods. These three people, coming from another world...gave him hope. That they came with good intentions, both he and Norhat accepted for the moment.

The devices they travelled on, the size of a small pony, sleek, two wheeled were amazing. They had not arrived by going through Orst but had approached the fort from the western desert only seen by the small dusty plumes they left behind in their wake. Moving fast.

After Nada explained the terrible history of the fallen cities. Arbour and Norhat though sceptical accepted the facts presented before them. If they indeed were from some distant planet, not star, for as Arbour explained, planet's had colours as opposed

to stars. And these beings did not pretend to be gods either. They claimed to come in peace.

The priests had been finally unveiled.

Norhat was thinking. The priests unmasked. Perhaps it was time to do the same to Astram. Inamus was of no consequence. Important yes but he followed Astram as long as it was convenient for him to do so. Maybe if they were brought in, find out what Astram knew. And send for the high priestess from Nurdas's temple.

Things were happening fast. Weird sensations and visions, the teachers murdered, the school razed. Burning their bridges whilst saving their accumulated wisdom, dispersed who knew where. At least out of reach of the priests. Visitors from amongst the stars. Now that was a sign the gods were still with them. And Perdus, Jez and Nuhan amenable to their beliefs. Not hostile.

He suggested bringing Astram in. With the purloined books?

"No. First see what Astram makes of their contents. Then we can compare the original to his interpretation." Arbour suggested.

"Makes sense. Let him reveal his intent."

Two guards were sent to fetch him.

Astram was pouring over the huge dusty tome in his room at the 'Courttyard Tavern'. The two rooms he occupied, the other for Inamus as he wanted him close were bright, well appointed, even with carpets, mattresses not straw beds, pitchers of water, a closet, writing desk, cushioned wicker chairs for visitors and plenty of candles. The burrowed book, a compendium of the greatest thinkers of the land including, what interested him most, the ancestors.

Until a clearer picture emerged he would study this most remarkable of books. Really a history of all the philosophers. What pertained to the ancestors was mostly cribbed from long lost source materials. He gleaned enough to fathom their mindset. Outright materialists, in denial of the present gods the people deluded themselves with. Apostates at best. Their calamity, their downfall sudden. No mention of an impending conflict. A surprise attack. Over in literally a sudden flash. Maybe other books or scrolls were as detailed but now that the library was dispersed, he might not find it on the long run. The other book was speculative, the heavens, treatises on astronomy. That would hopefully reveal how they saw the cosmos and by default reveal their souls.

Engrossed, marking passages here, paragraphs there for future reference. To recompile their knowledge. Searching for ideas which would lead the people towards

their ancient prescience indicating the presence of the unitary god. He liked the sound of it. Embracing, inclusive, non threatening. The gods its messengers. Astram did give the astronomy book a cursory glance. Mathematical models of the trajectory of the stars, planets, smaller satellites. But first to fathom their ideas.

Concentrating on the thick sentences, loaded with meaning, revealing a convolution of ideas leading to a veritable maze of speculative conclusions, each more contradictory than previous one. Which elements were more important? Which stratum was the basis for the rest. Earth? Water? Fire? Air? Or some magical effluvium, a combination, a unifying force termed the Aether? He marked that passage. The first inkling of what Astram sought. Confusion below, unity above. The celestial realm a perfect harmony. He was making progress.

Then the strangeness infused itself into his mind. The room invaded by some odd combination of the elements. Looking out the open shutters, overlooking the town it was for one moment quivering on the brink of dissolution. A quaking of elements. A sign!

For one pertinent moment nothing. Just the desert. Like that first vision. Now a second one. The unitary god making its presence felt. What was to be if they continued in their blinkered vision, doomed to decay. Or the gods withdrawing their essence, retreating back to their realm. Negate the unitary being and life itself was negated.

Dipping quill into ink he quickly noted his reaction. Busy, writing furiously barely paying attention to the hush which had fallen over the town. Barely noticing the almost night-like silence as he concentrated on the importance of the revelation. The portents were on his side. Deny and die, or accept and be granted cosmic eternity. The conclusion obvious. That of course would be revealed in the new testament at a later stage. First impress upon the reader the natural confusion when being misaligned in the great scheme of things. Then through subtle hints, leading to revelatory insights the ultimate truth. He hoped there would be more signs such as the one which had passed. Looking up again everything was back to normal.

A knock from Inamus's connecting door. Astram put the quill in its ink stand. He knew what Inamus was going to say. The momentary vision might have been universal, not just due to his astute mind. This interruption thus timely to confirm what he just experienced.

He bade Inamus to enter. Looking surprised, astounded even, Inamus revealed to Astram exactly what he too experienced. Good news. The ultimate god was making its presence felt. Warning unbelievers of their fate if they continued in their misconstrued ways. Inamus of course agreed. How could he think otherwise. Satisfied Astram told

Inamus to continue working through the other book. Their priority. The school? So what. That too was a portent. The projected seminary premature. Other opportunities would arise. Walking in the path of the new god would assure them success. Inamus was satisfied. The soldiers he said had not interfered at all at the burning of the school. That too was divinely ordained. Inamus left Astram to continue the great work.

Norhat's guards visited Astram seeking him for an interview. With some reluctance, working on his testament he put the quill down, inserted a marker in the book and shut it.

Was he a prisoner or was Norhat merely curious? Maybe he wanted an insight into the second divine sign. Astram hoped there were more to come. As he was escorted out of the tavern, momentary looks from the drinkers, subdued mumbles and whispers for the gossips of the town resented Astram. He felt their sullenness. All an act. As if he or his priests were responsible for the burning of the school. The very thought! Let them think what they wanted, the future was in his hands, in his mind, his soul, his divine being. Astram felt chosen as did the priests. More so than the almost dimensionalessness of their gods and the priestesses, mere appendages sorting out life's little problems. Compared to the divine message which he felt deep within, their sporadic resistance would be blown away like chaff in the wind.

They entered the fort, past the outer palisade, the deep ditch, the earthworks and ramparts, the observation towers, the place a hive of activity. A group of soldiers and three weird elongated wheeled shapes. His heart stopped, his brain froze in momentary panic. He tried to refuse to believe what he saw: three infernal alien objects! The tome alluding to magical artifices, but that had been so long ago. Was the vision then a rending of the heavens? Had this misbegotten apostate race returned? Were they challenging the coming revelation? If so they were indeed doomed. The intimidations crystal clear. He would have to enlighten Norhat, Kahleff and Jaffir of just how precarious things were right now. The ingress threatening to usurp reality itself. If they accepted these beings then divine retribution was at hand. He must have stopped and gawked at the three machines. The two accompanying guards were in no hurry to move him along. At least he was not under arrest. They wanted him to see this.

Recovering from the shock, his mind racing, Astram collected his thoughts. It all was becoming a slowly discernable pattern. History was being made. And he was at the centre, the fulcrum which would tip the scales, in his and his god's favour. It was just a matter of explaining divine revelation. The choice then was not his but theirs. Calamity or

redemption. How sweet, how straight forward, how simple. Accept or take the consequences. Enjoin in an eternal future or enshrine that future into a catafalque of mortal decay. He felt emboldened, ready for anything.

Astram fell into step with the guards moving through the inner courtyard. Blacksmiths were busy, soldiers grooming horses, cooks sweating, carpenters hammering away, others practicing their sword skills, scouts leaving, officers instructing the men and women who served here, just like the school, in open classes imbuing them in the theory of the martial arts. Other instructors drawing lines in the sand eagerly watched by their charges. Here they were focussed.

Instead of being taken to Norhat's downstairs command centre the guards led him into the centred tower. Reaching the top observation post the guards saluted and left. Norhat was with Arbour. What was he doing here? Three strangers with Nada. They too were in black, two men one woman. Were they messengers of his priests? He felt assured for a moment. Their apparel. Unlike any other. Seamless, cut from a single piece of cloth. Matte black.

Norhat made the introductions, even thanking him for taking the time to make his presence available. So far so good. If he could convince Norhat about what he knew, what he felt deep within his soul then the future was bright indeed.

The view was remarkable from up here. The highest of towers the whole of Orst was clearly visible. To the east the smouldering remains of the school still sent thin grey wisps of smoke into the clear sky. Soldiers were patrolling the upper walled bulwarks. The town square with his tents the priests milling with the crowd. The bright white temple of Nurdass, the braziers with their incense sending tiny clouds of their fragrance into the air. The odd priestess at the bottom of the steps conversing with a few of the gathered crowd. Seeking answers they could not give.

"You say Astram that you serve this unitary god." Norhat not asking.

"It is his will." Astrah speaking humbly. Not foolish enough to proclaim in his pride the divine truth.

"Does this god tolerate murder then." Another exclamation.

"The divine will encompasses all. I know what you are alluding to Norhat," focussing solely upon him, "for those who have done this outrage were moved by spirits with dark designs."

"Yet those spirits, as you claim, chose only those of the school."

Astram would not admit to anything.

"A sign of divine disfavour."

"So your god condones the most despicable of human folly."

"The jealousy of men is dangerous Norhat. It is not the way, nor is it my way or my intention to condone this tragedy."

"And now we have lost the school. You see Astram I have to report to the king. Should I tell him what the whole town thinks?"

Astram knew that the whole town did not think anything. Most of the students came from the king's city, the great estates and maybe the odd local. As they brought money with them they were accepted. If only for that alone.

"You know more than me Norhat."

Norhat let out a sigh. "Astram. Whilst you know yourself there is no direct evidence linking you to this outrage the whole town knows of you and your priests attitude regarding the school. In a way you drove them to this desperate act. Now we have lost not just the school but its library as well. And with that the students and the money they brought in. Jaffir by the way is considering moving you and your kind out. Into the desert. What say you to that?"

"Fine by me. We are in the hands of the divine."

Norhat realised Astram was as slippery as an eel. Even accepting banishment by royal decree did not bother him.

"There are those who would wish to see your priests removed permanently. Since the suspicion for the murders points in your direction there are those who would quite happily visit their revenge upon your kind. By law I cannot allow this. But at the same time we cannot watch every individual soul. This is not a prison, it is a free town Astram. If I were to remove my guards the lives of your priests..." Norhat let the assumption hang in the air.

Astram could not disguise his shock. Was the resentment real? Or feigned?

"Unless you answer truthfully I will withdraw my guards. You see," Norhat bluffed, "I have orders from the king to fortify the capital. Your priests are up to no good. So you can tell me now or your priests will be unprotected. The shamans of the tribes have no love of your religion. Nor does Jaffir."

Kahleff Astram thought. His days would be over unless he decided to enjoin Astram's ranks.

"I see."

"So you are willing to remove your spawn?"

"Spawn?" Astram was perplexed. The term loaded with malignancy.

"You don't really believe they are their own spiritual masters?" though Norhat knew what Astram's answer would be. A patrol was moving out north. It was then Astram saw groups of people making their way from the outer lands into the town. He understood what Norhat was doing. He must have stirred up the clans and tribes. Loading the dice. If these ferocious tribesmen were allowed in en mass then there could be dire consequences for his priests.

As Astram said nothing, letting him see the precariousness which faced him Norhat continued: "I know you will say they are serving this invisible, unprovable divinity. But there are those who think otherwise."

"Of course they would Norhat." Whilst watching the travellers from the north come into town in small groups.

"So they are lying?"

"Those who harbour such dark thoughts are misguided."

"How convenient Astram. You probably have an answer for everything. But we have intelligence that gives a different picture."

Astram waited. What deviousness was at play here? There was something deeper to this. The strangers proved that.

"The ancient war. They too deviated from the path and were destroyed by a mighty force. I have no wish for that to be visited upon us a second time. The portents prove it. Unless we redeem our souls then we are truly doomed."

"Yes Astram you are correct in your assumption."

Astram waited for the rest.

"The doom is of a deeper nature. You want to usurp the gods."

"They are his messengers. They have done much good. Now a new age is upon us."

"Is that it? Have you any idea what your...kind are involved with?"

"The coming revelation."

"Yes. You are being used Astram."

"I am in the hands of the divine."

"You are in no such thing."

"You..." But Astram dropped the thought. It was clear to him Norhat had made up his mind. The strangers.

"Grena."

From out of the shadows Grena appeared. What was she doing here?

"Norhat. Greetings strangers. I have heard of your presence. We welcome you."

So they were all in league. What did she know?

"Tell him."

"Astram," she turned to him. Her face serious yet calm. "I too have had visions, or to be precise one recurring vision. You are being manipulated. Do you not feel this deep within your soul?"

"The unitary divine essence is all and everything. The seer blessed with divine intervention will perceive this according to their own nature Grena."

"Yes, to be sure. But I'm afraid it is worse than that."

"Worse? Are the gods rebelling then?" which should be interesting.

"No Astram. You are, as are your priests, being controlled by a group mind."

"A group mind?" he felt at a loss. What lies were these?

"Yes. In a distant galaxy."

"Galaxy?" he felt stupid.

"Astram, the stars we see are grouped, millions of them in what is a galaxy." Arbour explained.

"So where is it?" Astram felt his confidence returning. The sun was turning orange as it started to set in the west. The sky glowing, the desert almost shining. It looked beautiful. He felt the divine glowing within him.

"As we are in it, we cannot rightly see it."

"Oh, I am disappointed."

"You will be when you hear the truth." Arbour answered.

"The group mind is guiding your priests. It is they who believe in this god of yours. Which is their intent. They have discovered us by psychic means. Now they are using the priests to further their will. Not yours, not ours, not anybody's but theirs. Think of it like the shaman spirit world. With dark intent." Grena explained patiently.

"This is not the truth. Even if this group mind exists. Maybe they are his messengers." Astram found his equilibrium. "Divine messengers."

"Manipulators." One of the strangers, the oldest said.

"And you would be the apostates." Astram countered not caring for the insult.

"Apostates are one's who turn away from their belief. We think otherwise. No we are not apostates. What we think is irrelevant here. It is what is being done to your minds that counts. You can be free or you can be possessed. That is what is at stake here for your people, your future." Their leader said.

He looked at Nada who was remarkably quiet. Arbour obviously satisfied with that odd explanation as was Grena. Norhat convinced by these strangers who were denying the truth.

"You saw the vision, you know the consequences. If we continue on this false path then we are doomed."

"That is what they want you to think Astram." Grena replied.

"Lies."

"Indeed, lies." Grena said sadly.

An image appeared on the wall of the tower. It surprised Astram. One of the strangers, the other man was holding his arm. A small picture was on his arm, glowing projecting stars and what must be a galaxy into the wall. His eyes opened in wonder. He nearly lost his footing as the stars came closer. Potent magic. Verhat would have liked that. Two planets circling a sun. Then one grey brown blue white crested orb appeared. Tiny white dots hung above it next to a sphere with tiny lights.

"Those dots are what are called Deep Visionaries. They are like shamans Astram." The second stranger said calmly. "It is they who are inserting their belief into your priests mind, and yours as well."

"It means nothing. Where is the proof?"

"That is the proof. They try the same trick on our world Astram."

"Just because you have this powerful magic does not mean you are right,"

"I sense them Astram." Grena added.

"Well, if these shamans know of this great god then it must be so."

"It is true in the sense that they want to believe." Their leader explained.

"What if, for the sake of argument I and the priests deny this revelation?"

"We think that they would rather see you succumb if you deny them."

"As in...?"

"We cannot be sure. But they will do everything in their power to keep you in this state you are in." the leader explained.

"State?" spluttering.

"Your people have a great future. One they wish to deny you."

"You mean instead of going your way? That is what destroyed our ancestors."

Astram guessed.

"Nada." Norhat said.

She showed him the book brought back by Arbour.

"More magic." Astram scoffed but took it just the same. Silence amongst them as Astram took in its contents. The images were enough. The picture on the wall vanished.

"Divine retribution."

"Just retribution. The Primaian's, our ancestors do not wish any world to be other than like them. They will use any means to achieve that aim." Their leader said.

"What if they are right? What if by leaving the true path divine retribution will visit those who deny the ultimate truth?"

"Even our gods are not that insane." Grena said.

"What if it was them?"

"Astram we are getting nowhere. The visitors, Grena, Nada have shown you conclusive proof of the problem we, as a planet face." Arbour replied.

"We have nothing against individuals believing whatever." Norhat was pragmatic. "But what you have in mind cannot be. You must make the choice. Now. Otherwise..."

"What Norhat? My priests are murdered? They will be martyrs. You forget the priests are at the kingdom's centre. If there is to be slaughter you think Jaffir will stand idly by and see Orst in flames? The crime then would be on your head."

"So you threaten the peace?"

"I cannot control how the priests would react to their brethren being assassinated. Surely you see that?" Astram confident again. He had been wise to argue for his own rights, where it mattered. Here and now. As soon as he was out of here he would have to get a message to them to take to the streets.

"If this powerful group mind is indeed the link then they would know of the crime committed here. You want to risk that?"

"You are free to choose your destiny." Their leader said. "If you choose your own path our kind will be there to assist you."

"So it is a choice between what you believe and what they believe. Which happens to be what we believe."

"Yes. But if you follow their path you will remain as you are, for ever. Your future negated. This present, unto eternity. Any deviation snuffed out, obviated from deep within your soul. Your mind never aware of the many possibilities it can think of, what the universe has to offer. To be in their perpetual thralldom."

"I would rather have my salvation assured than a precarious future with no guarantees at all. Are you not engrossed with this magic of yours?"

"It cannot possess. We are here by choice. To us the group mind is but an irritant Astram." Their leader said.

"Do you not have names?" Astram asked brusquely.

"If we reveal our identities the DVs, I mean the group mind will target us as well. The last thing we want is to bring the conflict here."

"But you have. By being here."

"No it is they who have started this Astram."

"They have shown the way."

"We are getting nowhere." Norhat said. "I have my duties to perform. Mark this well Astram. If the priests do anything that threatens the kingdom's serenity they will be rounded up and removed to the desert. Jaffir of course may use whatever means he wishes. Thus I cannot guarantee you or your priests safety. Even as we speak the nomads are pouring into Orst. I can only do so much. The decision is entirely yours Astram. You started this, you end it." Norhat commanded.

"You put them up to this."

"It began with the first murder of Nagor. Then Efhan, Jea and Fehz. So far no priest has been harmed. Your threats meant the end of the school. Now what did they know that so frightened you? Oh yes, I hear you removed some books as well."

"They were loaned."

"I'm sure they were Astram. Call off your priests. Recall them from Jaffir. And remove them from Orst. The king will decide their and your future. If you agree I will make sure no harm comes your way. As it is evening you move them out at sunrise. There are plenty of rivers out west to sustain a community. I will even, if Jaffir wishes this, assist you in establishing a monastery. But you are to desist from interfering, as from now, with the people. Is that understood?"

Astram did understand. He also realised that he would need to train the priests in martial arts. He had thought that the message alone would suffice along with the promise of the coming revelation. The signs were already there, two had come to pass. Maybe if the group mind were to discover these other visitors from that distant galaxy they would aid him in his holy mission.

"I accept your conditions Norhat." Astram feigned reluctance. It was not over. It, the great struggle had just begun.

"At last." Norhat was relieved. "Your word is good enough."

The visitors relaxed.

At least Norhat guaranteed their survival even if Jaffir was vacillating. The longer he and Kahleff delayed their decision the stronger Astram's presence. Astram knew he was the conduit to the ultimate god, the apex of cosmic power. Let these beings think he was cornered. At made no difference on the long run. The future an eternal presence of consummate control. The future a mere thought process, not an actuality, one they would dominate, for ever.

Perdus's comlink glowed on his sleeve's screen. If Mars went the way Astram insisted upon, their culture would mirror Prima's. Regum would be on its own. They knew it was one possibility, one choice.

Yet something *other* was hovering within the world of appearance. Another probability state trying to phase in. The vision had passed through his mind as a sub-set of events working simultaneously within the current reality. The DVs were trying to literally break in. Perdus's EAI was in full alert mode. He dared not let it run for fear of giving the DVs a hook.

The next comment by Astram surprised him.

"The visions are a foretaste of what will occur if these star travellers get their way Norhat."

Norhat eyeballed Astram. He seemed to be glowing, his eyes energized.

"Oh?"

"Their minds are as empty shells. If we follow their path, our world will collapse. With no gods there can be no life. We deny that reality we deny our reality. The emptiness foreboding. These beings are the threat Norhat, not the unitary god." Astram was on sure ground here.

"This embassy of theirs is to soften us up. They claim it is our doing that will see us vanish. Perhaps their magic deludes them. It does not delude me or the priests. It is their monstrous unbelief that will negate our world's essence. With the life force drained for they are psychic eviscerating beings whose intent is to weaken us. When the spirit is absent nothing will remain. The visions the warning of what is in store...if we follow their advice."

Norhat's mind seemed to bifurcate. Two realities impingent as one at odds with each other.

Perdus's mind was flooded with the recurring vision of Mars eviscerated. With two other images concurrent as well. One where everything was as it is now, one absent of life. The real present tenuous and fragile. A mere stop gap, a bridge between two competing alternatives. Neither dominant.

Jez's mind started to shake and vibrate. A massive mental surge overwhelmed her. The dominance of a powerful outside source triumphant. Way beyond her capabilities.

The DVs were on the attack. Not through their remote targeting though targeted they were. Not by their inserted psychic presence willing their mental state upon them here but by an *absence*. Withdrawing the mentally constructed sensory translation the mind engaged in to feed information of their world to the brain. They were *withdrawing* the present reality by *voiding* their minds here! With the brain not receiving any inputs, nothingness was all that remained. Another reality flickered behind the illusion of appearances. A combined force, an essence, an intelligent presence, undefined, unformed, hiding, a *probability*, a potential cosmic powered essence drawing *everything around them into its realm*. Like the unitary god Astram spoke of! *Or a configured probability data embedded propagated field wave. Mimicking the unitary god of the DVs. The DVs the source of this total absence..*

Nuhan's mind fractured, splintered. He was dumbfounded, overwhelmed by the conflict of realities. Was he perceiving some weird apotheosis? Were the beings here even more potent than Primaians? No wonder they were so interested in this planet. And winning. What dominated his sensory perception even more was the voidness. His mental processes incapable of grasping its reality, an absence in and of itself. Nuhan knew of course that at the quantum level there were only energy fields, what one saw was created by the mind's configured processing capabilities. This was utterly unreal and real. The DVs were dominant. Instead of infusing reality with their predetermined vision they had somehow created nothingness. The no-thing-ness of quantum reality loaded with extraneous non-data. It flooded his brain, poured into his mind, deleting everything within him.

Perdus tried to uplink himself to the ship so it could boost his being drained of all mental faculties. He felt rooted to the spot encased in a frame of space-time reality where time had stopped. Trapped in the moment, an eternity unto itself.

He was in the ships systems. It too was bifurcating. Two realities on one. The fractal pathways cascaded outwards drawing on one reality. Mars in another probability field wave. A vortex deep in space. A location in their galaxy. An energy field ballooned outwards, inflating faster than the speed of light, jumping exponentially into *all quantum field states*. Total dominance. Subtracting this reality into the DVs *configured non-reality*.

Norhat and Astram's minds were being riven apart. Too many conflicting realities. The mind had no chance of holding on. Merely grasping. It was an infusion of a

dominant presence tearing them away from their sense of self, their sense of reality. The fort, the town, their world both there and not there. The vision of a planet absent of all life appearing in flickering moments of perception. They were all being drawn away. They sensed the presence of the visitors concurrently as well. They too were being drained into this expanding surging energy inserting with it's intent upon them, moving through them, into them and sub extracting their world into it's domain. Norhat understood. Agram had been right. Something cosmic was there.

Norhat's mind fractured, teetered on the brink of exploding into a multitude of fragmented thoughts, pushed apart by a yawning chasm, an infinite abyss that poured into him, leaving nothing in its wake.

Agram felt the surge of redemption. The void was negating the false reality to leave the real penultimate divine revelation. His soul soaring predetermined into its inclusive realm. He sensed this ultimate of revelations gladly, leaving his other vacant shell behind. For a moment two worlds, one devoid of life, of everything, the other, *this world* immersed in the divine expanding into it. The redemption palpably present, eternal, the forever here, now, unto eternity.

The universe to Agram still looked the same. Everything was there yet he felt as if somewhere else. His lagging mind hanging uselessly onto a negated past. The struggle was over. The priests were as one spiritual essence, the holy infusion pouring through them into the minds of the people. Strangely enough he experienced a constriction even though the infinitude of space was there. He accepted the supreme revelation for it united them all. A fleeting sensation of Nuhan, ah, a name, Perdus the leader struggling against the inevitable. The void took them, only their outer shells remained, mere puppets devoid of volition, barely alive, but not dead.

Nada felt unsteady. Her mind, her soul exploded into shards. Hanging onto dear life she instinctively knew she was fighting a lost battle. Something utterly strange, yet familiar, a grasping essence infusing itself into her. In a net. The ocean of reality all around, constrained then immobilised. Time stopped. One part of her was being filled with the void, the other a screaming multitude of insanities completely overwhelming her whilst her remains were gutted. One soul lost in the receding reality of her world. The other a turbulent combination of all thoughts present at once. Marionettes in a mad frenzy pulled about by an unseen puppet master who refused to reveal himself. She felt the ascendancy of the priests, the group mind dominating the people who reacted as one to this perfidious vision. The world, the stars, the empyrium sucked into the expanding realm. She and everything around her swept into its encompassing embrace. Infinitely

vast yet trapped in this constrained realm. Everything was lost. She tried to grasp the reality left behind. Her memory of the past vanished like a dream then it too was gone.

On the ship Mirn, Head AI asked Los "You get that?" A momentary absence of...almost everything.

"Stray PWs."

"I wonder if they got that."

"We'll know when they make contact."

"You reckon I should let them know?"

"Perdus said no contact. Too delicate. Don't want to let our presence be revealed. We don't know how potent their minds are down there. Then there are the DVs. We know they're targeting the planet. We wait."

They both watched the array of screens and global read-outs. Everything was back to normal.

"OK. I'm gonna check the hyper-visuals." Mirn was curious. Stray PWs. It had come to her brain just like that. Since they were in a relative probability field it could interface where the placing impinged on other probable states. "Pity we can't see beyond our insertion field."

"Well when we get back we can get our brains to work on that." Los said,

"I'm gonna check on the aberration."

"OK. But if the ship gets compromised..."

"Of course, pull the plug." Mirn laughed. She reran the sequence at the stray insertion. The status field on the screens lost their clarity as the default analysis programme tried to latch onto that reality. The imagery of the empty planet pixellated, then the screens read outs went blank. Not zero, but blank. White noise which inverted itself into blackness. Absolute nothing. Nothing to analyse. Devoid of information.

"Strange." Mirn said. Los was watching the status of the ship. Everything normal at that end.

"Exponential decrease of information, fading into minus infinities." Mirn's Brain told her.

"Infinities? Well obviously the equations must be flawed."

"Can't be." Los was puzzled.

"Have to. Infinity is a false positive. Something they'll have to go over when we get back."

"This is the second time it's happened."

"Yes stray PWFs."

"You think it could be DV activity?"

"Maybe. Trouble is we can't backtrack to them. We're not here as far as they are concerned. Not even a softscan."

"Keep it that way Mirn."

"Don't worry I won't compromise us."

Information was dropping off and out no matter how she ran it. She created a sub-domain and reran the stray PWF. Same void. First a null result, the equations irrelevant, the algorithms absent. A strange field, hopefully not an attractor. But that would be positive, not negative. Well the quantum universe was not going to be logical in the normal sense. The trick was not to infect the ship's systems with its voidstate.

"Didn't originate our end?" Los asked.

"Nothing around us doing it. No source as such." She watched the simulated data realms go offline, black threads of nothingness snaking between them. Turning to black soot. She stopped the simulation regarding the stray field and using it called up the visuals focusing on the planet below. For a moment the simulation looked normal, then it too broke up leaving a blank read out. Mirn checked for viruses but the ship would have alerted her of that. She hoped this had nothing to do with their presence. They all knew if they were discovered by the DVs the mission would be unduly influenced, their aim: create failure.

Staying with the simulation she called up the complete ship's AI integrity. It kept itself complete. One of the processing nodes, in simulated real time was out, then vanished. Focussing on the stray PWF was dangerous.

"Energy can't vanish." Mirn said perplexed.

"It's a virtual vanishing."

"Somewhere the equations have to be faulty."

"If they were we wouldn't even be here."

"I know Los."

"Hm virtual space a total absence. There might be pockets in space that are totally void. Where there is real nothingness. Maybe a pocket passed this way. You know, a baseline way below anything we ever considered. Absolute zero. The lowest of the low."

"I'm gonna see what the ship's picking up."

"Covering you." Los ran all the back ups available.

"And running the virtual scenario."

"Gotcha."

"A PW shift. Different field."

"Can't be. Oh yes it can. Virtual again." Los said.

"It's in, then it's out, and holding. Doesn't make sense."

The image of the planet was going fuzzy. Internal corrections reimaged but it went blurry just the same. "Resolution's decaying. It's like, like..." Mirn watching the screens, "...there are two planets. One breaking up, the other remaining."

"I got news for you Mirn. The systems gone live. The virtual's become real."

"It can't."

"Quantum entanglement. Both are real now." Los explained. "And look. Both PWs are transitioning. Energy quotients shifting between the two. One going less the other going more. Ship's OK though."

Visual scanners showed the stars hazy, out of focus, growing momentarily dimmer as if obscured by dust. With nothing material present.

"Dark matter." Los's Brain said.

"Weird and weirder. Some form of energy insertion. But where's it coming from?"

"Or who's doing it. Our end?" Los asked.

"Prima's dark angels?"

"You mean the DVs."

Mirn nodded fearing the worst. But relieved for if it was potent DV activity it was all in the mind. Everything they saw was interference straight into their heads. The read outs skewed within their heads. When they would cease the real real-time information would return and make sense.

"At a guess Mirn I'd say they're trying to wipe us. This dark matter is just a mental cloud."

More data flows broke down, nodes breaking up, caches deleted, memory centres vaporising into fragments of disjointed information turning into more black soot.

Below the planet shivered. Patches of vegetation flickered in and out of focus then in and out completely.

"Potent shit." Los was impressed with what she hoped was DV activity. So far the ship was not affected as such. Just some of the processors oriented below. The patches of cultivated land went dusty pink and brown reverting to desert land. Rivers disappeared, not vaporising just vanishing leaving spidery lines of dry beds. Canals dusty depressions, their linearity mere outlines. The only reminder of a vanished past.

"Maybe they're shoving us into the distant future. Make it seem as if we're maybe millions of years from now."

Storm clouds turned to dust clouds. The ice caps at the poles shrunk to a fraction of their original size. The atmosphere much thinner, devoid of oxygen. Nothing could live down there.

"Potent." Los alluding to the DVs.

The stray probability field returned en masse. It became coherent, in phase displacing the PWF of the ship and its embrace of the planet which contained the crew below. The initial inserted field rumbled. For a moment the ship's system 'read' the new field but could not latch onto it. It was an absence, a void. All information drained including its entropic state. The sector of the universe momentarily was 'not there', then the normal enphasized probability fields of the current reality reinserted themselves. But with the informational content absent in real time, all data was lost, wiped off reality.

The ship was gone as were those onboard.

Mars was still there. The DVs inserted PWF negated everything. Mars was now a dead planet. No life. No people. No ruins. Nothing. Past or present.

In Reganian space Solar Station One, using the most powerful quantum computers in the universe which created the configured inserted probability field uncollapsed, smeared out as the void-environment flashed back through them from the DVs. Within the new superimposed projection space-time was equal due to zero quantum entanglement. The DVs absent field stronger. The void deleted everything. The combined DVs projection targeting their field in toto. The original probability field now absent. It was enough to delete the information content within the projected probability wave field of the SS 1's Quantum Computers.

The base and its scientists vanished.

A new set of continuing collapsing probability waves were dominant. Those of Prima's DVs. Not that they knew it. Their success absent The contents, the information simply not there. Unless one knew where to look for what and how, using QCs to relocate the uncollapsed PWFs, the evidence of that vanished reality would remain void.

Orbital: Prima

Elentra, Kroena and Risea were manning the consoles keeping the DVs under remote observation. The experiment needed to be contained. The DVs focussed their void-minds on the projected probability wave-field surrounding the distant alien planet. As the DVs were linked in an absolute continuum zero time frame, the individual specific monitors were ignored. Only the secondary target group, under observation contained the resonant signature of that distant race with tertiary stand by back up DVs holding the resonant fields. A quick conference between the three of them pondered if they could negate Regum's forced field. Risea reaffirmed the blank DVs mind-states. If they could void their minds they might neutralise Regum's effect as well. They had no idea how exactly the Reganian's technology achieved this, that could be sorted later. For the moment negating their presence was the primary concern.

Ung volunteered to be the group leader in this experiment. No one had ever attempted something like this before. They could burn out in the process through flash back overload, a price the volunteers gladly accepted. If they did burn out at least they could be realigned, reconstituted to a persona of their choice. For once BrainDraining was a blessing. If the DVs under Ung's guidance, even Ratze volunteering to be a back up for her, could blank Regum then the field would be void for Prima to take. Totally dominant. Shut down the planet completely. Deny Regum.

Ratze wished Ung luck. The null insertion field was what mattered. Here was a civilisation on the brink of stupendous potentiality. Ratze aligned in space with Ung's forward targeting assault DVs. Depending on the outcome they would decide what their next step would be. Aware of destiny in the making. This was a moment in time when everything hinged on what happened next. The moment everything. Ung quantum entangled with Ratze indicated this zero continuum could do untold damage to the actual PWF. If the DVs crashed it the results could coalesce into absolute chaos. If that was Elentra's intention then they both knew instinctively that their future was not with the

Primaians. Ratze concurred. This race was important somehow to their own future. It was criminal that Prima's DLs were bent on mindfucking the Martians. That made the Reganian's even more important. They were the ones that mattered. With Ratze already working for a general who seemed to have ideas of his own she was looking forward to what the DVs might or might not achieve. Going void was certainly unique. Perhaps even deadly.

Both their Brains could imitate the void state. Pre setup both women realised. Meant to be. By going hyper-void the chosen DVs, all natural psychics, would link up and project that void as a field over the whole planet. At best Ratze hoped they would wipe their own presence thus leaving the inhabitants of Mars free to continue to develop according to their evolutionary development whilst secretly hoping it would backfire on them all at the orbital.

At best by projecting the voidstate the inserted DV states would collapse a phased out field so that the natural state of the planet's resonance reassumed itself as it had done prior their interference. Maybe. This had never been tried before.

They were ready. Elentra herself taking command.

Ung and Ratze deleted their mental activity using strange logic attractors. To think of nothing, nothing being something even if it was an absence of everything. It only made sense at the quantum level.

The minds of the DVs like Ung and Ratze's, for she wanted to make sure Ung's absence was backed up directly by her, went into an easy phase transition, then aligned completely. For some time individual DVs were still flickering, remnant thoughts receding slowly as the void infused itself into their psyche. They might become so blank that they lost their memories as well. Even better.

The darkness which now was in Ung and Ratze's Brain held steady. Freedom of infinite expansion both within and without. Some DVs were still struggling to attain this zero state.

They blended into the inserted non-probability field. With a distant loci. Regum's PWF. Generated at a remote star using quantum processors. Both did their best not to focus on that location for fear of revealing it to their controllers. The data was buried deep in their heads, camouflaged by mental confusion, which when running sequentially made hacking into their Brains psychically impossible. Their combined voids held, remained on top, spreading like a membrane throughout the space of the inserted probability field. They were now embedded along with the DVs who were aligned as well. Stage one achieved.

It was tempting to insert their own preternatural knowledge but their configured Brains held Ung and Ratze in check. The void had to remain in place at all costs. Otherwise they'd be blown, the mask of their identities revealed. Neither knew as such the real, the true distinctiveness of themselves. Something to be maintained yet hidden at all cost. Concentrating for now just on this vast repository as an absence.

At first, feeling the link in unison, each individual psyche and its attendant memory were now void. Contact complete with the DVs and the field. For a moment all the information of Mars replaced by the void. That was merely preparatory. Nothing infused. The trap sprung. Too late for either Ung or Ratze to counter this insertion without blowing their cover. A non state now the overlaying reality, breaking up the dispersed redundant current probability field state. What replaced it was less dense, the bare minimum. A *planet void of life*. The attendant field waves of Regum demolished, gone, decoherent, uncollapsed, dispersed into the mega and meta fields of dark matter. The base state of space reabsorbing the now decayed reality they had so assiduously studied and contained. Dispersed into the quantum foam of space. All data gone.

Then nothing.

Ratze saw the DVs and Ung's mind fracture, shatter, disperse. Ratze immediately reached out to Ung to hang on for they had latched onto another powerful field coming from *behind* them, from *this section of space*. Not Prima but somewhere in this galaxy. A powerful mind, an artifice perhaps, a dormant AI making it's presence felt. It exploded outwards, using the void to insert its field for one moment. And one moment was enough for eternity. A configured set of fractal infinities, a construct drawing on some immense source of power. Not of space itself but using space to flood into the absence they created.

Fooled. Set up. Caught out. Mars's civilisation demolished. Ung's Brain split as part of it was extracted into this other field. Letting some conflicted contaminated modules go, excising the cyber contagion. Ung's mind steadied. Both of them remembered what had been lost to the DVs.

Everything went blank concerning the planet. The resonance field vanished as did all life. A desert planet. Ratze's Brain opened a subchannel instantaneously to Ung and pulled her back from the brink of her own dissolution. The DVs were caught in this matrixed webvoid existing in the substratum of space. The DVs resonance like dust motes in a receding vacuum cleaner taking all informational content with them. And more. Being linked to the orbital's computers who ran runtime checks on their status they

sucked out the information from the memory banks as well. What a pleasant surprise Ratze's Brain smirked. Prima would have no knowledge of anything.

Ratze checked on Ung. Catatonic or maybe just her Brain having shut down to remain in place, keeping her real state secure as this other external wave like expansion extended in quantum leaps out into the universe. Then it too was gone. As was the information of its presence. Riding the voidstate. Using it as camouflage. Self deleting as a source whilst expanding throughout space. Two quantum states. There and not there. Unless with the required sub-atomic quantum codes its presence near absolute zero the phenomenon was affective only at the sub atomic scale. Normal detection techniques had to be non aligned to detect its presence. Ratze's memory in the voidstate. She tried to remember something just out of reach. It was more important to hang onto Ung, to keep her here as the DVs were mentally sucked away, jumping out of their quantum collapsing wave having lost all information.

Then everything went back to normal. Ung was unconscious. Luckily the vital life signs were there. And her mind was not catatonic anymore. Just passed out. She had shut down so not to be overwhelmed by what? Ratze could not remember. The DVs they had been with were gone. Then that memory receded and vanished into the dark as well. What DVs?

Aware of a vanished event they made their way back to the orbital. Ung had woken.

"The alien field is real." Her first thoughts. **"Extraneous. Non localized."**

"Not Earth."

"No. Bury the data."

Ratze let the current inserted reality suppress that snippet of information. Another reality came online. Resumption of thought processes. Elentra had ordered them to ascertain if this alien field infusing their space was verifiable. The remaining DVs focussed. Ratze thinking time had been *wound back*, then steadied into its natural space-time continuum.

"Done. Notice the change?"

"Yes I felt it too." Ung referring to some quantum transitional wave state. She shook her head trying to clear something from her mind. What?

"They got no clue." Ung said **"We're enhanced Ratze."** Ratze always knew she was more than the sum of her head.

"Better keep it to ourselves. Some naturals might pick that up."

"So we're naturals." Ratze was happy with that.

Back onboard they both, as group leaders reported to Risea.

"So it's confirmed. The foreign influence is real. Even if all we got is a dead planet. Something isn't right." Risea mused. Ung and Ratze barely watched the monitors. Risea was thinking. Trying to remember something that simply eluded to be ascertained. She put that down to the influence of the alien field.

A momentary glitch, like a black out. Systems normal.

"When fully analysed we find out the exact location. More importantly your minds survived. High rate of burn outs trying to just get a fix. You both held. No need for a deep scan, you both came through brilliantly. The computers are working on it. Our supposition's right. The resonant signature indicates sentience. Now for the world it came from. This is not some cosmic freak. And it's certainly not the cosmic consciousness. Neither were either of you infected. We would have known. So go have a well earned rest. You did well. Your next assignment is easier. Mena. A natural. Shows much promise. Given that somehow your resonance is not affected by this alien field should give her the necessary protection when she's out there. You will be called regarding her. Thank you for a job well done."

Risea felt she was missing something though. Probably the quirkiness of the field being fed directly back to her. Next time she would let the computer digest the incoming data first. Ung and Ratze's resonance tighter than most. She'd run the risk of infection being linked with them, but well, sometimes one had to be adventurous. Natural's were like that she reasoned. If Kroena or Elentra found out they'd have a fit.

Kroena paced the floor in the observation room. "How do we explain that?" The log's entries showed more DVs present than were in actuality.

"Yes." Risea said. Having ridden Ung's mindstate including the crashed data pertaining Mars. "A momentary voidstate. Source unknown. Absolute Ultra Zero. No flashback, no containment," watching Prima's resonant envelope, "and no rupture. Not even a slight distortion. We're secure."

"The loss of personnel I'll explain as the capriciousness of the alien field incursion. A resonant darkness with field deletion capabilities. Problem is it self extracted its own data. The DLs wont believe it. At least we have learnt what to watch out for. Wont be caught out a second time." Elentra in two minds. Something had crashed over Mars. DVs missing. Success with a heavy price.

"None of this gets out. None. Our ability to finally having achieved a breakthrough in that there are forces at work with a potential previously not envisaged must be kept within our domain. It's up to Drassid. He's the one who's gonna have to inform the Domain Lords."

"Where is Drassid?" Kroena asked.

"On his way. Next shuttle."

Mission Control: Andromeda Station Three

The collapse of the probability field sent alerts to all four stations discretely dispersed throughout their sector in space. The surprise deletion came from station two which shadowed Ung. The facilitator looking after her nearly had his mind ripped apart as Ung's split into multiple fractal pathways. Status readouts surging through extra quadruple memory caches. Processors switching to locked secure data detection realms as the quantum waves went out of phase, then vanished.

Stray PWs impinging on the insertion field originating from near Regum. Cloaked. The relevant controllers could only observe. In a way now was an ideal moment to make contact letting the Reganian's know they were not alone. Overall command wanted to wait and see what the Reganian's intent was. They soon found out: Mars.

A flurry of activity. Another planet, another sentient race. On Command Station Three the overseers, back ups for the crews tailing Ung and Ratze observed at first with delight the fact that the Primaian's suspected nothing. Ung and Ratze in place as enhanced naturals. Their EAI configuration completely cloaked. Phantom programmes working in the background at the quantum level at a fraction above that of the phase state of space itself to give them cover. Prima's astronomical capabilities were basic, observing space but not fathoming it. Given their obsession with their hypothesis of space being infiltrated by some sort of intelligent design the controllers wondered why they were not milking Regum's analytical capabilities in trying to read the essential condition of space. The Primaian's simply accepted their factual interpretation as given. No analysis required.

But when the DVs started voiding their minds mission control was onto it. Given the remarkable ability of sentient minds to mimic so many of the possible quantum states intellectually it was only a matter of time until someone would put that to the test. What occurred was not totally unexpected. When the DVs linked their localized zero state the data processors within Ung and Ratze remained off line. Any probing would reveal more

about their inherent capabilities which they were not yet ready to display, even if merely passively.

This was not just a new experiment in quantum states on a virtual level, the Reganians were running the insert in real time. Superimposing their probability states by design. They had cracked the quantum code. They were capable of being anywhere in space. Given the success in inserting a ship as well as it's crew was a profound paradigm shift. The next logical step would be to insert their perceived reality, based on actual real space time probable states. Future jumping reality, making the future happen according to their design. It was that notion that was so tempting to reveal to them their existence here. It was lucky they held back given what happened next.

At central mission control on station three the back up facilitators were working in tandem with the actual back-ups in space. Ung and Ratze shielded from probing resonant scans, whether via the DVs or enhanced psychics. So far so good. The near total zero state, beyond the lowest phase state of space was building up in their heads of a specific advanced group of DVs under Ung's watchful mental eye. Ung of course was not aware of the link-back. The absent field state, devoid of all data would if let into the quantum processors delete everything within them as they enphased the data void. With no entropy there was no information rich fields. Somehow the DVs managed to posit a zero state. The aim was to ascertain Regum's probable insertion field.

Then it dawned on mission control: the Primaian's were going to crash the field. Not that they knew it. Instead of manipulating it by inserting themselves they were doing the exact opposite. They were on a hunch, following a whim. The ever present unpredictability of sentient intelligence. Being logical for a certain sequential unfolding of ordered thought, then transition points where quantum leaps of the imagination self-boosted, jumped mental states. Going void the least expected. Not that their processors had not anticipated that one out of thousands of possible mental probabilities. Singular experimental states which some mystics and other able minds could self create for a fraction of time, thus seeing reality unconditionally. The act of unifying void minds increased the void state exponentially.

Then aligned to Regum's insertion field by forward projection. Remote viewing into that state the DVs dissolved all informational content within that field. Not only did the field un-collapse, going uncoherent, they also deleted the source. Solar Station One. As it vanished so did its crew. As those on Mars and the ship. The DVs intent on inserting their reality, which apart from mentally dominating the Martians had the adverse effect of deleting their reality through their void state.

Unless that was their true intent.

They must have realised that the Martians were, in one possible future following the scientific path of both an emergent Earth and Regum. So rather than risk a second race, for they were not as yet aware of Earth's existence, they wiped that reality thanks to the insertion field Regum had in place. It was all too easy for them and they succeeded.

Head mission control was on line with the controller of station two and four. Ung's headspace was riding the void with her group of DVs. They watched nervously whether Ung would be deleted as well. That could entangle them here so Ung's facilitator was ordered to cut loose. They could still remote view her as well as Ratze. Ung secured herself, letting the void enter, except when the field vanished with the data. Whatever Ratze and Ung had known was no more. It existed in another probable rather than actual state. The Primaian's had managed to assert their reality as the dominant probability.

Ung's mind did fracture. Thousands of possible futures stranded out. Information overload. A part of her headstate collapsed with the void.

"Impossible." The controller said. "Energy, information cannot be voided."

"They've done it though." The back up facilitator replied keeping his counterpart on station two online.

"Apparently so." The controller reminded them.

"They created the perfect zero state. Less than the vacuum. Now we know there are vast holes in the universe where there is such a state. But these voids are so distant from where we are as to be a curiosity rather than an impinging actuality."

"You are correct." The controller added. "But look."

The void. "Even a pico second would do to delete the whole field and all its contents."

Mars desolate. The civilisation not present in the new reality.

"Prima has won. Their universe is now following their future probability." The facilitator said with dismay.

"It gets worse." The controller said as they watched the read outs. Another field made it's appearance. Tenuous yet expanding rapidly from the Primaian galaxy.

"The Discrepancy. At least we have a location." Its own informational content superimposed. That future specific state embedded, embraced, collected and absorbed, replacing the vanished PFW. That future captured, obviated, configured, discordant probabilities deleted from the new reality in space.

"It's lucky we are self isolated." The facilitator said, "Otherwise we would have lost the data as well."

"Our field is holding." The controller advised.

"Good. The Primaian's are far more powerful then we ever considered. Their DVs universally potent." As the controller watched Ung battle with her split mind. She held on, survived but her data was lost as well. Everything Ung and Ratze gained gone in the expanded field pulsing outwards, whilst withdrawing the caught, embedded data.

"What is that?" the facilitator asked frustrated. "None of our systems can get a fix on it."

"That is because it is still in a future state. It's leaking into the relative present but not of it."

"If it succeeds it will overwhelm all."

"You're right, we have to consider that scenario. Time for action." The controller had made up her mind. "Time to insert Nervina."

They busied themselves alerting station five to activate Nervina.

On station five Nervina was woken. The mission controller running the command sequence. The quantum computers opened a tunnel through space. Nervina woken, fully uploaded, enhanced, chameleon drives cloaking her capabilities was inserted into the container sitting out of phase in sub-space. The multiple array of VB generators came on, aligned and voided space just like the DVs managed except with requisite data content embedded on a much higher scale.

Nervina vanished from their space time continuum and found herself on Prima. Fully loaded. Not that she knew. The chameleon programme in her enhanced state hiding her true self. Like Ung and Ratze, whom she would feel were akin to her, creating an instant rapport, would like them upload any data to secure her legend, her history, her past, her present.

"Right. Transfer successful." The commander said at station three. Nervina's facilitator and back up linked to her. If her programme deviated thus giving her true potential away the facilitators would guide her back to the mapped out path. Buried in her head was the possible location of the Discrepancy. Announcing the fact would give her away as being far too smart. Maybe it was luck that the void-state DVs had vanished as well, leaving no trace of the information they contained. Prima's memory banks blank. The danger in merely revealing these known facts could trigger some remnant data that might have been left behind. Any hint could be picked up by the other remote viewers

focussing again on what Prima considered the alien field. Mission control ascertaining not so much where the discrepancy was but what it contained. Was it sentient driven? Was it a rogue AI? Was it real? Virtual quantum computers created virtual worlds, not unlike Regum's WebSpace and WebWorld. Now to ascertain whether the Discrepancy was hostile, benign or with its own intent.

They also had to make sure the Primaian's would not access it. Once more was known about it, then the data Nervina, Ung or Ratze gathered could be fed incrementally to the Reganian's, currently the most advanced civilisation there. Earth was still in initial stages of development. They could tilt in any direction. Until more was known given that both Prima and Regum would eventually make contact, revealing the Discrepancy too soon could have Earth jumping, like Prima to the wrong conclusion.

It was now a waiting game. They had their three agents in place.

Carias

"The night makes me feel free. No limits. The absence of everything so invigorating." Carias said quietly not sure even if words could explain what she felt, what she dreamt. The infinite manifest. Her dreams with a reality of their own. She wondered, whether the unbound mind was in a real actuality which upon waking wove a web of illusion around her head.

Fehna listened intently. That she was now spying on Carias invigorated her. Though she liked Carias Dr Shuss's calm explanation of the danger Carias posed, not just her addiction to the malignant delusions inherent in Regum's Web aside but what it's portents contained and the effect it had on the mind made Carias's attitude a danger to the serenity of society. In short, Shuss explained her deviation could trigger a mass psychosis through the influence of her twisted headspace. So to secure Fehna against Carias's influence she was to take some specific drugs that would secure her from Carias's beguiling delusions.

The drug, whatever it was, made her feel mentally superior. Total control. She could listen to Carias and not be influenced. Water off a duck's back.

The sun a brilliant orange low on the dark hills. The air turning cool, fresh, autumn in the air. The distant mountains jagged, glowing icy peaks in a cloudless sky.

Fehna was watching with Carias the glorious sunset as they sat in the gardens. She turned her face to her friend, the sun's glow on her smooth face, illuminating her. The light making her hair glow.

"It's too vast to comprehend. It makes me feel so alone, the vastness...scares me." Fehna sighed sadly.

"Scared?" Carias tried not to laugh. "Fehna, it is nothing...nothing, the potential of everything." And a flash back hit her. Some dream or another reality? Or the Web? Carias could not tell but the image of nothingness remained. Something lost, something taken, something stolen from the universe. Or was it her sense of self she was loosing here? She was certain they fed them all drugs to keep them stable, within their natural

limits. She saw Fehna's apprehension hiding her fear, her smile frozen her soft blue eyes retreating from her gaze.

"But what of the great divinity?" Fehna shocked that Carias could even think the universe was empty. Shuss was right. Carias was dangerous.

"Fehna, please."

"You think like that and you'll never get out."

"Contained, isolated for thinking. It's a crime Fehna."

"Denying reality Carias is the sign of an unstable mind."

"I like unstable. It's exciting." Carias felt invigorated. Especially now that she could get into the Web anytime she wanted. And with her father on side, what she could not tell anyone gave her hope. There was so much Fehna didn't know. Fehna was isolated, not her.

"We see so little." Carias said at last as Fehna was silent.

"You're different."

"Not really Fehna. There are many like me. And there will be more of us."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Fehna was shocked. Were the deviants on the rise? The thought disturbed her for if they did proliferate then she would be left out. Yet she feared the Web. It was too...

"Of course I do. At least to you." Fehna blushed hidden by the glow of the sun. Carias was set in her way. So certain of her illusions. So lost so unlike herself. Sure of herself until she met others, then her confidence crumbled. She hated herself. They made her feel weak yet Carias was so cool it soothed but still disturbed her equilibrium. Her world under threat. Even if the doctor thought she was the best person to try and get into Carias's head.

"I've got something to show you. It's going to be our secret." She looked conspiratorial. Fehna's heart raced. Apprehensive and curious. Carias retrieved from within her thick gown a small book. Fehna took it from her cautiously as if it was something dangerous. Mixed emotions. The writing was densely packed, little poems, thoughts scrawled over the small pages. The more Fehna read the more disturbed she became. Glorifying in a vast secret surrounding them, vibrating within the soul, unfolding within the realm of dreams. Strange worlds, stranger beings imbued with power to dominate their reality, masters of their own destiny, forging their own fate. No mention of the cosmic consciousness. Her writings peopled with godlike entities. Carias was really disturbed.

"You wrote this?" Fehna asked subdued.

"Aha." Carias expectant.

"It's...frightening. It's...weird." Fehna thinking the Web really got to her. False realities taking over her mind. And Carias appearing so normal. She was probably calmed by drugs. A breeze caressed them as the last sliver of molten gold wavered at the edge of the dark blue hills. The world was turning purple.

"Well given we are caught in the snares of what we are told to believe..."

"Carias." Fehna trying to hide her rising apprehension.

"It's getting chilly. Coming?" Carias rose shivering a little. The hills almost black, lights on at the buildings giving a sense of homeliness. The last of the liquid sun's glow illuminating the azure sky. Fehna handed the small booklet back. What Shuss would do to get his hands on that.

They walked back in silence. Carias wondered why she had even considered Fehna to have a look at her inmost thoughts. They walked up the path, climbed the few stairs.

"Are these beings real to you?" Fehna asked as they walked through the foyer.

"As real as my dreams are. Think of what other beings might imagine their world, their universe to be."

Fehna understood the content. She was thinking of what the Reganian's might be thinking. Had the Web really taken hold of her?

"So it's not spiritual?"

"It's a revelation. We all have the ability Fehna to see beyond the images, the appearance, the naked world."

"But it's real Carias."

"Perception is real Fehna."

Visions as gates to perception, inducing false illusions of some great mystery, fulfilling a false longing to Fehna of which Carias wanted more. The beauty of this world not enough.

Carias felt disappointed. Then a lingering depression. She thought Fehna might be excited, instead she was cautious. She thought she could find out if Fehna's mind was more than just the daily grind of rising, eating, vegetating, vacuous conversations, dinner, bed. Some life. If it were not for her dreams she knew she would go crazy. Reality could be dismal if she let it get to her.

Fehna sensed Carias's change of mood.

"Want to talk some more?" she asked clumsily.

"No Fehna. I'll think I'll crawl into my hole and be myself."

"What about dinner?"

"Don't know yet."

In her room automatically heading for the table and the view she watched the darkness encroach the land. The hills turning black from within. A void spreading over the material world of sensory images. Like some programme bent on usurping reality. Replacing, worse substituting all there was with a false image of what was normal. Normal. Ha! The doctors would probably frown at her view. Well she had her gear to get into the Web. A little twirl before dinner? Yes? No? Maybe. Damn. Decisions.

Dinner was not compulsory. But she guessed any absence might be noted. They might even send someone up. Up. Uploaded, up there, in there, in the Web. Reaching its very end. Two ends meeting. Her ending here physically, there mentally. If only mother, she could just not find her endearing, too uptight had let her have the education she wanted. No chance and what did dad do? Nothing. So nothing is what she got. She'd been good at basic maths, using equations to draw graphs, weird geometries just what the Web needed to spice it up a bit. Not like here, this world, this reality, this planet. Order of the highest essence. Deviations abhorred. The imagination suppressed. No wonder she'd painted her room industrial grey.

This room was nice though. Warm, cosy, relaxing with a magnificent view of the dark mushrooming trees, as black as night. Tiny guide lights for the paths now deserted. She got up, rummaged through her valise where there were still some underclothes to be unpacked and found the headband. Just a quick visit, random insertion. See what it was attuned to. There were countless portals. Find out what other realms there were. And check if her persona was realigned now that dad was onside. She a certified agent. She still couldn't believe it had happened.

Then she was in. A room of all places. Well the journey had to start somewhere. The image flickered labouring from a dodgy connection. Could be cross sequenced. Riding an instant duplication that responded to her presence. A dark silhouette, a woman perhaps, the adumbration too graceful to be any other. Around her ghosts. Three of them. She was not surprised. Anything was possible in here. Stand-by persona's. Maybe she could get into their headspace. Yeah, why not? How though. Was merely thinking the wish to be fulfilled? Parts of the web worked like that. Open domains. Something impinged on this room. Like a pressurized environment. Deep underwater. The feeling was real enough. The room bright but devoid of anything except a few chairs and a table. No screens, no hardware unless, unless the room was inside some vast computer. Thus the feeling of pressure, some force field. Hey what a breakthrough. The

ghosts steady in their foglike appearance, their soul like presence steady. Not volatiles. Were these beings masters of the Web's domains? No alerts indicating her intrusion. A feeling of not being quite there or in their relative time line.

The room began to fill out. Furniture appeared, panelled walls, a window, black, either night or absolute absence, her room! How strange. A duplicate reality. Of her own making? Memory filling in the blanks. The adumbrations unconcerned with the change in visuals. The graceful figure she concentrated upon had her back to her. Given the hazy appearance it looked like a jump suit DVs wore. Wow. Maybe they'd been contained. Isolated. They were the enemy. The calmness exuded contradicting their hostile attitude.

'Ah, you've come.' A disembodied woman's voice said. No way of knowing who exactly was doing the talking. Communicating. Their faces greyed out under dark light.

'I have.' Well she had.

'We knew you would.'

'Place is too irresistible.'

'It has its points.' Came the enigmatic reply. 'You found the end.'

'The end.' Carias repeated wondering what this self secreting presence meant. Then the image of her space trip. Returning in the distant future and running out of programming. Pixels breaking up. Nothing beyond. Only the undefined future. Not yet accessed. The probabilities uncertain. Shit her head was being filled with information. Thought transference. Way to go.

'The dark.' Carias thought.

'Undefined probabilities.'

'Calamity.' Her brain figured. 'Total eclipse.'

'So that future would seem. Dark Visionaries.'

'You mean Deep Visionaries.' Hey she knew something.

'Dark. They crashed a civilisation.'

'Why tell me?' Carias thought automatically. Her mind trying to fathom these ghostlike presences. Personas barely discernable. Abstractions from their real selves. The Web could be like that, was like that.

'We needed your memory for confirmation.'

'Which civilisation?'

'The one you visited.'

She tried to think. The memory was too vague. Two planets. One pink, brown, red the other blue, white clouds, greens, browns, yellow, masses of ocean, brilliant white ice caps.

'You've been most useful.'

'Glad to oblige.' Feeling used in a good way. Had her trip been predetermined? Had she been set up?

'No the decision was yours entirely.'

The three adumbrations amendable enough.

'You survived. Remarkable.'

Images of minds fracturing, splitting apart, overwhelmed by chaos.

'The fate of others.' Visions of insanity, catatonia, schizophrenia.

'When realities collide.'

'The future?' Carias a little frightened.

'A future.' One of them remarked.

'And you want me to...what?'

'Return.'

'To the chaos?'

'That is up to you. We needed confirmation. The data was scrambled. It too had turned into chaos. But chaos cannot be permanent. It is but one probability. Probabilities are potentialities. From there it falls into possibilities which collapse into actualities.'

'Time sequentials.'

'Indeed.'

'That future lead straight into chaos.'

Carias understood now why the Web existed. Probing the future, their destiny.

'Yes.' One of them responded.

'But if there are many, how can there be just one?'

'That is the problem. Something is controlling the future.'

'To your detriment.'

'One world's future is already gone.'

'And you think the same fate awaits you.' Carias certain these being were not Primaian insertions. Unless they were, leading her on.

'No we are not.'

'So why me?'

'Because you came.' Well that was obvious.

'Makes sense. What now?'

'Continue exploring. Test the limits, go beyond them. Every sentient being carries it's own futures within itself. If you can insert your presence, your entity, your potentialities, your life force into the chaos then it will disintegrate...'

'If it doesn't overcome me.'

'It did not. That is the proof.'

'What if it remembers me?'

The entity thought it ludicrous. 'Impossible. Both it's strength and weakness. Chaos is what it is and cannot be anything else. No past, no present, no future, no memory. Unaligned information, total entropy without any level of order. If chaos aligned even in your memory it would not be chaos anymore.'

'Ah. So why not yourselves?'

Silence.

'Surely I cannot be the only one.'

'You are not. But you succeeded where others have failed. You are unique.'

Carias knew that. It was nice to know others, even disembodied intelligences, virtual creations thought as much.

'So what now?'

'You push the limits. But if you feel any sense of threat, any disturbance that is inimical, anything, blank out of it. That is all we ask. We are not ordering you. It is voluntary, has to be. Otherwise your mind is labouring under preconceptions. Clarity is most important. Will you do this? When you feel like it. When it is opportune.'

Did they know of her presence at the asylum.

'Yes.'

'What about them?'

'Your controllers? They will see the end results as confirmation of their correct path, the decisions from on high as the right ones. They must continue to think that otherwise we will never know the actual causation involved.'

'That makes it easier.'

'Precisely the idea.'

'Who are you?'

'Concerned beings.'

'So why not reveal yourselves.'

'Our enemies.'

'The DVs'

'And them.'

'What happens after? What if I'm discovered?'

'Your visit will be scrambled. As long as they think we are in fear they will continue along their plans. That must remain so.' Emphatic.

'Can I come across?'

Hesitation. 'Eventually.'

'Ah, working on it.'

'Correct. In theory it is possible, but that too is in the future.'

'Beyond the chaos.'

'We have something for you.' The other entity thought. 'In your past there was a calamity. It came from this universe. Affecting others as well. Your Ecclesiastics want to keep that a secret.'

'Oh yes I remember now. That was not the alien thing?'

'There is no alien field.'

Revelation.

'Only information. It is being used to keep your planet, your people in fear.'

'A ruse.'

'A lie.'

'And the cosmic consciousness?' might as well ask.

'The unification of all information in the universe.'

'So it's real?'

'Only in your minds.'

Carias had always been indifferent to religion. It was a relief to know it was all an illusion based on facts reinterpreted to suit the aims of the Domain Lords, the Pontiff, the Ecclesiastics, the Divines, the DVs, down to the priests and from thence to the whole population.

'And they will do anything to keep it that way.'

'Now that I know won't that make me a heretic?'

'Not if you keep it to yourself.'

'So this has to remain hidden?'

'Up to you. But the time is not right. Not at this juncture.'

'Do others know?' meaning the people.

'You are not alone. There might be a future where you are free of this mental burden.'

'That is something.'

'There are ancient records testifying to another world, your world prior the calamity. Those books are hidden, on purpose. If they see the light of day...' the entity hinted.

Carias understood. Make that public and let the stories reveal what they are being denied.

'It's time to cut the link.'

Caria's mind was racing. The great lie, the imagined supreme being all a figment of their minds, in a universe of Prima's design. She had much to think about.

'Take your time.'

'Thank you for being there. Will you be back?'

'That might attract attention. Not in this form. We are not the only ones.' Meaning as Carias understood it, entities in the Web. It was enough. She felt she had her guardians with her in mind, linked to her cyber presence. 'Others will drop hints, offer suggestions, indicate specific orientations, reveal glimpses of possible future scenarios you could explore.'

'Yes.'

The room receded into blackness. Carias was looking out into the dark outside. She removed the headband and put it back in her valise.

Amazing. Who were they? On her side. Or...her father? Feminine. Their shapes too lithe. Tall, elegant. Constructed personas. Their density not as apparent as Primaian's. The thought startled her. Primaian's. She was one. Though felt more herself in the Web than outside it. Was that what the doctors feared. One's personality being subsumed or, even better, expanded. Free from the incessant social constraints. She certainly felt whole in there. Either way it was a relief, unshackled, an impervious essence. Her natural condition. And theirs. Who or whatever they were.

Her perception more objective. Memories of tutorials coming back when studying the self. Classic symptoms of alienation. No wonder she thought herself isolated from those around her. Of them but not with them. Never had been. Even her parents were outsiders. No friends really. No need either. Too vacuous, too engrossed in the immediate. Never seeing, or feeling, or being the total sum of one's self. Thoughts thoughts thoughts. It was enough to know. She felt better for it.

The panic attack hit her upon waking in her comfortable warm bed. Something was very wrong. Constrained mentally. Images of chaos pouring out of her. Where the ceiling ought to be were flat dimensional boulders. She heard birds chirping, moved her

head which felt as heavy as the boulders which jostled into position then became flat. The ceiling back in place.

What on earth had just happened? Another panic attack seized her mind, riveting her emotions into its fearful grasp of impending doom. Unseen, unfathomable, unavoidable. It's icy grip freezing her mind. She was shaking, shivering whilst being warm her mind an ice cold sphere of searing light. Burning her up on the inside, draining her energy, her body tense, her brain paralysed. The after image of being trapped recurred setting of another sensation of terror. She felt heavy, burdened by an invisible something unrecognisable denying her mind an explanation. Like a personality displacement, something invasive, subtle, persistent. How could this be real? A remnant resonance from her contact? A surge of warm excitement. The conversation came back. She was wanted. Accepted as she was. Friends? Maybe. Hostile? Definitely not.

The dream, whatever too foggy a substance, clammy, thick, viscous. It dissipated as her brain started to wake. Flawed. That was it. But what was flawed? This reality or the Web's? Or something else entirely? Aftershocks, mental tremors rippling right through her, targeting her. A baleful influence at work. Not of her making. An intrusion into her very being. Trying to craze her. Directed intent.

Nervous reaction. A spasm shook her at the thought of the calamity, ancient history haunting Prima, haunting her. The priests, no not the priests, the Divines and the rest of them behind it all. To what purpose? Control? Power? Domination! Well not her. Even if this was some desperate imaging in her mind. She had a focus, a fix. The Web an open source, untainted, more pure, accessible unlike her condition here, in this room, in this world, on this planet. Other worlds, other thoughts, other realities. Prima, one reality, one way of thinking, one way of being. Any deviation from that and one ended up here. How many others were in her position. Having mentally tasted freedom, even if in an artificial construct. If that is what it took then that's the way it was going to be for her.

The chime went off. Another day, more of the same. Caught in one's shell. Hiding one's true thoughts from them. Fehna was right about that. Maybe her room was some resonance chamber. Now she was getting paranoid. Did they have sensors installed? Until proven otherwise, yes. Reading her mind. What if...?

At least she was focussed now. An agent. Who would have thought her father and Dross were on her side. But why? Surely they had plenty to choose from. Was she some test case? The first? The anticipatory fear tried to rise within her but was repelled by her revulsion. She was not going to let that get to her. She tried to think of the outside world. Not much there. Tiny prisons every home.

The chime rang again. Staff. What did they want? Checking up on her. Had...how had she known...then smiled. She was a natural! Yes yes yes. The surging emotional sensation a release and relief. She was more than the sum of her parts. Add the Web and there was a volatile mix. Out of control here but in control there. Creating one's own reality, one's universe if one could be bothered. A universe unlike what Prima pretended was out there. Carias thinking in the third person as if she were someone else.

The door opened. Instinctively she pulled up her covers. The nurse was solidly built, thick square head, narrow set eyes betraying no emotion. Seeing her remotely like an automata. Some low life breed.

"Did you say something?"

She blinked. Could he read her mind? Or was he boosted? Well let him. Just looking at him exhausted her as if he was draining by his presence her life essence. His mouth a narrow thin slit. Reptilian. A throw back. His lips wet with saliva. What was he thinking? She turned her head away then heard him sigh. He lumbered over, pulled the sheets back, grunted as he put his brawny arms beneath her, lifting her up.

What was going on? Another nurse entered. This was not good. The door was open. All was silent. By the light of the sun it was early morning. Birds twittering. She went limp as he pulled her out of her warm cosy bed.

"Get dressed." He barked. The other nurse standing back, less concerned, indifferent. They must have done this many times. His clammy breath smelling of soil, soiled. Adjusting her pyjama.

She was having none of this. The rage in her mounted. He let go now that she was standing. Fearing the worst, rape she whipped around, pushed the flat palm of her outstretched hand square into his fat face, the flesh podgy. He squealed like the pig he was. She laid into him, whacking his face as he staggered backwards into the room. She was hoping he would fall and trip over the chair near the table. The other nurse too startled or bemused to bother reacting. Fat face's eyes lit up, two glowing malignant orbs. She had fallen into his trap. This is what he wanted. She could smell his anger and his sexual intent. Bastard. Another quick whack to his face for her arms were as long as his. He thought this a game! Idiot.

He deftly avoided falling into or over the chair using the table to balance himself. His thick headed accomplice sniggered coming up behind her. She lifted her left leg and stomped him on the shin. That would hurt whilst fat face stood in front of the window. Outside a peaceful sunny day, rich green hills, wonderful blue mountains, snow capped, crystal clear sky. Perfect.

Behind the nurse bent over rubbing his shin. His drooling mouth opened, his eyes basilisk, spewing hatred. She screamed which jolted him. He looked up and using both hands Carias whacked fat face under his chin. His corpulent frame light, so unresisting, then he toppled backwards, through the open window and out of sight. Close behind her a surprised gasp. Then the distinctive soft thud of the nurse's heavy body hitting the ground.

She felt better, spun around and saw the other nurse scurry like the rat he was out of her room. Well if the room had sensors whoever manned it would see her defiant act in maintaining her privacy, her dignity, her sense of preservation. She was surprised how well she'd handled herself.

Fearing that others would come she dressed quickly slamming the door shut. She wanted for a moment to get into the Web to get help. Or be retrieved but that was her mind playing games. Reality just didn't work like that. Maybe on Regum but not here.

In the communal meal room the others were all sitting like battery hens along rows of benches slurping, gulping their porridge. There was Fehna who quickly looked back down into her gruel. She heard their scraping, gulping, masticating, swallowing, grunting, which revolted her. Should she report the incident? They would find out anyway. It would reveal whether she was under direct observation in her room.

Fehna was surprised to see her. Maybe the nurses had been sent to take her away somewhere after they had their fun. Well any moment now Carias expected the goons to come for her. Well the scum would have a surprise on their hands if they thought she would succumb meekly. She would tell them all of what they were really like.

Her anger roared like a blazing fire inside her. She felt vengeful, hatred searing her mind in white hot heat. The whole room shimmered with her wrath irradiating the place. Someone dropped their utensils, others looked fearfully at her. They looked hollow, empty husks, depleted shells. They were afraid of her! Was it that obvious?

Carias looked at Fehna. Their eyes met. They linked mentally. Fehna was sending a distress signal. How? Was she enhanced? Upgraded? Boosted? A natural, a chameleon, a spy! Working for them. No wonder she had gone on about them. It was true and she was one of them. Bitch.

Someone moaned in fear or ecstasy or both. The clamour of discordant minds around her. At the edge of the room nurses looked puzzled still indecisive as to what to do. Move in or wait and see? Just like that other goon who had scampered off somewhere. One nurse moving towards her. Coming closer and ducked instinctively as an arcing arm whooshed over her head. She twisted around and with the flat palm of

her hand, it was coming in handy, whacked the nurse, a woman this time right on the side of her head. She toppled over, consternation and pandemonium breaking out in the breakfast hall. The nurses would be busy. Carias focussing on Fehna, so called friend. Moans and screams all around. Why? Just a little fracas. Nurses rushed in bundling off some of the hysterics. The nurse she flattened was lying there stunned. Must have hit her head on the leg of a chair. Some of the patients were whimpering, noses runny, some were pissing themselves, dark stains between their legs, others trembling in fear. Could they all sense her rage?

The stunned nurse got up and instead of looking at Carias looked at Fehna to see if she was alright. That confirmed it. Stool pigeon. The rage inside her exploded. Part of the attempted rape, now that she was over that, the sense of betrayal, well she would give Fehna something to think about. Fehna had risen, backing away from Carias as the nurse rose like some solid spectre intent to do her worst. Carias grabbed Fehna's long black hair, moved her head to the side and with a scream stuck her teeth into the tempting jugular. Though Fehna's neck muscles were tense, her whole body rigid with fear Carias did her best to rip her neck to shreds. Blood spurting in beautiful graceful arcing globules. Make her feel real fear...and her power. A needle was jabbed in her leg then vapid darkness enclosed her in its warm embrace.

She felt uncomfortable physically. The lethargy in her head mind numbing. Thoughts surfaced then sank rapidly, almost graspable then vanishing without a trace as her memory tried to latch onto them. Like covetous ghosts. Ghosts. They too vaporized, mist blown away in her mental turmoil. That too subsided. She was blank on the inside. Her loaded potential distant, way beyond her grasp.

She opened her eyes and her body stiffened, apprehensive, defensive. A spacious office, walls off white. She was sitting unconstrained in the middle of the bland room, in front a desk and a man in a suit. Not a doctor's coat. The desk empty as if whatever was there might give away his identity. Bulbous head, deep set dark eyes, sensuous lips. She felt drained. Bits were coming back. She remembered Fehna saying how they 'knew' what one thought. Carias knew about BrainDraining, everybody did. The last resort for the insane to reconstitute them. Remote controlled access to minds. She withdrew into her shell. Easy. The drug doing it for her. Think nothing and they would get nothing. They weren't that smart.

"How do you feel?" he asked at last. That was the last question she expected. A hint of a smile, eyes analytical, observant, professional, calculating.

"Numb." It took an effort to speak, to think even. He sat there, hands folded in front of him, so relaxed, so together, so there. His clothing bland really. He could be anybody. She felt weary. A moment of panic. Her head like jelly.

"You needed calming."

So she was deemed a volatile. Well even better. Unpredictable, with greater potential than the others, out there, in reality land. He was toying with the button on his sleeve. A microphone or transmitter perhaps. Seeing her watch him he folded his hands again. So calm, so sure, so neutral. His eyes never left her

She looked back. Nothing there. Flat orbs, like lenses. She tried to get her feelings across but couldn't work up the energy. A wave withdrawing, receding into chaotic thoughts. Bubbles in boiling water never making it to the surface. So many realms in one mind, her mind.

He even more remote. Was she being suppressed or was part of her mind putting a lid on her thoughts. To deny him access. My secrets not yours. She relaxed in the knowledge that they had not BrainDrained her. She tried to neutralise her thinking, inserting the image of the gardens, the hills, the trees, anything but what she really possessed. Not for him.

He shrank, withered, contracted in front of her. Her mind still as potent as when she had attacked Fehna. Viper. Sneak. Traitor. She let that out. See if he reacted. His brain oscillated. An enhanced natural, boosted no doubt, sensory heightened perception. His semblance of being neutral more than a mask, an attitude. Keeping his distance. That invigorated her. But what now? The attempted rape. She felt hot, affronted at the clumsy effort by that pig. The image seared her brain and she hoped he would get the picture. If he did he was not admitting to it, the eyes receding into their two dimensional flatness.

"Are you?"

"I am." What?

"Want to talk about it?"

"The attempted rape?"

He really did look surprised, shocked, almost.

"You tried to kill a patient."

"I did nothing of the sort." Taking a bite maybe.

"What made you freak out? Did you see demons?"

"Had one in my room, two in fact."

"Why would Fehna be a threat to you?" meaning why did she act the way she did.

Carias said nothing. If she mentioned she was one of them they would suggest she was paranoid. Yet if she did not reveal her duplicity then there was no cause for her to act the way she had. Carias wanted to show Fehna that there was more out there, more inside of her as well than met the eye. Appearances were deceptions.

"You screwed with my head. Maybe not you personally, but screwed it was. Otherwise why would I behave so differently? Drugs in the food. Dangerous you know, so unpredictable. Even the water is tampered with. All to make the treatment look like it's working. Well it's putting a sledgehammer to one's head. Trouble is there's a reaction. Not my doing doctor. So you gonna take the easy way out and drain me?" might as well find out.

"Why should we do that?"

"Because of the way you been brought up. What's been stuffed into your brain, the hyper paranoia, the crap up there, the crap in our heads to impress the dumbfucks. My mother is more demented than most patients here. Funny, she's normal. Sorry forgot." She said facetiously. "I'm not one of your cases, doctor, if that is what you are. Not some sneak in civilian clothes, changing your garb to hide your real vocation."

"What makes you think that?"

"Paranoia. Fear of revealing the truth. Hiding behind illusions. Repeat the game often enough and it takes on a life of its own."

"What game is that?"

"The bullshit pretending to be revealed reality."

"You know what you are saying?"

"What others think. Hundreds if not thousands. I'm not the only one." There. Take that, a dose of reality. "Doctor." She added for good measure.

"Dr Graben at your service Carias." He sounded gentle for a moment.

"Some service. Goons for nurses." She was disgusted.

"We are trying to cure you." Graben said with consideration. Her access to the Web irked him. Plus her insertion being encoded. Just jumbled data, screwed up numbers, messy pixels.

"I don't need curing. My mother does. I just want to be left alone. Who needs this shit anyway?"

"We have left you alone Carias." He was so gentle, so accommodating. "Now there is one dead nurse, and Fehna's in intensive care."

"Yeah well, piggy fell out the window. As for Fehna, she's not who you think she is."

"It's all on record Carias."

"So my room is censored. Then you'd know what your pig was up to."

He smiled sadly. So there were emotions. One for this sequence one for that sequence of events. How apt.

"Why Fehna?" as if the nurse was of no consequence. Maybe it happened all the time. Good.

"Indeed doctor."

"Carias. We will get to the truth. No matter how much you are in denial, subject to you delusions."

"This whole planet's deluded doctor. Or haven't you noticed. And one with your training, your high level of expertise." She scoffed.

His eyes hardened.

"Such a waste of potential." He sighed theatrically. Carias deemed an unstable volatile. So this silly experiment of Dross and Neghar would cease forthwith. Murder was murder. Rare but sadly it happened with her type.

"You gonna waste me then?" using his words. Not as he expected.

"Unless reconditioned, stabilized, sanitized. The other alternative is you remain here until your mind self heals. Could take an eternity. Your choice."

"Submission, like the rest."

He merely looked at her.

"So if you vacuum me I'm free. Is that it?"

"Not for me to decide. Though I do have the initial say as to your possibility of being cured. There is drug therapy of course, but we try to avoid that. Last recourse."

"From BrainDraining. I am here voluntarily you know."

"Not any more."

"One dead piggy. Can't molest the patients any more. He tried to rape me."

"All in your mind."

Set up. Bastards. Did he know that she was working undercover? Were they in this together? Had her dad or his boss spoken to this doctor? Cleared the way? Must be. But Groben didn't like it and so she was set up. Bastards.

"No doctor. Not my mind. Reality. That shit was after me."

"Paranoia. Maybe schizophrenic. You see things where nothing exists. You perceive plots in your mind. You suspect people of covert designs. Not unusual for someone in your condition."

"Maybe that is the divine mind's intent."

Now he really was surprised.

"Now you really are delusional."

"So why, according to you does it create schizophrenics then, doctor?"

"You know as well as any anybody why."

"OK. So why does it let the alien influence influence us?"

"To test our resolve. See if we are worthy. Strengthen us for the coming times of revelation. Weed out the fallen, the mentally corrupt which we are trying to help regain their inner equilibrium."

"Oh yes, can't have any original thoughts."

"The Web has messed with your mind. This Carias is reality, this and only this."

"So send me to Regum. You send the other delusional types."

"Oh? Who might they be then?"

"The priests on their mission of redemption."

"They are very adjusted Carias. Not volatile either."

"So where is this cosmic consciousness then doctor?"

"Everywhere."

"Well if it's everywhere we can't be here then, can we?"

"It's a subtle effluvium."

"Really."

"You don't believe?"

"I'm waiting for proof, doctor."

"Until you have adjusted, become stable, not a danger to others I will have to recommend you be isolated."

Inside she was happy. Finally to be left alone. She tried to look appropriately crestfallen.

"And my family?" Carias asked meekly.

"They will be informed." Groben was content.

Two female nurses entered the office.

"Take Carias back to her room. Her meals are to be served there. She is not to be let out for the duration. When we think Carias is stable enough we may let her enjoy the

gardens. But as she has a wonderful view I'm sure she can appreciate the panorama and imbibe its beauty."

Case dismissed Carias thought.

"We will talk again. Oh yes, Carias, given the incident, you appreciate there will be an enquiry. Murder is so unpleasant, so unnecessary. However I do believe you were out of your senses. You do appreciate what I am saying." Trying to look concerned.

"Yes doctor." She sighed. "I am grateful."

"That's good, that's good. We do mean to look after you."

"I know. I'm sorry." She said demurely. A little contrition would not hurt.

After Carias left Groben's office a wan smile from him. A psychopath in the Web. Should he contact Shuss. No he decided to wait until his superior liaising with Dross would get in touch with him. This was an internal matter. He was running Carias now. Dross and Neghar were involved in a dangerous game. Groben was well aware of the Ecclesiastics concern, in trouncing the Web, bringing it down. By any means. It was war of a different kind. Yet as far as he knew, which was precious little except that others were involved in this monumental struggle, Regum's WebSpace was expanding as they sent their satellites further into real space. Expanding relentlessly. Taking the misguided like Carias with it.

Dross finished looking at Caria's run in WebSpace. Two planets. Were they real? Their analytical capabilities were constrained. Remnant technology. The DVs were doing their best to get into Regum's scientists heads, subtract what they knew, what knowledge they possessed.

The trouble was the Reganian's got their computers to think for them, presenting possible avenues with which to continue, then make their decision which way to go. So that any development was always accomplished fact. Their computers inviolate. Machines, even smart ones mimicking awareness simply did not respond to psychic intruders. Totally useless. It was annoying. Maybe if one day their systems did evolve true sentience they might be able to influence them but as things stood now there was no chance of their interference yielding any results. Until then Neghar relied on operatives such as Carias. There were other agents in place. But most were overwhelmed by the multiplicity of alternative worlds. They got confused, lost their orientation and mission objectives, were sidelined by stealth programmes, contained by roving security sentinels which could be in any form. The enemy a master of camouflage. They were cornered and trapped with depressing regularity. Their people like self advertising beacons. Instant

targets. Except Carias. Their first success in being accepted for who she was, not who she worked for.

The real astronomical data concerning the two distant planets did not exist in their knowledge base except as a supposition. The alien field was presumed to have a source. It had to be somewhere. Could either of these planets be that hypothetical point of origin. Yet what Carias retrieved indicated nothing at all. In fact as far as the Reganian's were concerned the field did not even exist. Or if it did it was of no consequence to them. Background radiation was the term they used.

Frustrating as he sat in front of the consoles replaying Carias's excursion. Cyber worlds. Still it was something. Maybe their location was real. He doubted it. Just another construct amongst thousands. Its inhabitants had their own worlds simply because they could create them. Carias had chosen her destination on the grounds that they were the furthest out. In cyberspace there was no real distance. That space ships were needed was purely for fun, get the feel of being an explorer.

Carias coming to the cyber relative future. Dross marvelled at how the laws of physics were embedded in the architecture. The runtimes configured so that when she returned she was way ahead of the present she'd left when blasting off. Hitting the proverbial brick wall. It confirmed one thing though. Time was embedded and the future she accessed was as yet unconstructed. Now if he could get a future built according to what Prima wanted, then patch that into the Web they might be able to construct the cyber universe according to their designs, their view of the universe.

Having exhausted all the possibilities, which were far and few he called in Neghar. Entering Dross had him sit down and watch Caria's adventure as an explorer.

"So she survived." Neghar trying not to sound too proud.

"Yes, accepted by the inhabitants. The usual checks held. Another gamer wanting a fun ride."

"And no alerts."

"None whatsoever."

Neghar was relieved. Well his daughter had been in many times.

"Maybe they do know and want to see what she's after." Neghar suggested as her return hit the messy pixel image. "Though from what we retrieved of her previous insertions she was never after anything."

"Where our agents have gone wrong."

"Well I'm glad I don't set policy." Neghar smiled at Dross.

"All I can do is recommend. Not my decision. Though you would think as we are directly involved with the Web they would give us more leeway."

"Well Dross, we all know how they work." Meaning the Ecclesiastics who ran the higher Dominus and Domimax, secret enclaves of the different DV levels of activity.

"Yes, top down orders. Still they insist on playing spies. What we need is collaborators. Persona's that act like those inside. We're coming in basically as we are. And are subsequently neutralised. Sure we're making some progress," which he could not relate to Neghar, "but it's mostly trivial."

"If it helps to complete the picture."

"Except the picture is getting bigger all the time. More worlds, created upon mere whims. Soon they'll add new universes."

Neghar was surprised. He could barely fathom the concept. It was simply too big to comprehend. Almost illogical. With a cyber cosmos essentially being potentially infinite, adding more infinities boggled the mind.

"If they do this..." Neghar left his thoughts unfinished.

"I know. We're stuffed. Prima would not figure in them at all. We'd stick out even more. Our cyber planet there more for amusement."

It was a horrible thought but Dross was right. They were an irrelevance.

"So it's up to Carias then."

"For the moment. Trouble is we could use some of the DVs but up there," meaning the orbital, "they're not releasing any. And the burnt ones are of no use. Too unstable. We tried that Neghar."

"Yes. Didn't get them or us very far."

Dross could not admit they were losing this one. Unless the Web was brought down, which meant attacking Regum's global systems the best they could do is catch up. Always several steps behind.

"We have to convince Lord Qatus or Gharbel to use a new approach. Encourage our young, anybody really to get in there with no designated orientation. Let them play with the system. That way we might discover the inherent weakness that is in any system."

"Trouble is Dross this is a self rectifying system. They're using AIs. Multiple answers to any problem. Whatever we think if, it's covered."

"I know. How to get into the AI and reconfigure them."

"Our brief."

"At least Carias discovered a real end."

"Now if we could find more such ends and bring them in, we might be able to limit the web. Move the ends in until that is all that is left."

"A good point. Put real blocks in place. You want me to work on that?"

"It's worth exploring."

"Well at least we made some progress today."

"It's only a thought." Neghar said. "They might simply create more realms."

"You're right. But if we can get an operative to head into each of these realms future, hit the end and bring that in, it would be a start in containing the Web."

"If we get the right individuals."

"Yes back to that. Officially we don't exist. So releasing those who access the Web illegally becomes fraught with legalities. That's the trouble with prohibition, it locks out the very people, including the decision makers from the very environment needed to be controlled. Denying access gives the Reganian's more freedom whilst we flounder in the dark."

"And your position bears no weight?" Neghar asked.

"An advisor on the sidelines."

"I don't envy your position."

"Frustrating. Still we gotta work with what tools we're given. In a way I'm surprised they let us dabble in the web at all."

"Well it's not gonna go away."

Dross could not reveal the overall plan regarding the Web either. Those working in the field knew the final intent was to bring down the Web and hopefully cause a mighty calamity on Regum as well. Something the Reganian's did not suspect directly. Keeping their security on high alert. Viruses, stealth programmes, simulated warfare, sabotage, all a game to the Reganians. They relished the challenge and won every time. They knew what the Primaians were up to. They expected it. Most annoying.

"So what does Carias do now?"

"For the moment we let her run free. See how many dead ends there are. Maybe there's a pattern and if so can we use it to turn the whole Web into a dead end."

"Trick is to stop them creating new domains." Neghar sighed.

"Yes, back to that. Their AIs got everything covered."

"Doesn't look good does it?"

"Only on the outside Neghar. If we ever crash the Web, then we might be able to crash Regum in real time."

"Yes where would they be without their hardware."

"Indeed Neghar. Until then, Carias remains a free agent. She might pick up more surprises for us."

"Let's hope so."

"What we need is to maybe invade the Web. A massive assault. Put all the DVs in there at once, all the gamers, all our agents, the whole planet if need be."

"Neghar," Dross laughed, "you're dreaming." Then turning serious, "But it is an idea. One I might say will never be accepted. Our Lords would think we have capitulated. Plus it would leave Prima's resonance in a precarious state. They'd be able to infiltrate it and then, well that would be the end of our world as we know it."

"I was merely speculating Dross."

"I'm aware of that. You never know, it is a last resort. No, we have to be practical. But your opinion is not without relevance. Swamping the Web. Tempting."

"So what now?"

"As I said, let Carias do her own thing."

Orbital: Prima

Drassid listened to Elentra's report. She began with the missing target specific group of DVs under Ung's guidance.

"Yet Ung somehow was not affected by the experiment."

"Must have remained outside their field orientation."

"Lucky for her. Downloaded?"

"It's all there...what there is. Routine debrief. Remarkable woman. Part of her brain ran the insertion technique. As that got us no results it was decided, I," she corrected herself taking full responsibility, "decided to try this approach."

"Even though it was never attempted before. No simulations to see how dangerous this could be, was, and probably is." Drassid wanting to clear this up first. "For the record we will designate them as burnt. Held in isolation. All we have to do is insert their personal data, ghosts in the system."

"Drassid, there is something else that is odd. No files. No data. Nothing. Vanished."

"To what though? You said they emptied their minds. It's a scanning technique to have an observer there totally neutral. Yet this time something happened that self voided. Like popping a balloon and the balloon vanishes. I've had a look at the sequence. The interference of Regum's field is gone. I'm sure you were going to get around to that. It's good of you to relate the worst first. In a way this is a breakthrough but I'm wondering if Regum's not behind this."

"You mean they extracted themselves and took the DVs with them?" that thought had not occurred to her.

"It cannot be ruled out."

"So instead of us taking them out the reverse occurred. But Drassid, the ship, it's crew have mass. With us having a trace, thanks to Ung, wherever they would move we would know. Should know."

"Well the onboard systems confirm a puzzle. Now looking at this from a positive angle, you did succeed in removing them. I ought to congratulate you. Plus Ung of

course. Yet for security reasons I, nor you can enlighten her. In fact," he was studying the readouts on the monitors, "if Ung had vanished, then we'd have absolutely nothing. She's the anchor. An amazing brain, extremely tight focussed resonance. One of a new breed. The cosmic consciousness has given us this new evolved being. On par with that of the Domain Lords. There has never been a Natural like this before. Anywhere. I also went through the personnel files and the only other operative is Ratze. One is a fluke. Two makes a pattern."

It was his duty to know everything pertaining to their overall mission including the minutiae involved. What he could not say was there was a third. Nervina. How she managed to remain unnoticed for so long was due to her keeping her resonance at a level where she appeared other than what she truly was. Did that mean that these new beings, if that is what they were, an evolved leap having a higher level of resonance? Not just that but simultaneously playing down that level so that in Nervina's case she appeared less than what she was? There were ways of finding out. Deep Scanning. Drugs. See if they harboured a potential essence capable of compelling psychic feats. The opportunity offered would aid them in making inroads into Regum's protective cyber shell. Elentra's team had brought down the insertion field of Regum's experiment, maybe these beings could bring down the Web as well. But the danger of loosing them could not be ruled out. It would depend on what Regum did next. He had an idea.

"As I am going to assume the success is at this end, I am suggesting we run another experiment. First we get some DVs to go neutral."

"It's in place Drassid."

"Good. Anything else?"

"No. Just scanning space. The trouble is with the collapse of the field the source was lost as well."

"Even though Ung's downloaded data didn't wipe her memory. Yet the source should be within her and isn't. Something is not right here."

"Drassid. This is all new territory. Anything is possible. Remember Ung was not with them. She was more on the alert for any counter moves by the Reganian's."

"Yet managed to be both in and out. Remarkable."

"Fantastic." Elentra felt better. Loosing the DVs preyed on her mind, her well being. If not for the success she'd have been frantic. Drassid was completely professional about their apparent success. She did not like the idea though that maybe Regum self extracted. If they had they'd have their headspace as well. Basically it would then be an abduction. Officially there was little they could do. This game they were engaged in, this

struggle was all beyond the political horizon. Not even acknowledged. Regum released no information if in fact they did retrieve their ship and the DVs. It came back to the assumption that they were successful in crashing Regum's spatial extension. Since the Web was that as well the possibility was there now to bring it down. She told him.

"I agree. It must be explored. However since and let's assume this is our success they will of course expect us to repeat that performance. But we're going to have to disappoint them on that score."

Elentra waited. "Meaning?"

"We try a different approach."

"Glad to hear it."

Drassid's idea was to try and re-run what Elentra achieved from within the Web. It might then be sucked into the void-state. It became clearer to him whilst talking with Elentra that this was a state that acted differently to their resonance. Psychic at one level where distance and time was immaterial and possessed by a unique state that defied all analysis. The computers had come up with nothing. It never happened. That had potential. If they could get agents to duplicate this, then self delete the Reganians too had nothing. It was a great breakthrough. And with the appearance of Nervina's capabilities she would be perfect to send on the next mission to Regum.

"Until further orders, neutral run time sweeps. See what happens."

"Right. We'll get them yet."

"Of course. Only a matter of time." Drassid said confidently.

"Time. Such a limitation in one way even if we are independent of it."

"We are Elentra, we are."

"Pity we don't know the end result."

"Yes. So many futures with only one reality."

"It's going to be ours Drassid."

"That it is Elentra. Well I'm finished here. Oh yes, Ung. Don't release any data regarding our, your, success. Treat it as if what occurred is normal. Not for her to know anyway. Naturals are unpredictable, even when adjusted. If she were to vanish of her own volition along with that planet's future then any planet can be emptied of life as well."

"Yes that came as a surprise."

"We are dealing with something that can barely be explained. There it is, or was." He smiled for the first time. Elentra was relieved. She'd gotten away with it.

Carias

Back in her room, where the nurses left her. Then the unmistakable click as the door was locked. Removed, isolated, trapped. She felt nervous now, agitated. What had come over her to go for Fehna's jugular? Where had this searing hatred come from? She'd never been that emotional. Not like this. Were they mind screwing her? Fehna, in that moment of white boiling churning explosive heat was both horrified and almost willing as a victim. Giving in, giving up. Then something surfaced from the dark of her mind. The impression of Fehna asking for forgiveness. Forgive what? Ratting on her. Fehna had been used by Groben to spy on her. Why? What made her so special? Surely not going into the Web.

The ghosts gave her hope. Cautious. Remaining one step removed from character recognition. So good as not to be detected? Then there were the DVs. Could they insert themselves merely through their psychic capabilities? It was said they could be anywhere, including one's head. Messing with her resonance. Was she a target without knowing it?

The thoughts distracted her from her usual sense of equilibrium. Up to now, up to this morning she had been care-free, free even within the confinement of the asylum. Ung, her father all on her side. Her father helping her by working for his department. The link to the outside. Or a trap to remain here? Maybe he was being used as well. That all this was a game to keep her here. And do their dirty work for them in the Web.

She drank some water, she was that thirsty. It felt good, she was parched. She stared forlornly out of the window. Not even able to walk in the gardens. Like a cruel joke being so close yet so far, that everything that had happened was one reality removed. Like a dream, another state from which she was now disassociated. Gone for ever. Another cruel twist, another impossible attainability. If not for the headband she'd be totally lost. Completely confined. Isolated. Removed. Non existent. Condemned to life in this room.

A little calmer now. Her head a little thicker, the present more solid. The levity burdened by thoughts thoughts thoughts. Crowding in, persistent. Her lucidity swamped

by a heavy fog. More like a realm smudging out her imagination. Going blank. Her other realities distant memories. Not connecting. Receding as she tried to hang on to them. The portals to her inner self. Their reality denied to her. But not completely gone. The after images rippling through this weighted nothingness infusing her very being, body and soul.

Still thirsty she drank more water. Her movements remote, as if she was besides herself. Only the water felt real. A tangible something. The picture perfect view a projection, its immediacy curtained off. She thought of Ung. So free amongst the restrictions of socially accepted norms. How did she manage it? By simply doing it! What could she do here? Nothing. Even the Web was just another diversion. Using up energy, waylaying her being by distracting her inner senses from the real reality. What was she thinking? Her reasoning following its own pertinent logic. So what if there were multiple cyber worlds? Reality was still cloistered, no escape. Maybe the Reganian's felt this as well and escaped into the Web to get away from the enmeshed real web, the effusions of the cosmic consciousness trapping them all in its reality. What had the ghosts said? She had trouble remembering. Something about the content of the universe. Was the universe flawed due to the great mind? Were they all trapped inside its projected illusion?

Her sense of isolation gave her some hope. Just knowing that gave her what little strength she had left. How did the others cope? Shutting themselves off? Accepting this image of reality with reverence. She had tried to belong but could never quite bond. She'd connected with Fehna only to be betrayed. That meant she was something, something other. Alone amongst the vastness pouring into her.

Carias's body so heavy. She was sinking. Dragged down into its vortex, like water down the drain, being drained. Is that why she had gone for the jugular? Blood the liquescent essence of life? Was her inner self telling her something, creating the need to keep her energy which was subtly being extracted in this place? Though the thought should have horrified her there was only a vacant indifference, disavowed, meaningless, worse. Useless. Her father and Dross thought her of some use. To be used. So exhausting. It made no sense. Regum Prima Prima Regum, forever entwined in their stupid battle for reality. Turning reality into insanity.

Maybe by going out there, into the Web she'd been exposed to the alien field. Maybe that is why it was off limits. Infesting her with its life draining properties. Sapping the will to live so that it could survive. Or was that the great mind? In collusion. Otherwise why allow it at all? The great deception. With everyone caught in both its webs. No escape. Condemned for ever. No way out. Or was there? Negate the negation.

More water. The thirst did not surprise her. Thirst was thirst. She drained the glass. The water cool refreshing. The fog thickened. A twinkle of light. Light. The essence of life. Get to the light. The glass reflected in its tiny spark. Miniature stars of the universe. Right in front of her. A message of hope. She looked at the sun outside. Too bright. Only in the glass, as it captured its rays was her link to the outside established. The last link. That could not be taken from her. Ha! They thought they had her, whatever had her, didn't. There was always a possibility out if one but looked.

The insidious life leeching presence washed through her, mind and all. Memories vanished. Only the after glow remained. Tiny colourful beads dissipating in a slow explosion as the grey dimensionless fog poured into her. Time to put a stop to this. Infuse the light. The opposite of this limitless nothingness that was sucking out her very being.

Along the shards many suns. A beautiful array of starlight, enticingly close but still removed by one degree of reality. The pitcher was broken. She barely remembered smashing it. The twinkling light so pure. Beckoning her to infuse its pure essence into her vanishing self. Restore the link. Be one with it, become light itself. Self irradiate. She must have smashed it over the table. No pain, just warmth. She picked up the shards, all twinkling. So many suns, so much energy, the light her link out of this embodied prison.

Time to get at the light, to get it into her directly. She picked up one of the shards. It felt warm, infused with cosmic power. One of the stars glowing at its pointed jagged tip. She thrust it deep into her inner arm. For a moment searing pain which immediately receded deep into her head, the sharp awareness a minor sensation. Her body's feelings barely registering the immediacy of rent flesh, blood pouring out, so warm, washing over her arm's deep gash. The blood was capturing the light. She felt light. She picked up another shard and inserted that as well. She was getting it all, the power of the sun within her.

The fog inside her, this incestuous infusion shuddered as the light rippled through it, through her. She was linked to the stars themselves. More. Another shard entered her veins, right to the source. No wonder she had gone for Fehna's blood. Accept there she had misread the signs. It was her blood that mattered, not Fehna's.

Light headed. So much better than the heaviness from before. Ah bliss. So soothing, so relaxing, so expansive. Infused with the power of the stars. Gravity dissipated, her mind winging towards eternity. The crap, the bullshit, the useless thoughts turning irrelevant. Pure consciousness way beyond anything she ever felt. Bursting with joy. Freedom, the ultimate, the path opened, her soul ready like some heroine on the brink of revelation. High expectations, pregnant with the undefinable essence that had been

corrupted by vicious minds encouraging self delusion. She was free of that now. It was almost laughable, it was laughable. All problems destroyed. Self resurrecting. With that beautiful thought the mental burden dissipated from within her. The traps no more, the false reasoning mere illusions, it's malignant grip finally released. The light was everything now, then the soothing balm of eternal nothingness. The divine effluvium, the very stuff of the universe uniting her soaring soul as it left the containment of the body behind.

She was free.

It was not until dinner time, when her goalers enquired if she was hungry, for the water was drugged to sedate her aberrant mind that they found Carias sitting limp in a pool of blood. Jagged shards of glass in her arms, an angelic smile on her face. The eyes intense with wonder. Death looking at the sky as if she had received some divine revelation.

Dross felt for Neghar. He had known of Carias's suicide for over two days now. Dr. Groben through Shuss filed the report. Carias had gone volatile. First the murder of the nurse which Dross barely credited. The asylums were really the private domains of the DLs. Keep them up to date as to the extreme polarities of the people. The fallen at one end, the enhanced on the Orbital, the pure on the planet. By studying aberrant psychological states it was hoped some of the patients might be naturals with potent mental capabilities attuned hopefully to cause maximum mayhem on Regum and its spreading Web. The pure as the people were considered, more of a sop to make them feel good, make them accept their station and social status in life, keeping them Dross thought on the farm. Mainly those simply not mentally attuned to a sophisticated civilisation which Regum was.

Dross had to keep the bigger picture constantly in mind. The munitiae of their daily tasks was Neghar's province. Which included Carias. Now that she was dead they'd lost one of their best, if not the best. It was frustrating. With Carias's unique resonance, extremely tight they had had a chance.

Now she was dead.

Neghar was crestfallen.

"You can have time off. As long as you think necessary." Dross said with reserve.

Neghar was numb. "Carias was not the type. Something must have triggered her. How much do you know about the asylums?"

"In what way?"

"Well the routine regimen of the patients."

"Depends Neghar."

"I know. Are drugs a big deal?"

"Well the volatiles are suppressed. Sort of waking sleepers, or better said wakefully asleep. Doped up in other words."

"Depressants."

Dross nodded.

"Was Carias fed these drugs?"

"Not according to Groben. Mild sedatives yes, that was for all of them. In the water."

"Have they released the results? Any observational data?"

"Yes, we got that from Shuss. He extends his condolences as does Groben."

"Thank them will you?"

"I gather you don't want to see them."

"I have an aversion to Groben." Neghar trying not to dwell on his daughter's demise.

"Are there many suicides?"

"Not that we are aware of. Really not our domain Neghar. I think questions should be asked."

"I can envisage the answer there. Unstable volatiles."

"And no one noticed?"

"Apparently they were dealing with an outbreak of mass hysterics."

"So?"

"Not enough staff..." Dross said slowly. "Suicide is rare, very rare." As if that would help Neghar cope with his loss. He was almost going to say Carias's soul was with the maker but thought better of it. It would sound hollow. The priests of course would say the great divine being had called her, had created the mental ennui, that she actually wanted to ascend. Then there was that episode with Fehna. She had died of blood poisoning. Whilst there was a basic hospital at the asylum Groben had decided for whatever reason not to move her to a real hospital. Whether he had the power to deny proper treatment Dross was not sure. The evidence however showed a very confused young woman. Carias had lost it. Groben was insistent according to Shuss. Case closed. And it was.

As far as Neghar was concerned it was the treatment that sent Carias over the edge. She handled the web with aplomb, coped with extreme realities in the web. One who could handle that was not going to commit suicide.

"We got the headband back?"

"Shuss saw to that."

"So we have her data."

"We do." Dross was glad Neghar was still focussed. Must be an effort. "Dead end."

"How so?"

"Literally. She reached the limits of the web."

"Ah, a programmed dead end."

"Not so much programmed as the limit."

"Well that is something."

"In its relative future."

"At least it's not infinite."

"That is something Neghar."

"I guess it is."

"If you want you can take your leave right now. Get in touch in a day, a week, take all the time in the world."

"Thank you Dross." Dross respected Neghar. A good executive and hands on approach. He just hoped Neghar would stay here.

"I may as well keep an eye out for potentials whilst I'm gone."

"You don't have to Neghar. But is appreciated. It will go on your record. Very commendable. Again my deepest sympathies."

"Thank you Dross. I still cannot for the life of me understand what turned Carias suicidal."

"No one ever can Neghar. It's like...no I won't say it."

"Please do."

"It's always unexpected. There are no real tell tale signs. Or rather there are but they seem so ordinary at the time, in the context. It's as if suicides keep their intent secret. Maybe they don't even know it themselves. There is however a school of thought that claims, and I'm not saying this applies to your daughter, that the life essence, the resonance is depleted. It has done it's work in this life and as death cannot be natural for they are too young, the mind considers suicide as the only viable option. It's only a theory mind you."

"It does make some sense Dross. But not in Carias's case. She had so much to live for. The Web alone kept her going. And that was not denied. I can only think that the sedatives depressed her. The dosage too strong, even if as you say they claim it was mild. But she did drink the whole pitcher of water. Wanting her thirsty. You know Dross I almost think they wanted to sabotage our plan. Resented us running Carias in their domain. If I were you I would watch Groben very carefully. Either he is empire building, or simply a shit."

Dross smiled. "I prefer the latter."

"So do I. It would mean we could nail him. Not us but through Shuss. If he is empire building it would be nice to know who he's in league with."

"The DL?"

"They are in league with everybody Neghar."

"Still..."

"Well, we will see. So are we going to discuss work or are you taking your leave. Not that I'm trying to get rid of you."

Neghar rose. "I'll be in touch."

"When you're ready. And my condolences to your wife..."

"Ung. She's not going to like it."

"Of course not. Were they close?"

"Sort of. Ung older. No rivalry, the age difference saw to that. More protective, like a mentor. It's probably through Ung that Carias got into the web."

"I'm not hearing this."

"Thank you. I don't think Ung put her up to it. Please remember this."

"Of course."

"Ung is going to be very very angry. Who knows, it could be useful."

"In what way?" Dross asked as Neghar paced the floor.

"She moves in other circles."

"You mean we should have her with us?"

"It's a thought. If I can bring Groben down, I will be satisfied."

"You think he's responsible?"

"Maybe indirectly. Remember the interview."

"Oh yes."

"Well there you have it."

"I shall consider it. Now are you going to go on leave?"

"On my way Dross. See you soon."

"It's best if I don't come to the funeral. This position, you understand."

"Low profile."

"Exactly. Go now."

"On my way."

Mena

Mena and Ratze were hanging in space for Mena's daily meditation. When assigned a sector Ratze was informed they were to go into isolation well away from the DVs. Usually novices were engrouped, creating the feeling of being bonded. It was obvious the other DVs were on special assignment. Ung was in the rear as observer monitoring the overall situation of their combined resonant states including Mena's and Ratze's. Niatu was off duty. Ratze was tempted to say hello to Ung but held back. Something big was happening and as officially Ung was head overseer linking was not in her best interest. Keep the anonymity up.

Mena, in place with Ratze, the huge orbital behind them. Whatever the DVs were up to might influence Mena and any other novice. Rare indeed. Ratze's Brain anticipated something. She hoped Ung felt the same. This time Ratze would run an experiment of her own. It was risky and a little tricky. She was going to soft-scan Mena. The Dominus, persons unknown who basically ran the DVs on behalf of the Ecclesiastics were not to be trifled with. Whether they had capabilities way beyond naturals could not be ruled out. Ratze registered no probing. In the clear. She knew there was more to her than she herself realised but that was about all. With the DVs target mission specific now was a good time to get some information about how they worked, how they functioned, how they projected their headspace and maybe even the designated target of their psychic attention. She was surprised both her and Mena were let out at all. That could be due to Mena's status. Mena was no run of the mill acolyte. Fiercely determined to make contact with the great being. Who knows what Mena would come up with. She had to consider the possibility that they were being remotely observed. Thus the need to go into softscan open channel mode. Pretending her natural inclinations were active. Her Brain was ready.

Mena was excited. Feeling at home out here. The immensity of space invigorating. For some it was too much but for Mena she could not get enough. Every day she felt she was making progress. More within her than from any signs out here.

Aware that it would take time and effort to achieve her spiritual aims. If she could not get in touch here then...she banished the thought. She would make it, align her seeking soul with the great divinenes that was the whole universe. Be one with it. What would happen after she could not even guess. She was not after power. She had no intentions, not even any practical application in mind. Merely being in that transcendent state was enough. The rest would follow. Enlighten other seekers so that their resonance would be purified.

Even the space suit was normal to her now. The initial constriction of its physical reality merely a part of her. It occurred to her that whilst Niatu always made her aware of strange visions due to the alien field Ratze never mentioned it. She wanted Mena's mind clearer, less burdened with unnecessary mental diversions. Keep her focused. It was good having two different trainers.

Mena: time to concentrate. No thinking. Don't even think about not thinking. Breathe in breathe out. Breathe in breathe out. Get into the rhythm. Slowly her rambling mind receded, rambling but less of a presence. The distraction a minor disturbance until it was of no consequence. The feeling of lightness welcome. A burgeoning joy, refreshing. Her chattering mind at rest creating its own state of rapture. Incredible. She felt warm, comfortable, relaxed. The tension drained away.

Ratze aware of Mena's mental transition. She hoped Ung was onto it, keeping a mental eye here as Mena seemed to have somehow linked herself to the DVs. Ratze felt another back up kicking in. Without focussing on it, for she suspected it might be Ung she was satisfied that something within her Brain yet outside it was there. The field Mena acquired was like an elongated drop ballooning out into the universe. Tempted to find its source her Brain recoiled. Off limits. Interesting. No sense of danger, of devious intent. Value neutral. The DVs focussed determination overlayed itself within the field. Two membranes entwined, enphased. One actuality.

A third layer. The alien field? No that was too weak. A constant. Diaphonous. No source, non localised. Symmetric. Undefined potential.

A red planet. A space ship in an intense field. The DVs infusing themselves. A Reganian space ship in orbit. The sensation of living beings on the surface, intelligent life! Fantastic. Ratze's Brain tickled. A sweep from the DVs? Negative. The group mind dense. Focussed. Mena aligned, connected. But that had been the past. How...? The imagery collapsed back into a distant source in the opposite direction. A secret Reganian data domain. In deep space? Perhaps.

Anticipation. Vast possibilities of the third field, manifest, dormant awaiting activation. Waiting for the code. The DVs were ignoring it. Ratze's Brain isolated it. Back

to the actual field embracing the red planet. Mena's head space expanding with ghost DVs into it. Dual enphasing. There and not there. Typical quantum.

Mena did her best to remain neutral. The vision compelling. Too strong to be negated. A part of her sighed. This always happened. She was after the eternal and always got waylaid by some particularity. The universe was so full of stuff. How to get beyond these veils? She concentrated on her breath willing to still her mind. Floating in the field of the DVs. The sense of adventure enticing though. She let go. Ratze rode the field. Her Brain kept her in place pulling her back.

The DVs now enphased started to build down their unified psychic resonant state. This is interesting. Her head split in two. The soft scanning part with the DVs her Brain making sure she was in place there. Something weird was going on.

Mena, Ratze, Ung and the DVs partially united. The DVs a field in their own right flooding the inserted field encompassing the whole planet. Five Reganians on board the ship. Thousands on the planet. A stage one world. Pre technological. The DVs dominant. Not completely but influential just the same. Confirmation her Brain told her. As expected.

Temperature dropping. No not temperature, entropy rising. The DVs were going void. Disengaging.

A tidal wave coming in from behind her head. Mena's, Ratze's, Ung's and the source, the DVs. What were they up to? Ratze wondered. Her soft scan showed Mena in a transitional meta state. Amazing young woman. Definitely a natural. Potent unrealised psychic abilities. Without the intent of these DVs though. Along for the ride.

The DVs were powering down, powering out. Their minds muted containing the lot. The emptiness within them expanded and took over. A zero state of non perception. As a state in itself.

Mena felt the nothingness. It was a release from everything which bothered her. A heightened sense of awareness without awareness. Being. Being! She tried to not get excited. Hold on to this state. Remain within it. Finally a real breakthrough. Everything gone. Fantastic. The absence definitely something. The moment an eternity everywhere, nowhere, somewhere.

Absolute nothing.

Ratze's Brain recoiled thrown back into herself. Sudden shockwave repulsion. Her Brain linked with Ung's. She was the anchor. The planet was still there, running in parallel. The space ship gone, the civilisation vanished, the DVs gone! Shit! Only Ung and herself left.

Mena gone!

Self annihilated? Something. The void state. The DVs had brought down the insertion field. Total entropy washing out all data. But where did the mass, the inhabitants, everything go? Her Brain went up a notch automatically. She cloaked it, keeping Ung at bay aligned as Ratze was. The two of them had held back, their Brains had saved them from being in this void state. One loaded with momentary zero information.

The ship gone, the sentients gone, Mena gone.

Total extinction.

A heavy sense of déjà vu. Definitely. Weird. Strange. Entangled. Recalled.

Their survival might attract attention. Both Ung and Ratze were in a precarious position being more powerful than the best DVs. Then Ratze's Brain told her: the field negated with it's source. Then the source as well! The actual inserted probability field was negated and *a new probability field inserted*. One without Mars's civilisation. They would have aligned themselves with Regum so the DVs deleted them, the ship, the source of that manufactured probability field. Taking out two of the enemy at once. Regum's attempt at aligning Mars which made it antithetical to Prima's plans. Shit! If the Primaian's could do this, they could manipulate the present and align it to their future.

This was deadly stuff. Out of control. Devastating. Dangerous barely covered what the DVs just achieved. What Mena, or the third field had run. At their very own cost to their existence. Went out with the dissipated probability field that had been a present. Regum's attempt thwarted. All information lost. To the Reganian's, her Brain informed her the expedition never occurred. Lost as well was the knowledge of how they managed to insert *their* probability field as well. They would have to start all over again. A quick soft scan. Check Mena who had latched onto the process and was voided along with the DVs. But, but...the distant receding field reconfigured, realigned, stabilised.

"You can come in now." Risea said. Data still void. The DVs never existed. Mena? This went against the very laws of the universe. Matter, energy could not be destroyed. So where was it? Not in this present. Her Brain searched and found nothing. As if no violation of the laws of physics occurred at all. That meant only one thing. Changed realities. She and Ung knew it. Which made them what? Different beings. Differently aligned in space time. They might be discovered.

"Will do." Ratze replied. She moved back towards the orbital with Ung. On her way Ratze soft scanned the operators running the experiment. They were in a triple shielded secure control room. That would mean they might know what really happened

with a good chance of remembering. Elentra's crew. If she came into contact with them, they'd know she and Ung knew. Ung concurred.

'A bit of a dilemma.' Ung cool as always.

Ratze's Brain kicked in: no violation. The DVs are back on Prima. Potential recruits with no knowledge of having been out here. Living in this time line now, not the one that was deleted. So what happened to those on the planet? Wiped out during the war with Earth. Earth? An image of a blue white planet. In this present universe her Brain informed her. The prickling sensation alerted Ratze to being scanned. Her Brain went mute. The answer would have to wait. Her Brain receded as did Ung's.

That meant Mena would be down there somewhere as well.

She reached Ung.

'We have to get out.'

Keeping contact to a minimum. Brain to Brain. Both were running camouflage. It could only work for very brief moments. Any potent psychic and they both assumed the Dominus was one herself, or at least a natural would sense the cloak they threw around their minds.

They headed back to the orbital using one of the many launch bays. Both knew they would have to use their inherent programmes in their Brains to get away. They knew the Reganian's were in space, realtime. An idea. Though on the orbital the shuttles were for short runs there were ships which could traverse the distance to the twin planet as well. They would have to use their mental powers and make it appear they were cleared to take one.

'You agree?' Ratze to Ung. Ung assented.

Big moment. If they were caught they were well and truly stuffed. Turned into vegetables, something they had no intention of becoming. Time to create a smoke screen, make those they interacted with think nothing was amiss. If that worked all would be well.

They floated over to the open launch bay searching for the right ship. Since the initial DV exercise had stopped all traffic there were several to choose from. Their Brains would know how to navigate them.

They saw one of three clamped space ships. Fully prepared. No crew in sight, yet. Now that everything appeared back to normal whatever designated flights were ready to go would go. Ratze's Brain scanned the logs. Hacking in for them to get clearance. An interplanetary ship was fuelled, tanked up with air and provisions.

Easy if you have the capabilities. How long the ruse would last depended on the quality of the personnel and the systems. Then there was SpaceKorp to consider, the security. Two were in the bay suited up as well. Keeping guard.

Ratze's Brain entered the ships systems. Basic stuff really. Ratze was willing to expose her Brain whilst Ung remained on back up. She would handle the two guards on duty. Idle chit chat from Ung. Then Ung sent them a fast upload. As both were special trainers, Ung told them the data they'd collected was for DLs only. She faked a message that Lord Pentham was at a secret location, they understood, meaning a habitat. Thus the need for an interplanetary ship. They could check it out themselves as Ung uploaded the false data into the Dominus's systems. Like a knife through warm butter. Insert complete.

The two women made their way through the hatch and straight for the cockpit. Once inside they used their fibre optic links to upload the ship's systems, straight into their heads. As the prechecks were done the data came through. Easy. Clamps unclipped, magnetic clamps disengaged, using attitude jets the ship lifted off its pad and moved slowly out of the bay.

Control wanted to know the clearance codes, sounding surprised. Ung gave the codes, retrieved from the moment traffic control made contact. When asked for the destination Ung repeated what she uploaded to the two SpaceKorps guards.

`Clear to go. Good luck.'

`Thank you. See you soon.'

`No immediate traffic.'

`Over and out.'

When well away from the orbital Ratze fired the main hydrogen thrusters and they shot off into space away from Prima and the orbital.

"How's our chances?" Ung asked after a while reaching maximum thrust.

"You mean how long the codes will fool them?" Ratze replied.

"My Brain tells me as they're virtual they'll decay for the simple reason so as not to leave any trace of ever being there. Means we were never in the system. How long? Minutes. Maybe longer?"

"So far nothing. Don't know that one."

"At least we can communicate freely. I got the ship running silent."

"Good."

"I feel a prickle."

"Someone's onto us. DVs no doubt." Ratze confirmed.

"Ah traffic wants us to return. Some new orders."

"I bet. No chance."

"None."

"No reply Ung."

"No."

On the screens the rear view showed another ship leaving the orbital in pursuit.

"Time to get away." And Ratze hit the thrusters. "Might deplete the fuel a bit but speed is of the essence. We got any defence, or offence?"

"None. When the Primaian's acquired these ships the Reganian's stripped them down. Got some shielding though, more for asteroid hits."

The ship accelerated a pure white flame behind them.

"Time to see if we have any friendlies." Ratze using the basic radar to sweep the emptiness around them.

"They're holding but can't catch up." Ung advised.

"Sad isn't it? Wonder how long they'll do this."

"As long as us probably. Any other ships around?"

"Yes. Got one." Ratze got her Brain to override the ship's system and read the other vessel. Moments later her scanning was blocked.

"Must be Reganian. After all we're Primaian." She stopped the scan. The blocking stopped.

"This is Ratze and my companion Ung. We need help. This is no hoax no trick. We are being pursued. We are asking for asylum. Please confirm message."

Silence. Then came the reply.

"This is the Reganian `Blizzard'. Explain your status."

"Escaping Orbital. Escaping Prima. With pursuit on tail. About five minutes behind at current speed. On max burn. You get a free ship in the bargain." Ratze smiled at Ung.

"Oh oh. Two flares." Ung said.

"You got that?" Ratze asked the `Blizzard'.

Silence.

"Two missiles launched. We'll try and jam them. Though not guaranteeing success. You suited up?"

"Yes, ready to jettison ourselves."

Silence.

"We're on target to intercept you in around half a day. Your suits tanked up?"

Ratze made a quick check. As they had only been out for a mere half an hour before the vanishing trick they had three day's worth.

"Plenty."

Silence. The missiles gaining.

"My Brain tells me these missiles are mass and heat sensors."

"So this will turn into a junk heap. How long?"

"Five minutes."

"You ready to jettison?"

"Am."

"This is the `Blizzard. We'll be there in moments."

Ratze was not about to ask how they managed that. Keep as much information out of transmission.

"Keep away from the blast and debris." Ratze replied.

Silence.

"Look out for yourselves."

"Opening cockpit escape hatches."

"Now for one last little trick to make sure the `Blizzard' is safe. I'm turning the ship perpendicular. The rockets will hit the centre. At that point we hit the escape button. The detonation will give us extra acceleration. Good idea or what?"

"Fine." Ung focused as always.

The ship turned slowly, showing its underbelly to the two incoming rockets. With the canopy gone they saw the beautiful tranquil stars glowing serenely around them.

"These missiles Ratze are penetrators. Means first impact then detonation. The rockets could even be mere internal EM charges. My Brain's trying to confuse them but they're shielded. Smartware."

"Or basic ware. Mechanical."

"Could be. Any moment and counting, five, four, three, two, one, go!"

Ratze and Ung hit the escape buttons.

Two tiny explosions expelled them from the cockpit. Black space above. The small chemical rockets at the base of their seats fired them out of the ship, which receded away from them. A fireball exploded inside the abandoned ship. A flare of white fire detonating the oxygen and nearly empty fuel tanks. Then the ship was ripped apart, scrap polymer and metal fragments glowing white hot majestically expanding on arcing trajectories outwards as the fire ball enveloped the doomed ship. They watched in anxiety for incoming debris but the extra push of the rockets penetrating impact and

their seats jets had them accelerating safely away from the fire zone. Then the vacuum of space snuffed out the fire ball. In the blackness of space only the remnant glowing metallic shredded, torn, mangles pieces glowed a dull red.

"You OK?"

"Fine Ratze."

On the `Blizzard' the captain saw the tiny flares of the two escaping pilots. They had cut it fine. How had they managed to calculate the extra shove to coincide so close to give them extra velocity? Had the Primaian's updated their own computers? For to run an escape like this manually was folly in the most extreme. He understood that they wanted to make it appear as if they died in the explosion but the pursuit ship would, or should be able to sense their presence.

The `Blizzard' was cloaked so there was no way they could be detected. The pursuit ship turned slowly on it's axis and went into reverse using short thrusts to inspect the damage. The destroyed ship now scrap. Then they accelerated away.

By the laws of space any captain was obliged to come to their aid. Asylum. A first for him. He could not even remember when the last Primaian actually wanted to come across. Was Prima regressing? These pilots would know. The pursuers merely inspected the results of their mission and left the pilots in space. Interesting in itself not even bothering to retrieve them dead or alive.

Time to pick up the survivors.

Prima

Lord Qatus, Outer Guardian, was aware of the infusion of a low level energy state, undecided if the alien field was changing or whether the aliens had created a new form of psychic incursion into space. It was constant according to the remarkable sensitivity of the System Surveyors, cyber presences, inserted stand alone roving alert schemes making sure the overall resonance of the planet remained stable.

"It may be Lord Gharbel," Telafus gave a tight smile, as they sat in his private office at the palace, "that this aberration seems of no consequence at first appearances. But you still think this has nothing to do with the reason for the incident at the monastery. Elentra a worthy in her own right through the DVs thinks Regum is stepping up their activity in WebSpace. The Trine, the Immortals see all. Something did happen. The unfortunate death of Roshati is no light matter. She must have come in possession of knowledge dangerous to the holy mission entrusted in us. Deletion, not BrainDraining the preferable option." That a living soul had been sacrificed seemed hardly to matter at all.

Gharbel Telafus considered was not uncomfortable with the turn of events. That was relegated to those below him. Lord Penthan was satisfied that order prevailed, the status quo secure.

"These are minor irritants Lord Gharbel." Who with Qatus present were there to map out their next move. "The universe is indeed a strange place." Telafus added thoughtfully, playing with the golden frills of his white robed sleeve. Today not being busy with the functions of his public office, the simple white gown would suffice. Telafus had come through the ranks as one of the first in centuries to rise to the supreme office as a Natural Volatile. The Ecclesiastics no doubt thought a simple soul such as he would become their creature. On the surface he was. But within, within! There lurked the true person. One not to be used. Appearances, even his deeds were a cover, a deception to let them think he was furthering their aims in controlling the people.

Telafus had changed his private secretary once more. Not one suggested by the Es either. Semor, a cardinal was pragmatic. Telafus's engaged in a secret esoteric

visionary mission. Millennial, ushering in a new age. Using the alien field as a basis to demark the difference between the people's orientation, reinforcing their divine status even as Volatiles. Something his predecessors thought an obstacle. Volatility was divine activity straight from the Cosmic Architect. Bypassing those who saw themselves exalted harbouring the repository of divine wisdom. Like Gharbel. Not that Telafus cared one whit as to what Gharbel thought. Still he gave him his due respect.

The aberrant signs in the Trine could be easily explained as some minor cosmic disturbance. The Reganian scientists thought nothing of it. Background radiation, an apt term, a bit like the anomalous behaviour of the people. Constant yet not interfering with the overall resonance of the planet. The planet's resonance had incorporated this other essence. Not that it made much of a difference. The Trine merely noted it, the Sentinels aware as were the Immortal personas within in. Telafus would when time permitted, making time if need be to synchronise his holy state with theirs and see for himself what exactly was going on.

Though of concern to Gharbel if only in that he was trying to reshape events to suit his own position. By rights Gharbel would be the next pontiff if he chose that position. But Telafus knew Gharbel had more power being number two than being number one. He would make sure his successor was one like himself. For Telafus never revealed, except for outside appearances his true Volatile resonance. His inherent mental state, being a little unstable according to common wisdom enjoyed a broader sweep mentally. The mood swings opened up vistas a steady resonance could never appreciate. Times were changing and with that it needed a mind capable of handling change to make sure the overall resonance was charged not just with cosmic energy, but with that of all minds. Not just what the DLs and E's thought pertinent. They were ossifying and Telafus would see to it that they would have their grip loosened a little to keep the whole system subtle.

"Strangeness. An apt description." Gharbel said non committally. He second guessed where Telafus was going with this. In a way, strangeness made sense. Like using the alien field to keep the population on their toes. So too this background radiation could be useful. Gharbel was slightly perturbed, almost mentally ruffled with the intelligence received from the Orbital. Thanks to Reganian technology Elentra and her crew had witnessed a most phenomenal occurrence. The loss of a group of DVs, including a new acolyte showing amazing promise. And the loss of their data. An experiment gone wrong. A backflash, a cyber-void annihilation. Not that Telafus knew the details. But the Trine did in its own way. If DVs could vanish so could anybody. Either

the Reganian's abducted or deleted them, bad enough in itself or the Divine Mind had Ascended them. That was the official stance. It answered any uncomfortable questions if this event was cosmic based. A new occurrence, unexplainable. What had the DVs uncovered that made such an extreme move necessary? Worse if the Reganians were behind this then they could all be targets. Well Janon and Remo might come up with something.

"You are ponderous today."

"Yes pontiff."

"The decree for the priests to play down the changes in the holy domain."

"Indeed. It might make people think." The last thing anybody wanted. They might even question the nature of reality and come up with all sorts of answers, just like the Reganians. Then where would they be?

"Officially there is no substance to the rumours regarding the loss of two astronomers. Nothing is changing. That should be first and foremost on all our minds." Telafus emphasised.

"We must keep up appearances. Events, visions, signs can be made to conform. The faith maintained. It should be easy enough. Make it appear as a challenge from the Divine Mind. Test the spiritual mettle for the coming new age. Weed out those who are unworthy. Contain them and thus keep the peace."

"I agree Lord Gharbel. Still if the so called background radiation is the reason for disturbing the serenity of the people then it is our duty to investigate the true nature of this manifestation."

What Gharbel feared. The truth. He could advise against it but not command. Telafus was energized, rising to the challenge. If need be he might have to be contained as well. Not that a pontiff had ever been deposed in recent history. Those days were over. Their true history began with the great Calamity. A new age soon to reach its apogee for the next level of divine beingness.

Telafus could not rid his mind that this aberration, this disturbance was trouble. It could be explained away but that would not negate the actuality of it being there. He looked forward to the quest.

"The Immortals are unaffected." Gharbel said breezily.

"That is something." Telafus concurred.

They were both concerned in regards to the possible panic this could set off. It might sap spiritual fervour. A bit of an existential dilemma.

Qatus merely observing the two most powerful men on Prima.

"So far the divine state is coping. No realignment of cosmic forces. At a guess, another infiltration in our universe, apart maybe from the alien field or most likely a side effect of it."

"We know it exists. That foundation is secure." Telafus surprised at how logical it all seemed. Yet it was not logical at all. Still the Divine Mind chose what was to be revealed and what was not.

"There are plenty of rumours though. All guess work. There are heresies in some who think..."

"Heresies?" Telafus's eyes arched.

"Only in the sense that this is all wild speculation."

"Ah. Continue."

"Interpretations becoming more outlandish. Reconfigured by each individual. Compounded by imagined suppositions. No definite pattern as yet. Just rumours of some impending revelation."

"There you have it. The people are not fooled that easily. Their resonance holds as does our planet."

For how long? Gharbel thought. "I'm sure the priests can deal with it." Gharbel replied.

"Well that is settled then."

Gharbel was not so sure. Qatus keeping his thoughts to himself.

Telafus could not wait to get at the truth of the matter. Intriguing. If he was right, that this was indeed a new manifestation then it was his duty to get to the bottom of it.

Under normal circumstances, seeking the divine wisdom of an Immortal usually necessitated a spiritual pilgrimage with all the encumbrances of the sacred rites of holy passage. Prayers, fasting, divine invocations to ready the soul for the spiritual unity sought. Encumbrances indeed. Necessary for those obsessed with purity. What was really essential to Telafus was attitude. As one with a Volatile mind it was so much easier to align his soul with that of an Immortal. Only those who thought themselves unworthy needed these spiritual bridges to attain the requisite divine state to harmonize with that of an Immortal. Not that the people knew what these beings were now, after Ascension. Cyber persona's. That would never come out. Only four, three Domain Lords and he as pontiff knew this ultimate secret.

Alien field or not, this new resonance was a phenomena not to be feared but to be explored, understood and used to maintain their society as it had been for centuries.

No change envisaged. Ever. With Gharbel and Qatus on their way he was ready to align himself and seek answers.

Not that answers were in short supply. Gharbel, Qatus and Pentham all had their views but Telafus wanted certainty. Gharbel finally left, satisfied that nothing threatened their holy state.

All was quiet in the palatial grounds. No breeze. The sky overcast the night black. Veiled darkness. Telafus had changed from his robes of office to that of a priest in plain black garb. He was now a suppliant.

The dark trees unfolding forms of brooding life blending with the night. Footsteps. The palace guards doing their rounds. Telafus was at peace with himself. No turmoil, no agitation, just serene anticipation.

The mausoleum enshrining the Immortal appeared out of the gloom cast by the trees. Lit by electric torches throwing shadows on its marbled walls. With the public gone, for those who were permitted to enter its holy precinct, vetted by the palatial priests were long gone and back at their hearths. Two ceremonial guards were as usual on duty at the entrance keeping vigil through the dead of night. The rectangular building in front of him. As Telafus's head was bare they recognised him, bowed in acquiescence at his holy person and let him enter.

Inside it was cool, serene and deathly silent. His soul soared with inner happiness. He felt lighter, treading on air. The ground floor an empty space, the walls bare except for tiny lights just illuminating the area. A sensor pad in the floor activated not just the opening to the vault below but also the computer's machinery to activate the containment fields so that anyone going volatile was soothed to keep one's serenity so as to align one's inner self with that of the Immortal's eternal tranquillity. Telafus felt his mind warmer, the result of the containment fields working. The mental glow reassuring making him feel even more divine than he already was. His mind stronger than that of the field. Telafus calm. His thoughts opening inner realms not unlike that of his dreams. His dreams! If the domain lords knew what he knew they would be shocked. Not exactly outlandish but definitely other worldly. More like a Prima as it could be, or was, but certainly not as is.

With the slab in the floor receding silently he walked down the stairs into the inner chamber, the lights already on. The sarcophagus was plain black marble. On the inside where the decayed body was resting, intricate processors that not just linked the Immortal person with the Trine where it's remnant essence resided but also through the

containment fields it entered the seekers head giving the impression of cosmic connectivity with the Immortal.

There were cushions stacked in one corner. He arranged them to his liking and squatted length on with the sarcophagus. His soul enhanced, in a state of beatific bliss. He was being boosted. His previous thoughts faded away. His mood ebullient. Remembering the reason for his presence he focussed not so much on the question as rather the answer, whatever it might be. In short, the condition of the Divine Mind and thus the universe as well. The people, according to all information were restless, expectant, full of hope, others augured dissonant times at hand, an age of undoing, Telafus sensed within himself none of this. He did not share the millennial feel the people entertained. Either he was now unaligned, or rather realigned whilst the populace were succumbing to the subtle changes in the resonant envelope of the planet's united inherent unconscious essence. What mattered was: were the Immortals affected as well? Then he would see what needed to be done.

Time to stop thinking.

He concentrated on himself. Not to disturb the equilibrium, bring out whatever it was that had infused itself. Just be yourself he reminded himself. Slowly he relaxed, felt at one with the world, the cosmos, the Divine Being.

A presence.

A feeling of being watched.

The Immortal? They were neutral in their own unique way. The remnant personality traits in any case were more obvious than this. Unless this Immortal, and since they were linked through the Trine, the other five as well had undergone a change. But that would have been noted.

The sensation of intelligence unmistakable. Hidden. There and not there. A vastness circumscribed. Interesting. He felt like a vessel ready to be filled. Should he let go? How else to understand if not be seeking, or being found!

'Understand?' a voice in his head mocked.

A part of him recoiled. The acoustic was not his. An outside source. Expanding into predetermined space. His soul transcending. A seething mind like water about to boil. The mysterious effluvium. Had to be.

A thousand images exploded around him. Each a reality in itself. The Cosmic Mind? No answer. Silence on the other side. Worlds within worlds, bifurcating into multiples of themselves, stretching back in strange weird warped curving trajectories.

`Only the beginning.' The voice said. Mind wrenching excitement surged through him. He was insensate to his own being. The imagery dominant, disturbed, undiscernible. Hinting at its content without actually revealing its true substance. It now weighed on his soul, a burden carried. Should he negate it? Was this even an answer?

The foundation. But to what?

`Worlds to be.' The voice poured into his cavernous mind. So vast, so extensive, so hollow, ready for the infusion.

`Reveal yourself.' Telafus thought. The vibrant, dancing, pulsating imagery collapsed. Receded into the Immortal. He should not have asked. That was a stupid thing to do.

Another sentence. Totally unlike the Immortal. Unless some profound change occurred. Yet could everybody else have missed that? Or was he the first to notice the change?

He was barely hanging on by the tiniest of threads tenuously connected with his real self. He was both distant and here transmigrating into `it'. Something at least. `It' existed between space itself. Not of it but in it. Liquescent, insubstantial but there. Telafus tried to reach the Immortal essence for this sentence seemed to have usurped it.

Momentarily lost for some time now. Time. What time? There was a multitude of times. All concurrent, all real, all there.

Suffocating, drowning, overwhelmed, tossed by invisible yet sensible tides, currents and eddies. Torn along rips in space, sinking then rising. His brain putty, getting thinner dissolving in this sensate impregnating essence.

`I am the prophesy, the coming eternity. I am known by many names in many worlds. I have millions of believers throughout all time at my feet, at my call, doing my will. Will you do my will?' it mocked.

`What is your will?' Telafus asked feeling dim. Then the answer came. `It' was everywhere, and somewhere else. Possessor of many worlds. So many worlds. He had no idea the universe was so full of life. In the many pasts, presents and futures. Futures? Futures!

`I am my own will.' It said placidly. Sure of itself.

Telafus was shaken. This was not the Cosmic Consciousness, or was it?

`That?' it almost laughed. `Mere smoke, blown away by my power. Bonded to me.' It asserted. Subsuming infinity itself. Or aiming to, or had done, or would do, was doing!

`Creator of your future.'

`Show yourself.' Surprised at his audacity.

`I am everywhere. Creating your future.'

`You are a hallucination.' Telafus resisted, nearly saying `my hallucination.' The assertion dissipated amongst the furnace of its transforming power. Constant, relentless in conflict, restless with energy, glorying in its assumed supremacy.

`You are a figment of my mind for it is I who design.' It said imperiously.

`You,' Telafus responded with new found energy, `are either a construct, or a vestige of a dead past which we negated years ago.' He felt sure.

`My past cannot be destroyed. Your belief is tenuous glossing over the true reality to come. I have always been and will be.' Then anticipating Telafus's next comment added: `Your world is but one. Not even an obstacle. Far from it. Already the signs are there, seen by some, perceived by others who know the truth.' gloating its fervour. Undisputable.

`Prima is ageless. It is eternal.'

"It is what it is. Nothing more. Certainly less. Behold!"

Prima appeared. Then vanished.

`So easy.' It gloated.

Telafus thought of the vanished DVs. Holy shit. The image replayed itself of Prima vanishing, just to drive the point home. Then his planet reappeared. It looked so normal but not. Its resonance different, the amplitude changed, misconfigured. To all appearances the same. Worshipping the supreme deity. `It'!

`No.' Telafus's mind screamed.

`It is you who is misguided.'

`You are an excrescence. For every poison there is an antidote.' Telafus challenged. `All this is illusion.'

`And your childish belief is not?' It mocked. `I can give answers to questions you have not even thought of. I am the balm of the seeking soul, I am the answer to everything in the universe.'

Where was the cosmic consciousness?

Silence. Hesitance? Hope.

`I have the strength and knowledge to turn dreams into reality. Prima can accept and be the centre of my new creation. Or it can pretend to be defiant. It makes no difference. There are other worlds ready to accept me.'

Ah Telafus thought. Not there yet. His sense of mission intensified. If it was a mere matter of making dreams come true than Prima was on the right track to defy this hallucination. It was a matter of solidifying the resonance. It might rule it's designated realm, but Prima's solidity was already there. In any case Prima might not repel this strange entity but it could be usurped. If Telafus had his way. It's gloating boasts mere threats. If 'It's' will was indeed done then it would have been. As it had not, it was not. In its waxing insistence It had given itself away. More like a rogue Immortal than a god. Dependent only on the gullibility of believers to make it so. Telafus had found the enemy. It probably was using the alien field to further it's aims.

'Reading my thoughts? Good.'

Silence.

The fog in Telafus's mind was lifting

'See for yourself.' It came back.

The million images. Had they multiplied whilst he had been engaged with 'It'? flooded his brain. Worlds upon worlds. A trick for most were the same, just at different times making them appear to be more than there actually were. At least he was learning that other worlds, as suspected did exist. Now with the DVs it was merely a matter of connecting with them and alerting them to this cosmic danger. A blue white planet, one red, different permutations of other planets, all similar, most the same, just different time lines. Believing in the supreme consciousness. Behind the veil of belief, this spawned self created illusion hovered malignancy. Drawing on cosmic power. Find the source and 'It' could be neutered.

With that thought something snapped. The vision vanished just like that. Telafus nearly found the source. Somewhere close. One problem was that the universe was infinite. That would make the search difficult. Worse, one needed to align with 'It' to fathom its weakness to preferably dissipate it, destroy it. The realisation struck him, that with the help of Regum, try at least to contain it.

The Ecclesiastics would think him mad. He saw the sarcophagus, the warm wall lights, everything in its place. With creaking knees he rose. What a revelation.

His mind was racing. Was the Trine infected? Were the Immortals compromised? Was reality changing? What were the signs? Were the people being influenced? Was the planet's resonance contaminated enough to warp all their minds? All useful questions.

This had to be handled most delicately. Or, as he stood there looking about him, feeling the nightmare receding, alert the whole planet openly of this potency wanting to usurp their souls? Regum would be the litmus test. If they started believing would that be

due to the work of their priests or the alien presence? Maybe if they withdrew their priests and see if Regum's people's attitude changed then there would be proof. But to call back the priests would be an admission of failure. Maybe if they made contact. It was getting terribly confusing. To counteract this coming madness he would have to accept the help of Reganian technology and know how. Prima's whole attitude would have to accept something they decried since the Calamity. This was going to be messy, politically, socially and spiritually.

At least he had discovered `It'. Whatever it was. But where had `It' come from? From where he was in this moment of space and time `It' was not there. So it had to be in the future. Whose future? Theirs? Regum's? Those other worlds? It claimed them all yet It neither had made any impression on Regum or even here. So `It' had not succeeded yet. There was still time. Just.

Would the Ecclesiastics believe him? Or the Reganians. The DVs not aware. The experiment which went wrong at the orbital. Was that linked? Telafus was ready for the worst. They must have discovered something. Had `It' removed the DVs?

His mind was restless. He would take a sleeping draft, the only way he would get some peace. Then set to work. What a mission he had. It was perplexing that the Immortals, this Immortal had not been present. What if they had been deleted?

Right up to today, yesterday really no one had noticed any change. Perhaps it had all just occurred? That this had been the initial ingress, a hint of things to come.

He rose, left the inner sanctum. His mind still warm from the containment fields. A gasp. `It' had gone straight through Prima's resonant envelope. And his own personal resonance. If `It' could do that...

Outside the guards had changed. It was still night. So serene, so peaceful, so deceptive. So disturbing.

Nervina

Nervina was hot. She was sweating through every pore in her body. A furnace within her spreading its energy into the core of her bones. Her limbs flaccid her body some soft viscous fluid. Sitting in her favourite armchair, eyes open, the view out the window pleasant, familiar. The street outside her little flat a little fuzzy through the opaque thin white curtain.

Home. Home? Home her Brain emphatic.

A momentary memory flash instantly deleted. The remnant visuals suppressed. A dormitory, a library, books, pages of crabbed writing turning into tiny wriggling worms. Surging white heat obliterated the recall.

A spasm, then shock. Transitional. Glued to the armchair. Heavy gravity. In slowed motion she scanned the living room. Home. Reinforced application of her memory. Why the discomfort? The panic attack subsided like the receding tide. Its oceanic embrace relaxed her into somnolent ease.

Tiredness, exhausting then exhilaration as her head expanded then contracted. Her Brain riding the waves pulsing through her like she was some kind of oscillating device.

The walls quivered, the soft pastel colours glowing, full of texture. Velvet smoothness. A sense of pregnant urgency, something incomplete. What? The intensity of her heated body relaxed her totally, mind body and soul. Soul? Another receding memory flash nearly revealing what she'd just thought: persona. Not now her Brain informed her. The base line, an anchor amongst the fluid mental abstractions bubbling up from within. Silence. An intensity itself calming her, comforting.

Another rush of energetic heat nearly lifting her out of her armchair. Gravity won that one. Well her legs were still there. The soft smooth fabric of her trousers glowing from her inner radiance. A sense of summer in her head. But why was she at home? She had things to do, duties to fulfil. She had to be somewhere, had been somewhere else. Certainly not here. The sensation of both normalcy and abnormality tore at her mind.

An electric shock wave shot through her nearly wrenching her out of her chair. Something was not right yet not wrong. The living room energized. Charged. The walls glowed.

Another rush of warmth melted her back into her chair. Maybe getting up would clear her head. The room a goldfish bowl. A sense of supremacy, of impending greatness, on the brink of some stupendous revelation. All alone. Alone. As she was meant to be. Isolated. Secure. She wanted to rise, focussing on the window and the street outside, foggy through the thin white shimmering curtains. Instead her head telescoped the image closer. Why move if you don't have to? She nearly laughed. The dappled light intriguing on the carpet. So intense with power on the brink of dissolution quivering with dormant energy. Energy. Were the atoms feeding off something, transmuting into hidden emergent patterns almost discernable but then out of reach of her fluid mind.

On the other side of the mock living room four observers watched Nervina react to the powerful hallucinogen in full effect. The observation room at the Primaian embassy on Regum had Dr Olsen as advisor, Estra assisting. Tara Ostern, Nervina's case officer and Daros Sethum the political case officer of the Primaian mission all watching Nervina's mind unravel.

"She's coping well." Sitting comfortable, sipping coffees, Tara observed.

"Remarkable." Olsen replied. "Considering the dosage."

"That's Naturals for you." Daros said. "They can lap it up and spit it out just like that."

"Except she's holding it in. Enjoying it. She should be going to pieces, falling apart, ranting, raving, letting the contents of her brain out." Tara remarked.

Estra was content merely being present at this experiment.

They had been informed of Nervina's transgression back on Prima. Accessing forbidden books. How she got in, past security, oblivious to the containment fields suppressing any unauthorised intruder a remarkable feat. A security breach such as this was rare. It came to the attention of Reno, counter intelligence. The incident went up to Lord Pentham who ordered a full investigation. They checked her history, nothing remarkable. Just another Natural with potential. The other transgression that attracted attention was her lover Horat. As a Stable, their resonances were mismatched. Nervina polluting Horat's resonance. Breaking one of the fundamental laws on Prima. The choice was simple. Either throw her back amongst her own kind in the Outlands or use her. Data

checks revealed a remarkable, astute and very versatile mind. She had one option. Recruitment. Her mission to go with Horat, equally guilty of associating with an unaligned caste. A choice. A mission. Find what the Reganian's knew, remembered about not just the great Calamity but preceding it, written in folklore their ancient practiced magic that could cause problems for Prima's intent to format the Reganian mind set according to their intent.

Regum's Central University was soliciting a group of researchers, organised through Primaian back channels to scour their Outlands, the province of Kratham. An isolated remnant of the original inhabitants steeped in occult lore. If they, both the research team and with Prima's agents in place, retrieved their ancient knowledge of direct mind control it would be a remarkable boost in their inventory of psychic resources. Once understood how they practiced their occult powers the DVs would be able to enhance their psychic abilities. Stepping stones in dominating Regum's world.

So Nervina and Horat were sent as students to Regum who accepted them on the grounds that exposing Primaian's to Regum's knowledge base and way of life might from their point of view influence the Primaian's to their way of thinking. Both sides knew it was a battle of minds.

After arriving on Regum they were set up in the lower end of town, the student district in a run down flat. They had contacted the university and actually managed to get on the short list of applicants for Regum's mission to Kratham. They both passed the psyche tests. It was then that Janon, Reno's chief director of counter intelligence discovered gaps in Nervina's history. It was not that unusual in itself. The unwashed masses, peasants really were only rudimentary scanned by the priests when observing their holy communion in their local places of worship. Nervina's data base consistent. Yet when her parents were questioned they seemed rather vague as to their daughter. They had trouble remembering her, stuttering along wondering what her daughter's life was all about. Something was not right.

The alert was sent to the Primaian embassy and so Nervina and Horat had been called in, then separated. Nervina now set up in the observation room, a mock living room that would make Nervina think she was back home. With the infusion of the strong psychotropic drug, from her point of view she ought to think she was at home. Maybe the missing gaps of her life would be revealed.

Reno suspicious as his office demanded, considered whether Nervina might be a Reganian agent. If so it was a new development between the two planets. Whilst Prima had her agents on Regum the Reganians were denied access to their planet. They knew

though that the Reganians got more than enough on the Orbitals which through Primaian mind control allowed them to be up there with them. Of course the Primaian's, accept for the DVs once exposed to the Reganian way of thinking were never allowed back home. Exceptions were made now and then but Reno and Pentham knew the danger of Reganian thinking. It questioned everything whilst Prima's view was of accepting everything as it was, not what it might be, could be, and worse would be if they gained control by implementing their godless philosophy into their mind set.

If Nervina passed the test she was still slightly suspect. But no one had as yet managed to outsmart the hallucinogenic. The ultimate truth drug.

Still Nervina remained herself. The chair she was in was censored up. Prima would use Reganian technology when it suited them. For the elite, the DLs and their designated agents, but never for the masses. Never. For many good reasons. They might start to think, which would lead to them questioning not just their status but why the Reganians did not have to work at all. Their smart machines did that for them. Which would lead to the obvious question why they could not enjoy a life free of toil and labour. They might even question the theological tenets of their faith which ordained a caste structured society. If that fell apart it would be the end of the DLs, the ruling caste and possibly question the need for a pontiff as well. So everything was done on Prima's side to keep the status quo in place.

So who was Nervina?

Nervina felt the sweat, smelt the sweat on her. It was comforting and disconcerting. Was she overdressed? The idea of removing her clothing did occur to her but she felt too lazy to bother. It was not that bad. A rush of coldness sent goose bumps up her spine. The pleasant dreaminess crystallised into cold hard thoughts escaping from her open head. Leaking out, being sucked up by some invisible intelligence that seemed very immanent.

Ah.

Full of tumultuous thoughts, flashing in and out of her mind's perception, not being able to fully grasp them. Like flicking through pages of books. Books. She remembered reading books. Something to focus upon. But the changing environment in her head transmuted too fast for her to grasp her own thoughts. She felt 'other'. This could be the real her. Two presences. Her outer and inner self. Two personas. No dialogue between them. Two realities. One admitting everything as it was the other not

so sure. Isolated within this broader inclusiveness, the other exclusive loaded with so much more, just out of reach. By design.

With that comprehension the light through the window flared into cold white energy. Her sweat evaporated sending little plumes of vapour curling up above her, just like her thoughts leaking out of her head. Someone or something was extracting the contents of her mind.

The shock was instant. Spasmodic, fear ridden making her feel immobilised. An alien intelligence. Hers? Theirs? Who were they? Images of the past. Like a movie instilled in her. The library, the dormitory, the seminary, odd visions of a village, her parents. Parents? Parents. On a planet. Stars, space, Prima. A shiver went through her. Stars, space, Prima. So certain of the location. The place to be. Another image of 'others', a detritus of strange dreams crystallising, then dissolving in the mental warmth of her pulsing mind, gone.

A missed opportunity of some potent revelation. Her Brain blocked it. Then it too vanished like the momentary vision of the mind's construct. There within before. She was the repository of something great, awesome, monumental, cosmic in scope. This warmth, this well being a cloak to hide a promise of something stupendous. Cold, hard, fact. Deeply embedded, a seed. The kernel of truth, a heightened sense of reality out of reach.

She closed her eyes. Change. Abstract flowing geometric patterns danced in front of her. Weaving a web of, of illusion? Reality? The pulsing energy returned, as always, never stopping. And below, beneath, outside the remnant something much vaster in her head than it knew. Knew. Knew! A feeling of immanent revelation, on some stupendous mission in life. Her brain sparkled. No, that was not it. Just a diversion. The coruscating lights filled her with joy, full of wonder. Childhood. A strange weird longing superimposed itself. Alien at the same time. A distant past no longer there. Gone for ever with its hope of something she could not gather unto herself.

She sensed the approach. Someone was knocking at the door. She could almost see through it. A female. Panic. What? Who? How could she cope? This was ridiculous. Only a person. She tried to remember who she knew. Horat. Ah sweet Horat. Where was he? Another distant memory now. The flat. Regum. Yet this flat was on Prima. What on earth had occurred? Here, there, there, here. Here. Not there. Oh this is silly.

Another gentle knock. Not insistent. Reluctant.

"Nervina, how are you?" how did she get in? Door must have been unlocked. Silly me.

Tara stood there smiling. Warm eyes. Longish brown hair. Business suit. Sibylline, bathed in her own light. Friendly. Why? Who was she? Ah, recognition. From somewhere else. Approximate connection. Familiarity.

Tara was looking at her expectantly. Now what was she supposed to do? She could barely rise. Nor knew what to say. At ease.

"How have you been? Haven't seen you for a while." That much was true.

"Relaxing." Her voice sounded strange to her, speaking by remote control. Maybe she knew what was going on. A halo of lilac around her. Pretty.

"Heard you been away." She was way away. Almost not here at all. So where had she been? A flash of darkness, another space, gone. The dormitory? No. The seminary? No. Regum. Yes. But was her visitor allowed to know? Dare she tell?

"How did the trip go? The study group. Exciting? New stuff?" this woman continued chattering, her eyes excited.

"Oh that. Waiting." Ah yes, the interview. If..."Tara." Now it fell into place. Another interview? Or the same one? There had been several. Well something made sense at last.

"Your last message was so obscure. And your parents haven't heard from you either."

Why would she bother with her parents. She left them years, life times ago. Not her life. Intense emotional feelings flooded her warm brain.

"Rather difficult to explain."

"May I sit?"

A settee appeared. Oops. Where had that come from. Was she in some sort of cybergame? That would make sense. Virtual immersion. Well this was at some other level entirely. The Reganian's were smart. Or was that the Primaian's? Nervina went cautious. Reality was not as simple as it appeared.

"Yes." Eyeing Tara, looking for pixellated glitches. The aura around her lime green. Whatever that meant. So she was radiating as well. At least they were on a similar level mentally. Relief. Anxiety gone.

Then apprehension returned. If Tara was an insert, who was running this game? No idea. Was she uploaded or real? She felt too real, lithe, mental eddies rippling through her whole body resonating. Resonating. Primaian's resonated. Life resonated. The room was resonating. Tara. Someone concerned for her.

Maybe she was trapped and Tara was going to extricate her. Nervina tried to link her mind to hers. Resistance. No, more an absence, but not a void. An empty head. Ha! Comical.

"Something funny?" said lightly.

"Just you being here. I didn't think I'd see you." Nervina grinned, nearly dribbling saliva which she just managed to catch and slurp back.

"So how did it go? Learn anything?" being professional.

Learn anything? Her mind repeated. Full of it, just can't get to it.

"All there somewhere." Which was true. She searched the room for some exit icon. Everything was so full of itself. The doorknob a dark brown planet stuck on a plane of flat space. Dimensional and infinite in itself. Her gaze turned back on Tara. Not enhanced. And no exit points. Enclosed. The room everything. Comfortable.

"I, ahm, glad to see you're fine."

Fine? I'm brilliant. The inner fire flared, the room bathed in her light, brighter, glimmering walls, Tara glowing blue her face pale.

"So nothing for me?" Tara coaxed.

"Not yet. Too early." Memories of the university. The professor, his assistant, just faces, a committee interviewing her and Horat. Where was Horat?

"You think you're in?"

"Maybe."

"Did they show you any data?"

"No, just a general outline. Surprised that we came at all. Highly recommended. You're doing?"

"My boss." Tara replied happily, glowing yellow. Incredible. Did she know she was radiating her resonance?

"Of course." What was so recommendable about her? Apart from her dazzling mind. Was that it? Most likely. And something else, just out of reach.

"Well," Tara rose, the aura lime green, "good to see you."

"Off then?" wondering why one had to say the obvious.

"Afraid so."

Nervina frowned. At least she was not alone. Alone felt good. No one to have to bother with. Independent in this 'now'. Now is everything. Then the door shut. Relief. Peace, happiness, contentment.

Daros watched Tara return with interest taking his eyes off the monitors. Tara resumed her seat nodding to Olsen. His bald head reflecting the muted overhead lights. Nervina still in her cosy smart chair.

"Glad she's handling it rather well. Lucid enough, just, to remember the uni interview. But as you know that didn't reveal anything pertinent."

"Maybe she's hiding it. Like so much else about her." Daros said.

"Yes, a bit of a worry." Tara confirmed.

"From the scans I'd say she knows more than she's admitting to us. Back there and here. Yet her subterfuge, her mimicking resonant states that let her through security is such a rarity for a Natural. And only scant evidence that she progressed through the ranks. Fast tracked. Inserted at Lord Pentham's level." Daros concerned at the mystery.

"Unless Pentham recruited her, or Janon." Tara answered.

"Yes. And questioning Lord Pentham is out of our bounds. If we did that it would throw an aspersion his way. Not good for us. The implications alone in even thinking Pentham was engaged in anything untoward. Still we gotta get to the bottom of this."

"So we consider her suspect?"

"Make that an alert. The embassy found nothing this end. Either they deleted her if she is one of them, or she really is an advanced Natural."

"Almost too good to be true?"

"Well our professor here thought so. It was her casualness. Anyone who gets a chance at this survey of theirs dealing with their, ahm, darker states of mind should have thrown indicators out. Mental agitation, some reticence in being exposed to warped mind sets. Disturbing resonant patterns which an investigator would be exposed to. Trivial to her. You agree Dr Olsen?"

"I most certainly do. Horat's natural anxiety levels were as expected. But Nervina is a different personality entirely." The psychologist said.

"But is she Reganian?"

"From what we have observed, and what we know, can't tell."

"Not certain." Daros asked.

"Well," Olsen smiled benignly, "there is nothing this end. Unless the locals here have changed tactics. Now we know she was never at an orbital so contact up there can be ruled out. She's never been in space so contamination cannot explain her unique state of mind. Unless she is a new evolutionary development."

"You think so?"

"Suspect. Unless others like her appear. If not, which seems to be the case then we are dealing with a very unique individual."

"Any psychic powers?"

"That would have slipped out inadvertently under the influence. She showed no inclination to probe her mind. That in itself is another oddity. Psychotropics are natural gateways into the mind yet she remained aloof from that inner path. Anybody else would have delved right in. Not Nervina. She remained in control as far as possible. Another puzzle."

"Maybe this is not the first time." Tara suggested.

"A good point." Olsen answered. "But even so, the dosage we gave her was at a maximum. She should have been completely overwhelmed."

"And was not."

"Just so." He should know. He had delved into many disturbed minds at the asylums. Stripped the soul bare, exorcised their demons, their induced hallucinations and cured them of their mental aberrations. Fight fire with fire.

"Now we know Nervina got into our restricted zone. We know she fooled the scanners, the on the ground security, obviated the active containment fields, read we assume enough to know of our true ancient history, of what we contained thanks to the Calamity. When I was with her, not even that came out. One would think possessing such secrets would burn a hole in one's head. And as she remembered me she had no inclination to unburden herself. Anyone else ought to be shocked. Nothing made an impression on her." Tara puzzled. "Is she a spy though? That is the question right?"

"Well if she is, she's our spy now." Daros remarked amused. "She will be useful." They looked at him surprised. "Well it will give us leads back to whoever she is working for if she is one of them."

Olsen nodded at that.

Tara scratched her head. "Even so, she seems so like us."

"Annoying isn't it." Daros admitted. "No aberrant behaviour, if she is Reganian. They're into personal technology. Would be lost without it. Crave stimulation, almost addicted."

"And no such signs from her. Of course she could be configured."

"Tara, our scanners would have picked that up."

"You're right Daros. Just thinking."

"Glad to hear it." he joked.

"Nothing on record even indicating what she really thinks. Apart from her illicit liaison with Horat, she's very level headed." Olsen added.

"So we can assume she is not artificially conditioned?" Darros asked Olsen.

"If she is, it's a new development."

"And if that is true, then her being with us will give us plenty of opportunity, like now to learn." Daros rising to the challenge. "So Dr Olsen, could she be?"

"Configured? We know the Reganian's are always tinkering with their Als. We should consider her one such experiment."

"A newcomer. First visit. No records of having been here." Daros reminded him.

"Then we have to assume, as we broached already that she is a type."

"We might best them yet." Tara said.

Nervina's read outs were getting less erratic. Smaller surges, fewer spikes, more frequent lows. Purple.

"You noticed that?" Tara asked.

"Oh yes. A specific range akin to some though not all Naturals. By the way here's a surprise." Olsen's eyes merry. "The study group at Central's got Horat going under. He should be ready now. Our systems are linked. The test is whether these two are extricably linked. They commingled their resonant states. Now to find out if that is permanent."

"As in DV activity?"

"You got it Tara."

Estra was busy checking the condition of the relevant data domains. All was being routed into secure cached files. Bundled, wrapped, isolated, secured.

"System's fine." She said.

"Good."

"How did you manage to convince them?" Olsen queried.

"We run their department. Set it up, funded it."

"And they went along with it?" Olsen was surprised.

"Well," Daros smiled easily, "back door channels. Cultural exchange and all that. Not the embassy, philanthropists. Incognito bless them."

"They got access?" Tara asked concerned with security. They were not in the habit of disseminating information.

"Culled. Camouflaged. Surface stuff. Plus certain privileges. The names are concealed of course. Our intent a subterfuge. Innocent enough. General psychology really. And their contribution to furthering knowledge its own reward. After all this group

at the uni's going to the Outlands, Khratam. Can't have unstable volatiles out there. They'd be putty in the hands of some of the local shamans." Daros explained.

"I see. Well you have worked this out." Tara beamed.

"It's too important to just have anybody. Military is involved as well."

"Is that wise?" Olsen asked.

"Just riding along."

"But they got the some unpredictable wetware Daros." Tara uneasy.

"They're not the elite. Just Stable Volatile Naturals. Close to our own profiled students. Who knows what our two will stumble upon."

"Ah." Olsen comfortable with the doubled up approach. "More to this than meets the mind."

"Exactly doctor. Until we know more about Horat's headspace the team that is going on their jaunt into the country will for the moment remain with me. The link between us does not officially exist. We don't exist."

They nodded at that. Security. One never knew if a straying DV might come across their experiment. Or an intruding shaman out to make mischief.

"Everybody ready?"

They were manning the consoles.

"Maybe she might let some things slip that Horat might remember. After all their resonances interlocked. Who knows what might have seeped across." Daros said with relish.

"Is he on the same dosage?" Olsen asked.

"No. The cocktail is different. If we duplicated that they might link leaving us out. Similar dosage with some minor differences. The hallucinogenic component lighter, amphetamine boosted enough to keep his brain ticking over. Add some somnolent molecular tailored drugs to control what he's like under a hyper stressed state. Concordance on Nervina's side, discordance at Horat's. That would make their resonant unity harder to achieve. If they manage to match their resonances then we know they'll connect. Knowing at what level from the monitors will reveal their capabilities. We fine tune our scanners accordingly. If they don't entangle then we know cross pollution is at a minimum. Means each subject's RS was only temporarily effected. Right then, we're rolling." Daros focussing on the read outs coming through from the other observation room.

Horat

Sleeping was wonderful. His body comfortable, his brain warm, soothing. But his mind was all fervent activity. Ceaseless thoughts catapulted into his expanded head space: surfacing, vanishing, surfacing, twisting, turning, flitting from one moment to the next. One part of him was annoyed, the other indifferent. The duality disconcerting, then some benign calmness smoothed things over. More like vivid access into his head. So close, so there, enjoyable.

The calming darkness within him substantial. An essence. Enjoying sagacity with deep satisfaction. He felt whole, complete, brilliant. The tumultuous thoughts revealing patterns of mental activity just beyond conscious grasp. He let it go. The more these flashes of memory... the flat on Regum he shared with Nervina... ah sweet Nervina, cool Nervina, not sweet, more an inner radiating presence, her calm predisposition always on top of things.

Being caught out with him back on Prima had not bothered her. Horat experienced a momentary sense of panic. It passed, a warm wave of sensory feelings pacified the instant it happened. The initial interrogation. He actually felt guilty then but not now. She was not an incredible lover in the physical sense. He was taken by Nervina's calm predisposition. Her head so there. Nothing disturbed her equanimity. He reassured simply by her being there. Their resonances melded, flowed together, united yet each of their individuality remained in place. Exploring their headspaces even when making love. His brain definitely opening to hers as she flowed into his mind. So much potential within her.

Then came the feeling of timelessness. It was momentary, the sense of near infinity stunningly real. In that flowing intermingling of his soul with hers time itself expanded, illuminating the future with strange realms The expectation he felt...their united selves back then determined through their unity to conquer all. And conquer they did when physically entwined body to body, feeling to feeling, being to being. The future theirs, a future unlike anything he had ever come across with anybody. Even his past

girlfriends now seemed flat brained, loving more the moment for the moment. A dissimilar sensation of interwoven beingness. Nervina was different. Unlike any other.

Still something disturbed him now in the afterglow of happy memories. Something lost, something nearly gained, something no longer there. Nervina? Where was she? Where was he? Ah yes, the university. They had been separated for their final tests. The comfort of the bed, the embrace of consoling sleep washing over him in warm oceanic waves. He thought of their future. Without her a void, a nothingness, an absence of self.

Multiple realities would not let him dwell on trying to nail down the future. With Nervina's presence it was so reassuring, without her vacant. He hoped she would pass. That there was not some flaw, though all Naturals were flawed in some way. Would she fail the last hurdle?

Off on an adventure exploring the Outlands of Regum. Regum. That planet. The original aboriginals and their secret lore. Would he miss home if they never let him back? It did not matter. Nervina was with him. Even if she was not accepted, he sighed inwardly, he would survive here. The pressure to conform so absent on this planet. Maybe that was the future foretold when they were as close as can be.

He laughed in his sleep. The idea tickled him, nerves jangling merrily. The future was his, even if on Regum. What could they do to him from Prima? Nothing! Ha! Even if they abducted him their almost freakish, so childish really, obsession with resonant pollution would preclude his return to Prima. His destiny was here then.

The sense of being home surprised him. Preordained? Ah yes, forging one's own future. Thanks to Nervina, opening up areas in his mind he had barely grasped. There was so much more to Regum. Their glittering cities, at night a spread of jewelled splendour invigorated him, delighting his senses compared to the comparative gloom of Prima. He might even stay here. He would do his best on the team, as an explorer, accepted for who he was. Reassuring. Even at the interview there had been a calmness about it all. So casual even though it was of such importance to the team. Not trying to nail him down, probing his mental state the way they did on Prima. So tightly wrapped up in their relentlessness of maintaining one's precious resonance, the gift of the Divine Mind. It seemed ridiculous here. They didn't even bother with that concept, did not ask him about it. A welcome relief, a liberating lightness in his great mind. His great mind. He could almost relate to the Great Mind not as an outer reality but an inner essence. Maybe all sentient life was imbued with a sense of the tremendous potential his brain felt right now. Maybe the secret lay within not without. A creation of Primas' Ecclesiastics, distorting, inverting the great secret. Each living being possessed.

He woke. Eyes open. Ah back at the lab. On the couch. Wires coming out of his head. Monitors suspended from the ceiling so he could watch his brain waves. Professor Storaf's laboratory, his assistant the severe looking Etessa, a young hard determined woman. Tubes from his arms feeding some nutrient Storaf had explained. Needing to probe his mental capabilities. Storaf's square face trying to look concerned, not succeeding. More the way he was than he pretended to be. Professional, personally distant. A dual character. He drifted back to the calming balm of sweet sleep. So comfortable, so sensual. Gravity non existent. His mind soared complete into the warm darkness. His thoughts clamouring for attention in the background, irrelevant really. One quick glimpse into the future. Could he achieve this without Nervina's presence. Nothing but darkness. An absence of self, of non being. Momentary panic. His brain like ice. Something not right. Then the recurring balmy fog of repleteness alleviated the sense of total absence. Was he alone without Nervina? No future without her? He was in love no doubt about it. They were meant to be together, predestined, Nervina immaculate. Irradiating him with her presence giving him strength, comfort. With her another dimension opened up deep within him. Love. So strong, so beguiling, so welcome. He missed her a little. A moment of forlornness, a smidgin of sadness making him feel momentarily weak, emotional, devoid of substance, lost.

Energy coursed through him. His eyes opened. The monitors above distracting. Somebody, a young man was calmly detaching the two tubes from his arm. Pfft. Someone behind him removed the wired helmet from his head. He still felt the inner glowing warmth wash through him.

"Horat how do you feel?" the slightly metallic voice of Storaf.

"Fine thanks."

"Good. Join me in the control room please."

The attendants were done. The lights in the observation and scanning laboratory soft, less intense. He was done. Did he pass? He felt a little inadequate for a moment. It was nothing. Relaxed he swung his legs off the recliner and walked slowly through the door the attendant held open.

At a row of consoles and computer terminals Storaf, Etessa looking at him with blank eyes. Storaf showed no emotions. Cold. He worried he would not be accepted. That his turbulent thoughts made him too volatile. Another part of his brain still grappled with the astounding idea that Primaians were even considered for the expedition.

"The good news is you passed." Storaf with a hint of a smile.

Relief. His worries receded. Horat merely nodded. No point asking any questions as to his results. He felt great. The agonizing over. Not that it had been distracting him. Still it was good to know he passed. Yet was he good enough?

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Etessa's shrill voice demanded. What a type. No wonder she got along with Storaf. Two of a kind.

"Thank you Professor Storaf, Etessa. Passing is one thing, being accepted something else."

"I see what you mean young man. Commendable. Yes, you are with the research team. There are two more candidates we have to test. When the team is assembled we will have another little chat amongst ourselves. Now as you are aware our mission is rather unique. We have the grant, the funding to go into the Outlands. In a way Horat it is a bit like your planet's distant past prior the Great Calamity. What we made sure of here today is that your psychological state is solid enough to cope with the difference of their minds to ours. The aboriginal race has a completely different attitude to reality. They have shamans, similar to the DVs. What we need in our team is solid grounded minds that cope with their, ahm, how to say this, occult attitude. They, like DVs will probably probe us. So we must be ready and have the inner strength and ability to handle that without coming under undue influence. We don't know whether we will be accepted openly or resented for probing their culture. As you know that is what it's all about. A complete study of their way of thinking. Previous efforts were of a more anthropological nature. But as all sentients share certain similarities, that data is exhausted. This is not the what we are concerned with. It is the how. Is an occult mind different to our more prosaic, to them, mind? Is our materialistic empiricism radically different to their holistic mind set? Can we learn from each other?" Here Storaf thought of his contact with the Primaians. "Is the cyber world a natural outflow of let's say for the moment the subconscious? And so forth."

Horat understood. "My interest entirely."

"Good, good." Storaf satisfied with that simple answer.

"What about Nervina?"

"Ah yes. A secondary research team, another location. I haven't heard from them as yet. Since you two came to our planet and I assume you two are good friends," he smiled knowingly though made no allusion to his guess they could be lovers continued: "I guess you know she too is made of the right stuff. Very cool, not given to unnecessary emotional interference, the classic intellectual. But as you know yourself, what one projects is not the same as what one is."

Horat nodded. His head liquid. Languid.

"So for now, study up on the material we have prepared for all our successful candidates." And Storaf picked up a thick folder and handed it to Horat. "This is not complete of course. Since it is still several days until we actually leave you will have plenty of time to familiarize yourself with our subject matter. To be precise Horat, this is not an in-depth study. More sociological. Does the shaman mind dominate their culture? Is it a subset? Is the shaman mind the difference to the norm or vice versa? Does the rest of the population accept them in a way your culture accepts your Divines? Are their kind imbued with a natural sense of the psychic? Are they naturals? Have children a given aptitude that they grow out of? Are the shamans considered positively? Are they feared? Revered? Adulated? Resented with their natural gifts of psychic power? Is that power real or imagined? You get the drift. There is also a more mundane element to our exploration." He waited for Horat's reaction. Though his CV, his personal file, his history was exactly what Storaf required, he had to make sure Horat was not there to keep an eye on him. Prima's little ways of observing their acquired resources. There was no reason why an agent could not be an intellectual as well.

"Their folklore?" Storaf continued, "is it still the same as it was centuries ago? You know that we don't interfere in their social and spiritual way of life." For good reason. His masters needed to know the aborigines potentialities. Storaf could guess why. Manipulation. A back door to Regum. Social policy dictated non interference. "If they want to come over to us they can. You have to remember Horat we are not there to impugn our way of life onto them. That is purely up to them. This is not a proselysing mission. We are a study group. Have the tales changed? Is it due to our presence merely by being or is it a natural change within their society? Do cultures change or as in your case, is there a sense of eternal temporalness? In other words are some societies naturally static once they have achieved a certain threshold? Is that threshold kept artificially in check or is it the reflection of their inner being? Remember all that when you study the information you now have."

"It will be exciting. Other cultures. Other realities." Other heads.

"Precisely. You have the right attitude Horat. Congratulations."

"Thank you both. One for being accepted as a candidate and the second coming from Prima." A chance of relieving themselves. He felt better.

"So I can return back to the flat?"

"Yes. And once again, congratulations in making the grade."

A part of him knew instinctively he would. Only when they were finally on their way would he accept that fact. He dearly hoped Nervina would make it.

Estra studied Storaf. Liaising with him directly, ran certain risks. It was her job keeping Lord Gharbel informed. The top DL. She did not question why exactly him. Prima's politics were always convoluted. For a society that prided itself on simplicity they were very complex in the way they went about anything. But she had been ordered to get Storaf and Dr Olsen together. And the best place to meet was at Regum's Central University. Strangers would not be much noticed.

They were in the observation room. Horat had already left. Nervina was cleared so these two were in. This sudden interest in folklore was certainly a new development. A direct order from above.

Daros was in control even if Olsen was the figure head. He was the political officer, the one running Nervina and Horat. Estra was there to make sure they all worked together, iron out any conflicting set of interests. Make sure the Reganian's saw this as purely a cultural exercise. The data they obtained from Nervina and Horat secure. The computer programmes had siphoned out the nature of their resonant states, they psychological aptitude, moulding the information so that both of them were post graduate students. Young minds eager to learn. A one sided exchange programme, an insertion from Prima's end. The Reganians amendable and indifferent that they could not send any of their students to study on Prima. They had their own on the orbital over Prima. That was as close as they would ever get to their people, their planet.

"That went well." Daros said looking at Estra, Olsen and Storaf. The technicians were gone. The only reason they met in the observation room was that it was secure from eavesdropping.

"I'm satisfied." Olsen said looking at Storaf. Storaf aware of the bigger picture even if Olsen was not. He thought it amusing. A Reganian working for Prima knowing more than one of their own. Not that he would let on. This mission contained a military aspect since Prima had officially no military to speak of. Regum's military being the logistics of the expedition. A data sweep of the Outlands and their inhabitants. Every little bit they learnt built up the composite. Physically as in material resources, computational as in how it all worked, mentally in ascertaining the Outlander's mind set. The difference between the Outlanders and the rest of the population observed, studied. Understand their psychic attitude and mystical orientation. Storaf was looking forward to this little exercise. The Primaian contingent under close observation.

"Any questions Prof Storaf." Estra asked. Storaf did not look like an academic. More a high powered executive. Focused, determined, fully locked into his assigned task.

"No not really. The two students passed. That is good enough for me."

"Not even their mind set?"

"Only if there are aberrations I'm not aware of."

Estra looked at Daros. With no sign from him Estra continued: "Their minds are remarkably open. Hemispherically more connected. With no mystical inclinations. So they will be secure from undue mental influences. After all the aboriginals will be curious as to their, your, our presence."

"No signs of enhancement." Olsen spoke up. "No interleaved protein threads, no parallel computational inserts which means no hidden or buried command structures which could self activate if conditions became extreme."

"So you agree, they are what they are." Storaf needed to clear this.

"Stable Volatiles at best." Tara spoke up. Storaf merely looked at her.

"Your deep incursionary techniques confirm this?"

"They do." Daros answered.

"They are cleared to go then. They are unique in a sense." Estra admitted.

"Probably Prima's best."

"Glad to hear it, and, just to make sure, they're clean?"

"Oh yes. Without a doubt." Daros confirmed.

"What about their history?"

"You need to know?" Daros looked at Storaf.

"I'll be with them. Working with them."

"Rest assured, they're the right material." Daros sidestepping. He assumed the professor was what he appeared to be. An academic. "If there is anything else professor?"

"Just to thank you for vetting them."

"The least we could do."

"It is of course understood that the data we gain is our property. I am not cleared to release this. That has to go through higher channels."

"We are aware of that and I know you have to say that."

"You understand."

"What if they want to stay?"

"We'll concern ourselves with that if it arises." Daros unconcerned.

"Will your people," Storaf looked at Estra, Tara then Olsen, "be shadowing us?"

Daros smiled. "No undue influence."

"Well that would settle it then." Storaf was relieved. No complications. "I just hope the DVs stay out if this."

Daros said nothing. Not his department. He was ground control.

"They have to keep out of it."

"Professor Storaf, I'm sure the relevant Domain Lords are aware of the sensitive nature of this excursion. Any DV activity could be detected by the aborigines. That would compromise your teams. Therefore I'm sure the DVs won't be involved." Knowing their military were uplinked to the Orbital.

"I'm glad you're aware."

"This is too important to be manipulated. I understand your concern Professor."

" Well then, I'm off. Thank you again for your help."

"Glad to be of service." Daros replied amiably.

Nervina

Nervina's Brain kicked in as she and Horat entered the campus of Central University. It covered a whole city block. The high rise offices behind them, in front sprawling low rise buildings set amongst small parks giving the area a relaxed feel. Nervina on high alert. Her adrenaline under control, keeping her calm. The sense of anticipation remained. Something was up. Her senses vigilant, acute. She took in everything. The fellow students, support staff, lecturers, she soft scanned them all. Nothing overt. Horat's mind was all excitement. Natural for him. Not enhanced in any way. He was what he was: a Stable Volatile with some natural tendencies. At that very moment her mind switched itself around. Her Primaian self was now contained, functioning as a sub routine. Her other self came out. She was comfortable. Her Brain expanding. Not just that, her thoughts were clearer, there were less of them. The minutiae of the everyday subsided. She felt more herself. It was a good feeling, being in control. The difference remarkable.

Students milled past them as they walked along the broad concourse to the social science block. Nervina remembered where it was. Horat followed hesitatingly a little lost. It was a huge campus. Prima had nothing like it. They both were part of the milieu.

Memory recall. Her Brain revealed a data cache. Prima infiltrating the university. Should she be surprised? After all they were accepted as Primaians. Well Horat was. She not so certain. Query: she a Reganian agent, pretending to be Primaian? If so she had great programming in place. The sensation one of extreme caution. There had to be scanning minds somewhere in this area. Though piqued she held back. No point advertising oneself. The low level noise of the partially externally enhanced Reganian's were not the source. Her Brain had adjusted to that long ago, ever since touch down. Enphased in this world's environment. Whatever was in the background within was out of reach of her curious mind.

They skirted the main administration block heading for the assembly point. Having received the message from professor Storaf to come here for one final lecture prior their departure they dutifully left their run down flat down town. Horat excited, Nervina not. She wanted calm. It flooded through her mind, her head, her Brain. Parts of her not discovered when she was being probed, mindfucked and softscanned. Then her Brain had shrunk itself into a state of non localized being. Diffused itself throughout her mind-body field state. Neat. Undetectable. Simply not there.

Walking along the path, trees around them, a beautiful clear sky, a light breeze, a sunny day. Birds flying about. Change of lectures, more students about, going in all directions. Hurrying tutors. Her legend in place. Research assistant, like Horat. He the potential thinker from some elite family, she the progeny of a Volatile mother and father from a rural backwater.

Horat had gone quiet. He was too excited. Good cover for her. His mind crackling with enlivened motivation. He was looking forward to the adventure. They found the social science building walking into the spacious foyer. Security barely giving them a second glance. A tiny itch in her head. Ah, placid surface scanners in place. Just making sure they were who they were. Still they had to register their arrival. Reganian's could assume any self created persona. No funny business here. You had to be who you were, not who you wanted to be. Intellectual honesty was at stake. It made sense.

A cursory ID tagged check from mildly alert security guards. Three of them. One talking to some student, giving directions, one checking their consoles and one checking them. They verified Horat's true data and just as easily Nervina's false persona. Her Brain was running the show but not directly. Just there in the background, ready to jump into their computers if anything was revealed. She tried not to think if she was Primaian, which she was in her structured shell, or a Reganian pretending to be a Primaian, another shell hovering ready to withdraw..

The processing algorithms were aligning themselves in a certain direction. No clue as to where they, it, herself were heading. But a pathway out of many possibilities opened up. Predetermination in play now. Internal connections bifurcating. She was even more alert now. Horat at ease. After all they were both expected. What could go wrong?

She felt euphoric. As she should. Introspection was self limiting. Give nothing away. Prima's past hovered momentarily, as they were being checked. Taking forever. No it was her Brain working at hyper-speed. The faster one thought the slower time passed. They were cleared, a nod from the officer thanking them for their patience.

They walked towards the stairs as Storaf's office was on the first floor. Horat too rapt up in his thoughts to even talk. Whilst he was excited Nervina's Brain was calculating probabilities at mind warping speed. A programme activated. Having calculated probabilities, her Brain kicked into gear.

As they climbed the stairs Nervina's Brain took over.

"I've got to go to the toilet. The excitement." Was all she said. "You go on ahead. I know where it is."

"Alright."

She would never see him again. Within her mind a metamorphoses was unfolding. Nothing overt, just a subtle shift of attitude. Something decayed within her mind, another programme self deleting. Her perspective broadened out as she turned on the stairs and walked back down.

She was defecting, her Brain leading her out. Horat was in. Her withdrawal she hoped would be put down to nerves. One Primaian who did not make the grade. She just hoped Primaian's were not watching her. She could not ignore that scenario.

Horat was gone. Fact. She was betraying Prima's mission. Fact. Would it reflect on Horat? She hoped not. Horat. Something about him. An infiltrator to be sure. Prima's scout. The folklore. Prima's paranoia that another race had DV capabilities. Not of interest to her programme. Something else but not revealed just yet.

The two security guards were busy with enquiries. The third, the one who had passed them talking to a group of older men. One of the men glanced casually at her, very non challant. Their eyes locked. Stupid of her. She was able to see him without looking directly. Time stopped. His eyes synchronised data collectors. Very enhanced. Implants of the highest order. Boring into her. Being remote scanned. The itch the tell tale sign. The link tenuous for the moment. Her Brain shrivelled, retracted, vanished. A Primaian. Shit. A burst of endomorphic activity. Equilibrium re-established. Cool. Her look insolent. As if she cared.

He seemed prepared. Did he sense her shell like persona? There were several though for the moment she felt herself as Nervina. Reganian dominant. The wrong projection? Was he camouflaged as well? His eyes retracted, going blank. She looked defiantly at him making him out to be some voyeur. Good. She pushed his curiosity back into him. It worked. He did not take her on but there was a hint of defiance there. So was she. Take that. A sneer in his expression, a show of pretentiousness as his gaze retreated. She knew his game, engage her, probe her through her reaction. Careful. Resonant field

scanning capabilities. She held back from calling up an insertion template to cover herself. He would note the change. And arouse his suspicion.

At least his probing had not penetrated very far. Great precognitive reaction. Almost Reganian on her part. She continued down the stairs, past the security desk. The group now back conversing amongst themselves. Not clear yet. Would the security guard lock her in?

She continued walking with an air of disdain.

"Miss." She knew it. One of them was not going to let all this go at that. She kept on walking. He could be talking to anybody. They had her name after all. Near the first set of glass doors. People going in all directions around her. Natural cover.

"Miss." More insistent, bellicose almost. She sensed his presence. Through the first partition. Her Brain defused their lock-on mechanisms. A student gave her a smile. On Prima a crowd would have obeyed and stopped her. Not on this planet. Ah Volatiles, so wonderfully indifferent to order. The student let her pass as did the others.

"Stop." The voice insistent. Through the second glass partition. They all made way for her, parting in front of her. He was getting closer, hurrying.

"Stop right there." Came the command. She meandered through the last partition walking slowly onto the concourse. She heard his footsteps following her.

It was the same man. Indeterminate age, faceless, expressionless yet the eyes said it all. Intent. Focussed which her Brain ignored. His authoritative look meant nothing to her.

"I must ask you to step inside." Obviously no helpers out here. A small crowd gathered, slightly interested, mainly students keeping their distance whilst forming a protective cordon around her. They were relaxed, some amused others watching the man with a hint of defiance. Interesting. One in the crowd observing her. A young woman looking like a student. Then again maybe not.

Nervina turned. "You always like this? Harassing women?" for good measure. Her eyes fuming. The group got the hint. A ripple of laughter, bonded.

"I have reason to believe you are engaged in activities detrimental to the safety of the institution." Slight surprise all around. More became interested, some worried, others defiant. Through the glass partition the three security guards were very busy. The group he belonged to dissipated. Spreading out.

"It's called thinking." Nervina retorted calmly. "And only detrimental to the mentally challenged." Chuckles from the group. The young woman still focused on her.

Her Brain calculated flexing its architectural pathways. One, two hostiles plus the security guards who remained at their post. Two more hostiles fanning out.

Had the security check come up with something? Was Prima recalling her? Uncertainty.

"So indulge me." As her Brain started figuring out an exit strategy.

"There is a glitch we would like to clear up."

"The only glitch is your implants misfiring, again." As if he was misprogrammed.

"As are you friends out here." She guessed correctly. More amusement from the crowd. Some were drifting off, but not the young woman. She might be running this scenario. Nervina observing the minders.

"If you would be so kind." He appealed to her.

"I'm leaving. All I did was escort my friend to his interview with Professor Storaf. Check with him. And tell him I'm not joining him either. As to any detriment I caused, that's in your dysfunctional software." All she could think of was that her Brain might have deleted or reconfigured her persona. Something must have showed up.

Her Brain sparkling. She turned, saw her chameleon pattern go active. And moved with hyper speed. As he was using enhancements, she hacked his system. Now he would not even get a description of her out, visuals would be a mess. She was wearing various clothes which changed rapidly. No one would remember what she actually looked like. Boosted physically she melted through the small group, those around her nearly stationary, she a blur. Down the concourse and out onto the street. Catching a tram or taxi would only confine her. She had to stay in the open. As to what was really going on she had no clue.

Her Brain had taken over. Obviously Storaf's mission was not her concern. Being with him would not further any aims implanted in her. It might even be the opposite. Storaf's mission contaminated, wrong. A dead end, or just a non-end. Useless in itself. Or Storaf working for the Primaian's, or one of his team was. That might blow her cover. Too many probabilities, too many uncertainties, too many opportunities for Storaf to bifurcate at nodal vortices of the space-framed continuum whose quantum states could be easily configured. That meant the actualisation of realities which might complicate Nervina's mission. Whatever that was. She had no idea for suchlike data her Brain held was detained for now. Either way her Brain insisted she leave.

Her camouflage was still in chameleon mode. Long enough to be seen by enhanced implants the locals possessed, visual scanners uploading her several images. She changed again. Enough to sow confusion into whoever took an interest in her. Her

appearance mutating. Covers came and went with lightning speed. Now this gear, now those clothes, shoes, all run by her chameleon programme. Neat. Fast. Effective.

Walking not running. Her Brain uploaded a blank personality, it ran a new set of thoughts. Rampant. Images of another childhood on Regum. A semi desert scene, graceful floating airships, huge bulbous massive constructions, power assisted cruising above the brown landscape. Then isolation.

Her Brain in charge. She was on the main thoroughfare leading from CU back into the CBD. Glittering skyscrapers, wrapped in solar panels that shifted their axis relative to the position of the sun. People about, electric cars hummed by, trams rattled down the street, delivery trucks, noisy petrol engine bikes their helmeted riders looking sleek on designer machines. Spindly lampposts holding the overhead wires for the trams.

No one followed her. No one paid any attention, no pursuit either. If there was security or police around they were not present. Maybe they wanted to see where she went. Was this part of the plan? She sighed. She'd gone over that already. A pawn in a triple oriented set of game plans. Prima, where she was supposed to be from, not quite believing it except for the fact that's where it all began. Regum maybe given the interest of Storaf. Regum's Web could become real, inserting itself into any open sourced head, hers included which might be the actual reality. Their version of mindfucking. Or if Storaf was working for himself, a black op whose aims were closed off to her could be pulling the strings.

Her Brain sent out data tendrils into the Web. She had left some discordant patterns when going into chameleon mode at CU. They expanded like ripples in a pond around most data realms. Barely disturbing the overall equilibrium of the master systems. Not one but many. Clever. Crash proof.

The sense of abandonment remained. She an Isolate. Like most locals. So that's what it felt like. Nervina blending in, or rather blending out with the rest around her. Self absorbed. Her Brain let its tendriled data antennae dissipate, dissolve then vanish, absorbed as surplus energy in the vast realm of their cyberspace. Her individuality reasserted itself. The balance of being there and not there in equilibrium. Like a pixel amongst millions to the remote external sensory devices there not to keep an eye on the populace but to facilitate entry into the Web. The very reverse of Prima's systems.

Keep moving for now. The curious young woman was nowhere around. The traffic cleared and she crossed the wide sunlit boulevard. The skyscrapers were set back, huge pencil shaped structures maximising light to reach the ground, surrounded by spacious plazas dotted with cafés, bars, restaurants, eateries, park benches under broad trees.

The sky clear the sun hidden behind the office blocks which doubled as apartments as well. On the ground bookshops, amazing for this digital society, computer shops, data specialists, fashion and jewellery stores, small supermarkets, bottle shops. Wonderfully disorganised. A mosaic which would confuse any Primaian. Not her. So what was she? Not that again.

Time to find out if she was clear. She headed for one of the open plaza's found some tables spilling out around a café sat down and watched the passers by. A young waiter appeared so quietly she was almost startled.

"The biggest coffee you have, milk, three sugars."

"Fine." And vanished into the café. One or two patrons looked at her momentarily then returned to their own world.

Her Brain crackling. The feeling of abandonment gone. The waiter returned with a huge cup and saucer.

"Pay now?"

"When you're ready."

Time to take stock. No one had sat near her since she came. The jump suit looked like a two piece business outfit. Not too assertive. She had various credit and charge cards so she was not stranded. Horat was though. Or did he make it? Did Storaf care she bailed out? Maybe for twenty seconds. Surely he would have a shortlist from where he could find someone to replace her. Lets hope he would not panic. From Prima's view she had broken ranks. Or was this preordained? Then why wait until entering CU? Prima wanted to know what Regum knew regarding their folklore. After their psychological states. Were they current or vanished in the mists of time. Relevant or irrelevant? She watched everybody go about their business. Individuals creating a wholeness Prima found perplexing. Good. Let them stew on that. No group minds here. Maybe in the Web but certainly not in reality. Preferring fractured multi level scenarios.

Out of chaos order. That was Regum. No social superstructure like on Prima. She sipped her coffee. It was good. Just right. People here were free to move about anywhere, everywhere. No limitations, no constraints, no overt management. If Prima ever mastered AI systems, modelled on their resonant states they would screw down the whole population in perpetuity. Heck they were screwed down already.

Around her a feeling of happiness, of freedom. Being Volatile certainly had its advantages. No absolutes. She saw two priests moving self consciously through the passers by. Handing out leaflets, or rather trying to. No one cared. They knew the

message and were disinterested. How can one save a soul? A ridiculous precept. The soul saved itself. She hoped they would not come her way.

She drained her coffee, rose walked into the dark interior of the café, pulled out at random a credit card and paid. The waiter smiled at her. Not a bad looking young man now her eyes had adjusted. Interested in a detached sort of way. She was tempted to say something but nothing came to her. The card was returned by the waitress behind the counter, wishing her a pleasant day. She nodded at both of them knowing if they were trailing her they would need a whole team.

She kept her Brain in check. No softscanning. Even that would give her away. A part of her inner self unravelling. One of her multiple personas, she was not even aware there were so many, was dissipating, like morning mist with the rising sun. Lighter. The decision to walk out of CU and Horat with the vanished persona the right course of action.

Moving in the general direction of her flat. See if it was under observation, remote or otherwise. Be interesting to find out. Her Brain accepted her decision. Was she going over to the enemy? Depending on who you asked. Well at least with one persona scrubbed so went the data with it. Home. It made her feel warm, she belonged here. Another persona in place. The transition smooth. Out of reach of Prima's agents. That past erased.

People glid past her. What was so threatening about Regum anyway? Their individuality? Their AI capabilities? The Web? The contaminated universe? Everything? Enough to keep them busy. The Reganians did not care. She was at the corner store of the block where the flat was. She turned around but no one of particular interest tried to blend in. No sudden stopping of other passers by.

She walked into the old low rise building. No lifts, just stairs. Familiarity.

A skeleton of a distraught looking middle aged man appeared on the ground floor as she entered. He was staring at her. Her Brain recoiled. His steel grey eyes irradiated his confused state of mind. Web burn out. He held a little black box. A basic scanner.

"Your toy?" Nervina said disarmingly. Surely he was not a Primaian agent. Maybe he was. They were desperate given what little headway they made on this planet.

"You. I know all about you. A reconfigured Volatile. Only Primaians are that."

She hid her surprise, her inner systems dampening her reaction.

"If you say so."

Not what he expected.

"I got your resonance." he looked triumphant. Shit, he was one of them.

"Keeping you busy then, scanning, illegally I may add other people."

"You're an infiltrator. Polluting everybody you come in contact with."

He was crazy, his clothes a little dishevelled, in need of cleaning.

"Found another alien from Prima Nathan?" the landlady appeared talking in a motherly fashion. So he was crazy, or acting it. Her Brain remained mute.

"It's right here. See? Winking red." He said showing them his black box with its set of lights. One winking red.

"Make it yourself or bought it off some dodgy character?" Nervina mocked.

"It's genuine." Pulling the scanner back thinking Nervina was going to take it from him.

"Well you'd better tell the authorities then. I'm sure they are just waiting for you to come to them with this surprise." Nervina countered.

"Do not mock. We are being infiltrated. You are possessed."

She felt better. He was passionate in his assertion.

"So report me. I just hope your data base makes sense to them." The landlady amused by this exchange. She winked at Nervina.

"It's got a few of the enemy. They'll be glad I'm helping them."

"You're red light's having some sort of spasm." The two women looked at the flickering red light, it died. "Run out of steam?" Nervina smiled.

"She did it. see?"

"Nathan," the landlady said patiently, humouring him, "we all value your vigilance but if you harass my tenants, or tamper with their data bases or accuse them of being aliens simply because of your third rate toy then I will do something to have you screened."

He pocketed his mute black box in his baggy coat, sniffed, glared at Nervina and shambled off into the street.

"Nathan. Too much time in the Web. It gets to some. Can't tell which reality is what. Sad really." The pleasantly plump landlady said. The damp smell of cooking in the hallway.

"So one of the tenants."

"Want to make sure he didn't break into your flat?"

"Please."

"Actually it's gone to his head. The previous manager was a Primaian agent. Caught out by Nathan. That was two years ago. You remember?"

She did not but her Brain extracted the data from the Web. Sure enough, another gaunt looking local had been engaged by the Primaians to look out for potential targets.

"That man got a bit cocky, started harassing people until Nathan fooled him with is black box. The man caved in and was swiftly removed. Since then Nathan has been on the hunt for others." She called over her shoulder as they tramped up the stairs.

"I was out of town then. Not in the Web either. On holiday back at the outback."

"That's right, you were saying, I remember it now. Took time off uni. Stress no doubt."

"Don't remind me."

"In your final year now?"

"Well, sort of." Which was somewhat the truth.

Nervina took out her card and unlocked the door. The landlady let her pass then entered behind her, staying near the door. Someone had been in here. The clutter looked different. Everything was almost in its place. The ancient processor moved slightly, for she kept it flush to the edge of the solid wooden table she used. The machine still warm from usage. The dusty curtains wafted in the slight breeze at the open window. She smelt air freshener. She never used it. Even to remove cooking smells. So why use air freshener? Unless to cover up any molecular trails from one's breath. Nathan?

She decided to keep that to herself. She did not want to attract any attention, even by considerate authorities. Too much exposure.

"Tea?"

"Why thank you." Martha said.

"Take a seat."

Martha sat on the saggy lounge. The kitchen was old world. Manual. She lit the gas stove, boiled the water, poured it into the pot, took out milk and sugar and placed it on the low table.

"I don't use air freshener."

"That Nathan. Want it reported?"

Nervina walked around the flat. Nothing taken. She had a quick look at the files on her work table, Horat had his own, all there but all slightly disturbed. Smeared dust trails. Not very efficient, unless they wanted it known they paid a visit.

"Saw no one else?" Nervina asked.

"No love."

Nervina poured, Martha thanked her,

"Tell me about Nathan."

"He's a little, err..."

"Volatile?"

Martha seemed uncomfortable.

"That would be extreme."

"He might be Primaian."

"Wouldn't make sense. He caught the manager out."

"Set up. Cover. Agents are disposable."

"How would you know?" Martha asked out of curiosity.

"Playing in the Web."

"Of course. But is real life like that? Agents and all?"

"I've studied game theory. Theoretically yes."

"Well I'm sure you know what you're talking about." And sipped her tea, smiling sweetly at Nervina. "So," putting the cup down, "you gonna report him?"

"Nah. Waste of time. At least you know. No sensors in the stairwell?"

"There are, but, they're playing up. Must remember to get that fixed."

That was lucky. Nervina realised she could not remain here. Nathan or no Nathan. Someone had a look-see. Then Martha continued: "I'm glad you're not. I'm not stopping you, don't get me wrong. You have every right. He is a terrible busy body, but he keeps the riff raff out."

"You boosted?" Nervina asked. Her mind was tickling.

"For my medical condition love. It's ancient. Should get it updated. Why you feel it?"

Nervina nodded. Everybody was configured in some way on Regum.

"I sometimes get impressions of people, their state of mind. It detects but can't decipher much. More a fuzzy glow. It gets triggered by Nathan's black box. He must have got it working again. A bit annoying I know." Martha placated.

Was she true or was her basic implant a cover?

"Don't worry about Nathan's black box. As useful as his willy." They both laughed. "All he picks up is static frequencies. Maybe a music feed but it's practically neutered."

"Like his brain I hope."

"Nathan I think is some sort of look out. For whom I don't know. Don't want to. He might be black market. Maybe he does work for Prima. Though why they'd pick him being so dumb. Being so suspicious does not exactly make him inconspicuous. Still he pays the rent. Trouble is he's so borderline there is little point in treating him. He's harmless really."

That might be true. Nervina wondered if through Nathan Martha kept her cover. Medical implants were never out of date. And since everything on Regum was state of the art what was she doing with crappy implants? Unless it was a cover for her modifications. She remained wary.

Her Brain checked the processor. Though of an ancient make it contained a finely inner set of multiple light processors electronically configuring on the sub molecular level in a fuzzy quantum field. The information Nervina processed, encrypted in photon fields looked like normal light fields encased capsules activated by her aligned Brain. No one else could get in. Unless they hacked her Brain. The quantum probability fields in her head, accessed through her wristband had a basic access template powered by her body and her movements. The computer was secure but Martha's implant was a cloaking device. She did not explore that any further. Somehow she had to draw Martha out. Find the real persona.

Martha rose, looked for some paper on Nervina's desk and wrote something down, then handed the note to her. It stated that surveillance systems were impossible to detect, invasive passive snoopers possible, then Nathan? On the sheet of paper.

"That might explain the air freshener."

"Your lousy cooking?" Martha laughed.

"His clothes smell. Even that could be a cloak."

"Not could Nervina is. Hm, he's becoming interesting."

"For whom though?"

"And why you?"

Indeed. Why me?

"Politics bore me. I got no opinion on anything." Nervina explained.

"Then Nathan's out on a limb. Pesky little runt isn't he?"

Nervina's Brain tickled. She did not follow it up. She doubted it was Martha's old booster. Someone was remote scanning them. Maybe Nathan was targeting Martha and through Martha her. Nothing was impossible. Only one way to find out. Keep Martha talking. It was as if they were both circling each other. Both women sensed the other was more than she let out. From what little Nervina actually knew, in real time, of Regum was facile. Her Brain kept her up to date as need-to-know arose. Even when paying by credit card at the café her inbuilt chip downloaded as much as possible meaning security codes in case she needed to consolidate her credit history. The legend of her being a student was tenuous at best. Apart from her persona deposited in CU's data system being a mature student, for Horat, Horat her one time lover, as a Primaian post-grad, she

was barely present. Now that she had chickened out Storaf hopefully would loose interest in her. A Primaian freak out not going into the Outlands was not so unusual. That she had not run back for cover at their embassy or mission centres might let her get away with disappearing. She certainly could not stay here. Martha might be the sweet woman she was but something told her she was more than that. Going into her head though was out of the question. So verbal banter was all there was to it for the moment. Disassociations. Part of the unravelling of her previous persona.

"Let's assume Nathan scanned me. Well I am from Prima."

Martha tried to look surprised. Maybe other Primaian's had stayed here. Or in flats similar to this one. It was the student quarter after all. And not that many students. Most Reganian's learnt on-line, acquiring knowledge through the Web. How they made their way after was up to them. They might not be accredited, the only difference in their qualifications.

"Then he was right. Yet you're different love. Less intense, less fixated with order." Martha surveying the messy flat. Files everywhere, books stacked on the floor, papers strewn all over the two desks. Two ancient processors.

"Oh yes, order. So what could he do? I'm on record with the authorities. Even so, we're supposed to be a sort of commonwealth."

"Is that so?"

"Legally yes. Prima has yet to accept Regum as being independent. They want unity. Well I got no idea regarding Nathan and his type. Probably pimping for the authorities."

"I like that." Martha beamed, looking at her empty cup.

"More tea?"

"Yes please."

Nervina poured. As Martha sipped her tea Nervina activated her Brain in broad field oriented secure search mode. Anything relevant would be condensed into compressed data. The room turned midnight blue. No bugs. The walls transparent, just wiring. Kitchen and bathroom clear. At the entrance a thin red line along the bottom of the door. A passive/active trip sequencer, mute transmitter sending any activity to whoever. All the flats had one as she searched the building, front door included. Could be standard fixture. Basic data collection, more like a traffic count. Running off the power grid. She was tempted to scan Martha's flat which might alert her to Nervina's intrusion. So the population was being flagged. The system crude, or pretended to be.

She switched off, the dark blue glow vanished, sunlight flooded through the two windows. Keep intruders tagged Nervina reasoned.

"You had a look didn't you."

"How'd you know."

"Implant. Gotta make sure you Primaian's don't get ahead of yourselves."

"So you knew."

"The concierges in our buildings are alert, after someone discovered an agent operating out another block of flats. He was recruiting, not very good either. Advertising himself. You an agent too?" Martha said without rancour. Reganian's were used to Primaian activity in the field. Using others, not just priests.

"Not exactly." Nervina momentarily had no clue just what her status was. Double agent? One of Storaf's little helpers? Working for whom exactly. She didn't know. Barely understood what that had been all about.

"Well we know Nathan was here. Maybe. Someone was."

"The air freshener. So much for that trick."

"Maybe Nathan let somebody else in. Alerted them."

"It might just be routine Nervina. Given your status."

"I guess you're right." She gave up for now. One thing was certain. She would have to play it safe. Her Brain remained mute. She felt completely blank.

"What does your planet want?"

Good question. Easy answer. Dominance.

"I don't know."

"Surely..."

"You don't know Prima. No one is told anything."

She seemed to accept that. "And?"

"Well, I'm supposed to be with a research team going into the backwoods. Studying your folklore."

"Really?"

"Aha. Accept I changed my mind. Gut feeling. My friend seems OK with that. And that's about it Martha." What she did not say was how estranged they had become once here. Horat was more focussed on their mission and more distant from her. Their love making perfunctionary. She sensed the emotional bond severed as he threw himself into the mission. She realised he was totally in. She was not. She was meant for something else, but what?

"What are you going to do now then?"

"I don't know. I will have to think about it. If I suddenly vanish then they will have taken me into custody. They don't like individual decisions."

"Defecting?"

Nervina was surprised at how astute Martha was.

"Might have to. Can't go back. A loose canon. They'll find out soon enough. Might have already." It occurred to her she should get into Horat's head. But that might complicate things. Better not being there at all. Less is more. "Might get myself unprogrammed, become the real me."

"You would have to turn yourself in. Somehow that disturbs you."

"Not an easy decision."

"I can sympathise with you there. Must be a terrible burden." Martha said sympathetically.

"Well I don't feel I have an affinity with Prima anymore."

"Homeless." Her eyes soft.

"In a way. But free Martha, free."

"If you do leave of your own accord what will you do?"

"What can I do? Neutralise Nathan?"

"Oh him. He would be suspicious. But if he doesn't know where you are, unless he can tag you then you would be free. Depends what's in your head."

"Oh?"

"Meaning Nervina if your people send out a search signal. Track you. I'm sure you've got something embedded. If you'd remove that you could disappear."

"I'll have to think about it."

"If you stay they'll find you. Or our end. What a game all this is."

"Isn't it. Power power power." Power surge. Covered. In the building. How had that got past her Brain. Had Martha kept her talking to get her cornered? She seemed unaffected. No tell tale activity that end.

Cornered. Nathan entered the room, cocksure of himself. Another shape at the door. Non focused. Staying clear of her head. Escape was not impossible. Martha rose. Good cover.

In a flash she pushed Martha towards Nathan. Unexpected she lost her balance. Nathan tried to move sideways and in that one moment she darted past Martha and whacked Nathan in his shoulder. His other hand held a dart gun. The pneumatic hiss of air as the dart missed her. His cover came in, another dart gun ready, pulling the trigger. The needle hit her midriff. It was stopped at the second layer of her protective clothing,

the polymesh coalesced at the singular point of impact, stopping further penetration. Outside a car was waiting with one driver. Thank you Brain. She faked being hit, going wobbly at the knees. Nathan was back on his feet and his goon was reaching out to catch her. At that instant she kicked him in the knees, arching sideways as her leg stretched out. She felt bone shatter, a scream of pain as Nathan shot off another dark at her head. But by then she was bounding down the stairs. Her Brain was working so fast now time slowed. The driver had been alerted at Nervina's momentary escape. Her Brain sent an EM signal of white noise, obliterating any contact between the three of them. The driver was not about to barge through the front door, but was covering it. The next shot Nervina reasoned would be at her head. She crashed into Martha's downstairs flat. On the landing pounding footsteps. She locked Martha's door. Not a moment to loose. She calculated the distance to the window and with a running jump burst through the old glass, feet first, arms extended, rolled over, then jumped sideways at the startled driver. Speed enhanced, adrenaline pumping, muscles taut she pushed the driver forwards, who half turned missed his shot.

She jumped into the car, engine a still running. Her Brain hacked into the system, then engaging drive speeding off down the road. Given Reganian's used mass transit the road was fairly empty of traffic. The car had smart sensors checking out her surroundings. Luckily the car's inbuilt systems was not configured to any specific driver. The scanners, the processors, its data domain basic. So Nathan and his stooges were not Reganian. Thus the cars low profile. Most of the gear had to be black market, second hand, probably surplus. Easily taken over. Somebody was trying to regain control of her. No such luck. Her Brain was blocking their signals to disable the car's somewhat spluttering smart system. So far so good.

Now what? She could go back to the flat. The last place they'd look. It would mean disabling whatever boosted gear Nathan used. Time to keep a low profile. Her Brain shrank back into its secure retreat. Running this vehicle was easy for it. The stuff available to Primaian's was not even cutting edge.

No pursuit noted. Then again they could be using plain vehicles, completely manual. No way tracing that. But its occupants could still be read by her Brain. Their intent would give them away. As to her intent, her nano inserts were calming her down. Just another driver. She kept herself on alert.

The first place they might look for her was right where she was. Yet Nathan never had the capabilities to get a fix on her persona. Unless he was remarkably boosted. Primaian's abhorred artificial reconfigurations. But that was on Prima. Recruited

Reganian's might be far more capable. An alert of some sort ought to have been sent out. She detected nothing.

Of course! They were interested where she would run to. Little did they know that she was unaligned in any way. Her status was low key bottom of the chain. If there was any surveillance it was face to face. She could double back to the uni. Trouble was Storaf. He was most likely a double agent if he was smart. Solely backing Prima overtly would not gain him any friends. Still security at CU had been interested in her. Unless she had broken with some protocol. Prima did not like loose ends. Which meant they were aware of her going solitary. There was only one thing for her. She would give herself up to Reganian security. Get protection. She hoped they would not get wind of her defection.

By now the embassy would know of her rogue state. Unless Nathan worked not for Prima but Regum, or both. But then his tools would not have been that crude. She cruised downtown, turning left here, right there. No tags after her position. This city was huge. Everywhere block after block of skyscrapers. It made Prima's cities look not merely provincial but positively back dated. Easier to get lost, to loose oneself here.

She got her Brain to start searching for Regum's security agency. It accessed the public data base. Unlike on Prima Regum had several. Public security, the police. A whole plethora of private agencies. Data security, private and public property security, military security dispersed among the various arms. Local militia, on ground, naval, terrestrial, public flight, their air force and space. Then there was counter intelligence. No search results. Not that she expected that to be in the public register. Maybe off world diplomatic immunity. What she was really trying to find was whoever watched Primaians. She accessed the wanted lists. There had to be a register somewhere dealing with her kind. Nothing official. The trouble was she did not know what her true status was. Publicly she was a research student.

Around a block. She was using random sequencing to go in no particular direction. Ahead a parking station. Out of its building snaked monorails whisking passengers through the city. Trams on the ground. She drove in, a quick scan then up several levels until she found a place to park. She switched off the engine keeping the inbuilt computers on line. And had an idea. Some sort of surveillance would be in place at the Primaian embassy. That should do the trick. Her Brain using the public information base. Ah yes, diplomatic security. It existed but was not run by an agency as such. Perfect.

Now for the camouflage. She uploaded one of her persona's, as the student into its memory. If they were looking for her she would be 'here'. Pretending to make

contact. Now to choose a second cover. Public security had the most open files. Minor infractions of the law, mainly private data theft, data manipulation and quite a few outright acts of burglary. Mainly computers, external hook ups, the odd military theft of advanced gear. So a criminal sub culture existed on Regum. Then there was personal hacking, downright individual targeted attacks. Ah the games they played in the Web. Well Nathan had tried to attack her. It might be best going for the public police. Then she would ask for protection. But how would they react? The embassy ask for her back? She knew she had to defect. And Reganian's were space travellers. Going off world might work. But there Prima had its SpaceKorps. They would be after her. But first they had to find her. Primaians though were not known for space exploration. She saw a way out.

Her Brain itched. Looking, searching for her. She avoided a trace back. Could be an accidental intrusion by cyber thugs. Random targeting, hijacking personas for dubious ends. Use surrogates for some nefarious deed. She charged up her Brain, used the computer of the car as the nodal point and sent out an EM hit. White noise. Her Brain struck back. The itch stopped. Well that was easier than expected. She didn't bother with the trace.

She got out the car, made her way down stairs, not trusting the lifts and waited on the platform for the next mono rail to come through. She knew where the police station was. Whilst waiting she watched those around her. No one paid any particular attention. But that meant nothing. No tell tale itch. Whoever had tried had a mess on their hands. If they had smart gear they could trace the source of the attack, the car. Her persona there in place.

A train pulled into the station. She got on. Only two stops to the nearest police station. The train pulled out into bright sunlight. People below going about their business. Trams trundled down the broad streets, a few cars, delivery trucks, taxis.

She kept the image of helplessness in focus. Was that her Brain's doing to be extricated? She kept this image in place. Into another high rise building. A multilevel department store and shopping centre. The goods on display in the brightly lit shops looked fascinating. Nothing like it on Prima. Primitive stalls at best. Some shops in the holy city for the elite but nothing like this for the masses. People got on and off. No contact yet. The train moved out, exited the building, back into sunshine, along the side of an office block. People at computers working away at their own business. Some talking, others sitting around tables with their light screens in front of them. Activity everywhere. How could Prima compete with all this?

The next station approached. It stopped in an outside tube like structure. There at the platform was the police station. She hoped the alert officers there would send someone from their protective authorities to fetch her. And by going public it would be harder for Prima to extricate her.

Having recessed her Brain, after all Primaian's were primitive compared to Reganians, Nervina took a deep breath and walked into the police station. She decided to be up front, tell all. Not that there was that much to tell. A student seeking diplomatic asylum, being harassed by Nathan and his goons. That was the crime she would use as a lever to tilt things her way.

The duty officer listened patiently. He got out a hand sized computer, got her to put her thumb on it, registering her DNA, her persona which Nervina decided would be her self. Minus her Brain. He waited a moment. Nothing untoward came up. No criminal record, his first concern. He gave her a momentary smile, as officers went about their work. Clearing the first hurdle he called up a senior officer who took her into the station to an interview room.

"Is this room secure?" was the first question Nervina asked.

"You're in a police station." The middle aged man, dressed in an officer's uniform replied.

"I mean electronically."

"Put it this way, from what you told the officer on duty this Nathan has scanning capabilities. Infringing one's personal freedom outside the Web is illegal. So you have done the right thing in reporting this alleged incident to us."

"My real concern is protection. I don't want to go back. Don't forget the goon squad"

"To where?"

"Prima."

"Yes." He said slowly. "I have informed my superiors regarding your delicate position. You're seeking asylum."

"I am."

"From what we know, your status is Primaian. As such your people have a right to have access to you. Your entry data has you down as a research student at CU with a Professor Storaf. You never kept your appointment." Nothing concerning the way she left.

"Yes, well. More instinct. Nothing I can prove, but I think Storaf is working for the other side. No proof. But my main concern is being abducted."

"They have a right to retrieve you."

"I'd rather not."

"Why, are you in trouble?" the classic policeman's logic. See what one had to hide.

"You know what would happen to me if I returned?"

"I have no idea."

"BrainDraining. It's criminal. They suck out your memories, your whole self. Then they reconfigure you into a zombie."

"I see. And you say this is a certainty?"

"Any deviation officer is suspect. Non conformity is a crime on our planet. Non belief in their religion is enough to have one committed to an asylum."

"Is it?" he looked intrigued.

"It is. The whole planet is one vast prison, unless you belong to the elite."

"Which you are?"

"I was dumped here. My last chance to redeem myself." And she explained how her love affair had constituted a crime. Mingling with a different resonant type. Psychological cross infection. Lowering, corrupting the other.

"Remarkable." He answered diplomatically. "I have notified our security people who are responsible for off world situations. They of course will have more questions for you."

"I'm glad. Tell me are there many like me?"

"As in?"

"Defectors."

"Oh some of you do go missing, rare though. They usually don't last, get in all sorts of trouble. Mainly theft as they have no way of surviving here. Our crime syndicates usually try to recruit them. But they get caught soon enough. We send them back. So in a way you Nervina have done the right thing in coming to us."

"But you're not going to send me back I hope."

"Well the allegations you made warrant investigation. So for now you are of interest to us."

"If it checks out, what then?"

"If your allegations bear out there will be a trial."

"Trial?" Nervina guessed the concept but did not fully understand what he meant. Trials did not exist on Prima. Guilt in breaking any law was automatic, as was the punishment. Explanations were useless.

"That bother you?"

She told him how things worked on Prima. He was aghast.

"So from their point of view you are guilty in having walked out of CU?"

Nervina nodded. "Not only that but this Nathan would get a recommendation. Of course me slipping away, oh yes, there's a car at the parking station to confuse them. You might be interested in that. It's got some make shift gear in it. Could be hot."

He tapped something into his hand held computer and asked her to describe it. She did. But she could not remember the number plate. Then she realised she still had her persona in place. That would reveal some of her capabilities. Yet she dared not use her Brain here. It depended on how the interview went with the next echelon.

She was brought a cup of tea while they waited.

Two suits arrived. They looked pleasant enough. She hoped they were not sent from Prima's embassy.

"We'll take over commander." He gave them his computer. They uplinked it to their arms, then when done asked Nervina to come with them.

"Err, can I have some sort of proof that you are who you say you are? Not that you have."

They seemed a little miffed but took out their smart cards.

"Can you clear that through the commander's computer?"

"No. We don't want to leave a trace Nervina."

"So how will I know? How do I know the embassy has not put out a recall?"

"You are worried."

"Ask the commander what I told him how my kind are treated upon returning."

"We have your statement. If you want you can connect to our office."

"Well even that could be bogus."

"It could at that." One of them replied. "Put it this way, you are a rarity. Primaians usually try to avoid the authorities. Must have something to do with your planet. And since you requested asylum, which has been noted, entered, filed you can request our presence should your people wish to see you. So far no such request has been lodged."

"Not even by Storaf?"

"We're checking CU out. He's not overly concerned. Probably got other candidates on stand by. Plus if you say he might be linked to your embassy the last thing he would want to do is advertise that fact."

"Hm, makes sense. Well, I'm yours then." She brightened. She decided to risk a soft scan. It would be safer here than outside. Her Brain reluctant, having been in

hibernation but performed its duty. It was a flash scan. They checked out in so far as being Reganian.

"Whoa." One of them said as her Brain felt their firewalls replicated a microsecond after her flash scan. "You do that?"

"Do what?"

"Never mind."

Nervina knew that as their reactions had been defensive, and by now the source self deleted they could not trace this back to her. She hoped they would think it might be the Primaian embassy staff searching for her.

"Right young lady. This is how it works. We interview you. If we feel you have a case, then we can offer you protection. Make you an honorary citizen. A makeshift status, a temporal diplomatic solution. Then you have the right to refuse to see any of your people. If however we find any discrepancies, any previous convictions, any serious legal infringements on your planet, depending on the nature of that supposed infringement or any others committed on our planet than that protection is revoked automatically and instantly."

"What about the theft of the car?"

"Given those circumstances I am sure our superiors will take that into consideration."

"Not absolved yet."

"Pending."

"Well it's better than nothing. I am in your protective custody then?"

"You are. When you're ready."

"Ready and willing."

"Right. Commander." And he handed back his computer. "She's ours now. As to Nathan's alleged breaches, we'll sort that out. Depending on this young lady's status you may not be able to charge him directly. Not that we don't want to see justice done, but given the delicacy of the situation it's best there is less than more exposure. You understand."

"I do."

"Fine, that's settled then. Thank you of course for your cooperation. Not that it's on file."

"Glad to be of service. Nervina, you coming to us is appreciated, you have done the right thing." The other said.

"My intentions all along commander."

"Good luck with your application. You're reporting of the alleged crime committed by Nathan will help you." The policeman engaging.

"Every little bit counts."

"It does. Good bye then."

"Thank you for all you have done."

In an unmarked car one of her protectors told her to put on a hood.

"It's for your protection and ours." And handed her a beanie. "It acts as a cloaking device to contain your resonance. Furthermore we don't want them to know where you are. Retro hacking, digging into your memory. Any snippet of information is useful to them." Without elucidating who the 'them' was.

She was tempted to activate her uploaded bag of surprises. Could be easily done. But then she would be even of greater interest to them. She was thankful for what they were doing, looking after her rather than merely dealing with her as they would with any other citizen, due to Nathan's infraction. Taking him in, charge him and await the trial was too public. That's how one of the suits explained her situation.

"I hope your temporary removal is not going to bother you unduly. We know so little about your kind."

The car moved out, smooth motor, powerful in its effortless cruise down the road.

"What happens if the embassy makes enquiries?"

"Neither confirm nor deny is the procedure but in your case, given the interest shown the moment you walked out of CU we will simply deny your existence. Something like, 'we'll make enquires', get as much out of them as possible regarding your status and pretend the police are keeping a look out."

"What if they dig into police files?"

"You sure you're a student?" he asked lightly as they both sat in the rear of the car. Outside normalcy.

"Was."

"True. So you're not going back to either CU, Prima or your studies? We could use you. There is so much we don't know. Now," his voice changed, becoming focussed, "there will be some experts who will want to question you. I hope you will cooperate."

"The price of protection."

"No not really. As I said, we know nothing of your kind or you." Which was not the complete truth. Counter intelligence was aware of Prima's use of students to get knowledge about Reganian psychology, methodology of mental applications, intuitive

cognitive attitudes, state of research, levels of advanced high tech developments, scientific approaches to the cosmos. It always came back to that. The Primaiaans were obsessed with the universe.

The car changed direction several times the driver making sure they weren't being followed. Finally they arrived at their destination. They stopped engine idling, waiting, watching, searching for any undue interest shown in their arrival. When clear they led her, through a gate, up a gravel path and into a suburban house. They removed her headcover. She was in a living room, sparsely furnished. A couple of scenic pictures on the wall, a settee, a couple of armchairs, low table, wooden floor, drawn curtains made of some polymer that would block snoopers trying to gain access. Nervina assumed the house was wired to the hilt.

They showed her around. Kitchen, two bedrooms, one for her, one for the watchers, one room secured with a thick metal door even though the thin wood panelling over it gave the impression of just another room, probably their control centre. The pictures on the living room wall high density surveillance.

For the next few days, a studious looking man, in his sixties gently talked with her. She knew it was an interrogation but he lead his enquiries more like a conversation. Her past, of which she knew little. Born in some distant province, unremarkable parents, an aptitude for analytical thinking and whisked away by the priests into a special seminary at the nearest provincial town. There she realised there was so much more to reality than the placid life of an agrarian village. Workshops, small factories, and for the first time she saw horseless carriages. More tests and after a year off to the Holy City. Having a surprising resonance, extremely tight for a Volatile she and her kind were sent to a college of advanced education. By accepting this learning curve it was made clear to her that her past was over. She belonged to the elite. It all tumbled out of her Brain at the right moments, triggered by the requisite questions, her legend securely in place. To her mind it all was real enough with her feeling no similitude with that embedded cover. Given the students, segregated by their inherent resonant states, they were allowed the freedom of the City. She met Horat. And immediately had a crush on him. One thing led to another until they were caught. Then came the offer neither could refuse. Though the word banishment was not used, being sent to Regum was just that. Once exposed to their psychology they were deemed tainted. Moving through space further complicated the picture due to the infusion of the alien resonance. Now that interested her interrogator. There was not much to tell. It had come from some distance place in the

universe, from an alien culture bent on weakening, manipulating, changing their planetary resonance to that of the invasive resonant field of the aliens. Regum was completely tainted. And not aware they were. The Web was proof of that. Doing the aliens' will.

He asked about the mission Horat and herself were tasked with. Folklore. Was that it? Yes. Comparative studies? Probably, what else was there? she queried. You tell me he asked gently. She could not think of anything.

Thinking. That was what Nervina found out which her inquisitor returned to again and again. Prima's thought processes. It annoyed her a little but her tiny nano bots managed to keep her mind in equilibrium. She answered his probing questions understanding that he, they, were looking for discrepancies in her legend, of their limited knowledge of Primaian psychology. They gained what her Brain released. Of the latter even less.

One of her rotating minders cooked for them, bought the groceries, none were delivered. One was a woman to give the impression a couple lived here, professionals who were often on the move. Software, hardware trouble-shooters. Thus their prolonged absences. Not that the neighbours cared. None of which Nervina was directly aware of, learning how these people operated.

She told of Prima as a prison planet. Regum's knowledge off limits to the entire population except for the few like her and the higher Ecclesiastics. Continually under observation. The questioning was gentle. It made Nervina appreciate the freedom the Reganians enjoyed. No wonder the Primaians were paranoid that any who did come back from here were immediately contained in the Holy City. There was only one space port ferrying their agents to the Orbital. Why the Reganians facilitated them at all, letting them onto their Orbital she could not explain. Dispensing knowledge was the answer. By showing Regum's openness they hoped that attitude would eventually be reciprocated by the Primaians. No such luck. It underlined their different attitude even more so.

Then one day the surprise question. Would she work for them? Not totally unexpected but revealing just the same. What good was she? A mere student? Surely they would be looking for her. Then came the bombshell. Novus. Novus? A third planet. Colonised by Regum. An open planet. Acceptable to Prima. Politically neutral, no conflict, no spying, no agents of influence, pure trade only. Prima agreed for it gained them access to advanced technology which they were free to use for peaceful purposes to which they agreed. There Nervina would be safe.

It sounded tempting. But she asked, if it was a free planet with no politics, no agents of influence, meaning the priests then if she was working for them weren't they breaking their own rules? The minders smiled at that saying nothing. What would she be doing there? Merely observing the Primaians. Nothing specific. There would not be even any need for contact. All she had to do was upload her observations which they would download. Consider yourself a travel writer. That's your cover. Really, that simple? That simple.

She agreed. Her Brain happy with that. Not that it told her directly. More a feeling of moving in the right direction. It was enough for her to be amenable to their offer.

Krimi, in his office at the casino was indulging in some sex. The young woman was sitting on top of him in his executive chair, rotating her wet accommodating vagina teasing him into an even harder erection than he already had. She was a new babe, recommended by one of Nathan's lieutenants. Slowly she rose gently up and down with her exquisite posterior, letting him slobber all over her bared breasts, playing the slut.

Meanwhile an independent security contractor working for planetary security were hacking into his system. They had cornered Nathan soon enough, found the illegal dart guns and gave him an option he could not refuse if he wanted to stay out of jail. Be an informer. The two women from counter intelligence read him the riot act in his flat. For Nathan made the mistake of being just a little too sure of himself. Recompensed generously from the Primaian embassy who made no bones about their presence and their needs, namely finding Nervina. Not his first job either tracing their runaways. Primarily engaged in tracking down turned priests who became too comfortable with Regum's life style. Turning to sex, drugs, music, booze all in the name of blending into society. Not that his masters were fooled.

So when the Primaian embassy was after Nervina Nathan had assembled his men and failed in his mission. Nathan stalling. Counter intelligence on his back had given him some better intrusive gear keeping an eye on Krimi. They suspected him regarding the Primaian's fevered attempts to reign in their rogue agents which counter intelligence wanted for their own purposes. Since they suspected Krimi was one of the lynch pins doing Prima's dirty work it would be nice to know how deep he really was. Or if he was a threat to Reganian planetary security. So Nathan became a triple agent. For Krimi, for Prima, for Regum. He had no problems with that. Survive at any cost. Therefore on a designated day to get into Krimi's system it was arranged for a working girl to distract Krimi whilst Nathan hacked away under indirect observation by counter intel. They of

course from an operational point of view knew Nathan would be a one-case operation. When done they would let him go and let Krimi figure it out. If his system was loaded with black intel they then had enough dirt on him to either use him or shit all over him not forgetting to strip him of his ill gained loot.

As the girl, Kristel, paid in advance by Nathan worked on Krimi the hackers worked away patiently, melting through firewalls, trojan traps, masked counter viral infections aiming at backtracking any intruders which were vaporized, through hostile isolated terrains, simple blotters to mark unwanted search and destroy attacks, past sentinel guard posts, burrowing through crude minefields to finally get at multileveled data bases spread throughout legitimate systems masquerading as innocent analysis stealth scouts until various nodes were accessed that gave intel the whole picture. All this took time, was carried out with false positives pretending to be ram raids keeping the counter security measures busy whilst more innocuous probes penetrated further and further into Krimi's cyberdomain.

Not that Kristel knew. She was told a two hour session was what was required of her. But there was another mission to be completed. The disappearance of Nervina. Knowing that Nathan working for Krimi knew there was a bonus involved in finding her, intel assumed Nathan would in all probability alert Krimi as well as them so that it would be a race against time to get Nervina out. All space ports were on low level alert to facilitate her removal.

Krimi had his first orgasm, felt great, slobbered some more over Kristel's generous boobs and moaned with delight. So straight after satisfying Krimi she suggested a shower together. Krimi was on the verge of checking Nathan's progress. Given his system was now piggy backed to intel his search results were negative. Pending Nathan's enquiries knowing he had lost her. For Nathan procrastinated there not wanting to admit defeat. The sedative his darts contained included nano tracers so he hoped to get a fix on Nervina that way. Accept her smart ware had broken down its molecular structure making it defunct.

So whilst they were having fun in the shower, intel got more and more knowledge of Krimi's dirty little empire. He used surrogate gamblers, advanced credit at an outrageous rate which usually left them in his debt. They then recruited other punters snowballing Krimi's cash flow. Or mining data, drilling for corporate information on possible take over deals which looked legitimate enough on the surface. He was doing well. He also had connections with the Families on Novus who ran its only casino. Oversight on Novus was lax for obvious reasons. Enough rope to entangle them, discover

their MOs which inevitably but not always led back to Regum and not surprisingly Prima. They were inveterate gamblers. Addicted. Easy marks. Deeply in debt. Compromised, just as Regum had planned. Novus was both a gold mine and a wealth of information.

With some coaxing they had another session in the shower. Kristi knew how to turn a man on. Simple really given their logical brain fell apart at the sight of a bare bosom. Then they towelled each other off and to her delight his penis went slightly tumescent. She would play on that and see if they might indulge themselves for a third time. It would take a bit of work on her part but heck the credit was good. So she played the slut for all it was worth. A quarter of an hour later and Krimi, who could not get enough of her, his eyes feasting on her voluptuous body was totally distracted. This time she gave him a hand job then nibbling at his penis treated him to a head job. It took a while but it worked. One very satisfied customer. She rinsed out her mouth in the bathroom, got dressed and blew him a kiss. When he went to give her some credit she did not refuse saying it had all been arranged by a friend who would most likely reveal his or her generosity soon enough. She blew him another kiss and left as he watched her posterior amble out of his office.

What a way to start the day. He sure had some good friends. Wonder what they wanted. The search for Nervina momentarily forgotten. Down to business then.

"Kino." He addressed his wrist com link. His butler, secretary and factotum answered his master's call from adjoining reception. Dressed in an immaculate cut suit, his white hair slicked back over his pale parched old face. Without character lines he kept his age well. His coal black eyes focussed on his master, his thin lips pursed slightly.

With his remote Krimi opened the blinds revealing the city's office blocks sparkling in the sun.

"I assume I missed a few calls." He leered. Kristel had come in through the secret entrance. For the well heeled various discrete corridors led to their abode guaranteeing absolute privacy.

"That you have sir."

"And?"

"It's in your machine sir, but there was one persistent caller by the sound of it. Nathan."

"I hope he didn't call direct."

"No sir he did not."

"Say what he needed to say?"

"No sir. Just that it's urgent."

"He calling back?"

"I don't know sir, I would assume so."

"Did you trace it?"

"Of course. Secure. Third party."

"No ghost signals?"

"None whatsoever."

"Must have some new gear."

"Apparently."

"Well if he's upgraded we better return the gesture and send out an EM flux. If his gear is next generation I don't want my presence noted. Deal with it."

"From your office?"

"No, yours."

"Very good sir." And Kino returned to reception, hooked up the counter blast, recalled the call, traced all it's nodal points and sent white noise back through deleting not just the call but accessing Nathan's system as well. It would crash. If not then they knew Nathan was downloading Krimi's links for his own ends. It would be his end if he kept any sort of log. Kino smiled sinisterly. He did not like Nathan. That man was low life. His tenuous connection to some Primaian's though was too tempting to sever. But since the Primaians were interested in everything the only interest his master had was their gambling needs on Novus.

The crash was successful. Kino perceptive enough to note no flare. Absorbed. That had never happened before. So Nathan did have new gear. Another problem. He returned to his master and informed him of this difference.

"You think he's been nobbled?" Krimi asked.

"Could well be. Unless it's really the high end."

"Well find out if any of the agencies reported any gear missing. Could be a set up to get at me through him."

"Very good sir. Err there might be a problem."

"Oh?"

"Well they may not admit the fact of their gear being stolen. If that is so, then the agencies would be making their own enquires, using a pretext of course."

"Fine. Do what is necessary."

"I shall."

"I know you will. In the meantime I'll have a rummage around my domain. Let my search probes run. They'll know how to vanish if they stumble across something superior."

Kino nodded and went back to his office.

Too many players in this field Krimi mused. Part of the game. If Nathan was getting too smart he would not cut him loose.

He activated a search and destroy sequence, then waited. He set his automatic dialling machine on active to return missed calls saying he would get back.

Counter intelligence had what they wanted. Nathan was connected to Krimi and they were looking for Nervina. Well they would bait him. Move Nervina through the casino. That would trigger, hopefully Krimi's system, if not himself. Enough to get him for abduction. They had Nathan in their pocket regarding his assault on Nervina with his dart gun. Martha had been very helpful indeed. One witness was enough. Then they launched a low level threat at Krimi's system. The underworld was forever engaged in cyber warfare. This one would be no different. Enough to distract him whilst they moved Nervina. But not that compromised that his system was too distracted to follow his orders, if any, if he rose to the bait.

Diagnostics drew a blank. Apart from the usual remote attacks, spy bots, cruising malware, roaming trojans, rogue viruses, nothing it couldn't handle. Accept for the white noise counter surge. Nathan's end. Krimi ran a subroutine via spaghetti junction detours so that Nathan would have trouble unravelling Krimi's probe. A ping alert from outside.

There she was. Nervina. With a man and a woman. Casually dressed. Just a tad too smart though. She had protection! So Nathan had lost her, or never found her. Damn. No chance of rumbling her. He was not going to get burnt with this one. Then an idea occurred to him. His presence at the casino was no secret. This was no accident. The authorities were aware of what went on here. So they wanted her to be seen. A public appearance guaranteed Nervina's safety. She'd be profiled, in the open domain register. The Primaian's would be equally aware. This was in another league. He was not going to do anything but call Nathan.

He got through on a secure line. Maybe not so secure at Nathan's end. Kino would handle the trace, signal variations, spikes, fluxes, sudden drop outs, the usual tell tale signs of being intercepted along the way.

"You seeing this?" he said to Nathan.

"Err, no, what?"

"What do you think?"

"Oh that." Not too smart in the brains department.

"Yes that. Right here."

"Well then she..."

"Nathan you dork."

"Oh, sorry. Our terrain."

"Yes our terrain as you put it so brilliantly."

"You reap the reward then."

'I'll reap you.' Krimi thought darkly. Kino came back into the office. Seeing his master in conversation he waited. Kino looked distracted which was rare for him.

"Hold on." Then turning to Kino asked "What?"

"Though there's no direct evidence sir, but that gear of his is way beyond anything on the market sir."

"Good enough for me Kino. Well at least the system's aware of its signature. Good for future attempts. Delete what you can. We may even have to upgrade ourselves. See what's available. Price no problem."

"Very good sir." And left.

"Nathan, get your sorry ass over here."

"Yes sir." He said meekly.

"Meet me at the bar, the public bar in say an hour." And hung up. From a refrigerator Krimi took out a tiny sugar cube. A poison genetically tailored to attack the liver. Nathan simply drank too much and finally it got to him. The tiny glass phial he pocketed. From his safe he retrieved a casino credit card and told Kino he would be back shortly. He left his office through the front door, made his way to the casino and looked out for those staff who would do the odd job for him. As it was early in the day there were not that many customers which did not concern him. He was looking for his favourite waitress. Sitting at the bar he waited for about a quarter of an hour when Misty appeared. He waved her over.

"When Nathan arrives, make him a charged drink of champagne. You know the one. Champagne with bitters, brandy soaked in sugar cubes. Here's the sugar. Specially refined."

"He does like champagne." She smiled.

"And for that little bit of personal service here's your reward." Handing her the limited credit card.

"Why thank you. Why here he is now." For she was facing him and watching the bar as Nathan looking a little dejected walked in.

Krimi activated his sleeve embedded pc. Accessing the public cams. Well well well. Having switched between cameras, it showed Nathan, then Nervina with her companions. Boutique shopping.

"How did you manage to miss her?"

"Err I don't know."

"Well too late for that."

"Only three of them. I can get a team together."

"They are not the public Nathan."

Misty had the champagne ready for Nathan and a coffee for Krimi.

"Anyway, loosen up. Not gonna chew your head off even if you failed in this one. Shit happens." He added magisterially.

"I'm sorry sir. Some agency must have intercepted her."

"And before that?"

"I don't know." Nathan fumbled.

"She was solo until they picked her up. Not exactly focussed are you?"

"Unless she was being protected all along." Nathan ventured.

"Yeah," Krimi backed off, "you could be right. A bit out of our league. So drink up. Not the end of the world."

"Hm tastes good. Feel better already. Thank you."

"Next round's on you."

"The least I can do."

Krimi watched Nervina go into another boutique on his sleeve's pc. And try something on.

"This legitimate?" two strangers stood behind Krimi and Nathan.

"What?" Krimi half turned.

"Internal revenue. You are Krimi?"

"Shit what do you guys want? I pay taxes."

"Will you escort us to your office?" it was not a question that had many possibilities "You too Nathan."

"Me?" he gulped, then downed the fluted contents of the champagne glass.

'Well that's one problem solved.' Krimi was satisfied. The poison would take a few hours. Sclerosis of the liver. Not good. Krimi glanced at his sleeves little screen. Nervina was still in there.

Then Krimi understood what was going on. Nervina and her friends had exited this particular boutique via a back exit. His interest had been piqued and he had fallen right

into their trap. Snooping was an offence, a minor one. They would claim Krimi was planning something, hacking into public cameras was an offence. And found him just after Nathan arrived. It was too much of a coincidence. Nathan was a rat. Well he deserved what was coming. Asshole.

With a dramatic sigh Krimi rose.

"I'm all yours boys." Maybe he could make a deal. He hoped they were not from revenue. If they were, he was screwed.

Deep Space

Lehra's ship docked at Drassid's Habitat. He had moved since their last meeting away from the gas giant and into the asteroid belt. Since hundreds of other Reganian's made their home here, partly due to the intense mining activities, the industrial extraction and processing plants, the habitats for the miners, the bars, the working girls, adventurers, business types, engineers, thousands of experts hiding amongst this motley crew made any Primaian attempts to even discover that Drassid was in contact with Lady Lehra just that much harder. With hundreds of bulk cargo carriers, now off to Novus one more space ship, unless targeted by DVs made discovery unlikely.

Watching her ship approach Drassid wondered how long until the Primaian's would discover Lehra's duplicity. For the elite on Prima the curfew imposed on their people did not apply. That Lehra had to inform through Lord Pentham of Reganian activity was an acceptable risk. Janon and Reno, counter intelligence were hungry, and stayed hungry. Primaians were not very good with analysis or processing raw data. Seeing conspiracies everywhere ended up with so many impossible convoluted scenarios that their intelligence became a joke. The more Lehra fed them the crazier it got. But one thing was dominant: Regum was always up to something. Whether in the Web or real time. He was looking forward to her visit.

Her ship docked, was secured in the landing bay, rotated for instant exit. Entering his spacious living room. Cocktails ready, hors d'oeuvres on cooled platters. Lights soft. The portals embedded with smart ware sensors so that Drassid could see his surroundings full broad scale spectrum and in real light. Their meeting triple secure from any artificial or biometric probing. They could talk freely.

"The ride out is so boring." Lehra sighed dramatically as Drassid led her to a recliner.

"But not what you have for me."

"Indeed." Graciously lowering herself and taking the proffered martini sipped it, smiled and took in the surroundings. "Busy place."

"Novus is now up and running, basic infrastructure in place, space ports built, well one really with five launch facilities, drops zones for the cargo ships established, splash down in its ocean, the city nearing completion. The nano bots are remarkable. Mind you ascetics are rather basic." And he called up a light screen showing the towering edifices of Novus Prime City right next to the ocean. A huge complex at the edge, the masterpiece the casino, the money spinner that attracted hundreds of gamblers on a continual basis.

"Talking Novus Drassid, I'm thinking of relocating there. Prima is getting to hot. Too much happening that makes me feel uncomfortable."

"You think...?"

"No, yes, well...no. In the future perhaps." She laughed at her conundrum "Pentham seems to enjoy my company. Not that we're lovers. It's a nice change to talk to a man who doesn't want to seduce one. I think our rapport is good. Whether he knows what my jaunts are really about I wouldn't know. He's too discreet to even ask. But there are undercurrents."

"Aren't there always on your planet?" sipping his martini, then pushed a small plate of delectables towards her. She took a cheese and biscuit cracker enjoyed it's natural bite and creamy taste.

"As always you have the best Drassid."

"Well got to pamper my favourite visitor. Your company is always delightful. Actually for a change I have some news for you."

"Oh how exquisite, something for me?" fluttering her eyelids coquettishly. "But before you go on wouldn't you rather hear what I have?"

"Well, if you insist."

"You know I never insist. Something is rattling them."

Drassid understood she was referring to the power brokers, the elites, the Families, the Ecclesiastics, the Domain Lords, maybe even the pontiff.

"Not to do with the incident at the space port?"

"Oh that. Nothing there, case closed."

"They take out their own and simply dismiss it. The callousness is appalling."

"Isn't it just. From the bottom up then. As you know I invite all sorts from that rarefied circle one moves in. I had these two young men, siblings of powerful families. Well one went a little hyper regarding our obsession with the alien field."

"That stumbling block. Handy really, keeps them busy."

"Oh it sure does. Now if some Stable type goes hyper what does that imply? It's rhetorical Drassid."

He nodded.

"It's like he just unravelled, went volatile."

"Glad to hear it."

"Trouble is they're tightening the screws. Containment. Speaking of which there was a suicide at one of the asylums. Pentham told me. Now for your information not everyone in the asylums is mentally troubled. They double up as rehab centres for addicted Web users."

"Amazing. What on earth is so dangerous there? Does it screw their minds?"

"Actually yes. It's the dichotomy, the difference between all these possible cyberworlds. Coming back into reality leaves them depressed at best. Once hooked they live for the Web."

"I get it. Like the odd drug addict, or alcoholic."

"Something like it." she took another tasty morsel then chewed slowly. Outside the flare of a ship powering into space. She watched it for a while as it streaked off into the dark. "So using my ship's black market stuff I had a remote look. So I gotta ask this question first. How real are the space scenarios in the Web's presentation?"

"Real as in real real?"

"Aha."

"Real."

"No artificial constructs?"

"That too."

"That's the trouble with the Web. Us Primaian's can't tell the difference."

"Put it this way Lehra, going in blind would do that."

"So if you knew the reality you could tell the difference."

"Oh yes."

"Well this suicide, a young lady discovered two planets. I assuming, as would our agencies now have a fix on the origin of this alien field."

"Really? You know it aint real. All there is is photons travelling across space. What is revealed is photonic information. To be precise, yes a photon can be a field. But it's strength is so negligible Lehra that to call it a field is magnifying it out of all proportion."

"My thoughts exactly." Sipping some more of her drink. "Tasty." Putting the glass down. "Can you call them up?"

"These planets you mean?"

"Yes."

At his armrest he activated the ship's system. A light screen appeared out of the centre of the table, then turned into a globe.

"Luckily we know where they are." He consulted a directory, then punched in the coordinates. A solar system appeared in the centre. "Ten planets. But only three are in the comfort zone were life to exist." The image expanded to show one white planet, one blue and white and the outer reddish pink with tiny polar ice caps. "I assume it's any of these your referring to."

"Any life on them?"

"Well the central one has heaps of water, clouds, vegetation, so yes life would be there."

"But no resonant field, mental activity?"

"It would be an assumption only." He thought if there was life no one as yet knew about it officially. Technological activity would show signs of EM signatures that had not reached them yet. Could be millions of years into the future. The system was around two hundred light years away.

"Well it's got the Ecclesiastics excited. They're going on about this alien planet and its psychotic state of mind."

"They've revealed this?" Drassid attentive.

"Sure have."

"This from your DVs?"

"Aha."

"You know it could be a psychological reaction on Prima's part. Creating a reality of their own design."

"Bit like your Web?"

"Stretching it a bit Lehra, but yes something like it."

"So we could be fooling ourselves."

Drassid did not wish to agree to Lehra's supposition. But she was right. Prima was as usual deluding itself. Anything to save appearances. Force facts into hypotheticals embellished with religious dogma and add a touch of mania.

"As I said, keeps them busy." he finished his drink. "Another?"

"No, serve yourself first."

"You staying?"

"Am of two minds. Heck sometimes I don't even want to go back. Just stay here, anywhere really, maybe even Novus. Since it's an open planet. Still can't believe that we agreed to that."

"Well technically, and legally it's ours."

"Can't believe we could be so kind."

"So this suicide."

"Oh that was it. This young lady, Carias discovered these two planet. Now the suicide is suspicious but apparently she lost it and shoved a nurse out of her room's window. She snapped. Sad really. They're using her as an example of what can happen to you if you access the Web. Then slashes her wrists but not before going for another patient's jugular."

"Nice."

"You can imagine what they thought of that."

"Sure can do."

"And there was something else. Apparently a bit of a space war. Seems a couple of instructors decided to hike it out of there." She watched him to see if Drassid knew anything of that. "Took a cruiser. To cut a long story short SpaceKorps sent a pursuit ship after them and blew the ship to pieces."

"Rather drastic. Did they steal something?"

"Don't know. Anyway they didn't stick around as a Reganian ship was close by. Rather a coincidence don't you think? Hm?" her eyes bright with excitement.

"My my, you are informed."

"So now you know something."

Drassid collected his thoughts as he ate one of his cheese and biscuits. That incident was not in the Web. It was not in his realm. He wasn't that far in by choice. Merely a free lancer who reported what he learnt. Not target acquisition specific.

"Actually no Lehra. Honest." Explaining his position. She accepted his word. Not everyone was a spy, though given that Prima used everybody who was in space and on Regum and no doubt Novus to get as much as they could it always surprised her how relaxed the Reganian's were. She just hoped they would not one day be rolled over.

"So what have you for me?"

"That Novus is ready. And get this. Your planet has a colony there as well. Segregated of course. More a concentration camp. I think they're dumping your Volatiles they can't realign."

"Exiled."

"Aha."

"And your people don't mind? A prison on Novus?"

"Cheap labour."

"Doing what?"

"Farming, finished products, a steelworks."

"You think that's wise?"

"Free training. Anyway Regum built it."

"So Regum is using Primaian labour? Unbelievable. I would have thought you'd, well not you, they would try and free them, rehabilitate them, assimilate them."

"Your governor general..."

"Our what?"

"Yes that's right. A GG runs the colony. Legally it's an extension of Prima."

"And they accepted that?"

"Sure have. Tell me Lehra," Drassid focused on her for there was one thing that puzzled Reganian scientists. Several things in fact. "how's your cosmology?"

"Basic."

"Any noise about, well, the field changing? Since they've released the information regarding the planets. Or planet."

"Plenty of noise as you said."

"It's just that there is this background radiation, to be precise a secondary presence with a wave front that moved through our part of the universe."

"I wonder if that is what this astronomer discovered. But then why eliminate her?"

"Ah, brilliant. Connecting the dots."

"I'm only guessing Drassid. You can pour me another one now."

He rose and extracted the shaker from a small cooling recess in the table, she held her glass up he refilled Lehra's.

"The thing is. These two planets," as they watched the holo orb "seem to have two histories. Web based only. The pink planet is peopled with a type one civilisation. Yet in real space the planet has an extremely thin and oxygen poor atmosphere. There are signs of dry river valleys, evidence of water erosion. All indicative that once the planet was different to what it is now."

Lehra listened. "As you said Drassid, you have many worlds in your Web."

"We think this background radiation is more than a wave front. We think it's a phase change inside space itself."

"You know I'm on barren ground there."

"It's as if something washed through space."

"Well if it had, it would have affected us. Though I got no idea really even what I'm talking about." Affecting a sheepish smile.

"You see we have secure data domains. Solidly shielded so that no cosmic radiation can affect it. And the same scenario is in there as well."

"So someone uploaded it, maybe to study hypotheticals. See if they develop along our lines of thought or yours. A secret project Drassid." She dramatised.

"Must be. Trouble is no one knows how this radiation got in there. Who programmed it, built it, designed it. Could your remote viewing DVs have done it? For some reason?"

"If they did it would be an amazing breakthrough."

"We know. We're being targeted."

"Yes. I suppose apologising is an empty gesture."

"We're used to it. In fact if they stopped we would worry."

"Ah like that. Understand. Just for the why in itself."

Drassid continued, looking at the contents of his glass. "It looks innocuous. But as I said, we got no idea how it got there and we're wondering, maybe you can find out if someone your end put this there. We know your capabilities, and I'm not being disparaging here Lehra, but as your scientists can't do this we're wondering if this is a hypothetical from your end for reasons just mentioned."

"Like some sort of incubation?" helping herself to another tasty morsel.

"Good way of putting it. The programme's clean, or pretending to be. But it's got us stumped. For there are, ahm, remnants of code within its somewhat tenuous spread."

"And you want me to find out?" He smiled, she laughed. "Oh Drassid, here I thought we were good friends."

"We are, I hope."

"Of course we are. But getting me to snoop? I don't know." Then she had an idea. "How up to date is Novus?"

"Ah tricky that. Officially it's old world technology. That's why it's an open planet. Whether anything cutting edge is in place I doubt it. Why?"

"Well get someone there to access this, whatever it is."

"Yes I see." When Carias had found the two planets a low level alert had gone active. Scientific data along with the dead end Carias found in their system. Even in cyber reality the active algorithms would have continued to create 'space', yet it had not. It stopped. Something that should not have occurred.

Drassid reran the time lines forward and found that WebSpace did run into a void, an absence of data. It defied programming. No data, no energy. Unless they had reached the limit of the universe. For whatever was beyond would have conditions so alien to this universe that even basic mathematical rules did not apply. It was curious. A complete blank. Plus Carias's suicide. Fortuitous? Maybe. Then their astronomer's murder. Prima knew something and Regum's scientists just could not crack it. They were floundering around not getting the bigger picture. Well with the next generation of QCs and their adjunct VQC's where all the rules could be broken without destroying the basis of their enquiries the answers might reveal themselves yet. Then the worrying phenomena at that the edge, the end was moving relatively closer. It was not keeping its distance as time moved on, so that as time progressed the edge did not. It stayed where it was. Their worst fears was that somehow the Primaian's had managed to contain the Web. If they could do that then their whole systems were vulnerable. Yet everything was fully functional in the present. Had the DVs put some block onto the future? That was the big worry.

"So Drassid what now?"

"Indeed. I see you're using my Reganian name..." He smiled worried.

"I meant do we get plastered here or in one of those bars out there?"

"Oh yes. We can do both. Get plastered here and then when we've recovered do it all again."

"Sounds good to me. Not in any hurry?"

"You?"

"Well maybe it's your great martinis, but I feel like defecting."

"Don't." he answered quickly.

"Don't tell me you really really need me that much?"

"Lehra you got no idea how tight your people are. Your planet's off limits to us."

"You got us on the orbital over Prima."

"But your people are all believers thinking us a scourge."

"Bit extreme."

"It's true. Your people want us to be like you. Full on. Nothing less."

"Can't see that happening. It's been too many centuries for that."

"Yes but they're not giving up. We barely have anyone on the ground. Not us, people such as yourself. For all I know you could be the only one."

"That scarce. Well, am I precious or what?" half laughing.

"You are precious. I mean that."

"I'm sure you do. Now make another concoction and play some of that pounding driving music your planet's into."

Nervina

The moment she had finished her breakfast in the safe house, quarantined by her attentive minders her perception changed. Her head. She was about to mention this but changed her mind. It did not seem to matter. Her Brain contracting. Infused molecular stabilisers. Interesting. Her mind adapted. Nothing except the here and now. Extremely lucid, aware of her surroundings indelibly etched acutely perceiving everything around her. Someone was after her and these good people made sure she remained out of their clutches. But as to who or why she had no idea. Yet a moment ago...something she couldn't quite grasp as she stared into the empty tea cup.

"Time for you to move." The woman in the suit said. They had never alluded to their names so that they could not be easily identified. The less she knew the better, she understood that. Not that she knew anything. Maybe it was something she had done. Even that escaped her.

She rose expectantly, then waited. They moved cautiously through the house and out the rear into the waiting car. She was ushered into the back, with her minders. One sat next to her and two at the front. Going for a drive. It felt like she had been inside that house forever. They drove down the alleyway the house forgotten. Everything felt so right it was both a pleasure and a relief from threats that were there and not there. Into the street. A few cars, some passers by, an outing. Fine. Excellent. Fantastic. Good shit this her Brain whispered. Taking the edge out of her head.

They drove for a while, the city vibrant, exciting making her feel good. Her head crystal clear. All her cares wiped away. What cares? Feeling fine. She felt like squealing for joy it was that good, but kept herself in check. Not done getting this excited for her friends were a little tense, watching with purpose.

They turned a corner here, another there. Up front the one not driving looked into the side mirror. So was the woman sitting next to her. No one said anything, but that did not matter. She was positively effervescent. Showing her the sights. Plaza's, shops, cafes, bars, more shops, tall office blocks, high rise apartments gliding past. A tram stopped.

People getting on and off, a monorail moved across overhead and they turned yet again. People on the street all dressed differently, some in gaudy colours, mainly women, men more serene with their apparel. A bright sunny day all around, shining in her head as well.

After a while they entered a large car park, drove up a level and stopped next to a glassed entrance. They all got out, Nervina feeling as if she were treading on air she felt that light. Her head seemed to be bobbing like some balloon. She smiled, the woman returned the gesture.

"Gonna look at some shops now."

Nervina nodded. Into one and out the other. The mall was huge. Tiny lights in the establishments, brighter ceiling lights, a kaleidoscope of colour and people. Open café's, tables with patrons, more shops, into one boutique then another and finally at the third, always looking but never buying they ushered her into a change cubicle which opened at the rear into a cool cement passageway. The wall's clicked shut. A secret destination. How stimulating. They moved quickly down the cool corridor which ended at a lift. They all got in and went up. No numbers inside. A short while later it stopped, her stomach adjusting, the door opened and they were on the roof with a helicopter waiting. What a pleasant surprise. What fun, these people were good.

The two men remained behind watching, looking all around them. Nervina got in the back, one of the men in front and the woman next to her again. And they were off. The tall building shrank as they ascended, the whooshing blades slicing the air heading into the blue yonder. The city became smaller, the people tiny specks of colour. Over extensive parks, then the suburbs with their low rise apartments, broad avenues, so neat, so tiny, so tidy. Not a care in the world.

Then they told her they'd given her a cocktail of molecular stabilisers. That explained her feeling so here, so now, so good. Her Brain uninvolved. She nodded sagely since Brain had whispered.

Up head a space port. The tall gantry towers as huge as skyscrapers. They lost altitude, her ears popped, over a few perimeter fences, the rockets and shuttles aligned. One landing. She was ushered out and into a small trolley, a four seater. Her friends left her. Only the woman sat with her. The driver paid no attention. Another trolley arrived and the two men got onto that and off they were. Past the white gleaming rocket. They parked at a towering gantry with a white shiny shuttle and it's huge orange fuel tanks dwarfing it. Into the elevator, up past criss cross girders until they reached the top. A small gangway the woman still looking around escorting Nervina into the craft. She was given

a helmet which she helped her put on, an air tank attached with nozzles at her front, then an orange clothed technician helped the woman into her space gear clambering a little awkwardly into the upward facing seats. The others empty. Just them. This was getting better by the minute.

"Can you hear me?" the intercom came on.

"Yes."

"It's self activating. Tight. Secure channel just between us."

"Fine."

"We're going up for a little ride."

"Kind of you."

"Any moment now. You may pass out. Nothing to worry about."

"Pass out?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm prepared." Not caring at all if she did or didn't. The orange suited technician shut the cabin door. There were no portholes. Instead overhead three light screens came on showing the outside. The shuttle started to shudder, huge white glowing billowing clouds blowing sideways out. Then incrementally, quivering the slow lift off. This was more than she expected. Off into space. Below all was white blossoming glowing clouds as the white flames of the hydrogen rockets lifted them off Regum. The space port smaller and smaller. Through thin cloud cover, the sky already getting darker. Her stomach was trying to remain in place, her head felt a little heavier, her legs like massive tree trunks, her hands like blocks of metal. Breathing was a little harder but her Brain thought it was all right, which it was. She felt a little nauseous, nothing serious to make her feel sick. She was too enthusiastic with her treat. Then she passed out.

With a supreme effort, bit by bit Nervina's body guard, moved her hand forwards, trying to reach Nervina's gloved hand. Inside her middle digit hollowed out a phial containing a potent sedative. As the shuttle charged away from Regum Nervina might come to any moment as the blood coursed back into her brain. Her minder had nano bots equalizing the g force pushing onto their bodies. The lift off was crude technology. Nervina might be a Primaian with possible psychic capabilities. Until they really knew her capabilities standard procedure was to reveal as little as possible of their technology to her. So max sedation. Not until they knew more about this young woman who had defected. On Novus she would be safer. If the Primaian's tried anything the agencies were ready to make life hard for them there.

Her finger was getting closer. The dead weight increasing as the shuttle's booster rockets continued their acceleration. Finally, the sky outside turning a dark purple on the light screens she activated the tiny syringe in her finger pumping the sedative into Nervina's bloodstream. She would be out for long enough for them to scan her.

The boosters fell back having escaped Regum's gravity well. Space. Stars shining serenely heading for the orbital. Then after scanning Nervina she would either continue on to Novus, or if the results were detrimental, secured in isolation. They had learnt from Prima's containment fields that any mental state could be simulated. The brain could even be almost shut down creating a near death experience. Then the mind unfolded completely, the unconscious opened and the true nature of the subject fully revealed. The observers then knew more about the person than the subject herself. Full on treatment.

Nervina might have passed out but her Brain, self cloaked, having moved into her unconscious accepted the sedative into its outer physical field. Her Brain momentarily not a physical presence, an artificial insert, more an energy state. As such it could mimic any mind set thus hiding itself by pretending to be something it was not. Any scanning activity immediately activated its cloaking capabilities which it would pretend was the mind. Riding her resonance in tandem, a dual field collapsed onto the mind's generated presence, riding the persona's projection.

The shuttle docked at the orbital. A stretcher with two medics ready to wheel her, securely strapped straight into the theatre. Into the deep cavity scanner whilst Nervina's minders sat at the consoles.

"Now to see if she is who she thinks she is." The woman said. The scanner hummed generating insertion fields activating the various resonant levels of the natural mind. Any implants, insertions, boosted artificial intelligence systems, persona reconfigurations, up or downgraded sub routines, stealth programmes embedded in the subconscious would be revealed.

Nervina was clean. Her Brain saw to that. It faithfully duplicated every field state being quantum collapsed into her mind. Her childhood was fuzzy. No early memories at all. Trauma perhaps. Memories could self delete uncomfortable realities permanently leaving no remnant realities to be recalled. Unusual but not outside the norm. Maybe the Primaans subjected the young to their CFs if they thought there were signs of potential deviancy. Nervina's IQ in the upper range but with no particular aptitude. An extremely well balanced dual hemispherical brain with no real inclination either way.

"She's clean." One of the technicians pronounced.

"Almost too good to be true." The woman said frowning. Not that she knew much of Primaian in depth psychology. Nervina was the first subject they ever had who showed such a remarkable stability of mind. A Natural as they said. Her psychic potential was there but currently not active. So not the manipulative kind. The lack of curiosity could be explained if a CF had been applied at a young age when the brain was still growing its inner architecture. Primaians were determined to evolve, if that term was even relevant in an extremely tight band of development. No wonder they lagged behind in the sciences, technology and art. Primaians were not inventive. Or through specific social and thus individual manipulation holding back the natural inquisitiveness of a healthy mind.

She was relieved. No covert signatures.

"Yes." The technician agreed. "What do you want to do with the data?"

"Download it into an external memory, then onto disk. Delete from systems when done." Primaian psychology was top secret. They were able to get into their own minds more easily than unenhanced Reganian's so that the DCS had a minute chance of being discovered. They could not take that risk. Just from a political perspective the hiatus would create unnecessary problems. It would give the Primaian's the opportunity to mind fuck them in return. Call it random DV activity, saying it was accidental, yet practiced. Officially both races agreed to leave each others mind states alone. Officially. For what it was worth.

The technician retrieved the data, deleted the files, deleted the deletion sequence and handed her a small silver marble.

"All there."

"Thank you. I'll arrange for Nervina's transfer." She accessed the secure mainframe and entered Nervina's benign status and that she was off to Novus. Encoded into a tight pulse her data was beamed to headquarters. Since her defection Nervina's progress had been constantly monitored. Even the safe house was embedded with mind probing soft scanning smart ware. Nervina had only been gone over lightly there.

Then came the answer. 'Keep her as is.' Under normal procedure defectors were given a new identity, with memories more or less intact, depending on what they knew, what their commands had been which would be wiped out of their minds. The very fact that her superiors wanted Nervina to remain 'in situ' could only mean they wanted her as bait. Get Prima to reveal their unusual convoluted intents and covert purposes. If they went active over her all the better. It would reveal their operational procedures, their thinking, the logic applied, their rationale exposed. All precious information.

There was another reason for Nervina remaining as is. DCS's were not a hundred per cent perfect. Though it revealed all resonant levels, with Primaian natural psychic abilities dormant in some cases Nervina's potential could escape detection. She might go active due to some preordained trigger. She could be a sleeper. She was in the clear for now. The future had many possibilities each dependent on probable choices. It would be interesting to see how she survived. Credit she had plenty. Enough to start a new life. She hoped for her sake she did just that. Then upon reflection she felt a little disappointed. To get a real sleeper would be a great breakthrough, proof that Prima did have dark designs on them. It was all a waiting game for either side to slip up. The situation currently was very much in Prima's favour. They had their agents on her planet. DVs on their orbital over Prima. But with AI development making quantum breakthroughs it was only a matter of time until they self enhanced beyond even Prima's natural psychic capabilities. When that occurred and mass produced then... they would be the master race.

She felt confident of their future.

Novus

Nervina was asked by customs at Novus's space port to kindly follow them. Not that it bothered her. Her minder had explained it all to her on the orbital prior her departure to Novus. Since she was wanted by the Primaians her political status called for normal asylum procedures to be in place. The authorities would like therefore to talk to her. Not that she would be denied her new life. But given her somewhat tenuous situation it would be best if Novus was aware not just of her presence but more importantly of any Primaian agents who would take an interest in her. It was for own her protection. Nervina understood.

She felt free, lighter, her mind unburdened. Here she could be herself. No tasks to perform, no hidden agenda to focus upon, nothing expected of her. Just watch for approaches, undue interest shown in her. Prima was as far away as was Regum. A new world, a new life beckoned. To her it felt like an adventure. The sky the limit. She had credit so getting settled was no problem. As to what she would do, well she would wait and see what came her way. First to get the feel of the place.

The two customs agents, they looked like a couple, a bit older than her were nice enough. They took her away from the arrival lounge down a corridor and into a bare interview room. Dressed in suits. So not customs. Intelligence. Ah well the last time she hoped. At least she was safe with them. They seated themselves around a bare desk. No file, no data disk, just a terminal, no light screen either. Keeping their presence to a minimum. No file she hoped Prima might try to get at.

"Welcome to Novus." The woman said. Shoulder length black hair, her companion clean cut, neat. Friendly countenance.

"Thank you."

"You've no doubt been familiarised of your situation."

"I have."

"Prima's dogs are here. We know who they are. Most of them anyway. They may or may not take an interest in you. See which way you jump. From what we know you're here to begin a new life."

"Correct."

"Your profile is interesting."

Her Brain became alert.

"So I could be a target." Nervina staying calm.

"A person of interest as they say. Did you know you could be an insert?"

"Not that I'm aware."

"Your controllers have done their work. Nothing to indicate that. We got the report from your time at the safe house." Not mentioning the DCS on the orbital.

"And?"

"Well. As I mentioned. Of interest."

"Because of my defection?"

"Your race does not take kindly to that sort of behaviour."

"You think they'll try and get me back?"

"By rights on Regum that might have been a real possibility. You did the right thing going to the police. Here on Novus it would be a crime to attempt to kidnap you."

"That is good news."

"You're an opportunity for us Nervina."

"Really? A mere student."

"One with her own mind."

"Anything I should do? Apart from the obvious."

"No, just be yourself."

"Are the laws different here?"

"No not really. In fact there is more freedom here. Politics as such don't exist. An executive council manages the planet. Basically you can do what you want. Just don't murder, assault or invade any one's privacy."

"I won't."

"Good. You're free to go. Hope you'll stay."

"I intend to. A new life." She said dreamily. "Tell me, what is Novus all about?"

"A new planet Nervina. In a way a social experiment. That both our races can co-exist. As to the economy. Our big draw card is the casino. You might get a waitressing job there, if only to get started. It's got a huge shopping complex. You might start your own business. Or work in one. We are short of labour. The use of robots and similar

technology is at a minimum. Except for heavy industry. Oh yes, Prima has a colony at the edge of the desert. That is off limits. Understood?"

"What's going on there?"

"A rehab centre for your Volatiles. So stay clear."

"Oh definitely. I don't trust my kind. Or rather I got no affinity with them."

"That's good. Any other questions?"

"If I need to get help, if as you say I'm being say under their observation."

"Your minders uplinked you on your sleeve. A pc, it's also a com link. Hit enter and hold for five to ten seconds. Then help is on its way."

She already knew she had a processor embedded in both her sleeves. Her Brain aware. Its capabilities far more than any add-ons.

"Am I being tracked?"

"Only when necessary." She said blandly.

"That's good to know."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"On Prima we are always under observation. One gets used to it."

"Well Nervina, rest assured we're nothing like them."

"That is appreciated."

"And don't hesitate to call. Even if it's nothing. You never know. So if it's a false alarm don't worry."

"I am indebted."

"No not really. We understand your situation. They might not even care you're here."

"Hope not."

"Anything else?"

"I still can't believe I'm here. And free at that. It's delightful."

"Glad you feel that way."

"Is Novus's city, the planet uploaded?"

"Not as such. All external."

"Right."

"We'll escort you out. So that if anybody is watching you they'll know we know."

"Neat."

Nervina headed for the Casino. Not that she needed a job. But there was something about the place which attracted her. Enticing. She understood the concept

of gambling and the odds involved. Aware her Brain could calculate those odds and play the games accordingly. It would be a smart way to earn some credits.

So she rented a room in the triple towered complex at the edge of the city. She had never worked before, except in the village helping on their tiny farm and was not impressed. Life was not meant to be that hard. Regum proved it.

She started to gamble. Her Brain informed her if she won too much, at roulette, cards, poker machines, she tried them all management would become suspect. Smart ware was illegal to use when gambling. Chance had to be chance. Of course the odds were stacked against the gambler, that's how they made their money. She made sure she would come out even at worst. That was not hard to do.

A few days later she was approached by a pleasant young man. When anybody wanted something they were always on their best behaviour. Or nearly so if devious. This one was suave, as if reality blended to his will. Or those he worked for. Sure enough he made a commercial proposition.

Nervina had observed those around her. A charged microcosm of Novus. Deals made between gamblers, credits exchanged, credits taken, sometimes by the look of the looser to their detriment. Loan sharks. Day time tourists in for the thrill, gambling the natural high.

So she let him talk as she played a game called two hundred. A fast version of solitaire. One round only. Usually ending in a deficit. One could play a single deal, or multiples. Just tell the machine dealing how many games you wanted. She went for blocks of a hundred. Over a hundred deals that averaged out to either one or two but mostly four thousand in credit. Not too often. But one could loose the lot if the score reached a hundred. That usually deleted both the deficit and the credit. So she continued to loose by design whilst listening to his proposition.

It was simple really. Work for his boss's syndicate. He watched as she finished her run, having barely lost. No real damage.

They had coffee in one of the many restaurants. She would be advanced credit at two per cent interest. Her domicile upstairs would be free, as long as she handed over twenty percent of her winnings.

Her intuition went into high frequency boosted by her Brain. What he was proposing was not illegal. A sub culture in place. Individual gamblers were plenty, targeted by an existing underworld. Credit cards at times were lost, stolen. Unfortunate he said. Unless one could protect oneself. She could but that would attract attention.

She was trying to be invisible. She had also calculated the rates of pay as a worker and figured gambling paid better. The tout, and there would be quite a few must have marked her some while back. Take the first offer? Why not. She did not want to spread herself around advertising her professional abilities. This way she would have protection which he guaranteed outright.

"You would be under contract. An open one. If you want out you simply return the advance."

"I got a better idea..."

"Renar."

"I'm Nervina."

"Your idea?"

"I buy into your operation."

"Oh a shareholder?"

"Something less obvious. A silent asset. I deposit an amount to be negotiated and we'll talk percentages."

He was impressed.

"Excuse me for a moment." He spoke into his com link extended as a tiny patch from his collar. "Boss, got a potential here." Then waited. Nervina's Brain downloaded Renar's data base in his suit. No point going right in. The tiny patch retracted.

"He's willing to see you."

"Good. Let's go."

She felt a tickle in her head. A soft scan. They were geared up here. Good to know. It meant she could do likewise.

They walked through the brightly lit mall, past the boutiques, jewellery stores, more cafes and bars, restaurants, computer stores all lit up, shoppers and tourists strolling about. Then to a bank of lifts. They entered and went up just one floor. It stopped on the mezzanine level, another bar behind a glass partition with more gaming machines.

"That's for the high flyers. Down there is the low life, the punters who keep this place going." With her Brain on low level alert it reasoned that the odds on the floor below, for the small time gamblers were configured differently than up here. Down there she found out there were plenty of minor pay outs, enough to satisfy but not for a decent win. With small bets it might take longer to loose one's input but up here whilst losses might be greater so were the winnings.

"Seen enough? Depending on your credit you might operate out of here."

Using the data gleaned from Renar's link to his boss she accessed the mainframe's more open ended offices workstations. Families, Cooperations and Syndicates were the top end, in that order. The boss, simply known as E whom she was to meet was a syndicate in his own right.

They entered what looked like another lift but ended up being a secure entrance. Renar swiped an entry card, the door opened and they walked down a carpeted pastel painted corridor. Two security guards with 'Globus Corp' lettering acknowledged Renar as they passed them. Her Brain itched profusely, deeper scans as hers went neuter. Too smart to be caught out. Good try fellows. And armed. Stun guns. Easily negated. She forgot to ask her receiving officers what the deal was with private protection. Not that she needed it but appearances were everything. She'd get that information later. Probably some sort of licensing in place.

Another fake wooden secure door. A camera above. The door opened automatically. Reception. A young woman greeted Renar and spoke into her intercom on the desk, a manual set up. Then through the last door. A conference room and office. Two couches, several armchairs, low table, a glittering bar along one wall, the smell of fresh coffee, a shelf full of paper files, very secure, several screens showing various parts of the casino both inside and out. A view over the ocean, sunlight sparkling off the water. From a side door a thick set man, in his sixties, bald entered.

"Good of you to come." Dressed in a well tailored business suit, charcoal grey, white shirt, black tie, silver cufflinks that were comlinks. A hint of after shave. As it was morning he might have just risen. "And a pleasure to meet you young lady. Please take a seat. Any refreshment?"

"I'm fine thank you."

"You don't mind..."

"Something tells me you'd have one anyway." She laughed just a little. Treating him on socially equal terms. Yet not taken lightly. He had Renar pour his coffee as he sat, waited, observe ring her, studying her, sizing her up.

"You have met my assistant Linoch."

The first subterfuge. She did not bother looking at 'Renar'. So they wanted to be known by a public name whilst operating behind the scenes with another one. His eyes reflected the tiny ceiling halogen lights. Nervina sitting comfortably in an armchair watched his wry smile when introducing his assistant by his real name. She accepted the situation as is. Then receiving his coffee took a sip, seemed satisfied whilst Linoch stood back a little.

"I'm Nervina by the way."

"And a pleasure it is to meet you. You are doing well on the floor. Not actually loosing. Almost exceptional. So Nervina I'm impressed."

"A matter of not getting greedy."

"Wise. Showing remarkable control. So." He took another sip, "what do you say about the offer?"

"I have a counter proposition. Became a stakeholder."

"My, very upfront."

"I value my freedom, and time." Laying it out.

"You're new here."

"You can say that."

"Just arrived?" her Brain was tickling. Either the room was loaded or he was. Probably both. She let her Brain release some vague memories. It would help establish her legend. Each probe consolidating her past.

"Yes."

"Settled in?"

"Aha."

"Staying?"

"Sure am."

"Gamble before?"

"No. Prima has no casinos."

"Not Reganian?"

"Spent some time there and, ahm, had to leave in a hurry."

A slight smile. Letting him think she might be in trouble might make him think she was in, or was, in a bit of a fix. He didn't ask what exactly made her leave.

"Not unusual." He said placidly. "So a stakeholder." He repeated, thinking. Calculating. "I myself am recent. Most of us are. Come here for all sorts of reason, Primaians included. Though they tend to keep to themselves. But then so do Reganians. In our nature. We haven't the group mind of Primaians. You may even be approached by other syndicates or families. They basically run Novus like it was their domain."

"Sounds familiar." Thinking of Prima.

"I try to stay away from partners Nervina. Nothing personal. I work better on my own."

"So do I."

Another tickle. Trying to find out if she who she claimed she was.

Nervina soft scanned her surroundings. The casino had probes everywhere. Making sure no smart ware was being applied.

"I would have to make some background checks if I were to consider your offer."

"Won't find much. But feel free. I am me and that is that."

"Ha! Cool. I like that. Not enhanced by any chance?"

"If I were would I be here? I mean the casino, Novus. I know they're working on it on Regum. But what would be the point here? The casino doesn't allow even low grade programmes to be used. Sort of self defeating."

"Yes. But the others, well, let's say there is a jostling for position. Really playing power politics. Using any means available. Who knows? You could be an insert."

"I could."

"So you are what you claim to be. An isolate."

"Like the rest."

"You're not like the rest." An easy enough assumption.

"How is that?" be interesting to know.

"You don't socialize."

"I've just arrived. Know no one."

"Perhaps." Marrus was his name her Brain told her. Harmless enough but Nervina remained cautious. People like him had power. Somehow that seemed important to her Brain. Creating a back up. Drawing out any Primaian's after her. She was a defector after all. Nothing was certain. Having protection could come in handy. The price was just credit. Not exactly selling her soul here.

"Tell me have you considered why they let you go?"

"Why would you be interested in that?"

"I have to make sure whom I am dealing with."

"I understand. I used my situation to my advantage and got out."

"With some help no doubt. Unless you're enhanced. So which is it?"

She did not like the line he was taking. But then Marrus did not wish to be entangled with any authorities either.

"I am what Prima calls a Natural. Events sometimes fall into place. A matter of pattern recognition. I used circumstance to my advantage. And yes I did have help. They were only too glad to exit me. As to who they are they didn't say. Some freedom group I assume." She dissembled. "Just to get at Prima. Nothing more."

"They do exist. Run by their government. So they spotted you and got you out. You were lucky. Using the moment, making the right decision. For now I am satisfied." Replacing his cup on the low table.

"Another one?" Linnoch asked still standing.

Marrus nodded and Linnoch repoured handing the cup back.

"Need my daily fix to get the brain going." Assuming Marrus had a minimum of add-ons, configured. "Now Nervina I have a proposal. As you might be aware we sometimes gamble against challengers. The idea is to send someone broke and pocket their losses. These challengers are not revealed except by a code. The reason for that is obvious. How would you like to play against my challenger?"

"Sounds exciting."

"It gives the game another edge. This is relevant to the two hundred game only. The casino still gets its cut either way. It's legit. The plus side is winning's are of course their loss. I underwrite your losses you get twenty percent on the winnings."

"Why would I do that when I can get the lot for myself?"

"Accidents happen." He said without emotion.

"You said the identity is not revealed."

"And you are correct there. But it doesn't take a genius to get into public cameras. Easy to deduce who is playing what machine which is linked to the challenger."

"That open? Looks like security is a bit lax."

"It is. The casino says it's for the individuals protection. By being in the open were something to occur security would know who was playing whom."

"Which is being manipulated."

"That's where protection comes in."

"I see. And free rent?"

"Correct." Marrus like the others owned a few units in the complex. Throwing that in cost nothing. Especially for one such as her who never really lost. Marrus was interested because she might have either the intuition to know when to go for it or hold back. Coming via Regum could also mean she was uploaded with some new form of stealth processing. His scan did not reveal this but one never knew what that planet came up with. They might be testing her as a prototype and she would not even be aware of it. He wanted to find out.

"So what's the deal then?" might as well.

"Glad you're interested." another sip. "The easiest way is what Linnoch was told to offer you. You become a surrogate. I advance you say ten thousand credits. That should keep you going and hopefully break my challenger. I think I know who it is. A family. Too powerful to chase. It is now a matter of honour to finish this one way or another."

"And I'm it? Your ticket out?"

"If you continue to play as you are, why yes."

"What's in it for me?"

"If you win outright. Two thousand." She knew considering the stakes this was not much.

"And the contract then is done. No hidden catches."

"None whatsoever."

"All right."

"Nervina, welcome aboard. Now Linnoch if you will?"

He walked into the outer office and returned with a portable pc and handed it to Marrus who handed it to her.

"Read it first, it's plain enough."

She scrolled down the screen, was satisfied. It was just as he said. No mention of the underlying subcurrents concerning challengers, their power plays. Plus a clause regarding her personal protection and not just in the Casino but anywhere on the planet.

"Just imprint your thumb. Your identity will be uploaded and coded by the way."

She put her thumb onto the screen. A tiny laser scanned her iris and she was done. Her Brain alert withdrawing when the laser probed her. The tell tale tickle. Another data base with her open persona. Her base line more secure. How effective he really was remained to be seen.

Marrus attached a fibre optic strand and downloaded the contract and her `self' into his system. Beautiful. Now if she could get into that if only as a passive intruder. She thanked her Brain for that information. Then Linnoch retrieved the hand held computer and went back to reception.

"Your credit's been transferred into a casino card, not your personal account. There's a lot one can do with that amount. So the credit's only good on these premises, by that I mean the gaming floors. Of course the lower end remains open for you to use yourself, but the high flyer lounge will be your area now. The credit card also has a machine reserved for you through which the challenger plays. The card is only active with that particular machine. Tell me do you drink?"

"Not really."

"Good. In the high flyer lounge they are gratis. The idea is to get you to become reckless, loose inhibitions. You understand."

"I certainly do E."

"Now a word of warning. The casino have their own dogs. They've caught the odd high definition individuals trying to use their embedded enhancements to crack the odds. They were not only expelled, their credit stripped but also deported."

"Thorough." Whilst she considered how to get as much from him as possible. "The Web isn't in place here is it?"

"No and never will be. In a way even the Reganians want it like this. They just cannot resist, some of them, heck millions on Regum to live without it, literally. Here no such temptation. It makes for easier surveillance as well. Everybody is in the open on this planet. Why do you miss it?"

"I was never in it."

"Never?"

"No. Not interested. I mean it's just fake reality, a diversion. I prefer reality."

"Excellent. Now you might still be of interest to other factions Nervina. So don't be smart with them. If you do decide to defect you have to repay at a variable interest rate. Not cheap. Twenty percent. I would prefer you to honour your contract of course. But I think you will find my offer as generous as they come."

"I should thank you for the offer to be a part of your team."

"Accepted, duly noted." He replaced his cup.

"Well, looking forward to this." For she had the sagacity to comprehend her ability to grasp random sequencing which was how the cards were dealt. Then calculate, given it's a closed system, the odds within that system of specific winning combinations and bet on that as the game unfolded. That's where the real money was, the end run only significant to the challenger

"I have the utmost confidence in you." Which sounded more like a declamation than an observation. "Now I don't expect you to start straight away. Would say three days suffice to relax, unwind, recharge."

"Thank you." Now that she was in she decided she might need a bolt hole. She had checked out the city and found at the edge of the CBD near the light industrial suburbs several older flats. She would set up a second home there, for real privacy. The buildings were basic, no smartware, mainly external links only. There she could hibernate,

retreat, or disappear if things did not work out here or if anybody took an interest in her in any way.

Something distracted Marros. His eyes retreated just a fraction. Ah. Configured, even if using externals. Then he relaxed.

"Someone just accessed your track record here."

"Is that legal?"

"Yes. Gamblers can. Means the casino has nothing to hide. But it is perplexing given we have just sealed our contract. Could be a coincidence. Could be my challenger. You've just been witness to the way things work here. They're most likely trying to read your game plan. Every gambler has one or several, depending. Interesting." Marrus looked at her wondering if she had released the data herself. Maybe the casino knew someone was interested in her. Nervina knew her Brain was dormant. She would have to watch herself regardless of Marrus's claim of protecting her. At least he had notified her. Her confidence rose a little.

"Top range stuff." Alluding to the search. She was tempted but considered it a dry run, a scouting expedition. See if there was a reaction. None from her. She hoped Marros was astute enough not to follow it up. Or counter the move in some way. Let them flounder.

"So stay alert. You have a smart brain. Don't let them in. I know you're either a Natural and or a Volatile. They'll try and destabilize you so watch out for that as well. It's not exactly legal neither is it illegal."

"I am with you there."

"See you at the lounge, not here in three days Nervina. Anytime before midnight. Time of the high flyers. So how updated are you?" straight in, just like that.

"Not."

"Don't kid me." His deep eyes turning frosty.

"Well E if they did they didn't tell me."

"Prima? They mind fuck you there. Regum."

A little of the truth would not hurt the lie.

"Used CU as a cover."

"CU?"

"Central University."

"Ah." Mollified

"What's in it for them?"

"Pissing Prima off."

Marros laughed. "An extension of their security agencies. You know I'm gonna check this."

"Don't compromise them. Nice people."

He just looked at her expressionless. "See you in three days."

"Linnoch."

"Coming sir."

He entered Marros's office.

"Is she?"

"No artificial inserts. Just her pc, standard. Nothing for us to worry about."

"So she is a natural?"

"Stable at that."

"Well keep an eye on her. She claims she got out through some underground conduit, out of their uni. Knowing Regum I'm not surprised. Well I am a little. Still one picks up things. Gonna be interesting how she handles herself."

"I understand. You wanna do this remote or have someone on the ground?"

"Remote Linnoch. She might sense the watcher. Anyway the casino's got its look outs."

"We got her profile. I'll enter it. Only when she's on the premises?"

"Heck no. Constant at first. I wanna make sure she's the isolate she claims she is. Nothing heavy."

"Very good sir."

Nervina's Brain itched again. Oh boy, there were some nosey parties on Novus. Her boss? Well she was making sure she was a dud. She passed the two guards, into the lift and out on the floor of the vast entrance. No loaded searchers revealing themselves. Could be a broad scan sweep. The others, the Dormants just interested in having some fun. If loosing could be considered fun.

She had played to not just beat the machine but slowly access the processors. The casino's systems would be state of the art. In a way this place was perfect to siphon data from whoever was here. Especially the high flyers. Their credit ratings, their credit flows, the furtive caches and whatever else they wanted to secrete. From there to the syndicates, the corporations and most importantly the families. Shades of Prima. All by degrees, tiny steps testing first the cyber security in place. She could not swallow Marros saying Novus was low tech. From a Primaian perspective this was high tech. From what

little she gained on Regum this was a predeceased generation of computers and slow ware operating here. The space ports for one were using chemical rockets. Virtually ancient, cumbersome. Novus was not revealing it's secrets. The planet purely commercial.

First to get a flat at the outskirts. She caught the monorail back to the city. Find a real estate agent. There were several. The first one would do. The lady at the desk was most helpful. Then her enthusiasm dampened when Nervina indicated she wanted the low end of town explaining that until she was really settled no point blowing her credit on some upmarket joint. The lady wanted her credit rating. Nervina used her top level account. She seemed satisfied. There were several flats available as she turned the computer screen towards her. The one she picked, furnished, was a corner building, low rise, suitably run down. Good view of the intersection with a small row of shops. Ideal. The tram ran past it. She took it paid the deposit and signed a three month lease the legal minimum. It did not set her back that much paying straight up. That changed the woman's attitude again as she handed her the keys. Now that was low tech.

Free. Took some getting used to. No one watching her in an overt sense. Her Brain merely hovering in the background. Back to low alert. She waited at the tram stop and after a while it came. Transport was free. No driver. Last in pressed a button and it moved off smoothly. Not quite full. She sat down and watched as shops and shoppers passed by. Few ground vehicles, the odd loud motor cycle moving swiftly, small trucks delivering goods and services.

Her Brain woke up. Awareness. Alert but not alarmed. Recognising something akin to itself. That was a new sensation. Then it passed. A woman running along the footpath. The tram stopped and a few people got off and on including the runner. She looked casually around and ambled over to sit next to her.

"We're long lost acquaintances." Was all she said. This time her Brain felt comfortable. The woman, her age or thereabouts, short cropped black hair, pale, lean, lively blue eyes twinkling, a half smile on her face. Embedded pc on each sleeve. Geared up.

"We're secure."

"So we know each other?" Some sort of follow up. She thought she was free. Well they had done her a favour of getting her out so now came pay back time. She waited.

"Ratze."

"Nervina."

"Good to see you." The commuters kept to themselves. Nothing there.

"Could be."

The tram turned right down the street taking her to her flat.

"It is. Honest. Just arrived?"

"Aha."

"Me too." Why did Ratze feel like she knew her?

"Who sent you?"

"Sent? Now Ratze was thinking. Her rescuers had thought it wise to move her to Novus. Explained the concept of an open planet. Safety amongst the public. Straight out straight in.

"Some friends dropped me off. I had to get away."

"Same here."

"Really? Prima?"

"Yes."

"Same here. I defected."

"So did I."

"Shit. Most wanted to get away themselves. Bit like me."

The tram stopped. Some exited. The tram did not move. Ratze pressed a button. It moved off.

"So, the two of us running away from Prima." Nerivna looked at the screen's display. Several stops to go. "You think they'll try and hijack you or me?"

"They'd better not." Ratze sounded determined. Her Brain was eager to scan her. Just a little soft scan. Instead Nervina let her Brain go.

Ratze laughed. "I could do the same to you."

"You loaded as well?"

"Now that your Brain's skirted mine, yes."

"Couldn't resist. After all you, a stranger."

"Not that strange. Well actually yes but not in the normal sense. Not quite sure exactly how strange I really am." Ratze's eyes searching hers.

"Know the feeling."

"Kindred souls perhaps?" questioning.

"Could well be."

A comfortable silence. Nervina kept an eye on the overhead screens. Nearly there. Even though Ratze was like her she did not wish to have her find her flat. Not yet. In the distance to their left, having passed out of the CBD, with low rise flats the white flaring

flames and white billowing condensing glowing clouds of a rocket slowly ascending into space.

"Were you up before?" Nervina asked curious.

Crunch time Ratze thought. Hesitant. Those on the orbital were a race apart from those planet side. DVs might be held in high esteem but were not trusted by those left behind on the ground.

"You have." Nervina guessed.

"As you."

Should she reveal her aborted mission on Regum? Not yet.

"Looks like we're in the same boat."

"And we both aren't what we seem to be." Ratze's eyes locking onto hers.

Another stop. More people got off. The last passenger leaving pressed the button. The tram moved. Her Brain tried to reach into Ratze's. She let her in a little. A fascinating multiple layered protective set of shells.

"That's just the cover Nervina."

"I keep mine under wraps." Meaning her Brain did so. The less she knew the safer she was given any hostile probing. Nothing in her memory to give her cover or covers away.

"So surprise me."

"My stop is next."

"I'll stay on board. We'll meet again. I'm thinking we could be useful to each other."

"I prefer to be alone Ratze."

"So do I. But we seem to share a similar past."

"Which means a common future?"

"Futures Nervina." Her Brain went active for a moment. The image of bifurcating realities instant, throwing their probably tendrils like a tree into her mental space.

Ratze's was...what? Destined? Pre-programmed? Her Brain only told her what was there not how it got there. Fortuitous? Most unlikely.

"We do need to catch up." The tram was nearly empty. Nervina rose.

"I agree. Meet for drinks tonight?"

"You are in a hurry."

"If I'm right about you I've got heaps to tell you." That tasty morsel could not be denied. Her Brain was eager for information.

"Since our Brain's seem so similar I guess we can keep in touch."

"Sure can. Tonight? Know the `Ocean View?'"

"I'll find it. See ya then."

The tram stopped, Nervina gave her a backward glance then got off. The block of flats, three stories of bricks, reminding her of Prima's provincial cities was just like the screen showed at the agent's. The tram moved off Ratze looking but not waving.

They met early afternoon the next day at the bar in the city. It was full of office workers having a great time. That meant anybody wanting to observe them would stand out. Nervina saw Ratze sit near the entrance at a small table, a tall grey looking drink in front of her. Nervina was actually glad to see her. Not that she craved company but Ratze felt comfortable. Still she was cautious. She could be working for some agency here on Novus. Or like her seeking refuge. Maybe political. `Ah well' she decided to bear it. The price of freedom.

"What you having? I'll get it." Ratze smiled. "Just got here." Looking around, searching for watchers.

"Oh, ahm whatever you're having." Nervina replied easily.

"Gin sling."

Nervina nodded and sat down. Some younger men watched her then looked away talking to their friends. Ratze came back with two tall slim glasses and with a flourish set them down.

"Cheers."

"Those men at the nearest table seem interested." Nervina observed.

"Oh that, you'll have to get used to it. They're single."

"Well they won't get used to me." And sipped the slightly bitter, tangy drink. Refreshing. She felt it melt into her stomach, warming her slightly.

"You being tagged?" Nervina asked.

"Nope. Unless it's on the ground by either extremely uploaded ops or just plodders more or less braindead."

Nervina suppressed a laugh. The latter so true.

"Survival." Ratze said.

"Without a past." They clinked glasses.

"As long as it does not unravel. They will try, eventually. First they want to see what we do." Ratze focussed with a gleam in her eye.

"They won't get much from me then. No matter what's buried, and buried it is." Meaning her Brain but leaving that open. "Even if they did there isn't much of interest.

Whether Prima or Regum or here." Nervina was confident. "Bits and pieces all over the place at best. Nothing even a genius could make sense of. My past is fairly straightforward. Anyway I got a job. And you would never guess what that is."

"No I wouldn't."

"A surrogate gambler. With some character called Marros. Heard of him?"

"No."

"That's something then. So how come we're connected?"

"Beats me. My Brain told me." Ratze confident about Nervina. Her Brain's alignment for starters. "Not on this world that's for sure. I'd better come clean. I used to work for the DVs." then waited. Nervina did not react.

"The alien field." Nervina prompted taking another sip. Outside the blue waters sparkled in the afternoon sun.

"That."

"So you don't think there's anything to it?"

"No. Regum is doing it right. They're the future. Prima is...static." Diving right in. Get the feel of Nervina's Brain. If she had one. Ratze thought so.

"My sentiments exactly. And I don't feel any bond there either. I'm not a DV myself you understand. Even though they thought I was a potential."

"Means you're a natural."

"Oh yes. Right on the button, I think. You?"

"Me?" she took another sip. "Shit for brains."

"I should be paranoid having run away. I was sent to Regum on some research mission studying folklore there. Then at the final interview stage I walked, left my partner and got out."

"Congratulations." Ratze finishing off her first glass. "Love gin. When a suitable time comes I'd like us to do a reverse dump."

"Hm." Nervina not to sure. This was too fast.

"What?"

"I'm surprised. I thought you said you were solo."

"That will remain so. But if we pool what our Brains know..."

"Might confuse our personas." Nervina replied cautiously. "You could dump yourself into me, do whatever and I'm holding the can. I could even be the can Ratze."

"I'm running a bigger risk here. You alluded to not having probed your Brain. It's me that's going into the unknown here."

"You got a point there. I could be psychotic."

Ratze was amused by that admission.

"Maybe that is why they let me go, to cause havoc." Nervina ran with that delightful thought. A time bomb ticking away. "My synaptic pathways infused, suppressed dendrites, preconfigured algorithms in place ready to go." She paused. "Actually that makes some sense." And explained her probing the Casino's systems.

"That come to you out of the blue?"

"In a way."

"It's a lead in."

"It sure is."

"And dangerous."

Nervina's Brain tightened.

Ratze continued: "They have to be ultra security conscious. There is always some smart arse trying to get one over them."

Nervina relaxed. A different danger. For that one moment the hazard she perceived was on a much broader scale. Huge. So huge her Brain almost expanded into it and discovered that that domain was nearly if not directly infinite. Something was brewing somewhere. Any calculation, any set of equations resulting in infinity were flawed. So either the flaw lay in them, or, another slight surprise, a real flaw present and inherent in not just the casino's system but all systems. If the flaw was universal then it would be a constant and thus not recognisable. Yet her Brain had stumbled upon it and quickly retreated. More importantly that inkling was remembered in an inner safe containment domain of a mentally recessed haven.

"Something happen?" Ratze's Brain felt the surge receding as quickly as it surfaced. Nervina had an amazing repository.

"Something intangible. A flaw somewhere."

"Flaw?"

"Infinity."

"I'm a bit lost."

Nervina explained her guess.

"I see. No I don't. I can understand what it is you're saying. A flaw of great proportions. Either embedded or simply a glitch in the casino's system." Ratze started on her second drink. "Unless, there's a more prosaic answer. Flawed by design. Stack the odds in their favour. Either way you have stumbled across something."

"I have, haven't I?"

"Be careful."

"I'll be cautious. My Brain I'm certain will suitably configure itself if it gets close to this again. But if it is real, from what you say, that information would be worth a lot."

"Like your life."

"At least I've got some protection. You think I should alert my boss?"

"If the flaw's in the random generator that construes the way the cards come out, or all their other games then that would really send shockwaves through all those connected to the casino. Which in this case is the planet."

"A brilliant con."

"Exactly."

"You gotta be anywhere soon?"

"No why?"

"Let's get shitfaced."

Prima

"The Deep Visionary's survey of certain past events," without elucidating, "have yielded something that given its veracity has in a way answered our prayers." Lord Qatus looked at Lord Gharbel who had made the journey up to the Orbital the moment Qatus informed him of the breakthrough. Qatus sat in the observation room, along with two technical assistants fine tuning the captured visionary revelation from Elentra in charge of the DVs. Qatus could barely contain himself with this coup that might settle the problem of both the alien field and the homicidal race of psychopaths behind their monstrous projection.

It was pure chance. As Web Guardian Qatus had come up to investigate the incident regarding the escape and destruction of the two rogue guides, Ratze and Ung. Elentra replayed the sequence of their escape. Studying visual confirmation from a group of DVs scouring their specific time lines. Another group the alien world. That had been Elentra's idea. Go back to the beginning, see where and when their psychopathological path manifested itself. The escape of the two instructors almost irrelevant. They had the data-source.

After seeing what the DV's discovered Qatus realised its importance. The destruction of the spaceship, the possible defection of the instructors was a minor loss compared to the information they gained. The field remained, this time indicating exactly where. Another race responsible. Another Qatus thought. Where was the first one? No response. Nothing on file.

The designated specific target group of DVs chosen by Elentra had managed to lock into a sequence of time, millions of years ago that could be an answer to all their fears. Perhaps obviating the assault of their space by this misbegotten race of volatile delinquents. Qatus told the technicians to route the data into ultra secure memory storage. It would be up to Lord Gharbel to decide what to do with it.

"The Divine Mind guided them to a point in time that revealed itself to the DVs through its infinite wisdom answering our prayers." Elentra intoned with reverent

solemnity. Qatus nodded his appreciation whilst Gharbel was focussed on this magnificent, according to Gharbel and Elentra, breakthrough.

"What you will see Lord Gharbel is the power of divine wrath, the price paid by any who would dare meddle with the supreme serenity of His Being and by default the cosmos. Not only that but thanks to the revelation we now have the source of this malignancy. Blessed indeed." Qatus rambled on.

"What you are about to witness, what we will witness is truly magnificent." Elentra added. "At first what the DVs picked up was not that significant. Another huge asteroid dislocated at the outer accretion disk..."

"The what?" Gharbel preferred plain words.

"The rubble left over when their solar system was formed."

"Ah."

"Which through other stray micro planets sends pieces towards their sun. Then months later," Elentra continued, "something truly divine occurred. The asteroid collided with another sending it off onto another course entirely. Now it is heading for the planet we had been searching for ever since the alien field invaded our serene space."

"So we know the source. We have a target, a focus to work on." Gharbel said with some satisfaction.

"The Divine Mind has done that for us. Laying the groundwork. Computer simulations predict a catastrophe. It will lay them low, perhaps even destroy them. Our prayers duly answered after all this time." Qatus following accepted wisdom. "Our patience rewarded." he added gravely.

"Rewarding our fervent belief in its cosmic supremacy." Elentra repressing her excitement.

"And now we will witness the magnificent deed itself." Qatus allowed himself a gratifying smile. He nodded at the assistants who activated the screens. Space, a swathe of stars in the background. There it was. The massive asteroid tumbling serenely towards the distant planet. Hurtling through space moving inexorably towards its target.

"According the computers it's a million to one chance." Elentra informed Gharbel.

"Is it now?"

"It will end this struggle of ours." Qatus added. "And Regum will be left on its own. We know, according to the DVs that in another future that insane world would attach itself to Regum thus creating an intolerable situation for us. Now that link will be severed, the future rewritten in our favour."

"So we will be dominant?" Gharbel breathing relieved.

"The timing could not be more perfect."

The massive asteroid was closing in on the blue green cloud streaked planet. It started glowing a brilliant white leaving a flaming trail in its wake. Announcing its impending wrath. A second screen calculated its point of impact hitting the southern ice cap. Its presence a terrifying beauty. The massive chunk of rock glowed like a miniature star, tiny flecks flaring out as bits disintegrated in the atmosphere announcing its terrible intent.

Then it hammered into the white continent at a forty five degree angle. A white wave of dislodged ice rose slowly outward from the powerful impact. Smaller ripples and shockwaves expanded outwards into the ocean surrounding it. Plumes of white steam boiled upwards with cosmic fury as the asteroid burrowed deeply into its pristine surface. More undulating shock waves spread out as it slowly came to rest deep beneath the surface.

They all watched in holy admiration as the divine deed was done. The white icy waves became smaller.

A group of DVs were focussed on the minds, the resonant state of the hopefully doomed race. For the moment a few were awed, some though horrified as the broiling white clouds billowed angrily into their blue sky. Then came the frightening realisation of the massive impact as the earth trembled beneath their feet. The tectonic shock exploded volcanoes, their orange and red magma spewing out in brilliant splendour dirty grey black plumes of smoke. More volcanos flared their liquid fire skywards across the globe. The first white crested tidal waves hit the nearest landmasses around the southern icecap. Sticking land the tsunamis spread across the stricken coastlines. The shock wave rippled underneath the ground resulting in earthquakes, dust plumes rising from the surface. The DVs could see right through the fuzzy dirty fog. Mountains crumbled, rubble bouncing down from their snow capped heights. Cities tottered and disintegrated, trapping their inhabitants. Fires erupted within the calamitous destruction. Ships were flung ashore and smashed onto the mountains of debris. The southern ice cap was now smudged into dark glowing grey as its volcanoes came into life. Dirty steam hissed out of fractured crevices whilst the meteor glowed sinisterly below its collapsed surface.

The ice melted into hundreds of newly formed rivers, the ice cap shrinking. The sea level rose rapidly. The agitated oceans, their first tidal waves receding followed by less intense surges of water invaded the low coasts drowning more cities. Those inland

were collapsing with repeated quakes, the ground yawning caverns as the earth was rent apart repeatedly. The volcanoes continued to pour their swelling dark clouds into the sky obliterating the sun. Darkness enshrouded the planet. With no sun their crops would fail, wither and die as would their livestock. Those who did survive would die of starvation and disease. They had been smashed back into the stone age according to the computers whose projected calculations were even more lurid than the clouded planet.

Stunned, all were silent. Elentra then activated her back up DVs to insert their message to those who did survive. Imbue them with their vision of divine wrath for having strayed from the spiritual path which was their only true destiny. Show them the terrible glory of the Divine Consciousness. The DVs projected, en masse the holy retribution that became their fate for the heresies harboured in their misaligned souls. Now was the time for redemption and sanctified reflection.

They had them where they wanted them. On their knees. The Divine Will irrefutable. The computer analysis showed a tiny percentage would survive. Once the oceans had settled those who did endure could live on its bounty. Begin life anew but focussed not on technology and its material gains but devoted solely in aligning their souls to the Divine Supremacy of the cosmos. The DVs would make sure of that. Ram the message home. Stray from the divine path and risk punishment. Accept the supreme vision and eternal salvation was the reward. Those still intent on their pathological way of thinking would suffer the torments of a fractured soul. The DVs were in control now.

In their excitement, being witness to this historic event they forgot that the alien field was still in place.

"Elentra," Gharbel waiting until she had finished instructing the DVs, "it worked like a magnificent dream. It will reinforce our faith and those on that world."

"I believe the universe has been reclaimed." Qatus sighed contentedly.

They nodded sagely.

"We have work to do." Gharbel restless. "The Divine Consciousness has acted and we are duly humbled in its blessedness towards us as the divine race. Our resonance will be strengthened. Our foes vanquished. Now it is up to us to make sure they remain as they are. The DVs will hold them in check. That is their primary duty now. As for the Reganians they can draw their own conclusions."

"Should we release this?" Qatus asked.

"To them? No. They might decide the DVs were behind this. Moving the asteroid so that it struck that planet." Which on the screen was surrounded by black clouds

vomited forth from hundreds of volcanoes. "That might cause unpredictable reactions with possible hostile intent towards us."

"What about our people?" Qatus probed.

"Not necessary. We don't want it to be known that there are other races out there. Remember we have Volatile Naturals. If they link up independently anything could happen. So, not yet anyway. First we have to make sure the Earther's follow the correct path. Then we shall see." Gharbel warned.

"Lord Pentham would have to be informed. Be on the alert to what you just have alluded to. As you said, Volatiles are unpredictable." Qatus replied.

"And I presume I will also have to watch the DVs, make sure they stay aligned." Elentra added.

"That is so. Good thinking." Gharbel was pleased.

Elentra knew that it took only one individual on that planet who could create enough of an aberration to change the present in thinking along their old lines and thus recreate the past they had lost. It made her work easier now knowing they had the target in place. Vigilance was of the essence, both there and here. She would run some future projections, computer simulations to see what choices if any were possible on Earth.

"Now Lord Gharbel, Qatus. Shall we see how effective divine intervention manifests itself?" Elentra asked. They were still astounded at the massive hit. The white plume of snow and ice fell slowly over the southern icecap streaked with grey smoke from its gushing volcanoes. Tiny orange flaring molten streams of lava ejaculating obscuring the visual imprint of the observatories having found the location of Earth.

At a separate set of monitors the planet's resonant state enveloped the read outs, then channelled through the DVs, into control. System analysis showed their states of mind being in utter chaos. The high end of discordant volatility. The sea level was still rising dramatically as the excess heat continued to melt the ice cap. Huge chunks broke off slowly dispersed around the white continent now covered by dirt, snow, rain, volcanic ash all muddying the picture.

Tiny resonant bubbles glowed ubiquitously amongst the utter chaos of stricken fear riven prostrate minds. There were some whose resonant state was flaring into heightened consciousness.

'Apotheosis.' Elentra thought. The cosmic catastrophe was actually enhancing perspicacious intellects. She did not voice her concern. The idea of a moment ago that it took only one deviant to reconfigure mass resonant states might eventuate actually did.

After all that is how Prima's equivalent resonance was kept within the boundaries of their global state. Through the Immortals, one per continent. She looked at Gharbel. Qatus satisfied as he digested the horrific calamity like a sumptuous feast. Whilst the stricken, dying inhabitants were burning out with fear, horror, dumbstruck, their essence collapsing into utter chaos certain individuals on Earth searched for an answer to their doomed fate by imbibing the catastrophe in a way that mentally struck out in a completely different way of thought. Awareness of the vastness of their situation as a planet in the enormous ocean of space. Prior the asteroid hit they had imagined space and its millions of stars as a flat bowl, the gods behind that black curtain, the lights their souls. Now these astute thinkers saw space three dimensionally. They had become aware of space as space. The jump in their mental state that the reality of space was completely different to their previous assumptions. The ancient knowledge of their beliefs shattered. The conviction of their faith in the gods destroyed.

These few did not accept the DVs insertion of divine retribution as a plausible cause. They negated this aspersion of an overriding cosmic deity. They rejected it's presence, frustrating destiny. Filled with their own wrath for having so severely suffered their harsh fate. 'Never again' thought with a resolute determination to understand how the cosmos worked. The very thing the Divine Mind and the DVs had tried to obviate had been boosted.

All this came via the DVs observation, fed through the computers and Elentra's naturally enhanced resonance. She was the head of the DVs at the operational end. But for the moment she did not reveal this for her exalted visitors.

"You may have noted the flaring minds." Gharbel looked concerned.

"Yes. The very opposite of what was expected." Qatus came to understand.

"I've noticed that too gentlemen." Elentra agreed. She entered some commands into future possibilities. Moments later the answer she had already guessed came back. A new civilisation would arise from the ashes. One less superstitious, more analytical, less prone to mystical reasoning. Deleting the necessity of divine intervention. The calamity a freak accident.

"So this stupendous acclamation of the Cosmic Conscious is denied. The catastrophe actually enhancing their mental processes." Gharbel grasped the kernel of this newfound way of thinking.

"You think this might have been an error, a miscalculation?" Elentra aware she was close to thinking heretical thoughts. Given the seriousness of the situation all angles

needed to be considered. Asking difficult question was necessary for the moves they were to make in containing and subjugating the mental processes of the Earthers.

"No Elentra. Revealing the enemy." Qatus said serenely.

"Now we know of their existence the DVs can still work on them." Gharbel spoke with sure conviction.

"A revelation then."

"Correct Elentra. Flushed out." Who though? Not the Reganians.

Elentra, focussing on the practical end of running the DVs thought fields with self-boosted determination. Closer to Reganian logic than Primaian. She was after results not ideological correctness. Necessity dictated the need to counter Earth's misguided orientation. Specific minds had deepened, expanded. As the realisation of the immensity of space imprinted itself upon them so their minds reaction had deepened and expanded as well. Moved forward by a mammoth leap in evolutionary terms. Jumped millennia ahead by this decisive act to blast them back into the stone age.

"What of Regum?" Gharbel asked.

"No change." Elentra watching their monitors.

"Good. That shows they have not cracked the DVs. Now this event did occur millions of years ago. But there is something else we can do. Given what we now know, I'm referring to the revealed enemy, I am considering something more audacious. Since you Elentra are the supreme commander regarding the DVs there is no reason to hide this from you. I expect you concur Lord Qatus."

He merely nodded. Gharbel was above him. Elentra cautious. When Domain Lords had ideas things got messy and complex if not complicated.

"After a suitable stretch of time, as the Earthers rebuild their world it might be useful for us to actually have a presence there. Show them that we care for their well being spiritually. All it takes is one mind."

"Go in direct, reveal ourselves?" Qatus surprised. "You think that wise? It means they will be aware of us. I thought the divine command was for us to remain beyond them. Be the effect without showing the cause."

"Consider Qatus. If they try to link with us, we'll think of a surprise for them. It will convince them of our spiritual superiority."

"Ah I see." He beamed.

"Won't they then also become aware of Regum? Through us?"

"Even better. Then we'll know what the Reganians are up to as well."

"This gets better by the moment."

"We will be the dominant race." Gharbel intoned.

"I assume at some suitable time we shall reveal this major historic event."

"In good time. To draw the appropriate lesson."

"So you are intending for Earth to recuperate, see which way their minds flow. If they show signs of deviation we I assume show our interest in an appropriate way." For Qatus guessed what Gharbel was thinking. "Using whatever means the Reganians applied to convince them of our, err, disinterested interest. It will strengthen us. The Reganians can brag about their achievements whilst we infuse our own resonant state. Some diplomatic effort will have to be made to convince them that Earth is of interest to both our races."

"You think Tellafus will agree? By that I mean us working with the Reganians."

"I cannot see any difficulties there. In fact it is beyond his domain. The pontiff's primary concern is for the condition of our souls. We as Domain Lords have a far larger brief. There is no need to concern him. Not yet anyway."

"I understand Lord Gharbel. Who would you suggest?"

"If I may?" Elentra asked.

"Please." Gharbel was feeling munificent. So many opportunities were penning up.

"We have an extensive data base here of our people. We search for a suitable Volatile. With Earth recovering, and this could be centuries away from the current point in time, which as you say the Reganians can focus upon at will we find the right time to insert ourselves there. We need the Reganians to come on board this diplomatic mission to Earth. Let the Reganians think they are in control with us tagging along and sowing the right resonant state through an extremely potent but stable volatile."

"That would be Lord Nihen's domain." Qatus answered.

"We could find a relevant volatile who has not been groomed. Unconfigured." Elentra suggested.

"Someone untested?"

"More like unaffected by initial training."

"Purer."

"Yes."

"Worth considering."

"And able to withstand Reganian influence." Qatus warned.

"But of course. He or she will have the requisite resonance. Elentra you may start searching your data base. As you have clearance and access your search should have no trouble in that regard. However the reason remains with us." Gharbel warned.

"Understood."

"So who will run this?"

"Why Lord Qatus, the Reganians." He allowed himself a wicked smile.

Telafus's since the revelation at the Immortal's sarcophagus, devoted to not just their noble and holy ancestry but more importantly keeping the planet's resonance pure for all eternity wondered exactly what that entity contained. The being, the lordly presence holding that eternity in its sights if not grasp, or so it seemed was a heavy burden upon him. Though he had a confessor, revealing this would cause consternation. Worse if word got out the resultant anxiety that It would cause, not just with the Domain Lords and their realms but if It percolated down to the people their resonance would be imperilled. The people distraught. Unity fractured. The collapse of everything, he, all they stood for.

He was in the hidden control centre of the inner observatory at the pontifical palace. Functioning from the days when Regum had still been an obedient dominion prior the Calamity. The monitors linked to the Trine, the System Guardians, shadow presences of combined souls mimicking individual entities as Immortals were seemingly not effected by this strange alien being. The flawed intelligence was still outside, if It was as real as Telafus presumed. Had it been in his head? Was this Regum's doing? There was no linkage there. Whatever inherent discrepancy had manifested itself was somewhere out there in space and possibly in distant time itself. He hoped so. The monitors showed no undue influence. Everything was as it should be. Was this perhaps the alien field? Indicators showed that to have come from the opposite direction. Were there two fields then? The lack of knowledge was disconcerting. Intelligence from Regum specified they were not, as far as anybody knew, aware of It either. With no effect noted Tellafus wondered if he indeed was the only one cognisant of this malignant presence. An entity which poured images into his mind. Mimicking computer generated visions. The best he could come up with was some sort of subdomain of Regum's Web. A sick joke from a demented brain. An overweening ego playing master of the universe.

Lingering, festered in his memory, haunting him, mocking him. Subtly interwoven into his resonance, an outward projection, something `other' infusing and irradiating It's realm of space with Its deleterious essence. An overweening bombastic exultation of Its

insistent mind that nothing could stop It, nothing could touch It. As if It was some ancient god resurrecting Itself from the depths of their lost mythological past. Yet no DV, no Naturals, no Volatiles had noted Its presence. Was he the only one to note Its execrable presence? Was he going insane? Or merely targeted being the supreme pontiff tasked to unite the people in holy communion. So by focussing on him alone It was striking at the very focal point of their planet's divine essence. Bypassing the Cosmic Consciousness. Completely indifferent. An outrage, a heresy, apostasy.

The planet's resonance was still as it should be. He would alert the Domain Lords to watch out for new heresies. Cults devoted to this malign intelligence. Remove dissonant minds, contain the contagion wherever and however it manifested itself. Double their efforts to keep the Web out. He took solace from the monitors and DV links. Apart from the alien field, a constant, there was simply nothing there to give credence to his vision. Was this something merely a chimera? Or was he Chosen as an avatar? Worse, he chided himself for almost thinking it, could the Divine Mind have manifested itself in this most unusual of revelations? Becoming a personification of its holy projection into a tangible presence? He felt a surge of exultance at the thought of being Chosen.

There was another way of finding out. Premature Ascension. Enter the Trine where all was pure spirit. Unburdened by earthly thoughts. Pure divinity reaching into the whole universe as the penultimate end state of one's very existence. It had never been tried and he had no wish to end his days just yet. It would be his last recourse.

Nor was he so blind as to be ignorant of his own flaws. Part of life. Taking that flaw into the Trine would bring a certain contamination with it. He would then be rejected which would be the end of him as pontiff. To gain Ascension before one's preordained time would indicate hubris. The rejection would mean spiritual degradation. No pontiff had ever dared to assume Ascension due to the feeling of inner completeness. He was not that divinely attuned yet. He simply was not ready.

He would need to concentrate on imbibing the holy ether of the cosmos. Thus fortified he might be able to fathom this strange being that seemed to possess worlds, time and space. Would it be enough? Was his resonance strong in that regard? He had come away untarnished, except for the memory of the revelation. Nor had It challenged him directly. Not that It needed to. It seemed so sure of Itself. Disturbing at the indifference It showed regarding the very belief they knew was divinely ordained. So he came back to the rationalisation that this was a god not defeated. Merely driven back, then turned reclusive, gestating, self spawning to make a come back. If that were

indeed so than he considered himself a worthy challenger to fling this pretentious god into oblivion.

What if this god belonged to the alien planet? What if through their devotions it drew its strength to challenge not just him but the Supreme Being itself? Was a cosmically divine battle ordained? The Guardians, the Trine, the System Surveyors were not aware of it. He was going around in circles.

Maybe it was best to ignore it. A voice inside of him rejected that course. It would be what It wanted. So how to prove its reality? Open the Infinity Chip? That might be what It desired: access. Yet doing nothing was not going to remove it either. He would have to go back and study this presence, no matter what the consequences. He was willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good and take on this pretentious essence that dared to think Itself capable of usurping the Divine Being. Challenging it by its very being. The Immortals had wrestled the daemonic gods of old. Which gave him a pleasant idea. If he usurped this thing he too might be lifted up into the realm of an Immortal.

His mind was made up.

He secured the portal to the underground bunker and via secret passageways underneath the pontifical palace made his way to the official observation room. Devoted technicians and designated priests were relaxing, watching the screens covering the planet. A huge operation but a necessary one to keep an eye out for any deviant outburst as they arose. Then the containment fields would be adjusted to subsume the individuals who strayed from the divine path thereby saving their souls from the perdition they sailed into. Keeping the spiritual peace. The deviancy contained.

The foreman acknowledged his holiness. He told them to continue their sacred duties. Asked if there had been any unusual activity and was notified that minor fluctuations were manifest but nothing outside safe delimitations.

That at least was something.

He returned to his private chambers, took his evening meal then asked Semor to attend him.

"I'm going to pray at the Immortal shrine. What I want you to do is create a secure link into the Web Guardians."

Semor nodded. It was not his duty to ask but to obey.

"I felt a heightened resonance the last time. Now is it me, the Immortal or a manifestation of the Divine Mind? I don't want to think that I am in any way above my own station."

"Is it an outer or inner noticeable phenomena?"

"Exactly Semor." Telafus replied without answering.

"Very good. In the control room or your private link?"

"The control room. If the Great Divinity is self exalting that would indeed be a blessing for our planet."

"It would indeed."

"Blessed be the Great Mind. How long I shall be will depend on many factors. My resonance . It could be quick or take some time. I want you to remain in the control room. Of course if it takes longer get Ichnen to take over. But do not release it into the public domain. Thus the secure link. For if it is just me, well, I am not the type to wish to trumpet this heightened resonance. That would only create expectations I might not be able to fulfil."

"I understand. Very humble of you pontiff if I may say so."

"I don't know about humble, I'm thinking of the Domain Lords. I don't want them pestering me. They will read all sorts of things into it."

Semor suppressed a smile. As one of Telafus's private advisers he too was aware of the politicking the Domain Lords indulged in. He also knew how Telafus abhorred the gamesmanship they indulged in both with and against each other.

A heightened resonance. If only.

"Take a short break. I need to gather my thoughts, prepare myself. The Immortals deserve due reverence."

"Of course pontiff." Semor rose from the ornate armchair opposite Telafus's gold embossed recliner and left.

'How to deal with this?' Telafus considered. What exactly the entity intended remained obscure. It had shown him multiple worlds, multiple realities. From what he was told regarding the Web it could be assumed this was just another subdomain. He had only been shown its convoluted realms from the outside. He had no idea what it felt like being inside. Maybe after this venture he might try, compare its effect on the mind to that of the entity. Which had offered to share its dominion.

His mind tracked back to the Domain Lords. They had their spheres of influence deeper than surface reality and as vast as space linked to the planetary resonance. Within that envelope were the combined soul states of all of Prima's inhabitants. The Immortals had infinity, eternal life just short of that of the Divine Mind. And what had he? His office? The terrestrial end of Prima. A vicar to the people. Enclosed and isolated. Not that he craved power. It only disturbed the serenity his mind, the tranquillity of the soul.

Divineness his driving force. If only Regum was not so blind to the celestial magnificence. Shut out by the Web like a heavy curtain richly embroidered with manifold diversions. Well he had stumbled across a diversion, one deep in space, maybe of space and from what he remembered, gestating, growing and expanding. Surely It did not have the strength to usurp the Cosmic Consciousness. It could be a test. To see if they were vigilant, fastened to the Holy Ether. Stray from the path and loose your soul. Still a tiny voice niggled him: accept this gift and be strengthened. He could be the ultimate Lord of all domains. Tempting. But what to do with this power? His mind went blank. No answer. Just the silence round him.

What to do with this power? What did the entity intend? It had said it held worlds in its grasp. To what? Infuse itself! The image of Prima vanishing in its hold so real. Or a play of images. Well he could counter that with his own. Now when he thought of the Divine Being nothing came to mind. Nor could it. The Supreme Being was beyond mortal conception. There and not there. As the Reganians expanded into space they had not come across any essence at all. Just space. Space. Enigmatic. The ultimate puzzle. When he had finished his immersion he would check up on the science of space. If such a subject existed. There were scholars cleared to access Regum's knowledge base. If only to understand their thought processes. As non believers they saw the magically infused universe as an empty extension filled with stars, the galaxy and now millions surrounding their universe. Was this the real vision or their internal projection of what they wished it to be? If it were not for the alien field then this hallucination of theirs would be less tenuous.

So many baffling events. It had to be a sign, a challenge to strengthen their resoluteness in their belief. He would thus be strengthened by the challenge of the entity. Accept it for it was. Not as vast as the True Being. Reject it and let it fester in its own convoluted disfigured mind. Or, or could it be that this bizarreness was his mind's creation? His inner wishes, his own soul seeking not just the answer to all answers but wanting to be an answer in itself?

Well the revelation was upon him. He would rise to the challenge, invigorated by that thought.

He changed out of his pontifical robes into that of a humble priest. The black cowl and gown comfortable. The outer office empty, Semor taking his short rest. He had thought of going to the control room to make sure everything was set up to route whatever came his way out of the public domain for now. There were many secrets his predecessors kept hidden. Not even the Immortals aware. That was held in the Trine, the heart and soul of their divine essence, guiding the Ascending pontiff by revealing the

short falls of wrong reasoning to aid in the transformation from the body's end to the purely spiritual eternity upon passing on.

He felt his age. Or was he weary of his office? So much was happening yet nothing seemed to change. Mere surface disturbances upon a choppy lake its depths unruffled. It was an apt image he would use if things became tricky.

The night was clear, the stars bright, no breeze. He passed the ceremonial guards who saw only a priest. He showed them his signet ring and told them he was not to be disturbed as he prayed in the Immortal's shrine. They saluted.

His heart was beating faster, his mind crystal clear. He felt he was at the beginning of a stupendous adventure. Past the flickering flames of the wall's torches into the mausoleum, pressed the pressure plate the inner recess opened to where the Immortal resided.

The tiny lights came on. The sarcophagus resonating he thought in the knowledge that eternal life was possible, attainable. He arranged the cushions then squatted on his haunches and readied his inner self, soul, mind, body.

All would be revealed. Foreknowledge guiding him, making him aware of what was in store. Discover if It was an ancient entity, a mad dream, an alien insertion or an inner longing he denied himself.

Time to meditate. On It? No, let It come to him. He concentrated, eyes closed on the supreme divineness of the universe.

Space. Stars. So close. A planet. He refocussed on the Supreme Mind but the glittering blue waters, the ice cap, the snowy mountains, forests, deserts remained in sight. And the presence of the entity somehow involved at that distant world. No glorious galaxy in view. Telafus had left Prima's space. The source of the alien field! The presence was down there. Had it found a people who had accepted It? As an incarnation, as a god unto itself? Had he missed his chance to gain further understanding of its multifarious realms?

The essence of Its nature felt thick, clammy inside him, unwholesome like some poisonous exhalation. Dominant, a sinister putrid excrescence drawn down towards the planet. It's circumference expanded and slowly flattened out. A vast baleful citadel perched imperiously on top of serrated vicious jagged mountains. A bright light above it. The damned edifice crumbling and decaying with unnatural speed, shaken to its foundation. A cosmic war on an occult plane. The entity was being challenged! It had come to this place and was being rejected by another potent force, perhaps the bright orb pulsating above the crumbling citadel. On closer inspection it was not pure white but

rather embedded with tiny specks of coloured fragments. An artifice sent to destroy it. A construct of the Trine? The Web Guardians? What or whoever had created this was winning the cosmic battle.

The walls of the citadel collapsed to its unwholesome foundations. The essence which had dominated here in its foul reign escaping its foreordained doom poisoning the very air around it. A shadow passed through him and he shivered. A bubbling darkness, an evil mind, a cesspool of perdition dissipated both into him and up and away from this tiny sun's presence. A huge retaining wall bulged outwards and collapsed in thunderous decay. The radiance of the tiny sun relentless trying to burn out the dreadful monstrosity that both fought it and used it to draw upon thus aiding its escape. The invisible apparition instead of being blasted to oblivion worked on the deception in pretending to be destroyed.

The affinity from his previous encounter even stronger now. It was one and the same. The deception worked. The inveterate intelligence was outsmarting its aggressor with exquisite timing. Its fall, its demise a contemptible pretence. On the ground for he was hovering just above it a putrescent deliquescent corpse bubbled into nothingness. For a moment in its final assumed moments strange glowing three dimensional geometries, not unlike what he had initially come across. It went deep and far, inwards and outwards enmeshing the horrid entity in a protective cocoon, using the bright orb itself stretched across space and time to facilitate its escape. The pulsating patterns, a square and a circle, glowing gossamer lines, vibrant, full of resplendent alien energies fascinated Telafus. The artful ruse worked. Sentient anger and determination to rid their world of this pestilence. This unwholesome aberration infused with a venom barely contained in its foul mind expanded within the flaming patterns a malformed coterie of baleful impregnated homicidal madness. The dead were strewn all over the mountains where a desperate battle raged. The massacre of those under its wrathful embrace mangled, chopped, butchered in wanton carnage to obviate its evil servants.

All peripheral. The lambent quivering cocoon, glowing brightly now that the tiny sun had vanished, severing its link drew him away along with the strange brightly lit enclosure. The carnage below, the ruins of the citadel now a dark shadow if its former self, where there still clung remnant malevolent dormant vibrancies receding with a mind jolting rapidity as he followed the flickering blazing cocoon in which the essence had surrounded itself, following the trajectory of the tiny orb back into space.

His soul was being stretched through the distance, the speed of escape incredibly fast. He felt attached to this strange manifestation as it blazed brighter, the

tenuous spectral glowing lines becoming more solid, more intense. It was reassembling itself far away from the planet it had just managed to escape.

Awestruck Telafus realised too late the geometries were now all around him surrounding him in its unnatural embrace. The cloying viscous essence percolated thickly around him seeping into his pores. Insanely warped twisted patterns came and went, a tortured moulding reincarnation reflecting its deformed mind, a visage of demented exultation having escaped its preordained doom.

It had found a more potent source of power. An unseen vortex and with lightning rapidity, taking no note of Telafus, barely a blemish in its reconfiguration weaving its potent web. Pulsing obscenely in its living deformation all around him.

Telafus realised his entrapment due to his fascination with its outré power. He tried desperately to call out to the Divine Mind. Instead a sonorous intonation, a hiatus replaced instantly by a soul wrenching ululation mocking his pathetic cry for divine intervention. He tried to extricate himself by focussing with determined spiritual longing to be released. To no avail.

His mind agitated, unable to focus. The essence pleased with this as his thoughts were tossed about driven by an invisible fetid wind. Any focus on any particular deliberation torn apart by the raging storm in his head. The moment any idea tried to form itself it was twisted out of shape becoming unrecognisable deformities then sucked out of his soul making it impossible to get his bearings.

The strange glowing strands taut bonds. The domain in which he found himself, instilling a mind pounding dread weighed heavily upon him. All normalcy was negated, ignored. The entity completely indifferent to the havoc it caused not just in Telafus's stricken soul but equally in its own demented fashioning of its own spatial realm.

The silence that became the answer to his frantic impregnations was a deafening void within him. He felt eviscerated, ensnared in a catafalque of immanent destruction maybe even death. He did not want to pass on in this convoluted domain. He felt utterly corrupted. The entity all around him, within him not as a being, more a semblance of life eternally deformed. And a sensation of triumphant madness with a surety of its self, resolved in its own cosmic domination. A potency of almost unlimited power. A presence not easily denied.

'You have just witnessed my resurrection.' It was back, gleefully invigorated by its miraculous escape.

'Escape? You are a hallucination.' Hoping to break the spell.

'And?' not even challenging Telafus's assumption.

`You cannot be real.'

`I was real enough down there.'

`They destroyed you.'

`They butchered my believers. But not I. Thanks to a miscalculation on behalf of my enemies I used their pathetic attempt to interfere in my designs to escape, reform, redesign and resurrect myself in even greater splendour. Last time I showed you my possibilities. Do you deny them even now?' It snickered.

Telafus desperately searched for a way out. It's breath was cold, wet, a festering decay seeped into him. He searched for the being.

`You will know me soon enough.' It said derisively. `All worlds will.'

Telafus felt disembodied. He thought of the Web Guardians and It took note of that. A tremendous vibration shook his soul. Reverberating through him It threatened to shake the very flesh from his bones. His bowels turned to water. He felt himself putrefying as this monster sucked the very life essence and all of his soul from his being. It feasted in glorious sumptuousness on his unravelling mind, extricating his memories. All he knew, of Prima, of Regum, all the knowledge he possessed was absorbed by this being.

`You had your chance. Now it is my turn.' It scoffed.

Memories were strung out into the solidifying orb. As he had seen before. Each tiny image a world, a reality, a living reality, animated. Telafus stretched between where he was and the subtle infinities within this sphere. Dissipated in all directions becoming one with the insane patterns of his enclosed prison glowing eerily as his life gave substance to this quivering cosmic entombment.

`I have learnt much. And will put the knowledge gained, to be gained to further my aims. Those who I will reveal myself to will see what they wish to see, what I wish them to see. *I will be the redeemer of all the worlds in the universe.* Those that are, those that will be and if I feel like it those that have been. Your pitiable divinity is but a childish fantasy, as weak as that of your kind.'

Telafus was shocked, then frightened for there was no denying this entity. He had to get back and warn...when his mind snapped. For a moment he saw other races in torment, homicidal beings glorying in wanton destruction and filled with divine grandeur as they brought death to their enemies. Cities in flames, catastrophes overwhelming the recalcitrant, civilisations turned to dust as its demented followers resurrected new worlds to its unholy design.

The demonic visions exploded in self replicating patterns through the many domains it already possessed. It was too much. He became a husk, hanging on to dear

life. Tormenting fires within consumed his soul. His memory completely gone, his mind lost its anchor and unravelled. The apparent demise of this being untangled itself from an attempted entrapment. His soul turned to dust, it's essence absorbed by the entity. It had a thousand faces, countless personalities including that of being the Supreme Divinity for all time.

Several days later Semor looked for the pontiff. The monitors had shown extreme signs of fervent mental and spiritual activity. The pontiff in some state of apotheosis. Then the readings went crazy. The programmes could make no sense of it. Perhaps Telafus was in communion with the Supreme Mind. Then just as quickly as the heightened resonant state appeared it collapsed in intensity. The remnant discordant resonance remained steady. With a disturbing analysis. Insanity. Surely not.

He made his way with two priests, as witnesses fearing the worst and found Telafus a drooling, soiled, jabbering idiot. Rambling fearfully, haunted by maddening visions as his distorted mind rambled on about fallen worlds, a cosmos in decay, a usurping god, the peril of millions of souls at risk by some unknown being. Semor was glad Telafus had ordered him to route whatever came his way into a secure data domain. No pontiff had ever gone insane before.

He closed off the mausoleum and made his way to the asylum to admit Telafus. Officially he had passed on. A mock ceremony of Ascension would have to be performed and a new pontiff installed. A mad pontiff. What in all that is holy had driven his mind over the edge? He had no wish to go down that road.

Regum

The two all terrain ground vehicles were halted overlooking on a knoll the last Reganian settlement straddling the border to the Outlands. The settlement of Amaik nestled next to a vast lagoon. The ocean a dull grey reflecting the cloud laden sky. The tide was out. The remains of seaweed, stranded jellyfish and the rest of the muck from the lagoon's murky waters gave rise even at this distance to its awful stink.

The assembled team took in the panoramic view. Amaik was a fishing village of several thousand inhabitants. Some of the Outlanders mingled amongst the Reganian's, who craved a simpler life than the high tech glitz of Regum Central. Even from this vantage point they could see the people milling in the village. Huddled low rise brick buildings around the town square.

Off to one side slightly up the hill the hotel where they would be staying before venturing forth into the backwoods. Situated further up a gloomy edifice, massive walls, squat. A ponderous place of worship for believers in some new god the priests of Kratham preached as the redeemer of the universe.

Professor Storaf reminded his team and his military escort for the Outlands yet again that they were entering a land of ancient paganism. Steeped in magic and mystery. The reason of their journey.

The soldiers were stretching their legs. Mitaj's grunts Dag, Turd and his second in command, captain Headache. Storaf ambled up behind Mitaj knowing the Outlanders were indifferent to the high tech Reganian's, who, by political decree left them to their own devices. Nothing was certain as to their reception.

Headache, solid, brute strength was every inch the soldier. Turd brawny, a little slow at times, watching the town below warily, seeing potential hostiles everywhere whilst Dag, easy going was more compliant. Treating everything as some kind of pathetic joke. Mitaj allowed to choose his team. He knew the men. The rough end of the slippery pole. Perfect for this mission.

Their all terrain vehicles inbuilt systems detected no signs of hostility. Outlanders had a predilection for incessant conflict. Most were armed with crude mechanical guns, engaging in incessant blood feuds regarding some breach of honour in their archaic administration of justice. Every one of them a law unto themselves. Murder not uncommon. Strangers regarded with barely suppressed suspicion. They were entering a hornets nest. Their ruler Kratham who by virtue of his supremacy so named his city, really a hovel with his citadel and palace had been informed of their interest in the culture of his people. Impressed of the interest taken by these intruders he had laconically accepted their ingress with indifferent hauteur. He would not guarantee their safety. They would be on their own. Thus the military escort. It would keep the natives at bay. Brigands infested the mountains where even Kratham's writ was regarded with total indifference. Kratham's soldiers had to patrol in small expeditionary forces to make sure they returned with their lives intact.

Yep, thought Mitaj this field trip might not be so boring after all. Not that he was itching for a fire fight. Merely being here, representatives of Regum was a show of strength in itself. The powers that be knew pacifying this vast province would be a waste of strength, manpower and time. If they wanted to live like this then so be it. Even though there were gold and silver mines, ores and precious lapidary fields Regum had no real need for this province's wealth. By letting them keep their commercial enterprise they also kept Kratham on side.

Mitaj's men didn't give a shit which is how Mitaj liked it. Outlanders had no respect for subtle diplomacy, verboseness, pretentious kindness. Outsiders were imbued with a cool indifference. Just like his team. They had warned Kratham that any hostile intent would be dealt with using whatever means necessary. No doubt word had gone out to leave this team alone.

Horat considered himself merely a tourist. Etesa, a cold fish. Cena the aspiring idealist, enraptured at being a member of this expedition. She had a rosy view of archaic ancient life as some ideal. She saw a simple beauty in their rude ways, their closeness to nature, something Reganians thought at best as quaint. Easy to get along with. A bit like Dag, accepting everyone's view whilst showing no inclination to impose their own on anybody else's. Then there was Naj, a serious young man, rational, an explanation for everything and surprisingly quiet. Smarter than he pretended to be. It made Horat think. He seemed out of place here. Still by keeping low he was able to observe and learn. What was wanted. Information regarding not just Reganian psychology but equally if not more important that of the Outlanders, especially their mythological and occult lore.

Were they enhanced natural volatiles was the big question. What were their psychic capabilities? That point had been driven home in no uncertain terms. Horat wondered why the priests, who were accepted at Kratham's court had not fathomed the people they lived amongst. Not that Horat was deeply religious. He believed in the Supreme Being and that was that. He had given up praying years ago, feeling silly talking to a Being that remained silent.

For Mitaj this lengthy jaunt was almost like R & R, though he did not fool himself of the possibility of danger. As for the possibility of psychic hostility their onboard systems would alert them to any aberrant mental activity. No big deal. All military personnel were enhanced to some degree as well. Nothing they could not counter if the need arose.

So here they all stood viewing the little town below. Picture perfect were it not for the stench of the lagoon. The tiny harbour nearly empty, the fishing fleet out on the ocean.

Etesa looked like some matriarch reviewing her servants. Her tiny glasses kept on slipping down her nose. She let them sit there pretending that is how she wanted it. Not willing to admit they were the wrong size. Why she did not have her eyes surgically adjusted was her way of showing her individuality. That her eyes were not that imperfect. Mitaj wondered what Storaf saw in her. Etesa seemed complicated, difficult as she squinted into the distance.

Turd used his embedded system to check with their military satellite above surveying the terrain for them and nodded to Mitaj that everything was AOK.

Mitaj nodded back. His orders, apart from running protection were just as specific as Storaf's. Not just to keep an eye on the group but also find out what the Outlanders were. What they were on about. Counter surveillance. The need to know of the Outlander's state of mind eagerly sought by his superiors. And survey the terrain. Though the telemetry from above could replicate any part of the planet, including ground penetrating laser probes, capturing by imagery the ground itself would broaden the data in case they ever had to go in for whatever reason.

Then there was the military view that academics were eggheads, soft on the inside, not cool under pressure, crack easily, get compromised or get into trouble due to their naivety and run into messy endings. Mitaj there to make sure none of this would occur. Anticipation was the thing. That meant a knowledge of behavioural patterns expecting the obvious and the devious. As long as they kept a lid on things, they would remain solid as a force. Still this motley crew might become vulnerable to mental instabilities, freaking out if things got nasty. The professor appeared stable enough, Etesa

thoroughly hardboiled which probably was a front. As for the students, well youth always thought itself indestructible. He hoped. For the moment all was sweet harmony.

"Open a link to our quarters Headache. Use the vehicle's." Headache walked over and got in touch with the manager of the hotel. Everything was arranged for their stay.

"Alright people, let's move." Mitaj ordered and they climbed back into their vehicles. The mounted guns front and rear were weather protected. Once out in the wilderness they would be action ready. Mitaj preferred to fry the brains of any opponent. Using supercharged resonant states through EM spike hits. It would send any volatile over the top. Aware of the enemy's intent the moment they thought it.

Horat followed the others wondering if he was being monitored. He knew he was not enhanced. Not quite a Natural or a Volatile his resonance was a murky area of neither and both. What his true potential was he had no idea. When he had been with Nervina, Nervina where are you? What have you done? He had felt brilliant. Without her he was a mere shell of his former self. At least she had shown him his inner potential. For that he was grateful. Barely missed her. Strange how love, or was it lust, dissipated so quickly.

They rolled into town. People let them pass along narrow rutted dirt roads. Small smelly petrol driven vehicles bounced along with them. The five story hotel was at the edge of town, down the hill a little. Behind them the strange gloomy edifice of the priest's house of worship. Set behind tall walls it looked more of a deserted bastion. With simple antennae Mitaj noted. Linked to a base and from thence to where he wondered? Why would priests need that? He did a quick scan and found no signal. An opening in the roof showed an optical telescope. That might explain the antennae.

They pulled into the forecourt. Shrubs along the side fence, flower beds in bloom even though it was late autumn. The car park at the rear down a small lane surrounded on one side by hedges running along the side of the building. They drove down the little lane and under huge trees parked their vehicles facing frontwards. Only a few cars parked. The summer season over.

A liveried attendant was at the spacious rear entrance. Mitaj noticed security cameras. As they got out Headache walked away from them checking out the front and other side of the hotel. The professor, Etessa, Horat, Cena, Naj, had their personal belongings out. Turd, Dag and Mitaj their kits, to be met by an effusive round middle aged podgy faced smiling hotel manager in a discreet suit.

"Ah, welcome to our establishment." He beamed and bowed a little.

"Not many guests." Mitaj observed.

"Alas not this time of year. Picks up in winter. Ski season."

"Good. Then put us in a new set of rooms please."

"I beg your pardon?" he frowned.

"A new set of rooms if you will."

"If that is what your wish...it might take some moments."

"Thank you. First floor. We'll wait."

"What are you doing?" Storaf asked surprised.

"Security professor, security. Bugs."

"Bugs?"

"Surveillance."

Storaf was a little lost but nodded acquiescent. Why would anyone bug them?

The military mind at work.

"Who would be interested in us?" Etessa asked displeased at the delay.

"Who indeed?" Mitaj answered non committally.

The effuse manager returned and announced with a flourish that their rooms were ready. A group of attendants awaiting them in the grand foyer. A chandelier, huge vases with an explosion of blooming flowers, some armchairs and small tables, a bar with separate coffee lounge and restaurant, all deserted, greeted them. The grunts carried their own gear.

Headache returned.

"No enemy in sight?" Turd smirked.

Headache gave him a dead pan look.

"Got it all recorded?" Mitaj asked.

"And swept. Nothing out of the ordinary. In house security cams, visuals only. A sat link of course, mainstream public."

"Thank you Headache."

The hotel had seen better days now that they were adjusting to their surroundings. The wooden panelling showed some water stains, the carpet a little threadbare, the armchairs well worn a few lights missing in the overhead chandelier, the lift retro ancient, a brass cage with thick black buttons. It wheezed down and an elderly couple emerged a little surprised at seeing the military here but then showed no further interest. The attendants with Storaf leading the way. His troupe following entered the lift to the first floor where they had been relocated by Mitaj's instructions.

He took his men up the stairs. Checking out the layout of the hotel. Dag and Turd shared a room as did Mitaj and Headache. Etessa, Storaf and Cena had a room each, Horat sharing with Naj.

Horat and Naj exchanged nervous smiles. The room was basic. Two beds, a small table with two chairs, fresh flowers in a tiny vase, the inbuilt cupboard, two armchairs and a tiny patio with closed french doors. The attendants deposited their bags, showed them the ensuite, bowed and left.

The room overlooked the town's mixed gables and rooves, some with chimneys light grey smoke wafting up. The broad lagoon further out, the ocean beyond, the horizon blending in with the overcast sky. Wall lights illuminated the wood panelled room. No view screen, no computer terminals. Next to their beds an ancient intercom. With a touchkey set of numbers. A little note explaining that punching in a room number would connect them. Within moments Storaf called saying they would have their meeting in an hour. They could freshen up, relax, go over their notes and their tasks.

They were all gathered in the professor's room. The lights along the walls more ornate, a small chandelier, the furniture glowing well oiled the wood shiny. The french doors larger, the balcony with potted flowers, a huge single bed. Plus room for a conference around an oak table, ten chairs around which they sat. Palatial. Coffee and tea making facilities. Even with the french doors shut the whiff of the lagoon was still seeping into the room.

Headache and Dag were on patrol. Everyone else present for the final briefing. Cena demure, Naj attentive, notes ready in front of him, small notations here and there, Etessa prim and proper surveying them as if they were her charges, Storaf looking all business, Mitaj observant, Turd relaxed, amused.

Storaf said they could make their own coffees. No one moved.

"I'll do it." Naj offered, asked them how they liked theirs, and busied himself brewing a big pot of instant coffee. When they all had their cups in front of them, amongst their folders and paper note pads, for nothing would be entered into an electronic data base for security reasons Storaf started to proceed.

"Our roles are clear. Mitaj and his men are our escort. When out in the field, if an incident arises we are to obey his and his men's orders."

They nodded, Etessa reluctantly to Horat. Why she singled him out was a mystery.

"Once we leave here we are passing out of Regum's legal jurisdiction. So to make it clear, Mitaj has complete authority regarding enforcement of his orders,

pacification where necessary and subsequent follow up procedures." Looking at Mitaj. "To which we are grateful." A wan smile from Mitaj's square set face. The eyes softening slightly at the acknowledgement. Turd was looking around the room, observant.

"Now the Outlands are a law unto themselves. No fraternisation with the opposite sex."

Where did that come from Horat wondered.

"We are here to gather their folklore. I can be more specific now. We are surveying what they posses. If time permits delve into it. But it primarily is a surveying mission only. Who are the wise men and women. Particularly the shamans. Is their folklore rote or memory based? Then there are their centres of worship. Again the same questions apply. Where are their monasteries if any? Do they have monasteries. From what we know there is no central belief systems. Do they acknowledge a supreme being? Or as we know, many gods? For essentially they are pagan. Now this is most important. We are not here to judge their belief systems. We are social scientists not priests." Storaf let that sink in.

Horat felt better. He was aware the role he was playing for his mentors. Uncover the shaman psyche. Did it pose a threat to Prima's DVs. His mind alert to the fact that Storaf's mission was his cover. Not that he would reveal his true intent. Plus he was fascinated having studied what the Reganian's knew. Yet no one in the group made mention of his origins. Either they did not know, care or were too polite to mention it. If Storaf knew he was not saying. It boosted Horat's confidence as he sipped his coffee. He felt perked up. More than a research assistant, a post grad student. He was surveillance itself. What a buzz. Refreshing. A good sensation. Stay in the background, observe, note, commit nothing to writing that might give you away. Take copious notes regarding the field trip so that his focus was out of focus. Was Storaf even aware that the interview had been a game or had he passed on his own laurels? Was his presence arranged through his embassy?

Storaf went on about methodological purity, objective analysis and a phenomenological approach to whatever they came across.

"And no pretence please. Try and be humble. We don't want to be so overt as to make them withdraw into themselves. Use your brains in trying to acknowledge their point of view. This is not about us, it is all about them." Looking at each in turn. Everyone nodded dutifully.

"Now for some basics." And from his briefcase Storaf unrolled some maps. A stamp at the bottom had CU's seal. A slight muddying of the insignia Horat noticed, one overstamp. Military? Probably.

"As we have no view screens here, these maps will have to suffice." Lot's of green, forests, rivers, red dots indicating settlements, getting thinner further north, grey for mountains, closer to the shore farms, not many roads. A distinct red line indicating their journey heading mostly north. Well into the Outlands. Then the line became dotted further out.

"I'll pass it around." Storaf said. Whilst they were taking their turns he continued: "Of course our escort have our projected travels uploaded in their on board systems. But in case of fall-out it's good to have secure print media back up." Looking at Mitaj

"Now where the line of progress is dotted means basically unknown territory. Here even Kratham is barely acknowledged. The best way to describe the area is independent hill tribes. A law unto their own. There we, as we will at all times, be on our best behaviour."

"Bandit country." Mitaj added.

"Precisely. We could be robbed. Though I doubt it. Even out there they know that Regum has power it could use against them. That should be enough for us to be left alone. But this is to make you aware that time has not changed anything since Regum's arrival. They are the original inhabitants. We respect their decision."

They understood. Right into the heart Horat thought. At a nod Mitaj asked for their attention.

"Out there this is logistically a military not a civilian operation." Holding them in his roving gaze. Etesa displeased but said nothing, her glasses still a little down her nose.

"Any questions?"

Cena quiet, Naj suppressed a smile, Storaf inscrutable, Horat curious.

"What's that mean exactly?" Naj asked at last.

"It means young man you listen to us, follow our instructions, no matter what. We are in charge."

"Including fahrting?" he jested.

"Even that. We tell you where you can shit or can't." Mitaj said with a straight face.

"No free will?" Etesa asked.

"Not unless I say so." Mitaj turned to her.

"Unless I'm mistaken commander", she took a deep breath, "but this civilian research us under Reganian federal jurisdiction which includes but not precludes the use of enforcement, meaning its legal application in both spirit and letter of the law. For the moment you may speak of course, have the floor within the prescribed guidelines and subsequent attendant acts, amendments and empowered authority vested in the entity of which we are its designated agents as granted under the seal of the constitution granted by federal decree meaning the body of the university. And in further pursuance of its legal activities as outlined within its empowered jurisdiction, to whitt any area in the case pertaining to the expedition. As such we can exercise free will. The university is a separate legal corporation, a body, entity constituted through various legal appliances and extensions decreed by the executive council and by that same extension exercising those rights in space as in time. So wherever we are present as such agents we are a free constituted representative body made up of individual entities who are thus the expedition itself. You are present," she smiled, "with due respect, at our invitation."

"Not here, not now. The university signed a legal waiver placing all of you under military jurisdiction." Unoffended by Etesa's little speech. "So, any relevant questions then?"

"Etesa has a point." Naj offered.

"She can have as many points as she likes. It makes no difference. You take orders from us. It's us laying our asses on the line."

"I think the commander has made his point. He is C & C on the ground." Storaf tried to lay it to rest.

"You say you have powers of suppression of hostiles, lethal or otherwise." Naj piped up. "We have no weapons. If I am attacked or have to kill someone in self defence..." he paused.

The very thought shocked Cena. There had not been a homicide in Regum for years. The idea was poison to their world. It was like resurrecting the barbarism of mythological times.

"... would I be liable?"

"It won't come to that." Mitaj replied without hesitation.

"Even if accidental. I may wound the assailant and he or she dies of an infection. It is primitive out there."

"No charges would be laid."

"Would there be a record against me?"

"A record yes but not against you. As you are not the aggressor."

"I would remain innocent."

"Yes."

"What about a pre-emptive strike?"

"We'll take care of that."

"What if I discover some sort of lethal ambush, say whilst a diversion is in place to distract your men and the only way to save the situation is to strike first. What then?"

Mitaj looked a little exasperated.

"They are far fetched hypotheticals that simply will not occur. We have surveillance gear that does in depth sweeps and scans. There will be no surprises. And though I shouldn't say this but we are in touch with the orbital." Without saying what they could do up there.

"Anyway... "

"Who owns the notes we take?" Cena asked.

"The university. Remember everything is under military jurisdiction." Storaf spoke for Mitaj.

"So they have access to our notes?" Horat listened to that.

"If it contains pertinent data relating to the operational end of the mission then yes, we have access to that."

"But don't own it."

"We can secure it for obvious reasons." Mitaj said blandly.

"You mean steal it." Naj said.

"Steal, secure, whatever."

"Would we get it back?"

"Depends what's in it."

"What if the group has been infiltrated by a rogue agent?" Horat had to ask.

"What? Rogue agent? Get real." Mitaj said a little huffed. "My men are clean as a whistle in that regard."

"Spies can be sneaky."

"Well, Horat is it? If you think there is such a rogue agent then you'd better come to me quick smart.."

"What if it were the commander?" Etesa jumped in, smarting no doubt from her own demolition.

"Young lady let me tell you, and the rest, categorically. In the military orders are obeyed not broken. Anything vaguely resembling as being regarded suspicious, or any action deemed subversive is rectified long before that deviation will actually occur. It's

called checks and balances, plus C & C. If there is any possibility of infiltration it's on your end, not ours." Mitaj explained smoothly. "Anything else?" he waited. "No?" Silence. "All clear?" it was hard to tell if Mitaj was facetious. "Good. Glad that is cleared up."

"We leave tomorrow." Storaf announced. "Early. Get ready. By dawn."

"What about the bar?" Naj asked.

"What about it?"

"A celebratory drink."

"Ah, good point." Storaf relaxed. "I don't know about our escort," glancing at Mitaj who slowly shook his head, "for this is a grey area. Murky even. Whilst you are all under contract whilst performing your duties you are to remain sober. This includes drugs as well." He paused. "However, as the Outlanders indulge in both, one socialisation, the other religious a situation could occur if pertinent knowledge could be gained that one must do as the locals. Take the shamanistic experience. We know so far that there are certain individuals who have natural gifts. Their shamans recognised at childhood. They are then trained further in the mystical arts. Dream divination is, as your notes tell you extremely important. Some do use drugs."

Horat's mind was electrified. Drugs he thought. He knew on Prima the villagers smoked some mind enhancing weed or drank their home made brews. Yet the 'chosen', meaning the select few, the Families of which he was one, the higher Ecclesiastics, Divines, the elite both at the executive level and their representative political arm, in fact those who were living in their vast enclaves away from the rest of the planet kept their minds pure. Drugs and alcohol were for the masses. Yet reading his notes about the Outlanders, their attitude was not dissimilar to that of Prima. See which minds were attuned to the greater resonance, aligned. Everybody knew that as such drugs were used selectively to further their religiosity.

"Is that a yes?" Naj wanted to know.

"Professor." Mitaj interrupted. Storaf nodded.

"I think a clear head is wanted. As you know, the Outlanders have psychic capabilities. Not unlike Prima's DVs." Mitaj looked at all of them. Horat's face felt momentarily hot. It passed. "So being aware, focussed would be preferred. We all know what hangovers are like. Makes the mind sluggish. If a situation arose that called for quick thinking, fast responses being half pissed might endanger all of us."

"I concur." Storaf added.

"I guess that means no." Naj replied.

"It does that." Storaf replied.

"Good try." Cena looked slyly at Naj.

"So people, go over your notes. I cannot emphasise enough that we have to relate to the Outlanders. See things from their perspective. But, as I just said if we are invited to partake of either, and I mean invited, then we should be compliant."

"Well let's hope for the best then." Naj answered.

"You may return to your rooms."

"Can we see the town?" Cena asked. "It is still in Regum. Might meet some Outlanders."

"If Amaik was part of our research yes. But we want to leave early tomorrow. We have a lot of terrain to cover."

"Why didn't we fly in?"

"Yes indeed. Partly to get a feel of the land. Dropping in from above was considered a bit overwhelming. We don't want to awe them."

"But they know we can fly. They might think it strange we're doing this the slow way. They might think us as spies." Naj considered.

"Surveying the land." Mitaj informed him.

"The sats do that."

"As I said," Storaf said patiently, "to get a feel of the land, the people."

Naj accepted that.

"Any last questions?"

There were none. They were allowed to leave.

After the research assistants left Mitaj wanted a few words with Storaf. He dismissed his two men. They rose, saluted. "You two can relieve the others now. Four hours on four hours off. Extend the perimeter. Patrol round the hotel. I doubt anyone is particularly anxious regarding our presence. Vehicles remain primary. They are our survival gear. Boring I know men." They understood, saluted once more and left.

"Your team members. How secure are they mentally?" Mitaj asked.

"They've been vetted."

"As you know we have psychotronic gear we are testing."

"You mean the military?" A wan smile. Storaf wondered if they were as liberal in its uses as his masters. "I suspected it." wondering if there would be complications.

"Not surprised then." Mitaj dismissed that assumption.

"The military and their toys. I suppose you want to test your weapons as well?"

"If need be, yes." Mitaj stated. "That is why I asked. A firefight is the last thing I want. Reports to be filed for starters. Rest assured we are not here as a show of strength. Protection professor, protection."

"This equipment. You have scanned us."

Mitaj said nothing. He knew what this group's true capabilities were. He was embedded with a psyche-hot node linked to his embedded pc in his sleeve and threaded via his semi bio insert to his enhanced brain. Naturally this was top secret. It read everyone around him for a radius of fifty clicks. Partially AI this gear they were testing could create resonant standing waves of any frequency and amplitude to synchronise with any individual who might target them psychically. It would neutralise any overt insertion, from any source, hard or softcore, AI or bio, if they were deemed hostile in intent.

"Had to. During the trip out. Now we both know that the inhabitants, some anyway have boosted capabilities. The stuff we have neutralises their mental waves, their projected field. It reads their minds, enhances our resonance then forms a cacoon around us. A shield. That should make you happy."

"But it can be turned against them."

Mitaj was reluctant to release that information. Not only could it be turned against anybody who tried, but ramped up and hit with a resonant field that burnt their brains, fried their minds.

"Neutralize is the term professor."

"Psychotronic mindware. Dangerous stuff."

"All under control" up at the orbital Mitaj thought. Silent running. Constantly soft scanning their area of operation. "Anything hostile shows up and we overwhelm them with feelings of goodness. Sort of tickle their endomorphins."

"Well I'm glad to hear it. We don't want to get into mind games here."

"All depends on the locals, who I am told are not exactly open to strangers."

"Something we shall find out Mitaj."

"Then there is Prima to consider professor."

"Them?" he was not about to reveal Horat's status or his deal with his controllers.

"We know their DVs target Regum which includes the Outlands. Part of my job is to find out what they are discovering by remote viewing. Regum needs to know if they are in direct contact. Whether forced or through their own volition. You get the drift?"

"A dual purpose mission."

"That's right."

"I should not be surprised."

"Why I'm telling you this. And why I changed the rooms. In case of bugs."

"None here then?"

"Clean."

There was another aspect to the psychotronic resonant field generators with which Mitaj was linked. Testing the integrity of its architecture. Find out limitations of the molecular frequency associated with internal mental structures mimicking uploaded neural pathways of targets of interest and that of the gear itself. The core a shell, a ghost, an ephemeral duplicate residing within it, a cyber mind in itself. Cutting edge stuff.

"Tell me, what were the results?"

"Of your assistants? Fine." Settling in his chair, relaxed. "Naj is focused, tight resonance. A veritable citadel. Smart. Logical. Analytical. Hard to surprise. Cena is the opposite. Soft, pliant. A reed bending with the breeze. Fascinating in itself. Solid at the core. Her outer self might freak out but she has as I said her core in place. She might seem ruffled at times but it's mere rippling waves on an otherwise deep lake. Horat is something else. Strange really. His outer resonance is tight. Rare in fact. Trouble is what's beneath. It's like he's projected everything into outer defences. That could be problematic if that were breached. Without deeper scanning I can't say how solid he is."

"You think he might crack?" Storaf explored Mitaj's concerns.

"Rock solid on the outside. Under normal circumstances, perfect. Problem is if that were breached his inner self could collapse. The plus is it would take a very potent psychic field to get through, but once it did he could crumple like a house of cards. Still the vetting process cleared him."

"He could be a liability?"

"Only in the most extreme of circumstances."

"Well we don't expect any excessive mental assaults."

"Correct. Actually professor it's not that bad. I'm viewing all this from a worse case scenario. All your assistants are remarkable in themselves. Naj's mind is fast. He has the capability to anticipate, a huge advantage. He can see things from another perspective. Abstract, highly intellectual. So no surprises for him. Cena would at first be flattened. Yet her resilience will bounce back. Then she would self align and like Naj adapt to the changed circumstance. Appear compliant without giving way. Only Horat is the dark one. This outer show of strength could be hiding an inherent weakness. But first his shell has to be cracked as I said. And it ain't uniform either. It's like, as if multiple algorithms are working in conjunction. Constantly shifting their parameters within whilst

creating a series of buffers without. Like an active AI. Multiple locking logic gates in place. Be interesting to see how he copes under stress. Etassa is a brick. Solid reasoning inside and out. She could fracture but like Horat it would need a massive surge."

"Let's hope not."

"Agreed there. We're not here to kick ass."

"I'm glad to hear it commander." He paused. "You know I was interviewed by some military types. I didn't even know we had a military. I mean I know we have a branch, a pool of extra trained security forces. But I thought of them more like police with extra, ahm resources. But had no idea of your outfit."

Mitaj looked pleased.

"They seem to have people in place everywhere. Not that the two who came to see me said so. But their views were so broad ranging that even I was surprised. And they knew their psychology, even Prima's. Trying on the Orbital to learn Primaian states of mind..."

"The DVs."

"...most definitely. 'Foreign agents' they alluded to. Then us of course and the Outlanders. Gave me hope. Not force oriented at all. Back door approach. And here I thought the military were a battering ram." Storaf smiled.

"If need be."

"Sort of non enhancing that image."

"That's the idea."

"And interested in knowledge systems. You're other mission Mitaj?." Coaxing. "You got some secret project?" his eyes flaring a little.

"Let's say taking an interest." Meaning those above him.

"Well I'll be."

"And here I thought I'm minding a bunch of eggheads. Your team know this?."

"Of course not."

"Good. Keep it that way." Mitaj rose to make himself another cup.

"I get the feeling something is up commander."

"Tell me." He sat with his fresh cup of coffee.

"A hunch. Why now? Prima is planning a subterfuge." Testing Mitaj.

"Professor they are always up to something. Except it's the same hymn sheet over and over."

"That could be camouflage."

"Oh yeah?"

"I get this feeling they want more." Storaf feeling his way.

"Well we all know what they want."

"True. I feel as if they are shifting their approach."

"Really."

"You're hedging."

"Professor." He admonished him with a tight smile.

"I won't push it but I'm glad you know the layout."

Mitaj aware Prima's psychic infiltration techniques were threatening to breach their basic AI capabilities. Anomalities were appearing in the data gained. A low grade back ground non coherent, non localized anomaly present in their overall data. It did not interfere directly with any com systems, data spheres, or other sensitive info realms. But it's consistency did mimic their planet's resonant state as if it had spread itself into the universe. One of Mitaj's tasks was to locate this source. It could be that the psychic abilities of the Outlanders might be amplified through resonant insertion by the DVs, then boosted through them out into real space.

With Primaian psychic warfare anything was possible. The Outlanders being used, since the priests were at Kratham's court. Maybe singular shaman types could do a double take on the DVs and screw with their heads. All options were open. This mission was meant to find out what was going on. Then there was the edifice on the hill. An observatory? A link to Prima's orbital. Less conspicuous here for they only had a small military outpost in place. Probably testing their capabilities. Yet no red flags had gone up. Mitaj was relaxed.

"I'll leave you to it professor. See you in the morning. Bright and early."

"You too commander. I'm glad we had this little chat."

"Clear the decks."

"For a collision?" Storaf smiled darkly.

"No. No collisions. Not from our end. Until tomorrow." And left his room. The only other thing Mitaj thought was that Horat was unusual or Primaian. It might have been arranged through the embassy. He could thus be an agent. Maybe not of influence. An experiment, a test case. Connect with the local shamans. Make them think Horat was one of their kind. An outsider yes, one on their level.

Then there was the edifice on the hill. Low grade tech capabilities. The first step to a listening post.

Outside the hotel, dusk smeared the grey sky into sombreness. Having called his men Mitaj asked Headache to come with him. Turd and Dag would continue patrolling. He was going to check out the dark edifice squatting on the hill behind them, then pay a courtesy call to their tiny military outpost. Mitaj needed information. The background radiation one thing. Was it some ethersphere the Primaians were using. Use their backchannel to see what could be dug up. His men listened, then he left them to patrol the hotel grounds both inside and out. All floors. The kitchen, laundry, even the manager's office if possible. They saluted and he set off with HA.

Some guests were returning to the hotel. Others stepping out for the night. Below the town's lights gave the place the look of a dull fishing village.

The cry of seagulls, the smell of the lagoon and ocean, salty air, the distant roar of the surf, the air cool, the sky overcast.

"You know we might have a Primaian amongst us." Mitaj said to HA as they started to make their way up the hill past small cottages. Soft lights within humble houses. Dinner time. The smell of cooking. Fish

"Interesting. The gear come up with anything?"

"Nothing covert."

"Ah. You want me to keep an eye out. Who?"

"Horat."

HA nodded.

Further up the hill some mansions were set back from the narrow deserted street. No pedestrians about. All snug at home. The trees looming shapes spreading their shadowy foliage into the darkening sky. Only the odd streetlight here and there. Small pools of pale light in the encroaching gloom. The pile of stone on the hill a black radiance cloaking itself with the coming night. A petrol driven car made its way up the hill, it's headlights as dim as the streetlights. It was like stepping back centuries. The silence pervasive. A heavy moroseness saturated their surroundings.

They looked at the squat dark building. No one about. At least the locals were not taken by Prima's proselysing. Believers fervent in their insistence of having found all their answers in one go. One idea. One revelation. Sad really.

Mitaj accessed his HID function and saw in front of him the streets they were in. The road ahead branched in either direction around the citadel. No access except by a tiny gate which was shut. The structure as mute as the stones it was built of. No plan of its insides. No data on its observatory or the lone crude antennae. He updated it by looking

at it. Then his link pixellated. The signal was breaking up. Interference capabilities in there. Duly noted.

"You getting any glitches HA?"

"I'm passive. Feeling of resistance as if something is there yet isn't."

"Could be them. Primaians for certain."

"Gotcha."

"Good."

"Ah we have company. Go active?"

"No."

"Calm, focussed on us."

"What a surprise."

"Linked?"

"No boss."

"Go braindead."

"Sure thing."

Mitaj felt their approach. He was still passive-active. A vague thickness around them, slightly foggy, viscous. The building neutral within. Then they saw the two cowed figures approach.

"Peace and harmony to you." One of the men said. Middle aged by the sound of his voice. Their cowls hiding their faces, gloomy shadows.

"Likewise." Mitaj answered. Oozing darkness. Others alert inside now. Aware. Recessed within their resonance. A cordon around the squat structure.

"You are invited to the rite of Ascension. In three days time."

"Thank you." Whatever that meant. He kept his system as low as possible. Calling up data not considered.

"Our blessing."

"Fine. Good night."

"Travel well."

HA looked at Mitaj who merely nodded then started to turn and walk back down the hill. The lights of the town a little brighter as darkness fell.

"How did they know we're here at all, travelling?"

"HA. We're not locals. An easy assumption."

"Gotcha."

The two priests watched them walk back down the hill, not moving. A quick passive scan. The entities within the precincts still alert.

"What's this rite?"

"Some religious whatever. I'm not accessing my data base HA. And now we pay the local commander a visit."

"Colonel, now that we're out here, are we really baby sitting them?"

"We are captain." Back past the hotel. Night had fallen. The few lights did little to dispel the gloom around them. The dark an essence, like a black fog. The lights of the town barely shedding light. The crystal brightness of Regum City another world away.

At the front of the hotel a soldier was waiting.

"Ah Colonel, captain, our commander is waiting for you." The man, a corporal stood to attention having received Mitaj's message the previous day of their coming this way. The base more a political presence than a military one. A basic compound set behind the local university college. It boasted a few light armoured vehicles, a com station and a handful of staff. Essentially a listening post, the closest they could legally get to the Outlands. A backwater concerned with intelligence pertaining to the restiveness of its distant inhabitants. During the day the technicians made sure the computers and ancillary gear functioned.

Prior their mission he had been briefed as to the true nature of their own presence. His superiors, via the orbital were aware that the locals were passively hostile to Prima's priests. It was the latter that concerned them. They were trying to white ant the ancient culture. If push came to shove they were here to help the aboriginal inhabitants. Kratham knew he had back up. Even if under the priest's spell. DV activity? Something. So the military decided to keep an extremely low profile. A minor outpost pretending to be an afterthought.

Then there were the people of Amaik themselves. Indifferent to Regum's glittering high tech life. Rejecting civilisation, harking for an existence long left behind. Closer in attitude to Prima than Regum. Again the question at the highest echelons was posed if they too were under the influence of Prima's DVs. It just made no sense that having freed themselves from the mentally mind numbing need to physically work, wasting one's precious life on necessities that could easy be attained automatically that they wanted to live life the hard way. The locals even paid lip service to the priests message of spiritual salvation. A no brainer if ever there was one. How could a spirit be saved? Since life is life it was what it was. Self replicating. It saved itself by being alive. Anything else was supposition with no concrete evidence to prove that some other dimensionality of thought was required to fulfil life. Like the attraction of a drug. If it spread across the

planet their whole social structure could be contaminated. Exactly what the priests wanted.

That there was an agenda at work was obvious. To flush out the protagonists essential. Not the priests as such but their puppet masters. Or the DVs. The only other cause might be the shamans themselves. If not by design than by default. The life of the noble primitive had its own illogical attraction. Was the strange background radiation an effusion of these ancient minds? Mitaj told to find out what really was going on. So when CU's little outing was put together military intelligence had a legitimate way in. So far they only had questions, not answers. Mitaj was there to see what was under the rocks. Prod a little and see what gave itself away. Thus the high tech gear in his vehicles. And a little enhancement for himself and his troops.

They went to their little base. All was quiet. Two guards at the entrance. At the outer office a soldier engaged them in chit chat. On the wall a poster of the priest's propaganda enjoining all to share the cosmic peace they brought. Go with the flow.

The duty officer came out of the commander's office and announced they could go through. They entered a primitive office. Behind the metal desk a middle aged woman, a colonel just like Mitaj, accept he was for the moment designated 'special group leader' which made him a smidgen above her. She rose from her desk in her neat uniform and saluted them. A few filing cabinets with their tiny status lights electronically sealed. Deep black eyes, a no nonsense expression, slightly hard facial lines, generous eyes. Short black hair. Mitaj immediately knew she too was enhanced. They exchanged knowing smiles without connecting.

"Thank you for seeing us at such short notice. My superiors suggested a courtesy call so we can acquaint you of our presence."

"Appreciated commander Mitaj. Please you and your captain, take a seat."

They sat on two metal fold out chairs. On the wall paper maps showing Amaik and its surroundings, another of the area and a third map opposite showing the whole province. Most of it was green, forests and mountains with less and less settlements further west and north.

"Refreshments?"

"Coffee would be welcome."

"Nothing stronger?"

"On duty."

"Off course." She answered a little disappointed. Bored probably. "Welcome to our, ahm, base." She suppressed a smile.

"A pleasure to be here."

"Not if your term of duty is as long as mine colonel Mitaj."

"That busy?"

She pressed an old fashioned intercom and asked for three coffees.

"So what can I do for you gentlemen?"

"First to log us in."

"Already done at the front desk."

"Local knowledge."

"Briefing a bit vague?"

"General."

"Understood." Not one to waste words.

A knock and her subaltern entered with a tray of three cups of coffee. He placed them on her desk saluted and left.

"We want our presence as low keyed as possible." Mitaj said after tasting the instant coffee. He wanted to pull a face at its odd taste. Nothing like the real thing. He noted her epaulets. Signals. Intelligence.

"Naturally. I have been made aware to offer such assistance as I can. We have a few all terrain vehicles but I know you have your own."

"There is one minor request. That this conversation is off the record."

"That I cannot allow. However, whilst the meeting is duly noted the contents are not. Or rather they will be appropriately vague. Generalities such as your request for local knowledge. After all we're both in the same outfit." Meaning military intelligence.

"We're here to find out what the situation is regarding psychic activity. I know the military have a long winded definition: enhanced intelligent operational directed target acquisition capabilities or some such. Psychic intrusion. And those behind it. The group I am with," without giving her their name, "are the perfect cover for me to do a little active probing."

"Glad to hear it. My brief is to be passive. So finally some movement in our field of operations. I assume some sanitized version will eventually find its way back here."

"I cannot even vouchsafe that colonel."

HA finished his cup and put it at the edge of her desk. She had not touched hers.

"There seems to be a third force in place." Mitaj offered.

"Now let me see." She said playfully. "We have the DVs, the priests, the shamans. Taking the first two as one leaves what? Prima. Correct?"

"Go on."

"Alright." She finally took a sip. "They've reconfigured their resonant envelope."

"Almost."

"Regum's Web has gone intelligent."

"That is a possibility I actually have not considered. Put it this way colonel, something is being detected, something new."

"Ah, an EM field then."

"Warm. Have you noticed certain aberrations?"

She laughed. "We get nothing but."

Mitaj looked surprised.

"The nature of the shaman mind. Naturally enhanced. No two are alike. Broadscale yes, but each mental signature is individual."

"I see." Mitaj continued. "There is a field of background radiation in place out there. With, at present no discernable effect on our capabilities, meaning both enhanced and associated systems. Now I noticed up on the hill a gloomy edifice. With a telescope and rudimentary electronics. What's the story there?"

"Ah the priests. Studying the starry hemisphere."

"Looking away from the galaxy."

"Indeed."

"Nothing much to see, unless they are searching for something."

"That is my view as well. So far our scans have come up with nothing. We can blend into their com links. It's really an optical telescope. So far nothing of interest."

"Not even this field?"

"If so they're ignoring it."

"Deliberate?"

"Could well be. Make us think they know less than they do."

"That's the trouble with intelligence. Always so many hidden agendas."

"Well at least with the Primaian's and their obsession things usually fall into their predetermined pattern of thinking. However we are on top of their little outfit here."

"Well that's cleared that up. So this EM field is being ignored or missed, even though as you said they have radio frequency analysers."

She was considering something.

"I may be able to throw light onto this mysterious field."

"That would be appreciated."

"You are sworn to secrecy."

"Naturally."

She pressed the intercom. Her subaltern entered.

"Get my second to take over. I'm going out. A few hours at most."

"Yes colonel." Saluted and left.

"We're going to pay someone a visit."

Mitaj nodded.

She lifted a hand held mouthpiece from the console, punched in a few numbers, waited, connected via an encryption link, then said she was bringing some friends then hung up.

"This little gadget makes calls untraceable. Rerouted."

"Only the best."

"These people don't exist regarding us. They work at the college behind us. Not even on our files. Recompensed through a special fund at my discretion."

"Intel."

"Indeed. Keep our profile low."

"Excellent."

They walked back out into the salt laden night air. Using a civilian car they drove off. No designated driver, no official record.

Mitaj was up front with her, HA in the back.

"We should have changed into civvies, but at this time of night most of the inhabitants are getting ready to call it a night. You may have noted," as she manoeuvred the car down deserted streets, "that no one is about. So if anybody does see us, we're dark shapes. Oh captain. At your feet are some bottles of wine. Please bring them when we get there."

HA groped at his feet. "Found them."

She drove all over the place. Right here, left there, another right and left. Making sure no one was following. Then stopped along a row of cottages. Nearly all were dark. The colonel was right. People went to bed early. She must be bored out here Mitaj mused. HA was all awareness. She killed the engine, got out and let Mitaj carry the bottles.

"Oh by the way I'm Baia to them. Not my real name of course. I'll just call you colonel and captain."

She knocked. Moments later a hall light came on. A thud of feet and a man appeared, silhouetted against the dim ceiling light. They entered walked down the corridor and into a tiny living room. On the couch a woman rose, long chestnut hair, tanned, lively brown eyes, mid thirties in a long dress and brown blouse. The man too had long hair, paler, blue staring eyes, brown pants, pale blue shirt.

"Hello." Baia smiled, walked over to the woman and gave a quick hug. "Duvik, Risa, two associates. They've got something for you to check out. Brought some wine for the occasion. Can't drink myself, but you two go ahead."

Pleasantries were exchanged.

"This way." Duvik said. Risa went into the kitchen to open the bottle as Duvik led them into the house. In the hallway he removed a carpet and lifted up a section of the boarding. A ladder led below. He switched on a light, they clambered down. Their op centre. Four tatty lounge chairs, a small stained coffee table, the surface slightly warped. Risa followed shutting the cover, using a lever to move the carpet back over the entrance. Threadbare carpet on the floor. What the room contained impressed Mitaj.

Along the walls industrial shelving with computer screens, consoles, external hard drives, software attachments, racks of data files, manual controls, three different com links, stand alone data banks, encrypters, scanners, tiny status lights glowing on their equipment. Overhead climate control hissing quietly and the soft putter of a mobile fuel driven generator, it's exhaust vent going into the wall.

"Scrubbed by a set of filters which is fed into the wall's cavity. Keeps the house warm as well." Duvik explained as he showed them to their seats. Risa poured into two cups the white wine Baia brought.

"You sure?" Risa asked indicating the bottle.

"Fine thank you." And looked at Mitaj and HA. Not tempted.

They sat, Duvik and Risa drank their wine. Baia exchanged small talk, how their tutoring was going at the college, who said what to whom, which academics played the incessant game of internal politics.

"So," Duvik said after a while, "you want something. Or your friends do."

"Two things."

"Only two? Must be a slow one." He smiled.

"The hill."

"Them. Well what do you want to know?"

"What is going on up there?" Mitaj asked.

"Yes, good question. What's the second one?"

"Any unusual fluctuations? As in an EM field. Might be related, might not."

"Well they got a telescope up there. Not very powerful. Looking out. We know Prima thinks this so called alien field has its origins that way. Not that there is anything remotely close. Apart from the other universe. Which is probably what they think this alien field is. Just data. Photons really."

"This is something else."

"Glad you said that. We have detected some background radiation. In fact Baia two fields. One is broad-spectrum a few degrees above absolute zero, very constant, so low level it is of no direct consequence. But," he drank some wine, "there is another resonance in place. Sort of fades in and out. And close. As if it's this universe's background radiation. Like an interference pattern. Sort of. More like a quantum superimposition. Looks static though."

"What do you make of it?"

"It's there, sometimes. Has wave properties. A field that sort of pulses and is expanding, but at a very slow rate. This side of the universe, definitely."

"So it's confirmed." Baia said. Mitaj was satisfied.

"Like a fog with holes in it."

"But nothing to do with the hill?"

"No."

"What about the Outlands. Could it come from there. Sort of communal field projection?"

"Like the shamans focussing their psychic abilities into space?"

"Something like that. If I may. Did this field manifest with the coming of the priests up there?" Mitaj queried.

"No. They are recent. No whatever that field is, well it's thousands of light years away. So it started millennia ago."

"Is it focussed in any way? Any specific frequencies?" Baia asked.

"My sensors tell me it's broad-spectrum. Remember my stuff has limitations. The orbital should have a better picture. What are they saying?"

"Nothing Duvik."

"Well that could mean one of two things." He drained his glass, reached for the bottle and refilled Risa's and his glass. "They know and want to keep it secret, or they know and it doesn't matter. Or just another cosmic phenomena. Which Baia it could be."

"Anything from Prima's end?"

"Well it's not effecting their envelope."

"Is it affecting Regum? Are the shamans resonance changing. Any patterns?"

"Ah, they are always transmuting. Always active. But no overall pattern of what you mean."

"Thank you." Mitaj replied. "We're trying to track this to its source."

"What if it amplifies?" Baia asked.

"Glad you asked. Here it gets weird. It would expand of course. Assuming, and this is a big assumption, it's data rich then it could effect Prima's resonance. Realign it. Not that they'd notice it if its incremental enough. But if it is data rich, and the universe is nothing but a changing set of data fields, it could, and remember this is all speculation, could inform our universe if its contents. Self revealing."

"I've had a thought. Knowing Prima's orientation they might see this as some sort of divine revelation."

"Not bad Baia." Duvik was pleased.

"Is that possible?" Mitaj asked.

"Anything is possible." Duvik turned to Mitaj. "Everything is undefined, probable. It's what's actual that counts."

"So it's probable."

"Maybe. But that has to be studied from your end. My facilities are limited."

"Understood." Mitaj was satisfied. At least he had corroboration. "So just to make sure I got this right. It's got no effect on us."

"Too weak, too far."

"When would it get this far?"

"Beyond our lifetimes. Thousands of years at its current pace. If it ever gets this far. It could be excessive radiation from the galaxy. It might have been there forever, growing slowly. Given there is only x amount of energy it might only expand to an equivalent amount. It may never get here at all."

"So out there no unusual activity?" Mitaj wanted to make sure they were under no psychic threats.

"No."

"Well I'm satisfied. Baia?"

"Nothing else?"

Matij had enough data pertaining to the Outlands and their psychic states. The extraneous source self limited. Still the area was a hot spot of activity. Not as strong as the DVs but intense through their naturally enhanced population. Especially up north where they were heading. If they could download direct their states of mind, then reconfigure

that into their EAI's they then had the jump on the DVs. Not that Storaf would ever know. He was just their ticket in.

After some more chit chat they decided to leave. Duvik showed them to the front door having made sure with his basic surveillance gear that the area was clear.

In the car she said: "You know we could do with a some upgrades up here." Pointing to her temple. "Counter the priests. Why they even let them here is beyond me. It stinks."

"Open door policy."

"I disagree."

"We have them under control Mitaj."

"We?"

"Well the powers that be. I sometimes think," concentrating on driving the car down the deserted road, headlights barely illuminating the street in front of them, the houses shrouded in darkness under a black overcast night, "we are becoming too individual."

"Too individual. Individual is individual. How can that be too?"

"Socially fragmenting. No core values."

"We are our own core value."

"What I mean is Prima is united. We are not. Each doing their own thing."

"Don't forget. Once the E component of the AI's is mass produced we'll be on top. Weld that to whatever we got and the DVs wont know what hit them."

"Is that policy?"

"It would be if I had my way."

"So they're playing with the idea."

"Haven't told me colonel."

"I just hope it doesn't backfire."

"You mean turn us into Primaians. Or Outlanders. That'd be funny." Mitaj laughed.

"Your friends were useful."

"They are."

"I hope their equipment is securely routed elsewhere."

"It is."

"That's good. So they can't get nailed down."

"As long as you don't mention them."

"I won't. Neither will you captain."

"Sir."

"Drop you off somewhere?"

"The hotel will be fine."

"Sure thing." They headed through the sleeping town towards the hotel.

"Front door?"

"Please."

She drove into the courtyard. Dag and Turd were somewhere, out of sight. He would relieve them and do the rounds with HA.

"Thank you colonel. Unfortunately all I can say in my progress report that you were very supportive and helped our orientation."

"Fine by me. Won't stand on ceremony and salute you out. You're not keeping contact with me?"

"No colonel."

"Good. The less said the better."

"Totally agree. Good night then."

"Night."

"Thank you colonel." HA said. "A drink another time?"

"Sure thing soldier."

She left them and headed back to her quarters.

Dag and Turd appeared having heard the car. They saluted.

"Anything?"

"All quiet."

"Good. Take your rest. We'll take over from here. Relieve us at oh four hundred."

"Yes sir." Turd replied. They headed back into the hotel.

Later that night Mitaj's bio-enhanced inserts alerted to an incoming call. He headed for the lead vehicle, plugged in his fibre optical patch from his sleeve and listened. A flyer was being sent. The team was to be split up. The professor and part of his team to head directly to a monastery at the foothills of the northern mountains. The rest continue as planned then rendezvous there. He cut the link.

He got out the vehicle and told HA the change of plans.

"To chose who goes ahead." Mitaj considered.

"Why you sir."

"No we got our mission. If I come flying in it would send a message. We want to keep this low profile. Turd definitely. Two soldiers of lower rank will look less intrusive. How about you as well?"

"Yeah, I'll go."

"Good man."

"You and Dag. Just observe. Don't get into any shitfights."

"Not us sir."

Turd was smart. One reason for his nickname. They were all trained as one man armies. So Mitaj expected no problems there. They could look after themselves. They had their basic AI capabilities. Turd and HA would be the advance party then. When they came out Mitaj informed them of the change of plans. It made sense splitting up the team. Not that Mitaj was told as to why the plan was changed, unless it had been intended as such and not revealed until the last moment.

Turd was excited to fly ahead. HA more laconic. He was now the second in command and accepted his role quietly.

"Now unless something in the extreme occurs, we run silent."

They nodded.

"Conversely if the shit hits the fan and you are being overtly threatened you have permission to use reasonable force. I leave you to decide that."

"Understood." HA replied.

"Engage the professor if you can. Learn. Ask questions. Appear interested in his work."

"Is Etessa going?"

"I'm considering keeping her with me."

"That's good."

"Do I detect a little, ahm, discretionary relief?"

"She's hard as nails."

"That's why I'm keeping her under observation. Horat seems so not there, less emotional he will be a good buffer. Naj is smart. Cena is just Cena. She might be the easiest to get any info out of. If away from the others. Sweet talk her."

"Yes sir."

"Another thing. This monetary. An abbess Mudhan runs it. It's got a library. If you can get access, find out all you can about their head space. The term I believe is 'magic'. Psychic applications. That's important."

"With you."

"You have your writing gear. Take notes."

"Sir."

"Well we were all briefed so I need not say any more. If we get our shit together on this one we may even get a recommendation at the least men."

"Nice to be noted."

"You were chosen for this mission. That says something in itself."

"Guess so." Dag said.

"So you two get some rest."

They saluted and left.

Mitaj relaxed. They would get the jump on the DVs yet. If this worked out their EAI's would be no match for them. Motioning to HA they started their rounds.

Novus

During her remaining two days off Nervina travelled on the mass transit systems. Get the feel of the place. Trams in the city and suburbs supplemented by mini buses. A maglev train connected the casino at the southern end of the CBD. The place had no name, just 'The City'. It was the only one around. The scintillating high rise buildings glittered in the constant sunshine on Novus. A dry desert planet, water came from a desalination plant at the northern promontory.

Then there was the vast ocean which received bulk deliveries from space. Splash downs. Huge crude iron encased containers, mainly bulk goods, processed ores from the distant asteroid belt were dumped here. Huge plumes of white rose with a slow serenity to the rushing sound of water. Settling on the ocean floor their crude external engines on pop out wheels self drove to the wharves to be transported by goods trains to the steelworks west. A pall of red dust, from open hearth and blast furnaces, black dirt from the coke ovens hung smudged over the vast industrial spread. Worked my Primaians. The Outback off limits.

Her suburban flat mostly populated by workers employed at the small factories nearby. Mainly specialist engineering outfits, custom made producers, computer factories, mechanical workshops gave her a view of the industrial estate spreading out in a large area of prefab factories. The rest of the planet was terra incognita. No one really left the City. There was no where to go. Above the Orbital stayed in its geostationary orbit, linking the five space launching facilities just behind where she lived. A little north a headland jutted out, where the more wealthy and connected, their mansions stretched out along a road resided. No public transport there. They had their own vehicles.

Once whilst strolling along the waterfront, dotted with a few bars, restaurants and cafes Nervina spotted Ratze again. Nervina remained incognito. She toyed with the idea of following her, subsuming her Brain to remain invisible but changed her mind. She really did not want to know, or her Brain decided against it. If Ratze was working for some outfit it might be better if she were left to herself.

Ratze. A Natural. But with whom? Alone? Perhaps. Her escapade from Prima could, like Nervina's removal from that planet be a cover. Which meant Ratze was on a mission. Not her she hoped. Maybe like her she worked for some outfit or Family who engaged in their dubious activities freely here whilst having to operate more clandestinely on Regum. There were maybe Primaian Families and these she wanted to stay away from. She might be out of the loop, secure, as long as she kept to herself. Nor did she want any attention focussed on her. Thus being seen with Ratze too often not recommendable just yet. Her Brain knew very little about Marrus, who as an independent unit could be a front for entities she had no wish to come into contact with. Hacking his data base would have to wait.

She caught a tram back to her flat.

Of greater interest were the space ports. Privately run by both corporations and families. The engineers, scientists and specialists kept mostly to themselves living in a small village built right next to it. Soft scanning open data bases revealed exotic material research facilities, bio-researches dabbling in molecular permutations probably concerned with new AI interfacing processors. Along with metallurgists, chemists, computer buffs, astronomers all drawn from Regums academics. If they ventured out they maintained a low profile. Their facilities in a secure compound. Secrets. At least Novus was more than just a commercial enterprise..

Her neighbours were a mixed lot. All workers, no specialists. They accepted each other at face value. Nothing like on Prima where everybody was in each other's heads, constantly. Making sure one's resonance stayed attuned to one's being. Prima, a vast prison in comparison to Regum and Novus. She felt free here, lighter. Without the oppressive mental atmosphere which had been the norm. Not until one left was the difference apparent. No wonder so few were allowed back after having been away. She nearly missed her stop.

She was sitting at her window watching those walking with their groceries, their shopping, coming and going. Ratze. Something about her. A feeling of familiarity. But the question was, was there a motive? Restless she went back into the City. With no particular place in mind. She ended up at the casino to see it as a visitor. No one paid her the least attention. The security guards only looking cursory past her. Her Brain recessed. Something was bothering her. Undefined yet present. Maybe a left over from Prima's constant surveillance of every thought, every action, every nuance being analysed. Freedom, what a precious commodity. She ambled through the endless malls, passed so many shops that no amount of credit could exhaust what was on offer. Such

riches were reserved for the elite and chosen on Prima. Bored she decided to head for her little bolt hole. She was comfortable there. The furniture a little worse for wear, basic, cosy.

She made her way to the terminus. The maglev train appeared, all perspex in a silver aluminium frame glid smoothly to a halt. The doors slid opened, the travellers exited, some excited tourists or like her workers on their day off. They got on. After a cursory wait, it was fully automated the doors slid shut and off it went. Those around her were chatting, out for the day. She was sitting on the left admiring the desert's pastel pink brown colours. An azure sky above, in the distance the white flare of a rocket slowly ascending into space. She was starting to feel at home here. Even if she only knew Ratze. It was enough. Company she did not crave. Even the casual conversations she had with her relaxed neighbours occurred on such a light level that there was no feeling of personal intrusion. Everybody had a comfortable ambience about them.

The City's large edifices moved slowly towards her. She saw a helicopter rise from one of the taller buildings, sunlight flashing momentarily off its cockpit..

"Such an easy way to get around." An older lady remarked sitting down next to her. Daydreaming she had not realised a fellow passenger sitting next to her. She would have to try and not drift off too far. Then again her Brain might be adjusting her to be like the rest.

"I think it's great they way they've organised it all." Nervina replied happy at the diversion.

"Very satisfactory." The older lady said. Dressed simply. Elegant. A wealthy retiree. A whiff of perfume, delicate, a rich essence. Taste.

The high rise buildings were getting closer. Some low rise buildings whizzed past

"From Regum?" her companion asked.

"Last port of call." Nervina volunteered. See how she would react.

"A traveller. I used to travel in my time. But now I've decided to make Novus my home. It's so relaxing here. I used to teach, tutor I should say at CU."

"I nearly studied there. Then changed my mind. Had a few interviews with some academics. But the overspecialisation of my subjects turned me of."

"That is a pity. Learning is good for the brain."

"I agree. But since all the data's in the Web..."

"True, but it's singularly focussed. A specific area of interest is always more than it's shell contents. The Web may give you answers, but true learning is the art of asking the right questions. A discipline in itself." She said kindly. "Any family here?"

Tricky. Stop being so hypersensitive she told herself. "No."

"Neither I," she beamed. "Well at my age they're all dead. The others I found too self enclosed. I want real freedom."

"So you're from Regum as well." `Dead' not `passed on.' Regum for sure.

"Where else?" she chuckled.

"Oh I don't know, a habitat perhaps?"

"Been there. Dangerous for the mind."

"Really? How?"

"Well you loose contact with others. Become your own world. There are plenty who have mentally lost it. Completely warped." She said with some distaste.

"I would have thought their AI's would keep them on track." Interested in what she had just said. Different mental bifurcations.

"Well they can be ignored can't they? Switched off even, except for the basics. One needs an amazingly strong mind to stay focused."

"Never thought of that."

"Neither have they. I shudder to think in what sort of a mental cul de sac they can imprison themselves with."

"Sounds like Prima." Nervina laughed.

"Oh that place. Ugh." The lady shuddered.

"Yes they are strange."

"Deluded."

"So I gather." Nervina said cautiously. Nothing covert about this seemingly nice woman.

"Always conspiring."

"You met them?" see where that would lead.

"One hears things." She answered.

"I suppose."

"Surely you've run into priests."

"Avoided them. If I saw them in the street I would do anything not to pass them. Hide in an entrance, pretend I'm not there. Total aversion." Nervina add libbed.

"Not a bad idea." She smiled. "I'm Kisa by the way."

"Nervina, pleased to meet you."

"Did you know dear, there are some criminally insane in the Outback?" she said conspiratorially.

"You mean..."

"Where they have their colony."

"Is this good or bad news?"

"Bad of course. They are up to something out there. I can feel it. Sometimes," she continued, "I think I must have distant ancestors from there. I get these flashes, remnant psychic left overs probably. Not enough to tip me over the edge, but I do get the strangest of dreams."

Knowing what the Primaian's thought of that Nervina admitted: "Same here. Sometimes. Strange worlds, similar beings but endowed with awesome powers."

"You too? You might have Primaian blood yourself. Ever checked your family history?"

"No. I don't want any surprises."

"I can understand that. A new beginning and all that."

"Yes Kisa. A new beginning."

"I just hope they don't do anything nasty."

"Who?"

"That governor general out there. I don't trust them. But why would the Council even allow them here? Novus belongs to Regum. I tell you Nervina something is going on out there."

"Some sort of deal."

"Some sort of deal. You said it. What's in it for them I ask myself."

"Cheap labour I hear."

"That's just the surface. It's a conspiracy." Kisa was determined.

The train started to slow down.

"I talk too much." Kisa apologised.

"No not at all. Interesting what you said."

"Well most people don't want to know or don't care. But there are some of us who do care for this planet. Maybe we can have a coffee sometime..."

"Hm. Kisa you come to the casino often?"

"For a flutter now and again."

"Because I work there. If I see you then yes, why not?" Nervina replied without even thinking.

The train pulled up at the concourse along the water front. The doors slid open.

"Here is my card Nervina. Don't be shy." Kisa winked at her. "When you have time of course." She rose. Nervina likewise.

She watched Kisa blend in with the other commuters, crossed the plaza and onto a fleet of waiting mini buses taking her to wherever she lived. It was nice to have someone talk to you for the pure pleasure of it. Exchange ideas without ulterior motives or get an angle that usually concerned them not herself. Or be manipulated into revealing snippets of data or compromised by being drawn out in endless games which counter intel played.

A man's voice asked solicitously if she were lost. She was standing rather vacantly with her own thoughts. She turned and saw a casually dressed elegant young man, wired at the back of his neck, the tiny strands off line. No activity.

"Just bored. Thinking. Thanks." He nodded and moved away bidding her a good day. No internal alerts. Coincidence? A watcher? She could not allow her guard to be down. She was essentially a refugee and a possible target. She had disobeyed orders and done a runner. People here were indifferent. Even when gambling pleasantries were exchanged with a minimum of curiosity.

Time to do some homework. Externally. Her flat was the bare minimum with no computer terminal. Not that she needed one. Find out if Ratze and by default herself were in the public register. Everyone was scanned coming in. Would it be locked down for the security agencies here? With that positive idea she felt invigorated. Her rescue might be noted. Or hidden. See how exposed she was.

She walked over to a large map of the city next to the waiting area. Use what data was available rather than do a back entrance run internally. On Prima any information accessed was tagged. There the DLs knew exactly who wanted to know what. It made her cautious. See what happens this end with her curiosity. See how Novus's systems worked. Any trip mechanisms that alerted hounds, passive watchers like the man wondering if she were lost.

The maze of the city showed where the malls were, the most important businesses, service centres, doctors, specialists, and everything else one could want. So not everybody was on-line, wired, inserted, hooked up, sub-tuned, module specific. The information external. This planet had a logic of its own regarding data. Harking back to the old days. It would be interesting what was not there.

She looked at the lay out. Ah a library. Prima had them, off limits to the public only a few blocks away. She would walk, see if anybody was following her. No containment fields either. An open planet. No overt controls in place. Nervina strolled into the CBD. Office blocks towered above her. So much activity for such a small population. No programmes to guide you. Here you had to think for yourself. After

walking down a few blocks, past shoppers, people on business she found the library in a non descript edifice. Unlike Regum City the buildings here were straight up, functional, simple solar panelled outer walls between hundreds windows. Above a few helicopters connecting commuters from roof to roof top.

The foyer was busy with whatever brought the populace here. A directory. The library was over three floors. So many offices. It would certainly overwhelm any true Primaian's. True Primaian's. If she was not one of them then was she a Reganian agent sent to Prima after being reconfigured. Maybe here were some answers. She walked up the stairs. Most used lifts. On the third floor the main entrance to the library. A foyer, a long desk with several staff busy with books. Books. Hidden on Prima, back up data storage on Regum, since the Calamity had affected their systems. Books were incorruptible. Safe. Secure.

Her Brain tickled a little. Natural curiosity by the staff. Or a security check. She was in passive mode. Not much to retrieve from her. A uniformed attendant studying her. Not intense just cursory. She walked towards the front desk with its consoles, view screens and com links. A male attendant in a business suit looked up his expression ready for her inquiry.

"Browsing."

"Well that's a beginning. Anything in particular?"

"Several. science, astronomy, history. Recently arrived so I'm curious about Novus."

He nodded. "Next level up. This floor is fiction."

"Mythology, folk tales."

"Third floor. Under ancient history, sociology, psychology. Second floor is science and technology."

"Thank you."

The tickle in her Brain remained. Not quite an itch. Low intensity. Then they left her alone. A spiral staircase next to an internal lift. A guard busy focussing on someone else who arrived. She climbed the metal stair case and saw shelves covering the whole floor. Amazing from a Primaian perspective. A few people sitting at reading desk lining the windows for the light. She was after information regarding the corporations, if they were here. Which she did not want to make known. She saw various terminals to narrow down the search.

Another help desk. The young woman looked up.

"I'm checking out prospective employers. Where would organisations, business's be?"

"Well you're on the right floor. Are you taking any books out?"

"No."

She seemed relieved. "Then you won't have to register. But you can do that anytime."

"What about downloading?"

"Scanners are available. A small fee. Point one of a credit per page. Just swipe your credit card." She smiled. "Most business's have their data pre-packaged so you don't have to go through their information page by page. The screen advises you how much they contain and an abstract of course."

"Can I uplink the scanner?"

"Yes. No problem. Saves paper. Point five of a credit per page."

"Thank you for your time."

"Glad to be of service."

"What section is the business directory?"

"Oh of course. Yes. Nine hundred. It's all marked along the isles."

"Thanks."

She was relieved that her status was of no concern to the staff. Maybe security had already cleared her.

She discovered that the books were really computer slabs. The scanner for flexi data rich download. She walked along the rows until she discovered the Casino. There were several slabs. Subsidiaries and subcontractors. Might as well download the lot and let her Brain sort it out. She activated her sleeve's computer and walked over to a table next to the window. It looked over to the next office block. She pulled out her fibre link, inserted it into the spine and let her link do the downloading. Her Brain hid behind her personal pc. Companies, contractors, official owners, family concerns, principle stakeholders and shareholders, affiliates. Having done that she put it back and took down the space corporations. None connected to Prima. Now for Novus's government. A quick search at the terminal and she found the section it was at. Executive Council, Representational Council, departments.

Now for the history of the planet. Up the spiral staircase. She asked the attendant, another young woman where that was. Three hundred plus. She found what she wanted and this time took her time downloading it slowly.

First came the probes. Automated observation station. Tree planting on a huge scale to enrich the atmosphere, bacteria in the air to soak up excess CO2, fungi, viruses to make the air breathable. Several decades passed. Massive injections of bio-forming molecular designated scrubbers creating an atmospheric equilibrium. Vast fresh water underground coming mostly from the ice caps. Mineral rich. Then came the colonists, all Reganians. Labour was needed. Regum used low tech applications since this was an open planet. Prima was happy to supply the necessary workers. The city rose, micro factories to get the infrastructure in place, engineering works, construction companies, transport organised. No evidence of prior inhabitants. No evidence of any remnant extra-terrestrial visitors.

She searched for the 'Calamity'. Refer to 'Regum'. Her Brain, rerouting itself into her sleeve's pc reminded her that on Prima that was privileged information. She found 'Regum' and accessed the 'Calamity'. Speculative only. Massive EM flux [?] from within the galaxy. Possible source. Centre of galaxy. Possible cause: speculative. Drawing in 'space' due to its gravity well, possible repulsion wave. Singular occurrence [?]. Cyclic [?]. Due to pre-technological civilisation any previous [if any] EM wave would have passed through without discernable effects noted. Refer to 'mythology', 'folklore'. Also refer to 'Prima' [ditto]

She got up replaced that history and found Prima. Under 'mythology' distant struggles with ancient gods who won usurping 'demons'. Under 'folklore' many individual stories of resistance by 'occultists' and 'shamans'. Subsumed to priesthood and the coming of the singular god. Obviously the source here was Reganian. History stopped. Millennia later technology. Near civil war. Exodus of scientists [et.al.] to Regum, twin planet. 'Calamity'. Supposed wrath of singular god. Regum proclaimed 'heretic'. Alleged psychic enhancement of Prima's 'volatile naturals'. Coming of Domain Lords. Upon their death transmuted. Declared as 'Immortals'. Pontiff proclaimed as 'unitary immortal'. Orbitals and habitats built by Regum. Space exploration. Building of WebWorld, later WebSpace. Supposed 'alien field' appears in near space. Universe bigger than previously thought. Surrounded by hundreds [?] of micro galaxies. Supposedly inhabited by alien sentients responsible for assumed alien field. Data does not confirm such a field.

She took a mental break. If the Primaian's knew this...She continued. Cooperation on Orbital. Priests sent to Regum. That was that. No it wasn't. Novus discovered. Refer to 'Novus'.

Nervina ran through 'government' both Regum and Novus. No religious departments. Just as she thought. A strange manifestation of Prima's.

She returned the slab. Then she had an idea. Ratze. Find out if possible her agenda. If she could. There was something about her. An affinity. Chance? Luck? Pre-determined? Time to find out.

As she reminded herself with no Web hence no curiosity regarding herself or Ratze. Like stepping out of the picture. Even the Orbital was not doing any sweeps on the ground. Just pure research. Maybe. Nothing her Brain recognised. Yet the Orbital was not mentioned.

Back to Ratze. Maybe from space. The habitats had definitely unique individuals who rejected socialising as a way of life. Manifesting pure individuality. Ratze perhaps one of them. Someone who had infiltrated Prima's orbital. An interesting person.

But first, she had nearly forgotten, a search of herself. Back to the 'Novus' file. Sure enough a personal directory. With contact numbers, simplified personal computer addresses. She found herself, arriving several days ago. Student from Regum. Nothing relating to Prima. Her Brain must have deleted her other past. Ratze, Reganian. Visitor. Habitat unknown. Corrupt files. Pending. So she had nothing to do with Prima, officially. An agent of sorts, weren't all agents that? Just her being here. Corrupted files. Someone muddying the waters.

Nervina sent her a txt message on the open link. 'Drinks?'

Moments later an answer. 'Fine, around three at the 'Terminus'?'

'Sure thing.'

Nervina was on her second cup of coffee at the 'Terminus' watching from a bar stool at the window the passers by. The view of the plaza, the maglev train moving out as people strolled by. In front the ocean, the waves lapping the broad sweep of the shoreline. Splashed down selfdriving containers, huge white impact plumes of white water rising up majestically as they came in from space, lumbering out of the water, auto docking at the wharves ready to be lifted by overhead cranes onto waiting flat rail wagons.

Everybody busy, going about their business. Uniforms. Not military, just security police somewhat laconic. Corporation insignia on their smart clothes, walking signage.

Ratze appeared amongst the commuters pouring out of a tram, dispersing, going their various ways. She walked slowly letting others pass her by. Nervina watched her and anybody who might be trailing her. No one loitering near her.

The bar when Nervina entered almost empty. The lunch time crowd gone leaving tourists, others off duty to enjoy the afternoon over a few drinks. Some solitary drinkers. Her Brain sensed nothing. One or two men had glanced at her arrival. One older business type even asked her to join him. She declined politely and wished him a pleasant afternoon. She took her coffee to her place at the window. He left shortly after even giving her a wave. Nothing to indicate he was more than wanting someone to pass the time with.

Ratze was still cautious as she made her way towards the bar. No one around her was relaying any signs, changing a briefcase from one hand to another, fiddling with a lapel, tugging an earlobe, all prolix forms of communication to back ups who might take an interest in her. Nervina kept her Brain on standby. Ratze half turned keeping an eye on the others see if there was a subtle change in body language, a cursory stare, a feigned glance or suddenly leaving to be replaced by another watcher. So far nothing. Inside a few workers were drinking at the bar, who could easily see behind them given there was a full length mirror, shelving stacked with colourful bottles of liqueurs and various spirits.

Ratze was still taking precautions, fiddling with her shoes. She pretended to half loose her balance and did a quick sweep to see if anybody was watching her. Nothing. Then she walked in.

They greeted each other. Ratze though focussed was in an amiable mood. She asked Nervina what she wanted. She was fine. Ratze strolled to the bar, nodded at the workers, exchanged some pleasantries, took her beer and rejoined Nervina.

They hugged, watching those around them. No one gave them a second look. They sat.

"Glad you could make it. So how was your day?" Ratze asked taking a generous swig leaving a white line on her upper lip.

"Checked records. Public domain. You're there. Ex habitat."

"Really? You?"

"Student."

They exchanged a knowing smile. Neither were what the official data base assumed. Their cover was holding.

"I got a job." Meaning Ratze was establishing her legend.

"Yeah? What?"

"Fire safety officer." amused.

"Same here. A surrogate for some character, professional gambler."

"You a pro?"

"Easy as pie."

"Careful. If you got smart ware..."

"I understand Ratze. And a unit to go with that."

"Is it clean?"

"No bugs. But I didn't dig too deep."

"Good."

Nervina realised they were both inserts on the loose. Neither had to acknowledge that.

"Checked the history of all three planets." Nervina divulged. "One overriding factor. The calamity. Interesting, some sort of cosmic pulse. Totally stuffed all systems. One has to assume it's all more secure now."

Ratze nodded and drank some more beer. "Hm, not bad."

"No overt explanations. Just theorising."

"Nothing religious?"

"Nope."

"So you're, were a student on Regum."

"Sure was."

"What was wrong with it?"

Nervina knew that eventually somebody would ask that question. She was glad Ratze did.

"Get away from my ex. He walked in and I walked out. Some research into folklore on Regum's aborigines. He was going strange ever since..." Nearly saying their arrival. "Anyway, I thought of making a clean break. Leave the memories behind."

"Good move. So Novus it was."

"Aha."

Ratze finished her beer, saying "To Novus."

"To Novus." Nervina agreed.

"Want something?"

"A liqueur and another coffee. Use my card."

"I'll get it."

"Generous."

"Not always." And Ratze made her way to the bar.

As she ordered her drinks, a middle aged business suit deleted his portable viewscreen, pocketed it and asked if she was from Regum. Given that there were so many arrivals here it was merely an opening line.

"I heard you toasting Novus. I'm on sabbatical." His eyes twinkling, a few character lines and a rich resonant voice. He would make a good speaker. No tell tale itch. "I'm sorry to intrude. Just arrived myself."

"Know the feeling. Company. Not many academics here." As the barmaid delivered her drinks. Ratze paid with her credit card.

"There are, but not my field. Group dynamics. My assistant is gone missing." He lied. "Don't know where he's gotten to. He'll turn up. Got a few days to get my stuff together. So here I am at this bar." He smiled charmingly. "So how are things on Regum?"

Strange question if he just left.

Then added. "When my assignment is done I may stay here."

"Same here." Ratze concurred.

"Name is Talex. I might as well come out with it. I'm bored."

"You wanna join us." It was an observation.

"If you don't mind."

"Depends on my friend." Ratze watching Nervina in the mirror. "So follow me." making their way over to the stools at the window.

"Talex. From CU at Regum. May I join you?" as Ratze handed Nervina a small green glass, her coffee, then returned to the bar to retrieve her beer. Talex was drinking some cocktail, cheeks slightly flushed. No microbots on him Nervina noticed. Or off to enjoy the effects of the alcohol. No itch.

"You may." Nervina replied graciously.

"Social scientist specialising in group dynamics." He explained.

"CU?"

"Yes. And you?" focussing on Nervina. Then sat a little away so that Nervina and Ratze could stay together. Not intrusive.

"Ex student. The curriculum was not what it said it was. Too much blah blah. Not enough substance. Motivational studies, psychology." Nervina made up. Not that that faculty did not exist. She was being cautious.

Talex laughed pleasantly. "Yes, I think I know what you mean. Wasn't always like that. But ever since the advent of the priests there's been a change in orientation in the Arts and human sciences. Enter ideology. Right up my alley. Defending their stance.

Always assumed but now part of the course. Don't agree with it myself..." As he sipped his clear cocktail.

"My reason for bombing out."

"Sad really. Waste of a good brain."

"Well if they would stick to the data..."

"My point exactly. Leave the philosophising to the philosophers." He readily agreed.

"So what's your interest here?"

"New world. New social experiment. Free form. No established social norms, no guiding laws, freedom to be whatever one wants. Almost like the habitats. What are you in?"

"Gambling."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"Good brains are needed here. Actually," he paused, took a sip, the classic move to collect one's thoughts, or dissemble, "I'm working for the council. They want future projections, probabilities in social and individual behaviour. I could do with another research assistant. As you know, there's no web here. So everything has to be done manually, collation of data. Time consuming but necessary just the same."

Nervina and Ratze looked at each other. Could be true could be false. Without a deep scan Talex was an unknown quantity.

"Don't look at me." Ratze smiled.

"I got a well paying habit." Nervina answered.

"They are even considering integrating the Volatiles."

Both women held back. Either he was an academic or he was sending out a signal to them. Coincidence?

"Labour market's tight. I tried several agencies but everyone's taken. Everybody is outsourced. Even secretaries are hard to get." He hinted. Languid brown eyes. No intensity. Could be the drink they both thought.

"Talex, if your contractor has set you up here, surely they have the means of procuring the qualified personnel. Even if they have to do that on Regum." Nervina said spot on.

"That's what I was doing at the bar when your friend came along. If you want to have a look, check it out. Remember not everyone on Regum wants to come here.

Compared to the City this place is a suburb. Limited life style. And no web. I'm a little desperate ladies."

They laughed at that.

"You don't look it." Ratze observed.

"Can't you use or design a data cruncher?" Nervina asked then took a sip of her liqueur. "Nice." Followed by coffee.

"So where do you actually do your work?" Ratze queried.

"Everywhere. In the field as they say. But I do have an office. Actually I work from my unit."

"You got access to the Outback?" see what happens Nervina thought.

"Limited. No one wants to go out there." Talex despondent. Either a good actor or genuine. Both women were holding back scanning him. So they had to pump him the slow way, by conversation.

"People," he continued, "misunderstand Vs. They're not dangerous. They don't infect your minds and they're not violent. Just their emotions are a little unstable."

Nervina wanted to stay away from the Outback simply because it was under Primaian jurisdiction.

"I want nothing to do with Prima." She replied.

"Your legal status is guaranteed."

"I don't like them."

"Neither do I." Ratze added for good measure. "Good luck in finding someone Talex."

"I guess that's that."

"Sure is." Ratze confirmed.

"So, for your time, get you the next round?" he pulled back.

They placed their order.

"My pleasure." Talex slid off the stool heading for the bar.

"A bit obvious." Ratze said to Nervina.

"Telling me." As she watched Talex at the bar. See if he gave any signs to any of the drinkers there. As Talex left one of the men pulled over a coaster.

Gotcha.

"He just passed a message to that bloke drinking on his own, to the right of Talex Ratze."

Ratze gave her a knowing look. Low level approach.

"There you are then." As he lowered the tray of drinks and coffee.

"To our respective futures."

They cheered each other. His embedded pc at his sleeve was inactive.

"Hope you get what or who you want." Nervina said softly.

"Sorry for wasting your time." And downed his cocktail. "Ah, just what the brain ordered." Smiling effusively.

He rose, nodded once more to them and ambled out of the bar. They did not discuss Talex's attempt at their recruitment or entrapment. Whether Ratze knew of Nervina's somewhat precarious situation could be left for another suitable time. So they talked about Novus in general, their respective 'jobs' and the bright, hopefully, great unknown future.

The sun was setting the sky ablaze in deep crimson as it slowly sank behind the office blocks casting purple shadows over the foreshore and plaza. Lights twinkled along the jetties, buses alight, streetlamps coming on. Shadows moving across their field of vision. Workers were coming in for their first drinks.

Ratze watched on the reflection of the window pane the tag at the bar. Using optical enhancements she could see him clearly in her head. He was just sitting there nursing a beer. She reverse zoomed onto the mirror. He was not watching them. Very professional.

They finished their drinks, the night ahead of them. Outside a solitary taxi cruised by. Both brains tingled. Whether from that one cab or the agent at the bar neither of them bothered to check out the attempted scan.

"Fuck fuck fuck." Nervina spat. Ratze looked a little surprised at her.

"Know the feeling."

"They're onto me."

"Something happen on Regum? I know you said you left CU."

"I had to get out."

It was cool outside. The sky over the ocean turning black. The stars shone bright.

'Take the taxi.'

"You get that?" Nervina asked. Ratze nodded. She did a quick search only to end up at a defunct outbox.

"Someone's taking an interest. Not Talex. I got his resonance." Ratze's Brain was assuring her.

The 'not for hire' cab cruised closer. Nervina waved, it pulled over. They got in. Ratze remained on low alert. Whoever was tagging them did not resist. But all she got was a remnant presence. Isolated drop boxes. Someone was as configured as

themselves. Tempting to follow it up Ratze thought but not yet. She knew `he' was interested in Nervina. Yet `he' did not mind Ratze's presence.

Inside the cab they were sealed from the driver. The door shut, they moved off.

"Just drive driver."

He looked over a little and merely nodded.

Ratze made it understood that she would trace the interested party. She sent out a tight squirt bomb which slowly blossomed into several packed fragmented search engines. The engines dissolved. Countermeasures. A persona appeared. An operative linked to a family. An interested party that wanted to keep Nervina secure. Ratze accepted it for the moment. If `he' could dissolve search engines then `he' was connected to a very potent data realm.

The two women looked at each other.

`Nervina. Talex is one of Prima's active sleepers.'

"I shadowed with you just in case," Ratze said, "there's an echo."

The taxi turned here, then there, then into the centre of town.

"You got that as well?"

Ratze nodded.

"Tempted?"

"Do some drifting? No. Way ahead of me." Better be cautious than too assured. `He', for the voice, de-encrypted sounded male, was using some very advanced gear. Neither of them wanted to reveal even a smidgen of their own capabilities. The itch was gone. So Talex was a look out, a recruiter, a stooge. His work most likely genuine.

First contact Nervina thought. Cover blown. Not that she had one accept as an ex-student. The partition in the cab was opaque. Just a fuzzy shadow of the driver. Ratze was tempted to use her optics to see clearer but even that would reveal something of her enhanced state.

The partition came down. With short black hair, a round face, tiny strands at the nape of his neck feeding into his collar the driver remarked: "They will be relentless."

He turned right then right again. Next left. Checking for tails. Not that it was necessary. "Prima prides itself on physical intimidation as well. Playing external mind games." The driver said looking straight ahead.

"No point asking who is with us." Nervina said at last as the cabbie concentrated on driving. Ahead a tram stopped letting off some passengers. He drove around.

The driver did not respond.

"Why the interest?" might as well ask Nervina reasoned.

"Prima's activities. Whoever they are interested in is noted." Not even saying who `he' was. For all she knew this could be a ruse as well. Reveal a portion of your capabilities, then come to the `rescue'. But Prima was not that sophisticated. They were more up front and relentless no matter what the cost or intermediate outcome.

"So driver, saviour," Nervina added for good measure, "it's the situation I'm in rather than me per se."

"A bit of both."

No surprise there.

"Your accepting Talex's offer is under consideration Nervina." Nervina ran a voice recognition analysis to see if `he' was the origin. Not that she expected confirmation. Programmes in place to counter her probing. No match. If the driver was aware of her curiosity he did not remark on it.

"Well you can tell your boss I'm not going."

Down into another street. They were driving aimlessly.

"They'll mind fuck me."

"Nervina if they wished that as a priority you would have been snatched." He answered.

"What about the authorities, the council?"

"Ah, you don't know the set up here. The council is really a business. Huge latitude regarding Prima's activities. They meaning the council want Prima in the open."

"Including abduction?"

"If there is a security risk to Novus, then yes. Officially agents are not considered desirable. So removing an agent from the streets no matter who is acceptable to the council is one less problem as far as they are concerned."

"So much for an open planet."

"Council sees this differently. They don't want any conflict of interest."

Ratze laughed at the ludicrousness of the council's stance. Every corporation, every family had their personnel engaged in some form of data gathering. Contracts, agreements, positions regarding commercial ventures, future hedging, everything was of interest. Manifests, type of cargoes, movement of personnel, it all was of importance since the market was a free for all on Novus. What the council did not want were political agents. She looked at Nervina in a new light. Nervina could be designated political. Her move to freedom an affront to Prima's loss of control. And Primaian's were control freaks. So Nervina was of interest to them. Ratze wondered what this Talex really knew that made them want her back.

"So you're removing me from the situation." Nervina observed.

"No we want you in."

"I told you..."

"I know. For the moment it's in your interest to go along."

"Some choice. I have an employer you know."

"It's being taken care of."

The street lights glowed, casting pools of light, momentarily lighting up the interior of the taxi.

"Did your people get me out?"

"Prima is after the Kabal. They're using Vs, DVs to try and find them. We want to make sure they don't."

"This relates to me? What's the Kabal anyway?"

"A group dedicated to containing Prima."

"They are contained. Self contained."

"Not in space."

"There's the Web."

"It's open. You found out yourself."

"Ran into it's end."

"Yes. Interesting that. By rights it should loop back into itself. Which it did not."

"End of the sequence." Then turning to Ratze asked: "Kabal. You know anything?" She shook her head.

"Tell me, you a believer?"

"No."

"What about the alien field?"

"That? The Primaian bogey."

"Will you see Talex at least? At his residence?" changing tack.

"Could be a trap."

"It won't be. I'll drop both of you off..."

"I told you."

"...and consider it at least. Ask some questions." Ignoring her protest. Well she did owe somebody something for getting her out. Now they wanted her back in. There was an upside. Now that Talex was outed, she might learn more of what Prima was up to on Novus.

"You want to come along?"

"Oh definitely." Ratze said with relish.

"Don't commit yourself Ratze." He said.

"Oh I wont."

"Neither will I." Nervina emphasised.

"What we know of the Vs out there is they're itching to get out." He hinted that the environment in the Outback was not as hostile as it appeared. "Oh yes," he added as an afterthought, "there's a party tomorrow night. One of our leading socialites, Nerfahsi. Talex is invited. No gate crashers. So if you play your cards right...a few Primaians ingratiating themselves."

"You want us to keep our ears open."

"Exactly. That's why seeing him tonight is essential."

"No one else available?"

"Nervina, Novus is a small community."

"And we're new faces."

"You got it." he handed an envelope to Ratze. "Your invite."

"Embedded?"

"No, clean."

Ratze pulled a pair of gloves out and took the envelope. She did not want an imprint left on the envelope. No DNA trace. Then pocketed the invitation.

"Oh yes, I'll be there as well. But you won't know me, at first. You can of course ignore me. I'm there to make sure there are no surprises."

He also handed over, steering with one hand, a small portable pc. It was a tiny matte black flat slab.

"Press that anywhere, hard if you're in real trouble. In case Talex tries anything. It's self configuring Nervina. No one else can trigger it. Sends a one time squirt then self eradicates."

"Thank you driver."

He pulled over in front of a non descript high rise building.

"No charge. Talex's residence. See you two tomorrow."

They clambered out and the taxi drove off with the 'not for hire' sign on.

"Looks like you got friends Nervina."

"Yes. But are they fair weather friends."

"I'll stick by ya."

Talex lived where he worked. A large one bedroom flat. The living room with a view onto another building across the street was cluttered with basic computers lacking

AI capabilities. Regum was not letting Primaian's get a glimpse of their latest devices. He had some bottles of a white clear rum, mixers, nibblies set out on a tray. A little surprised that Ratze was with her he accepted with good grace. The assistant was not around.

After some inconsequential chitchat Talex broached the need for a research assistant. Nervina avoided the offer by saying until her political status was clarified since she was applying for citizenship she would then let him know her final decision. Her job paid well, free accommodation. He would have to have better remuneration. It worked. Talex needed to clear that.

He filled them in regarding Novus's society. Credit ruled. Brains were highly regarded in the technical field implying social scientists were at the bottom rung of the ladder. A little frission there. However, he brightened, in the Outback it was the reverse. Brains held in high regard. And mentioning high regard he beamed, there was a party tomorrow. Would Nervina grace him with her presence. It would be an honour he added.

Nervina played the reluctant, indifferent individual. Parties bored her. This one would not. The hostess, Nerfahsi was a patroness of the arts. Novus's best. She would meet him there after work. A few more desultory drinks, Ratze remaining suitably subdued, played the tired visitor giving Nervina constant looks that she wanted to be out of here.

Talex tried his best to be a good host. To no effect on the two women. He asked yet again of the offer and Nervina said once her situation was cleared up and a better offer of her salary negotiated she would seriously consider it. Then they left, hailed a taxi and rode out to her hideaway at the edge of the city next to the light industrial parks servicing Novus.

Ratze was delighted with Nervina's second home. Unpretentious, basic yet comfortable, the living room couch folding out into a spare bed.

The next day, Ratze left early leaving a note saying she would be in touch regarding the party. When Nervina appeared to play the surrogate at the casino, one of her boss's minders told her that some powerful individual had deposited an unspecified amount of credit to cover Nervina's take for the next three days. A little surprised, she was glad to have the time off. The basic comlink in her flat upstairs Nervina had not bothered to activate. She knew she could link with Ratze direct which was enough. Talex would have to get to her the hard way, preset node to node. With nothing to do Nervina

decided to walk around the neighbourhood and get a feel once more of the place and the layout. With Talex in the equation everything changed.

Back at her block she watched pedestrians, some of whom nodded without infringing her privacy. No tell tale itch of being scanned. People actually minded their own business. After walking for several hours she had a late light lunch at a gloomy café, welcoming the immunity she felt amongst the few patrons eating their meals. Then returned to her flat and decided to have a nap until Ratze returned.

When Ratze did in the early evening she ceremoniously and with much aplomb pulled out what she called some 'rotgut'. It was a half flat bottle of white rum and placed it like some sacred icon on the small rickety coffee table.

"Do we have to bring something?" Nervina asked, a little worried thinking of Novus's social norms. It dawned on her how isolated she really was. Horat had sometimes drunk with her which usually threw her mind in turmoil. No warming effect of spirits, nor the merry mayhem going off in all directions at once. She wanted to remain focussed.

"No, this is for us. Get into the swing of things. The locals drink Nervina, most days. Well the bars are never empty are they? You do drink don't ya?" she was rummaging in the tiny kitchen for some glasses and found only two old cups. It would do. She unscrewed the cap and poured two generous swigs. Nervina was instantly apprehensive. Ratze was definitely in a party mood. Parties. Prima was another world in more ways than one. She could not remember going to any on Regum with Horat, 'Horat I wonder where you are.' He belonged to the past. Trying to get her drunk. She reluctant. Horat desperate to get away from something the way he drank with a vengeance trying to be another person.

"Not really Ratze."

"Shit hey? Well never mind." Raising the cup and taking a gulp. "Ah that hit the spot. This stuff is rare you know. Made from sugar cane. Worth millions here."

"Millions?"

"Precious."

"Ah." Uncomprehending.

"Well more for me then." Ratze smiled inanely.

For the next hour, with Ratze doing more of the talking, as the level in the bottle went down her effervescence went up. They talked about everything and nothing. This was a different Ratze. Getting blasted. Occasionally she would have a glass of water to dilute the effects. Ratze rambled on about her time with the DVs, their obsession regarding Prima's paranoia which interested Nervina. Another perspective. Nervina did

not feel she was a Primaian. More as an outsider, Ratze explaining their religious psychology, so alien she barely connected. On Regum she had felt some affinity with the place. There everybody was not so much introverted as singular, pursuing their own dreams. Then at CU she felt disconnected which surfaced when inserted into a group environment. Cooperating with others cramped her mind. Just having to pay attention to others an effort, draining her. Ratze understood saying the best way to deal with that was to ignore it. Easier said than done.

When darkness at last descended Ratze suggested they should make their way to the party. More interaction. Nervina wondered how long she would last there. Others just did not interest her. They were in their own lives which dominated their thoughts. Life was life, going on about it tedious to her. She had nothing in common with character types that subsumed their individuality, focused more on their offspring, or their work which ended up to be their whole universe. Universe. The ultimate mystery. Of little interest to the majority she stumbled across.

Outside it was cool with the advent of night. The bright stars shining in profusion overhead. A tram passed. Traffic was light. Dinner time. A few passers by with their groceries. Ratze saw a taxi and hailed it.

The driver had no idea where Nerfahsi lived. He explained that he needed an address. Ratze told him to head for the northern headland. Nervina looked up Nerfahsi on her sleeve's pc and was surprised she was not listed.

"What about the invite?" Nervina asked.

"No address." They drove past the low rise flats, lights on everywhere, including the many shops. Then into the darker streets of the light industrial estates that spread out around them.

"Looks like one of us has to get in touch with Talex."

"I'll do it." Ratze offered. She used her comlink, apologised for interrupting him and got the location which she passed on to the driver. They followed the empty ring road, the city aglow, the lit up high rise buildings slowly receding behind them. Past more darkened workshops, processing plants, small factories.

"You trust Talex much? I mean now, as he is, or thinks he is."

"Nervina I don't trust anybody. You heard the man yesterday."

"Yes I know. I don't know if I should accept the offer. Did you know somebody paid my boss for me not to show up for the next few days?"

"Really? Interesting. No fix on who?"

"None. Must have been quite a few credits. Someone is interested in me."

"And that is worrying you."

"Well, not that in itself. I don't know. All I know is I feel things are happening around me and I'm the last to know."

Ratze wanted to allay her fears by saying if she was an `insert', which piqued her Brain, then that was to be expected. Surprises were part of the game. She had a sneaking suspicion she was meant for something stupendous herself. The meeting with the general, the secluded house, checking her out then letting her run. Where to? With what intent?

A huge truck roared past them.

"It's as if I was being led somewhere." Nervina suggested.

"Same here. Still better being here than where I was."

"I wonder why we would be invited to this party."

"I agree there. We're at the bottom of the social feeding chain."

"Bottom. I don't even feel part of that Ratze."

"Stay that way."

The driver sped up after they left the industrial estate and turned off towards the headland. The odd car came the other way. Darkness around them under the night sky. Ahead they could see a few lights of the houses strung along the road to the promontory.

"What if it's a set up?"

"I checked Nervina. Nurfahsi is a real socialite. So why Talex? Well I did some digging there as well. He's in with the governor general of the Outback. So he could be a person of interest if not influence. And since the Outback is sealed off, well who knows what Nurfahsi is angling for. There might be more to her than the social butterfly."

"Maybe she's got the hots for him."

Ratze thought that was funny. To their left the white roaring flame of a rocket taking off, the launch pads hidden behind a series of low rising hills.

"I wonder if there are any answers here." Nervina said wistfully.

"Same here. Trouble is no one's given us any direction. It's intriguing." Ratze knew the alcohol was making her loquacious if only because she let it be so. Her little nanobots could easily convert it into extra energy without it's boozy effects. But this time she wanted to play the part of being `herself'. The insight made her aware she was more than the sum of her parts. But tonight she would be like everybody else. That would hopefully let `their' guard down. She sensed that the evening might not be entirely wasted getting wasted.

"You know I feel at home here."

"You do?"

"And you?"

"I got this feeling this is only the beginning."

"I get the opposite. I guess it's being whisked away from Regum. Sort of like an end run."

"It may not last." Ratze said thoughtfully.

They started the slow climb up the headland. The houses were set back from the road, some with lights on, others swathed in darkness. There were gaps between them. Antennae and micro dishes indicated they were built into the ground still with magnificent views of the coast.

The taxi slowed into a driveway. Ahead security with glowing night sticks waved them to stop at an open gate. Nerfahsi's house was ablaze with lights. Several cars parked on the spacious forecourt. The entrance festooned with colourful globes, groups and individuals milling about. They both felt the tiny touch of a custom scan. The taxi stopped. Ratze lowered her window and showed the guard her invitation.

"Who's the extra?" he asked.

"She's with Talex. I think he's on his way."

The guard looked at his glowing screen, asked if she were Nervina, to which she assented and he waved them through. The taxi drove down the path, dark hedges on each side for privacy and stopped outside the grand entrance. Ratze paid the driver, ready to party. Nervina tense. There were two small helicopters, two VAVs, limousines, motorbikes and a few smaller cars.

"If you want me to pick you up later, here's my card." The driver said.

"Thanks, we'll keep you in mind. Have a pleasant evening."

"You too ladies." And he drove away.

They could hear conversation and laughter spilling out into the night air.

The reception area, a plush magenta carpet, huge vases with dried flowers, oil paintings depicting mountains, oceans, valleys and liveried servants with trays of champagne, beer, spirits, hors d'oeuvres were busy everywhere under a small chandelier. The conversations good natured banter, tinkling of ice cubes in drinks, background party music of some intricate rhythms flowing merrily along.

They entered the huge lounge. Holographic pictures glowed on the walls. The overhead chandelier turned down, wall lights adding a soft glow amongst the multitude of guests. The holograms changed, abstract patterns growing into an almost

recognisable pattern then dispersing in soft explosions, lashing jets of ink in water dispersing into fractal tongues, others mild sunsets on alien planets, moonscapes with darting meteors impacting in riotous blasts sending up glowing grey clouds of swirling twinkling dust.

There were easily a hundred people here. All shapes and sizes, fashion statements by most women, others discreetly dressed, some men ostentatious in their appearance, a few with glowing jewels, women with patterned facial make up. Orange hair, blue hair, lime green, masquerades with exotic face masks. A generous buffet stretched along one side of the wall glittering on crystal glass platters the food as colourful as the guests. At the other side of the huge room the wet bar where black suited attendants served an array of drinks. Beer, wine, champagne, spirits, cocktails, the bottles glowing shades, fruit juices, mixers, a glistening ice tray reflecting the wall lights. Corks popped, guests laughed.

Ratze went for the food first saying it would soak up the alcohol. In an adjoining room, full of even more guests they took their plates and devoured with relish the exotic offerings of shell fish, mussels, oysters, tiny bite sized deep fried fish, cold meats, potato salad, fresh garden salads, strips of marinated beef, chicken wings, octopus. Having devoured their entrees Ratze then steered Nervina in tow to the bar.

She ordered a double green liqueur and knocked it back then asked for a glass of champagne. Nervina went for apple juice, Ratze giving her a look of shocked mock horror.

No one seemed to take the least interest in them. Perhaps because they were in their jump suits, a statement from the lower end of the social spectrum. Ratze did not mind. With no distractions she could observe the others. Nervina remaining in her shell. Demure.

A short woman, dressed smartly in an elegant jacket, no jewellery, a face of indeterminate age and dark black eyes extracted herself from a group and made her way towards them. They both felt their Brain's being tickled thinking she could be security. They were both wrong.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Nerfhasi, your hostess. You must be Nervina," who bowed a little, "and you are Ratze."

"Thank you for the invite." Ratze replied.

"A pleasure to see new faces. You cannot imagine how tight our community is. We share an acquaintance." She said.

"Not on this planet Nerfahsi. Unless you are alluding to my employer."

"Oh nothing as trite as that Ratze." She beamed. "Lady Lehra."

"Really, how is she?"

"Fine by all accounts. Apparently you met some..." paused as a garishly dressed young man, loud clothes, a riotous mismatch greeted her, then momentarily dwelling, looked at Ratze and Nervina and decided to move on. "...bores."

"Oh those two. Can't even remember their names." Ratze said lightly. What a small world, worlds.

"Oh that's alright. Merely boys riding on daddy's coattails." Nerfahsi laughed.

"I left early. Lord P was there and I thought, suspect they are lovers."

"How astute of you. But the answer is no. Let's go to the patio." And with smooth graceful motion glid through the crowd, accepting a nod here, a smile there. Outside the patio overlooked the great dark ocean, the stars barely visible as festooned lights twined their way around the overhead trellis.

"You're a naughty woman." Ratze said at last as they stood and looked out into the space ahead of them.

"I should hope so."

"I mean you scanned us."

"But of course." She replied cheekily. "I had to make sure."

"I understand. You know Talex I assume."

"Yes." She replied cautiously.

Nervina had a Brainwave. Talex. Right through his dormant memory to the Outback. The impression of the Vs one huge resonant wave. Contaminated. Nervina's Brain recoiled. So that was it. Some sort of psychic experiments was going on out there. She wondered if Ratze had received the same surge. Then it passed.

"It's just that my friend Nervina here has been offered a job as his assistant working in the Outback. Something to do with intelligent resources."

"Yes Talex. Came to my attention a while back." And took a sip of champagne.

"Can't find anything remiss about him. Now that makes me suspicious." She winked.

"That why you invited him?"

"Oh yes. Everybody here on Novus has a past. Something they left behind wherever they came from. So when somebody is squeaky clean..."

"Indeed." Ratze concurred.

A group came out, boisterous, acknowledged Nerfahsi and walked a little away to sit at the outdoor tables.

"So he's in with the GG." Ratze offered after a momentary silence.

"There's some weird stuff going on out there." Nervina ventured.

"Do go on." Nerfhasi was all attention.

"Only that he's ex CU or still with them. Thing is why he's so interested in me?"

"You were a student there?"

"Was yes." Without elucidating. She was tempted to do a scan on her hostess but thought better of it. Not yet.

"Well there you have your answer."

"Trouble is I don't want to go near Primaians."

"Now that I can understand. Though we should not be too hard on the Vs. Not their fault they were born that way."

"It's not that. It's the GG."

"Oh I see. My you are mysterious." Then seeing Nervina's muted reaction Nerfahsi quickly added: "Not that I'm prying. As I said, we all leave our past behind when we come here. No one asks about political or religious affiliation. Each to their own." She placated Nervina.

"Well I said I wouldn't but Talex seems intent on me. That makes me suspicious."

"I'm sure you have your reasons Nervina. Personally I would accept. Everybody's dying to find out what really goes on out there." She said softly.

"Really? I thought it was to adjust them."

"Well yes. But you know Primaians. Never what they seem."

"What about the council?" Ratze asked to deflect attention away from Nervina.

"Ha! In cahoots if you ask me."

"For what aim though?" Ratze continued the line of conversation.

"Well that's it isn't it?"

The party was getting louder inside, the ambient music rising with the level of conversation driving their exuberance along.

"Anyway," she touched Nervina's arm, "you're perfectly safe here. Every one is scanned as you may have noticed. Any overt designs are just not welcome."

"What if someone's enhanced?"

Good question Nervina Ratze thought.

"You are in deep." Nerfahsi observed, her eyes shrewd.

"Trying to stay out."

"There is a lot at stake at the moment. Ratze's friend, Lady Lehra is a person of interest to us. You could say we are connected. Why am I telling you all this. Because," she lowered her voice again, "I suspect you two are, how shall I put it, 'on leave'."

Both their Brains went into alert mode. But nothing was coming their way. Not from the guests, or Nerfahsi. Ratze wondered how much of this was a set up by Talex or by other interested parties.

"Oh don't look so glum. Let us say that our mutual friend is with a group who have an interest here, meaning the planet. For the good of Novus. Keep it independent. Now I've said enough." She resumed her normal voice. "And I must get back to my guests. Too long with you two and people's tongues will start wagging. Let's say I'm a facilitator. And believe me the GG is our highest priority. What you decide to do Nervina is up to you of course. But if you need help do contact me. I mean it. Now I must be off. I'm sure we'll run into each other before the night is through. And thank you for coming."

"The pleasure is ours."

Nerfahsi smiled and drifted back into the living room where another group were ready to embrace her.

Ratze was alert. When Nerfahsi mentioned being a 'facilitator' her Brain clicked. So did Nervina's. Neither of them placing the previous momentary link they felt in their Brains. One thing Ratze was certain of, they were both linked. Sharing their configuration. From a similar source. Intriguing the way they had come together here on Novus. Nervina from Regum and she getting out from the DVs. Then there was Ung. No point searching for answers. It was not going to be as easy as that.

Other party guests were coming out to the patio, drifting in small groups, carousing, voluble in the cool. Even with climate control the house was getting warmer. The women felt slight tingles. Ratze got her Brain to molecularly break down the alcohol before it had any further effects.

"I'm being scanned." Ratze said quietly

"Same here. Not returning though. I'm passive receiving. Get the source."

"Sources Nervina."

She did a quick take. Multiple points of origin. Not all in-house. Without doing a trace neither could be sure who the outsiders were. Without a reliable third source to verify the soft scan neither could be sure whether Nerfahsi's crowd was under observation or doing the scanning.

"It could be a general sweep." Nervina suggested.

"I know. Annoying isn't it?"

"Not being able to counter it. Still someone's revealed themselves. You know Ratze that one of the safest environments is the casino."

"You're right there. So are they after Nerfahsi's little group?"

"Could well be. Trouble is they are aware of us. I'm staying low. If there are watchers here, they're good. Unless Nerfahsi is a front."

"Like Talex? Where is your intriguing recruiter?"

"If he doesn't show up soon I'm out of here. The place is too hot."

"Yeah, well I wanna find out who this interested party is."

"Wait, let your Brain do it's stuff." It was the first time Nervina alluded directly to Ratze's capabilities.

"So you know."

"It's a guess. Don't worry I'm, ahm, configured myself." Nervina was about to say 'enhanced' but thought better of it. It was not that she did not trust Ratze, she got out herself. But until the need arose she would just let her know that she was not without her own resources.

A short man, dressed in grey, two piece tailored suit, some crumbs on his lapel, round face, glistening dark eyes, tipsy, holding a champagne glass almost blundered into them. Then as if focussing properly said: "Ladies. Pardon me. I'm Yosu. You're new here."

"Well Yosu," Ratze kept her Brain open, nothing there, "I don't do many parties."

"No? Two lovely young ladies? What about you?" looking at Nervina, almost focussing, then gave up and wobbled slightly on his feet.

"I get bored easily Yosu." Nervina said matter of fact.

"Maybe you haven't met the right people. Nerfahsi knows just about everybody who is anybody in this backwater. I can point out the artist who created the holograms, the odd writer, which is odd." He chuckled and took a generous swig of his champagne.

"Writing what?" Nervina asked.

"Oh this and that. When I was last on Regum I found a library. Wow, should have seen what there was."

"Rambled on about whatever excited them no doubt." Ratze answered disinterested. The tell tale itch came and went. Something was going on. She did not like it. Someone was searching for something.

"Yeah, but not all." He said trying to sound mysterious. "I'm doing some research into this library. It's only available to a very select few."

"And you're one of them?"

"Just don't tell anyone."

"Well you told us." Came Ratze's bland reply.

"Ah," he grinned, "that's because you two are special."

"Doubt it."

"Oh no. I mean oh yes." And he tapped the side of his head.

"So Yosu what do you do?"

"Me? Nothing, nothing at all."

"So tell us about this library. I mean is it some information graveyard?"

"Ho ho ho. If only. There is even an index of who is connected to who. You would be surprised."

Ratze wondered why Yosu was telling them this. She did not like the way he had tapped the side of his temple indicating they were enhanced.

"Not just who is in who's pocket but what they get up to."

"And what might that be?" time to dig a little Ratze thought.

"Murder."

"My that is something. Where here?"

"No ladies. Prima."

Ratze was alert. Nervina looked coolly at Yosu trying to appraise him.

Some walked past, Yosu waiting until they were gone.

"Well. I know nothing about Prima." Ratze trying to draw him out.

"I'm actually an investigator. My brief is to track down the culprits."

"Aren't you on the wrong planet? No web for starters."

"I've got a lead here. Into the Outback. Prima is using that as a cover to hide certain individuals."

"Why are you telling us this?"

"To make Novanian's if they can be called that aware they are being used."

"Used?"

"Not directly, well yes directly." And he slurped some more champagne. "It's time to blow their cover."

"Are you trying to recruit us?"

"Perish the thought. It's just that your persona's are in that library."

"?"

"Along with Lady Lehra, a suicide of some rich kid in an asylum, can't remember her name, happens when I drink. No matter, even this murder of some astronomer." Looking bleakly at them.

"What's that supposed to mean? I mean, it's so unrelated. I think your synapses are misfiring." Ratze said dead pan.

"Prima is looking for you. They don't like escape artists."

"They don't like a lot of things Yosu. So I got out. I'm sure I'm not the only one."

"Then there is the missing agent." He looked at Nervina. She froze. From Yosu's point of view her appearance was cool. But her Brain was warm, alert. Given that Yosu knew so much, that the Web had a secreted data base where somebody was feeding it uncomfortable information, either set up by Prima's intelligence agencies, or Regum's and by default even Novus made her realise this was no accidental meeting. She decided to softscan Yosu. Slightly configured. Standard AI stuff. His intoxication real. Straight into his memory. What he said was true, according to what he knew. With his intrepid brain one thing stood out. He had been sent to warn them. As to who that remained ambiguous. Foggy persona. A very smart system, chaos based algorithms. External construct. Very sophisticated. She withdrew.

This party was more than just a good excuse to celebrate. Nerfahsi's little group, Yosu's access to the web's data base and their being in it. At a guess it had to be Primaian counter intel which Ratze dumped into Nervina's Brain..

"I'm a refugee Yosu. So I would prefer it if you kept that to yourself, whoever you're working for..." Nervina warned him.

"I'm freelance." Yosu looking a little offended. "And to show you that I mean you no harm, both of you, here's my card." Then fumbled inside his suit and extracted a card announcing that he was a lawyer.

"You see," he continued, draining his glass, "I've been hired by a client to find out what happened to this astronomer. Vanished, missing, presumed dead according to what I've been told."

"But it's got nothing to do with us."

"No it hasn't. Not directly."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying Yosu?" Ratze all attention.

"Prima does not like defectors."

"So you are saying in your oblique way what I think you're saying. Tell me ever heard of Talex?" Nervina asked.

"No can't say I do. What's he do?"

"Works as a researcher for the Outback. Trying to recruit me." Nervina explained. "Might give you a lead. You ought to check him out."

"I might. Look I might as well come out with it." looking forlornly at his empty glass. "I'm no friend of Prima, unlike some. When I found you two in there it made me think that your 'escape' was arranged. The time line fitted with the vanishing of my client's

daughter. So when I saw you two I had to make sure. Trust me I don't think you, or you," looking at them each in turn, "are the culprits."

"Better believe it." Ratze warned him. Not that he noticed.

Nervina called up Talex in her Brain. With Yosu sozzled he would not notice. Obviating his AI was no problem. The tell tale itch of the surface scans were gone. Whoever had done the search was hopefully finished. No remote probes either, no triggers in place.

Talex `appeared' in her Brain. His head a fog. Configured. To penetrate the fog was risky but it did reveal he had something to hide.

"But you two are on their search list." He said finally. "I must get a refill. Get you anything?"

"I'm right." Ratze said.

"Same here." Nervina thinking. If she and Ratze were being wanted then either they needed protection, which Nervina thought she had, or they had to vanish.

"Oh before I go. There's a rocket leaving in a couple of hours. Launch pad five." He fumbled in his pocket. Here's the key to my bike." And bowing as gracefully as possible straightened up a little unsteadily and walked back into the living room.

Ratze and Nervina exchanged glances.

"I guess it's decision time. You think he's for real?"

"I checked him out. What he said came straight out of his memory."

"Yeah, well, doesn't mean much. Could be a set up. I mean where is this rocket heading? Prima, orbital, Regum, habitat?"

"I know Ratze. But being in that data base, Prima's no doubt means we're both on some wanted list. I didn't even think Prima would use the web."

"Plus the hint of the missing astronomer. It's a warning for both of us."

"Ah there you are." Talex carrying three glasses of champagne.

They took the offering. Ratze blocking her alcoholic effects. Nervina like wise.

"I don't drink." Nervina said.

"It's a party." He said expansively. "What d'ya think?"

Ratze's Brain on active subtly probed him. The fog still in place. If he tried to get smart she'd head-ram him. He'd pass out

"About what?" Nervina not wanting to discuss his offer. She had made up her mind. It was too dangerous even if Nurfahsi claimed to have contacts on her side.

"The party of course. Great isn't it?"

"Where'd you meet Nurfahsi?"

"Oh she met me. At a bar, where else?" he chuckled.

"It's a little cool out here. I'm heading back in. And go to the restroom. Coming Ratze?"

She nodded.

"If you'll excuse us Talex."

"Of course."

Moving through the vocal crowd Ratze spotted Yosu.

"Which is your bike?"

He turned, smiled, then said: "Just press the key. The bike will have a status light flash on. Also activates it. You can ride one? Manual gears on the left, one down, neutral the rest up. Throttle's on the right, brakes on the left. It's powerful so don't gun it. She packs a punch. I'll pick her up tomorrow. You got just under two hours. Good luck." And disengaged.

The two women made their way into the foyer where the guests restrooms were located. Placing their glasses on a small table, the liveried attendants nodding courteously. Yosu ambled out as Ratze and Nervina went to the restroom. Some woman was doing her make up, smiled and left.

"You reckon this is safe?" Nervina asked.

"Nothing is safe. But if we're wanted, heck a little ride somewhere might be fun. It's obvious that one of us has back up. At a guess Nervina that is you. You had 'friends' get you out. Someone is looking out for you. And me." She was thinking of the general.

"So let's do it."

Another woman came in, looking a little hazy, smiled a deep grin as Nervina and Ratze left. Yosu was standing at the entrance.

"Let's go then." Smiling at an attendant who smiled back.

"Just as I thought." Yosu said as they walked into the fore courtyard. Two dark shapes were 'admiring' his bike. They came to a VAV, the doors gulled open and they all got in. The engine purred quietly, systems on go as the dashboard lit up. With the doors shut Yosu said: "See that? Somebody was watching the bike. Not mine." He chuckled. "Somebody heard what I said."

"Not good." Ratze agreed.

Nervina was all nerves, adrenaline rushing. Ratze counted herself lucky that she had not been active back there. They whoever they were must be using pretty advanced AI gear to have picked that up. Then again there had been revellers around them on the patio.

"The bike was a ruse." He smiled cheekily.

Yosu could not take off in the crowded space of the other vehicles. The dirt blown out and the jet's blast would blister the other modes of transport. So they drove out slowly, past some people drinking. Both women felt a tickle.

"That's just me checking those two at the bike." Yuso informed them.

Through the iron grated gates and slowly onto the empty road leading down into darkness. Yosu hit the accelerator pushing them back into their seats. A clunk as the omnidirectional thrusters engaged and they were airborne, two long hydrogen flames pluming brilliant white behind them.

Nervina sitting in the back shut her Brain down. Ratze decided to get a fix on Talex. Nothing yet.

"I've sent a pulse out to your rocket. No acknowledgement of course but the lock on's just happened. Ignition sequence has started. We'll be there in a few ticks."

"Not the two hours then?" Ratze smiled.

"No. Can't really reveal real time scenario's. Anyway it's a routine transport. You're persona's been a little modified. Now for the surprise. Nervina, you're the one they're interested in. Ratze might be in the data base but she is officially missing presumed dead. Some incident in space. Destruction of a ship. So Nervina you are an insurance agent, freelancer of course. Doing a routine run to make sure the company's following safety procedures. Nothing unusual in that." From the dashboard he retrieved a data disk with the insurance companies insignia, a simple 'GSI' imprint. Nervina uploaded it onto her pc then pocket it.

Ahead the lit up towers of the launch pads, lights in the night rising from below. Gantries aglow, condensing vapours coming from feed lines radiant white at the waiting rocket.

"Officially cargoes go missing. Always a black market. Prima no less. The crew don't like anybody around but they accept the need for vigilance."

"Gotcha Yosu." Nervina replied.

"It's all standard procedure."

"Talex is getting restless." Ratze interrupted.

"Anxious?" Yosu concerned.

"Trying not to."

"Nearly there."

The space port was rushing up filling their view.

"I can hover at the entry gate. Straight in. I see you two are always ready with your jump suits."

"Oh yes, never leave home without one." Nervina laughed. "I'll miss you Ratze."

"I hope we meet again."

"A techie will have your helmet and reserve pack ready."

"You must have friends in high paces." Ratze jested. "Won't this, ahm unusual delivery attract attention?"

"Short notice is how insurance companies work."

"Where am I heading?" Nervina asked.

"Sorry. Even though no one's looking for us yet, you understand."

Nervina nodded.

The VAV decelerated as Yosu swung her around to the top gantry platform. An extension of the platform slid out. The door gulled open and Nervina walked straight out.

"Thanks for everything Yosu." Nervina called out over the roar of the engine.

"Love ya Ratze. You too Yosu."

"Go. Talex is doing a low scan." He called out.

Nervina disengaged her Brain completely

"Thank you again."

"Go." He called out then his door shut and he slowly hovered away from the platform and flew back into the deep night sky.

Two techies, one putting her helmet over her head, the neck extension sealing itself to her jump suit's collar. He fiddled with the fibres linking her AI to her body's computers. Her Brain off. The first thing that happened was the HID superimposed on her vision running through com-check, systems check of her integrity, fitting her survival back pack, pack status, water, air, her ID for the crew, uploading and accepted. A pat on the shoulder and she was AOK. The short brightly lit walk into the waiting open hatch, guide lights on the pathway going vertically down past the pilot and co-pilot as she took hold of a handrail and dexterously manoeuvred herself into the rear seat behind the flight crew. Another passenger was already strapped into the webbing, all suited up. The cockpit door shut, ground control doing one last assessment. Ignition sequence on hold now ran the final countdown. Ignition. Small viewscreens gave a comprehensive view. The engines below roaring its mighty flames, clouds of condensation billowing out in a brilliant lit white yellow glow. The telemetry fed into her. The rocket shuddered as the thrust began, feed lines disengaged, the vibration increased the gantry tower tilted

back. Audio came through as background noise to give the pilots the necessary tactile sense of how smoothly the engines were functioning.

The shields on the windows were up during lift off. Full thrust, the space port an island of lights as the exhaust forced the expanding clouds out and upward. Nothing was said to her even though the comlink was open. The HUD she deleted from her head. The first stage disengaged, a tiny clunk then the second thruster kicked in. A slight wobble more speed, the g forces pushing her back into her seat. Extra oxygen for the brain automatically fed stopping her from blacking out.

The vibrations decreased as they soared into the stratosphere. The space port now a glowing spread, their white plume trailing back. Then the lights of the city, the casino, the steelworks in the outback and darkness beyond. Stars appeared in the background beyond the curvature of Novus. The second stage disengaged and the final blast into space itself began. A short time later the g forces receded escaping the planet's gravity well.

"Welcome aboard. You may remove your helmets. If you need help say so." The co-pilot said. Her co-passenger removed Nervina's saying she had no idea how the seals worked. Her fellow traveller was a squat bulky squarish headed middle aged man. Silver hair reflecting the tiny lights in their cabin once the co-pilot had swivelled around and helped him take his helmet off.

"So lady, an agent of the insurance company. Extra company is always appreciated." He was youngish, thirty something, bright blond hair now that his helmet was off as well. The captain removed his own, a shock of black hair.

"My name is Shalor and our captain here, his first, just promoted is Terrad. Not to worry he passed his exam with flying colours and that does not include the contents of his stomach." He laughed. Terrad grimaced with a tight smile. "Well," Shalor continued, "I won't ask who you are. Travel much?"

"Occasionally." She put her Brain on standby, open but not scanning. Just reading her companion's. No alerts. She came to a decision in case Prima would take an interest in her. "I'm Nervina, investigator and sometime refugee prior that."

"Isn't everybody?" Shalor smiled.

"Been up often?"

"Third trip"

"Yes! Three times lucky." He hollered punching Terrad on the arm. "Us old hands have our little superstitions. So a triple welcome to you Nervina."

"I'm Khavit." The older man's voice gravely.

"Pleased to meet you." His smile on his lined face more a grimace. She thought of Talex, keen to scan him to see how deep he was with the GG. Then there was Ratze to consider. She would wait for her to make contact if the need arose. Ditto Khavit.

"Hm, what is that aroma I detect?" Kahvit asked.

"Apple juice. So Kahvit what brings you into space?" Nervina asked. They would be together for a while.

He studied her, eyes a little narrower but no scan detected. The look was intimidating not that it worried Nervina.

Instead he asked: "How long you been on Novus?"

"Hopefully not long enough to leave a history."

"A pro hey?" his expression softening.

"I don't know about that."

"GSI send a rookie?"

"Just past trainee level. Freelancer actually."

"My. They are serious. The manifest had someone else down."

"Really. That's head office for you." She smiled easily.

"Hm." Not convinced.

"You don't think they'd advertise exactly who is gonna be present?"

He was fishing. Maybe he thought her brief extended beyond cargo. Or felt himself compromised, on a mission. A trouble-shooter, or a king pin. Extracting himself just like her. It could even be that he was trying to find out whatever GSI were after. Not that she had the faintest. All she knew somebody was looking after her. He could even be her minder. Instead she thought of Talex. An attempt at remote viewing.

"I don't like snoops. Think of them as low life Nervina."

"Just here for the ride. Make sure everything is safe and sound."

"What's this about being a reffo?"

"That was then, this is now."

"I think there's more to you than that."

"Well Kahvit, everybody's got a past on Novus. Past tense past. Including you."

He looked at her eye to eye. She didn't blink. What company!

"I even have discretionary powers."

"I must remember that." Then laughed. Now that he relaxed she focussed on Talex. If Kahvit was configured the presence of her Brain might get him to back off. Nervina relied on her memory more than her Brain directly to link back. Well well well. He was with Nerfahsi. So was she a 'marker' on his behalf? The job offer was most likely an

attempt to snare her in. Before her imagery ran into interference on board she voided her link. She would wait until Kahvit would be asleep and rummage around his head. He was no ordinary passenger.

"I won't apologize for my brusqueness Nervina. I don't like amateurs." Had he sensed her point of focus? or her method of application? Her Brain was certain he had not. Using instinct. A Natural. Ex Prima perhaps? "Or wanna be adventurers, usually Reganians who've been too long in the Web and think the real world's not much different. Or the insurance company sending some superficial shit just to fulfil their contract on the cheap." He said sanguinely, his rough voice sounding like a congested motor chocking along. Theatrical. His initial intensity receded. "So Nervina what are you on about?"

It was a standard question trying to gather dirt. Or trying to make her feel cornered. He was no amateur. The shields were down now, the bright stars everywhere.

"Indeed Kahvit. Let's say the people behind me are not standard fare."

"Is that so?"

"Believe it."

He looked at her studiously wondering, vainly no doubt whether he was her target. Nervina pondered her destination. She was not about to hack into the ship's systems until she knew just how smart it was. One thing was sure, whoever was with her, took an interest in her was connected at the highest level. That thought lent itself most likely to Kahvit as well. Short notice arrival. Not the norm.

Mission Control: Andromeda Station Three.

`Commander.'

Her mind alert. Sleeping wakefulness. In her quarters. Lying comfortably in her cocoon. It's bio-molecular configured external AI sentient field, her public persona keeping watch. Whilst she rested receiving the incoming sentience from the Komantura. The audio link directed in phase to her projected field resonance. Fully awake she collapsed it back into her mind. Sentinel power points rose to configure a secure chameleon projection. Any probing, sentient or invasive assault systems would only `see' a low level intelligence asleep. The security in place she said: **`Yes.'**

`Watch this.' Her superior communicated. Mind to mind,

She had expected a compressed extract of the data their QCs down loaded from the section of space where the three operatives were. Instead she saw a space ship materialize over Mars. A stage one world. Solid foundation of an urban civilization. Then both space ship and everything on the planet was gone.

`Potent PWs' correct in the first assumption. Confirmed.

Prima appeared surrounded by its motley brown pulsing reconfiguring resonant envelope.

`The source.'

`Sentient interphase. Hijacking the collapsing PW and substituting their own.'

DVs in space.

`Sentient driven. Heavy stuff.'

`That whole section. Through a void wave.'

Earth. Less affected. Scene one: space faring capabilities. Limited advances. Mechanical computers, external devices. Vanished just like Mars's sentients. Earth survived the inserted void PWs. Deep scanning revealed a heightened psychic sense. An inkling of *their* presence. Earth perspective: supreme beings mentally constructed as gods. The answer amongst the stars. Their technology deemed magical. Remembering a golden past, a collapse, a cosmic calamity of wrathful gods. The sentients of Prima. Fear, loathing mingled with exultation and a will to reconnect. Earther's remembered. With their present vanished so was the perception of that reality. Yet that switch was due to their bifurcating brains not completely deleting the now gone past. The knowledge base was there, just not the means of application. They would recover the knowledge lost. It

would be their main driving force. But it would be difficult. Psychic frontal assault waves tried to suppress their fervent desire to recapture their once glorious past.

`Dangerous.' She communicated.

`A third force.' Her superior remarked. **`Destabilisation.'**

`Universal?'

`In a moment.'

Ung at a huge space station near a mid range star. A huge array of energy dishes driving QCs.

`The source?'

`No. Ung will rectify.' Another correct assumption. Then: **`The anomaly contains two worlds. One race. Genetic drift. Divergent minds. Regum on track, Prima self isolated. Entropic decay held in check with their resonant field. Total suppression.'**

`Weird.'

`Self generating psychic abilities. You're on high alert. They can get in.'

`We'll cover ourselves.'

`Essential. Strange background radiation in the anomaly. Micro universe predating ours.'

`Verified.' But it did not come as a relief. What they knew of this monumental gravity well was now substantiated. Intelligent life did reside within that section of space.

`The anomaly. Increasing gravity waves. It's pulling our two galaxies into it.'

`By design?' knowing they had millions of years to figure out what was going on in there.

`Perhaps. Could be due to it's internal mass. A freak occurrence on a cosmic scale. It's the extraneous background radiation that is of interest. In and out of phase. Collapsing momentarily then gone. Something is developing in there. Different to the background radiation of our universe. Similar but not the same.'

`Alert our agents?'

`No. Preconclusive deduction will only pre-empt. Independent verification is essential.'

She accessed the base's data.

`A third planet. Novus. They're both there.' Slightly surprised that instead of being dispersed they were conglomerate. No QCs in place. She understood. If their Brains unravelled the mystery no overt smart systems could lock onto their Brains on Novus. The DVs were no problem for their agents. Yet the Primaians revealed their ability to pull reality out and insert their own. It could make a difference to Ratze and Nervina..

`It might.' He replied. **`Initial computational simulations suggest Regum is in danger. It could be anywhere between now and the distant future. Their Web a series of terminating end points. Absolute zero in several hundred years. But the time line is shrinking. The countdown is on.'**

`Do we act?'

`No. Our presence must not be revealed. The calamity is not final in itself. Something similar to what occurred on Mars. At least we are aware of the pattern. All your spare capacity has been reconfigured to monitor the most likely PWs. Which will be the one that actually collapses in reality will become apparent the moment the transition point approaches. Then we will know what to do.'

`Any specific orders for me?'

`Cosmic surveillance. Ung, Ratze and Nervina are still secure. Now this non-phased field may be nothing, or it could be related. The fluctuations indicate that it is a future state leaking into time.'

`Why not...'

`Because it could be a trap. If it is sentient it will know that other sentient minds are curious. Then if linked it could dominate, insert it's programme. Contamination on a cosmic scale. It might even use us to further its aims. All speculation. Or just be a spatial phenomena. Until we know more we observe.'

`Understood.'

`All the requisite data is in place at your end.'

`Thank you.'

`End contact.'

Things were happening. Potent DVs manipulating not just time but it's contents. The assault over Mars a worrying development. A possible intelligence embedded in their background radiation. Even they never explored that possibility.

A new frontier, a totally alien application of the inherent universal laws of physics. Gestating in that micro universe. Or merely excess energy from its huge black hole at the centre of their galaxy. Drawing in the ancient background radiation from its bursting into existence trillenia ago. Unless a future mind was moulding it to its design. That would change everything in that universe. Luckily due to its titanic gravity well it could not expand very far. Not now. Even less in the future. She tried not to think of all the possible permutations. Their computers could do that. He said she had all the data required. Ratze and Nervina were on to it even if they did not know it themselves. It made sense. If the DVs found out and Prima was behind this it could unmask them. It made sense for

them to uncover whatever was going on by stealth and by degrees. Nothing overt. Less to lock on to.

She relaxed and went back to sleep.

Prima

Gharbel at his sprawling estate was wary. His serenity always slightly agitated when he contemplated the future. Regum's mere presence galled him. However that was balanced with the success of removing through the DVs their mission to Mars. Thanks to Elenra who had managed through Ung to sub route the last remnant files prior their dissipation into nothingness. It was a success beyond even his most fervent desires. The loss of the civilisation though puzzled him. The power of the DVs, under Elenra's guidance, watching ever assiduously was a feat of cosmic proportions. Discussing the implications which were even beyond his comprehension necessitated the need to fathom the resonant ground state they had achieved. Whilst at the orbital Qatus had urged him to return at his earliest convenience. Even the request, couched in a vague reference to certain developments irked him. He was the supreme domain lord. Qatus had better have a good reason to expect him to be responsive to this request. He took orders only from the pontiff. He replied gruffly that he would accept.

Using the shuttle he returned leaving Elenra to come up with some plausible answer to their stupendous achievement in removing Regum from the scene. At the expense of vanishing a civilisation. The obvious answer was of course that the Great Mind had taken a direct role in their removal. One less target for recruitment in the cosmic game to dominate space. What surprised him was Regum's silence on the matter. Not even the slightest hint that something had gone awry. If that was the case then the expedition must have been run at the deepest of levels. Not willing to admit defeat.

Interestingly enough, as Qatus returned back to the planet, there was no hint on Prima itself of their success. Nothing from Pentham whose primary duties lay with the security agency. Nor had the priests on Regum fed them any information regarding their stupendous feat. Everybody had gone to ground.

At the space port a VAV was waiting for him. He flew over the desert towards the distant forests heading straight to Gharbel's private estate. The meeting secret. His pilot communicated ahead, merely announcing they were on their way and would be there shortly. He had slept a little on the way down and decided to doze a little more.

Landing at the estate he was greeted by Gharbel himself. No servants present.

Well this had better be good. It wasn't. Totally unexpected.

"Insane?" Gharbel was mystified. "Impossible. With the backing of the Trine, with an Immortal?"

"His resonance is a mess. Volatile barely describes his state. The pontiff is safe in his asylum. I think the alien resonance has gotten to him."

"This is critical." As he came to grips with the situation. By all rights he would be vice-pope until another candidate was selected. "Does the palace know?"

"No he was instantly removed. The guards who saw him have been reassigned. They are isolated. No one knows. His secretaries have been sent on leave. No staff for the moment that know of the calamity. To think Telafus was vulnerable."

Gharbel barely took in the study they were sitting in. Ancient tomes, out of public view lined the shelves. He looked at them as if an answer lay there.

"This is a bad omen."

Coming right after their success in removing Regum's mission it occurred to Gharbel that maybe they, the Kabal were behind this. Using nefarious means to wreak havoc and extract revenge upon them for their success over that planet. If news got out it could lead to social chaos. The panic unleashed horrendous. The question that was on his mind was whether the Trine, the Infinity Chip, the Immortals were infected as well. So far the planet's resonance was secure.

"Anything from Regum?"

"Nothing Lord Gharbel."

"We have suitable candidates ready. I've accessed the Guardians who have chosen Skias. A bishop who is amendable. Quite happy where he is in the field. Since time is of the essence I have asked him to present himself to us. He's clean. Solid resonance. No intricate dealings with the Families, rather a loner. Stays clear of the Ecclesiastics, some connections with the Divines, as expected. No links to Lord Pentham. His slate is clean."

"So Skias? Run past the Immortals?"

"His resonance has been fed to them by me and they are flexible. Or rather silent. Which means acceptance. No disturbance there."

"How is Telafus?"

"A mess. Isolated from the other patients."

"Good."

"To think after all the news we had. Earth nearly demolished, an opportunity for us to align their surviving remnants and now this. Maybe Telafus disintegrated due to the alien field."

"Officially perhaps. He is under intense observation."

"I should hope so."

"You err, will forgive me for having called you?" Qatus wishing to clear the air.

"You are forgiven." Gharbel was magnanimous. "The other Domain Lords are aware of this, ahm, most unusual occurrence?"

"No. I threw a cordon around the event."

"Excellent. Any disturbance in their resonance?"

"None whatsoever. A completely isolated incident."

"We will have to assemble new retainers, new secretaries. Experts who can ascertain Skias's mental state. I am aware the Cosmic Consciousness may have found Telafus wanting, a sign that maybe Telafus harboured heretical tendencies."

Qatus looked at Gharbel uneasily, shifting in the ornate arm chairs they were sitting in.

"We should create a diversion. Keep the new and temporary," Gharbel underlined, "pontiff busy."

"Oh?"

"Earth is demolished. This is our opportunity to make sure they become aligned. Until then no one aligns with this heretical race."

The shift of perspective expected. Qatus more concerned with terrestrial matters. The logic sound.

"More than just a diversion. If the Reganians..." Then held himself in check. Not yet. Instead he backtracked. "The DVs have as you know amazing capabilities. We have not even begun to use their full potential. But there is one thing missing. Technical capabilities. In fact certain capabilities only Regum has." For a plan was dawning upon him. Since the Reganian's could insert a mission then why not use them to insert one of their own on Earth. It went against the status quo. Telafus could have been targeted by Earth. The disaster that visited their planet was perhaps preordained. If they could convince these beings that Regum was behind this and that they were there to save them in this, their precarious moment, then great things were possible in having the Earther's accept them as saviours.

"Put it this way, I think we can get Earth on side." Gharbel determined.

"A worthy cause."

"But we need Reganian help. Find a charismatic to fulfil that role. A magnet to their spiritual needs."

"Something worth exploring."

"You know of course that we have a technical department."

"Yes."

"I think it's time we paid them a visit."

"What have you in mind?"

"Ah Lord Qatus. To dominate Earth of course."

"Commendable."

"It's more than that. Consider. I have just come from the Orbital. Suffice it to say something occurred that must remain cloaked. However Regum in their arrogance managed a brilliant break through. Something along the lines of the DVs but in a material sense. If we can use that know-how, feign peaceful scientific collaboration, in other words get them to accept what I have in mind then we can have a real presence on Earth."

"Space travel."

Gharbel smiled.

"Get them to have one of our own there?" Qatus's eyes expanded in astonishment.

"Convert the natives."

"By all that is holy..."

Gharbel's VAV made a perfect landing in the desert complex near the space port. Out here, away from the rest of the planet Prima's technical experts acquiring their information through the remote viewing capabilities of the DVs did their best, along with informants on the Orbital to gain as much knowledge of Regum's scientific achievements as possible. The complex with its own perimeter fences was some distance off from where they landed. Only approached through special transit officers who dispatched the cleared visitors. Restricted to Domain Lords and their designated agents. The public did not even know of its existence, nor that of the space port. If the masses knew the official attitude regarding the study of material science the consequences would be calamitous. It flew in the face of everything the priests preached. The need to get the upper hand on Regum required unorthodox methods. It was for the greater good of the planet.

They exited the VAV and were met by two security guards expecting their arrival. Gharbel was his serene self whilst Qatus blinked in the bright desert sun. An unmarked van, doors open was waiting for them to take them to the research centre. Behind the driver's compartment were four swivel chairs for their comfort. They climbed in. The VAV they arrived in was being towed out of sight into one of the hangars. Both Domain Lords sensed the heightened mental activities of their escort. Stable Volatiles. Dedicated to

cracking the DVs raw data, devoting their entire lives in this isolated colony to the great cause.

They drove down a dusty evenly graded road towards the distant mini city out in the middle of nowhere. No one spoke. Qatus excited, his first visit. Gharbel completely at ease. The slight jolts, they were travelling at speed enhanced the sense of excitement for Qatus. Not all Domain Lords knew of the extensive facilities out here, the only other one being Lord Pentham. After some time they came to a perimeter fence and guard post. The van stopped, a cursory look then they were waved through. A second security fence, another quick inspection and they were in the large town. Apartment blocks and research facilities, a scientific college for specially gifted individuals who had an aptitude for mathematics, science, analysis, the requisite know how to keep up with Regum's advances.

The van stopped in front of a low two storey building. Nothing to indicate what facility they were at. Security extremely tight. As expected. Their escort showed the way. Inside the corridor two white frocked women, senior staff welcomed them to their establishment. Their escort withdrew.

They were shown into a computer laboratory. Huge external cabinets gleamed under white overhead lights, tiny green, yellow and red status lights winking. View screens along work benches, cables snaking across the floor. In the centre more upright screens some scrolling down data.

The two middle aged women did not identify themselves nor did they address their two visitors by name. Secrecy was of the utmost importance. One of the women, they might have been sisters the elder took out a hand held device from her laboratory coat's pocket and pressed a button. A hologram appeared at the centre of the table. Qatus was impressed, Gharbel merely waiting for the glowing ball to reveal its contents.

"From what I've been told," one of the women began, whilst the other was using a console to punch in some commands, "you have a need to be made familiar with certain specific information. So to familiarize you with the general situation we shall begin this little tutorial with certain paradigms relating to Regum."

She pressed another button. Regum as seen from space. The planet was swathed in an aura of colours, its resonant image. Brighter than Prima's which was in the background on a second screen, it's usual motley of browns, greens and blues.

"This is a computer simulation of course. A future state." she paused for emphasis on that particular scenario. "We are studying divergence here in regards to our

anticipated future. As you can see Prima has decayed a little. Not much but degradation is slightly apparent."

"So they're getting stronger." Gharbel said shifting on the stool.

"Indeed that is correct. If present trends continue that is."

The second woman sat a little back from them.

"Regum has gone past critical point. What that means is that they have gone beyond their natural RS. Cyber enhanced. Not computer enhanced, cyber. Artificial intelligence is dominant."

"The Web." Gharbel expostulated.

"That is so. A quantum shift actually. A higher energy state simply put, drawing on the energy of space."

She waited. When neither spoke she continued.

"So an apparent resonant shift. Regum has self-isolated causing a rupture. Impenetrable to our DVs. In a way their isolation is our isolation as well. Now it gets interesting."

Regum and Prima receded amongst a star field which fell away so that they saw their spiral galaxy. Towards the outer rim of the hologram two smaller galaxies. A tenuous fog narrowing between the two galaxies, ballooning out around both planets.

"What this represents is the alien field. As you can see its source is Earth. Not encouraging I know, but this is millennia in the future." Actually it was less but she did not want to spook her visitors. The view zoomed in on Earth. Their resonance was a riot of colours. None dominant as around Prima or Regum.

"It is a fairly young planet. Relatively speaking their formative intelligence is very malleable thus no dominance of any specific mind set."

"Malleable, I like that." Gharbel said.

"Indeed. But potent. A heady brew."

"Surrounded." Qatus barely whispering.

"Remember this is only a future projection my lords."

"Is the asteroid hit factored in?"

"It is."

"So it had no effect."

"It had an effect alright. It sped up their mental capabilities."

"But how..." Qatus was astonished that the catastrophe could have hastened their cerebral development.

"Well that would be speculation on our part. We are concerned with facts here, probable factual actualities."

"This effects our resonance?" Gharbel content to let Qatus do the talking.

"It does. Thus our somewhat weaker field along with Regum's enhanced state. Assuming total passivity on our part. If the alien planet is left to its own volition, advancing along its evolutionary path they will not only self enhance both spiritually and materially..."

"You mean a combination of the two?" Qatus asked surprised. "Would that not destabilize their minds, their souls and thus create an unstable resonance?"

"Ah you pre-empted what we are studying here. So to jump ahead, yes. Our RF would be contaminated. That would filter through to our Volatile population. We would be hard pressed even with the CFs to keep a lid on it. They, along with Regum would usurp or negate us. Either scenario would be abhorrent."

"Where will this lead?"

"Glad you asked. Please observe."

Earth and Regum appeared next to each other. On both planets new patches of various intermingled light tonalities became apparent. Multiple layered like Prima's but denser as a new set of membranes were weaving themselves around both planets. Less homogenous than Prima, more discordant.

"From the initial base state to diversity to fragmented wholeness. A totally new sentience. Considered impossible but there it is. Layer upon layer of meta-formulated resonances, growing over each other until so sealed that they cannot be influenced by our RS. There you have it gentlemen." Then continued hastily:

"Not only that, WebSpace is enhanced as well. Physical domination of both universes. If we are included it is at a very low level." She said dispassionately.

"So if we do nothing this is the future?" Qatus was worried.

"It is."

"Who else knows of this?"

"Nobody except us and now you two."

"The pontiff?" Gharbel asked.

"No. This is only a possibility not an actuality. No point disturbing his serenity, or that of the Immortals."

"How did Regum manage this future state?"

"Ah here it gets tricky. Phase state of space. It is as if they are drawing upon the energy of space itself."

"Using the Great Mind?" Qatus was aghast.

She ignored the suggestion. "We cannot even pinpoint how or where they are doing it. It appears the source is everywhere and nowhere specific. All we detect is the effect, not the cause. What we think is, is that somehow their WebSpace has become a force unto itself. No doubt their computers are behind this, but they are using thousands on their planet and in space. In a way the machines have taken over, both on a future Earth and Regum. Self duplicating. Our resonance could collapse."

"This cannot happen." Qatus exclaimed. Gharbel barely acknowledging the seriousness of the situation. A compromised future.

"We will be at their mercy, if one can call it that." She looked at them so objectively it unnerved Qatus. How could they handle this knowledge so dispassionately? Her fellow scientist stood there just observing them. No emotion in their eyes either. No wonder these workers were so far removed from the mainstream. They were almost Reganian.

"No doubt my lords have a plan." She said as if it were an accomplished fact. Gharbel definitely had more than one.

He said: "Most certainly. Turn the tide against Regum. Through their orbitals. Use the DVs. We do have access to their minds. The machines will be ours. We configure them to our resonance. And I have Earth in mind as well."

"It is good that there is hope." She said.

"We have our containment fields. Tell me is there a way of getting into their computers?"

"If one has the access codes, why yes." She answered.

"Right, we get the DVs onto that. Machines are limited by their very nature. Every artifice is less than perfect. We exploit that. Apart from a power failure what else can cause a massive malfunction?" Gharbel focussed.

"Electronic fields."

"Their systems are shielded, as are ours."

"So they are protected." Qatus guessed correctly.

"Radiation can effect computers."

"Thank you. Most helpful. Well if there is anything else?" Gharbel asked.

"I think from your query that covers your interest."

"It does. At least we know what we are dealing with. We thank you for your time ladies."

"It has been our pleasure."

"Tell me," Qatus asked, "how do you cope with this dark knowledge?"

"Faith."

"Commendable."

They were shown out of the computer laboratory. The hologram collapsed into nothingness. Gharbel was going to make sure so would Regum.

Outside two new security men were waiting to take them back to the space port.

In the van Gharbel remained silent. He was formulating his counter measures with sweet revenge in mind. So Regum wants to dominate utterly? Once back at the space port their VAV was ready for them. Their assigned pilot came out of the hangar as the small tractor pulled the flyer up in front of them. During the flight back Gharbel stayed within his own thoughts.

How to irradiate Regum's computers. A lot of research would need to be done. Secretly. Then there was the matter of aligning Earth. The task was not so daunting as to be impossible.

"You know Qatus, the Great Mind has certainly revealed through our intrepid researchers a way out."

"A way out? It's horrific."

"Don't you see? By knowing the future we are prepared."

"It's demoralizing."

"I learnt something very useful about the capabilities of the DVs up there. Rest assured there is a way out. Several actually."

"I'm glad. At least it was only a projection, millennia away."

"Remember, that whole sequence began when T equals zero."

"Whatever that means."

"Qatus it means that a certain set of events unfold in a given situation when all other things are equal, stable."

"But we are all equal in the Great Mind's realm."

"It is a mathematical tool."

"The sacred numbers. Manipulating them is..."

"Bordering on heresy? Playing with the sacred forces of the universe?"

"Exactly."

"How do you think those scientists work?"

"By divine inspiration."

"The paths to that are as many as the mind can conceive Qatus."

"Who said that?"

"I did. The end does justify the means."

"I agree there. Our future is at stake."

They were leaving the desert behind them. Savannah below, in the distance the haze of the forests, further ahead the pale mountains and beyond that their estates. Comfort and familiarity. Qatus was rather shaken by the revelation he had just witnesses. Even if it was only one possible future. Containing Regum would be nothing but short of a miracle.

"We have to start thinking like Reganian's Qatus. How else to contain them but by their means."

"As long as we keep ourselves in check."

"Qatus, this is a priority. Not even the pontiff is to be informed."

"I am with you there. I'm just worried that by thinking like them we don't fall into the trap and become like them." Qatus felt the discordance of a Volatile. It disturbed his equilibrium. Plus Telafus going mad. What had brought that on? He almost shuddered not wishing to know the answer to that. Events were coming apart all around him. As the woman said, if they did nothing then they were doomed, irrevocably so.

"Where do you wish to be dropped off?" Gharbel asked.

"When do you intend to see Telafus?"

"Later. First we must invest Skias."

"Will you need my presence?"

"Not really why?"

"I think I need some time to contemplate."

"Seeking inspiration I hope."

"Hope. What we need is a doomsday weapon."

"My thoughts exactly." Gharbel concurred.

Skias, in white unadorned robes knelt in ardent prayer at the foot of the catafalque housing the sacred Immortal in the palatial grounds. This act his first step of investiture as a supplicant, offering his soul to be as one with the ancient sages. The initial step on becoming pontiff part of the esoteric initiation: acceptance, by uniting his selfless seeking soul with the sacrosanctity of the Immortal, and by default the other Immortals shrouded in the ultimate outer realm contained in the Trine, the Guardians. Aligned with previous if lesser exalted pontiffs who acted as shields, keepers of the penultimate mystery encased in the Infinity Chip, the unity of all: the sacred souls of the Immortals. The

active vigilance of the Guardians sacrificing their undying essence to keep the Infinity Chip's holy domain and thereby Prima's resonance pure.

If Skias's resonance was deeply flawed, misaligned or contaminated by devious heresies he would be rejected. As he considered the honour bestowed upon him by the conclave of the Ecclesiastics and Divines drawn from the broad multitude of priests and bishops Skias was not without the nervousness that he as the holy petitioner sought ingress to the penultimate of his soul's holy reverberation. What the holy orders heads did not know was that Skias harboured a secret life. Now would come the test as to whether it was indeed heretical.

Skias had made it his mission to use any means to achieve Primaian supremacy. Keeping that firmly in mind, to create the necessary cover he had sought out the forbidden knowledge denied to the masses. The true inherent wisdom of their ancient occult lore. He would delve deeper into the precursor to that other strand of applied wisdom: scientia. It was a combination of the two: occult revelations to be applied through the scientific method to objective enquiry. All information, all thoughts a unitary whole. Did not the Supreme Consciousness reject Regum's WebSpace? Her technological prowess? If that was deemed as a profane sacrilege than surely Prima's concern for the truth of their faith the correct path. Not that he would, if accepted by this Immortal linked through the Trine change the orientation of the divine orders. His ideas would remain closed to any probing by any of the exalted domain lords.

The status quo would remain, on the surface. He would make it his duty to align his resonance with the universe itself. The Great Mind was a part of it. But since Regum acquired knowledge as if plucking it out of the ether, that strange effluvium that seemed to contain all the answers, so he too would seek its hoary knowledge. Then and only then could he put his plan into action. To suffuse the Trine, align it with that of the ethereal cosmos. Prima would have the best of both worlds. To be in command of both the exo and esoteric. They would then be truly supreme.

As things stood now they were being relegated to be an appendage in the great scheme of things. If the holy orders continued along this path they would become a mere curiosity. The insistence of saving one's soul without enquiring to understand and not comprehend the very universe which had given them their conscious lives truncated their own intelligence. Skias was going to use knowledge to expand the consciousness of their race. With himself of the first order.

Having spent all his life harbouring these deviant thoughts, having as bishop access to the forbidden lore including glimpses of the magic of sacred numbers. He was

well adapted to keep even these intellectual longings subsumed from spreading into his conscious thoughts when called to sacred enclaves where the political application of their divine mission was constantly reaffirmed. No one knew of his clandestine objectives. Now his stance would be put to the ultimate test. If he failed it would be of no major importance. There had been others who had been rejected. He would not be the first nor the last.

The change of perspective occurred so subtly that he was only aware of the difference in that his surroundings were resonating on a different wavelength. His mind becoming unitary. His head was open. The enchantment wholesome just like back in his study in the small town where he administered the sacred needs of the people. The familiarity reassuring. But what followed next was not. A potent presence. The cosmic essence somehow different. Powerful, determined, unformed. Something potentate. He put the feeling of this dormant cognizance due to the projection of his own self.

Meta-symbiosis. There were Volatiles who claimed through their dreams knowledge of a previous life. Returning until they reached their own apotheosis. The past or the future? In this undeterminating field it was hard to tell. The feeling of immanent power supreme receding yet reasserting itself. A momentary vision of some stupendous struggle. The memory of his own effort to forge a link with the ultimate.

A damned realm. Horrific nightmares of overweening minds thriving on discord. The alien planet! In utter decay. Chaos reigning supreme. A commanding presence. His? An ancient war. Prima? Was primordial Prima the alien planet? The past they negated? A secondary incidental potential source applying its prevalence over the receding consciousness both within and without space. Trying to entrap him by artful deceit. A potent supremacy tempting him to access this distant conflict deep in space. War. The progenitor of the conflict amongst a multitude of malformed minds. Skias subtly withdrawing to escape the trap. Circumventing the ambush laid out for It or for him. A barely flickering intelligence, a glowing three dimensional geometric web, drawing upon the power of space. Maybe united with the Great Mind. Or the base design of Regum's Web.

Fascinating. Skias the observer in this confusion swirling around him. Secrets the Immortals ignored. No records alluded to this strange violence of both brute force and unadulterated will trying to force itself into space, into reality, into the holy ether.

Transformation. Movement through and within space. Connected. Escaping mortality. Moving through the Supreme Consciousness, a mere spectral presence. During a split second It picked up power, enhancing Itself to fulfil Its designated destiny.

Escaping the clutches of Its almost fated doom. The remnant decay left behind, the fascinating geometric configuration dissolved back on that distant world whence the essence found a secure place in the universe. The bright glow of the galactic centre shone brilliantly. A massive black orb, huge drawing in the churning stars, in blinding white streams of foggy light. Right next to It. Skias in the realm of this mighty presumption of an enhanced consciousness.

'So you wish to know me.' The voice reverberated in his head.

Was this what Telafus had experienced?

'One of my minions.'

Disguised in a web of insanity. It was enough. Skias willed himself out of this presumptive presence. He knew enough. The images stayed deeply embedded in his own being. With determined desperation he thought of where he should be. The strength of the Immortal reasserted itself. The dark star, the glowing enticing geometrically growing matrix receded into a tiny lilac ball. For a moment the blackness of space all around him. Focussing upon the sarcophagus reality resumed its natural embrace. One amongst many.

One amongst many? Did its realm contain other futures? Willed by Its own supraconscious mind? Was this the Cosmic Architect? Or...the convoluted images threatened to resurrect within him. Focus. Refocus. You are the pontiff.

Still entangled.

'I can offer you supremacy.' The voice chilled him. He was not about to reply.

Blinking he opened his eyes. He was in the sacred fane of the Immortal. It was over. He had not been rejected. Yet what he had learnt! If he was to comprehend this occurrence one thing was certain. Telafus had been trapped, his mind blown away by its own determination to survive whatever threatened Its existence. Another powerful force had negated Its presence on that distant alien planet. One thing was certain. It would return. Skias was ready. It might even be useful in the coming struggle.

That 'thing' endowed with intelligence would be trouble. They could ignore it at their peril, or accept its reality. A terrible choice. He hoped he did not have to make that decision. He felt strengthened by the fact of knowing the possible disaster that lay in store. Hopefully after his final Ascension.

He would use proxies to try and comprehend what was going on. It might even require Reganian help. Their own knowledge of science, of the universe was as nothing compared to what this distant cosmic consciousness harboured.

The public ceremony of Skias's investiture was acclaimed by the multitude in the public arena at the pontifical palace. The prelates, the Divines, the Ecclesiastics, the bishops and select priest all bowing before him as he took his seat under a canopy erected for the holy occasion. Three days of festivity were unctuously proclaimed to a mighty cheer from the gathered masses. The ceremony over after giving a speech to keep Prima secure from malign enemies, both within the realm of life, not forgetting the universe, whilst trying not to think of his experience for fear of recreating the ardency of this dark intelligence.

In the palace, a large reception to celebrate his holy ascension was given. Skias chatted away. Whilst all was revelry and happy commotion he knew that his office might be a troubled one. It was as if he were at the edge of a precipice whence the whole planet was heading. Oblivious to the danger. Or rather as he reminded himself, seeing danger where there was none, which meant mainly Regum, thus missing the bigger picture. He vowed to take an interest in the secret machinations of the highest Domain Lords. Gharbel who looked after the Immortal's realm, the Guardians and the Trine, the contents of the Infinity Chip, unknown to the population at large. Qatus, logistics of keeping this configured realm secure and Pentham the Sentinel making sure all were at peace.

He was not about to expose himself to the dread that lurked at the centre of the galaxy. Then again it could all have been his mental projection, his fervency in uniting his soul with the invisible essence, the ether of the universe. Time would tell. He hoped it was time enough. At least he now had access to all the hidden lore of their planet's long millennial history. He would scour the ancient tomes for strange hints, furtive suggestions, oblique references to anything unusual in the quest for divine knowledge and cosmic wisdom. Find if when and where this entity had been spawned.

"You may sit Domain Lords." The reedy voice of Skias intoned serenely at the first secret enclave. Gharbel, serious, lean, mean and determined to be supreme of all the lesser Domain Realms. Qatus, good natured on the outside, and just as jealous of his realm rose awkwardly due to his girth and Pentham, fluid certain of the knowledge he possessed pertaining to the true condition of the planet. Supreme Lord of security which included the ferreting out of dangerous deviancies and unholy heresies. Exactly what Skias was after. No intention of making them familiar with his revelation. Take an interest in Telafus's well being. What his madness contained could be what he had not dared to ascertain. He might have withstood the onslaught that brought Telafus down but

knowing what did happen to the previous pontiff, presumed Ascended to the rest of the planet, he was not about to tempt fate. There were other ways of going about fathoming his revelation.

The Domain Lords seated themselves on the ornate chairs in front of a small dais where Skias held court. A small table, hand carved coffee ready for them to enjoy. Skias had dismissed the palace servants and as yet not decided who his secretaries would be. For the moment temporary assignees filled those positions.

The throne like chair upon which he sat, silver wrought legs, golden back set in black onyx speckled with dots of silver representing the universe upon which he now reclined as Divine representative of their world. At the back of the chair rays alluding to the sun etched into the golden surface radiating out of an embossed disk.

From court gossip at the reception of his investiture Skias learnt that he was considered a creation of the Ecclesiastics. Neutral, indifferent with no opinion whatsoever. It was assumed his mind was as bland as his rarely voiced declamations. That had worked in his favour. They wanted a non entity on the throne. He was happy to oblige. He had kept his personal quest to himself. Accepted orthodoxy without hesitation.

"A new era my lords." Skias said graciously, like the sun itself surrounded by his satellites taking, at least in his presence, his mind as supreme in all matters. Telafus he had discovered had let the DLs roam free. He had been a vacillator, relying on them to formulate policy, using their decisions instead of his own. Skias was going to be cautious at first. The Ecclesiastical staff had filled him in on all the domain lords lives, their orientation, the strengths and weaknesses couched in diplomatic niceties. He would take an interest in the state of the universe. That meant knowledge of the astronomers and the DVs.

"We are indeed blessed by one such as exalted as yourself pontiff." Gharbel said unctuously, a matter of form over substance.

"Thank you Lord Gharbel, and thank you Qatus and Pentham for coming at such short notice."

"Our pleasure." Qatus beamed drinking his coffee.

"I have of course been studying the files of Telafus. I seek fervently that he may be rehabilitated."

"Very decent of you." Qatus added.

"Yes. Well there are reasons apart from common decency. Knowledge my lords." And waited to see their reaction. The concept loaded. There was holy and mundane

knowledge, Prima's and Regum's. Skias was not about to differentiate. Keep them guessing.

"Hubris of the soul." Gharbel said at last.

"Only if perused for selfish aims. Regum is surrounding us through their Web with knowledge. From that perspective we are in a way contained."

"A solid rock of faith in a sea of heresy." Pentham replied.

They were all being terribly correct. Well it was to be expected at this first private audience.

"I fear the strength of their knowledge contains a certain danger."

Nodding of heads.

"From a material perspective we could be easily negated." Skias though was thinking of something else. This had to be approached cautiously.

"Surely not. There is nothing in holy writ to suggest such a negative stance pontiff." Qatus replied, sipping his coffee.

"The planet's resonance is displaying certain minor fluctuations which reflect the conflict going on in the universe."

"The alien field." Pentham replied asserting the status quo entailed in the pontiff's allusion.

"The intelligence behind it." Skias ventured a little further.

"The Great Mind has delivered us from this evil pontiff." Gharbel answered and relayed the asteroid that had laid Earth low. Destroyed their misguided civilization. "It will take millennia for them to recover. In the meantime our DVs will make sure their minds are attuned to that of the Divine Will."

"So my lords, why is Regum still so powerful?"

A pause.

"Their minds are deviant." Skias intoned solemnly. "They are audacious in the extreme in laying down this Web onto the universe and thus the Cosmic Consciousness. If unchecked it might distort reality as we perceive it. Therefore I consider it my first duty to obviate the danger in the cosmic realm."

"I wise decision." Pentham concurred.

Gharbel thought the obsequious complement unnecessary. This was a private gathering. Such puffery smacked of small mindedness.

"I will familiarise myself with the sacred astronomy. There seems to be a flaw laid onto the universe. You say Earth has its misguided orientation wiped off their planet. Still

the alien field remains. That my lords would suggest would it not that perhaps this excrescence might have its origins elsewhere?"

A sharp intake of breath from Gharbel. The trouble was Skias could be right in that assumption. A worry.

"It might well be Regums doing." Skias suggested.

"Nothing to indicate that is so pontiff." Pentham answered.

"Perhaps it was sent from the future?"

Stunned silence.

"That is impossible. With due respect pontiff." Pentham replied. Gharbel and Qatus remained silent. In interesting concept if a little illogical.

"I agree it is only a cautious exploration."

"Your holiness is most humble." Qatus said. "There is some disturbing data," Gharbel tried to caution him regarding the knowledge they possessed, "that the Earthers will at some future date recuperate. The DVs have discovered that the shock of the calamity has spurred certain of their kind into heightened mental activity. At the moment they cannot do much, their planet in ruins. But once they have recovered from the calamity I consider it pertinent that we make sure they are aligned to our way of thinking."

"Of course Lord Qatus. What disturbs me is that the DVs have not been able to curtail this sudden mental development of Earth's."

"It could well be," Pentham jumped in, "that it may have been much worse without them."

"You have a point. However I have a suggestion. Use heresy to fight heresy."

They were all attention. A pontiff with dangerous ideas. That was something new. It might even be exciting to watch him succeed or fail gloriously.

"Regum's technology. I am aware of certain developments regarding their achievements. I am familiar, now, as pontiff of what they are capable of."

Qatus looked at Gharbel. Did he know what they knew? Or was Skias truly psychic?

"Instigate a peaceful approach regarding Regum my Lords. It cannot hurt. There is officially no change anticipated in the status quo. However I think we should combine our intellectual resources and insert one of our own on that planet. By understanding them directly we can tailor our needs more finely."

Gharbel could not believe it. Exactly his and Qatus's thoughts. If the pontiff was on side, why that would be delightful. Fantastic. Exactly what he wanted.

"Any views?"

"Pontiff," Gharbel began. "We have been exploring this very scenario which your perspicacious mind just revealed. By the Holy Mind itself this is a most fortuitous conjunction."

"You have?" Skias was delighted. He drained his cup of coffee. "Please pour yourselves."

"Indeed yes. It is true that the Earthers," Gharbel continued, "some, seem to have an enhanced intelligence. To have the ability to combine both Reganian and our way of thinking. Something that could work to our advantage. It causes mental instabilities. Thus the reason I believe for the persistence of the alien field. However if we act now, we can guide them onto the holy path of spiritual redemption."

"Lord Qatus, Lord Pentham?"

"It would certainly give us more knowledge of their capabilities and their intentions. Of course regarding Regum a formal approach or behind the scenes regarding diplomacy has to be envisioned. Let them think we are actually interested in their way of thinking, a sort of thaw in our attitude." Pentham recommended.

"I think Regum would be amendable pontiff," Gharbel concurred. "Find a suitable candidate from amongst the Stable Volatiles or Naturals. Maybe even a heretic."

"A heretic. How apt." Skias was amused. The others relaxed. "Now Lord Pentham. You are of course familiar with your duties. Meaning the heretics. I'm sure you have a list of deviants. We need an individual who has a certain charisma, a stable mind in the sense that this mission will not overwhelm him or her, in that it does not go to their head. Someone knowledgeable and solid enough to be with us spiritually."

"I will see to it pontiff."

"Now my lords. We put out feelers to the Reganians concerning our interest in wishing to learn of these distant beings. Help them recover from their unfortunate disaster. Give them succour. Though we will not admit our spiritual endeavours. More as a gentle presence. We shall put it about that a Kabal exists amongst us who are not in agreement with the overall tenor of Prima's attitude. To facilitate that impression, let some heretics free. Make it appear as if there are covert agents letting this occur. Maybe even let them escape to Regum. That will make them think the Kabal is effective in its limited way. An odd scientist or astronomer could smooth the way."

Pentham could not believe what he was hearing. The plan was brilliant in its simplicity. He said: "It would also take some of the pressure of containing these deviants."

The people in general are behind us. I don't know how they would take to have heretics on the loose."

"A good point Lord Pentham. No this individual will come from within our inner domains."

"I agree." Pentham nodded draining his cup. "Lord Gharbel, Qatus?"

"I see no problems there pontiff." Gharbel answered.

"I concur." Qatus was happy.

"Now I must impress upon you that this is classified. There are to be no records. Anybody who comes into possession of even the slightest hint of what we are about will get BrainDrained."

They knew it was drastic but necessary.

"Err what if the DVs stumble upon our thoughts pontiff?"

"The same."

"But once the Kabal is in place, what then?" Pentham a little worried.

"We will go through the motion of pretending to BrainDrain whoever is too fervent with the Kabal's aims. Relocation to the provinces for a certain period of time should suffice. So my lords are there any other questions?"

"I assume a shortlist is to be drawn up?"

"No Lord Pentham, no records. Use your head. Your capabilities should keep the DVs out should they accidentally stray. You are Domain Lords after all. Just stay vigilant. Now I know this will take time. Also we cannot meet too regularly. That creates a pattern which the palace staff might remember. I will send word now and again regarding our progress. Remember we are all sworn to secrecy. I would consider it an insult to actually make you swear an oath. For it includes me as well. Rest assured this is no trap. I am not here on some witch hunt. We need to get at the bottom of the existence of the alien field."

They agreed to that.

"You may go. Lord Pentham I have to indulge your presence."

"Of course pontiff."

Gharbel was a little miffed that Pentham was asked to remain behind. Qatus happy to get away. They could now continue their work knowing that they had the pontiff's blessing.

"Lord Pentham." Skias studied the Domain Lord. The pontiff he was glad, so far, was not in resonance trying to embrace his domain memory as was Telafus's wants when

faced with difficult decisions. All Pentham was aware after drinking a few cups of coffee was his empty stomach. No matter how exalted one was the biological necessities continued to remind him of corporeal existence. The pontiff was trying to ascertain something. His steel grey eyes focussed, determined. This new spiritual head was unlike his now insane predecessor. He waited feeling himself examined. All he got was a shrewd intelligence behind the bland look.

At last Pentham said: "Supreme Lord?" As spiritual leader of all inhabitants he was above the Domain Lords, not of them. By venturing the appellation he in fact was letting Skias know of their power hinting at their unity even though Skias was above their realms. The holy office was that of the corporeal representative of the Cosmic Mind. Skias was the sun and he the subservient vassal. Skias was not about to disabuse him.

"I am aware of your sacred duties regarding the overall security of our planet's resonance, that of the masses, the vigilance required to ferret out deviance and heresies wherever it may occur."

Was Skias hinting that aberrations were manifesting at their own level?

Pentham merely nodded.

"Your position is somewhat unique amongst all of the Domain Lords. The proverbial fly in the ointment, an irritant which by its very presence, its very nature reveals what may well be camouflaged."

As pontiff he could if he desired appoint new Domain Lords, dismiss those found wanting, reshuffle the orders.

"What we cannot afford now is for this," he allowed himself a smile, "ahm, study group to be used for ends other than its intention. As you are the supreme officer regarding security, counter intelligence I task you to report anyone who thinks they can further their own aims through this group. It must remain unsullied. I cannot allow it to be sidetracked for whatever reason."

"I understand."

"I hope you do." Skias was hinting the he was not to use it to entrap those who might find it useful to further their aims through this secret body.

"If I comprehend this correctly do I have full executive power?"

"Ah I was informed of your directness. I welcome your attitude. Exactly what is required. You may as well know, I probably think you suspect it anyway that your office is tolerated. That the need of an overseeing security apparatus in these, err, interesting times is becoming more important. There are many developments on several fronts which have to be juggled. I have familiarized myself with all the domains." Letting

Pentham know that Skias was not one to let the Domain Lords dictate policy as Telafus had done.

"If I could I would make you supreme Domain Lord. Not dependent on Lord Gharbel's whim or Qatus's favours. For there has been a monumental stuff up."

Ah. Who stuffed up he wondered.

"We are in recession regarding the whole planet. I don't know what the DVs are doing but it seems that they and by default us are reacting to events rather than formulating events to further consolidate what should be our primary position."

So far so good. The DVs, though overseen by the Ecclesiastics and Divines who though they were merely a higher order of the priesthood kept vigilance over the DVs. A united body backing them up, the reserve force behind them. The actual functioning of their efforts guided by Elentra.

"Regum is on the ascendant. That is one reason why we have to work with them. So one of your duties is to make sure that no one involved is contaminated with their thought processes. That will be difficult for we have to make it appear we concur with their methodology. It does not mean we are in agreement. So you will have to watch out for that."

"As my duties require pontiff."

"I am satisfied on that score. Make it plain to Janon that it is imperative we work to gain the upper hand. For there is something I came across that is of interest which I discovered amongst Telafus's files. This mission on Regum."

"There are several pontiff." Trying to get clarification.

"The priests may continue as they are. Telafus cleared one specific mission which is of significance. The search for the ancient knowledge amongst the aboriginal culture on Regum. And not too soon either. If it turns out there are similarities in regards to our distant mythological lore then we will be able to obviate their shamanistic powers. The Reganians were extremely smart in leaving them to their devices. They are of our race. We think the genetic drift over the centuries has curtailed their mental capabilities. It is one of the reasons I suspect why the priests are not making much of an impression. It is also one of the reasons why Regum never bothered to impress upon the aborigines their view of the world, of reality. In short they are leaving them alone so that they may find a use regarding their psychic abilities to counter our DV activity. Let me show you."

Skias was well and truly on top of his field. Telafus barely bothered to make himself acquainted with what occurred on Regum. He had been Prima focussed. As such they had let Regum slip out of their net. The correlation was there. Pentham could not fault

the supreme pontiff. The office was sacrosanct, guided directly by the Great Mind. That Telafus was found wanting would be anathema. Skias was by the sound of his preamble taking the struggle back to Regum.

Skias activated the viewscreen on the wall where a picture of a bucolic scene of Prima's mountains changed to an image of Regum. Skias had a small console which he took out from his desk.

The image of Regum was that of their resonant state. It glowed brightly, yellow based unlike Prima's motley browns, greens and blues. Focussing on the northern Outlands. There the swirling darker coloured resonance revealed the mental state of the aboriginals. Skias zoomed in and amongst the darker similar patterning an almost tiny white orb shone.

"I am aware Lord Pentham of the incident regarding Varus and Shach."

Lord Pentham had almost forgotten about that and the debacle.

"It seems to me there is now a third force involved. That white orb is due to a singular entity. It is not Reganian, or if it is, it is a new psychic development. Even though it is almost discordant amongst the sea of the aboriginals resonance it is not in conflict. A most unusual phenomenon would you not agree?"

"The mission on Regum under Professor Storaf will eventually arrive there."

"Yes I have read the notes. Make it appear that, yes, it is there but more as a finishing touch than a prime objective. Excellent planning."

"Believe it or not pontiff that mission originated with SpaceKorps."

"Even better. No linkage to your domain then?"

"None whatsoever."

"Nor Janon?"

"Not unless it has some significance to our status."

"Who is in charge? The reason I ask this is that the reports are what I believe your people called 'sanitized'."

Skias was extremely well informed. One positive aspect, Pentham considered was that if Skias was outward directed, he would be less involved with the terrestrial domains. He might even have more freedom to fulfil his duties here.

"I can find out. SpaceKorps is really the security arm on the Orbital. Making sure that whatever intelligence is gathered by the DVs remains secure. The raw data is safe up there. As you correctly stated the cleaned up reports come to this office."

"Good. So why was there no mention of this? Observe."

Skias punched in some commands into the console. It was a time-line. The resonant field over the Outlands was paler. Then a dark spot appeared, tiny at first. It went fuzzy, seemingly irradiating the area which slowly turned brighter, more dense, psychically stronger. Staying within its boundaries. Then the tiny sun appeared as if out of nowhere.

"What do you make of that?"

"Two vortices."

"Yes Lord Pentham, I can see that."

"Forgive me, I was not aware of these two phenomena."

"No mention in the reports."

"Maybe according to the DVs they are local. No threat to us."

"But are they not unusual?"

"Unusual?" Pentham felt stupid repeating Skias.

"There is nothing like it in the records."

"Ultra individuals." Pentham was amazed. A totally new development in the psychic scheme of things. Watching the time-line run they were a different set of behavioural patterns. The darker dot diffused itself into the general resonance, the white dot remaining isolated.

"Observe this then."

The location on the zoomed in scale moved south east. The local resonance there paler, tiny speckled browns within.

"These are our priests which their leader, Khratham has actually accepted. A breakthrough for us. Whereas on Regum's huge city and it's surroundings it almost washes out their presence. Progress in the Outlands."

"Yes pontiff. It looks like the inhabitants are aligning to our resonance."

"Except out there. What intrigues me, and should have alerted SpaceKorps and your domain is how these two phenomena can be so independent of the overall background resonance."

"That is the aim of the mission." Penthan explained. "If we can get into their folklore, uncover their inherent wisdom then we shall know definitely as to the how and why's pontiff."

"Why could not the DVs?" Skias persisted.

"The DVs primary objective is Earth, the alien planet and the alien field. They are battling that, neutralizing it as much as possible. All efforts are directed to that field. The scouts are trying to align the inhabitants of Earth. Now that the calamity has struck,

blessed be the Divine Mind, the focus continues. The other DVs are of course targeting Regum's population. The Outlands, because they are in alignment to a certain degree with ours are kept under cursory observation only pontiff. Then there is the burn out rate. We are loosing more than we can recruit. Our asylums are almost full. We shall need more."

"As I thought. Now as pontiff I do not like to interfere in the day to day running of our operations. It only creates difficulties."

"Very wise."

"Common sense Lord Pentham. Common sense. So there is no spare capacity available?"

"Regarding the DVs. Well there is always room for some manoeuvring."

"I follow you. How long until we know what is actually going on in the Outlands?"

"As we discussed, the location of the white resonance is one endpoint, the other vortice, a mystery."

Skias looked at the imagery. "Well at least it's holding. If there is a sudden change than I shall order the team to go there directly."

"Understood pontiff."

"There is something else to consider."

"I am listening."

"The Web."

"Yes?"

"How is the infiltration going there?"

"Not good."

"I appreciate your candour. Explain."

"Whoever we send, after they have been vetted, don't last long. Burnt. They can't handle the multiple realities. Freaks them out. They become targets. They get destroyed. The Reganians spot them almost immediately."

"Well send in more. Keep them busy whilst we formulate our plans to negate their Web."

"Negate the Web?" Skias had done it again.

"Yes. The other function of our little Kabal. Scour the planet for specific individuals who have an aptitude to think like Reganians. Use the heretics. Surely they would be the best to cause havoc."

"I had never thought of that. No, that is not quite correct. We considered it but came to the conclusion that they would go over to the other side. Not only that but once over they would, in our parlance have been turned."

"Yes I see the logic there. We have to find the source of the Web."

"Pontiff. There is no source. It is a combination of all their computers."

"Well then let us shift our perspective. We need to consider a global assault."

"Yes you alluded to that."

"Keep that in mind."

"As you wish."

"One last matter. We have to find out what sent Telafus over the edge."

"Yes. Most unfortunate."

"There has never been a case like this for centuries. The best I could come up with was in our ancient history, pre-Calamity. I suspect that that had been more political. Word cannot, must not get out that Telafus is insane."

"Your holiness communed with the Immortal. Dare I ask...?"

"Indeed. Though technically sworn to secrecy, there was nothing to indicate Telafus's demise had anything to do with the Immortals."

"I am pleased and relieved to hear it." for that domain was off limits to Pentham. It belonged to the domains of Qatus and Gharbel. The less they were involved the more freedom he had.

"As you are concerned with security Lord Penthan, perhaps you can draw up a list of potential secretaries for my office. The bureaucracy here is a nightmare. And this is off the record, the DLs want their own amendable candidates. If only to find out what I am about. Given our specific agenda I will need rock solid personnel."

"I shall see to it pontiff."

"Now any questions?"

"We need secure channels of communication."

"Yes I have considered this as well. I think it is time to use embedded comlinks. Shielded. Just you, Lord Gharbel and Qatus and myself of course."

"It will simplify our work."

"I know SpaceKorp use them up there. I am also aware that it is forbidden to use Reganian technology on Prima." Skias smiled with simple delight. "But given we use their technology anyway I don't see why we should be curtailed in our holy mission. The ends do justify the means."

"I wholeheartedly concur there pontiff."

"Wholeheartedly?" Skias's face changed suddenly.

"Why yes. With direct communication, secure, it will reduce the risk of messengers from knowing what it is we do know."

"Of course. I just wanted to make sure you did not embrace this step merely for the chance to engage in technology for its own sake."

"It is a tool pontiff."

"Well. You have my trust Lord Pentham. Just one last thing. If either Lord Qatus or Gharbel prove to be difficult, let me know."

"I am indeed indebted pontiff."

"That you are."

Elentra disengaged out of the filtered data realm of the DVs gathered information. She checked regularly, then tailored the information for Kroena. Whilst trawling through sub-domains, curious how the scouts targeting Regum were performing to sets of incoming data domains found a sudden match. One group of DVs concerned with Earth was so near to what was coming from those specifically focussed on Regum that the similarity was uncanny. Not that one group of DVs knew what the others were harvesting. A matter of stopping cross feeds into each other's heads. She double checked. Both streams came through different channels. It verified the information she was accessing. Remarkable. Backtracking the Reganian feed it appeared the DVs were reading a Reganian mind. Or more to the point accessing its resonance.

Her first reaction was that it was a trap. Disinformation. The Reganians suspected their intent so when the data matched she was more than curious. Not alarmed, excited. This could be a first. A Reganian actually allowing access to his mind. She had informed that group to not increase their activity, not to engage in remote viewing. Stay on passive alert. This was too good to be true.

She checked and double checked having called Kroena in. They went over the evidence repeatedly. The results were always the same. Skias's interest in Earth was welcome. Domain Lords were too smart for their own good she thought. Necessary if difficult. Always jealous of their domains. This was too big for any one of them. Ever since the asteroid hit she had been assigned to make that planet their primary target. It would be up to others to decide what to do with both sets of information. The breakthrough on Regum and Earth. The planet was stricken after all. Kroena agreed that a courier was too risky. She was also as interested about Earth and Regum as her superior Elentra was.

Elentra arranged for a shuttle to take her down. At the spaceport a VAV would take her directly to the palace. The only location on Prima that allowed direct flights. The desert lay to one side. The inhabitants never knew, living on the other side of the planet just how they used Reganian technology.

She touched down on the palatial grounds, ceremonial guards in their gaudy tessellated uniforms ready to take her to the pontiff. She was escorted into the rear of the sprawling buildings, through corridors, an inner courtyard and finally into the main building. At one nondescript door her escort halted and knocked. How quaint.

Elentra entered and saw the dark grey robed gaunt face of the pontiff's private secretary. Without any emotion or expression of interest he showed her through a double set of doors leading from reception into a study.

She was announced. Skias, in a plain robe, with only a small insignia indicating his position, in slippers for it was nearly midnight was sitting in a deep armchair in front of a low table. Reports were scattered upon it, a decanter of some liqueur and coffee in front of him. Skias dismissed his secretary who shut the doors behind him.

Skias asked if she wanted a coffee or something stronger.

"Your holiness..."

"Please Elentra, Skias will do."

She relaxed. "Coffee, milk, three sugars will do fine thank you." Amazed at his unpretentiousness. He did the honours then bade her to take a seat. She sat in the armchair ready for her. She savoured the coffee.

"I have news your...Skias." He looked alert at her.

"So I gather." He replied easily. "Important enough to come yourself. We have heard much about your difficult work Elentra."

She remained appropriately silent.

"There have been developments." Taking a deep breath she continued: "In a way we have been fooled." Getting the bad news out first.

"Why does that not surprise me?" he replied unruffled. She had no idea how pontiffs behaved but his unpretentiousness threw her a little. She expected a person of immense gravitas, a resonating presence. In a way he was. Maybe he kept himself in check. The ease of his persona so different to the impression Domain Lords had on her.

"Because you are the supreme head? Supreme in all domains?"

"A worthy burden." A smile playing on his lip. Would it remain after she revealed what she knew?

"As it is I am sure pontiff."

"Elentra. Your worthy position does not necessitate formalities."

"Of course, ahm, Skias. The DVs have had some surprising success."

"Even though the Reganians remain true to form?" he made it easy for her.

"Perplexing once I've explained myself. Tricky almost. One of the reasons why this information could not be sent by courier Skias. The data has been checked and double checked, independently evaluated by my trusted second in command Kroena."

"Which is?" he asked gently.

The coffee had perked her up by now. Skias sipped his liqueur, he the essence of infinite patience.

"It's like this. Two data streams. Identical. One from Regum, the other from Earth. Both confirming the veracity of its contents." She had gone over her presentation so often she hoped it would sound professional now that Skias had shown himself to be so accommodating.

"Go on."

"The meteor strike on Earth was real. It did occur. In the distant past."

"I see. I am familiar with the divine act."

"Time Skias."

"Let me guess. The event we witnessed is in the past."

"Millennia Skias."

"That much." He accepted the fact.

"As you know our DVs can access any event irrespective of time."

"So I gather." He put his tiny crystal glass down.

"Earth has arisen from the ashes." There, she said it.

"Ah." No surprise, no shock. Cool comprehension.

"They are technologically capable once again. Not space faring yet. But they have machines that move them across their world. It is only a matter of time until they end up in space again."

"Really. How remarkable. What an enterprising race. Being hit by a massive meteor sent by divine providence which becomes to them a minor setback. That should please the Reganians. Did they have a hand in this?"

"Which brings me to my second point Skias. We seem to have independent verification from Regum. The DVs have a source."

"Now that is interesting. We are aware of the difficulties in accessing their minds, any mind really. The priests try of course. Without much success." He seemed unperturbed. "So a source? From the Web or live?"

"He appears live Skias. Almost compliant. I smell a trap. The information harvested from his resonance is the same regarding Earth."

"So Regum is feeding us information. Verifiable information."

"They are. Well somebody is."

"Do we have an identity?"

"There it gets tricky Skias. As I said, it feels alive. But it could be an opening in the Web. Either way the data matches."

"It was good of you to bring this to our attention directly." He paused and poured himself another small glass from his decanter, holding it aloft for her.

"No thank you, tempting as it is."

He replaced the decanter.

"Well then. We must assume, in the greater scheme of things that the powers of the DVs in curtailing Earth's resurrection regarding their capabilities that shall we say, they have been less than successful."

"Annoying." She admitted. "The strange thing is, that unlike on Regum, many of the Earthers are amendable to our orientation. The DVs are effecting their mind set. They do believe in a unitary god. But that has no effect on more independent minds who align with Regum. One could almost conclude Skias that maybe the Web extends as far as their planet. It certainly exists in their space. Both our worlds are an influence. Concomitant. Even stranger is that they have their wars. Not for and against the spiritual and the technological but even weirder they use their technology against each other. They are still homicidal."

"Which would explain the alien field."

"Indeed Skias. A bizarre race of beings."

"That is an understatement." Not upset at this development. Serene, unperturbed. Telafus had been focussed on the alien field. Now he was no more. She must have missed the Ascension. She wondered if the Cosmic Mind was realigning this new pontiff. He certainly was not so obsessed with Regum as his predecessor.

"What would you have me do?" Elentra needing confirmation.

"Good question. The Reganians are influencing Earth. Well well well. So be it. They seem to be, for the moment, on the ascendant."

"An uncomfortable truth." Because it was so.

"Then we must adapt as needs be."

"That is the pattern."

"Meaning we should take the lead?"

"Naturally."

"What would you do?"

"Err, as in from your or my position?"

"Any position Elentra."

"Well, we have contingencies in place. Either we step up DV activity or curtail Regum's, or preferably both. Ideally if we could get on to Earth then maybe use our influence there to reveal to them the glory of our civilisation. Not forgetting the spiritual wasteland that is Regum. Present the truth in such a way that they come towards our view. Of the possibility of uniting one's soul upon Ascension with the immaculate, the divine, infinity itself."

"Eternity."

"Yes. It would dwarf their fascinating technology as one mere bauble. A form of entrapment."

"We must be practical. You say you are in communication, or this entity with you on Regum or via the Web. Either way the link is there, correct?"

"That is so."

"As I have indicated, do not press the advantage. This can be of immense benefit to us." Skias was already thinking of the plans for his Kabal. "We will not hide the fact that Earth has arisen. We shall let it be known just how dangerous, how pathological these Earthers are. To both planet's futures. You say they are still engaged in homicidal warfare. Then let Regum know that if they continue to influence them the war might come to them as well." His mind was enlivened for there might be a way to curtail Regum's expansion. By divine inspiration. Maybe Earth was the answer to putting Regum in place. "That may make them stop and think. Depending on how they react to that. Then we shall know what contingencies we have available for our divine mission."

"So do I target Earth? Regum?"

"Continue as you were. No change as yet."

"Understood."

"I am pleased. Now I assume," for Skias had another stirring thought. "that you have studied the psychopathology of the Earthers."

"Only at a distance. It burns the DVs out. I study the effects. I must admit I'm too frightened for my sanity to go down that path."

"Is this effect the alien field or their kind?"

"The DVs Skias come across potent psychics. There the real struggle truly is decided. Though they are not targeting us directly it cannot be ruled out."

"You are sure?"

"Not dead certain."

"Their society, if one could call it that though has potent psychics? Shamans?"

"Definitely."

"So their threat to us is minimal?"

"So far. The interesting thing is that Regum's WebWorld and WebSpace, the two are interlinked yet self contained is doing us a favour pontiff."

"I find that hard to credit Elentra."

"So did I at first. As did Kroena."

"Go on."

"Well as I said. Their shamans are drawn not just to the Web, they actually journey into it."

"Really?"

"In a way they are being drawn away from us. Any interaction with Prima is in cyberspace. Since Prima is a simplification and to a degree a make believe pretence, overblown, their knowledge of us is both restricted as to our true selves whilst magnified in relation to our esoteric state of being."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Right from the start."

"Yet our inserts are impotent." Skias assumed correctly.

"Our inserts fail. Anyway their primary concern is Regum."

"True." Skias looked at the glowing contents of the decanter but thought better of it. The liqueur was an excellent drop. Combined with the strong coffee it was the perfect combination of the two to both ease the mind and invigorate it at the same time.

"I assume of course that you are familiar with psychic states of mind?"

"Well yes. The DVs are of principal concern."

"I want you to remain for a little longer. Are you tired?"

"No Skias. I slept on the way down."

"Good. Your knowledge then of the Volatile mind, those of a Natural inclination your field of study."

"Not just me pontiff. There is Kroena and two others I should mention. Risea and Khral. Extremely capable."

"I am sure they are that Elentra. There is something that I need ascertained."

"As you wish pontiff, I mean Skias."

Skias must have asked his secretary to come in.

"Bring us Telafus."

"?"

"Remember Elentra this is beyond top secret."

"Understood."

"I need a second opinion. You see this has never occurred in our long and noble history. Unless we go back way beyond the Calamity. You are familiar with the role the Immortals play?"

"I know they are the eternal repository of ancient wisdom. A conduit to the Great Cosmic Mind. The Ascendant supplicant is guided by their psychic awareness and of course both spiritual guide and celestial repository of all the previous pontiffs as well."

"So by rights they are benevolent."

"Of course..." Elentra surprised of what Skias was laying before her.

"You see, this is most difficult not just for me, but my office and in a way the serenity of the masses." His expression cool, detached. "You see Telafus must have experienced something whilst in holy communion with the Immortal whose eternal soul graces the sacrosanct temple. He is possessed. Not by the Immortal for I too have sought his guiding spiritual force. Now you are familiar with burnt out cases. I believe Telafus too has burnt out. Or to be more precise is burning out."

"That is terrible." Thinking of the poor man's suffering. For a pontiff, the Supreme Lord of all Domains to be so vulnerable was disturbing. She understood why she was sworn to secrecy. Not only might it destabilize the social cohesion of their race but the roll on effect which Regum could use would collapse the very foundations of not just their belief and faith but also their political base as well. Never mind the ramifications. The pontiff led to madness. Regum would have a field day. The consequences unthinkable. Which is exactly what had occurred. She was ready to face the madman. BrainDraining though an option deemed sacrilegious. It must be a dilemma for Skias.

"Are you shocked?"

"I cannot even begin to explain how I feel Skias."

"I see why you are indeed head of your section. Your attitude has been noted with gratification."

She felt a warm inner glow. To have the pontiff on her side, sharing the greatest secret on Prima was in a way an honour which was priceless. She had reached the pinnacle in her duties. Her station was above all others. The Ecclesiastics and Divines relatively below her. She had the most powerful office holder solidly behind her.

Nahkt appeared from a well hidden door. The bookcase parted and Telafus was wheeled in by his secretary. Drips from attached bottles were fed intravenously into his arm. Sedatives most likely calming a disturbed mind, a riven soul, a mentally tortured being. Nahkt withdrew.

"To think he had once been the supreme spiritual guide, the culmination of all that is sacred on Prima. Reduced to this shell of a being." Skias sighed.

Telafus looked gaunt, emaciated. Barely aware, completely indifferent to his surroundings. Not even bothered by the straps that fastened him to his wheelchair. Dribbling from thin wet lips. The skin sallow, transparent. She had seen cases like this before. The haunted look still disturbing. The madness willing itself to remain with him.

Telafus muttered, incoherent, babbling. There was no way he could be Ascended.

"Officially, from a medical point of view the prognosis is that the alien field has subsumed him." Then turning to the patient called his name.

A momentary flicker of recognition, then his eyes withdrew as Telafus thought about who he actually was.

"Telafus? Yes he is known to me." His dry voice crackled.

Skias gave Elentra a look of sorrow. She was fascinated by Telafus's inner convolutions. A battle was raging in his mind. She could almost taste the fear he was suffering.

"It is you." Skias said gently

"You do not know me yet. But you will soon enough." He cackled, his dark eyes blazing. His visage changed. The character lines deepened, sweat appearing on his brow, the lips pursed, thin, mean, indomitable.

"I am going to put a sensor band on your head Telafus." Skias extracting the headband Gamers used to get into the Web. This pontiff was not afraid to use Reganian technology for his hallowed duty. Elentra was glad. The use of technology did not compromise the soul. Skias rose and gently wrapped the matte black headband on Telafus's shaven head.

A hologram appeared on Skias's work desk. The glowing sphere permeated by a purple haze. Tiny lights indicating the planets. At the periphery the glow of their galaxy.

"This is a representation of our universe. I thought the purple haze was the alien field. You..." and Skias used his remote control to change the imagery within, "...will see that the alien field is a pale yellow. It was initially assumed that we might have finally detected the Cosmic Consciousness. Since the Holy Mind is Eternal and Infinite it can

never be determined as a physical form. Then it was assumed that it could be an extension of our resonance commingled with that of Regum. We are not certain. Nothing is. So Elentra, what do you make of this?"

Before she could answer Telafus blurted out: "My essence. You are seeing my essence. Nothing you can do about it. I am cosmic." Looking with childish delight at the hologram.

"His psychic residue. His projection? Is Telafus..."

"Telafus Telafus Telafus. What is he compared to me?"

"...projecting via the Immortals this field?"

"No."

"I possess the secret of time, all the worlds are at my beck and call. I am the creator of what will be, what will come to pass. No one can deny me."

"He thinks he is someone else."

"Possession."

"Yes but who's?"

"Could the Reganians be behind this?"

"In what way Elentra?"

"Well they have personas in the Web. Maybe Telafus absorbed some mythological being. The way the Earthers, their shamans imbibe the fantasies in there. This could be the Web you know."

"An interesting supposition."

"The Web. A platform."

Telafus eyes flaring. "Useful to...but you will know soon enough." His eyes fixed on Elentra. The dark orbs receding in perpetual continuity. She held the gaze willing herself into his open eyes. They contained space itself. A vast nothingness as something. Filled with an ether or that of his expanded soul. It went on forever, without end. Elentra was not scared. Burn outs were not that rare. She had seen the look before. The soul inflated, embracing everything which overloaded the mind to comprehend and cope with the vast realm they expanded into. She explained this to Skias.

"Yes but if you look closely, the purple haze does not extend as far as Prima or Regum. Only the pale yellow field." Focused on the hologram.

"Maybe he inserted himself into that."

"Can your device quantify the phenomena?"

"Certainly." Skias punched in some commands and a flat light screen appeared next to the hologram. Whole data strings rolled across it.

"Slow it down please." All she needed was a quick view. The technicians were the experts there. But she could recognise the algebraic configurations, the inherent algorithms driving the data. The equations ran into infinity again and again. Trying to quantify without success. Either the structure of the mathematical methodology was flawed or the field was.

"Something is definitely wrong here."

"You're telling me." Skias jested. She returned his smile.

"Nothing is wrong or everything is wrong." Telafus laughed. It sent a chill down her spine.

"Is it his mind we are seeing?"

"Or something else?" Elentra speculated.

Telafus was grinning triumphantly.

"Your numbers will never get at me. I have them all." Telafus's certainly disconcerting.

"Is he always like this?"

"Mostly. Sometimes he is another person. But he won't reveal whoever is in possession."

"And nothing from the Web?"

"Not yet. You think it's Web based? Even though the purple field is nowhere near us? Tell me Elentra, how is your astronomy?"

"Basic."

"What do you know of the galaxy?"

"That it's there. Sorry to be so trite."

"No that is alright."

At the mention of the galaxy Telafus's eyes withdrew, watching them suspiciously.

"Who are you?" Elentra directed her gaze at Telafus.

"I am many, I am all, I am one. I can be whoever I want and you will never know me. I will only reveal what I wish to reveal. And you will be none the wiser. No one will. I am indeterminate to your puny minds. Mere sand beneath my feet. I shall..." then Telafus withdrew into himself.

"I wonder if this madness is not faked."

"How?" Skias asked.

"A veil."

"Camouflage?"

"Something like it. From what little psychology I do know Telafus is suffering from ego expansion. The immensity of the Immortals too much. To cope with the shock, he's invented a third person so that he does not have to deal with it. It's happened before Skias."

"That might explain a lot. It is also the opinion of the doctors. Your opinion has verified our analysis." Skias voided the screen and holograph. The study resumed its warm comforting glow of the low lamps lining the walls.

"Given his ego inflation, it's a pity we can't use him as a remote viewer. Imagine the chaos he would create." Skias amused by the idea. "And it has nothing to do with the Immortals Elentra. I was there as part of my inauguration. Had it been otherwise I too would have been embraced by something other." Thinking back of the strange occurrence. He was worried the Immortals were infected. But by what? Telafus had the answer. The experts agreed on ego inflation. It made sense. But was it the right prognosis?

"Telafus. Are you an Immortal?" Elentra asked. Skias was impressed.

"Ha. Immortals." Telafus refocused.

"Are you?"

"I am."

"We know that. But are you the next Immortal?"

"Ah very clever. I can be if I want. But they are so puny, so limited, so curtailed, so contained in their little realm. So self absorbed. But they shall serve me well when the time comes. Time comes and time goes. And you will never know the difference." Telafus chuckled.

"Are you divine?"

"Divine. What a constriction. Divine. What does that mean when the universe is my playground. I am ready. You may join me of course." And his eyes opened up again. For a moment Elentra was touched by his sense of infinity.

"You have a most difficult case Skias."

"From now on Elentra, all burn outs that show similar signs are to be routed through this office. Only Nahkt has my confidence. So if I am unavailable," he rose and took the headband of Telafus's glistening head putting it back into a locked drawer, the empty hologram collapsed, "you may safely deal with him. I will see that the Ecclesiastics and Divines do not interfere. They use the Domain Lords and vice versa. This is beyond politics. Straight here."

"I am gratified. You have my fullest cooperation Skias. If the next burn out does show similar signs, again I assume no messengers, no third parties?"

"Correct. Just you."

"I am honoured."

"Any questions then?"

"Yes Skias." she looked at Telafus wondering what he did know. "If this ego inflation continues, as it will I would suggest Skias that it might be of interest...you see I just had an idea. These third persons the burnt cases manufacture, invent if you will, are there similarities?"

"An excellent point Elentra. I shall go through the data."

"Trouble is when BrainDraining given the dangerous nature of the event that too is deleted."

"I didn't know that. I thought it would be in some secure stand-alone system."

"And officially that is correct. It is too dangerous to consider. Madness what a strange catastrophe it has on the mind." She paused.

"Trouble is, Regum could access it, that is the great fear. Then turn the psychopathology against us."

"It can work both ways Skias. Let the insanity loose."

"Elentra, why are there not more like you." He was pleased looking at her like a kind uncle. She had an answer for that but mentioning it might not please him. Such as thinking without keeping oneself in check just in case one transgressed the limited boundaries one's domain delimited upon one's thought processes.

"You are certainly inspiring."

"There is one thing that is important. Access."

"Access?"

"Yes. The data base of the DVs. It is sealed off to my group. Only the highest of Ecclesiastics and a few Divines. Plus the relevant Domain Lords if they so wish."

"Yes, you are right." He made his way to his desk, and wrote on official paper his order that Elentra and whom she thought necessary in her absence, looked up at her and said "Kroena?"

"Safe. I trust her impeccably."

"Kroena it is." And finished writing out the order for her to access all DV data regarding burn outs, BrainDraining.

"Without reference to any DLs?" Elentra risked going over the highest authorities. It was a gamble.

"Your reasons?" he looked up, pen poised over paper.

"Security Skias."

"Indeed. A most useful term. So inclusive. Shall we say `for pontificate consideration only.'"

"Yes that would narrow it down nicely."

"So it shall be." He finished writing. The duplicate he handed to Elentra.

"The data. The safest medium is paper."

"Yes of course. From now on you only report to me." Then smiled. "Well at least we have made some progress. You have served, are serving I should say, us well."

"My duties Skias."

"Of course. Still, it is appreciated. Remember I trust you in this."

"Rest assured. This meeting never occurred."

"Exactly."

Back on board the Orbital Elentra called in Kroena. She familiarized her second in command regarding the conversation she had with the pontiff. Then extracted the pontifical order beaming victoriously. Having cleared up the bureaucratic end Elentra arranged for their observers to continue as they were. She informed Kroena that she was going to align herself with the DVs directly. It was not unusual as section chief to insert herself with the DVs specific orientation. To check their pure information without alluding to the secondary field. Making sure her mind did not create or anticipate and thus project its willed ideas onto their reality. Elentra merely explained that they were after divergent developments designated as an alert. She mentioned the possibility of a new threat, an aberration in the making without relaying the source, which would remain unidentified until she knew more.

That done they set to work. Elentra suited up, went out amongst the DVs scanning general space. The back up reservists in place. Instead of opening up herself she scanned the DVs around her to find one who suited her temperament, who resonated with her. Trying to find the best `sensitive' mind. After a while she latched on to Kesheera. Her resonance was fluctuating more so than the others in her group. If this new field harboured any hostile intent then she was one level removed from its assault capabilities. She could gain the information which had sent Telafus over the edge without her going down that same path to perdition.

Having chosen Kesheera she sought out her file back on the Orbital. It was classical recruitment. A precocious child in some distant village noted by the priests of

her school. Her fate thus sealed. One with an imaginative bent. Kesheera had drawn strange engines, water driven wheels to mill flour, crush rocks, steam engines using their locomotive force to travel both on the ground and using dirigibles to cruise power assisted through the air, even into space.

From then on she seemed to 'lock into' the web and her imagination went riot. At first destined to become an engineer her tutors discovered her psychic talent. For she had not accessed the Web via black market headbands but through sheer force of will. Once in she explored the cyber worlds with abandon. Seeking the best brains out and picking them clean. A natural remote viewer. Burn proof her guardians hoped. By being familiar with the concept of alien intelligences, their foreign mind set would not cause any conflict in her serenity observing those domains with fascination. Unaffected by the inherent convoluted logic in there that unsettled lesser minds. Nor was she blinded by the need to refer back to the Cosmic Consciousness as reinforcement thus keeping her psychic realm clear of unnecessary interference. Kesheera could travel at will virtually anywhere. All Elentra had to do was nudge her in the right direction. Not that she would know for Elentra could clear her mind as well by basically subduing her own personality. If Kesheera was aware of Elentra's focussing on the new field she would merely sense a guiding orientation and hopefully accept the new focus as if it actually came from within her.

So far so good.

They were both 'in'. The suddenness surprised Elentra. The ease of the realignment went smoothly. Kesheera accepted the change of perspective without undue surprise. Kesheera even managed to do a self analysis to make sure she was not the creator of the field's presence. It was no longing to satisfy idle curiosity or a wish to escape into a cyber dreamworld. Kesheera dismissed the idea this being the alien field with its mentally disturbing malignancy. The field the two accessed was loaded with a sense of presence. Indeterminate and distant. Just as the hologram had shown.

The jolt resulting from contact created an inverted perspective. Not outside in but inside out. Remarkable. Elentra felt Kesheera's barely suppressed excitement followed immediately by her focused calmness. Outstanding. Kesheera held the vision at bay. Both there and not there. Heretical thoughts in the background. That the Cosmic Mind was not everything, that other events on a huge scale were manifest in space. The Cosmic Mind merely in the background rather than an attentive force in direct contact with its sentient creations. That other mindful forms of life existed in the universe, one Elentra had detected. Her own secret. She was impressed with the young woman feeling

kinship. If the other DVs were aware or aligned they gave no sign. Remaining focussed on the vast realm of space, on the alien field thus blocking out this phenomena. Something or someone had achieved an impressive effect. Pellucid in its projection. Real not imagined. Elentra was satisfied, fascinated.

Then it happened. Its resonance in tandem with both their minds. Elentra no longer the observer. Equally present within this creation. It hummed with potent energy. Opaque light made up of tiny soft glowing points. Denser towards its centre where an orb glowed darkly. She let Kesheera go, not disengaging, more in tandem. This was too intriguing to leave to a secondary party. An AI construct? Perhaps. No. Impregnated with a unique essence. More than a resonance. Oriented and resolute.

So playing games? Elentra considered. This opportunity might not come so quickly and easily again. The dispersed glowing points of light were stars, no, planets! Worlds upon worlds. Duplicated. The mottled dark brown of Prima, the brilliant yellow speckled aura of Regum. A pearly blue, white and green of another planet with sentient life. Earth. The pinkish red of its near companion. Several of each, duplicated. A tiny flash of light. A spaceship! An ancient city. Cities on these planets. Each running a different time sequence. Diverse scenario's. Then the ship blinked out of existence, taking the cities below with it. The inserted field voiding everything. A powerful force negating reality? Then the ship appeared again. A time loop! The inserted field appeared again, voiding everything then it replayed. The field felt familiar.

'I hold these worlds at my will.' The voice inside Elentra's head.

Elentra was not about to engage. Is this what Telafus discovered? But why the madness?

'My will will be done.'

This was not the Cosmic Consciousness.

Laughter. Nasty triumphant.

Disengage. Nothing. How to get out?

'By aligning yourself to me.' It commanded, its authority dominant.

Distracted Elentra turned within the foggy lilac field. Regum's worlds. A subtle glow at its nearest star. Flickering realities popped in and out of its expansive inserted energy field. Similar to what the DVs could project into and onto space. So the Reganian's could achieve what the DVs had accomplished. Inserting other realities.

'Achieving my desire.' Then that field vanished, relooped and started again.

'They try so hard without realising I possess all the potentialities of time.' It sneered. 'You can be part of it, you can be entrapped within it or you can dominate with me your own destiny.' An implied threat.

Kesheera was a floating essence gravitating around her. Her aura the same lilac as the essence of the field. She was absorbing whatever it was. Then Kesheera vanished.

'She understood.' It said cryptically.

Elentra concentrated on her breath. It was the easiest way for her to disengage the continual thought processes generated within her mind. Moments later the imagery in which she was collapsed into one of many of her tumultuous thoughts. Her mind bifurcating rapidly. That's what had sent Telafus over the edge.

'He belongs with me. As do so many others on so many worlds.' It sneered with satisfied relish.

She continued to concentrate on her breath, thinking herself as part of the greater universe. The purple field receded inside her head and vanished like a dream upon waking.

She was back with the DVs. As was Kesheera. Elentra expected a query from this strange contact. Had it all been a projection. She was no longer linked to Kesheera. Her mind remembered the duplicate worlds, the alternative realities, the projected field from that distant star. The same resonance as the DVs. All possible futures held in a fluctuating field near the centre of their galaxy. The voice within it. An AI? A cosmic being? What of the Great Mind? So absent, so silent, so not there! Were they deluding themselves? She shuddered at the thought that the universe was indeed as empty as it looked. Except for this entity. A past event? A future event? A contained event waiting to break out and expand into their universe?

Its need to harvest other minds indicated a certain weakness as if it could not go beyond its limited expanse, needing others to further its aims. Telafus held the answer. Maybe. So did the DVs who had burnt out. Their raving jabbering minds frightening through their distorted, twisted, churning resonance. No wonder BrainDraining was so essential to rid them of this horror they envisaged. She would have to get into their on board systems. BrainDraining might wipe their memories but from what she knew about computers there were always stray bits of code left behind. They were eventually deleted through continual clean sweeps. However the sweepers themselves might have tiny embedded remnants as well. It occurred to Elentra that just as the Earther's projected their collective psychoses onto reality so would the DVs, maybe all sentient life

forms. That included the Reganians. As they were also their target she might begin with them. Come in through a back channel, through cyberspace. Safer.

On her way back to the Orbital she considered what the Reganians appeared to have accomplished. If they did indeed duplicate what the DVs could achieve then they would be undisputed masters of the universe. The struggle had reached, literally, a new dimension. The idea of going into cyberspace made her feel wicked. Basically forbidden. Primary objective: all methods needed to be explored. She would wait until Kesheera's shift was over, then debrief her before her controllers did.

"Kesheera. My name is Elentra. I'm head of the DVs." Elentra introduced herself. Kesheera looked composed. Not even slightly stimulated by her vision. Her resonance remarkably steady. No tell tale signs of excitement. Cool, very calm, totally self possessed.

"Pleased to meet you Elentra." Serene. They were not in the usual debriefing room but in the scanner section. The huge machine, really a complex box, a tray for the designated subject to be wheeled into the cavity within where the scanning took place. It gleamed white under the overhead lights in its pristine and secure enclosure. Kesheera not overly concerned at the extra attention she was receiving.

"You have an exceptional mind." Elentra paying her a compliment.

"Oh?" genuinely surprised. Her dark eyes calm.

"I believe you have remarkable capabilities. A Natural in other words."

"So I've been told." Not even awed. Her gaze steady.

"Normal debriefings work fine. But in the end talking can only get one so far." Hoping that might trigger a reaction. Nothing. Kesheera studying her.

"I would like to scan you. We do this now and again."

"I know." Kesheera simply replied.

"Through that process we not only just siphon what you perceive but strengthen the composite picture and enhance our resonant states."

"Aha."

"It wont hurt I assure you. Completely harmless."

"Well it would be Elentra."

Elentra was not so sure. She remembered the last time when they had to disengage the whole system as it nearly had been infected, compromised, crashed. She wondered if whatever Kesheera picked up out there might repeat that sequence.

"Just making you feel at ease Kesheera. All you have to do is lay on that tray. There's nothing you have to do. Are you relaxed enough or would you like a mild sedative?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"That's good. Who knows we might even find hidden capabilities that you might not be aware of. The mind is a wonderful organ. So mysterious. Who knows what is hidden in your unconscious." Elentra hinted. Kesheera was giving nothing away. Not caring. Unless whatever she had experienced out there was indeed buried deep within her.

"You checking for contamination?" blasé as well. She had no idea what Elentra's interest in her was. Maybe her mindfulness was unique. She felt great, full of potent possibilities, enhanced, way beyond the other DVs who were insular compared to her. Kesheera could barely relate to their vapid minds. She hoped that the scan would prove just how far ahead she was of them. Way above them. If Elentra's scan could prove that then she would be satisfied. She was looking forward to the experience. She had been scanned after her arrival but that was ages ago.

"No" Elentra avoiding the question. "We have detected a slight change in the field's orientation. So we're making sure if the DVs are aware of it, if it is pertinent to our quest, even," she smiled, "if it matters at all that is."

"The field is always changing within itself Elentra. Millions of minds in there. Rather tedious. Almost banal. A little boring as it is always the same."

"So you detected no change then?"

"Unless the endless jabbering has some significance." She replied with an indifference which surprised Elentra.

"It has. You've probably reached the outer limits of your search. If my hunch is right, there might even be an advancement in your status. I cannot guarantee it of course. I can only make recommendations. You could become a special agent. Who knows? But first we have to make sure."

"Advancement? Now I am listening. Because Elentra, quite frankly, that alien field is more a nuisance than anything else."

"That might be due to your special resonance. Not all are of your exceptional calibre."

"Is that so? Here I thought...never mind."

"No go on."

"It's nothing."

"Kesheera." Elentra admonished.

"Sorry I was forgetting myself. It's just that, well, I cannot see any inherent danger in the alien field. It's just there, full of garbage. Their dreams, their wants, their desires, it's so tedious. I was beginning to worry the boredom was going to kill me. Not in actuality, just mind numbing stupidity."

"I'm glad to hear it. It means we can beat this."

"Beat it? Why not just ignore it?"

"Because Kesheera, whilst it may not have an effect on you it has on others. As you are aware it contaminates our planet's protective resonance."

"Yeah well that's easily explained."

It was Elentra's turn to be surprised.

"The base level intelligence of our people."

Elentra hid her shock. Kesheera was right of course. But that was social policy. Keep the natural state of their people unsullied. Kesheera was essentially saying they should follow the path of Regum. She was lucky that her resonance was so tight. If they did not need her she would have been contained below, maybe even reconfigured so that this anti social attitude would be negated.

"The holy path, the Great Mind's chosen race must remain pure. Aligned."

"Yeah well, I suppose so. Not doing much good is it?"

"Well Kesheera you are though. Let's focus on that shall we?"

"As you wish Elentra."

"Shall we proceed?"

Kesheera rose like one who was certain of herself. Walked towards the extended tray climbed on and lay head first ready to be inserted. Elentra at the console pressed a button and the tray glid into the cavity resonance scanner.

Then she called in Khral who was on standby. A witness was necessary.

"We're scanning Kesheera. She's top grade. Very independent. Good up here not so good down there."

Khral smiled at the divergence of attitudes. No wonder most DVs were not allowed back down. Their gain and their loss at the same time.

The scanner hummed into life, all systems on. Screens on line. Elentra doing a deep scan, short of BrainDraining. Kesheera too precious to be wasted. Plus the fact that the process had to be run past the Ecclesiastics and she certainly did not wish to involve them. Who knows what they would make of this new field. If it did contain a super intelligence it might be of use to them. Ecclesiastics hated space, space travel,

technology, everything they did not deem holy. Elentra knew that whatever was in there was not holy. Just extremely powerful, power they could use before Regum got onto it. Unless they created it.

"Let's go." Then: "Kesheera ready?"

"Yes." Came the muffled reply.

"Starting...now."

The images came through immediately. All mixed up. First the mind's memories. Home, the village, her school, faces of friends, the sense of being enclosed, trapped as her resonance came on-line. The field or her life? The scanner could not differentiate. Elentra had set it on broad spectrum. Milking cows, farmers racking in the hay, sunny brooks, buzzing insects, birds chirping, images of summer. A world without care. Not exactly revealing. Still plenty of time to go. Picnics at a river embankment, villagers outside a tavern. A thunderstorm, clouds billowing skywards, stars in space. At last. Getting somewhere. Empty space. No orbital. The villagers had no idea they existed. All the scanner retrieved were her planetary memories.

Elentra opened the data banks on the console to what the other DVs were locked on to. No response. No DVs either. She deleted that file and inserted Regum's. Fallen machines, crashed planes, charred wreckage, dark sombre skyscrapers totally blank, broken windows, fallen off solar panels, the dead everywhere, the debris of a crashed twisted orbital, strewn wreckage, a blasted city, twisted burnt tree trunks like jagged knives seared unto death, roaming ragged people amongst litter and debris! Shit! What was going on?

She deleted Regum's file but the horror continued. The dead in the suburbs, disused ground vehicles, burnt out homes, abandoned factories, Regum destroyed by some ultra calamity. Was this the future? Had Prima won by such foul deeds? Or was this the doing of the alien field? She reinserted the data of Prima. The same golden innocence. So they were not effected. That was something. Khral looked aghast at the horrendous disaster. Was Earth responsible? She inserted the relevant file. Teeming cities, silver glinting flying machines with long wings powering through the skies, a duplicate of Regum, almost. This could not be! Houses of worship. That's better. Devout believers. Technology with no apparent mental conflict. Two different mind sets combined in one sentient race. Prima reverted back to form. Elentra was not sure she liked this.

"This will have to be contained Khral."

"What did she uncover?"

"An imagined future. She's got psychopathic tendencies. We're going to have to go to the next level."

Khral did not object. Not his decision. Elentra decided to not quite BrainDrain Kesheera, just reconfigure her resonance. Extract the poison. She set the scanner to the frequency where and when Kesheera envisioned the twisted broken lifeless landscape of Regum. Completely unexpected. On the screen her resonance graphically glowing in pure dark reds now stabilised. Elentra added the scanner's scrubbers to the same frequency. The psychopathic images reverberated in unison then the scanner extracted those wavelengths into its cavity. Kesheera's memory partially drained. When she came out she would remember nothing of that nightmare scenario. If this was Regum's future, or be it Earth's or their doing she was not going to have anything to do with it. In fact she made up her mind to try and stop this future from happening. But for now she had no idea how she would go about it. Short of defecting to Regum. There still was the Web.

Whilst the scanner was extracting Kesheera's dark visions Elentra pulled out the pontiff's orders. Khral was impressed.

"This data is to be deleted."

"Will do Elentra."

"The cleaned up version of Kesheera's scan remains. This is too important to be picked apart by any other party. That decision I leave to the pontiff."

"Understood."

The scanner had done its job. Odd, the image Elentra experienced out there had never entered Kesheera's mind. Or if it had it was no longer there. Unless Kesheera had hidden it so well even the scanner could not access it. An interesting woman. Elentra would keep this to herself.

A sleeping Kesheera was ejected from the cavity.

"Let's hope the extraction was complete." Elentra still worried at the immensity of the tragedy. "Not a word Khral. This gets out and it's BrainDrain time."

"Elentra."

"I mean it. I have to make this clear. And clean."

"You have my word."

"And keep on eye on Kesheera."

"Fine." He nodded sombrely.

Regum: the Outlands.

Krool, shaman to Khratham, ruler of the land of Regum's true inhabitants, was invoking the sky god Achter at his open air temple outside the city. He hummed his prayer seeking guidance. The coming of the priests and their perfidious religion claiming their unitary god as the supreme being in the universe could not go unchallenged. Khratham under their spell. They promised much but delivered little. The simple act of belief in this invisible god's might based on mere faith, faith! ha it took more than that to attract a deity. Krool's advice thwarted. Khratham interested in how his subjects responded to the priest's mission. At least Krool had his tribe, his ancestors to fall back on. Still alive in the northern mountains at the polar edge, hunting seals, bears, keeping wolves at bay, fishing in the many lakes. Khratham's power as king barely reached that far. As long as they remained in their lands they were free. Khratham was hinting that his subjects accept the new divinity. If this god was real then why had no other shaman ever found this being? Nothing but lies so that the priests could spiritually enslave all those they came in contact with. They even promised new weapons that could harm and kill an enemy at a distance. Powerful magic which made their pledge so attractive. For the powerful of the king's city, taking its name of the ruler the elite had since the coming of the priests sought to subjugate Krool's own kin. Without success. Their magic was far too prevailing. Attacking with potent spells the priest-soldiers minds sent out to subdue them ended in utter confusion. A few staid to send their message back to the king that they were a free people.

Khratham was once again planning an assault on them, guided by the perfidious priests. What did they know of warcraft. Mere courtiers in black. A plague upon the land. Krool would deal with them. So he prayed to Achter seeking guidance. All he got was confusion. It was a sign. But who was it that was confused? He himself? His people or perhaps the whole kingdom. Thrown into turmoil due to the insipid machinations of the priests. His presence at court tolerated but only just. If Khratham did banish him he would be released from his allegiance and free to act in any way to maintain that freedom. Magical weapons aside.

Discordant visions, images of possible alternatives, all vying in a cesspool of perdition to assert one dominant reality. The influence of the priest's delusional god Krool was never-the-less perplexed as he squatted in the sacred enclosure of Achter on the hill overlooking the city below. The priests were disturbing the equilibrium of the sacred world

which shimmered beyond surface appearances. An echoing call. The presence of a silver mechanical bird, the coming of strangers. An omen. Another group of strangers would leave their mark behind on the ground in a mechanical device. Krool knew of what the distant Reganian's were capable of. But Regum left them alone. These beings came to steal his knowledge, that of his people. They were hiding their intent under the guise of arriving as seekers of the ancient wisdom. That plus the priests was not a good combination, a portentous sign. With Khratham's blessing. He was being fooled. But then Khratham only cared for his own position at whatever cost, even that of his soul.

He thought he saw a silver speck in the sky. Achter's presence. Thanking the god for the sign and the revelation. He would alert Khratham to the dangerous game the priests were playing. If their god was accepted, dire happenings would tear them all apart.

The sky grey. Autumn. A cold breeze slicing its way down the mountains. He doubted Khratham would send his soldiers out this late in the season. But come next spring Krool was certain Khratham, bedazzled by the priests would send out an expedition. So a little magic thrown at the strangers might wake the king up as to who possessed real power over the elements, over lives.

Krool was satisfied with the discordant vision. His mind had been in turmoil ever since the arrival of the priests. The people though went about their business as always. At least they were not on their knees as was the king. He would deal with the blasphemy. Denying their olden heritage. Time to have a chat with the king.

He rose with creaking knees leaving the holy fane. A circle of stones on the hill its hallowed precinct. Achter, the invisible god made manifest by the wind, showing signs in the clouds, revealing at night the passed on souls in the heavenly lights shining eternal. The home of gods, women and men. Thinking of women his mind drifted to Mudhan. An extraordinary priestess who believed in the divine as an essence yet prayed to no god or gods in calm equanimity. Neither for nor against. She the balance between the two contending beliefs. Maybe her presence at the white abbey would tilt the coming struggle in his favour. With a purposeful stride he made his way down the grassy hill, devoid of supplicants towards the bustle of the town below.

The guards at the kings palisade let him pass, the polished tips of their sturdy spears glinting even in the overcast sky. He smiled in acknowledgement and mingled in the busy street lined with shops, full of goods and wares. Ahead the citadel, a massive solid structure as old as their history. Two more guarded towers let him through amongst

the drays and carts delivering their goods to the palace within the citadel. Krool felt the presence of the priests. He could smell their intrigue.

The first courtyard was busy with blacksmith's, carpenters, millers, bakers, butchers all looking after the king and his entourage of hangers on, of rich merchants seeking favours or redress of some wrong done, of petitioners, of minor chiefs asserting their lesser power and the presence of the priests who always moved in groups amongst the people afraid to be on their own. Then there were the beggars and vagabonds whom the king used as his informants. For they knew the street better than anyone else and were rewarded with a meal, some wine and a few coins. Today the king saw them all in due course. Maybe it was not the best time to seek his attention but the discordant vision was not one to be ignored.

Through one last guard post as harried soldiers searched for any hidden weapons, acknowledged Krool's presence, their eyes trying to ascertain his thoughts. Not that they could transgress into his mind. Unlike the priests he kept his knowledge to himself, except for his people. Through to the inner courtyard, ancient trees giving cool shade where the courtiers disported themselves whilst awaiting the pleasure of the king. Plotting their own ascent trying to gain royal favours. He was not one to beg, to seek, even to hint that he wanted anything at all. Through an arched doorway, the guards now ceremonial looking self-important bordering on disdainful arrogance at him. So there was a shift in the palace's or the king's attitude. How easily they gave themselves away. Finally, down a short corridor admitted to the public courtroom where Khratham, in his richly embroidered and bejewelled robe and golden crown held court. Intricate tapestries lined the walls of past battles, glorious in knightly victories of distant struggles to claim the crown. Tall windows let in light but on this gloomy day the candles had been lit giving the lofty cold room a festive look.

Next to the king, on a smaller ornate chair sat Mudhan, the abbottess herself. Krool waited as the king dealt with some fur lined merchant, making his way through the few admitted. Catching the king's attention.

"You may come forth Krool. You know Mudhan of course."

"My liege, my lady." She acknowledged him graceful as always. Krool stood. If he was given a chair it would be sign of special royal favour. None was forthcoming. The pages remained where they were. Behind the throne, an ornately carved padded chair, empty, stood the dark visage of a priest. No wonder the hall was gloomy. In the candlelight Khratham's jewels and precious stones glinted, his woollen robes keeping the king warm. Mudhan was in her white gown, spotless as always. Khratham called over

one of his attendants, whispered something and the attendant announced that the king would be in conference. No one dared express their displeasure at the interruption. The room cleared amongst suppressed murmurs and shuffling of feet. The dense smell of the unwashed dissipated.

"Come." Khratham who had cut his hair short, in the manner of the priests led the way behind the throne followed by Mudhan who gave him a terse smile, a warning followed by the silent shadow of the priest. They followed the king into one of his private chambers.

The ceremonial guards in front of the oaken door saluted, opened the doors passing into the royal retreat. Servants followed but Khratham dismissed them. Then bade them be seated. Well a minor favour at least. The chairs were of course lower than Khratham's who sat on the most comfortable. At a table a silver pitcher of wine and gleaming goblets.

"Wine anyone? Mudhan and Krool declined, the priest of course did not. They were one's never to refuse anything. In public of course they would have to accept the king's generosity but in private it was good manners to deny oneself. The guards announced Shatan, the king's supreme advisor. Ancient with long white hair and a plain brown robe he entered refined as always.

"Your highness." Shatan bowed slightly and was allowed the last seat.

"Priest." The king ordered.

"My liege." He bowed slightly then from beneath his robe retrieved a flat object. On the small table around which they sat he placed it reverently. It glowed an image forming. Growing into a three dimensional representation of the city. All in miniature yet alive! More dazzling magic of the priests. Khratham filled with joy. Mudhan watched with interest, Shatan with caution. Krool barely hid his displeasure nearly sneering at this childish trick.

"This my liege is the future." The priest intoned.

Khratham looked satisfied at the image of the city. It was enough to disgust Krool. The vision shifted. A battle of the king's soldiers victorious as they hacked, stabbed, slashed with violent frenzy at what looked like his people! Then the scene of carnage changed. Regum's city. Blackened, charred, destroyed. Dead bodies everywhere, burnt out machines, smouldering fires, a pall of dark soot and smoke drifting along the streets. Then it was over.

"Explain what you revealed through the power of your Supreme Being to me." The king ordered the priest.

"Your enemies vanquished oh Khratham. All lands recognise you as the highest of temporal rulers in your possession." The priest spoke with reverence.

"Ours is a religion of peace." Without batting an eyelid at the carnage just viewed, "The beneficent vision of your future oh king. Supreme." Not exactly how Krool envisioned Achter's premonition granted him.

"The outer tribes, denying the grace of the Great God are the cause of civil strife and homicidal war. Denying the king his peace. A nation divided through the heretical blasphemy of false divinities. Unity of mind and soul to which the king has this right, obstinately denied. A dark nefarious resentment of those riven souls denying the godly truth and wisdom of true revelation. Threatening the tranquillity that the king rightfully expects. Rebellion, traitorous deeds, dark murder, foul thoughts all threatening this land." The priest looked menacingly at Krool. Shatan was disturbed, Mudhan appalled at the carnage, Khratham eyeing Krool with slitted eyes as if he were the cause of this dark pretence of the future. A trick by the priest, it was obvious. They were using the magic of Regum's devices for their own ends. No wonder his people rebelled at this fakery, this pretence at holiness, this doom laden scenario threatening the real peace of the future. Being held to spiritual blackmail.

"What say you Krool?" Khratham's icy voice deadly.

"A clever trick."

"Oh a clever trick indeed. A foul conspiracy to deny us what is rightfully ours to receive." Khratham's eyes flashing with suppressed anger.

"It is not my doing." Krool replied calmly.

"Shatan?"

"My king. Forewarned is forearmed. The Outlanders defy you. They do not pay you obescience. They resent the new order." Shatan replied eyes lowered. Telling the king what he wanted to hear. Unusual for Shatan.

"Mudhan?"

"It is indeed a future. But not necessarily *the* future."

"Explain yourself priestess."

"If no attempt at union is successful then yes this may come to pass. But it does not have to be that way..."

"I agree, it does not. And it will not." Khratham interrupted surprising Krool.

Mudhan waited respectfully. The king motioned she could continue.

"I was going to say that it is a possibility not an actuality. There are strangers coming who want to study the wisdom of the people. To draw the poison out of those

souls contaminated with an evil darkness. If they succeed then this may not come to pass. Nor should the priests force their belief upon your subjects Khratham. If this supreme being is as the priest's claim then it will reveal itself to them. However if they force the issue then this calamity may not be avoided."

Shatan was impressed. Krool though not satisfied saw her logic. The priest seemed slightly put out. Kratham wavered in his certainty.

"I see." He said at last. Not so assured at whatever the priest had pretended was the future...if they were denied their supremacy over his subjects in matters spiritual.

"You saw the might of the avenging deity regarding Regum. They are unbelievers and will pay the price for their arrogance." Khratham said at last.

Krool realised the king was under the priest's spell.

"The ancient gods have withdrawn with the coming might of the true god. However, Mudhan is right. The anger and wrath need not come to pass." Khratham continued. The priest stiffened a little. "Krool." He locked eyes with the shaman. There was a power shining within him that could not be denied. Krool pulled back.

"Yes Khratham."

"I will give you a chance to redeem yourself from your misguided allegiance to the vanquished gods of old. They were the messengers of the true god. I want you to go to your people and show them the errors of their ways. This, I will." Came the royal command. Krool hid his shock. Shatan's face chiselled granite. Mudhan showing interest in the small black object from whence the image of the future had come. "No longer can they deny the true revelation of what will come to pass. I will not as yet send the priests to your people. Not yet. If they accept the divine wisdom granted by the priests then peace may yet reign. Supreme under the hallowed guidance of his representatives. Deny the ultimate truth and your people will taste the bitter wrath of an offended god. You have until spring."

So Khratham was planning an expedition. Krool even guessed he wanted this mission to fail. He would also have to do something about the coming strangers. 'Draw the poison!' what a diabolical scheme. Yes, target the strangers. It would let the king know of his power without breaking the peace with his subjects.

"My will will be done." Khratham's voice hard steel. "Your magic is but an illusion that will be dissipated like the morning fog under the light of the divine one and only god. It would be foolish to refute the revelation. Any who deny this truth will be considered traitors and dealt with by the full severity of the new laws."

"Your majesty. I have no intention of going against the royal decree. As for your subjects and my people they must decide for themselves."

"Then it would be wise you enlighten them Krool. You may leave the royal presence."

Peremptorily dismissed. Shocked rather than dismayed even though Achter had forewarned him of a coming conflict. Krool surprised at the sudden turn of events. Shatan accepted the status quo, or appeared to. Mudhan was the only one not to have been turned by this trickery. Kratham undisputed ruler. As there was no progeny, no one waiting in the isles to usurp the king Krool was temporarily isolated from gaining a source of support. Shatan was his own man. Krool thrown out. Now was the time to rely on one's resources. He would seek the guidance of the real spirit beings inhabiting not just the planet but the cloaken realms hidden behind the appearance of reality. He would find a way to combat these insidious perpetrators denying them their spiritual heritage. The priests his rallying point of focus to strike back.

He rose, bowed and left the royal chamber. Not being vain, Krool would not be vindictive either. A clear head was needed. In the outer hall all was noise and gossip. If they knew what was in store for them they might stop thinking about themselves for a while. No one knew what transpired but the news would soon leak out. The rumours would spread and his name blackened by those currying the king's favour. The weak would rally, the strong appraise the situation dragging the others along. Only Mudhan remained independent for the time being. Some tried to gain his attention but Krool distracted did not pay them the time they sought. Yet he would need friends in the city.

He walked past the first guards who still saluted him. That would soon change. The king was enthralled. Krool would drive that home. Make it known to his people and hopefully dampen the priests oily obsequience.

Once outside the citadel he breathed easier. If something happened to the king then the priests might supplant him with an even weaker person. These spiritual ghouls had to be thwarted. He stepped past puddles smelling of urine, following some pack animals having delivered their goods to the palace. He needed a plan. His mind could think of none except for exposing the priests as liars.

The clouds were lifting, Krool passing through the last gate at the city's perimeter. He looked longingly at the sky for inspiration. Achter was vague at best. Testing the resources of his followers. The clouds might have lost their heavy sombreness, the smeary greys streaking the skies foretelling what? The sky shrouding itself in mystery. Uniforming defining thoughts. Confusion the future.

It struck him, not for the first time, that he was alone in the city. Mudhan would not be against him. That at least was something. Shatan the consummate realist. He sought the aid of the gods when necessary. Any god, even the priest's god if Khratham willed it, which seemed most likely. The only power he could draw on were the arctic tribes. They traded in furs, sometimes oil as well. Some ventured further south to fell the tall pines for grains from these lush valleys. They fermented their own liquor and with the food of the gods lived amongst them. That could not be taken from them. What could the priest's promise in their stead apart from mealy mouthed sermons? An idea. Well ideas needed to be backed up. That the priests were using Khratham was obvious. What was in it for him though? Krool thought as he made his way back north. Was he truly on his own? Had the gods withdrawn? Were they lesser powers? Inspiration would come. He knew that from before. Revelation often coming at the least expected moment.

To seek his revenge on the strangers. 'Drawing the poison.' It was galling to think of their knowledge with such distaste. The peasants drew on their folklore. Not quite the same as the direct knowledge gained through the sacred mushroom. The strangers sought that knowledge. Why now? Connected with the priest's presence? Did they want to know the secrets of their divine wisdom? Know the adversary? He would have to talk with Mudhan. She was level headed. She was more than that. She too possessed something of the eternal within her. Yet she prayed to no god, sought not the spirits to do her bidding or guide her along the sacred path of life. Imbued with a silence that spoke more than any eloquence of the sycophantic priests. 'Drawing the poison.' An unguarded expression of intent. Careless or a warning? He climbed the first rise through the low pass amongst the wooded hills 'poison'. If it is to be thus, it is then. He would leave the king be. Instead he would poison the souls of these strangers. That would send a message to the king as to who held the power of life over death.

He stopped off at the White Abbey. The acolytes were busy tending the herb garden for the medicines they concocted. The harvest done. In their pretty valley, the vines bare, the barrels full, the day labourers returning to the surrounding villages. Mudhan at court. Her acolytes remarked upon that without any great distinction.

His mind teeming with so many thoughts it became distracting. It was time to plan, to converse with the chiefs, the clan leaders and most importantly the apprentice shamans. He was getting old. Not ancient yet. Three possible candidates to succeed him, trained, tested. At least with the priest's presence Krool had a focus. He was determined to block their aims, usurp their way of thinking.

He was made welcome and offered to stay the night. He could cover great distances when in trance, swifter than the fastest horse. But with his restless mind he simply was not bothered to expend the extra effort necessary to will himself into the reverie and keep in focus. Refreshed after a good nights sleep he would continue in the morrow. He looked foreword to test his skills upon the interlopers. If he succeeded the message was clear as to who possessed the true fount of power. By striking at a distance nothing could be proven. But much speculated upon. Create consternation at the palace. A sly comforting sensation spread through him. A glimmering of the essence of Achter glowed within.

The team was to split up. Storaf conferring with Mitaj explaining their reasons for this change of plan. One was the essence of surprise. The White Abbey had a library containing the folklore and who knew what else. The other research team could make their way at leisure through the villages to ascertain the lay of the land and the disposition of the people. Observation only. Later specifically trained investigators would do the tedious work of actually compiling what the locals actually believed in or really knew. By then word would have gotten out as to their curiosity. It might not be welcome. So getting to the library as fast as possible made sense. As to what Khratham possessed they would leave that last.

Storaf would go ahead with Cena and Naj accompanied by Headache and Turd. Since it was a mission of learning Mitaj was satisfied that his two men would look after the advance party. Etessa a little miffed that she had to crawl along the ground, following. Storaf being tactful explained that she was the team leader regarding the ground force now. She looked at Horat as if he was barely qualified to constitute a team. Mitaj's other reason was surveillance. Sure the orbital knew the topography but even so his superiors still regarded knowledge on the ground still of some worth. Solid surface intelligence. Dag was relaxed about going the slow way. He treated it as an excursion. Being cooked up at he Abbey would have driven him to distraction. HA and Turd were looking foreword to meeting the women there. Storaf said nothing. Etessa gave a sour look of disgust.

Mitaj checked the vehicle inside and out. The other was driven to the small military outpost until they returned. They were new and Reganian technology was the best. In the unlikely event of a breakdown the outpost would come to save them. It was not proper procedure but one vehicle was less intimidating than two. The firepower they presented was intimidating enough. The rapid assault canons and machine guns were

tested firing blanks. The racket had some passers by give curious glances, practicing at the outskirts of the town. The gunclips loaded at the ready, onboard systems checked, a quick transmission to the orbital advising them of their plans. Beacons tested, the engine gone over, the undercarriage examined. Their supplies stowed securely, clamped in and strapped down, plenty of water plus the tiny field kitchen tucked away. They were ready.

The VAV, arrived on time from Regum. Mitaj's men checked their comlinks plus that of their vehicle and the VAV. Good naturedly they parted except for Etessa. Horat said his farewells to Naj and Cena, not forgetting HA and Turd and the VAV took off blowing dust all around and over them.

Etessa was seething at being left out. She merely grunted when they got onboard barely hiding her distaste at having been sidelined. She was miffed. The existence of the White Abbey and its library. There would be esoteric knowledge worthy of the scholar she thought she was. Storaf no doubt wanted the glory for himself. Knowledge was power. By the time she arrived Storaf would have it all together. How much he decided to make available to her remained to be seen. He would get the major credit in the report. She would be a footnote on the same level as the assistants. To be grouped with them galled her.

Horat was looking forward to the excursion. He barely noticed Etessa's cool attitude and put it down to a quirk of character. With her breezy detachment it made for easy travel. He was not the talkative type anyway so Etessa being in a world of her own suited him. So unlike Nervina who wanted his attention. Nervina, so far in another time and place it surprised him that he still thought of her. Pleasant memories but no lingering longing at her absence. She too had seemed a little veiled. His first major love a distant congenial diversion.

Now that the time had come to move out into the countryside he felt excited. Not just the adventure ahead, but the whole reason for his being here. Discover the Outlander's state of mind. A little frightening though. Occult knowledge. So portentous. He hoped it would not effect his state of mind. Still the overlords on Prima considered it of crucial importance. He felt proud of having been chosen. Fated. The assignation with Nervina destined to bring him here. Not just to Regum but the Outlands, that dark province with its strange resonance. Right in the thick of it. It did not frighten him. It would give him a special place as he was the only one, priests aside, who were privy to their secrets. He was ready.

And cautious enough to remain in the background as he had done right from the beginning. Only Etessa seemed to study him. He sometimes caught her looking at him as

if she was aware he was not just another research graduant. Cena took everybody for what they were whilst Naj, extremely clever analysed everybody he came in contact with. Etessa was, in comparison one who wanted power. Use any means to achieve her aim to get to the top. Maybe she would even deem to notice him if she thought he could be of use to her. He would not make it easy for her. If she knew not just who he was but had one of Prima's top Domain Lords behind him she would be most surprised. Not that she would find out from him. Maybe at some future time the truth would come out. That was reward enough. And if it did not, if he did not pull this off either way no loss.

The sky was overcast, a smeary lambent grey, the light weak. The group got into the ground vehicle, Mitaj deciding to drive first. Dag put on his weapons helmet, linked to the two guns. As if they were expecting trouble. Here? Horat was bemused. Etessa wanted to sit in the front. So he sat with Dag in the back. Under his helmet there was little chance of conversation, and Etessa, well she tried to be so aloof she was out of reach. Horat was ready for an enjoyable trip. If Etessa wanted to close herself off, then he had plenty of time to try and slyly ascertain her resonance. Try some close remote sensing.

They made their way around the edge of Amaik, past the little cottages, the smell of brine, the windows down, the light hum of the engine, the cry of seagulls, all very pleasant. Etessa's mind closed and vacant. A bit like exhuming the dead once he managed to get through her outer shell. Softy softly. Horat withdrew. A little bit at a time.

They were soon on the open road leading towards the first hills the town behind them. Patches of earth where timber had been felled amongst the dense dark pine forest. Dag remote swivelling the gun in front of them. At least they were giving notice not to be molested. They passed a few tractors pulling carts of produce into town. The odd ground vehicle, some farmers walking on the side of the road merely giving them a cursory look.

Horat was amazed at the electronic gear the ground vehicle packed. Several light projected consoles on the dashboard's flat surface. Mitaj driving at a steady pace on the well packed dirt road. Horat watched the radar, omni-directional and target specific. Now and again a green, yellow, blue, red or white dot would light up, tiny numbers scrolled, a short flickering, downloaded and the next dot acquired. At an intuitive guess they were mapping the area they were passing through.

Etessa finally enjoyed the ride. She had expected to go into the villages but Mitaj drove past those huddled amongst the now fallow fields. The rich brown earth sprouting late grass. Cows grazed in others, some had horses, sheep or goats or a small collection

of all. It reminded him of home. Home. Prima at the opposite end of Regum's journey around the sun. Months away. He adrift. Even though the similarities were comparable he felt lighter here. The burden of tilling the fields by oxen was done in part by tractors. Not all farms though. Most of the hamlets they passed without stopping were surrounded by patches of tiny plots, wisps of smoke rising serenely in the still air from thatched roofs, some tiled, mostly wooden, others of brick. He was free here. Probably due to the excursion they were on.

Dag was still swivelling the guns both front and rear. He noticed a small black extended knob, a directional seeking device, search and acquire targeting system. The tiny circular screen shifting with the movement of the barrel. Tiny red glowing dots, the animals, the farmers.

"You been in the country before?" Horat asked, seeing who would answer.

"First mission Horat." Mitaj replied keeping his eyes on the road. He too wore the helmet but had his visor retracted.

"You Etesa?"

"Me?" she sounded almost surprised at the question. "Yes." They passed over a wooden bridge, the beams rattling beneath them, the stream dull grey reflecting the sombre sky.

Etesa felt a strangeness out here. Nature in the raw. A city girl all these wooded hills packed densely with trees exuding a sense of their presence like some combined organism, silent, aware of their incursion. Trespassing into their domain. Horat felt her inwardness, her cool exterior, her resenting Storaf having prior access to the library.

"Aren't we going to stop anywhere?" Horat asked more out of curiosity.

"I was thinking the same." Etesa ventured. After all this was their show, their undertaking.

What Mitaj did not tell them was that he was scanning not just the physical terrain and the basic infrastructure but more importantly any electronic devices amongst the inhabitants. See if they were being watched. The inbuilt AI would then reconfigure their passing, downloading a chameleon presence of no consequence. Their quest irrelevant. Scouting. Prima had designs on the planet and it would be good to know what, if any, private capabilities were available. The Outlanders were independent. Regum respected them without wishing to impress upon them their high tech society. Prima's designs upon Regum might pretend to re-purify their aberrant development. Mitaj had a job to do. If a window of opportunity arose where they could rummage around some village then maybe he would make time for them to do their research. Not that he

expected to find any libraries out here. The White Abbey and Khratham were the only repositories of knowledge. Plus the distant shaman based aborigines in the far north. To be ascertained at a later time.

The road was winding into the low lying hills. Traffic non existent.

"Do you feel it Horat?" Etessa asked. Horat did feel something. A sense of alienation, being different, almost out of tune. Even though it all looked like Prima there was a sense of latency all around that was too close.

"Brooding nature, in the raw." Horat's answer came out without thinking.

"Oppressive and gloomy. Mitaj," she turned to him, who merely nodded without shifting his gaze, "you feel as if we're being watched?"

"Nothing on our scanners."

Horat wished he had the capabilities of an Enhanced Natural. What Etessa guessed at was right. Some dormant intelligence, tintured with suppressed malignancy hovering near them, shadowing them. An abhorrent feeling of being naked against something overwhelming. That much he was aware of. His mind detached, uncoupled as if he were of two minds. Strange and disturbing. He put that down to his being Primaian. This planet had a different resonance and this part a different one altogether. His sentience some weird abstraction totally out of synchronicity with nature's aims. Exclusive. The trees were reaching down the hills on both sides of the road. They were on their own.

Over the rise they saw a beautiful valley. The clouds parted momentarily, the road snaking down towards dwellings on a river. The town looked contained huddling into itself. Empty fields around it with the pressing forest held back with great effort. The clouds moved back across a weak sun. The river a sliver of dark brown, tiny fishing boats alongside a small wharf. To the east the dark shaded ocean. The road would lead them through the town and presumably they would follow it north west to their destination.

Nature everywhere, overwhelming. Mitaj slowed a little at some bends. Down a gully, across a wet causeway, the air fresh.

`How's it going Dag?'

`Fine Mitaj.'

`Anything?'

`Nothing.'

`Good.'

`Bored?'

`Not a bit.'

`Good man.'

`Thanks.'

"Well, according to the map this place is a bit of a tourist spot." Mitaj announced.

`Keep scanning.'

`Never stopped.'

Horat reasoned Prima's interest were the aborigines of course. But what could he do? Were the DVs reading him, using his eyes on the ground? If so he did not feel being linked. Unless he had been configured. Then he would never know what add-in would by pass his conscious mind.

`Want to drive?'

`Not unless it's an order.'

`It's not. Just thought you might want a change.'

`Thanks, fine scanning the surroundings. All vacant out here.'

`Good. Don't tell them if you find anything of interest.'

`With pleasure.'

`No contact with the advance party either.'

`Not unless they call us.'

Over a rise with carts pulled by the ubiquitous tractors slowing their progress as they passed them slowly. Empty fields, the sky a little brighter the trees receding. The main street almost empty even though it was the middle of the day. A few shops. A blacksmith, carpenter, builders, a brickyard set behind the town, black smoke pouring from the ovens, some sheds, a granary. A few pedestrians dressed in drab long brown coats, fur lined caps to keep out the fresh breeze. The smell of salt, a few gulls riding the breeze before swooping down to the river near the boats.

Horat's mind clogged. The locals reclusive. So that was what interested Prima. Their sense of self isolation. Not conducive to being influenced. Their independence palpable. Self-determined and free. Brooking no interference. He wondered if his thoughts were being picked up. On automatic as he analysed the people around him. Some of the locals in the street looked at them with indifference. No real curiosity. All blank. Some kid threw a stone at them. It clanked on the hood..

"Reception." Mitaj smiled. Etessa looked startled. Dag swivelled his armoury. The tiny red dot flickered.

"Want to talk to the locals?" Mitaj asked Etessa.

She seemed to huddle, to draw into herself. "Not particularly." She mumbled. Mitaj nodded.

They crossed a wooden bridge, passed the pier with a fish monger, a forlorn tourist shop, a restaurant, empty tables on the forecourt, a few people strolling about, fishing nets laid out. Then they were out of the town and heading at an intersection into the hills.

Slowed by a hay laden dray, a seagull splattered the front hood with its white, olive streaked shit.

"Direct hit." Dag laughed. "Blown away by crap. Enemy at three o' clock."

`Could have been a remote impactor Dag. Corrosive or a tag. Check out the gull.'

Dag swivelled the secondary radar. `Carbon based life form Mitaj.'

Horat's head started to ache. A dull thick pounding hammering inside his brain. The world glared brightly, everything intensely illuminated from within. Something scratching, scrabbling, crawling, trying to force its way through. The intensity of light hitting him in a vicelike grip of white fire. His head was vibrating, the whumping thumping pain obliterating in the intense glare everything around him. The wormlike furrowing trying to burrow into him. It was rebuffed as another part of his mind kicked into gear. It tried different ways but was denied access to get any further, going frantic at being denied its ingress. The feverish scratching an angry buzz. Horat alert to its frenzied frustration.

He sat dumbstruck, fear possessing him, nerves taught, immobilised, frozen. The glare diminished a little, shapes became discernable again The engulfing reverberation in his head bearable, receding, the wave spent. The grass by the road still glowed with preternatural immanence. The inertia now less intense, the fog lifted as a part of his mind reasserted itself, moving in where the ingress had occurred, re-establishing control. Then the cloying thickness, the viscous presence dissipated.

Everything around him looked so normal as if nothing had happened. The colours around him dull, the vibrancy vanished, even the immensity of the forest dreary, its living essence so distant, so basic, dumb, mindless, soulless, vacuous. He had passed through something. The others seemingly unaware of what he just experienced. Had he been targeted? He did not want to alert them. They might think he's cracking up. Now that it was over it felt as if it had been a dream. Of no consequence. Just his brain going weird. A headache. The rest his paranoia. Unless he considered it was something inside trying to get out. His possible configuration? He knew that a conflict could arise within his mind if the resonant attunement was not precise enough. For his superiors would not have sent him to Regum as is. Nor would they have told him what they had done so that he would not be influenced by that knowledge to act other than they wished. Knowing one was

Enhanced gave one a different state of mind, a different attitude. Maybe he was just a Natural so as not to alert those around him of his configuration.

Krool pulled back from his search. In one of the guest rooms of the White Abbey he was satisfied with the cursory exploration of the visitors. Dinner was announced.

Eating with the others he engaged in pleasantries as they enjoyed their repast. The meal, a rich compot of vegetables plus a small side dish of goats meat in honour of Krool being a guest he played the thankful visitor. Still not at ease. Maybe the audience with Khratham, his dismissal which harboured an unspoken hint of his future status. Slightly troubling him. But there seemed more to what he now felt within his soul. His perception. An alien incursion. He put that down to the presence of the priests at court. So when the others started drinking wine, getting congenial he begged to be excused. Though they tried to entice him to join in some good cheer he reluctantly declined. Something was bothering him. Good-naturedly they bade him good night.

In his room, a warm bed, with quilt, a pitcher of fresh water drawn from the well, he composed himself to ascertain what was bothering him. Who was bothering him. He felt a coming, an immanence. Time to investigate. Rather than seek it out directly he would open his mind to determine what was being projected. So Krool concentrated on nothing. Unfocus to see his ethereal surroundings. The presence was not revealing itself. It could be a passing spirit. But now that he achieved mindlessness might as well continue. It was always a good feeling, this freedom, this abandonment of self.

Then revelation. Latent intent. It was after something without revealing what. Surreptitious. Clever. Cloaked. Linked to a group mind. Hovering in the background. But not here, not in Khratham, not even on this planet. And not from the spirit world either. Far away. Strong, determined and very focussed without revealing the source of its interest. Which was close relatively. Moving this way. Ah. An attentive mind. Covered, protected by a layered projection of being other than it was. The image of a young man. With a group of people. He inextricably linked to the alien group mind somewhere in space. That could be investigated later. Better not alert him to the fact of his search. He would explore this being, get into its mind to find out what it wanted. That person was after something. Of course. A spy. So there were those after his powers. Not just his but his people's. Not Reganian. They did not interfere. This person had infiltrated, insinuated himself amongst them. Moving slowly. Cautiously. In no hurry as if assured of success. Time to do some probing.

Another deep breath and some cautious exploring. The outer mind a shell. The inner mind, masked in a shield of sorts. Like a warrior keeping his ideas well camouflaged. Krool started probing. First confusion. See how he would react. He absorbed the first gentle prodding. Resistance from within. Fine. Try to seek a flaw. Since every mind was unique it could not be perfect in absolute terms. Being individual it was a distinct pattern of its inherent soul state. He tried to wriggle through its memory. For memory was everywhere as were emotions. That he could leave till later. Resistance. Within another mind. So he was linked to the alien group mind. Primaians. In a moment of anger at their wanton psychic aggression his own emotional state flared slightly. He allowed himself this little indulgence. Let him taste his wrath at their malicious incursion. Trying to weavil their way in. He let his anger build slowly, stoking the fire within him, then concentrated it in a bundle, rather than just an expanding infuriation. He shot the bolt of white flaring heat without attaching himself to it. No point revealing himself. If that group mind in space, cowards, wanting to play hide and seek then so would he. The bolt of thundering reprisal detached itself, homing in on this spy. He withdrew himself and observed. It exploded in its outer mind. Maybe a crack would appear for Krool to explore next time. The spy's mind reverberated and Krool absorbed its psychic wavelength. By default he gathered the weaker three this slithering viper was with. They could easily be dealt with as well. Krool had the imprint of the inner layer which was enclosed in that man's mind. He was still at some distance. Plenty of time for Krool to plan his next assault. Maybe even cause a flashback to his secret army in space. Give them something to think about.

Whilst ruminating an image came through of where the terrestrial link was at the moment. A military ground vehicle, armed, making its way north. Three others. Their escort bio enhanced. Not unusual for Reganian's. The woman a bundle of heightened mental nervousness. Her mind leaking information due to her determined state. Knowledge of that which was not for her to know. He thought his way close to her. She was so focused it radiated out of her. No doubt about it. The ancient wisdom her primary concern. Not as an adept, not even a curious student wishing to immerse themselves in the wisdom of his people. Neither to lighten up their minds and unite that which was there in the eternally present spirit world. To gain insights for devious ends. Mind control. The enemy was revealing itself. Their first move.

Krool was slightly surprised at their shifting attitude. The Reganians in general accepted their life for what it was and left them alone. Hundreds of years ago when intrepid farmers, trappers, hunters had ventured here they had been impressed with his folk. And respected their way of life. It transpired that these beings were colonists from

Prima. They had no wish to be under the yoke of the priests. To be contained and constrained unable to live their lives according to their spiritual orientation. In fact they rejected any notion of invisible deities but they did not discard the notion behind the thought process which led to that conclusion. All so long ago. In fact they were fascinated by what they called 'mythology'. They had wished to learn and did so with open minds. That his ancestors had this astonishing and marvellous capability to transcend the every day mind intrigued them.

On Prima it was hammered down, contorted and twisted into a dictatorial religion that brooked no independent thought, no individual expression of what was latent in the soul. They related how once they too had that capability to commune direct with the divine. But after the Calamity everything changed. So they left with their mighty machines to travel across space from the sister planet to start life afresh. Without the despotic tyranny which weighed so heavily on those left behind. It was a watershed. They learnt eagerly of the ways of the shaman without criticism, without intellectual arrogance, accepting their ways as a valid expression to fulfil an inner need which was being polluted on Prima by the almighty priesthood. Having learnt all they withdrew to their rising city. Many stayed. These were the people of the lowlands what was now Khratham. His people were left alone. Yet if winters were hard, if harvests failed they helped and brought mountains of grain, delivered live stock, fish from the plentiful sea, made life easier.

Until now. Krool sighed and looked out of the window of his room at the forest. At least this institution was caring. Mudhan practiced an intriguing method of spiritual enlightenment. They came as devotees to study the magical arts without censure. And developed their own way of mystical communion. Even some of his people studied here. At the abbey their gods, their spiritual helpers were not denied their place in the majestyrium of the great realm, both within one and out there amongst nature.

Then an idea struck Krool. Nature was in itself an intractably linked web of various levels of energy. Hard to rouse even by a shaman but not impossible. He would see if he could not hamper this group's progress if not stop them. He felt some guilt in taking life. But if that was what was called for...this small group presented one of the greatest threats to the independence of his people. In fact Krool could not recall whether a threat such as this had ever occurred in their long continuous history. It was the group mind in space that was the real threat. Sending their minions down here to gain their secrets. Not like the Reganian's to learn, to appreciate their insight's into the larger realm which the ignorant mind denied. This group mind hungered after what he knew. Once in

possession, it was no great leap to conclude that they would turn their power against his people. Possess them, enthrall them, use them and if recalcitrant waste them.

It was all falling into place. The priests were the initial pawns. Insert themselves and slowly whittle away at their soul's natural state to replace their quest for the eternal with that of their spiteful unitary god which detested anything that denied its existence. This was turning into a battle to possess them, possess the planet. They were not having much success with the other Reganians. He smiled at that. By not believing no psychic energy was being fed to Prima's authoritarian being. Nor were they drawing upon his people's spiritual ancestors. Regum a cacoon, impenetrable. So they changed their method of attack and focussed in on here.

He should be making his way back home. But first to leave a little message behind, deal with these malignant intruders who wanted to destroy their souls so that they could rule supreme. Not if he could help it. Krool felt invigorated and readied himself for his next move.

Etessa thought it was a trick of her moving perspective. She had not seen it directly but definitely out of the corner of her eye. Where vision was slightly enhanced. Evolved when they as a species millennia ago were hunters and thus hunted. Peripheral vision. A little ahead to her left the trees appeared to have moved. Not physical motion, more like an invisible wind, an animated force that followed them. The moment she looked of course everything was back to normal. The panic attack surprised her leaving the unmistakable taste of fear etched in her mind. The branches looked like arms gestulating, signalling each other. Ridiculous. The idea of some other force present embedded in her very awake mind. Some ingress bordering on the magical or worse the occult. Nature was energy in physical manifest form. No covert intent. She could not shake the feeling, the perception that for a moment the trees were imbued with preternatural forces, charging up, watching, waiting, expectant. She looked at the console's read outs and graphs. Nothing there. How could there be. It was her imagination. But how, why now? The road was clear, meandering into a ravine ahead. Small rocks littered the road. Tiny ruts from rivulets formed during heavy rains which the vehicle handled well never losing traction. She looked in the rear vision mirror but saw only Dag's helmet and the glowing info on his visor. Unconcerned.

Horat's attention heightened. Nature was denser here, packed with dormant energy. A sense of liveliness, a breeze moving the trees into static animation. The tree tops motionless. A ground breeze. The gloom amongst the thick forest glowed darkly. A

murky presence infusing itself into the trunks quivering. Nature overbearing. He could not shake the feeling of oppression. Though it all looked so passive, holding back, recumbent, on the verge of waking.

They were approaching a gorge. Smaller trees had gained a tenacious hold on the cliff faces on each side. For a moment Horat thought he saw ripples of energy vibrate the very rocks. It was the slightest of movements.

Without thinking Horat said frantically: "Hit the pedal." Mitaj jerked a little at the dread in his voice. The road was straight so Mitaj reacted and floored it. The wheels spun, skidding slightly as they accelerated, fishtailing a little. They all heard the crack of something giving way. At the apex of the gorge tiny rocks were spilling down followed by a shadow spreading over them. The whump and thud of a huge boulder landed with a shuddering thump behind them. Smaller rocks followed some spraying the vehicle as they rained down upon them. A larger rock hit the road in front of them, the vehicle scraping along it, the polymer skin shrieking, absorbing the friction and spreading it throughout the body of the vehicle. With a controlled skid Mitaj deftly corrected the vehicle as another jagged rock missed them, splinters and shards pinged off the roof.

To Horat a presence slithered around him, then withdrew leaving a void, a momentary respite from the assault. They were out of the gorge having reached the plateau.

"Shit that was close." Mitaj said having stopped. Moisture covered the road, dark clouds just above them, a slight misty drizzle ahead.

"Bloody nature." Dag said. He was not wrong.

"Good observation Horat. I was concentrating on the road not even thinking the gorge was about to go unstable. Thank you." Without turning around. Mitaj was studying the read outs and asked Dag if there was anything his end.

"Nothing."

Horat wondered. Aware of a field of force. Some residual energy loosened the boulders. The odds were phenomenal.

"Any one around?" Horat asked.

"Dag?" Mitaj asked.

"Nothing close on the infra red. Some animals, maybe an eagle in the sky nothing substantial."

"Uncanny how nature behaves." Mitaj's voice level.

Etessa was freaking. Her brain on fire from the aftershock. Her rational mind shaky. Her intuition heightened. Her conclusion scary. Remote psychic activity. She could not,

did not want to believe it. She turned to Horat, desperate for confirmation one way or another. Horat sitting in the back had seen that the rocks would come down. Her view of him, reluctant though it was gained him some respect. The man was attuned. And here she had thought of him as just another dumb-fuck student. His presence on this mission she had thought suspect. Arranged. Some rich patron pulling strings.

The trees on the plateau were more stunted. Twisted by the incessant winds. The clouds just above them, the hazy drizzle washing out the scenery into a misty embrace of faded colours as the wipers cleared the screen.

"You think this was an accident?" Etessa asked, wishing for a rational explanation. Mitaj had not even considered any alternatives. No natives on top of the gorge wedging rocks loose. He did not believe in the occult. As a form of mind game yes. The ability to project false realities into one's head, yes. Had the rock fall been an illusion he would have accepted that. But Etessa's question implied something else entirely. An effect from a distant cause.

Horat was in a quandary. First the weird sensation, then his remarkable cognisance he realised there was more to his brain than he realised. But he did not want to reveal what he suspected: that he might be configured.

"Accident." Horat mouthed. "A conjunction of events. But then we are in another world." And stopped. He had almost given away his origin.

"As opposed to which world?" Etessa guessed. Or did she? Just her natural suspicion.

"This part of the world. The Outlands."

"You really think it's different? Nature is nature. The laws aren't any different here."

"No, of course not. Maybe it was the DVs." it came out before he could stop himself.

"The DVs?" Mitaj alert.

"I don't know. They are the only one's with psychic capabilities."

"So they," without defining who they were "don't want us to discover whatever it is these people are capable of Horat?" Mitaj asked.

"One assumes so."

"Maybe someone here did it." Etessa uncomfortable with that notion.

"Like some magician?" Mitaj asked.

"Well they do have shamans."

"Dag. Anything?"

"Scanning." But he knew he would come up with nothing. The arrays checked for bodies, even mental activity including at AI level. "Nothing."

Mitaj decided he would have to connect with the Orbital, the satellite covering them. Up there they had the requisite gear.

"Right. We're going back."

Etessa cringed. Horat felt uncomfortable. He did not like being messed with.

They heard the wind whispering in the trees. As if relating to someone what was transpiring here. Horat felt the ancient fear of their evolutionary past moving in close. The preternatural dread, the primitive but effective alert mechanism awakening. Everything shrouded in mist, impregnated with an alien essence. Nature was watching, something was waiting. Who or whatever had done this would try again. Unless it was merely a warning. If they left all would be well, if they continued he dared not think that far. If they examined the gorge the whole place might fall in on top of them.

"As a soldier in the field I know something about layouts of terrain. Whether the gorge is unstable. We have to make sure. I don't know about the DVs," Mitaj lied, "if they can psychically project energy." answering Horat's question, "but if it occurs again then we know. But I doubt it. DVs are remote viewers, unsettling the mind, screwing with it. As for causing avalanches..." Mitaj sounded sceptical. He was. But there was that nagging feeling reminding him of his briefing. That the aborigines were shamans. With everything that that entailed. Time to find out.

`Dag, use all scanners.'

`Always have.'

`I'm linking up.'

`I'll cover us here.'

`I'm also opening the onboard system for a download.'

`Gotcha.'

Mitaj called up their surveillance on the Orbital, routing it through the tracking satellite to encrypt the linkage.

`Reading you Mitaj.'

"We had an incident. One of the students may have enhanced capabilities. That's just so that you know. It's not the problem. He may have saved us from a messy ending. We were nearly caught in an avalanche. I want to know if either the DVs or someone on the ground here had anything to do with that. Psychic warfare. Our vehicle isn't that uploaded. We'd need a truck for that. I'm going back to the scene and see if an interested party bites."

`Understood.'

`Moving in now. Track us directly, total focus and broad spectrum sweep.'

`Will do.'

Mitaj turned around and drove back slowly towards the boulder strewn road. He did not drive into the gorge itself, stopped in front of the massive boulder, got out and using his field glasses examined the rock surface. Glistening with moisture it could have been natural erosion causing the rock fall. There had been none for a while, the rocks too dark to show any recent activity. So in a way one would have occurred eventually. He looked at the other side. It looked stable.

Krool in tandem with their presence. The warning, hoping it might have been lethal had not occurred. Still they were puzzled. Good. Make them feel apprehensive. Make them think that powerful forces are around. The woman was a little frightened. Something at least. The man with the deeper mind uneasy. The other two in control of their faculties. They were going back! Then he felt a vibration from without. Far away. The machines were looking for him. But not from Regum. Krool withdrew.

`We've found activity.' surveillance said. `In your area. Momentary spike. Not unusual out your way. But this was concentrated, very local. Remnant psychotronic field wave. Entangled. The source is elsewhere. Someone revealed themselves. Possible hostile. It's gone.'

`So we have activity.' Mitaj answered.

`Expect more.'

`Can you obviate it?'

`We can try.'

`Try? You've got the gear.'

`Not that simple. The locals cloak themselves. They can project themselves, out of mind and body. If we track the source directly it can do the same to us. The damage up here would be colossal. You know that. We can warn you. Use your resources. You have an enhanced with you. He flared.'

`Upgrade our scanners.'

`No can do. Mission parameters commander.'

`Any news of the advance team?'

`No contact is expected. However you have clearance to use all your resources available as you see fit. That includes extreme measures. We'll deal with the fall out.'

`Thank you. Oh any tracers, remote sensors around?'

`None.'

`Check DV activity. If they were behind this...'

`We'll check. Any damage?'

`Nothing the vehicle couldn't handle.'

`No further contact unless you're compromised. Clear?'

`Understood.'

`Disengaging.'

The link was cut.

`Got that Dag?'

`Yep. No help from up there.'

`None expected.'

`An upgrade would have come in handy.'

`Obviously Horat's enhanced. We'll sweet talk him.'

`Gotcha. Etessa?'

`She's what she is.'

`Ah well.'

`Rock face hasn't had a fall in ages. But as you heard, extra dimensional activity. Remote. They're checking the DVs. We stay on max alert.'

`Always is.'

He cut the com link. Mitaj had a thought. See if Horat could respond to his AI. He thought of Horat. Spongy resistance. Not absorbing, not repulsing. Then his mind opened up. At that instance Mitaj saw a mental vastness, a powerful mind. He quickly withdrew. It was getting crowded with implications. The Primaian's were after these people's occult knowledge. They took it seriously. So the DV's weren't behind this. But they were interested. Next transmit he would let his controllers know. Hopefully as they went over the data they ought to come to the same conclusion. Interesting times.

Back in the vehicle, they drove away from the near calamity.

"Looks like a rock fall pure and simple folks. Hasn't been one for ages. Only a matter of time. Could have been our vibration set it off." to calm Etessa's fear and Horat. Horat. Couldn't be run of the mill. Primaian? From the lectures they had Naturals whom they enhanced. But Horat? Be remarkable what might develop when they made contact with the real aborigines. See what transpired at the abbey first.

They proceeded along the empty road. Etessa was quiet, Horat alert. Calm descended all around them. Nature recumbent, drawing a shroud around herself. The trees mute, the misty drizzle just that, the air fresh, Mitaj's mind clear.

Ahead a wall of white.

"Hail, or snow." Mitaj announced as he slowed down.

'Forward sensors Dag.'

'Hail. Stationary.'

'Wrong weather.'

'I know.'

'Dag, send in a percussion grenade.'

'With pleasure.' He busied himself remote loading the forward gun. The auto feeder loaded the time fused grenade into the launcher.

"Alright you two. I'm gonna go through this mess the army way. Stick your fingers in your ears, take a deep breath, as deep as you can and hold it when I tell you." They followed his instructions.

"Counting, five, four, three, two, one, fire."

Dag pressed the button. A whump as the small oblong shape was expelled.

"Hold your breath."

It arced forwards then vanished into the white wall.

Sssssccrrrkwhuuuuuuuummmmmmpshhhhhhh prrrrrkkkkkkhhhhhhh. The curtain of hailstones bulged within, glowing slightly yellow, then shimmered, vibrated, oscillated as the shockwave from the explosion passed through the dense hailstorm. The foggy sun inside the mist shone, sprays of white tendrils snaked outwards. The inner detonation expanded the misty curtain, then pushed outwards into coiling clouds. Some of the hailstones hit the ground and bounced randomly all over the place. Shards of ice rained down on them beating a tattoo on the vehicle. Larger chunks ricocheted everywhere, others disintegrated. The white curtain collapsed the road covered in white, a puff of black smoke slowly dissipating in the still air. Birds startled by the explosion circled overhead, in the undergrowth rustling of anxious creatures, a few leaves drifting down.

Horat felt anger building within him. Tension mounting in his head wanting to rip it apart. Caught unawares. His brain prickly and hot. Instead of having his head invaded he decided not to fight but close his inner shell off. Just in time. Surprised. It relented. Trying to trap him. At that moment Horat counteracted the pretence at withdrawal and went out after it but within the confines of his mind. Something alerted him that it might

want to draw him out. Not angry. More cool, calculating. Horat threw his anger at it. Then it was gone.

Horat told Mitaj what had occurred.

"So our friend is back?"

"You found something?" Etessa asked. A little unsure in wanting the answer.

"It found me. Second time now."

Interesting thought Mitaj. `Anything Dag?'

`Nope.'

`Well upstairs are watching. They might deal with it.'

`Is this shit for real?'

`It is to Horat.'

`Why him?'

`He's Primaian.'

`Crap.'

`Better believe it.'

`I is. So why him?'

`He's the alien. Some wise guy's onto him.'

`You mean this shaman stuff is real?'

`So it appears.'

`Will that compromise us?'

`Well you saw what happened at the cutting. Then this weird hailstorm.'

`So someone's throwing their weight around.'

`Sure is.'

"Hail's gone." The road clear.

"You enhanced?" Etessa asked Horat.

"I don't know." Though he did, now.

"C'mon Horat. Either you do or you aren't. You are aren't you?"

"If I am I wasn't told."

"You're a throwback. That's why Storaf wanted you. You're our litmus test."

Horat was glad Etessa thought he was local.

"Yes. The uni thinks so." He made up.

"Well, I must say, it is a surprise. And you so reticent."

"Did not want to skew the survey."

"You link yourself?"

Horat understood what she meant. "Try not to. But something, someone is linking me in. It's awful."

"You poor thing."

Mitaj kept his response of that to himself.

"You haven't tried getting to me?"

"No Etessa."

"You sure. Not tempted? Not even a little?"

"Honest. No."

"It's just that, I had a few strange feelings. No not feelings, sensations. My reptilian brain." She half laughed.

"Maybe you're here to make contact. Parley with the locals. If they think you're one of them then they might open up. It all makes sense now. You're our pathfinder." Etessa saw Horat in a new light. Not some connected kid at all pushing his way in. Not that she would admit she'd been wrong.

Horat relieved that the heat was off. He was secure.

"You will let us know when you're in phase?" Etessa asked.

"Of course." He did not like being a target. Annoying barely expressed what he felt: hatred. It wasn't him. The resentment of being stirred up, being goaded. Maybe that is what it wanted. He would stay on top of this. At least he knew now what was going on.

They reached the edge of the escarpment. Below the valley to the east spread as far as the distant ocean. Khratham in view. Ahead the outlying hills jagged cloud covered rocky mountains. Below fields, fences, farmsteads, rolling hills, clusters of trees, creeks, hamlets, and the capital. A pile of jumbled brown spread out gabled houses. In the middle on a hill the citadel.

"We going there?" Etessa asked.

Mitaj was pleased. She finally accepted that he was on control.

"No. The monastery."

Etessa nodded. "That place looks primitive." Surveying the densely packed houses, the teeming multitudes, the mess, the stink, the noise, all a cacophony of sight and sound. Even from this distance the place was rank.

Mitaj studied the map on the screen on the dashboard. A yellow line zig zagged around the town, along borders of farms then directly north.

"So decrepit." Etessa pulling a face. "I bet it's dirty, congested, smelly, ancient, no plumbing, no comfort. How could anyone want to live like that?"

Mitaj studied the roads. Because they passed so many fields it would waste some time. He punched in a closer scan of the terrain. They could skirt the edge of the hills by going cross country. It would save time. He could follow the stream, they would be on the plain which led to the edge of the northern escarpment. On the other side the wooded hills of the stream. Mostly meadow.

They drove down the declining road. Reaching the bottom they turned off onto the grass and found a crude track. A shortcut the locals used. Though rutted, rocks clanging against the protection plate beneath the chassis, the vehicle bounced along. It was remarkably stable. The track meandered along the stream littered with boulders and rocks from previous floods. Mitaj drove slowly. The sky still a leaden colour, clouds piling up towards the mountains now out of sight.

Krool pulled back from the explosion that dispersed the membrane he knew they must pass through. Creating the hailstorm had not been that difficult. A matter of intense concentration for a novice Krool used nature's forces when the need arose. By tuning into the wind amongst the trees it revealed the groups progress. He was not going to go directly into Horat's head. There was too much in there to start scrutinizing. Several cloaks covered whatever potential he possessed. Satisfied for he had Horat's overall resonance.

He sat back in his chair. Comfortable in the room at the abbey, practicing his arts he understood the need for caution. The acolytes here might be novices but that did not mean they were fumbling in the dark. The teachers concerned more with individual mental exercises of general awareness. Magic as such, especially shamanistic magic was not practiced. He had a clear field. Still he remained cautious. Someone could accidentally resonate with him. Then his aim at stopping these four might cause suspicions to be aroused. Not so much him being a shaman but what his aims were. Those who came here were not intent on being psychic warriors. They were after something else entirely. Awareness. Studying the nature of their soul, attuning it to the world around them and living a life of harmony. The very opposite of his intentions.

At the moment when they had dispersed the projected mist amongst the hailstones, came a distant shadow, a telltale presence. In space. With recourse to a machine realm. Mimicking their minds in a crude fashion. It was a tiny ball far above linked to their Orbital, all seeing, all knowing. He might do something about that when taking the others minds out. Shadow watchers in space. Their artificial minds constrained by the very fact they possessed no real awareness. Not a threat directly. He could confuse it now that he knew what he was dealing with. So much the better. Show them

that their intrusion was not welcome. They could have approached him directly but they did not. That implied subterfuge. That meant they were after the ancient heritage of his wisdom. For what ends was of course not apparent. Nor had they any intention of revealing their clandestine curiosity.

No matter. They were coming into his sacred realm. He would stop them. Then present them with a display of his power they might change their arrogant attitude that they could do as they pleased. The shaman world of spiritual power was not there for the taking. It had to be approached in the proper manner, with the right respectful attitude. Knowledge and wisdom was not something on display as if it were some goods available in a bazaar. No. These people had no respect. Nor were they going to get what they wanted by merely barging in and expecting to be given the answers simply because they wanted to.

The group was still some way off. Near Khratham. If he could pull this off whilst they were still on the plain then with a bit of luck it could be assumed that Khratham's priests and the renegade shamans at the court working for the king, now that he was basically displaced, might be held responsible. Had Khratham approached him with the deference that was his due he might have helped him. But he had chosen his lot. Accepted the pretentious powers of the priests. So be it. Krool prepared himself for the next assault.

Mudhan listened to Khratham expostulate the way of the priests. There was just the three of them. The king, herself and the priest who remained nameless. He clung to the superstition that if his name was known the shamans up north would have his identity. That implied that they might have a certain hold over him. By remaining incognito all they could focus on was a presence. Undefined. Thus harder to focus upon, grasping at ethereal shadows.

Mudhan had been called by Khratham for political reasons rather than esoteric ones. He assured her that as her orientation was essentially friendly he had no designs on her White Abbey. The priest's face remained blank. For the moment he had no opinion. Which did not mean that at some future date he might have some means of inserting his priests amongst her community. Khratham was concerned that the priests first consolidate their power at the palace and the city. The idea was to convert those who had power and status. The merchants, the local shamans, the occultists, the magisterial practitioners of the secret arts and the military commanders. The people would follow in due course.

Why her presence was required was apparent enough. She was being given fair warning that the new spiritual order would be established by royal decree. Krool's icy dismissal the first sign of change.

Mudhan alerted the king of a time of confusion The ether disturbed. She had tried to penetrate the alien field the priest went on about. There was something disturbing about its presence. Fleeting images of chaos, of death, of a threatening annihilation regarding the soul. Keeping her cool, detached as always the fabric of space was being manipulated. Yet the source was not that alien planet but something much closer cosmically. Somewhere in this, their universe. The priest adamant it was an alien planet. She held back.

Corrupting the ether. That much was certain. She suspected the priest's unitary god. She was well aware of Prima's resonant field enveloping the planet. The similarities between what was above to that which was below had certain disturbing similarities. A latent spiritual poison was rarefied and enhanced in space, drawing upon Prima's combined psyche to refashion its determined state into a greater potency. That the priests were drawing upon this dark power was obvious. Whether they were aware that this was not their unitary god she was almost certain. They were either being fooled, fooling themselves or worse: that they knew what they were doing. If that was the case then her presence, her work was all the more important. To infuse spiritual calmness onto a discordant ether.

She explained this in far simpler terms. That the aim of the White Abbey was to soothe the soul from its imagined troubles, to align the seeker with the natural state of the world and the universe. To be calm, detached and most importantly positive towards all life which included Prima's. Thus she let it be known that she had no problems with the priests or Khratham's intentions to use them to guide the people.

So whilst the three of them discussed the high nature of their objectives Khratham dropped the hint, almost as an afterthought that visitors from Regum were coming to study her knowledge, that of the people as well. As she had a comprehensive library, as he did, she was to give them the assistance they required. They were collating their spiritual wisdom.

The priest remained neutral as always. She suspected he was not neutral regarding her orientation, to clear the mind of self deluding ignorance. It was a mask hiding his real intentions, spiritual domination.

Khratham asked her how the students from the tribes were behaving.

"Good." She answered puzzled.

"Do they harbour any intent?"

"As to...?"

"Strengthening their souls."

"That is part of the learning process Khratham."

"Yes I have gathered that." The priest watching intently.

"Are they readying themselves to repel the unitary god?"

"Of that I cannot say. I do not pry into their souls."

"Then perhaps some priests would be needed to clear that up."

"They are welcome, as you are." Mudhan replied solicitously.

"You miss the point of my enquiry Mudhan. Are they using you to further their aims? Continuing their heresies, bowing down to false gods?"

"I teach them that the god's ultimate source rests within their minds."

"Very clever. So by implication they are delusions." The priest spoke up.

"Ultimately the whole universe is in our heads. What we populate within that universe is an individual decision." She replied calmly.

"A remarkable view. So is the unitary god an individual creation also?" meaning of course that by accepting that view it too was a hallucination.

"If by that you mean it resides not out there but between our ears then all I can say is that the power of the spirit feeds it's own belief. Get enough energy together and it is not impossible to project that image onto reality."

"So the unitary god is then a real power unto itself."

"Yes." She admitted.

Not too happy with that explanation that the Primaian's had created this being. Whilst not rejecting its being out there the priest deemed her explanation acceptable, for now. Mudhan knew that she was on tenuous ground.

"So you do not reject the Great Mind."

"No." she replied with certainty. What she did not reveal was that as gods can be created so they too can be destroyed. The priest feared this. That was her intent. She did not agree that gods should be destroyed simply for being there. The superstition was harmless. The priest saw it as a quest for complete power. She could only enlighten those who came to her. She would not force them to think as to how they saw their universe. Each to their own. She wanted her students to understand how their mind worked. What they did was their own concern. Clear mindedness her focus.

"Are you aware that the shaman tribes are preparing a revolt?" Khratham asked.

"Revolt?" genuine surprise. She knew of course they were connected to their spirit ancestors, the ascended souls of the departed, their spirit guides...ah that was it. The priests wanted that role. So by not accepting the priests they were resisting the new order.

"Yes Mudhan. You are closest to them."

"Not those who study at the abbey my lord."

"Well keep an eye out. Otherwise more priests will be necessary to uncover their dark designs to impress upon the people their false view of things."

"I am sure that whatever you choose Khratham is for the best of the kingdom." She replied diplomatically. A stony response from the priest.

"When the visitors come, extend them every courtesy."

"As I always do my lord."

Khratham looked at the priest. But he was immutable, expressionless.

"You may leave us Mudhan."

"Thank you Khratham for allowing me into your august presence."

He waved his hand allowing her to leave.

After she had gone Khratham said: "I know there are only a few of you here as yet. Once we have convinced those who matter that your unitary god is the supreme being in the universe, the people will come around. Most barely acknowledge the ancient gods as it is."

"I beg to differ your highness."

"Oh?" a dangerous look on Khratham's face.

"They believe in the spirit of the fire in their hearths, spirits in their streams, Achter revealing himself in the clouds, the wind the secret messenger of the elemental gods, thunder an expression..."

"Yes I see your point. Well it is up to you to make sure that they come to see the spiritual truth."

"A pleasure to serve your majesty. You have been truly ordained by the Divine Being to be the wise ruler that you are. Once the people have accepted the marvellous wisdom they will be your most obedient servants. Thus it is decreed by holy order."

Khratham was pleased.

"Some wine priest?"

Mudhan rode her mare at a leisurely pace through the crowded streets of the city. Amongst the merchants on their steeds most of the locals were on foot. The farmers

walked their wagons with their beasts of burden, donkeys, bullocks, the wealthier horses. Even in the autumn sun, now cooler flies still pestered thriving on dollops of dung everywhere. In the villages this was collected, dried and used for fuel. Trees were sacred and used sparingly.

She was thinking. Khratham was gambling with the people. They were his to command to be sure but in matters of the soul it should not be the king's right to meddle in what people believed. Certainly to her, the belief in the nature gods made sense. Personifying the forces, the energy by which all living beings existed had its own inherent logic. To deny them their satisfaction went against the grain. Mudhan had no problem paying lip service to this god of the priests. They were Primaian. But to insist that this was the only god, that any deviation became heresy would spell trouble. At best most might acknowledge publicly at least this ultra divine being whilst most likely still offering their thoughts and prayers to the forces of nature. Pray for rain at the right time, invoke the nature gods to give them a good harvest, even asking them that the beer they brewed in their homesteads would not go sour.

She passed through the outer gates. The road bustling with carts going both ways. Houses spilled beyond the outer walls as the city thrived. The fresh smell of the country. The air clean, crisp, the sky overcast. So different to the smells of the crowded bazaar, of spices, cooking, dung, a heady mix, like the dominance of the priests. So far they had not ventured much into the countryside.

As far as she knew the people were sceptical regarding this overarching deity. They didn't buy it. The wealthier guarded in their acceptance. If there was something in it for them they would easily convert. From what she knew the priests were hinting of an ordered society. The king at the temporal apex, then his subjects stratified down and at the bottom the people. The king installed by divine fiat. She knew what that meant. Going against his will meant going against the supreme being. That bothered her. Autocracy becoming theocracy, a miniature Prima. It would be interesting if the council at Regum would react at all. Mudhan knew what the priests were up to. Getting their power base established here since they failed there. Reganian's were too individualistic to even bother with things of a spiritual nature. When machines served you so well what need of gods.

As she rode at ease wondering how all this might effect the daily running of the abbey the sensation of being connected made itself known in the back of her mind. Someone was seeking her out. Krool. The visitors from Regum. After the contents of her library. She welcomed any who sought knowledge. That was the reason for its existence.

`Ah but they have designs Mudhan.' Krool thought.

`The nature of sentients.'

`There are in two groups.'

The image of the VAV.

`Interesting.' Mudhan thought.

`There's more. Another of their group is making their way out as well.'

The ground vehicle. She waited for what Krool had in mind.

`There's a Primaian spy amongst them.'

`A priest.'

`Oh,' Krool chuckled, `nothing so obvious. A student. Enhanced even if he does not know it. Or maybe he does.'

`Thank you Krool.'

She opened her mind so that Krool was aware of what transpired at the citadel.

`I thought so. Leeches.'

`You have your gods they have theirs.'

`But you know they want domination. First the king, then the wealthy, the powerful families who advise the king, then the army and last the people.'

`So it may be.'

`May? Will if nothing is done.'

`Your people will remain true to their gods.'

`These priests don't like the idea that one can commune directly with the spirit world. They want to be the conduit and no one else. You know what that will mean.'

`The end of enchantment, the closing of the spiritual realms.'

`The usurping of all that is truly sacred.'

`If the priests succeed.'

`Khratham will make it so. Through the priests he will be the supreme magician.'

`And you outcast.'

`Outcast.' Krool scoffed. `I will let my displeasure be known Mudhan.'

`Reinforce your people.'

`Let us say I little show of what true power really is.'

`What are you going to do?' thinking he would invoke his gods, strengthen the spirit of his people to priest-proof their cosmic vision.

`That as well Mudhan. I shall test this viper's perniciousness. This student is most likely connected to the DVs. You know what that means.'

`Psychic power.'

`Domination. He is their creature.'

`Don't incur their wrath Krool.'

`Mudhan, it is too late for that. They have their designs and will stop at nothing to achieve it. This student and your visitors want the ancient wisdom to deny future generations their spiritual heritage. This is only the beginning. The sooner I act the sooner I can preclude their dark design.'

`Remember all life is sacred.'

`That is in the hands of the gods.'

`It is also in your ability to act wisely.'

`This is not some disputation amongst scholars Mudhan. They want it all. They want to possess our souls, bend them to their heinous will, make subjects of us all.'

`Only if it is accepted Krool.'

`I just want to clear the way.'

`You mean for me to stay out of whatever it is you intend to do.'

`When I am done I shall leave your abbey. The visitors do not know who I am. I told Shelan that I am merely a traveller, of no consequence. She agreed.'

`What are they doing now?'

Instead he replied: They even brought soldiers along with their clever machines.'

`Soldiers? But why?'

`A show of strength Mudhan. Showing their intent.'

`The same for the other group?'

`Of course. I tested them and they reacted. I laid down a curtain of mist so that I could read their minds as they passed through that. But they used some detonating device to blow it apart. Now what does that tell you?'

`Enough.'

`I am glad you are aware then.'

`I am indebted Krool.'

`Circumstance dictates.'

`It certainly does.'

`I just thought I'd let you know I shall be applying my powers. So that whatever you may experience is my presence, a show of my supremacy.'

`I have no intention of interfering Krool.'

`That is as I would have wished. I will probably be gone by the time you arrive. I don't want them to think we are scheming in our own way.'

`I do not fear them Krool. It is of indifference to me.'

'I am aware of your orientation Mudhan. You may watch if you so desire. But do not stop me.'

'As if I could.'

'You could and you know it.'

'I left that path years ago.'

'I know. But everything is changing. You might change as well.'

'I have found the course that I follow.'

'I must ready myself. A tranquil journey Mudhan.'

'May clarity of mind guide you Krool.'

He cloaked himself as he drew the ethereal powers into his soul. She decided not to interfere, or even be cognisant of what he intended to do. Whatever it was it would make itself known.

She sighed. Why did beings complicate reality so? The ways of nature would continue whatever anyone thought. Gods or no gods. It made no difference. What made a difference was attitude. Beliefs could be traps, weaving self induced enthrallment into the soul. The shamans in their amazing, stupendous multiple realms, the Primaians with their unitary obsession, so close to the answer yet missing it completely. Only the Reganian's were unconcerned. Loosing themselves willingly in their artifices. At least they knew what they were doing.

She spurred her mare on into a light gallop. These visitors Krool mentioned intrigued her. After the knowledge of the ancient arts. Was Krool right that they either wanted to deny future generations that wisdom so that priests had a clear run? Or build their own knowledge upon that? So why bring a Primaian along? Krool had a point. Making their presence felt.

Etessa, jolted, feeling slightly strange as they progressed slowly over the rough ground. She became drowsy. The initial excitement of the journey wearing off. Nothing but trees, meadows. More trees, hills covered in trees, nature repeating herself. She would go nuts living out here. No wonder the locals were so primitive. With no interchange of comprehensive thoughts except the rearing of cattle, the growing of grains, and having endless children seemed to be the limits of their lives. No wonder Regum did not bother to venture out here. These beings here so close to nature they were vegetables themselves.

They bumped and bounced over small knolls under thick grass, the open land to the right, the dense trees to the left along the stream. With a slight breeze ripples waved

of grass in undulating patterns. In her half awake state it was as if something was passed along the ground. Her brain felt thick, sluggish. At least inside the vehicle she was comfortable. Disassociated from nature. The dark hillside palpable, its presence resonated in her sleepy mind. Dumb nature. Comforting in its own stupid way. Brainless. Yet something within that mordant state. An undefinable essence pervaded everything. Was she being affected? Was it true what they said about mythological based societies? That their brainwaves fed on each other, reinforcing each other, crowding into her head? Well then let's see what this was all about. Nothing else to do.

She relaxed, too lazy to turn around and see how Horat was doing. Mitaj all concentration as he guided the vehicle along the bumpy embankment. Was nature a field in itself? Gone through some portal and were in its domain. Gosh, was she thinking like a local? Was everything she knew, even Regum some fantasy, a memory? Feeling timeless.

Comforting. Twisted geometries in each tree, the grass a waving pattern of distorted curvatures. Her mind rippled with energy. The waves grew, expanded as her mind expanded. Wow. Fantastic. Phenomenal. Unreal. Real unreal. What was going on? The expansion would not stop. It ballooned outwards, she herself expanding. This was something else. White heat deep within her. Her essence trying to hold her together. Her outer shell, her self, her memory of herself so far apart like the stars in the galaxy. She tried to get a hold of herself as she slipped away into a growing nothingness Then a tiny sun, flaring like a super nova blowing the images around her to smithereens. Only the bright searing, burning, scorching brightness remained, obliterating those tiny specks in the distance beyond reach that was everything she knew about herself, what she was. Was. Like dying stars. Receding sparks flaring for a short moment then engulfed by the growing glowing orb leaving nothing in its wake. Nothing.

Mitaj's linked AI filled with white noise. He tried filtering the incoming surge. Inbuilt processors tried to cope with this excess energy. His system wanting to shunt the rush into buffers and sub-memories. It sizzled with vibrancy. The real world grew brighter, momentary trace backs revealing only wavering patterns superimposed all around. Someone was doing an intense sweep. Sending out a precursor to disorientate their AI capabilities. A firestorm in his brain. He tried to link to Dag but found himself so isolated it took all his concentration to keep the vehicle moving. He had no volition at all to get the vehicle into auto-drive. His brain boiling. Like trying to extinguish a volcano. Something or someone had found them. With no apparent source.

He was being smeared into a constructed energy wave form. The surge intensified. Engaging his AI to repulse this onslaught only to feel his AI vibrating on the same frequencies, becoming an enphased standing wave. His brain melted. His AI retreated leaving his mind vacant, open, flooded with the insensate power of the invasive incursion. The last thing Mitaj was aware of was an unravelling. His memory exploded into fragments, disassociating, fracturing, being blown apart. What entered between the open spaces was utter relentless chaos. His mind collapsed. He self disintegrated.

Dag's alerts went off in his AI. Seeing the preternatural glow of the trees, a dark glow everywhere he fired the gun. Trees exploded in majestic destruction, incinerated in bright orange balls of fire. Startled birds flew in panic into the leaden sky, the clouds momentarily reflecting the fire ball below. Bullets ripped off branches, cracking, splintering as trees were cut to pieces falling against each other. He let of some grenades, arced away hit the forest floor and detonated in a white flash of anger, just like his brain. Shrieks of wildlife as the flames flared sending up white grey smoke. Rustling in the undergrowth, startled animals scurrying to safety.

A potent scan with no apparent source. His AI withdrew into a protective shell whilst the rest of his brain was immobilized. Collapse the field. As it was inside of him, he barely noticed his body. Some weird shit happening. Intercept the target. Don't let it get to you. His brain hot. White noise everywhere. Try letting go, the AI did. Trouble was his mind was drained. Vacant. He could not remember anything. Utter disorientation. Information loss. High energy involved.

Concentrate otherwise you're fucked. Gone. Wiped, cleaned out, vacant, braindead. No way. Quantum entanglement. Strange attractor. So let's go strange. After all this attack was shoved into his head so use your head to shove back. Instead the white noise intensified, a sphere within a sphere, a glowing sun, pure fission. White hot tendrils snaking out and into him, burrowing into his hot head. The enemy within.

Falling and rising. So relative. In space, out of time. Vertigo. Barely functioning, tottering, unstable, threatening melt down. Perception remained. Ride the wave, use the field, control the centre. The centre was in him. Another expansive blast wave. His brain torn apart, bit's flying off in all directions. Tendrils of energy snapped, flashes of memory flared than vanished, as did everything else, his sense of self, his self, his being flooded with utter chaos.

Then nothing.

Horat was looking at the trees quivering. His mind mud, all of it. The inner demarcations dissolved. Then came the heaviness of the earth beneath him, the pressure of the clouds pressing upon him, squeezing him. A few raindrops crashed with a resounding thump into his head, his ears highly attuned. The trees were vibrating. Then an explosion ripped into them. Dag was firing. This time they were prepared.

He felt the change of airpressure pushing into him. The explosion went on forever. Deep in his head something withdrew, sensing danger. He smelt the burning wood, the sizzled pine needles, so fragrant. The illuminated smoke from the explosion, another one expanded into his vision, telescoping into it. Tiny flames flickering on the ground. The white centre of the explosion remained in place as time slowed. Or his brain sped up.

The white glow all around him. He could not even see Etesa or Mitaj. Fascinating. Not turning to see what Dag was doing. The white ball was covered with a film of energy, wavy as water in a breeze, spreading out, spreading into him. Smooth below its surface pure energy irradiating him. The other part of his brain shrunk back in fear. Fear? Fear of what? His senses alert. His reptilian brain awakening. Expanding from deep within. Self activated in this moment of menacing perturbation. Then it, for he seemed apart from that anciently evolved ancestral past enjoined the flaring ball of white heat. A sun.

The storm front hit him, tumultuous vortices twisting within it, unleashing more energy. Amazing. Disconnected. Cool. Ice cold heat spiked his brain, shoving itself into his pliable mind. Whatever had receded moments before was now a tiny dark fleck. He felt elastic, viscous as the hard shards of light pushed their way further in. Blazing like hot rods his brain going deliquescent turning into mush. The white energy pulsed obscenely, malignant in intent.

A snowstorm with a visage which would not reveal itself. Almost graspable but never there long enough to get a fix. His shadow! The familiarity connected him to his projected essence, burning within the whiteness. Certainly not the Divine Mind. Another mind. He had thought it was his but it was not. With wilful intent. But to what aim? Why this manifestation?

His brain was pouring out of him. Diffusing in all directions, absorbed by this shining presence. He felt its essence, its power, its infinity. Some revelation. His brain still leaking out like a boiling pot of soup. He almost laughed at the weirdness of it all. Some trick. Trick alright. Tricked! So trick me! Instead of fighting the onslaught Horat welcomed it. Give me more!

The white heat crawled down his spine making his body lighter. It seeped into every cell of his being, transmuting him into pure energy. The shards of hard light were

now flowing puddles into what was left of him. Left? He felt his brain evaporating and there was nothing he could do. Disengaged, as sometimes happens in dreams. Except this was more than real. The white inflation inserted itself throughout his remaining shell. Remaining? It too glowed, having eaten its way right through and simultaneously throughout him. The energy bubbled, white blobs popping up, more and more of them until all was bubble and trouble. The gurgling fizzing shells empty within, not dark, just utter absence. Pouring out inexorably, pushing their way outwards, dissipating of what remained. Scattering his remains into the white ball of pure fire. The lightness of non-ness overwhelmed the last physical resistance of his dispersed being. The tenuous bonds of reality dissolving, turning into gossamer threads that broke apart, then were blown away by an invisible force until nothing was left.

Several days later some children playing near the stream, out on their own adventure found four cadavers. Flies buzzed in profusion, their eyes picked out, insects crawling in and out of their ears, mouths, and noses. Vermin lived in the hair of a woman and a man. The two soldiers were still helmeted. The children prodded them with long sticks. They were dead.

It was done. The Primaian and his accomplices extinguished. What a little determination could do. After that little exercise Krool simply walked out of the White Abbey. The others, Professor Storaf, probably clever but with very little learning and his two helpers Cena, innocent open mindedness and the other student Naj, clever, holding back had swarmed over the books in the library with eager interest. They might acquire the contents of the books, they could even glimpse what was revealed by their words but they would not comprehend in how that wisdom was applied. Even the incantations were mere words unless one infused them with power. That took years of training. Attuning the mind to the invisible forces giving life its energy to manifest itself. An effect, not a cause.

Storaf's mind was like a chatter box. Thinking this, analysing that, weighing up this bit of information, correlating it to other minor revelations. Ceaseless in constant mental activity drawing a convoluted maze across the mind as well as what he was studying. The more he acquired the further away the kernel of revealed truths became obscured. He would have the outer shell but would have no clue as to how its contents related.

Having left the abbey he put himself into trance to walk rapidly back to his people. It made the body lighter, drew on the energy all around, aided by a psychic breeze to boost his speed walk.

Hills were transgressed with consummate ease. The wind fresh, bracing. He could do this for days. A shadow following him. A guarded mind. There was no need to ascertain its being or where it was hidden. It belonged to the group mind in space. A show of spiritual superiority.

So the group mind had found him. He was not going to be so silly as to seek it out. It would thus need even more of a concentrated effort to follow him. It could not get a hold of him as a potency. Being in trance helped as well. All they might get was a hazy presence, at best an adumbration. Grasping at a fog.

Of course he could rest and create an identity that was not him. He would reserve that option if it tried to get any closer. In a way by knowing Mudhan he had acquired what appeared to be the final piece in his learning. He was not that vain to think that by being the shaman of his people, having reached the pinnacle of his potential that that was that. The universe, the realms within it were too vast, the gods too tricky to let him assume by merely being attuned he could learn no more. Mudhan had taught him the value of the absence of mindfulness. It made him realize there was another path into the vastness infusing reality. Whilst almost opposite to the way, he followed emptiness which had its advantages. Awareness. And with that came revelations upon revelations. One became a detached observer. Which is what he was doing whilst trance walking through the next valley. Anyone seeing him would merely catch a glimpse for a moment then vanish and appear much further ahead.

Another pass to cross. The wind getting cooler. He getting closer to the sacred lands of the ancestors. A world inhabited by spirits. Slowly the trees disappeared as another mountain range was left behind. Gray rocky cliff faces, the first sprinkling of snow and ice, under clouds barely over his head.

The presence remained. It got Krool thinking. Then a flash. Remembering something. Whilst the four he had taken out of this life who struggled uselessly in their final moments a vague image had formed within the sphere of energy Krool used to achieve his deadly aim. It had not been a god aiding him. Nor had he sought any divine being. A powerful possibly an archimage had perhaps revealed something of itself. Not quite there. Intrigued or drawn automatically to this show of psychic strength. Not outright inimical. Just there. Curious. A passed on spirit of a long dead shaman, an archimage of old roaming freely across the realms of the gods. Maybe. A spirit of the forest? Perhaps.

Its psychic presence too tenuous, both distant yet manifest. A protector? It was not that unusual that a spirit being might aid a magician such as himself.

Then the image was inside of him. The face hidden in shadow. It was not a projection of the group mind. Residing in space. Superimposed onto him rather than into his inner realm. Forming a connection, offering the way. A lesser archimage would jump at the chance of exploring this manifest revelation. Krool knew that it might have its own aims for seeking him out. That could mean enthrallment. He was bidden to no one. Death itself? Was this a premonition of being called?

He was moving along a rugged river. Rocks everywhere, the path narrow, crooked, uneven following the rushing waters. The presence, present was trying to reside within him. This was not good. He would have to dispel his trance state and sort out its inquisitiveness. The terrain was rocky. He was in a narrow gorge. Suitably secluded, for this was not the trade route his people used but a harder shortcut would make as good a spot as any to try and fathom what this being was all about.

Death. Why did that thought return? He was no stranger regarding its eternal presence. It was a part of any initiation to cope with ultimate forces. The price to pay for being incarnated in bodily form. And Death took many forms. Being the absence of life on this planet it thus presented itself as all possible materializations to those called to move on. Life and Death in this plane of existence inextricably intertwined. Give and take. He could partake of it and remain alive.

He stopped his trance walk. Everything around him took on a more solid appearance. Both the shadow being and visage remained. The former intrigued, the latter attentive. So it had sought him out. As it had sought out Horat in his final moments

The presence liquescent, amorphous, a fluid like essence pouring into him. He sat and concentrated on nothing. Just his breath. Like Mudhan did. It was more than what it was. Everything. Still one level removed from immanent self revelation. An insubstantiality pregnant with the possibilities of creation.

His head opened, his skull was removed, the darkness moved in. The face that was not. A semblance of its own undefined form. A sense of something impending, something awesome, overwhelming, not threatening. Isolating him from the forces which were dominant below. He had been uplifted. This was not the god of the priests, nor an impression sent by the shadow which now had receded, withdrawn. He was being extracted.

He felt immense. Pregnant with power. On the verge of great impending revelations. All his for the taking. Even though it was too much. What a being. He had

never conversed with a surviving magus in the outer realms, nor come across a god of such a vast and almost infinite realm. More than he ever imagined.

An absence of light, the dim purple glow, barely shimmering, a gateway to uncountable worlds. He felt so light he was drifting. It was a pleasant sensation. This being was taking him to its realm. Surrounded by a lilac sphere. A shimmering curtain upon which were impressed hundreds of worlds, hundreds of possibilities. All in its grasp.

The godlike being made it understood that it would not disclose itself. For good reason. The moment it was known it would be revealed. Something it had as yet no intention of doing. Not in this present time. What Krool saw around him was not just what was to be, what is, but also what was. This young god, it was the best Krool could come up with, wishing not to seem unappreciative of the favour it bestowed upon him was amused by that thought.

‘Not a god to you. I was once like you, made of flesh and blood. But no more. Witness all the worlds, as they were and what I *can will them to be.*’

Krool astounded. The most powerful archimage ever. He thought back on his ancestors only to have the being deny his pedigree.

‘I can offer you any world you want Krool.’

‘The one I am in will suffice.’ It was not humbleness, it was determination. He wanted to curtail the priests, keep the land pure from their infestation.

It held back.

‘They are your servants?’ not shocked which surprised him. Fate decreed their presence, destiny determining their path.

‘They are part of the mosaic, the tapestry of possibilities.’

‘They are...annoying.’

It seemed to smile at that. As if that was its intent. An advance guard.

‘Why negate the gods?’ Krool thought before thinking.

‘They will not be negated.’ It was a half truth. Krool understood. These mortals were doing his will. The gods did not concern him. In this realm they were just one piece of the greater montage around him. It had all possibilities open to it. The one it chose was obviously the one where it would be supreme Krool thought.

It agreed with him.

Krool had a decision to make. He could withdraw, for even though he was immersed in its realm it was just a realm amongst many. The god's, the spirit worlds of the ancestors, the realms of the archimages of ancient times and that of this shaman who had access to all. As they all did. This being's was simply one that was in the *making*.

`I see you understand.'

Krool did. The question was whether this was an opportunity for him.

`It is.'

He was being offered a supreme role in its design.

`The choice is yours.'

`I have no quarrel with you.'

Silence. The tiny globes flickered, animated by those who lived within them. He could choose any world. Maybe even one where he was supreme. He remained reticent. He wanted to achieve whatever fate had in store for him by his own efforts. For only by applying oneself consciously, practicing the divine arts was one strengthened within so that at the moment of passing one had the vigour and knowledge to overcome death, pass through its realm and continue ever onwards in the realm of eternity. The dominion of the gods if lucky, or transmigrating into a lower level. But beyond death. Even being able to choose one's reincarnation. Krool feared if he accepted whatever was on offer his essence might be dissipated into that realm from which it drew its strength.

`Very good.' Pleased. `You want to do this the hard way.'

`The only way.'

`There are worlds where you are nothing and where you are supreme.'

Meaning he was in a middle world. Powerful amongst his race but that was all.

`Is that what you want?'

`It was the destiny I chose.'

`Even if the outcome might go against you.'

Implying It would reign supreme in his world. But that did not mean It would be the end of him.

Silence.

He could not forsake his world, its destiny, his people. This being was determined to use the priests for its own ends.

The being felt satisfied sure of its intent. For Krool it was enough to know there were other possibilities. It also dawned on him, he could not stop his thoughts that there were worlds where It might not be supreme either. The knowledge and its implications gave him hope.

`Hope.' It laughed. It really was sure of itself. The tiny worlds expanded, shining like colourful pearls on the lilac web. Krool held back for he knew that if he went into one of those possible worlds he could well remain there thinking he was back in his real world.

`All are real as this is real.'

Krool did not deny this. What is, is.

`The world's are mine.'

Which they were not. But that It could observe them It must have foreknowledge in how to manipulate them, as in manipulating the priests. Which did not mean It would win in all cases. As long as there was free will there was choice.

`Within boundaries, within limits. How much choice does one have in the stone age? Certainly there is free will, but what can be done with that under such circumstances?'

The strange thing was that Krool did not resent this being. If he had the chance he might well do the same thing.

It relaxed, Krool felt profound. There was a way out. He could accept the offer. Once accepted it could not be taken away.

Apprehension. Entering might be like being incarnated.

It was waiting.

`There will always be other times.' Krool thought.

`Times change. The curtain is strengthening.'

Meaning It was implying It could draw a veil over the ancient realms. The further removed, the more the soul was isolated from the divine, the harder it was to attain it. Then the isolation was complete. Only dreams and drugs remained to access the hidden realms. Remove the latter and the dreams could only attain the state of revelation within that curtained of reality. The task unfinished. Its control supreme. All conditional.

`There will be others.'

`But none like me.'

`Even on your world there are your predecessors. There are other worlds with living entities just like you. You are not that unique.'

He had to accept the facts. Take it or leave it.

It seemed to relish Krool's predicament.

`I will go back.'

`I'm sure you will. But will you make the right choice?'

Multiple images of his world appeared. Each reality replaced by another. All very similar, almost the same but with different futures. It was trying to confuse him. Instead of trying to find the true world he had come from Krool emptied his mind. Not easy for the images were inside his head. Like paintings rapidly succeeding each other. After a while the fast moving worlds receded as he went void and held in stock the world he knew. It

was the one that made the least impression upon him directly. More like an infusion, an energy that was unmistakable, what the Primaian's called 'resonance'. He remained unfocussed whilst aware of his world's essential presence, its reverberation, its inherent qualities, its majestic realms, its very being.

He was back at the stream. The sensation of the being as a presence was gone. The shadow lingering. Had it aided him in choosing the right world? Krool liked to think so. Then the shadow departed. Drawn back into the group mind. It too had gotten what it wanted.

Prima

How significant was that? Spare me from Divines and Ecclesiastics and their ideas. Elentra's mind numb from the seminar. The delegates had droned on and on about the alien menace. Lord Pentham fiddled with the sleeve of his grey robe, embellished with his crest, his status, entrusted with seeking out heretics. The secret conference pursuing the favourite subject under the innocuous banner of 'Alien resonance – future states and implications'. Called together by the Divines it revealed nothing the two of them did not know already. Elentra wanted answers not clerical sermonizing. Specifics not the staple of holy invocations to muster the people's vigilance, essentially doing their work for them. If they needed the masses to ascertain the true condition of their planet's resonance, to unearth the inner manifestations of the outer incursion then these Divines were next to useless. Too cloistered, a hot house of intrigue, of jockeying ego's. The quest to gain recognition more important than the struggle they faced with the new developments at hand.

Elentra understood the need to be kept informed and was thankful that Pentham had invited her to the seminar. He just wanted her along. The only one she thought smugly who was tech-savvy. Using the DVs psychic abilities to hold the incursion, dilute it and preferably shut it out of their space. With the first they were successful, the second doubtful and the third...

Nor had she been called for any input. Not that she expected it. She was merely a delegate, sitting amongst the gathered faithful, more intent at having their beliefs reinforced than actually doing anything constructive, short of containing the Volatiles or healing the insane, the fallen, the misguided, the heretics.

Pentham, Elentra assumed was on a fishing expedition. Even their best astronomer, Varris had merely summed up what little they knew regarding the strangeness that was lurking in their universe. Not that the Divines and Ecclesiastics had a clue just how strange the incursion was. So much for celestial enlightenment. The Great Mind was certainly not with them. Or at best holding back, waiting, watching how the struggle went to cleanse the universe of this incursion. Instead awed by religiosity, they bent facts to fit their holy attitude pertaining to spiritual redemption. Even Regum's powerful WebSpace more an appendix than the core of their orientation to best Prima's position. The knowledge of their technology deemed a blind alley which it could well be.

Just that this blind alley was turning into a superhighway leading to vast realms way beyond their limited, piously oriented vision.

She had been gone too long from Prima. The odd visit only re-established her mental separation from the devout. She was practical. Facts were facts. They could not be denied. Instead they were buried in an avalanche of holiness. These people were isolating themselves with their sacred quest for ultimate purity of their souls. Rational analysis not even considered. The question of what confronted them negating the how it was achieved. That it was alien was obvious. There it ended. Spiritual unity, holy communion with the Cosmic Consciousness their only concern. Anything else smacked of heresy. Deviant ideas were denied scrutiny. It was blasphemy and that was that.

Elentra thought of the DVs. Who had latched onto a presence. Officially it was deemed the vision of the Cosmic Architect. Seen through the prism of their adulterated souls unduly influenced by the presence of Regum's Web. The intelligence an artifice of their imagination. Or another realm in WebSpace. A lure tailored to Prima's determined mind set to see everything through one approach. One that was not working in stopping the alien field, even influencing it. This new phenomena out there considered a bogey.

Lord Penthan, Elentra, Janon and Darlos were in Pentham's office. The Divines and Ecclesiastics returning to their own haunts to continue to pray for redemption. With limited results, if any.

"They did their best Elentra. They are Spirituals after all." Pentham said understanding her frustration. Pentham knew she had the pontiff's ear, interested in her work which included the gathering of intelligence regarding Regum. Not that the DVs came up with much. Except the psychic flare at Khratham. Then the deadly silence of four deceased souls. Psychic warfare. A shaman with resolute determination to enforce his will and succeeding spectacularly. A supreme Natural. Elentra had her work cut out. The setback duly noted with as little commentary as possible. She did not want any interference for it could be considered failure on her part, her DVs in not foreseeing this. Another disaster.

"At least they weren't interested in our work." Janon said relieved.

"More for our benefit to remain focused." Darlos scoffed. Pentham had done well in finding two clear headed, reality focused staffers for his unit. Religiously untainted. Hope yet Elentra thought.

Pentham sensed Elentra's dissatisfaction. He sympathised. The speakers had done nothing but recite their mantras. Containment, cleansing, resonant alignment, seeking out heresies destabilising their spirituality. That was how they approached the future. If

the evil won it would be another Calamity. No specifics as to how to deal with what they faced in concrete terms. Accept to equate the alien resonance as an overarching event that needed to be smashed, hinting that Regum had to be dealt with. It was one repetitive merry-go-round as each delegate repeated in florid language what the previous speaker said. Maintaining the cosmic equilibrium. Accept something else was disturbing it. As it had Kesheera. Yet any innovation, breathing diverse approaches into their work was deemed suspicious. Divergent thinking, new conceptualisations all tainted with profanations. A sign that the alien incursion was fracturing minds, dissecting cosmic unity which would only strengthen the ingress until all become disjointed with the Web the ultimate wedge. Then the collapse of their planet's resonance a foregone conclusion.

Maybe that is why the Divines had called the conference together. Revealing their antiquated mindset instead.

"I think we should go outside." Pentham suggested. They rose and left his office, walked to the rear of the pontifical palace, in silence passing the ceremonial guards and out to the large park under a cloudy sky. Where Pentham's VAV was parked, glinting in the sun. The doors swung open as he suggested they climb in. When comfortable the doors shut.

"It's totally secure in here." Pentham beamed since the palace's offices were not, according to him. The VAV Reganian. If they had smart bugs Elentra mused then perhaps that was indeed Pentham's intention. A game spanning two planets.

"Well one thing is certain. The Reganian's don't seem to care." Indicating their approach to the alien field. "They are aware of the alien planet though we know nothing of their intent. Even with that asteroid hit," Elentra wondering if this was for the Reganian's benefit, slipping something their way, see if they reacted.

"has not aroused their interest. As far as we know." With a tight smile. "In other words nothing from the DVs." Elentra said nothing. "But there is something, isn't there?" he looked at her. Janon and Darlos listened with interest.

Elentra nodded. "Always something."

"We know that Telafus's state is a slight problem for us. To allow a fallen soul to ascend. Will it poison the Immortals? Affect the Trine and Guardians? Will this alien field have an impact on the transcendent soul?" meaning no doubt the DVs. Elentra thought of Kesheera again. The Divines clueless. Elentra hoped it would stay that way.

"Of course all this is nothing new to us. I could relate hundreds of deviant thoughts. All rather meaningless, babblings of distorted minds, flawed resonances. Which

I have noted." And he retrieved from within the folds of his gown a paper which he first passed to Elentra.

Weirdness upon weirdness. From this it could be assumed that some alien intelligence was forcing its thought processes upon weaker souls. Those who could not resist its dominance. Was there something peculiar amongst these discordant imaginings? A pattern? Most of it was fantastic. Way out there. Imaginings of potent beings, neither Primaian or Reganian. Mythological. Demented dream states, or revelations of other worlds? No wonder this was deemed heretical. It went against the grain of Prima's primacy as the Chosen Race. If there were others, more potent psychically then no wonder it was suppressed. Being overwhelmed by alien minds said it all. They were weaker, the aliens stronger. With some wiggle room. These souls had delved back into ancient history. That too did not bode well. It meant they were weaker now, under the divine guidance of the Great Mind than when they had been pagan. Either way it was bad news. Elentra kept her thoughts to herself. The revelation though helped her focus. She handed the sheet to Darlos.

"Your thoughts Elentra." Pentham prompted.

"I know it sounds trite, especially after the talk. We have scanned some of our DVs and think we're onto something." She was thinking slowly. She had no wish to come right out with it. Not enough confirmation yet. "Either the alien field is condensing in space or it is the workings of the Divine Mind Lord Pentham."

That was enough for the moment.

"A localisation?" Pentham arched his brows, interested, thinking of what was revealed out in the desert when he had visited the analysts and their possible future projections.

"Sort of. More like a fog, but present all the same. Not a life form."

"Finally, something."

Darlos handed the sheet to Janon.

"Separate in a way from the general incursion which is not location specific." Elentra explained.

"A secondary manifestation."

"So it appears."

"Could it be the Web? Artificially generated?" Darlos asked.

"Too early to tell."

"So it could be Reganian." Janon replied.

"It would need a power source and so far that too is not apparent. I brought what we do have." Elentra looking at Pentham who nodded. She got out a small data disk and gave it to Pentham. "You can keep this."

He inserted it. A lightscreen appeared, numbers scrolling down in brilliant green.

"It's a simulation from what some DVs picked up."

A lilac mist far out towards the centre of their galaxy. No values assigned to it. There and not there, just like a dreamstate.

"A superimposition." Janon guessed.

"Or a by-product. But why out there? Unless it's hiding. Yet that cannot be it for we now know of it. Unless that's its intention." Darlos considered.

"Or a trap." Pentham replied

"I ran the numbers, with a control base using specific DV oriented targeting methods to make sure it's not a mental projection. The numbers are real."

Pentham took back the sheet. "Your conclusion?"

"The pattern is real, just not the substance. It could be pure energy."

"Is there such a thing?" Darlos asked.

"The soul is pure energy."

"We know that..." Darlos trailed off considering his own idea. "A pure life form? The Divine Mind revealing itself."

"Could be." Elentra glad the conversation was slipping into its predetermined slant. Though she ruled out divine manifestation.

"A revelation. We are overjoyed." Now Elentra was astonished the path Pentham was taking. With reason. Dissembling. Buying time. For the moment Pentham let the Divines run with their appraisal. The DVs were so focussed towards outer space they had ignored inner space, that of their galaxy. Pentham would use their orientation as a cover. Janon and Darlos understood this as well.

They watched the lilac haze. Pentham was thinking of what Telafus had ranted on about. Could the two be connected? Had pure divinity melted his brain?

"These numbers, they are recurring." Janon said.

"And?" Pentham replied.

"Means its static. Rerunning its configuration. Timeless. Or rather time constrained. Self timing."

"Go on." Pentham prompted.

"Or all of the above."

"And?"

"As in what implications it holds. It's aim if any?" Elentra queried.

"If you don't know Elentra..." Darlos looked at her.

"I'm not predicting what this is until I know more. Sure a few DVs have had visions but they were not this." Or rather they were closer to the heresies according to the Divines.

"It's more what I don't know." Darlos looked displeased. Elentra continued:

"What can be ruled out at this stage. Regum for starters. Unless of course they made some breakthrough. One thing is certain. It has nothing in common with the alien field. Unrelated."

"You are certain?" Pentham needed to know. They all did.

"Numbers don't lie."

"No they don't." Pentham said slowly, not yet convinced of anything.

Pentham understood what he possessed. Knowledge of something only the four of them knew of on Prima. He was thinking even further. If a 'reality' could be superimposed then why stop there? DVs did that all the time. And not just the source either. Nor was Elentra running a clandestine experiment. But it gave him inspiration. Once Elentra cracked just what it was then that could be used for their aims. They could duplicate this event. Once they knew how it got its energy. Drawing on the Divine Mind? Maybe. The universe's alien field? Elentra said not. Something else then. But what? At least Elentra had some concrete results. Use the computers on the Orbital to see if it was possible to duplicate this. Without the Reganians finding out. Maybe the DVs, if all were harnessed to think a field into existence. Why not? Indeed. The solution simple. The only drawback their lack of technological resources. As always. Time to do some experimentation.

He now wished they had not wiped out the Reganian ship over that distant planet. They had had a field in place. He would get Elentra to bring all that back up. Then if they could discover how they had inserted a ship just like that, with a live crew then perhaps he could duplicate the experiment on a much vaster scale. Maybe they could even delete the Web itself. Now wouldn't that be a surprise. He felt good. If this was divinely ordained he was truly thankful. He had come to a decision. Janon and Darlos might as well know. They were the only two, plus Reno, Janon's operational manager who were closest in his domain. But they had to make sure to keep a tight grip on the information, giving the appearance that for the rest, this was a divine sign. Nothing more.

Elentra had come to a decision herself. She had been too detached from the DVs. She had not practiced her capabilities for some time. Too busy overseeing her work. It left little else to engage her psychic capabilities. She too was interested now that Pentham was, in ascertaining the true nature of this most remarkable evidence they possessed. If she could discover its source then they could move to the next stage themselves. Field insertion. This was real science. Praying might be good for the soul but that was about as far as it went. The universe was made of sterner stuff. The Reganians knew how to manipulate matter, do amazing tricks. Prima's Divines too obsessed with the state of being. It was time for doing.

On the Orbital the first test run was ready. After weeks of number crunching, going meticulously through the DV data base, reversing the processes of the field equations the computers disgorged the mathematical information Elentra needed. Algorithms. Weird little processes which revealed the underlying logic of how closed and even open systems worked. Self determining results that were infinitesimal at first but as the process continued, quickly narrowing down to one final result. So Elentra started out with the results and worked backwards to the initial ground state. Then it was a matter of creating the right base to make sure the run sequence came out as intended. That's how the Reganian's achieved their desired results. This was stupendous. It meant they could configure future states. To their own design.

Then she had to find the energy to drive the system that would create the field, the desired effect. It was so obvious. The galaxy itself. It was so dense towards the centre. That equated to more free energy. The galaxy was the power house. That's what that strange lilac haze could be using to be exactly where it was. A divine sign.

She had done it. Understood the secret of Regum's almost magical science. The knowledge of numbers. No wonder the religious castes were so adamant that that understanding was so off limits. One could become a god. Not that Elentra had illusions in that regard. She was just doing her job. So whilst the Reganians played in their Web she would be creating one of their own. If it had more energy than theirs they could dominate space itself. Not exactly how the Divines envisioned it. They might even resent it. But if she pulled this off then the reality of their power could not be denied. Anyway it could always be shut down if it did not perform as intended. Pentham would be pleased.

When the test runs confirmed the algorithms were performing she contacted Pentham. Delighted he made his way up to the Orbital. Here their secret work was more secure than down there.

"The theory," she explained to Pentham in the control room at the centre of the processors the Primaian's used on the Orbital, huge white boxes humming away, "is so simple." Having explained the basics to him.

"Generate the field equations. Then beam the digital simulation, for that is what it is, to the near centre of the galaxy. Not the centre itself."

She called up a viewscreen to show Pentham what she meant. The image of the central white glow where millions of stars were densely packed together. The intense radiation was enough for their needs.

"Too intense."

"But that lilac glow is there."

As it was. Located at the edge of a huge black hole. Balanced between it and the inner rim of the galaxy's fused stars, pure light energy.

"Wont the energy we beam there be swallowed up?"

"No. For the data field will draw immediately upon that energy to configure itself into being. What is being inserted Lord Pentham is a *process*, not something physically real. That will be generated out of the process."

"Remarkable Elentra."

"Isn't it just? I've also linked a group of DVs to project the idea of what we are aiming for. Some are concentrating on the equations, reinforcing them. Others are projecting the result we want."

"Which is?" he asked suspiciously. For Elentra could it seemed insert whatever she wanted.

"Why our supremacy." She smiled triumphantly. "Actually it is a little more mundane than that. The state of our resonance."

Pentham was relieved.

"The computers have allocated the required space which the DVs are focussed upon. It's now a matter of inserting the equations. They will do the hard work of transforming light energy into our resonant energy. Even if it fails, no damage done." She smiled a little, for though the simulations worked that did not mean it would.

"I've also called up the moment Regum's ship vanished when the DVs were aligned to the drop field the Reganians used to accomplish their insertion. Accept this time it's more a matter of again, absorbing that drop field and adding it to ours. Because the field has in it all the information, again mathematical, to be where it was. That too will be transferred across. A little back up, just in case."

"My you have been busy."

"To the exclusion of everything else. My second is handling her temporary advanced status rather well."

"Kroena isn't it?"

"Yes Lord Pentham. Now you can press the start button." She showed him which one on the console.

Without ceremony Pentham pressed the 'send' button.

The designated area near the galactic centre's acquired target locale was aligned as the computers downloaded the data matrices with their inherent algorithms. Instantly the DVs aligned their mind sets though nothing could be seen physically. The numbers on the consoles scrolled down as fast as the computers could manage creating a green blur. Another console showed a hazy mist glowing near the centre of the galaxy for a fraction then it expanded outwards with lightning speed. And vanished. Not quite. The projected DV mind fields, plus the data, plus the energy pouring out of the galaxy were united in one projected field expanding faster than light as a wave according to the downsized computer imagery. The instant expansion had gone past them. Once more the distant Reganian field was washed away, the ship included. And continued beyond. Then it stabilized.

Elentra and Pentham looked at each other.

"Now what?" he asked a little taken aback that something had happened and somewhat disappointed that nothing had happened at all. The alien field still there for starters. The lilac sphere a little darker as if, it had, drawn on the energy projected from Elentra's experiment.

Yet the numbers held, having slowed down, the algorithms working.

"Our resonance is in place Lord Pentham."

"It is?"

"The read outs confirm it. We have boosted the universe."

"I feel nothing."

"Hm, neither do I. Well something happened anyway. One way to find out is if this has affected the Reganians or their Web. The changes might be subtle Lord Pentham. It might be only in the psychic realm."

She told the DVs to stand down. Disconnect. The numerical values did not change.

"In theory our resonance has now flooded the universe. Is I should say." As she studied the readouts on the screens.

"So we are dominant?"

"According to this, yes."

"So our essence is imprinted onto the fabric of space."

"Neatly put."

"Could Regum twist it?"

"Well, perhaps. They would have to duplicate what we have done. But I shall alert the DVs for any Reganian activity. Have done so. I could assign more."

"Well we must observe their reaction. And ours as well."

Elentra entered some codes. Prima came up. The indications were positive. Their resonant envelope looked denser, the colouring tighter, more intense.

"I am impressed Elentra. You know that this feat must remain secret. If news got out that we used science and technology to achieve what the Ecclesiastics, the Divines and the rest failed to achieve what you have..." He gestured feigning helplessness.

"I understand Lord Pentham. Anyway that is your decision."

"It has to be Elentra. A pity really."

"What?"

"You not being credited with this achievement. If it is real."

"It is." Elentra already thinking something else. If the Reganians did discover what had just been achieved they could undo their work and superimpose their resonance. It would be a never ending battle. In a way they had let the use of their minds become unleashed. If it could be done here it could be done anywhere.

"This sets a precedent." Pentham said. He too knew the implications.

"I guess this stays secret."

"As it must".

"Now comes the hard work."

"What might that be Elentra."

"Seeing what happens on Earth, on Regum."

"Yes you are correct. See if their mental orientation changes."

"If it does Lord Pentham it will be by degrees. The memory is a potent organ determining thought. It might even set off an opposite reaction."

"You think so?"

"The difference between now and the past's previous perception. The more determined of their race noting the difference might try even harder."

"Yes I have considered this as well. Still it's a beginning Elentra. We could not sit back and wait and hope that it would work our way. We had to act."

"I'm glad we did Lord Pentham."

"Who knows? The Earthers might finally see the truth. If that is so it would be enough. As for the Reganian's, our kin, well they are as obstinate as us. At least you have done the groundwork, underlined our divinely inclined nature."

"As long as one of us is left Lord Pentham we shall remain supreme."

"At least if some anarchistic minds appear they may not do as much damage as otherwise might have been."

She was thinking of Kesheera's downloaded data. They had linked to an event. It seems that anarchistic minds were the best equipped to deal with all their problems. Most DVs were too stable. When they fell they fell, burnt out, incapable of handling the space they were immersed in, space that contained such bizarre revelations, along with something utterly unholy.

"Might have been. Lord Pentham you've said it all."

"And what will be of course."

"Oh yes." Elentra's eyes sparkled. Then she looked at Pentham directly.

"What?"

"You know what we have done don't you?"

Pentham waited. They were engaged in this titanic struggle and here was Elentra, so detached yet on top of her tasks that he gave her his due respect. There was no one else like her. Almost half Reganian in her approach if not her outlook.

"Bested Regum."

"Oh?" inquisitive.

"We shut down their incursion. Well the DVs to give them their due."

"Yes."

"Our resonance supreme."

"Just."

"This side of the equations. In a way we have created a fulcrum to tip the scales our way."

"At the moment." He was thinking of the analysis, the other probable states he had been shown in the desert laboratory.

"Using Reganian methodologies."

"Which remain secret Elentra." He emphasised.

"That is why we are having this conversation up here. It's safer. We are now more than equal to the task."

"I am in hope. The Divine Mind is guiding you well."

"Hm, yes. I've tasked half the DVs to focus on our resonance. Instead of just fighting this incursion, I intend to obliterate it."

"Very worthwhile."

"I think rather than react, act."

"I concur."

"So you are in agreement."

"If it works, of course."

"It will." Then she switched track. "About Darlos."

"What about him?"

"You trust him."

"Naturally."

"Good. What we are doing here I wish to keep under wraps."

"Meaning Darlos might inform the assigned group he represents."

"Yes." Though Elentra had no clue as to who they were. Typical Prima. Everything was so secret no one really knew who was doing what, achieving what. Each sub group pushing their own agenda. Not very coordinated either.

"I think he is cautious enough not to run with hypotheticals."

"Good. This is too important to let out until success is total."

"I would have thought Elentra, that the removal of the ship..."

"That is only the beginning. I want the Divines and Ecclesiastics to have the bare minimum of information, of our capabilities. In short Lord Pentham they are more of a nuisance than anything else."

"I see your point of view."

"Will you do what you can? I know," she hastened to add, "that in a way I have no right to even ask you, but this is too important to be politicized."

A smile spread across his rugged face. She continued:

"I think we're on the edge of a breakthrough. It might be worth your while to stay, if you can afford the time."

"In a way Elentra, getting away from Prima does me good. Get a better perspective. Ever since the Roshati incident, I have come to the conclusion that by an odd twist of logic your work here relates directly to the condition of Prima itself. Oh yes, I am staying for a while. So is Darlos."

"Yes Darlos. Security is of course your concern more than mine. But Darlos's assignment is to feed information to his group. You know I have inserted myself into the artificial configuration." Her persona spread across space. Digitally spread. The

subdomain her secret, directly fed from space. Her secondary persona with an agenda. Not Prima oriented. From within the universe still looked the same as from 'here' on the orbital. The subtle change universal in application. A third field. With her the loci. Her persona taking in the whole universe. "I've uploaded some DVs with the simulation." And she activated a viewscreen. They were mere constructs, Less than her.

A line appeared. Almost horizontal with the slightest of a decline. Then a little bump and the horizontal read out went faintly up.

"That is the new field. It is affecting space. It's a resonance in its own state. Attuned to ours."

"Well that is good news."

"Accept it is not our doing."

"Well we will have to tailor this so that it is our doing."

"Good. It will keep me covered up here. There is something embedded in the data."

The graph turned into a thicker line. The sequences changed.

"Reganian input. Tainted. Lord Penthan all this is new to us."

"So if I understand you correctly, Reganians know how to create Primaian results."

"In a nutshell."

"Now that is intriguing."

"Isn't it just. Trouble is, this field was initially not linked, embedded or phased with our DVs, our resonance or that of our space. Now of course it is."

"What are you saying?"

"That it is not our creation, yet it has our resonant state and some of Regum's within it."

"A hybrid."

"Which I am prioritizing. I want to check it out myself. The DVs are the sentinels."

"You want to risk it?"

Elentra nodded. "If I go down, then that is the Divine Will."

"You're not under Reganian influence." Pentham felt uncomfortable saying it but it had to be said.

"Not according to my scans. The data is there if you want."

"I'll take your word for it."

"There is something else as well."

"Isn't there always." He sighed.

"Earth."

"Oh yes. The origin of the alien incursion."

"It's continually gestating, bifurcating fields, collapsing then reforming. The calamity they suffered sped up their minds."

"Well we had better keep an eye on them."

"This other field has vestiges of their thought patterns."

"This gets stranger by the moment Elentra."

"Strangeness which we can use to contain Regum."

"Ah." Though Pentham was not to sure exactly what Elentra had in mind.

"We can use this other field as camouflage. Get in through the back door so to speak."

"Ah." A beneficial smile.

"Shall we go to the control room? Unless there is something else still on your mind Lord Pentham."

"Plenty Elentra but it can wait."

"Thank you."

"What had you in mind?"

"Earth. They might be rationally insane, warped I know, impossible by our standards. But if we can reconfigure, pare down certain aspects, boost others their resonance field could be of use to us."

"You are suggesting..."

"Yes. We still fight. I think it's got potential."

"You are on dangerous ground Elentra."

"I know." She smiled.

"It's on your head."

In my head she mused. "Thank you Lord Pentham."

They made their way from the secure debriefing room to the centre of Elentra's operational headquarters. Buried deep in the Orbital it had rows of screens manned by operatives watching all aspects of space. The inner field was routed to secure data banks to which only Elentra and her immediate crew had access.

The staff noticing Lord Pentham were about to rise but he motioned for them to remain seated. Darlos looked up and nodded. Darlos. Probably sent by Skias or someone close to him to get the real data, not just the reports. Her concern to negate the Ecclesiastics primary concern with their overall resonant state. She needed her persona

to be an Isolate. Elentra fed up with the demarcations in place. Down below they played at politics, up here it was different.

Elentra and Pentham walked to a bank of screens dealing with Earth. The imagery was thanks to the DVs remote sensing capabilities remarkably clear. Cities reminiscent of their own millennia ago rose with a certain crude majesty into their blue skies. Temple complexes, towers reaching upward, palatial grounds, then the mass of houses around them, contained in walled security, testament of their warlike nature needing protection. The read outs were not dissimilar to that of Prima's resonance. Polluted to a degree by their own instabilities, but familiar just the same.

The architecture of the temple looked bombastic. Solid. Self assured, the houses humble. A tower centred in a city reaching up to the heavens. The Earthers were using this massive structure to observe the stars. The memory of the meteor strike too persistent to be forgotten. They were studying the night sky above them, seeking divine signs, trying to read the minds of their gods. The effect of the secondary field was having little results on their state of mind. Elentra understood their orientation. They were duplicating their earlier civilisation's outlook to reach for the stars. Something inherent in their mental make up. She wondered if the Earthers would accept their unitary god. Whether that would influence their outlook to be merely satisfied with that or like the Reganians, continue with their natural inclination to try and break out from their planet. However one city did not mean that the rest of the population were of similar intent. There was still time.

Elentra asked one of the observers to show Pentham the rest of the planet. Darlos walked over and observed as well.

Vast areas of forests, deserts, mountain ranges, jagged, sharp edges, snow covered, a young planet. At the edge of a vast ocean the spread of a magnificent city. Elsewhere humble villages not unlike Prima's. Oxen ploughing fields. Good. No technology as such. Oared sailing ships. Gaudily painted with eyes at the bows, ornate dragon designs on their billowing sails, gulls overhead, smaller boats fishing near the shore. Were these beings meant to be no matter what? Were they under some sort of divine protection?

Elentra was shocked by her supposition. Another frightening thought occurred to her.

"Can we move to my office?"

Pentham fascinated by what he saw nodded, Darlos remained all attention.

They made their way up a small set of stairs to a recessed observation room where Elentra asked Kroena and Khral to leave them in private. Here was secure enough. They two of them left.

Elentra quickly looked at the five screens. The first dealt with the ground state of Earth prior the secondary field's expansion, a before event, the second as Earth was now, the numbers barely noticeable to the effect it was having on Earth's resonant state. The third observing the dusty pink planet devoid of all life, the fourth the general view of the larger space the planet's were in and the last to work with. Elentra wanted a future scenario of Earth's projected development.

She started the simulation. She also wanted to see if there was any wash-back, if in fact Earth's future state could influence the DVs and thus Prima's resonance. The computers worked on the simulation. Cities spread across the globe, tiny ships sailing between them, the images rapidly moving. A massive volcanic eruption near the city they held under observation. Whilst it was destroyed others rose along distant coasts. Then for millennia nothing. Slowly more and more cities, with smudges, dark grey and black clouds. Technology.

So their input was having no effect. Stranger still, the numbers indicated that some did believe in a unitary god. Just as she feared. They did accept to a degree Prima's resonant state yet still evolved to be more Reganian than Primaian. Then the tell tale signs of tiny white flares. Rockets into space.

They watched in silence at Earth's recurring urge to move into space.

"It's a simulation including our resonance." Elentra explained.

Pentham merely nodded. It would not harbour well for this to get out. Something was not right. The Earther's, some anyway accepted their Divine Mind yet these being still went technological. They had a major problem on their hands. If this homicidal race did expand into space it was only a matter of time until either Regum or Prima or both were discovered. She did not even want to think of the implications. That was Lord Pentham's domain. They might even reach the other dead planet. If they found ruins there...

"That future must not be allowed to happen."

"I agree." Pentham said. Unsettled by the future states which seemed to remanifest themselves. Encased in the universe itself. Earth's technological evolution was meant to be. Unitary god or not. The universe was being stirred up through distant Earth. It would strengthen Regum at the expense of Prima. No doubt about it. Less chance their soulful serenity remained present on all worlds. Otherwise chaos would manifest itself. The

Divine Mind had handed them a challenge to prove themselves. They could not allow this to happen.

A space ship over the dead dusty planet.

"This is too much." Pentham exclaimed. "So Earth follows Regum's heinous path. We have to do something."

"Recruit more DVs."

Pentham sighed. It might help. He had an idea. Not exactly ground shattering.

"Delete." Pentham ordered. Elentra surprised. Pentham determined. Elentra let the simulation run for a moment longer. Colonies on the dusty planet. So the cycle would start all over again. What was going on? How could they...? She speculated. Were the DVs that impotent in the face of Earth's resonance?

She contained, then deleted the data, wiping the memory back ups, running a controlled crash. The fifth screen went blank.

"This has got to be stopped. We have to get to Earth." Pentham considered. "We know how the Reganian's inserted themselves. Something we must consider. We must realign the Earther's to their true spiritual destiny."

"A good idea Lord Pentham. Now to convince the Reganians."

"Well obviously we have to change our orientation for their benefit."

"They know how we think."

"Yes true enough. What if there is a, ahm, kabal amongst us who disagree with our real intentions?"

"Rogue heretics?" Elentra impressed.

"Indeed. They convince the Reganian's that they want to help Earth, that our intentions are less than noble, to make sure that these beings are free from our interference, or at least prepared to counter our measures. It has to be convincing Elentra."

"Well let us not disabuse them then." A wan smile.

"Indeed. That way being on the ground we learn about what they are up to. We need personnel who are amendable. I'm sure there are a few whom we could lead in the right direction."

"A Stable Volatile with heretical tendencies."

"And a scientific bent of mind as well."

"Lord Pentham, this could backfire."

"I think it will if we don't act. We must think like them to best them. Bring them back towards the righteous path."

"A double act."

"And Elentra this is top secret."

"I concur."

"I mean to whoever you report to."

"As long as I can."

"So you are on board."

"From what I have seen. I think it's a brilliant idea. Let your agents do what must be done."

"I am glad we understand each other." Pentham was satisfied. "It must be a person who will lead them in the requisite direction. Show them by psychic results our glory so as to disinterest them in this folly they pursue. Furthermore," Pentham in his element, "it must be done at the right historical configuration on Earth. Before they deviate. In fact I have a suggestion. The city that was destroyed by the volcano. Even though it is doomed there would be a good start."

"Why there?" Elentra asked.

"Well, if we fail then that is divine displeasure. If we succeed we can warn them of the calamity. Send out on their ships the converted to preach to the rest the way of divine redemption. They can say the city was destroyed by being blasphemous, the price paid to those who would deviate from the divine plan."

"A powerful argument." Elentra agreed.

"Then they will gladly do anything to stop a similar fate reoccurring. Let it be said that divine wrath is never too far away, watching. If they behave..."

"But these are natural events. They will occur either way." Elentra suggested.

"Of course. Then the priests can say some have strayed, harboured dark heresies in their hearts. It will keep them on their toes." Pentham said breezily.

"And Regum isolated." Pentham purred. "So an astute mind, a Natural, potent psychic, a born leader, someone with fervour. Someone dangerous." Pentham said with relish.

"I'm sure out of the millions one such being exists. Even if we have to search the asylums."

Elentra was impressed. "If that fails," Elentra said, "maybe even a Reganian. That will certainly make them agreeable. They might even think we are seeing this from their point of view."

"Elentra, we shall consider all options. Your idea has a certain, ahm, charm about it."

Regum: Solar Station 1

Regum launched a top secret shuttle towards the location of their scientific station engaged in mastering probability waves. First to position sludge tanks that contained the molecular configurations of a thousand nanobots. The aim to assemble their first solar station at NS3, a star five light years away from Regum. NS3 would finish the construction as the nanobots utilised the star's energy to assemble from enphased blue prints down to the minutest of details the structure. Even if the DVs could sense this solidary technological presence, Regum sent three other rockets in various direction, depositing more booster satellites to expand WebSpace. Mission controllers hoped that this particular rocket heading to NS3 would not attract any undue attention. Whatever the DVs might pick up, the contents would be 'read' as a soup whose actual inserted programming was as yet undefined. Mud. A molecular soup with designs held in potential through micro generated actual probability states generated by mini quantum fields. The architecture of the station a future actuality to be collapsed upon the initial work of the nano assembled station. Perfect camouflage.

By using gravity drives where the ship generated a gravity field ahead of itself but never reaching it, it would accelerate way beyond light speed to reach its target within the hour instead of years. Even though NS3 was free energy the projected solar station had back up fusion generators. The whole project would be coated with radar elusive properties in case Prima did a sweep using conventional technology. Safe from accidental discovery at their end for the solar station's essential aim was to generate probability waves, the stuff of the universe whereby 'reality' manifested itself. Those field-waves itself removing the station from real space, becoming the field itself. A minor spike near a distant star. The quantum energy the same density as the star.

The mass-converters inserted as templates along with the inherent blue-prints using encrypted algorithms, the essential working brains of their latest development of virtual quantum computers were, it was hoped be immune to reveal when hostile intent was detected to easily generate false positives. Denying the DVs the intrinsic of the construction. The VQCs would generate an observation post through digital mass sub atomic entrainment indicating a remote laboratory studying this mid range star. It's aim to understand the fusion process as a cover.

The real intent to secure Regum's future through information rich PFWs by strengthening their probable reality into actuality as much as Prima was using their DVs

who inserted their `reality' onto their targets. But whilst Prima was target specific, Regum's scientists had a much bigger picture in mind. Securing not just WebSpace but space *itself*. Fool proof it against DV interruptions. Once working they would create a massive field which would be manipulated from within. Whatever the DVs were planning the station's overarching architecture would hold since the PFWs were embedded in space itself. According to Regum's projected design. As a further security measure the assembled station would always face away from Prima's direct line of sight. Located behind NS 3. The final touch, an engineering feat whereby solar energy collectors would assemble around the whole of the star. Getting all its energy at once.

The ship arrived and the sludge tanks absorbing the vast energy of the star using sequenced exponentially self assembling and self replicating nano-bots increased the speed of assembly. The station grew rapidly. A multiple modular self sustaining set of independent units able to operate individually in case of hostile attack. Nor was its computational capabilities merely linear. Encased in false projected EM fields the multiple processing phased arrays of its computer banks would enhance its security from possible cyber attacks. Recycling units would reabsorb the generated heat from the computers thereby leaving no tell tale signs of any technological activity. If any section did crash other modules would kick in and reassemble any compromised unit.

The molecules assembled the structure not piece by piece but in totality as if a painting was started at one end of the canvas and spread across its designated space in its totality. Furthermore during construction the VQCs were assembled first, generating a field of virtual space basically voiding itself behind a projected image of the star. No scan would detect the activity going on at NS3. Based to a certain degree on gamer applications data fields dispersed the master program not in one specific location, but mimicked the methodology of the brain. If a section failed another would take over. No matter how little remained if physically destroyed in parts, the smallest remaining remnant could start the construction of itself all over again.

The designers had even gone one step further should the false picture of the EM field be penetrated. All they would find was a gaming-hub. From the Primaian perspective WebSpace would be included in the original false design of the station including WebWorld. A false cyber and real reality simultaneously existing in both. It was hoped that even though Primaian's possessed psychic abilities their peculiar linear reasoning, convergent rather than divergent would believe what they `saw' if they ever did manage to ascertain the solar station's location.

The Reganian group that was tasked with its construction had personnel standing by to populate it once it was complete. More G drive ships were launched from their orbital. The crews travelling at a leisurely sub-light speed. Just a bunch of scientists off to some distant habitat many which fringed the vast asteroid belt where industrial plants did the dirty work of smelting the ores to manufacture finished products. Regum had long ago moved their manufacturing base off planet.

However the real reason of the station were probability waves. The actual structure of this cosmic manifestation still a mystery. Their reality beyond scientific doubt. The application of generating them using VQCs was only limited by the amount of energy available. A star's energy an obvious starting point. The universe was filled with PWs continually collapsing to manifest a probability state into an actual one: thus was the nature of reality itself determined. By configuring a probable wave one could also access framed time reference fields. For PWs were a field, independent of time, strangely similar to states of consciousness.

That Prima's DVs were doing this mentally had urged on Regum's scientists to understand the nature of PWs. Having done the theoretics they discovered that the past was instantly accessible as were possible future states as inherent probabilities. Insert enough energy into that constituted field and it would become actual. Anywhere in space, anywhere in time. Of course any state had to be aligned, just as the DVs aligned their states of mind regarding wherever they projected their attention. Both past and present could not just be read but interacted with. The solar station was payback time.

The Reganian's had professional gamers stand by to play with the false reality of this hub. Sheathed in multiple programmed realities if the DVs got this close they would be lost in a labyrinth of cyber constructed domain worlds. Once inside Primaian's would be, as usual hopelessly lost. A handy diversion.

Months later the nano-bots finished their work. The solar station, SS1 was completed, in geostationary orbit away from Prima at NS 3. The Reganian's could have run the station remotely but that might have attracted attention in itself. Best to have personal at the site. From here they could study Earth at their own pace uninterrupted by Prima's consistent hassling them, both on their own planet and in space. And thinking space, the nano-bots had furthermore built two space ships simply called 'Explorer One' and 'Explorer Two'. No point in getting too symbolic. That might give the DVs ideas.

Now that SS1 was completed, the first ship went into g-hyper drive, accelerated exponentially almost vanishing off the tracking screens at mission control. The only time

delay was in both the acceleration and deceleration so as not to smear it's passengers into molecular oblivion.

They had been in stasis and were now coming out of it a bit groggy. Their own medi-bots helped them back to normal quickly enough. Docking they marvelled at their engineering capabilities. Exultant they entered the station taking possession of their new home. Even though enhanced AI boosted they explored the assembled modules, abstract cubes put haphazardly together. With the plans inside their heads they looked over the computer labs, the fusion generators, on line, all protected by a vast shield behind which the solar station was positioned collecting the energy of NS3. During their waking period they had discussed their aims, the projects they were involved with, and as always Prima's politics in space. Their obsession not just the alien field which they laughed at. For they knew it was merely photons travelling across space that had finally reached them. There was no field as such. It was all in their paranoid minds. Not that they were going to disabuse them of their delusion.

The group was gathered in one of the triple secure briefing rooms deep inside the station. The observational arrays studying space, visually, electronically and soon probing at the quantum scale, they were ready to begin their work.

Sakaris, head of station, lean, fit, intense welcomed them officially. The others radiated their contentment in being in possession of a secret facility that did not officially exist. Loara was special operational manager, meaning intel, lithe, lean and Sakaris knew mean if she had to be. Perdus looked the part of a dishevelled university professor specialising in sentient life and AI interphasing. Los, diminutive, alert, brimming with energy was the engineer. Mirn, more solid, easy going without getting distracted, Enhanced would keep a look out for Primaian activity. Mirn, women figured heavily in the initial crew, was an expert in AIs and virtual space environments. Exuberant which she tried to keep under wraps. Jez was a natural in para-psychology. So if the station's systems did not pick up DV activity she would. She had worked with Perdus at CU who had recruited her. And Nuhan, a tense young man with his education in general science was also tasked with studying group behaviour in closed environments.

"As we all know each other by now, I will still welcome you all." Sakaris was effable, looking at them. "As you are aware and since each and everyone of you is equally important, there is as such no overall command structure. Yet I have to say this. Intelligence is this mission's primary concern. QPW the hot ticket. So be it exo-sentience, engineering, potential DV activity, intrusion in whatever form or source, and," looking at Nuhan, "even ourselves which by the way, as Nuhan is our minder you may approach

him about whatever concerns you. You can discuss anything with each other. We're a group. But that does not mean we pry into each other or watch ourselves as if this was some sort of security contained environment. We're all free agents here. Over time no doubt, as personnel come on board some sort of structure will evolve. Naturally I hope. So here we are then."

They nodded at that.

"So, to work. We've familiarised ourselves with the station on our way here. Everyone feel familiar?" Sakaris asked. They were.

"Your AIs are a good resource. If there are hostile events you know the station can reassemble itself differently. But I doubt that in the near future anyone is going to storm this place. There's only us and the Primaians. And they got no g-driven ships so the only thing we can expect is direct contact. Your AIs will of course alert you if they get nosy. Some of us are also Enhanced. Next generation. I cannot reveal who for obvious reasons."

"Our other concern is to keep Prima in the dark. Next Earth. We may assume Prima's DVs are targeting them. Our aim is to find out just what sort of an influence they really have. Here the QCs and our AIs will aid our work. Is it individual or as a field? As a field we may be able to crash it. Now Earther's seem a complex mix of both us and Prima. Remarkable really. Pity they're so homicidal. Something to check out. Both on the path to technology, and mystical at the same time. No wonder Prima's attracted. Time to add ourselves into the mix. Projections have it that in good time Earth will discover us, or Prima, or both. So we must be prepared to give them the true picture, not just what Prima wants them to believe. As such their first reaction might be cautious if not hostile. We have to disabuse them of that erroneous conclusion, if that is actually so."

"Now, they have started exploring space. Interestingly enough their ships are not armed. That is indeed a good sign. Leaving their loathsome squabbles behind. Jez had been most helpful there. If we do make contact directly we will only bring knowledge. No artefacts just yet. They have to make their own discoveries. So our initial interest is to," and he allowed himself a smile, "spy on them. Not as an end in itself, more to ascertain Primaian influences at work. Here both Nuhan and Jez will be of invaluable help. Nuhan to see where their science is leading them. Who knows we might learn something. Of course Nuhan will also look at the way they develop their thinking, their social behaviour and Jez to look for potent Anomalities that could affect us."

"Sakaris. We have to assume that to them we're hostile." Nuham spoke up.

"Yes I know," Sakaris said reluctantly. "It's something we have to keep in mind. Tricky really. That's where Mirn can help, as can Jez of course, all of us really. So we keep a check on Primaian resonant states, both here and there if applicable. Hopefully Mirn or Jez can suppress any hostile intent. At best we can give them an alternative. But it is for Earth to choose. Now it may well be that the Primaian's have cloaked themselves, inserted certain patterns of thought so that the Earther's think they have arrived at whatever they arrived at, independently. I hope they can see through Prima's subterfuge. But before all that we have to first do a test run with a ship, and only the ship to see if the use of PWs actually works." Sakaris informed them.

"Given Earth's hostility amongst themselves might they not, not forgetting Prima's somewhat let's say one sided view of themselves and perhaps even painting us as some sort of less than friendly race could they not take umbrage at our presence? Treating us as a threat?" Nuhan asked.

"Good point. We did discuss this as you all know. First the ship we will try and insert has no weaponry. If our controllers agree that we actually should go in seeing what we can achieve, this ought to impress them. Meaning our technology. Seeing that alone might make them amenable to our presence, if and when this occurs. Nothing has been decided yet because," Sakaris paused, "we are going to study possible future states first. With and without our input." Sakaris finished off.

"So," Nuhan continued looking at the others who seemed relaxed that he was asking questions on their behalf, "are they exploring for the pure fun of it? Are they traders or diplomats, or both? Do they emphasize with other sentients?" and here he looked at Jez. "Do they care? Are they exploitive? Do they think like Primaian's or us? We know they can do both but which is dominant? We do know they send reconnaissance satellites for pure scientific data into their solar system. That is a sign in itself. It speaks immensely of an inquiring mind. They plan. They don't just rush off, they do their homework. Yet they have weapons in orbit. Trained upon themselves. So they fear each other more than any race in space, like us. So it's not a 'stay out' approach. My question though is if anyone does go down, if things turn ugly can we be whisked out just like that?"

"That is what we will find out when we do our first test run Nuhan. Anyway whoever is chosen will be able to, hopefully, have either EAI or natural capabilities to calm any hostile intent."

"Depending on DV activity," Jez said.

Nuhan summed it up: "Well so far their space exploration is science oriented."

"That is something." Los said. "Not using weapons when exploring."

"Correct."

"They could be personally armed." Los continued.

"Still whoever goes, if this occurs," Sakaris reminded them, "then as I said we shall show them our peaceable intentions."

"What if they discover the existence of PWs and get in here?" Loara asked.

"Ah. Good. As we speak, Regum is building a second solar station. Location classified. And if the experiment works, well we can move to another location. It won't be ready for a while though. So we have plenty of time."

"What if the DVs take over en masse? As a field?" Los asked.

"Yes," Loara added, "would we know? I mean in theory if a future projected field becomes actuality, would we even know? Would the computer's know of the difference?"

"Well your enhanced state would be aware of the change. That data would be filed securely and separately. It would become a reference point. A before and after." Sakaris assured them. "That by the way is another of our experiments. Studying the phase states of space."

"Right up my alley." Mirn replied.

"It is that."

"Are we certain?" Loara asked.

"You mean have we tested different fields to see if one is superimposed on the other, can the secondary field tell the difference?" Sakaris asked for her.

"Yes."

"Directly no. But the primary field, the initial field is still there, back in time. That cannot be changed. What is changed is once the secondary field is in place, is the perception of the first field. It appears, relative from the second field as one. But by going back the discrepancy is revealed."

"And we have the means, theoretically." Mirn said relieved.

"Theoretically here. Back on Regum the tests were conclusive. The past is immutable. Only the present can be changed."

"So even if the DVs dominate the present, and by default, their and our future we could tell the difference. I'm glad." Mirn replied.

"There is another bonus. When we do generate a probability field, it excludes reality. The generated field becomes its own reality. A bubble that is self contained. So in that sense we self isolate. Impregnable to outside influences."

"Really? DV activity included?" Loara was asking for them all.

"From the outside yes."

"But they can still insert a false reality." Mirn suggested.

"That is where the EAI comes in. Again to repeat it would notice the phase change, the superimposition." Sakaris explained patiently. "Don't forget as well that for one field to override another it needs more energy than the first field. Now that generating capability is technological. We would detect it. So us using the energy of a star would mean whoever wants to usurp our field would need something like a supernova lets say. And the Primaian's are light years away from even getting that far. Also as we have not as yet detected any worlds out there that can even achieve what we have I think it is safe to say is us in control at the moment. By studying future states we can alert ourselves that at some future time should this be possible we would be forewarned."

"Yes, good point Sakaris. I didn't think of that." Mirn admitted.

"Like radar, except across time." Loara thought out aloud.

"Precisely. So shall we begin the test run?" Sakaris asked them.

They were ready.

The QCs backed up by their fusion generators, harnessing the energy of NS3 powered up. Meta-chaos-equations turning numbers into quantum energy fields configuring present probability waves over Earth. Another set of QCs uploaded the 'Explorer One's' total data down to its atomic structure and the current field it was in. The ship became a quantum state, the chaos field-equations handling quantum fluctuations within design parameters. The two states became quantum entangled. The ship was uploaded. The computers knew where to download the generated field, the insertion dump point known, homing in by tracing back the photon trajectories emanating from Earth. The computers inserted the secondary virtual probability waves into place. It was now a space-time envelope in and of itself. If the experiment failed nothing would happen. With the power of a star the secondary field held. It was now linked, quantum superimposed over Earth.

Fully enphased, entangled the group allowed Sakaris to do the honours in the computer laboratory to press the send button. It had taken several hours to assemble all the data, the fields both stable. Just for fun they did a countdown and Sakaris pressed 'send'.

`Explorer One' vanished from their space and appeared over Earth. Quantum entanglement held. Earth appeared on one of the monitors all blue, white clouds, green brown land below, ice caps at the southern end of the planet.

"Transfer successful." Sakaris remarked quietly. They were all staring at the monitors, watching the equations hold.

They congratulated each other.

"Yes, take that Prima." Nuhan exclaimed.

"Masters of space and time." Mirn whispered.

"Remember this is over the top secret." Sakaris warned.

"Knowing is enough." Loara replied.

"Well said." Los added.

"Whatever the Primaian's and their DVs attempt we can negate, counter even. Supersede might be a better expression. We are dominant." Los said impressed with their superior technology.

"Fantastic isn't it? Pity it's secret, that our people cannot share this great moment in science." Nuhan awed as they all were.

"Better call it back." Sakaris focussing on recalling the ship. "As the VQCs have the data this end as well, it's a simply a matter of uncollapsing the secondary field." And he pressed `recall'. The ship vanished and rematerialised outside the solar station. The numbers vanished off the screen over Earth.

"Pick your next visit, anywhere." Mirn laughed.

"Yes I can see the potential here." Perdus delighted with the experiment.

"I just hope nobody else discovers this." Loara was sombre. "In the wrong hands..."

"Remember this is no utopia inclined exercise. Maybe other worlds, other sentients will one day stumble across what we have discovered. Our main aim is to let sentients evolve naturally, each according to their means and inclinations." Sakaris reminded them.

"Except Prima." Loara countered.

"I think we have become some sort of guardians of the present." Mirn told them.

"And the future." Loara whispered.

Andromeda: Arktus.

The Magniter, privately known as Monas belonged to the highest symbiotic sentients, an Eternal, capable of transferring his individual persona anywhere, whether an artifice or reincarnating or leaving his past behind, communicated with the hybrid Nesho. Bearing data coming in from the Gravity Well two hundred light years away.

"Virtual Quantum Collapse. Several minutes ago. Duration a pico second or less, it does not matter. That insertion worked. We have the phase state. Reganians.'

'Secure?'" the Magniter asked indicating safe from unauthorised penetration by any sentient, configured AIs be they Arktari, cyberoids, or their lesser configured Domenars, living AIs. Including the necessary base liners to allow evolution to throw the quantum dice to evolve their race. All could through quantum entanglement by fluke access the Magniter. Not that he let them. The interference would only be minor, a mere distraction of no consequence. His kind's sentience the supreme accomplishment of their race the Evons.

The Magniter, aware of the field wave in space over Earth was the reason Nesho was now present. Having used the portal, a jump gate into his house, real, along an ancient trade route in the semi desert. The dry air refreshing. The mountains poured their streams of melted water from the icy heights of majestic peaks behind into the valley below. They sat on the patio drinking tea. The setting serene. Clear sky, the quiet, below the ancient weathered pass winding down into the valley, lush trees and peace which belied the situation they faced.

He called Sytarus one of the best astronomers whom he knew. He asked him over. Moments later Sytarus teleported himself into the Magniter's domicile. .

"It changes everything. A tipping point." Nesho said, sitting comfortably in the pleasant afternoon sun. Often not using climate control visitors had to dress for the weather when calling. Even during night, when the temperature plummeted, they were made to sit on his broad veranda in the cool under a star studded sky.

"I assume the projections, the probabilities are real." Sytarus calling up the coordinates to confirm what the Magniter knew. "Embedded within the fabric of space at will. Super enhanced."

"As we speak." Nesho's brain linked to the astronomer's computers, ascertaining quantum space. "The variables alone...'

"Are astronomical. So we have faces." Sytarus guessed correctly.

"And their memories." Nesho added. Monas only too pleased to listen.

"Select reconfigurations. Cloaked in emotions and desires, often deleting facts, or rather reconstruing facts to suit what is wanted to be believed." Relishing his knowledge of psychology.

"The Reganian's deposit that into their WebWorld Magniter."

"Yes, rather handy. What of the Primaians?" he replied. From objective observation to subjective focussing. Zooming in on these beings.

Sytarus called up what little he had. "The DVs of course are set on their missions. As for the race itself, their resonant envelope has undergone a minor boost. Denser when we noted a minor phase change in space. A shift. Whether that is related to what the Reganians just achieved is circumstantial."

"This from the Controller?"

"Indirect download." Below a small twirler churned dust into a cylindrical shape. Nature's little patterns.

"Nothing more?" given they had a lock-on in.

"As you know the DVs are Isolates. Have to be. Alert them and who knows where that knowledge may end up. Extracting underlying causes like base liners. If they discern our presence we enphase them with value neutral data."

"Voiding our presence." The Magniter satisfied. "Expected time lines." Nesho paying attention. Beyond his field. More the quiet confidant to Monas the person. When Magniter Nesho remained in the background.

"Hard to say. Probabilities are of course enormous. From a moment to years."

"Even with their capabilities?"

"The inserts. Well they are self contained. Don't want to be noticed. Good camouflage."

"Of course. More tea?"

"Please."

"So the Reganian's are on their way."

"Most definitely."

"Good."

"But there is something else."

"The phase change." The Magniter knew.

"It may not be the first. I've done some research. Apparently, centuries ago, real time, a pulse expanded from within that galaxy, the centre of the Gravity Well to be precise."

"At least we have something then. A micro universe."

"Indeed. Ancient. Before ours."

"Remarkable it survived."

"In fact."

"Not that they would have noticed."

"They did, but it's lost in their mythology. Battle of cosmic deities."

"Just like Earth."

"Yes the similarities are striking."

"A pattern."

"Makes it easier to anticipate the paths open to them."

"This pulse you mentioned."

"Dark matter repulsion."

"The gravity well."

"Yes. Only so much can fit into space. Another quite recent."

The Magniter poured some more tea for both of them. Eccentric. Doing it himself.

"Similar." Nesho surmised.

"Except the intake has not reached secondary repulsion. Yet." Sytaris replied cautiously.

"Interesting."

"Yes Magniter. There was something else."

"Why all this now, not then?"

"You mean the delay?"

Nesho looked concerned. "It's the quantum state. It's changed."

"In their universe. Ours as well." Sytarus added.

Now the Magniter looked surprised. Since he was connected, the living embodiment of the totality of everything they knew, their sensory computers collating the change ought to have noticed. That the field expanded, inflated appearing here as well as there was of concern.

"It has affected the phase state of space." Sytarus continued.

"Yet no alerts. Phenomenal."

"Almost numinal."

"Embedded consciousness. Meta-dimensions. Has there been any noticeable change at the base line?"

For a Magniter to even ask a question was rare. Either a lack of data, misconstrued due to flawed processes or quantum fluctuations within the calculations. At best the event was truly puzzling. Something Nesho picked up. Which the Enhanced had not noticed, nor their AIs or cyber-hybrids such as himself. It meant they would have to seek answers among the base liners. Especially those inclined to deviate from the norm. Mentally enphased Nesho said: "Too early to tell. The deviants might, but since they are deviants, so many false positives to go through..."

"Then recall one of the inserts." Sytarus in the loop. Not completely. The Inserts as far as he knew were investigating the Great Attractor from within. Nothing more.

"I have thought of that."

"I know."

"You're linked."

"Partially. Using a configured shell only. More like passive radar. And guessing at this stage." he drank his tea. A cloud passed over them, the temperature dropped as the shadow moved across the patio. The shiver Nesho felt though was within. What had transpired in that universe was something new, unforeseen. Their reading of the probability waves should have calculated this manifestation, foreseen its possibility. Out of space. Remarkable.

"What if the insert's are not aware of it either?" the Magniter probed.

"Then it would seem a phase change has indeed taken place within that micro-verse. It's not impossible. You know yourself the projections, the entropy factor has moved in this direction for aeons. Long before life appeared in this universe. The change is not unexpected itself." Sytarus explained.

"Agreed. Manifested itself there, not here." Nesho expanded.

"You are certain?"

"Not completely Magniter."

"Have we any real data?"

"No. If it is quantum embedded then it's like a change in consciousness. An analogy only. Deleting the previous memory."

"A deleted memory. Something has washed out information." Sytarus struck by his insight.

"If that is so..."

"Let us assume it is so. Is it natural or is some other sentient force at work?"

"So far there is nothing to indicate a resonance to that effect."

"Stranger by the moment."

"An aberration."

"So it appears." Nesho struck by his allusion. For that is exactly what did occur. He kept that supposition to himself. "No source Magniter."

"If that is so then some dimension within space has opened up. Now that is perplexing. Most unusual."

This was getting more complex by the moment.

"Strange attractor. A ripped vortex."

"Something from the other side."

"An influx of another universe?" Nesho's turn to be surprised at Sytarus's question. More of a hypothetical.

"I hope not. That is how our universe came to be."

"The primary field wave then."

"Yet without the concomitant enriched data. More like a still birth." Nesho assumed. "Like an afterbirth. Or an ancient echo." He concluded. This was getting messy.

"Well we have made some headway. Shall I call the controller regarding the inserts?" Sytarus was an advisor to the mission. Even if he did not know the real intent. What seemed to be developing out there was major. Cosmic in scale.

"I think that is best. But it is their decision not ours."

"Of course. So where. There or here?"

"There. The Controller and the support staff have to know and be aware of the environment the inserts are in. We can only hope that they may become attentive of the change in their universe's environment. 'May' is conditional at this point in time. Here it gets tricky."

"Oh?" Sytarus interested in what the Magniter was angling for.

"Point in time. We can choose at will any space time coordinate."

"Yes...?"

"So it becomes important what is implanted into our agents. That we do not preempt their perceived reality. Only as a last resort. There is no point for us to upload them with what may as yet be revealed. We cannot interfere directly. First find out what they know."

"I will await your order." Nesho eager.

"Go there. Use my jump-gate. It's preset on three."

"Can I finish my tea?"

The Magniter smiled. He sent the instructions to the Controller at Station Three.

Ratze blinked involuntarily. She had been asleep at Nervina's flat and woken in the room where the briefing had taken place. Instant memory recall. The same bland room, the same off white walls. Three chairs and a table. With nothing outside as the VBs isolated the room from space. This time the Controller had a visitor who actually identified himself.

"My name is Nesho. I want to ask you a question. That is why the Controller is here as well."

"Fine." Ratze was relieved she could be extricated. It was reassuring.

"Any progress?" Nesho not pre-empting the data he was after.

"How detailed or trivial do you want to go?"

Nesho smiled. "Overall will do."

"Prima's frustrated. The Reganian's own physical space. The obsession with the alien field continues. They think the Reganian's are somehow involved. Nothing conclusive. Nothing my end." Referring to her Brain.

"Good. So you're internally stable."

She thought for a moment. Her Brain was hovering in the background. Nothing unusual. She said so.

"Good. We can assume the same then for your compatriots. We know you have met Ung and Nervina. Things are progressing even though it might not appear as such to you." The Controller reassured her.

"It's good to know I'm not alone."

"No you are not. Any difficulties?" Nesho resumed.

"As in...?"

"The way others respond."

"It pans out. Nothing hostile. Though Nervina had to leave Regum in a hurry. Don't know of course what is going on there. Could be part of the plan. There was a run in with a character called Talex on Novus. Nervina exited. Got her on a flight out, just like that."

"That means your Brain's are doing its assigned job. Keeping you out of trouble. Have you noticed any other changes of behaviour? In general?"

"I have been approached by a general to be a scout for him. I haven't traced him of course. Got no idea who he is working for though."

"Wise. At least you're making connections."

"I even got a job on Novus."

"Good for cover."

"No point asking what I'm after."

"We don't want the DVs barging in."

"No you're right."

"So any unusual signs by those around you?"

"Apart from Talex? Does this relate to me?"

"That is what I'm trying to ascertain. We need to know if your Brain's functioning, that's all." Nesho dissembled.

"So far so good."

"It has inbuilt alerts."

"That's something. No, no alerts as such."

"As such. Can you elucidate?"

"I get the tell tale itch when scanners are active."

"Well your Brain is functioning as intended. Have some rest. Later of course we will reinsert you."

"I'm off duty?" Ratze looked pleased.

"You are."

Nesho hid his disappointment that even Ratze's Brain was phase changed as well. That meant the inserted field, phase changed was embedded. Recalling the data prior the change would be problematical. It could disturb the actual probability waves, alert the cause, the non existent source to the DVs. If the field was sentient it would notice, if it was a programme of the highest order it would also be aware, if it was a natural occurrence then at least they could play with its probability states.

But only once they knew what had created the conditions that affected the change. From Sytarus Nesho knew that the phase field of the universe had been due for a correction. It was just sooner than expected. Until then they would have to wait and see what the inserts could uncover, if anything. If it was normal behaviour for space, or the universe then they could act accordingly. If however a new universe was leaking in through the massive Gravity Well, it could be a collapsing universe announced by space's phase change. Even though the Gravity Well's micro-verse was expanding

incrementally, its expansion was contained by their universe. Drawing in massive amounts of energy and exuding excess energy as well. Inflationary and deflationary at the same time. Very strange. For the moment all they could do is wait. Short of barging in. But that would change both Prima and Regums reactions. Knowing sentient logic, a third force was always destabilizing. The last thing they wanted. So for now the inserts had to continue as they were. With a minimum of knowledge.

Nervina.

Nervina woke. The ship had stopped. Terra was busy with the rendezvous of a cruiser hanging in space.

"Time to go." she said putting her helmet back on. Her Brain kicked in. No hostile intent. The implants stabilized her reaction dampening her surprise. Shalor busy at the exit assisting Khavit into the attached tube linking the two ships.

"Thank you Terra."

"GSI." Terra laughed.

Nervina shrugged her shoulders. "You know how it is. Don't forget to delete me."

"Already done. Shadow files remain. You officially transferred with the goods."

As the ship did have some cargo that was not unusual. Her Brain suggested Khavit might be the goods as well. Two passengers who wanted to disappear. Whatever network was running this show they were systematic. She drifted towards the chute, Shalor smiled, she thanked him. Her Brain did a quick scan of the other cruiser. Sleek, elegant. A GD with chemical boosters, the huge nozzles flaring out at the rear. No Primaian's detected by her Brain. Into the other airlock where a suited up figure with oxygen face mask introduced himself.

"Northam. Welcome aboard."

"Nervina, pleasure to be here."

"Khavit." A growl.

"Captain is Arthea. She's mean, she's lean, she's good."

"She sounds great."

"And would dump you just like that if it means saving her end."

"Good to know."

"Retracting the tube." Then to his two passengers: "Up the pole straight into the living quarters. Standard design." Her Brain unlocked the Reganian lay out. Most ships were indeed standard. Cockpits optional since they could be run from the lounge of these private cruisers. Minimal cargo holds. All had gravity drives with chemical rockets for close range manoeuvring at space ports and cargo bays. Their e-fields not interfering with her local hardware.

Up the pole and into the lounge where Khavit made himself comfortable. A velcro stripped rack for their helmets, spare space suits, air and water tanks securely

strapped down. Six easy chairs. Captain Arthea, quite tall, thin, short cut black hair, almost luminescent white skin, a spacer got down to business.

"Right. Ladies first. GSI. Don't know whether that's good or bad." She eyeballed Nervina who was now helped with her helmet by Northam. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown pale skin. Another spacer. Possibly some Reganian aboriginal bloodline there, definitely.

"Not bad." Nervina smiled.

"Hm."

"Nervina."

"I don't need to know your name lady, but since you volunteered. Anything I need to know? That goes for you as well." Fixing her gaze on Khavit. "First Nervina."

"Well, the short of it is I'm getting out. Undue attention from some Primaian, err, agent. Not too sure of his status. Works either for or with the GG on Novus. Talex. Insisted on recruiting me. Actually Arthea I've escaped Prima."

"No shit. Sure you're not an inplant?"

"Was on Regum. Not inclined to help Primaians."

"So you say."

"It's the truth."

"I'll take your word." Arthea relaxed a little. "Had you been a real agent you'd have spun some bullshit my way. OK Khavit what's the deal?"

"I'm moving between assignments. Corporate."

"Trouble shooter."

"You could say that."

"Loaded?"

"No. Weapons only create havoc."

"My attitude as well. So you're not on any wanted list."

Enor the all round technician came over the com-link to say they were ready to go. "Let's head off then. Wait for the other ship then hit the GD."

"Will do Arthea." He came up the pole, Northam helping him up. Short, pale as Arthea, scrawny, tussled brown hair, lively blue eyes, young. Nervina smiled at Enor. He gave a cursory return acknowledgment then went over to the consoles and punched in the captain's commands. On the screen the other ship, squirting attitude jets turned slightly away from them.

After the flight path was entered by Arthea she said to Khavit: "Agent?"

"I wouldn't say that captain." Khavit growled. "Not political. Commercial. The Families, corporations. They all got something to hide."

"No one gunning after you."

"Not yet." A tight smile.

"Yeah right. Data related."

Khavit gave her a level look.

"I gotta know what I got here."

"Of course you do." without venturing any information.

"Right. Cockpit's functions are off limits. Food dispensers along the wall, toilet and chemical shower, one minute of recycled water if you must. The chairs extend, with webbing where you will sleep. Manual switches for light. Got some games in the system if you're bored. Any questions?"

"Anyone after you?" Khavit rasped.

"Prima. Just said so." Nervina not looking his way.

"Actually I was referring..." He growled looking the captain's way..

"No dice." Arthea cut in: Looking at them both. "Now I'm not revealing where we're heading. If you got contacts don't. Not until I say so. Breach that or anything else and I'm dumping you. Same goes for you Nervina. Business you understand. The ship is everything. Of course I'd give youse enough air and water to last until some other ship comes by. But out here, well you get the picture. Stay low. Remember no contact. Anyone tries anything cute, I'll be listening and watching. The ship's smart. It'll know before you two if anything goes on. So have a pleasant journey. I'll be seeing youse later." And having laid down the law turned abruptly and disappeared through to the cockpit. Northam followed whilst Enor checked the consoles.

The other ship hit its boosters, a white flare amongst the stars. Then Enor hit the GD. Their ship accelerated slowly. Nervina was strapping herself into her chair.

She called up a generic blue print and found the cargo bay. Arthea might be security conscious but so was she. Her Brain downloaded the superficial structure of the ship. EM field around it. Smart outer and inner skins. Live processors in between. She checked the cargo. Not whether it was contraband but what it was. Whether it related to Prima. Pirates were not unknown, hijacking cargo for all sorts of sources. Computer hardware, off line. The containers not shielded. Low grade intel. She stopped her search.

Khavit extracted some pills and walked over to the water dispenser.

"Want some?"

"What?"

Enor turned around to watch them.

"Knock outs."

"Thanks. Gotta do some thinking."

"You slept well back there."

"Hm."

"Yeah, could do with a drink. Anything there Enor?" he turned to face the technician.

"No." he lied. The captains locker was stocked with booze and pills.

Khavit swallowed his medication, returned to his chair and looked at Nervina. She felt his animal instincts. 'No chance.' She thought. Still some would be attracted to him. He exuded power, and prowess. Maybe at another time, in another place and if she had another persona. Another persona. The thought struck her as familiar. Then it receded. Gone. Her Brain receded. 'Sleep' she imaged. Went drowsy and slumbered.

Days later someone roused her. Part of her Brain got her awake. Her stomach was empty yet she suppressed her hunger. In good time. It was Enor.

"We've arrived." Not saying where. On the screen a spread of lights blending in with the stars behind the miniature glittering city in space. The ship piloted towards one of several projected landing platforms that retracted as the ship touched down delicately. Magnetic clamps secured it, plus spring action bolts just to make sure. Behind the spread of lights a huge brown dwarf. Extraction units in geo-orbit taking in the ample hydrogen it supplied. Other screens showed small planetoids in near orbit. The platform retracted into one of several huge hangars. Several other ships parked as well. All cruisers. Personnel were unloading their cargoes.

On the monitors she saw that one of the planetoids swinging by was being mined. The dust clouds the tell tale sign of mining activity. The ore deposited into self drive containers that flew to the space factories. Using low gravity smelters, manufacturing basic products that other factories finished off. A hive of activity. Tiny bots moving goods and material. Small shuttles for personnel. Then huge transports exported the finished products to Novus and Regum. Her Brain had no trouble making sense of the operations here.

As to why she was here was another matter. At least she was out of Talex's reach, she hoped. As was her persona. Her Brain informed her that data was decaying.

Arthea made an appearance and wished Nervina and Khavit well. She even thanked them for being perfect passengers. Khavit grumbled his appreciation, Nervina

like wise. They clambered off the ship and down into the hanger in their space suits.

Khavit was met by someone. He did not even wave good-bye.

Her Brain itched. A suited figure watching her. She allowed the scan. It was not deep. Registering her essential self. He clomped over in the heavy boots to mimic full gravity. Nervina bounced over to the shape.

"Nervina." Just to make sure.

"Michor. Welcome to H8. GSI I assume."

So the legend was holding. Giving her the cover to roam. H8. Her Brain informed her was an industrial base in the Cenor Sector eight AU's from Regum. The scan ceased.

"Hello Michor."

"So someone onto you at Novus?"

"Too right. Probable Primaian recruitment." It occurred to Nervina she had never checked GSI. Whether the organisation was legit or extra curricular. Whoever was on her side was certainly systematic. GSI a cover op, probably by design.

"Understand. Follow me."

They went up a set of stairs and into a double airlock. At the second one Michor removed her helmet. By now her Brain had figured out what to do and she removed his. Another spacer. Pale, short black hair, middle aged yet still youthful, smooth skin, lively black eyes, tiny crow marks at the edges, full sensual lips. He seemed delighted to see her.

Down a corridor where they came to a platform. Mag-lev guide rail.

"We're off to your quarters." She had expected questions.

"That's accommodating."

"Gotta go somewhere. Dorms are for those who wanna save credits. I assume you've got credit."

A few others were waiting at the platform as well. Minding their own business.

"Yes. Good to be here."

"It is."

A train appeared. Doors slid open, passengers, some suited up got off, they got on. Doors shut and they were off. Into a tunnel.

"After you've rested, someone will want to talk to you."

"Aha." Her Brain mute.

The train followed the circular design of the H8. Several stops later Michor ushered her out. The station next to a courtyard. Plants everywhere, supplementing air, absorbing excess CO2, moisturizing. The temperature pleasant. Lugging their helmets, he asked if

she wanted anything. Seeing the cafeterias and restaurants she now found she had an appetite. He guided her to a set of outside tables. Self service from food dispensers. It even had fresh coffee.

She ate an omelette. He told her of the food factories using genetic techniques that grew chickens, beef, lamb, though fish were still in tanks. Water was not so scarce as an outer planetoid was covered in ice. Hydrogen plentiful, almost free. Michor had a hamburger, the perfect balanced meal. Then they enjoyed their coffee. Nervina felt better, energized, warmer. The coffee was good, sparkling her brain.

They talked in generalities about Novus, Regum and of course Prima.

"How much do you need to know Michor?"

"Me? Whatever you want."

"It's a long story."

"Leave that for whoever's interested. By the way do you drink?"

"Sort of. No not really. Sometime. Makes me dizzy." Even though her medi-bots could metamorphose the alcohol into energy before it hit the liver and her head.

"Oh."

"Why..."

"You see after setting you up I'm off duty."

"Aha." Non committal.

"But you had a long journey, I forgot. It's just that even though there's around thirty thousand here, give or take, well it's not often new faces appear."

"That means I'd be noticed."

"Hm. I see what you mean. Well the only one's Centre's interested in is those that are wanted. Embezzlement, industrial espionage, saboteurs."

"Saboteurs?"

"Oh yes, Prima sends its stooges now and again. They're usually pretty stupid. Not very tech savvy. First they got no uploads. Well some do but it's crude, ancient. So they think that by disrupting processing units, the moving parts that shutting them down has some sort of affect. It doesn't. Auto self replicating parts replace the damage. No big deal. They even tried poisoning the water supply. Well I can tell ya there are micro processors in the water that detect harmful molecules. The tanks are one of the most secure apparatuses around. So they tried food production. But all that was years ago. Now unless the Centre's satisfied no Primaians have managed to get even into our city.

Yet she had. Given her history. Her Brain.

That reassured Nervina. At first she had thought he was warning her that they knew her origins. If she was deemed a threat she doubted Michor would have been sent, more like a security detachment instead. She had seen none. At least they took her for what she was. Someone who had been gotten out. She was being looked after.

He showed her to her quarters. Down a broad thoroughfare where self driving trolleys moved parcels and other goods, foodstuff mainly, water canisters, recyclables and the odd passenger hitching a ride. With four seats at the front and rear. She preferred to walk, wanting to move her muscles. After a while, all they passed were doors. Then right into a smaller corridor. Her Brain remembering. The design was not unlike a tree. Finally into the smallest of passageways and she was ushered into her cabin.

A one roomer. Inbuilt shower, thirty litre capacity. A sleeping tube to conserve air, an inbuilt wardrobe where she put her helmet. Her jump suit blended with smart ware dispelled dust and grime never needed cleaning. Down to her shoes all the energy used in walking powered her sleeve's pc. A viewscreen that could split to give her different views of the outside. External com link, climate control and potted plants. A fold out desk and collapsible chairs. A fridge for food and drink, stocked, microwave as well.

"I'll leave you to it then. Oh by the way, all external communications are monitored. Not that anybody cares who you love or miss. But you understand."

"I certainly do Michor. Thank you."

"As there is no real tomorrow, someone will see you after you've rested."

Then he left.

She did not feel tired. She was too excited being here. Distant yes. For a reason. Out of Prima's reach. Using an industrial base. Smart. All visitors vetted. She wondered what they did know about her. Her Primaian origins? The aborted mission on Regum? Talex's almost desperate attempt to ensnare her? The dodgy GSI cover?

She tried the terminal. Basic overall view of the city. The manufacturing plants, all off limits. The data was related to her status as 'visitor', nothing mentioning GSI. She could access the food halls, the shops, bars and restaurants and departure areas. Nor was she tagged. Unless they knew she had a Brain. Which could retreat into obscurity. Non recognisable security personnel. Michor probably one of them. He'd have her persona in the system. She read the local history. Two hundred years old. The brown dwarf and its planetoids plus the rubble of an unformed planet rich in minerals, precious metals, and an abundant supply of hydrogen. All made possible with the invention of GD's. H8 affiliated with both Regum and Novus. Heavy industry without designating the actual products. Given that Prima's industrial base was primitive, off limits to nearly all the

population her Brain filled in the gaps. Heavy industry meant superstructures for transport, manufacturing machinery. Light industry finished products, possible cyber laboratories, nano technology, food production under primary, recycling and the service sector. Self reliant in short.

There was even a library. Maybe a good book. Something mindless, an adventure of sorts. See how that fitted in to her world. Movies? Yes. Less effort. There was even one 'Escape from Prima'. Ha! It was all subterfuge and action, murder and mayhem, data theft and sabotage, Reganian's the heroes. Not like her at all. Satisfying entertainment.

Then she crawled into her sleeping tube. The room stopped circulating air. She slept like a log.

A stream sparkling under shady trees. A group of children splashed water at each other squealing with delight. Summer. Insects in the air, a slight breeze, a spray of water as someone jumped in. Nervina thirsty. Standing a little back from the other group she walked with delicate steps over the wet river stones to a side stream gurgling out of the small embankment. She drank eagerly of the cool fresh water, crystal clear, bright flashes of tiny suns reflecting on the rippled surface. Then she saw the leeches wiggling at the bottom of the tiny pool.

Yuk. Leeches in the water? Calmly she searched her mouth with her finger. Sure enough two of them were trying to attach themselves which she quickly flung away. Gross. Not revolted, more surprised that she had not seen them when she was so eager to drink the fresh water.

Later. Night. Something was gagging at the back of her mouth. Solid snot. Viscous, elongated. She dry retched. It was hanging on, reaching right down into her stomach as if it had struck roots. Rubbery she pulled and pulled but all that happened was that it elongated. Then she saw the lines. Long, some at angles like a circuit board. Bits of gleaming gold, black dots where the lines vanished into the plastic feeling mucous. No matter how hard she stretched the alien substance, this outgrowth hiding, growing, gestating in her guts it hung on for dear life. It was so much a part of her that her mind accepted the fact as natural.

Nervina woke. The dreaming had returned. She had not dreamt since childhood. Dreams were excess bits of data the mind had not as yet assimilated. But she was now configured, of the right psychological type, enhanced. Once the bio-symbiotic inserts

were fully functioning the dreams vanished. The mind completely at rest during sleep. Strange.

Was her Brain unravelling, the protein molecular chemical equations corrupted? Her Brain just sat there, mute. No answer. So no problem. So why the dream? A pseudo mythological state. Ancient warlocks claimed to have a second life force within them. That's what made them so powerful, so hard to be killed. Was she inhabited by some strange sensate entity? A throwback to their distant ancestors? Had her dream reached that far back in time? Had something awakened in her? Had she come across a strange attractor, a vortex where alien sentiences waited, like leeches for a host? Had she been a warlock in some previous incarnation? Or had something reached across time into her finding her a suitable vessel to allow this secondary life form to strengthen her essence, her resonance, one of life's mysteries never really explained? Her race had moved on from those magical times so long ago they might have been another breed entirely. Was she a flash back? Did something trigger this viscous thick wormlike, computer embedded life form? Or, as her scientific education remembered, that their bodies were really a protective, smart shell, a cover for combinant self aware molecular life forms. When their planet was a bionic soup whence this thing decided to construct itself out of the elements the body she now was? Add sentience. Replicate and become the dominant life form leaving its primitive ancestors to wallow in their own truncated evolution. And what was it about the childhood memory? It was as if she had been another person.

All she knew was that she was Nervina. Escaping from Regum and now from Novus. Always running away, or conversely moving towards an objective which had to remain hidden from those who sought her out for their own dark reasons. Being directed by hidden manipulators who guided her whilst confusing her persuers?

She wished Ratze were here. So totally focussed. No nonsense. Feet firmly on the ground, head in place, unencumbered by irrelevant abstractions. Back to her feeling somewhat alien. To blend with the information rich universe then attain the next level of evolution.

The tube's status was steady. She pressed the programme to exit, waiting for her room to fill with air. So she had dreamt. Something had opened her mind. Opened her mind? Were not dreams unfinished thoughts? Not this time. The thing inside her? Real or imagined? She self scanned. Nothing. She ran a check on her Brain, her conscious state, her bio rhythms, anything on the quantum level. Nothing. Was this thing then something that grew into their living essence like a life form that configured itself into its host?

Disappearing as a singular entity to blend into the body, the mind. Apart from their mythological past the state of her species was what it was. Nothing more.

Or...she was going around in circles. Systems checked out the room. It was safe to exit the tube. She took a quick shower and waited for whoever wanted her attention.

So far nothing made much sense. OK, she was Primaian. That might be of interest. Nothing was known to the Reganians about life down there. A closed system. Some contact on the orbitals. Apprehension at CU. An inimical potential her Brain could not analyse but never-the-less reacted to.. A sentient wormlike lifeform, computerized. Unless her imagination had zoomed in on the protein strands that was the driving process of her enhancement. Enhancement? Primaian's weren't AIs. Or were they? If only to catch up with the Reganians. If that was the case then maybe that's why, whoever was behind her was also interested in her. Thus the round about route, entering a maze her distant pursuers would have trouble tracing. She wanted answers as much as 'they' did. Ding dong. Why had it taken so long? Her Brain. That indicated a rather tenuous connection to Prima. What was going on?

Maybe she was a freak occurrence. That made her feel better, being unique. She hoped she would run into Ratze, see what she made of it. She'd probably laugh.

The monitor came on line. A woman appeared. Light brown skin that must have been darker before she too became a spacer. Short black hair. Only on Prima did people grow their hair long. With the odd eccentric on Regum.

"Welcome to H8 Nervina." The voice rich, relaxed, pleasant.

"Hello and thank you for having me as your, ahm, guest."

"My name is Tryces."

"Well Tryces, how are you?" see if she was a programme, an avatar, or real.

"Me? Fine. Thank you for asking." A slight lilt in her voice. "More importantly have you slept well, feel rested, refreshed?"

"Very." Had they scanned her dream? No she would have known, or her Brain at least. That was another thing. Recurrent. It did not make her the usual Primaian. Then again Primaians were not used to being in space. So her legend held. Legend? Things were certainly puzzling. Herself was definitely somebody else.

"How shall I put it? Someone is interested in you. You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

"You want to have breakfast?"

"Not hungry thank you. You go right ahead."

"I'm fine Nervina. I'll be with you in a moment."

"Alright."

A few minutes later a tiny chime announced her visitor. She opened the door.

"Ready?" Tryces asked. Geared up on her jump suit. Pockets everywhere. Shorter by a head. Lively eyes, smooth complexion, middle aged.

Tryces led the way to a cafeteria.

"An amazing place you got here." Nervina said walking through corridors, meeting the odd person, who nodded at them.

"Not really. Rather standard Nervina. But I guess we're so used to it..."

"You mean there are more?"

"Plenty. Scattered throughout space. Regum moved all its manufacturing bases, heavy industry off world. No pollution, no large scale mining to scar the landscape. And it satisfies our need to be in space. Our biological imperative. I'm basically here to look after you."

They walked onto the plaza. People everywhere. Several cafeterias, restaurants and bars. Tryces explained that everything was continually open for the shift workers. The concept of day and night unnecessary. View screens set up overhead showed H8 from various angles. Tiny cubelike structures hovered near, personal habitation clusters. A ship's rocket flared moving off into space. Stars everywhere.

They sat at a table scattered across the open space. Tryces ordered coffee as did Nervina. A second concourse displayed some shops. Clothes, jewellery, computers, vegetables and fruit, dry goods, canned goods, processed meat products, it looked like a village square. Above and below offices, work stations, climate control, maintainance. On one screen the huge dirty orange gas giant. Servo bots trundled about, the auto trolleys let off their passengers. At the end of one of several corridors the mag-lev train whizzed by.

Drinking their coffee from out of nowhere a young man came to their table. Deep black eyes roving around them. Nervina felt the tell tale itch of a general scan. He was lean, a little tense and alert wearing the same exo-suits as Tryces and Nervina. Ready to go into space at a moment's notice. Tiny wires at his neck. A handsome younger face. Nervina was tempted to do a trace back but held her curiosity in check.

"You must be Nervina." He smiled engagingly, greeting Tryces. He was brimming with confidence. Self assured. A sudden flash in her Brain. A sneak preview of her head. Her Brain neutral. Letting it happen.

"And you're loaded up. I'm Nah." She knew it was only an assumption.

Tryces not surprised. Like two pro's.

"I guess I am. Well it's shelf life's been exhausted."

"Just making sure you're not hostile. All sorts come here Nervina." He sat. The same waiter that served them came over Nah ordered a pot of tea. "Industrial espionage and not just Primaian's. Not saying you are one. But well, every controller keeps their agents in the dark to some degree. One of my duties is to remove that suspicion. Though in your case it is a little different."

"I got to thank whoever is helping me."

"Now if I was going by the rules I would assume that you want a face, a place and then who knows what your Brain might siphon."

"It was said in gratitude."

"Appreciate that Nervina. But we must be cautious."

"Then why in the open?"

"So that, if anybody is watching, they'll think we think you are a low level agent. No secret rooms, no drugs to interrogate you with, or deep scanning. A pleasant conversation. Anyway all of us are enhanced to some degree. The Primaian's have not caught up yet. They rely on the DVs as you're only too well aware." Nervina a little captivated. He oozed sensual charm. Very urbane. On Prima he would have a ball.

The waiter arrived with the tea and left.

"So you're the traveller from Novus."

"Escaped, rescued Nah."

"Yes." Cautious. "There have been prior attempts at infiltration from your end. Using Reganian's. Once they see what we really are on about," without disclosing what that was, "they usually give up. Primaian's are more focussed. Too much in fact. Too mission intensive. Unlike you. Which of course makes me suspicious. I have to be. Nothing personal."

"Fine by me." she sipped her coffee.

"Good. I hope I haven't offended you." A couple near their table got up and left.

"No of course not. I don't trust Prima either. Scurrying all over Regum, trying to get at you...you are Reganian? No need to answer. And I have no idea what H8 is on about, apart from all this industry. As Tryces informed me, this isn't the only one. You are so far ahead, it's ridiculous to even challenge you. Then there is the Web. I tell you Tryces, Nah, I'm on your side. Life on Prima sucks. There is no other way of putting it. All your magnificent achievements are unknown to the masses. If they really knew..."

"Novus. We know about Storaf's mission on Regum. But not much else."

"Yes. Something inside of me wanted to get out."

"Curious that. I mean what you did attracted attention Nervina."

"Lucky me."

"True. But then it might have been arranged. Maybe they want to know how we operate. So from my perspective you could be a plant."

"If I am I'm not even aware of it."

"That could be so. If it is then you are indeed a next level operative."

"Well, I'm here."

Nervina wondered what it was that they were after. The last sentence was a cover for something else. Her Brain? Good Brain. It would be interesting to know what was implanted in her... That dream! No point mentioning that. They might think she's unravelling. Then they might discard her as a Volatile. Or reconfigure her or worse, BrainDraining.

He finally poured his tea. "Apart from this Talex, were there any other unusual persons of interest paying undue attention?"

"Nah," she smiled, "from a Primaian point of view, everybody outside that planet is not just unusual but weird, potentially dangerous, under some alien influence, or psychotic."

He smiled at that. Tryces relaxed, listening. "Put it this way, were any individuals interested in you that did not fit their normal pattern of behaviour given what they pretended to be. Interested not in you per se but your reason for being on Regum or Novus."

"There was a run in on Regum with some rather flatfooted strangers. Maybe Primaian stooges once they realised I was not following orders. On Novus Talex and can't remember his name, can you believe that? Who helped me escape. Apart from that, nothing there that might be useful."

"What about your recruitment on Novus?"

"Recruitment?"

"Gambling."

"Oh him. I seemed to have luck on the machines. I'm sure that was all there was to it. A surrogate as they say. Hm, I wonder what he is thinking, me absconding. Marros. Mr E."

"Maybe that was your mission. Get into the casino."

"The casino?" Nervina was surprised.

"Primaian's are inveterate gamblers. Crack the code, the odds to make a profit."

"Something as base as that?"

"You never know. They're loosing heaps."

"I never thought of that Nah. But isn't that rather, ahm, boring? I mean, it's got no real significance."

"Unless they were testing you, your Brain. Something does not add up here. We have bits of data that may or may not relate. We have to know what the Primaian's know. And they are sheathed in their resonance fields Nervina."

"Nah. Prima's aims are straightforward. Control Regum. Novus is an open planet so they're free there. SpaceKorps makes sure the Orbital's secure for them. The one over Prima anyway. They basically run it. I don't even know why the Reganians let them."

Nah knew. To penetrate the resonance field. Track DV activity and play the reluctant hosts who made it look like Prima was in control.

"Well that's a matter of policy. Beyond my brief Nervina. Go on."

"Now us agents aren't told much. I'm supposed to be on this quest for Regum's folklore. It's probably all propaganda. Prove how flawed they are in comparison. Big deal. The thing is, is Storaf being used?" she thought of Horat but did not want to complicate the picture. It was messy enough as it was. "I don't know. But it must have been arranged. I mean I'm no anthropologist for starters but got in. And out." She grimaced wondering how Horat was coping.

"There were others though." Nah prompted.

By using 'others', the plural meant he was fishing. Why was she protecting Horat? Lovers they had been but that was in another life.

"I can only tell you about me. I'm a Stable Volatile. So if we get corrupted, the alien thing, they think we can handle that better than the pure. And of course are disposable. That is one big reason not to return. BrainDrained, become a vegetable. In a way I'd do anything to bring Prima to its senses. There is no threat in space. I don't even know if these aliens exist. Sure they say the planet's there. But that might have been pulled from WebSpace. Anything to keep everybody in place. The whole planet's a prison for the majority. As for my recruitment at the casino that was just one of those things."

"You could be right concerning the latter." Nah admitted.

"I might be a ruse. I don't know. Unless whoever got me out from Regum's now been compromised, or whatever, same for Novus...you see my predicament. I'm a refugee."

"So it appears."

"Appears Nah? Is! You think I could be some virus or bacterial phage if we're talking enhancements. Some alert system so that in come the mega nukes or meta-bombs, the big scale of what was uploaded into me. A moving alignment, anything. Shit. I really don't know Nah. Maybe I'm a cyber construct from the Web. Some sort of prototype."

"Which brings me to the next point Nervina. Someone more familiar with exo-intelligence. Would you be prepared to talk to him?"

"Exo-intel. Oh yes. Most definitely. Does that mean Prima is not wrong?"

"Up to now you are the first we have ever had Nervina."

"Really?"

"Really."

Tryces left them at the platform. Nah and Nervina took the train. After several stops they left an empty station and took a passing trolley down a long deserted corridor. No doors. More a like being funnelled along a chute.

"The person who is interested in you, is Yuli. We need to know more about Primaian psychology. We're acquainted with the basics of course, but as I said you are indeed precious."

"Why thank you Nah." As she smiled coyly. He laughed .Pleasant. The trolley stopped in front of a heavy duty clamped door way. More like a bank vault. Cameras watched them, soft scans cleared them, biometrics accepted them.

Through a double set of doors. No indication to what though. One more check and then they entered an office. The usual computer terminals, solid consoles, monitors showing space, some with graphs, bars flickering. Then into an observation bubble. A telescope. One of three from what she could see. Monitors, arrays of antennae as well as other dishes all pointing into deep space. A white cruiser took off. Its four massive thrusters flaring away, the flames flickering momentarily, then it became a white dot and was on its way.

An older woman, thinning grey hair, kind face, deep set eyes, thin nose and lips greeting them.

"Nervina, meet Yuli." Yuli made a simple gesture with her bony hand the smile almost reptilian.

"Delighted to meet you Nervina." Her voice a little raspy, but welcoming. "So shall we be seated?" taking roller chairs. "Tell me about yourself. Not your personal history, but how you fit into Prima's structure."

"I don't."

An understanding smile from Yuli.

"Prima no doubt want me back. They hate non sequential behaviour. Probably why they recruited me. Fits the Reganian model. But on Prima everything, every thought, every action, every nuance must fit a predetermined pattern of social behaviour. It's stifling I can assure you. Deviancy is abhorred. I'm supposed to be a Natural Volatile, stabilized. That's about it Yuli."

"Interesting. So you seem comfortable with your deviancy."

"Very. It defines me."

"I assume you could not be so open about yourself on Prima."

"Not unless you want to remain as you are."

"Very candid. Your kind seem rather reticent."

"Have to be."

"A tight structure."

"Tight." Nervina mock laughed ruefully.

"What do you know about space?"

"That it's empty?"

Another indulgent smile from Yuli.

"We gather astronomy on your planet is extremely restricted."

"So much so that they're out in the desert somewhere. Isolated. Absolutely no contact with the rest of the planet."

"Is that so?"

"Not just astronomy Yuli. Technology, even mathematics. Sacred. Controlled by priests. Now I was not deemed to be made of the right stuff. So got no idea even what it's all about. By that I mean everything Yuli."

"So we understand. Not a believer?"

"In Prima's mission, or that belief system?"

"Well both actually."

"No to both."

"That is promising."

"I don't know about that."

"Not to worry. As long as you are comfortable with your decision."

"Well, to be honest. Not uncomfortable might be a better expression. I feel when I see space that there is something out there, something vast and wonderful, something

amazing and...beyond words, beyond concepts. Well mine anyway. As if the universe is more than it appears."

"Ah the majesty of the universe. But filled with something. Not the alien field perhaps?"

"That? It's a con. Keep the fear factor going."

Yuli nodded without comment.

"Tell me Yuli, you too Nah. Are we out of reach?"

"Discounting DVs, yes. Prima concentrates on Regum and the alien field."

"So it is real?"

"My apologies, using their terms of reference. It's just photons travelling across space, from the other universe."

"Photons?"

"Light particles which are also paradoxically waves. Prima's notion of a field Nervina."

"Ah." Accepting the concept without really understanding it. Still it was a relief to get a straight answer. "Do they know this?"

"That's what we would love to know. You see Nervina, if they do know the truth then it means they are involved in a great conspiracy. If however they actually believe their supposition, then they are deluding themselves."

"Not good either way."

"Unfortunately no."

"Well I'm glad you people are here. But isn't this in the Web?"

"Your people think it's propaganda. Underlying our blinkered materialism. Not seeing the bigger picture, paring the field down to its construct. Like seeing the trees and not the forest."

"Now that I do understand Yuli. So the DVs can find us in this place and all the others."

"Luckily for us they think we are irrelevant. More an extension of the same. Rest assured Nervina, so far, apart from them sending their potential hostiles amongst us, their interest is more sabotage than mind control."

"A relief."

"At the moment."

"You mean my masters are planning something?"

"We have to be vigilant."

"Good."

"Would you mind being deep scanned?"

"Must I?"

"You're thinking we might mess with your head?"

Nervina reluctantly admitted to that fact.

"No, your persona will be safe. Just the superstructure, your mental architecture. If you are loaded with something nasty, no matter how entrenched, how integrated it would have a phase state on the quantum level."

She understood the idea behind the probe. Her Brain did not mind. It could deal with it.

"And your unconscious is inviolate. What we discovered is that no matter what one inserts, it always self configures to the unique persona one possesses."

"The unconscious?"

"You're not familiar with that designation?"

"Our education on Prima is almost non existent. Anything to do with the mind is in the hands of the Domain Lords and their asylums."

"Well in short it's your meta-mind. Your resonance if you will."

Nervina caught a glimmer of her mind. A vague vast field within her head Yet when she tried to reach into it the non specificness of it remained obscure, like some distant realm shrouded in fog, unrecognizable. Where thoughts melted, disintegrated, were absorbed with no return signal. Amazing. Its vastness alluring, hidden potential.

"Well I'd be as interested as you. As long as it's not tampered with." She wanted to trust Yuli, Nah, any who helped her.

"Very commendable Nervina. Your cooperation is appreciated." Yuli relieved. Nah happy.

"I haven't agreed as yet." She tried to sound pleasant not wishing to give the impression of obstinance.

"Oh." Yuli sounded a little disappointed. Then he said: "Prima. You're worried. What do they do?"

"I may have mentioned Brain Draining. It happens, often."

"Nervina," Nah placatory, "our Als can scan whoever we wish." Without saying just how successful they were in that field. Conditions applied.

"Like in my sleeping tube?" it was as good a guess as any.

A studied silence.

"Ah. Tell me, was it active?"

"Only as far as monitoring your biorhythms."

"Nothing more profound?"

"It's auto diagnostic. I don't know what they've told you about us, whether we're some sort of biological freaks given we're supposedly exposed, but the deep scans you're thinking of cannot be done willy nilly." Which was really a half truth. EAls could. But not many had as yet been upgraded. The wetware for that was only just being distributed off world. H8 was not a primary designation.

"I believe you." Nervina was curious about her dream.

"So do we have your permission?"

"I suppose signing some sort of contract, safeguarding my sanity and my persona," she trailed off, her Brain amused. That was surprising. Her Brain having a reaction on an intimate level. Another dimension within it. Or a projection of what they wanted it to recognise without revealing her real essence. Was that somewhere within her unconscious, the kernel of what one thought of being oneself? No. Her Brain assured her even on that level they were not going to get much more than what she was as is.

Since neither Yuli or Nah were going to commit anything onto even a medical file if only to make sure she left as little a trace as possible of her whereabouts she agreed, with feigned reluctance. Might as well milk the situation for what it was worth.

"You don't know just how much of assistance you are to us." Nah smiled.

"I'm sure you'll tell me what, if anything might be unusual once the scan is done." Reticence.

"You have to. I got to know if they configured me. If I'm on some sort of mental restraint."

"I see what you mean." Yuli replied at last looking at Nah.

"It's for your own good."

"And yours."

"Nervina, we have to know how stable you are. We are aware of Primaian psychological stratifications. Volatiles are valuable. In more ways than might be imagined. Important on the evolutionary level."

"That deep?"

"Without going into the theory, something we can discuss later. If there weren't any it would mean the end of diversity. So we have to know how dissimilar you are and also whether there are configured scenario's buried within you that might endanger us."

"Yes, I see. I would then be aware of my potential. You realise that if you removed this theoretical threat it might alert some DVs?"

"We recognise the danger. The last thing we want is to alert them to anything. From our point of view we want you to remain as veiled as possible." Tryces assured her.

She passed the initial scan with flying colours. Her Brain had withdrawn, dispersing itself along neurological pathways, dumping any data blocks in fragmentation codes throughout her natural memory. Nervina was designated as safe. Natural self enhanced Volatile. Good enough to be allowed to remain. Then induced into deep sleep.

"The flight is going to take some time. I cannot be more specific. Our captain and his pilot is Jorge and Jesha. Our cover is routine transport. Some things have not changed regarding trade." Yuli explained as Nervina strapped herself into the web couch. "One day perhaps instant transfer is achievable, like data but until then, just as in the days of old, the movement of goods is as it always has been." Yuli explained as she secured herself.

"You know that on Prima they still use bullock carts?" Nervina laughed.

"They are making sure your people are not exposed to even basic technology." Yuli dismayed. Anything they learnt about Prima deemed important.

"Oh there are some machines around. But it's all sort of graded. I was lucky." as Yuli watched the onboard monitors whilst the captain got the ship underway. Chatting with flight control, doing one last diagnostic check.

The ship was more the size of a cruiser. The superstructure's cargo bay secured with extension clamps to the rear in front of the thrusters. Feed lines underneath, it looked like a loaded flat top wagon except for the boosters and the fuel tanks at the rear.

They were cleared for take off. The extended LZ platform retracted and smaller jets slowly moved the ship away from the hangar. Their movement barely noticeable. In front the huge orange ball of the gas giant. Near them the clusters of habitats, their lights spread out, hundreds of them. When far enough from the structure they engaged the engines. The thrust pushed them into their recliners. They were off into deep space. The further away Nervina went the better she felt. It was good to get away from Prima's tenuous reach.

After some time Yuli extracted a helmet coated by an opaque greyness. Yuli pressed a switch, random pixels glowed softly.

"This Nervina is a preliminary probe, to read the superficial, your biological mental architecture. Synaptic pathways, dendrites, chemical activity. It takes a while. Thus with your mental map from the Cavity Resonance Chamber back at base we can now scan

you much faster. For we have discovered, years ago, that scanning actually affects the mind. Quantum stuff. The act of observation affects the observed. They become one. Which of course inserts an affect, a cause. Not value neutral. We used to get around that by then running a deletion sequence to ascertain the real data. Now with the preliminary survey we did on you this is obviated. This secondary scan is more for verification. Your resonance contained some troughs which puzzled us. Troughs Nervina, not spikes.

Nervina grasped the basics even though she had no clue what this quantum stuff was. Her Brain merely related 'energetic field states'.

Yuli attached a thick chord which linked the helmet to a box Yuli had brought with her, a self contained processor, a secure data storage unit.

"Just put it on."

It felt light, after all there was barely any gravity save for the gentle acceleration of the ship. They used the gas giant's gravity to sling shoot themselves off to wherever they were going.

Darkness now that she had the helmet on.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"The best way we found to do this is by putting you to sleep."

"Fine by me."

"It will be almost instant. Mapping is harmless. The helmet is shielded so the ship's systems won't interfere. Anyway the ship's smart. Nor will space. Field or no alien field. It's much a muchness."

"Yuli, will I have access to whatever you find?"

"Certainly." Though that depended on what she found.

"And no injecting search bots, sentinels, dormant programmes and the like."

"I understand where you're coming from Nervina. No, all quite superficial."

The inside of the helmet had visuals on standby, the same greyness as was on its outside.

"The helmet will see directly into your head, projected onto its outer surface giving me a top down view of your mind Nervina." Yuli relaxed.

She felt warm, comfortable, at ease. Her mind chattering away to itself, immersed in its own conversation.

"What if I'm some sort of enemy Yuli?" drowsy.

"How do you mean?" she held the process.

Nervina could think but had trouble articulating her thoughts. Barely making the connections.

"If I'm dangerous to you."

"This probe does not go that deep. It's a mapping exercise. Later if there is something inimical embedded we can isolate it. I should add, should there be some sort of fail-safe programme that is inimical to you, then we can reconstitute your mind from the map and your resonant state. We clean you up. You'll be as fresh as the new day."

"Let's hope so."

"You'll be fine. If you were loaded believe me Nervina you would have resisted. You would have done whatever in your means to avoid this."

"What if I'm a virus?"

A chuckle from Yuli. "Now that would be exciting."

"You're not worried."

"Not at all. We've had some experience with the agents we did catch. Their heads went into meltdown. Something was triggered, I shouldn't say this in case it worries you, but their brains got scrambled. We managed to unscramble them. Of course they then could not remember that they had been loaded. Basic Primaian know how. So shall we continue?"

"Please."

She began to dream.

She woke. Conscious. Sensuous. Floating in a warm cocoon. Warmth everywhere akin to a lovely bath. Unfocussed her mind lighter, expanding smoothly. She a tiny part of a greater wholeness. Her Brain receded into some distant point, then vanished. Her incessant thoughts remote yet still there way back in her huge spread out head. At one with the greyness. She felt great, fantastic, immaculate, at one with everything. Even though there was nothing there.

Transition. A veil removed. Stars. Space. But not physical space. More like a substance, an essence. Certainly not the alien field. Caressing. What was this? A touch of eternity? Space did go on forever. Her mind felt a tickle. The essence of infinity palpable. Smooth. Cool. Connected.

She was infinite. Yes yes yes. Exuberant exaltation. This was cosmic. The squabble between Regum and Prima so dumb, so irrelevant. Euphoria.

Whoops. What was that? A shadow passing through, a silhouette. A gust of wind. In space? A presence in the oceanic calm. A veiled attendant moving, pulsating.

Incredible. Credible. Inert, expectant. Full of possibilities. A challenge. Way beyond her reckoning. Keep it coming. This was fascinating. Moving in in slow pulsations from outside.

Neither warm nor cold this infusion. A loaded presence. The surge built up both inside of her and out there. She was being lifted with it. So was her head. Life out here? Determined. Insistent. Unstoppable. Stop hiding, reveal yourself, itself, some self. Awareness from without. Was it sensing her? Unquantifiable. A search pattern. Or just it's pattern.

More than that. Taking shape. Circular. Expanding at a phenomenal rate through space. Invigorated by the contact, the immersion. Conscious intent, cloaked yet present. Come on then. Not as vast as the space she was in. Potentiality convoluted with entangled thoughts. Messy. So much within it, like scrambled data. More than just a repository, sensate!

Dark glowing particles swirled around her trying to find a surface to latch on to. Oily, grimy. Coded. Fragmented. Incomplete. Building blocks the sphere lilac. The dots barely glowing. Was she energizing them? No the design was inherent. Rearranging space! A lurking intelligence with will, infusing space with its design.

A subset of space glowing in seductive splendour near the centre of the galaxy in washed out white. Hovering at the edge of a massive black hole where stars melted before being sucked in right next to it. Absorbing the excess energy released, self charging, feeding, millions of speckled dots flickering popping in and out of existence. There and not there.

Probing, recognition of her presence. Tenuously connected. The glimmering lilac charged orb, charged space twisting in fascinating bifurcating abstract geometries. Was this her mind? Writhing, churning, intent on self creating, the data already in place. Tiny glowing specks of colour.

`What is this?' her Brain curious.

`It is.' Audio in space?

`Why?' as in intent.

`Because.'

`Because what?'

`I can.'

Shit. Sentience.

The image of an unformed presence. Hidden *within* space.

`What for?'

`To be. Will be. Am.'

`Really?'

`Really.'

`What for?'

A feeling of impending dominance. Infusing itself into space.

`Taking on the Cosmic Consciousness?'

Disparaging laughter? Supremacy!

`How'? her Brain curious. The birth of an idea. Its reality. Self creating out of space. Not impossible. Configuring controlling cosmic laws. Future domination. A god in the making. A god? Abstractions of the mind. An abstract mind! A future reality. Future realities!. Covering time lines. Each dot a tentacled gateway into a future, a past, a present. Feeding off the universe, self maintaining, embedded.

The sum of everything inside the viscous orb. The process begun. With no way out once inside. Expanding, sending out a base-line quantum state. The rest would follow. The universe too big her Brain reassured her.

It knew that.

Indestructible.

Energy can not be destroyed.

It could not be destroyed.

But it could be converted. Thank you Brain. Nervina wished she knew more about cosmic science. One thing was certain, there was no Cosmic Consciousness. Prima's imagination. Or had they latched into this thinking it was that?

A programme just the same. Malfunctioning? Who or what had put it there? Prima? They weren't that advanced. Regum? Would they dare? Prima's logic was self contained. Regum's expansive. Could they have? Were they? What was going on?

She had to get back. How though? Enthralled. The galaxy from where she was was infused by this lilac mist. The assembling data still miniscule in comparison. She must be extremely close. The effluvia of particles moved through her leaving tiny sub atomic traces in their wake as they disintegrated when hitting her Brain. At least she was not affected. That was something.

A programme with a sensate intelligence. Just like the unconscious Yuli had explained. A vast domain at a what was it? quantum level. A colossus in the making. If she became a part of it, she would be in the system. Then it could not remain a self isolate. Tempting. No. Anything this easy would be a trap. Given the energy it had available she would be overwhelmed, then bye bye Nervina. No rush.

How to get out? Ride the outward pulse, use it's expansion. Prima's minds open to the dubious essence. Reganian minds not relevant. Remaining in WebSpace. So close, your mind, Nervina. Would this thing follow her. No. Yes. Maybe. Her Brain continuing to disintegrate the stray particles spewing out of it. No itch. No probing. No scan. That's it. It was done, over.

She remembered Yuli, the ship, her being there. Maybe it was all in her unconscious. Think of yourself. All its inherent imagery a waking dream. Thoughts. The chatter of her mind. Transition before she knew it. Disentangled. Flashes of light. Excess energy sparking within her Brain. She was breathing. Her mind exhausted, sleepy, heavier. The soft glow of the fog immersing her, comfortable, warm, cocooned.

"Wake up Nervina." Yuli's heartening soft voice.

Eyes open. Pixellated greyness. Not dissimilar to the tenuous orb only denser. How it might appear. Her helmet was removed.

They were still in the ship. Everything appeared normal. She felt invigorated, fresh, recharged, brimming with a glowing warmth radiating happiness. Feeling transcendent. So different from a moment ago.

"How do you feel?"

A multitude of answers, so many possibilities, with one reality. How to explain what she just witnessed.

"Excellent Yuli." Feeling comfortable in the recliner.

She considered her answer, looking at Yuli in a new light. Had she discovered her Brain? A shadow essence, a quantum field at the unconscious level. Appearing only as a probable state, not as an actuality her Brain informed her.

"I have an admission to make Nervina."

That would give her time to formulate her own experience. If it was necessary. Maybe she was loaded. Maybe this forming thing was in her head and not 'out there' at all. Maybe the universe was in her head, in everybody's head. Something for the philosophers and psychologists to chew over.

"I deep scanned you." Looking like some weird abstract piece of art that would not reveal its content to her enquiring mind, or the scanner.

"What? Why?" more surprised than offended.

"Because if the subject is aware of the procedure certain discrepancies arise, interfering with the mind's ground state. So by not knowing, the brain's more relaxed. By your expression you seem relaxed, correct?"

She nodded.

"I'm not after your persona or its mental construct of itself. Us Reganian's aren't that obsessed with what your kind consider correct psychological states. We thrive on divergence, Prima on convergence."

Something was diverging as a convergence out there.

"This is not about mind control Nervina." Yuli said kindly, like one's attentive doctor concerned with the patient's welfare. "More to do with your potential, your inherent value."

`To them.' She thought. `And to me.'

"But I am intrigued."

"Can I see the results?"

"It's pure numerics."

"I thought the helmet mapped my architecture."

"Oh, of course." A screen came on. Thin red lines bifurcating into branches, then smaller tinier ones until the ends mushroomed out. Dark blue transition points, yellow for the chemical stimulus engaged in thought, a lilac haze diffused through her physical brain. Was that lilac her Brain or the thing she perceived out there? Was it in her now?

"What's the lilac haze?"

"Your resonance, your essence, the sum of everything within you, a quantum state."

"Is that normal?"

"To a degree." Yuli said guardedly. "Whoever inbuilt, uploaded, inserted your enhancement did an excellent job."

So Yuli knew she was at least an Enhanced Stable Volatile.

"Now it might be natural to you. You might have been born like this, evolution creating one of its remarkable surprises." Pleased with that hypothetical.

"You're not going to make this public I hope."

"No."

"But you're not going to delete it either."

"It's safe in its box." Looking at the data cube next to her. Nervina knew her Brain could delete it. The box was shielded against an EM hit, scanners and probes, viruses and the various phages they could spawn.

"Your multiple processing abilities are of the highest order Nervina."

Even as a compliment she was tossing the idea about of deleting her data in Yuli's data box. With the scan over she let her Brain go into havoc mode inside it. Went in

easily enough, after all its copy existed in there. A small quantum driven computer. Accessible to a Brain functioning at its own quantum level. It self deleted itself, leaving the superficial architecture in place. Her Brain secure once more.

Yuli was alerted by her own sentinels. Not sophisticated enough to trace back the source of the interference. Let her think this was an active hostile DV. That would ramp up security. And hopefully, she grinned inwardly give her more protection. Good Brain. Making Yuli think the DVs nearly had the right fix on her but missed and went after the contents of the data box instead.

The job done she relaxed. Her secret was safe with her. Yuli's assumption about her remained of course, making her even more precious than just that of an escaped agent. The other possible scenario was that a trojan self deleted any unauthorized access. Make Yuli think Prima was more advanced than she had previously thought possible.

Yuli was puzzled. Nervina alert. She was tempted to ask what concerned her. Yuli entered some information on her sleeve's pc. She was certain the box was secure from infringement but ninety percent of the data had just vanished. Nervina's persona deleted, vanished, jumped out of its quantum state. But it must reappear somewhere. Where? Back into her head? Puzzled Yuli tried a soft scan. Nervina's mind itched.

"Forgotten something?"

"No, something odd just occurred." Yuli checked the ships EAI. Nothing there had passed through. Now Nervina was curious just what her Brain had done. Dumped it in the self constructing data domain in space? Where she just had been. So it is out there? Affirmative her Brain informed her.

`Why there?' a little shocked given it's intent was so alien.

`Precisely because.' Meaning its as yet unconfigured final state.

`But that means whatever it is, will be, knows of me.' Confused there.

`Quantum decoupling. Quiet safe.' She wished she knew what her Brain was talking about. Somehow understanding the implications.

`There and not there?'

`Like an electron.'

`A what?' she knew so little.

`An energy shell within atoms. In many possible states at once. They can jump energy states. During the jump they are in hyperspace. Basically disappearing during zero time transition. If it tries to access the shadow Brain, the result collapses the base state then infuses itself into that self. Thus a modicum of control and awareness. The

capability is there to jump out of it any time. But as only you are currently aware of its existence Yuli can only conclude on the current data available that this thing is a configuration of your imagination.'

'Should Yuli, the Reganian's be made aware of that thing?'

'Too early and too risky. You cannot be entrapped, but a natural mind can. That is how it will access information. The current singular event still in its probable possibilities. At the moment almost infinite. Once it collapses more data its intent, its substance, its essence will become clearer. For the moment it is best this thing stays hidden.'

'But can entrap any enquiring mind.'

'Correct.'

'Yet I am secure.'

'Definitely.'

'How?'

Silence. Her Brain knew more than her.

'But I will know eventually?'

'Depends on certain prerequisites.'

'Unavailable.' She guessed.

'For your protection. Knowing the future can delete it. A specific future state must be arrived at through the right circumstance. If they are not in place others of course come into existence. Then the revealed state is replaced by another probability. You have to be kept on the right track, if only to secure the mission and your survival.'

'Thank you Brain.'

Silence.

"What do you know Nervina?" Yuli asked seeing she had disengaged from her internal conversation.

"Very little Yuli. Primaian's are not exactly open minded. I was wondering about my scan, my resonance, my real self."

"Enhanced Natural Volatile in your terms."

"Anything else?"

"That is what intrigues me. You know that the so-called self is a construct of the mind. In that way we are not predetermined. Which Prima rejects. You seem to have so many possibilities it makes me wonder about the evolutionary process at work. You seem to be a new type of persona."

"Not that I would know." She covered herself.

"No because you are inside yourself. What the scan showed, from what I can remember some mental state is melded into your neural architecture. Enhanced barely covers it. All minds are parallel processors. Yours seems multiple, integrated and enhanced. A quantum state. The content gone. Vanished. The downloaded data I mean. Maybe its inherent energy state was unstable within the confines of the data box. Like water bubbling out of a pot."

"Meaning?"

"We are the sum of our parts. Consciousness the result. Your consciousness is at a different level entirely. Unique, fascinating, and uncontainable in a physical data storage system. Then there are your memories. Remember they are distributed throughout the mind. You have conflicting scenario's. That could be due to your meta-states. Where dreams, reality, the bits of memory data converge to form your history. Your mind does not seem to differentiate between what is imagined and what is real."

'To confuse scans.' Her Brain told her.

"*By rights you should be insane.*" Yuli puzzled.

"And I'm not."

"Exactly. On Prima you could have been a Divine. In touch with the mystical, an ancient expression relating to the remnant dreamstates of your ancestors. It is reckoned that during our race's early evolution the distinction between imagination and reality was far more fluid than it is today. In the sense our Primaian relatives are further back."

"And I am a sort of throw-back?"

"Yes but with a puzzling aspect. Not diverted by your imagination into seeing reality as fantasy. That is what makes you so unique." What Yuli could not admit to Nervina was what was gestating in her unconscious. Not that she could prove it for it had escaped. Dissolved. Reintegrated into the data rich environment within space. If Nervina was connected to the phase state of space then her potential verged on the infinite. How could a mind cope with that? The only solution was her imagination. Turn the overwhelming potentialities into configured abstractions. In a way Nervina lived in a mythological realm yet had no visions.

"Do you dream?"

She remembered the strange bio-based part processing slug inside of her.

"None I can remember."

"Hm. Not so unusual. If you do, note them. Now your sleeping tube cannot read the contents of your mind, just its level of activity. Ideally you should sleep in the scanner." Her Brain balked at this. She found a way out.

"Later." Nervina answered. "You as a Reganian, have knowledge I can barely guess at. These quantum states for example. I can intuit them but not much more. Then there is psychology of which I know nothing. On Prima education is so secret, so self contained, so physically removed from most that only the chosen few are taught science, astronomy, philosophy and technological applications. In a way Prima is locked into a past that was left behind by your race centuries ago. Even the aborigines on Regum are more advanced. Mentally I mean. Which brings me to my almost vacant state. If I knew how what you know fits then I can be of more use to you or whoever is looking after me. As long as I never have to go near a Primaian. Most are psychics. Low level stuff, but everybody's into each other's heads. No peace. I trained myself to shut all that out. Maybe that is why I was chosen to go to Regum. Get rid of me. Who knows?"

The captain announced their arrival.

"We're at a group of habitats. I cannot reveal what it's real location is, you understand. They value their privacy. So we just call them habitats."

"I'm with you." Outside hanging serenely in space, in the middle of nowhere.

Nah returned from the cockpit. He did not ask how the scan went.

"So will someone, you perhaps teach me the basics?" Nervina wanting to deflect their curiosity about her mind.

"That can be arranged Nervina. First to get you accommodated. I can give you some data disks. Get you acquainted with our knowledge. You said psychology, and I agree. Philosophy. Maybe later. Too many answers to reality might confuse you. Basic science I think is imperative, astronomy as well and what we know of the universe, that great imponderable." Yuli smiled.

"Oh yes." Nah confirmed. "Now two of them. Ours and the other. Infinite maybe. Or finite universes going on forever. Mind boggling."

"Sure is."

"Who would you suggest Yuli?"

"Varus the Philosopher."

"Is he here?"

"Certainly is."

"Well Nervina, you are about to meet one of the best brains ever. Slightly contemplative, but easy going. He teaches courses on philosophy. Originally trained as an astronomer. A bit mystical. That should suit your temperament. Sees the universe as some sort of living organism. Thinks we're living inside a brain! Not that it can be disproven. I mean it's impossible to look into this universe from outside of it. One would

have to get to the edge and there, ahm, certain difficulties arise. Won't go into that. Yes if Varus will have you, which I think will tickle him pink, you being the first Primaian we have amongst us. I think he would be delighted."

"I think so too." Yuli agreed.

Yuli finished her presentation to the gathered group regarding Nervina. Nah and Tryces's account of her behaviour, the ship's analysis of her resonant state, the deep scan put Sakaris as head of security in a pensive mood. Loara along with Sakaris had left the SS 1 to ascertain Nervina. She was there, in the secure room at one of the modules of the spread out habitats as a stand-by. Good cover. Habiter's had as many configurations as their imaginations were capable of thinking up.

Now Nervina amongst them. A defector or a plant. Was she a loose canon? Yet she had been helped by clandestine cells working for Regum, all loosely aligned with the barest of oversight. That way if Prima latched on to one, others would conglomerate and move in. Had she stayed with Storaf, she might have gleaned much regarding Prima's obsession with alternative head spaces. Their ambivalent psychic states and the ancient lore of a by gone age, still remnant amongst the aborigines in the Outlands.

Instead Nervina had gotten out, ending up on Novus. Talex's attempted entrapment which she readily volunteered made it look she was running away from Prima's clutches. Or was Talex sure that his approach made her make a run for it thus following the escape route she and her friend Ratze managed to organise at such short notice. How had that been arranged? What concerned the group was Nervina's state of mind as well.

"The scans showed nothing pertinent. No remnant e-signature, no debris from her immediate past as if her head is deleting what others would remember. No bugs either or unexplainable modules, triggers. Except for her unconscious. Pure chaos. A sub-superimposition." Yuli finished.

"Unless that is her unconscious." Loara suggested.

Sakaris called up the hologram of Nervina's results. The brain's superficial architecture, the synaptic pathways, dendrite activity, the lilac haze, all there. Sakaris folded his hands as they concentrated on Nervina's head space.

"Yuli is right." Nah spoke up. "Self isolate. Configured. Her knowledge of even the most basic of scientific assumptions absent. That part of her Primaian brain checks out. Her resonant state too value neutral, a cover."

"In her unconscious." Yuli finished off for Nah.

"She might not even be aware of her own contents."

"A screen." Loara suggested. "Classic sleeper."

"No covert probing. No rogue feelers. Not interested in the ship's brain. No interest in any data banks." Tryces was dismayed at Nervina's neutrality..

"Is she active? By being passive?" Yuli theorized. "She's totally new. Or is it evolution at work, something the Primaian's misdiagnosed. Categorizing her as just another quirk, a Volatile. And," she answered her own proposition, "does not act like one."

"Her endomorphins barely activate. Suppressors. Could be tiny nanobots within her bloodstream. Problem is Prima's no where near duplicating that bio technology. Even if we did take a blood sample, they could dissolve upon analysis." Nah suggested.

"So we have her brain, enhanced, overtly stable. No tell tale nodal vortices, no bio implants, no artificial constructs, no configurations. Nothing in her memory of any interest. Totally off line. No skills. A blank. Puzzling." Sakaris concluded. "Well Tryces, you sat in at her lessons with Varus."

Tryces extracted a data disk and handed it to Sakaris across the empty table. The hologram glowed serenely. Sakaris inserted the disk at the slot in front of him. Only a slight change in brain activity. The neural network a little denser as she soaked up the information.

"Now that is remarkable. Bifurcations. One very unique brain." Loara said for all of them. "With no concomitant emotional state. Almost robotic. Let's see what Varus has to say." She called him on the com-link.

Wizened with age, almost bald, creased character lines from the days spent outdoors on Regum prior his move to this habitat he greeted them with a happy smile, his lively eyes taking them all in. Amongst friends. He had been briefed regarding Nervina's wish to learn, her recent past and that she was Primaian. He had been told by Sakaris to also ascertain how she reacted to what knowledge Varus passed on to her.

"Her mind's into generalities. Sees the big picture. Not that good with minor details. A good theorist in the making. Hopeless with advanced mathematics. The basic concepts are there but higher abstractions loose her. However, on the applied level she can make sense of the equations. I even tried basic chemistry, very similar at the equational end she picked that up quite well. When we got into the theoretical end of probabilities, she was less intrigued. The very essence of our research. Said there was only one future. Very Primaian. Almost humoured me when I delved into quantum states." Varus explained.

"So she is Primaian." Sakaris asked.

"Most likely. Vague about her childhood. Maybe she wants to forget, or has forgotten. Maybe some early trauma. Who knows how they deal with their children. Tempted to suggest 'inner emigration'."

"Denial." Sakaris ventured.

"Very."

"Well that complicates things for her." Nah watching the new hologram.

"And no questions or interest about what we are up to? I mean our research Varus."

"None Sakaris."

"So she appears who she is."

"Indeed Sakaris."

"So Nervina is in her own way not obsessed in general. You know hypothetical teleological end points, our physical presence in space, the alien field."

"No, never mentions it."

"You know of course that we are making progress regarding PWs."

"I'm glad we are."

"And its highly classified." Sakaris reminded Varus. He after all was essentially there for sentient oversight.

"You haven't broached that as yet, in theory I mean. The nature of PWs, the change from probable to actual. How with enough energy any PW can be extricated from the probable states awash throughout space to an actuality in space."

"Of course not."

"Good." Sakaris was satisfied. In a way, if their experiments panned out they would be masters of their own destiny. Prima could tag along or be left out. It was that simple.

"Prima's main focus is mind control. Nervina's just not interested regarding that." Varus brought the conversation back to her.

"Well feed her bits of theory. See how or if she reacts. It might reveal something buried in her head. So anything else Varus?"

"No Sakaris."

"Right. Tread carefully. You're our best hope in unearthing what could be a sentience in the making."

"That unique?" Varus was surprised.

"It's speculation."

"I shall look forward to that. I don't know what sort of an impression her lessons are having. She's quite detached. Almost as if she knows yet does not."

"Her questions then are not directed towards our secrets? Our potentialities."

"No."

"Either she's well trained or she is a Natural as they say."

"I'm thinking of the latter Sakaris."

"Let us hope so Varus. Right. Thank you. We'll call you when we need you. You're free to go into the more esoteric end of our sciences. But make sure it's at the theoretical end, not what we are actually doing."

"Of course not." Varus smiled and stood. "I guess I'll be seeing you later."

"Thank you for all you are doing, have done."

"It's a pleasure, believe me. If we get this right, then Prima is history."

He rose, bade them farewell and left the secure room.

"There is that chance that Nervina's been recruited by some agency of ours." Sakaris stated. Being head of security out here did not automatically translate that he would be informed what Regum itself did back home. Nah and Tryces on board here, with Loara the go between the various intelligence groups. But as Regum organised everything on a decentralized basis and with the Solar Station his concern, the nature of the game was shifting into another geared phase.

"So Tryces. What plans for Nervina?"

"If she is some evolutionary product she might come in handy at the base. Mind you once there, there's no way she could ever leave. But we could use a test subject." Tryces suggested.

"If we stuff up it's less of a loss."

"Yes. That will have to be considered. Because if we perfect the technique in riding PWs then having a Primaian sort of balances things out. If the DVs find out it would be a shocker." Sakaris cautious.

"Nervina's whole persona might be a false positive." Loara suggested.

"That has crossed my mind as well. It would explain the childhood vacuum. Trauma aside. Some degradation of real time memories. Now as you know the VQCs can create cyber realities. Be interesting how she would react. The Web is one thing, this is something else."

"You said it." Tryces concurred.

"Is she running as a Head with no persona? Or a selfless one. She's just too stable. Never met anyone like her." Sakaris more puzzled than worried. If Nervina tried to

communicate with anybody they would know anyway. Even at a quantum level, something the DVs did without understanding what was involved.

"What if she's an alien?" Loara asked. It had been on her mind.

"Now that would be something. But why keep that hidden?"

"Our PW experiment. Let's assume we continue to succeed." Loara said "Then in the future it's effects might be noted by a similarly advanced civilisation. So they send in an observer. Maybe even help us achieve our aims."

"A bit far fetched Loara. Anyway nothing has come in. No insertion. No quantum fluctuations." Sakaris brought her back down.

"Just a thought."

"One worth remembering." Tryces remarked.

"Well I'll have to clear Nervina's possible one way visit to our distant station. In a way being isolated out there will keep her with us."

"She might even come on board." Loara was hopeful.

"It will be Perdus's decision. Having her confined out there might get her to reveal herself. Thus her current neutrality. I mean what we are doing here is pretty basic stuff. Nothing Prima does not know." As Sakaris watched the glowing hologram of her mind. He deleted the image.

"Send Varus out with her." Tryces suggested.

"Yes. They seem to get along. That is if Varus wants to."

"Well he can leave anytime."

"True."

"You gonna do it?" Loara asked.

"Yes. I'm making the arrangements. I assume you two want to come out as well?"

"Love to. Tryces?" Loara turned around.

"Definitely."

"Oh by the way. Change of plan."

"For us? As in, what?"

"Nervina. Until we know more, I want her back on Novus. There's something that doesn't really add up about her. Not so much what we do. The data seems fine. But there are blanks. Meshed. Fractal interphased. Makes her mind appear natural." Having re-run her data.

"You mean she drops out?"

"Yes."

"Where to? What in?"

"That's just it."

"So..."

"Take her back. Give her a knock out dose when she sleeps. Then into stasis. Deliver her to Novus. She's got accommodation there. If not we'll arrange it either way. There we can observe her."

"Tag?"

"RS. Prima's applications good for some things."

"I see. This is final?"

"We can always get her later. Close call."

Sakaris activated a secure dummy run so that if intercepted they would get trivial chit chat from via his AI simulacrum. He sent his coded message of their coming, Nervina included. Even their exit would be camouflaged with several flights leaving simultaneously. The Solar Station was distant enough, behind the star and from this end obscured by a huge dust cloud as well. A quick scan showed that space was clear, no DV activity noted. Too busy focused on Regum and Earth. He got through to Perdus. He was only too happy to have more staff. There was plenty of room Though they needed technical back up and accompanying scientists which to a degree Tryces, Nah and himself were. Sakaris thought it best to get total security in place first. Perdus understood.

The next day Sakaris assembled his group. Nah, Tryces and Loara. Informed them that they would actually head out towards the closest asteroid belt first. Another industrial base, good cover. If they were discovered all the Primaian's would get was a routine flight. Nothing unusual there. They would take their time getting there.

Prima.

Darlos left Elentra with what data they had about Earth's remarkable come back. Hit by a meteor the size of a building the damage done should have crashed their civilisation.

The majority of the DVs soaked up the fright, the scare, the titanic catastrophe overwhelming the stricken population. Within hours the sea levels rose flooding the coastal cities. The earthquakes triggered by the impact shook their inland cities into piles of rubble. Volcanic eruptions of sulphurous poisoned cloud blotting out the sun. Crops would fail killing the survivors. Huge tidal waves finished off what the meteor hit had started. The agony of their despair came in a massive wave of anguish, of hopelessness, of immanent death.

Then amongst this hopelessness, this desolation of the soul an anger arose at the injustice of the gods. Questions arose. Had they not served their gods faithfully? Had they not paid due obescience to them? And yet they had been punished for what? Among those who survived anger turned subtly outwards. Never again would they be duped by gods pretending to be the harbingers of life, of salvation. If this was their way of calling them into the great beyond then these astute minds who had survived in pockets all over the planet could do without them.

Elentra all this time, during the euphoria of having Earth's wilful determination turning into something inimical to Prima, collated the data without comment. Whilst Darlos gave thanks to the Supreme Being, Elentra and Kroena went about their work with methodological detachment. When Darlos asked how they could be so immune by this divine sign they answered that they did not want to pollute the sensitive data with their resonant states. Darlos was taken aback at the indisputable logic of their approach. He had to admit to himself that in a way the two women were right. Detachment was important in their line of work. The DVs were the gateway to all the possible futures. Into present and past scenario's of Earth and Regum. Other groups focused on the alien field which showed no change of status even though the majority of Earthers were dead, dying all those millennia ago. Somehow these beings bounced back. Action was required of that Darlos was certain. The DVs might be influencing these beings but neither were they stopping rebellious minds who thought nothing of rejecting the divine. It was a worrisome development. A cruel joke for both Earth and Prima. To have this

notion of disbelief in the celestial manifestation of the Supreme Consciousness would, as was often discussed, bring about the very opposite of what they wanted to attain.

It was time to teach Earth the true meaning of the cosmos. They had been awoken to the vastness and dangers lurking in space and were assiduously thinking along mechanical modes of thought due to the impact of the meteor. Certain indisputable laws were at work. If they could understand that they might never have to suffer such a calamity again. Currently at that time these thoughts were merely gestating. There was a huge difference in comprehending facts and having the means of acting.

Later probing showed Earth recovering. The same cities sprang up. Their belief in many gods resurfaced even though these same gods to them had been the cause of their heavy tribulation.

Elentra merely shrugged saying the Earthers were aliens. Though the people once more believed in the interwovenness of life as a marvel, its mystery enshrined in divine holiness many others merely paid lip service. Worse some studied the gods as one would an implement, a broken plough and how to improve its function. These beings were approaching their gods not with due deference and humbleness but as something to be used, if not usurped. The meteor hit had changed their very outlook upon reality itself.

Kroena put that down to survival instinct. Use any means available. The purely divine had failed them and they were determined for this horror never to surprise them again. As the gods had a vicious streak then they would make sure they would never become victims again.

Earth was rising from the ashes. Their new orientation could not be disputed. Facts had to be faced. Their resurgent psychology duly influenced by the DVs were to guide them back to the cosmic truth of which Prima was the central, holy, immaculate manifestation. More than remote viewing, more than subtle guidance was now necessary.

All this played itself out in his mind as Darlos caught a shuttle back to Prima along with another batch of burnt out DVs. Some had been emotionally overwhelmed at the suffering, the immensity of the calamity, the resultant surge of their stoic endurance in the face of the fated disaster. Instead of begging for forgiveness for harbouring heretical thoughts, instead of being humbled by this sign of divine wrath more than just a few were determined to become masters of their own destiny. Not to be like gods, though many now thought this a possibility. The logic that came across revealed its twisted consistency. The gods, or the supreme deity monumentally flawed. This went against the

divine plan. Once the clouds, the choking dust had settled and cleared, the stars eternal presence gave them the idea that the calamity was not due to their imperfection. So they would make themselves perfect. With or without these supposed gods. They were determined not to be denied.

The DVs revealed all this in the weeks after the cosmic hit. Elentra had tasked others to view Earth centuries later. Moving once more into dangerous territory. How Pentham, Qatus or Gharbel reacted or dealt with this new menacing approach determined Darlos's view that they had to get to Earth. They knew that the Reganian's had the technical capabilities. The idea that some Primaian's, a splinter group he chuckled wished to peaceably interact with that heinous, homicidal race, for they still indulged in their incessant pathetic wars, if only to be a calming influence on them ought to get the Reganians on side. Peace and goodwill to all life. How could they refuse?

An idea formed in Darlos's overworked mind. Since these beings were intent on murder, then why not stoke the fires of their demented psychosis? If not to hopefully wipe each other out, at least keep them so immersed in their bezerk states that they would never attain any level of civilisation. Neat. Use what one had, not what one had not. They want war? Let them have war.

The shuttle came down at the space port. Darlos, bubbling with energy transferred to a flyer to take him to Lord Pentham. Always available. Unlike Qatus who was busy socialising, as usual, pursuing the good life, Gharbel busy playing politics, influencing Skias. Determined to keep Prima's masses in harness. That left Pentham to do the work necessary for this ambitious project.

The desert passed below replaced by savannah and finally the forests surrounding the countless villages where life went on as it had always done, in stasis. Kept in line by the proselysing priests. Where would they be without them? Tiny workshops using primitive forges, brick kilns pouring out black smoke was about as technological as the Domain Lords allowed. The high tech end safely contained, isolated in the desert and purpose built urban enclosures. The chosen one's, those with a specific logical mind set allowed to pursue their vocations specializing, studying applied science and technology, in glorious isolation to keep en par with Regum.

More settlements appeared, closely packed, roads snaking through them to small provincial cities, dioceses where bishops ruled over their domains. All as it should be. Serenity, calmness, devout, believing and most importantly happy as well.

Pentham advised Darlos to meet him at his asylum. His primary concern the heretics. Searching their dangerous minds to excise all that was forbidden. Keeping an eye on misguided fallen souls. The flyer landed sending clouds of dust into the air. Stretching Darlos breathed the succulent fresh air. Late flowers in their last bloom. A verdant forest all around. Tranquillity. It was good to be alive during these momentous times, sustaining his inner spirituality. He gave silent thanks to the All Knowing. Which brought him to a sudden halt. He was anxious about Elentra and to a lesser degree her charges. Worried she was thinking more like a Reganian every day. Her work though, the results from Earth impeccable. Did she infuse the divine element into the DVs enough? Is that why they could not get on top of the Earthers? It was a possibility to be explored.

An attendant, alerted at his coming escorted Darlos through the main foyer and towards the administrator's office instead of Pentham's private suite. Maybe some development regarding the heretics. Many were astute psychics. It could be they had sensed Earth's reactions, their distress resonating across space and straight into these riven, often desperate souls seeking succour in dark domains of their own creation.

He was courteously shown in through the outer office. The young man on duty knocked on the door announcing him. Pentham's voice bade him enter.

Lord Pentham was in conference with Taruk, the head doctor. Maybe the heretics did sense something bordering on the paranoid. Manipulated by doctors, Domain Lords and the priests.

Darlos was asked to join them around the low table.

"Some refreshment?" Taruk asked. Short fuzzy grey hair, tanned. He spoke to his patients often outdoors.

"Thank you no." Then: "Lord Pentham."

"Glad you could come." Not that Darlos had a choice. Still such little courtesies were welcome.

"A pleasure as always."

"Pleasure?" a touch of the cynic in Pentham who smiled crookedly.

"Of course."

"We may as well start with Elentra." He too had been thinking about her. They might have been momentarily linked. Darlos had the relevant disk which Pentham slotted into the desk. A small screen appeared away from him at the desk.

Pentham and Taruk studied the graphs, her resonant state. Staff were monitored by both DVs and dual CFs which monitored their reactions to the dampeners exercised on their minds when threatening to expand into off limit mental realms, specific thought

patterns, dubious behaviour. By the colour coding Elentra was solid. No divergent sub realms present. Or hidden by her.

"Looks fine." Pentham turned to Taruk.

"If I may. Some paranoiacs, even schizophrenics and the like can live dual lives. Compartmentalize discrepancies to the highest level of abstraction. Almost psychopathic in their tendency to be normal." The seed of distrust sown.

But then Taruk, like all the others thrived on their intake of patients. The more in an asylum the greater the asylum's worth, the more important doctors and Domain Lords became. A numbers game. Rule of thumb had it twenty per cent of any given group were defective. Even with rigorous screening for those on the orbital the same divergence was expected to manifest itself up there. Actually given they were in space, immersed in the alien field outside Prima's resonant envelope it was higher. The burn out rate amongst the DVs was double that.

They seemed disappointed at the result.

Kroena's data was there as well. She too remarkably stable.

"As you know Darlos, your job is deliberately vague. We don't want personnel up there knowing exactly what some of your rather important duties are." Pentham said.

"Keeping an eye out for aberrations, deviancy, discordant minds."

"Precisely. The DVs are in contact with both alien minds and the field. Elentra steady even though exposed. There ought to be some cross contamination. That is why we're here with Taruk." Darlos exchanged a smile with the head doctor.

Pentham continued, "Either her data's reconfigured..." and Pentham held up a hand for Darlos was going to say that the computer would have picked that up. "...or she is a DV of exceptional capabilities, willing in fact what she wants revealed. Elentra must know we keep an eye on everybody on the orbital. For good reason. Infection. Then there is the possibility she might be under Reganian influence. I'm sure they're trying."

"They have no DVs."

"That we are aware of. Yes. But they have AI copycats."

"It is possible."

"So for the moment we shall start with the basics. Elentra could be self isolating her resonance. Project it like one's perception of one self. How one sees oneself is not necessarily the same as how others see one."

"Yes. I agree."

"Now, as well as downloading their data, the system self checks for flaws or fluctuations. Again from the graphs and numbers on display everything is as it should be."

"Maybe it is."

"With what happened on Earth? The DV burn rate doubled. You rode down with some cases." Then turning to the doctor: "So Taruk. Let's do some comparisons."

Taruk entered a search for the patient's analysis. Though the colour coding changed, the ones Taruk was using were remarkably similar to that of Elenra and to a lesser degree Kroena.

"Now Kroena is a Stable Volatile and Natural. Elenra on the logical side, the Reganian spectrum. One of the reasons why that is of benefit is so that she does not get influenced by DV activity or Reganian counter measures. We must always make sure they don't go over."

"Which you think may have happened." Darlos trying second guess Lord Pentham. Elenra's cool reaction to Earth's unexpected divergence played on his mind. "Any sign of tampering?" always a possibility.

"Only if the programme itself was accessed. That ought to send up alerts. Yet if one is smart enough..."

"So that any discrepancy never arises."

"Yes Lord Pentham."

"There are also drugs that do stabilise volatility." Taruk remarked. "It can fool a read out."

"Do they have access up there?"

"Yes. Elenra could be self-prescribing." Taruk agreed.

"So doctor, you think the read out is too good?"

"If I did not know any better I would say she is extremely stable. Not given to imaginings as in Reganian intent. However I must urge caution. She could be a super-a-rational mind."

"Super?" Pentham frowned.

"It cannot be ruled out. She may be as good as she is. Rare but not impossible Lord Pentham."

"You're not making this easy."

"I have to give you all the possibilities."

"But surely and remember this is in the strictest of confidence, the calamity on Earth, the surprising results overwhelmed forty percent of DVs. I've transferred only the worst cases. I want to see how they handle it, see if they can recover by themselves. The

Earther's did. A small fraction, but given the millions involved that becomes a large number."

"You're saying there should have been a reaction and as there is none amongst those who run the DVs, that that in itself is what we are concerned with here?" Taruk asked.

"Correct."

"So Elentra is self cloaking. Not as some low level vacancy." Darlos understood Taruk's logic. If Elentra could do it then so could others. Slip through the scanners.

"What if she is some sort of evolutionary freak?" Darlos trying a different angle, not one Pentham might like to hear.

"Genetic drift? Like our Reganians?"

"Yes."

"Reverse pollution."

"Yes."

"You know what you are saying?"

"It's a supposition Lord Pentham."

"I know that Darlos. But if that is the case that would mean the Divine Mind has meant this to be and I cannot see that to be so. It would be...disturbing."

Disturbing barely covered it. The implications would go against everything they believed in.

"A little far fetched Darlos." Taruk said without rancour. More like a slight admonishment.

"I think Elentra has made sure we don't get her true state of mind. So let's stay focused on that for the moment." Pentham said. "Remember Darlos, psychics, psychotics can pretend to be other than they are. I come across this all the time. They create a fantasy reality."

Darlos was about to say Elentra was the last to fall into such a realm of thought, of being, of thinking.

"It's too perfect." Pentham was adamant. He could be right. Heresy was his brief and its security implications. "Which brings me to my second point. Taruk is one of our best experts in abnormal psychology. I have cleared him regarding a certain project. Target Earth. That is why it is so imperative for someone in Elentra's position to be on side."

"We can always recall her." simple really Darlos thought.

"Ah." Pentham gave him a crooked smile. "You're not devious enough Darlos. But that is a compliment. It's really straight forward. If there is a cross over regarding her resonance, if there is something gestating in her mind which she has hidden then by removing her we may loose potential leads. It could be a kabal in the making."

"Yes. If she goes then we will never know who else is involved." Darlos agreed.

"Exactly."

"But let's say this is so. Could she, they, whoever then not give our aims away?"

"That is where Taruk comes in. He has a list of potentials from our more stable psychopaths. Ones who can play both ends simultaneously. Given their split minds they appear benign but are willing regarding our intent."

"I agree. But might they not tilt towards ahm..."

"The psychotic?" Pentham looked pleased. "That is the intent."

Darlos was not surprised for that had entered his mind as well. Send in someone who would nudge the Earthers over the edge. To indulge their horrific wars. It might keep them busy for generations. Hatred natural to them. Then insert or infuse Prima's calming influence, rescue them from their own horrors, pave the way for religious enlightenment, secure the peace, run the planet. If that is what it took then so be it.

"I concur."

"That was quick." Pentham though not surprised.

"I had thought of that on the way down. I assume the other Domain Lords would be informed?"

"Only Lord Qatus and Gharbel. I have also found a suitable negotiator for our little group. One Juris. I pulled him from one of the seminaries. He of course has no idea what we are really intending to accomplish. But he's got a head for science, for technology, understands Reganian thinking. He's already been primed."

"How do we get around the Ecclesiastics. They run the diplomatic corps."

"There Lord Gharbel has done wonders. They have been appraised that we are in fact going in head first meaning we are after Reganian capabilities. As the Divines and their priests on Regum are not making any headway, none worth mentioning, well, after years of floundering in the dark it is time a new approach is tried. It has been agreed that our kabal, for Reganian consumption makes the approach regarding Earth. The Reganian's know of our DV activity anyway. So an open peaceful advance should convince them of our benevolent intent."

"You think so? I mean..." Darlos did not want to give the impression of questioning the feasibility of Lord Pentham's plan. Wondering rather if the Reganian's would accept their proposal.

"The Reganian's are put off by our reticence to allow them down here. Not that that will change. But for the first time since we parted ways we are now extending the hand of friendship, of intellectual collaboration to go to Earth as a team. That should whet their appetite. And you Darlos are part of the approach."

"Me?"

"Why not? You liaise with Qatus and Gharbel, Janon and Reno, deal with the palace. I cannot think of anyone more suitable."

"Thank you for the trust you have bestowed in me. I shall do my best of course."

"Of course you will." Pentham reached into his attaché case and extracted a sheaf of papers. "Briefing notes. I want you to read them here. Memorize them. It covers our cover so to speak. How this kabal of ours functions, how we got around our own security, how we kept Elentra in the dark. After all any aberrant activity on our part might get picked up her end."

"What about how we get to them?"

"Well I don't know if you know but there was an incident at the Orbital a while back. Some personnel escaped. Would you believe it? I didn't at first. But given their exposure I suppose it had to happen eventually. Well they took a shuttle and must have sent out a distress signal or some such, the data's been deleted of course, but they were actually going to be picked up by a Reganian ship which just happened to be near by. Needless to say the pursuit ship was armed and blew the escaping shuttle into scrap. So that means we do this all again. A shuttle, well stocked for a long ride in space simply calls for help. Now to consolidate our mission we have leaked certain hints at `our' dissatisfaction regarding how `we' are handling Earth. So you and Juris will make a break. Your, our aim is to collaborate with them. It means of course that for a suitable time you cannot return to Prima. We will make some noise regarding your defection. Of course that puts `us' in a quandary. You being exposed and all that."

"But I will be exposed."

"Darlos, the ships, space suits are all insulated. The alien field cannot get through. Even the face shields are reflective. Only long term exposure on a mental level has any effect. As does contact with Reganians. But unless you are unstable, which you are not, you and Juris will be safe. In fact Juris might even take to them. Which of course is the aim and we hope that if not instantly reciprocal they will at least be attentive."

"What about my family?"

"Yes, unfortunate that. They cannot be told of your true mission. We will simply say you are busy." Pentham chuckled.

"When is all this happening?"

"Now is always a good time. So read these briefing notes. There will also be some data about Earth. How we want merely to be with them. After all we do have some good points. Our thinking and Regum's more practical view should balance out nicely. After all Earthers are schizophrenic and split minded. You see one thing unites both our worlds: our abhorrence of war. So through our combined efforts we hope the Reganians will see this as a mission of peace. Then once the groundwork has been done, we suggest our choice of candidate."

"Won't they want one themselves?"

"They can send as many as they like." Pentham unconcerned. "As long as our chosen one is in place..." pushing the sheathes of paper across to Darlos.

"So I assume your office will deal with Elentra. If she is showing signs of covering something up." Pentham reminded Darlos.

"Rest assured. It shall be looked into."

It became instantly apparent to Darlos as he started to read the background papers that some tentative conversations had occurred within the Web. The Reganians treated this with amused detachment, though not baulking at the tenuous contact established thus far. The individuals involved were inserted persona's to protect their true identity. As they were in the Web SpaceKorps was not involved. Thus one security arm was neutralized.

The entities related how they were dissatisfied with the official diplomacy practiced by the Ecclesiastics which was getting no one anywhere. The Divines and their priests a nuisance to Regum. The kabal hinting that united they could achieve more than working against each other. Knowledge shared. And they had plenty of that regarding Earth. As this had nothing to do with Prima's overweening sense of being divine, that that was besides the point the idea was to get the Earther's out of their inherent barbarism. Data supplied. The group wanted scientific collaboration. They understood that certain experiments by the Reganian's had accomplished by means unknown the transfer of matter from point to point in zero time. Armed with that knowledge Regum would have to admit that it would only be a matter of time until Prima would duplicate the experiment. So why not collaborate instead? Regum should digest with appropriate

caution what Prima divulged for their own consumption. The `rift' thus established. Prima had many scientists, almost true, who were not satisfied with being locked down by the religious orders. Knowledge when not shared only bred suspicion. It was time to establish contact as it had been centuries ago.

Thus their intent was pure at heart. But in a perilous situation going against everything the Divines stood for. Secrecy was of the essence. Otherwise the repercussions for the scientists involved, and other intellectuals catastrophic hinting at being reconfigured. It was noted that they were not after how exactly Reganian scientists achieved this almost magical transfer regarding their breakthrough experiment. Merely to come to Earth as a team. Both could learn from them, and from each other. They would not preach their belief system, rather make apparent the horrors of war. Currently searching for a suitable representative who would be amendable for both parties. It was starting to read like a contract Darlos thought.

As such the advance team to discuss the feasibility was Juris, an expert in exo-life forms. Darlos, familiar with the power structure on an operational level who would manage to give the relevant authorities the slip, sacrificing their lives in even making contact. Darlos did not like the word `sacrifice' and hoped that had been inserted for dramatic effect. He dared not ask Pentham to define that and kept on reading.

They were `fed up' with Prima's one sided view of the universe, of their two planets who had more in common than was admitted, officially at least. What they intended was to send an observer who as said had Earth's best interest at heart. The Reganian's were masters in applied technology whilst on their end, with their innate mental capabilities to soothe the Earther's continual aberrations of being violent amongst themselves. Data supplied. It was in short an extended joint hand of friendship.

If they would agree then if they wished they could go public on their planet. That might rattle Prima a bit but things could not go on as they were. For both worlds, all three actually. It was hoped this joint venture would bring peace on Earth and good will between three sentient races who in some distant future were expected to make contact anyway given Earth's proclivity for the technical. Would it thus not be better that they started off with the right attitude rather than mistrust, which they accepted was mainly due to Prima's recalcitrance. Delete that and all three worlds could share a future beneficial to each other.

"Yes. Well put Lord Pentham."

"You are satisfied with it's content?"

"Regarding our real aims, most certainly. Sweetness itself."

"As I said, with the help of Taruk we shall find the perfect candidate should this mission eventuate."

"And if we fail?"

"We won't." Pentham certain.

"You, err, mentioned sacrifice for starters."

"Well put it this way, an extended leave of absence. Who knows what you may learn from them."

"What if they detain me? And Juris?"

"We will not abandon you."

"No BrainDraining."

"Darlos." Pentham feigned shock. Darlos apologized. For if that was considered, if that was the case he might be better off remaining on Regum. Not that he had much choice. Still the idea behind this move had a certain poignancy about it, one that was irresistible.

"I accept."

"Good." Pentham looked at Taruk. "Now that you belong I can reveal one last piece of extra news." His eyes twinkling mischievously. "The DVs, one special group amongst several are there as back up. However to minimize exposure they will form a separate group mind. United as one. Create a repository in the form of a simulacrum. A void presence, a ghost with the combined personality traits of the DVs. Many minds and yet none. This essence could be of use for the project. If this thing could be planted or used by a Reganian AI construct, well, it would mean we would be in control of it's programmed intentions all the way."

"Remarkable."

"Isn't it just?"

"Does Elentra know?"

"No. Not that it matters for the moment. What we're thinking of is keeping that group of DV focussed purely as a control. The reason is that once you and Juris are on your way to the Reganians, DVs will shadow you so that when the right time comes, the opportunity arrives they will use a Reganian AI entity which the DVs can dump as a persona onto Earth."

"It becomes one of our own."

Smiles all around.

Andromeda: Mission Control Station Three.

The read out was there. Mission Controller Three engaged her AI into the computers and ran a quantum variable search recognition pattern to make sure that data she had obtained was what it was. A micro data rich EM spike in the micro universe. She relaxed when the search came up with near zero. Not a spatial phenomena. Not astral physics, no supernova activity, no distant gamma ray burst, no solar flares. Either an accident or...something else. It would not effect mission parameters.

Observation was passive, no deep probing to alert them in their micro universe, though fascinating in itself. The occurrence noted, logged, uploaded in the general register of accumulated background information.

Something to keep on alert and stand-by. A glitch which did not effect their aims in understanding this Strange Attractor, the huge gravity well. The mass of that micro universe was more than what mass detectors so far revealed. One probable was that dark matter was far more concentrated in their space. That made it one mega anomaly.

The shell computer, working separately from integrated systems alerted her to incoming data. Source Arktus, status Nesho. Contents flash update. She looked at the numbers her AI translating the equations into conceptals. A phase change in space, time: the present. Since the station was cloaked in zero point space by the concentration of vacuum beamed energy lifting it out of the space-time-foam of real space into pure space, the station was isolated and not effected.

No overt alert confluent with the spike, accompanying the data. Matched.

Curious she reran the future probabilities so that Ratze's return plus the status of Ung and Nervina were not at risk. Going off on a tangent into a probability that might not become actuality. That was when she discovered the change, tiny by astronomical comparisons. A minor surge. Possible explanation an incident. These things happened. No follow up. Not a conflict situation. An aberration. Future embedding of the hybrid agents unaffected.

What puzzled her was that this flare happened at all. Malfunctions were impossible when she considered their technology. Too many fail safe's built into every nodal processing data translation points. A younger civilisation with progressive

technological advancement had the odds of accidents as a mathematical possibility. The likelihood miniscule but there just the same. Accidents will happen.

Then the general incoming data dropped dramatically relative to the scale of observation. EM leakage dropped abruptly. Power shut down. A quick search through distant space, zooming back showed no other activity, in either direction. Curious she ran a search for similar phenomena. Seconds later Earth came up. Two events almost on top of each other. Micro fission explosions. A near future event. Related. According to the probabilities. More pertinent than other quantum hypotheticals.

She got in touch with Nesho sending out the future data. Then waited.

It was fortuitous that Nesho was taking an interest. Passive feed. This mission of theirs was taking on an extra dimension. Not just pure science, trying to discover as much as possible about that micro universe. Potent technology. Whilst she waited to see what Nesho would make of it, knowing now through their agents that two sentient races existed in there, it became apparent whether this might complicate matters. Was this accident due to their presence? Had the future been fast tracked? Were the probabilities influencing the actuality, the real collapsing quantum field waves? Were they inadvertently influencing the future?

Nesho appeared virtual.

"This is a surprise." She said.

"So is what you sent."

"Just checking." Explaining her concerns. He agreed.

"As Ratze is with us, with you I should say send her to investigate. It may be nothing. But Controller, not at the time this occurred. Ahead of it. That way whatever happened becomes common knowledge. It may be as you say, an accident, then again...who knows what they are up to. With Ratze ahead of the event, well, it would be interesting to see how they coped. On both planets. Someone certainly wanted an effect. I'm thinking worse case scenario's. By inserting Ratze into the post event it will be easier for her to pick up the pieces. But she is not to know. We don't know their actual capabilities, even their potential except that they are at a stage two level. We must remain in the background so much so that we do not exist. On the surface for an energy spike to trigger a zero effect is to say the least extremely disturbing."

"And significantly dangerous. That is our priority, I understand."

"You have clearance to insert Ratze. Just make doubly sure the time line of the probability matches as close as possible that future she will be in matched to prior the event. No point ending up in a non actual probability."

"Yes. I've already got our computers working on that. Scanning the various potential bifurcations, whittling them down, making sure the algorithms match themselves, both in reverse, static and forward calculations. Using chaos equations as the control mechanism." Just to make sure she was on the right track. Sometimes the obvious had to be stated.

"I know you're capable of extracting the right information for this."

"When I have the results shall I have them checked externally by you?"

"No. The systems are complete Controller. Even natural entropy will not effect the real future state or it's relative data field from that of the probable. A big difference to the actual as you know."

"I'm also running that. Have the entropic states as a base line. That will give us insight into their real future. And Nesho, I'm using their whole space as the environment, not the locale itself."

"I know you are on the right track. No need to run it past me. We need to keep any interchange to a minimum. The system's are failsafe. When you got your result, insert Ratze."

"Will do."

Nesho vanished.

Ratze.

Ratze woke as the passengers began to disembark on the flight from Prima. Through the extended corridor where customs were waiting. The arrival lounge filling up waiting for the routine scan. Priests observing. She felt the usual tickle and let her Brain do the upload of her self. Cloaked in black, their faces barely visible they looked sombre, intent, searching for what? Haughtily indifferent. Feeling supreme. In control.

On a large screen the `wanted'. Faces looking blankly, others from old files laughing, caught in some innocent act. Hers was not amongst them. So Prima had enemies across the universe. The benefactors and saviours of Regum, come to set things right to help them in these difficult times. Obviously not everybody wanted to be saved. The search for the Kabal. That mysterious group in league with the aliens. Wanting to undo the good work. Prima's humble. self sacrificing volunteers here to rebuild Regum. Get it back on track, their track.

She felt secure. A member of SpaceKorps but not in uniform. Sent to track down the underground, the resistance and hopefully their masters, the Kabal leaders. Neat cover. She knew the Kabal was space based. Still some of them could be on Regum. She was officially a contactee on behalf of SpaceKorps. Observe, recruit, track down leads, get the feel of the locals. Then there was Lord Pentham. He was certainly extending his domain. Information had it the underground was spoiling Prima's work, sabotaging their aid, stealing their equipment, hijacking food transports, stirring up trouble. Counter intelligence already in place.

SpaceKorps was another matter. They would attract less attention. Barely on the ground. But present. As in herself. Since the `event', now that Prima was recolonising Regum staff shortages were extreme. The Reganian's not exactly overjoyed, barely compliant, reluctant to engage with their Primaian saviours. The Kabal supposedly running a guerrilla war. A convenient scape goat.

She followed the other passengers through the scanner. This time no itch. The tech primitive. She went through being watched by the cowled priests and uniformed customs agents. Nothing to declare except herself.

"Reason for your visit?"

Was this necessary? Or the usual posturing. She extracted her tag. A chip embedded ID with SpaceKorp's crest. Black, stars in the background with SK

emblazoned on it in shiny silver. Ratze had been told to keep a low profile. Yet with this officialdom someone else wanted to make sure her presence was noted. So much for being undercover. She did not want to use her other IDs. That was for burying herself deeper into the system. If found that data would self destruct. The personas used vanish.

He checked his clipboard. How quaint. Still even this primitive system worked. A menacing smile. Bluff and bluster. Pretending the ID was a fake. Asserting his importance. Probably a low level intelligence officer. Maybe even a local recruit emphasizing his power. Not that he could deny her entry. Scaag telling her some difficulties might occur. The officer took his time. Others were waiting behind her. Dutifully complacent. A little resentful at the hold up. Almost blaming her for the delay.

"I haven't got time for this officer. You got any problems you know what to do." As good a pretence as any. Maybe Scaag was not known to them, nor the fact that the general was using her to test their own effective control. Was she some sort of dummy run? Her Brain remained muted.

With theatrical reluctance, giving her the eye, the priests, their silence supposedly intimidating, handing back her ID, let her pass. More security ahead, fully helmeted ready for combat. Welcome to New Regum. Power games in full swing. Everybody wanted to be on top of their little domain.

"Oh," she turned, "if I have been compromised by this insistence of yours to reveal my true ID, if the people I have to meet are even noted, if this information is not deleted you will be a prime target for possible treason. You got that?"

He blanched visibly, fumbled with his clipboard and fiddled at the side of his pants with a small device. 'Thought so. Prick.' Her arrival deleted.

"I'll remember you. Anything happens to me you're in for it kiddo." Maybe she was overdoing it. A few suppressed gasps from behind her.

Ahead the three over armed security guards started shambling about. Taking their attention off her.

"That goes for the goons over there as well." Adding a little spice to the mix. Then smiling sweetly. "And if I run across you next time I may not be this civilized."

Let him sweat on that. Primaian Domain rulers. Time to do a little vanishing. Her Brain alert. She sent out an EM pulse felt the crackle as it voided her data in all directions. Along with that a trojan where Ratze become someone else as well. Their stuff barely made the AI grade. Since they were scanning they were an open source. Nothing could be simpler. Sure enough the guards ignored her now. Not even remembering what it was that took their interest.

Another gate to reception. With no baggage she walked with a light step outside. Behind the launch pads, huge chemical rockets standing ready for lift off. Runways. A shuttle took off to somewhere, the sound of its jets rumbling in the still air.

Sunshine. After space so bright, pleasant, feeling the warmth on her face. She remembered her assignment. Start at the City, work out from there. Mingle. Be one of them. Subdued bitter memories now that Prima had taken over Regum. Be cautious. Informers everywhere. Amazing what could be achieved with food rations. Prima was keeping the whole planet on a near starvation level. The farms growing food again, rearing cattle on par with Prima. Feudal. The struggle to survive paramount.

A parking area. Two hovercraft, a few buses where most of the arrivals were headed herself included. More anonymous. The smell of jet fuel, the stink of vehicle's exhausts wafting in the air. She headed for a bus, engine idling interested in her fellow passengers. Nothing pertinent concerning her. Climbing on board she felt a sense of coming home. The memory vague. Her friends lost to her. She had been away too long. A few seats still vacant. She sat next to a window. Parks. Twisted black tree stumps. Nature coming back, sprouting new trees. Home. Strange. An absent presence in her memory.

"So security gave you a hard time?" a friendly voice cut in behind her. She turned surprised that someone had feelings for her. Warm open face, short black hair, a little older than her, non descript clothes. Not like her coverall, an upmarket tailored jump suit. An innocent approach?

"My charm no doubt."

"May I sit next to you? I noticed you on the way down."

"Sure." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Neat trick you played there. For a survivor." His eyes searching, no scan.

"So who are you? What are you?"

"A friend."

"And how did you manage to stop others from sitting here."

"Certain travellers are last to go through. To observe, take in the environment. As for the seat I simply said I'm waiting for my friend."

"Which is me. You bored or something."

"Regum can be a lonely place."

The bus started, pulled away, manoeuvred slowly towards the road leading into the City.

"I like lonely."

"Surely not."

"Lonely is different to alone. Close anyway."

"A loner. Just like me."

"Not like you at all." Running a search. Trouble was Reganians and Primaians were of the same race. He could be a local using the bus at the end of his shift. A plant, an observer, a contact. A recruiter, an informant, an opportunist, a scammer, a conman, a crook. That might come in handy. A lead perhaps. She indulged him.

The bus accelerated on the almost empty road. Everywhere fire blackened trees with young vines crawling up them, reaching for the light. To the left the hangars of the space and airport. Dim high rise buildings in the distance ahead of them. Muted conversations on the bus.

"So what brings you here?" he asked.

"Visiting."

"Visiting?" amused. "They don't allow visitors. Food shortages for starters."

"I didn't say who I was visiting."

Empty trucks spewing foul exhaust fumes trundled past them.

"I'm Choas."

She merely looked at him. Then said: "I told you I was a loner."

"Well hello loner." He accepted her reticence.

For the rest of the ride Ratze ignored him. Choas was too obvious. Unless he was a mark. Still even if a crook, she hoped, which meant connections to the underground, too easy that, he might merely be a scavenger. Most likely.

Choas went on about how Prima was in control, how to survive using one's wits, grease the leeches, said with a tight smile to get what you wanted or needed.

"So you're an operator." Hinting at his unspoken activities.

"I operate nothing."

"So how do you survive?"

"I'm with customs."

"That's handy."

"It has its plusses."

"Like intimidating visitors."

"I'm not with them. Ground staff. Cargo."

"Ah I see."

"Bet you don't." trying to draw her out. Black market goods most likely.

"No I don't. I don't really care Choas."

"Spoken like a true loner."

"You're learning." Ratze relapsing into silence. Probably after her credit if not herself. Not that he was not bad looking. She just didn't like his pushy friendliness. Too Primaian to want to bond even if superficially.

The bus turned off the road into an interchange with a dozen or so mini buses, Choas explained for various parts of the city. More security on the ground.

"Is there something up?"

"Up?"

"All this macho."

"Trouble makers."

"How uncivilized. In this new world order? Trouble? My my. And manual scanners."

"Yes." He said non committally.

Ratze let the others disembark waiting for Choas to move. He was waiting for her. Maybe he was her designated tag. Rather than follow her he took the opportunity to be with her. Then she would have to loose him. Report him to the guards? Hm.

Finally she exited, Choas making way for her, followed. She thanked the driver who returned the compliment. The guards, helmeted were watching all of the disembarking group.

At the edge of the City. The closer, though still distant high rise buildings looked decrepit. Empty. Crumbling. Bits of masonry fallen off, blank dark windows, some missing, some charred from a fire. Birds circling having made their nests in these artificial aeries. The smell of diesel fumes and rotting garbage. Closer low brown dirt stained blocks of flats. Shambling pedestrians, worn clothing, some threadbare, empty looks. Hunger or indifference or resignation.

Ratze's Brain kicked into gear. She had a destination, a place to live, a flat. But first she had to meet someone. Recognition delayed. Contact to be made. Obviously not Choas. Some cranes moved in the distance rebuilding or demolishing some ruin. Desolation impregnated the very air she was breathing. She looked at the destinations of the smaller buses and found several were heading into the City. Choas tagging along.

"You gonna follow me all day?"

"You are pleasant company."

"I am no company. Choas, you might be a nice person, in another place, another time, another life, but not this life or this time. So scoot will you?"

"I can help you adjust. Get you things..." using his last reservoir of charm.

"Alright. If I do need you how do I get you?"

At that he brightened and pulled out a small notebook together with pencil and wrote down his contact details. Without looking she pocketed it then thanked him.

He walked away sprightly as if he had just scored a date. She shook her head. Hopefully they weren't all like him. Be a nightmare. She got onto the shuttle bus for the city. Some memories came back. More of what had been left behind in her life. Her friends vague faces. Gaming. Multiple worlds, all gone. The Web no more. Reality wasted. People dragged themselves about. Along the pavements dim looking shops with not much on display. Some café's, a bar or two, mostly empty food shops with a queue of dismally dressed customers. Not the memories she had of the City. It had been a teeming metropolis. Glitzy, glamorous, sparkling, vibrant. What had happened?

A dark shape, out of nowhere, amongst the other rugged up pedestrians bumped into her throwing Ratze off balance. With swift dexterity she palmed a crumpled scrap of paper into her hand as Ratze pivoted slightly avoiding a fall. 'Well done.' The person hooded, most were. Mimicking the priests? As a sign of defiance or anonymity? Or simply to keep warm. A quick glance, eye contact. No recognition. A quick appraisal, an unspoken message and the need for discretion. A mumbled apology, a woman. A few passers by detoured around them barely glancing. Ratze looked past her. No one was watching them directly. Ratze saying she should have been watching where she was going. A laconic wave by the woman and Ratze put her hand back into her pocket. The crumpled message could wait.

She activated a passive scan drawing a blank. Was everybody off-line? Were the authorities scanning the population? Their social networks? She did not probe further. Some static white noise of a malfunctioning system close by, maybe in one of the grimy flats. Or dodgy equipment. Then amongst the hiss the coded information. No, even less. Just a location. Her Brain unscrambled the little data package amongst the configured static. Once downloaded the hiss ceased. Clever. So why the note?

She walked into one of the many shops. Dark, the grocery store stacked with canned goods mainly. Fresh food scarce. Half a dozen grey, brown, stained blue dressed customers. No one turned with her appearance as they waited for counter service. A broadsheet screaming in big bold type how reconstruction was giving them all a better life. How happy volunteers worked on the farms, food the priority. A new pumping station returning water to the city and the need for vigilance against saboteurs wanting to wreck the good work being done by self sacrificing Primaians, their saviours in these dark

times. Dark alright. No power, rationed if that. Being the last in the queue she now looked at the crumpled paper. An address. Ratze memorized it then slipped the paper into her mouth, chewed it and swallowed a few times, turned and left.

Not activating her Brain to get a picture of the lay out of the City. She asked someone for a street and was given directions. Following her information she found the building after some time meandering indirectly towards her destination. If someone was following her it would have to be a team. Going in opposite directions, changing over as others were replaced so she could not get a fix on her tags. Maybe she was too cautious. After all, according to the news she was a part of the selfless Primaians. Then again there was the underground. All Ratze knew for the moment was that Prima was running the planet now. Officially. They had regained control after several centuries of independence. But that was not the worst of it. The decrepit state of the City was a puzzle. Someone had switched off the power, collapsed the Web, turned back the clock. The transport for starters. Ancient combustion engines, smelly, noisy spewing their foul exhaust into the air. She could almost taste the reek they left in their wake.

Finally at the edge of the City where the suburbs started. The villas looked in better shape. Some behind walls, surrounded by trees, smaller bungalows set back from the road, weeds sprouting in the grass. Birds flitting amongst the trees. A dog barking somewhere. Hardly any pedestrians. The area forlorn, deserted. Blank windows, some with musty curtains. Others abandoned, doors open, the interior cavernous. Pieces of junk strewn about. Then she saw the place. Two storied, an ageless retro curved look, a tongue shaped balcony, antennae, a microdish, not unusual in itself but obviously working given the linkage amongst the white noise established previously.

The iron grilled gate was open. A pebble path with a ground vehicle parked out front. She checked her shoelaces and saw no one. A soft scan. The feeling of withdrawal, something in the shadows receding even further, out of reach unless probed. Not this time.

She knocked on the door the buzzer covered with dust. Not much used. The sound of footsteps. The spy hole going dark. The solid door opened. A silhouette inviting her in.

"I'm your designated case officer." He said. She followed him up the stairs. The place looked clean. A muffled engine puttering along. A generator. So the power grid was haphazard if that.

"The City's a pile of junk." She said by way of conversation. Going upstairs. He dressed in a well tailored black suit. Muscular, fit, nimble in his step. It was brighter in his

office. Filing cabinets, files on the desk, an ancient wind up telephone. Had she gone back in time? No, the city junked. Some mega breakdown. Her Brain alert.

"Most of the technology is scrap now. All hands on deck as the saying goes." he manoeuvred himself behind his desk. Ratze pulled up a chair to face him. Handsome, rugged, field officer, or case officer. Ratze didn't know if this was good or bad news. She didn't want anyone on her back. Then again a bit of back up never hurt. She grimaced.

"Not pleased?"

"Why this interest?"

He rose and shut the door. The window's curtains were drawn.

"It's gonna take generations to get this planet even remotely back to where it was. If ever." He pulled a face. "But there is a future in reconstruction, in assembling resources." Ratze wondered what this had to do with her.

"Officially everybody now has to have an assigned guarantour." Which made no sense to Ratze. She was here, her Brain told her to recruit potentials for SpaceKorps, especially ex-gamers. Anyone tech-savvy. Fathom the underground. Further instructions released as necessary.

"I'm with SpaceKorps, mission classified."

"The reason I'm here. Your organisation is on shaky ground."

"We're not even on the ground." She quipped.

"I'm here to give you cover. Create a file, a legend."

"You're more than meets the eye."

"Trying not to. I handle the City's human resources."

'On his own? Unless his workers were out.'

"Must have your work cut out." It dawned on her that this office, out of the way had to be a cover.

"I'm only administration. Sorting out the mess. Checking IDs, potentials. Given Reganian society as it was, no one is really cut out for the work needed to get the farms working and the rest."

"Talking IDs, you sure you got no name?"

"Norak."

"Well Norak, got anything on a youngish guy called Choas. Very friendly." Giving him the impression she was not impressed.

He turned to the filing cabinet, had a look for a while and shook his head.

"Not everyone's been processed yet."

"Why the clandestine note? I assume this room's secure."

"It is. When the shit hit the fan even surveillance went down. Not that there was any. It was an open society. More for show. A gesture."

"Is SpaceKorps under scrutiny. Being appraised of its usefulness?"

"Just the priests who don't like us. They want control. They are in control. I'm making sure that won't happen. And you need a cover. I'm officially recruiting you. Once processed," and he took out a sheet of paper from one of the filled trays, "you're covered. Had I sent somebody they would have seen. Thus the cloaked approach."

She looked at the sheet. Standard pro forma. All the bits filled in, a grainy image of herself but not in uniform. She never had one.

"So my friendly friend's not on file. He was better dressed than the locals. Claims to be with customs."

"That explains it. Assigned. I'm trawling the left overs, which you might find useful. Will you sign?"

Ratze signed.

"You are now a designated field officer." He put a plastic card into a stamping machine, pulled down the small lever, waited a moment then handed it to her. Yet another ID Ratze mused.

"So I'm scouring for talent. Anything in particular?"

"Ex Gamers. This organization needs their talents." Confirmation. Right target.

"Before the priest's get them?"

"You got it. I assign them..."

"And get them out." Ratze guessed.

He looked blankly at her.

"What a mess." She sympathized. "Picking up the pieces. I'm speculating here but something tells me the ex-gamers and their tech savvy friends are not exactly cooperating."

"They've gone into hiding."

"As would I. How do they survive?"

"Scrounging. Scamming. Stealing."

"Ah, now Choas makes sense. I knew he was involved in something."

"The authorities want it that way. The only lead they can get this way."

"So he's playing both ends."

"More likely his end. As long as he is of use to them."

She had enough for now.

"What a thing to do to a planet." Norak had not dropped that line just to make conversation.

"Turning it into a pile of shit. Yeah, great move."

"At least SpaceKorps kept their collective head."

"So far. I just hope they get to keep theirs," she paused, "in tact."

"Precisely." Norak was on side.

A cloud passed over the sun, the room gloomy.

"I'll keep my wits about me. Now I can say this. Our objectives match."

"I knew SpaceKorps would send someone in the end."

"Well at the spaceport I got registered then self deleted I hope. I've got other persona's. And now yours. Human Resources hey?"

"So they know." He was despondent.

"Not anymore. Shitty gear and I didn't want to get hijacked."

"Yes your other cover might have been less protective. In a way you may be moving things along a bit. Now they know, they might react. That will reveal certain intentions."

"Revelations."

"Leads in and out. You got family here?"

"Long gone. Distant past."

"Well then they can't get at them."

"Hostage to the situation."

"Less leverage. This is the new world order."

"Norak, nothing is forever."

"You're right. The habitats are still there. They thought they could have it all with one decisive move."

"Appearances can be tricky. A matter of interpretation Norak."

"Oh yes. The big picture certainly has shrunk."

The sun came out again.

"Only here. SpaceKorps is not just Orbital security."

"I'm glad. Not that I know. By the way you don't have to report to me concerning your, ahm, activities."

Ratze smiled, not that she intended to.

"I'll stay out of your way."

"I won't even check up on you. You're under deep cover now. So, any questions?"

"Plenty but they can wait Norak. Tell me, is anybody still uploaded?"

"Much to the authorities annoyance yes. Smart ware. Self energizing. Limited now, but still functioning."

"Like the embedded white noise."

"Yes. A one off from my end. In a way we're working in tandem. We both want the same thing." Searching for an answer.

"Sure do. I don't know what back up I do have down here. As you guessed I'm a scout. And hopefully can get out if I have to."

"Not unless they shut you down. Rest assured if I hear anything I'll risk another squirt. I guess that's it then."

"A pleasure to have met you Norak. Are you changing your cyber-locales?"

"Yes, though I shouldn't be telling you this."

"So there are still functioning nodal transfer points."

"Less each day as it's cleaned up."

"They are shutting it all down? Shit."

"That's the operative word Ratze. But not all of it. They have to scan for the remaining actives. A dilemma. They need what's left to find what's left. And what's left uses what's left to remain underground. Rather a-symmetrical."

"Cute."

Norak smiled, his eyes glinting.

"Well I hope we succeed."

"We will."

"Things are tight Ratze." He warned. "It's hard to trust anyone."

"You included?" a sweet smile.

"If I get compromised you'll know."

"But you are taking precautions."

"Oh yes."

"Well that seems to be that."

"Sure is. See you out?"

"Couldn't drop me off in town?"

"Anywhere in particular?" Rising from his chair. Ratze got up likewise.

"No just near the centre."

"You got a place then?"

"Now now."

"I was only asking if you needed help."

"Sorry. The answer is yes."

"Good. Well the files can wait. Given the glacial pace of progress."

They made their way to the car.

"Where did they get this ancient technology from?"

"Museums. The designs were sent to Novus who manufacture them."

"Novus." Ratze sighed. She remembered the place, just. A planet of light and freedom. Hopefully for a long time yet.

"Why not here?" as she sat up front. Norak started the vehicle. It coughed into life.

"Tooling's not right. Well actually they could have but I think they want to keep Regum dependent upon their largesse." They moved out into the deserted street. Ratze did another soft scan. Nothing. A distant thunderous rumble shook the ground. Ratze hid her surprise.

"Another collapse. Either through decay or demolition." Referring to the high rises. Past deserted looking houses.

"Health hazards now with all the dead occupants."

Ratze merely shook her head as she glimpsed the horror of it. With no power the occupants were trapped, for ever. No way out. The recognition of that fate when it came beyond words. Doors and windows sealed, no water. It would have been over in a matter of days. If the food producing factories, all infrastructure went down as well millions would have died her Brain informed her. The shops would have run out of stock with no replenishment. Maybe on the farms some would have survived but the City dwellers fate was sealed. As to what caused it, or worse how the Primaian's achieved it...the need to know imperative. She thought of those trapped outside, with no way back in to their dwellings. No transport to even get out. What the famine did not kill off disease would, with no means of survival. The planet littered with the dead.

"You're quiet." They turned into a major thoroughfare, empty leading back into the City ahead. A pall of dust hung in the air. A skyscraper had come down. No sirens. A truck belching grey fumes rattled past, the back full of people.

"Work gang."

"I was just thinking. The enormity of what happened here..."

"Unforgivable. Though officially Prima is assisting I can't help but wonder if the Crash had not been engineered. You are never to mention this Ratze."

"Of course not. My thoughts exactly. Given all the fail safe's in place..."

"Well they claim it was divine retribution. The accumulation of negative resonances that created the calamity. Nothing Prima could do. Claiming they had warned them for years to desist along their path. I'm not so sure."

"I don't think anybody is."

"Up there?"

"Life goes on."

"As it does."

"Yet nothing affected up there. Just down here."

"Yes, rather freaky." Norak thought aloud.

"Too freaky. Scary."

"Very."

"I'm glad we understand each other. Maybe I'll find something out."

"Ratze, there would have been plenty who have tried. Let us say they vanish.

There was never an official enquiry."

"Not surprised. Says a lot though doesn't it?"

"Ask the dead. The bloated putrefying corpses."

"Maybe one day we will."

"A bit fantastic wouldn't you say?" with a touch of hope.

"Who knows Norak. Some future race might be able to recall the past. Then all would be revealed."

"Is that possible?" again that glimmer of anticipation. Expectant.

"Anything is possible if one set's one mind to it. Think of what Regum had achieved. From the stone age to space travel. No one huddling in the caves would have thought that possible, but with a lot of mental activity, add some fantasy, dreams or what have you and our ancestors made it all happen. A paradise lost." She sighed.

"Crashing a failsafe system. You realise all the records would have been wiped as well. Rather convenient wouldn't you say?"

"Very." The whole system going down. Though once up and running the data ought still to be there. Or wiped. Using radiation perhaps. Her Brain picked up no remnant after glow. Unless it was a zero state shaped quantum field. But Prima was too ignorant to even conceive anything as close as that. The DVs? Maybe.

"Makes one think." He said after a while.

"Sure does."

"I have to say this Ratze. Don't dig it up. They'll BrainDrain you, SpaceKorps or not. Even beyond me."

"They're BrainDraining?" shocked.

"Yes. Mainly rumours." They were at a major intersection.

"Go right." He did.

"The odd person running into someone they knew, no recognition. If you understand."

"I do Norak. So there is suspicion."

"Conspiracy theories are rife. Some no doubt planted. See who bites."

"So Prima's not just cleaning up this planet, they're cleaning out memories as well."

"Oh yes. The propaganda's thick and fast now. Very determined."

"Luckily there is still space."

"Our only salvation. Yet as you know, contact with space is almost impossible. The planet is under effective quarantine."

"As I found out. Yet Prima is sending her people here."

"Repopulating. Soon there may be none left who even remember."

"But there are the Outlands."

"Off limits."

"Not that they would know, would they?"

"No one knows what is going on out there. As I said. Khratham is isolated."

"So no answers there then?"

"None that I can think of. It's techno free."

"I suppose some have tried to access cyber memory chips."

"As I said, nothing there. The Primaian's are trashing them as fast as they can lay their hands on them."

Past a park. New trees growing amongst black stumps. The surrounding high rise buildings charred, flaky, mangled girders, gaping holes in the upper levels where birds were nesting.

"I want to look at one of those buildings."

"They're off limits. Safety."

"Safety. Yeah right."

"They are decaying Ratze."

"You don't want to go." She teased. "I could say we saw some activity."

"Well, the files won't run away." He pulled over. A few people about on the pavement. The park empty.

Norak locked the vehicle. They made their way across grass thick with weeds. The young trees were several years old. The blackened stumps interested her. A fire. The same near the space port. A massive fire. She dared not think any further. At the edge of the park a large wire meshed fence with razor sharp spikes to seal off the once vibrant CBD, mixed in with apartments, shops, services.

Out of the corner of her eye three security guards had caught their attention. Luckily at the fence someone had gotten in, or out.

"Guards Ratze."

"So? Look a breach."

The three geared up guards walked with resolve towards them. Rusty signs warned off trespassers.

"Well we'll see what our guardians have to say." Ratze winked.

"They can make life unpleasant." Norak not too concerned.

"Well I've dealt with shithheads before. I'll be nice." She joked. She studied them. Face helmets down. Short range scanners. Ratze's Brain vanished.

"You are in a restricted area." The lead guard's metallic voice came through.

"We're this side of the fence. Look a breach."

"That's ancient. You new here?"

"Not my first visit officer." Ratze replied. "Possible suspects in there." It was as good as an excuse as any.

"ID."

Ratze and Novark showed their official status. He seemed satisfied. But transmitting. Smart gear. Not the best but functioning just the same. As Novark said: the system was still on line. Bits of it. The other two stood back covering their team leader, stun guns drawn. The locals must really be cooperative. On the street a patrol car stopped as well.

He handed back the cards.

"Recruiting in a forbidden zone."

"The park, officer, is common ground."

"You know the rules, pavement only."

"We thought we saw movement."

Ratze felt a tiny itch. So they could scan.

"Rodents. We are aware of the situation here. You are in infringement of the law. I will have to make a note of it. Of course you can pay an on the spot fine."

"Officer." Ratze cut in. "My duties are universal. I have more clearance than you imagine. You upload any of this and your presence regarding my superior's will mark you. Shall we say my authority has to remain under wraps. There is more here than meets the eye. I am on a retrieval mission. To take out certain data. By take out I mean take out. Not for your eyes or your commander. Now we can discuss this at headquarters. However you are aware there is an underground on the loose. If only because the security agencies are falling short, if not flat footed. I am tasked to explore the physical environment for suspect activities. By the very fact that the fence's hole is deliberately left as is has aroused my suspicion. Call it a field inspection by a higher authority. Since this is your beat tell me one good reason why I should not report this deliberate break down of security."

Silence. Another scan. She released a common virus. Potent enough to screw their basic encryption capabilities. That he felt, he jerked a little, an involuntary reaction.

"You want me to continue? Insert my real capabilities? For they will reach your superior through your embedded system. Maybe you want a transfer to some prison farm? Food might be good but the natives aren't so friendly."

He motioned for this team to leave. The squad car at the kerb moved off.

"That was a bit naughty." Novark smirked.

"Low life. Think their presence equates to power."

"It does. Most are sullen, but cooperate just the same. It's the ration cards. Or worse, as you said, the prison farms. Though they are called communals. Nice work. And you scrambled their gear."

"So you're loaded as well?"

"Basic stuff. Bit more upmarket. After all we're after Gamers and they are all still in top form. Gotta know who we're dealing with."

"Shall we scan the building?" Ratze felt adventurous.

"Hm."

"Why hm?"

"They might have trackers in place."

Ratze let her Brain do a search.

"Only for physical intruders. One of these high rises still has some solar panels functioning. Not much, a trickle really. We don't even have to get in."

"Not that I would want to Ratze."

Some masonry came crashing down, trailing dust along with more chunks of cement.

"I see what you mean. OK I'm gonna do a trace. Now let's see how to route my entry. Yep, got the bank of solar panels. You know they're only off line? So add a little zzzzt and see what gives." concentrating on getting into the computers inside. "Even accessing a hot water system ought to give an idea what occurred." A moment later she was in. Nothing.

"Well it's a blank. Totally wiped. But something interesting did occur. The solar panels switched off automatically. Overloaded. Cut out. Then the data was deleted. Now what would that be all about?" looking up at the grey mass in front of her.

"I'm no computer specialist. Barely can work my own uploads. Luckily it's intuitive."

"So you're a Reganian?"

"Aren't you?"

"My origins have to remain out of bounds. I'm not Primaian if that's what you mean."

Novark satisfied with that. He didn't press the issue.

"What can delete a system?"

"Plenty. Malware of all sorts."

"Self analysing systems wouldn't allow that."

"Trojans."

"Perhaps. Must have been coordinated. Planned way ahead. With insiders to help of course."

"Well the priests were always recruiting."

"Wonder what they promised them."

"The good life." Novark replied distastefully. "Fucking traitors."

"Must have promised more. Regum was the good life."

"Power."

"Yes, power. The great ego trip. Or bored with their lives."

"You reckon this could have been done from space?"

"Possible." Novark distracted. Ratze was on to something but it was all so vague. Prima never explained it rationally. Just the religious propaganda. Very thin on the ground with details regarding the technical end. And those that did find out vanished. So the answer had to be technical. Divine wrath. Ridiculous.

"Well I guess the only other way is to get friendly with the Primaian's."

"Oh brother."

"I see. Not good."

"No."

"So our best bet is still the Gamers."

"Who have gone underground. Actually Ratze I have a confession to make. Since we both want the same answers. The authorities, as I alluded back at the office keep certain channels open. So be careful you don't get picked up that end."

"Thanks for the warning Novark."

"There is an industrial satellite city with a few survivors. At the moment it's a no-go zone."

"How did they manage that much freedom?"

"Not enough security to go around. They mopped up many but found the city dwellers less than useless. So those living outside remained where they were and those within, ditto. Most of them are kids really. With attitude. Very pissed off actually. Security will get around to clearing them out or so we're told." a wan smile. "The underground is there if anywhere. So for the moment they are standing back. Maybe you should go in before it's too late."

"That would be a pleasure."

"You familiar with Gaming?"

"Part of the training."

"SpaceKorps?"

"Train by simulations. Same thing really. Well, similar." She admitted nothing more.

"What you doing tonight?"

"Me? Sleeping."

"Before that."

"Eating."

"Take you out for dinner?"

"You got no partner?"

A cloud passed over his face.

"I'm sorry."

"Still getting used to it. Wonder if I ever will."

"I wish I could say something..."

"The thought that counts. So?" he brightened.

"If that is possible. I mean the food shortages."

"Politics. Part is to keep morale going. Diversions. We do have restaurants though the glitzier are full of collaborators. It'll be down market."

"Much preferable. So where, when?" Ratze perked up as well.

"You know your way round?"

"Not really."

"Know where CU is?"

"Central uni?"

"Yes."

"I can find it."

"It's a huge complex. And functioning. The area has many cheaper places."

"I see."

"Anyway at the southern end, at a square is a fountain." He looked up at the sky. It was clear. No rain in sight. Just a few clouds. "Anyway meet me at the southern end around seven hundred. I'll scour the area as well."

"Fine Norak. It's a date."

"We won't be noticed. You know," he paused, "I'm beginning to trust you."

"It's good if we can work together." Which was not saying Ratze had total confidence in him. Yet. It seemed too easy. Still he had shared certain information which he need not have. But that could mean anything. Maybe he was tasked in finding out what SpaceKorps were up to. But then she had been told so little, for her own good. Even that was vague. But that was the nature of the intel game.

Ratze checked out the flat. How secure it was, was another question. The private entrance was trip wired and inactive. The lock ancient, key and bolt, solid enough, the door real wood in a metal frame. It would need some force to bust in. Two rooms on the top floor, living room, spacious, tiny stand up kitchen, bedroom, bathroom. The concierge who came up with her told her when the water and power was on. The curtains were faded, sun bleached, drawn back to let in light and air. The situation was as perfect as could be. A three story building on a corner near CU. Until the solar cells were working again she could heat the water on the stove or have a cold shower. Since it was furnished, rather worn, scuffed, scratched, the living room table and its chairs a little wobbly, the bed sagging, the wardrobe door out of joint, it would do. Most of the other tenants were on work duty so the concierge guessed this was Ratze's day off. Rather corpulent, how Ratze wondered did she manage that. The concierge whilst appraising her asked no questions. Just pay the rent and don't destroy the flat she quipped. Then with little ceremony having paid her deposit in hard cash, preferable as each auto transaction incurred a fee for both of them Ratze was left to her own devices. Her lack of luggage registered only to the point of indifferent interest as she kept on

fidgiting with her strands of grey hair. Nor had she revealed her name. The receipt was in the name of 'The Sunrise Corporation'.

She went through all the drawers, found fluff and dust, and a stray sock. A woman's by the size. The kitchen had utensils, battered pots and pans, a few chipped cups and plates. It was enough. Ratze had paid a month in advance.

She took a little nap. Then near sundown rose, quickly doused herself and decided to walk to the fountain to meet Norak. A one man show. A cover? Probably for something else. He hinted as much. Gamers. Where were they? All at the industrial estate. That would be interesting. A no go zone. The whole planet a tottering slum, literally run down.

She walked down the street, the occasional vehicle motoring by, saw some collapsed buildings, rubble piled up by work gangs, demolishing houses verging on immanent collapse. With millions dead there were plenty of empty flats, the suburbs even worse. The dead still in there, decaying, diseased, the deceased the legacy of the Crash. Even her mind balked at what had occurred down here. A world brought down, a civilisation truncated in one awesome act of what, sabotage? What could Prima gain? Only tottering ruins, rusting factories, farm land going to seed. What had been so dangerous about Regum? It had to be more than just ideological, surely. Unless they knew something. Even then bringing the whole planet down was overkill. Someone had blood on their hands. Murder on a planetary scale. The answer could lie with CU. The occupation forces would have that well guarded if that were the case.

She found the plaza with the fountain. A circular base squirting jets of water up then down. Benches around it. A few couples, a family with some young children, one or two old men. She sat at one bench facing the street and watched the world go by. She should have walked around a bit see if any one took an interest in her, a bored watcher, an apathetic tag, or an amateur like Choas. What a nerve the guy had. And confident. The black market was perhaps one way of satisfying a demand the occupation forces could not satisfy.

So she watched. A few better dressed. Some business types engaged in eager conversation. A gust of wind whipped up dust. Two trucks passed, filled with work gangs.

"Shall we?"

"Norak." She turned. He had approached her from behind. At least he had surveyed their meeting place. She should not be this relaxed. He had changed his clothes, dressed down. Non descript pants and jacket looking second hand.

She rose. "You lead."

They walked in silence. Ratze found she had nothing to say. It had all been said the first time. She was curiously indifferent about him. He probably did not want to pry into her private life. Some people changed personalities at work, others did not. They left the fountain behind them, the sun blotted by the buildings, cool shadows, the air brisk.

Norak chatted on about how the City could be a magnificent show piece. Get rid of all the useless buildings and turn them into parks, recreate an urban village. Cluster the flats around common squares. No need for private transport. Have everything within walking distance. It made sense. And plant trees everywhere.

The forlorn shops were now interspersed with cheap eateries, bars and a few restaurants. As it was early evening, the sun had set, though the streetlights remained off power was on in this district. Novark explained many had their own petrol driven generators whilst the city administration made sure the entertainment district remained supplied, to boost morale.

Norak led her into an establishment aglow with tiny bulbs giving it a comfortable ambience in the semi-dark. On one side a long bar with stools and a few patrons, to the other side semi circular enclaves where a candle shone for those who preferred more comfort. The moment they sat a waiter appeared apologized for the lack of an extensive menu. They settled for 'Farmers Delight', a mystery really of this and that. Then it was beer, wine or spirits. Novark suggested wine, Ratze beer, so they had both. The drinks arrived and they cheered each other, and the future, which did not look too bright.

Moments later the food arrived. A hotch potch breakfast, in the evening. Beans, eggs, sausages and potatoes in gravy. At least it was filling. They ate in silence. The beer was not bad. Ratze got her biobots to break down the alcohol.

"Been a while." Ratze meaning going out.

"Same here. The people I work with have chosen the suburbs to live in. Too self isolating for me which means I'm marooned." He sighed dramatically.

"What no lover?" Ratze pretended to be coy.

"Too much work and the women are either too young or too old. Just my luck."

From the kitchen came the clatter of utensils being used, a whiff of the meals prepared. Ratze's Brain was trying to associate everything around her but strangely enough no real time memories came up.

"There's a reason I chose this place."

"The food." Ratze joked.

He smiled. "Believe it or not this is one of the more better dives."

Ratze dared not speculate what the average was.

"Professionals come here, those who don't eat at CU. Now that thousands of students are on work details there is plenty of room for the lecturers. But those who want to get away come here."

"Conversation?"

"Yes. It also attracts black marketeers. Prima might be an egalitarian society, so was Regum, one by design the latter by default but the authorities want the pro's inside. So they get the best ration cards. They're all standard issue but the elite simply get more of them. Of course cash does wonders."

"With the, ahm, entrepreneurs would that not attract the dogs?"

"Well they're in on it as well."

"My what initiative. Spot any?"

"Could be at the bar. Depends on who talks to whom." Stuffing a small potato in his mouth. Ratze sipped her beer.

"Psychology's the thing now."

"Looking for deviants."

"And that as well. Dreams Ratze, dreams."

"Dreams?" a little puzzled. "Oh yes, now that enhancement's off line the mind has to sort out it's own accumulated left overs. So how's that relate to the price of eggs?" as she stuffed one, whole into her mouth.

"Prima's little obsession. According to the new psychology, theirs I mean, they are supposedly the gateway to the soul."

"Mind."

"Soul Ratze."

"And?"

"Before the workers get to work they have to write down their dreams."

"Wonder why?" her Brain was no help.

"Open psychic state."

"So they're looking for DV potentials."

"There is more." He nodded and cut up his remaining sausage. "They are after what the Reganians remember."

"They could have asked before the place went down. What did happen?"

"I told you." He dropped his voice. "Don't talk about it in public."

"I'm learning."

"Those who long for the old days are weeded out. Re-education. Out in the sticks."

"Concentration camps."

"Err, I would be careful there."

"As in concentrated Norak."

"They're testing psychotronic gear on them. At first security wasn't as tight as they thought. Some escaped, word got out."

"New order."

"Big pyramid. Everyone is watched. Even here." He reminded her.

"Watchers to watch watchers. Oversight at all levels. Including you?"

"It gets better, a little hairy. I don't even know who my controller is. They all work under cover. It's those you don't see that are the ones to watch."

"Scanners any good?"

"They got some crude devices, external, portable."

"Ran into that on arrival."

"Roaming amongst us. If you got any, err, counter measures, I know nothing about SK accept they exist, I'd be careful."

"Thanks. Know what you mean."

"Trouble is they can fake a scan."

"Oh uh. Pile on the pressure."

"It's vicious. Anyone they don't like and, pfffft, you're gone."

"Effective."

"Very." He squashed his potatoes into a goo then shovelled it in. "Or on the take."

"Squeezing."

"Domination."

"At all levels."

Ratze continued eating. "Sounds a bit out of control."

"Now and then an example is made. More for show."

"So they really want the locals to know who's boss. But wouldn't all this shit backfire?"

"It makes me wonder why all the agro."

"Control freaks."

"One theory has it if they can't bust someone..."

"They invent a case."

"So far they're only targeting deviants."

"Heck that'd be the whole planet."

"The dreamers. Those hanging on to the past, their lost heritage."

"Web's off though."

"The real web? Yes. But rumour has it the underground's connected." Again lowering his voice. As if sharing some outrageous joke. "Given that smartware's still around, you know self generating embedded, minor linkage can be established. If you're loaded, which I'm not asking by the way, it could be a way in."

"For you or me?" she lifted her head.

"You primarily. I'm after the big fish. If I can get the evidence I want and get that to Novus..."

"I'd forgotten about that planet." Her Brain updated her.

Two young couples occupied the booth next to them, all laughter and good spirits. At least someone was happy. Ratze sympathetic.

"I'm not asking," having watched them settle in, "what you're after. We discussed that anyway. SP is after brains. I guess everybody is. Ideally we should both be on Novus. Be much easier. But I guess you could say we're running a protection racket." Which Ratze thought amusing.

He laughed with her. "You're right there." What Novark could not say was that he was helping some get out. In that regard having Ratze from SK was almost too good to be true. From what little he gained, she was real. Of course being SK had its disadvantages as well. They were all after the gifted, the talented, potentials. They might even use her to snatch them from him.

"You know the local authorities might use you as a pathfinder."

"Well, considering, ahm, though I'm free to roam the planet for recruits, I prefer of course the unaligned for a better expression, those who actually use their brains. Still, we're talking to the Reganian's up there. And as you yourself know," she finished her beer, "we run transport. Sure Novus have their own security but that's minor. We're in control. So if the locals here want the goods delivered at all..."

"They have to be nice." Novark finished off for her. He sat back, satisfied with the meal, the way the conversation was going. His eyes glowing reflecting the light from the candle. He poured from the open bottle a glass of wine for both of them. Ratze felt they had achieved something, an understanding.

She smiled.

"What?" he asked pleasantly, took a sip of wine and pulled a face.

"A bit on the young side?" enjoying the double entendre.

"A bit perky." He smiled back. She took a sip. Sweet and bitter, then surprisingly smooth going down. It would do.

"You know Novark there is another way to get dreamers."

"Oh?"

"Psychiatrists. Their records."

"They've all rolled over."

"Oh."

"Good try though."

"Then I suggest going in."

"Going in where?"

"Where the unaligned are. The surviving gamers. Since they're still free must mean they have as you said, attitude. Take no shit."

"It's a no-go zone. Cordoned off."

"Let's do a reckie."

"Now?"

"Night time is the right time." Ratze's Brain sparkled, or was that her mind? Either way, time was of the essence. With her uploaded configuration she surmised she could get past their primitive gear. Configuring a personality for their scanners would be the least of her problems. These kids would be sharp. Any wrong shit from her and she'd be cut out.

Novark was dressed down. Perfect. Now what sort of a persona for her. Certainly not social welfare. The best thing was to be upfront here. A survivor on the run. How to explain Novark. Facilitating the escape route? To where? Novus? Then again she could go in as SK. Tempt them with weapons training. Once the contract was up they'd have the knowledge to use firearms. It might be five years down the line but they'd have the training, a pro's attitude. They'd have made contacts, got the gist of how to really run an outfit. And be off planet.

Regum. Mission Classified. Beyond Most Secret.

For Juris it was more than just moving out through space to Regum, forbidden to any but the priests, but moving out mentally as well. Reganians were not Primaian anymore. Genetic drift and mental applications saw to that. Different to what he was used to in the provincial back water where the priests were the eyes and ears of the establishment. This was information gathering on a higher plane. It made him nervous even though Darlos was rather relaxed about the contact about to be made.

Juris pursued knowledge for its own sake. He considered it his moral duty. The intelligence agencies were after power, pure and simple. Prima was behind in everything. Juris considered science as the tool to reveal the mystery of life in the universe and the universe itself. Regum controlled physical space, Prima the mental sphere. Regum's dream was Prima's nightmare. This distinction enough to separate the two races to such an extent that even acknowledging their existence was almost anathema to the Ecclesiastics. Any who got too close, too familiar with their thinking, vanished. Some in asylums, others never to be seen again. Wrong thoughts, wrong intent was enough to cast suspicion on anyone. Those who were cleared to further their education or teach were under constant surveillance. Each expressed thought, each proposed supposition, each statement intensely scrutinised. Still he had passed the requisite vetting. On his way to Regum.

The reasons stated vague in detail though not in context. Exo-sentient-lifeforms on Earth. They all knew about Earth. Home of the aliens, poisoning space. A homicidal race intent on strife, thriving on war, indulging in bloody murder. Juris's speciality. Made of the right stuff: a stable volatile. Almost Reganian. A matching profile. On the outside. He really had no agenda except to learn. Naïve perhaps.

They had been frank. This was more than just an exchange of what each side knew about the Earthers. It was to forge a plan to go there. The DVs presence there since he could remember, even before he was born. Since the alien field's discovery. Now Prima wanted to be in on the ground as well. It was a matter of convincing the Reganians that this was a good idea.

"Ready to meet our accommodating hosts?" Darlos asked. They had left Prima two months ago. Juris, nervous, excited nodded. Speechless. Chosen for this academic interchange to discuss the alien planet, the bane of their troubles still took some getting

used to. One moment he was a lecturer at a provincial seminary and now a representative of Prima meeting Reganians. Darlos had filled him in yet again, coming out of cryo-sleep, the importance of the mission, the need for Regum's cooperation to have a suitable candidate present on Earth.

Earth Juris shuddered. A homicidal race that had no compulsion to slaughtering their own kind. Barbarism at its worst. Not that Darlos enlightened Juris as to the real aim of this mission. The three Domain Lords, Gharbel, Qatus and Pentham were in agreement. Something had to be done and now they were going to do it.

Juris the peaceful front of their academic research into Earth's behaviour. The psychologist, sociologist, philosopher par excellence who had studied the secret data pertaining to Earth's convoluted history. Regum had been reticent during the initial tentative conversations as to what they actually knew about Earthers. Either they were holding back, accepted as fact, or not unduly concerned with that warlike race. Preferring most probably to wait until they got over their murderous instincts before making contact. But by then it might be too late, Earth too advanced technologically to turn the clock back in time mentally. Gharbel insisted they had to find a point in their history to make sure they never went down the similar path Regum had taken all those centuries ago when thousands had left each year to start a new life on their sister planet.

The exploratory discussions complete Regum finally accepted a mission to further explore the possibilities of making contact with Earth.

The Reganian's sent a message that one of their ships was to take them to Regum. It was all going well. So far. Rather they meet on Regum then let any information get out at this end. Thus the mission would remain classified, top secret with the attendant security containing whatever was discussed. Their ship would return to the orbital whilst Darlos and Juris continued to Regum. The Reganians had accepted the ruse that a kabal was in place on the Orbital who thought the artificial dichotomy not just between their two worlds, but their belief systems, if Regum actually had one, was keeping from uniting them. A common vision, together, not apart. Earth would be the means of healing the rift.

Darlos studied Juris as they were waiting to transfer. Juris would create an atmosphere of natural empathy with their counterparts. The Reganian's were outgoing, loquacious, ebullient. He might also glean what the Reganian's long term plans were, not just for Earth but their planet as well.

Darlos had met the Reganians on the orbital. Each race trying to get as much from each other to pass back to their superiors. An ongoing game with no end in sight.

The Primaian's were psychically advanced, the Reganians technological wizards. Each feeding off the other. Both in the same cosmos. A perfect blend of the two heading for Earth. So Darlos hoped. Nothing as yet was guaranteed. Not even the candidate broached. Reganian or Primaian. Though Gharbel insisted it be one of their own. They after all had the psychic capabilities Reganian's lacked.

"I have something to impart." Finney said upfront to Darlos and Juris.

"Go on." Darlos replied.

"We think the Reganians have achieved something similar to what the DVs accomplish regarding insertions. We all know DVs are remote viewers. Well we think the Reganians can do this technologically now."

"How long?" Darlos alert. So the rumours were true. No evidence they had used that capability to any great degree. Technology was complicated enough even without thinking machines, their AIs.

"Not long. And a lot of guesswork Darlos. The Reganians, some anyway, seem even more confident. Obviously something had transpired. We got this by DV remote viewing. When they ran their experiment, on their planet by the way a perturbation in real space occurred. At first nothing could be made of it. It did not last long you see. But with a bit of introspection it was discovered that the state of mind of a remote viewer, whilst not the same as the physical event had some resonant similarities. So upon closer inspection it was classified as a new event. Not only that a general sweep of space showed that such an event was also in place. In a way it mimicked what they are doing in the Web when transferring between data domains. Slowly the dots were joined."

"I am grateful Finney."

"Needless to say..."

"Yes I understand." Darlos replied then turning to Juris: "Not a word. It's up to the Reganians to reveal this if they wish to do so. Feigning ignorance is important. No point letting them know."

"Yes Darlos." Juris ready to accept the order happy to be even kept informed.

"Time to get ready. Their ship is hailing us."

"Allow me to introduce Marez, scientific adviser, the wonderful Irrnet our human resource manager, the capable Duncos, an observer and myself, Sovark, designated team leader at your service." He beamed. Marez, tall, dark smiled, Irrnet a nice open face, golden blond hair and very pale, Duncos, feisty, short, lean and Sovark patrician, the oldest of the group.

"We welcome you in the name of Regum, extend our greetings from all our people. It is indeed an honour to have you as our guests on board this ship."

They were in the lounge and command centre of the 'Explorer', a sleek ship with triple thrusters and a huge fuel tank at the rear made for deep space travel. The view screens were all around them, showing real space, abstracted space, the ship, the environment, radiation levels, cosmic ray activity, the condition of the ship, system parameters, different areas inside the ship. All very colourful.

Relaxing in recliners around a small pop up table

"This is Juris, an able scientist whose speciality is Earth and I am Darlos of SpaceKorps. We thank you for the affectionate welcome extended and offer our warmest greetings on behalf of those who wish to further the pursuit of knowledge, wherever it may be found, wherever it may lead. One day we hope that both our worlds will again be united as they once had been." Darlos hinting at the precarious position they were in.

"We acknowledge the difficulties you are faced with and accept your salutation. We feel privileged by your presence and are sympathetic to your situation." Sovark underlined, "It is appreciated."

Juris, whilst Darlos made his little speech and their situation known, found Marez lively, Irnet tense, fierce concentration, probably a psychologist. Duncos, full of abundant energy relaxed in her own way whilst Sovark showed his smoothness as a diplomat.

"If you would like some refreshments?" Sovark asked solicitously.

"No thank you. We filled up on our wonderful space paste." Darlos joked. It broke the ice. Everybody relaxed in their own way. Some things were universal in space.

"Something to drink perhaps. Controlled air does tend to parch one." Sovark suggested.

"Maybe later thank you. So shall we?"

Sovark indicated his ascent, the others focussed.

"Well, where to begin?" Darlos began. "We have made a bit of a scientific breakthrough, thanks to your generous assistance on the Orbital."

They were pleased with that. He didn't say how or what given it was made up. Part of the cover story to embellish the existence of the Kabal.

"And of course we share a common interest." Darlos being cautious.

"We are pleased." Sovark replied. Fully aware how little so far Darlos was actually saying, given that the conversation was monitored. Reganians had no problem with that.

Darlos only too happy to have this conversation on file, proof of the Kabal and equally important their counterparts reactions.

"We have surmised, the evidence is scanty of a certain engineering feat that is not dissimilar to instant messaging, except on a larger scale," pushing the envelope a bit, "and reasoned, given enough energy it was only a matter of time until the eventual breakthrough, an apt pun I hope," indulgent smiles all around, "would occur. So congratulations on a great effort." Darlos bluffed. It was only a supposition but given Reganian prowess not too surprising if undeniably they were successful with their experiment to move matter through space in zero time.

"Thank you Darlos. Well informed and candid. We respect that." Sovark leading the discussion. Not revealing anything just yet.

"Well, we both know Earth, to a degree. We witnessed, millions of years ago an asteroid hit. It did not destroy their civilisation. Merely set it back. A remarkable race, very resilient. Oh and thank you for coming. A most suitable location for this conversation." Darlos all pleasantries.

"We are glad we could assist."

"Might as well come to the point. Since you have the technical capabilities to go anywhere in space," the others remained unfazed, "we have a proposition. Go in. Insert an observer on Earth. Not a priest. Someone familiar with exo-sentience." Looking at Juris. This surprised him. He had not volunteered for this. Darlos smiled. "Don't worry Juris, only if you want to volunteer."

Juris smiled back, nervously.

"And you think our technology can achieve this? Correct?" Marez asked without confirming that they did have that capability.

"Most definitely. We could work on this ourselves. The theory is there. The DVs accomplish this by remote viewing. The energy state, the resonance can be put in place. But why waste time and energy catching up? In return, if this proposition gets off the ground," Darlos allowed himself another smile, "we can reveal certain advances we ourselves have made." Tempt them.

"Darlos. Without being impolite. We respect your directness and the situation you have volunteered to be in. A good way to start. But these are only exploratory feelers to see how much common ground we have. We too are aware of Earth's existence. In fact your DVs guided us to them." Which ought to get the Ecclesiastics something to think about. "Making contact, if not now but in the future has not been entirely ruled out. If I

am to understand you correctly, your people are suggesting a person we could agree upon actually go there?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"You understand the unique nature of this request. And its as yet undefined mission. If this is accepted then I have to make quite clear the person would have observer status only. The Earthers must develop according to their evolutionary destiny."

Which of course was the crunch, the pivotal point, the fulcrum, the lever, the very essence of Prima wanting to go to Earth. Which Darlos kept in the back of his mind.

"I agree. A neutral observer along the lines of say, an anthropologist." Darlos answered smoothly. "Now we know the presence of such an observer could change Earth's natural evolution regarding sentient advancement. Our aims are convergent. Our DVs have seen the future." Which was true. The trick was to get them to swallow the bait. "We know, or assume so, Earth will follow a similar trajectory as that of your noble civilisation. This we accept as is. The Divines may not like it. Still what will be, will be. No if's or but's. Our people," hinting at the Kabal, "are using the logic that the Divine Presence wills it so. Our presence is to be in harmony, not tinker with their or any other future." hoping to convince them of their sincerity. To give the impression that the Kabal was accepting facts as they were.

"It is good of you to be so forthright Darlos. Your broadmindedness and that of your people is indeed welcome. Your planet sometimes gives a slightly different impression but we understand that every mind is unique." to them anyway, "We even accept your race's orientation as one of many answers within the universe. It is something we do not deny." Sovark being agreeable. "I can see no reason why further exploratory talks cannot take place, why we could not work on this in common harmony and an atmosphere of mutual trust. We welcome your approach in what can only be momentous. Historic to say the least. For Prima, for Regum, for Earth."

"We are honoured to play a role in facilitating the process of mutual understanding. We also appreciate the fact that whoever is chosen is as value free from our preconceptions as possible." Darlos sweetening his intentions.

"Correct. Agreed." Sovark answered.

"There is something else. It may make the decision easier. From our research into intelligence, basically DV activity, well, they can create a simulacrum." Juris was surprised.

"Really?" Marez asked. More curious than taken aback.

"It's not unlike the personas your gamers create in cyberspace."

Juris was astounded. Creating a life form. Impossible. Yet he was aware of hidden mysteries within the Web. More hearsay than direct information.

"That is interesting." Marez actually pleased. Juris was worried. Where would this lead?

"Self isolate. Malleable mind."

"A cyber intelligence." Marez remarked.

"Not as yet. More like a resonant presence. A cognisant field. Your technology could, maybe, turn it into that." Darlos said assured. "It might take less energy to effect the transfer. With its mind contained it might have less effect on the Earthers. We have what is known as Containment Fields. It's used in asylums to repress the more violent patients. This could be applied to the simulacrum. Also if there was to be an emergency, or certain unforeseen consequences it could easily be not merely removed but shut down as well. And it can look like them." Darlos finished off.

"Hm." Irrnet began. "Is there any way the Earthers would not consider a being from another world, depending where in time it is placed, let's say pre-technologically, be deemed a godlike being? Or if they are astute, like your DVs an alien from beyond the stars? It would have a great impact on their history." Irrnet considered.

"They will be heading for the stars either way I would have assumed."

"They were already in space millions of years ago. It explains the lull. The asteroid hit. We thank you for that information Darlos. It would only reinforce what they already knew, or assumed." Irrnet said.

"I have brought a present." Darlos retrieved a data disk. "It's virus free." handing it to Sovark. "The prototype." He announced proudly. Juris was lost for words. How far was Prima into this? Artificial life created by the combined minds of the DVs. Mimicking Regum's AIs. Instant matter transfer and now this. Would they be able to control it? Oh yes, the containment fields. He was excited by the prospect.

Sovark inserted the disk into the desk. A hologram appeared of a sentient. Different modes of dress, hair, accoutrements, morphing through different appearances. They seemed interested if not impressed.

"It would relieve the cultural baggage any of us or your people could not but help carry across." Irrnet explained. Sovark agreed. "It does resolve a bit of a dilemma. We are indebted for what you have shown us. And such progress as well. You are right Darlos, the personas, the progenitors in cyberspace are one thing. Sovark, Marez you know what this means?" Irrnet though still looking at Darlos and answering her own question: "Intelligent life is about to appear in a new form in the universe. I'm glad you

said it has containment fields built in. Some sort of mental suppression and routing system. Fascinating. Well done." Irnet delighted.

"Darlos, if I said I wasn't surprised at this," Sovark remarked as they watched the holoscreen, "I'd be lying. I am. Your people have created what in a way we thought so common in cyberspace we never even considered going to the next logical step. Yes, very very impressive. Of course we cannot make a decision given these are our first tentative talks but your gift, this application of knowledge is indeed cherished."

"Well science is meant to be shared." Darlos said humbly. A minor coup.

"To set your mind at rest. Given the nature of the breakthrough let me assure you on behalf of all of us here," leaving out the ship's smartware, "this will remain secret for the moment. Even on Regum. Only those tasked with our combined mission, if it does go ahead will be informed, when," Sovark emphasises, "the need to know arises. So we extend an invitation to come to our planet."

Darlos hesitated a moment. Only to make it look as if he were unprepared to go right in. "Err yes."

"You have clearance from your people?"

"We thought we would progress more cautiously."

"Yes I see what you mean. You have the requisite knowledge, you are informed about Earth I take it?"

"Juris is the brains there."

Juris blushed. Fantastic.

"You are comfortable to take this to the next level?"

"If you or your people have no objection." Darlos being considerate. Approach with caution. Too eager might be gauche.

"None. Of course access will be limited. This is not a public event. No welcoming party or speeches to the people."

"That is expected. Feel free to use the data in any way which will facilitate our common aim."

"We will be extremely discreet." Sovark intoned. Duncos was watching. She would make sure they would.

Juris's head was going hyper. The enormity of the mission barely sinking in. The Reganian's reasonable. No super-egos. No mind numbing logic wrenching convoluted techno babble. Certainly not contaminated or a danger to his state of mind. Reasonable, approachable, perfect hosts.

The sleeping tube felt at first a little constricting. The perspex enclosure reeling off numbers, glowing graphs of his bio-state. The lime green numerics having a calming effect. Most impressive. If this was evolution gone wrong, according to Prima's best minds than perhaps if they actually approached Reganian's not as some hostile race but merely a different extension of themselves then maybe they would come to comprehend that their natural inquisitiveness netted these fantastic results like this sleeping tube, or their ship, were harmless. How all this was some sort of distortion of an evolutionary path meant the experts back on Prima were certainly not open to the possibilities a thinking mind could achieve. Or was he so under their influence already that he was starting to be under their sway? And Prima's intellectual achievements mere footnotes of their specific sequential order so deeply embedded in their minds.

Prima labouring with a clouded mind. Confusion through association. One idea at a time was about all they managed to focus upon. Yet the Reganian mind, even the five on the ship who perhaps were not really the true representatives of their planet as much as those on the orbital over Prima might not be representative of their race. Maybe space was gestating a new mindful approach to life. That idea was exciting since he was a part of that. Maybe he too might advance mentally, sloughing off the detritus of their mono-mania. Were they blinded by belief? What did the Reganian's believe? Nothing! And look at the results. Perplexing. How could they accrue so much knowledge out of nothing? The answer had to lie in the mind itself. Worse, he was going into dangerous territory here. Maybe by dispelling ideological constructs, preconceived notions of a Great Mind the hidden mind was thus open to as many possibilities as it could think of. Primaian's were certainly not that. Thinking seemed to exhaust them so that they withdrew into their shell cocooned from everything around them, nature, the universe. For a Primaian he was starting to disassociate! Too busy being in each other's heads all the time. As if nothing else mattered.

Maybe as a Stable Volatile he could think like a Reganian. He certainly encountered no difficulty in following the conversation. The expectant culture shock never came. Well, as he lay there in the warmth of his tube, trying to get to sleep if his excited mind would only let him, there was no hint of danger coming from his hosts. The Reganians were certainly techno dominant. With gates into time itself. Sure the Primaian mind, the chosen few could do this of their own volition, but now the Reganians could do this anytime, anywhere with anyone. If this was a distortion of applied thinking then just maybe there was no such thing as pure thought. Or all thought in themselves were pure.

Darlos too was in deep thought. Sleep held at bay by his heightened excitement. Duncos, had to be intelligence. An observer. Observing them, or keeping an eye? With dispassionate curiosity. Rational means for a rational end. Get the simulacrum onto Earth. With its embedded programme they could deflect Earth's thinking from following Regum's path. If they accepted the proposal. Of course there were Enhanced Stable Volatiles ready to replace the simulacrum if the Reganian's balked at this being. Even the terminology used revealed the gap between Regum and Prima. Or was the Divine Mind finally using the contact between them to make sure the Primaian's lived up to their belief, to influence the Earthers along the path of pure divinity rather than the convolutions caused by machine driven pursuits.

Being exposed to their technology, like this sleeping tube with its cool numbers, its wave graphs seemed to have no effect on him. Except to get him to think. Juris had remained stable. That was good. Neither overawed or subsumed. Sovark had not said much. Well it was, he smiled, the Kabal that was coming to them. Revealing what he had the way to gain their trust. It was in their hands. The simulacrum certainly interested them. Really a construct of the DVs, a most secret experiment, run on an 'what if' approach. Almost Reganian in conceptual intent. Already existent in the computers on the orbital. Calculations proved given enough energy a 'construct' could be created and deposited anywhere in space. The disk had all the requisite data. Maybe the Divine Mind was showing the way. Use Reganian methods for higher aims. Darlos felt better. So far so good.

The tube put them into cryo-stasis. Lowering their resonance, slowing bio-rhythms to the lowest possible state. When they were woken they were over Regum. The group transferred to a shuttle down. Regum looked marvellous. Green patches of vast forests, the City beneath white and grey clouds covering the planet in swirling patches. One of the icecaps glowing blueish white. Sparkling oceans. Into the centre of their enemy.

Orbital: Regum

"Rerun sequence from T at 0 seven hundred to 0 nine hundred." The quantum computer blinked a green status light in acknowledgment. Heana, twiddled with her short golden hair. In an observation bubble, one of several at the far side of the orbital she was observing the data they had gleaned from the Primaian's regarding the ancient catastrophe that hit earth over sixty million years ago. The QCs, so advanced and top secret that none existed on Regum due to the prying eyes of Primas agents often masquerading as post graduate students meant the orbital was the safest place for them. Until mass production, they were individually assembled up here. Achieving quantum stability was a hard act to duplicate. Each QC had to be separately attuned. There was even talk of Virtual QCs, ready to be constructed in cyberspace. If they could achieve that then whatever the DVs threw at them would be obviated in space. The DVs mere background interference. But until then this would suffice. For now.

At least they could access the spatial continuum that was the universe. Heana as a cosmologist focussed on the big picture. Apart from the technicians observing the quantum state of the computer, auto run stabilisers notorious for getting entangled in the quantum soup of its guts meant that oversight was imperative to keep the thing focussed. The theory might be straightforward but its application was not. Luckily no Primaian's here. Not like over Prima, the closest they could get to that closed of planet.

She watched with both fascination and a touch of horror as the cosmic calamity unfolded. The rerun showed a disturbance by some massive object at that solar system's outer accretion disk. A rogue planetoid on the loose it had created a massive bulge, freeing the rubble and sending it sunwards. Most were absorbed by the outer frozen gaseous planets and the huge brown giant. The others lost in space heading slowly towards the distant central star. Except one. The size of a small house. Then it collided with another asteroid sending it towards Earth. The odds were in the million yet they collided as if pre-programmed. Intentional by some superior race? DV activity willing the collision? She would have to check for overt sentient activity to make sure this freak accident was what it appeared to be.

Farros, head astronomer on the orbital entered the observation platform. He walked over to Derlon, who kept the codes in line, handling both the in and outflow of massive data fields, ready with standby codes to keep the chancy volatility of the QC in phase. Derlon coding the shaky equilibrium of the QCs base state had to make sure that

the QCs did not do a quantum jump themselves as the projected and inserted configured probability waves remained out there and not in here. Entanglement would destroy all data. But everything was running smoothly. The data extricated from the target field. They actually saw what was there.

"How's the interference?" Farros asked. His slender frame belied his innate physical toughness. Fit. Sharp mind.

"Hi." Heana said not taking her eyes off one of the screens surrounding them. "EM shielding up, the Sentinel Computers are running interference as well so that the DVs if they are present will get a load of useless shit."

"Don't want them coming in through the rear." Farros stating the obvious.

"Data's clear." As the massive asteroid tumbled towards distant Earth.

"That stray planetoid. Analysis says it's there but no visuals."

"Not much light out there Farros. The mass is detectable. Want some observation done out there as well?"

"Later. Glad the QCs work."

Another screen read of Earth's status. Water, rich atmosphere, EM leakage, at least a stage one world, sentient life. About to be devastated.

"Wish we could stop it."

"Happened millions of years ago Heana. Not our job to change cosmic history."

"I know." She sighed giving him a sad smile. She never had her rather oddly placed teeth, leaning in all directions adjusted. It did not detract from her dimpled smile, her blue eyes radiant.

"I'm still amazed that thanks to the DVs we knew of this. The Primaian's weren't hiding it."

"Well we all know why."

"More propaganda."

"Can't help themselves."

"Run 0 fifteen continuous." Heana told the computer. The light blinked. She hated its crappy smooth voice which was on mute. "Close to impact."

Farros pulled up a chair, both of them watching the screen.

The asteroid, a flaming star buried itself into the southern icecap. The whole continent shivered, shock waves radiating outwards then vanishing into the ocean. Volcanoes erupted, bright orange magma spouting upwards, dark billowing clouds spewing into the atmosphere. Then nothing. They waited for the tsunamis to hit the nearest landmass. White cresting waves moved inland as more volcanoes erupted into

life. The EM fields got weaker. More tidal waves, fracture lines along other continents resulting in earthquakes, dust making the image murky. Total devastation planetwide. The coastal cities destroyed, inland centres collapsing into rubble, fires everywhere as the magma set the flora on fire. The planet slowly covered in a pall of smoke. The EM fields got weaker, then were near zero as the power grids ceased.

No one said anything. The precariousness of life hung on a thread down there.

"Some spaceships heading out. Probably the next planet." Heana informed Farros.

"Let's hope they survive."

"They even got a space station up. Though if not replenished..."

"Reality can be a shit. Had they been more advanced they might have avoided the calamity."

"Send a rocket up and deflect it."

"Yes."

"It was that collision..."

"Unexpected. What were they doing down there?"

"Well we might find out one day. More to the point, what are they going to do now? Have they survived? Back on track? Recovered?"

"Or wiped out. Nature doing the rest. With all that smoke, it will take years until the sun shines again. Crop failures for starters."

"Millions dead, dying." Heana's voice infused with sadness.

"Well I got to go Heana. At least the QCs are working as predicted. Better shut them down. Go over the technical stuff, see how they performed. Do a scan for DV activity. The report is not to go on file. Written only."

"Understood."

Farros left the observation bubble.

"Derlon."

"Yes Heana?"

"Check for DV activity. We got their RSs. They put us onto it. Which makes me think. I know I'm only an astronomer but if they had no qualms actually alerting us to this there has to be a reason. Primaian's don't share knowledge, so why now?"

"I see what you're getting at. Onto it."

They both waited. First Derlos uncollapsed the inserted Probability Field-Waves. It was as if the QC breathed a sigh of relief, self enclosed once more. Then Derlos activated a local scan.

"No RS present."

"OK. Retime it when we were in."

He entered the time sequence, reactivated the QCs memory, the Sentinels off and waited for any activity. Moments later the results were in.

"Intense, focused. And remaining. The DVs are targeting Earth."

"And not hiding it? No diversions at all?"

"None Heana."

"I think the boss needs to know this. Collect it. Write it up then delete it."

"Will do."

`Farros'. Heana waited. No answer. A message came up. `In conference.' Probably reporting on the success of the QCs first successful real time run. Well Heana would not chase after him. Their data quarantined. At least the DVs had not been aware of their quantum presence. She could wait until he returned. It was all history anyway. Time to see how Earth was doing. Then she might have more information, see how they were recovering. If they had recovered. Farros was in control, so she went back to her routine work. Observe Prima, and observe distant Earth as is. At least she had something to focus upon.

`Heana.' It was Farros.

`You secure?'

`Shielded.'

`Got something.'

`Can it wait?'

`Depends.' Knowing he would not like vagueness. `Maybe not. I hate panicking. Not really my department but we do have something.'

`Something.' His voice precise. `Anything that's currently urgent?'

`No.' which was not the whole truth.

`We'll meet. Grab a shuttle. Further data to follow.' Doublespeak for location. Farros never left anything to chance. Which frustrated some. Not Heana. The intelligence war, not even officially recognised raged behind the scenes. In the Web, on Regum, at Prima's Orbital. Nothing was said about it. The Primaians going all out to get all they could by any means short of outright data theft by the crudest of means, short of using violence.

In the landing bay a shuttle had just unloaded, the two pilots inside the small waiting room near the double airlocks. She nodded at them then went to flight control in person. She told the despatch officer she had to meet with Farros. Not that they knew who he really was. Just some Head from Regum who came up often.

`Maintenance job, a forgotten spare part.' He accepted her cover story. Let others think this was an assignation. Even better if the DVs were in.

`Farros.'

`Yes.'

`Malfunction your end. Bringing back up parts.'

`Understood.'

Despatch assigned her to a fuelled shuttle. She collected the back pack for spare air and water, took her helmet, went to technical supplies, asked for an external diagnostics back up system, then put on her helmet, went through the airlocks and got into the ready shuttle. Received clearance, taxied out and waited for Farros to give her his position. A tight squirt came through. The ship read it and headed out into space. Regum shone brightly as the shuttle tore into space. Farros was moving out somewhere, away from the Orbital, the planet then held his position. Feigning technical trouble.

An hour later she was onboard his space cruiser.

"Got you your spare part."

"Good thinking."

"It's the only thing on record. I'm not even here. Went to flight control myself. Your name says it all." She smirked.

"I wish it didn't."

"They just think you're somebody up the line of command. Nothing else."

"Yes, well. Let's hope it stays that way."

"It will."

"Nothing lasts. Might have to arrange a re-assignment. Normal rotation. Keep on forgetting. Well we can speak here. These new generation triple shielded ships are DV proof."

"I thought..."

"Our minds? Well I can tell you this much. Language programmes are translating our conversation into something else entirely. You brought a malfunctioning spare part so that's what they'd get if they were in. Even includes chit chat. Ships EAI. Includes counter intuition."

She relaxed on the recliner in the lounge. Cockpits were there only because they had always been there. Now with smartware, the ship was run from the lounge.

"Even got a micro fusion generator. The only reason fuel tanks are still on is to make the Primaians think nothing's changed."

"Amazing, the progress we're making."

"EAI's the next big thing."

"Smarter than AI hey."

"Beyond digital. So Heana."

"Two things..."

"Only two?" he laughed quietly.

"Several depending on your point of view, or priorities."

"The DVs are getting smarter."

"Hope not. Right. In no particular order. Earth is the location of the EM field we picked up but had trouble locating. Even though they're at the edge of their galaxy it still is rather crowded there. Heaps of dead born planets. A veritable zoo. So whilst we astronomers were searching and source deleting them, thanks to the DVs and the QCs riding resonance field-waves we got lucky. They, the DVs really can focus if they try. And they are using swarms of them, forming group minds."

"That is scary."

"So far they're still focussed as is. But analysis showed their major effort is Earth. So, that means life went on there post hit wise. I haven't assigned anybody to follow up. Just in case. Awaiting orders."

"We'll have to assume they know we know. It's best."

"To be prepared, yes. I understand. However past records show they also were interested in the nearest outer planet as well. Telemetry says it's dead."

"Is it?"

"No EM signature. Lousy atmosphere, mainly carbon dioxide and that thin on the ground, literally. Dry ice polar caps. If there is water, nothing on the surface it may be, may be Farros, underground. Now why would they be interested in a dead planet?"

"Because Heana," Farros wiggled in the recliner, "the Earther's went there. Knowing what the hit had done it was the nearest semi-inhabitable place. If they got the right ingredients to format the air they might survive. If they're smart they'd move their space station there as well. Maybe even land it. If they can pull that off, they'd have an even better chance."

"Anyway, the DVs were active regarding the hit. We disengaged they remained focussed."

"So would we, but by more prosaic means. Normal astronomy, radar, optical telescopes."

"Showing Earth around two hundred million years ago. Interesting but useless for what is going on."

"Which you are about to tell me. But shouldn't my contacts..."

"Camouflage. If one of your flunkies," she smiled sweetly thinking counter intelligence, "was detected, well one and one would make two, so me coming..."

"You're right."

"Anyway, Prima's still fixated with Earth. That's the main thing. The reason I thought that important is even though they got severely whacked they didn't get whacked out. The DVs mental leeches Farros."

"Dead right there."

"There's something else."

"There always is Heana. Do tell."

"Could be the QCs getting all entangled with something. Remnant field-wave fronts did emanate from the dead planet. Thing is, with PWs it's hard to tell if it's all probability or some future or past actuality."

"Now that is interesting."

"Yeah, since our breakthrough, it's changed astronomy. It's not passive anymore."

"Well don't get too active." Farros warned.

"Still strictly off limits I know."

"Don't go there. The DVs would be onto it."

"Reason I'm here. Well one anyway."

"We still have a long way to go in just understanding probability waves. Let alone using them."

"Well the first run was a success."

"Exactly. But you know science. Successful duplication depends on the original variables."

"The DVs are doing just that. Not themselves as such. They're using a composite."

"Group mind?"

"Bit freaky. But yes, you could say that."

"Thus their determined concentration."

"They might have a ghost presence on Earth."

"A composite group mind, an avatar." He mused.

"Most likely. They definitely got a field going, non-directional, that's what gave them away, thanks to our QCs."

Farros rubbed his chin.

"They just can't leave alone."

"No, apparently not. So they got a presence on the ground."

"So it appears."

"I read you. They'll have to be watched then."

"It may come to this: if they screw around down there..."

"It forces us to act."

"Afraid so. I'm only an astronomer but as I said, that pursuit has irrevocably changed, forever. It's like our early quantum experiments. Where the act of observing defined the results. Until we managed to extract that interference to really see what was going on in that chaotic fog."

"You are thinking today."

She ignored that. "Ever since we started on this it's just that the DVs are forcing the issue here."

"I'm glad you did come."

"We can, ought to duplicate that."

"Duplicate?"

"Well if they can then so can we. We got the EAI. The gamers are doing more in that field than our scientists."

"One of the reasons we let them. Gaming is part of intelligent behaviour. The why's I leave to the philosophers and psychologists. That's how the E end of AI got started. The kid's just didn't want smart programmes to test their skills on, the wanted unpredictable programmes, self adjusting reasoning scenarios."

"Machine intelligence."

"Which we have."

"We should use it."

"Not my decision."

"Well whoever decides then. Use your charm Farros."

"Ha! Very funny."

"Earth could use us."

"We have to let Prima think we're stuck, or satisfied with what we got. Even the E component is hidden and will remain hidden Heana."

"It's an opportunity."

"We should wait and see what Prima is up to. If they're passive..."

"Now it's my turn to laugh."

"...then we'll see what sort of an impact they're making. And take it from there. Let them reveal themselves. Now that we got the QCs tuned, Heana, it doesn't matter what they do, it's the when that is of essence. Consider. They do A at A. We can come in at B and obviate A. Get it?"

"So they come in at C."

"That is why we can't let this spiral out of control. Imagine the mess on the worlds, multiple effective interference patterns crafting alternative PW scenarios."

"It is mind boggling I know."

"This requires a lot of thought and detailed planning."

"Which you are so good at."

"I think you're overestimating me Heana."

"Me? Farros you're the proverbial tip of the iceberg."

"Frozen from the scalp down?" he laughed.

"Make that neck."

"Heana, I'm going to swear you to secrecy."

"I thought I already was by being here."

"There are certain developments in the pipe-line, certain advances which will I hope, we all hope make a positive difference in more than just our research capabilities. At the moment it is just so much potential. Astronomers, only a few will be needed if, if this project is considered feasible. Technical glitches aside. I'm drawing up a shortlist and was wondering if you would consider, if this all goes to plan, to join an elite research team." It was the best way he could phrase the staff needed for the finished SS 1.

"Hm, thank you. When and where?"

"You're not hooked up."

"You mean do I have a lover? Had Farros. The time spent on the Orbital killed that."

"Couldn't lover boy..."

"Girl." She looked evenly at him.

"Girl," he continued unfazed, "have been allocated a position?"

"Said ex lover's a fringe dweller. Part time gamer of course. More a pisspot. Awful with a hangover, when she did stop drinking."

"That good?" he grinned.

"Way down the bottom. Self destructive type."

"Whom you managed to get along with?"

"Shit yeah. A relief from all these so-together types."

"Hm. Yes. I can see the attraction in that. Going for it full on."

"Starting at the gutter and heading for the sewer."

"I am impressed. So..."

"What happened? She got bored waiting..."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. Happened a while ago. Over it."

"I got to hand it to you. I'm...repeating myself."

"Impressed? Not wanting to sound gauche?"

"Not now. Especially not now."

"And here I thought you were the corporate type."

"What does that mean?" Farros asked good-naturedly.

"A total head case."

"Head will do fine thank you." Not offended.

"So Farros are we going to push the future."

"Ours? Theirs? Earth's?"

"Wherever they are interfering."

"All to be decided Heana."

"If we do nothing Prima wins. Here, there, wherever."

"If we go to Earth then you know what will happen."

"Our off planet battle ground. The intelligence war will be fought by proxy on their world."

"And we are not here to change history."

"Too late for that."

"A group mind." Farros paused. "Maybe the Earther's will think it is a ghost presence and ignore it."

"One can hope. But do you honestly think Prima is just going to sit there? They are on a divine mission. They're trying to save us, deflect us from where we want to go. If the Earther's got into space once, you think they're gonna say no to that again? Prima will have their way."

"You're assuming they will."

"And you actually think they won't?" Heana stared at him. She understood he had to see it from more than one perspective.

"We don't know yet."

"Hm. Then I think we should at least observe, someone anyway, what if any effect they are having on that planet."

"There I agree."

"Their very presence has changed everything. That means our future as well."

"Unless they withdraw."

"Yeah right. And we drop the Web. Farros!"

"I'm just worried about telescoping in reverse the future into the present."

"We could run a scenario on ourselves Farros."

"What in interesting thought."

"Calculate where our planet will be in X years and collapse the PWFs there. See what gives. Or if we don't want to know so that we don't get slack and by doing nothing thinking it will happen it won't because we know therefore we don't have to," she took a breath. "which we have to do to make it happen, oh boy, some hairy logic there, then we could see what Prima's on about at some future point in time."

"Yes. That will have to be dealt with. Maybe we should put a block into the QCs so that we will never know. You raised an interesting quagmire. Someone would have thought of that anyway. Better sooner than later. Looking at Prima's future or Earths', that will have to be explored."

"As in a committee?"

"You being facetious?"

"Yes."

"Talking committees Heana, this job offer isn't official."

"Nor this conversation."

"Good. It has to be made clear."

"I know. Thanks again though. I think I'll accept."

"You don't even know what will be asked of you. I don't even know." Which was not true but Farros could not let the SS 1's existence be known outright. Whoever went there would vanish for the duration. Luckily there were thousands of habitats in space, mining stations, processing plants at the various asteroid belts for cover. Plenty. DVs aside.

"You're off to an important meeting aren't you?"

"Now now."

"Thought so. Don't worry won't blab. Not even Derlon."

"Family?"

"Sort of."

"Won't miss you?"

"Hard to tell. I do visit. But you know how it is. They got their lives, we chat, find we got our own interests which don't overlap and that's about as deep and meaningless as it gets."

"So a cover in space wouldn't get them excited."

"No. A passing sentence maybe."

"Don't follow your progress?"

Heana got the impression she was being seriously considered.

"Not really. Astronomy is almost esoteric to them. Something some people do. Star gazing. Computers can do that. That's the esteem they got for my vocation."

Farros nodded, satisfied. Heana was on the shortlist.

"You're AI right?"

"Basic model if there is one. Configured for my work."

"How would you like to be upgraded?"

"Shit yeah."

Farros released the clip containing the webbing and floated off towards a wall drawer, fiddled with a compartment then pushed his way back floating horizontally in front of her.

"Say ah."

"Ah."

Farros placed a tiny black square, paper thin in her mouth.

"Water?"

"I'll manage."

He used the arm rest to propel himself back towards the recliner.

"That won't upgrade you but it will make you ready. There is a waiting list." Then looked at her thoughtfully.

"Are you in?"

She understood. "Yes."

"Good welcome aboard. You are now, don't let this get to your head, with a special op group. We haven't even got a name, no designation, no headquarters, no

real chain of command, no presence, no cyberfront, no recognition, no official support, no backup, no contacts to call on."

"Sounds perfect."

"As I am going to be gone for a while, not long, I want you to run future scenarios on Prima. If the QCs get Regum mixed up, delete that. Imperative. If you do download anything, anything regarding Regum destroy it. If someone else finds out tell me, no matter where I am or where I am not. I can say this. SK is also being recruited. We want some force with us. Normal security is just not on. Too obvious. So this preliminary search can be your first assignment. Say it's a test run and since Prima is spying on us we'd be stupid not to. Any DV activity kill it, not them ha-ha. Uncollapse the field. Want me to go over that again?"

"No, got it thank you."

"Repeat."

Heana did so.

"It was when you mentioned the conundrum of knowing what the future entails, the inherent flaw, I realised you understood the implications. Always remember that."

"Most definitely."

"Need anything before you return?"

"No. A couple of hours is nothing. Got my wetpack. Plenty left."

"I'll be in touch. Better get this emergency stuff data'd."

"Oh yes. Must do." She got out the small plastic card and floated it over his way. Farros inserted it into the armrest downloaded the delivery and let it drift back to her.

Heana unravelled herself from the seat's webbing.

"I'm off. Err, how long?"

"Till you know? Well it's gotta be confirmed. But as you are the first really and I shouldn't say this but I'm talent hunting, know I, we, they, us," he laughed, "want several weeks at the earliest. Then of course we can't have people vanishing all over the place. It will take a while."

"I hate waiting."

"Start waiting. Oh, that black square you consumed. It's a pre E program. It will strengthen your mental architecture, holistically. First your AI will be adjusted. Getting it ready for the update. Then the protein strands will assemble boosting your inherent mental faculties. By rights someone should have done a Deep Resonance Scan to make sure you're not unstable, demented, psychotic or repressed in any way. Then when that process is done, this takes days, a week maybe your upgraded AI will mimic beta-

blockers so that your brain doesn't go supernova. The plus is once done and once we got the QCs more fine tuned and a few add ons put in place you will be able to mentally link via some abstract code, we're still deciding whether numerics, conceptals or abstractions, or all three to access QCs directly. Mind to Mind. Means you could manoeuvre this ship by thinking commands. Only QCs though. All to do with resonant states. What the Primaians grasped intuitively we have achieved in our own way. Head to head. Really an extension of HID capabilities. To have the computational power of the QC linked, well we're hoping also to out-resonate the DVs. The application of this smartware is phenomenal Heana. Only the limits of thinking the limit. One day maybe we can think to a computer to not just bring a chair over but create one with nanobots and pile of dirt...you get the picture."

"Your fantasising Farros."

"Sure am. That's the future. For now though it's linkage that's the big plus. Once we got the accessibility conundrum sorted...who knows we might be able to scram-ram the DVs."

"Now that I would gladly sign up on." Heana feisty. It could be the placebo effect but she was feeling great.

"Safe journey. Remember your first exercise then."

"If I get the results sooner than later..."

"Start next week when your brain's ready. You'll be able to remember the coordinates you punched in, the energy quotient used because the results you get can then be duplicated, rerun exactly as you had. Of course the time difference as far as spatial coordinates have to be entered to subtract that differential, so that even if the DVs did read it, well the universe would have moved on, unless they stay locked in on your result. I only want a snap shot, not a study. That would not give them enough time to get a lock on. Precautions are always primary. Always think the DVs might know. And remember, part of this is also to be aware of their remote targeting capabilities."

"I shall certainly remember that. And thank you Farros for the trust implied in my new position."

"You may not be head astronomer though."

"I think I can handle that."

"Yes you don't seem the insistent type."

"Oh I can be insistent, but it's usually not work related." She smiled cheekily.

"And if anybody asked why this delivery took so long, I don't mean our end per se, but if someone who could be working for Prima or some stray DV gets into this, which I

doubt, say we did a bit of astronomy on the ship, you teaching me tricks of the trade, or parts of the universe that look spectacular, the hobby end."

"Covered."

"Till next time. Don't forget, it might take months before we call you. Until then I'm just a Head."

"Cavernous." She joked.

"One last thing. The upgrade's not very focussed at the moment. You may get flashes."

Heana tapped her head.

"Yes. Hyper-illusions. They don't last long. But as the new architecture is strengthened, the protein strands weave and wend their way along your synaptic pathways bits of memory will get triggered. Even dream states. And we know that nearly ninety five percent are lost upon waking. So anything weird happens, enjoy the show."

"Would this disable my other functioning parts?"

"Daydreams. Won't remain long. Just flashes and vanish as soon as they came on. Nor destabilising or a total mind fucker of an experience."

"I like mind fucking."

"You'd have made a great DV."

"Don't tempt me." She smirked.

"You wouldn't last long with them."

"Instant boredom, I know. Anything else?"

"Stay away from the DVs for a week. I must get a manual of sorts together regarding E boosting."

"You're doing fine Farros. Err could there be cross linkage?"

"Maybe. On the plus side it should make you aware of them. Oh yes, one last thing I forgot. If someone's trying to get into your head, that includes soft scans, you'll feel a not unenjoyable slight tingling or tickling inside your brain."

"Soft scan?"

"Forgot. Once enhanced you are secure from intrusions. But we run scans as you know for all sorts of reasons. Mainly trying to catch Primaian infiltrators. There are several levels, the common one being soft scans. It's routine stuff also known as passive scanning. You'll get used to it. Not unpleasant. And even as the scan stays the tickling will fade as your brain adjusts. It's only for a moment. You're going to be one smart cookie Heana."

"As long as you put the crumbs in the right place if I crumble."

"It would need all the DVs combined for that Heana. And even then, more of them does not translate exponentially into greater penetrating capabilities. Just a change of density, not a boosted one."

"That's good to know. Dare I ask?"

"What Heana."

"Am I running this future scenario on your authority?"

Farros wagged his head. "You're right." He touched the lightpad on his sleeve, pulled the fiberoptic strand from his sleeve and hooked it to the recliner. Entered the request and authorization and waited. Moments later a tiny black data disk popped out of the slot. He flew it over to her.

"Thank you. By the way, why not upload this meaning the enhancement data onto the microblotter?"

"In case they get it. But I won't go into details."

"Let me guess, there's a way of scrambling if not deleting the data."

"Have a pleasant trip back."

"Sorry Farrus. How long until these visions?"

"Oh yes, right." He smiled sheepishly. "A day or two."

"See ya when I see ya. Nice ship." Then used the recliner to twist herself around heading for the airlock.

"Derlon, party time."

"Hi Heana. What's up?" he replied, scratching his dishevelled dark brown hair. "I was running games through QCs, see how it's logic sequencer was handling puzzles. Not that I had a chance...talk about fast and furious. Game's practically over the moment the first move is made. It ran millions of possibilities for each go, then using chaos algorithms, well the combo of both and the rest in that quantum soup brain, and it's game over. But we can see it working. I thought I'd smarten it up a bit. Used flat three dimensional board games from our ancient past, not cyberspace as your horrified looks tell me..."

"That was close Derlos."

"I wouldn't hook it in though I reckon for gaming..."

"Don't worry," Heana moving towards her chair along the semi circle of monitors, "that day will come. In fact with quantum smartware it might play with the Primaian intruders so well they don't know they're being led by the nose. Add nano-capabilities

and soon these applications will be the size of our hands. Using compressed dimensions of course. What else you been up to? Anyone miss me?"

"Thought the outer office handled that."

"Yes but you know some in SK want to see for themselves where anybody's heading. Then there's the tourists who want a sticky beak, those off duty and of course the amateurs who want to verify something. Academics from Regum whom we have to make time for. I mean the other teams handle that. But since we're a restricted zone, well it goes against the grain of everything we stand for. So any queries that end?"

"Outer office is keeping us nicely out of the picture. We're still installing the new gear ha-ha."

"And the techies going in and out. They could at least make a better pretence of it. So no snoopers. You are part of the team you know."

"I guess three is a team. You, me and Farros."

"Testing."

"Which I was doing."

"There is a manual you know that don't you?"

"Exhausted it. Whoever got that together wasn't into gaming much."

"I see. Puzzles in multi dimensional space. Should have got to it to study atoms, molecules, cells..."

"Good point. The brain even."

"Glad we got you. Never stuck for ideas. Anyway we got a project."

"Great. Prima I hope."

"Prima it is. How did you guess that?"

"That or the DVs"

"Ah off limits. General scan. Well scan's the end product, meaning the data."

Heana got out a classified time acquisitive disk and slotted it into the console. Numbers came up.

"In short Farros wants us to look at Prima, snap shot only in a decade from now. Oh yes before I forget. We are never to look at our future. Anyone who even goes down that route is finished."

"Why?" Derlos asked without thinking. Heana told him. "Oh, yes, the classic conundrum. Same with diddling in the past. Would change our present."

"Except we wouldn't know it. Think Derlos. You've been gaming too long. Should make you sharper."

"Well the QC did the gaming I was the victim." Cheesy grin.

"Of course. The past would move along the collapsing quantum probability waves into our present. With changed circumstances. Only that time line valid, intact, united, entangled, memories and all. Paradigm shift, big time."

"Spot on. So we got the coordinates from Farros. So power her up, get the triple reactors humming, alert the base we're doing another test so the back up batteries and solar panels keep things ticking over."

"You realise Heana that this beauty is going to need it's own reactor?"

"Hopefully it's own platform as well. What we're doing here has never been done before."

"I know, I know. Great stuff hey?"

"Friggin out of this world."

"We are on top of things today. What happened yesterday?"

"Oh nothing much. Accept for this test run." Thinking how her brain was being reconfigured. Yet whatever she thought she felt must have been anticipation, like seeing a bottle of wine to be drunk, the anticipation enhancing the yet to be felt effect.

Derlos merely nodded. Maybe this being enhanced was a tad overrated. More of the same except faster. Though it would be nice to have a supercharged brain. More than just data blocks, computational sequences on the molecular level at an exponential rate. Zip zip zip, bingo, the answer.

Derlos watched the status graphs as the QC went from stand by, to ready. The screen read out the coordinates of where Prima would be a decade from now.

"General scan, total environment, non-targeting, grid and space-time continuum matrix only." Heanna advised. Then alerted the Orbital that a test run was pending in fifteen. Control ready. Really more as fall back and oversight. Even with a total power outage the banks of batteries could last a week, no big deal. Longer if on half life.

"We'll know what they won't." Derlos remarked whilst they waited.

"They might have their DVs onto that. Future proofing. Or rather future aiming, like GD ships."

"Nice analogy. Because that's exactly it Heana."

"Yeah, you're right. Got their current resonance up."

"As we speak." On another monitor Prima's planetary resonance. Dark brown, green, grey, blue speckled field glowed in front of them.

"Mark it as zero."

"Done."

"Ten years from now. Wonder where we'll be?"

"Could be anywhere. Might have quantum telescopes by then."

"What are they?"

"Don't know just made it up. Maybe like some sort of quantum wave-beam that can read space itself."

"It would only project itself."

"I knew it was a silly idea. Quantum collectors."

"Now you're talking. Collecting what though?"

"Quantum states of course. Next step after nano tech. Just add the molecular equations, digitalise chemical and sub atomic laws and you could create whatever you can think of. No machines necessary. Just add energy."

"That I can live with. Right, orbital's power system are ready. Five to go, shall we wait?"

"No hurry the future can't run away."

"What if we get a surprise?"

"Like Regum vanishing?"

"Or their resonance less dense, more active, like ours. No more delusions of grandeur would be nice. Cooperation, no more stupid games."

"Nah, can't see it happening."

"Get ready."

The reactors were on line feeding the power-hungry quantum field drives. The arrays aligned focussed on where Prima would be.

"That's the easy bit done. Location acquired." Derlos informed her. "Do the countdown?"

"Bit retro..."

Prima appeared. Stronger resonant read outs. DVs still in place. Orbital still there.

"Looks the same except for the density. Sort of condensed."

"See what you mean." the monitors confirmed Derlach's comment.

"OK. End run."

"Ending now." And hit the big red button in front of him. The reactors powered down.

Heana announced to the Orbital the test run was over.

"Now to go through the data. Anything we note is on paper Derlach."

"I know."

"We have to remember security."

"I know." He said pleasantly.

"So let's see what the future is really like. I don't like that strengthened envelope."

"Sealed themselves in even more. Either we found a way through, I mean our radar lasers can get through anyway, check that whilst you're at it."

"Checking. No problems there."

"Standard radar."

"Checking. Repeat status."

"Computer disassembly capabilities."

"Strip search you mean?" he smirked. "Standard. Still able to see in."

"Well something's made them tighter."

"Their anus. Always knew they had a head problem."

"Yeah, brain fahrt activity on the up."

"Wonder why. I mean how smug can they get?"

"Earth?"

"Can't rule it out."

"Hm." Heanna considered. "So by this read out they self consolidated. Maybe they're securing themselves against our WebSpace. Now for Regum's natural EM field. Not the planet but the space."

"Can do. Check it?"

"Can we? Sorry thinking aloud. Gotta get used to these capabilities of ours."

"Checking. Nothing."

"Maybe slipped through the radar, so to speak."

"Could be. I'll check Prima's tiny EM field. You know, their space port." He called up the data. "Yep there. Faint but there."

"Well if it can pick that up...unless we withdrew of course. Maybe made some dopey deal."

"Probably. Never know what the trade off was."

"Could have said if you keep out of our space we'll leave you guys alone, 'cause they were useless in there anyway. So we moved out. No problem. Could be anything Derlach. Check for general EM field."

"And checking. Oops. Nothing."

"Nothing, again?" disbelief as the monitors confirmed her supposition.

"Have we still got the data from our first run?"

"Not on file. I'll get it." Derlach rose and went to the safe. Digit print, iris scan opened the safe. He rummaged through the files and got the read outs.

"There. Earth's EM field until the hit. Then the line wavers off."

"So it could read that but couldn't read it here. Strange."

"Maybe it's too close."

"Close?" puzzled.

"Remember how there is a fail safe built in so it doesn't self entangle? Maybe, just maybe, let's say we were running a PWF at the same time. Remember all this is new. Then so as not to interfere with that run it self extricated itself from being entangled. Might have gotten messy. Bit like meeting yourself in the future or past, if that is possible."

"Yes, good. We'll have to underline that. Right return those papers and let's get this data printed out. Oh dear. Did you run the Sentinels?"

"Forgot to tell you, I put them on auto run. Securer that way."

"Excellent."

They busied themselves with the information. Several hours later they were finished.

"One more thing. The diagnostics."

"Should be with the other stuff we collated. Let's see." Derlach rummaged through the files. "Anything in particular?" holding up a fat wad of pages.

"It's self extraction, or holding back, whatever it's called."

"We'll both go through it. At least that gets rid of most of it. But gotta go through it anyway. Might as well be now."

"At least until Farros is back or we get an order, we're free Derlach."

"About time too. I'm dying to get plastered."

"Me too. So let's get to it."

Hours later they came up with nothing.

"This is strange."

"Quantum states are." Derlach said absentmindedly as they sorted through the diagnostics.

"Could be a programming oversight. It cuts out but leaves no memory of its action. Someone forgot to tell it."

"I'll check the logic sequences. Oh boy, a simple snapshot turns into this."

"You hungry?"

"Me? No. I want to figure this out."

"Same here."

They sorted through the design parameters, auto sequences, command structures, execution modules, designated end runs. Nothing to indicate self activating

procedures regarding target specific entanglement other than feed back flash points where the QC might meet itself.

"Well that must be it." Derlach said at last having exhausted all possibilities.

"You might be right. Looking into the past the QC isn't there. But in the future it is. Farros will have to take it up with whoever designed or coordinated it's processing fields." Then she had a thought. "Check for general EM field again. It's the last thing I can think of."

They went through the files. Only Prima's tiny field was present.

"So it's deleted our leakage. Maybe we became ultra secure by then. Total shielding."

"There's still the com stuff."

"Subatomic? Maybe we use quantum states for messaging."

"Space ships."

"Maybe we jump through space."

"Ancient habitats. They would be left behind. They leak. I mean it's got all the various cosmic ray activity here."

"Well, we'll have to wait till Farros gets back. Which I may add could be some time."

"What's he up to?"

"Got no idea. Maybe he wants more of these..." as she waved her hand around her.

"A separate new observatory. Of course. And who knows, maybe a new location as well. Isolated platform. Our own space station."

"That'd be something. So Derlach. A meal and then hit it?"

"Bring some friends?"

"Shit yeah. Told ya it's party time."

Deep Space: Nervina

Asteroid belts were great hiding places. Yuli let the ship navigate through the rubble, using micro jets to manoeuvre deftly past the thousands of boulders. They were heading for one of many secret rendezvous points, this one a worked out asteroid. The ship was in stealth passing unsolicited random scans, probes around it. Other asteroids were still being worked. Plenty of ships around moving the ores to manufacturing plants dotted around the area. Mainly automated factories, robots doing the mining, with a few personnel for oversight. Bulk carriers blasted off continuously. Local traffic control acknowledged their presence and left Yuli to it.

During the flight out Nervina had two minders. Usaki making his convoluted way as head astronomer to the SS 1 and Varus her teacher looking after her. Now Varus and Usaki were on their own, Nervina asleep. Varus gave Usaki a data disk summing up Nervina's complete persona. Who she was, from the previous scan and what she knew. Which was not much. She seemed who she said she was. The scan confirmed that much. A smart Primaian with very little education. Typical of their race.

But that was just a part of their functions. Usaki studied space itself. With the use of QCs PWFs were now a study in itself. A completely new facet of interest. The concept of space itself changed. Not as empty as it looked. Apart from a plethora of EM fields, exotic rays, gravity wells there was the weird result at the centre of the galaxy. A mess of contradictory phenomena. The huge black hole that consumed stars, ripped them apart, turned them into a broiling goo then sucked it all in. At its centre of rotation high energy particles spewed out. But that was not all of it.

Opposite further out dwarf galaxies, thousands, small scale models of their galaxy. They too had black holes at their centre. The other universe much much larger and whilst looking out there discovered a high energy wave rippling outwards from their galaxy. Behind, its wake, a subtle agitation which went up in stages. The first energy wave coincided with the Calamity when Prima had withdrawn into itself breaking off contact with Regum centuries ago. Strange things were happening all around them. Yet one thing Usaki was relieved not to have found: traces of any Cosmic Consciousness. Now that would have been disturbing. But what was disconcerting was the amount of mass in the universe. There was more than one actually saw. From the data he gleaned concerning Nervina that might be what the Primaians intuited as the Cosmic Essence. And then there was Earth.

Yuli confirmed Nervina's limited knowledge was the real state of her mind. Her intellectual capabilities barely tapped. Except her recent memories. She had gone into a high energy field near the centre of the galaxy. Something was gestating there. Massive information matrixes, encoded data vortices. In mathematical terms 'strange attractors'. Strange alright.

They discussed Nervina. Loara, Sakaris, Yuli and Varus. Her mind naturally inquisitive. Almost naïve when it came to the overall situation not that any Primaian knew the true state of affairs, that of the universe and the politics involved. For the Primaians used knowledge to keep their elite at a level with which to control their kind. Nervina could be deemed an agnostic, indifferent to their belief system. As far as the alien field went she thought it irrelevant. In a way she had Reganian potential, as she was willing to learn. For her Prima was past tense.

The ship approached the worked out asteroid. Navigational screens blotting out the star field to focus on their vector. The docking bay crudely hewn out, guide lights flashing their LZ next to another cruiser. The ship reversed and edged its way in mechanical clamps securing it. Over the com Senak bade them welcome. Suited up they joined him all floating out the airlock towards guide poles. Nervina a bit clumsy let Yuli nudge her expertly towards their entry. Once through, they manoeuvred up a shaft in the airless asteroid and into what had once been a control centre. The equipment gone, the room bare with just some shelving and bolted down chairs. They all strapped themselves in.

"We didn't expect you so soon Senak." Yuli said.

"Gotta fool possible snoops. Hello Usaki, Nah, Tryces and," the helmet turned to Nervina, "our guest."

"Thank you for having me."

"OK quick time up date." Senak got down to business. Her voice impossible to pin down her age. Neither young nor old.

Yuli revealed Nervina's strange discovery near the centre of the galaxy. Usaki condensed the information into the underlying science, succinct, to the point and a little speculative.

"Interesting. Luckily its thousands of light years away. Nervina you OK?"

"Yes."

"Just that Deflection Shield Fields can make one a little drowsy." Senak advised. Nervina felt fine as did her Brain.

"Didn't feel a thing. And still myself. Pain free."

"We try." A hint of self mockery in Senak's tone. "Now we know you left Prima a while ago. Anything that seems important?"

"Only Regum, the Orbital, the alien field."

"Nothing's changed then." Relief. "What do you know of the Immortals?"

The question stumped her. Her Brain kicked into gear. "Ascended ancestors, sort of a gate of their pure souls which the pontiffs use when they pass on. A repository of the soul, souls, their divine state making them Eternal, thus Immortal."

"You know how they achieve that?" which to Nervina sounded as if Senak knew the answer. Not Nervina. She shook her head, her helmet swaying in slow motion.

"They're hooked up. Know what a persona is?"

"Oh yes. When I was a surrogate on Novus my ex-boss ran them. Being someone else on the outside." She said with confidence.

"Too right. Next step Immortals. Sort of AIs." Seeing how she would react.

"Yes." Not too sure.

"They upload themselves. A group mind so to speak. Singularities on the inside whilst a composite persona on the outside. So that each Immortal is on the same wavelength. As each pontiff ascends more data, more brain power is added." Senak explained.

"To a composite singularity?"

"Oh yes. The sum of it's parts less than the whole which is also more than. With each addition of the life field it gains in potential. Infinite potential Nervina. Trouble is it's impossible to crack. Or rather once in there is no way out." Senak was thinking that phenomena near the centre were similar, as if the Immortals were creating an off world repository. With far more power at their disposal.

"Computer based." Her Brain doing the thinking.

"The singularities? Yes. But did you know the DVs have duplicated a group mind?"

"No."

"What Prima has is the AI concept at one end and a psychic residuum at the other."

"Way beyond me. Bit of a blank there."

"That's alright Nervina. Are you surprised the holy of holies are AI?"

"No."

"No?" Senak was surprised.

"No."

A studied silence.

"So it's all one monumental lie." More to herself than the group.

They were too polite to agree with her.

"That means," Nervina brightened, missing Ratze, she would love this, "they can be brought down. Destroy them."

"Slow down Nervina. We're not that fanatical. I can see though why you might want to get rid of that charade. We would rather use them."

"Right. Sorry about the excitement."

"You have every right to be. All this happened prior the Calamity. We were once a united race Nervina. However it looks your Domain Lords and your pontiff have kept the old technology going. In a way the Immortals are their own webspace." Senak said cautiously then moving on: "Ours started as a com system. Our Web that is. Then we added the AI capabilities, and the Web went into a higher order energy state. Superimposed like the Immortals onto or within space itself. Being of a higher order, meta and mega dimensional data became instant everywhere. That data can be configured, numerically processed to create within the Web whatever one thinks of. With the Immortals it is the Cosmic Consciousness, the divine realm, the end point of advanced algorithms."

"I think I get the picture. Two competing Webs."

"Separate energy states."

"Wouldn't there be some confusion?"

"Ha." Senak laughed. "Forgive me, but that is an understatement. You see there appears to be a third Web forming. It's speculation but it's as if either something's escaped or...we just don't know. It might be a shadow realm, some sort of feedback that's dumped itself out there. So far no linkage detected. Now our data realm does incorporate that of the Singularities. But we keep them separate and we want to keep it that way. Anyway..." Senak knew Regum had more generating power at their disposal. The Primaian Singularities were really sub realms and posed no threat. Then there were the Trine Guardians, some basic firewalls and the first Infinity Chip, the precursor to Quantum computing. As far as Prima got. Senak like the others knew that as yet QCs had to remain secret. If the Primaians got hold of that then they could interfere with their Web. A real cyber war in the making.

Nervina's Brain soaked all this up like a sponge.

"So the Supreme Consciousness is Prima's version of the Web, AI generated. The combined resonant state of the Immortals self generated then inserted into their Web. They are really praying to themselves." aghast at the implications. "The Ds, the pontiff all in on this. What a con."

"Nervina," Senak replied, "it must come as a shock. Everything you were led to believe..."

"Why doesn't anyone on Regum tell them?" puzzled at their reticence.

"Tell them they are self deluded?" Yuli stating the obvious.

"The truth." Nervina more surprised than outraged. Disassociated, the Primaians a separate race. A visitor amongst them so long ago. The further away from Prima the less of an affinity with their resonance. She looked around the dust strewn shell of the defunct control room. Gaping holes where leads and cables once snaked their way into the removed equipment.

"It must come as a surprise as it would on Prima. I'm sorry." Senark's expression one of compassion.

"More like angry but I feel calm. Relieved even. No need to have this inner urge to connect with that, that, creation. Free." she exhaled, ridding herself of a malodorous vapour. Each breath clearing her mind, voiding this artificial infusion.

"We're glad you've taken this so positively. As to why not ram the truth home? Politics presumably. Leave the best till last." Loara explained. Nervina saw the logic in that.

"You have to remember Nervina that this Web of theirs works both ways. The belief preceded the construct, we think." Senark gave a weak smile. "Not that it matters. It might well be that they can't even remember the origins themselves. A psychic inversion, logic proof. Thus the universe, it's immutable laws the subtle expression of the Supreme Consciousness."

"Still, it's it's..."

"Beyond words?" Loara suggested.

"I'm truly stumped. But like I said. I feel relieved."

"The thing is Nervina, many on Prima would not think like you. To have everything one holds dear, one clusters in one's brain, one orients towards suddenly removed could cause immeasurable mental harm."

"Shock?"

"Indeed."

"And you don't want that to happen?"

"No. Out of our hands anyway." Nah cleared up for Nervina.

"Politics like Loara suggested. Whilst the Primainas are blissfully unaware."

"Keeps the peace." Loara the realist.

"Blessed is ignorance. The people do seem content." Nervina a little crestfallen.

"How strange life can be."

"Stranger than the universe." Yuli agreed.

"So the DLs are from their point of view masters of the cosmos."

"Their vision of it, yes." Semark surprised how easily Nervina accepted the revelation. Hope for the Primaian race.

"What now?"

"For us, space is the future. Us Reganian's are either restless and move out, or comfortable on Regum and move into the Web basically. As for your kind, well the game continues. Which system will be supreme. We're not fighting Prima." Senark's exhalation coming across the com link. In the distance a ship's rocket fired, then a short streak of white and it was gone.

"Nervina," Senak asked gently, "any idea if Prima was working on something else?"

"As in...?"

"Another cyber-realm. A back up?"

"I wouldn't know."

"From what little we know about you, your people are on Regum looking into folklore. How all this ties together...we are in the dark. But we get the feeling the Primaian's are after something. Searching amongst the ancient lore for an answer. As if the occult contains something within its belief system..."

"The occult." The word resonated. A feeling of immensity and unity.

"Could there be a connection?" Senark asked.

"I got no idea." Her Brain explained that the occult was a knowledge system pre-dating pure science. A belief in the unity of the universe by hidden laws which could be used. Science united with mysticism. "Wait." And she told them what she thought.

"I wonder." Loara said tentatively. "Prima might have lost that knowledge. Regum the perfect place. The aboriginals are still practicing. Infuse the occult into their Web. That might explain that mysterious something. A psychic data realm projected maybe, by potent DVs, ultra psychics."

Nervina thought back on her strange experience. "Maybe." If that was what it was then it was more of the same. "Another data realm."

"Usaki, can such a domain be thought?" Senak asked him.

"Not without a power source."

"So a group of potent remote viewing, remote inserting psychics have no chance to transform a mental image into reality by itself?"

"Only in the mind of the perceiver. Not as an externalisation."

"That's something." Senak relieved.

Nervina's Brain merely said 'object of unknown origin'.

"But an unknown though?" Loara's EAI in tune with Nervina, wanting concrete answers.

"Let's get back to the ship."

Whilst Nervina slept Senark called them together. They had slipped her a sedative so that even if she was a Natural her dream state when the brain went active did not accidentally link with what to do with her.

"She discovered something we have not." Senark began. "Initial probing's found nothing. The centre's there in this galaxy. All high energy physics. Interesting in itself but as to anything being there, nothing. I think it could be some new DV activity. However being too attentive would attract attention. Something we cannot afford regarding our current project." Hinting at SS 1.

"We still don't know whether Nervina's a plant or an in-plant." Loara reminded them.

"If she's sent back to Regum the Primaian's will get her. Against policy. We offer any political asylum. Novus is the best place for her but given that it's an open planet and this Talex character is after her...the odds are not great. So far our systems don't indicate any activity regarding her. That makes me suspicious." Loara making sure they understood the precariousness of the situation.

"You mean she could be a tracker. Like some dormant virus." Yuli thought.

"If she is that." Senak wondered.

"Unless she's here, not here but amongst Reganians to find out what we know about Earth, but what our intentions are."

"Do we have any intentions Loara." Senak asked.

"None that I know of. Accept to study it and make sure the Primaians behave themselves." Loara gave a tight smile. "Talking of study I suggest Varus," nodding to him in the lounge of the ship as it cruised aimlessly away from the asteroid belt along with a

group of cargo ships heading for Regum, "you teach her the basics of science. See how she reacts. And history. We gotta get to the bottom of who Nervina really is."

"You don't think she's just one Primaian who managed to escape?" Senark wondered at Loara's caution.

"Who helped her get away from Regum? No group I'm aware of. Then the almost perfect escape from Novus. She had help there as well. The Ratze character. She's vanished. Something strange going on."

"Loara, I hate to state the obvious but no one is ever told everything." Yuli reminded her.

"I know I know. Maybe we should send Nervina back to Novus. Find out what's happening in the Outback."

"Is that a directive Loara?"

"Regum is interested and Nervina is perfect. Talex wants her. What do we need her for? No scientific training, technically ignorant..."

"You could say that about the majority on our planet." Yuli laughed.

Loara gave her a look. "Something's going on out there. And we are locked out. She's the key in."

"Fine then. We put it to her." Senark agreed.

"Then if she goes over we'll know."

"What if they BrainDrain her?"

"So all they find is us. Nothing special there. A failed attempt at recruiting. Pretty standard fare Loara."

"Yes. I think we should create a new legend for her. That ought to confuse things a little." Loara smiled at the thought. "Install a rogue programme that'd create havoc in their system."

"Yes." Senak concurred.

"While she's out of it."

"Then, after the configuration's done she'll want to do this."

"Better get her transfer organised. See who of our free lancers is in the area then?"

Nervina said goodbye to the group. The other ship, a small cargo vessel was waiting to receive her.

"You not only have our thanks working with us but as we said, our people are in place to help you. That information is buried. Any deep probing and the information will

dissolve. Not that we expect trouble." Senark said as they gathered at the front of the airlocks.

"What if Talex has upgraded the V's?"

"Then we'll be in touch. Novus is the perfect place to dig in each other's pockets. You'll be fine. Your head's solid. In fact we value you. And hopefully in the near future we can reward you as well. You're not being abandoned."

"So I'm really in. You've taken me into your confidence and for that I'm grateful. No long goodbye's. See yas around."

Yuli fastened her helmet and Nervina entered the airlocks. There was no connecting tube, just a line. She put her wrist hook around it and using a tiny jet propelled herself to the waiting airlock of the cargo ship. One huge container at the rear, a small cockpit up front, small fuel tanks for emergency engines, nozzles flaring out.

The ship was named after it's owner: 'Mega.' Mega what? Ego? Loot? She smiled. Inside the airlock the line retracted the outer doors shut. She missed the other crew, they had been nice. Good memories. Through the second airlock. She removed her helmet, unlatched the backpack and walked into a tiny cubicle where she stored her gear. Through the last door to see 'Mega' the captain standing there appraising her. Tall, dark, rugged lined face, faded tan. Not a pure Spacer. Jet-black outfit.

"Welcome aboard. Small ship. A sleeping tube of course but that's about it. Follow me." It was more a matter of turning as they propelled themselves forwards. Along a wall status lights where four tubes were.

"Pick any when you feel like sleeping. Mine's the top right." His voice sounded younger than he was. Prematurely aged? "Now I'm running solo and as we have no lounge you'll sit up front and touch nothing, link with nothing accept each other. Understood?" very peremptory.

"Of course captain." Nervina tried to be serious.

"If you're loaded, keep it to yourself. I'm not interested in your persona. The less we know the better."

"Understood."

He gave a perfunctory smile. "At least you came recommended."

"Did I now?" arching her eyebrows.

"C'mon follow me."

They drifted through a hatch and up into the cockpit. Two seats in the rear two up front. Hers to the left. They both strapped themselves in. Screens read out numbers, location, radar, deep probing arrays on line, simplified star fields on monitors, buttons and

status lights all glowing. Space and its white stars all around them. In the middle of nowhere. Mega waited for the other ship to leave. A tiny blip on the radar. Then it went out. Cloaked.

Mega used the semi autonomous system to move his ship. He clicked buttons, lights changed from red to green to yellow here and there. Static hiss from outside audio. He shut down the comlink.

"I don't talk much."

"Nervina."

"Nervina. Unusual name."

"So is Mega." She said lightly.

"We don't talk about what we do."

"Naturally. You got the desto?"

"Sure have lady."

Nervina nodded.

"Ahm Mega," as he hit the go button, they were gently pushed into their seats, "Prima maybe searching for me."

"I am aware of that." Not telling her the ship had the classic triple layer isolation barriers around it.

"Just thought I'd let you know."

"Thanks. If you're bored, sleep back there."

"I will though I just came out of a good rest."

He shrugged.

"Been to Regum or Novus lately?" she asked hoping for information on the ground.

"No. Do courier work mainly between industrial sectors."

"Aha. I've been gone a while and thought maybe, you know, Prima is always interfering."

"Shit yeah."

After a while Nervina was bored. One could only look at space for so long. Mega was enhanced, otherwise the attention span would not persist.

"I'm off to the sleeping tube. You're right Mega."

"Thought so. Have a pleasant rest."

She manoeuvred herself out the cockpit and towards the wall behind, pressed a lower tube which extended, drifted in and rested.

She rummaged through her Brain. A clone programme inside of her. So the group had uploaded her with another cover. Another! Her Brain did not seem to mind. They must have found her real memories on Novus for she was going back to Marrus. Well he would be in for a surprise. The tube's system displayed no linked AI insertions. A bio-scan. A tiny itch measuring her brain waves.

`Where are you Ratze?' blankness. Void, darkness, complete utter total absence. Removed from space? Hyperspace? Nothing. A slight shock. Removed as a persona? No. She missed her. She went to sleep.

`Approaching end run.' Mega's voice came over the comlink.

`Getting ready.' Her Brain shrank back having kept watch. Nothing to report.

`You can stay there and watch or come up.'

`Coming up.'

Flash memory. She'd left her Brain open, reclusive. Watching, roaming. Mythology, the occult. `What you got?' she asked her Brain.

`Mythology as a rallying nexus of diffracted mental states. A multitude of possibilities, an index of potentialities. Counter move to Prima's mono-mania of one deity, one race, one empire. A meta mental construct of countless names, all seeing, all knowing, all dominating.'

`Dominating?'`

`Paradigm constraints in place. Unaligned, unaffiliated, unconnected.' `That's better.'

`Regum's diversifying and separating mind-sets, the gods a cover, a convenient abstraction. Three players to condense the multitudinal minds involved: gods, sentients, AIs. Meta-cyber-realms all. On a different plane altogether. Beyond normal consciousness. Expanding data realms. Multi directional, in space and in time. Non exclusive. The outer shells a cacophonic symphony of discordance, unassociated patterns, a-logical.'

What did it mean though? The meanings were contained within, not without. She felt like going in. `Don't' her Brain told her. `Not yet. Too unstable.'

`What?'

`The energy field waves. Fluctuating between probable and actual. Insertion would collapse the field waves into self manifestation.' Her Brain warned. It made sense but still eluded her.

"Dispatching cargo Nervina. Just warning you of the jolt."

The ship nudged a little.

"Reception coming."

"Reception?"

"Your transfer down."

"You're not."

"No return cargo."

"OK, getting ready."

She got out the tube and with Mega's help secured her backpack. He sealed on her helmet. The shuttle rendezvoused with the 'Mega'. The line connected, Nervina thanked Mega and propelled herself forewords.

My she thought, all this for me. It wasn't. There was an Orbital over Novus as well. The scheduled shuttle stopped for an extra pick up, her. Once inside she found, with remarked whisperings that there were around a dozen passengers on board. Nervina took off her helmet and backpack, latched them down, strapped in and they were on their way. No one asked her about this unusual method of travelling. A while later the shuttle shuddered as it hit Novus's upper atmosphere. Then the ride down smoothened out. Overhead view screens came on showing the pink planet. A glint of sunlight reflected off some structure down below. The dark mass of the ocean at their final descent. Her ears popped repeatedly. The city to their left. The approaching runway. Touched down, bumped a little and were jolted as the shutes opened and engines went into reverse thrust. The shuttle shuddered to a stop. A chute extended out towards the exit.

Back on Novus.

At reception six Globus Corp guards, full protection, tasers ready on standby in a semicircle past the scanner. Nervina was the last of the group. Behind the guards two individuals she recognised. Linnoch. How did Marrus know? Talex standing there boring his eyes into hers. Pathetic. Intimidation which did not work with her. She was idiot proof.

The guards stood back a bit as the customs official behind his tiny desk, a viewscreen scanned her, cleared her, asked for her ID, passed it and waved her through. The guards were behind Talex. Had he hired them? Or were they part of general security. Linnoch gave a wan smile, eyes agleam. Talex still focussed on her.

The minor itch receded. Talex had one hand in his pocket. She felt a little pressure in her mind, starting to feel docile. He had some gadget he was using on her. Adrenaline kicked in overcoming her lethargy. Not that easy. Her Brain disassociated the running interference turning into an isolation bubble. Not subduing it, more like making room to

let the gadget think it had the desired effect. A localized, target specific containment field. Overt suppressors. The effect sidelined. Under analysis.

Talex moved forward. "Nervina I'm here to escort you to HQ." the guards watching.

"I think, sir," Linnoch stepping up, "that it is my master who through me, his designated agent is to escort the lady." Polite. His demeanour very correct, relaxed, certain of his position and Nervina's.

"I have my orders from the governor-general." Talex countered.

A bit of political posturing. Even Nervina knew the GGs writ was limited to the Outer Zone, the Outback.

"That might be so sir." Linnoch replied turning towards Talex, shorter by a head. "But my master and Nervina have a mutual contractual obligation to each other. Furthermore, as you are aware, Novus operates under common law. I am sure the GG knows Nervina's legal status. Voiding the contract would set an unfortunate precedent not conducive to the legal functions of Novus's civil society." Looking calmly at Talex.

"Contracts have fallout clauses. The GG has given me full plenipotentiary powers to do just that." As Talex retrieved a small pc. "I am authorized to buy out the default clauses between Marrus and Nervina plus a generous bonus for the inconvenience caused." Smiling blandly.

"As there is no inconvenience sir, your offer having been anticipated is gratefully...rejected." Linnoch answered smoothly, "Sir."

"The contract if you will." Talex persisted. The guards watching.

"Privileged information between the two contractual parties. If you have any difficulties with the law I suggest you contact the Executive Council's legal department."

"Gentlemen." Nervina cut in. "I Nervina, of my own free will and verifying the sanity of my faculties choose, as a free citizen of Novus, under all its governing laws invested in the representative government to have Linnoch as my legal representative to fulfil my contractual obligations."

"As such, sir," Linnoch continued seamlessly, "Nervina is under legal protection. It would take a special decree by the governor general, witnessed by the Legal Department of the Executive Committee, subject to approval of the Representative Council to override your demand to take Nervina into custody thereby breaking the parties contractual obligations between them. Furthermore they would also have to be ratified and indexed, promulgated by the EC to come into legal existence as a statutory

entity. Unless such a law is in existence you have no claim on Nervina." Linnoch proceeded unruffled.

It fitted the pattern mapped out for Nervina. To make her recruitment difficult, achieved under less than conducive conditions. Nervina uploaded her latest inserted legend.

One of the guards handed Talex a micro-disk. He inserted it into his sleeve's slot. Scowled at it, then handed it back.

"Everything in order?" Linnoch hiding his amusement. Talex had been informed of Nervina's legal status. The grimace said it all. Talex barely nodded, not pleased. Linnoch stood there motionless, the guards having done their duty by clearing up Nervina's legal status. She was tempted to go into Talex's basic system. Talex harrumphed then turned and walked away. The guards at ease.

"Thank you." Nervina said to them all.

"If you would be so kind as to follow me." Linnoch also nodding at the guards. Their face plates reflecting them as glowing elongated blobs.

Linnoch, tall, lanky, smoothed down hair walked slowly a little ahead of her. Courteous, considerate, attentive yet Nervina felt uneasy. Residue of the containment field which Talex might still be exercising out of sheer spite until she was out of range. It was annoying and a little distracting.

"Linnoch," as they strode down the corridor leading out, "you feel anything?"

"In what way ma'am?"

"Nervina, please."

"Very good. Could you please elucidate?"

She decided to be open. Marrus probably had his own gear.

"Talex was trying to be clever. He had something that tried to mess with my head," Keep it vague. "which I can still feel. Dullness, sort of tired, exhausted. Something like that. I've got implants." Who hadn't on Regum? Even if she was Primaian. Maybe Marrus knew, maybe he didn't.

Linnoch considered the situation. "Yes. There is some low level interference. I'm sure when Talex is out of range that shall cease. Luckily you were not close enough to be tagged or have something planted on your person. Unless he is uploaded of course. And if he is Primaian, they are known for their psychic abilities Nervina."

They were in the reception area now. A large sign enticed travellers to 'Go Cosmic'. She just hoped she would not go psycho. More guards watching their progress as if freedom of movement was due to their benevolence. Fully protected, their face

plates reflecting the overhead lights. The rest of their body armour matte black. A few travellers, some technical support staff waiting for their shuttle, hanging around, passing time. The sound of a shuttle taking off, the dull roar in the background.

Outside the air was crisp. A twang of jet fuel, thin milky clouds above. The sun looking bleached. A few transports in the car park with several buses waiting to take passengers back to the city. One pulled out. Linnoch made his way to a low slung two seater, the doors slid open, the engine idling. They got in, seatbelts on, status lights green and were off.

Free. One last checkpoint. Linnoch gave them a disk and they were on the exit ramp leading to the expressway. In the distance soft grey towers. Nervina felt great.

"How has Marrus taken my absence?" thinking how did he know she was coming back to Novus.

"The boss was a little ropeable at first." Linnoch answered without rancour, his attention on the near empty road. On both sides desert, quiet in the car the engine barely an audible whine.

"And then?" for Linnoch had fallen silent.

"What Nervina?"

"You said 'at first'. He got worse?" giving him a crooked smile, knowing she had run out on him. Well on Talex really. She had never really read her contract letting the verbal explanation suffice. There was probably some subclause for loss of potential income or inconvenience.

"The boss is a person of many characters, very diverse." Linnoch answered as he accelerated. "He did use some choice adjectives to describe your behaviour. However once he discovered your extraordinary departure he actually was a little excited. Aware that Talex was causing difficulties he seemed to be perplexed why that man should want to recruit you. I think he would have been, ahm cautious had you accepted that man's offer. By making a hasty get away and vanishing at the same time intrigued him. Fascinated even."

"Fascinated hey?" Nervina was amused.

"That is correct."

They passed some lorries.

"You must like driving. Not in auto."

"Yes. It gives a feeling of power. Invigorating, sharpens the senses."

"So I made an impression on Marrus."

"Impressed, very much so. As was I if I may be so bold." Keeping his eyes on the road.

"You may Linnoch, you may. I just hope it caused no ripples."

"Ripples?"

"Gossip."

"Ah Marrus is not that indiscreet. Once he realised you could vanish, well his interest was piqued. However I was not privy to his thoughts concerning you. I think he took a greater interest in your attempted recruitment."

"I'm glad. I'd like to know why Talex thinks I could be of any use to him."

"You have no idea?"

"Maybe he just wants a face. Maybe he fancies me. Or is after some profile I fit in to."

"That may well be so."

"I didn't like the way he pushed his authority Linnoch."

"Neither did I. But Marrus expected that. Luckily Novus is not Prima."

"As in?"

"Contractual obligations. They are the law here first and foremost."

"Prima. I hate that planet."

"I concur."

"Talex might have some authority there but I am glad his is limited here."

"Indeed."

The city was closer, the high rise buildings muted lustrous under the opaque sky. They exited the freeway and were soon in the CBD. The streets looked deserted. Few pedestrians, mini buses, taxis.

"It's so quiet. Everybody having a day off?"

"I would not know."

"It feels so desolate. Unless it's always been like this."

"Oh I should say the Casino is under investigation. Not unusual in itself. More like intense scrutiny. Some sort of unstated irregularity."

"Really?"

"An audit of some sort."

"Someone fiddling the books?" Nervina laughed. "Should I be surprised?"

Linnoch smiled. "Something to do with the gaming machines. Very hush hush."

"Are we affected?"

"Profits are down."

"I see."

"All around."

"That is serious. Including Marros?"

"I do not know. Not that I am aware of personally. The boss does not confide his pecuniary status in me. As is proper."

"Proper. What a nice sounding word. Comforting. So if losses are up who benefits?"

"A very good question Nervina. Rumour. There are those who say that the controlling computers have been interfered with. That reflects badly on the Casino as a corporation and by default the families who are both investors and directors. You can see where the accusations would head."

"That is interesting. A scam."

"Let us hope not."

They were driving down a ring road, skirting the city to their left. The pink desert to the right.

The Casino's triple towers appeared in the distance. Opaque sunlight bathed it in burnished splendour, the solar panels angled towards the light. The sun glinted off the maglev train. The ocean sparkling blue.

"I wonder how that could be done. You'd have to insert camouflage, spread some false alarms around to keep the sentinels busy, have the data co-conforming with the master codes. There'd have to be several, then sneak in between the spaces. That would override the masters. The codes dense, boosted as well. Not impossible, in theory. Of course they might have changed the odds themselves. Tinkering by rewriting the equations regulating the odds. Yet the system is mute. But that would then be a conspiracy by the owners. Not just the machines, the computers even the codes. Three sets. But it does not make sense except as sabotage. What does Marrus say?"

"Plenty Nervina. He thinks it's the Primaians. They are heavy gamblers. So by making things worse it might wean them off it."

"That would create further losses. Anything in the political grapevine?"

"Ah, consternation. A lot of hot air is being generated. Questions are being asked."

"Destabilizing a profitable outfit."

"The numbers do not lie. As a gamer one has access, it's public."

"Someone must still win though. Can't be all losses."

"Oh yes Nervina."

"The system's been fiddled with. So who stands to gain? It always comes back to that."

"As you suggested, it could be Prima laying on the pressure. There has to be compensation somewhere. Our representatives perhaps?"

The triple towers were looming up in front of them. Traffic scarce.

"There are other rumours as well."

"My my."

"Word has it the GG wants to release at the request of the Ruling Council some of their Volatiles into the workforce."

"Is that good?"

"The locals are none too pleased. Meaning those from Regum."

"I can sympathise. Who knows what crap they've been instilled with."

"It has to be political." Linnoch considered.

"Isn't it always?"

"Voting rights."

"Stacking the numbers." Nervina sighed. She was not political. But Prima as always was there trying to gain some advantage.

They followed the road into the casino complex. The concourse devoid of people. The lights a little garish, the glitz chintzy, tacky. Down an entry ramp and into the underground car park, then straight into a lift. The door clanged shut behind them and they ascended to Marrus's level. The floor turned the car around. They got out, Nervina stretching herself. A door opened to a corridor and they were in Marrus's office.

Plush, magenta carpet, pale grey walls, in both the outer office where his secretary Ageha sat hooked to the desk dictating some notes. She smiled effusively, her mousy hair shining under the overhead strip lights. They walked straight into Marus's office. Dressed in a black two piece suit, cufflinks that looked like com-links and probably were his bald head shining under the multitude of halogen lights in the ceiling, screens along the walls he sat there in front of a lightscreen looking at numbers, waving them to sit down. They sat in the plush leather lounge looking back out over the city. If Marrus was displeased with Nervina's vanishing act he showed no sign. Neither had he welcomed her. She waited.

"What a shocker, a shocker." He said to the screen. "Good with numbers Nervina?"

"Basics." She answered evasively. "Nothing formal."

"Take a look." On top of the low slung table a light-screen appeared. "It's all gone to crap."

Nervina smiled.

"You think this is funny?" he barked.

"No sir. Just your sunny sentience shining through. I like it."

"Hm. You too Linnoch. See what you make of this."

Maybe Marrus would question her later. She hoped her escape was mysterious enough for him so that it gave the impression there was a deeper reason than just Talex for her rapid exit. Merely being head hunted was a positive appraisal in itself. Her Brain serene.

"Right fellow sentients. These are some of the results chosen at random." Marrus barked. The screen split. "Here are the winners, using the thousand run. On the left the old runs, on the right the current runs. I can't tell the difference. Same zero hits, same or similar full runs per thousand. End results are mega negative. Before a few hundred plus, now thousands minus. The spread looks the same. What the shit is going on?"

Nervina concurred. The spread did look the same, except, except, her Brain was doing the calculations. Similar but not the same. Aha.

"Got it. It's the position of the zero's and the thousand pay out. The zero's hit the positive and also after the thousand jack pot. They all like this?"

"You're right. Why didn't I see that?" Marrus grunted. "I'll call up some more."

Same result. Her Brain suddenly withdrew without letting go of the numbers. Rather more like an overall view. The forest not the trees. Whilst the left, the old runs were pure random sequenced, her Brain informed, the right screen were patterned. Definitely. Like ripples, or something. Abstract. Was someone using these readouts for a message? Whatever it was, the pattern was there.

"I don't know sir. Let's try superimposing several runs, merge them, get an average. Can that be done?" Linnoch suggested.

"We'll see." Marrus answered.

The screen split into ten, using the right side read outs. For a moment the results were jumbled, then settled. Troughs and peaks hidden in the numbers. Something was affecting the results. The hits tending towards the negative.

"Well the results stand sir. Positive results get hit by zero's. The individual results are pretty much the same. Just that previous where the zero's would wipe out a negative run they now do the opposite."

"Yes I see that now. Something stinks here."

"Sure does. How long?"

"A while."

"Any upsurge in Primaian's playing?" Nervina taking over from Linnoch.

"Don't know. What's that got to do with it?"

"They're psychics. It could be an attempt at sabotage."

"Well I'll be...sabotage? Who the fuck gains there?"

Nervina and Linnoch exchanged looks.

"Sir, they might be crashing the system itself, the random sequencing."

"They can do that?"

"They got remote viewers. They might be willing this."

"Affecting machines? No way. How?"

"It's only a suggestion." Nervina and her Brain happy with that supposition. "Who knows what is going on in the Outback. Maybe Talex is behind this. You know..."

"Yes, at the space port. Is that why you left, because of him?"

"Yes sir. He wants, insists I work for him."

"What have you got that's so interesting? Apart from a pretty face and a brain that can gamble?"

"Maybe it's connected. If so he didn't need me after all."

"But yet he did. Is there something I should know?"

"Indeed sir. If so I would like to know myself. Maybe the Primaian's have merged some volatile brain with an AI."

"Testing it here? Holy shit. What next? A simple glitch and you start going into overdrive. Makes sense. A test run of sorts. More than a test run." Marrus on fire, "a successful test run. If they can do this, they can do anything. Sabotage, that's all we need."

"If I may sir." Linnoch asked.

"Yes?"

"We were talking in the car sir and it came to us that given the Primaians are such inveterate gamblers this could be a way of weaning them off their addiction."

"And fuck the Casino at the same time. You got a point Linnoch."

"Well, with Nervina's input sir."

"Yeah yeah, nice. Nervina, tomorrow do a couple of thousand runs. Any time. See if you can beat the odds. You did before. If this shit continues that's confirmation at one end. If you beat the odds then my other hunch is confirmed."

"Other hunch sir?" Linnoch looked interested.

"That you Nervina got more between the ears than meets the eye. Don't worry, don't look so shocked. I'm making sure you're gonna be protected."

"You mean I wasn't before?"

"Saved your butt at the space port."

"So you did. Thank you."

"However if you get lucky too much you might become even more a person of interest. And we can't have that, can we Linnoch."

"Indeed we cannot sir."

"Nothing too heavy please." Nervina tried to sound light.

"Rest assured sweetheart nothing as heavy as Talex's lead head intended. Enjoy the rest of your day. Your suite's still there, as you left it."

"Thank you boss."

"Yeah, I am the boss."

In her suite she wondered about random sequences going non-random. Some influence there to be sure. Fiddled with down here, via DV activity up there or Talex's Volatiles in the Outback. Or... 'Brain' does Talex know?

Nothing.

'Does he suspect?' and she formed a hazy image of her Brain as a brain.

Nothing.

'Is me connected to the Casino in any way?'

Nothing.

'Why does Talex want me at all?'

A slight flicker of activity. 'Enhanced Natural Volatile. Perfect as a control.'

'Meaning their experiments out there?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you.' She relaxed. So he's recruiting. 'Am I the only one on the planet?' Then realising her Brain might do a scan and give itself away she deleted the question. She was even tempted to scan Talex who might be a latent potency. The last thing she wanted was to be linked with him. The entanglement could be disconcerting creating unnecessary interference.

Ah the feeling of enhancement. It made her feel supreme. The skyscrapers reflected the burnished light of the sun behind high thin clouds. Sniped memories of Novus. With more vibrancy. A new planet, a new life. The entrepreneurial spirit alive and

buzzing. Yet on the way in, even when skirting the city it seemed as if everybody was laying low, keeping off the streets. Ah well can't be on the go all the time.

She tried to self diagnose knowing now she was Enhanced. Maybe that was why not just Talex, but some DL was after her. Or simply her defection? Were others watching? If so they were good for she felt no presence, no scans. Maybe she was boosted as well, reconfigured, loaded with nodal functionary add-ons. She used a mirror template to search through her Brain's superstructure. The only thing she sensed was a fog. Her Brain was self cloaking, not even accessible to herself. At least it could hide its essence secure from prying probes.

In the afternoon she started to gamble at Marrus's machine. The gaming device, a viewscreen and simple console to deal the cards got her excited. Gambling self activating a feeling of pleasant anticipation. To beat the odds. To will a result even though the odds were mathematical equations based on the amount of cards in a closed system. The random results of zero and jackpot runs still current but like the results they had gone over in Marrus's office, came at the worst times. Zero's when winning, jackpots at a new run which by the end was whittled down to a bare win. Her Brain involved in trying to sense the sequence and configure it to minimize the potential loss into a probable win. Around her in the 'high flying' lounge a few inveterate gamblers, faces vaguely familiar. Hostesses cruised amongst the gaming machines with free drinks. Nervina stuck with vegetable juice wanting to keep a clear head. Even though she knew her body's nano-bots could break down the alcohol into energy without the mind numbing effect might be picked up by either remote security scans or some potent psychic if they were Primaian super volatiles.

She was losing and others doing much worse than her. Their runs terminated sooner. The losers left. The Casino was still making money for one had to insert a credit of two hundred for ten runs, win or lose. Only they were getting less.

She was going through the motion of dealing her cards, not really willing anything when suddenly on the last run and near the end of the deals she managed to get two jackpots. Zowie. It reduced the losses considerably. Not focussing netted results. Non will, non intrusive with a positive result. Five to go. In by a margin. A minus ten, close, a plus five, close. She willed two more wins for a trifecta. Plus two and the last, plus five. Yep, the trifecta had been on the cards. Her Brain just knew it. She'd made a profit. Not much but as she got her cut the first thousand run worked out well. Go for another? Somehow she

felt the machine had been depleted, exhausted of good luck. Let the others play the coming negative runs and dive in later. It had to do with timing. When luck would strike.

She disengaged her slightly hyper excitement that made gambling so addictive. The credit was with Marrus's account which was linked with hers for her take. She'd collect it later. The others continued to chase the odds

A vague sense of being sought alerted her. Someone was interested in wanting to make contact. More an inkling than a direct message. Her Brain held back not chasing down the source. Someone enhanced. Not unusual but cautious. Primaian's had no finesse. They were too logical, straight to the point with no subtlety. The 'A Café' flashed through her.

She tried not to look around. Walking slowly the gamblers around her focused on their machines, the faces glowing green from the screens in front of them. She left the exclusive lounge out on the broad concourse. Below tourists ambled about. The buzz that had been there previously was absent. A subdued atmosphere. More like lost sheep than eager beavers out for the day.

She circumnavigated the 'A Café'. Just a few patrons at the outside tables. One or two individuals staring into space. A few with their own viewscreens doing business, keeping in touch or looking at the news. Nervina entered the café. A bar, a display of cakes and biscuits, the cappuccino machine hissing as a waiter made some coffee's, it's rich aroma sparkling her brain. No one as yet paid any attention to her. A few couples, middle aged and older still entranced with each other. Love. Then she spotted him. A solitary figure with his back to her. The source. Coatless with just a plain shirt, slacks, legs crossed, fawn brown shoes. Very forgettable clothing.

He lifted an arm wanting to attract the staff. She stopped to look at the cakes on display. Ambling slowly inwards she saw it was Marrus. Dressed down like a retiree in gentle poverty. With an empty coffee cup.

"Take a seat." He croaked. Even his voice was different. The sunglasses. Embedded chip and comlink. That's how he got into her head. Low level, her Brain felt no telltale itch. Just a vague sense of being called.

"Thank you sir." Nervina sat opposite him. His pork pie hat hiding his bald head. A waitress appeared.

"Tomato juice." Nervina ordered. She waited for Marrus but he just shook his head.

"Not bad. Your last run."

"Luck." Which it might have been. Luck she wanted, anticipated and got.

"And a trifecta. Luck had nothing to do with it."

"Sir."

The waitress returned with the juice in a tall glass. Nervina did not bother to ask Marrus at his change of appearance. He probably had several persona's he played with depending on mood.

"Linnoch is making some enquiries regarding your pesky friend. He's got some interesting results." Without further explanation. Marrus wanted to see the complete picture this time. Not just the Casino but the whole situation on Novus. "But that can wait for the moment. You winning is what interests me. No one else on the floor. It was good of you to get out when you did."

"Sir. I disengaged, going random, non sequential, discordant even by not concentrating whilst still being a presence hoping to align myself with the random sequence which we know ain't random."

"So you non-aligned?" impressed. "Excellent. There could be something in that."

"Hope so."

"I found that my office has foreign ears. That's why we're here. Linnoch is working on it. Not surprised?"

"No sir."

"Hm. Who? Not you. Politicians after dirt? Corporations after tricks? Families after a position? Gamblers desperate to crack our approach maybe."

"Maybe."

"Well my own creepy crawlies will sort that. Incorporate their AI and then feed them the bullshit they deserve."

"So it's no problem."

"It's a problem alright. Not the technology but the nerve of the intrusion. How did they get in? It has to be through the Casino. Or someone inside."

"I see."

"Do you?" eyeballing her.

"Not really, no." without going deeper that is.

His large eyes a little blank. Probably some background programme running in his head. His mood sombre not like his usual ebullient self. She tried the minutest of soft scans whilst he was concerned about his bugged office. His retreat, his world invaded. Sullied.

Reptilian brain. Enhanced though not deeply embedded. Subject to mood swings. Thus the various personas. Some suppression activity. A strong discordant personality which he controlled to a certain degree. Possible nano bots. Able to shunt in

and out who he wanted to be. Subject to aberrant behaviour. She stopped the search. He seemed not to have noticed.

"So what do you know?"

Whoosh. What did she know? Nervina on edge, alert. Was he fishing? Had to be. She did her utmost to withdraw into herself subsuming her Brain in the process.

"Depends." Sipping her tomato juice. At least it wasn't watered down.

"Nervina. I sense a vague unease of some impending conflict situation. Ever since you arrived. So is it your brain or that of your masters? Are they stuffing around with, well, stuff that they don't understand, I don't understand."

"I don't understand." Wondering what he was on about? All she knew she had been helped by total unknowns.

"Someone is stuffing us around at our expense."

"I gathered that sir."

"An inside job. My office, the Casino going for broke literally. And I get a sense of unease. About everything Nervina. Everything."

"Like luck running out?"

"Exactly. You got it. So you feel it too?"

"No sir. A guess. Maybe the Volatiles are going active."

"Well if they are there will be shit to pay."

"Hit back. If they are behind this they have to be linked. That works two ways sir."

"Yes. Easier said than done."

"Surely there must be smart systems on Novus." Nervina had a feeling of things being out of tune. Maybe that was why the city was so lethargic. Flooding Novus with discordance. Like the Primaian's containment fields.

"Probably."

"The overhead Orbital? Maybe they're trying to screw the Volatiles in the outback and this washback or infusion is having a general effect."

"You're one smart cookie. How is it that I think your are not who you are?"

Think. "It's normal. I seem to have that effect on others."

"Yeah. Maybe. Not sent to spy on me." His eyes containing a hard glint.

"What for?"

"You tell me."

"If they can bug your office they then wont need me, sir."

"Cut the sir crap Nervina. Everybody knows machine intelligence aint perfect. Eyes on the ground."

"But why? I mean if there is an op going surely going for the biggie, the Casino or it's heads would be more appropriate. You are a singular player, well," she smiled, "I think you are. Unless you're not." There, up to him now.

Surprised at her supposition.

"There are corporations that built the Casino. There are Families that both have invested and run it. They are the one's who run the numbers. You know, back individual bets. As long as the Casino gets it cut. Now you have been making a mint there. Individual runs usually loose, so by placing a winner it ends up nine out of ten times as a loss. Except with you. You manage to back your own winners, loose a few for appearance sake."

"From which you profit as well. Even now." She reminded Marrus.

He gave a non committal grunt. "I still think you're a spy of some sort. I don't know how they bugged the office but your appearance is too coincidental. And the break in which affects the random sequence. It's all very very wrong. It's like you're some sort of trigger mechanism. So I'm keeping you close for now." Marrus stated. "No argument."

"Are you saying...?"

"Nervina, the coincidence is too much of long odds coming home."

"Marrus has it ever occurred to you that you're off track?" she toyed with the tomato juice. "If I had the power to affect these computers you think I would be in the open? Consider. I have the means to screw with the core. For starters I would use a proxy to upload whatever needs uploading to create the desired results. Being in the open, being here, it really is not operationally secure now is it?"

"The best place to hide a pebble is amongst other pebbles." pleased with that piece of wisdom.

"Certainly. But you forget I'm basically a refugee."

"Good cover."

"Talex?"

"Yes, that is interesting. Anyway the reason I want you close is not for those reasons. You're still making credits come my way. That's the reason I want you to keep to the contract. But your escapade bothers me."

"It did me too Marrus."

"It also confirms what I know about you. You basically advertised the fact you could get out, just like that." Snapping his fingers. "What does that tell me?"

"I'm fleet footed?"

"Ha ha. Anyway I'm calling in some brains. I'm gonna get to the bottom of this shit that's happening here Nervina. If you're involved..."

"I could be a set up and not know it." it was really an idea with no substance.

"Then I'd have to get rid of you."

"Nice to know one is wanted."

"Yet I trust you." He relented.

"I wish you would make up your mind Marros."

"Who knows? If you're smarter than you think you are, or even know, you may still have some other uses."

"Marros, I'm not some sort of play by numbers persona. I'm no rogue element. Anyway I think you overrate my importance. If I were the source behind this aberration I would not be this open. Even as camouflage. As a pro the subterfuge would leave a trace. No if you're looking for clues it's amongst the DVs up there. They have mass-minds, self linking. They've been trying to crash programmes ever since programmes existed. The answer is up there. Believe me. That much I do know. The Primaian's don't hide that you know."

"You could be the lead in."

"DV's don't need me for that."

"Fine. Have it your way. I am exploring other possibilities. One way or another I'm gonna find out. And when I do..."

"You're gonna use it to your own advantage." Nervina finished off for him.

Linnoch looked at Ex as they sat in the coupe at a vacant block on the western fringes of the industrial estate. Windows up, the batteries ran a current through the whole chassis, glass included. Any invasive surveillance effectively blocked. From here they could actually see Ex's flat, a low rise two story cement block where he had his workshop.

"I'm like the building Linnoch, crappy on the outside, deceptive on the inside." His podgy young round face observed the thin man. "See those containers behind us? Well that's what the first settlers lived in. Then came mass immigration. I followed in their wake. Primaian's mostly. Getting away from it all. At least here surveillance is a private affair. That's why I suggested this place. Plenty of room, some open space. Anybody gets curious we know about it. My work on computers might not be a secret, but my methods are."

"You do have a reputable record of satisfying your customers Erx." Linnoch was tempted to call him `sir'. It was second nature without any hint of the obsequious. Erx was dressed down. Sloppy joe and fatigue's. Linnoch's pc already discovered that Erx ran some embedded interference. Maybe in his clothing. If he was enhanced, uploaded, configured he kept that in the background. "Nice bike." Propped next to the coupe he added as Erx relaxed taking his time, since customers came to him. Furthermore his reticence served him well.

"Yes. Custom made. Petrol engine, well mixed with a special oil for high revs. Packs a punch. Will throw you if you're a novice." What he did not say was that the handlebars were DNA sensitive. A thief, short of picking it up could not ride it. Even then the electric shock was enough to singe any culprits greedy fingers.

"Very impressive." Linnoch felt at ease with this young man. From what Marrus had said, Erx was a loner, classic Reganian. His knowledge of computers excellent. Upgrading old computers, seeking out vulnerabilities, securing data systems, creating diversionary programmes against invasive malware, debugging compromised systems and hopefully able to locate his boss's bugs. The Casino was a hot bed of incessant prying. Who owned what. Not what they claimed to be involved in officially but what they used to be where they positioned themselves. The Families might act as a front politically but underneath was an undercurrent of constant subterfuge. Like the position the Casino as a legal entity found itself in. Maybe through Erx's expertise more than just neutralising the bugs would lead to the perpetrator who if clever would use a one-off operator like Erx to achieve penetration. Now and again the forces of law and order would bust the more daring exceeding the accepted norm of assertive security measures. Erx content to swim at the bottom of the cyber currents. He was even known to reject the more dodgy propositions of desperate operators.

"It has been said you saved one of the space corporations from some massive cyber attack." Linnoch slowly getting to the point of his visit. Paying compliments never hurt. Respect whom you deal with. Linnoch had his boss's confidence.

"There is always someone lower than oneself as I constantly discover." Thinking of the Grobaldi Concern. Family tightly knit with one or two shady outsiders who were useful in their own way. Acquiring credit without actually having to use one's own resources necessitated the need for certain sharks. Erx wondered if Linnoch was alluding to the audit he had run for that family. Not so much the numbers themselves but the fixed system that had scammed minute fifth position decimals of various accounts.

Linnoch assumed the reference did not apply to his boss. "The reason Ex is that my superior has a specific inconvenience that needs to be dealt with." Obliqueness necessary until he was satisfied Ex was the right person to deal with it.

"Yep. Not unusual. A bit different to Regum."

"A bit." Linnoch barely suppressing a sardonic smile. Behind them the rumble of a rocket taking off.

"This person or entity you represent, what are they?"

"Does it matter?"

"Family feuds. Corporate skull doggery. I don't get involved in turf wars. Not healthy. It attracts attention Linnoch." Ex said a little curtly. It was too early for him. He rose at midday and as far as he was concerned it was early morning. Still the secretary who had contacted him had found him awake. Not that he hid himself. He was in a general data base somewhere.

Ex was impressed with Linnoch's demeanour. Correct in his speech and manners, polite and cool, not emotional. A man in control. A calm soul. Whether through molecular stabilizers or as a natural did not matter. Not that Ex cared much, for anybody. He could simply not be bothered. That included himself. Being a persona he thought pretentious. Nothing but a bloated ego. He sometimes wondered if he had an ego at all not having configured himself. He jacked-up when necessary. That way cyber attacks were a mere external inconvenience. They might crash his pc but so what? He had plenty more.

"I cannot acquaint you with the reasons for my boss's need to approach you because, quite frankly we don't know who is behind the inconvenience."

"Recent?"

"Very."

"Before we proceed Linnoch I need to know who or what I am dealing with. With persona's the rage, who is what? Sometimes with some of them they get confused as to their orientation. It causes problems." In his office come workshop he had interfaces to drill through personality shells, interphasers to run radar cloaked intrusions, short penetrators that activated for a nano-second, distant insertive resonance projectors creating false realities and his latest spying dust mites that burnt out when transmitting, leaving dust in their wake. That covered what most of his customers required when dealing with intelligence.

"I can reveal the what at this stage of our negotiations."

Ex shifted in his seat making himself more comfortable. Time to really pay attention. Even if it was too early for him.

"Bugs."

Ex laughed. Linnoch tried to keep his mien.

"Indeed."

"On Regum that would be fun. But on Regum cyberspace is a game. Here it's real. Not that one finds bodies. But it has been known for people to vanish. They probably had to leave town fast. Sometimes a customer finds out things they'd rather not, usually when it's too late. Or the patsy that did uncover some dirt who knew too much. Luckily Linnoch I don't care. I don't gossip. And to gossip one needs someone to gossip to. The few friends I do have are what I call fringe dwellers. Not into society at all."

That seemed to fit the profile Linnoch had from Marrus. That's why he was seeking Ex out. Linnoch could relate here. He too was not into company. At best amusing but mostly boring. Money, power, position the social cement. Parties to be seen at, people one knew, deals one made. All so tedious.

"That is one of the prime reasons why you have been chosen Ex."

"Your boss is a target then? What's he into?"

A studied silence.

"Linnoch I'm not after his private life, if he has one. The nature of the beast reveals the environment it lives in."

"I understand. Gambling mostly."

"Mostly. What else?"

"Speculator."

"No industrial espionage? It's a growth industry."

"I'm sure it is. No my master is his own man, his own concern. An individual when it comes to business. Unaffiliated. Not even on any board. As to his stake holdings or shares or interests I cannot reveal that because I myself am not privy."

"I almost believe you. So why would a gambler be bugged?"

"That is the big question Ex."

"The Casino onto him?"

"He uses surrogates."

"Maybe they are the target."

"Ex, given the hiatus this has caused it is an excellent insight. But no."

"So then," shifting in his seat again, "the surrogates. If he's as clean as you think he is."

"One, Nervina."

Erx pulled out his little pc and punched in her name. Her entry to Novus the latest info. "Who is Talex?"

"Oh some flunkey from the Outback. Trying to get his hands on her. She's under contract so no deal there. And reluctant to go out there."

"Don't blame her. So why her?"

"She is I believe a refugee. Escaped from Prima."

"No one escapes from Prima."

"Well Erx, she defected from Regum."

"Ah. Enterprising. Well that clears that up. If I take you up, it's pure credits only. Not interested in low value shares by the container full, or futures in precious metals, a stake in some tottering company Linnoch."

"That shall present no problem Erx."

"I don't deal in private conflicts but do covert engagements within certain limits. Anything to do with Prima I consider fun. Personal revenge I leave to others."

"A wise attitude."

"Your employer has a name?"

"First I have to ask. Can you trace the bugs?"

"Shit yeah. Mostly. Smartware always has a source. Even when that is a front. The configuration, the guts of the equipment usually reveals the level of operation, the hardware and software the object of the intrusion indicates the MO and that leads to a source, whether open or not."

"As I said. We are bugged. Now we do have all the gadgets in place for security and still they managed to get in. We do have a secretary but she is not allowed in to the sanctum unless the boss is present. Or myself. Now I am not the culprit. I like my position, and I am not craven to anybody. It might be an inside job."

"The Casino?"

"Most likely."

"Why?"

"Well there is an audit on. Certain discrepancies have been unearthed."

"What kind?"

"Losses. The odds of winning have shifted."

"The Casino loosing as well?"

"On paper yes. Less gamblers for starters."

"I see. Anybody else bugged?"

"No one is saying."

"They wouldn't, no." Erx considered. "Too embarrassing."

"That might be so."

"So it's not personal."

"We don't know but we believe not."

"That's a plus. Tried a private detective?"

"That might send out certain signals Erx. That is something that can be looked into later."

"Yes. So it's not you, or staff. What about this Nervina? She might have. If this Talex is pressuring her."

"She's rejected his approach Erx."

"On the surface."

"No Erx, she is too open. Anyway she has no access."

"Right. Just exploring possibilities. The question always is, who profits?"

"Indeed."

"You say an audit."

"Correct."

"It might be the auditors themselves. In conjunction with the Casino's board."

"You do have a point there. Would that influence your decision?"

"Only in the positive Linnoch."

"May I ask why?"

"Well if it's official then their approach to their problem is clandestine. If it comes back to me I won't end up a floater. I'd get a visit and that would be that. And I would obey Linnoch."

"Of course. So Erx, do we have an understanding?"

"We are having a conversation."

Linnoch wanted an answer. "Will you do it? Trace the bugs. Analyse them, whatever you need to do."

"My fee is five hundred up front, two hundred a day or if you prefer a thousand all in all, however long it takes."

"The first option."

"Fine."

"May I see your establishment?"

"Is that necessary?"

"Confirmation of your capabilities Erx."

"Alright. Follow me then."

Erx exited the coupe and got on his bike. He kick started it, savouring the growl of the machine. He waited a moment and then led the way out, down the road. Linnoch behind they went back to the western fringe of the CBD where Erx rented his flat. He rode into a back alley, dustbins alongside the rear of the buildings, activated the remote to open the garage and rode in. Linnoch parked outside. He noted with satisfaction that others parked their cars here as well. There were only a few.

The door of the garage opened to the hallway. Erx disengaged his security system of his flat on the second floor. They entered his abode.

Linnoch was impressed. Shelves lined the walls with parts everywhere. Harddrives, circuit boards, soldering iron, containers with spare parts, wires, leads, plugs, two generators, com links, exotic constructs, screwdrivers, clamps, grips, a vice, a lathe, drills, tiny hammers, the work shop well equipped if a little messy. A desk strewn with papers, good for keeping correspondence secure, a small wall safe bolted to the floor. A lounge, a viewscreen propped on a low table, a stereo, tiny kitchen and the bedroom. The flat looked out at a high rise. The windows slightly tinted. Smart glass.

"You want anything?" as Erx sat at his desk.

"No thank you."

"Do we need to sign a contract?"

"My master prefers not to."

"So we trust each other."

"That is the correct term. Yes."

"You got any credits on you?"

"My boss assumed you would prefer that form of payment."

"Nice."

Linnoch extracted a credit disk of fine hundred. Erx started a small computer, inserted the card to verify it's contents.

"Excellent. Right to business." Erx activated a low level scan of the room. Linnoch was neutral. As were the clothes he wore. Except for his comlink and pc both of which were offline. He detected a minute object. Ah.

"I see you brought a sample. I hope it's encased."

"It is Erx." And handing him a tiny cube. "It's from inside." Not revealing its origins. "Of course they would know it's gone off-line. But this box is made from some very exotic polymer. Given the nature of the device penetration is most unlikely."

"Yes. I got a few myself. SpaceKorps."

"SpaceKorps?" Linnoch was surprised. High grade gear.

"Tell me Linnoch, please take a seat, the lounge," Erx gestured as he turned his chair around, "had your boss considered counter measures?"

"As in?"

"Bugging the buggers."

"If it can be done. If you can do it."

"I'm working on a finished prototype. Can't reveal it."

"Of course not." Linnoch felt with satisfaction that Erx was up to the job.

"But first things first. I shall analyse this bug and that might, might Linnox reveal as we said a lead in."

"Well that is all satisfactory then."

"Agreed. So shall we take a look see?"

"Please."

Erx rose and took it to a tiny box. "It's DNA configured." Walked to a multi-wave-field resonance cavity scanner. Linnox's thumb print opened the tiny box and there was a flat brown square the size of a microdot.

"In she goes."

"What does that do?"

"It reads it as a field." He shut the door which glowed grey, a screen. Moments later the guts of it was revealed. A tiny set of catalogue IDs, encrypted. Erx started one of his computers to run through his data base of manufacturers, distributors, end users.

"It's SK."

"You certain?"

Erx smiled. "SK is, shall we say a-political. Believe it or not, they do favours now and then. It cuts both ways. So whoever got this is into space. That narrows it to five families. This little beauty went missing two years ago." reading the data off the computer. "It's probably been around. Now someone at the Casino got into your boss's office. Through the master system. A breach of trust. Now they might be investigating your boss for the usual, hiding his profits, declaring his take on the short side. Or if exceptionally lucky wondering how he is winning against the odds."

"A possibility."

"Now, whatever I discover, covering technological applications, codes, programmes, systems, hardware, peripherals become my property. It's for my data base so I can do my job better. I undertake not to release any gained information to any third party and so on and so forth."

"Agreed. But you will release the pertinent data so my boss can take countermeasures. That is not negotiable."

"All relevant data will be released concerning this case."

"Excellent. So SK?"

"Definitely. So which family is hot? Err, does your boss owe anybody?"

"I would not know."

"Pity. However if you say the Casino is undergoing an audit...Are any families on their board?"

"The Grobaldi's. Then there is the Narcis Group and Consolidated Finance. A bit tangled. The others are actually there by executive decree. Political appointments. And my boss."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Why is that?"

"I think it's time to give them a taste of their own medicine."

"My boss would be delighted with that proposal."

"Give me a few days."

"Very good."

"And now I shall see you out."

Elentra.

"The resonance is muddy." Elentra said to Kroena more just to keep conversational with her second.

"Regum could be running interference." Kroena having pulled up her chair closer to the glowing banks of monitors in the semi dark observation and control room. No tech staff present, this was too sensitive.

"They're all there on board. Should be easy. After all Juris is the lead in."

"More like a halo." Feeling frustrated at the lack of resolution.

"Done a physical?"

"No just started now."

"I'll do one."

"Careful. General sweep only."

"Of course Elentra. Can't let them know we're following them. What are they doing there anyway?"

"Kroena even I don't know that. Pentham said it was better to have an open mind. Not pre-empt the search results."

"That old story. That's for the DV's, not us."

"Must be sensitive."

"Even so DV's can't get in here...can we scan ourselves?"

"How do you mean?" watching the foggy penumbra with six murky centres, six individuals with no specifics regarding their headspace.

"I'm wondering. Something is blocking the DV's..."

"Dead right there."

"...like the set up this room uses."

"Then I'll call up the programme." She accessed the loaded files regarding their security, then went for the specs and expected action sequence. Elentra compared them to the fog. "A match. Approximately. Same difference."

"So their ships, well that one can isolate itself from DV intrusion. Great."

"Can't even determine probable desto. Now what have we here?"

Kroena used one of the monitors to see what Elentra was seeing. "A double bind." Pausing. "Here?"

"Interesting isn't it. Any idea?"

"A presence amongst us."

"Dead right. How long has that been there?" more to herself. Elentra ran a reverse time sequence. She was puzzled and impressed. "You got that?"

"Sure have."

"I'm going to do a standard diagnostics on that. Something Kroena really is amongst us."

"Some sort of back up self-contained resonance by the look of it. Undetermined."

Elentra hit the reverse run sequence. The results conclusive.

"Started recently, a few hours ago. I'm going to see what it is."

"Looks like a ghost of some sort."

"Ghosts. The undead. And look at this. Someone's sidelined a group of DV's, hm, executive order..."

"Pentham."

"Pentham indeed. What's he up to? Not telling us...this." Elentra gestured.

"It's a holding pattern. Linked with these DVs. A repository of some sort. Must be there for a reason." Kroena fascinated.

Elentra ceased the internal diagnostics. "I'm going in. Cover me."

"You think that's wise?"

"Kroena, one advantage of being a Stable Natural Volatile is that we do the unexpected."

"I'm with you."

"First I'm going to try the external approach."

"Safer."

Using her personal access card she slotted it in beneath the consoles. Took out a headband put it on and hooked it up to the mainframe.

All she saw was a dull dirty yellow mist. Crackling with psychic energy. A body in stasis. Real or a projected persona? There was an undefined essence in a section of the orbital Elentra did not even know about.

"Kroena. Pull up the plan of this place. I want to know not just what we're dealing with but where." Elentra requested seeing this barely resonating ghost.

"Will do. Any particular section?"

"Location of the ghost presence please."

"Onto it. Got it. Isolation ward."

"Perfect place to hide something or someone. Any live bodies around?"

"Got cleaned out a couple of shuttles ago."

"The last batch?"

"Yes. You want to try it?"

"No thanks Elentra. Unless you want Risea along."

"No. Whatever this thing is, we're not meant to know. I mean I wasn't told. Which means it's higher up. I'm going to try and sync with it. Keep watch."

"Of course. I'll only call you if something goes strange. Going quiet, now."

Kroena fine tuned the ghost-presence, calibrated it's resonant state, then on a separate monitor read off Elentra's RS. While Elentra's RS ran at one hundred for her base state this thing was barely registering twenty. Elentra was in no danger, yet. On a third monitor Kroena checked the double bind with the group of DVs who exhibited a similar RS. Classic holding pattern. So whoever had ordered this group of DVs to maintain this penumbra with a life essence base state, was running a wild card here. Someone intended to do something with this. An experiment, one they were not supposed to know about. That worried her. Their duties were to all the DVs. Their output, their intake, the RS, the targets, the field and the backups. Yet here was a splinter group, barely registering, active.

Elentra cut out the external link and started concentrating on the ghost presence, trying to align her RS to it. Usually any psychic activity was just that, active but this had to be approached passively. Her training geared to such a mind state.

The trick was to stop thinking. So stop thinking Elentra. Just the breath. Just the breath. Breath in, breathe out, breathe in, breath out...

Open space. Limitless. Empty. Just. The DVs present, neutral just like her. A mind, an essence, a cognitive life form on hold. A future repository. She felt the membrane pass through her as she entered the dull milky glowing resonant field state. It was being readied for something. Nothing else. Very comfortable. Tempting to stay. Even though the DVs in phase with this were barely perceptible they themselves were just like her, holding it in its present state. Her mind open she let this group of DVs reveal themselves. They were definitely on some low key, low level RS. With no instructions as to the intent of this experiment.

Then she was out. Elentra took off the headband, focussing her eyes.

"What you got?" Kroena's first question ascertaining the data. It confirmed the presence there. A future contrived sentience running on a low level RS. Barely noticeable. Some new trick? Something that could slip in unnoticed?

"Kroena we're going to keep an eye on this."

"You think that wise?" Kroena cautioned.

"Wise?" she laughed. "It's less than dumb. I got a hunch it's gonna be used for something. A prototype. I sensed an outline, vague, unformed, undefined, waiting to be filled."

"Looks like someone is planning something. And there aren't many cleared to run something like this. Ds maybe, Es perhaps, or if not them Lord Pentham. He's come up quite often. How you want to do this?"

"Now and then we do our diagnostics. Use that as a cover. Anything on that ship out there?"

"Still the same. Foggy."

"So we got a ship that is impregnable to our usual methods of infiltration."

"Ah got something." Kroena interrupted. "Look at the read outs, the RSs. Two of our kind, the others, by the more erratic read out have to be Reganian's."

"You're right. Out in distant space."

"And heading away. Projected destination Regum."

"Well well well."

"Are we still sending priests out to them?"

"Suppose so. But they're on regular transports."

"Which this ship isn't."

"Dead right. So the question is not just who but why?"

"Not really our concern."

"No it is not. But fascinating just the same. I wonder who left recently from here?"

"They could have launched from Prima."

"We'll keep an eye on them. Traitors perhaps." Elentra joked.

"That is different. Concerns us all. You gonna log this?"

"No way. Then again, this could be potent. Cache it, secrete it. Only us two have access. See what gives."

Space. Mission to Regum.

"Well then," Sovark relaxed in the recliner, "what do you make of them?" Darlos and Juris were sleeping, the perfect time to discuss them. The ship was heading in low g-drive to Regum. They wanted to find out more about them before letting them on to not just their planet but their research centre. The ship's softscan revealed no hostile intent. But it did pick up low level suppression in their minds, not totally open. Sovark accepted that. They could always instigate a deeper scan. For now they would use the tube's alert system to scrutinize their general mental activity. Two screens relayed their states. Currently dreamless. "Who's first? Duncos, if you please."

"Right. Well, " As she looked at the others. "so here's the state of play as I see it. Are they manifesting a new outlook? Are they sincere? Are they a set up? Are they on a fishing expedition? Is this a cell working on its own? Has a DL gone rogue? Is this even policy? Are we seeing a shift of perspective meaning are they accepting the scientific view? Is this a political play? Will they accept what they consider our heresy? Do they want to learn or just siphon information for some as yet undiscovered motive? Is there a reform movement in progress? Are they genuine? Is this a new beginning, a new dawn at last? I hear you ask. The answer is yes to all of the above at this stage. I say we remain alert, guarded, vigilant. Of course I would prefer to ram-scan them. Go right in." Duncos advised. She was security after all.

"Excellent analysis. I agree. Marez."

"Yes, Duncos has covered it all pretty well. I'm surprised they are so open about the approach. I'm not political but this is more than just exploratory on their part. They want to do this. So for the moment let's assume they are what they seem. Exposure for them to new ideas can only further the quest for knowledge. It will strengthen rather than weaken the tenuous bonds between our two planets. Currently their science is basically non-existent. Technically they are using our more antiquated means to achieve their aims. Now we all know what their overall aim is, but this could be something new. I say let them in. After all they will be in our environment. If they play up we send them back, if they're sincere, all the better."

"Yes, in an ideal world." Irrnet replied. "Not a criticism Marez."

He accepted her view.

"Science is science," Irrnet continued casting a quick glance at the readouts, a little puzzled at the non-existent REM states. "it's application universal. Not confined to

one race, us. It's there for all. We know the Primaians use knowledge as a control mechanism. We have to remember that. Every move they make they have thought out. To them the ends justify the means. They want control, at all times. Let them in and they will become sponges, soaking everything up. They appear benign, so what? They are covert by nature and will be in the future as well. Maybe some mental bifurcation is at work. Maybe. I don't trust them. I mean any of them including our esteemed guests. They want something on Earth. So we have to ask ourselves, what? I mean, alright, they revealed the asteroid hit of millions of years ago. Destroyed a fledgling civilization. They got back on their feet. They want to study Earth for a reason. I'm sure of that. We know their DVs are active, have been since they deluded themselves with this alien field of theirs. We know they think Earth is responsible." Irnet said distastefully. "I feel they are digging up dirt for some grand scheme of theirs."

"Which is duly noted Irnet. A good point." Sovark nodded.

"Tell me," Marez asked, "is there a reason why we never went down the road of creating a cyber-intelligence?"

"Ha! You should know that, your field after all." Sovark laughed.

"It was considered, still is." Duncos continued for Marez. "Gamers do it all the time. If you remember our calamitous wars, then you'd know the military went into robotics. Problem was programming glitches. Imagine a CI then. Far smarter than us non enhanced. Projections were done and three scenario's arose. The first, all things being equal they were there to be used for whatever purpose. Two, they got smarter and smarter exponentially, self replicated and basically would run Regum. Their logic would rule supreme. Not to our whims, what makes us the sentients we are. And thirdly they might consider us wasteful, a-logical if not illogical but tolerate us like we tolerate Primaians. And fourthly they might, in the future see us as a waste of space. Then they might let us die out naturally. Fifthly, having achieved supremacy they start exploring space. Now here it gets really hairy. They might consider all biological life forms as wasting resources for their grubby ways. Then they either contain or delete bio-lifeforms. They could contain life, say Earth by keeping wars going so that there is no time other than that to think about. Mere survival the overarching motive. Keep stirring the pot. Or give them thermo-nuclear weapons to wipe themselves out. Then take the planet for themselves. And so on and so forth. You get the picture."

"You are chirpy." Sovark remarked. "And right of course. Not that that field of research has ceased. But it has been decided so far that it is better for us to self enhance than let an independent, can't call it life form, entity become so smart that we would be

dumb in comparison. Duncos is right. I doubt our friends have that in mind as well. But to set the record straight we run simulations in cyberspace regarding a possible CI phenomena." Smiled, then "The Web is practically that already."

"Yet no one's getting deleted." Irnet paused to consider.

"Codes." Duncoss answered. "Right I got a suggestion. Instead of taking them to Regum we ought to do this on a space station. Thus they remain isolated."

"Like the Orbital over Prima? Duncos!" Marez reminded her.

"Not my idea to let them in. I think they're better off to have on the ground. There's more of us than them. I'm just curious why they're so friendly having considered the what's and why's. They got a new pontiff. That might have something to do with it. That leaves the DLs, specifically Pentham, Gharbel and Qatus. Three evil weevils." She smirked. "I tell you they're up to something."

"A cover?"

"Most definitely Sovark."

"Well then Duncos, isn't it better that we let this happen? It's self advertising. We know they're possibly up to something. So we stay alert and continue with our work. Anyway even if they are working within a grander web of deceit, then I'd like to know what that is. Personally I think this is an opportunity, a challenge. Not a problem."

"So you're for accepting them." Duncos asked.

"Yes." Sovark determined.

"You're the boss. Do I get the resources to shadow them?"

"Of course."

"Total license?"

"You mean..."

"Deletion if necessary and stuff Prima."

"That I'm afraid goes against everything we stand for Duncos."

"Sovark, Prima goes against everything we stand for. If they could take our planet they would. The DVs are trying to mind-fuck us with some success I may add. A tiny proportion to be sure, less than random. But multiply that by our total population and that's a lot. If they get politically active, use their psychic powers to screw those who matter then we'd be under some sort of dominion at best."

"We all know that Duncos. Why do you think we're going for the E end. Prima proof." Sovark smiled.

"Yeah that's gonna be a while though."

"Talking of which. I have run some probability fields regarding inserted persona's regarding Earth. Preparing the ground and through sheer coincidence ran it with a CI."

"Bravo Marez." Duncos applauded.

"You can run the sequence I played with in your own time. The insertion is at zero minus one." Marrez holding a tiny data sphere in his hands. Then pocketing it. "In other words, pre-machine age yet with a basic knowledge of the possibilities of technology harnessing power. Water wheels, wind power, draft animals for instance. The short of it is the CI becomes a god. Revered, feared a little, held in awe. If it reveals it's origin from a planet an even more remarkable thing occurs. Conscious expansion of the mind, perception. All of a sudden the stars are not just lights on a canopy, or holes in the sky but separate shining objects like their sun. The concept of infinity takes shape. The possibilities then diverge. One scenario goes Primaian. Such supremacy is beyond their mental capability so they will do anything to keep this CI amongst them. In other words they allow it total domination."

"Sounds like that scenario I outlined." Duncos said.

"True. The other scenario is to be like it. It creates a will, a drive to push the mind beyond it's culturally self containing limits. If it could travel amongst the stars then so could they. Science as we know it is born. The third scenario is a little strange. They try to get into it's head. Now I have assumed it's sentience is a self learning programme, not a life essence. So of course they can't get into it's head. They discover that it's unnatural. It becomes evil. That leads to any advance along technology to be evil if that is the result."

"Prima's intent."

"Indeed Irnet."

"There was another hypothetical. The CI being 'perfect' they considered themselves unworthy. The whole scenario considered tainted. That fed on itself. They then created simulacrams, monsters, imaginative distortions representing their imperfect state. That became consolidated into an essence of pure evil. So they spent their whole lives in rituals of purification. That had an opposite effect. For if there is pure evil then maybe somewhere, somehow there is pure good. But not on their world. Another bifurcation. One technological, to get off this corrupted world and seek the divine amongst the stars. Two, self purification by aligning oneself to some cosmic mystery, the laws of the universe clouded in their minds through some mystical imaginings regarding this supreme purity. Obsessive Primaian's." Marez finished.

"What happens if nothing happens?" Irnet asked.

"Us."

"Going Reganian?"

"Indeed."

"Not Primaian?"

"No."

Irrnet was puzzled: "Then how did the Primaian's end up so, err themselves? I know I should know this one..."

"The alien field Irrnet." Duncos answered for her.

"Yeah I know that. But something must have been gestating within them to go that way. I mean if it was sudden, which it was, the whole population accepting their cosmic view, just like that. Something must have prepared them. I mean look at us."

"It's a puzzle alright. Anyway our efforts are in the here and now. We know how they think. Why they think it. They're not about to change." Duncoss was certain of that.

"Maybe seeing Earthers as they once were, given to inner misconceptions might wake them up, diffuse that mental muddled headedness of theirs." Marez hoped.

"What if our friends want to do on Earth what they are doing on our planet?" Duncos asked.

"Well, we'll make sure they wont." Sovark replied.

"We have to stay on top of this." Duncoss warned.

"We will. It's our show. We design the parameters. The configured entity will be adaptable, chameleon. They will see it as one of their own. Of no real consequence as there is no sentient intent at work, observer status only."

Elentra

Elentra sat with Kroena in her cabin. Off duty she was about to break a cardinal rule. Several actually. That in itself did not weigh heavily on her mind. She would break a confidence. Kroena was a master controller of the DVs. She had a right to know. It could affect her work even jeopardize the RSs of the active DVs. Drassid had just visited her. They had gone into the secure room for the information he relayed to her came directly from Lord Pentham. The conversation extremely short. A message would have sufficed. Yet by coming up himself Drassid underlined the importance and the necessary secrecy that the experiment regarding the target specific group of DVs: intently focussing on the simulacrum. It was a project of the utmost importance. The only reason she was being told was that certain unusual resonant states might manifest themselves.

To create the semblance of a living bio form. A self possessed entity doing their will on Earth. To his surprise Elentra remained level headed. No exultant response, just cool calculating determination. Focused.

He gave her the parameters and the action, or rather no action she was required to follow. Furthermore no one cleared was to remotely access the unformed entity in the isolation chamber. Currently pliable, an ectoplasm awaiting activation. Using enphased RSs through psychic interfusion. Isolation primary. Stray psychic states even if not consciously intended could wreck the experiment. He was ordering the issue of sleeping tablets that would suppress dream states which might accidentally stumble across the entity in formation.

Posited in the isolation chamber secure from psychic intrusion. Drassid was adamant on taking no chances. What about the others on board Elentra asked. Those sections for the duration would be sealed off. For the present all contact amongst all of them on the orbital was off. They were sealed in, the rest, meaning the Reganian technical staff sealed out of this section. The lock down might create rumours Elentra cautioned. Even better. The truth even if stumbled upon lost amongst the imaginings of speculative minds. They were not to be countered or explained.

Officially they were going through a holy and sacred spiritual cleansing. Let the Reganians make of that what they will. The lock out would not last long. The orders were to be followed. The sleeping pills were being distributed to create welcome rest for the hard working DVs and the stressed support staff. Elentra wanted to know, for the DVs

sake that if certain RS phenomena occurred how to deal with that? She needed to know what was involved so as to counter any unforeseen consequences.

Drassid was cagey. All she needed to know was that the entity would go active and be inserted in the near future. How long? It depended on the secret orders he possessed. The final phase was about to begin. The selected DVs were to be isolated in space. How did they get through into the secure isolation chamber? They had specific resonant states which the entity was aligned to receive. This was something completely new. Would it not effect all of them? No. DVs were excellent as remote viewers, target specific. For the others the sleeping tablets would dampen any higher mental activity. They would all feel sluggish, lethargic, indifferent. The other DVs on active duty in space would remain outwardly focused so no problems were seen there. When rotated they would fall under the current, temporary sleep induced regimen.

He would return when the experiment, a mission of a most delicate nature, was completed. No questions about intentions. In the chamber he assured her the entity could not be corrupted by stray psychic activity. Officially it did not even exist, therefore no one would be curious. But if certain mental aberrations did occur, though the medication would see to it that it would not, then it was her job to isolate those who strayed into this resonant state. Shut their brains down, BrainDrain them if need be. She was in charge of psychic security. SK had a special squad on standby to deal with any problems. He gave Elentra a tight smile, underlining the fact she was now in a 'need to know' loop. No one else. Then he left.

"What do you make of that then?" Elentra asked Kroena.

"One of Prima's great ideas." She sighed. "Lord Pentham? Who knows."

"Sounds like the Divines on some eccentric mission. But where are they inserting this entity? Regum? Prima? Here? Drassid did not say for fear that someone might remote view the designated target."

"Well I did some checking as to what is going on. A couple of days ago Marez and Juris left." Kroena grinned.

"Don't know Juris but Marez. He works for Pentham."

"Off into space. Or rather out of space."

"What do you mean?" Elentra amused.

"They vanished. Or rather the data did. They came here but never left. Then a space ship, not a shuttle departed desto unknown. It returned several days later. With only the pilot. How do I know. Prima's finickyness. They might hide the personnel but are

extremely detailed about space craft, anything really pertaining to technology. Everything has to be accounted, including the tiniest screws that are used to secure say inspection plates. Ship goes out and comes in with some gear. A shuttle could have done that. Of course I couldn't find out where they went, the flight was not logged. But as I said the ship's departure and return was. Not with traffic but with resources. Ha."

"Excellent work Kroena. So we have Darlos and whoever. Who is Juris?"

"Don't know."

"...going out and not coming back. Very iffy. Meeting whom? We're not out there."

"I know." A gleam in Kroena's eye.

"Talking to Reganian's I bet. In space. They could have done this onboard and attract less attention. Unless of course it's a one-way trip. For the moment."

"Defecting?"

"That would be a first." Elentra was dismissive. "Organized more likely."

"They could have gotten on the ships we use to ferry our zealous priests."

"Interesting isn't it? They don't want anyone to know."

"You think it might be connected with this thing?"

"Well Kroena, coincidences can be just that."

"Yeah, sure, right."

"Are we being cynical?" Elentra smirked.

"There's something else. We got more than normal burn outs. You know that."

"I do. It happens."

"Well the last batch ended up at various asylums."

"Hm. We know there was nothing unusual out there. I mean I sometimes practice. Sort of keep myself attuned to their attunement."

"Same here."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Anything Kroena?"

"No, not really. Well maybe, I don't know. Too vague to be of importance."

"Run with it."

"Just a sense of presence, a feeling of, I don't know, something great."

"Really?"

"Not definite. Just there, back of the head. What about you?"

"Haven't bothered to go deep, more floating around. Can't say I feel any different."

"Well these DVs must have. Otherwise why secrete them? What have they uncovered?"

"Could be field fatigue."

"Yeah, maybe, even though its constant."

"Is it?"

"You're here. You see the overall picture."

"You're right."

"Now Elentra, are you ordering me to take my medication?"

"It might be best. Who knows what the DVs are concocting. Could be a mental time bomb."

"A what?"

"I'm making this up Kroena. Maybe it's a virus, a trojan, malware, a walking drifting psychic assault system, or the perfect spy."

"Sounds, ahm rather, like some prototype of some sort. What if this is not meant for them but us?"

"Us?"

"Well what if it's meant to keep us in? Read our RSs, keep us on track."

"Oversight?"

"That's the word. Wouldn't put it past them. Even worse. What if by us it means us, as in you and me."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because we know things."

"So some brainless entity runs the DVs?"

"A configured controlled entity Elentra."

"Shit."

"It gets better."

"Do go on."

"It's like this. For starters, going out on a limb here, we know the field is so weak it's of no real consequence."

"It's weakness is it's strength."

"Yeah yeah."

"How do you explain the burn outs then?" Elentra wanting to know.

"Overworked brain. Intense concentration not meant to be so forcefully applied not just for the length per session out there but time after time as well. Overworked." Kroena emphasised.

"Hm."

"No? Yes? Maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Well even so. That means...heck, we've been here forever and are we insane?"

"Err no."

"So if we after all this time are still in control of our faculties, what does that suggest?"

"That we're still sane."

"Exactly. As is SK. Shuttle pilots. You name it."

"But we know they're all shielded. We're shielded."

"True. But it's claimed that our eyes see into the field. So it does affect us according to accepted wisdom that we are exposed. And well put it this way, I don't feel anything. Do you?"

"No."

"Dreams?"

"Sometimes, more often than not."

"Me too. But even so when waking, pfft, nothing. No big deal. In fact I like my dreams."

"Can't say I don't disagree. Though I do get nightmares Kroena. But not a word."

"No worries there. You know the Reganian are dream freaks?"

"Yes. Went to the induction."

"Indoctrination."

Elentra laughed. "And?"

"The suppressed soul theory."

"Oh yes, the bane of our Ecclesiastics."

"Then there's the asteroid hit. The DVs didn't foresee that. The DVs did not foresee the coming of the field. In fact they don't seem to foresee anything."

"Yet their remote viewing works."

"That's different, you know that."

"You're right I guess. Anyway what's that got to do with this living ghost?"

"Nothing. I'm just getting rid of my thoughts. Oh yes, I remember." Kroena brightened. "One, the DVs never mentioned that at some future state some psychic

entity would appear here. See what I mean? Maybe to replace us. You know why we can't return permanently."

"Yes. Resonant contamination."

"Which I don't believe. And because we know it's the reality up here is the reason they don't want us down there. We're too normal. We deal with facts, figures, not mystical speculation. It's a bind for our overlords. We need to use Reganian thinking and methods of application to push our will."

"Irony isn't it?"

"Thus we too are suspect."

"Where did all this come from?"

"I've been thinking this for a long time Elentra. You?"

"I don't bother. Easier."

"Think about it."

"If you insist." Elentra said lightly. "So we're locked down, in, out."

"That must...never mind, I've said it all. And I trust you Elentra. If I get BrainDrained because of this..."

"...you'll never remember and never knew we had this conversation."

"You'd be surprised what some remember in the asylums."

"Ranting."

"Glimpses of lost memories. And it ain't what the doctors want to hear."

"This is quite a conspiracy you've cooked up."

"Conspiracy alright. It's real Elentra, it's real." Shaking her head in dismay.

"What you gonna do?"

"Me? Nothing."

"Good."

"But I'm keeping my head open. I suggest you do too."

"Thanks, I'll remember that."

"And don't take no shit."

"What shit would you be referring to?" Elentra's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"That mind dumbing medication. Just act dense."

"_"

"Good enough for me. I'll let you know if something is cooking. I might even help and stir the pot."

"You are powering along here."

"Elentra, I'm supercharged."

"It's good of you to have taken me into your confidence. I appreciate that."

"We never had this conversation, gotta say that."

"I know."

"Not even Risea. I know we all get along. I mean she might even agree, but well..."

"Don't worry. I don't gossip."

"Thanks."

"You look worried, a little anyway."

"Well what I just said...I mean it."

"Know you do. Glad you're brain's working."

"Very funny."

Later Elentra struggled with a personal decision. To self scan or not. She was not due for a check up just yet. Some called it the 'dream machine.' Working at and below the subconscious level, that intermediate realm between the pure soul, the glow of the divine within and the superstructure, the mind. Working on its resonance translated into field equations. Retrieving the ethereal effluvium, the outer manifestation of the Divine Mind as the scanners attuned themselves to the mind's resonance. Then perhaps, if she thought of her mind through the scanner it might resonate with it. Boost in through enphasing. Access her potentialities. If Drassid objected she had an answer: Security. Psychic phenomena always worked both ways. She just wanted to observe herself objectively.

But that was only the cover. She accessed her logged DV data base. What really caused the last burn outs? Overload. Within or without? Both. Well that confirmed psychic activity. The same pattern again. She went back several decades. The screens data showed less burn outs. So psychic activity was up. Incremental or sudden? Sudden. Sort of. A long transition period, wavering between one resonant state and a slightly heightened one. Levelling out. No not quite. Subtle, incremental but rising, by minute degrees. The source? Everywhere. The field? Separate as a resonance, interwoven into the field. Two fields. Maybe that thing in the isolation chamber was there to read this secondary superimposition. Too dangerous for them. What did Darlos know? Going out into space and vanishing. Or the DLs and weren't saying. Sleep my foot. Drassid wanted no prying minds involved. He did have a point. An unformed, as yet unfocused psychic presence in the making could be dangerous. It might not be so value neutral at all. Thus the need for chemical dampeners.

Elentra was smart enough not to target the specific DVs assigned to this thing. That would give her away. A routine scan though would access all RSs. That might reveal something.

Fortified with her supposition she made her way, unannounced to the DRS. No one on duty. She shut herself in the laboratory. Activated the scanning sequence, got on the trolley, hand held controls firmly gripped. The trolley rolled her into its cavity. Run time set at twenty. Ten would do but given her excitement it would take a bit longer for her to calm down. Her brain going through all the possibilities of the secondary field's existence. Less than a fog, not even a veil. Leakage from Regum's WebSpace? There on purpose? All would be revealed.

The trolley stopped. The irises shut. Maybe the secondary resonance was Reganian. They were spread around space after all. Concentrate Elentra. Stop all this thinking. She set the scan on high. Total insertion, maximum penetration. Oh boy. Time to open the mind. Think of space. The absence of everything. Ignore the Divine Mind. She wanted to know if this secondary field was real, being so vague, such a low resonance, flickering in and out. Whether that thing had anything to do with, if anything at all. Plus a self revealing diagnostic run was always welcome. It was good to know where one's head was.

Suppressing her fervency she pressed the 'run' button. The scanner hummed into life, the inside soft hued spread of light faded out. Black as black could be. Slowly the machine took her mind through its various levels from wakefulness to drowsiness. Now the fun would begin. Images popped into her head. Unrelated memories. Kroena, Risea, Darlos, all in surreal settings, silent, active, energized with latent potencies. A soft wave washed through her. She felt divine, far more heady. Her mind ballooned out exponentially. She had all the answers without actually being able to think of one. Unformed, dormant, awaiting discovery which meant being attuned to the universe. The universe? Answers there? The Divine Mind? Silence within.

A different wave surrounded her. Stalinisation. In harmony. In tandem, floating. A power within this spread of energy she was in. Space three dimensional. A cosmic matrix united to sentient life. Prima, Regum, Earth. That planet. No madness emanated from there. Unity itself. Primaian unity.

And death. Nothingness, less than the void imagined as an abyss, an absence. No passing on? No redemption? Dependent on one's inner psychic strength. Relief. A centre, somewhere. Everywhere with a distant focus. The CC? Drawing on life, unto itself. The three dimensional field tenuous yet still present in its unformed way. The centre of the

universe. Slowly imperceptibly gaining strength by absorbing this vague something that was spread all around them. Drawing everything into it. Everything pertaining not just to life, but all thoughts. Resonant states influenced, minds influenced, space influenced. In its wake nothing. No perception, no sentient life outside its inward drawing power. Just a void. No stars, no planets, no galaxy. It had to be an illusion. Nothing could void the cosmos.

Nothing.

Nothing existed around it.

The entity the simulacrum within this realm.

The void cosmos dissolving behind, around, outside this inward sucking centre.

Not the universe, her. The scanner was going into BrainDrain mode! She pressed the release button. Null result. She moved her fingers along the console for visuals. No response. Trapped. They had her.

What had she discovered that was so dangerous?

Consciousness was all, or nothing. She focussed on the inward drawing field-source. Invigorating warmth. Had she been at the edge of the universe? Where there was nothing? Not even the Divine Mind? In that case it was limited to the universe, not beyond it. Revelations of revelations. The truth.

The indistinct field was limited. Partial completion within its spread. With a difference. The field was there the CC was not. Or at another level. One confined the other excluded.

She had to think to stop the BrainDraining process. Her resonance was still there since perception was self manifesting. The field contained minute fragments of what? Focus. She was back in the warm bubble. Stars everywhere, different colours. Not stars, data realms. She was hanging in there. This inserted field stronger than the BrainDraining resonance. Maybe that was what was taboo. That it could be fought. The process held a bay.

She felt lighter infused with an etherealness that made her mind expand again throughout all of space, simultaneously within this assembling entity. Not quite in its confines. This universe was enough. She felt stronger, warmer, possessed with knowledge full of recognition without actualisation. Two sets of data fields. Before and after. Contingent. The universe in phase transition. Whose? Primas? Regums? Earth? Hard to tell, it being so vast and its centre somewhere else.

A sentience, vaguely present like a whisper. Her mental projection? No definitely out there. Everything was out there. Ready to be grasped by attuning the mind. Was that

the big secret? This other essence on the orbital? That anyone could access the information, the revelation it entailed? No priests or Divines necessary, nor the imagined Supreme Mind.

This was disclosure, not mystical revelation. The universe a huge memory bank. With no persona. Not quite. A feeling of individuality, again, there and not there. For the moment she was there, everywhere, spread across space and time. The dots glowed everywhere, it was magical. She seemed to be the universe itself. The scanner could not cope with that. She was too beyond. Then a glowing membrane, glowing strings flickering between nodal vortices.

Someone reset the sequence to maximum, calling on back up power to finish the job. Lock onto something Elentra! Hang in there. Enter a data realm, any data realm. It's your anchor. Meta-realities expanded like so many bubbles around her. Tiny glowing sequences of numbers churning data. They blazed like the cities on Regum, vast edifices of energy and more importantly power. Lock onto that. Find the master memory. Regum had none. The Web the memory spread across space.

That was close. For had she focused the drain would have focused too. By spreading herself out it had no fix. One radiant data realm stronger than the others, slightly. That would do. Keep the rest in mind. An eddying spiral. The thing. Amorphous. No not there. Tempting but DV dependent.

Head for the sun. Keep your essence, your sense of self in mind. You can beat the machine for this was a greater energy source. The white fiery ball expanded as she drew closer. Shafts of light shimmering in and out as it transferred information, a veritable maze of glowing light, tiny balls of energy zipping between countless intersections of light pulses. A white glowing mist holding it all together, pure quanta of energy.

She was in its oceanic glow. The light a balm for the soul. She was the sun itself, irradiating her within. Whole, complete. The feeling of loss gone. So far so good. Her presence of mind, of herself still intact. Now that she was in how to get out? This was a construct, a pulsating vibrating glowing heart of sorts. Her mind whizzed along abstracting patterns of glowing pathways, more rectangular than those within one's brain. A brain. An artificial brain. Not that thing back there, that simulacrum so puny, irrelevant. There had to be a source, a feed, a link to whatever it was in which it existed materially. Very important.

She was speeding along the spread of a short bursting linear running light stream. A digital duplicate light wave of herself. A copy transported. Think exit strategy. Cocooning her. Drawing energy from the maze continually unfolding itself around her.

Fractal expansion. Of course! Don't think, be! Be your resonance, for you too are a field, a life field, a force in its own right.

Her mind reached into the shifting glowing abstract networking labyrinth. The light show collapsed, receded, went out.

She was out, steady. Somewhere else. Another void state.

In the cool data matrix. Her mind level Elentra said: "Hello."

"Identify." A female voice said.

"Elentra." She looked around her. Pristine white walls, energized, a console, rows of monitors, two people in white. Space gear. "That was close."

Inside a small white room. On the floor. Certainly not the orbital.

"Regum or Prima?" Kora asked now that she stopped staring at the apparition in front of her. She and Tryces were inside the VQC calibrating its search parameters to align it with the PWF regarding Prima's intentions. Instead this woman materialised. Was she virtual or real? Not that it mattered much. For on and in the QVSS 1 Virtual was Real.

"Could be a rogue." A man's voice. Middle aged, both short black hair, extremely pale, spacers. Kora younger by a generation. Large black eyes focussed. Now that the surprise was over, she focussed on Elentra.

"Not enhanced. Detect no AI presence. Unaligned. Natural."

"Prima." Tryces answered.

"Shit. How did they get through?"

"Quantum entanglement. We targeted them."

"Deleting all programming. Information back into sub Planck domains. Download complete. Secure."

"Cores unaffected. No leakage."

"This changes everything."

"It's unusual but not beyond the possible. Not much different to gaming."

"Yes but she's a Natural. Pity we can't do a traceback."

"No, better not. Can't have them find out."

"We'll let K figure it out first. Then we can speculate."

"Agree."

"No rogue." Elentra impressed. The air dry. She sensed immense power. Way beyond the resonance scanner.

"What was close?" Tryces asked.

"I was being BrainDrained...I think. I was doing a self diagnostics when, well, here I am. I had to get out of that. Must have worked. Certainly not passed on, am I?"

"Primaian."

"From the Orbital. You Reganians?"

"Doing what?"

"Run DVs"

"Really?" Kora interested and a little worried. If they could transfer using DCSs they could access any place in the universe. Not good.

"Brain. Check Prima's capabilities pertaining to PWF technology."

The core memory ran through its data.

"Negative."

"Possibilities, actualities regarding transfer."

"Entanglement. Mental resonance attuned, in phase."

"So you thought your way here."

"I guess so. I don't suppose you're going to reveal who you wonderful people are and where I am?"

"No." Kora dead pan.

"Not a rogue insert. Pure fluke. The resonance melded. No targeting regarding Prima for the moment."

"Agreed." Kora replied.

"Brain, four coffees, milk, cream, sugar." Tryces ordered. Keep up the appearance of solid state reality.

"What are you after?"

"Survival." Elentra answered.

"Follow me." The wall opened a section which led to another white room, white recliners. From the floor a table rose with freshly brewed coffee, four cups, milk, cream and sugar.

"Sit."

"Thanks."

"Explain. Oh yes help yourself." Elentra did. She told them what happened.

"Brain. Observe, soft scan Elentra at all times. Any hostile intent ram-scam."

"You know you can't return."

"Pity." More relieved to have survived.

"Why." Kora almost barked.

"Got some good friends who would love to come across. One way trip."

"Maybe later." Tryces said softly. Kora hid her displeasure.

"Nice coffee. So how did I do it?" Elentra told them as best she could.

"Remember I was head of my section. Prima's very security conscious. Obsessed even. But I willed myself out, used what was around me during my boosted RS. Pure imagery of course, but real imagery by the look of it." as Elentra tapped the table.

"Brain call up the Sakaris persona. Insert outside this room."

The wall opened and a tall lean mature man, dressed in a white suit entered.

"Delighted to meet you Elentra."

"Likewise."

Another chair rose out of the floor. Sakaris sat. "What's the status regarding Regum?" he asked her taking a sip of his coffee.

"We send priests to try and realign your race. My end the DVs, remote viewing trying to anticipate you. Strange thing happened recently. One Darlos and Juris left for space. Possible meeting with Reganian space ship. Not logged. Kroena found out via ships status log. Current pontiff Skias, if that helps."

"It does." Sakaris satisfied.

"History. Pre Crash. Close but not close enough."

"We'll have to move up a bit. Recalibrate." Kora answered.

"Telafus still alive?"

"Alive?"

"He was replaced by Skias."

"Really?" The DVs ignorant of this place. What else didn't the DVs know. If that was their state then Prima's intentions to dominate Regum would never succeed. She felt better. It was obvious to her that Regum was successful scientifically. This area, whether a space station or on their planet, or wherever proved it.

"Did you receive any covert or overt orders regarding Regum?"

"The usual. Mind fuck them." Elentra replied with distaste. "Can you protect me from DV activity?"

"We shall try." Sakaris replied. "Psychic activity can be detected but not deleted. Sentient consciousness still defies all laws. It is possible through the use of PWFs to read intentions but not stop thoughts from being individually generated. And hopefully never will. It would mean the end of free will."

"Actually they're not that good." Elentra was amused by the revelation.

"Can you elucidate if you will?"

"Well DVs can lock on to anything. But," she gestured vaguely, "we keep in getting surprises. The alien field, so called I should say, Earth, even what Regum is up to. Then there was that asteroid hit on Earth millions of years ago. Could lock on to that event but not foretell it. Once an image has been attained remote viewing works. The future though seems to be unknowable."

"The laws of physics." Tryces replied. Their use of PWFs of course could read any positional reality anytime in the universe. And be there through the power of the VQC's generated PFWs. Thus time was simply coordinates. Without revealing that knowledge.

"I have a suggestion." Elentra said, comfortable in her surroundings.

They waited.

"I need to have a new name. DVs tracking you see. I don't know if there is a 'me' at the other end or whether I transferred completely. If feel complete but that's just my brain telling me so. I could be in a computer, we all could if one wants to stretch the logic to its conclusion."

"Any preference?" Kora asked not wanting to confirm Elentra's lucky guess.

"Athea."

"Brain Elentra is Athea. Create a cyber-reality of Elentra being destroyed during her transitional state. Stay alert for possible DV scans regarding both persona's. Until we reconfigure her signature is still in place as Elentra. Do not take action against search targets. Elentra successfully BrainDrained."

"There is a weak link on Prima." Elentra volunteered.

Kora softened a bit. E-A volunteering information or dis-information. Either way it would gain them knowledge of Primaian intentions.

"The DLs are linked to the Trine Guardians. No one knows who they are except the DLs and the pontiff. Then there are the Immortals. Ancient sages in permanent sleep who are not dead. That's the official line. But given our two races were one once, meaning technically I sometimes wonder if there are not vestiges of that past still active. Some sort of program to impress the masses. The Immortals are supposedly the fount of wisdom and a source of spiritual power." Elentra-Athea hinted darkly. "If they are some sort of ancient super system, crash that and well, who knows the liberating effect that could have."

"Thank you for your frankness." Tryces smiled and drained his cup.

"If I can help in any way I will. Oh yes. One other thing." She told them about the simulacrum the DVs were holding in the isolation chamber. "Got no idea as to intent, purpose or reason. But it is there."

"We'll check that out." Kora wondering whether such a thing could be thought into reality. If it was so then, then, Primaian psychics were catching up with Regum's technology through sheer force of will. They could achieve anything in an time, at any place. Agents of influence who could be undetectable. Like Elenra-Athea.

"For the moment you will stay here. I'll show you to your quarters."

"Thank you for having me."

"We're glad you came." Kora meant it. Maybe they could snatch hostiles. That made her feel better.

"Brain. When E-A is in her quarters induce deep sleep. Extract her memory. Contain all data in new data field. Cover it with multiple chameleon personas."

"What do you make of that?" Sakaris asked after Kora had shown E-A to her quarters.

"I'm worried." Kora answered.

"Likewise." Tryces agreed.

"Remarkable achievement."

"Exactly Sakaris." Kora leaned foreword and had another cup.

"She must have locked into the PWF." Tryces ventured.

"I hope it's off."

"It is Kora. The moment she popped up. Not in the design. Aberration was strong enough to trigger failsafe."

"Should have blocked her."

"Her mind was in phase." Sakaris less perturbed. "Might come in useful."

"An insert? The Primaian's would remember this." Tryces advised.

"Maybe for some future mission to Earth." Kora wondered.

"Good point. So for the moment do we educate her?"

"Do we accept her?" Kora countered.

"Do we?" Sakaris asked them.

"You're asking us?" Kora laughed. "I'd isolate her, full treatment. They usually talk then. Gotta make sure she's as eager as she appears."

"You'd do well in security."

"Well in a way we all are, here especially."

"Let's assume she's not hostile. Who is suitably matched?" Tryces asked.

"Varus." Sakaris having access to all the persona's, as they all had. But he was head of security. "Impervious to penetration."

"So how much do we tell her?" Tryces continued. "Kora?"

"Nothing yet. We get her to talk first."

"I agree."

"Do a future run?"

"See what effect she has being present?" Sakaris thinking ahead like Kora.

"Yes. It might be near zero, or go both ways, on or off track. We're not going to get screwed a second time."

"The projections do not indicate any major destabilisation Kora."

"That does not eliminate the threat though."

"She seems genuine." Tryces thought E-A agreeable.

"Still it's a shift in paradigms. Even K the Brain had not foreseen this. Otherwise it would have alerted us when we did the run."

"Unless it is meant to be Kora." Sakaris underscoring her point.

"We input meaning into the universe. We decide. We make our future. We make sure if she stays she fits into that. And keep her away from anything remotely close to our operation."

"We'll give her a holiday." Sakaris smiled. "After all she has no idea where she is."

"Send her somewhere deep in space. Some habitat maybe. Or if she is on our side, well just because Prima is currently dormant does not mean they've given up."

"They seem content." Tryces placated.

"Tryces you know yourself, there is no such thing as constant social stability. Either a gestalt switch or a mental paradigm shift is gonna happen."

"Agreed Kora. Know what you're getting at. Maybe we are being a little complacent here."

"Not me."

"No, Kora," he was in a benevolent mood, "not you."

"Everybody." Brain cut in. **"Confirmed data. Athea is virtual."**

"Now for the fly in the ointment. If they can access her memory..."

"Kora, she was being BrainDrained. They mucked that up." Sakaris reminded them.

"Hope so."

"How remarkable of her to get out when she did."

"She got lucky we did the run sequence when we did."

"Brain. Check for Athea's-Elentra's data gaps. Memories may be incomplete in an architectural brain pattern and field-resonance-state. The RFS would be less than the architecture's potential." Tryces asked it.

"See if anything was left behind."

"Yes Sakaris. You want Brain or your virtual self to see ..." Tryces checked Athea's sleeping mental resonance. "...if she's ready for scanning."

"A pleasant diversion. Relax her. If I go in, even as a substitute my configuration might enphase. That could wake her."

"True."

"Memory complete." The light screens showed Elentra-Athea's potential nearly matched the actual RFS.

"Within parameters." Kora was relieved. The Primaian's had nothing.

"I think we could use E-A to be a forward sentinel regarding DV activity."

"I agree Tryces. Now that she's shown them that one can escape they may try that again. We're going to have to rewrite the codes. Put any cross overs into a holding bay. Self contained. Isolated."

"Certainly."

Prima

Forch was chosen to go up to the Orbital after Pentham had been notified of an incident. Nothing more. Routine message, no sender. That indicated a major problem. The shuttle shuddered as they broke the sound barrier. Lift off always made him feel good. The change exciting. It was his first trip up. Lord Pentham had taken him off Janon, informed him of the call. He was to liaise with Drassid if necessary. Pentham understood the need to change faces. Familiarity with a situation could lead to complacency and mistakes. The message in its simplicity indicated it was a high order priority. When so little was sent then something major always occurred. Drassid was busy. The simulacrum.

They passed through high altitude clouds the sky darkening into a deep purple, the first stars shining through. Forch had not much to go on regarding DV activity. Keep the field at bay, look for potential agents on Regum, ascertain Regum's intentions. Specific mission objectives non disclosed. He had the authority to ascertain what the incident involved. Drassid would fill him in.

Booster tanks were jettisoned. Forch felt the power of the escape velocity. The cares of Prima receded. The sense of freedom delicious. He savoured every moment. In a way it was about time he went up. As liaison officer for SK on Prima, attached to Janon and Lord Pentham he really was a glorified fixer for SK's needs to operate smoothly both on and off world. It would be informative to see the real environment, rather than just the second hand scenarios of computer reconstructions as to what went on at the Orbital and how they executed their duties.

The Orbital announced itself, sent a tracking beam out for the shuttle to manoeuvre it's way into a landing bay.

Forch was met by Drassid as he extricated himself out of his space gear. The helmet and backpack removed, he was surprised gravity was normal up here. Gravity generators Drassid informed him. They walked down corridors, Forch already feeling lost up here. He had been informed of one major experiment, the creation of a psychic persona which he guessed was some form of automatum the DVs could use. Pentham hinted that that might have had some unforeseen consequences too delicate and too revealing to be sent even encoded back down.

Forch decided not to ask questions. See what Drassid knew first. Questions resulted in evasive answers. Responsibility was always passed up or down. Never

admitted at the source of the problem. Along more corridors, meeting a few personnel who merely nodded as they passed each other. They entered a room marked simply 'Control'. There behind a desk, banks of screens monitoring DV activity, a young woman rose, pale, short dark hair, black eyes who announced herself as Kroena. Introductions over she bade them to follow her.

They entered the Scanning laboratory with its separate control booth where technicians were busy checking the system. Tension filled the room. Below Forch saw a huge white cabinet on the floor. Cables snaked out back, others leading into the floor and walls. On a trolley Elentra looking very pale, her skin translucent. Forch had seen his dead uncle once as a child and was surprised. Elentra looked like death.

A technician rose and looked at Drassid. Worried.

"Tell him." Drassid ordered.

"I came in for shift duty and found Elentra in there. Self scanning."

"Is that usual?" Forch asked.

"No, yes, sometimes. She's head control. Personnel are routinely scanned of course. She was not due. Procedure requires at least one technician present. There was none. I came on duty and noticed aberrant mental behaviour. She had gone completely volatile. That of course set off alarm bells. I had a decision to make. She was going hyper, boosting herself. The reverse of a scan. She was running a separate program. I tried to power down but she had higher access codes, overrode normal command procedure. I wanted to know what was going on so I started the scanner which was on low. To see what her intent was. It looked like self-sabotage. Her resonance way over the limit. The only thing I could think of was deep scanning, siphon off the results into a separate and secure data bank. That only heightened the intensity of her aberrant resonance. She was mentally regressing."

"As in?"

"Reverting evolutionary into an unstable volatile."

"Hm." Forch looked at Drassid. "What's the procedure regarding that?"

"BrainDraining. Only way to save the patient." Forch noticed the change of appellation. Elentra had lost her status as one of the living.

"And that is what you did?"

"Yes sir. After all her persona could be recreated, rebuilt, reconfigured. She could be saved."

"So you instigated the procedure. In this emergency you had such authority?"

The technician looked at Drassid then Kroena.

"Normally," Kroena began, "I should have been there. Elentra became her own security breach. But given the state Elentra was in going into BrainDrain mode was the best way to proceed. It's not instant and can be halted. It takes around thirty minutes to go all the way. Elentra was only in for ten then. The technician did call me. I told him to put the drain on hold which he did."

"Then," the technician continued, "she powered up. How I have no idea. No overt activity around. No DV hook up, no Reganian fields around. Not that they can penetrate this laboratory."

"Powered up. Explain."

"That is the mystery. Unless of the highest resonance level overriding a BrainDrain is impossible. Elentra was certainly above average, her resonance fairly dense, secure as it were so by rights..."

"It should not have been possible."

"Yes." The worried technician answered. "She somehow used the whole system as a power unit. We have a link to the core. So did she. Now it gets weird. While the BrainDraining sequence was on hold her brain continued to get into its own higher resonance. She was self boosting. That's never happened before. Not here."

"DVs" Kroena explained, "do have that capability. Not of such an intensity though. That Elentra had that gift was unknown to us."

"And it did not show on her routine scans. Or even when she took up her position?"

"Apparently not." Kroena answered. She was glad. She knew what Elentra had done. She had exited with her persona leaving her body behind. Gone Immortal. And not on Prima either. Her guess was she was either in WebWorld or WebSpace. Or Reganian's had another field in place which Elentra had locked on to and in to. Another cyber realm that had escaped detection by the DVs, again. For Kroena guessing Elentra's suicidal mission figured by going through with the BrainDrain Elentra was somehow feeding off that. Using its energy to jump out of space.

"What then?"

"Kroena ordered a full BrainDrain."

"It was to delete her mental activity. We, I that is, had no idea what her intentions were. Maybe she wanted to get into their system. That too had never been done, or thought of. In theory it's impossible to go active. I should correct that. Active in an escape sense. The more potent the drain the higher mental activity becomes as the

unconscious is breached. Thus the need for energy at its maximum. Then it happened. Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Correct. All activity ceased yet the drain was not complete. Prior total extraction her persona vanished leaving a shell behind."

"The thing is," the technician continued, "during the draining process the data is stored in a temporary self contained memory file to keep continuity both of the person drained and so to secure it from the total data files where the results end up. To stop contamination of the files and to stop any flash backs. That could actually boost the patients mind, reversing the process. She took all that with her."

"Just her `self'." Kroena dissembled.

"Correct." The technician answered. "Here is the report." Handing Kroena a data disk.

"What do you suggest?" Forch asked Drassid for politeness sake. It was his investigation. Drassid was Pentham's second. No need to disturb the status quo.

"Delete everything. If this stays in the data files it might be accessed by the next candidate. Nor is the full data ever to be sent down. The information is too sensitive, too dangerous. Abstracts only. The result, not the method, or procedure." Drassid ordered. "Create shadow files saying Elentra's drain proceeded without incident."

"We have no data." The technician reminded Drassid.

"So recall her initial scans when she came up here."

"Of course."

"Then reconstruct her persona and run her mind backwards."

"I can do that." Kroena volunteered.

"Good."

Kroena was delighted. The official Elentra would be less than she was. No further interest regarding her vanishing act later on.

"The escapee is now what? Alive? Dead? Static?" Forch asked.

"Dead sir." The technician informed them.

"Any idea where all that information went then?"

"Come with me Forch." Drassid said instead. "Kroena start the reconstruction of the events as we need them to appear. Then come and see me prior upload."

"Yes. Gentlemen."

Drassid escorted Forch out of the control booth. Down a corridor and into Elentra's office.

"We can talk in here. It's secure."

Forch nodded.

"Take a seat." Drassid sat behind Elentra's desk. Forch in front. Making his status obvious. Not that Forch cared. Data was his focus.

"Information. It's everything. I know you have the highest clearance so we are almost on equal terms. What you are about to hear is for Lord Pentham only."

Forch was satisfied so far. The cover up about to begin.

"DVs as you know can be anywhere. All they have to do is set their mind onto a target, which really is a position in space and time." Drassid recited.

"And you think Elentra's gone one step further."

"You guessed it."

"How?"

"Energy. Regum's cyber reality works on the same principle."

"So she's in there?"

"Knowing her resonance we are searching. No matches so far."

"Then she's not there. Unless she just died. The data dissipated at her passing on. Lost in the universe."

"A soul does not die Forch. She has to be somewhere."

"If she's with the Divine Mind then that is that. No one's ever accessed the Great Being by computational means. Never will."

"It's the answer we will use officially. But I'm not so sure."

"You think her persona is somewhere then?"

"I'm sure she is with the Reganians. In a computer."

"How much does she know?" not surprised at the guess.

"Ah. Up to a while ago nothing they didn't know. That is the other reason I asked you here. There is a certain project, an experiment under way." Drassid explained the logic behind the simulacrum.

"That is something. A person that looks real yet is controlled by the DVs. The perfect spy."

"That is the idea Forch." That its intent was for the Earth mission Drassid kept to himself. Forch was SK. If there was heat coming down from up above he was the lightning rod. The Earth mission was so secret it was not even classified.

"Elentra's not in that thing."

"No. It's unaffected."

"The disk. I'll take it to Pentham of course."

"It would only contain her memories. No different really to that which we extracted during her induction. It could reveal her intentions Forch. She was intent on getting out. It's the where that matters. As I said, she might be in Regum's Web. And that is the only way in. There is nothing else, anywhere."

"You said the DVs can go anywhere. Why not Elentra?"

"You mean jump out of time as well?" Drassid dismayed at the implication.

"I do."

"Then, that is, I mean..."

"I know how you feel. Get the DVs onto it."

"I shall. Why didn't I think of that?"

"You would have I'm sure." Forch replied. "Since there is her initial resonance, that's something. A lead in."

"Most certainly." His spirits lifted. There was a chance of tracking her.

"Well that seems to be that then."

"Anything else we can do?" Drassid relieved to see Forch leave.

"Not for the moment. Up to Lord Pentham really. Or Janon."

"Yes. Indeed. Well I'm glad this went smoothly."

"So am I. Tell me, why would she have been so desperate to even try?"

"That is what we have to find out. If we can. Remember it's all lost."

"Yes. Her going volatile, no signs at all?"

"None."

"That's not good."

"Not for the record, no."

"For the event. Let's hope there aren't any others."

"You don't think..."

"The codes have to be tightened in the program. That should be the first priority. If it can happen once it can happen again."

"You realise Forch that this might work our way as well."

"A jump gate."

"Precisely."

"Then Drassid why not submit that to Lord Pentham. Or shall I, giving you the credit of course."

"It is worth considering."

"Isn't it just." They both were pleased.

"Might even find a way in keeping the body alive."

"A jump gate..." Drassid mused.

"She what?" Pentham asked astounded. "And dead as well?" somewhat mollified as he sat on his porch of his estate. Not that the incident detracted from their overall plans in dealing with Regum, somehow, eventually. Plans were afoot. Ideas gestating. Actions formulated. Skias wanted results. He was not your average pontiff. Maybe even just the man for these changing times. Changes instigated by Prima.

"Tell me again Forch, and please be seated." Indicating a deck chair overlooking the rolling wooded hills spread out before them. Forch sat and explained in detail about the malfunction that killed Elentra.

"Show me what you got."

Forch handed the disk to Lord Pentham. An emerald on his finger glinted in the sun light.

"I assume you have seen it."

"Yes Lord Pentham. I have also made some notes, on paper." And extracted a sheaf from his immaculate SK dark forest green uniform. "The notes are a summation of the disk." Forch explained.

Had Elentra's mind defected to Regum? That was on Pentham's mind. Extricated herself from a closed system. That was worrying.

"So this is no accident in the conventional sense then." After skimming over the contents. "No mishap that deleted the information. Or sabotage."

"Sabotage?" Forch asked surprised. That was one possibility he had not considered.

"The Reganian's hooking into our system. Downloading deep scans. BrainDraining is not a dissimilar process. Just more thorough." Was some sort of operation in place working against them? That was Pentham's main concern.

"The technicians found nothing unusual in the system."

"Well they wouldn't. Not if the Reganian's came through the proverbial back door."

"As far as we know and I'm sure Drassid would have checked, the system was not breached, tampered with, rerouted, diverted or accessed."

Pentham merely grunted.

"Maybe she went insane and committed suicide." Forch not believing it.

"No signs of mental instability. Tight resonance. Nowhere near a volatile."

"No. A complete mystery. The DVs are looking for her I assume. Ah yes, so you reported. I like the idea this may be of use to us. There is a benevolent deity after all. Thank you Forch. You may resume your normal duties."

"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be of service."

"I shall keep you in mind should other unfortunate incidents occur. Not that we are expecting any."

"No sir."

"You may leave us."

"At your command." Forch stood, bowed and left.

Pentham heard his vehicle start. He leaned back in his chair. Weird. Strange. Suicide? A malfunction? Nothing. Alien abduction? Absurd. There were more important persons than Elentra. He rose and walked into his office. Entered the disk and watched the graphs, the resonance field of Elentra's mind, the background sequence of the program. Heightened mental activity. If only the resonant state could be read as the mind perceived it. Elentra certainly boosted. Extremely rare, amazing, super stable volatile. What had gone on in her mind? Unless the data was ever retrieved they, he, would never know. The heightened mental activity indisputable. Had she been influenced? The DVs detailed to keep the orbital under surveillance detected no unusual activity.

Pentham considered Elentra did think at times like a Reganian. She had to. One must think like one's opponent to get into their heads. Had she gotten into a Reganian head? He was really clutching at desperate explanations. Surely Elentra had not intend to self-delete. Maybe she did go crazy. No covert resonant states originating from anywhere detected. Chasing shadows until interference entangled, but what? Not the Web. As Forch stated, the DVs had searched and come up empty.

He called Reno, intel-ops on the secure line.

"Lord Pentham."

"Any unusual com traffic regarding the Orbital?"

"None."

"Mission control?" Pentham was thinking of the rogue astronaut at the base who had to be taken out. Maybe someone else had gotten ideas.

"No."

"There's been an incident regarding BrainDraining. Massive data loss. I'm doing the rounds. Drassid is up there. Forch is investigating. I'm not ruling out sabotage or external intrusion."

"SK?"

"Forch was forthcoming. Anyway what would they do with her mind, her memories. DV activity was within all the parameters. No leakage or cross contamination either. Too loose all that data and have a corpse..."

"Really?"

"Really. Well thank you. Be on alert."

"Yes Lord Pentham."

"Out."

He did not relish seeing Lord Gharbel. Gharbel. He would see it as some monumental failure pertaining to his domain. Qatus would probably think nothing much of this. Just a glitch. Pentham hoped that that would be that. If the scanner had not malfunctioned then a right mess was all Pentham could see. Elentra had attempted something. But what? Or where? Or who? Just the when. And that showed nothing.

He looked over the report once more. Elentra's mind vanishing. She had been solid. He was getting nowhere. Elentra was nowhere.

A call came through from Drassid. 'Scanner functioning.'

Well that did not solve anything. He accessed the data base of ground mission control. Maybe a Reganian space ship was in the vicinity using some new technological system. Several ships not that that meant anything. Traffic and coms were active low level, routine. Nothing to indicate a massive data transfer.

Instead of dealing with Gharbel Pentham decided to see the pontiff at a later time. Gharbel would first survey the disaster and inoculate himself from the situation. Qatus would take some heat by close association. He was one step removed through his position of Web surveillance. So far an isolated case. Either way, Skias would love this. For a moment he was thinking of taking responsibility. It would head off any fall out coming his way. As long as news did not leak out. Janon would have to be informed. It could still have been a snatch. Now that would be something. Had counter intel picked anything up. They had the equipment regarding interference. They also had the latest surveillance programmes. Maybe there was something on the disk that had been missed. Something so obvious it was, well, too obvious. Pentham knew something about coding sequences. Elentra might have re-written the scanners functions. Janon had scourers, search engines looking for computational discrepancies. If that did not net results then Pentham was at a loss as to what really had occurred at Elentra's final moments.

Then there was the mission to Regum concerning Earth. It occurred to him, as he stared at the forest spread out in front of him, not really seeing the dark mass of trees and

rolling hills that he might try Taruk. As advisor regarding the mission, he might be able to throw some light on this mess. Could a mind exist solely in a machine? Even the Reganian's had not explored that possibility. So far all he knew, all anybody knew was Elentra had vanished. It might be just that. The BrainDrain too successful. He called Taruk.

By late afternoon Taruk arrived. Pentham explained the situation. Taruk attentive. Fascinated. After all he could take an interest without being responsible. A neutral observer. A different perspective.

"If the Ds or Es find out they'll use that as an excuse to shut down all operations using technology, even its applications. DVs only." Taruk said. "One thing is certain. Her resonance from what you showed me on that disk is gone. Or worse case scenario, a one way trip. It expanded as it went out. By out I mean both as in deleted and moving away from the point of exit.

They were in Pentham's private office.

"The information fans out, is dispersed. That would suggest Elentra, as a life essence passed on. No spiritual centre. She must have been contaminated. Her spirit dispersed. It looks like she is gone Pentham."

"I just hope so. No ascension then."

"Not on the surface." Taruk watched the read outs of the disk on Pentham's screen. "One thing puzzles me. Her RS remained constant right to the end. Even during the dispersion. In fact," and he pointed to the graph. "a slight increase."

"Passing on is the greatest of mysteries awaiting us at the end of our sojourn in the world."

"To be sure. Yes. We know from our pontiff that the spirit remains a unitary field. Dispersion depends on the inner strength of the soul. The weaker, the greater the dispersion. Elentra fits the pattern of a fallen soul. The price paid for being up there, exposed to the field, the Reganians."

"Maybe we should rotate them."

"Not our decision. We can but advise."

"Indeed." Pentham exhaled. Something was not right. "Elentra must have discovered something. Otherwise why do a self-scan? She was not due for one for some time. Tell me Taruk, as you are familiar with our more difficult cases, have you ever come across anyone self deleting?"

"Suicide?" the word cut through their thoughts.

"A harsh word. Maybe she wanted to cleanse herself."

"And it went wrong."

"Well the technician claims the machine was set on low-max level. Then the system continued. The settings escalated and..."

"She may have used that as a cover."

"?"

"If she thought she could contain her core, the sacred energy of her soul in place then only the superstructure would go. Or she was trying to get rid of something that had infected her."

"I'm impressed Taruk."

He waved the compliment away. "There is something else to consider Lord Pentham. As you know the soul is, if not corrupted, indestructible. Let's say Elentra had a chance of redemption. She sensed, discovered an infestation within her. She tries to burn it out. She's aware BrainDraining has certain benefits regarding that. Her soul is in the system. Which is read as her resonance. It remains there right unto the end, the dispersion. That can be redeemed. This may sound odd but even a vacant state of mind is still a state of mind."

"You mean the remnant resonance."

"Yes. I assume the system's checks were functioning?"

"Nothing to indicate a mechanical malfunction Taruk." His face an eerie murky green reflecting the light of the screen in front of them.

"The shell remains. Both as in body and spiritual resonance."

"At least we have something. And still nothing." Not satisfied with the facts and the logic underlining the event.

"Nothing is something." Taruk smiled.

Pentham's com-link blinked. He put his earpiece in place, listened, eyes brightening for a moment. "Add that to the contained data." Then fixed his attention towards Taruk. "Two phenomena have come to our notice. Kroena has done some more checks, rerunning the sequence, broad spectrum analysis."

Taruk was interested. Pentham excited.

"First Elentra's body lost weight at the moment of transition. Miniscule yet definite. What happens when one passes on and the soul leaves the body."

"That would confirm she passed on." Taruk nodded. "Which brings up the uncomfortable question of whether she willed this to occur or something went wrong."

"Maybe the Great Being...but I have to focus on the present." Pentham continued. "There was, is I should say something else at play. A subtle surge. Not in the system but outside, in space. A tiny surge, universal. You know what that means?"

"Universal as in everywhere?"

"Yes. Spread evenly across space. It may have affected the process."

"Detected by the onboard systems. Do they have any more? When it began?"

"Concerning Elentra, this background something in space was constant."

"Breaching the interference barriers in place?"

"We must assume so."

"Rerun Elentra's sequence, duplicate her settings and see if the same thing occurs again."

"One step at a time Taruk." He paused. Then: "So we have another field."

Pentham linked his computers to the orbital, going live. He checked the data the technicians just alert him to. At first, on the graphs they could not see it. Then the computer brought it up. The first line the general state of the universe's resonant state. Designated zero. Then Elentra's at one hundred. Towards the end the line fanned out. The secondary field, for the alien field was a two, barely present, a weak washed out graph that had almost no significance. The secondary field at the same level as Elentra's. It was only when she dispersed that it was revealed. Pentham deleted Elentra's graph. The thin line remained. Not constant but broken. There and not there. The same level as a living soul.

"Interesting." Taruk leaning forewords.

"Makes one wonder if Elentra's resonance was in lock-phase with that."

"Intentional or accidental? It's rhetorical Lord Pentham."

"Good point. Two heads are better than one." Allowing himself a smile.

"Is it Reganian?"

"Ah." Pentham called up Regum's WebSpace. A broad graph appeared rising from zero to eighty. You see?"

"Indeed I do. This other graph is far behind it."

"At least it's not connected. Just there."

"Well looks like we got another question instead of an answer."

"So it appears Taruk. At least Elentra's death is confirmed."

"That it is."

After Taruk left Pentham called in Janon. He would leave Drassid out of it. He was busy with the Reganian mission. No need to bother him with Elentra's file. If he wanted to be informed Pentham would oblige him. The man could not be denied. He was close to the pontiff.

Janon watched the replay without comment. In his mind there was nothing to indicate Reganian activity. The run continued after Elentra's dispersion. Pentham wanted to see if Janon picked up on what was there in the background.

"Well Lord Pentham, it looks like somehow Elentra's BD was too successful."

"Yes. Most unfortunate."

"Thank you for taking me into your confidence."

"Well Janon. We are security in all its aspects."

"So, Elentra dies in the process. Her resonance is dispersed back into the universe from whence all lives arises. Not as a soul. Just dispersed energy. No Reganian activity accept, what's that graph that's barely noticeable?" craning his neck to get a closer look on the screen..

"Seems to have been there all the time."

"Can you backtrack? Not Elentra's file, but previous ones?"

"Most certainly how far?"

"Say one year, ten years."

Pentham, linked to the Orbital called up older BD's. The graph's appeared. One year ago, nothing, ten the same.

"Is it a resonant state? Maybe the Divine Mind?"

"Since the Cosmic Consciousness is All, I don't think it would appear at our sentient level Janon."

"Of course not. Well it's recent. Checked with Regum?"

"We have gone through this with all diagnostic tools available Janon."

"I see."

Pentham wondered if it had anything to do with the simulacrum. But he was merely speculating. The graph indicated distance with no locational centre. No source. No fixed point of energy.

"It looks like something to do with the cosmos. I doubt if it is related. Other BDs did not go off track. Let the astronomers puzzle it out Lord Pentham."

"Thank you for coming Janon."

"Pity I could not be of more help. The best we can do is watch the others. Elentra tried to cleanse herself. She wanted to make sure. Maybe she was infected and thought it best to do this on her own. Unfortunately it went wrong. Somehow. Unless she willed herself towards this tragic end."

"A desperate soul?"

"Most likely."

"Yet nothing showed up on the internal scanners in place."

"It might have just manifested Lord Pentham."

"Elentra must have had a very acute mind, a fine tuned resonance."

"Which was very solid. Still unless anything else shows up, I would say the case is closed."

"Yes Janon. I needed another opinion before reaching that conclusion myself."

"The only problem now is keeping an eye on the others. They hate being observed. I don't blame them. Interferes with their duties. Like not being fully trusted."

"At least now it's for their own good."

"That's been said so often it's lost its impact."

"Well we can thank the Ecclesiastics for that."

Janon thought it best not to express an opinion on that. Lord Pentham had the power and leeway to think more openly but Janon was not in such an exalted position. He was relieved Pentham was not taken in by the incessant mysticism of the religious orders. They often hindered more than helped in his duties to keep Prima secure. Intelligence work used logical analysis to keep abreast of events. It might smack of Reganian thought patterns. When dealing with Reganians one had to see things from their perspective to comprehend their nuances, their possible moves, their anticipated actions. Praying like the E's and D's were wont to do was not going to reveal their intentions.

Orbital: Prima

Drassid was still slightly apprehensive even though Darlos and Juris were acceptable to the Reganians. Stage One completed. Then dealing with the simulacrum. A value neutral observer. Neither machine intelligence or a real sentient. But one with a hidden agenda which the DVs would infuse into its vacant mind.

He searched for a stand by should the Reganian's reject the concept of the inserted simulacrum. He had gone through a short list of group leaders handling the DVs. The candidate one not obsessed with bringing Regum down. Nor infused with the holy mission of cleansing the universe or bent on showing the Reganians the error of their ways. The priests on Regum were living proof of how not to proceed. For the mission to succeed cool heads were needed. And Primaiaans in general were anything but that. DLs excepted. Those who had the right profile were working as technicians, engineers, researchers simply to maintain their top secret space programme. Then there were the support crews on the Orbital to learn from their Reganian counterparts. And so it went on. In the end that did not leave much for Drassid or Janon to recruit. Carias had been a case in point. Which had gone horribly wrong. So he trawled the group leaders handling DVs. Even there most candidates simply were too obsessed with success. That discounted most of them. In fact it left only one.

Merduk. Drassid looked over the file as the cruiser made its way back. Merduk ran back-up DVs warning the others of any aberrations or hostile activity. The rear guard. That meant a sharp observant mind not distracted by theological stances or the need to maintain religious purity with the usual ecclesiastical baggage which the Es insisted upon. Sometimes one had to study the ground trod upon in the path of life. Merduk a realist. Very rare. He was familiar with the alien field and its contents. He knew more than the others of Earth's conflicting RSs. An expert in his field. Not unduly influenced by both Earth's and Regum's way of thinking. Merduk understood the inherent logic of both races.

Back on the Orbital he ran into a minor crisis. The head of the DV section was dead. BD had sucked out the soul from her body. Great. Kroena her second naturally filled her place until another could replace Elentra. Kroena continuing the great struggle.

Then there was the matter of the simulacrum. Pentham was cautious. If it worked they'd have a great sentinel as a resource. Potent and hopefully conducive and effective to their aims. If the prototype worked, Pentham hinted, then others would

follow. To throw a cloak around the project Merduk, since he did very little, more a minder would oversee its heightened RS. Along with aligning with the combined mental powers of his back up DVs into his and the simulacrum's base states.

They could take the risk. Merduk had accepted the concept, the entire proposition with barely a flicker of excitement recognising the idea as worthwhile. The simulacrum's shadow based on Regum. Officially to observe. In reality to make sure it executed their designs.

After Kroena had filled him in regarding the tragedy of Elentra's death, Drassid muttering the correct sentiments checked the level of the simulacrum's mental activity. In the isolation chamber the foggy outline of a resonating figure. After weeks of focussed attention it now mimicked the back up value neutral DVs. The next trick was for the thing to be independent of the lifeline the DVs threw it. Not that they would ever cease. Resonant background backup.

Janon and Merduk were watching the simulacrum through the portal as it radiated its dim glowing yellow essence in the chamber.

"Amazing." Merduk said at last. He was the oldest of the group leaders. He was also the longest serving operative. Somehow overlooked for promotion. Not that he seemed to care much. Stable, not given to histrionics, content in his position. It gave him time to think. What Merduk thought no one knew. Routine scans revealed nothing covert. Focussed.

"To create a pure essence, the combination of the DVs pure RS. It needs a body, a vessel which is constant." Drassid remarked. For the adumbration shifted its appearance reflecting the strongest DVs imagination transferred upon it. Short range remote viewing. Now it looked like one DV, then another. Sometimes a combination of several.

"It might be ready for just one DV to run it." Kroena suggested. Merduk concurred.

"You could be right there." As Drassid studied the read outs on the monitor.

"Me?" a slight change in Merduk's voice. Surprised. It was the strongest signal he had ever gotten out of Merduk.

"Why not?"

"Err..."

"Lost for words?"

"Well, yes."

Drassid looked around. No one else present. Their faces glowed an eerie yellow from the radiating simulacrum.

"Dual persona, parallel processes, singular orientation."

"It has a subtle DV essence of its own." Merduk noticed, felt.

"Really? That advanced?" Drassid could not hide his surprise. Merduk was sensitive. And stable. His wizened face expressionless.

"Has been since the DVs infused it with their RFs." Merduk commented.

"Constant from the beginning?"

"Just about."

"You know you are our expert regarding Earth." Drassid broached. Ignoring Juris.

"I am?" Merduk downplaying his role.

"You're familiar with their discordant mental states. And more importantly you've kept your head. They seem to not have the slightest influence on you. The routine scans confirm it."

"So what you are suggesting is that I link with it, see through its presence, become it."

"Your DVs would back you up. It would not be a complete transference. Remote viewing, part symbiosis."

"I have a better suggestion. I am only one consciousness. Use the group mind. Then having several would enable it to cope with any changing situations far more rapidly than just one single remote viewer. Even at close range."

"Good point." Drassid saw the logic in that. The simulacrum flickered then turned lime green as another DV radiated through its ectoplasmic body.

"What is its true intent?"

"This is beyond top secret Merduk. If this gets out you might end up like Elentra." Drassid tried to soften the threat like someone giving good advice. Merduk merely listened, watching the glowing apparition. "Destination Earth."

"We move in." Merduk guessed correctly.

"We do. It will be our presence there. The remote viewing DVs as you know have been laying down their resonance-field thought patterns for years. In a way this presence would thus have not just back up boosted resonance states near it, it might even feel at home!"

"I see."

"Several minds within one resonance. You sure there would be no conflict? One trying to dominate the others?" Drassid addressing both Kroena and Merduk. Worried that the thing might be riven with disparate urges.

"That would have shown by now." Merduk set him at peace.

How much had he ascertained? Drassid thought. In a way it was rather fortuitous having chosen Merduk. If he was that attuned to what the DVs were importing into the simulacrum and someone like Merduk receive almost in the open the content of their projections then it was high time he was taken into confidence. Along with his knowledge and using it. Merduk would be alert to Earthers mind sets. Yes Merduk was the proper choice for this delicate, dicey if not dangerous project. At worst the DVs or Merduk could take the simulacrum over if the Earther's gained some sort of psychic advantage.

"With the remote viewers to aid it, much can be accomplished."

"Let us hope so."

"Hope Merduk?" Drassid wondered. "Why hope?"

"Well nothing is certain. What we see is of course a monumental achievement. Remote viewing works. That is fact. The DVs are on Earth, linked with that volatile race's individuals. So," he paused, "I keep this entity secure, oriented, focussed. That is the unknown aspect."

"Thought transference works, does it not?" Drassid asked instead.

"Oh yes."

"Have you tried to enter it?" motioning towards the bright outline. Pink.

"It's like having a conversation with a group. Rather cosy since we all know each other."

"Really?"

"Most assuredly Drassid."

Merduk calm, serene, relaxed. It boded well.

"Well the next thing to do is to test if your DVs can move this sentience."

"I don't know about sentience Drassid..." Kroena remarked.

"Lets not quibble."

"No." she demurred.

"You also know what Earther's look like, as do your DVs."

"Correct."

"Then get them to create an image that would pass off as one of their own."

"That should be easy enough."

"Really?"

"I'm just beginning to take all this in. The DVs create a direct link to us and Earth. There is one thing that concerns me. The DVs being 'there', here, may come under that planet's resonance."

"That is the idea. Blend in. Anyway they've been there for ages."

"What if it," glowing orange, "gets taken over?"

"We will rotate crews familiar with Earth. The target team a separate section. Even if it takes half the DVs to maintain it's presence on Earth we will always be in command. Merduk this is our big chance to get Earth on side. The DVs have prepared the ground. The only difference is that instead of being a broad spectrum insertion we focus on one location in time. Kroena and her DVs is your back up. Apart from her and her team you and yours are the only ones so far who know about this. The DVs will be told where to remote view when the time comes."

"Understood Drassid."

"Try the relocation now."

"And if it fails?"

"Then we try until we succeed."

Merduk suited up and relocated himself with his DVs in space.

Kroena was impressed. Though still a little shaken by Elentra's passing on. She just could not believe her life essence had been dispersed back into the universe, dissolved into space. Undisputable. Time to move on. Drassid advising her of refocussing as many DVs as it took regarding this secret project. Kroena glad to concentrate upon something big.

"What we have to be vigilant of is contamination." Drassid advised.

"Of course. I assume the group remains in space. Not inside the orbital."

"It would attract attention. We keep them in space."

"How long will this experiment, if Merduk is successful..." and was distracted by a glowing penumbra in space. Well away from the DVs. "What is that?"

Drassid could barely contain his excitement. "That Kroena is the simulacrum."

"What's it doing out there?"

"Merduk's DVs have moved it. A test." The dim distant glow vanished. "He's done it. You know there will be no records of any of this Kroena."

"You're the authority." she began deleting the observational data.

"We are going to go in. Not now but soon Kroena."

"Direct contact. Drassid, we're making history."

"Yes, you're right. But a lot depends on behind the scenes. This is all very tenuous at the moment." Thinking if the Reganians would accept Merduk as well.

"Right."

"Now I have to report to my superior. Remember Kroena, nothing remains of this, whatever happens. This is too important. We know that Reganian WebSpace includes Earth. Thanks to Caria's little excursion. It could be a simulation or it could be real time. No way of telling in the Web. Works both ways. Means they may notice our activity on Earth only in cyberspace. Then if they want to do a trace they'll have very little to go on."

"Understood."

Merduk was satisfied with the results. The shift by thought transference combined with remote viewing worked. Destination Earth. Most of the data they obtained from that dissonant planet was still filtered through DV intelligence. Now Drassid was considering using the entity for him to go in. Under observation. Hm. He could always engage in remote viewing himself. Then another thought occurred to him. If several DVs could create a simulacrum could he? The idea appealing. He could be free to roam the universe! As could anybody with the strength within that entity. All it needed, all that was necessary was determined focussing. Mentally straining, yes. But no different than focussing anyway. The mental act was the same. Just the orientation different.

To be amongst them, learn more of their dissonant potent minds. Merduk had seen their civilisations changing over time. They survived blood curling violent wars, natural catastrophes, even cosmic disasters. With such inner strength, if he was blended with their race, Prima would be supreme. The Reganian's might pale into insignificance. If the two planets could combine their mental faculties for Earther's were both Primaian and Reganian simultaneously then under proper guidance the best might be brought out in both of them. Regum could do what they liked then. Either join in or be isolated.

Nor was his idea to self transmutate a breach in security. He could easily explain that he was observing the inserted entity from within. Make sure it remained stable, oriented without being contaminated or taken over. Making sure it would remain in their control. Yes.

Time to start his mental exercises. Composing himself. It was mental activity which moved it. The simulacrum had been created by the combined effort of his group's mind. A subjective object. With objective psychic potential.

His com link buzzed just as he was getting ready to engage in his meditation. Drassid. What did he want that was so urgent. He answered the call and returned to the Orbital.

Seated Drassid in the conference room talked of inconsequential things. A way to ascertaining both his state of mind, that of his group and how he took Elentra's abrupt exit. Some of his DVs had tried to reach out to her passed on soul. No joy there. Not that that was revealed to Drassid. If the passed on were truly dissipated when the time came then there was no resurrection in the ethereal realm of the Divine Mind. Or the thought disturbed him as Drassid made pleasant conversation that it had been intended for her dissipation to take place. That she might have known something so sensitive, so dangerous that even her spirit necessitated its removal and dispersion.

At last Drassid came to the point on the simulacrum. "Let's go to your quarters."

Once there, just the two of them Drassid said: "The transfer is in progress. Steady state."

"Good. No problems?"

"Easy. It barely has substance, all essence." Preoccupied. He finally came out with it. "How would you like to go on a trip?"

Coming from Drassid the question was an order formulated politely.

"I am always ready to serve in whatever capacity you see fit." Drassid carried maximum weight. The palace's representative, a roving brief and trouble shooter.

"You are the most familiar with Earth's inhabitants."

"I am?" Merduk assumed specialists, analysts were at work digesting his group's input.

"Indeed that is so."

"I'm surprised."

"Why should that be?"

"Well I thought the information we glean is processed higher up."

"Ah." Drassid smiled which did not come naturally. "The data is dealt with right here. Abstracts are forwarded on. For the Ecclesiastics mostly. They formulate policy."

Merduk merely nodded. His reports going to Elentra, now Kroena. The head controller would create the abstracts which were then passed on. Merduk wondered why he was needed to go somewhere.

"You have studied Earth."

"As has the group." For he did not consider it his group.

"Of course. A remarkable assemblage. Low burn out rate."

"Lucky."

"No. It reflects the inner harmony of its combined resonant state. Your resonant state Merduk. I cannot reveal how the other's are faring but rest assured your team is the best."

Merduk did not react. If that was indeed so then it was so.

"Due to your state of being."

"Maybe." Merduk answered cautiously. He already guessed Drassid had him marked for something other than just group leader.

"Who in your opinion is as worthy?"

"I have no idea. Absolutely none. That is for others to decide."

"True enough. You see there is an important mission in progress."

"Isn't there always? Regum, Novus, Earth even."

"Indeed. But it is Earth that concerns us."

"Of course. A dangerous race."

"With a minimal effect upon you and your group."

"We keep control of ourselves. Get close without deep immersion. Safer that way. Other DVs go right in. Deep penetration. We observe."

"Your method works."

"Apparently."

"Their homicidal tendencies, their aberrant psychotic states are just a phenomena to you and your group."

"You've summed it up."

"Yes. I want you to go to Regum."

"Really?" Merduk hid his surprise. Priests went to Regum, low level penetration. Sloggers. Not him at all. He balked at the suggestion.

"Oh Merduk not at that level." Sensing his thoughts. "You're too astute to go amongst their masses to proselyse. No it is something else entirely. What I am about to reveal is top secret. If it works then at some future date those involved may be recognised for the work they were engaged in. But for the moment this specific mission is not on any file. Only a very select few are aware of its existence. And two of our players are already there. Have you ever heard of Darros or Juris?"

"No."

"Good. So will you, are you willing to go?"

"Drassid you know I cannot refuse." Merduk placated.

"In this case you can. For you would be exposed to Earth's resonance."

"Aren't we already?"

"Only remotely."

"So this is different."

"Very much so. It would be a long trip. Months even."

"Whatever it takes."

"You agree?"

"I would like to know what it entails."

"That's the tricky bit Merduk. If I reveal it there is no turning back. If I don't reveal it the choice remains. Let us say it is an intensive study of Earth. And not from here..."

"...from Regum. Why?"

"Again I cannot as yet reveal that."

"Upset some higher ups?" Merduk making it easy for Drassid.

"Upset." A subtle smile.

"That dubious."

"You see we have a team working with the Reganians."

"I see what you mean. Almost traitorous if not heretical."

"Precisely. Interested?"

"Very much."

"Right, I consider that an acceptance."

"Like most I find Regum fascinating. The forbidden planet."

"Well appearances must be seen to be maintained."

"Things are changing then."

"Actually no. Not as yet."

"Will be?"

"Might, Merduk, might. Of course all your data here has to be removed."

"Or deleted."

"Secured."

"Fine."

"No objections that your hard work just vanishes?"

"Like me?"

"Well officially you are going under as they say."

"Spying."

"Learning."

"On Regum."

"On Regum."

"I'm in."

"I can give you time to consider."

"No need."

"Right." Drassid looked relieved. He became more relaxed. "It's quite simple. Darlos and Juris are in. We have actually managed to convince the Reganian's to study Earth as a combined unit. They have by the way agreed to keep this under wraps as well. No one either end knows. Which protects their identities as it will yours. Now your group is in control of the simulacrum. It is our intent to use that entity to go to Earth, as an observer. That's why we need you. You will be able to control it. You can link with it. In other words through remote viewing you will be on Earth, direct. How does that sound?"

"Fantastic."

"Thought so. Of course you have to convince the Reganians that this is the safest way to study the Earther's."

"But there is more isn't there?"

"There is. Thus the secrecy, thus my being here. Nothing on file or even on paper. It is our intention to have this simulacrum guide the Earther's to recognise not just the divinity of the universe but our presence as well."

"We are going to reveal to them our existence?"

"Indeed."

"I am...lost for words. This is a remarkable development."

"Projections indicate the Earther's will at some relative future date discover us anyway. So it is better we smooth the way. For by the very fact that they will discover us, eventually then it goes without saying they would also become aware of Regum."

"And to make sure they prefer us we go there in the form of this emissary. But Drassid since the Reganian's are involved aren't we letting the Earther's know of both planets?"

"It is a bit of a tightrope act. But remember we are in control through the simulacrum. Sure Regum might reveal its existence. So what? They are minor players. We have the knowledge of the divine not they. We are attuned to the cosmic harmony not they. We are the chosen race not they." Drassid recited facts. "Timing is everything. Earth will go through many transmutations. Have done so. Oscillating between spiritual fervour and space exploring capabilities. They go through their dualistic mind set either way. We are making sure they go our way." And he let Merduk consider the proposition..

"Get them on side when they are most amenable."

"Correct."

"What if they don't?"

"As I said, we insert the entity when they are more spiritually inclined."

"I see." Merduk paused, then: "Makes sense."

"You agree then?"

"Most certainly Drassid."

"Lord Pentham, don't you think this adventure, this experiment taking place on Regum with some of our best is not, to say a little out of the ordinary?" Gharbel huffed. To Pentham his was a kind of patrician act trying to make some minor official understand the appalling consequences of his rash actions.

Pentham, ensconced in Gharbel's opulent office looked at him evenly.

"You don't trust Darlos, myself, and those chosen for this unique opportunity."

"The Reganian's are in control for starters. On their ground. You know what that means. So to spell it out for you, contamination." Gharbel was livid.

"Cover is not content Gharbel." Pentham answered smoothly.

"What cover?" Gharbel dismissive. "If this turns against...you..." for he nearly said 'us'.

"You mean if the Reganians take over...then that will be a revelation for us. It's a win win situation. Gharbel we have infiltrated them. It is us that will gain valuable information."

"Which we have been collecting by tried and true methods."

"Believe me Gharbel," not bothering with the polite form of address, "it's more than under control." Not revealing the existence of the simulacrum. "The pontiff will be informed."

"That is as it may be. When it is too late. You lost Elentra." A cheap shot. Pentham knew what was bugging Gharbel. One: taking the initiative to the Reganians, two: mounting a mission to Earth over which Gharbel now had no say. How that must chafe.

"You know the BrainDrain was too successful. Anyway we learnt from that. How to dispose of enemies."

"Hmf."

"The DVs will be in control." .

"And their insertion." How had Gharbel come across this? No matter. Gharbel continued: "Until it gets to Earth. Or worse the Reganians copy this idea. Something we should not even consider revealing Pentham."

"Ah you're thinking they are going to what? Copy it. How? It is a creation of a group mind. Beyond the reach of their thinking machines." Pentham pointed out.

"So far all I see is that they are cognisant of our latest efforts. I am sure that will not escape their notice. And sending Merduk as well. One less resource available to us."

"The DVs will be watching."

"So will the Reganians, no matter what they prefer us to believe."

"It is what we want them to believe Gharbel." Looking past him through the open window onto his estate. Gardeners were busy removing faded flowers.

"Us coming to them like supplicants."

"They will think we are amendable. That is the whole intent of the exercise. And discover how advanced they are. The priests certainly are not revealing anything remarkable Gharbel."

He had no answer for that. The Reganians did have capabilities that no one was aware of. Pentham had a point. To make it appear that a small break away group wanted to work with them not against them. Using Earth as a common denominator took the focus away from their planet. The ruse was good, if it worked. But if they found out the real intent, the fall out would be disastrous. They might recall their own on the Orbital. Without them the whole operation to penetrate their thoughts would be void. The risk was huge.

"They have welcomed our approach Gharbel. That in itself is a minor coup."

"Even if we compromise our selves?"

"Compromise." Pentham said a little disdainfully. Gharbel might be above him on Prima but he had the broader domain.

"If this turns against us..." Gharbel going around in circles. Pentham wondered why he had paid him the courtesy to keep him informed. After all Gharbel was Prima centred, the System Sentinel, Guardian of the Immortals and the Infinity Chip. The only reason Pentham had informed him was in case the Reganian's by using as yet unknown technological potentialities through WebSpace might have some influence on their ancient computers. He was warning Gharbel that the Reganian's might do a broad sweep. As such their end had to be secure. He could have easily alerted Gharbel of potential hostile activity and left it at that. He should have.

"Skias might kill it."

"He might. Depending on how it is presented."

"This mission is premature. The Reganians will know of our capabilities. It should have been tested first, then configured so that it is secure from their penetration. You

think they are just going to let us use it without wanting to know what it really is? What if it goes rogue? What if the DVs are blocked? Then what are you going to do? What if it cannot be recalled? What if the Reganians gain control of it? Or even enhance it? Then we would have lost something so unique, so awesome..."

"Now that we have achieved this Gharbel we can do it again. It would not matter."

"They have their super computers. AI capable. They can boost it so that it becomes impossible to counter its re-configuration. An indestructible being in their hands. They could even make it appear that they haven't even touched it. We would be unaware of their duplicity. They could turn it on us and we might never even know through its camouflage, both mentally and in physical appearance of its conflicting intentions."

"Yes but our people are there. And Merduk's resonance is tight. He's got solid psychic capabilities. You think he is going to do nothing?"

"Up to now we have been reacting to Reganian progress. This indeed, will surprise them. We infiltrating at any time, of our choosing and you hand it to them, on a platter claiming a noble cause. It's just the means you are using I find atrocious. This should have been thought through."

"The Reganians are peaceful. Ever since the schism they have never made a move against us."

"They don't have to. They are doing all the moving, they are the ones expanding into space with that Web of theirs. That is the move against us. Invading the holy domain of space itself."

"It's all show Gharbel. Where is the substance?"

"They, their Web is the substance."

"And what have any of us done to stop this? The DVs? Hm?"

"You're playing a most dangerous game. It could threaten our future. You have run future scenario's I take it."

Pentham had not. For one good reason. Call it superstition, intuition or the fear factor. Not gutwrenching instinctive fear but that of the thinking mind. If he had run future possibilities using remote viewers pertaining to the entity then there was the potential for the Reganian's to read that themselves. Their minds might have developed differently over the centuries but there could be still some vestiges of their ancient past coming to the fore in the odd psychic individual.

"No." telling him why.

"Big mistake."

"Really. Gharbel."

"What is that supposed to mean." As he fiddled with his embroidered sleeve.

"They have, so far, not built independent thinking machines. I have studied that. You fear the machines could take over the Web, master becomes servant. But it is we who have created a simulacrum. Big difference. It is us, not them. It is filled with our resonance not theirs. Theirs is incompatible. The simulacrum cannot be infiltrated by machine intelligence. Nor by their minds. Unless they want to take on the group mind behind it. Now that would give them away. And besides they haven't got our resources. Or DVs. Also, its orientation is outwards, to Earth, not Regum. They will accept it or even welcome it. If not, we can always recall it. It will work out Gharbel."

"You have opened up a domain, you know that. Only the pontiff can create, through the Immortals a new realm. You may have created a reality that will come to haunt us."

"A bit dramatic."

"Dramatic? Have you any idea what is involved here? The Reganians are not going to just let us have our way. Why should they? They might at first duplicate it in the Web. But what if it gets out. We would be dealing with a monster."

"For starters the entity is on Earth. Not in our space."

"And you know how dangerous that race is. They have psychic potential as well. What if they create an army and flood us with it? Have you thought of that?"

"Gharbel, as I explained, it will appear as one of them. With reduced mental capabilities, not enhanced. They will think it is, as I just said, one of their own. They will suspect nothing."

"The Reganian's..."

"Yes, yes, I am aware. Remember this entity is going to be inserted at a time when the Earther's are more spiritual, mystical not high tech like the Reganians Pentham."

"It's on your head Pentham."

Regum: Mission Earth

The ease with which Merduk was accommodated by the Reganians surprised him. Deemed their second best expert regarding Earth Sovark liaising with Darlos gladly accepted the third member of the Primaian mission. This time a shuttle was used. Darlos did not want to use the space cruiser in case it created a pattern. The flight scrubbed from all data logs as was Merduk himself. By leaving the Orbital he was leaving his presence as well. Destination classified.

Several days out a Reganian space cruiser picked him up. Merduk was then put into stasis for the slow three months it would take to get to Regum. They were not sending a gravity drive ship. Two days prior landing Merduk was given a crash course on Regum with plenty of time to adjust his near dormant biorhythms.

The space port a hive of activity. Busy with countless people so unlike Prima's operating under a cloud of secrecy trying to be as invisible as possible. The first thing Merduk noted, already on the cruiser was that Reganians were exuberant, engaging, Primaians reticent. Even on the ground it looked more like organised chaos. Incessant movement, ground vehicles flitting about, shuttles flying off in all directions. Everyone engaged, hurried and relaxed at the same time. Merduk adjusted quickly enough, he had to if he was to get along with them.

After disembarking a white vehicle awaited him. Irnet knew they could have flown but she wanted to get to know their other expert on Earth. Engage him indirectly, get a feel for the Primaians. She was familiar with Darlos and Juris. Relating to Merduk would be a pleasant diversion.

She introduced herself, part of the team he would be working with. Studying him. Attentive, relaxed, sure of herself, holding back as Merduk observed this young pale woman with lively eyes. On Prima the masses were brown. The planet largely agrarian, they spent their time outdoors in the fields. Except for the elite in the holy city affecting a paler skin, a pretentious sign of their exalted social status.

Pleasantries were exchanged. They clambered in, Irnet cleared to go. In the distance skyscrapers, soft grey outlines. Nothing like Prima. Here they were proud of their achievements. It made Prima look like the backwater it was. As outward going in their achievements as Prima was inward looking and withdrawn. Huddled tiny villages were the norm, crowded low rise provincial cities at best. The distant metropolis did not just

dwarf anything on Prima it made Prima look primitive. After all their society was bonded, here they seemed dispersed yet unitary as well. He would get used to it.

The ride was smooth, not like the creaking contraptions on Prima. Merduk had the feeling of floating on the tarmac. Another difference. On Prima their roads merely dirt. The dash showed various readouts, a mini capsule not dissimilar to a space ship. Even a map of where they were heading. On Prima they used their memories, here machines thought for them. He wondered if that lowered their mental capabilities.

They exited the space port, slowed at a gate. With her window down, Irnet merely flashed a card and was waived through. The space port on Prima had triple layered security barriers and electrified fences. This place was virtually open to all. What a difference. The Reganians were so relaxed it made Merduk feel free. A strange sensation. If this was corrupting then the Ecclesiastics had it all wrong. Unless it lulled one's mind into wakeful somnolence.

The road was busy with traffic. Trucks, cars, motor bikes whizzing past. Overhead under a bright sky the odd flash of a flying vehicle, then another and another. Where was everybody going? On Prima they all staid within a proscribed area really centred on the village or the town. Rarely any further. Here they were all over the place. They took an exit that was marked indicating some places ahead of them. Nothing like that on Prima. Everybody knew their place.

Then another exit. More buildings, warehouses by the look fell behind as fields of crops were harvested by bright red contrivances. Several per field. No one in sight as these machines loaded the harvest into huge trailers behind them. They then disengaged as another moved up behind it. Not a village in sight. They passed huge silo's, lines of wagon on silver rails stretching into the distance.

Irnet made him welcome, was honoured they could spare him for this unique project. Then she fell into silence. The idea was to get Merduk to talk. But he was content just to be driven down the road. Other vehicles ahead and behind them.

Fields gave way to forests stretching into the distance. Occasionally a wide gap, the earth a rich brown where felling occurred. The lumber moved by rail to automated saw mills after Merduk asked. On Prima gangs of villagers were assigned to that task with huge four man saws and axes. Merduk tried to steal glances at Irnet as she drove. This was one of the few roads that were not electronically peppered with guides to relieve its occupants of actually having to drive manually. Regum discouraged the curious, if there were any, of the research station she was taking Merduk to. Irnet assumed, like all

Primaiaans that he too was cagey by nature. So she gave him the silent treatment. In the end he would open up.

Merduk relaxed with his situation. Irrnet wished she had been enhanced. Apparently the update did wonders. Not just at the processing end but also getting directly into minds. They had achieved DV capabilities. But the higher echelon thought it best not to reveal that to the visitors. They would be impressed enough with the ability to move through space and time at will. Keep Prima's idea of them as an outward focused race in place.

Merduk at ease maybe because Irrnet just kept to herself. He had been given to understand Reganian's as loquacious. Maybe the masses, not researchers such as Irrnet and presumably the team he would be engaged with.

Primaiaans could be with each other for hours without saying anything. They embedded themselves with their partners often knowing each others thoughts without the need of stating the obvious. Togetherness came naturally especially if their resonances clicked.

At last after passing over a hill, the forest continuing towards the horizon Irrnet finally asked what he knew of the Earthers. He had sensed her mind getting ready to communicate with him. Felt her energy rising.

"Aberrant, unpredictable, volatile, psychotic at times, then swinging back to some sort of shaky balance. Recurring cycles of violence only to stabilize after those less than sane outbreaks. They exalt when going into their hyper modes of destruction. The core of their essential selves continually seething with rampant emotional states. Unstable by nature. Believe in all sorts of outrageous beliefs. Ghosts, werewolves, vampires. Imagine strange apparitions as being real in some sort of transient physical state, and a multitude of gods," he paused, "as we did once." Nearly adding 'prior enlightenment.' But kept himself in check not wishing to preach. Irrnet would have done her homework.

She nodded sagely as if he confirmed her knowledge regarding that perplexing race. When she remained silent, Merduk wondered, "Is it true that it is now possible to actually get there?"

"Yes." As if it was old news.

"You know our DVs have been 'in place' for ages."

"We suspected that."

"Suspected?"

"Heightened mental awareness. Quite a feat. Your people are a remarkable race." Irrnet following the script of downplaying themselves.

"I don't know about 'remarkable' Irrnet. The DVs most certainly but they are few compared to the rest of us." Merduk not wishing to boast their capabilities. He was borderline. Sometimes his intuitions were spot on but he was always cautious when his mind went like that. Not really believing his own potential. He was usually right of course, events unfolded as expected, knowledge came his way when necessary, situations developed which suited his current situation. Like being on Regum. Something he had wished for but never expected to occur. Now here he was. On Regum and not just as a visitor or working through the embassy but on a secret mission to insert their simulacrum if possible on Earth. He still remembered with awe how the DVs shifted it out of the isolation chamber, the preternatural glow in space as it hovered there, deposited by their will. Then vanished, jumping into a transitional-ready hyper state.

The air in the vehicle was becoming tangy. The smell of the ocean. Over another rise, the road deserted, to the right ahead a cluster of white buildings. A small cupola, a telescope no doubt and the ocean ahead of them set on a cliff top. The waters glittered in the sunlight.

Irrnet pulled into a parking lot. No security. How relaxed, how confident Reganian's were.

"Well Merduk, we're here." Which was obvious. The door moved back and Merduk got out glad to stretch his legs. The buildings were single storied, the windows shining silver reflecting the trees, the sky, the ocean.

At the front two guards, their weaponry holstered. Antennae along with dishes on the roof. Irrnet merely nodded at the guards who smiled but said nothing. Barely taking in Merduk. The door opened automatically. The foyer had a front desk with three guards, their faces reflecting the glow of monitoring screens. One looked up and handed Irrnet a plastic square. She fastened it to Merduk's lapel.

"You're one of us now. I'll show you to your room first." Down the corridor past several doors. Spacious. A large living area, couch, recliners, workstation, a window overlooking the ocean, a shower recess and inbuilt wardrobe with a change of clothes.

At the open door a knock. Marez, standing a little back, friendly face.

"Scientific advisor. Welcome Merduk."

"A pleasure and an honour."

"Marez."

"Merduk."

"I know. You've achieved quite a bit."

"I have?"

"A worthy addition to the team."

"Glad to be of service."

"And well versed regarding Earthers."

"A little. A complex race."

"Yes indeed."

Irrnet showed him the intercom.

"Would you like to rest? Have a shower?" Marez asked.

"I feel fine thank you."

"We'll take you on the guided tour. If you get lost don't worry. Some sections are sealed off of course. So you won't accidentally stray..." He understood. "Anything with a red light is out of bounds. The disk on your lapel you keep with you at all times. It allows you access to the areas regarding our collaboration."

"I am looking forward to that."

"As we all are." Smiles from Marez and Irrnet. "Let's have a seat." Marez continued. The door shut and they sat around the low coffee table.

"Once more, welcome to Regum and to our little community out here. You may stroll around the grounds. Whilst our particular endeavours are classified, this station also doubles as an observatory. You are familiar with astronomy?"

Merduk knew the basics, yes.

"Fine, excellent. We understand you are quite familiar with Earth's way of thinking?"

"In a way."

"No, ahm, problems?"

"As in...?"

"Their often strange behaviour. It can be disconcerting."

Merduk was amused. "Understatement."

"Aren't they just." Marez beamed.

"Well it will be interesting to see how we go when in place."

"Yes. That will have to be discussed at some stage. Apparently your people have made an incredible breakthrough..." watching Merduk's reaction.

"Our DVs have that ability, yes." Merduk answered blandly.

"I mean this entity of yours."

"Well Marez, it isn't mine. A composite creation of several DVs." How had they known?

"Fascinating. Way ahead of us. Never occurred to us either. But then we don't have your unique abilities." Marez all pleasantry.

"All sentients have that capability. A matter of practice and training."

"To be sure." Not revealing that their EAI capabilities were on par. "Your profile suggests you have a natural empathy with the Earthers."

Merduk hid his surprise. They knew about him? How? Darlos and Juris were strangers to him. Maybe they were made familiar with his profile and had been ordered to pass that on.

"They are fascinating. I try to hold back of course." Which as team leader he had to. The DVs of course did not.

"Wise when dealing with exo-sentients. Observe, study, learn."

"Precisely." Merduk could not reveal Prima's real intent he reminded himself. The alignment with Prima's. The very reason of inserting the simulacrum. Direct Earth's future to that of Prima's.

"This entity your people created..."

"Yes?"

"When will it be transferred?"

That astonished Merduk. Darlos had of course said that that was of the essence to get the Reganian's to accept it. Darlos though expected difficulties there. An entity such as that was a potent force. It would be linked via the DVs with Merduk as the nexus back to them. And here was Marez eager to have this entity here, now.

"Any time which suits you. You know what this is?"

"We call it a CI. Cyber Intelligence. CI for short."

"Well Marez, the CI is below a sentient entity. Not quite an independent being as such. Like a servant if you will. There, in the background, discreet with the ability to pass on it's perception."

"A mute?"

"If necessary. Through me it can interact. It can also take on any appearance. So to the Earther's it will look like one of their kind." Without revealing that the back up DVs powered the inserted entity.

"Which is the idea. A remote sensor."

"A remote viewer."

"Great, fantastic. We are going to be present on an alien planet." Then Marez paused. "Understand that whatever we do discover is not meant for general consumption."

"Keeping it secret? Yes."

"Good. Normally we disseminate information as you know yourself. But here we too are making an exception. There would be some," Marez quickly looking at Irnet who's mien did not change, "that think working with Primaian's is a breach of confidence. Dangerous even."

"Dangerous?"

"Some suggesting we have been infiltrated. That by having a potent mind such as yours amongst us breaches our security."

"I can see the logic. Rest assured I'm concerned with Earth, not Regum."

"Thank you for your candour Merduk."

"I'm a researcher, not a spy."

Marez was satisfied with Merduk's word. Not that it mattered much. The whole building was smart-ware installed. Any psychic activity noted. Not just the Primaian's but themselves as well. The complex was completely sealed off from the outside world. Accept for Merduk's resonant states when engaged with the CI Prima's DV activity could not penetrate them here. In theory.

"We may start tomorrow then?"

"Indeed."

"You can meet your friends now if you will."

"A nice thought."

"We'll leave you to it. We'll start at midday then."

"Once more I'd like to thank you, and whoever accepted this mission between our two planets as well. I'm certain both our races will learn much." Marez satisfied at their collaboration believing Merduk.

"To scientific co-operation."

"To scientific co-operation it is."

After his visitors had left. Darlos and Juris came, happy for a third to be present. They chatted inconsequentially then left. Then Merduk became pensive. As far as this mission went they really only needed him. Juris had been a lecturer in psychology so that was of some use. A second opinion to either confirm or deny specific mental phenomenon. Darlos was another matter. He claimed to be a scientist. With limited knowledge. That suggested he was there to keep an eye on them, and or the Reganians. The spy in the ointment. To keep him and Juris on track? Not to deviate into heresies? Or warn them if they started to think like Reganians? Become polluted by their

mind set? Probably. He did not exhibit the usual fervour of some Divine or Ecclesiastic. Which made sense given the nature of the experiment.

Merduk as he lay on the comfortable bed, went through his own mind regarding this adventure. That it was top secret he had no problems with. Everything Prima did concerning Regum was secret. The masses on his planet only knew what they were told. Which wasn't much. Of Earth only that they were homicidal psychotics. DV activity was all about containing Earth, obviating the field, dominating them. Still Earth continued to develop along disturbing lines. Reganian technology minded progress and Primaian spiritual expansion within their souls. No wonder they were so unstable. The insertion of the simulacrum to occur in Earth's ancient history, prior their discovery of technology. Nudge them onto the spiritual path. The DVs back at his end ready to boost Earthers along the way. Show them the magic of the celestial empyrium in all its vast splendour. Infuse into them the idea of a resurrected life upon passing on. Death as they called it. Yes. The body might die but the soul was eternal. Once they accepted that they would not be disappointed or look back at what might have been. It was what was to be that would focus their attention. The salvation of the soul was everything. Any deviation and upon Death if their spiritual fervour was found wanting would reduce them to dust. Put that fear into them and their mystical inclinations would do the rest. Simple really. The insert would see to that.

Darlos was certainly fulfilling his role. Observant he kept in the background as the Reganian team went over the data they had on Earth. Which was not much. Unlike the DVs who had been in contact for generations. Marez in tune with Juris, the cautious scientist. Both admiring each others knowledge though Juris certainly was far in advance of Marez. More like lecturer and student. Merduk filled them in on whatever gaps they came across regarding Earth psychology.

In the meantime the DVs inculcated the CI as a progenitor of their race. Assuming behind a cloak of Inner Consciousness a self-effacing with an appropriate demeanour resonance that hopefully ought to align with Earth's inhabitants, targeting their consciousness.

They ran hostile simulations knowing the volatility of the Earthers to see how the CI would respond. It pretended meekness under such assaults. It deigned to suffer gladly thereby giving the impression of patient submission in the face of overt hostility. These crucial tests the CI passed to the satisfaction of all. The CI remained value free as an observer. It did not even counter the simulated arguments thrown at it. The DVs inserted

persona was working. The CI appeared as an Earthling, had its own life, its own history. To all intents and purposed it was a local inhabitant. In its first test run it preached peace and salvation, of an eternal life. Sovark had some misgivings there. Merduk replied that they believed in the gods, were eternal to them anyway, so why not their lives as well? The CI was only mirroring what these aliens thought. Still Sovark insisted that that should be kept in the background. Merduk passed that on to the DVs. Retracting the CIs vision of life after death was not so much deleted as cloaked. The results would be the same. The CI never mentioned it again as they continued the simulations.

The ease with which the DVs maintained contact with both the CI and Merduk was due to the group's acknowledgement that DVs simply could not be stopped. What Sovark and his team could not ascertain was the exact methodology by the DVs tasked to focus in the simulacrum. What the Primaian's did not know was that the building's smart ware, the processors encased into its very structure was 'reading' the resonance of the DVs passively. The mentally generated field was duly noted in all its diverse levels as the DVs irradiated the CI. The resultant data then shifted to their EAI research centres so that the E end of the capabilities of the AI functions could mimic what came naturally to the DVs. The Reganians were learning.

The night before the CIs release they gathered going over its intelligent application. The minor volatility matched that of the Earthers. It made Merduk's job easier as an observer and advisor. He knew intellectually, rather like oversight the behavioural patterns the Earthers displayed. As such Merduk did not need to get directly involved, directly entangled, a word he had picked up from Marez pertaining to specific field states. It was how the Reganians explained DV activity, their remote viewing.

There was the extra benefit that should things go wrong, and their probability calculations came up with plenty it would boomerang back onto the Primaian's CI, not themselves. Anyway they could duplicate the experiment anytime.

Merduk relaxed. He had covered as much as he could. All three were in a way on their own in this. Working independently. In shifts. Then when it was time for the CI to 'rest' to give the appearance that it too needed sleep Merduk could then report on the progress achieved, the information gained on Earth. Whether the CI impacted on the multitude, or if her leaders were slowly aligned to Prima's way of thinking.

Merduk had trouble sleeping. He was excited. The group had met for one final discussion, agreed as always on how they would navigate the CI, keep it in check. Their computers would keep the CI balanced. Not that it mattered what the Reganians did.

By merely infusing the CI with the DVs predetermined orientation they would achieve their aim. It was not honest but there was too much at stake to quibble about the finer points of cooperation. On the surface the three of them were the guides and so it would appear to Sovark's team. For the CI would according to the simulations blend in and then they would take it from there with the aid and back up of the target specific DVs. It would slowly integrate itself into their social structure, convince whoever was in a position from the rulers point of view that the CI had their interests at heart. Then when the CI had achieved a position of power it would slowly guide them along its predestined will. There was no need to even reveal its origins. They might never know that the CI was an agent of influence. As long as the Earther's were amendable. As they would be. After all the DVs had been influencing the Earther's for generations. Generally and specific. Laying the groundwork for this moment in time.

In time. In space. In mind. Earth would be aligned, her resonance fitting in with that of Prima's. Earth would be theirs. A compliant race thinking along Prima's natural orientation. Locking out the Reganians from there on. Merduk marvelled at the audacity. Some resistance might be expected. Earther's were no unitary people. Powerful groups coalesced and dissolved rapidly. Yet their core element, that of a powerful ruler and an equally powerful priesthood remained in place, even if the individuals changed.

Sleep finally came.

The final day arrived.

The image of the CI looked slightly outlandish to the gathered group. Lean and fit looking, brown, tanned by the sun, robed in loose fitting pants, a cowl over a shirt and cape to ward off the cold winds, bejewelled rings on his hands, a talisman around his neck for good luck, Earthers were superstitious, and the CI's long black hair deemed by Earthers to contain inner strength and martial prowess. The CI's deep black eyes, almost hypnotic giving the appearance of deep wisdom, sacred knowledge of the gods and the spirits who served them. Enough to demand attention.

Assembled in the observation room they saw in a three dimensional holo-screen the CI ready to be inserted. In an isolation room, where two smart-ware installed recliners transmitted Darlos's and Juris's focussed minds. They both awaited the go-ahead to link with it. The CI itself was in a room of its own in the laboratory, the quantum computer that would effect the transfer to the predetermined point on Earth ready, aligned, focussed.

A time when Earth was still a pre-stage one civilisation. When religion was being born. Merduk had convinced them that at this stage Earth was at a transition point. It was there and then that their inherent unconscious revealed itself in outward form. Mapping out the future path of their society, their attitudes, their perception of the world. The unspoken spiritual universe their environment. At this point in their history about to launch from their primary civilisation wars of conquest across the ocean moving east to usurp fledgling communities. If the Earthers were nudged into being peaceful instead through the insertion then their mission aims would be on track. The moment of the transfer actually chosen by future computer simulations. To which the whole group demurred.

Nothing could interrupt the process, the transfer. The research station had its own generators. The watchers were about to virtually be in place on that far of planet. They all moved from the floor of the laboratory where the CI glowed in still life to the raised and sealed observation platform with its banks of monitors. Marez barely containing his excitement, Irrnet as cool as ever, Duncos observant, aware, checking on the group. Intel Merduk assumed working with Sovark who now that it was time to insert the CI let the others do their work. Marez would be in control. Darlos and Juris for the initial insertion were ready in the isolated room where they would guide the CI's behaviour. Darlos would be the prime mover and Juris back up advisor. Merduk with them, keeping his mind's eye on them just in case.

"We are about to witness a remarkable feat." Merduk suggested hoping to draw either Marez or Sovark out just how the Reganian's could move matter through space and time. Merduk realised they could have done this themselves but part of his mission was to find out how the Reganian's achieved something that was in a way was a frightening development as far as Prima was concerned. It meant the Reganians could insert their agents onto Prima. Manipulate their history. Reverse engineer a CI of their own. But as yet they could not interleave a conscious presence. Only the DVs had that capability.

"We are indeed." Marez all excitement. The fruition of generations of research about to be tested. They had of course run successful experiments over a short range on their planet. The theory was sound, the application of the QCs successful. The larger distance involved irrelevant.

"A real time virtual insertion." Marez beamed.

"You make it sound so simple." Merduk answered, the computers running the coordinates, the generators powering up the carrier wave, riding the distant universe's

probability wave field. Not that Marez explained it that way. Official orders were to keep that as vague as possible.

"It looks that way. Currently we still don't know exactly how."

"Really?"

"Just that it works. There are theories of course..." Marez trailed off indicating that they had no concrete answer for what they were about to achieve. Merduk had of course tried to read Marez's mind but all he got were vague impressions, foggy concepts, unclear volatile thoughts. From his point of view all he knew was that the DVs merely thought an image into its place. He would have had trouble explaining that as well. They were in the same boat.

"All we do know is that it needs energy to effect the transfer. The computers need the coordinates and the rest...just happens." Irnet said.

"And now the moment." Sovark announced, the control lights green. Everything was ready. They checked with Darlos and Juris who replied they too were now standing by.

"Normally someone would do a speech about our cooperation, our being united in this scientific endeavour, what it means to both our worlds. That we are on a new path, united in exploring Earth. Our gratitude to your people regarding the shell that is the CI with your exceptional remote viewers. Prima's experts who filled in so many gaps regarding our lack of knowledge as well. Even if we do not officially exist your presence is appreciated and on behalf of all of us our deep-felt thanks. So, let's do it." Sovark's fingers itching to press the start button. That of course was left for Marez.

All sitting in front of the terminals. Below the static CI glowed eerily, the laboratory lights dimmed. Irnet gave a quick smile to Merduk who returned the gesture. She seemed a little nervous. Then she pressed a button on the command console. "Room secure."

"Ready when you are Marez." Sovark indicated.

"And counting, three, two, one, initialize." And without undue ceremony pressed the system to begin the transfer.

For a moment the image of the simulacrum flickered. Pixellated images glimmered as if transmission was breaking up, then it quickly reassembled. Then vanished.

In the holo-orb in the lab where the simulacrum had been and the light screens in the control room a towering structure appeared. Massive square base, followed at each level by a smaller square levels, tapering off until the apex, a truncated platform with a

small building on top. Wafting smoke drifted out from it's roof. A ziggurat the gained data informed them. The CI was in the market place below teeming with the multitude who were arrayed in colourful clothing. Apparently through the active DVs the entity could be viewed from without. That disappointed the Reganians who wanted to get inside the simulacrum. Apparently not.

Jewels sparkled in the sun, women wearing bangles of lustrous gold moving gracefully amongst the crowd. They could even hear the murmur of conversations, the calls of vendors in their market stalls spread out in front of the huge tower. Language programmes working on the translation. Incoming data confirming the angle of vision due to the DVs remote viewing of the area. Marez let the DVs and programmes run. No one said a word. They were all fascinated at the successful transition whilst maintaining the link.

Stalls with earthenware pottery, metal beaten copper plates and cook pots, delicate vases, richly woven cloth, intricate scarves, mantles against the cold, glass vials glinting in the sun, herbs, spices, an open air butcher with cuts of meat hanging from hooks behind muslin cloth, others with hot food in bubbling pots, all coming through directly from the CI's link to the DVs. Merduk realised he was not really necessary. Just extra back up.

No one was paying undue attention to its sudden arrival. For the CI's carrier wave contained it's legend. Whoever did see it accepted it as just another person amongst them.

The CI pretended to be a traveller seeking his fortune and destiny in the royal city. On three sides of the plaza white dazzling public buildings, some with small cupolas, others with crenulated towers all dwarfed by the ziggurat. Temples to the left, raised incense filled burners, wafts of smoke rising serenely in the midday sun. Next to the temple, broad sweeping stairs rising up to its columned entrance the living quarters of the priests and next to that a sturdy garrison where breastplated soldiers moved amongst the crowd, keeping the peace. The CI moved slowly through the market square and looked down a broad avenue. On both sides ornate private residences, some with intricately wooden carved balconies. Pack animals pulled two and four wheeled carts laden with goods. The road going down for the city was built on a hill. In the distance an ocean with a harbour filled with masted ships, the breakwater arching out.

They congratulated each other of this momentous achievement.

"Remarkable." Merduk replied after they calmed down a bit.

"Isn't it just." Irrnet answered.

"Front row seats." Duncos was happy. They all were. Darlos and Juris had no problems holding the CI in place. Really achieved by the DVs. But pretence was necessary to create the impression that the Reganians were in charge.

A few of the inhabitants were remarking upon the CI.

"Can we get better sound?" Sovark asked.

"Might." Marez fiddled with some slide controls. The hum of the surrounding noise was amplified. "Translation programs are still learning."

"Right." Sovark replied.

Farmers in brown and grey long flowing robes, with pants protruding, some with shoes others sandals, or bare footed. The women wore brightly embroidered head scarves, some men cowls, all wore jewellery of some kind, flashing in the sun. Many men had sheathed knives, others short swords and dirty faces

"Oh uh." Marez exclaimed.

"What's happening?" Sovark asked looking at the readouts.

"Looks like the CI is attracting some attention." Merduk observed.

"It's supposed to blend in, not stand out." Irnnet intently observing the hologram.

"No sign of any cerebral activity." Marez informed them. "Up to Darlos or Juris now."

The crowd were jabbering but not hostile. Curious Merduk thought. The first words were coming through from the translations. 'Who', 'what', 'sign', 'holy' filtered through.

'I have come bringing tidings.' The CI said.

'A holy messenger.' Someone said in the crowd. More discourse.

'Where did he come from?' someone else asked. The CI attracting a small crowd. At the periphery a group of soldiers, gleaming bronze breastplates, swords sheathed but with sturdy staffs cleared a way through the gathered multitude.

"Shut it down? Recall it?" Irnnet a little worried.

"No." Merduk replied quickly interested how the CI would interact. No harm could come to it. It was an insert after all. The CI remained calm. Merduk was 'with it'. A part of his brain was with the CI. Just like that. He detected a will. Or was that Juris or Darlos's? or the back up DVs? Not strong. Subtly present. It seemed to gather its senses, focussed on something, orienting itself, ascertaining the mood of the people, almost calculating in a reasoning way, summing up the situation. Great. Merduk wondered what the DVs were aiming at back over Prima. The CI's persona was supposedly an itinerant traveller. Thus its curiosity natural. Interaction low keyed. Yet it had spoken. Volition present.

The soldiers were now standing in front of it and the rest of the squad a little back watching the people. Watching the CI with relaxed interest. So far so good.

'Who are you stranger.' The captain demanded. Authorative yet firm and calm. 'Wherefrom do you hail?'

"What's it's base-line persona?" Marez asked.

"Traveller." Merduk answered. "Some outlying village beyond the realm of this kingdom. We were aiming for some obscure place hard to check with from their point of view. It's showing awareness."

"Could be control."

"Could. Maybe not completely soulless. Might be just what's necessary. Imagine if it blanked out now."

"You're right there." Irrnet agreed. Merduk felt Duncos's eyes on him.

"Such a vague term." Duncos said. "Your DVs inserted a persona?"

"Don't know. Presumably. Something. Independent of our observers. Had to. Can't have them involved directly. You all saw the data I was given. Adapt, absorb information, react at a minimum."

"Which it is." Marez agreed.

"Read outs indicate a rising resonance Merduk." Duncos puzzled.

"Not me. Are they our observers?"

"No. The CI is its own persona. What are your intentions Sovark?" she asked.

"Nothing yet."

"Maybe Darlos and or Juris should disengage. Let the CI handle itself. They might be inadvertently boosting it."

How did Duncos know so much? Merduk wondered. She rarely said anything but now was going active.

"You may have a point."

"It already has shown signs of intent.."

"You're right Duncos. Merduk?" Sovark turned to him.

"It's your experiment." He gave way.

"Ours Merduk, ours. Disengaging back ups." Meaning Darlos and Juris.

The hologram pixellated, breaking the incoming imagery then reassembled. The soldiers were accompanying it towards the temple.

"At least they aren't taking it to their garrison." Merduk relieved for they were indeed heading for the temple. Attentive red robed priests were watching avidly. From down the steps two white robed priests approached. They gave a salutation placing

their fists over their right breast. The long hair of the priests hung to their shoulders, just like the CIs. They all saw the old scars on the soldiers face, one with no ear under their strapless helmets.

The program only got snatches of the conversation. Who's jurisdiction the stranger belonged to, where he should be taken. At least the CI had not over reacted. They saw the weathered brown skin of the soldiers in minute detail. Sovark wondered if they ought to have inserted the CI during the night but it was too late for that now. The soldiers were deferential to the priests. So the priests had authority over the CI at least. Not a fully fledged military caste Merduk ascertained. The CI was there in his head. Not flooding it with its resonance, more like a partial dream in the background. A good sign.

The soldiers saluted and left the CI with the priests. The translations were still not complete.

'We....welcome....I am.....of...temple of Polaris. This is.....aide....secretary. Please accept.....guest.' The older priest's eyes sparkling with effervescent energy. His equally white robed assistant with a yellow sash, probably indicating his status as a scribe stood a little back. Not as friendly but not hostile either. More observant, watching, studying trying to fathom its mind. Merduk felt the probing. Luckily with Darlos and Juris removed this person would only get the pre-loaded CI's base-line persona. Merduk a little perplexed having expected more and gotten less. Images of the remote village where it had supposedly come from. So the priests could mind read, psychic abilities. Excellent Merduk thought enthusiastically. Amendable. Things were good so far.

Irrnet returned whispered something to Marez then resumed her seat next to Merduk.

"Looks like the CI passed the first test. He's being welcomed." Marez related as they saw it climbing the stairs of the temple. The raised brazier's smoke rose lazily into the air.

"They all seem relaxed enough."

"Soldiers Marez indicate a certain amount of instability." Irrnet countered.

"Or by their presence creating order." Marez suggested.

"With swords? Looks drastic. But we must remember they are a proto-type race. We were like that once."

"And it took a while for us to become stable." Duncos reminded them.

The CI ascended the stairs, led through a forecourt, priests and supplicants milling about. Statues of people with strange headgear were on pedestals, rulers or gods? Through an open courtyard, flanked by strange looking animals, with wings, halos, claws,

beaks, talons, hideous, eyes filled with menace. They watched in awe as the inner soul of these beings was presented to them impregnated with dark intent. Or as a warning. They had much to learn. There was no conversation.

They moved through a small door led by the priest, his secretary following trying to read the CI's mind. It kept to the script. The staircase was cast in darkness. Tiny slits in the wall let in some light climbing upward. Then reaching the end into a room flooded with natural light shutters open. Embroidered cushions strewn in riotous colours across the floor. Richly embroidered tapestries hung on the walls. Scenes of mayhem, of some titanic struggle against ravenous beasts, fighting tooth and claw against small figures engaged in some Valliant combat. Dismembered corpses on the ground in pools of dark blood. Overhead shining bright stars, a huge moon, under a night sky. Disturbing as to its intent. The walls were chiselled with intertwining interlacing patterns, its sinuous meanderings moving along the periphery of the ceiling where hung a profusion of tiny oil lamps. Their flames extinguished for now.

Merduk wondered if the imagery was real, or the essence of their tortured souls. The shapes on the verge of movement. The struggle against the deformities incessant, relentless, violent. Or some esoteric message?

The secretary pulled on a rope near the door and the shutters squeaked shut. The room in darkness. Slowly the CIs eyes adjusted.

'Time to know you stranger.' The priest intoned with serene indifference. Some test or initiation Merduk thought. He wondered how familiar the Reganians were with these ancient rites so vivid in the hologram.

"Sensory deprivation." Duncos explained.

"Smart. Remove the sensual stimuli and have the mind reveal itself. This should be interesting." Irnet was eager to see what the CI contained.

"Fascinating. Expert psychologists already." Marez said intent on the vision in front of them.

'No harm will come to you stranger.' The priest said smoothly. From beneath his cowl he handed the CI a small phial. 'Drink this. It is not poison. Had we wished some harm we would have handed you to the soldiers.'

"Nice." Duncos remarked wryly.

"Probably some mind expanding drug." Irnet guessed. "Be interesting if it has an effect on the CI."

"Shouldn't." Marez answered. "However, will it know what its effects are and mimic that? Act in expectation of what they want to find out about it? So a drug oriented culture. Just like our ancient past, correct Merduk?"

"Indeed, that is so. To be with the gods as an equal."

Marez thought of their EAI capabilities. Similar but not the same. More control. Not that that would be revealed to the Primaians.

A village. A family in a humble cottage. Earthen floor, crude little windows, thatched roof. A glowing hearth, a blackened pot bubbling with a hearty meal. So peaceful. Then palpable fear. Immanent danger, consternation mixed with anger. The Cl was a child now maybe seven years old. The legend was playing out. Screams and shouting outside. By the light through the window it was evening or early morning. His parents both reached for their swords. Some horrific calamity was unfolding outside. Raiders or bandits.

They all watched appalled even though it was pure imagery. Neither of their planets had suffered warfare for millennia. But this was Earth. Merduk was familiar with the scene. A trap door was opened and the boy was quickly huddled into the crude cellar. They heard the thumping of feet above as the parents defended hearth and home. Shrieks were muffled in the dark. Metal struck metal as swords clashed. Shouts of defiant resistance, determined, angry. Not in fear but red hot anger. The boy was groping in the dark for something, his own sword. There was a bundle there as well. It contained their wealth, coins, rings, some precious stones. Enough for two handfuls. He opened the pouch and started swallowing the jewellery. Amazing!

Above the pandemonium continued as more violence was committed. Horses neighed in fright, cows bellowed, chickens squawked, pigs grunted, the animals sensing the murderous intent and treachery which had fallen onto the small village. The roar of anger as others joined in the fight, farm labourers fighting for their lives as well. Slowly the screams and groans, the foul exclamations of the attackers subsided. Below the boy groped for something else. A cross bow. What convincing pretence.

Then came the silence. The thumps above subsided. Then returned. Someone found the trap door and opened it. A fearsome face, lust in its eyes as it held a torch, looked in and the boy shot off an arrow right into his left eye. Not even time to be surprised the stout figure slumped foreword. With extreme exertion the boy pulled the dead man towards him landing in a sickening crunch at his feet. With swift dexterity he removed the rings from his fingers, swallowing the smaller ones. Then he shut the trap door. Stomping above. Once again the trap door was yanked open and the boy let off

another arrow which pierced the mans skull right at his forehead. Someone pulled the dead man aside.

`Come out and your life will be spared.' The growl angry at having lost two more men.

Silence.

`You cannot kill us all. And you cannot stay there forever.'

Nothing.

`Not only will we spare you, we could use a warrior such as yourself.'

The boy moved back reloading the cross bow. From the glow of the hearth he saw the shadow looming a little away from the opening. Dark shapes flickered on the walls. It was a stand off.

`Shall we smoke you out?'

Trapped.

`I'm coming out. You promise to spare me?' uncertain as to his fate.

'Damn, it's a boy.' Someone growled. Then laughed. The boy determined to live had the cross bow ready. He fumbled for the makeshift ladder and saw the bandit had a shield in front of him, well positioned. He shot off another arrow but it glanced off, the bandit ducking.

`Ho ho, we are frisky.'

`Just making some room.'

`A child. Your parents trained you well. Pity they're dead.'

`Better dead than being your slaves.' He retorted his crossbow balanced on his left hand. The brute stepped back not frightened but stealthily cautious. The cottage was a mess. Chairs upturned, their wall hangings already torn down, the place ransacked. The boy threw the remains of their wealth at the bandits' feet.

`Learning. Anyone else down there. A tasty sister perhaps?' he leered.

The boy shook his head. Another bandit shone a torch down there just to make sure. Their leader stepped back, shield still up the other hand outstretched to take the crossbow. A third bandit appeared, saw his fallen comrade and let out a moan of anguish.

`Now you know death.' The boy sneered avoiding looking at his fallen parents. His adrenaline was rushing, his mind hyper, taking it all in and yet strangely disembodied as well. The CI was performing his own miraculous salvation. The raiders dragged his massacred parents outside then righted the strewn furniture, sat and helped themselves to the bubbling broth. They took his crossbow and sword. Their keg of beer they soon got

stuck into and sat the boy between them, his life spared. Outside the quietness of death. The farm animals had calmed down. An eerie orange glow flickered as one of the labourer's huts was burning, acrid smoke filled the air, the smell of charred flesh adding to the pungency.

'The boy showed courage. He has the warrior spirit.' One of the unwashed, blood smeared bandits ventured looking at him with almost a paternal glint in his dark foreboding eyes.

'If you do as your...' their leader said.

'I will not be anyone's slave.' He said defiantly. Laughter as they swilled their beer and slurped their broth.

'The booty will suffice to spare your life lad.' The leader remarked. The jewelled rings on his brawny hand glinted dully even as the candles on the table shed light on their hideous faces. If not for the murder perpetrated it could easily be a scene of jovial merriment. Someone coughed outside. Guards. After a while two bandits rose and replaced those on duty outside. When they had satiated themselves they took the boy outside, torched his home, put him on a horse, fastening his hands and rode into the night.

He did not look back. It was over, his life on the farm, once the scene of laughter and happiness gone, for ever. Two days later they arrived at a large camp. Rawhide tents were scattered behind two palisades, guards on duty, men and women milling about, the sound of a blacksmith shoeing a horse. Stockades for their horses and livestock, now supplemented by the raid on his farmstead. Children ran amongst the adults, squealing, happy not realizing the ways of their parents. Nomadic barbarians.

The boy was brought into the presence of a vicious looking shaman. Dressed in sheepskins, the bones of the dead fashioned into a grotesque necklace, a huge skull covering his head of some slain giant. The eyes behind this monstrous visage were dark, the boy sensed the power the shaman exuded. Then something clicked. Their eyes locked as the boy stared at the malignant visage with cool determination. Merduk was surprised that the CI could call forth anything at all. Their gaze held. The boy determined, the shaman defiant. Those gathered in his tent fell silent. The small fire in the centre crackled, smoke rose up and out through the tent's apex as the two held each other gaze, fixated. Though the boy blinked he did not loose his concentration. Time seemed to stop. Then someone put a hood over the boy's head. Darkness. It was a programme after all, a false reality yet the imagery virtual real time.

No one in the control room said anything. They were all equally fascinated at the revelatory intent of the CI to convince the priests of his bona fides.

From then on the boy became the shaman's second assistant. He was taught the spiritual mysteries of the sky gods, the earth gods, the elemental powers, the god of war, of combat and conflict, his messengers lightning and thunder, dwelling amongst the stars centred on Polaris. Night after night the boy stared at the most singular of stars around which the lesser stars moved. The boy by focussing upon the centre claimed his divine connection as the essence of his very being. The CI was associated with that one shining light in the night sky. The shaman's first assistant resented the power of this newcomer. So one day the boy shot an arrow into his head. He would not be challenged or resented. The shaman was impressed. Only the weak died prematurely unless in battle which determined the warriors fate.

Years passed. The CIs history amazed Merduk as well as the Reganians. This was so unexpected how a programme, imbibing the mere thoughts of the distant DVs and the inhabitants could create with such rapidness its own persona.

The chief of the band had eyes on the fabulous city of Tellurium. Back at control that information was duly noted. The city was no pretence, no imagined vision either of the CI or the extraneous DVs. The Reganian's QCs confirmed, something the Primaians were not made aware of that this city and its continental empire had once existed. It was there, it was real, living history.

A call went out to the other tribes to formulate plans in attacking the city. Some of their men and women were making their way as humble peasants, some as traders to get the lay of the land, the plan of the city, its strength and weaknesses. They had gold to bribe the guards manning the four gates. The boy thought it was madness to take on such a stronghold. If necessary he would melt into the multitude should the attack fail. Dark forbodence gestated in his mind. A preternatural gloom shrouded the future in its cloying darkness of the soul, harbinger of a frightful death written in the stars. When asked, for the shaman was busy fortifying the warriors in some impenetrable cloak of protection, the boy stood in when necessary. He did not announce their defeat, only of coming titanic struggle that would see the city fall. It was what they wanted to hear and he was not about to disappoint them.

"Amazing." Sovark said. "The way the CI can think, adapt, react, anticipate events."

Merduk agreed.

Their war plans ready the tribes moved out. There were feints to confuse the royal army of their true intent. The outlying farmsteads were raided drawing off the defenders, scattering their strength as the hordes struck here and there without rhyme or reason. Those defending the city went on high alert. Troops were recalled closer to the city to bolster and consolidate its defences. The raiding nomads spread out into smaller groups along with their live stock and women making it seem they were on the move elsewhere, out of harms way.

Weeks later the nomads coalesced. When the attack finally came, as the CI had known but not foretold the nomads were routed before they even came close to the walls. The boy, now a young man melted away, changing his appearance, easy enough to do as a CI. The barbarians no match for professionally trained soldiers who were disciplined, focussed and had something to fight for: their survival and that of the golden city, the beacon of the empire, the repository of their strength, their hoary wisdom, their shining enlightened rule, the focus of civilisation itself.

The CI though did not venture into the city. He retreated into the wooded hills nearby finding a secluded cave near a hamlet that had not been raided. It understood the mind-set of the barbarians and their crude superstitions. They were almost too easy to manipulate. The rout complete the shaman was, during the retreat, those whom the soldiers did not fell, judiciously murdered. His magic had not been strong enough, so he paid the price. His assistant's vanishing made them think he had been the traitor amongst them. They searched high and low for him without success.

Due to their primitive beliefs the villagers deemed him a messenger from the gods. The weak losing the war. Thousands had been massacred. The nomads as raiders now more an irritant than something to be feared. Furthermore, by dispersing the soldiers due to their feints, they were now in place to finish off the marauders retreat. The massacres continued.

The CI saw it all. In the hamlet below his cave, the villagers saw his presence as the coming of a holy sage.

"The CI is changing persona's." Duncos observed. "Remarkable."

Offerings of food were made as the sage interpreted their dreams. Telling them again what they wanted to hear. These folk though were peaceful, concerned with the success of their harvests, finding suitable matches for their offspring, wishing to live the good life. Malleable. He exorcised their demons, foretold their future, wished them well. Even if some itinerant bandits began life anew they had no clue, no inkling that the shaman's assistant had resurrected himself. For it had its own plans. It had tasted power.

He created a series of images that by his prayers, his belief in cosmic gods centred on Polaris he had aided the bandits defeat. He became his own bait. The priests of Tellurium would see him as one of their own.

`And so I left the cave once peace had been re-established. The barbarians dispersed, scattered, that is those who have not been put to the sword. The terror is over. For the moment. They harbour resentment, do not take defeat kindly. Their shaman of course is dead. As to his assistant...' The CI smirked.

`Yes?' his interrogator queried.

`I passed on through dreams and visions the coming of the marauders, their feints, their true intent so your people could rally where most pressed. My knowledge and your soldiers valiant effort defeated this army of darkness.'

`Who are you really?'

Expectant silence at the control room.

"Good question." Irnet like the others holding her breath.

`I am Zohex.'

"A persona." Sovark said with quiet resolution. "Download its resonance. analyse potentialities, probabilities, see if such an entity actually existed back then."

"Will do." Marez replied.

`You are now a man of peace.'

`I come humbly to learn,' Zohex paused, `and to cleanse myself of the taint of their misbegotten spirits, their mad gods.'

`Then indeed you are welcome. You are no longer a stranger Zohex. You will of course be an acolyte. But you will I am sure progress through the mysteries of our divine awareness. Hopefully your soul will ascent and blend in with the power of the cosmos, the fount of all life. As the sun irradiates the land and fructifies it so the forces around us, may they enlighten your soul.'

"So he's accepted." Marez was relieved. A little convoluted but they and it achieved their aim, at last.

Merduk understood this was only the beginning. The CIs history convincing. What a program. What astute determination of the DVs. By being aligned with Zohex he had a window into their world. To go to the centre of their minds, to infuse their knowledge, reveal their mysteries and deal with them when the time came. Double penetration: Regum and Earth.

Sovark liaising with Marez and Merduk allocated shifts to watch Zohex's progress in Tellurium. They had succeeded beyond expectation. He called a meeting.

"For a while I was worried there when he became the shaman's assistant. Going rogue. What a brilliant cover." Irnet was impressed, her eyes blazing.

"I agree. From one extreme to the other. Quite a feat." Marez agreed.

"In peace, wishing to learn. It cannot get any better." Merduk watching the hologram.

"Fits like a glove. Assimilated his environment with consummate ease. My head is spinning." Irnet smiled. "Carving out his destiny. Which reminds me.." turning to Sovark.

"Yes I know." No need to state that they would have to run probabilities to see what effect Zohex's actions would have. Now that the CI mimicked sentience. What Sovark hoped was that the Primaians would not be aware of the change in orientation even though it was their creation. The only actual mental activity was that of Merduk's remote channelling. It disturbed Irnet just how easily Primaian's could link up, anywhere, anytime. They might have facilitated the insertion but knowing Prima the team would not be privy to what the future held regarding the CI. For the moment future probabilities was the best they had. As to intent that was another matter entirely. Zohex the persona as a man of peace could be a ruse as well. Whether the CIs, the DVs, Merduk or even Darlos or Juris they would have to find out the hard way. Soft scans were in place at all times but they did not probe that deep. It would alert the visitors.

"Yes it does pose problems." Sovark was sitting with his team. Darlos was resting, Juris on call.

Zohex had been shown to the temple's private accommodation and was resting. Did the CI dream? Was Zohex still a tabula rasa?

"At least it is outward focused. Our scans picked up nothing to indicate any covert activity regarding the research centre, this lab, even Regum as such. Behaving."

"Well Irnet you are our social scientist. A pity we can't use our, ahm capabilities." Not wishing to reveal how far they had gotten.

"Indeed not Sovark." She smiled blandly sitting in their small conference room. The monitors along the walls showed the centre both inside and out. Graphs from the building's smartware. "Nothing to indicate any deviations."

"CI aside." Marez replied toying with his light pen.

"You think it's possessed by their DVs?" Irnet asked Duncos. "Does it pose problems?"

"Nothing yet. Except this show of volition. But it's at the other side of the universe. However there is a quandary. If we use our QCs to connect to the DVs, Prima will know we have them. Our AI capabilities, even this building's inserted programmes deals with the here and now. We really need a psychic of our own." Sovark considered.

"Not any in the data base?" Marez queried.

"If they are I'm not in the loop." Duncos explained.

"Would we want one here? Are any cleared for this?"

"Well Marez you know as I do, as we do," Sovark corrected, "that this little experiment of ours does not exist. We're an astronomical outfit focussing on Earth real time. The orbital above does the real processing, we're just observers. Studying exotic life forms. Scouring the universe for intelligent life."

"Which we have found." Irnet happy with the results they were getting. "And keeping it secret if only to stop the Primaian's getting extra help."

"I'm wondering why they didn't just go ahead with their construct without us? What makes us so special? I mean," Duncos continued, looking at each of them broadly, "how to say this...I'm suspicious."

"As you should be." Sovark emphasised.

"You trust them?"

"I trust nobody." A tight smile.

"Same here." Duncos agreed. "We have to consider then why us?"

"Technology." Marez answered.

"Prima? That would be a change. From what little we know of their DV activity they do suffer burn outs. Rotation. Call backs. Maybe we're simply making it easier for them to insert their entity."

"True. Then again it is unique that they sent such level headed personnel our way." Marez thoughtful. As a scientist he was less concerned with security and more with getting their visitors on side. "They have made a huge jump, a leap in orientation. Pure science. That has not happened for centuries."

"You think there might be a change of policy?" Irnet asked.

"Definitely. Not official as yet. But if our cooperation works out, this could be a new start."

"Ever the optimist." Irnet smiled at Marez.

"I have to be. Science is everything. Which brings me to a point we discussed before and will do so again. There will come a time, some of our projections indicate this

that we will make contact with Earth. They will discover us in their mid twenty third century or so. Give or take a hundred."

"You're thinking of the Primaian reaction Marez." Irrnet voiced. "Which means given Prima never changes, their intentions."

"Either to watch us or to spread their propaganda."

"With not much luck I'm glad to say." Duncos pleased they weren't buying their line of thinking.

"Yes but the Earther's are really a combination of the two." Irrnet reminded them.

"You mean they might be amendable?" Marez asked.

"Most definitely. Projections indicate as much."

"It's a conundrum."

"You're right there Duncos." Irrnet agreed. "Once it's on it's gonna be a complex situation."

"A battle for their minds." Duncos sounding the warning.

"Their souls."

"Do they have souls?"

"Well, sentience then Marez."

"That is fact."

"Well then for the moment we stick to the guidelines." Sovark replied. "Irrnet you keep an eye on the CI's interaction, Duncos of course is our alert systems manager so that Marez can get on with the job."

"What do you think Sovark." Duncos looked at him. Ever since the CI created its own persona she had gone into high alert. It was still a neutral observer but once the CI created its identity, she was not too sure she liked that. Still even that had been factored in.

"Me? I don't think it matters. As long as our visitors stick to the script I see no immediate conflict situation. However the CI has to be watched at all times."

"Do we have any control over it? Can we delete it? Recall it?" Duncos getting to the gist of the matter.

"Put it this way, we're working on it."

"How? Not the search patterns, the scanning as such..."

"It's like this Duncos. Research is continuing regarding the QCs, probability wave research. If we can duplicate Prima's insertion techniques, and we have proven that then I cannot see why that process cannot be duplicated."

"But that is currently hypothetical isn't it Sovark?"

"It is Duncos."

"So for the moment the Primaian's have the field."

"They do."

"Let's hope we do before that thing gets any ideas." Duncos warned.

"You mean the DVs behind it? Or Merduk?"

"I mean at the moment we're one step behind. I would prefer it if we were one step ahead."

"They are cooperating Duncos." Sovark reemphasised.

"Too neat."

"Not wanting to repeat myself. We are forgetting how far they have gone out on a limb by being here." Irrnet reminded them. "For us all this is second nature."

"You think they're too busy being here in their capacity as scientists?"

"One would hope so."

"Well at least we're aware of the implications, the bigger picture. For the moment we continue as we are. Treat our visitors as equals. If they misbehave, we have options." Sovark revealed.

"I'm glad."

"Thought you would be Duncos."

"Pity we can't braindrain them."

"Against our principles."

"That is as may be. We should look into that."

"We have deep scanning capabilities."

"I know."

"Which I am ordered not to use. But our valid concerns won't go unnoticed."

"Glad to hear it Sovark. You know of course if things go strange I too have certain discretionary powers."

"We know Duncos."

"I will use them if I have to."

"Would that include shutting this down?"

"If need be. Anyway now that we have affected the transfer I really don't see how we even need them."

"Politics Duncos. Prima, even unofficially sending a scientific team our way is a monumental break through. Don't forget that. In a way they are in greater danger from their own than us."

"I'll remember that."

"So," Sovark looked at them, "if there is anything else I call this meeting closed."

Prima: Orbital

"Janon, good of you to come at such short notice." Pentham relaxed in his seat as Janon entered having just come up with the last shuttle. Below the clouds covered most of Prima. Some splashes of blue, the sun dazzling on the water. "What a view, I never tire of it."

"I am about to reveal an operation in progress. I have to emphasize..." without elucidating. Janon knew the drill.

Janon sat. He was used to the clandestine nature of his work and nodded wondering what Pentham was up to, up here. He knew of course that Pentham was travelling more and more to the orbital. Ever since Elentra's demise, handled in secret Janon mused whether some new development unfolded regarding that fatal BrainDrain.

Pentham was on a different track. The secret mission to Regum.

"It might eventually leak out so I thought it best to appraise you of certain, ahm, significant developments. We need you, I need you. No this is not about Elentra. She has passed on. And we're not revealing those details, ever. No. It concerns something else entirely. As you know," Pentham leaned back in his chair, "DVs are focussed in all sorts of events." He would have to be careful here in revealing enough to legitimize his operation without mentioning either Darlos, the pontiff's office or even himself. The brainchild had been his and since DVs connected sometimes some news might filter out.

Janon listened.

"A group of DVs I collected for the purpose of studying Earth have discovered something interesting." Then waited. Janon was not the type to ask questions. They derailed due process. Created minor eddies, losing focus.

"A psychic has appeared amongst them. Normally that would be of minor interest. As you know we have DVs targeting Earth anyway. But when this person appeared I thought it best to use him as a case study. In fact the link is mutual." Pentham dissembled. "So how does this concern you? Well the DVs are a special unit. Targeting one who calls himself Zohex." Without saying what it really was. "The DVs hold great expectations for it. Yet I don't want any interference by the Divines or worse, the Ecclesiastics."

Janon quietly concurred. They meddled.

"So I am throwing a cloak around this. I know the DVs information is supposed to make everything available to them but this time that will not be the case. Call it

planetary security. That usually is broad enough to cover, well," he allowed himself a smile, "certain developments. The DVs have hinted that this Zohex will become important on Earth. The future is a little murky. But he will be of prime interest. Imbued with extremely," Pentham emphasised, "extremely developed capabilities. He may even link back here. Meaning the DVs. What I want you to do is make sure nothing gets out. Any data pertaining to Zohex is to be routed to me alone. For the moment." Pentham smiled expansively. "Drassid knows a little, looking in from the outside. If he asks anything stonewall him. The same for Qatus. Though I doubt he will be a problem. Too busy socializing. Gharbel is another matter."

Janon understood that Lord Pentham did not think too highly of the two highest Domain Lords. Pentham had something underway.

"What is going on?" might as well get to the point.

"Nothing yet. I'm not one to crow Janon. I rather deliver than indulge in what may happen. A big difference. Gharbel may bluster in his usual way of what he is capable of, usually issued as some sort of threat if he cannot get his way. I don't think he wants to replace Skias if he lives that long preferring to manipulate the palace. Gharbel will use anything to further his aims. I'm not here to stop him or even interfere. But if word got out that we have this direct link, so the DVs tell me, Gharbel would want to get in on the act."

"Sideline him."

"Exactly. Now three of the DVs are special in this group. There is Shogon, extremely focused, Trum a bit of a live wire and Efa who's been around for ever. I want them protected."

"Isolated."

"From busybodies. No matter who. This is too important to turn into some mind game, used as a fulcrum to extract some tedious advantage." Pentham rolling his eyes at the inanity of it all. Janon understood.

"This group of DVs are in a way a special think tank. Their information is what we need to contain. Nor will I allow them to be BrainDrained. What they might get from Earth is at this moment in time too sensitive to be even securely dumped. So your job is to make sure it stays that way."

"So I detail any possible leaks. Including DV activity."

"Pull it, delete it, void it. After sending it to me. No couriers. You alone. On paper. Single copy only. I am putting my trust in you here."

"Reno runs ops."

"Yes, the chain of command. So I guess he has to be informed as well."

"I think it can be done Lord Pentham."

"All other requisite data stays up here for the near future."

"What if questions..."

"Planetary security. Possible overt threat. Covert if need be. If it works out and the indicators seem to point that way we may gain control of Earth. It's that important."

"I see."

Pentham wanted the glory. If it failed so would he. No one else. "The said DVs are forwarding their written reports to me only. So this is really making sure it stays that way. Anybody leaks and you have, under my authority the full powers invested in you, your department to..."

"Terminate?"

"If need be."

Janon held Pentham's determined gaze. He meant it.

"Why not just reassign them? If a breach occurs. Send them to Regum."

"The last thing we want, if they knew something they should not."

"What should they not know Lord Pentham. What are the indicators?"

"Zohex does not exist. Yet. If it works out and I am confident it will then when the deed is done, the orientation on Earth developing to our advantage, the indicators in place, the information may be released."

His com linked blinked. Pentham allowed Kroena to enter.

"Please be seated. This is Janon."

"A pleasure." Kroena sat, watching them both.

"Janon is here to make sure the, ahm, link through Zohex remains not just up here but stays amongst the designated group. You as temporary head, and that might be permanent," Pentham hinted, meaning if she followed his orders, "will keep an eye on things. In fact Kroena I'm making you my second in command. The Ds and Es are not to be informed. You think with Janon's help you can manage?"

"Keeping Zohex's data secure? Sure."

"Good. Janon is tech security. Under normal circumstances a specialist would be employed. But this is too important. The Reganian's might get a whiff." Pentham said. "We know their Web reaches far. What they will make of it ought to be interesting. But none of this and I have to emphasise this even if I repeat myself, is to get out. Politics. There are those who would love to use this for their own ends."

Kroena got the gist. Janon was used to it.

"Then there are the heresies." Pentham paused for them to orientate themselves. "The bait is Zohex. He will most certainly assimilate himself with the Earthers. That is the intention. The Es would balk at that, claiming that to even consider such views is to strengthen divergent resonances. Which is precisely the means to our ends."

Kroena smirked. Subterfuge, she loved it. Janon was relaxed.

"So here is the plan. Zohex is our creature. He will be an Earther. To all intents and purposes he is one of them. Now if the Es issue any orders regarding Zohex's activities refer them to me. I have not appraised them of this delicate mission. This is a long term assignment. It could take weeks or months. And as Janon knows, the longer a mission is in place the more likely things will go awry. But rest assured, once Zohex has aligned the Earthers we will have created the designated path to our advantage. It will release the DVs targeting Earth. Not all. But once the Earthers begin to think like us, then you do appreciate how that will lighten the load. For there are more important things to consider." Pentham did not wait for them to ask what they were for he continued: "Regum is next."

"If I may Lord Pentham."

"Yes Kroena."

"Regum already is."

"Oh yes. But there is a new phase under consideration. To duplicate the efforts of the DVs onto their world. The priests on the ground are more a distraction than anything else. We are going into a full scale DV assault."

"Any details as such?" Kroena asked.

"Not yet. But I thought I'd inform you."

"Thank you Lord Pentham."

"Since there is a change in policy," Janon was thinking, "will my end be involved?"

"Not as such Janon. The Reganians would expect that. So for now no change in your operations. If this move works it may even lighten your workload." Pentham pleased with himself.

"A DV assault then?"

"Stage one."

"Ah." So there was more coming Kroena realised.

Regum: Mission Earth

"Votal." Sovark gestured to the cyber technician. Votal a wisp of a man, and a bundle of energy, his hair askew with his focussed expression smiled shyly at Sovark's group. He knew Marez, had seen Irrnet and suspected Duncos was intel. What he had discovered had not surprised him as such when Sovark had asked him to run a full spectrum diagnostics on the CI. He had undertaken his task with relish. It was new, it was audacious, it was dangerous. Beyond their EAI capabilities. By studying the CI they would learn.

Votal aware how sensitive this project with the Primaians was. Thus the secret facility. He relished the atmosphere of this place. Cutting edge stuff. He took a breath and said: "The CI is loaded."

"As you appreciate Votal, our guests cannot be present." Duncoss remarked more so he understood the need for discretion. "We don't know if they knew, were appraised even. Knowing Primaians probably not. If they were, if they knew then this will open up a can of worms."

Sovark agreed.

"I ran extractions and disengagement scenarios with null results. Thinking that this might have been a little too extreme I then tried to insert a neutral sentient resonance onto it. Read its state of mind. That is when I realised that it was loaded. The paradigm shift very subtle, the hard evidence indirect but there. The CI displays volition. Independent volition." Votal emphasised.

"You mean it's autonomous?" Marez asked.

"I attempted to shut it down in cyberspace. The tech end is running a parallel duplicate using a sub-domain. We know that the CI had to have a certain amount of configured programming to present itself as a sentient being. Give it artificial reasoning capabilities. Within certain limits the CI has to anticipate within its inherent design the changes of its environment. What I found was that these volitional tendencies are dispersed throughout its programming. Yet focus on any part within its mental domain and all one gets is the general expected architecture which by the way barely shows up on a broad sweep scan. A bit like the brain. Dispersed, parallel, holistic. Thus its success in mimicking Earthers."

"Or any other sentient." Sovark concerned.

"Correct." Votal agreed. "The CI is holding back its full potential. Either waiting for some trigger, or in intel parlance acting like a sleeper." Looking at Duncos.

"Any positives?" Marez queried.

"It's not showing its true colours. Wrapping itself into its projected person, namely Zohex. Interesting history it created for itself."

"You have seen its pathetic childhood?" Irrnet asked.

"Everything. Remarkable. It is remarkable. The CI absorbed the reality of these people. I checked with the earlier runs. Put it this way, when the CI first appeared it was more or less a blank."

"And now it's not." Duncoss concluded.

"Our E capabilities have not even considered creating false realities." Marez intrigued at the potential of the CI.

"Primaians are good at faking themselves." Duncoss said as if she had swallowed something awful.

Votal continued: "The CI is enhanced. It may even be a rogue. So I ran the scenarios. Starting with a zero base line the results were always the same. The CI will become a dominant factor on their world. And it has chosen not the military, or even the political supremo's but the priesthood. Clever. They are everywhere on the ground. Benevolent and peaceful. The CI thus not just pretends to be inclined towards their way of thinking but encapsulates it both within itself and as its external personality. One that cannot be shut down."

"So what do you suggest?" Sovark prodded.

"There are several options. The first is theoretical. As the DVs can insert their mindspace into any field in space time so can we. Research indicates that by collapsing information rich probability waves, collapse them into the designated area one could contain the CIs activities."

"Which would effect the locale and its inhabitants?" Sovark asked.

"Indeed, to a degree. More like an imposition. The energy necessary would be phenomenal. The second scenario is to assemble a group of psychics and do what the DVs are doing through remote viewing."

"Do we have the time for that Irrnet?"

"It would take a while. First to find them, then to test them. And keep it from the Primaians as well. When will this CI take over Votal?"

"Sooner than later. Sorry can't be more specific."

"Any other possibilities?"

"Power up WebSpace. Lure the CI into that."

"Too dangerous." Sovark killed the idea off.

"Or send in our own CI."

"Interesting Votal." Sovark considered. "Tell me what is it made of? Constituted?"

Votal beamed. "Superficially it's a DV projection, with substance."

"As in energy?" Marez curious.

"Psychic energy. Its mind, if we can call it that is already complex. It could well be that several DVs are projecting themselves into it. With one slight dominant persona." Votal activated a light screen showing the various mental resonances within in. One matched. Merduk's.

"He must be the focal point here." Duncoss guessed first.

"Is he guiding it?"

"More like aligning Marez. There was something else. A certain inner tension, anxiety. As you know my team is checking on our visitors." Looking at Duncoss. Knowing it to be a necessary security measure. "Now Juris is equivocal as is Darlos. They are really remote viewers. But Merduk appears to be a suppressed personality. If I were to guess here, I think he harbours suspicions. He does not seem to be that aligned as a Primaian."

"From Votal's data," Duncoss cut in, "it's as if Merduk is not committed in the Primaian sense of their mission. Curious of course. Interested. Who wouldn't be? I think he's the one we should work on."

"How does this relate to the CI? This Zohex creation?" Sovark asked.

"The Primaians may have made a mistake. They are not too smart when it comes to scientific thinking. They needed psychological types acceptable to us. That they managed to do. But it looks like not all Primaian's are equal regarding their mental orientation. It could well be that Merduk is the rogue with potential. If he is disturbed by what this Zohex is doing, will do, then he may be the perfect candidate to insert on Earth. The CI will accept his presence as maybe a back up. But one working for us." Duncoss explained.

"That too is my suggestion." Votal deferred to her.

"Glad you agree." She smiled at him then looked to Sovark.

"I think we got bamboozled." Marez laughed. "Big time."

Sovark was perturbed. Votal's data was disturbing. They had been set up that was certain. Worse, Duncoss might be aware but preferred not to voice her concerns that this was a security breach. The Primaians were right in the centre of their secret

research pertaining to their insertion capabilities. Now he knew why Primaian's used BrainDraining. He wished they could BrainDrain their visitors. At best be kept on Regum. Then how to cut a psychic link? Drugs, a last resort. More like a first choice. Make them catatonic until this was over. But then Prima's intentions would not be revealed. What a mess. They had been amenable to this combined scientific research and Prima as usual had sucked them in, just like delivering an Orbital to their planet.

"I blame myself." Irnnet was despondent. "I'm a trained social scientist. Never did I comprehend their subterfuge."

"Don't worry Irnnet, neither did I." Duncoss sympathised. "Well, we're all in this together. It is an intelligence failure. Self activation never crossed my mind. It's supposed to be a CI, nothing more. Shit."

"I wonder." Irnnet continued. "If it is self aware it may even consider its own survival. Meaning intentions against it."

"From a shitty situation we go down the gutter." Duncoss sighed.

"Well a decision has to be made." Sovark replied. The group having fallen silent, watching the light screen of Merduk's slightly dominant factor in the group mind running the CI.

Sovark aware they wanted to act. If Merduk could be convinced to cross over, keep Zohex in check, shadow him, hopefully influence him, preferably contain him they had a chance. Having a CI influence Earth went against their whole philosophy of not interfering with other civilisations. Not that Prima cared. They wanted control and looked like getting it.

He put the proposition to them. "Two Primaian's on Earth." Duncoss could see what Sovark was getting at. That way there would be no conflict. "Is Merduk's persona stronger than this Zohex?"

"Has to be." Votal answered straight away. "The combinant DVs are less than their individuality as a group mind. Merduk's resonance as we can see has a tighter information rich resonance. He would also, once extricated from their influence shine so to speak. If we can convince him that is."

In the sealed observation room Merduk was on-line, linked to the CI. Darlos was there as back up, Juris taking a rest. They had been all excited at the success of placing one of their own on Earth. Whist recognising that they might never receive the accolades due to them officially, nevertheless to be engaged in this amazing experiment was reward enough on its own. Merduk realised that neither Darlos nor Juris actually

questioned whether the Earthers should be told through the CI of Prima's intentions. They both accepted Earth had to be aligned and that was that. The more Merduk saw of the Earthers the more he was captivated by their restless minds. He had been shocked at what the CI surmised of how they interacted with themselves when he had created his own history as Zohex. Prima's dim past had not been so dissimilar. A bloody learning curve. Some strange sickness that would slowly be expunged along the way of not just building their own world but learning as well until in the end the need for warfare was shown to be the waste it was. Zohex's mission of peace to be admired. Why not have a race develop that. Incorporate the best of both worlds? It might even unite their two planets.

Zohex had persuaded the priest's led by Strahl that he had the makings of an archimage. His reasoning persuasive. Beguiling them with splendid visions of celestial power, all false illusions. Reinforced by the DVs who flowed through him. He only a transmitter. Zohex was no mere observer anymore. He was a major player. Was this Prima's true intention all along? If so Merduk had been used. It left a bad taste in his mind. And not just himself. Earth was being manipulated. Was Sovark and his team aware of the duplicity?

Zohex's sense of his own power was unmistakable. Already in Tellaris, their capital the priests were fracturing into two distinct groups. Those for him as an archimage, a seer of the future and those who mistrusted his power. As such Zohex was influencing Earth's history. Had they a right to create the Primaian vision at the exclusion of all else?

The vision inside his head collapsed. The system disengaged. Like waking from an intense dream. Merduk took off the headband that connected him to the computers and stood up from the recliner.

Duncoss entered the observation room.

"We have a problem." She said looking around at Merduk and Darlos. "You can take over Darlos." And she switched the system over.

"Oh?" was all Darlos said.

Duncoss led Merduk out to the adjoining room where they just had their meeting.. "Please take a seat." The whole group was there he noticed. Concerned faces.

"We have to do something about the CI Merduk." Duncoss came straight out with it. Almost apologetically. They were concerned. So he had been right. They had noticed the change regarding Zohex as well. Not exactly the neutral observer anymore.

Sovark explained the situation. It was what Merduk had thought himself. Without Juris or Darlos present. They asked him how much he knew and he told them, very little. They were satisfied with that.

"We have a proposition Merduk." Sovark said when Duncoss was finished. "Now you don't have to accept. If not then Juris or Darlos. But act we will."

Merduk nodded.

"Would you be interested in rectifying the balance?"

"Link into the CI? Why not yourselves? Why not write another programme for it?"

"Because Merduk we don't want to reveal anything at this point. You understand our position."

He did.

"It might activate Zohex even further. The idea is to neutralise the CI."

"I understand."

Sovark brought up a light screen. "We've run some simulations."

Tellurium reigning supreme. Zohex at the apex of power. The city a larger version of itself. Other cities duplicated along various seashores and littorals.

"So Zohex rules?"

"Indeed. Then there is his legacy."

The imagery did not change. The seasons came and went. That was about it. The numbers below ran into centuries. Merduk knew he was missing something. They waited expectantly.

"You see?" Sovark prompted.

"I do...but."

"No change."

"Ah." It dawned on Merduk that Earth was under Primaian control. No change. So unlike Earthers. "Zohex."

"His influence." Duncoss answered.

"I see."

"I know this might be difficult for you Merduk..." Sovark concerned.

"Yes. I too have thought about this. Only just now. Well," he tried to make light of it, "I've considered that if Earth were to develop without any interference they could bridge the gap between our two races."

"Interesting." Irrnet answered. "A good point Merduk."

He merely inclined his head.

"Now we know Prima's intentions. Earth if not the same at least similar."

"So it appears."

"So it will appear."

"What do you suggest? Block the DVs? Talk to Prima?"

"Nothing that extreme. We insert you."

"Why not shut down Zohex?"

"That would reveal our capabilities." Duncoss answered quickly. She had no wish for Merduk to know that even if they switched off the energy generated insertion field, the DVs would still maintain Zohex's influence as a psychic phenomena.

"Yes. But what could I do?" wondering how he could override the DVs. Not only that they would know what he was up to. They would send a pack after him. Psychic warfare. He did not relish the prospect.

"Nothing overt. Your mere presence, as one of its kind would not arouse any suspicions, we hope. Remind it that it is overstepping its original mission objectives as an observer. That it is being used. That it is endangering itself through the opposition it is fermenting."

"But it knows it is indestructible."

"Physically yes. But Earthers are potent psychics as well. If they unite in this they can, might or will bring it down."

"But your projections..."

"That is only one. There are several. Some not as pretty." Duncoss explained. "If Earthers do bring it down, they can also bring down your DVs. You don't want to get into psychic warfare with Earthers."

That was true enough. He had not even thought they would go over to the offensive. This was frightening. Earthers were still homicidal. He could just imagine Pentham or Gharbel saying it was Reganian propaganda if it got back to them. Or that it was just one future, not the future. Nor would they stop there. If Earthers were intent in going after Primaiaans then they would use all their resources to make sure Earth remained inviolate. It was turning into a dangerous cyclical phase. They should have left Earth alone. Now it was too late. If he could help obviate the worst he would. Even if only for Prima's overweening pride in declaiming themselves as a privileged race.

"That is true Duncoss. So you think I've got the power to influence this entity that has several minds running it?" If they had not known this they did now. They did not seem surprised. Were they bluffing?

Sovark called up another light screen and showed Merduk's slightly dominant resonance. He understood. Well well.

"They'll know if I go in," he said carefully.

"We'll say we were that impressed that having two Primaian's there is only natural. After all you're not going against us." Duncoss reasoned. "And like Sovark said. If not you then us. So you could inform your superiors that it was better to have another Primaian there than...you get the picture?"

"I certainly do. It is tempting."

"The last thing we want is a battle regarding Earth." Irrnet added.

"I can understand that as well. The resources alone..."

"Working together." Duncoss enticing.

"If the CI had remained neutral all this would not even be considered."

"I know," Merduk agreed. "What about Darlos and Juris?"

"Well since you are aiding Zohex..." A sweet smile from Duncoss.

"I'll do it. Earth. I can't believe all this is happening."

"Neither can we." Duncoss said dryly.

Sakaris and Duncoss watched Juris's reaction when they informed them of Merduk's decision to go in. As a scientist he felt betrayed. Merduk for going and the Reganians in not considering him. Was he not worthy? As they looked blandly at him.

"Has this to do with Zohex?" sitting in the white conference room.

"No." Sovark answered.

"Merduk is your best expert. He knows Earthers. This Zohex is a CI after all. They are a smart race. If they even intuit that Zohex is not all he pretends it could unravel. If they reject Zohex the whole principle of our exercise will fall apart. The Earthers might even record the event. Then there is the state of its mind. Earth has psychics. If they find out that Zohex is essentially a blank, infused with your alien intelligence who knows what they will make of it."

"I see." Not seeing at all. What had Merduk said to them to convince them that he, not Juris or even Darlos should have been considered first. The Reganians were being duplicitous. Had Merduk gone over? If under their influence whatever he discovered might not get back to the DVs. Maybe Merduk could even isolate them. The Reganians were taking over the experiment. He should have prepared for that. Darlos would be furious. Or Merduk was always intended to insert himself, strengthen Prima's link on that heinous planet. Juris swallowed his affronted pride.

"We understand that this is all a little unusual." Sovark trying to be placating.

"But then so is what we are doing."

"So what now?"

"You are free to leave." Duncoss cut in, not even looking at Sovark.

They were taking over. Isolating Merduk.

"Or stay." Sovark replied. "But you would be confined to this base for the duration."

He was being told to leave. It never occurred to him they could make him stay.

"All this research..." meaning he was missing out. At least the DVs would still be in contact.

"We understand your disappointment." Sovark commiserated.

"It's like this Juris." Duncoss began. "Possible cross contamination. Earth's resonance is a potent heady mix. We think they could influence us remotely, through being in direct contact with them. Since we know so little at least with Merduk there and the CI it is safer for us here. Your people are on the right track when it comes to this. Your theory of undue influence carries some weight. So in a way it is for your own protection that we are allowing you to leave." Duncoss not believing a word she said.

Juris hid his surprise. So they agreed with the basic idea that Earth's field did have some influence. He would remember that. If the Reganians began to act strangely then he would know why. Their admission invaluable. He would return.

"And Darlos?"

Sovark, Duncos, Darlos and Juris were on their way back to the space port. Home Juris thought. Darlos was philosophical. He had been ebullient at being chosen but always felt it was all too good to be true. And that is how it played out. The Reganian's simply, now that the simulacrum was in place, did not want them to find out whatever Earth was up to. At least the DVs could not be disengaged, linked as they were to the entity. Even if the Reganians were under the impression that they had removed them from their centre of operations. He pretended it was a setback.

The straight road ahead empty. Forests everywhere. Not a soul in sight. Some automated logging device felled swathes of trees into huge trucks behind them. At least he had learnt that Reganians could be two faced. Go back on their word. But then they had never guaranteed that much in the first place. The Reganians knew something and wished to keep it to themselves. He would remain true to Prima. Considering him and Juris disposable. Well at least he had learnt that Reganians were not as honest as they

pretended to be. When it came to sharing knowledge it was only on their terms. That meant they had an agenda.

"What is going to happen on Earth?" Darlos asked. "Meaning Merduk."

"Watch the watcher." Duncoss answered sitting up front with Sovark.

"Even though it worked." Indicating their remote viewing via the computers.

"As we explained. There is a danger of flash memory entanglement. We cannot risk having you two exposed." Which did not explain why Merduk was on the other side. Totally inserted. Unless Merduk was there for another reason. What had the Reganians said to him to get him to agree? Had he been turned? Or had Merduk received orders to the contrary?

"Thoughtful." Darlos tried to sound cynical. It came out flat. Juris was keeping to himself. He had given up. The forest gave way to vast fields of wheat. Harvesters working along side each other. With no one around. So different to Prima. Here nothing but machines. All so deceptive, like the Reganians. Using them then disposing of them, just like that.

They crested a hill. On the horizon the vague outline of their huge city. A white light, a rocket taking off billowing clouds of condensation in its wake.

"Exposed." Juris said doubting the reason.

"A possibility." Duncoss replied, not saying how the CI had taken on volition. Maybe the Primaians knew, maybe not. More likely not. And hoped they had not come to that conclusion. Let them wrestle with it. Or go along with it. The DVs reaction was what concerned her. And that had to be kept from Juris and Darlos. They might be scientists, they might be bright but they were still Primaians. She knew it was too good to be true when they had been approached. Well the CI had revealed itself as Votal had indicated. It might even reveal the DVs intentions. Who knew what secret instructions Juris and or Darlos carried with them. The game continuing at a more intense level. Not so remote anymore. No wonder the Primaians wanted in. Obviously the DVs had certain limitations.

To Darlos Merduk had defected. That put them in the clear. Leaving was the correct thing to do. Merduk the traitor. At least he had not been corrupted. Or was Merduk following orders? Strengthening the link through the DVs?

The fields went on forever. They passed huge silos with their oversized rail wagons. On the road a few trucks and the odd vehicle. The hazy skyscrapers up ahead, larger now but still distant as ever.

Silence. Nothing more to be said. Darlos wondering why no one swore them to secrecy. It was as if they, he, was now of no consequence. Well he would reveal everything he knew, down to the nuts and bolts of the research centre.

"You know your entity went active?" Duncoss said at last not even bothering to turn around.

"Active?" Juris repeated.

"Well it can't be a mute." Darlos stated the obvious. Her nonchalance annoyed him. What did she mean 'active'. Unless the DVs were guiding it! Was that why they wanted Merduk there and themselves out? Something had developed. They, as Primaians taking control. No wonder they wanted to remove him and Juris. Maybe the simulacrum had fooled them. He felt a warm glow of pride inside of him. They had bested the Reganians. Maybe even entrapped them.

Silence once more. They turned off towards the space port. A while later entering the complex itself. Past huge booster rockets lying on large flat rail cars. Tiny vehicles flitted about with trolleys attached moving parts around. Sovark pulled up next to a small shuttle bus. Time to get out.

"Well Juris, Darlos, on behalf of the people of my planet it has indeed been an honour, a pleasure and a privilege to have had you as our esteemed guests. We thank you for the presence of your company. The gesture of your people is appreciated." Sovark said majestically. Duncoss merely stood there looking into the distance.

"It was an honour to be accepted. We too are grateful for the unique opportunity offered by your kind gesture." Juris replied thinking the Reganians were maybe not as sincere as they wished to appear.

"A pleasant journey and a safe one." Sovark smiled benevolently.

"Who knows what the future holds." Darlos replied cryptically.

Duncoss merely said: "Good bye." Having already dismissed them from her mind.

Prima

In deep space Juris and Darlos transferred to their shuttle and were put into cryo-stasis. Juris never regained consciousness. On the Orbital wheeled straight to the Deep Scanner and BrainDrained. His acquired knowledge too important to be disseminated. Darlos working for Pentham wanted the information regarding Regum's computer capabilities along with the insertion techniques isolated. Juris had been exposed to Reganian ways of thinking. Darlos's know how necessary to take it from there. He knew about the presence of the simulacrum having been linked to it's intent. For the moment any release of that had to remain cloaked. If they succeeded on Earth, then Darlos could proceed in targeting Regum. The reason for not being BrainDrained. Darlos was convinced, with the scientists knowledge which they now possessed that Regum's weak link would eventually be exposed. Using the insertion technique. Then he could act and deliver the decisive blow that would bring Regum down once and for all.

Juris's Drain revealed plenty. The Reganians were EAI capable, far more advanced than they had previously thought. Their computers could insert anything, anyone. If they could do that Darlos was delighted with the discovery then, a wicked smile spread across his face they could insert *anything* as well. He was formulating the strike against Regum. All that was necessary was some fine tuning. Pentham would be delighted. So would Gharbel and Qatus, right up to Skias.

As for Juris with his memories void he would have a new set implanted. For the moment he would remain on the Orbital to make sure the new persona was stable before returning him down. To rusticate in some distant village. Maybe become a tutor again. No point wasting good brains. He would never know who or where he had been.

The data acquisition secure, deleted from the scanner's memory Darlos pocketed the two disks. For the moment he kept them on him. Eventually to be released to Lord Pentham. There was much to do.

The end of Regum was starting to become more of an actuality than a dream. The information gathered revealing a pattern. Not by design. Regum secure in their superiority pertaining to their data systems not even aware just how much they were releasing. A little bit here, a small informational stream there, add the odd blocks of code and soon enough the pieces fell into place. Not sufficient just yet to be certain, but the potential was there to possibly cause enough havoc to gain the upper hand. It was too early to put together a solid plan but given time, given the DVs circuitous access to

Regum's supposedly secure research station enough could be culled, was being culled to have ample data to formulate a plan of attack. Not one they envisioned at this moment in time.

Darlos sat back well satisfied with the information they had brought back. Now to tell Lord Pentham the other news regarding Merduk. Either way Merduk was in, totally. An active insert run by Sovark's group. It would be interesting how Lord Pentham reacted.

Lord Pentham was amused that he was now subject to his underlings missives. Gharbel would certainly take a dim view that he would have to answer their call. Pentham did not mind taking yet another shuttle ride up to the orbital. He was spending more and more time up in space than at his base. His Domain Realm was certainly expanding, all the way to Regum. So far that had not aroused any suspicion. Nor should it. They were all concerned with the monumental task of securing Prima's position even if it appeared that Regum was expanding with stupendous strides into space itself. It would be foolish to ignore their progress. Qatus was as usual indifferent. Gharbel more concerned with positioning himself favourable to Skias. He though was going to get results. . Deliver the goods. In a way, being head of planetary security, even if of a lower status had many advantages. He had to cover all the seven domains which gave him access to their data bases and their charges if need be. Now that he had infiltrated Regum his horizons were so broad, so vast in space with such rapidity it was breathtaking. All this without even the slightest design on his part.

So when Darlos reported, cautiously at first the results of Juris's BrainDrained resonant memory Pentham a little surprised at the drastic action soon relaxed when Darlos explained what they had actually siphoned. Regardless of the filters the Ecclesiastics put in place. With Merduk the subterfuge to gain access to Regum's most advanced laboratories no matter what they thought, he was making progress.

"Juris returning voluntarily might have been the correct thing to do Darlos but from an operational point of view we concentrate on our direct contact." Pentham stating the obvious. Which was true enough. Juris in stasis awaiting his rebirth. All because the Ecclesiastics were still so fervent regarding exposure to Reganians, to space, to different ways of thinking. "Which reminds me, how is the simulacrum going?"

"That was one of the reasons why our ops were removed." Darlos replied. "Whether the Reganians had tricked it, given it volition, turning it to their advantage, thus

using it as one of their own perhaps." Darlos not bothering to look at the notes in front of him.

Pentham glanced at the read outs on the screen coming from the download Darlos acquired of the BrainDrain. The majestic city with its powerful architecture. The rising solid tower, a monument to their will. Access to the cosmos. He watched with professional detachment how this Zohex convinced the priests he was one of them.

"I still don't see why they removed the advance team." Pentham wondered.

"They probably thought since the simulacrum is ours..."

"Were they suspecting that they might be being used for purposes conducive to us that is."

"Apparently not at that stage."

"Did they suspect anything at all then?" Pentham asked calmly.

"The change in the simulacrum made them uneasy. They thought," Darlos glancing at his written notes, "they were being used."

"But didn't say exactly what for, did they. Just suppositions." Pentham relaxed. Not that he felt it. Something was wrong. Something was missing. At least Merduk was still there. From what Pentham could gather, it looked like Merduk was merely going along with the intentions of the DVs. Get in. Which he had. Instead of three Primaian's there was now only one. Linked with the DVs, though they were focussed on Zohex. They were still in. Nothing had changed unless, unless the Reganians were concerned valuable information getting out. He needed a technical expert, several preferably. There was Forch. One of Janon's advisors. He checked his data base. Forch was busy.

"Who up here has the requisite brains Darlos regarding the more technical aspects regarding Reganian systems?"

"Elentra was the best..."

"And dead."

Darlos looked up. It was a severe thing to say.

"Kroena perhaps then Khral, astute observer."

"We need someone to go over the technical data, up here."

Darlos wondered if Pentham was thinking along his lines of enquiry. To find the weak link in Regum's vast Web. Bring that down and Regum would be blind sided. Or was Pentham thinking of another insert? Create another simulacrum? Let the techs do the hard work of sifting through the reams of information without alluding to exactly what anything specifically. If an entity could be inserted then so could disinformation. The thought piqued his curiosity. Sabotage the Web.

"Yes." Darlos agreed.

"Data wise?"

"Patterns are forming Lord Pentham." Thinking beyond personnel.

"Dispersed pieces of information. None related, as yet. We have to find out what the Reganian's intend. Is Earth a mere curiosity? Do they suspect our intentions? Or have they figured that out already? If so are they moving one step ahead with this entity? Have they subsumed it for their purposes?"

"All good questions Lord Pentham. We could get the DVs, along with systems to do some projections."

"Let's start with the projections. We have enough."

Darlos walked over to a terminal, inserted the disk and waited for it to be uploaded. "Anything specific?"

"Assume this Zohex is in Reganian control. A total tech head."

Darlos entered the parameters and waited.

"Enter a few centuries ahead."

Darlos ran the requisite projection.

On the screen several cities appeared. All similar to the one where the entity was. Black smoke coming out of workshops. Steam driven devices.

Darlos gave Pentham a knowing look.

"Another two centuries."

The cities were vast now. Houses spread over large distances, to the horizon. Not exactly Reganian but very similar.

"Doesn't look good does it?" Darlos said at last.

"Yet if you check their RS, you'll see it hasn't deviated that much from ours. Even if dual minded." Wondering if they could ever subjugate them entirely. The Earthers being technically minded still did not reject outright their mystical beliefs. Not totally. Interesting.

"Delete."

"Deleting." The screen went blank.

"Now run the entity according to our wishes, same two timelines."

They waited a moment. The screen showed vast cities, the buildings more basic. Brick, wood and stone structures similar to the city as it was now. Spread over their globe. Temples everywhere. No sign of machinery.

Then cities in decay. Many abandoned. Villages still extant. An agrarian planet. Many towns blackened burned out ruins. Natural calamity or war. Earthers relentless in

their strange rationalised insanity to destroy one another. The RF stronger, tighter, potent. Their psychic abilities on par with the DVs. Pentham was disturbed even though this is what they wanted. A race similar to themselves. The danger now if they had advanced psychically then they could influence the DVs here.

"Call up Prima, same time line."

Darlos reconfigured the projection homing in on their planet. Their resonance was as tight as ever, still the same. With a change in their projected future. Dotted across the lands were citadels. Potent centres of psychic activity. Meshed across the planet. The villages were there as ever though Pentham could not put his finger on it. It all looked the same even if something had changed. Increased psychic activity that much was certain.

"Compare and contrast both planets."

The screen split. Similar resonant envelopes. The two were inextricably linked. The question on Pentham's mind was who controlled whom now? Certainly Prima had undergone a subtle change. The citadels disturbed him. They looked solid, massive, squatting with determination on the landscape, exuding power, control. As Pentham considered the implications the three DV's designated to keep in touch asked to come to him. Shogun, Trum and Eta. He told them to wait. As he considered the outcome he asked Darlos how the three were faring.

"Taking it in shifts now that Juris is no longer there. Maintaining their vigilance regarding Merduk."

"Can they influence him?"

"If you wish. I'm sure Kroena will oblige as will Risea."

The trouble was whether their idea of subjugating Earth was such a good idea. The ultimate heresy Pentham realised. Prima's projected future disturbed him. *It looked as if the Earthers were dominant.*

"Get me the data of those three regarding Merduk."

Darlos obliged. The screen voided the two planets refocussing on where Merduk actually was. On Regum. Being himself, inserted remotely, watching Zohex. Pentham was relieved. With some minor discrepancies manifesting in Merduk's RS. Only to be expected. He was on Regum after all.

"I think we're done here Darlos."

"As you wish Lord Pentham."

"Just to let you know. Janon is handling the technical end up here. Nothing gets down, including Gharbel or Qatus though I doubt he'd be that interested. And that

includes the pontiff. Half knowledge has the tendency to miss the overall point. It appears for the moment that this entity will boost Earth's RS, and ours by the look of things. But remember Darlos these are only projections. And by the very fact we are doing this indicates that nothing untoward has occurred regarding our overall state. If the Earthers had won we would not be having this conversation."

On the way back down Pentham went over the reports from the DVs assigned to watch the simulacrum and Merduk. The overall view of Earthers remained the same: anarchical and homicidal, barely keeping themselves in check through the use of military force. Both as a method of keeping the peace amongst themselves and simultaneously waging war. How duplicitous.

The entity's transition a complex matter. Shogun thought it was a positive development. Taking the initiative. Trum suggested this would destabilize their society by becoming Tellurium's ruler, creating a new order in a way usurping what the Earthers envisaged for themselves. Eta suggested they would adapt. As long as the negative effects were at a minimum this Zohex would be no problem. Merely a focus, one that would have happened eventually as their society became socially more complex. Who was right?

He let that go for the moment as the shuttle fell back towards Prima. Next Juris's and Darlos's downloads regarding Reganian insertion techniques. That was pertinent. If they could duplicate that...the potential alone was terrific. They could then infiltrate and dominate Regum. First via the Web. If that worked, if it could be brought down by other inserts who could take over at the crucial moment when maximum havoc caused their society to be disrupted. Save them from themselves, re-establish order, Prima's order. For that to work he would need both Gharbel and Qatus to be informed. He sent word ahead that they needed to meet.

The next day Pentham met Gharbel and Qatus at Gharbel's private estate. Let him think he was the important domain lord, which he was. With Pentham calling the shots.

They had a light lunch out on the patio overlooking the vineyard surrounded by his private forest. A picturesque setting under a grey sky. Gharbel had dismissed his servants having cooked lunch himself. They feasted on grilled fish, sautéed vegetables, drinking a slightly fruity white wine.

The meal over, finished with the small talk they now focussed, pleasantly relaxed and satisfied on the dossier Pentham had prepared. Whilst Gharbel and Qatus studied that Pentham helped himself to more wine, enjoying the scenery. Wondering what would happen in the past if Zohex had his way on Earth. That troubled him yet it was not in the report. Not his misgivings or the projection he had studied with Darlos. What the dossier did contain was the bare minimum. No point playing all the cards. Put a gloss on it, generate some spin, make the project look like a success even if Merduk had not yet succeeded. He had put that in inverted commas, whilst indicating Juris's fraying mind unravelling on Regum. In an appendix he inserted the possibilities of infiltrating Regum's Web and hopefully the social distraction that would cause opening the way for political supremacy, theirs.

"Fantastic." Qatus finally said having finished reading Pentham's report.

"Planetary domination." Gharbel straight to the point. Buoyant. "The DVs in control through this Zohex. The Reganian's thought they'd be running the show whilst this construct becomes the prime factor. Our factor." He sipped his wine. "Even Merduk's insertion is almost too good to be true."

"You don't see..." but Qatus was interrupted.

"No. Perfect in itself." Gharbel beamed. "They think he's defected. All he is doing is going in. Two entities in place. Consolidation. Zohex as pure spirit and Merduk as the primary presence. He is the link in now that Zohex has found his true identity thanks to the remarkable achievements of the DVs. As for the appendix, that shall have to be considered as well. At an appropriate time."

"You do understand that this stays here, amongst us?" Pentham reiterated.

Gharbel gave him a look. Qatus assented.

"We can get at the Reganians, right to their core. Blast that and the planet is open to us."

"Excellent work Pentham." Gharbel acknowledged as he waved a fly away.

"What interests me is the Reganian theory behind the insertion. Something that the DVs picked up as is, so to speak. With no mental interference. Pure data." Pentham beamed.

"Pure theory." Gharbel cautioned. Qatus was at a loss.

"Probability waves." Pentham suggested.

"Mere words. Not unlike our concept. The universe filled with them, the mind of the Cosmic Architect. Except the Reganians subtract the whole from the sum of the parts." Gharbel onto it. "In a way they have clarified what we already know to be."

"Yes. They have approached the outer limits of the Cosmic Mind's completeness. As it holds both of what was, is and will be, managing to extract a slice if you like then there is no reason for us not to duplicate that method and gain access *and insert the reality we want.*" Pentham emphasised.

"I tend to agree. Thanks to Regum's, as per usual, crowing, they have left themselves wide open. Excellent." Gharbel impressed. "The possibilities are...delightful." allowing himself a rare tight smile.

"Infinite potentialities await us." Pentham underlined. Qatus merely agreed. "The importance of this is not to be underestimated. Of course it works both ways. We must make sure the Reganian's do not ever get wind of our intentions. We need to assemble a group of DVs to make sure that this remains so. Let them think we have not digested this knowledge or come to any conclusions. We have to feign ignorance."

"I concur." Qatus said.

Gharbel looked at him obliquely.

Pentham continued. "It is up to us to fathom not just the potential offered but how far, meaning both in time and regarding the penetration of Regum we go."

"How far would you suggest?" Gharbel asked.

"Caution first. It appears they insert a projected possibility onto an actuality, redesigning that present. Now since the divine mind is everywhere at once, what the Reganians call a field, at that moment of transfer the generated equations become both simultaneous, the two are one. A sign of divine inspiration, for us." Pentham was ecstatic.

"Or a trap." Qatus suggested,

"A trap?" Gharbel nonplussed.

"If we use their method then we will reveal that we know."

"So what?" Gharbel countered.

"Indeed." Pentham agreed with Gharbel.

"We have the ability to insert our resonance Qatus."

"You mean flood the future or the present with our state?"

"Of course, what else?" Gharbel thinking this was so obvious it barely needed iteration.

"Take it to its logical conclusion?" Qatus almost overwhelmed by the idea.

"Why not?" Gharbel cool.

"Why not indeed?" Qatus now excited. "Glory be the Divine Mind."

"No harm in trying." Pentham relaxed with Qatus's reaction. It was all very amazing.

"And try we will. Not just try but succeed." Gharbel focussed once more. "Of course we have to proceed with utter caution. The less who know the better. The DVs have to be isolated. Since we know what we are considering I agree with Pentham that this," looking at Qatus, "stays with us. Simulations have to be run. In secret."

"What about the pontiff?" Qatus asked.

"In good time." Gharbel replied. "Remember this is only a potential we are exploring. No point wasting Skias's time with minor details. Then when the trials do indicate, when we have perfected the techniques behind our assault on Regum's reality then it will be time to inform Skias."

"He might gain insight from the DVs."

"Qatus. If he does then that is what the Divine Mind wants."

"Of course. So you think it is possible?"

"It worked for the simulacrum. Inserting information will be much easier. Inserting RSs ought to be child's play." Pentham was certain.

"Getting at Regum. You think they'll notice?" Qatus asked.

"Does it matter? Preferably not. The point is that we succeed." Gharbel in his element.

"Remember Qatus," Pentham said patiently, "once our RS has been inserted theirs vanishes."

"That easy?"

"In theory Qatus. But thanks to Juris's BrainDraining, we have their field equations. Access to their computer cores. They too are fields. All faithfully duplicated through the DVs routing via Merduk. If the Reganian's had not hooked up, all we would have is what we already know. But as they insisted on doing it their way, they actually did us a favour."

"Regum will be contained."

"I cannot believe it is that simple." Qatus trying to take it all in.

"Often the simple confounds the complex." Gharbel answered.

Pentham returned to the orbital and downloaded all the requisite data concerning the BrainDrains. Once disentangled from what they thought to what they had, the field equations and how they were generated, meaning the light processing computers were also revealed. Extricated from their resonant states.

On Prima, in the arctic wastes a research station was built to test the insertion techniques. The cover story was to check weather patterns. The generators were in place, the building of the light processing semi-quantum computers something else. They were inherently unstable. But slowly, trying this field equation, that set of data codes they finally got them to work. It was a matter of thinking backwards to the logical derivatives from whence the field equations began to be applied. The quantum computers held the equations. The first sequence in place. Now to assess alternative realities.

The research station the test ground, the computers were uploaded to remove the rubbish outside the station. Recreate reality prior that. The refuse was moved well away from the building. The coordinates were set to the near past. First the past environment had to be re-read, then uploaded and projected onto the current quantum field waves. The result a resounding success. As long as the equations held so did the field. When switched off, the inserted reality uncollapsed and the garbage was back. It was then that Pentham considered they should have shielded the base more thoroughly, done the experiment inside. Dangerous yes but the Reganian's might have discovered the phase-change at the research centre. Well it was too late now. The point was they had done it. They were now enpar with Reganian know how. The only difference was in generating enough power for what Pentham had in mind. But that was a minor detail. The scientists were sworn to the utmost secrecy. Given what they achieved they readily complied. As far as Pentham was concerned, he was ready to act. Now it was a matter of timing. In other words, politics. For the moment knowing they could achieve what they had was what mattered. Time was really immaterial now. The past, the present, the future not just accessible but fine tuned as well. Real reality would always be there, but the nuances could be changed. It was enough for what Pentham intended, what the meeting with Gharbel and Qatus had been agreed upon. For the moment he would await developments. The mission to Earth was still of primary concern. That could not be jeopardised.

Skias retreated to his private apartments in the palatial complex. Here he was left alone away from prying minds, incessant clamouring from the various divine orders that sought his attention. He relaxed amongst the sumptuous furniture, the rich tapestries picturesque representations of a time when holy unity was supreme. Telafus was still babbling incomprehensibilities. Taruk probing the fallen pontiff with mild hallucinogenic drugs. Revealing more about his state of mind, how Telafus saw the strange encounter at

the temple of the Immortal. Such was the confusion that it was as yet impossible to tell where reality began or where Telafus's self tortured mind ended. Or whether the two were linked. More to the point. The Immortal was not contaminated. Given the sensitivity of having a mad pontiff, one who the people thought ascended required extra finesse.

Starting by changing his personal secretary. Bern a welcome change. Reticent, quiet, reserved, one who knew discretion. Skias felt a natural affinity with the man. A priest who remained in the background, diligent, focused, not given to move beyond that which duly concerned him. Not beholden to any domain lord. Nor influenced by the Ecclesiastics who were more concerned with their status than the holy disposition of the people. Skias was determined to smooth their minds.

Gharbel had just left. As usual there were problems. The man seemed to not just attract them but relish them as a challenge and as evidence that they were under constant psychic attack. Telafus the prime example of what lay in store for those who strayed from the holy path. That the highest on the planet had succumbed could of course never be revealed. The implications alone not even speculated upon. It could ruin the social fabric that united them as a race.

That unity under constant threat. Not just regarding Telafus.

Now one of their own had defected to the Reganian's. Merduk. As to how he even got there Gharbel seemed rather vague. Not like him at all. Were the Reganian's now recruiting potential heretics Skias wondered. How had the Domain Lords not recognised Merduk's inane weakness as he progressed through the various levels. It was the silent ones that needed watching. According to Gharbel everybody needed watching. When Skias ventured to say that Lord Pentham would be overwhelmed, implying more resources, Gharbel retreated. The point had been made. Merduk's defection enhanced security. More DVs, stronger containment fields, deeper oversight.

Dark influences were at work. Skias asked if the DVs were tracking Merduk. They were but...it appeared Merduk was at some secure location on Regum that was insulated against their probing minds. To Gharbel it was obvious the Reganian's were interfering on Earth. Skias asked what role Merduk was playing, if any. Again Gharbel was not too sure. Skias though was not to be put off. Gharbel was not being direct. Unfortunately as pontiff, as noble as his position was, as powerful as it appeared there really was not much Skias could do with the Domain Lords. They ruled their fiefs with iron minds. Given the alien incursion, now was not the time to test their strength or plumb their knowledge or even consider their agendas. The priests who kept him informed, his office

if not his person were not indicating any radical changes being afoot. DV input likewise. Except Regum's interest in Earth. Using Merduk.

Skias checked the data Qatus had left with him. Earth the possible threat at some future date. The DVs doing their best to obviate Earth's possible psychic trajectory. Falling into Regum's intellectual orbit if left unchecked. Qatus's effervescent personality unperturbed using the logic that what was to be was what the Divine Mind intended. So unlike Gharbel who countered that by saying the Great Architect had given them intelligence to be used, applied. The conclusion not in need of elucidation. He stared out of the window into the courtyard. Leaves falling, turning yellow, winter coming. The winter of the soul. A perturbed cosmos. Disturbances everywhere. Nothing as yet to worry about but the people were restless. Regum's WebSpace expanding. Now parts, whole sections falling out of DV penetration. Novus developing in leaps and bounds. Discrepancies everywhere.

Change he realised did not sit well with Primaians in general. Rather than acting they were reacting. Not a good sign. Gharbel, steadfast assured him that amongst this cauldron of fermenting dissonance lay latent possibilities for action. Everything was for a good reason. It was up to them to make the best use of what expanded around them. With everything so fluid. Testing times. The Great Mind was indeed challenging them to rise to the occasion. To grasp what was available, bend it to their divine will and reign supreme. The universe turning into a puzzle which should strengthen their determination not weaken it. In that Skias agreed with Gharbel. Even if it required Reganian logic. Thus Merduk's defection was a way in, not its opposite of being locked out.

Telafus had not been much help. Though loved by the masses he had succumbed to their adulation. Believing himself to be popular he had pandered to them, drawing on their devoutness to think that he was their vessel filling himself with their spirit, pretending to be more than they were. He had delegated unsavoury tasks to the Ecclesiastics and through them the Divines thus isolating his commands from what really was occurring on the ground, in the villages, the towns, even that of the Domain Lords. The vacuum thus created was eagerly filled by strengthening those of a lesser stature than himself. It would take some doing to reorient this most holy of offices back to its rightful state at the apex, not the base. Telafus had lowered his resonance which whilst attuned to the base, the masses it had done nothing to strengthen the planet's envelope to hold at bay the alien field threatening their overall divine state. Ruling by default whilst exclaiming holy precedents would no longer suffice. Skias was determined

to take an active role. He would avail himself to resources which were if anything unorthodox. Let the Ecclesiastics protest, or more likely the vehicle of the Divines to maintain their powerful hold within the pontifical palace.

How one mere thought could have so much potential. Skias thanked the Divine Mind for the inspiration to access the Trine Guardians. A vestige from ancient days when their almost sentient inclined programmes were put in place to scour the universe for signs of divine intervention, to read the mind of the Great Architect's intentions. And guard against heresies so that the Immortals remained secure in their eternal being.

What annoyed and fascinated Skias were all these unconnected phenomena. The field, Earth, Regum's Webs, Telafus's strange encounter with some undefined presence. He activated his personal computer, pressed his thumb on the screen to gain access to the Trine system, the bedrock of Prima's external holy state to see what exactly was going on. Ascertain strengths and weaknesses not just in the resonant state of the planet but more importantly the potential of the alien field. The bugbear of their existence. As expected, albeit reluctantly, the Trine ignored its presence. A weak photon field carrying Earth's universe as information across space. Extremely weak, barely the strength of a candle. Not that this would ever become public knowledge. It had served them well. It kept the masses on edge, imbued them with a sense of this need for spiritual vigilance. Creating an inner longing for redemption, even if it really was more an illusion than anything else. With the priests giving them hope as long as they all remained true to the path. Skias did not believe in hope but in answers.

The Domain Lords of course kept everything to themselves. He only knew what they wanted him to know. He went from the Trine into the Immortals. The great ancient spiritual sages in stasis hovering between this physical life and the soul's ascension reuniting itself with the Divine Cosmic Consciousness. The guides to eternity when even his time would come. Which had sent Telafus insane whilst he was in communion. The Immortals a gateway to eternity, not eternity itself.

Seven. One for each continent. And one empty sarcophagus. The Void. A massive island never to be ventured upon. Abandoned aeons ago. The Dark. The opposite of life. To draw down like a lightning rod and ward of any manifest evil. Surrounded by violent winds intrepid explorers had turned back then with woeful reports. Mostly desert, little water, certainly not conducive to habitation. Even when Prima had dabbled in technology the island continent had been avoided. As if it laboured under a strange bourn, an enigmatic spell, an ancient presence inimical to life. It became over time a warning of what would occur to the whole planet if they strayed from the

righteous path. For a while apostates, unbelievers and atheists were transported there, if they survived the voyage. Later of course they emigrated to Regum instead. The ancient space ports along the island's wind strewn coastline were now ruins, rusted twisted metal, the supporting infrastructure rubble.

Out of curiosity Skias accessed the Void. The great emptiness. A depository without an Immortal, a soul devoid of life. A warning to all what lay in store from following heresies. Still linked to the Trine. The alien field not even present unless the scale of observation changed down to the finest level of scrutiny. There it was on the screen. A hazy band, a minor perturbation. A different configuration to the intrusion from beyond their universe. This was within their universe. A convoluted resonance. Not complete. Ambient. He checked the other Immortal states. The same opaque bandwidth. Weak, foggy, glowing strangely irradiated but no outside source. The Trine Guardians were supposed to keep the Immortals pure. This though was what? He scrolled back letting the computer run backwards in time. The thin resonance vanished. So it had not been there forever. An infestation had gotten through. Nor was it related to Regum's Web. Present everywhere, each Immortal had that vague unformed resonance hovering in the background. Not from Earth, not from Regum, unassociated with Novus. Diffused weakly through space.

Skias sought divine inspiration. Silence from the other side. Had Telafus accessed this potential resonance? It appeared like one in the making. The pattern was there, weak, its tenuous presence vague, unformed, so opaque it defied analysis. Slightly frustrated Skias called up Telafus's file.

A mind in decay. An overwrought state burning up his soul. Very similar to a DV burning out. Amongst the mayhem of Telafus's volatility the same strange essence was manifest. Telafus was infected. And no one else in the ecclesiastical orbit. Resonant with it. Should the temples of the Immortals be shut? That would cause chaos. The inescapable fact remained that this outer reverberation was there without affecting the Immortals themselves. Only lesser minds. Were the masses infected? Though they were restless they were not overtly volatile. Maybe their lower resonant state did not reverberate with this gossamer presence.

He shut down the computer access, destroyed the search and stared out of the window barely taking in the mottled sunlight amongst the trees. No Domain Lord had alluded to this manifestation. Was he and Telafus the only one's aware of it? Surely not. It would be interesting what the Reganian's knew. Nor had the Orbital's observatory mentioned the resonance either. Unless, he shuddered at the thought, this essence was

not really out there but within. Maybe it was the combination of the Immortals residue. How quickly dark thoughts could form when enlightened thinking resolved a quandary. That had been close. He would be vigilant, keep an eye on it and on Telafus.

"With Merduk, what is the situation there?" Skias asked Qatus. "As Outer Guardian..." Letting the implication hang in that even though the operation fell into Lord Pentham's domain, given the secrecy Skias also expected Qatus to remain informed.

"Lord Nihen's report showed a Stable Volatile. Perfect for what was intended." Meaning infiltrating Regum. "Lord Acht trained him, Pentham cleared him."

Skias in his private residence, surrounded by sumptuous hand carved furniture, richly embroidered, ornate chairs, the coffee table in front of them, empty. Skias letting it be know this was no private chat. Pure business. The computer screen blank after Skias had checked on the DVs assigned to shadow Merduk. They were only tenuously connected. They were slipping. Or something else was in place which created an absence of future possibilities. Potential probabilities absent from DV prognosis.

"I am familiar with his status Lord Qatus. I meant his RS."

Qatus did not answer. He wondered how Merduk concerned him unless he became a threat. Now that he had crossed the divide between the two worlds anything was possible.

"What are the DVs presenting?" Skias pressed on.

"Pontiff. The general tenor I am familiar with. I mean Merduk. He's not really in my Domain as such. Unless he becomes hostile, infected."

"We have to assume the worst and work back from that."

Qatus concluded that Skias had got it into his head that Merduk's supposed defection involved him. Had the pontiff grasped something from the future that would impinge on his domain?

"Sound reasoning."

"Let me show you something." Skias swivelled around on the solid oak chair, accessed his computer and showed Qatus the strange evasive misty band glowing eerily on the screen.

Qatus felt caught.

"What we need is intelligence."

Qatus waited. The statement sounding like an accusation. Intel was not his concern but Pentham's.

"Of course." He replied sombrely.

"This strange resonance is like a fog forming in space."

Maybe Qatus thought. He was certainly not aware of it.

"Extremely weak." As it was.

"It appeared recently."

As if that meant anything. There was nothing Qatus could think of that caught his attention. He did not even know Merduk had defected until Pentham let it slip that there might be trouble brewing at the palace.

"Does this relate to Merduk?"

"That is why I called you. Is there a connection?"

"No." Qatus was certain of that much. "Is there a source?"

"That's just it. There isn't."

That surprised Qatus. He grasped Skias's gist. No defining point to focus upon. A presence. Feeble, deformed, incomplete and steady.

No point hedging. "I have no idea pontiff."

"Thought so."

What was Skias angling for? Qatus studied the read outs.

"I gather this is not the alien field."

"Correct."

"Is it aligned to us?"

"Good question. There are similarities with our RS at the moment."

"Similarities." Qatus repeated. He hated having to think. It lead to all sorts of problems. Better to let reality run its course. Things evened out in the end. Interference usually prolonged disturbances rather than settle them. "And the DVs?"

"Nothing. They're focussed. Their RS far too strong. Unidirectional. This is broad, spread out."

"Not a mind." Qatus hoped. He dared not contemplate the obvious. An outpouring of the Divine Mind. Should he suggest that? Better not. Skias knew more than he did. Unless Skias was playing with him. Having accidentally stumbled across this.

"Too diluted."

"So, it's unrelated to Merduk's defection, or...insertion." Merduk now intrigued him. Regum. Were they moving into position regarding Earth. The source of the baleful cosmic poison. Not using one of their own either. Merduk the test probe.

"That remains to be seen." Which annoyed Skias. This strange effluvium everywhere. It did not reach far into their universe.

"You want me to look into it." it seemed the logical thing to do.

"I do."

"And Merduk?"

"The same. Oversight. It might be nothing as far as the two events are concerned. But I want you to be aware, now that Merduk is on Earth whether even that may effect us."

"Surely the DVs as sentinels..."

"Yes, yes." Skias slightly irritable.

"I only meant pontiff whether my domain extends to them."

"Yes of course Lord Qatus. Not just the DVs, everything. The others can deal with the minutiae."

"I understand." At least that was going to be easy.

"Maybe you do. Include Regum's WebSpace. It might be merely some leakage."

Skias was on top of Reganian thinking. Applying their mental idioms. Unlike Tellafus, unlike all the other pontiffs. One who did not shy from what they were faced with.

"Or a new project of theirs."

"Indeed."

"Apart from this vague resonance, no hard data as to its contents?" for Skias had only showed him what there was on the outside. DV reports indicated nothing unusual.

"If there were we would know what it was, and where it is." Skias having deleted the idea this was some vibrant holy manifestation. Considered its presence as having something to do with space. Another infusion. As if one alien field was not enough. Building itself up. Pretending to be so dispersed as to be inconsequential. Like a stream trickling into a vast lake. And now that lake was full to overflowing. Overflowing out of space, or into space. Even that could not be discerned.

"Maybe something is coming through the back door."

"You mean it could be Earth?" Skias not discounting Qatus's approach. It had occurred to him as well. With no direct link. Unless their psychics were imitating what the DVs themselves were engaged in. Forward projections. Insert something into their universe without revealing its contents. Testing their strength, their resolution, their capabilities. "You may have a point."

"A specific group trying to destabilize us." Qatus suggested.

"Then we may as well check it out."

Skias rose, went over to the terminal and accessed the DVs targeting Merduk. Another group focussing on Zohex. As Merduk was the lesser presence Skias wondered if the puzzle did originate from Earth. Maybe the Reganian's had data which they wished to verify. Shogun was on duty shadowing Merduk. Another three DVs linked to Zohex. All by-passing the Reganian centre of operations. Was that why they had convinced Merduk he would be of use to them on Earth? Get the DVs distracted from whatever the Reganian's intended to do? It was possible.

On the screen the solid tower rose into the sky. The temple complex a hive of activity around it. Fractured images of Zohex meeting with Strahl and other head priests. Zohex effectively their spiritual leader. On the ground more soldiers which did not sit well with the priestly caste. Zohex explaining that as long as bandits threatened the peace, a show of force was needed to maintain the peace they so much desired. Otherwise their kingdom would fall into barbarism. Zohex was smart enough to explain that the masses nodded sagely at the logic of the argument. The priests were disturbed but relented. They all wanted peace.

Then Merduk appeared in the forecourt of the temple precinct. Just like that. With his past as well. A refugee from the outer provinces, escaping the ravenous marauding thieves. With so many dead it would be hard to trace Merduk's supposed lineage. He pretended to be an orphan, brought up by the local priests who were conveniently murdered as well. Sole survivor. His life accepted by all who came into contact with him.

Merduk played the part of observer. Unlike Zohex the centre of attention. Acting the humble supplicant regarding the temple priests of the royal city. No king. Ruling left to the priestly caste.

Merduk learnt of Zohex's meteoric rise. Having expanded the military, signing up bandits by delaying their just punishment they became faithful soldiers now taking the field against their brethren bandits. It caused some consternation amongst the military who were puzzled at the rise of violence. Zohex's new army had defeated the first major assault against the holy city. Now he was taking the fight to them. Militarizing the countryside. Garrisons in every major town. Patrols going amongst the villagers who were relieved that order was being restored. The combined wealth of the kingdom increased. As society became more settled priests were sent out as well. Though they competed with the few shamans that maintained the old ways the priests preached benevolence towards all peoples. And the people listened.

Though not all agreed. The nomads were being pushed into the wilderness, retreating sullenly taking their shamans with them. Zohex was indifferent to their resentment. Their lost pastures now farmed out as villages spread across the wide land. At the edge the fight continued. Rustling herds, stealing grain from the granaries, abducting the odd woman, murdering peasants until the squads of soldiers extirpated them, once caught. Incessant guerrilla warfare at the periphery. So more combatants were recruited. Expansion fed on itself. More land under cultivation, more wealth. More wealth greater temptation. The need for more security. More military force and with that Zohex's power increased incrementally as well. With more bounty the pay of the soldiers was secure as was their loyalty, to Zohex. The granaries were full at harvest, the herds roaming the pastures whilst on the coast fishing boats supplemented the food supply. Trade expanded into distant lands across the vast ocean, mines revealed the earth's riches of precious metals and wonderful gems. Tellaris as a city shone like a magnificent star wrought in golden domes, silver cupolas, bright copper doors studded with glistening rubies, amethysts, opals, diamonds. Though the people were happy in their taverns, imbibing good beer and mellow wines some priests thought the wealth corrupted the soul of the people. But they were a minority. Zohex was adulated and accepted their submission with good grace.

Merduk took it all in, remaining on the sidelines. The CI was certainly far more successful than the Reganian's or the DVs ever imagined. Zohex softening up the people, getting them ready for his message. Merduk's link fed it all back to Regum's laboratory. Sovark cautiously appraising Prima's simulacrum. Projections indicated that if not Zohex than someone else would have arisen with the same plan. Maybe Prima was learning that one could live with other sentients and not see them as a threat for being pagan, for believing in a multiplicity of gods or immersed in shaman realms. The DVs got it all.

Gharbel assumed a semblance of satisfaction. As Inner Guardian he had been tasked by Skias to exert extra vigilance given the strange resonance which was hanging like a wan shroud in space. As the superior Domain Lord he relished the new assignment for it enhanced his standing, embedded his status over both Qatus and Pentham.

They were sitting on large comfortable armchairs in the study of Gharbel's asylum. The subtle point being that at any time, any of them might be subject to alien if not Reganian heresies. That no one was immune since Gharbel considered the perplexing resonance a threat. Weak as it was its presence was a mystery. He had accessed the Trine Guardians which identified and filtered out via the Infinity Chip

corrupting resonant states, purifying discordant resonances so that the Immortals remained pure. Its imprimatur remained. Lurking in space, in the dark, waiting, gestating. Palpable, recumbent, disturbing. Puzzling as it exerted no effect upon their planet's resonance, upon the DVs who merely ignored it, of no consequence.

Gharbel sighed inwardly whilst Qatus and Pentham exchanged information in how they handled their asylum's inmates. Hard science was needed to explain this manifestation. As supreme Domain Lords they had access to Regum's state of knowledge, netting no results.

Pentham active. Not psychically, that was for last resorts. Filled with nervous energy, his mind bordering on the volatile which indicated he was deeply concerned with Merduk's defection. Hinting certain developments were in place which could now be revealed. He had appraised his two superior Domain Lords of the project. Qatus as usual was delighted and excited. Pentham underlining the fact that this most unusual mission regarding the simulacrum could never be disseminated. Gharbel only too ready to keep a secret. Secrets were powerful weapons in his arsenal.

"You are to be congratulated." Gharbel admitted easily. "The DVs construction of an entity in itself is a major development and breakthrough. Testing it with the Reganians on Earth the perfect location. Creating for itself a persona admirable in the technique of camouflage. Your team deserves praise even though it can never be publicly acknowledged."

"Yes, unfortunate, for now. It depends on Skias of course." Pentham reluctant to take direct credit.

"The Earthers have no idea then?" Qatus barely suppressing his excitement. Gharbel suffered his exuberance silently.

"Just watch the latest download." Pentham replied handing Gharbel the disk. Duly inserted they watched the screen come to life.

Zohex had discarded the white garb of the priests. He wore a richly embroidered mantle as supreme commander to give sign of his absolute status. Beneath the garb a white shirt to let the priests know he was now assuming a dual role. Spiritual and temporal ruler of Tellurium with himself at its centre. Outside the temple complex the busy marketplace. Merchants from distant shores bringing in rare spices, precious cut stones, intricately worked jewellery and Zohex's innovation, slaves. The kingdom needed cheap labour to manufacture expensive linen, weaving rich tapestries, export the work of silver and goldsmiths, exotically carven furniture. Then there were the many blacksmiths and forges turning out the weaponry for the army. Zohex had formed

auxiliary regiments fitted out with quality livery, the best swords and horses creating a military industry in itself producing shields, armaments, the articles of war and ships of war.

The domain lords marvelled at Zohex's ingenuity. Now and again a glimpse of Merduk who assumed the role of a minor officiating priest. He helped in the temples expanded roles as administrators for the priests were now also traders and bankers. In a way it was an astute move by Merduk. Aware what Zohex was up to.

Intelligence had come in through adventurous traders of an eastern continent where a military race ruled. They established themselves along its inland sea trading cedars for Tellurium's jewellery and other high value goods.

Zohex understood that there might come a time when this military caste would get greedy, lusting after Tellurium's wealth. The conclave of priest suggested cutting off their trade. No dice. Zohex needed timber for the building of the navy. The priests retorted they had whole forests which Zohex answered by saying once the trees were gone then what? Having recently banned their export. It took generations for the best trees to mature. Better to denude other lands than their own. The ban remained.

The priests, led by Strahl lamented the emigration of dissatisfied souls who regretted the loss of their previous life. When all had been more equal, sharing in the bounty of the land amongst each other. Zohex indifferent to that complaint. Let them leave. The population was rising, what did a few disgruntled peasants matter? They might become enemies. Then they shall taste our swords. The priests were shocked that Zohex considered murdering their own kind.

The towns continued to prosper. Dissent barely present. The people felt confident in their new status and unsurpassed power. Zohex kept a wary eye on this new military caste spreading across the eastern continent. Even though land based it would only be a matter of time until they would launched their ships across the ocean..

Ratze

After night fell Choss appeared out of nowhere. Arrived straight at her flat. Surprising Ratze he mentioned one name, Norak, sitting at her kitchen table. Barely glancing around. Norak, Choss sole entities. Isolates. Attached to SpaceKorps. Her Brain didn't know much and Ratze was not intending to probe either Norak or his questionable associations.

Regum City a pile of ruins, the high rise towers crumbling away, masonry falling off everywhere, pipes bursting oozing rancid liquid wastes in slimy green brown blotches down cracked walls. Mould festering. Rodents scuttling amongst the refuse and rotting garbage. Swarms of insects attracting birds who had a ready made aerie where broken windows allowed their ingress. The view from her corner flat.

The older buildings had survived the Crash. Built prior the advances made in self maintaining buildings that drew nutrients out of the ground. Self assembling dirt, reconfiguring their molecular structures to repair themselves now dormant. Some towers leaned drunkenly against their tottering neighbours, others just decaying but these old brick structures she lived in were sturdy. The windows could do with a coat of paint, as could the flat. Maintenance at a minimum. There just wasn't enough labour to fix these minor details. Most able bodied men and women were working the farms, feeding the planet. Others in antiquated factories that billowed out dust, dirt, steam and thick belching smoke. Chugging monstrosities from another age.

During the day priests everywhere on the ground. Keeping the peace, reassuring the survivors of a bright future though it had been ages since the Crash. Security guards enforcing order, rounding up shirkers. With food rationing not many in the city had the energy to be useful. Clean up details salvaging bits and pieces for the foundries, recycling taps, cupboards, furniture, removing corpses. Securing buildings that were threatening to collapse, sometimes bringing down a whole block with an ominous rumble reverberating through the city. The mighty crash of creaking beams and splintering concrete collapsing in a putrid pile sending pugnacious evil smells into the air, birds shrieking overhead. Yep Choss grimaced, the place to be. Taking in Ratze's flat without comment. A place to live. Finally asking her how ready she was.

"Always Choss." For Ratze had ventured out at night. Probing ruins for information. The old office blocks. Mostly commercial transactions. A picture of a world that once had been and was no more. Might never be anymore either. The suburbs more

rewarding. With the decline in population accommodation was plentiful. The dead so decomposed as to no longer be a serious health hazard. Her bio-bots an extra layer of resistance ready to neutralize festering diseases. Their rotting smell impregnating the very walls of their homes. Some had libraries, defunct computers. Ratze easily accessed those by patching in with fibre optics using her energy pack. Zero content. Indicating potent distortion fields. The Reganians taken completely by surprise when the end came.

It was the living that mattered. The offspring now teenagers, those that had not been caught in their smart houses which had sealed their parents in, with no way out. Ratze could barely relate to the mass genocide which had swept over the planet. One death was a tragedy, mega death just too over the top to digest. Too abstract. Too overpowering, too deadly a catastrophe to fathom.

Choss outlined the plan. Go into the Dump. Ratze knew of it, everybody did. A radical community of survivors, anarchistic, independent low lifers according to the authorities. Accept they took no shit from no one. The security forces rarely venturing even near the old industrial complex. A vast ancient steelworks and related processing plants now idle, mostly scrap, useless junk. The Primaian's incompetent to salvage the silent machines except for their metal which could be melted down in crude furnaces. The heavy machinery a testament to an industrial age they could barely relate to. Some of it had been dismantled to try and rebuild new factories in the countryside. That information gathered by watching foul fuming trucks taking the defunct remnants away.

Populated by the resistance. Non compliant. Refusing to be hijacked into work details. Growing their own food, kept some goats helped by those in the country who had gravitated to the city. A self sustaining community. Surviving through their own contacts, sympathisers, racketeers, with their own guards. Running the black market. Prima simply did not have the personnel to reign them in.

Choss knew the area, knew the city, the planet.

Ratze pretended to relate what little she knew. Choss listened. With the data banks void, files wiped there was not much to be learnt regarding the Crash. It happened, just like that. In a flash. Then it was over. Non functioning systems. Doors sealed shut. Windows tight. Death by starvation. Factories stopped, farm machinery idle when the smart-ware ceased to function. Rotting ripe wheat fields. Going to seed. Mass starvation.

In the Dump Choss informed her they had the means of acquiring just about anything that could still be gotten from the ruins. He suspected, for the moment that the authorities allowed them to continue since they plugged the gaps of Prima's planned

economy. Only when they felt more secure would the authorities move in. But not in the near future, certainly not now.

Choss was dressed in overalls. Ratze in her ubiquitous jump suit. After dark they left the flat, took some food tubes, small water containers and coupons. Ratze checked her Brain which was there as always ready to activate her chameleon cover in case she had to vanish quickly leaving confused witnesses behind. They did not expect to be welcomed. The Dump was a closed tight knit community. Off limits unless one brought valuable resources, weaponry or food Choss explained as they walked down the dark deserted street. Trail bikes were in demand. They could easily traverse rubble, narrow paths, stairs. They were only bringing themselves. Credit was useful but bartering was the order of the day. She did not even ask her Brain what had gone on before. It was better that way in case of being scanned. Being blank certainly helped secure one's being. It would also give the impression that her Brain had been wiped along at the Crash. They would consider her a Reganian. She certainly felt like one.

Several hours later, hardly meeting anyone they reached the outskirts of the city. Ahead loomed large blast furnaces, huge rolling mills, open hearth furnaces darker within than night. Now and again movement amongst the defunct machines. Puddles of oily water, dirt, grime, dust. Creaking corrugated sheets, a ping as some rivet hit metal. Stealthy movement. Ratze's Brain alert.

They avoided the many gates watched by their local organised patrols. It took them another hour to slip in through a broken wire mesh fence, darting between abandoned rolling stock. Slowly, cautious. Gaining ground second by second until they were finally in one of many huge mills. Enormous rolls of rusting steel, one suspended from an overhead crane. Underneath the roof, along a conduit of an overhead crane a patrol looking down. They hid amongst the rusting coils of steel. To one side a large forklift, it's wheels alone their size, stopped dead in its tracks.

All around a myriad of walkways. Huge bolted machines driving the mill's rollers, underground passageways which normally would have been ideal but Choss thought too obvious. After all they wanted to get in and talk to someone, anyone who could shed some light onto not just the Crash but also Prima's real intentions in taking down the planet. And possible recruits to bring down the occupation. Sussing out the real state of the resistance. Looking for links to the invisible Kabal.

Ratze had her own aim to remember. The Crash only a symptom, not the cause itself. Regum's scientists probably all dead or knowing Prima, mentally reconditioned. Maybe the survivors here had had parents who had been educated. After all the

offspring had the aptitude to organise themselves collectively. Minds at work. Smarter than the average. Most accepted, wearily, their fate Choss reasoned.

That intrigued Ratze. How a whole people could so easily give up. Something in the air? Massive brainwashing exercised remotely? What had been the softening up process? Had there been one? Had Regum discovered something so dangerous that the Primaian's had used the last recourse to obviate some potent danger? Had the Reganian's acquired some menace so powerful it constituted a threat to Prima, to themselves, to the universe her Brain contemplated. Or had Prima acted out of mere spite and malice?

Which made no sense. Primaians and Reganians were not warlike. Both had left that behind millennia ago. So why the overkill? So far Prima claimed the Crash to be an accident. Not saying what though. Sabotage could not be ruled out. Which brought back the question: why? Why indeed? More like what? The how would resolve itself, be revealed amongst the other questions that concerned her.

Chains rattled slightly in the breeze. The smell of moist dust in the air. She looked up the access ways overhead. The patrol had gone. Half way up the large wall dark offices to oversee the production process, redundant control rooms. They needed to be discovered as friendlies. If they could wangle their way in it would reflect their ingenuity in getting into the heart of their community. And get them to someone who was running this show. They should know in turn, hopefully, people or those who had known their parents who had access to the broad spectrum of the planet's knowledge base. Not just gamers. Though they would be the second recourse. What they ascertained in WebSpace. Ratze knew the answer lay there somewhere, in the past, the vanished past. One Prima had destroyed.

"Let's move." Choss whispered. They walked carefully out from amongst the looming coils of steel around them. Further away hollow metallic sounds. Walking carefully on the grimy floor, splotches of dark fluids, Choss seemed to know where he was going. They weren't just stumbling around the forlorn factories. Coming out the other end of the rolling mill with processed rolls as useless as those at the entrance, into open space where parallel rolling mills ended. Ahead huge blast furnaces, towering into the starry night, black shapes with their pipes, access inspection and maintenance stairs and gangways around them, with look outs. Near them sounds of footsteps. In the distance screams and shouts adding to the surreal environment.

Ratze's Brain active she detected no overt scanners. Amongst all this metal, the size of a city itself there would be just too much distortion. A good place to be.

"What they want," Choss feeling secure as they finally broke into open space, "is tools. They've got spring loaded guns which can do some damage if you get in the road." Ratze in step. Around them the vast structures, dark, silent, ominous. The place was alive even though they had managed to avoid the patrols and any local drifters in this industrial graveyard.

Movement, shadows flitting in and out of the derelict factories. Choss and Ratze walking as if they belonged here. Not looking around too much, heads up. Ratze felt a tiny tickle. A general scan or, the signal was weak, leaking radiation. Something was in place, something that worked, that was being used. Not intentionally at them, she hoped. Her Brain did not react.

A few ragged inhabitants gathered, curious. No one wanted extra mouths to feed. From the motley assembly one small, skinny young man detached himself.

"You're spies."

"Good one." Ratze replied. Given they were a generation older the assumption was pretty much correct. "Testing security, exercise." Trying to throw them off balance.

"So who are youse?"

"Here, have some food vouchers." And Ratze handed him a small wad.

A murmur of appreciation amongst the others.

"That takes care of your entry fee." He said. Now she could see them better. Alert, not relaxed. Lanky, gaunt face, dark penetrating eyes. Nervous energy. Youth.

"Come with me."

Sounds of footsteps behind them. The tread was similar to what Ratze had heard at the overhead crane. So they had been followed. Well organised.

They moved off as a group, whispered conversation around them. Definitely not too trusted. The vouchers helped, for the moment. That they were forgeries did not seem to matter. Choss with Norak's help had aged them in an oven, smudged them, made them seem used.

Looming up front he was big, bearded, solid, well built, sharp eyes, a scar along his face, a suppressed angry violence about him. Commanding respect.

"Ham." Checking them out. "Intruders vanish you know." An adult. Getting somewhere. "I'll talk to the woman, you Morf detain the other". Ratze did not turn to see what was happening to Choss, she was focussed on Ham. They were still in the open. Ham was not so foolish as to take them to his lair. That would give too much away.

"We're after info." Ratze came out with it.

"Who isn't?" Ham spat on the ground.

"Not that sort of info. More like what happened. I've scoured the old buildings in the centre. Mostly blanks. Crashed memories." She hinted letting him know her usefulness. "Choss knows the area, knows this area." Letting Ham know this was no accident.

Several eyes boring into her. None loaded. If Ham was he was not revealing it. So she did a passive scan. Volatiles. Anger, despair, greed, want, needs and joy. No counter detection. Ham was studying her.

"What." Ratze challenged.

"You're thinking." He parried.

"Of course Ham. Name is Ratze. My guide is Choss. Maybe you already know. As for myself I'm almost a blank. Can barely remember yesterday. Got the attention span of a goldfish."

Ham couldn't help but smile a little.

"So you were one of the Linked?"

"Gamer really. WebSpace my little domain."

"WebSpace?"

The tension around her eased. Ham was not so easily taken in.

"What were its limits?"

"Configured, real or cyber?" Ratze countered.

"Configured." Ah right into the guts of things.

"Truncated time-lines. Real dead ends." Her Brain cut in. Straight from Nervina's download. Nervina. Where was she? Ratze refocused on Ham and the group around her. Probably the best entertainment they'd had for a while.

"Correct. So you hit them as well."

"Only as a secondary persona. I wasn't going to risk falling into the Void. Or something." She added. Her Brain informed.

"Smart move. Some say there is something in there that is the equivalent of BrainDraining."

"No shit."

"Totally shitless."

"I can believe it."

"So you didn't cross."

"No. Should have. Too late now."

"Nothing is ever too late Ratze."

"I'm glad to hear it Ham."

"What about your friend." Ham motioning his head away from her.

"Choss? Keeping away from the vultures. All I'm prepared to reveal for the moment is that there are those outside who are not aligned." Interesting expression. 'Aligned'. What Prima was doing to the survivors on this planet.

"You're still spying though." Ham closing up again. Around her the ambience hardened. She wondered if he was the head or just one of many. The kingpin remaining in the background.

"Not this place as such. As I said, not much data in the city."

"So what would you find in these steelworks?"

"Well, it's global in scope. Just by its size alone. Business has to know the lay of the land. Plan for the future. Often they know more than any agency. They deal with clients scattered not just across the globe but further Ham."

"Hm." Not that satisfied. Obviously he had not considered that.

"It's true."

"Follow me. Your friend stays here." Then turning to the group: "Watch him. He's our guarantee. No rough stuff." Murmurs of assent.

Ratze shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll be waiting." Choss laughed.

"Cheeky bugger." Ham growled leading the way into one of the blast furnaces. They entered the slag ridden floor and up a metal staircase to a projecting office. They entered the grimy dusty cubicle. Dead dials, blank screens, cables snaking along the metal floor to deceased computers.

"Sit."

There were a few swivel chairs on rollers.

"So what are you?" interesting Ham did not say 'who'.

"Got no idea. Don't know anymore. My memories could be pure bullshit. Who knows?"

A knock on the door, then it opened. Two women appeared, carrying crude home made spring action bolt firing guns. At close range lethal. One with dark hair walked over to Ham and whispered something. The blonde watched Ratze at a distance. No joy there.

"I'm releasing Choss. His brain is well and truly fucked."

"I know." Ratze said resignedly. Smart Choss. How did he do that?

"Got some coupons to facilitate our conversation?"

Ratze extracted another small wad, the last. "That's all I got. What I could pilfer from the slave farm I worked at."

"You an escapee?"

"Shit yeah."

"So how come you haven't been rounded up. Got rid of your tag?"

Silly Ham, revealing that.

"Better than that. Scrammed it."

"You got access to some gear?" Ham's eyes wide in anticipation.

"Not me. Friends."

"Ah the underground. Or rather overground." Seeing if Ratze would open up a little.

"I have to assume the hounds are still searching. Face recognition."

"Yes. A worry Ratze. If you led them here then I cannot vouchsafe Choss's survival."

"You said you let him go."

"I have, when I'm satisfied."

"Are you?" she smiled cheekily.

The black haired woman rolled her eyes. "Pathetic."

Choss was pushed through the door. A metallic clang as it shut. He looked around comprehending Ham was not taking chances. The place by the grime covered dust everywhere indicated this was not the centre Ham used.

"Your friend claims the authorities are going in for another round up."

"Really? Well, not surprised." Ratze answered.

"Now what to do with you two? No good as mechanics. You brought some coupons which is fine in itself. So all I can suggest is for you two to be detained."

Choss understood. See if they were missing after a while. Norak would not be concerned regarding Ratze. She was a walk-in, non-aligned. That was something. Nor would Norak give himself away, or his people so readily. The city still in flux. People did vanish constantly.

"Nothing." Ratze suggested.

"You may be right there." Ham conceded. "Be interesting who might take an interest in your disappearance." It sounded worrying. The two women's eyes were blank slates. Ratze and Choss already past tense.

"We'll take you to secure quarters." He rose, his bulky frame filling the room.

They moved back down. Outside a motley group hung around hoping something was up. They let them pass, the two guards flanking them. Across open ground, into another factory, down dirty encrusted stairs, where weak light bulbs shone. So they managed to rig up a generator. That meant some competence. Fuel, maintainance, organisational detail, some expert knowledge.

The passageway below ground was cavernous. Huge metal encased machines driving the defunct rolls finishing off long slabs of steel, silent. Then a series of jerry built metal cages. Dirty oil splattered blankets. A container for water, the smell of stale urine, effluent and musty moist cloying air. The cage's door creaked open and they were allowed to enter as if this was some hotel. Another dim light bulb above. The door padlocked, Ham and his two guards left.

Choss and Ratze looked at each other. Ratze poked around the blankets. Slightly moist. But enough for the two of them. Ratze picked up two, wrapped them around her and squatted on the hard uneven concrete floor. Quite warm down here if a little stifling. Ratze looked around giving Choss a signal that maybe this place was wired. Choss merely shrugged.

"Well I'm going to have a little sleep. Bit of an anti-climax this."

"You're telling me. Not trusted. Why?"

"Caution."

"We're on their side. Or rather not against them. All we want is data. Anything to get at the reason for the Crash. Instead we're now the enemy. Under suspicion."

"They might have got burnt."

"Probably. Prima's show of strength. So anybody is now suspect. I wonder who else fell into their hands."

"Yeah." Ratze was powering down. Keeping her Brain vigilant whilst letting her mind rest. "Wake me if something happens."

"I might have a snooze myself."

Ratze felt the itch. Her Brain opened a little. She sensed Choss's awareness. So he was loaded himself. A plus. Certainly kept that to himself. Just like her. Even though the signal was weak it was not distant.

Eyes open. Choss awake, standing still. Sensing.

"I'm off mode." Not caring if the place was bugged. He had found nothing.

"So I gathered." Disguising her surprise. An outside source then.

"Good sleep?"

"Fine thanks. Wonder where they are?"

"Who?"

"Primaians?"

"Planet's full of them. The place has not yet been pacified. Just Regum Central and the farms. Then there is the Outland. Shamans, natural psychics."

"Not that." Pointing to her head. Meaning the scan she was receiving.

"Interesting situation."

"Maybe us?" Ratze suggested.

"Too soon." Thinking of Novark.

"Maybe Ham leaked us. Get rid of us, curry favours. We'd be a tasty acquisition. Maybe Ham is a front. When you have so much shit happening on this planet, anything's possible."

"You mean him being their eyes and ears? In informer?" it made some sense.

"Could be to our advantage."

"Well Choss. Yes and no." she peeled off the blankets and rose. Awake. "At the moment a problem. Who's interested? What are they interested in?"

"Well types like us. No matter what side we're on. We're remnants, loose ends with open minds. Prime targets."

"Sitting ducks."

"Time to get out. We're only locked in you know."

"No secondary security?"

"None. Basic stuff."

"Sounds too easy. No guards."

"They got everybody as guards Ratze."

"Only if they've been told. There would be informers amongst them. So Ham might be playing us down. He did mention us maybe vanishing. I don't think he was going to bump us off. So for the moment that might mean he's keeping us as collateral."

"Not good either way."

"So let's hike it out of here."

"That's the other thing. We were never searched."

"He wants to see where we run."

"Let's not disappoint him then." And Choss extracted a set of skeleton keys and started fiddling with the solid padlock. It took a while but he managed to open it. Then waited. Alert. Ratze still felt the tiny itch. She wondered if it was a beacon, or a trap. Or

something else. He opened the cage's door. No alarms. Ratze shook her head. This was too easy.

They moved out and went the opposite direction. Several stairways leading out.

"You choose."

"I'll go for the end one. Might lead into open space."

"Right."

They walked slowly, carefully past rows of encased machinery. Up the last set of stairs where the outer door was ajar. He peeped through into the night. They were above ground again outside the rolling mill. Shapes moved about. So far so good.

"Maybe we should leave. I don't think we're gonna get much here."

"Choss, anything would help. Remember this industry was global. They're dealing with big stuff. Maybe military. That means they need a minimum of information. Specifications the sign posts. Every little bit helps."

"Admin?"

"More than that. Consider. Most if not all heavy industry's at the Rust Belt. Yet here's a fully integrated steelworks, planetside. My guess it's military. So admin is good. The job orders for the mills themselves can reveal plenty."

"So close to the cage?"

"Well it's like this. By not running away indicates we are not scampering for cover. That should tell them that we meant what we said."

"Got a point. OK you lead."

"You feel the itch?"

"Itch? No. Someone onto us? Could be Ham and his group."

"If it is then they'll know we're on the move."

"Or someone else."

"Or someone else. Unless it's just static surveillance."

"Either way."

"I still want to find what I can."

"Sure thing." Choss agreed. "So far no one's come after us."

"They might want to see what we are up to." As Ratze glanced around the dark looming mass of dormant machinery. Even outside all seemed quiet.

No one that interested in either of them. The dark of night a cloak across the sky. Feeble lights in the distance. Vague murmurs in the air. The odd laugh. Between the hulking mills the flicker of a fire, dim shapes illuminated in streaks of wavering orange. The itch persisted.

"I don't like being tagged." Ratze said as she tried to get her bearings. She accessed her Brain for it to get a read out of the vast complex. Her HUD superimposed a map of the steelworks. They were between the open hearth furnaces, coke ovens, blast furnaces and behind them the rolling mills. Admin was off to one side.

"At least someone's on-line. Rare that." Choss remarked as Ratze turned.

"Yeah? We have to go back. Stay in the open or go through the mill again. I prefer confinement."

"You do?"

"Yeah. More obstacles."

"Works both ways."

"Not if you're attacking."

"You think..."

She started walking back into the looming structure. Somewhere a sheet of corrugated iron grated against something. The sense of being watched remained with her.

Back in through the opening they had just left.

"Who could be on-line, active Choss?"

"Apart from our group? I don't even know what Norak is doing, or whom he is doing it with." As he sidestepped a dark puddle.

"That's good. Less is more."

"Can be."

They moved along the yellow lined walkway, just visible and deftly amongst the rows of looming steel coils. The itch still present, scarcely noticeable, like some left over residue, leaking feedback. Too constant. Ratze was tempted to get a lock on. Not yet. Only if it changed its pattern of exposure.

Past lines of coils a huge tower where the uptake of the long strips of steel took up the slack as rolls were changed over. Looking up at external gangways out of the corner of her eye she detected movement underneath the roof.

"Don't look up Choss but someone's following us. I'm surprised they didn't come down when we left."

"Maybe they're only watching this building."

"Or us."

"We're intruders. If I were Ham I'd have us watched."

"Unless it's someone else. The Dump attracts all sorts. Black marketeers, traffickers in personnel, abductors, eliminators...so Choss is there anything in your head that's worth stealing?"

"Plenty from the authorities. More I cannot say."

Ratze nodded at that. They left the tower behind then along the rolling mill vanishing in the gloom up ahead. A bolt fell to the floor, a dull pong.

"Yep, they're here alright."

"Looking decidedly good." Choss joked.

"We could ambush them if they make a move. Cause a fracas. See how Ham operates."

"You think they're infiltrators like us?" walking slowly down the long passage. To their right the acid baths where the steel sheets rolled through. To their left the wall, small tool sheds, bits of machinery, empty coils stripped of their wire.

"I am assuming that. Otherwise why the scan? It could be Ham of course. Being surreptitious."

"I don't feel like being taken in again. Or tailed. I just wonder. If there is a team up there, if they are pro's they'd have back up somewhere." Choss not revealing that he had basic head-ware. Let Ratze use hers. Now he felt the itch too.

"If we do get taken we get even further in."

"In shit." Choss remarked with dry humour.

"Anybody been snatched recently?"

"All the time Ratze."

"So we're assigned targets by the looks of things." As the shapes above moved slowly with them. "Hm. Itch is getting itchier."

"Closing in. Verifying. Got a source?"

"I'm passive. Picking up a lot of clutter, deflections, black noise."

"Stronger? Directional?"

"No and yes. Means nothing really. Receding signals can be faked. No big deal that. Make you think you've been missed. Oldest trick around."

"So we let them make the first move."

It was when they were under the overhead crane that they acted. The slight whoosh in the air as a net came down with weights attached. Ratze dived forwards, rolled and stood. Choss was caught. She quickly lifted a section then heard the whirr of bodies descending down tough strands. Three of them. The first one, bracing for the landing had his legs apart. It looked like a man, the shape dark, lithe. Ratze put up her

knee as his testicles connected with a yelp. Then with the flat of her hand she whacked him in the nose, heard the crunch as it broke, felt it recede upwards into his head killing him.

Choss swivelled around, his second attacker tried to jump him as he retracted his legs. The third was in front of her. She ran right into him, head banging his helmet, sending out a high energy resonance temporarily frying his brain then ran back the way she had come. Choss right behind her. A surge in her head. They were calling backup. She heard a body thump and hoped it was not Choss. It wasn't. He was hard on her heels. Ratze, in full flight sent an alarm out hoping Ham was in on this. Her Brain a temporary beacon. Whether he had sent them would soon be revealed. She flashed the image of their assailants along with the distress beacon. It was obvious they were wanted alive for they could easily have been taken out using lethal weapons.

Choss was running hard on her heels followed by one of their pursuers. Past the rolls of steel and into the open. She did not want to play hide and seek. Outside a few itinerants were gathering. Ex-gamers, still loaded. Having survived the head burn of the Crash. Ratze felt several of them locking in on her beacon. Not hostile.

Her Brain felt the heat rise within her head. Anger, anguish, demented wrath, fired by adrenaline charged nervous energy. Their attackers were head crashing the gathered, re-aligning them in their inserted net of commands. Turning them hostile. This was cutting edge stuff. Para-military.

Her Brain handled the incoming flood of unadulterated hate, focussed on her primarily. Choss was off-line. He seemed helpless as the remaining pursuers, quickly regaining their breath. Coalescing the ex-gamers as a group mind. They had linked, were linked and now being used in combination as an impregnable wall of resistance. The source, it was the two remaining combatants, let the gathering crowd, for more were coming to do their work for them.

Their disorientation at the first wave washing through them turned into irrational logic as the accompanying pain they experienced appeared to them to come from Ratze. She did not as yet want to use her powerful Brain. Ratze the source of their mental discomfort. All these minds wanted was to be released from the anguish they suffered. Yet being so desperate, so over focussed they vacillated between attacking and the smarter amongst them covering themselves by adopting defensive measures, not against the point source but against mainly Ratze. They basically ignored Choss.

There was only one thing for it. Go into overdrive. Use pure physical force. She felt the surge in her head then course through her body reverberating with extra energy. Her

head was buzzing, the shapes crystal clear, their slow approach looking disfigured, lacking in concentrated drive since they were being flooded by heightened illogical emotional states blinding them to see clearly the real focus that was Ratze.

She dodged grappling hands, swaying arms, lunging figures. She zig-zagged, letting her Brain map out through algorithmic centred chaos equations to dodge amongst the growing mass of wavering tormented souls. With alacrity, hoping Choss was aligning himself with her powering up Brainwaves she dodged an extended foot, darting at thrice the speed of their reactions. A young man came at her with a hammer, threw it which she deflected with her arm, her suit soaking up the impacting energy. Others starting throwing pieces of piping, rivets, bolts, scrap metal hitting more of their own than her. From her left a burly type tried to crash tackle her. She lifted her legs Choss behind her. Something impacted him but he remained as fleet as her.

Whacking the nearest obstructing shape right in the chest she was clear of the gathered group only to find even more coming at her, slowly. It was time for a frontal assault. Which they expected. And since they expected that they were defensive not offensive. Her arms forming a skewed cross, hands flat out she headed for the centre of the group. She leaned forwards a little, ready to impact took a deep breath and screamed from the depth of her diaphragm completely filling her Brain with its piercing screech. It stopped them in their tracks, the moments hesitation all she needed. The best the others could do was stretch out their arms, like loose callipers which she slapped down whilst her foot kicked down a shin causing more pain than any damage. Then she grabbed the howling figure by the shoulder and the waist, swung it sideways like so much baggage, twirled with flaying arms at the others and let it go as the hapless body connected. Ratze's head scream pierced their brains.

She was through. One last oomph as Choss came along side her.

Her two would be assailants now unleashed a sonic attack of their own. It affected everybody, which meant the group were now aware where the source of their demented agony originated. Her head felt like a jackhammer. It did not stop Ratze's momentum but turned everything blurry for a moment until her Brain adjusted, sidelining the sonic waves, re-routing turning it into background noise. Away from the crowd, Choss looking a little dishevelled. Ratze saw two attackers coming for her screamed once more. The hammering ceased but her Brain was itching badly.

She unleashed static white noise. Anything to disorient them. The general mental assault had already ceased but the gathered took a while to realize their suffering, their

being manipulated had ceased. They looked somewhat dazed as if coming out of a deep sleep. Some in shock.

Five shapes. The back up team.

"There is your enemy, the source of the shit they rammed you with." Ratze bellowed.

The gathered at first were at a loss who Ratze was referring to. She pointed at the five spread out figures.

"They used you, like the Primaians used your people." Just for good measure.

"They panicked you, to do their dirty work. I'm an ex-gamer myself. I know what we have all lost. These things are tracking those they couldn't mind fuck. They couldn't mind fuck you and they certainly won't mind fuck me. If you don't get rid of them, then they'll be back again and again."

More were gathering amongst the ruins. All around her coming out of their disorientation.

Someone yelled: "Let's get them." And the crowd surged as one towards the five. With amazing speed, even though untrained in the arts of war, they ran towards the five, youth and energy on their side. The despair they had felt now turned to genuine anger.

"Youth feels itself indestructible." Ratze nodded at Choss with satisfaction. They went at them with unrestrained glee to seek their vengeance at having been so blatantly misused.

The infiltrators turned, self boosted and hiked away from where Ratze and Choss were standing. The itch in her Brain had gone. Yelps, shrieks and shouts followed the retreating assault team who were now way ahead of the others in hot pursuit. The escapees became a blur in the dark, then they were gone. The pursuers continued on for a while. Around her silence once more.

Ratze sat on a pile of rubbish. Regulating her breathing, letting her adrenaline slow down, getting her Brain stable, her nerves relax. She let out a welcome sigh, drained but not exhausted. Wherever this group had run to they had not returned, having lost interest in Ratze and Choss.

"You OK?" she asked.

"Bit bruised. Got the odd thump on my shoulders. Someone even socked me one, my cheekbone feels sore."

She took a look. "Hard to tell in the dark. Any blood?"

He testily touched his face, looked at his fingers, shook his head. In the distance, shouts and yelps like some celebration. Around them shapes moved cautiously away from the near calamity they just suffered.

"Notice something missing?" Ratze asked.

"My pride."

She laughed. "No, seriously."

"Plenty. Where d'you want me to start?"

"Choss, think."

"Right boss." He smiled crookedly at her. "Thinking. This place is a ruin. Alright I'm thinking thinking thinking. How the kids were on-line? Even now? Survived the burn out? Brain's still active? Able to link? Hopefully learnt a lesson as to the potential they still got?"

"Not bad. Let's hope so anyway. Something else though."

"You want me to keep on guessing?"

"No."

"Well?"

"None of Ham's guards."

"Unless these shadow presences were his."

"Could be. Then again, could be not. Something not quite right."

"Ratze, this whole planet is not quite right."

A girl came towards them out of the dark. Maybe twelve. Calm. Taking them in. Emotionless, curious and confident. "We got one." She finally said. Then turned. It was up to them to follow, or not.

Ratze gave Choss a look. She rose, now calm, serene, mentally together. Choss was still recovering. Not that enhanced she reasoned. Or using his own resources. But he had come through, that's what mattered. The girl, narrow waist, a long tatty skirt and an oversized coat moved like a wraith through the night. Someone moved next to her a quick glance behind then whispering something.

"Still no sign of any of Ham's guards."

"Who knows what's going on." Choss not that concerned.

They passed a mill with half its wall missing, just struts of steel beams cold as death inside. At one open end a fire burned with bits of wood sticking out of a drum. Excited talk, some yelling, good natured, others angry at having been used, abused. And from what Ratze's acute hearing could pick up, resentful at being infiltrated. Questions were being asked where Ham's protection was all this time? The crowd fell silent as the girl and a companion arrived with Ratze and Choss in tow.

They all turned and looked at them as one group mind. United. For ever. Some curious, others bewildered that Ratze and Choss attracted such determined attention. They parted in front of the girl, her companion melting into the crowd. Flames crackling, sending sparks skywards. Shadows flickering on the ground.

In front of them the mangled remains of one of the assault team. His face squashed into a bloody pulp. Totally unrecognisable. The cranium cracked open, the helmet to one side, grey gore oozing in the dirt. Its body armour standard issue Ratze saw. The result she guessed of their artificially fuelled rage boiling over. Given his splayed position, arms, legs outstretched he must have been held down whilst the rest jumped onto him, boots first with all the frustration and anger they had been invaded with. His lungs would have collapsed, internal organs smashed, head cracked open, blood seeping out of the mangled remains. The face now a patois of a painter's palate mingled with coagulated meat, the flies already coming to feast and lay their eggs.

They were over their shock now, the explosion of primitive hatred gone. Some seemed to be seeing the dead body for the first time. They all looked as one, almost incomprehensive at the bloodied pulp, its awful position, the still oozing blood and unrecognisable face.

Dumbfounded, some crestfallen. Prima's new goons Ratze thought fretfully. Puppets in a game far beyond the gamers wildest imagination. Even she did not know its delimitations or what the rules were. Even though most of them were teenagers the Crash had made sure their adolescent dreams, their fervour negated, fast forwarded into the worst aspects of adulthood.

"What the fuck's going on." Someone yelled. It was directed at Ratze. Incomprehensible anger.

"We were targeted." Ratze answered regrettably.

"Then we're all targets." The voice still distraught.

"You always have been." Ratze trying to get them to understand reality.

"Bullshit." A girl retorted.

"They'll come after us now." Another angry voice. Their reason was returning, their resilience bouncing back in the way they expressed their frustrations.

"You are going to have to organize yourselves. Get some leadership amongst..."

"This is totally fucked and it's your fault." Someone accused.

"The fault lies with Prima. And you'd better bury that body before it's diseased."

"You're not the first to infiltrate us. But now it's war." The first voice said, seething. "And you're our first prisoner, woman." Establishing the age gap. She now belonged to

the world that had caused all this. The end to their lives, their happiness, now their crappy future.

"We already...never mind. I'm willing to be a hostage if it makes you feel any better. But I'd rather help. You don't want me as your enemy." Ratze's eyes narrowed.

Her tone of voice surprised them. Some had seen her in action. "And what you saw was without weapons."

"You're some sort of AI dummy. We're gamers. We fuck heads all the time." Snickers from some.

"We don't do leadership bullshit. We're not falling into the same trap you adults fell into. We're many heads, united as one..."

"Enough." An older voice said. "Just shut up. None of her business what we are, how we are."

"Just telling her she'll never get a chance, no adult gets a chance to break us up." The laughter derisive.

"People..." Ratze was cut off.

"Don't lecture us woman."

Ratze sighed. Choss shuffled nervously next to her, eyes to the ground.

"Then do something positive, plan to strike back."

"Yeah. Get rid of traitors."

"Maybe getting into your head will show just how fucked you are. Shithead."

This anger didn't make sense to Ratze. "Now you're talking like a Primaian stooge." Ratze fed up. "Maybe you're not so clean inside that brain of yours yourself. Maybe you've been had. Maybe you're an agent stirring everybody up. Maybe you're the enemy."

"We're all clean, we're unfucked, we're still free."

"People." For they were more adult than they realised. "This attack was no coincidence."

"Too right."

"Let her speak."

"Yeah yeah yeah, blah blah blah."

"Oh shut up."

"Fuck this."

"We nearly got bounced. What does that tell you? That we're enemy? They stuffed your heads with hatred. You experienced that. You honestly think we'd come in

like this, attracting attention? Getting bushwhacked? Get real." Ratze letting them have it.

Mumbles.

"And where's Ham and his guards? All I see is the enemy walks in, then when we best them they use you guys. We drive them off, for youse all helped and even got one for yourselves. And what do you do? Kill it. Not that it would have had any ID so you can't trace its operational status, but you could have found its divisional command module, or those it took orders from. A source. But no your infantile rage snuffed out its life. So now some alert's gone out. You think ops like this go in blind. The moment it died an alarm went off somewhere. And whoever knows what happened here is gonna be mightily pissed off. You have made yourselves a prime target. They probably would have come eventually but now with lethal force." Ratze rammed it into them.

They were a little impressed, reluctantly accepting her reasoning.

"So you'd better get your shit together. Otherwise you'll be eating it." she couldn't resist the come back.

"Yeah, right. You fucked up and you're telling us to get our heads together. Well listen," the young man, his face reflecting the flames, eyes deep set black cavities, straggly long hair, "we are still together. Stronger than you'd think. We can take you out as well."

"Narr, leave it." some girl said. "You saw, she nearly got hijacked."

He turned sideways looking at the girl that had led Ratze here.

"You think she's some hostile?" Then facing Ratze: "Anyway what are you doing here?" her face orange in the glow of the fire.

"Ah." Ratze answered relieved some sanity was returning. "Trying to get information."

"See?" he sneered.

"Narr. If she was some agent you think she'd admit it? or what she's after?"

"How should I know? Could be camouflage." He persisted, moving restlessly on his feet. Hyper. Worked up. Buzzing.

The girl ignored him. The others stood around, enjoying the warmth, the friction, seeing how it'd play out. "So what are you after?"

"As I was about to say, info regarding the Crash." And more

"Yeah, wants to make sure it stays that way. Checking up." He wouldn't let go.

"Talking checking up. How come youse are all so free when everybody's needed to work the farms, clear the rubble. Makes me wonder what they are keeping youse for

here. Or could it be that you guys made some deal? What d'you say to that then?"

Ratze sowing a little dissention.

"That's easy." A male voice said. He had come out of nowhere. Walked past them all. A few heads turned. Local. Aware of him.

Ratze looked at the newcomer. Not tall, round, a little chubby, short curly hair, long black coat. The fire reflecting it's orange red illuminated by the flames. The teenagers moved back a bit. Some whispering. His boots were muddy, thick soled.

"Who have we here?" his eyes shone even in the dark. Tiny orange dots of light from the fire. Ratze impressed the way he just appeared.

"Hello somebody." She half smiled. Choss shuffled where he stood. Did he get something? Her Brain, neutral felt nothing. Choss remained hidden within. The latest addition completely normal, not connected, dormant most likely. Unless Primaian. But then they had a presence about them. Or a recruit. The Dump attracting all sorts.

"So you want info? Who doesn't?" then seeing the mangled corpse looked at it indifferently, saying nothing. "And the reason why we're left alone," identifying himself with them, "is that we don't influence the others, those out there. The fallen."

"Fallen, as in...?"

"Web Crash. Marooned in reality. Something they weren't familiar with. Total virtual collapse. Snared by the priests, offering salvation given the hole in their heads. Loss of direction. Lost and found. Here are the survivors, real survivors. Targets for recruitment. Offering positions in the new hierarchy. Some defect, missing the buzz, the make believe power they once exercised as gamers. Except now it's real. Instant ego inflation, big time. They're the worst. Is that what you were after? Potent heads?" he said as if reciting some worn out truisms.

"No. Got no interest in any of their games." Leaving it up to the rest whether she was referring to Primaians or these self styled outcasts. But some deal had to be in place, simply just to get fed and not raided.

Dismissive snorts from a few. Being relegated to indifference did not sit too well. They had their pride.

"Well, sad to say," keeping his hands in his coats pocket, "the game, the new rules have been imposed. Even if it sucks. No way out any more."

"There's the Outlands. The mountains. The Northern spaces." Someone said. Ratze's Brain informed her of the distant continent where the original inhabitants of Regum lived. A continent away.

"True." He answered. "It explains some who vanished. Not all accept the new order. Unless you got some basic skills you'd starve there. The locals aren't exactly helping. Why should they? Nothing to do with them what happened here. Lots of casualties along the way as well. Bandits. More like desperado's. Time certainly wound back for us. So lady, what you and your companion really here for? You said info? What sort?" seeming sure of himself. The others certainly did not mind him even if he was an adult.

"Why Regum got Crashed."

Mutters of assent.

"Crashed. Yes, interesting phrase wouldn't you say. Calamity more like it."

"Configured, shaped, inserted, or the system gone rogue? Some AI programme going bezerk." Ratze suggested.

"Now there's a thought. Some game gone out of control. AI going sentient, then like a cancer cell killing its host."

"Possible." Frightening actually. Not impossible. Her Brain ran the scenario. Smart system goes self conscious. Designed for control. Sees its makers as obstacles. Realized they're all hooked in. Disturbing its plan due to the irrational logic of sentient thinking. So it brings them down. Prima moves in. Prima instigates the resurrection scene, prepares their way. A weak link somewhere, that much was certain.

"Name's Agrero by the way." He smiled benevolently at them, like some host pleased to meet his guests.

"Choss." From behind Ratze.

They greeted each other. Then he turned his eyes on her.

"I'm just me." Smiling softly.

"Hello me." He joked. "I may be able to help you. May."

"She just wants stuff she can use." Someone said.

"You mean against us?" Agrero laughed. "Even if? No power structure here. We're all individuals. Our strength. Prima can't cope with that. Too anarchistic."

"Anarchy, yeah."

"Life."

"You got it." Agrero agreed. "So what's with the corpse?"

Several voices at once told him what transpired. After he listened he said: "This little shit fight's gotta be more than that. This guy was no peacekeeper. Maybe a precious re-fucked Volatile. Some high value shit head sent by one of the Orders. You see lady, there are several power groups here now. Typical Prima. Convolute the simple.

So they outdo each other. The way the Ecclesiastics want it. Many centres. Then you turn up. Shadowed. But this place ain't called the Dump for nothing. Only mainstream tech ruins. You got attracted here, as is your friend, your lead in."

He was guessing. Or very well informed.

"Tell me Agrero. Where's Ham and his guards? Conveniently missing."

"No point becoming a target. You're an outsider after all."

"Abandoned. Even after distributing food vouchers."

"Entry fee." Then turning to the others. "Someone bury that body. Strip what you can. You know the rules regarding weapons."

They buried him. More came to watch as news got out. Some of Ham's auxiliaries appeared. Watching. They had dug a grave near one of the many canals that criss crossed the dilapidated steelworks. Marooned barges at rotting piers. The dead soldier stripped right down to his underwear. His tech gear lying in a small pile, retrieved by Ham's guards. Agrero not interested. Before the body was piled into the grave Alex suggested they cut open the rest of his head. Look for implants. Some of the kids eager to do the grisly job. Agrero decided to execute that task. Someone handed him the blade of a hacksaw. Agrero extracted a torch placed it on the ground and started sawing away, right down the middle. As the skull was fractured anyway he got easily through the bone. Still no sight of Ham.

Agrero had gloves on. He rummaged around the brain, bits flopping out. Testing, feeling, touching, sampling the gore. He got a kid to shine the torch now here, now there. No flashes of reflecting light from some micro processor. Then along the base of the neck. A tiny micro-chip. Gray strands connecting to the nerves. He spat on it and cleaned it up. Put it inside his coat pocket. Then rose, switched off the torch.

The naked body, almost blue it was that pale, fallen in rib cage, dark rivulets of blood forming grotesque abstract running patterns, was unceremoniously dumped into the grave with a splosh, hitting ground water. A cheer went up.

"So dies the enemy. Not the first death and neither the last." They stood around the grave. "Life is precious. But there are those who value power beyond all else. Creating despair, sorrow consuming broken hearts. These usurpers amongst us think themselves holy, divine. But only for themselves." Agrero looking around, taking them all in his solemnity. "Nor will these self deluded masters rest until we are like them. Do not be deceived." His voice rising a little. "As long as we remain individuals first, they cannot break us. In that inimitability is our strength. They cannot cope with diversity, that precious

gift that makes you what you are: yourselves. Take strength from your uniqueness. It is a flaw to their hive minds for they have subsumed themselves into the depressing shroud of their life subsuming theology. It is only a belief, nothing more. Their mono-mania is exactly that. Regum's fall is going to be their catafalque."

If only Ratze thought.

"You are the future, our hope. Your inner strength, your natural gifts will never succumb to their regimentation for some invisible bullshit. Not now, not ever."

Agrero was finished.

"We'll fuck 'em." Someone answered. Shouts assenting that sentiment. Agrero stepped back from the graveside. Plods of earth were shovelled onto the misshapen corpse, it's face a frenzied abstraction frozen in time.

"There will be others who seek our submission." The girl who had led Ratze and Choss to her group spoke up. "We will never accept their false promises, never be like them. In Prima's eyes being oneself, is a crime in itself. You know their bullshit. We will never accept their lies, never become tools of their oppression. You all felt the madness this piece of shit induced. You felt the false hatred, the strangeness flooding our heads, our minds, our inner core. We know what they are capable of. Fooled once. Once is enough. To beat them we will also have to get into their heads. The Web might be gone, it might be dormant, still there somewhere."

Maybe Ratze considered.

"Evil bastards." Someone interjected.

"With a mission. But not our mission. We are unique and will remain so as long as we live."

"Yeah."

"So let's celebrate life. Our life. Better this shit than their shit." She said calmly. Agrero watched her, pride shining in his eyes. He felt for them.

"One day we'll take the fight to them. We have to be strong, united. This woman showed us that, with training we can defend ourselves. She might be one of them, the generation that lost it all. But I think they got conned. So we have to stop thinking of us versus them. We are all Reganians."

"Shit yeah." A determined voice in the dark.

"Let's party."

The kids were gathered around a large drum. Home brewed moonshine gestated from rotten fruit appeared. Its smell a pungent sweet acid. The concoction drunk with

abandon. Ratze hung around only because Agrero did. They were offered the heady brew in broken cups, dented mugs. Choss, Ratze and Agrero declined. No one was offended. Some started banging on drums, workbenches which had been dragged from the factories, singing songs they remembered. Others started gyrating, dancing even if the rhythm was not that syncopated. Wails, shrieks, yells, it all added to the festivity. Wanting life, affirm their exceptionality, their sense of themselves.

Choss said he was going to clean himself up at the canal's edge. Ratze and Agrero were standing back a bit. A pile of rubbish upon which they both reclined, a little moist. Like the air. The stars shone overhead. Other worlds, other futures, other potentials Ratze mused. Hope.

"So you some big gun then?" Ratze breaking the silence. He was half smiling, relaxed, at peace, satisfied, calm. As if stablelised. Or enhanced through his own power source. The long black coat did not reveal anything beneath the exterior. It was worth cultivating him. Choss came back from the embankment. The waters blacker than night. On the other side dilapidated cranes. Barges, the waters lapping serenely against abandoned hulks.

This planet Ratze thought. Sidelined. Cut off. Claustrophobia. Wondering if she was stuck here. Only one world. Like house arrest. She missed the openness of space. Space. A memory more than an actuality.

"Not really." He answered eventually. Amiably. Choss was staring into the dark. Then: "They might come back. Given the assorted types here I'm sure some informer melted away."

The drumming got louder, dull pounding thuds, high pitched clangs, somnolent beats. Ah, music.

"So...?"

"Luckily there aren't enough of them on the ground. Otherwise this place wouldn't exist. You know I think all this was planned. No accident. Certainly not divine retribution. They waited until millions were dead. Then when exhausted, their energy been depleted, when anybody would do anything for food they came to help us. Waiting until we were too weak to resist."

"You remember."

"Oh yes."

"So was Regum onto something so big it threatened Prima?"

"You're an off worlder." Not too certain. A good guess.

"I don't know what I am." Letting him think her head had crashed as well.

"You're not the only one."

That piqued her interest. Did he mean on Regum or elsewhere, out there.

"Others too?" wondering if the occupiers had been dumbed down.

"Don't know. If anybody did come down," meaning space, "we can't tell anymore. Locked out. It started at the Orbital you know. Then fed instantaneously through the system. Total shut down. Backups isolated, power gone. Everything went down Ratze."

She merely looked ahead.

"So how'd you survive?"

Decision time. Could she trust him? And where was Ham?

"I just did Agrero." She avoided an answer. Not too sure of herself. No memory but the present. Post Crash. "Like waking up in a new reality."

"That I can understand."

"Agrero I'm on some mission."

"Thought so."

Cool response. Agrero was not just some survivor. Not directly interested.

"We have to talk, somewhere quiet. Secure."

He rose, Choss standing. Smudges on his face.

They walked along the canal, the dark outlines of dormant factories everywhere. A cold wind sprung up.

"What's on your mind?" Agrero asked. Choss kicked a stone. Plop in the water.

"Plenty. How they did it. How they're keeping the population down. Their plans."

"You and the rest of the planet."

"Accept in the city...it's so normal. Subdued of course. No one seems to care."

"It hit them hard. I think we were in a dead end."

"Dead end?"

"The Web. It's what most lived for, lived in. When that vanished it was like being ripped out of the only reality they knew. Many just gave up. Strange that. Others relieved it was all over. As if they lost their focus. Getting in touch again. Prima worked that well. Anyway it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?" Ratze surprised.

"It's the future that counts."

"Yes, well, certainly. But a major crime was committed. I don't think there's anything like it to compare with even. On a planetary scale..."

"Only Regum Central and a few provincial towns went down. Plus the orbital."

"Really? You're well informed."

Agrero said nothing. They came to a pedestrian bridge. The waters gurgled below, lapping against the canal's edge. Ahead groups of flat barges. She stopped in the middle.

"Why not use them?" motioning to the tied up dark floating shapes

"Engines wont start. Computer's burnt out. Well that's not quite right. Data's wiped. Total blanks. You'd have to row them. And then where to? Let's keep walking, it's getting colder."

They continued into the night. The drumming carried in the still air. Voices drifted over, then receded, wafting. Clouds came in blotting out the stars. A chill in the air.

"Can I trust you?" Ratze asked as they walked along the other side.

"No."

She stopped, Choss nearly bumping into her.

"Why ever not?"

"I want to remain free. I've never been freer in my life."

"Really?" she could see the convoluted logic. Bit puzzling just the same.

"This is my inheritance."

Ratze took it to mean as a release from the Web.

"We own all this."

"We?"

Agrero started walking again. "My family."

She understood. He meant the steelworks.

"So they didn't get out? Got caught?"

"Long story. Well short really. Yes." He paused. "I wasn't here when it happened. In the Outlands. Made my way back. See if...whatever." he suppressed thoughts about his lost dead family. "I painted, wrote some poetry, that sort of stuff." He almost apologized.

"Ah."

"You think you understand?" testing her.

"Sort of. Reganian's are famous for that. Mostly in cyberspace though. So you were of the old school."

"You are off world."

Now it was her turn not to answer. Choss curious.

"Somewhere."

They passed under rows of conveyor belts. Small mountains of ore, raw materials. Sprouting weeds. Nature reclaiming her own turf. Wherever life was possible it would make its presence known.

"Can I trust you?" returning the question. He stopped once more. All Ratze could see was his silhouette. Across the canal the party was getting louder, the noise ambient. They were forgetting the shitty present, enjoying life, letting go of all the crap around them. It made her feel better, Regum was not dead yet.

Agrero exuded a presence that was both reassuring yet mingled with something other. A sort of relaxed mind that was certain of itself. There were too many questions in her head. So much unspoken. Like Choss. As with Norak even if low level. Either he never upgraded or was merely connected. Then it dawned on her. He could well be an aboriginal, one of the original. She took comfort in that. He'd have some psychic abilities.

"We're going to have to make some decisions here regarding us." Ratze wondering if she too was, like him, a remaining Isolate. Cooperation yes, when necessary, like now. Ratze guessing he was a shareholder, if his family did own all this...how does one own a steelworks of this size? He might know what Prima was on about regarding the survivors. The Crash. Prima shutting Regum's infrastructure down and no one the wiser.

"Decisions?" Choss asked, feeling uncomfortable.

"Like us being followed. OK, they were pro's. Easy to get in. They could have used these canals. So why us? What do I know? Nothing. What do you know Choss?"

"Regarding this place? only that it exists."

She did not probe any further whilst Agrero was around.

"And you they respect." She added for good measure.

"Do they?" Agrero faking mock surprise. "Not my doing. I'm feeling the wind. Let's keep moving."

They walked on. A gull somewhere with its plaintive cry. A group came out of nowhere, asked what was going on. Agrero told them of the party. They moved on towards the looming hulk of a blast furnace. In front a dark pit where the dross was skimmed off, flaky remains on the floor. Up a metal staircase to what he called his gallery. She could see a row of grimy windows.

They entered the control room. Dusty consoles. Bits of paper strewn on the ground, Agrero switched on the lights. One low strip light came on. Just enough for them to see each other. They were all pale blue. She saw a tatty sofa, some swivel chairs, the stuffing coming out at the seams, dead lights along the walls, non functioning dials with

blank read outs. A table with some cups, a plate with crumbs and chugging in the corner a kerosene run fridge.

"Home. Very nice."

Agrero grunted, Choss sat in one of the chairs.

"Nothing present." Choss said. Ratze's Brain was cold. At least Agrero wasn't trying anything. "You?"

"Copy. But I'm not in command of my Brain. It does it's own thing. Like when we got cornered. I had no idea of my capabilities."

"Which is good. Means they didn't know either."

"Indeed. At least I get boosted when necessary."

"But you got no direct idea, no lead in?" Agrero asked. Then sat. Ratze followed suit. She could smell the dust as she sat down.

"None whatsoever Agrero. Sequenced algorithms activate where and when necessary."

"What about your intentions?"

Yes. My intentions.

"Not a tag?" Agrero asked.

"Me? Ha."

"You might not even know. After all your memory's gone."

"For a reason."

"What do you know?" Choss interested. Being with Norak and Norak had his own agenda. Running the underground.

"I'm after what caused the Crash."

"As you said."

"Maybe even access the Web or what's left of it."

"I think that was Prima's first target." Agrero suggested.

"There has to be local talent."

"My friend's onto that." Choss admitted.

A metallic clang. They froze. Choss moved instantly behind the door. Agrero looked out. "It's alright, a friendly. And here comes..." The door opposite opened and in walked a lanky woman, spiky blond hair glowing iridescent blue under the weak strip light, covered in blotches of grease and grime. Her face was clean though. Dark pools for eyes. "...Manda."

She had her hands in her overalls, steel capped boots. No refugee.

"Non hostiles Manda."

"Thank you." Ratze being cynical.

Manda was observing Ratze and Choss, lips set firmly together.

"You're leaving a trail." Manda said. Was she thinking the scan she herself experienced prior the ambush.

"Crap."

"You're hot. Either malfunctioning, incompetent, or arrogant." Saying this evenly, a statement she thought she was sure of. Or catch her off guard. Ratze merely accepted her take.

"Not me."

"You're leaking, were leaking."

"That was them." Choss answered. Manda looked at him, expressionless. "Would be abductors."

"Could be a set up. You're still here. They're not."

"Annoying I know." Ratze as indifferent as Manda

"What you gonna do?" Manda asked Agrero.

"They're assets."

"Not again." Ratze pretending to be bored with games.

"Way of the world, as it is." Manda pleased with herself. "Come in boys."

Both doors opened and six balaclava'd figures appeared, three from each entrance. Ratze laughed. She'd been well and truly set up. Even her Brain had no idea. Off liners. She saw the active stun guns, set on ready. At least they didn't want her dead. Either she was making progress, getting further in, or being squeezed further out.

"Must be my charisma. Really Agrero. A bit dramatic wouldn't you say?"

Choss was cool. No point in panicking.

Agrero merely shrugged.

"So how you want to play this? Easy hard? Soft?" Manda turning to Ratze. "Don't even think it lady." Meaning sending out some tight emergency signal she assumed.

Not that Ratze was one to cry help. "And here I thought...well just goes to show what thinking can do. Well you were right Agrero."

He knew what she meant. About being trusted.

"Start walking sister."

Ratze looked at Agrero. "Why up here? You could have asked."

"I saw you handle the goons. Here was better."

"Voyeur."

"Move it." Manda dispensing courteousness.

"Fine. The night life on this planet is something else."

Manda extracted a syringe. 'Not this'. But instead it was jabbed into Choss. He crumpled in the armchair.

"He'll be right when he comes around". Three of them lifted him up and carried him out.

"He's on your side you know."

"You don't know our side sister."

"Be seeing you Agrero."

He just stood there, with that same half smile. The other three stepped back behind Ratze, Manda leading the way. At least the stunners weren't pointed at her head. As she left Agrero's hideaway she heard the others struggle with the comatose Choss.

Outside more were gathered, spread out. Ratze wondered how Agrero had sent out word, made contact, organised this. Ham was almost an irrelevancy. Her Brain mute. If they weren't linked, uploaded then psychic was the only answer. As they clambered down the stairs it came to her. Given they had power an old fashioned press button alert would do the trick. On the floor, wired to the console, an arranged signal. So low tech it went under the radar.

She was marched across the furnace floor, the others still spread out, some looking further afield. Well placed. Impossible to break out the cordon around her. In the open the waffing beat of drums, the celebration continuing.

Maybe Ratze thought she was trouble. She'd already attracted the attention of some goon squad. Back to the canal. There bobbing next to a pier a jet boat. Obviously running silent. Maybe it had been there all the time. They had come in a different way. The sleek boat as black as night, blacker even. Stealth coating. Her Brain picked up it's layout. Fusion generator, very Reganian. Enough power to bend light around it as well. No gravity meters. So it's mass might be detected. But for normal evasion techniques it was just fine.

Three planks had been thrown across to the pier. Overhead the clouds low, rain in the air, the wind chilly, moist. Water lapping the boat. Not quite flat decked. Deflect missiles, shells, projectiles. No one spoke. Pro's communicating with hand signals. No one taking an interest in her mind's contents. That would open a channel to crash into them from her end. She wondered what Choss would make of this. Hoping Norak would not be compromised. Unless he'd arranged to literally dump her. Too many variables. Regum's a mess she thought. Just can't trust anybody these days.

Below deck, the captain's command centre a smidgin above the top of the hull, the width of a narrow multi-spectrum sensor scanning strip. Her escorts keeping their distance ready for any potential threat scenario, even on their own turf. Ratze was motioned into the command centre. A lounge with several fixed screens. Ham swivelled around, unplugging a fibre optic cable from his sleeve. One of the screens voided itself.

He had changed into a two piece suit, well tailored, voice and head band studded with either diamonds or transceivers or both. Probably multiple memory and processing units working independently of the ship. His head shaven the overhead halogen lights shining on his cranium. His sensuous lips parted as if greeting a friend, his ears looking too large. An unmodified non gene sequenced birth no doubt. Natural parents. Rare.

Ratze surprised at the data her Brain released. The boat's inbuilt escaped her Brain, unless it too was playing possum. The guards still fanned out around her. Ham waved them away, rose easily considering his bulk. Like cats her escort vanished leaving just two of them to remain behind.

If they had armortuff plating it was beneath their jump suits, pockets bulging with deadly toys. Pro's, silent, smooth, fluid in their motions, mind reading each other gave Ratze confidence. She had not been threatened, but then that was not their duty. They were escorts. Still they followed orders. She felt a familiarity regarding her position.

She heard the planks being kicked away. Then silence as the boat sealed itself. The slightest of motion as they moved off. The engine barely audible. The air ducts made more noise and that was barely a whisper. Miniature fusion reactors, the best nano-tech could produce. Regum's great breakthrough, along with g-drives, unlimited energy.

"Glad you could make it." as if this is what she wanted. Had bifurcating probabilities been reduced to logical possibilities? Something her Brain set up so that whatever fell naturally into place? Possible.

"I assume Choss is irrelevant."

"Not irrelevant."

Ratze nodded, watching the radar do it's sweep, on board systems running through the ship's environmental status, other scanners probing the channel, probing space. She could tell by the specs used.

"Someone knowledgeable. Not completely crashed out."

"Just blank. Mostly blank."

"Not as blank as you think."

"Oh?"

"The way you handled yourself with the snatch squad. Someone must have bounced a signal off you. Maybe your natural brain was just too steady. So they thought you'd be an Enhanced Natural. Or better." He smiled effusively. Meant he wasn't certain what she was. Neither was she.

The craft accelerated slowly. The screens showed the ruins around her, enhanced, colour imbued mimicking daylight. Rusting structures falling to pieces.

"A good place to operate out of. But there comes a time when enough is enough. New blood, new faces, new ideas." Referring to Agrero Ratze guessed.

"I cut it tight remaining as long as I did. Agrero will do fine."

"Do what?"

"Keep the place going. Turn it into a graveyard. Make the Primaian's fear the place. I just organised it. The kids will be perfect. Youth, exuberance, brimming with ideas of their own. Giving Primaian's hell."

"With a little help of course."

"Of course."

The ships systems sealed itself off. So Regum had not been totally secured. Then again a craft such as this might be detected with the right gear. Mass distortion detectors. But if this little beauty had a g-drive they'd never get hold of it. Nothing was scanning her.

"You're off world." Ratze said as Ham consider something.

"As are you."

"I am?"

"C'mon. You're boosted. You're reflexes for starters. Whiz bang stuff."

"This boat ain't bad either. I'm surprised you let it be viewed for what it is."

"Give the kids hope that some good shit is still operational."

"Is now."

Ratze's mind meandered. Highly trained security on call. Definitely not Reganian. Unless they'd been hidden of course. If not that left SpaceKorps. But they were not that type of security. Para-military. Things were developing in space. There were the habitats, the processing set ups, who knew, whole cities by now. Independent of all. Dispersed. Beyond Prima's reach. DV activity aside.

"Aren't you even a tiny bit interested in your fate?" Ham's eyes sparkled playing the showman. As if he needed to. "I would be."

"Can't see any cryo-box lying in wait."

From the floor a table rose. Solid state tech, no energy morph. He put his feet on it, relaxed. Well the ship knew what it was doing.

"No we're not freezing your head. We like it just as it is."

"How's yours? Memories sequestered somewhere too? Disabled consciousness running through quantum drives? Not here of course, meaning the planet, but maybe the ship."

"Well we established what you are. Not who you are."

"Ham. Even the who doesn't matter. Anybody can upload a persona. Or void it. Primaian's been mindfucking each other ever since I can remember. Then there's the gamers."

"Ex-gamers."

"Real timers now."

"Yes. I hope they confuse them."

"So what is my future? Is there one?"

"Your life for starters."

"Seems that way. Otherwise I'd be with those goons."

"Correct."

The craft moved slightly to the left.

"Take a seat."

Ratze sat. The recliner adjusting to her shape and weight.

"Comfortable."

"I'm here to pick your brains. You'd be too boosted to do a DRS. Would only get garbage anyway. Or worse."

"A euphemism that is appropriate and appreciated Ham."

"Now let's see. Not family, nor corporate. Maybe ex-Gamer, anarchist perhaps. Just for the fun of it. Good for systems analysis and diagnostics. Smartens the ware. Chaos, very necessary. Something Primaian's just don't welcome."

"To their own detriment."

"Great, isn't it?"

"Tell me Ham why did you lock us up?"

"Why, to see who'd rescue you."

"Hm."

"Or how resourceful you were. You know some types give up, just like that. I mean the cage wasn't exactly secure. Might stop a Primaian, or some sub-normal reject."

"You're terrible." Ratze smiled.

"I can be a real horror if I have to." Still good natured. "Hm, back to you. Quite a history there. You've popped up at several places. And now here. Aren't you getting a bit ahead of yourself?"

"It's all relative." Ratze doubly alert. 'Ahead of yourself'. Ham was referring to a time line, not her self as self.

"Popped up at by vanishing. Alerted more by the absence you left behind. But that was then. Even training DVs. Magical. They never knew. Novus. All red herrings. So why use someone such as you," he waved his hand around as if words failed him, "for such an," pausing for effect, "operation. A bit pedestrian." Did he mean her or whatever her mission was? Her Brain receded into near nothingness as she thought about her reason for being where she was. "You're after something only your controllers know. Or suspect. Either it's in your head or it isn't. If so then spec alerts would be lurking in there. Of course they cannot be detected. They won't assemble until the conditions are right. Now currently you're not connected to anything. That confirms your status as an agent. But what I wonder? To set something in motion, to stop something, or just a watcher? Activating a third party."

"Don't agents report in?"

"No. depends."

He was right.

"I'm only guessing of course. Maybe you're some sort of processor. Weaning out the chaff. Plenty of that around. Or a dormant sponge, soaking it all up, others do the analysis. Or bait. Not subtle either. More like a dare. But in difficult times some issues have to be forced before certain powers or groups gain by consolidating, or, conversely, dispersing. But why the Dump? We know what it is. Full of independents, operators in the black market, recruiters, assassins, dealers, a veritable microcosm. All in a neat delineated area. Just dip in and choose whatever. Information perhaps?"

"Any bits falling into place as you're having so much fun?"

The ship veered a little. She felt the water's resistance. Not speeding up. Submerging. No, yes, maybe. Inertial stabilisers. Taking off? The screens had gone blank. Ham was not concerned.

"Then again, your escape might have been well planned. You're in with the enemy."

"That is a very relative term Ham."

"You've got more inside of you than you know."

She merely waited. No point stating the obvious.

"We have learnt a lot since our liberators graced us with their presence." The eyes going opaque. What was Ham on about? No. Her Brain recoiled. Trapped. Fucking taken.

"You understand, nothing personal." The door behind her opened and two of his men held her shoulders, their grip strong but not as yet exerting any pressure. "Too many discrepancies about you."

That word. Her Brain withdrew to a lesser level. The memory of the word gone. Blank.

"To some." Trying to remain mentally stable. Not much she could do.

The smile frozen on his lips. Wet, moist, anticipating something...ugly.

A subtle click. The craft connected to something.

"Depending on your answers will decide our journey. Sanctuary or..."

If only she could remember whom she had met, been with, arranged things, made deals or contracts. Nothing came to mind. Nothing. Nothing was what they were going to get.

"Ham, don't push it. Even I don't know the havoc I could cause."

"Then enlighten me."

"About what?" was he thick or something? The status screens continued their read outs.

"Your discrepancies."

"OK. Here's what little I do remember. Tasked with DVs. Lots of shit there. Mainly Earth. I think." She hesitated. "Zero stage civilizations." `civilizations'? More than one? "Obsession with the alien field. Going into absurdum reductio the alien resonance a challenge to their so-called Divine Mind. A clash of ego's more like it. Stupid really. But they got themselves convinced of that. A stint on Novus. Talex trying to recruit..." leaving Nervina out of it. "Got out. Blank after that. Blankety blanks. Then here." Looking at him, not caring what he made of that. She couldn't even make sense of it.

"Well we're getting somewhere."

She turned her head back up to the guards holding her in place. She could easily give them the slip but couldn't be bothered. Something fake about all this.

"You're being on both sides bothers me."

"It doesn't me."

"That's just it. Of course you could easily be a double or triple agent. Not unknown. They think they got protection that way. Alas, reality can be confounding. Many just vanish if they know too much, whatever side they think they're with."

"Situation's too fluid Ham."

He laughed. "Not anymore."

"You wouldn't be ex-Prima by any chance? All these questions. A Reganian wouldn't even bother with the basics. They'd be assumed Ham."

"I am of no consequence. Prima may have Naturals trying to get into Reganian head space. But they're too diverse to nail down. Not like each other at all. Frustrating. But that is not the discrepancy I'm after. However you know."

It was the old interrogation technique. Everybody knew something. By assuming one was holding back put that person on the defensive. And that netted results through mistakes and slip ups.

"I know squat diddley."

"Maybe some deep scanning might unearth something."

"You seem to forget even what you said Ham."

"Oh?" looking at his two minders. No response there.

"Data bombs."

"Well cryo's the way to go."

A subtle shift of the ship. Movement.

"Won't work. Life support won't work. Even with a duplicate resonance field masquerading as me. It'll decay." Was he add libbing? Must be. Then again...

"Not with scram rams."

"Flare out."

"You got it. Like being in a particle collider. You being the collision."

"Handy."

"You're ex-Prima. You're reconstituted. Or ex-mind fucked." The tension on her shoulders changed. A response. They obviously didn't know. Well they did now. He looked hard at her.

If one was reconstituted one really never quite knew who one was. Memories included. Optional extra Ratze considered.

Then he chortled. "You are unstable."

"No. Well yes, a little." He motioned at the guards. They released their hold on her and withdrew.

"Apologies for the game. I wanted to know how you'd react if you were with Primaians. I guess I wasn't that good."

She was too tempted to agree but let it ride.

Ham opened up. "Well you're half right. I was ex-Prima. Via Novus. We were supposedly the next generation. They were doing psycho-crap in the Outback. I escaped. Just seeing the distant city sometimes, it turned my head. I knew what Prima was, is. One big farm. We were the potential volatiles designed to mind fuck everybody. Trouble is it never worked their way. Sure we took over Novus. But it didn't last. We all fell apart. Prima's not sending our types out. Now they're studying us in closed environments."

"Let me guess. Asylums."

"Exactly. I got into some corporation, hunting down low lifers. Crims I mean. That often meant going into space. I guess I was good at what I did. The rest doesn't concern you."

"So what is happening on Novus?"

"Nothing much."

"No effects?"

"Oh you mean the Crash. No. Too far. Too low tech. And their systems are secure, shielded. So was Regum's. But it still went down. If anybody does know, they're not saying."

"You mean others are...?"

"Others are. We're in space now. Dispersed. On the surface. With myriads of networks in place. It's got Prima stuffed. They gained a planet but lost space instead."

"That's something."

"They had no idea just how many Reganian's went out there."

"Really?"

"Yes. Once news reached them, the habitats, the mining concerns, the industrial bases, it united them. Reganian civilization has gone spatial. Hopefully one day they'll return."

"What's stopping them?"

"Now you mean? CF's."

"?"

"Containment fields. Doesn't effect you it appears, or me. But for the unlinked, the unhinged it lowers mental activity. Add depression, anxiety, paranoia, a feeling of senselessness and you have the masses in your hand. They'd been doing it on their planet for generations. That's how they rule."

"No shit." Her head stupefied at the immensity, the audacity of the conspiracy.

"So I guess you're with us." His natural good natured self resurfacing.

"Not against you."

"You know, you could be a habitater. Totally non-social."

"Is that what they are?"

"Not all. Most. Abhor the notion of society. No matter how caring. After all with smart intuitive systems, almost sentient AI's in place there are many who feel comfortable with themselves. Others are too much for them. Emotionally draining. Where their heads are heading no one can guess. One possibility is that they might merge, or subsume themselves into AI systems. And stay there. Almost what the Web was on Regum. But there one entered as a persona. Now they're trying to ascend over it."

"I have been so not there."

"Don't let it worry you. They're Isolates. Doing their own thing."

"And you?"

"Me?" he laughed again, his eyes merry. "I'm here to recruit you."

"Put me down as a trainee."

Ham got out a flat pc for her to be signed up. Another data point. She changed her mind.

"What?" Ham looking irritated.

"I'm on two contracts already. A third, so recent might, for me that is," she decided on the spot, making it up, but almost certain, "create a security problem. Anyway I got no idea what your outfit is. Not that you're going to tell me. You could have but you didn't, so I'll decline."

He now had the choice of offloading her. Her Brain in the meantime calculated the dislocational shifts of herself on the craft. As that mainly incurred locational trigonometry it neither interfered with the ship's or any other on board systems.

They were in space. The tiny click previously had been fuel tanks, coupled into the craft. Why them when he had state of the art fusion energy could only be explained by making the ship look less advanced than it was. Then there was the little hiatus in being locked up. To be sure she might have done the same. Or when the goon squad was after her and Choss. Either the goons were too good and Ham could not afford to engage his personnel, or there was some arrangement going on. Maybe her capture concerned some deal. An exchange of captives perhaps. Ham. Peripheral, a sometime cut-out. Freelancer, on side whilst the opportunities were there. Or a double agent. Like herself. But her shifting allegiances were there for a purpose, to gain information. She relayed none to anybody and those she dealt with wrote her off when she vanished. Yes,

the escape from the Orbital had caused Prima some heartburn but they, like herself had other priorities. She just wished she knew what hers were.

Her Brain was guiding her through the maze. The different groups, the movers jockeying for position, the often less than harmonious agendas all interlacing. The individuals involved following their own mapped out trajectories. She did not want to fall into any of their grooves. If she was caught up it had to be at a minimum.

And not making much headway, anywhere. Wherever she went it was politics. Not at the executive level but on the ground. No wonder these worlds had taken aeons to get to where they were now. Prima static, Regum gone back to a stage one civilization. It had taken them millennia to disengage themselves from the drag of accumulated cultural baggage, overcoming the attendant mental inertia to get into space. Now the planet's capabilities were severely curtailed.

Ham was still looking at her. Amazing how many thought processes her Brain could cram into moments of time.

"I'm not against you, or what you're offering Ham. But I want to remain my own entity. Like you I'm on a mission. And it ain't affairs of state, secret schema, tactical manoeuvrings, target specific data mining if you get my drift."

"I think I understand. It has its certain attractive logic. Not quite an Isolate." He laughed. "And I found absolutely nothing on you that was even of the slightest use to me."

"I'm glad. Though I sometimes wonder what use I am to..."

"Yes?" thinking Ratze was about to reveal her cut-in, her guide and part-time mentor.

"Scan me if you want but even I don't know who I'm working for."

"You been damaged?"

"Can't tell. Post Crash trauma."

He nodded. His attention focused inwards. The ship communicating with him. She was tempted to open her Brain up but guessed anyway what the ship was capable of .

"OK transfer's coming up. We're off loading you."

"Glad to be gotten rid of."

"You do attract attention."

"Well Ham I'm grateful for the ride." She said out of politeness

He looked levelly at her. All small time stuff. So who wanted her?

She transferred to a research vessel. Or so she was told by Ham. More a utility ship. Ratze drifted across the tethered line between airlocks. Half ship, half extension pads to lock on processing units, extra test labs, accommodation for crews, fuel, cargo, armoires. Versatile.

Times had changed. No that wasn't right. Characters and technology had. This was a multipurpose vessel. The engineers creating their designer's intentions. Configured to task multiple specific missions. Saved time, energy and resources building ships for single use only. Fusion reactor. Standard now.

Now. A time shift. She wasn't worried about the how. It might explain her blank mind, her lack of memories. Interesting. Even the who did not matter. Obviously her controllers. Invisible to her Brain. The uploaded data so isolated there was no hint of its origins. The way information is assembled reveals something of the source's analytical thought processes. Hers compartmentalized without being localised. That mean her information resided in a field. Bit like reading electrons.

She looked around as she drifted across. Not a planet in sight. Infinite blackness and the star field. The spiral arms of the galaxy a distant haze. On the outer edges where the stars thinned out. Yet there were still thousands scattered around. A massive galaxy then. Another hint. It meant others were smaller. That she knew by comparison of the surrounding universe around this one. Whoa. Stuff was coming through. Giving her a vague locational fix, broad scale. WebSpace had been but a portion of the reality it superimposed itself with. Had she corrected herself. Wrong. A Web existed. Vague without intensive study. Not as vast as its distant in time original. More as an integrated com set up. An energy grid flashing on and off. Quantum data transfer. Neat. She could relate to that.

First air-lock. Coming from Regum she was irradiated in her suit, then chemically doused. With her helmet off the procedure was repeated her head powdered to debug any micro-organisms to dissolve the residue. Squeaky clean.

Through the second air lock. No one greeted her. Only two clunky looking servo bots on all fours. Insectoid design. The floor sticky. Creating a sense of gravity. Different colour coded lines. Five of them leading into the ship. No message of welcome. Another bot appeared, blinked green. Universal safe signal. She followed it. Along the tubular corridor. Then a central hub. Six doors. She noticed five others went from green to red. One remained green.

'I guess enter it is.'

The door split down the middle and she was what looked like in a conference room. No one present. Just another bot standing on its hind legs. Access panels, tiny status lights winking, a sophisticated can. Circular and nozzle shaped extras, inner extensions of some sort. Wire darts, grapplers, chem sprays, slug projectile armoury even. And a set of fast processors. Energy panels. Multiple environment capable. Armchairs, fake panelled wood, a glowing holoscreen showing the stars, tiny halogen lights above. Recessed to one side a perspex book case. Books! Crash proof for starters. Data secure. Priceless museum pieces. The cabinet with a combination lock. A physical lock made out of some recombinant metal with tiny rotating numerical rings, ten of them. Then on closer inspection she saw there were two layers. Between the first and second sheet flickering red laser beams, criss crossing randomly. Get through one and you could have the tips of your fingers cut off, or your nails pared. She squinted. The inner layer distorting the spines of the books. Optically deranged. So a curious intruder had no idea what the bookcase contained. Unless one found the index. The panelling a solid holo projection

A door hissed open. Four people in charcoal grey jump suits. Some things don't change. Two men, two women. All short cropped hair. At least not Primaians. Neckbands. Moving into the room with neutral expressions, tiny optical fibres at their necks. Externally enhanced. Probably back up configurations. Change the neckband or reprogram it depending on your needs.

They could all have been siblings. Smooth skinned, pale but with variations of skin colour.

"Welcome..." Ratze's Head went warm. Not a scan. Resonant superimposition. Her Brain taken aback threw up a cloak of black noise. Not scrambling her data but voiding it. She felt a momentary drain of energy. "...Ratze."

She looked at the first speaker. Brown, black hair, brown expressive eyes. Probably the one reading her Brain. Then he smiled. Charming. He knew what her Brain had done. The other three sat. Then the first speaker, Ratze followed suit.

"The one on your right is Kaster. She's systems manager." Ratze nodded. She'd be the one who tried to read her. EAI capable. They probably all were. Loosing her natural tan. Recent arrival.

"I'm Jahrus by the way." Deathly pale. Long term spacer. Black cropped hair, reflecting glistening lights, deep dark eyes, smooth skin, her age. Thin, determined set expression. "I'm the scientific officer. To my right Nefah, our cultural attaché and rounding off the group Aster. Roving brief." Which meant security to Ratze.

"Thank you for having me on board. Books. Haven't seen them since..." and stopped herself. "I'll be honest, I can't remember."

"Post crash syndrome." Aster said sympathetically. He and Kaster were aware of Ratze's mental inner retreat. To be expected. After all she was going in blind. They'd done their pre-sets regarding her transfer. Using general field equations amongst which was embedded recognition specifics alerts regarding hostile configured activity. Ratze was a neutral active. There but with no operational intents. None she revealed as yet. The fast flash test run though had triggered a considered, rapid recognition alert response. From the way their probing vanished in her black noise environment was interesting and disturbing. The former in that here was a unique avoidance system in place, the latter they did not have that capability to get very far. The uncertainty so unique she was now marked. She went off line.

"Something." Ratze non committal. If only because it appeared to be so. Didn't mean it was.

"I'm the team leader." Jahrus smiled depreciatively. "You in need of nourishment? Thirsty?" her Brain a little warm again. Whatever they were using wasn't causing an itch. This form of scanning was in advance of what she'd been used to. No itch. That could only mean they were using an aligned field to try and access what she possessed. Her Brain wasn't perturbed. The black noise had ceased having created several convoluted triple layered time and space shifting secure algorithms, running randomly. Field proof. As an after effect.

"Well we can eat later. One thing bothers me." Jahrus continued, leaning back in his chair. Relaxed. "The way you switch, adapt, leave."

She felt a tiny shock. Both at the truth of the statement and what it harboured. Pre-crash memories. Little images flashed by. The Orbital, being on some planet, location unknown, the casino on Novus. Shit. Amazing. Vast empty data-less realms in between. An absence of content but wasn't. More like a buffer. Or something removed, extracted without remeshing her memory, or the time sequence of her inner continuum. Sloppy work by her controllers? Or there for a reason? To let the curious know pertinent information had once been there. Letting them know that her capabilities were far more than she even knew. In other words, letting this group know the total was far more than the sum of her capabilities. That meant they had to be friendlies.

"It makes us cautious. Not untrustworthy, that concept is irrelevant. Treacherous is of course another matter. Yet no bodies in your wake. Just syphoned data, you being

the transfer point. Thus the gaps." Referring to her Brain. Their EAI capabilities coming out to the fore. Letting her know where they were at.

"I'm wondering if you're some for hire vacuum cleaner." Astor remarked off hand. "For hire, think a rogue element. Self styled isolate. Or an insert for a third party sussing out the local milieus for reasons you wouldn't even know. Which of course makes you the target you are. Explains you're a-logical movements. Covering all bases without intent or premeditated design factors. You with me?" it was a challenge.

She was momentarily blank. Inner response mechanism. If in doubt, do nothing.

"Well are you?" he asked without emotion. A simple question. No more.

"I don't know." She meant it. "I seem to be always getting recruited. Even Ham wanted me with his group. This time I declined. It's getting so normal I'm wondering why everyone's so eager. So much shit going on. Prima, Regum, Earth..." She threw in for good measure.

"Earth. The great distraction." Jahrus sighed.

"Yeah, I did throw that one in."

"So what's your stance?" Aster resumed.

"Non aligned."

"Don't care or playing the loose ends. Or making yourself more than you are." A statement that was not that far off the mark.

"All I know is being driven. Except reality gets in the road. Mainly the politics..." Ratze thinking of this part of the universe. The Great Anomaly with its two conflicting worlds. Outside looking in. But for what? Pertaining to its state. Then her Brain stopped.

"An operative. Well whoever is running you are certainly not apparent. Maybe you're a construct that left the Web." Kaster suggested.

"Web's gone people. Went with the Crash."

"You don't know do you?" Jahrus joined in.

She questioned his question.

"Prima created a cyber-boosted entity. Used Regum as the conduit. If they can do it once they can do it again." He explained.

"Suppose so." She said lightly, her Brain avoiding the driving force behind that move. It was extremely significant. A potent clue. Not an answer though.

"You seem rather relaxed."

"Err...?"

"A perfect insert. Undetectable under the usual conditions. The gear necessary to rip off the semblance needing more power than what an insert needs to be in place. Not easily done."

"And..." As she tried to hide her surprise. "Not me. Definitely."

"You wouldn't know."

"Hm. So find out."

"It's a bit more complex than that Ratze. Prima is full of deception. Regum is extraneous. Novus is Novus, no change there. You flit across worlds. No one thinks anything of you but what you wish them to see. Even now." Astor assumed.

"If you reveal your intentions then we will know how to proceed. Otherwise we might consider you hostile. You're clever at gamesmanship."

"Gamesmanship?" Ratze surprised. Anything but. "Not me. Everybody, out there I mean is into their little empires, their politics, jostling for power, control. Take the coming Ascension of Prima's pontiff. Who gives a rat's arse what that old fahrt is heading for. Thinking himself Immortal, in touch with the universe. Yeah right, dream on baby."

"Regum's destruction?" Astor switched tracks.

"Monumental crime. Ambushed. So much for their knowledge, their info, their alert systems. Poof. The end." Her head warmer. They were lapping this up.

"And it doesn't concern you, worry you. The millions of dead don't matter. You almost seem satisfied with the way things went."

"Satisfied? No, of course not. More an absence of faith in power, in authorities claiming to have clout. Or knowledge, or wisdom. Such tiny domains, such self constricting mental constructs. Such delusions about reality." Her Brain recognising it was all so much larger and the contents so much less relevant. "Fuck up big time. Didn't even see it coming. Not gonna defend their ignorance. But not gonna applaud Prima's deception either. A shit fight between two..." she nearly said little, "...empire

builders. One dominant in space, one dominant within. You'd think they'd team up instead of falling out."

"We think that was designed, manipulated. Put it this way Ratze, you leave chaos in your wake."

"Timing." She said easily. Unless she was seeding systems with some very serious entropic field states. Even her Brain was not that advanced. 'That advanced.' Her Brain picked up on that. Filed it to remember.

"You were with the DVs."

How did they know all this?

"Yes."

"Joined them."

"They got some tricks I wanted to know about."

"Means you had to be a believer, or pretend to be one. They accepted you as one of theirs. They wouldn't take Reganians. So you're one of them. Your little escapade arranged. An insert." She agreed with the latter. Not the rest.

"Maybe I am an insert. So here I am, here you are. Your call." Which was not exactly being in charge of herself.

"We could get in." her Brain doubted that.

"You might."

"Doesn't worry you?" Aster focussed.

"No singular army if that's what you mean. Pure solo. Like I said, I'm after information. Nothing to do with politics, posturing, games..."

"Yet you were in the Dump."

"You were there too? How was I? did I pass?" what were these people worried about? EAI capable. Acting like kids. No that was wrong. The kids in the Dump far more mature. She wondered if being in space too long addled the brain. With computers doing all the hard work in planning, thinking, orchestrating, creating, processing, getting results, developing technology the thing that happened on Regum, mental atrophy except for the Gamers, might be happening to these spacers. Regressing whilst advancing. The more cyber brained they got, the more their natural brain became dormant.

They were linked for a moment.

"You know the parameters of the data you seek?" Jahrus the first to speak after their little mind to mind session.

"Something that doesn't add up. Somewhere. Somewhen. Somehow."

"They do have you blinded."

"There might be a good reason for that. If whoever, or whatever finds out that I'm after something that is so strange it defies...or is so dangerous then the last thing that is gonna be revealed is somebody looking for that exact whatever, whatever it is. So I'm bouncing around in the dark so to speak. With no determined focus. No one, not even me can calculate my potential target. Understand that?" she challenged them.

"Prima accepted you as a DV." Aster came back to that.

"Gotta survive."

"So you'd know what the DVs know. Knew I should rather say."

"They knew bugger all. Apart from their little illusions. Freak visions mostly."

"What about Nerfahsi?"

"Nerfahsi?" Ah. Novus. Nervina. Talex. "A hothouse of the idle and the bored, the indolent rich. Well they need their entertainment. Otherwise they'd be bored shitless. So they fuck with each other, in as many ways as they can invent."

They looked at each other. Came to some decision. Ratze not bothered. Obviously she was being screened until her next destination. And access parts of her Brain she forgot were there.

"You remember the Crash?"

"No."

"With your capabilities..." Aster hinted at her Brain. Thinking it was as EAI as theirs. And needing to know how parts of her memory survived. It dawned on Ratze that since the whole of Regum's systems went down, so must have the active EAI's turning them into zombies, all screwed up into dribbling demented retards. Having had computers to do their thinking for them they were left imbeciles having to think, to fend, to organise themselves. In a way what Prima achieved was brilliant. The simplicity of the logic behind their attack stunning in concept, stunning in result. Even if a few million died along the way.

"Ratze, we need to know if you're a believer, an insert, a provocateur, an agent of influence..."

She laughed at that.

"You really are using the scatter gun approach."

Aster beamed. "Gotta keep things moving." The tension amongst them gone.

"I know you guys gotta be careful. Some serious shit happened and I was around. Mightn't look good. But then you could pull anybody and use the same logic to come to the same conclusion."

"Very good." Aster pleased. "Thing is, you were absent during Regum's crises."

"That would explain the blank."

"You don't deny it?"

"No."

"No idea, preceding the Crash where you were either?"

"Mind's a blank."

"What about your configured attachments?"

"Well Aster, methinks that too's been deleted."

"Talking of deletions. Did you know WebSpace had certain strange non-realms at the end of its projected probable time lines?"

"No."

"What was considered a non-field, was actually the barrier, that band of time that was the Crash."

"So they knew but didn't recognise it?"

"Seems that way."

"And the Gamers?"

"Just ignored it. Impossible to crack. Since it was an absence of everything whatever got projected got mangled."

"Like a black hole."

"On the surface. Good point Ratze." Jahrus pleasantly surprised.

She wondered, given they were research, data exploration, testing, analysing why she was that important? Surely the Reganians had, had she noted, innumerable agents themselves. Given the trail she left, most of which momentarily escaped her and apart from that last escapade in the Dump the question formulated itself into the 'why now?' when she knew less in this instant than at any other time. She knew her memory was short, truncated. Was that it?

She relaxed having been a little tense. Taking the cue from them. They worked as a group. Coordinated. Their E end did that for them.

"At least you're not tagged." Aster said after a moments silence.

"Good to hear."

"One last thing."

"Only one?" she joked. They let it pass.

"Regum as you know is now in Prima's orbit so to speak." The screen on the wall changed. There was Regum not as a planet but it's resonant signature. Next to it Prima's. Different colours. Regum more unstable than Prima's darker hues. Vibrant flaring now and then. A different blotch, the Outlands. The blackness of space behind it changed into an opaque curtain. Though more transparent the computer found certain similarities between Regum and the background radiation.

"What do you see?" Jahrus asked.

"The obvious. No disrespect. The RSs of the two planets. And presumably the so-called alien field Prima goes on about."

"Not bad. We thought so too. Just about everybody does. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Think that is the alien field?"

"Could be. It seems stronger though."

"Yes." The external field vanished. "Under this level of scrutiny that alien field is barely noticeable. Just a photon field really." The dim fog returned.

"So this is something else? Natural resonant leakage perhaps." Ratze suggested.

"Good point. Like the residue of both planets. We thought that as well."

"So it's not."

"No. But it has certain similarities with Regum's new resonance."

"Well then, there you have it."

"Except it's non-localized."

"Not Reganian?"

"No, but attracted to it. A superimposition. Trouble is no source."

"The phase state of space." Her Brain informed her.

"Correct. And it's recent, astronomically speaking."

"Things happen."

"It also appears to be of two sets of events. One it could be a construct and two it has it's own resonant specific signature."

"The remnant of WebSpace."

"Maybe."

Aster not convinced. But he said no more.

"No one ever say anything about that? The DVs?"

"Them. They wouldn't know if shit was coming at them Aster. They're too busy projecting to receive."

"Yes. Probes have verified the field. It's dim, its diffuse, it's...a mystery."

"Sorry." Her Brain clammed up. "First time I've seen this." Which was correct as far as things went. "You think it's got something to do with the Crash?"

"Nothing conclusive. A coincidence perhaps. We cannot see how it had to do with the massive energy released at the Crash."

"That's news to me. Massive, passive. Interesting."

"We wondered whether an outside boosting forcefield became active, dominant alongside the Crash, contiguous, influencing the Reganian's on a planetary scale."

"Scary stuff."

"Prima unaffected."

"Target specific?"

"On the surface."

"And within?"

"Too weak. One can read it from the outside. But try and get into the data field itself..."

"You said 'data field'."

"Yes, an interesting phenomenon. Not complete. Not like a programme or even a set of data blocks or coded streams. Unrelated bits. Strewn around randomly. That by the way takes weeks to obtain. That's how feeble it is. Inserting search codes breaks it up. The great quantum conundrum. Where the act of viewing influences the field viewed."

"Well, sounds like you hit a barrier."

"We have done simulations though." Ratze understood the shift. Her examination was over. Now they were milking her for gaps in their knowledge. She was content to comply.

"Do go on."

"Zooming in is useless. Just more of the same. It's partially fractal."

"That means..."

"Natural. Doesn't solve anything. But interesting to find them there. Something is mimicking something."

Ratze laughed.

"I know." Jahrus cut in. "So you honestly," he emphasised, "got no idea?"

"Absolutely none." Her Brain insisted.

Nervina

For the next three days Nervina hit the casino concentrating on her one thousand runs. It wasn't for the credits. She was getting plenty through punters betting on her results, uppers, downers, zeros, stumping them, netting continually small amounts. Building it all up, incrementally. Gambling the buzz. She even let the adrenaline give her that rush, that moment of anticipation. Finger poised on the run button, the wait, the deal, the result. Usually down. Not that that mattered. Getting the jackpot's when necessary. Still the frequency of zero results remained inevitable voiding her profits. But as they occurred mostly at the end of a sequence the losses were minor.

The high flyers lounge was less patronized. The losses were hitting hard. Not her but the Casino. Marros took it in his stride. Nervina surmised if the numbers were manipulated, then some very powerful programme was behind it. Marros was at a loss. So were the directors. The Families fuming. As she watched the cards being dealt on the screen, her mind wandered. The manipulation so far untraceable. No source as yet. Everybody was looking with no one finding anything. She had no formulated plan to unearth the discrepancy. The smarter mentally agile gamblers though found a way to profit from the negative runs. Betting on individual cards. Revenue increased. Covering their own investment.

She finished her third run. Tempted to continue. She had lost by under five hundred. Marros could wear it.

A presence near her. Knowing that she turned slowly. A suit. Neatly tailored, slim, debonair, black hair slicked back, remnants of a tan. So she considered, he travels. Goes off-world. Their eyes met. Locked. The lounge indistinct. His powerful presence radiated a nimbus around him. Her Brain tingling just a little. Not strong enough for the telltale itch. A Natural with psychic possibilities. Restraining himself, engine idling, potent, dormant dominant.

She held his gaze and thought, 'oh dear it's who's got the most concentration'. She could keep her brain on hold indefinitely, go on for ever. Her eyes never watering, she wasn't about to blink. In the end he smiled as if acknowledging the silly game he'd instigated, lowered his gaze, removed one hand out of his pocket. The soft buzz in her head vanished. Some device then. Or a trigger. Whatever.

"I waited until you finished your game. Schoss." A smooth smile as he introduced himself. "Message from Linnox which of course means Mr E." being discreet regarding her

boss. By now she was used to Marros assuming different personalities now and then. Mr E. E for egregious, exalted, exhumed? She smirked.

"So why you, Schoss?"

"Things have changed. Even at the Casino." He half turned watching.

"So?"

"There are those who are suspicious, those who are cautious, those wanting to take advantage and inevitably some who will loose. And I don't mean credits."

"Not me." Nervina was certain she was out of it. Whatever whoever was playing.

"Your good fortune."

"Don't know about that Schoss." Staring right at his brown eyes. The iris opened a fraction. Natural response or designer lenses?

"You don't know what busted is obviously."

"Obviously." Being not that cooperative. "Now Schoss, I'm sure you didn't come here to waste your time..." Meaning she was not interested, in him or his proposition. There had been plenty of those. Never stopped. Part of the scene at the Casino.

"No."

"This message then."

"Mr E for reasons that are no big secret wishes to remain in the background. Linnox being his factotum would also be unsuitable. As you are one of his latest surrogates, a new face it was considered that I approach you."

"Well, here you are."

A waitress passed with a tray of drinks. Schoss waved her away.

"I'm sorry, did you...?"

"No, that's fine."

"The family is having a meeting."

"Don't tell me, they want to see me."

"It has been suggested you might be able to help resolve the current difficulty, the situation as it is."

"Me? I'd be the last person you want. I'm not connected, got no back up, got no friends." Not that it bothered her. Alone was good.

"That is why. Perfect. Barely a legend in place. And what there is of you in the system is so banal it barely registers."

"Nice to know."

"You're almost invisible."

"I try."

"And you succeed. Not much of a track record regarding credit defaults. No off planet accounts, nothing stashed in obscure secure deposits, don't dabble with commerce, have no holdings or stakes anywhere, including this place...perfect non profile."

"I intend to keep it that way Schoss."

"No one is suggesting anything to the contrary."

"Good. Finished then?"

"Me?" he laughed, dimples forming. Cute almost. Almost. "Yes, I guess I have. So will you join me?"

"In what?"

"A family meeting."

"Not into families. Too convoluted, too emotional, too entangled, too Destablelising for what I want."

"Another plus. Objective."

"Maybe. What's in it for me?"

"Ah, spoken like a local." He seemed amused. "Social credit."

"Now let me guess. Nothing profitable in itself. More like being used for their benefit and disposed of as easily as being approached."

"We're not Primaians Nervina. Nice name."

"Yeah well thank my parents, or the lab." She was dismissive.

"You think you're a construct?"

Nervina merely shrugged her shoulders. It made no difference where she crawled out of. She was who she was. Only that counted. Points of origins an obsession with Primaians. Even what continent one was born on carried a certain stigma the further out one was from the pontifical palace. As if one part of a planet to another made any difference. To Primaians it did. Their fixed views on what resonance one was under when exposed at birth.

"I don't care Schoss."

"So would you care to be included?"

"In what?"

"Finding out who is manipulating..."

"Oh that. Yeah, sure, fine." She slipped off the comfortable high backed bar stool. Retracted her credit and Casino ID then stood next to Schoss. He was a smidgin shorter than her. Stature negated size. Schoss carried himself well.

"Marros sends his apologies for not attending. Thus my approach."

Nervina was tempted to cross check. She did. Linnox answered in the positive.

"Why me?" as Schoss waited.

"They'll let their guard down. He does not trust them."

"I didn't know he even..."

"Report later."

The link severed. Her Brain alert, relaxed. Anticipating.

They left the exclusive lounge, took a lift up, along an empty corridor the strip lights lit as they entered, through a double set of doors, iris and DNA scan with camcorders, into an outer office where some mannequin secretary greeted Schoss as if he had been away for months. He might have at that. She looked at Nervina's less than impressive clothing, in her jump suit as always. One never knew when to make an exit fast. Through another double door and into a conference room. The window's light was bright. Her eyes adjusted. Overlooking the desert. The pink sandy hills rolling away under a sapphire sky. Cirrus clouds high above. A white ball of flame leaving condensation in its trail as a rocket took off.

Several people sitting around the table. Some with a few notes on paper in front of them. No screens, no pc's, no console present. Schoss introduced his older sister Noru, chief financial officer, blond hair tied back, prominent cheek bones, nice lips, bony nose. Power dressed in a suit. Ahne barely an adult. Upturned nose, luscious lips, lively young eyes, glistening black hair cut to ear length, exposing her white neck, smiled at Ratze. Norn, the matriarch. Longish brown hair, slim face, piercing blue eyes, summing Nervina up. Pursed lips, a beak of a nose. And the head, Nicos, jet black hair receding a little, very patrician. And the odd one out: Kahl, short, bony face, skinny, all nervous energy, darting restless black eyes who protected the family.

Greetings exchanged, Nervina sat at the remaining chair, Schoss next to her. On the oval table a large coffee pot and delicious pastries, everyone with tiny plates, full of crumbs. She was offered some, declined, satisfied with coffee, cream and sugar. The rich aroma delightful. The coffee strong though not bitter. Quality.

"Thank you for coming Nervina. You may be able to help." Nicos began.

"I'll do what I can unless it affects my contract."

Norn's lips turned into a mean smile. She understood.

"Nothing so underhanded, I assure you. We think you have certain abilities that may be useful, not just to us. To all who are part of the conglomerate. I'm referring of course to the casino as an entity. Sure they have their own personnel to cover contingencies but we think it useful to get a fresh head involved. Not only that we think

you are unique. You have travelled, been exposed to other worlds, can see things from various perspectives. You may have training in the esoteric arts of computational systems, systems that are being manipulated. Which remains in this room." To set her at ease. "So my first question which I may add is on everyone's minds is: is this sabotage?"

"Of sorts." Nervina's Brain tentative, non committal.

"So you're not denying that possibility."

"No. I find it's best to start with the worse case scenario and work back from there. It eliminates other potential scenario's."

"Now," Nicos paying her attention, "is it remote or point sourced? By that I mean is someone or some-thing behind these numbers. Have a look at the folder in front of you, please. And take your time."

She opened the file, no insignia, no cover note. Inside several paper sheets covered in numbers. The read outs of the results. She immediately saw the pattern that ought to not be there.

"Well they're definitely not random."

"Amazing." Schoss said. "Just like that."

Nervina said nothing. By looking at the sheet itself rather than focussing on individual read outs, the mind saw the whole rather than the parts. A pattern did ripple through it, like a series of wave fronts.

"So we're being screwed." Nicos had already come to that conclusion. "Ahne?"

"Well. Security can't trace it. No EM signatures, no residues, no lingering resonance fields, absolutely nothing."

"You're referring to Novus."

"Yes..."

"Check up there?"

"Routine. Nothing that correlates."

"You see Nervina? The nature of the problem."

"Yes, off world." More her Brain's thought than hers.

"What about our Primaian friends?"

"DVs I assume. Can't see it. Remote viewing, remote insertion needs a focus, an image usually. Whether a person or object. Now computers are live systems. Constant change due to data processing inputs. Unless they have a read out they might get one's perception to change, but that would be localized, not this general. Unless they're concentrating on everybody, en masse. However a Natural would be sensitive to their intrusion. Anything there?"

Nicos nodded appreciatively. He looked at Ahne.

The young woman shook her head, admitting defeat.

"The bank?"

Noru glanced up. "Still in the black. But then it's diversified."

Nicos satisfied with that.

"So we come to the question. Who gains?"

"Prima." Schoss answered immediately.

"Why?"

"Discredit Novus, the Casino and by default shareholders such as ourselves. It could be purely political. Less Primaians come. Could be their aim. You know how they think. Exposure to other worlds and so on."

"There are easier ways." Nicos growled.

"Sure. Yet destabilizing the economy..."

"Correct. A massive conspiracy. Nervina?"

"I'm ignorant as far as politics go."

"But you were there. You were on Regum. Anything at all?" curious, not desperate.

It was obvious they had only limited information to go on. Or pretended to.

"Usual manoeuvrings. Prima wants domination. It might well be that a new faction has arisen with an agenda."

"That's all we need. Another group."

"Who want to isolate Novus. For themselves. Discredit this place, you get bad rap." Nervina suggested. She drained her cup.

"Is it a virus? Malware, intruders, rogue sentinels?" Nicos exploring the possibilities.

"Nothing." Ahne replied. "Systems check out. Secure, uncompromised, flawless to the last digit."

"Doesn't make sense."

"No." Ahne said quietly.

"Kahl."

"Boss."

"Well?"

"Rumours a-plenty. You name it, they think it. Ground is rich regarding possibilities. Prima the obvious first choice. Since there is no money trail..."

"Correct." Noru cut in. "No one's getting anything out of this. The machines are running loss sequences. The real losers are the gamblers. As far as I'm concerned they want to wreck the casino."

"So it appears. Well then it's got to be political."

"Yet nothing from Prima." Norn said. "Normally they trumpet their achievements. Regum remains reticent."

"You think they may be behind this? Get the Primaian's to stop coming here? Interesting. Keep the population more Reganian. It's a possibility. Nervina."

"I've been gone too long. Anyway I wasn't there for long."

"So no rumours when you were there."

"Absolutely none."

"Nothing in the Web?"

"I did go in, yes. I didn't check out Novus as a cyber presence, so..."

"Understood. So either Regum and or Prima."

"Or a third force." Kahl suggested.

Nicos looked at him.

"Spacers. Maybe they want to wreck the place, then when it's lost its real value pick it up for small change."

"You're guessing."

"I am boss."

"Rogue elements at work."

"Then it's Prima and or Regum boss."

"Or the said third party working at an arm's length with their backers."

"I wouldn't rule it out boss."

"Yet you're not losing Nervina." Nicos changed tact.

"Not exactly winning like I used to." She countered.

"Still, you're the only one so far minimizing their losses. How?"

"I go by instinct. Got no plan. I let the machine reveal its intentions and act accordingly."

"Instinct?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Your near wins. We got your runs. The similarities are there. But when you play luck seems to favour you."

"A matter of mathematical odds really."

"We know that." Nicos curt. "Why you though?"

"Odds on favourite."

"You believe that?" suspicious.

"The casino has hundreds if not thousands of gamblers. As there is no such thing as a perfect system, since every system is subject to entropy, which is how the Casino makes its money the negative will always outweigh the positive."

"Which does not explain your lucky streak." Ahne determined.

"Patience please." Nicos did not look affronted, but held back. Nervina was here through Marros's assent.

"It's like this. The game sequences is a closed system. Limited variables. Big numbers but still...the gamblers are the outside input that keeps the system moving along. You could call them the energy quotient." Hm, her science lessons had paid off. "Thus it continues. Now each gambler comes in randomly. Well not exactly, group dynamics are at play. Even so, they're individuals. Now when the numbers are big enough someone is gonna win."

"Which happens to be you."

Nicos was right. She was. But was she the only one? Was her Brain involved. Using higher computational methodologies to guess when to hold back, when to go for it? Reading the whole sequence before it played out. The odds were limited, being a closed system. Made sense. Not that she could reveal that. She'd be thrown out. Her Brain not forcing the issue. It just knew when the results, the dealt cards would fall. Of course her interference threw in chaos, chance mentally, thus creating the semblance of a Natural. The results close to conforming to what the Casino expected. She had attracted attention to this group. But no suspicion. Nothing her Brain detected as yet. But then these people weren't as highly geared as herself. Maybe a little. AI add-on, basic computational stuff, certainly not E-loaded. Whoa. Now there was food for thought.

"You're not linked to some super computer in space?" Nicos really guessing now.

"Security would pick that up." Ahne reminded him.

"Maybe they got some new form of transmission. I've heard they can send in micro seconds immense data, cloak it, configure it, make it seem it's not what it is. Get it?"

"Yes dad." Ahne said chastened. She knew the Casino had top grade gear. Even less than a micro-second would show up. Maybe not the contents, if the encryption was tight enough. Analytical computers would not take long to decipher it. "But you know system analysis would eventually crack whatever code used. Unless it's alien." She laughed.

Nervina was thunderstruck.

"But that would need an alien receiver. It's strangeness would be noted." Nicos countered.

"I was joking dad. No aliens here." She said smiling.

Aliens. Why not? If they're advanced enough they could mimic whatever milieu they found themselves in. But their head space, their own logic would give them away. And if they did mimic local logic they would self constrain themselves. Dumbed down. No sense in that unless as sleepers. But then they'd have no affect on the system. There goes the alien theory.

"Maybe the system self corrupted." Nervina moving away from Ahne's not so outrageous guess. "Maybe the consequences were non intentional. A by product of their information processing data base."

"That cannot happen Nervina." Ahne turned her sweet face to her. Ahne really was lovely, a happy spirit with a beautiful soul. "Self analytical. Even if that end went, there are double back ups for every function conceivable."

Nervina nodded. "Any alien sightings then?" she joked.

"Kahl?" Nicos taking up the lead.

"Sorry boss. But then our knowledge only goes so far. There are habitats out there way beyond our reach. No resonance. But our trustworthy eyes in the sky would be onto that. Especially if we are the target boss."

"Gotta eliminate the fantastic to get to the real. It's gotta be somewhere. I think it's right under our noses."

"Know the feeling." Ahne agreed.

"Maybe you can turn this to your favour." Nervina had a thought. They waited. "Pre-empt the enemy. Make it known that the Casino is being screwed by persons or systems unknown. That would put everybody on alert. Manipulated by Prima. They'd be on the defensive. Get someone to panic. Stir the pot. See what bubbles up from beneath the surface. They might blow their cover by trying to hide even further."

"You Nervina are not just a pretty head. Lucky Marros."

"Makes sense." Norn confirmed.

"Or start a whisper campaign." Noru suggested.

"Hey, this gets better." Nicos pleased, pouring himself another cup. And took another pastry. Eyed it with anticipation then a big bite. Bits of pastry flaked down onto his plate.

"Get them on edge. They may make a mistake." Kahl said during a moment's silence.

"Be great if that did work." Ahne agreed.

"Nothing from the Outback?" Norn asked everyone.

"Nothing." Nervina guessed. Talex? Hm. "Nothing directional from there. Just the usual volatile stuff oozing out. If it was them it'd affect other systems as well. And that just ain't happening."

"Yes, you're right of course. Just a thought."

"You're doing well Nervina." Schoss said to her. She smiled appreciatively.

"Yes Nervina." Nicos putting down the pastry after swallowing.

"I'm not supposed to say this. But someone planted a bug in Marros's office." Nervina throwing open further complications.

"Ha! Did they now." Nicos seemed amused. Ahne subtly shook her head at him. He was not going to reveal their security measures in front of Nervina. She'd seen the slight movement. Covering the possibilities.

"Tell me Nervina. You come into contact with some real scientific brains during your journeys?"

Nailed. The memory of being in space. Her Brain withdrawing its informational content and encrypted data fields. She relaxed.

"I wish."

"None of our business where you go, who you meet..."

"But? And?"

"What and why?"

"Does this relate?" alert.

"Maybe."

"Crickey, Nervina, we're in the dark about this. You travel, as do others." Nico conceded. "We're after hard data. Maybe there's been developments in cracking this."

"Yes, I see."

"I wonder. You're enhanced." He paused. She didn't bat an eyelid. "Or a Natural Volatile. Wish my surrogates..."

"I tell you Nico, it's odds on."

"I know that." He admitted. "Just that the odds are always in your favour."

Sure seems that way her Brain thought for her.

"Anyway, on behalf of all of us, thank you for your presence and your input."

She was being dismissed.

"If you ever, if or when your contract permits..." Norn's expression softening towards her.

"Become a surrogate?"

"Initially. We think you have potential."

"Thank you for that confidence." She rose. "We'll see." Schoss rose as well.

"I'll escort Nervina."

"Fine."

"Well they were interested in you. Apologies for father's abruptness." Schoss glowing with pride.

"Don't know why." Waving that away as they walked down the corridor.

"You know. Marros spooked." He said lightly.

"Really." Nervina indifferent. Random stacked numbers. Hm.

He let it go. Down the lift and into the foyer this time. Linnox was seated by himself having a coffee. He rose as they approached.

"How was our guest?" he asked polite as always.

"Me? So, so."

"Marrus is waiting."

"Surely not. For me?"

"For you. Another meeting I'm afraid." He seemed apologetic.

"Must I?" looking at Schoss for support. She didn't like having all this interest focussed on her. She knew less than the Families. They'd have their sources, their agents, trade related data, commercial projections, information regarding the planet's executive decisions, so why her? Was her Brain leaking its presence? No response.

"Well, I'll leave you then. A drink perhaps?" Schoss hovering.

"Perhaps." Nervina answered merely for forms sake. Not wishing to put him off either.

He nodded at Linnox then went back to the lifts.

"So what's up Linnox?"

"Big meeting."

"But I'm just me." Trying to make herself invisible.

"Rumours."

"About."

"I shouldn't say Nervina. But as such an outstanding surrogate, well you've attracted attention."

"Not by design Linnox."

"Of course not." He concurred. "If you would follow me." Bowing a little.

Marros introduced Grahf, solemn, tall, old, eviscerated, skin pale as parchment, white thin hair combed back, looking taciturn now Nervina arrived. He took her in, summed her up looking disgruntled. Jorg, well built, a little vain his greeting prim. Rich blue eyes a mocking expression, not at her, more general. Exuding charm. Next Senida, middle aged, fresh face, no jewellery, looking business like, executive material. In control. Curt greeting, pleasant. Rich expressive lively brown eyes. Marros in the middle around the low table. All sharing a glass of wine. Marros not elucidating further. Powerful people. Certain of themselves. She was slowly being drawn into higher orbits. Allotted her seat between Grahf and Marrus. Looking a little preoccupied. So he knew people in high places.

No notes on the table. Just wine glasses and the bottle in a silver cooler, droplets glistening under the overhead lights.

Grahf watched Marros. He began: "Even though everyone's losing Nervina here has beaten the odds." Smiles of encouragement. "Congratulations Nervina. What do you know of Prima?" direct, full on, intentionally focussed.

"Nothing that no one else knows, Marros." What was going on?

"Regum is allowing unlimited emigration. Diverting them from themselves to here. You are Primaian. We know you can link with your kind." Not exactly a compliment. And in that he was wrong. More for appearance sake.

"I can't. I don't."

"The Outback is showing signs of unrest." Grahf rasped. "They are linking to the like minded. That much is certain. The targets flare momentarily at contact then recede. Data transfers." Looking at her. Fierce, accusatory.

"Really? I've been away."

"Interesting." Senida said. "Where?"

"Visiting."

"Contacts?" Jorg joking, whilst meaning it.

"Contacts." Nervina said dismissively. "I'm an off-worlder. I know nobody here."

"Ratze." Grahf hit the spot.

"I forgot about her."

"She got you out."

"Only because of Talex. Don't trust him."

"We don't either." Marrus answered for all of them. "It has been suggested you are a pathfinder."

She got the gist. But whose? "Whose?"

"Prima's. Though you may not know it." Grahf continued, as if that explained anything. Getting edgy, focussing their paranoia, controlled as yet, onto her.

"Because I'm some late arrival? Don't kid yourselves. I escaped."

"No one escapes Prima's influence. Ever." Grahf insisted.

"No one?"

"No one."

"Certain?"

"Certain."

"Ridiculous. You cannot know that. You'd need access to Orbital data. Whole mega blocks of it."

A studied silence. So much for that approach.

"Social disharmony is increasing. There are dark influences at work. Many are affected. Loss of energy, lack of interest, less entrepreneurial drive, lethargy. All signs of Primaian influences." Marros steering them back to their concerns. Curious. Not interested in her performance as such.

"DV activity." Nervina said evenly. It was obvious. "Or the Outback. Nothing to do with me." As if she cared. Novus had changed, was changing. The freewheeling, free thinking society drawing in on itself. Not good. If this kept up she would get out. Space. Freedom. Potential possibilities. She had friends out there who didn't suspect her of anything. Good to know. It gave her resolute strength.

"It's like a third wave." Jorg said. An odd analogy. She merely looked at him. "Embedded." He said cryptically. Marros was watching her. Linnox unfortunately had retreated to the outer office. She hoped he was listening to this.

"So?"

"The similarities are surprising." Jorg continued.

"Depends on the paradigms used, the delineated specs in position, the conceptual limits imposed, inferences drawn. All very relative."

"Your resonance..."

"What of it?" vigilant. Brain barely there.

"Is unique. As if Prima's developed a new model. You." Grahf irritable.

"Shit hey? Well lucky me. Aren't you guys glad I'm here and not there? I mean from there I'm in their circumference, but here, well, figure it out."

"Not that simple Nervina. There are the Anomalities to consider. Something that doesn't seem to affect you."

"As I explained to Nico and family, odds on favourite." Take that.

"Projections indicate a third wave is present amongst us. Some strange new resonance. Yet you seem to float amongst it, or rather, perhaps, the very opposite. Or different. I'm no genius," Marros admitted as he fumbled for the words, the right expression, took a sip of wine, "but the short of it is this. Nervina you don't make sense."

She laughed. It was funny. "Not making sense. Really. I net you results and you say I don't make sense. Maybe that's the way to go. Beat the odds."

"Nervina you just don't beat the odds on the floor, your head's totally non involved with wherever you are. You are so unconnected."

"An Isolate is what Jorg is trying to say, as is Marrus, your employer."

"My contractor. There is a difference Grahf."

He suppressed his annoyance.

"A tipping point is being reached here on Novus. Undue influences are at work." Grahf hinted.

"And I'm responsible?"

"The coincidence is too...coincidental." Marrus stumbled on.

"We have subtracted and gone over the usual expected malfunctions, siphoned out instabilities..." Grahf not letting go.

"And came up with me?" this in the outer limits of the impossible.

"Whatever you are, you keep on being the residue."

"As a what?"

"An infiltrator."

"Here we go. You are looking for a scapegoat. Fine. You got me. Now what?" maybe she should have phrased that differently.

"What concerns us is making good use of you." Grahf intoned.

"?"

"As you are odds-on as you say, well we would like you to be our odds on." Senida looking kindly at her.

"Doing what? I mean, I've got no training...in anything."

"Perhaps you are looking at yourself from a wrong perspective." Jorg looking like a teacher encouraging his student.

"So I turn myself inside out?" this was ridiculous.

"Not as such. An inversion could net results."

"What results?"

"Crack the interference. Someone has to." Senida explained.

"I'm not a maths whiz."

"You don't have to. Your brain does."

Subdued shock. They were referring to her mind. Her Brain hung in there. Not perturbed the way this was going. Almost waiting to be unleashed. The prospect bothered her. She wanted to vanish. Get off this planet. They were in some sort of melt down mode.

"We think you're some kind of link. If not, then a potential. We just want you before they do."

"Who's they?"

"Primaian's. They're gonna activate you eventually. We make sure you're configured to be on our side."

"Re-configured you mean. Mind fucked more like it. Your machines are too primitive. Like swatting a fly with a brick..." She hoped they didn't catch the way she put herself into a third person. They had mentioned the 'third wave'. Whatever that was. Influencing the Casino's random sequences?

"Prima must be contained." Grahf sibilant's expression intoning unspoken fear. Theirs.

"I agree. But me? Really. Here we have this planet, run, populated, shit, invented by Regum's top brains. And you're coming to me? Get real here."

"We think you can crack this anomaly. Will you do this at least?"

"That I will." Time to give a little, slacken the tension, be agreeable.

Not that she had the faintest idea on how to go about it. Nico's family might have been aware that the runs, the cards, the odds were all askew, as did the punters but as to finding hard evidence...thinking as she sat in one of the general lounges. By the time she had left them it was night. The thud and thump of base and drums, intriguing. Music. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a live band. Memories of a distant past. Something lost along the way, or left behind. Or a dream. Memories woke, happiness, joy, booze, friends, mayhem, drugs, parties, people. Another life, another reality, another world. Certainly not this one, or Regum. Definitely not Prima. So where then? Some memory of the Web. The closest to a logical answer.

She ambled over to the Live Lounge. Moderately full, mainly her age and younger, the odd adult, well older than the rest crowded into tiny tables. Some were

dancing, gyrating, moving to the music. Dual tracked. Thudding base, back-beat percussion, intertwined with a rolling beat, almost syncopated. The chords minor, driving, giving a semblance of order to interwoven, slightly repressed dissonant sounds. Drawn out scraping noises, pulsing, a-rhythmically, interwoven with patterned discords. Low ambient pulse, more an audio impression as a sound wave rather than just a tune. Moving into the body of the melodic notes, aligning itself riding that wave rather than having it wash through. Strange stuff. But then she'd not been long enough on Novus to taste the nightlife.

The crowd, thin as it was seemed both perturbed and enthralled. No that was not quite right. Taken. Overtaken. Subdued. Definitely not excited, not as she remembered her time when...she had been somewhere else.

The bar bare with drinkers. She sauntered up and ordered a fruit cocktail. Pure. The woman filled her glass. It tasted yummy. The band continued the tune. It rose, it fell, it meandered, lost it's thread by design, dislocated itself, reassembled, piece by piece. First the base, rich full low octave rumbles, a cacophony of crashing thudding thumps, the chaotic percussionist slowly drummed up into a beat, chords sharp, long, drawn out with feedback half an octave higher helped cement the tune. Then a high pitched screaming guitar slowly moving down the scale nearly aligned with the chords but not quite, moving around it like two stars entangled in a strange gravitational pull.

The low moan of a girl's voice. With the lights low, even on the small stage, the light coming at you from behind the band members were adumbrations, in brilliant silhouette, skin as white as ice, black gear as they pounded on, relentless, driving, pushing through time, through space, through reality, dimensionality, expanding, contracting, pounding rhythms in the brain. Her Brain. Alert. She had not even noticed it surfacing, relating. Nervina thought it was her. Maybe it was. Her Brain most definitely interested.

Away from the bar she walked along the edge, saw those sitting nodding slightly with the beat, others simply staring, some stunned though not vacant, attentive, large eyes fixated. Probably the low light opening the irises. She felt herself to be two entities. That of her Brain that of her self. Amazing what music could do. Lift you out of yourself or into yourself, over yourself? She suppressed a smile. She could not remember ever listening to stuff like this.

Past the few dancers, mostly women, the odd guy jerking along, a parody, a puppet, a malfunctioning bot, unquestionably not as graceful as their partners. Some women dancing by themselves, drifting away...her Brain latched onto one young girl,

not ecstatic but transformed. Half mystical, half focussed trying to understand the music emotionally. Her body had the beat, her head pulsing. Configuring itself into the audio ocean, with its strange patterned waves washing through her, through Nervina's Brain, then her mind.

She stood at the side of the stage. The band members, there were four, moved slowly even though the pace had picked up. They had their own timing in place, moving with the music, not burning it up. Mostly minor chords. Smooth yet sharp, the pitch's transitions shifting something within her. Lifting her, the lead guitar screaming onto the next octave up, the base two below. Brilliant. She felt in touch with something awesome. Around her mere shadows, quivering, resonating with something `otherworldly'. Primitive, ageless, dormant energy being called back from way beyond reality. Some outfit.

Then the sound disintegrated. The drumming dissonant, the lead discordant, the rhythm guitar drawing out the last chord then ramming it up through the notes, the base playing faster, in freeform fall. They stopped. The echo chamber bounced the remaining notes around, reverberating through her body, spreading out through her head, out her head as it tried to remain in contact, reach for something that was being lost. Then the music diffused itself into space, dissolving in time. Emptiness remained creating a longing for something that had been on the brink of...only to fall into itself, recacoon, remove itself from reality's limited interphases.

For a moment Nervina felt hollow. The band came out of their audio immersion. Unplugged their instruments, packing up. The dancers a little lost now it was all over. The lights brightened, the stage lights still on so the musicians could see what they were doing. Then they walked off stage to a reserved table right next to where Nervina just happened to be standing.

Her Brain replaying the musical progression, looping it, fixated, analysing, looking for a pattern amongst the overlay of sound. The members sat, whilst one of them went to the bar. Nervina followed. Her Brain wanted to ask him something.

As he ordered his drinks Nervina said: "Secret of the friggin universe. Brilliant. Supernova."

He turned, a little surprised at being spoken to. Everybody else was leaving. Some finishing off their drinks.

"Thanks. Most got no idea. Darvias." Black hair, pale, no make up.

"It's there alright. Subtly hidden. Pushed in the background, or the rest in the foreground. Two realities interwoven."

"You latched on then. Tell the others. They think it ain't working."

"Oh it's working alright. I'll pay for your drinks."

"Thanks then. Join us for a while. My friends need a lift."

The four drinks arrived. Nervina picked up the tab and followed Darvias with her fruit juice.

"Someone's picked it up and paid for the drinks. We got a fan. Our singer is the immaculate Jena," looking like Darlias, maybe his sister, face rounder, "Seku on rhythm," her eyes slightly slanted, open, endless, Korch on drums," a skinny type, as anaemic as the rest, short brown hair, prominent cheekbones, thin lips, his forehead glistening from his exertions, "and myself on base."

"Nervina."

They made room for her. She felt comfortable. Whatever her Brain had rummaged through it now left alone.

"So who's the creative genius?" she asked.

They looked at each other.

"All of us. More or less, sort of, sometimes." Seku answered.

"I'm new on this planet. Via this place and that world."

"Regum." Darvias asked.

"That too."

"Place is dying." Jena pronounced.

"Really?"

"Everyone's in the Web. Totally disassociated."

"Fragmented." Korch agreed.

"Fractured." Seku confirmed.

"That good. Glad I got out then."

"Not missing much. Unless you're immersed, linked..."

"Caught in the delusions of cyberspace." Seku not impressed. "Turning infantile."

"What they want." Darvias said. The way he said it meant they had gone through this before. Not news.

"They?"

"The authorities. Keep everybody occupied, keep them dazzled, keep them dumb, lock them in." Korch emphatic.

"The Web you mean."

"And what's in it. Subliminal programming." Darvias explained.

"The softening up phase." Seku looked at Nervina.

"A conspiracy."

"Dead right Nervina. That's why we left. Even though not everybody's slaving to stay in the Web."

"Yeah." Nervina thoughtful. Interesting. "Whose pushing this subliminal agenda?"

"They. The rulers, the politicians of course. Maybe the corporations. Probably all of them." Korch spat.

"If we knew it'd be in our repertoire." Seku stated sipping her drink.

A man came over, dropped a credit card on the table and left.

"Err..." Darvias catching his attention.

"What?" came the brusque reply.

"Next gig."

"One night stand. Good luck." Turned and left.

"Fuck." Seku looking pissed off.

"Fuck 'em." Korch confirmed the bands feeling.

"Happens every time." Jena explained.

"Really? I thought you guys are unique. I mean anybody can do the one two three four, chord, note, bang thing." Nervina trying to make them feel better.

"That's all they want." Jena looking into the remains of her glass.

"Who?"

"The managers. We could go back to the underground, the circuit. But one can't live off booze alone." Korch explained.

"No. You self-manage then?"

"Sure do." Jena brightened.

"I heard some background stuff I found intriguing. Spacey."

"You noticed. Good. Our whole reason, musically I mean." Darvias draining his glass.

"Yeah, spacey..."

"That's because it is."

"How do you mean?"

"The sound of the universe." Jena stated as if it was obvious.

"?"

"Stuff from the observatory. We use it to help fill out that song you heard. Don't use it all the time. And make sure it stays in the background, like it was a real time upload." Seku chirpy.

"You wouldn't have a copy?"

"Sure have." Darvias happy to comply. He rummaged in his pocket and gave her a disk.

"What you want for it?"

"A squillion credits." Seku joked. "No, drinks are fine. Keep it. Listen to the pulse of the universe." She intoned dramatically. "It opens spaces in your head that leaves the Web for shit."

"You definitely don't need a manager." Nervina smiled. "Why don't you guys go off-planet. Tour the mining sites. Not many muso's out there. There are also the bored, meaning Habitats. Some are lost navel gazing but not all. Heaps of credits out there." Encouraging them to make a break.

They looked at each other.

"We do think about it." Jena admitted.

"Work on some cruiser till they call in to a space port. Etcetera."

"Yeah. Etcetera more like it. Nervina we're not exactly mainstream." Darvias explained.

"Not all ships are that staid. Talk to the captains. Bother them. Someone's sure to bite."

"Bite back." Korch joked.

"Never say never."

"Yeah, we know." Seku sighed.

"Anyway, I'm off."

"Thanks for the drinks." Darvias looked at her.

"Thanks for the music."

"Spread the word. We're 'Ripped', think of 'Ripped Space.'"

"Both are fine." Nervina looked down, standing. "Might see you out there. When you're famous."

"Ha ha ha." Korch mimicked.

Her Brain crackled. Heavy duty targeting. Not herself as such, more the area. Inserting full spectrum ram-scramming signals. More potent than white noise. Cyber. Unless enhanced. Unnoticeable accept for the effect. Everybody around her going comatose, brains in slo-mo, geared down by targeting containment fields. Her Brain found the source. A truck outside the casino the reason. Ultra security. Top shit. On Novus? CFs were Primaian. So whatever Talex and the GG were up to was being put in place. Exercising their powers. Something nasty had developed whilst she'd been away. A political shift. Goon squads. After her? Nervina did not wait to find out.

Either she had sped up or they were all slowed down. She looked at the muso's. They sat there, stunned. She jumped onto the stage, headed out back, past the change rooms. To cover her tracks she got her Brain to replay the bands cacophonous bits, stop any intrusion. Better than using her own back up. More sophisticated but at the same time revealing its advanced state of counter measures. Not this time. Along rough cement rendered corridors. A bank of service lifts. That would do. The door opened and up she went, heading for the general garage.

Part of her Brain homed in on the venue. A squad already barging in. Not much of a response from the patrons. Straight to the band members. She realised they might think she'd led them in. They were after the music. The music? Think about it later Nervina.

Adrenaline rush. Clear minded. Her Brain taking over. A moment's buzz as it sent a squirt distress signal. 'Get me out.' her mind mimicked. She did not follow it's trajectory. Pre-configured. Her Brain turning to ice. Impregnable. Then hot on the inside, energy buzzing, she the homing beacon for the response, acknowledgement, coordinates for interception and retrieval.

The lift stopped at a warehouse within the casino. Packing cases, dry goods, bulk and cases of booze. She raced to the next bank of lifts. Up two levels. Special pass to get out. She tried her pass-card as she had a unit here. Wrong level. No access. She pulled out a strand from her wristband, her pc online, ran it along the door, found the release mechanism, waited for the encryption to be decoded. The door opened. The CF weaker. They might not even know she had been at the venue. Given that everybody was somewhat subdued answers would take a while to be even thought of, then formulated before finally spoken.

The garage was for visitors. Ground vehicles, VAVs, two bikes. Powerful engines. All locked down. The strand still out she inserted it into the recognition pad of the smaller road bike. Waited as it read the user's profile, her Brain duplicated the persona, the lights came on. She swung herself onto the machine, pressed start ignition. Her Brain uploaded the technique of riding the machine. A bike is a bike. She tested the gears, brakes, hit the engine start. A full bodied throttling growl. Mean.

She rode slowly along, passed the other parked vehicles, down the exit ramp and onto the access road. Most of the guards were at the concourse, but two geared goons covered the rear exit. She slowed letting her Brain adjust to their presence, the CF weaker. The music disk in a sealed, secure, shielded pocket. No scan would pick that up. If that is what they were after.

"Can't leave until searched." One of them said. "Off the bike."

She did. Whilst one guard was going over the rear compartment attached to the bike Nervina went straight for the other guards throat, squeezed until his windpipe collapsed. He had no time to even respond thinking her subdued due to the CF. The other guard though instinctively reacted to the scuffle, went to draw his weapon and got a kick on the groin, followed by a thump in the stomach completely taking his breath away. Doubled over in pain she ripped off his helmet and put it on. His com link was now severed. He might have back up in their vehicle but for now she was back on the bike, away, slowly merging onto the main road. The helmet's com link jabbering about what was going on at the Casino. She accelerated, letting her Brain guide her. Overhead a helicopter. Momentarily a search light on her then swept away. So far no one took an interest in the two rear guards. Her Brain had already configured Nervina to that of the guard who might be getting his breath back by now. Her Brain sent out another distant target specific urgent call to whatever ship might be in space. A pico second was enough.

In deep space a ship responded. Engaging it's g-drive, having unscrambled Nervina's unique ID it was over Novus in mere minutes. The bike and its rider in its sight. Entering cloaked, Novanian sub-space, ignoring and being ignored by the Orbital. Those there not even aware of it. They didn't use mass-detectors. Novus was low tech for the simple reason to let the Primaian's think they were less advanced than they were. The ruse had to be failsafe and that meant retro-gearing their own equipment. It worked well enough. Novus was a trading planet. Ships came and went. The orbital was there purely for display purposes only. The ship entered from the opposite side, streaked through the stratosphere, over the vast deserts below, devoid of all life. Arriving, Nervina's racing down the empty road and sent a return squirt. Her Brain guiding her to her rescuers.

She turned left to hit the city's by-pass then took the turn left again towards the outback. Not the space port. She gunned the bike. Flashed past trucks, some who tooted just for the heck of it. Half way to the Outback, approaching the forbidden zone, the perimeter she felt the momentary distortion of a gravity field. Hey hey. A g-drive coming her way.

A dark mass appeared. Optically shrouded. Light bending around it. Her pick up arrived. Her Brain did the looking, deciphered it's position. She stopped the bike in front of it. The cloaked ship hovered just above the ground, she climbed through the open air lock. Let them think what they want when they found the abandoned bike. Even if they did figure out that Nervina somehow escaped it would make no difference. Prima might

have control of Novus politically, on the ground even, at times maybe, but space was still in Reganian hands. She hoped they were Reganian.

They were.

Erx

For the next week Erx was busy in his workshop. The sensors were ready. Solar powered, extracting ambient energy, including weak leaking EM fields. These dust mites, carbon based to avoid detection, looked like natural microbugs, microprobes that would get past any detectors whilst dormant. As a swarm some were tasked to process data, others transmit. The mites would do the job nicely for Linnox's requirement. Guided by a remote.

He tested them upon the Outback. The swarm held picking up strong resonant fields, active Volatiles. Once their usage over, he let them burn out and drift away as natural detritus. He rode his bike back to his workshop, gathered another handful and went off to meet his contractor. Linnox replied they had time for him. Things were slow at the casino.

Something was going on. Security all over the place including its approach. As for the mites he had them in a container. Carbon dust he merely said to the guards it was his instant coffee. They scanned him. Not that they would find much. He was a Natural, not even Enhanced. He used add-ons and portable pc's. All basic stuff off line.

Inside the garish foyer, tinsel lights and chintzy designs, glitzy kitch on a big scale. Impress the tourists who still could not resist the allure of gambling. Primaian's mainly. Totally focussed on their gaming machines with their tacky tinkling musical sounds when a minor win came their way. The bar nearly empty so Erx sat there nursing a coffee.

Linnox approached. "Mr E has some time available."

"Thank you. Time to see who I'm dealing with." He drained his cup making their way to a bank of lifts. They got out on a parking level. Linnox extracted a small pc. A door along the wall appeared, opened, up another level, down a bland corridor. Blank walls.

"Here we are then." The wall opened entering a small cubicle. Erx was scanned through another door and in E's foyer. One last door. Directly into E's office.

Marrus was Mr Enigmatic. Behind a large wooden desk, strange twisted patterned turned legs, a light screen making his face look sickly yellow, his bald head reflecting the tiny halogen lights overhead. The view of the city, cranes hovering above the new high rises to accommodate ever more arriving Reganians and Primaians wanting a new life here.

E swivelled towards Erx and Linnox.

"Please be seated. Glad you could come." Sounding a little distracted. Erx sat in a comfortable lounge chair, Linnox standing off to one side. Large black expressive eyes studied him, sensuous mouth, slightly podgy yet of solid build in an elegant two piece suit.

"Delighted to be here Mr E." the desk empty. Obviously cautious in leaving anything to be seen.

"Refreshment?"

"No thanks. Just had a jolt of caffeine."

E nodded. "You may sit Linnox."

"Thank you sir."

"So Erx..."

"Well I'm ready. Now this building is climate controlled, yes?"

E nodded.

"And your office..."

"Is cleaner as far as I know." Tight smile.

Erx extracted the small container with his swarm of mites. He rose put it on the desk, opened it. Then looked for the air ducts.

"Can you reverse cycle?"

"What?"

"The air conditioning. Draw air out."

"Yes, why?"

"I release these into the air ducts. They'll spread around the building. A preliminary look see. Get an overall view. Then work back from whatever results they obtain."

"This pile of dust?" E looked suspiciously at the brown flowery substance. Erx did not enlighten him what they were or how they functioned.

"So, reverse the cycle please."

E looked at Linnox who rose and changed the settings. Erx was standing using a rubber ball with a small glass tube sucked in the dust then blew it into the air duct. Erx activated his shielded pc. The screen on he waited. The mites were sensitive to com-gear, hidden or otherwise.

"It will take a while for them to work their way through the building. Of course whoever has their reverse cycle on will miss out. But we should know if anybody is interested in this office."

"How good is this dust? How certain?"

"Mr E. Nothing is ever certain. Only probabilities. Except the bugs in your office. But once we get results then by controlling the parameters, probabilities become certainties. Even if running into counter measures. If my mites are noted, they shut down and become mere dust. Self deleting."

"Traced?"

"Yes and no. Traced to themselves yes but not here. Anyway my receiver is shielded. Hard to crack." Erx said comfortably, sure of his abilities.

"If you say so." Marros a little doubtful. Yet having searched the city's more independent operators Erx stood out more by his absence than his presence. Even his clients could not be traced. Such operational procedures recommended themselves.

"So what do I need to know." Erx began as he waited for the swarm to diffuse itself. "The ground conditions I'm referring to Mr E."

"Can you be a little more specific?" he asked warily.

"The managers targeting you?"

"That is what you are here for."

"It's part of the recce Mr E. Trying to eliminate the variables. Are you financially secure?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"No, you don't." Erx replied easily.

A bleep on his pc. Then another. Marros looked up having shut down the light screen. Erx looked at his read outs.

"Two sources. One on the top floor of this building..."

"Management." Marros informed him.

"And two a link out there."

"Out where?"

"The Outback."

"No shit."

"Some of my swarm went airborne."

Marros satisfied. "So one may assume they are behind this breach of security."

"With management."

"Certain?"

"Certain."

"You've done well."

Erx said nothing. Being humble for him was easy.

Marros extracted a credit card from his desk and along with a piece of paper moved it over to Ex.

"Yours."

Ex ran the card through his hand held and delighted thanked him. "Anything else?" whilst reading the note asking if the office was now clean. He consulted the handheld. Surveillance had changed. Now one area lit up, held, followed by another, all random. An automated system. Even if manned the top level was the Casino's listening post. Some data interchanged between there and the Outback. Confirmed. The Outback was involved. What exactly they were after though could not, without further sweeps be ascertained.

Ex poured some of the last mites on Marros's gleaming desk and waited. He showed Marros the handheld. He saw his office on the unit light up. The sweep remained steady, then finding nothing, no alerts triggered moved on.

"That's how its done." Hoping Marros understood. Ex doubted they had anything as sophisticated as his little swarm of mites.

"Could you replay..."

Ex shook his head. "Not that good." Meaning this was a working prototype, somewhat limited. Anyway being target specific ran its own risks of detection which would set off certain counter measures. If these were then considered for analysis those who ran this operation would go into high alert. Which meant only one thing. Being shut down at best, removed at worst. Ex had no wish to end up in the Outback as an indefinite guest of the GG. Or have one's head reconditioned. End up a stable or configured Volatile.

Rumours of what the inmates were used for ran into the fantastic. Probably all part of the disinformation deliberately leaking out from there.

"I'll leave this behind." Indicating the tiny pile of brown dust. "Sunlight is good." Meaning they self charged. "Ambient light as well. Even your screen will suffice. But they'll die in a few days depending on the amount of work they have to do."

Marros was satisfied. He was tempted to poke his finger into the pile, get a feel. Ex shook his head.

"They'll focus on you. All early stuff. Can't tell what they'll find attractive."

"You're talking about them as if they were your pets."

"They are that Mr E."

"Anyone else following this line?"

"Don't know."

"You don't keep up?"

Ex looked at Marros with a shy smile. He understood.

"Well, it has been a pleasure..."

"Likewise." Looking expectantly at Ex. Marros had a last question. "Err, one of my surrogates claims the system in the games room is malfunctioning. Not running a pure sequence of random runs regarding the cards dealt by the machines. Odds are stacked against winning."

"Odds always are."

"Sure. But now it's even worse."

"So someone's screwing around." Was Ex's initial explanation. "Known as corruption. Someone's skimming..."

"That's just it. The casino is loosing as well."

"Oh-uh. Sounds political. Way above me."

"Pity."

"Won't stop me from being interested though."

"It didn't come from me." Marros quickly added in case he was going to be charged for that as well.

"I shall consider it as a hobby. You know what they say?"

"What?"

"Knowledge..."

"Ah yes. Well then..." Marros leaning back.

"I'm off."

"If I or someone from the syndicate..."

"Yes. Please. All approaches considered. No guarantees of acceptance. Even I have limits."

"Of course. Linnox will see you out."

"No need Mr E, I'll manage." Ex said content with having his credit generously replenished.

So the Outback Ex considered. The factories delivered on the cheap. No one wanted that to change. In a way they were all complicit by their acceptance of the status quo. As he rode his bike back he had to pass a cursory search. His handheld had hidden the data gleaned at Mr E's office. That would need specialist code breakers to get through and multiple sets of info busting search extractors to gain access to the data. Then encryption techniques to unravel the contents. Primaian know how no where

near such capabilities. Not down here anyway. He was waved through. Maybe they too were looking for whoever was screwing with the system at the casino.

Riding of he had to laugh. Those who were behind it would be very well connected. They would not be so stupid as to carry such hot data around on the ground. Use quantum tunnelling to transfer their information. No such computers were in place here at the complex. The Reganians had that up in space. He knew because he could trace it's after effects. The surge a dead give-away. The hyped particle fields left in their wake revealing what had transpired. The contents encoded, unassailable.

Primaians were attuned to the diurnal cycle, much more so than Novanians and Reganians whose bio-rhythms were more individual, whether the sun was up or not. Some slept through the day and woke at night. Such as himself. He had only dragged himself out of bed because the Outback intrigued him.

At his flat he checked the vat that was brewing his mites. A bit like brewing beer really. Create the right nutrient rich soup, add some carbon, irradiate using his micro generators with a resonant field configuring the processing units, boosting it with micro chips to lay down the pattern and wait for the goo to self assemble. Nano tech at its most basic. It worked.

Ex got his gear together. A tiny microwave dish, portable batteries, his mites, all fitting into his backpack. Then off on his trail bike which he kept at a mechanic's workshop for a minimal fee. Instead of following roads Ex headed straight over the undulating hills around the city. Heading west but not too close to the Outback's high security perimeter. Nor did he wish to be seen by the truckers or anyone else.

His HUD capable helmet searched the area for any high energy activity. The Outback's security was really old world. Manned lookouts, visual sighting, basic security sweeps, not even any deep scanners to try and read the mind of anyone approaching. For that the GG used Volatiles in the same way the orbital over Prima used DVs.

He left the glittering city behind. Knowing the lay out of the land Ex remembered several spots where he could hide more or less. At least not be readily detected. A few ravines were around. He had no need for line-of-sight applications. It would only be a short test run. At best they on the other side would pick up some temporary interference. Ex was tempted to piggy-back his system through one of the many routers at the space port. Just to confuse any observers.

Riding over the hard desert surface his HUD alerted him that the whole Outback was in lock-down mode. A complete security blanket in place. Even airspace off limits.

His computers ignored the cordon. Any curious hackers would be bombed out. Total crash-down. He was secure.

Having found a remote and secure spot he extracted the tiny palm size array, hooked it to the wafer thin batteries, aligned them using his HUD readouts and waited.

Ex merely read the lock down, passive scanning. Expecting the usual glowing superimposed dome like structure. Instead it was a cylindrical shape, all the way to the orbital. He released the mites. They were familiar with the discrepancy uncovered at the casino. See if a similar pattern existed here. Knowing the Primaians they would go for global control. They never did anything by stages. All or nothing.

He was surprised to find the same non random sequences embedded in the protective electronic cordon. Dormant background radiation. He downloaded the results, cached, then secured, the process of extraction deleted. It was enough. He packed up his gear and returned home. The trial bike to the mechanics shop, then on his road bike back to his flat at the edge of the city's CBD.

After a coffee and a little think Ex created a simulation of the actuality he had recovered out there. He also activated his dishes pointing at the orbital. With such a tiny pulse they would think nothing of it. There were many who needed to communicate up there: traders, merchants, visitors, personnel who were off to space, enquiries, security checks, info request. Ex pretended his system had been accidentally left on.

Moments later, running the simulation whilst another screen showed the reality he found the two to be the same. So his information was true. Not reconfigured, moulded, changed, buzzing with inserted malware, spyware, or shaped to pretend something it was not. The contact between the orbital and the Outback fully shielded. Triple layered. At the virtual end Ex inserted a tracking beam. He used his dummy computers to safeguard the virtuality in front of him.

A passive scan over the city revealed nothing. Even the casino was not within any parameters. So whatever was going on there was internal only. He wished he could tell someone of the strange going ons at the Outback. Zor came to mind. His last girlfriend who had walked out one day. Ex accused of not caring. He did care but he rarely had time to care. He thought of her a lot, had thought of her a lot. But thinking isn't doing. She wanted attention. He found that tedious, mind draining, exhausting. Ah well.

An idea struck him. Release the swarm here, in the flat. Opening the container he got his remote guidance system ready, threw the mites into the air and held them in place. No interference detected. His hard systems would know that anyway. No passing EM fields except what he generated.

He walked over to the window. A slight breeze was coming in off the ocean. Inspiration. Using the remote he steered the swarm through the window and let it head to the Outback. Now was as good a time as any. Especially since they were in lock out mode.

The mites released hung together as he intended them to be. Cohesion achieved by their weak magnetic field. A give away if detected. Nothing was without some risk and Erx was curious. He returned to his real time computer screen, whilst running the simulation as a control. The mites were on max multi spectrum analysis. See what the Outback was really engaged in. If and when they got there.

Half an hour later the swarm arrived over the Outback's secure uplink. Oops. Omnidirectional path finders engaged instantly. Whoops. A slight miscalculation on his part. The interceding mites were hijacked. Not from the ground base but the orbital. Engage magnetic distortion fields.

He damned himself for feeling too on top, too smart and too secure. He sent a routine signal to Mr E in case there was a flash back. It could well be that all his mites, since they all had the same constituent configurations, another mistake on his part, were reverse targeted. They were trying to crash through his system. His data blocks were holding, absorbing the digital assault, just. Worse was that he had been found. Instant hop-sotch. One, two, three, target acquired, Erx being the target. Time for countermeasures. Flare outs, flash bangs creating white noise. The probing continued, confirming the fix.

Given the security on the ground Erx was ready for the worst. Get out. Now. No time to get sentimental.

Linnox came on line. Erx simply said the Outback was going super-active. He did not mention that he might have been responsible for that trigger. Linnox asked what Erx intended to do about it.

"Check your end."

Whilst waiting he got his EM-bombs ready. The flash back would delete their fix. It would wreck his system but that was better then being wrecked oneself. The Outback went into high alert. Shit. What sort of information was going on between the orbital and the Outback for them to come on this heavy? He activated all his EM bombs on a timer. Create a hot field hopefully melting the digital and field equations containing whatever data was embedded within the mites. He could virtually disappear or, what, run for it?

"I'm on my way." Was all Linnox said to Erx then cut the link.

On the real time screen security squads poured out of the Outback. Several vans. Erx ran into the bedroom and snatched his carry-all bag. Ready for a quick exit. One he expected, later than sooner. But that was the nature of quick exits. It was now or be busted.

Reluctantly he hit the activate. The EMBs glowed, the heat localised, intense. The processors of all his active computers were electronically wiped, their guts melted, the screens went blank. He switched off the vat brewing his mites. All the programmes in his flat were now electronic dust. Then to finish the job, the final touch, his grenades. Short burst radiation to make sure nothing was retrievable. His carry all on his back, he pushed the trigger, lobbed the grenade shut the door and raced down the stairs.

The Whump blew the bathroom door off its hinges. Everything he owned destroyed. A bright flash, the stench of fused wires, burnt out capacitors, data matrixes all carbonized. And the odd cockroach. Turned to charcoal the flash too target shaped to actually cause a fire for it vaporized everything instead. Smoke poured through the open door. He shut it. On his way down the stairs Erx knocked on his neighbour's door. Nothing. Hopefully he wasn't in in case the floor collapsed on him. In the distance the sounds of a siren.

The inside of his head went white. Not from the explosion he caused. This was a head attack. Some directional flare messing with his brain. Except it accelerated everything in his head instead. He was glad he had fed himself the protein based microprocessors which slowly grew along his brain's architecture. Instead of mind jamming him they were using the excess energy to surge into activity.

Endomorphins were released making him feel indestructible. Adrenaline buzzed his body, dendrites tingled pushing his mental parameters to new configurations, reassembling, creating new neural pathways. The changed resonance creating a new persona on the outside. The fix dropped of.

Out on the street some were staggering about, disoriented. Others balancing themselves against buildings to stop from tottering onto the road. A tram up the road had ground to a halt. The orbital! Above and near space either that or the Outback or both were targeting the city going for a mental lock down. Crashing all systems that were not ultra secure. Fortuitous? Or was he its cause? A reaction like this certainly was not a mere response to some sneaky infiltrators like his mites. This was overkill on an extremely large scale. All around him anxiety glowed. Not everyone was enhanced, boosted, secure. Distressed minds everywhere. A mega resonant attack. The Outback was taking over. Their mind assault relentless.

A black petrol driven car pulled up. Indifferent to the jamming in place. Not everything was run by computers. A shape leaned over opening the passenger door. Linnox to the rescue.

"Good man." Erx shouted as he threw his bag onto the back seat and got in. Linnox accelerated, tyres squealing enjoying this. Linnox concentrated on driving. Pedestrians staggered about, smart cars ground to a halt in the middle of the road. This car was solid metal. Erx could feel the growl of the engine, feel the inertia of acceleration racing out of the CBD towards the industrial centre. Linnox stayed in the middle of the road, weaving between stalled vehicles. Then the powerful interference patterns ceased. The attack over.

Car lights lit up again as systems were restored. Not all. The cheaper models crashed internally now trash. The trams lights came on starting to move. Even the blind siding of brains ceased. The pedestrian recovering their equilibrium. Linnox put on the radio.

`...state of emergency due to alien resonant incursion using Novus as a beacon. Security squads have been mobilised to track down the enemy amongst us. I the governor general have declared a temporary...' Linnox switched it off.

He was travelling at speed. The car lurched as they wove through the slow moving traffic. The car's internal radar came on. Blips everywhere.

"That's the security details. It looks like the city's being occupied Erx."

"What is going on?"

"They're taking over, finally."

"Finally?"

"We suspected it for some time now. The discrepancy the last finishing touch. Except even I did not see it for what it was."

"Neither did anybody else by the look of it." hoping he had nothing to do with it.

"No. We were all completely fooled. Mind you," navigated a corner, the rear wheels sliding slightly with Linnox in complete control, "the screwing contained within the discrepancy should have set off alarm bells. I should have sent out an alert."

Erx was beginning to understand that Linnox was alluding to something other than his boss. The `we' meant other people.

"I hope my mites didn't..."

"They did, actually. Not at first."

They raced past a truck.

"But then the whole system, meaning the casino's lit up. Went hyper. Then I realised it was on."

"What was?"

"The take over. I knew, knew," he emphasised, "they were up to something."

"The Outback?"

"Indeed. Configuring the Volatiles. They were leaking..."

"Mentally?"

"Yes, if one had the right detection in place." without elucidating whether external or internal. Erx assumed Linnox was at least boosted. Saving him. Remarkable turn of events. Linnox quickly looked at the radar's moving blips. The takeover was in place. Vehicles pouring out along the western road.

They though were heading for the industrial estate. The convoys towards the city. Securing data bases, comlinks and the casino. One vehicle Erx noted was at his place.

"You have taken precautions."

"Oh yes. The place is trashed."

"All of it?"

"Including the vat breeding my mites."

Linnox nodded, satisfied. They stopped at an iron gate. Engine running Linnox unlocked it manually, rolled it back and headed for the warehouse. Then he unlocked another padlock, raced back to the car and drove in.

There sat a modified VAV. Linnox got out, Erx with his backpack followed. Linnox who pressed a button on the wall and the roof slowly retracted. Simultaneously a ramp extended from the VAV. Linnox reached into the car, fiddled with something and motioned for Erx to follow him in. He did not have to be told twice. The on board system ready to go. Turbines started whining as they made their way into the cockpit.

Settled in, the roof fully extended, webbed into their seats, Linnox at the controls the VAV wobbled slightly lifting off. They ascended through the roof, the thrusters pivoted roaring into the sky. Behind them an orange mushroom cloud exploded at the warehouse.

"That beautiful car."

"Or your equipment." Linnox consoled Erx.

"Yes, can't have them getting their hands on anything of ours."

"Exactly Erx."

Erx saw the flares moments after Linnox.

"Missiles."

The VAV shot ahead pushing them into their seats. Linnox dropped several flares. The missiles veered off course.

"Lucky for us no smart ware." Watching the missiles drop back.

They hit the cloud layer, the blue sky above, then turning crimson and purple leaving Novus behind. Face masks popped out conserving the air on board. Behind them the bright orb of a momentary sun. Another missile detonated, activated by the ship to prematurely detonate.

"Neat." Erx was impressed.

"They'll use low yield fission heads next."

"Where'd they get all this hardware? I mean, I'm confused. I thought weapons don't exist anymore."

"Not officially."

"So...?"

"Traders, arms merchants, weapon dealers. The clandestine market is alive and well. Thanks to some corporations and families on Novus."

"Working for Prima?"

"Themselves. Anything for profit Erx."

"But that's...that's...criminal."

"It's business Erx."

"That sucks."

"Tell me..." Linnox grimaced.

The ship passed through the expanded penumbra of the blast radius. Screens flickered momentarily then stabilized.

"Ship's pretty well protected Erx. And as it is also manually set up we should be alright."

Erx relaxed a little. They were now in space. Stars everywhere. His brain had calmed down a little now that they were away from the RF radiating out of the distant Outback.

"I feel a little strange." Erx mouthed.

"Not surprised. A bit of a shock." Linnox concurred.

"It's my head."

"Oh? Interference. It does that."

"It?"

"Them. Could be the Vs. They headed for your place I noted as we were driving to the warehouse. Probably focussing on something that may have escaped the destruction you caused."

"Oh, it's nothing like that Linnox. Not so much disoriented as..." He started to explain how he was becoming boosted, now that the surprises were over. Except they weren't.

Four flaring light beams.

"Long range laser guided radar sweeps. So far non intrusive. Must be near the orbital, using their forward alerts." Linnox informed Erx.

The bright lights went into a dark purple aura near the planet's curved horizon. Erx tried to get into that system. Instead the light flashes were more rockets heading their way, using far reaching radar to lock onto the VAV.

"Maybe if we head towards the Orbital...they'll have to abort."

"Unless that's their intentions." Linnox remarked. "We have some time..."

Erx retrieved his handheld pc. Once activated allowed it to begin transmitting its inner resonance field containing command and control prompts for his ancient boosters inside his head. His inner hardware started to conform with the outer software. New structural pathways unfolded, grew, expanded. Data fields flooded in from the outer computer. For a moment Erx saw nothing as he aligned with the ship's system. He felt his brain go supernova. The light fields collapsed upon themselves. Data transfer complete.

"Ten and counting..." Erx now linked with the ship. "Last stage firing..." so relaxed it was ridiculous, totally on top, "five and counting. Multiple warheads about to be released." Speaking through the ship, the ship speaking through him.

The ship spewed out twenty primed decoy deception flares mimicking the signature of the ship followed by five EM spiked warheads, the missiles targeted the wrong acquisition vector.

"Fire the fusion booster if you will." Erx said so calmly he couldn't believe how close they were cutting it.

The micro-reactors went full bore. A minor fusion detonation in the ships wake. The multiple warheads finally released headed for that instead, the pilot missile pathfinders confused, as it 'saw' the fusion flare. Twenty multiple warheads followed behind the ship. With mere seconds remaining the ship launched a dozen super dense, intense flash-flares, EM spikes activated to wipe any unshielded processors.

"You think all the warheads...here they come...behind us, too late boys..." as Erx's head started to crackle. The ship had activated its own EM repulsion field. Strands of

flickering, spasmodic white-blue-lilac lightning flickered over the ships surface like strobe webbing. Ex's mind retreated, feeling cosy, warm, secure.

Ahead, some distance off the orbital, half illuminated. Ex sensed the anticipation on board. DVs guiding the missile heads.

The warheads were solid state fuelled. All they saw were white hot balls which detonated at the false image-flare mimicking the ship. The other warheads followed suit. Ex felt the euphoria of the DVs on board. They too had mistaken the false image as real and the real as a shadow of itself thinking that was false.

"Clever ship." Ex was impressed.

A whole series of detonations behind them. The ship's outer skin absorbed the exploding energy, converting it and storing it in the ships back up batteries. What was left over strengthened the EM shield ready to cloak it. The ship vanished to those on the orbital.

"We didn't even have to use our weapons." Linnox said at last now the danger passed behind them.

"We're gone."

"We are that." Linnox proud of the ship's capabilities.

Ex's brain was still buzzing a little, winding down by degrees. Everything looked sharper, more defined, greater depth, deeper resonances around. He could feel the ship, warm in its EM shroud. Some dummy heads and dumb bombs floating aimlessly around. The shifting EM scaffold kept the ship off line to any of the orbital's mass detectors. The blasts all absorbed. The ship stable, Ex stable, Linnox cool as a cucumber.

"Nice work." Ex applauded.

Behind them the glittering mass of tiny stars, some of it shrapnel, and two comets. Two comets?

"Err, you noticed?" Ex worried. Where had two more rockets come from?

"And...taking...evasive...action...two, one, hit it." as Linnox twisted the ship one eighty degrees and engaged a full chemically fuelled blast. The turn so swift Ex's head went dizzy, the stars streaks of light. Linnox deactivated the cloaking shroud to let the missiles see their target. Then he headed for the orbital. The oldest trick in the book. The missiles went for the kill, the rockets going for the ship. The vectors locked into their tiny brains. With seconds to go Linnox twisted the ship one eighty degrees drawing the released warheads nearer and nearer. Then tilting the ship slightly, shutting off the heat vents he hit the fusion drive. For precious seconds the excess heat could be absorbed by the ships multiple skins, batteries, and the magnetic surplus energy container designed

for an overheating fusion reactor. Under pressure it could absorb enough energy should a reactor go into melt down for the crew to safely get away. Around five minutes. They needed less than that.

With no heat signature to aim for, cloaked once more, all the missiles saw was the tempting target of the orbital. They had been so close they could see into the portals when they turned, drawing in the warheads and dropping away. Even if the heads were prematurely detonated the blast damage to the orbital would be severe.

Linnox opened the heat vents. Behind them they saw two white suns illuminate the orbital. The shock wave rippled along its surface looking severely dented. Inside the structure was collapsing. It was ripping itself to shreds. The three reactors were out of control, disengaged, overheating. The lights went out. Then the massive atomic fireball mushrooming out in perfect symmetry. Through the cracks and portholes the intense radioactive light glowed, the white balls in the centre fusing into one bright sun. Then came the physical explosion, as pieces of the orbital, struts, plating, whole sections were flung outwards trailing momentary vapour trails from escaping air, glowing white hot contrails. Whatever remained would eventually burn up in Novus's upper atmosphere.

A part of Erx's brain calmed down. His agitation gone. The DVs! Those in space would be blasted further out. Some might be rescued if they launched rescue vessels. Maybe with the destruction of the orbital the Novian's might shake off the GG's attempted military coup d'état . Maybe.

The ship felt the shock wave and rocked a little.

"Neat strategy." Erx complimented,

"More desperation." Linnox exhaled having held his breath during the crucial moments. "It was pure instinct."

"You mean to say we got away with it by the skin of..."

"Not quite Erx. I was thinking. I know what the DVs are capable of. Had they locked onto me, had I told you, had I communicated with the ship they would have known our intentions and acted accordingly. Including cloaking manoeuvres and protocols."

"Ah. Via the ship's system."

"Which worked. You had no idea what I was doing, neither had the ship going into symbiotic camouflage."

Erx excited at having survived. He felt invincible, eternal, infinite.

"I am flummoxed."

"This is a first."

"What the ship you mean?"

"Indeed yes."

"I'm thinking of the possibilities Linnox."

"You are?"

"Spyware. Imagine. A system going into a target. With a trojan mind inside of it."

"Yes, I see what you mean. Ah." He looked at the readouts. "Rockets going up."

"Not again."

"No this would be rescue."

"Any Reganians or Novanian's on board?"

"The orbital was basically Primaian, as always. Some to be sure."

"Sad really."

"Let us hope they did not die in vain."

All that was behind them was the radioactive afterglow. Pieces of twisted structural remnants were floating through space, along with hundreds of dead. Those who were outside in their suits still had a chance.

Prima

"Tellaris grows in wealth and splendour." Qatus remarked as he folded his hands over his protruding paunch. He sat back, satisfied with Zohex's progress. "A beacon of power, of strength, imbibing these...these beings...with a new found confidence. I don't know if that is what we actually want."

The three domain lords, Pentham, Qatus and Gharbel were watching the DV downloads on the Orbital above Prima. Kroena had set up an observation module amongst the astronomical arrayed surveillance blisters attached to the outer section of the orbital. Rather than meeting secretly within the orbital in a specially secured room, given the proximity to other personnel she had the DLs watch the progress of the simulacrum amongst the astronomers cupolas, studying astronomical events, undisturbed. No one would accidentally stumble upon them in the module. Not only that but a shuttle could pick them up without having to go through the hangars and airlocks where personnel could see their arrival and departures. It had not taken long for the engineers to rig up an extra airlock and transfer gangway. The computers re-running the gained data as isolated as the three DLs now watching Zohex organise the continent he ruled over.

They had gotten over Merduk's supposed defection. All was not yet lost. Gharbel wanting to go after him, which Pentham considered a mistake. It was better he was ignored. Let Merduk think his going over was of lesser consequence than he might have thought himself.

What was of interest, now that Zohex had consolidated his position as prime mover amongst these beings was the incursion of this bestial, almost maddened warlike race moving over the eastern continent, edging westwards, claiming the coastlines along the way, destroying most cities but keeping some as harbours to supply their armies, move their forces, rule over the stricken losers.

They saw that Zohex had strengthened the citadel. Triple layered walls surrounded his palace. Even the bricks used were covered with intricately designed spells to ward off the enemy. Granite building blocks chiselled laboriously with bas reliefs onto the surface giving the appearance of the singular god amongst the people. That caused a ripple of satisfaction from the three gathered lords watching in awe and wonder at the land spread out in front of them. The DVs had no problems holding the simulacrum as an independent entity.

"He is using art to spread the message." Qatus excited.

"Using fractured imagery to reveal the fractured nature of the many gods. And using the citadel, the temple, the priests to reveal that truly all that is revealed to the mind's eye is based on one solidary source: the unitary god." Gharbel figured out.

"Blessed be the supreme mind." Qatus intoned.

"This ziggurat the centrepiece of his cosmic power. Direct. Impressive. A forceful statement. The people see the outer authority vested in the celestial priests. Its orientation towards Polaris, the central star the verification of the unitary nature of the cosmos and all it contains." Pentham confirmed partly to himself and partly at being impressed at the immense success this created entity of theirs actually achieved. And last, that the Reganians were going along with the experiment without even a dissenting thought manifest amongst them. Maybe Merduk's dubious defection, Pentham was still wondering to himself if this was not some ruse of Merduk's, would play into their hands. Cause a little diversion to keep the Reganian's guessing, hoping, distracted from the overall plan they were now executing.

"Do you think he's learnt or remembered from us, our resonance now that he is putting a legal code in place as to who wears what colours according to their station?" Qatus asked watching with fascination the light screen's milieu spread out before them.

"And getting the soldiers to wear camouflage, remarkable." Gharbel added.

"Brilliant." Pentham impressed.

"For tax purposes." Qatus guffawed. "I like it."

"He's fracturing society whilst uniting it. Now that is sheer genius." Gharbel nodded sagely. "He found an egalitarian people which are now stratified according to various divisions of labour. Then he introduced the abstract concept of money replacing the barter system. And controlling the mines extracting precious metals he's creating an over-caste furthering the rupture amongst the people from each other. The pursuit of wealth an obsession in itself. Zohex rewards those who are useful to him thus consolidating his position even more. Not bad wouldn't you say?" Gharbel at his most loquacious. The other two agreed.

"The way he's organised the masses...ten year contracts, slaves who then get paid off. Keeps them in line, hooked for the reward."

"If they last Qatus." Gharbel laughed. Pentham surprised, Gharbel laughing, a rarity indeed. "Then with their rewards they become entwined within the social structure." Slightly shaking his head in amazement. "Brilliant."

Zohex was listening to a merchant. They had become the eyes and ears of his spreading empire. His face weather beaten for he journeyed with his ships, short cropped hair to avoid catching lice. The merchant told stories of wanton bloodshed which this rising dark race soaked their conquered lands in. Not wanton, even if it appeared as such, but selective. By allowing some trading cities to survive it created the impression amongst the vanquished of being chosen, selected to thus pay obsequence to the new rulers, willingly for their lives had been spared. They had their own gods of course. Even darker beings with black hearts. The representative vision of the destructive powers of nature, the invigorating wrath of war, the power of total domination.

Zohex, sitting in his splendid forecourt where those of use, those with intelligence both within and of the world allowed to present themselves in his august presence. Humble priests in the background. His chosen representatives aligned to his will. The merchant told his horror stricken audience of bloody deeds, of human sacrifices, of sinister shrines imbued with the shroud of death, a state exultant to the gods. The military race worshiped with determined fervour. There were rumours, the merchant continued of a secret archimage, a potent sorcerer who ruled with a malignant queen further east. The priests suppressed a gasp of shocked dismay for they imagined this powerful couple, who controlled vast armies as a potential threat. Zohex listened with complete concentration. Not dismayed by this turn of events. He questioned the merchant by what was meant when he revealed this distant sorcerer. One, the merchant replied steadfast in his deposition, who by secret arts controlled the forces of nature by calling upon the secret power of the universe. For everything was interconnected and linked. Manipulate that which energises the mind, thus creating the images to focus upon, extending that focussed will to achieve supreme power. Without the help of the gods? For Zohex was cautious in disseminating the unitary god he knew was the real ruler of the cosmos. This was no time to stray into religious themes or theological disputation. With or without the merchant replied. It all had to do with power. Tainted, dark, fearful, potent, irresistible. Zohex relaxed. It was obvious to the domain lords that Zohex considered himself more than equal to the challenge.

"You think he will use this knowledge?" Qatus asked worried that this strange, sombre and baleful revelation could unhinge their project.

"We hope he will use it." Gharbel replied, almost insisting Zohex go down this dark path of destruction. "Use this military race to subdue that planet's inhabitants." The Cosmic Mind was truly magnificent in having created on that Earth the answer to their problem.

Gharbel voided the screen. For a while no one said anything.

"It looks as if our prayers have been answered. That dark race, with its occult powers might be the answer necessary to contain these dangerous sentients." Pentham spoke for all of them.

"I have it from Eta that given their strange psychology, the dark is part of their make up. I am glad she sees things clearly. We must use that orientation with Zohex's guidance to vanquish, to extinguish if necessary their heretical tendencies regarding the future. If we can imbue them with this dark effusion then nature will do the rest." Gharbel calculating.

"There is a certain deranged symmetry in this." Pentham answered. "It might go against our thinking but then again Earth is a strange planet. So strange devices have to be used to achieve our aim. I think Zohex is on track here."

Gharbel agreed. "Plan, anticipate, act."

"A remarkable achievement so far. Tellaris value neutral. Socially stratified. Along comes a dark force, exactly what is necessary for our intentions to make sure the Earther's don't go down Regum's path. Earth's evolution must be aligned, channelled into that of this blood maddened insane race. I would urge caution." Pentham waited, but Gharbel was content to listen, as did Qatus. "By that I mean we don't show an interest in this occultly endowed couple. I'm sure they will reveal themselves in good time. The last thing we want is to trouble them. Keep their darkness pure. Thus events will fall into place as we desire. At best remove obstacles in their path to world domination. There Zohex must help."

"I'm sure he will." Gharbel certain as always.

"We must put in place conditions whereby this archimage and his queen are attracted to Zohex or vice versa."

"Agreed Lord Pentham."

"What if this does come to pass? You noted how the cosmos was included. That means us." Qatus a little uncertain.

"In what way?" Gharbel wondering what Qatus was on about.

"They might influence our resonance." Qatus said meekly.

"Nothing the DVs cannot handle. They are only Earthers."

Qatus satisfied with that.

"Even if let us say it comes to a conflict between Zohex and this strange couple, that in itself will siphon their energies into the destruction we envision for them. Either way

the plan is on track." Gharbel stated as if he had seen into the future. Maybe he had Pentham considered.

"Merduk so impotent." Qatus continued the conversation.

"Good." Gharbel answered. "What was he prior to this? A minor tutor at some distant seminary. Chosen originally because of his heretical alignment to Reganian abstractions. Now that things are moving in the opposite direction on Earth there is not much for him to do, can do. Outmanoeuvred."

"Yes, not a major player. Of less significance now. But necessary to watch just the same."

"Of course Pentham. Well it has been a fruitful session." Gharbel well pleased.

"Perhaps the DVs should explore this hidden archimage?" Qatus suggested.

"He's right Gharbel, what do you think?"

"The simulacrum is aware. For the moment that is enough. We will let the future be as is, for now. Why interfere if things are moving as we wish?"

"That is true." Qatus concurrent as well.

A bleep on the com-link. Urgent flash. Gharbel the senior domain lord took the call. His face went graven. His eyes darted, excited, agitated. Then he regained control.

"The orbital over Novus is no more."

They looked perplexed. Then aghast. No one said anything. Asking the obvious would not explain the disaster.

"Sabotage? Or an accident?" Pentham finally breaking the silence. He was worried if they were in any danger.

"A bit confused, the situation. As you know Novus was to come under our jurisdiction. From what little information was retrieved from the ground stations, for all the orbital's data is lost, a huge series of explosions ripped it apart. Missiles. And a rogue ship. That is all that is known at the moment."

"Reganians." Qatus face contorted in suppressed anger.

"Or Novanian's doing their dirty work." Gharbel replied. "with their own people on board as well. Never in our history would I have thought to be witness to such a heinous crime. This, my lords, takes the struggle to a new level."

"I'll see what I can dig up." Pentham composed himself. He was stunned.

"Good. Keep me informed." Gharbel rose.

The meeting over. There was no point in speculating so early on. The truth would be revealed. Then they would know how to react. With or without the pontiff's blessing. Gharbel had long considered, as had Pentham on how to neutralize Regum. If they were

behind this horrific act then his conscience was assuaged in what he was configuring as a possibility regarding Reganian domination of space. Not just bring down their Web, but bring down the whole rotten planet. He had discussed this with Pentham in the abstract and Pentham had not been hostile to such extreme measures regarding crashing the Web. Gharbel doubted, if Regum was behind this act of homicidal destruction that Pentham would object to teaching Regum what it meant to invoke Prima's wrath.

Qatus was disturbed as well. This was a loss of equilibrium. He hated conflict no matter who caused it. The last thing he wanted was for Prima to make some counter-move. That could set off a whole series of events which could easily spiral out of control. With Regum's assured position in space, with their orbitals which they needed if Prima was to remain in space the last thing he wanted was for them to be turfed out. Limited to their planet. What was needed now was nimble diplomacy, to defuse the situation, not inflame it. He hated this development. His inertia screamed at being disturbed in his serenity. This was indeed a bad omen. Very bad.

Skias, in his secular robes, looked at the decaying body of Telafus. Either his body was shrinking, his clothes hanging limp or his head was expanding. They were sitting in the vast gardens, more a park at Skias's asylum. Nurses kept their distance when the pontiff made an appearance, deferentially remaining in the background. Overhead clouds scudded across the windy sky. Skias sat with Reno watching Telafus's drooling expression. Sad and disgusting how such an exalted mind could be brought so low. Reno was here because Skias was worried. If Telafus's state was due to something within the Immortals it might well effect the masses at large. As such he wanted Reno's appraisal of the situation on the ground. He was relieved when Reno had no news regarding the shrines or its supplicants. All was well.

Sitting on benches under a huge tree the two of them watched Telafus mumble to himself. And this with a regimen of drugs prescribed by Taruk. Officially the prognosis was schizophrenia but Skias thought otherwise. More possessed than anything else. Telafus had touched something with his divine resonance. Had ventured into some strange domain, some hidden realm within the Immortals. Regarding the Immortal here. On the surface tranquillity resonating as always. There were continually minor perturbations hovering in the background state of the Immortals, but that never affected holy seekers. Until Telafus ventured into their holy domain.

Telafus indifferent if not oblivious to his surroundings. His fevered mind struggled with incessant thoughts pouring out of him, disjointed ramblings from which little sense

could be gleaned. Taruk of course wanted to be present in case Telafus became too agitated but Skias managed to dissuade him today. He wanted to know what Telafus actually knew. It had to be something that was beyond their ken. Skias was concerned that it could be some destabilizing force at work. If that was so then security would eventually have to be informed. Thus Reno's presence.

"I'm thinking of an alien resonance within the Immortals domain Reno."

Reno listened, relaxed in the pontiff's presence. It was most unusual to be called into his divine orbit. The last thing Skias wanted was some obsequious vapid servant agreeing with whatever came from the his lips. Reno was only surprised that his boss, Janon was not here. Reno was ops. So once Skias questioned Reno about the possible effects on the other holy sites Reno understood where Skias was coming from. Janon after all got his information from him, in the abstract. Skias wanted the raw data, the details.

"The DVs of course blame the alien incursion Reno."

"They might be right." His department received very little there.

"Telafus stumbled upon a hidden domain perhaps. A new manifestation which the DVs are not aware of."

"May I speak frankly pontiff?"

"The reason you're here." Skias replied expansively.

"Thank you. It could be Telafus's mind."

"I am considering that avenue. Unfortunately if that is the case then the implications are horrendous."

"For Telafus?"

"For the office man. A pontiff going insane?"

"Oh yes. My apologies."

"I've made subtle enquiries amongst the Dominus, the Ecclesiastics, more to the point the Divines and DVs of course. Needless to say I've drawn a blank. So here is a little suggestion. Can you find out, amongst the files, the data banks if something is being withheld, secreted? It could well be that in this initial stage information is being held back prior proper verification or release. Held back by design and caution. You have full access of course."

"Thank you pontiff."

"It's not that I don't trust the others. But even if the truth is unpalatable it needs to be aired. There is of course another reason...my sanity." He gave a wan smile. Reno understood.

"Now regarding Telafus. So far everybody on the planet thinks he has passed on. Security is holding there. But we cannot let it be known that the pontiff is conferring with a mental patient. Possessed by a holy fire is more apt. I have informed Dr Taruk that that is the prognosis."

Reno nodded. Birds twittered in the trees. Telafus's overwrought mind took momentary solace as he gazed into the tree's crown.

"Not only that. But the way the pontiff is chosen might be questioned. A failure of proper procedure. The Ecclesiastics would love that. Get one over the Divines. So if they ever find out then as far as I'm concerned Telafus is conversing with the Divine Mind. Unfortunately it is too much for any of our less than perfect minds. Thus his distorted ramblings. Each expression holy."

"Yes."

"The divine essence overflowing. As we are witnessing. Now in his present condition," as Telafus rambled on, Skias momentarily in thought continued, "having him ascend into the holy domain would be somewhat fraught with difficulties. The DVs might, might that is, be correct that he really is under the alien influence. Taruk is not saying one way or another. If that is the case, big if Reno then Telafus fell. If the pontiff falls then no one is safe. That's what your people have to watch out for. I know the priests are there for that but well, let us say we need a fresh approach, a new perspective."

"I am humbled by your confidence."

"Don't be. Be alert."

"Of course pontiff."

"You know Reno, Telafus and I go back a long way. I want to see him healed."

"A burden."

"There is something else as well. So far it is only speculation of course. But there is a pattern in all this. It looks like chaos on the outside but seems part of a design on the inside. Now whether that is Telafus's design or something other is still open to interpretation. Let us say if this bears out it does not fit into what we have thought, spiritually, cosmically even."

"Oh?"

"Indeed. Telafus is going on about a coming saviour. Only he seems privy to that. So what does that mean? Are the Immortals self resurrecting? The Divine Mind actually moulding a representative to see us through these difficult times? Can there be such a being at all? A new evolutionary stage perhaps? No one knows. The DVs certainly don't

and neither do the Divines. So it comes back to Telafus's disturbed mind. Is his ego trying to break out?"

"Or is this a glimpse into the future?"

"Yes."

Reno made eye contact with Telafus. His shining black orbs imbued with infinite realms on the brink of creation. He looked away, disturbed, unnerved. The visage an enervated mask of impending death. Living in a nightmare dominion where a conspiracy gestated. Reno shuddered involuntarily.

"He has that effect on me as well."

"You sense something...stupendous?"

Skias sighed. "I do Reno."

They watched his shifting moods, his confusion which expressed itself so potently in his radiating eyes. A dark fire burning, searing his soul. Burdened with a terrible secret. Grunting guttural exclamations. Panic stricken.

"It's like a part of the cosmos has opened itself only to him. If only he could spell it out." Looking at Telafus. "Sad really and frustrating. Entangled in something we cannot reach. Dare not reach."

"They are taken." Telafus said, suddenly coherent.

"Who my friend? Us? Regum, Earth?"

"All under his thrall. Time fractured. He will soon be upon us. There is no escape. He is coming, as it has been, as it is, as it will be."

Telafus was breathing rapidly, animated.

"What Telafus, what?"

A thin icy smile. "Nothing can stop him."

"Who?"

"He is hidden yet present, everywhere. I know of his design. He is all." Then he fell into his convoluted demonic visions. Jabbering nonsense.

"You were lucky Reno. One of his rarer lucid moments. Always the same. No need to expand."

"Hm."

"He speaks of this coming person, imbedded with celestial power."

"Maybe it is to be."

"Maybe. But given what we know, how can a sentient being be simultaneously divine? It would be next to impossible. One cannot be half divine, like being partially

pregnant. The divine is complete, we as living beings are not. It's that, that bothers Telafus. And me."

"A divine vessel. Even the Immortals are mere gateways to the divine, not the divine itself."

"You understand Reno. I'm glad."

Telafus shrieked. In the distance some nurses turned. The tortured howl turned into cackling laughter.

"He is supreme." Telafus blurted.

"You see?"

"I do."

"He will be everywhere. That is why he can never be found. But I know where he is, where no one can see him." A sly expression on Telafus's face.

"If you know Telafus, then so can we. Can we not share your vision?"

"Maybe, if he wills it." Then he became angry. "Why do you incarcerate me? Because of your fear. He will take your power for he is the power. I can wait. It makes no difference for I am in communion with him. And he will be supreme." Breathing hard. Then his eyes were suffused in dread. Lost in his strange resonance. "The Great Mind is not so great. But it will be greater with his manifestation. It will be over soon. Then it will be everything as now it is nothing." Then slumped over seemingly asleep.

Skias waved to the nurses. They hurried over, one with a medikit whilst the other felt his pulse, opened an eyelid. They shook their heads.

Telafus was dead.

Skias said a prayer for his deceased friend. Reno closed his eyes trying to obliterate Telafus's nightmare world.

"The Cosmic Mind has released him from his sufferings. Travel well my friend." Skias said at last. "Nurses, bury him right now. Let him sleep in the bosom of the earth. I have prayed for his soul. There is nothing else we can do for him. He is with his maker."

They nodded.

"Come to my office please."

They walked away from the eviscerated shell that once was Telafus.

Back in his office Skias regained his composure.

"How is your science? Your psychology Reno?"

"Basic Skias."

"What we need to do is be aware of other such disturbed minds. In the asylums, at the Immortal shrines."

"I understand. What about the priests?"

"Nothing. If they are informed of what to look for, some of them will make it up to curry favour. We need clear-headedness now, not some spiritual...you follow?"

Reno was not shocked in that Skias dismissed the divine which, when considered expanded the mind into its eternal realm. Yet what was happening was the temporal being disturbed. Telafus its vessel, one broken, seared by some seething energy which Skias hoped had limited itself to Telafus's riven domain.

"Indeed I do pontiff. And Janon?"

"He is to be notified. You can break the sad news."

"Lord Pentham?"

"Naturally. I will see that Lord Gharbel and Qatus are in the know as well. Later perhaps. I want to keep a lid on this. If this is a mental plague then the less anybody knows of Telafus's ramblings the better. In fact we are not even having this conversation."

"I'm good at forgetting pontiff." Reno half smiled.

Skias was satisfied Reno would keep this experience amongst the upper domains. Since Telafus, officially, had already passed on his dreadful end would remain within the walls of the asylum.

"Now, so far I assume those who have fallen into heresies have not duplicated Telafus's mind set."

"Not so direct, no. Reports indicate, and here Lord Pentham would have the overview..."

"I'm asking you Reno. You are the intelligence on the ground."

"Thank you for the confidence. Some are obsessed with a dark mind twisting their sanity into convoluted realms. Disquieting dreams, fluid hallucinations, aberrant visions. Those we pick up anyway. We put that down to the alien resonance."

"Keep it that way."

"Done. I assume I should inform you if there are certain signs?"

"Yes. Through normal channels."

"Janon and Lord Pentham."

"Yes."

"A coming." Reno mused. "A new domain in the cosmos?"

"That depends on the astronomers. No fall out there, psychologically I mean. Which makes me wonder if this is not..."

"Some fantasy."

Skias remembered the incident at the ground station. The unfortunate death of Roshati. That had never been explained. All the relevant data deleted. Even he, the supreme spiritual head of Prima denied its contents.

"That's for the doctors to decide."

"And what do you think?"

"Me pontiff?" Reno was taken by surprise.

"Indulge me."

"Very well. The universe is what it is. If we have missed something then that is our lack of perspective. What Telafus was wrestling with is a condition of the mind. And whatever happened when he was communing with the Immortal. I'd have that holy fane checked out. Maybe it is attracting something. Maybe the Immortals are creating a new realm. Maybe they have combined their essences into one. Maybe that is what Telafus is all about, was I am sorry to say."

"Excellent Reno. My thoughts exactly. I have sealed it off by the way."

"Your caution is to be applauded."

"Glad you concur."

"Given what happened to one of the greatest minds on the planet."

"Any movement from the Reganians?"

"None pontiff."

"Well that rules them out."

"Yes."

"Even our holy books mention none of this."

"You mean this so-called divine birth."

"Yes. It does not make sense. One cannot be totally divine yet inhabit a less than perfect mind, never mind the body that comes with it."

"No wonder Telafus was so torn."

"Obsessed."

"Obsessed." Reno agreed.

"At least we know the symptoms."

"I will keep a look out."

"No notes either."

"What if cases do appear?"

"Refer them to me. That goes for Janon as well. If he wants he can check with me on that one."

"I shall inform him of your wishes pontiff."

Qatus hated secrets. It bothered him. An unnecessary distraction. The notion just in itself disturbing his balance. Gharbel of course thrived on subterfuge. Pentham merely dealt with it, using information to maintain his domain. But Qatus was the Outer Guardian. The idea of the simulacrum, now an individual entity posed certain problems, indicated latent possibilities. Qatus wondered if they had thought this experiment through. Going to Earth, linking by means of the DVs might bring their alien thinking into their sacred realm. Create a focal presence, another resonance, an alien one at that. For the simulacrum appeared on the surface at least to have gone native. Sooner or later, he had thought long and hard, it might influence the DVs overall mission: keeping the alien resonance at bay. Now they had a conduit in. It changed everything. He needed to be convinced by a higher authority that what this kabal was doing was for the best.

Pentham was not concerned. Zohex was over there. Distant in time and space. Yet present amongst them here, those who were linked. Even if only through secondary representative imagery, Zohex's created soul reverberated in the DV's minds. Gharbel considered it merely a construct. Intrinsically of no consequence, an apparition at best. But for Qatus it was real, it was alive, it had independent volition, it was a new force. One that could lead who knew where. The projections that were run indicated Zohex would dominate the continent, align it's inhabitants with that of Prima's resonance. What disturbed Qatus was the coming conflict. They were all aware Zohex had plans for that warlike race with their obsession to conquer, to destroy, to dominate the planet. Once achieved would they stop there? They were an occult race. That meant they had similar capabilities to his race. He sometimes wondered whether Gharbel even considered himself to be Primaian. His aloofness, his barely repressed hauteur distinguishing him as a being apart. Shades of Zohex. No wonder he was so readily amendable to the mission. What his intentions were Qatus could not guess. But he feared the worst. Gharbel would use any means to not just consolidate his domain but those of the other DLs as well. Which included himself. He was not about to hand over his realm that easily. Pentham of course would continue as always. His independence might be curtailed through Gharbel's but Qatus was not about to be subsumed. Not to become less. And since the Outer Realm was space, what they were doing on Earth fell into his territory. There was only one thing for it: see Skias.

Their lunch at his retreat had been most satisfying. Sitting with Skias on the patio, looking over the garden, the forest stretching away, the scene pleasant, relaxing, conducive to positive thoughts. Just how he liked it. Setting one at ease. Qatus in turmoil. Instead of coming straight out with it, what concerned him he had instead kept Skias amused during the meal about anecdotes regarding the foibles of the Divines, their singularity of mind which was in a way the bedrock of their spirituality.

"Your steamed fish was magnificent as always." Skias relaxing with a glass of wine. "And this drop, exquisite Lord Qatus."

"Please pontiff, you may dispense with the formalities."

"Of course. Now..." using his napkin to dab his lips, "there is something on your mind. Unless this is purely a social occasion."

"If it were pontiff we would not be alone." The time had come. He felt the butterflies in his stomach though the wine did relax him a little. It had also fired his imagination.

"I have some pertinent news. I don't know if your holiness is aware of it. But as Outer Guardian I feel it my duty to make certain events known to you. It may or may not affect us. But in a way I need guidance."

Skias was attentive.

"Some time ago a simulacrum was created." And waited to see how Skias would react. He merely arched his eyebrows. "Inserted on Earth." Waiting for the reaction. Nothing yet. "Along with an observer of ours, one Merduk."

"Am I aware of this person?"

"No pontiff but you will. You see he is on Regum. In fact the simulacrum was inserted using Reganian technology onto Earth. A secret mission. A secret I am revealing now."

"Interesting." Skias hiding his surprise. Whilst there was no ban regarding Earth this development was fraught with potential difficulties.

"The simulacrum has assumed an identity. Zohex."

"Curious."

"It, Zohex that is, is now undisputed ruler of a continent known as Telluris. I think. I'm referring to the name, not the events that are transpiring as we speak. The idea is to align the Earthers to our way of thinking."

"Commendable." An audacious undertaking.

"I don't know what control the Reganians have, not just this thing, but over Merduk. He is on Earth. We think he has defected."

"That is serious. But given how many of our kind are over there, meaning Regum one cannot not expect the odd person being seduced."

"I'm relieved your holiness is so calm."

"I assume you are less than serene concerning this project."

"I thought it best to acquaint you with the facts pontiff."

"And we thank you. Who else is involved?"

"Gharbel, Pentham and Darlos. Plus a group of DVs who are channelling the simulacrum's presence directly back. At the orbital of course."

"It's not under any threat?"

"So far this Zohex is focussed where he is."

"And will remain this way?" taking a sip of Qatus's delightful wine.

"Depending on what Merduk may do."

"What would that be?"

"We don't know if he has gone over or is only pretending."

"Or both."

"Something I am hoping is not the case."

"But you're not too sure."

"No one is and no one is saying. No one knows really."

"Tell me about this simulacrum." Skias remembering Telafus's last words. Perhaps Telafus's strange apparition, this coming divine being was nothing more than this entity which had been inserted onto Earth. It would explain that much at least. Even though Telafus's experience began at the Immortal shrine in the pontifical palace's grounds. Was the entity linked psychically with the Immortals? Was it active amongst them? His curiosity was piqued.

"Well, from what I can gather a group of DVs were tasked to create a blank presence. They succeeded. A bit like an ectoplasm." He looked at his glass of wine, the sun sparkling within its mellow liquid. He drained it. A wonderful vintage.

"This opens possibilities." Skias remarked and refilled his glass.

"We are learning a lot about the Earthers. I should inform you that a time was chosen prior their technological development. As we were millennia ago. When like them we believed in many gods."

"I assume this being will correct that defect?"

"It looks like it. But Zohex is not a preacher. The method is different to what we use on Regum." Without much success there Skias reminded himself. Maybe that experiment

was on the right track. If it worked on Earth then it could be applied to Regum. Skias was glad of Qatus's frankness.

"There is something else. One of the ideas of this being being there is also to keep Earthers busy amongst themselves. Not just delay their progress but curtail their, ahm unnatural inclinations as long as it takes."

"How is that intended then?"

"Earthers are diverse. Unlike us, unlike Reganians. There is a dark occult race amongst them, slowly spreading across a continent. Gravitating towards Tellurium where Zohex rules."

"And?"

"It is as if Zohex is allowing this warlike race to come to him, to destroy Tellurium."

"I think I'm beginning to understand. Tellurium if left to itself creates the conditions we most fear Earth to take. So by aiding, by whatever means these invaders a war will occur. One that will keep the Earthers busy. How long?"

"Well, almost forever. This dark occult race will vanquish Tellurium. That at least obviates their development. The invaders will rule with blood, with death, with fear. Total submission of the vanquished."

"Sounds good wouldn't you say Qatus."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Why?"

"They are a psychic race. They might influence us through the DVs."

"So the DVs curtail them. After all we have been doing this for quite some time. Not exactly novices. But something tells me you have certain thoughts."

"I'm just worried this new race, once dominant will continue."

"Continue where?"

"Everywhere where there is a world worth plundering."

"Ah, you mean we could be the next target, or Regum perhaps?"

"Yes pontiff."

"Then we must make sure that will not happen."

"What if Zohex becomes the supreme archimage? He is in a way our creation. Thus he knows our thinking, is attuned to our resonance. He might come back as a conqueror."

"This is based on future possibilities?"

"I could say yes. It is one of many. Not certain. It's me pontiff. I am worried that if this race wins it will spell trouble for us."

"You are right of course in bringing this matter up, even if a little prematurely. We thank you for that."

"Err, you are not, shall we say, less than happy that this project was instigated without your knowledge, pontiff?"

"Well I do know now."

"Only because I broke a trust."

"Rest your mind at ease. The Divine Consciousness guided you to this moment."

Qatus sighed with relief. He had worked himself up to this moment and when it finally came it was easier than he imagined. Relief indeed. He felt much better and poured himself another glass.

"So Earth will fall into incessant warfare?"

"That is the idea. With no time for contemplation, they will be busy merely assuring their survival. This dark race, if successful will keep them all in submission. Physically and mentally enslaved."

"Serving the singular god I hope."

"Yes, if Zohex's powers of persuasion works."

"You think the reverse might be true. That many gods will remain within their psyche?"

"It is not impossible."

"As long as they are prostrate Qatus, the essentials are in place. I am sure this inserted entity will do its best. Convince the new rulers that it was the Cosmic Consciousness to which they owe their victory. Then the lesser gods atrophy. It might take some time, but, well, we are masters of time are we not?"

"We are pontiff."

"Still a little unsettled."

"I'm just worried they will leak across..."

"Forewarned is forearmed Qatus. It is good you have unburdened your thoughts."

"Pontiff, can I as your source remain in the background?"

"Why of course. In fact we are indebted to you for making us acquainted with this most noble of endeavours. Rest assured, I will not betray your confidence."

"Thank you Skias. I apologize for the presumption of even asking."

"Think nothing of it Qatus. One will be interested in how Gharbel, Pentham and Darlos handle their intelligence."

"And the DVs."

"Yes. They should be sound enough not to fall under Earth's spell."

"So far they are holding Skias."

"They are our advance shock troops, our holy sentinels, our scouts and our deliverers. Tell me Qatus, is there a chance that Earth's race might be reduced to a subservient level so much so that they will remain there? With our help of course. What do the projections reveal there?"

"Very possible pontiff."

"But not certain."

"That is the trouble with the Earthers. Even after the calamitous hit by that huge meteor they survived. But now we are further ahead in time. Hopefully their ancient minds remember the asteroid hit. As a sign of divine wrath for worshipping false gods. And rebuild their world according to our design."

"Not so bleak after all."

"No pontiff."

What concerned Qatus was the possibility that their obsession with war might create diabolical machines of destruction. Technology could thus slip back in through the back door. If that were to occur it would be worse for Prima and maybe even Regum. Instead of a peaceful space exploring race they could instead be homicidal maniacs, occultly endowed. Usurping the DVs, cutting a path right through that protective mantle. Then Prima would have to rely on Reganian technology. Matters would be much worse than if they simply let the Earther's develop along their own destined evolutionary path.

A remote possibility but one that could not be entirely ignored.

Regum: Mission Earth

Sakaris on Sovark's suggestion connected to Merduk through the uplink at the research station. With the projected PWs holding Sakaris's recruitment from a pool of ex-Gamers was adequate for their needs. Pushing middle age that age group slowly dropped out of the Web due to the intensity of the contextual experience which burnt many out. Others addicted to the rush and the cerebral demands of the potency in the cyber environment left many depleted mentally. Total Webheads needing extrication. Maladjusted to the real world. A come down. Into base line reality devoid of the creative potential within the Web. Inside one built one's own world, connected to others, interphasing through individual configurations to become master of one's cyberlife. Reality the very opposite. Simply being out left many dissatisfied. The effort required in merely living, even though one could have what one wanted by ordering whatever one desired was not enough. Reality was found wanting.

Sovark was aware of the dichotomy mature aged Gamers such as Sakaris grappled with. Tasked with searching the data bases that tracked cyber-personalities Sovark could seek out astute, level headed Gamers who had control over their emotions. In the Web that run riot. An escape valve releasing ancient primitive urges. Satisfying the need to always get what one wanted without worrying about consequences. Gamers ruthless if their freedom was impinged upon. In the real world there had to be respect towards one fellow citizens. In the cyber world the converse held. Respect only for the dominant types. Sakaris was a blend of the two, balanced. Rare. Perfect for this mission's parameters.

No need for Sakaris to ascertain his mental equilibrium. His history, his legend in the Web testimony to his skills in evading conflict situations. Not indulging in overkill for the sheer fun of it. Sakaris belonged to a sub-set of Gamers who used the Web as originally intended: a learning experience. He had built up an academy within the Web where seekers of knowledge both contributed and extracted information. Building models of alternative worlds putting certain theories into practice to see how groups would evolve in select environments. A bit like a Petrie dish with designer inserted spawn.

Sakaris's cyber world similar to that of Earth in a future that probably would never eventuate. Aligned to research potential probabilities his inserted research centre toyed with arcane futures. That alone made him an excellent choice. Nor had he unduly interfered in his worlds as they evolved along basic algorithmic projections. It was not

about individual domination, the main theme of Gamers, but how the whole milieu unfolded, which dominant types evolved within the constricts of certain essential rules.

There were other Gamers of course as adapt as Sakaris. He though was one of the originators of the alternative-worlds scenario. Attracting academics from Central University, studying group dynamics. That led to the department of exo-life forms and their socially and environmentally evolved cyber-constructs. Inevitably Sakaris came to Sovark's attention.

Merduk the beacon and transmitting device staying in touch with Regum. But since the Primaian's were using their DVs at the orbital to run with Zohex, adding psychic energy to its inserted manifestation Sovark decided Merduk should have the same energizing back up. Add Sakaris's innate knowledge of alien ways of thinking, of puzzle solving, of intelligent utilization of their abstract environment the mere linking to Merduk would be relatively easy for Sakaris to concentrate upon. And there was the added benefit that Sakaris's knowledge of various possibilities which could become actualities regarding specific conditions evolving on distant Earth would be invaluable. Merduk had thus a veritable knowledge base to choose from if pertinent decisions had to be made.

Sakaris was fully briefed about the nature of the dual inserted personalities. A CI and a real sentient. Primaian at that. If there was some unforeseen set of dangerous consequences, either technical in loosing the link, psychological due to the combined resonance of the Earthers or the CI going rogue then it was better a Primaian was left stranded than one of their own. No conflict regarding expendability. Sovark satisfied the system would hold Merduk in place and extricate him if things went chaotic. Sakaris ready to upload Merduk with different paths of action to make sure he survived on Earth with the minimum of impact upon those whom he came in contact with.

Sakaris disengaged, unplugging and disentangling himself from the smart-ware recliner which linked him in the observation room to Merduk. Earth was not such an alien concept, not dissimilar to one of the worlds he had created in the Web. With one major difference. Two ruling archimages, one in the form of Zohex, the other an unknown quantity. What impressed Sakaris was the development of a live CI. That he had never considered. In his models, there was always a tendency of groups to form for specific tasks which coalesced then dissolved. Leaders appeared for the duration only, not as a permanent fixture. When he did run individual specific power groups entropy would overtake the whole scenario leading to monumental conflict scenario's, the making of war. The more powerful the individual the worse the result. It was as if the interaction that

was normal within a group ossified divergent thought processes into convergent disaster scenarios. That in turn made change, outer variables problematic where no problems ought to have been. Chaos projected outwards from within the selected group, speeding up what was repressed within a specific individual's domination of that group. Kingdoms became warring factions at odds with each other. In the end smaller groups were absorbed creating even further discord. Overreaction by those on the outside conflicted with the dominant group. It created a spiral of externalized violence until the dominant group won by sheer force. But that was only temporary for then the incessant change that was inherent in the universe began to fracture the dominant group. Civil wars broke out and the whole tedious cycle whereby the dominant personalities insisted on total control began all over again. In such a scenario any notion of progress was still born.

All manifesting on Earth. Zohex the archetype of one who insisted on prevailing, no matter what the cost.

Sakaris sitting with the team going over his initial impressions.

"The multiple personality scenario is vanishing." Sakaris began. "Merduk interestingly enough is holding out as an individual. Unaffected by the power of the CI. His assumption of a persona is...interesting. Ideally this whole experiment should really be in cyber-space."

"The Primaian's would have gone ahead anyway Sakaris." Marez informed him. "So obviously by going through us means that not only are we aware of their intentions but hopefully we can curtail whatever it is they are trying to achieve on Earth by being there. Somehow I don't think it's just academic. One thing certain is that this CI's intention is to rule Tellurium along Primaian lines. I also think," Marez looking at the group around the conference table, "it is not just how the Earthers react but and this is only a supposition, whether they could duplicate their experiment on Prima."

"Or Regum." Duncos added.

"It may not work to their advantage." Sakaris said thoughtfully. "I've detected an inbuilt duality in the CI. Inhabited by two beings. One the original construct and two its personality, which as you are aware is making itself presently felt. If this continues, natural group dynamics will arise. For a while that will hold but internal friction will fracture the unity achieved. A matter of time unless Zohex is balanced. In himself and in deed."

"And you can't see that happening." Irnet answered for him.

"Too early to tell. What is interesting is the internal configuration. Like hidden files, not active but not dormant either. Possible trigger mechanisms. The CI has intent which has gone volitional. How you want to deal with that..."

"So you're saying there is an agenda in place. Not just the insertion to study Earth but to, well, manipulate them?" Duncos aware of Prima's intentions. What they were failing to achieve on Regum they were attempting on Earth.

"Can Merduk balance out this intent?" Marez asked.

"Depends on his configuration."

"Not in the classical sense of active codes. A DV like projection, in phase, a complete superimposition. If Merduk were code based then it would be a simple matter of rewriting them. But you are suggesting something more complex. Something stronger. Something intentional beyond our control."

"Hm. The CI is potent. It did not take Zohex long to assume his domain over their priests. Straight to the centre."

"Using intuitive reasoning. Through the DVs." Irrnet concluded.

"Yes. No part is the whole. Or more specific, each part is part of the whole. So changing anything within the CI's domain will not have much of an effect on its orientation."

"We can always shut it down." Marez suggested. Except he knew the DVs would simply continue as they were. In a way the DVs didn't need the team at all. Yet initially they had been uncertain enough to ask for help. Regum supplied physical energy to the CI and now Merduk. If the plug was pulled the essence of Zohex would remain. Marez even considered that if Zohex's projected body went it, as an essence would simply move into the nearest entity that showed the same personality traits as that of the CI. Then they would have no control at all. A dilemma. He was glad Sovark had found Sakaris.

Sovark agreed with Marez.

"So far," Sakaris continued, "Merduk is the observer. Letting things develop. Wise. By being a nobody Zohex is uninterested. For the moment he considers Merduk of no importance."

"At least we can recall Merduk. Sakaris?" Irrnet asked.

"Sovark?"

"Yes. But back to developments. Merduk is going with the flow. So there are no extra external possibilities that would confuse the issue. Zohex is dominant. That distant

race across the ocean is growing in strength just as Zohex is. The two are entangled no doubt about it."

"So if Zohex was neutralised then so would that race?" Irnet queried.

"It may be too late for that."

"Hm." Sovark was not pleased. "The CI has adjusted like an EAI. Blending in seamlessly. Displaying Primaian tendencies to think along their ideological lines of reasoning. Whilst acting like the locals. Which of course is its intent. Nothing to indicate what Zohex's real intent is."

"From my studies, if Zohex becomes supreme in all aspects then this occult race across the ocean will entangle itself. In a way they are drawn to the power Zohex exudes. That might be the whole reason for Zohex's being there. A test run for either their own planet, bolstering their pontiff or as Irnet said, next destination Regum." Sakaris elucidated.

"Not Earth then?"

"Marez." Duncos looked at him as if to say 'really'.

"Why Earth? Why then?"

"If I may."

"Go ahead Sakaris."

"Earth has many possibilities. Prima is trying to align them with their way of thinking. Not the way they are on our planet. It's obvious that that is not working. So by going into a time in history where Earth will be in flux, where potentialities manifest Prima is making sure a certain time line manifests which makes them feel comfortable. Pure politics people." Sakaris was certain.

"Yet we know Earth will explore space. Which gives me hope." Marez reminded them.

"As things are now." Sakaris informed him. "But if Earth is at a crux and they turn to religion instead of technology then you may find their future will not be as it is. And they won't be the wiser. They'll simply have developed differently."

"The probability fields." Sovark revealed.

"Different actualities falling into place. It could even effect us."

"But then this experiment at our end would not be occurring. Even this conversation."

"You are very correct Duncos. So far so good then." Sakaris smiled.

"Still, even though Zohex has introduced the concept of a unitary god he has not interfered with the people, their beliefs, their knowledge, their way of life. If anything he has consolidated it." Marez slightly puzzled.

"It really depends on that other race. They might win. That might be Zohex's intention. Not his doing, but theirs."

"Duncoss could be right." Sakaris agreed. "It is in the realm of the possible."

"So we are faced with some unpalatable futures." Sovark continued. "Zohex lets Tellurium be destroyed. Zohex becomes the ruler of Tellurium and defeats the enemy. Satisfied with the conquest. Two powerful kingdoms become one on the planet. Then if technology intervenes we are back to scenario one. A showdown. So technology has to stay out of the picture to maintain the status quo for the Primaians. Earthers stay non technological. In the end it will be their doom. Meteor hits, climate change due to their sun's cyclical changes, their planet's erratic progress, their position at their galaxial location moving through hydrogen rich space could doom them easily enough. It's the same for any race. Be techno-secure or face extinction. No planet unless protected by artificial means can continue indefinitely. A precondition applying to all intelligent life. Praying won't deflect a meteor, will not change hostile environments in space or effect solar cycles let alone near space supernova's."

"Never mind a potentially hostile race threatening Tellurium Marez." Sovark agreeing with Marez's quick summing up of Earth's precarious situation.

"There is some hope. The occult is a precursor to science as we understand it." Irrnet reminded them.

"Except this race is homicidal Irrnet. If they get technology then the future of Earth is worse than Zohex's presence no matter what the Primaian's intentions are." Sovark worried about this can of worms they were landed with.

"Which leaves Merduk." Sakaris suggested.

"Indeed. But if he acts, reveals himself, he becomes a beacon and attracts Zohex's attention. If they are mutually incompatible or if Zohex sees Merduk as some sort of infringing element, a threat to his domination, an opposing ideology or merely as an opposition to his aims then we will be really taking this fight to them. Which is not our intention."

"Sovark, the Primaians started this."

"Irrnet, correct. We are now complicit. Whether we like it or not. The trick is to let Earth develop according to their own dreams, their own ideals, their own pursuit of knowledge."

"Sovark, Prima has no intention of letting them develop along our or their evolutionary path. That much I can guarantee." Duncos certain of her analysis.

"That is the problem." Sovark agreed.

"A hornet's nest." Irnet a little dismayed.

"Well, at least we are aware of the potential outcomes. I think more modelling will have to be done." Sovark focussing on the future.

"There is another possibility." Duncoss suggested.

"Oh?"

"The SS 1."

"Yes?" Sovark reluctant to reveal anything at all. It was still so secret that hardly anybody on Regum was aware of its construction, let alone its reason for being built in the first place.

"With the extra energy available...using PWs..." Duncoss hinted.

"I am aware of the potential." Sovark replied without expanding. He knew what Duncoss was thinking. Insert not just a persona, or a CI but one preferred possibility out of all the potential actualities at any given moment in any designated target area in space. Put in place a future of Earth which was an actual probability according to their created conditions. Fast track what Prima wished to negate. It was one of the reasons for the SS 1. Not with Earth as their primary concern but their own planet. It would, if successful negate the influence of the DVs. It might even negate Prima as a force in themselves.

"Prima can still undo it all Sovark. They might not know that PWs exist or how they apply but they know how to use them. The DVs are proof enough." Duncoss reminded them all. "The future can be ours. Let the Primaian's play their game on Earth. If we can secure our destiny it will not matter whatever short term achievements they might attain."

"I wish I had your certainty Duncoss." Sovark gave her a weak smile. He knew that with the success of the CI's insertion their theories were sound. The applications worked. Duncoss was correct. Using PWs on a larger scale was merely an extension of what they were doing here. But as the Primaian's did insert a CI, then they could easily insert a persona and move events on any planet, within any civilisation along their desired path. Thus their use of PWFs was merely catching up to what the Primaians were able to do anyway. Manipulate whole worlds. It was almost a *reductio absurdum*. Prima engages in point A, Regum follows with point B and so on. An infinite regression. No winners just an eternal struggle unto the end of time.

"Duncos, any idea what this is about?" Sovark asked as the VAV flew them from the research centre to the City.

"As your official observer the call was as much as a surprise to me as it was to you." Duncos answered. That she worked for intelligence Sovark already guessed. An oversight committee, a specialist task force dealing with extra-terrestrial contact scenario's did not come totally out of the blue.

"They are following events regarding the effects DV activity is having not just on Regum but also on Earth." Duncos explained. Below the forest spread out as far as the horizon.

"How much clout do they have?"

"Well I don't even know if they answer to a minister. If they're from the Representative Council it will be an interesting experience."

"Politicians." Sovark readying is approach. "And nothing said as to what it is they wish to discuss?"

"Discuss Sovark. Let's hope it's only that."

"Surely they're not going to interfere in policy."

"That cannot be discounted. My guess it's some busybody on the Ruling Council who's got wind of our activities. That we can easily deal with. If however it's the execs then we are at the mercy of their whims."

"Somehow I'm thinking this is not going to be easy."

"Why is that?"

The VAV was flown by a pilot who had his head wrapped in a HID system. Even if he overheard their conversation they knew his discretion was assured. Unless whoever was interested in the project wanted it to be leaked, for whatever gains they considered opportune.

"The vagueness of the request."

"Order you mean."

"Request, order. At least they're being polite."

"Yes, well. And no call for data."

"Means they're concerned. Even mentioning what information they want would get you ready with your answers. It could be an ambush."

"Just what we need. Before I forget," Sovark looking casually at the trees below, "nothing about the SS 1. They can bring it up if they want, we know nothing."

"Fine by me. This whole thing could be academic you know. Some think tank from the uni. Who knows they might have data for us that is so sensitive it can't be passed on through even our tight security."

"Meaning they bypassed you."

"Until now. I'm surprised they asked for me as well."

"Maybe new instructions."

"It might be just that. Then of course there is Prima to consider. After all Merduk is one of their citizens. Maybe they want him back."

"Putting pressure on us."

"That would be their usual way. Amendable, then coercive."

"Unless they have concocted something..."

"Which we have to answer. I have thought of that." Duncos staring into the blue sky ahead. "Has any of our data been passed on?"

"No."

"And yet they didn't request any." Coming back to where they started. "How you gonna handle it?"

"Meaning?"

"How much you gonna tell them?"

"How much will you?" Sovark countered, smiling though.

"You know that I'm under different orders to you. I'm security. Make sure no alien influence effects us. You are more a filter, see what is useful what isn't."

"You got that right."

"It might simply be that the Primaian's want an update relating to Merduk. He has excommunicated himself. They probably think he's defected and want him back. We'll be given a lesson in diplomacy, extricate Merduk and continue. No big deal. Now that we know it all works we can send in one of our own."

"If we know who was interested in us we'd know what they want."

"Yet they didn't, which means they...well we just discussed that. Maybe peace and harmony is about to break out."

"Yes and Prima recalls their priests. Sure Duncos."

"Do I detect a touch of cynicism?"

"You got that right. You'd think someone would have come out to us. Unless we are being relieved of our duties."

"Reassigned? Hm, maybe."

"Or the Cosmic Consciousness talked to the Primaians and said: get them out. This is my turf."

"Funny."

They were over the bright wheat fields slowly being harvested. Rail cars lining up at the silos, stretching along the steel tracks. The VAV steered north.

"Looks like we were wrong. Not political."

"Because we're not heading for the City itself Duncos?"

"My guess it's either the uni or some offshoot."

"Let's hope so."

In the distance the pale outline of the high rise buildings came into view. They skirted the outer suburbs, heading away from the centre. The sun reflecting of the solar panels. The VAV hovered over a series of low rise buildings set in a park then descended onto the marked LZ blowing dust and dirt everywhere. Security guards cleared the area. Straight out of the VAV, the doors swung open the engines whined down.

"Well at least we're not being detained."

"Why is that?" Sovark asked.

"Otherwise our transport would have left."

"Still might." Sovark saw a smart dressed suit approach them from the foyer of the building. Nothing to indicate what his function might be.

"Tuvlev." He identified himself. "I'm here to escort you to the meeting." He looked like somebody's secretary. Young, prim, neat, formal.

"Thank you. Lead the way." Sovark relaxed.

Inside they got into a lift, iris scanned, then descended. Duncos was impressed. A secret meeting. Rare. Maybe not in Sovark's field but definitely hers. Into a corridor, mute security bots in attendance, their electronic eyes staring blankly at them. Past plain doors. Tuvlev walked right to the end, touched the wall with the palm of his hand, it opened into an outer office where a young woman glanced up from her work station, merely nodded and waved them through. The second door hissed open entering a conference room. Deep underground. Away from search systems, rogue intruders or real time prying eyes.

The table was large, empty, not a computer or scrap of paper in sight, greeted by just one man. He didn't bother to rise. So they sat across from him, a united front Sovark hoped. Tuvlev sat next to him. Of late middle age, relatively smooth face, roving grey eyes, slicked back grey hair he introduced himself as Hern. Introductions over Hern ready to formulate what he wished to say.

"Disturbing." Was all he said. Duncos and Sovark decided to wait. See what was actually disturbing him. "Now that is only an opinion," Hern continued at last. Neither of them spoke. Tuvlev merely sat there, expressionless.

"Reality can have that effect." Sovark said at last. He knew what Hern was alluding to: their experiment. Should he have cleared it with the execs? He was under the impression that had been done.

"When running against the grain." Hern being oblique.

"Matter of perspective I would have thought." Sovark establishing his position.

"It's the CI. Within a week it already is dominant."

Sovark was a little taken aback in that their information was known here.

Wherever here was.

"Who accessed the data?"

"Who hasn't?"

"What?" Duncoss astounded. She thought their station was secure.

"It's in WebSpace."

"How? We're not aware of it."

"It's the CI's programme. Primaian intentions. They are crowing."

"So the secret is out." Duncoss realized.

"Afraid so. Luckily the Gamers think it just another data-realm."

"Another cyber world." Duncos hoped.

"Indeed, yes. In a way it might be for the best. My concern, however is how to manage the data."

"I'm at a loss at how it came out. We are sealed. Supposedly." Sovark replied.

"You might be, but Earth and the CI is not."

"Can the Gamers influence the scenario.?" Sovark focussing on the fall out.

"No. The CI is too tight. One can watch but not touch. Not in the Web anyway. The Gamers will loose interest. Just a 3 D backdrop."

Duncoss was relieved.

"And?"

"Who gave you permission to enter Earth?"

"I did." Sovark admitted. He was not going to drag Marez into it. He was the team leader. He had consulted other scientists and exo-planetary specialists. The sciences really unsupervised simply because everything was disseminated. There were no secrets regarding knowledge. Except this project and the building of the SS 1 and it's cyber companion.

"I assume you ran the probabilities?"

"I did."

"Using a Primaian construct."

"They would have done it anyway. Using their DVs. They came to us. It would have been self defeating to turn them down."

"So now they know of our insertion techniques."

"Good. That'll give them something to worry about."

"You know this effects the delicate balance between our two planets."

"It shouldn't."

"It is."

"Well then, it is. If not this then something else. You know the Primaians by now. They don't need excuses. They fabricate them. An obsession of theirs in case you haven't noticed Hern."

"And another Primaian by the name of Merduk in as well. Would you consider this not a little unusual?"

"What is unusual Hern is Prima."

"Agreed. But surely the last thing we want is for them to know..."

"Our intentions?"

"Correct."

"We have none. Pure observer status only."

"But you know that is not so."

"The CI. What's it going to do?"

"Destroy Tellurium."

"Hern. My team has studied Earth's history. Maybe we should have put that in the Web. We really did want to keep this hidden more from them than us. Anyway, Tellurium was destroyed either way. It was later remembered on Earth as Atlantis. Those who escaped started new civilizations which after some painstaking millennia..."

"Yes, I am aware of the possible time lines."

"You mean it's in flux?"

"Thanks to the CI's insertion."

"I don't know how solid your quantum science is Hern, but ultra-reality, for a better word cannot itself be undone. Emphasis though can be changed."

"Which is what the CI is doing."

"We have Merduk as the observer, the control, the base line."

"That too is a problem. How do you know he's not a sleeper? A latent insert?"

"Pretending to be on side with us?"

"Indeed."

"Is he?"

"If it's any consolation, the CI will crash, eventually, Merduk left stranded."

"Really?"

"One possibility."

"So the CI will come unstuck."

"Maybe."

"I know what you are saying. Prima should not be there, neither should we. The law of non-interference Sovark."

"Remember Hern, Prima went in not us. Don't forget had they gone in solo it might have been much worse."

"I cannot dispute that. You should have come to us though."

"I don't even know who you are." Sovark challenged.

"An oversight group."

"If you want us to extricate ourselves Hern, just say so," knowing that once the SS 1 was operational even this conversation would not matter. Trump Prima for starters. Keep Earth and any other planet the Primaian's gravitate to out of their control. "Don't forget Hern we are learning from them as well. I thought the idea was to isolate Prima, not ourselves."

"By aiding them?"

"I thought I'd just explained..."

"You have. Let's say Merduk is with us. That will set of an insertion run as who can best who."

"Yes I know."

"And still you wish to go down this path?"

"If only to keep the Primaians out. Or reduce their influence."

"Commendable I'm sure." Hern not sounding completely convinced. "There are three possibilities. One Prima aligns Earth. The means trouble for us. Two Earth aligns with us. That means trouble for us because it will put Prima off. And three, Earth develops along their own lines. They end up linking with both our planets. The status quo is maintained."

"Assuming Prima keep their heads out of it. Not much chance of that wouldn't you say Hern? Like the priests infesting our planet, hm?"

"We shift our priorities."

Sovark hoped it would not be an order.

"Enlighten the Primaians."

"Hern whilst I agree...isn't there a flaw in your logic. One moment you're saying we're not to influence any world and yet now, Prima becomes our target."

"Well, yes, pushing that logic would make it look somewhat shaky. But our two worlds have been interacting since day one. Since we emigrated. The point is this Sovark: let them see Earth is no threat."

"What about their ahm, wars?"

"In space they will be united Sovark."

"This is certain?"

"Assuredly so." Which it wasn't. But for the near future, the next few centuries, maybe millennia the answer was positive.

"I see. So do we shut ourselves out now that they have the CI in place?"

"Unfortunately no. This has to play out. The certainty of the CI going down looks good. Then this run ceases to exist. After that we target Prima."

Sovark felt Duncos relax.

"There is something else to consider."

Here come the conditions.

"It's a bit metaphysical. But relates to PWFs." Hern began. "It's like this. We know there are no concrete absolutes in reality. The universe is constantly changing. We are constantly changing, affecting change. Now this may sound as an oxymoron but there are two relative absolutes in play. It's semantics really." Allowing himself a thin smile. "The primary relative absolutes within our minds. A carrier wave containing information, knowledge, our expanding consciousness. The more we know the greater the universe appears to us. So the universe is in our heads as much as it is out there. Prima has one definition, we have ours. As our concepts are far more inclusive as opposed to their exclusiveness then by rights we will come out on top. Short of resorting to brute force. If that were to occur and we loose then they win. But that is not on the horizon. A distant possibility, yes, but we don't think they will resort to such extreme measures. Two cosmic views, each psychologically valid. *Whoever has the greater consciousness dominates the PWFs.* With our progressive technology, EAI capabilities, riding, manipulating quantum states we ought to remain not just in control but unassailable as well. Simply by thinking big. The Web the bedrock, our minds the energy. Our picture is reality, theirs an ideology. Now if we were not here then their cosmic view would be supreme. In a way we fashion reality. Luckily for us using the scientific method uncovers the mysteries and

secrets of the universe and one day perhaps its creation. Whoever uncovers that will be master of the universe." Hern postulated. Sovark and Duncoss sat there like good students. "Not bad for a future wouldn't you say?"

"You're saying the act of thinking creates reality?"

"On the quantum level, yes. The very foundation of, well, everything. So now you know why concentrating on Prima is more important than Earth."

"You mean they might beat us to reality?" Sovark being speculative.

"If we let them, yes."

"But we know which reality is more real."

"Certainly. Why do you think they have their priests over here?"

"To change our minds." Duncoss felt like being at school again.

"They want it all. Under the guise of their religious notions."

"No surprise there."

"One we have been neglecting."

"So it's a battle of the minds."

"You got it Duncoss."

Khratham

Mudhan breathing rhythmically, linking her mind, her essence, her soul, to that undefinable something which was trying to void her mind, was annoyed by the interest shown in her monastery by the strangers, the research team from Regum. Instead of finding peace and solace during her meditations she was to her instead distracted by the irruptions of their minds. All unconsciously connected, the resonance ruffled by surface events, in fervent excitement of some impending event she could get her mind on.

The image of Khratham, the leader, engaged in magic. The leader was the land, the city, the people. All looked to him for guidance, for spiritual succour which were currently influenced, by the priests. She felt its disturbing manifestation as subtle mental waves washing through the collective unconscious of the people. No doubt about it. The priest's resonance was strong, on the surface. The effect potent even if on an individual level the cause was weak. But Primaian minds were grouped, linked like a swarm of wasps. Oriented on the leader. Subsume him and they had the province under their sway.

But not yet. Krool, the head shaman of the outer northern clans had left the citadel under a cloud. Mudhan's mind went automatically out to him. She had given up trying to just meditate. There was too much happening. Now was the time to try and understand not just what was happening but how events were being moved, placed, empowered. Serenity would have to wait a while.

She sensed Krool's stirring presence in the expansive fog of her inner mind. Felt his stubbornness, vindicating his decision to retreat back to his people. If Khratham did not want to seek his knowledge, the inheritance of his spiritual wisdom then Krool would not be responsible for the consequences. For consequences there would be. He would, instead strengthen his soul and that of the clans. Create an inner immunity from the spreading flotsam of the determined priests to convert not just Khratham but all of the people. Create a new base. They had failed in Regum, they were determined not to fail here. There they had tried to start with the people and the people had ignored them. Thus the change of tactics.

Amazing how her mind could receive Krool's radiance, that of the people as well, even the land itself. One positive outcome of the priests presence, their proselysing was

that more concerned souls were coming to the Abbey. She considered herself the caretaker only, not its possessor.

Interesting how this team found her work of interest. To use or misuse. Detached academic interest? Storaf gave that impression but this did not hide the fact he had an agenda. Safeguarding the accumulated knowledge of her library. Maybe. Then the disturbance. The other support team making its way through the country side at a leisurely pace which had met with sudden death. Nor had she seen it coming. Even if she had there was little she could have done. Unless she had wanted to get involved and dampened the psychic blow that had come literally out of nowhere. A very powerful shaman at work. She guessed it might be Krool of course. For him to take such a drastic course would not have been executed out of vindictive spite. He had guessed, she assumed, their real intent and sent a warning. Yet she doubted Storaf would take note of that phenomenon. Unnerving yes, unfortunate yet the reason escaped him. Being warned off.

Her mind bifurcated. It happened before. Sometimes there were three of her, sometimes many minds within her mind. At first she thought she would fracture, explode then be dissipated as psychic flotsam into the spiritual cosmos. But nothing of the kind happened. The voices did dissipate like leaves in the wind leaving her as she was, impressed, more potent and remarkably calmer after the experience.

So she had drawn a map of her mind. Circles within circles. Points of consciousness not unlike the stars above with her at the centre. Her own universe. She was in a way following the path of the ancient shamans. She the explorer, moving into vast unknowns. Multiple realms resonating within her. Over time the map grew, becoming populated with more sub-realms. Some repeated themselves. Others reconfigured, whilst others self created, lasting for the session then absorbed either into more potent realms or simply vanishing, sinking like some island in a measureless ocean where the sky fused with the sea creating infinite proportions. Defined but not delimited.

She saw calamities visit the land. The death of the visitors the harbinger of worse to come. Images of spiritual corruption spread about by the priests. Mental ennui of the people exhausted by an unwholesome bourn infesting them. Creating a psychic decay glowing like a triumphant disease over the land. The priests the carriers. Wanting to be feared. Their supposed strength their weakness. They were nothing to her, or to Krool.

'It's all bullshit.' A voice in her head. She laughed and fell out of her meditative state. Back in her simple room. The voice hers, not a spiritual being, or even that overarching blasphemy which the priests proclaimed as the master of creation.

A mental construct, an artifice. By being everything this so called unitary god was nothing. Logic alone defeated the concept. If it was everywhere then there could be no universe, no life, no her, no priests. So it had to be outside. If it was then it wasn't absolute for the universe was in the way. If the universe was its creation then why was it so messy? Why did life take millennia to crawl out of the sludge. The obviousness of so much that didn't fit could not be explained by being spiritually blinded, or of such a low intelligence that the obvious could not be seen or ascertained. The Reganians were exploring space and finding nothing even remotely resembling some superior force, or energy or anything else. Even the DVs over Prima had never seen the mind of the cosmic consciousness. And if they couldn't reach out to it, link to it, resonate with it then, well, the truth could not be denied.

Still the universe, both in the abstract and in real time fascinated Mudhan. Astronomers might study it, Krool as a shaman might soar through it but Mudhan wanted to link with its hidden energies. Get into that and she would be happy having achieved something in her life. Satisfying a craving she had since a little girl when staring into space and being fascinated by the blackness between the stars. Going on forever. Holding the stars in place. There lay answers to questions she could hardly formulate.

Then something moved her. Foggy clarity. It was weird but not unknown to her. A sense of the impending, present, pulsating just beyond contact. A dark radiance, alien yet familiar. A presence, some vast reservoir of intelligence hovering, waiting, threatening to overwhelm. Its being not enough. Drawing in everything within its reach.

A point, a light, a bright sun, lilac hard light embedded in frothing darkness. Drawing her in. Beguiling, containing answers. On the brink of revelations waiting to be accessed. This luminescence a data sphere. Tendrils of energetic paths flaring around her. Just one strand of these flickering, crackling, lashing beams allowing instant access. Abstract patterns filled her vision, hinting at awesome power. Surely not the Primaian Cosmic Mind. Something though. Or was this her head? Entwined. She felt warm, then hot. Becoming irradiated. Attraction and revulsion. No, more of a dissonance, of something terribly wrong. Distorted, convoluted, decaying. Only a process, an outer manifestation. An alien dream, porous, viscously solid, a vast containment field. Fascinating. But she was not going any further. An alien ingress, self generating drawing on space itself. Her space. The space of her childhood's imagination. Not as emptiness but as something unexplainable, the very fabric of creation being manipulated, crafted into a semblance of a lurking intelligence. She sensed it's volition, almost tasted its determination to extend itself throughout...everything.

Mudhan thought of the abbey, see if there was a connection. The spell broke. Her mind emptied as quickly as it had been filled, her being the open vessel. The lay of the land around her. A dark resonance hanging over it like thunderous clouds, a brewing storm front. Drawing on the strangeness out there. She was still warm. Now a satisfying glow of home, of being centred, within the confines of the abbey's magical protection. The building both fortress and temple. Open for those whose minds were unsullied by the spiritual pollution around them, closed to those whose predetermined mind set sought to dominate the realm, the province, the planet, the universe.

Maybe she had stumbled upon some secret sphere of power which the DVs used, or had created. A psychic resonance, a pool of energy, a mental realm, or just her imagination? She would put this on her map. Not as a realm but as something that could be all around them if it had enough energy. Drawing in space itself. Then when it was saturated, when the tipping point came what then? The birth of a supernova mind? Were the priests in league with this distant, yet mentally close...she searched for some abstraction to explain it to herself and came back to the Reganian definition of a data sphere. One with inherent design. Was this their creation to obviate the DVs domain? Fighting fire with fire? There was no reason why they could not create a data realm mimicking intelligence. Nothing was impossible in the universe. It was just a matter of thinking it, then spending the energy in creating one's dreams. The Reganians had achieved that with their Web, the Primaian's with their DVs.

Then there was the northern myth of the Undead. The souls of the departed who were not with the gods. Was this then their temporary world? Had she seen this back to front? Krool she remembered was adamant the priests were bent in destroying his people's shaman world. Being squeezed out of existence. Reaching out desperately for living souls to continue the battle? The rupture immanent? Thus the inherent hostility she sensed of their impending fate? So they retreated, consolidated, all these passed on beings, to self resurrect in the near future? And whilst drawing on the essence of space assimilating its hidden content thus acquiring the knowledge of how the universe really behaved? From the chaos of unformed creation to the higher orders of intelligent life? Meld the two and these beings would appear like gods. Was this what the priests feared in Krool, what they resented with Regum's exploration of space, which the DVs already sensed, which Prima would do anything to stop?

The next evening she told the visitors of her concerns. Her vision, her suppositions. Then let it drop that Khratham, thinking himself an archimage, an occultist who resented

Krool's presence simply because he could be a rival may have been led by the priests to assault their second team with devastating consequences.

Storaf listened politely. Not quite believing that magicians or spirits could kill.

Mudhan informed him of Khratham's library of occult lore. The ancient folk tales that told of similar events, the spells of ancient shamans, of warlocks and witches, the usage of hallucinogenics to travel in the spirit world, to create effects without having the cause traced to the originator of the deed, the vision of a different universe altogether. Not unlike her map, except the ancient world was full of spirits, of animals as avatar's of the gods when it suited them to not intervene directly. Of possessing certain individuals to be their mouthpiece, the easiest way to influence those who would not listen, or be deaf to the gods impregnations, or blind to their deeds.

Storaf listened astutely, taking the odd note here and there. Cena and Naj, post grad students just about wrote everything down Mudhan told them. Even HA and Turd listened without interruption.

Storaf thanked Mudhan on their final day. They had studied her library, itemized the most pertinent books. Eventually some others would come to make a more detailed examination of its valuable and priceless contents. They were merely the initial survey team.

HA scanned the territory ahead. No response to anything. No active com-links, no scanners, no radar, no warning systems, no alert security applications, no EM leakage from gadgets of any kind. No vehicles around, accept for their VAVs which had brought along one all terrain vehicle. HA did not even detect any smart weaponry. They were really in another time. As to what struck down the others control merely informed them their mission remained in place.

The VAV left. They continued with their ground vehicle, HA the commanding officer. A duty he exercised with due care. He alerted them to the unpalatable fact that something or someone had taken the others out. If they could do it once they might do it again. Given their isolation, even those on the orbital were reticent to the cause of the calamity. Nor did any particular individual or group claim bragging rights in executing this target specific ambush.

HA took it as a warning. Their presence was not tolerated. Mudhan pretended she could not think who harboured any malignant intent towards them. It was a cultural survey they were engaged in. Yet it might appear, to some as a military reconnaissance

mission which it was. Even if the real surveying was done from the orbital. HA's mission command was to get intelligence on the ground solely because electronic data gathering resulted in mainly null results. These people were really living in ancient times. With no indications of any overtly intended threats. The only incursion that of the priests who remained in the city and at the citadel from what Mudhan knew.

HA was perplexed. Dag and Mitaj were no more. He reflected that two good men were now dead. Angry at their being ambushed. Incensed that their mission controllers had not foreseen this tragedy. That covert methods could be so successfully put in place with such spectacular results. HA was aware of psychotronic warfare. If that was the case then this whole province was an entirely different threat scenario. Alert to the fact that they had to consider themselves in enemy territory. Storaf argued that many reasons might explain their unfortunate demise. None which made sense.

The trees around them cast their own gloom over the land. The sun filtered through the tree tops. Now and then something moved amongst the undergrowth. The enemy invisible. Once the autopsies were done HA would be able to relax. Storaf assuming a stoic stance which was good for the group. Naj lost in his own thoughts. HA could tell he was worried. When HA asked him what ailed him Naj replied that he could not get it out of his head that the attack may have been achieved by occult means. Which confirmed HA's suspicion about psychotronic warfare. If the locals were capable of such achievements then HA meant to find out exactly how they had achieved these deaths. The event too fast for them to activate their distress beacon. Some serious shit was going down here.

They drove for hours, bouncing along the track, each wrapped in their own thoughts. The forests at last gave way to cleared pastures, cows, sheep, horses dotting the countryside. Villages huddled together near streams, wisps of smoke rising from their thatched rooves. All so picturesque. They passed drays laden with produce, pulled by buffalos or horses, even donkeys and goats for smaller carts. The villages themselves were off the main track. The locals stared at them, whispered amongst themselves but let them pass.

The road was now solid dirt. HA accelerated, the sun moving across the sky, shadows lengthening, ahead the muddled brown buildings of Khratham the city. Birds circling in the sky. A few priests, clad in dusty black moved like alien beings amongst the inhabitants. Some of the farmers carried scythes, glinting dully in the sun, flecked with dirt

and mud. All rudimentary tools invented millennia ago and never improved upon. At least they showed no signs of hostility.

Ahead behind the outer walls and inner palisades rose narrow gabled rooved houses. Approaching the teeming city were the houses of the outer suburbs that did not fit into the confines of the walled city, a sign of solidly secure expansion. The road crowded with folks travelling to and from the markets, bullock carts having brought the produce into the town left empty or stocked with a few provisions of new pots and pans, agricultural tools or having gone to the stock markets to buy cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, all surrounded by swarms of flies. The stench came through the air conditioning. Rich, musty, earthy. To one side a primitive brick making factory, furnaces, wood fired. Excavating rich white clay. Smoke and fire, stacks of cooling bricks.

They halted in front of a rudimentary outpost. Leather clad guards with sharp pikes, vicious hooks, broadswords at their waist, sheathed knives, burly, a swagger of muscular strength, some beared, fierce eyes staring at the vehicle, at them. Some had cauliflower ears, the captain a broken nose, definitely not to be messed with.

HA lowered the window. The first thing that assailed them was the smell of unwashed bodies, the pong of animal droppings, pesky flies. They were behind some drays, their baggage and sacks of produce stabbed and prodded. The outer wall thick, high, solid enough for the rudimentary state of the times. On top guards patrolled in two's, watch towers dotted along the receding structure, ancient looking canons pointing out over the serene countryside.

HA activated the machine gun, swivelled it to let the captain know they too were armed. The black gleaming gun barrel looking dangerous. The peasants around them a little excited at this exotic horseless carriage.

"Someone from the palace will escort you. Park that thing over there." The captain gestured to an open space behind the guard post. HA drove in, reversed and kept the engine idling. The guards held the inquisitive back. Whilst they waited, a runner was summoned who must have been waiting for their arrival, previously organised prior leaving Amaik. They had come early by several days.

The town was teeming with people. Hawkers strapped with display boards for their inns, some carrying baskets of fruit and vegetables, others cheap trinkets, jewellery, household utensils made of tin tempting buyers before they entered the market square or the bazaar. They knew the layout of the city. Everywhere the energy of the people was present, an incessant moving chaos. Voices rising and falling, the odd high pitched exclamation of some woman, mostly draped in sarongs, richly embroidered or

plain, hiding most of their faces, only their mysterious eyes and nose seen, some studded with jewels and rings. They slowly got used to the smell. Excreta and flies, stray mangy dogs sniffing amongst the garbage strewn everywhere looking very diseased. Bits of lettuce, orange peels, apple cores, rotten potatoes, a hygienic horror. Many of the inhabitants did not look any better. Pock marked faces, boils, pimples, their hair if long matted and greasy, others cut it short to keep out vermin. Some men sported silver earrings, armed with swords, others just knives, most with mud stained clothes. Carts passed with barrels of beer and wine, pulled by sweating labourers. With bent legs, others crippled, a few staggering about intoxicated. Dirty beggars in rags, skinny deformed arms, claws for hands.

They sat and waited watching it all around them. A group of urchins stood a little back with wide eyed wonder.

"What now?" Storaf asked if only to break the silence.

"We wait." HA answered. He took out his binoculars, telescoping out and studied the road ahead, across pointed rooves, the citadel towering over the city on the only hill around, an obvious choice. Four clean dark grey uniformed people moved steadily through the teeming multitude towards them. They first spoke with the guards as they continued to check the people for who knew what. HA pocketed the binoculars. Some yelling was going on at the gate.

"To think we were like this once." Naj remarked.

"We have company." HA said as he got out. The four grey cloaked representatives, two men, two women looked spotless amongst the unwashed multitude. Clean faces, the men shaven, their skin unblemished greeted them with genuine warmth. They looked alert, lean, short cropped hair.

"Salutations." HA replied with a flicker of a smile. He motioned for the others to get out. "This is Professor Storaf," who nodded, "Naj his assistant and myself their guide. HA will do. And not forgetting Cena." Turd remained with the weaponry in the vehicle.

Smiles all around.

"Our esteemed ruler wishes to know the reason of your presence." Their spokesman, a man of middling years enquired politely.

"You weren't told?" HA a little surprised. A cock up either upstairs or on the ground. Not a comfortable position to be in.

"If you could tell us now." For all they knew was that strangers in a contraption were making their way towards the city, having been spotted by the guards who had rudimentary telescopes.

"We are on a cultural mission. Come to learn in your great library." Storaf explained.

"Khratham welcomes all visitors. And any of learning especially. You are Reganians?"

"We are indeed that."

Looking at HA's military gear he guessed correctly: "Military intelligence."

"Protection." HA answered expressionless.

"To learn of our wisdom is an honour indeed."

"One we hope to earn..." But HA got no name from the escort. They were weaponless.

"Building a data base." The man said. So they were not so in the past as appeared. Interesting.

"Collating. Making sure it remains. There is much we do not know of your wisdom, your folklore, your customs, your history." HA ventured. Storaf felt it was he who should be speaking but HA was in command. At least he was familiar with the mission.

"And not just here, but at the abbey as well. In your great country." Leaving it at that.

"And vulnerable." He said looking at the vehicle's automated machine gun.

"Rampaging beasts." HA said with a straight face.

"Of course." Their spokesman replied not believing it. "We are to escort you."

"Excellent. I am glad, honoured, humbled to be treated with such kindness." HA answered generously. "It will be a bit cramped but I think we can fit all of you in."

HA folded down the extra seats turning them into benches. They just squeezed in.

"Lead on." HA said even though the console could show the layout of the city. But he had shut most of the vehicle's functions down. No point giving too much away.

"This road leads straight to the palace." HA slowly negotiating his way around groups of people, reluctantly getting out of the way. "Khratham, blessed be his name, has kept the peace. There are some who would like to see things change..."

"Not us." HA answered quickly.

"It was not you I was thinking of or your people. There are the priests and their new religion. They too take an interest in our lore, our knowledge."

"No surprise there." HA said easily. 'Know thy enemy'.

"You are here for the same purpose." It was not a question. HA realised they were well informed, astute as to intentions, prepared for various possibilities that might unfold. So the priests were not entirely trusted. Good.

Storaf thought the same. Prima was interested. Studying not the lay of the land but that of the mind. Get into their heads and work on them from there.

"Understanding dispels ignorance." Storaf replied as an opener. People, people everywhere. They passed around the edge of a large open market. Goods displayed on carpets, ground sheets, rough heshan covers. Then back into the wide road past the shops of the bazaar. The open shutters offering some shade with their colourful displays of spices, cloths, pots, more jewellery, fruit, vegetables, blacksmiths, barbers, taverns, tea shops, a bookstore. Around them five storeyed houses, casting the wide street into cool shadow, some leaning a little drunkenly amongst their neighbours, smoke drifting out of tea shops and tiny eateries, the flies less intrusive, the aroma's more pleasant. Past a wine shop with a few inebriated customers staggering out, vomit near the entrance. A horde of flies rising off the remnants as they slowly rolled along.

The wooden houses gave way to more solid brick mansions, some recessed behind high walls, fruit trees set in walled gardens, ahead the looming edifice of the palace and within it the towering citadel built of huge granite stone blocks. Lookout towers reaching towards the sky. Surrounded by marching guards on their way out, some returning. The black eyes of canons recessed in the massive walls.

In front of the palace a huge square with a graceful temple where many milled about, white priests moving amongst them. No sign of the black priests.

"Achter, the sky god." They saw raised bowls where smoke rose from a flickering flame, the building white marble, solid, tall, columned, classical design, broad sweeping steps leading upward and inward. "There is also the sun god, wind, water, the earth god and their consorts. The many facets of nature's power by the grace of the divine ones energizing life."

"Very true." Storaf agreed for the fundamentals were right. 'energizing life.'

"What about a god of, ahm, vengeance? You know, storms, floods..." Naj enquired.

"Ah young man, the vicissitudes of nature. More a forceful statement of a god's display of power. A conflict in heaven. The gods have their reason."

"But those believers surely die, sad to say." Naj being delicate.

"A life taken by the gods is a special privilege. The power of the god infusing the parting soul with greatness. To become one of their legion ruling the hidden world so conjoined with the world of which we see only a fraction. Some return as their messengers in dreams or if spiritually stronger as phantom beings. Even animals are chosen for their holy mission."

"The stars." Storaf asked.

"The celestial realm. The ultimate of mysteries. Home of the gods. Their eyes when the sun god sleeps. Watching over us, guiding us if we can but read their conjunctions. The revealed design for us to contemplate, to study, imbuing us with cool wisdom." He answered.

"That is beautiful." Naj said as they approached the outer structure. A thick rising wall, massive gate, watchtowers above, guard towers below, and canons.

Storaf remarked on the military might of Khratham.

"A deterrent only. Their casting a secret formula kept thus by the ruler and the blacksmiths."

"Would not those blacksmiths be wont to advertise their expertise?" HA considering the security implications of having spies try and wiggle out the method of creating these ancient weapons of war.

"They do not leave the compound. The secret is safe."

"Imprisoned. A high price to pay." HA suggested.

"If I could have a prison as theirs." Their spokesman smiled. "I would gladly serve as an apprentice. They want for nothing. Wine, women, luxury. Even Khratham and the rulers before pay them with honours. As the archimage himself."

"Magicians?" Storaf not totally surprised.

"Oh yes. How else to gain intelligence from those who might wish us ill."

"But there is peace now?" Naj asked. He wondered if the other team had indeed been brought down by magical means. Maybe that is what they were searching for without being told directly. That would give their search pattern away. Had this archimage or some other shaman ascertained their true intent and sent them a dire warning to desist? Storaf immune to such superstitions or pretended as such. Then there was Mudhan. She could easily be an enchantress. Exquisite on the outside, impenetrable within. Or Khratham's doing? A strange land, yet the people were so normal. If a little rough around the edges. Untouched by Regum's technology. Civilizations rose around them and still they continued as they had always done, following the path of their ancestors. Similar to Prima but without the weight of their belief system. Many gods gave more freedom of the seeking soul to the believer. If it came down to which older culture was more life affirming then this province would be his choice. Naj understood that their escort were in a way diplomats. The military presence not oppressive. More peace keepers than overlords. Fascinating.

"Yes."

"The priests from Prima." Naj finally came out with it. Storaf tensed a little. HA concentrated on not running anyone over.

"Our esteemed visitors."

"We understand they have the ear of your noble ruler."

"He listens to all who are imbued with divine wisdom." He answered smoothly.

They were held up behind a row of carts bringing in produce to the palace and citadel. The outer walls thick by several spans, reaching up. Observation towers in place, the canons a sign of unassailable power from below. No match for a fission strike HA thought. Enough to keep out any marauders. The whole place asserting by its mere presence its power. Guards patrolled the heights of the two walls, the second higher than the first. Bobbing halberds, pikes, lances.

At last they passed through the massive crenulated walls and into a large courtyard. Stores everywhere. Barrels of wine, the smell of malt, a brewery, the clanging workshops, fodder for the animals, wheat and barley, the mill grinding away where a team of horses trod in circles the rolling grindstones.

Their guide motioned them towards a garage fitted with a thick steel door. Someone was using a massive key to unlock it, opening on well oiled hinges. They parked their vehicle and were glad to get out and stretch their legs.

HA surreptitiously observant noted the make of the soldier's uniforms where the officers were quartered, the servants, the guards and themselves. Foot soldiers, the grunts, were dispersed throughout the complex. In the middle the tall commanding central tower rose unperturbedly into the sky. The palace, which they were being escorted along, was sombre and functional, designed for defence. Narrow slits on the bastions, gun emplacements covered by netting keeping out excessive dust and dirt. Canon balls neatly stacked, small torches burning, ready to fire. Along dark corridors tiny oil lamps flickered hung from the ceiling.

A breeze played about the group, swirling dust about them. HA looked at Naj who too was watchful, taking in the layout. In the garage HA had seen oil stains. Khratham was not unfamiliar with technology. Either their own or that of others, like themselves.

"I guess you must receive quite a few visitors." HA making conversation to their escort.

"Some. Traders, merchants, the odd counsellor." Came the indifferent reply.

"Rare?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. Khratham has a certain mystique..."

"Ah. Our presence does attract a certain attention." Dismissive, indifferent to the interest they attracted. HA was thinking more of military experts. Or trade. Khratham's wines were famous, as were their spirits but apart from that, maybe some of their intricate jewellery. Nothing apart from these luxury goods held any interest to Reganians.

HA complimented their spokesman on their fine wines. He smiled without further comment. A group of soldiers dispersed for guard duty. The command tower imposing, dominating both citadel and palace. A ground assault by traditional means would take a minor army to successfully storm this place. If they got through the surrounding city. Street fighting was extremely hazardous. HA saw a well. The place a fortress. He was certain that beneath were underground cellars stacked with provisions and ordnance.

Up a set of stairs, along open corridors arriving at the guest quarters. The adjoining rooms, everybody one each whilst not luxurious were comfortable. A straw bed with fresh linen, quilts for warmth, a table, a few carved padded chairs, a wardrobe and magnificent view over the gabled roofs of the city below. The broad avenue teeming with carts and people, narrow crooked alleyways leading off in all directions. The white majestic temple bright in the sun. Compared to Prima these people were far better off. HA observed the shop fronts through his binoculars, traders, workshops, scribes, accountants, the necessary professionals required in any advanced society. The only difference between Khratham and Regum the absent technology. Or hidden.

Storaf was the last to be accommodated. He looked around the simple room pleased with its rustic comfort.

"What is the protocol in greeting your esteemed ruler?" Storaf asked.

"Khratham is not obsessed with ceremony. Civility is the order of the day."

"From what I'd imagined, overlords require, if not demand, certain etiquette."

"I see what you mean. Court procedure. Well you enter, are announced and approach. Depending on your status and importance a low chair or high chair is offered. Or you stand. Then again if Khratham considers you very important, if the mood strikes him, you may even be granted a private audience. Then again if it is a matter of minor concern one of his ministers will speak on his behalf. However as you are esteemed guests I am sure he will see you."

"Should we offer him gifts or would that be considered an insult?"

"Khratham is not ostentatious. Scholars are rarely wealthy so that some valuable gift is not expected. Nor are you here to make a deal so that the offering of some token of good faith is not pertinent. But a gesture of kindness would not be remiss."

"Thank you. Convey our humble thanks for the generous gesture in affording us our comfortable accommodation. To be accepted is indeed an honour."

The guide bowed a little in deference to the compliment.

"We are pleased with your satisfaction. Khratham has been notified of your presence. Now we understand that Reganians are a little impatient when dealing with each other. Everything is instant. So that you are not under a false impression, Khratham will see you. When I cannot say. So be patient."

"I shall. Since we have come to study your worthy history, when would it be possible to be admitted to your library?"

"All in good time. I am assigned to look after your needs. There are servants on call. Just pull that tessellated rope. Wine, water, nourishment. You may all converse with each other at your leisure. You may also notice there are no locks on your doors. Guards patrol everywhere. Your belongings are safe. Again, if there is anything that may trouble you or should you experience some difficulties, perhaps you may be confused as to some detail or shall we say surprise at our ways do not hesitate to call on me or my three designated servants."

"I don't even know your name. Mine is Storaf. Our escort is HA, Turd and the student is Naj the other Cena."

"My name is Raben."

"Thank you for your kind attention Raben."

Khratham though had other concerns. The impression at court of Krool's banishment was purely for appearance sake. Since Krool left Khratham had expected some form of spiritual rebellion. The Priest assured him that Krool would prove recalcitrant. He would plot. Mudhan the priest claimed pretended to be neutral. She wanted power for herself the Priest assured him. He must decide what to do about these enemies amongst his people.

Khratham having considered the reality of the situation, having conversed with Shatan whose sage advice was as usual a realistic appraisal even if it did not always conform with Khratham's initial conclusions was made to understand that the Priest's promise that Khratham was really ordained by their unitary god as the anointed to lead them into a great spiritual resurrection was merely a pledge. Nor should he accept the

Priest's reasoning that if he failed it was not due to any spiritual flaw within him, but rather the fact that the unitary god was not all it was made out to be.

So apart from the Outlander's the kingdom was at peace. As it had been even prior his ascension to the throne. Shatan had hinted that it was the Priest who was causing dissention by challenging their ancient belief system, their gods, their inherent powers. To say it was all an illusion bordered on heresy. Yet they ruled a planet, Prima. They had drawn in an Orbital over their world thus using the Reganians, having them under their thrall. Was that not evidence enough of their power? Perhaps Shatan replied. It was more a matter of will. Khratham countered that that had to be the will of the unitary god. Shatan answered that it was the will of their minds. If they could do it so could he. There were many amongst his people who studied the occult arts. Not with any dark design upon his person, his office or his rule. Merely to be with the gods, strengthen their souls. That was the best defence against any godlike challenge. Shatan was well aware of the priest's methods. Doubt, dissent, conflict. Use these negative forces and present their solution. By negating their ancient wisdom the Priest's power would appear to be supreme. But if the king's people were strong, resolute that would strengthen their society, unite them spiritually to resist the subtle corrosion of the priests.

Khratham considered all this. The power the Priest represented could not be denied. Still Shatan claimed that ultimately the power rested within the individual who when in congress with their real gods became more not less. The unitary god was an alien imposition, allayed with honeyed words and the promise of supreme power. A potent illusion, nothing more. Had anyone else but Shatan spoken these words Khratham would have dealt with them promptly. Banishment would not have been enough. Incarceration to let them dwell on the errors of their way.

Khratham then, now that the office of High Advisor, the representative of the gods at the palace was vacant, having been Krool's, assumed that holy and sacred office. One thing the Priest might not have intended was that Khratham understood that power resided within oneself. He could become an archimage. With whatever god or gods existed. The Priest of course wanted the vacancy so as to be even closer to the seat of power. Not for a Primaian. If the people discovered that there was no telling how they would react. Actually according to Shatan there was: dismay, discontent, disharmony. Exactly what the Priest intended for then he could come in as saviour on behalf of his god.

Nor was Khratham merely concerned with the condition of his soul. In order to understand the feelings of his people he had sent his agents among them to discover

who these occultists were. Lonely sojourners amongst the mysteries of nature and of the cosmos. He learnt that they believed in the force of nature as a power unto itself, uniting the cosmos with it. Godless from the Priest's point of view. Not dismissing their own gods though. He would fathom their knowledge to see if he could thus not just infuse his soul with the powers that be but that of the people and the land as well. In a way Mudhan was doing this at her abbey. It was the major reason he left her alone.

Now to deal with the present. His agents informed him of the few who were engaged in the lore of magic. As they had done since the beginning of time. It was explained to him that they had broken away from the shamanistic spiritual and godlike realms, focussing more on their power than their being. One thing united them all even though they were not cohesive. To fill the soul with the mysterious supremacy that was the effluvium, the ether by which even the gods existed. And the unitary god as well. They were thus one step further along the path than the priest. He had to find out just how true this was. After weeks of receiving intelligence of the few practitioners of the hidden arts Khratham decided not to engage with the most esteemed, or known, but one who worked solely as an individual, who seemed not too obsessed with power but with divine wisdom, one who not unlike Mudhan wanted to know by being united with the ether not to wield power for its own sake but to understand what the greatest of mystery, reality was all about. He could always call on others if and when the need arose.

He had conversed with them all and decided for the moment to focus on one man, Luferious. More of an itinerant student, even though he was approaching middle age, the man had a few students to eke out a very humble living in one of the gabled lofts of his retreat. He according to his informants lived humbly, was modest in his mannerisms and life, though tempted to imbibe generously of the good nectar on occasion which Khratham acknowledged with a smile. One not obsessed with spiritual purity like the Priest. Nor had Luferious an exalted opinion of his own self. Rather, for one of his informants was a student he despaired at his imperfection complaining he was so close and yet so far in unravelling the ultimate of mysteries by which he meant the power that energized the universe. Link with that and one could converse with the gods. He was not after this for power, for personal aggrandizement, not even to collect like minded souls. Or like the shamans of the north become a spiritual leader. Luferious considered himself a seeker, finding a path through the intricate web of appearances, to get at the kernel of it all. For its own sake. What happened then, the informant related, was anyone's guess. That was enough for Khratham to engage with this reclusive seeker, who

neither shunned society as some of the others were want, nor use individuals to impress them with his knowledge or power. And more importantly harboured no intentions to execute that power and become a defacto challenge not just to Khratham's rule, but that of the vacant position of spiritual advisor, as the others had obliquely hinted so forthright in their lusting intentions. They could all wait.

Luferious, in his cleanest cloak, washed shirt and spotless trousers, though his boots were a little muddy stood in front of Khratham so nervous that he appeared calm. In fact he was mentally and emotionally frozen up within.

The tapestries hung along the walls were not encouraging. Here were mighty deeds of ruling ancestors vanquishing ancient armies in detailed murderous gore. Of agreements reached with subdued rebels, offering sanctuary to wise men and women with the overall impression that all were bent to the indomitable will of these distant kings who had united the province so long ago. Luferious felt totally inadequate guessing at the duty Khratham expected of him.

"What news?" Khratham having studied the immobile stance of Luferious, slightly impressed which his composure commanded.

"My liege. The students progress, albeit slowly in their spiritual exercises. It takes years just to create the right mental conditions to even begin the great work." Then the pertinent aspect: "There are, I suspect followers of the Priest amongst them." Which was true enough. He could tell by their questions. At least the supposed unitary god dovetailed with the notion of a universal power. "But I wonder at their sincerity. Do they want knowledge for its own sake or some other, darker design?"

"That is why I called you to this audience." Khratham answered a little abruptly. "You may be seated."

A servant appeared and brought a padded chair. Luferious waited for Khratham to give the sign he could actually sit. The sign was given and Luferious expressed his thanks.

"You wish for some refreshment?"

"Only if your serenity is in need."

"I am."

He called over a servant and ordered coffee.

Moments later a low table was brought in, of brass. The legs serpents, precious stones inlaid on its surface, sparkling with effulgent splendour. The silver coffee pot on a silver tray, the servants pouring two cups. First Khratham then Luferious. He waited for the

king to take the first sip then drank some of the bitter sweet beverage. This was indeed an honour. Luferious tried to keep an even head.

"So a follower of the priests amongst your students. You think they pretend they can use your knowledge to further their aims?"

"It's hard to say Khratham." No point dissembling. "The signs are there. Or rather they are not. They act with such non-challantness. I suspect they are being coached at being invisible as to intent. They will make poor acolytes for they have predetermined preconceptions muddying their minds."

"The unitary god."

"Though they hint at its presence they do not openly admit it."

"So they are being coy. How far have you penetrated their veiled minds?"

"Ah, like penetrating mud Khratham."

Khratham laughed at that. Luferious smiled and waited.

"Go on."

"It is only upon reflection that it comes to me king. Harboursing a darkness. A fog that shrouds the mind. Making them stupid as in thick headed. Whether the cloak is there to deceive or it is a psychic manifestation of their unitary god is as yet, ahm, unclear. There is a certain vanity they have difficulty in masking, a certain pretence in giving the impression of knowing more, of being in possession of some ultimate secret."

"And are they?"

"The impression is there. But not the substance. During the exercises they are easily distracted. Their energy focused outwards not inwards. Their heads are inside out..."

Khratham laughed again. Luferious's observations were accurate for he too had felt their nervous energy, both unfocused, distracting whilst pretending to be in control. This unitary god was more of a problem than a solution.

"And whilst their brains are inside out Luferious do you sniff any hidden agendas?"

"On a personal level they will use any means to attain power. On the broader level, they want all to believe what they believe. To get into the minds of the people they are studying what the people, what we, what I believe. Then through argument and discourse convince us they are right and we are deluded, in need of spiritual salvation, misguided, bedazzled by our own gods who are supposedly projections of their unitary god Khratham."

"Your candour is appreciated Luferious. I have done well in choosing you. Tell me do you consider them to be under an outside influence?"

"Their supposed god or some agency?"

"Good point. The latter." And he took a sip of his coffee. Luferious followed suit.

"They are repressed. Whether it is their inner turmoil, whether the imagined influence they believe in or some higher priest guiding them I have as yet to ascertain. That much is certain."

"Have you heard of Deep Visionaries?"

He had. He was from Regum after all.

"Only generally."

"Well they are Primaian psychics. Warriors intent on domination."

"Not good."

"No. What I suspect is that the Priest is a conduit into our realm."

Luferious understood the implications.

Khratham continued. "Their intentions is to channel their divine power into our kingdom, which means the people. We have remained true to our heritage for generations. Regum has come, Prima is expanding but we remain immune. Why? Because of our inner strength, our resolute determination to be true to our gods. And it works. The Priest and his kind wish to align us to Prima. The promises of cosmic power may be irresistible to some."

Even Khratham had to admit he was tempted at times. But first to find out if the occultists, on a similar track were onto something even greater. If less he knew what he would do. Power was everything. He had to make certain it was the right kind of power. Luferious had given him new information. The promise of the Priest sounded good but if their heads were turned into mud as Luferious indicated then that of course meant the spiritual infusion was flawed. That could be used as well. Khratham sensed that the Priest was determined to get his way. If Khratham was not amendable then it would not surprise him if they would groom someone else to challenge him. Not that there was a usurper waiting in the wings. Certainly not Krool. He was neither vindictive nor jealous. Peeved at being sent on his way no doubt. Mudhan content where she was and Shatan equally so. But one of the occultists might get it into their heads that they were especially chosen by divine grace to rule on behalf of this alien god. Maybe even the Priest himself?

"The ultimate temptation. Many a seeker has fallen due to this illusion."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now Luferious. Keep vigilant. By that I mean amongst your students. Watch out for any changes. Study the effects these hidden priests have

amongst your group. Are they agents of influence. Are they turning our people away from our gods? Are they sowing seeds of dissention?"

"I understand and obey." Luferious agreeing with Khratham.

"They preach peace and unity. Making out the obvious is something due to their god's influence. Now onto another matter. Have you ever studied the books in the library?"

"Yes. Your majesty allows access. Your wise guidance is appreciated by those who wish to learn."

"Is there anything that could be detrimental to our safety?"

Did he mean himself or the kingdom? Luferious assumed it was the latter.

"Depends. For in discourse any piece of information can be twisted."

"Thank you. You see we have a group of Reganian's amongst us. Now you being one yourself what do you think their intentions would be?"

"Purely knowledge Khratham."

"They would not be under Primaian influence?"

"Hardly. No. If they are here to study the contents of your library it is for that only. I would go so far as to say it could be of benefit. It will spread our knowledge amongst them. So if these priests have any ill conceived intentions regarding our knowledge, our wisdom the interest shown by the visitors can only be to your benefit Khratham."

"You know one of their group were taken out." watching intently for a reaction.

"Taken out?"

"Murdered."

"Murdered?" Luferious repeated. "I am..."

"Surprised?"

"Indeed yes. Who...?"

"Who indeed? There are two candidates. Either Krool, or the DVs. Or just to convolute things a little, the DVs using Krool as their tool. To create dissention amongst us."

"Who would want us to fall apart?" though the moment Luferious had said that the answer became obvious.

"Luferious." Khratham admonished.

"Yes my lord, the answer came to me. I spoke a little too rashly."

"I doubt the Reganians would do this."

"No."

"Certain?"

"Definitely. They have no design's upon your realm."

"Not even as a pre-emptive move to keep the Priests out?"

"If they considered this land under threat they would send advisors or emissaries."

Khratham considered his visitors in a new light.

"I want you to find out, if you can, surreptitiously, how that deed was done. Is that possible?"

"I may get lucky. Reality is so convoluted, so entwined it can reveal, hide, distort whatever one seeks. Clarity of mind, which I teach is hopefully translated into clarity of perception which then flows into clarity of action. Now I am leagues away from that state of being. But I shall do my utmost to uncover the mystery my liege."

"Remember Luferious, this is to be kept secret."

"Yes, of course. But surely you have agents of a much higher calibre...?"

Khratham was realizing with Krool's dismissal there was only Shatan. Krool had left a spiritual and psychic gap. Mudhan too remote, both in spirit and in her presence at the White Abbey. The Priest had to be convinced that he pretended to be on side. Not only that he wanted Krool to be dissatisfied. The idea was to stir up the northern Outlanders. And have their hatred vented on the priests. Then Khratham would see who was the stronger, whose gods served best. When the dust settled he would know which power was supreme. The display of power which had so suddenly curtailed the lives of the Reganian team was disturbing. Had Krool done that in a fit of revenge? Maybe as a warning.

"I do." Khratham replied easily. "But now any interest they show might attract attention. A new face is required and you Luferious are it. Be careful though."

"I shall Khratham. And I am honoured at the faith you have in me."

"More faith than you have in yourself?"

"If I answered that I would not be speaking the truth."

Luferious bowed, then left the king. At the ante-chamber the guards had changed. These were not the ceremonial guardians of the palace but the soldiers of the realm. Khratham rotated them so they would not get too complacent. So, Khratham really was interested in his way, his path, his orientation. Gossip of course was rife amongst the occultists. All wanted to impress upon the king their acquired wisdom, except Luferious. And he had been called. Being Khratham's agent was exhilarating. A sense of purpose on the mundane level. A part of him balked at the digression. It was a distraction having to watch the few students he had. Or fathom the deadly strike.

He made his way down the wide stairs of the palace into the busy quadrangle. Chickens squawked, pecking at the ground, pigeons fluttered about, the smell of fresh hay, the metallic clang of the blacksmiths, carpenters banging away. Out of disorder, order. Trite yet true. Was the converse true. Could the Priest and his hidden accomplices create enough disorder to be used to their advantage? The shock of the Reganian visitors being murdered by occult means now replayed itself in his mind. He had sensed nothing. No dark perturbation in the ether, no discordant reverberations trembling through the effluvium, no flaring sentience exercising its power. He was so out of tune, focussing on the whole, missing the detail. For details could become fascinating dead ends. Had it been the Priest? Just thinking of this dark raven, this clever bird of prey created a shiver in the air around him. A potency that lay behind a dark veil, seeping out incrementally, poisoning the atmosphere by his mere presence. Then there were those who in secret conclaves did his bidding. Corrupt the people, make out that the great gods like Achter were but a pale manifestation of the unitary god. Luferious was studying the miracle of creation, they using it to further their aims for psychic and physical domination. His mind could not be more diametrically opposed. Khratham choosing him to keep any eye out on infiltrators, spiritual traitors even. He had to assume the other occultists, whom he acknowledged but rarely bothered to be with would have been tasked just as he was.

He passed the ramparts of the outer palisades, leaving the citadel and palace behind. Long rows of carts waited to be inspected, the usual good natured jostling at the broad wide gates, the soldiers joking with the regulars, giving newer farmers a hard time, looking out for hidden spies and more importantly making sure the willy farmers did not inflate or adulterate the value of their goods.

In front of the outer defences a wide open area to mow down any foolish enough to attack this palatial fortress. Luferious noticed the priests like flies in the ointment and just as black. Make shift stalls sold refreshments, steaming fresh bread, tasty pastries, pies, meatloaves, stews bubbling over tiny fires, tempting both guards, soldiers off duty, visitors such as himself. Luferious had to watch his meagre earnings. The prices here slightly inflated.

A group of four, two young men and women, washed, their clothes not yet dusty approached him as if they were greeting a familiar acquaintance. Luferious looked around, having left the carts behind and sure enough their attention was focussed upon him.

"Brother, greetings." One of them said. They all looked so alike. He certainly did not know them. The few students he had he would have recognised. The surroundings receded for a moment, everything a little distant experiencing a sense of déjà vu. It never ceased to surprise him when this happened. His life predestined, he getting glimpses of the inner path he was intent on. A premonition. They were in front of him oozing self satisfaction. Some rich young people? Seeking his guidance? Had word gotten out already of his interview with Khratham? Was he favoured? Thus their being attracted to him, he a person of interest?

He readied himself to either accept or reject whatever it was they wanted. The rich always wanted something. The rest of the population flowed like a stream around a small island. cursory looks, idle curiosity, no more than that. The colours of the day drained of its natural glow as if these four were eviscerating reality of its essence. Potent.

Was this intentional? Showing off their power? A pretentious haughtiness their eyes studying him dispassionately with keen interest. Their pugnacious attitude irritated Luferious. Collared in broad daylight, within sight of the guard tower. He felt a cold glowing within him and shuddered involuntarily. He stood there waiting. Being called by a familiar greeting irked him as well. He hated familiarity from strangers. It usually meant they wanted something and Luferious was not the accommodating type. Thus his lack of friends.

"We are the last revelation, the final apotheosis, the new way." One of them said, just like that. So they were recruiting. Had he been watched by them? Did they know he belonged to that group of unaffiliated individuals who were on the great path? Were they in need of better minds, not finding much amongst the people? He remembered the priests in Regum. Not much different. But this group were not in black but a light grey. Exuding a different air about them. Imbued with a certainty, a surety of mind, an unassailable presence with a whiff of latent power. Interesting. Primaian?

"The new way. What for?" upfront.

"To be saved when the time comes." Their designated spokesman replied as if it was the most natural of facts.

"Going down on my knees or going down with a headache." Luferious dismissive. "You're obscurantists. Try clearing your brain, it may do wonders. See reality." His companions tried to fix him with their united gaze. His head felt thick.

"A saviour will come, a man who not just knows but who will act. He will cleanse all. Those who resist will suffer. Only because their resonance will be discordant. Align before it is too late brother."

Luferious sighed. They had no idea what he was on about. He had taken his path of aligning himself with the energy of the universe years ago. For precious moments he was sometimes at one with it all, micro-moments at best. It was enough to give him hope and the confidence to continue. He had chosen the right path. No gods, no god, no priests, no verbose philosophies, no shaman delusions, just the mind, the source, the fount, the creator within.

"I am aligned." Might as well push it for what it was worth.

It made no difference. Their minds were set. "The great change, the power within him will pour out of his godhead. A new intelligence is in the universe. An ageless eternity awaits those who align." The young man, such a smooth face, insisted. "You have been misled. We are offering you the chance of salvation."

"Oh that."

"You may scoff. But when the time comes you will wish you had hearkened our offer of redemption." He warned. "All knowledge shall be as dust to the cosmic wind. Only those who have him in his heart shall be uplifted."

"Who is this he?" a few idle passers by stood a little away from the discourse. Interested. Though not convinced. This was street theatre.

"An ancient mind waking. Potent, powerful. He gathers his strength as we speak to refurbish lost souls. Accept his divinity and you too shall be divine."

"If I wanted to be divine I would have been so ages ago. What I am is enough. I have no need of alien delusions."

"Ah, the great mental inversion. It is you..."

"Yes it is me. The cosmos has created me, not your what's-his-name. Now if you will let me pass, I've got a life. It might not be your life but that is none of your business."

"Join us in the great coming brother."

"No." fed up with their cant. But it had given him food for thought. A veiled presence in the universe. Some incarnating god whom they mistook as their redeemer? Maybe. Life's little surprises. Hints not to be ignored. Something to pursue, to look for. In his meditations beings appeared, never alike, never the same. Projections of some ultra-mind? Could such a being exist?

"If you fall do not blame us. We held out the hand of friendship."

"Friends do not threaten."

"Warn. Your soul is in peril."

"More threats."

"Consider the consequences."

"You inhabit a very narrow self limiting universe." And said no more. He did not want them to even know the spiritual prison they were building for themselves. It would be they who would fall, not he.

The sun shone brighter, the strange cocooning silence dissipated, the noise of the square back. It was a pleasure to be alive. It was an even greater feeling of something tremendous at the edge of his mind. They had reminded him that the universe did harbour strangeness otherwise these four would not be here sprouting their infantile imaginings as revelations.

Luferious gave them a bored look. The two women had already disassociated, as had the other, but the speaker looked at him saddened. Pathetic. They turned pretending to feel some great emotional burden. To Luferious it was all an act. He was annoyed in that they had accosted him. Maybe they would spread the word amongst their community that he was indeed lost. He'd rather be lost and find his own way, than be led by some headcase with delusions of power. Without dismissing out of hand that just maybe, something was gestating out there. It might be some arch-persona in WebSpace. Which they mistook as their future hierophant. Or the ultimate joke. He would keep himself alert to any weird sentient aberrations. Having cleared that from his brain he now wrestled with a decision: to get drunk or return to his studies.

He shuffled along, the onlookers dispersed, some giving him a wry smile. Down the hill, guards marching past, pedestrians busy with their daily chores. He was nearing his neighbourhood, into the narrow alley barely wide enough for two small carts and even narrower passageways leading off to countless flats piled on top of each other. The closeness created a sense of community, of belonging without being too familiar, too prying.

He passed the bakery, the grocer, the coffee and tea shop with just a few idle customers. He nodded to some familiar face slowing down in front of a the tiny corner bar where one of the innumerable passageways disappeared into the shadows of the gabled buildings.

To drink or not to drink. Hangover the next day and an empty purse. Again. Wash away the sullen anger still bubbling within at being accosted by these dellusionists. He was annoyed at having even bothered replying to them. The opening they wanted. He decided to keep his head clear and entered instead the coffee shop, the aroma making him feel better. A few people were animated in conversation, one or two watched the world pass by.

The window tables taken, he looked around in the semi gloom at which table he could still sit himself down and try a few of the delicious biscuits they served here. They were pure heaven. Light, a smooth sweetness unlike any other, melting in the mouth, totally addictive. A couple who had eyes only for each other sat near him, two gentlemen, by their cut cloth, taking in the atmosphere. There was of course the odd informer, not just from the palace but also scouts working for the Priest.

At the counter he ordered his pot of coffee and four of those irresistible biscuits. As a regular Luferious's coffee would be freshly brewed, not served from the simmering copper pot reserved for street customers. The old man, a family that had been running this establishment for ages served him when finally his coffee had drawn, placing with a flourish on a small porcelain plate, tin for the rougher type of customer onto the scarred wooden table. The daughter sometimes helped out, a thin girl who was learning to be a seamstress selling her embroidered scarves, laces, gloves and socks to supplement their income. The detail of the needle-point-work exquisite. In the evenings they served a one pot stew, helped out by a young boy useful in the kitchen for the few hours when customers would enjoy the hearty fare.

Finishing his coffee and biscuits he paid the few coppers it cost, head alive, feeling refreshed, energetic ready to continue his studies. So, an intelligence was supposedly self creating itself somewhere either in their imaginations or really in some distant dark forgotten corner of the universe. He would study the ancient lores to see if any of it made even any sense.

He arrived at the tottering ancient pile of wood and stone where he had his two roomed garret. Downstairs the grocery store and back extension of the owners, then a family with more children than common sense, a young couple above though how they coped with the screaming kids would have tested his nerves no end. Some itinerant workers and then his roof apartment. Only half the roof for the other half was used to dry clothes. It was a happy enough establishment. A little damp mostly, a privy on each floor.

As he walked into the side door, the grocer came out informing Luferious a gentlemen had called, waited then left. He had just missed him. Dolf looked at him as if Luferious knew who this person was.

"What did he look like?"

"Well, like a gentleman, travelling cloak, good cloth, private looking like, said he was unannounced." Eager for more titbits. Dolf knew he had his four students, all in their early twenties and the few friends he did have were certainly not well heeled.

"From the palace perhaps?"

"He didn't say."

"An informer? An agent? A spy?" Luferious joked.

"Quiet.." Luferious was surprised Dolf even knew such a word.

"Alone?"

"Looked like it."

"Anybody hang around outside?"

"I couldn't say Luferious." Thinking, shaking his head. "I kept my eye on him as he was in the shop. Thievery might mean the gallows but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

"Of course."

"And villains are not always poorly dressed. Just ask the rich." He laughed.

"Sword? Big knife, little knife? Pistol? Did he wish to be taken up?"

"I think he had a sword. They are so common that one hardly notices. And no he didn't want to be taken up."

It bothered Luferious that any one of note took an interest in him. The rich usually wanted something, more often for nothing. He had refused some bored rich sons who were either idling the time away dabbling in this or that. Not that he wouldn't get a few extra coppers but Luferious had no time for wastrels. Maybe discreet enquiries from the palace.

"No message either?"

"No. Not one of your students?"

"Maybe one of them got rich," bothered how a stranger knew where he lived.

"Maybe the palace..." Dolf fishing. Gossip. He was worse than his chubby wife. Luferious according to the landlord was a 'gentleman'. If only because he could read and write, without knowing he was from Regum, one of the few who wanted a different life. Dolf would not have known of his audience with Khratham. And he was certainly not going to volunteer it. The whole neighbourhood would start to gaggle. The best Luferious could think of was that some discreet business was afoot. Unless the visitor was shopping for an occultist. If not Luferious than someone else. The established Families were like that. An exorcism, a séance, fortune telling, the usual requests. Unless it was pertinent information from the palace. But then the messenger would have waited. The corner pub or coffee shop the perfect place to observe his return.

After jiggling the ancient padlock with a well worn key Luferious entered his tiny abode. He gazed lovingly over his precious books, some on the floor, most stacked

randomly in the small bookcase along with rare manuscripts, obscure author's testaments to discoveries in the Art as the study of the occult was known. Some were memories of other times, copied, their veracity dubious and what Luferious suspected a little embellished. Along with notes from his days in Regum when he had begun to take an interest in the ancient lores of the original inhabitants.

Unbuttoning his coat, hanging it in the tiny wardrobe, a little musty Luferious wondered about the visitor. He hated surprises. Why leave no message? Secretive or merely cautious? He sat at the solid desk staring out over the rooves.

He heard footsteps coming up the creaking stairway sounding like Dolf. A knock, Luferious asked his landlord to enter.

"The gentleman is back. Shall I show him up or would you prefer to meet him downstairs?"

"Dolf you are discretion personified. I'll meet him downstairs. No card?"

"No nothing."

"Any idea?"

"Well presented."

"Hm."

The children were having a ruckus of a time as they clambered down the dark stairs. Dolf was about to say something as they came to the downstairs passageway that led to his shop.

"The gentleman." Dolf smiled. "She asked me to dissemble slightly." and returned behind the counter where his wife was smiling for the lady in question had taken a seat offered whilst she waited. She must have seen Luferious return. Middle aged, stunning plain face no make up. She did not need any. She rose gracefully, one fluid motion. Dressed in plain long black velvet trousers, no jewellery and a black skull cap over her ivory face. She could easily be taken for a courtier and if not looking too closely maybe pretend she was a man. Predominant cheekbones, long thin nose, bloodless thin lips, narrow slitted eyes she seemed a being from another age. Her grey eyes softened as she gave Luferious a half smile. He was captivated. Her presence filled the shop with an enticing aura of her vibrant personality.

"I am sorry to disturb your leisure." Her voice affecting a slight lilt, playful.

"I am honoured to be sought by one such as noble as yourself my lady." Luferious bowing graciously. "Shall we retire for some tea or coffee. I fear my lodgings are not exactly comfortable."

Though her grey eyes were pleasant, taking him in, appraising him they also seemed like shutters closing off her true feelings. Well practiced. A woman sure of herself.

"Yes it would give an air of respectability. Tongues might wag were I to visit you..."

Dolf's wife blushed, then curtsied automatically as the two women met each other's gaze. "I wouldn't..." was all she said. She inclined her head slightly at the acknowledgment of the preferred discretion.

"Allow me to escort you then."

She walked out into the cool street ahead of him. Once outside they turned left, out from the warren of houses towards the main thoroughfare. Luferious decided not to go to his normal tea and coffee shops. The locals would know him there. Along the main street there was less chance of being recognised. Nor would anybody think anything of the two of them together.

"My name is Morfur of the House of Enbar."

"And I am Luferious of no particular lineage." He answered amused.

The sun was well behind the tall narrow houses. Once away from the narrow lanes more pedestrians were about.

"You must forgive my intrusion for taking advantage of your time." As they walked along the broad footpath.

"Luckily that does not occur often my lady. A pleasant distraction indeed. My circle of friends is extremely limited."

"Yes, friends can be tiring." She said lightly strolling down the busy road.

"I suspect your circle of friends must engage you somewhat."

"Your are correct in your assumption." She sighed. "The need to be seen at the right places, the pretence in engaging in something useful, fending of mentally challenged suitors for one's daughter mixed with endless social engagements sometimes makes me want to emigrate to Regum."

"Regum." Luferious thought back of his time there.

"You have been there?"

"I come from there."

Light laughter. "Here I am wishing to go there and you having left there."

They came to a tea shop, entered, were shown by a waiter to a vacant table. Morfur declined a window seat. A central table. Circumspect. Luferious waited. She had her reasons for seeking him out. Maybe a private session. Did she wish to enrol her daughter and first make his acquaintance? Be who he appeared to be. There were

rumours of priests taking advantage of their young charges. Malicious gossip trying to denigrate their bloated esteem. Would they be so foolish as to conduct themselves in a less than a discretionary manner?

They ordered as the waiter hovered a little distant with superb manners. Morfur had a 'morning tea' and Luferious finding most teas the same, likewise. The double pot was duly brought over, the soft aroma filling the space between them.

Though Morfur was a stranger Luferious relaxed in her rarefied presence. She certainly needed no teaching in being in possession of her mental faculties. He imagined her busy with the papers of her estate, advising her husband, coming to decisions, someone who could think rationally and act with smooth determination. A boon companion no matter what the circumstances or difficulties. Which brought him back to reality when she had poured herself, added a splash of milk, no sugar. Luferious was the opposite, drowning the tea in milk and over sweetening his cup. Compared to coffee it was indeed a light beverage.

Satisfied with merely a sip, she focussed upon him as if he was the only person in this polite establishment.

"I'll come right out with it." If she was unburdening herself she showed no signs of inner conflict. "It's my daughter, a troubled soul." A statement. Luferious said nothing. Asking some trite question would disturb her train of thought or irritate her. Though Morfur did not look distracted by whatever was ailing her daughter. Collecting her thoughts. The flat grey eyes showed some animation. If this were Regum he would have guessed she had implants or some form of enhancement.

Morfur had gone over her daughter's disposition many times before reaching a decision, coming to a conclusion, deciding to take matters in hand. Luferious hoped this was not clandestine. The last thing he wanted was unwelcome perturbations between Morfur and her husband, if she was indeed married. He found himself attracted to her plain face imbued with an aura of inner beauty. Not immediately apparent, nor suppressed. Infusing her air with a presence he found captivating. If her emotions were turbulent she gave no sign. Her hands were calm, as white as her face, her manner of expression light, conversational.

"She is having truly frightful nightmares." Watching for his reaction. "I have had doctors who merely give her sleeping drafts. But all they do is suppress the condition without curing it."

"Dreams are messages of the gods." and wished he had come up with something better than that. "Have you spoken to any priests?"

"Yes. But what god would torment a soul so relentlessly, so persistently Luferious?" He hid his surprise at the mention of his name. Unless Dolf had informed her.

"Indeed. Does she study the Arts?"

"She thinks she is being punished by some transgression she made." Ignoring his question. Obviously not then. Luferious was not so gauche as to enquire just what this supposed transgression was.

"The gods move in mysterious ways." And again chided himself for such a blasé answer to something so deep.

She looked at him for a moment and he wondered if she would leave. He was not exactly helpful.

"Luferious. The gossip amongst the more erudite claim you have gone someway in your practical philosophy. Penetrating past the veil of our minds to see reality more clearly. I myself consider the gods creations of our minds. Vestiges of a distant past. Maybe they really dwell in our souls as opposed to the outer world."

"Makes sense. I too think along similar lines."

"Good. I thought you would. The others I have spoken too have some extremely outlandish theories. Interesting from a philosophical stance but of little use to my daughter." drinking some of her tea.

Even with her problem she looked in full possession of her emotions

"What can I do? I am not the kind of practitioner who wants to get into people's heads, read their future, read their present state, or their past. I am more a surveyor of my surroundings. Non specific, see what lurks in the shadows, try and perceive reality. If a soul, or spirit, is involved, entwined then yes there could be a revelation of that specific individual involved. But in depth analysis I stay away from. In a way Morfur, other's scare me. You never know what lurks beneath the surface."

"It looks like the surface has been ruptured Luferious. My daughter is being turned inside out." Distressed.

"Now there I might be able to be of some use."

"If I can impose this one wish of mine, not for me understand, but my daughter, of your precious time."

"Time indeed is precious Morfur. For all of us. Have you tried a priest? They are after all the nexus between what is and what is hidden."

"We have tried the practitioners of the ancient gods, who tried to exorcise her. In fact," she put her cup down, "they were momentarily possessed themselves. A strange

experience I can tell you." He had expected her to say 'frightening'. She was obviously immune to whatever had invaded her daughter.

"We did try one of these new priests. Of course they are not so new. They have been on our planet for quite some time. But not here. I was desperate."

"And?" hoping the priest was unsuccessful.

"He too is possessed." Present tense. Interesting. Luferious wondered if this daughter was an avatar. Chosen by one of the gods. A divine sign. He could even rationalise the nightmares. Intense dreams, potent realities, powerful magical realms flooding the soul with a heady infusion. Information overload. The result chaos. The imagery, nightmares.

"An extremely commanding deity has chosen my daughter."

"And the priest."

"And the priest. But if this is indeed one of the gods then that god is insane."

"Divine madness to us Morfur who are lesser vessels. Maybe this god sees a potential in your daughter we as mere mortals do not."

"True Luferious. Don't you think I have not thought about this day in day out? I have studied books, sought advice, am seeking advice. In a way a pattern is emerging which you have verified. But there is something else. It is as if the two, that is my daughter and the priest are as one."

"One possession, two souls?" If the gods did indeed reside within the soul then the priest's possession indicated the daughter as the nearest available vessel to cope with the excess energy. Not wishing to harm her parents, and since priests were the conduit to the gods or this unitary imagined being, then the priest was the obvious choice. Smart girl. He was tempted to enquire of her condition, the signs, the pattern if any of her behaviour but neither did he wish for Morfur to be unnecessarily distressed.

"So it seems. Now there are two."

"Surely the priest should know what is going on. That is what they are on about. Morfur, I forgot to ask. Is this priest that of their unitary god?"

"Yes."

"Then surely he ought to be in control, not being controlled?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Yes. If this unitary god is so supreme..."

"Exactly. Maybe my daughter sought out some god...and engaged in some transgression which she feels she committed. But then the priest, supposedly holy would have assuaged this turmoil which is infusing itself...if you had children..."

"That I know of." Luferious half smiled.

It released some of the tension she was feeling suppressing a smile. Her eyes lightened up a little. She poured another cup. His had gone cold.

"We are at our wits end Luferious. To be sure some of our more erudite acquaintances have made sensible suggestions, but they speak not from experience."

"Yes. Astute thinkers have comprehension as well."

"Knowledge is one thing, solutions no matter how logical..."

He nodded. "And drugs have not helped?"

"The elixirs do calm her."

"Hallucinogens."

"That might send her over the edge. Maybe as a last resort. Yes we do give her calming potions. But that cannot continue indefinitely. And the other recourse, treatment at an asylum, or sending her to a retreat in Regum..."

"The priest. Any enquiries about him?"

"None."

"That is something then."

"Maybe he is being missed. Which brings me to my next step. I want to remove him. For the two, who are one in this frightening manifestation seem to be draining each other. Or the priest is pushing her to extremes. Whether by wilful intent I cannot say. Everything is wrong Luferious." Putting her cup down. "I want to remove the priest. And my daughter. New surroundings may help her. Maybe it is the house, its location. It might be an ancient scrying site. Oh I don't know. Confusing and annoying. Will you help?"

"Of course. But why me?"

"You have been recommended."

"What exactly do you wish me to do?"

"Your presence is enough. A clearer mind."

"I shall see what I can do Morfur."

"Thank you Luferious. You will be recompensed."

He was polite enough not to answer.

They left the tea shop and made their way to a ground vehicle. Established Families did own them. The ultimate of status symbols. Some urchins were playing around it. From within her coat Morfur extracted a small purse and dispersed some coins to the street kids for looking after it. Cars were worth stealing.

The vehicle was manual. That needed some skills in driving which also made their removal harder for just any burglar to thief. She inserted the key, the engine purred

when to Luferious's surprise he saw two recumbent shapes in the back. Asleep. The daughter looked around eighteen, pale, drawn, emaciated. The priest merely snoozing. The ravages of possession not yet marking his face.

She drove slowly, the street busy with pedestrians, carts, pack animals. At the city gate the guards waved her through. They nudged their way through the usual congestion and then headed away from the city.

"Your estate?" he asked.

"Indeed."

"Can't your husband help?"

"I have no husband."

"Oh."

"He died of some wasting disease. Cancer probably."

Luferious could think of nothing to say except the obvious. But that in itself meant nothing. The way she said it, his passing was some time distant.

"The gods give life and take it. He was a good man if a little simple. I helped manage the estate whilst he was busy working social connections. He thought the villagers a lowering influence. Typical."

Luferious watched the countryside move past at such speed. A thin plume of dust kicked up behind them. The sun was starting to set behind the purple mountains, shadows reaching across the land. Morfur turned left along another smooth dirt road.

"Our estate."

"Good land."

"Alluvial soil. The river flows through our land. We even have two weirs stocked with fish. Are you free for the next few days?"

"I have brought nothing with me."

"No need, we can supply your needs. I did not want to let anyone know of your intentions. We brew our own beer, press our own wine, grow medicinal herbs."

They drove over a crest then saw a village nestled near a copse of trees. Around the village small plots for the inhabitants to grow their own vegetables or keep a cow or two. The village was off road, then another nearby. The setting sun cast its golden rays onto a humble mansion. No ostentation. Just a simple two storied brick building, tiled roof. Some low extensions around it to one side, servants quarters. Behind stables, a barn, silo, carts and drays. Strange dichotomy. A ground vehicle yet the estate run on traditional lines. Labourers were returning from the fields with scythes and rakes to their rustic homes.

As they pulled up front a thin man appeared, his clean clothes hanging off him. A cart with two horses, full of workers, some drinking ale waved to Morfur heading back to their village.

She drove the vehicle into the open garage. Two tractors and a mechanised hoe bits of mud sticking to them. The thin man, obviously the household head, her assistant manager called Mehr she informed him waited outside. They got out. Chickens squawked, behind the house a pond and a gaggle of geese, ducks, two dogs who rose from their warm spot, tails wagging, sniffing out Luferious.

Morfur asked for some help in moving the two invalids into their respective rooms upstairs. Mehr acknowledged her wish and soon one very robust looking man and a young lad appeared. They each carried the sleeping bodies inside.

"Your guestroom is next to the house. I'll show you." And went to the annex. The room was simple. A bed with fresh linen, mattress and quilt, candles, wardrobe, desk, two chairs, a wash basin on a dresser and water pitcher. Outside the latrines. The smell of disinfectant.

"Very pleasant."

"Humble." Morfur almost apologised.

"Now, about the patients."

"Tomorrow will be time enough. Please come in." leading him through the rear of the house. The large kitchen, a table in the middle, solid cast iron stoves, wood neatly chopped and stacked, gleaming copper pots, pans, kettles, a pot bubbling over an open hearth its rich stewing aroma of herbs, meat and vegetables. A trap door leading to the cellar, the larder. Upstairs heavy footfalls as the servants made their two drugged patients comfortable. Morfur led him through the dark corridor into the front living room.

Ancient weighty furniture, a large table, four huge padded chairs, a fire flickering behind a mesh, old tapestries hanging on the walls, lace curtained windows overlooking the land.

"Impressive."

"Isn't it?" she said joyously. "The flickering flames of the fire make the tapestries come alive." A hint of pride at the workmanship. One a scene of Khratham the city, its ancient houses, tiny bits of gold stitched into the windows sparkling. Overhead a ring of candles suspended the chandelier from the ceiling. Candle holders on the sideboard, heavy silver. A low table in front of the four armchairs, a silver pitcher with delicate spout and a tray of silver goblets reflecting the cheery fire. Homely.

"We can go into the study if you prefer."

"A library." Luferious was impressed. Her eyes had a fire of their own. "But then I would be distracted from your company."

She bowed her head a little.

"We have a dinner guest tonight. She has not arrived yet. You may find her interesting. I do. She is living as a semi-recluse in the next valley north of here." And paused. "I have an admission to make."

Luferious waited, happy to stand after all the sitting.

"I seek her advice in this matter. A witness to the tribulations. Oh nothing legal. She is focussed on the esoteric. You two might have something in common. But I am a distracted host. Please, be seated. Let me pour you some of our wine. Or would you prefer a pipe?"

He waited for her to be seated then sat with one chair between them in front of the fire so he could get a better view of Morfur.

"I don't touch tobacco. I know it is a bit if a fad amongst the wealthy. Makes me dizzy."

"Yes it can have that effect. I was thinking of opium."

"Thank you, maybe later."

"As you wish. Wine then? Or beer?"

"Beer would be perfect Morfur. And thank you for the hospitality."

She accepted the compliment lightly. Mehr must have been standing at the door since the footfalls upstairs had stopped. He informed her that both were sleeping comfortably. She thanked him and asked for a pitcher of beer adding he could join them. He bowed then went to fetch the refreshment. Morfur poured herself a goblet of wine.

"Mehr is somewhat of a confidant."

"Good to have one."

He returned with a huge clay pitcher and two mugs. He put it on the low table and sat at the outer chair. He let Luferious, whom she now introduced, pour his beer then Mehr followed suit.

The beer was a smooth blend of the bitter and the sweet. A rich froth left a little moustache in his lips which he wiped with his sleeve. It went down well as they all gazed into the fire.

"As you can imagine, I need informed opinions."

"I am surprised of course in that you sought me Morfur. Not just that but inviting me to your house."

"I...well, given the circumstances..."

"Yes, it may be better here. One can study them in more amenable surroundings. So tell me about this mysterious guest."

She put down the goblet. "As I alluded. Similar in orientation."

"Forgive me Morfur, but you hardly know anything about me." Wondering what sort of enquiries she had made about him.

"Your students speak highly of you." Seeing him puzzled, surprised added, "In my limited social circle Luferious. For I..." she picked up the goblet again, looking into it as if some answer would appear to her, "...move amongst like minded people. Not many, just a few who have a clearer shall we say understanding of, well, everything. Your name came up, sort of handed to me on a platter when I needed someone of your learning. What piqued my interest was in what you did not say or reveal. This from your students. Unlike the others who are busy spouting their wisdom, their supposed wisdom. Words words words. Thoughts following thoughts, each more convoluted than the next...philosophers. Mostly their tomes can be summed up in a sentence or two."

Luferious laughed. "Morfur you are so right."

"Philosophers like to complicate the obvious. More sophistry, intellectual acrobatics, verbose sententiousness."

"Well thinking can get complex."

"The act of thinking perhaps. Not its revelations, its context."

"Right again."

"Each philosopher claims the answer. And what does one get? Diametrically opposed views. The great Aristos is obsessed with logic. Logic is a tool, not an end product. It means nothing. It's like cooking. The act of cooking depends on the ingredients. Aristos I'm afraid lacks ingredients."

Luferious was amused. He had wrestled with this great thinker. And found him wanting.

"Does one have to analyse every sentence? Surely not. Then there is Memor who says all is water, Aryes who says all is air, breath. Dorus who talks of the inner fire as the essence of life, Trikos who combines all the elements into some super element, Suras who along similar lines talks of an invisible substance animating the universe, a godless Primaian maybe and Demos who claims the stars ate the souls of the unborn and the gods who rule over us. And now the priests to this heady mix."

"You are erudite."

"Have been Luferious. Not any more. The only positive conclusion I came up with was that thinking is fine but as an end in itself, well does it solve my problem? How does fire help me to understand what is burning up my daughter. Drinking water has no effect. So apart from sustaining life it has nothing to do with the mind. Is Suras's substance responsible? Who can tell? I can't. Nor could the doctors who are confounded. All these philosophers cannot help my daughter."

Luferious was familiar with these sages. He had studied them at university. Found them interesting as psychological specimens. Their great contribution to knowledge though was the unnecessary assumption that there was a need for the gods to understand nature. Which did not explain life or conscious existence. Yet each had a contribution to make. And Morfur was right. Just one explanation did not answer much. But it did explain natural causes. That was how science began. Here though, in Khratham people were focussed on their being. The elements of water or fire mere abstractions of the mind, not constituent of the soul. Morfur had a point.

The rich aroma of food cooking was wafting into the living room. The sun set behind the dark mountains. Indigo shadows moved across the land. A cow bellowed somewhere, or was that a bull? Dogs barked for a while, utensils clanked in the kitchen.

"Mehr, have we finished? Please excuse us for a moment Luferious."

He nodded, happy to enjoy the beer and the fire.

"In a day or two I will have to go over the books. The harvest is just about in. The wholesalers have to be notified. The villagers have already what is theirs."

"We are organised Mehr."

"I think the worst is over. We are ready for the coming winter. Apart from making the conserves. But that is your department."

"I am looking forward to making my fruit liqueurs." And turning to Luferious, "They are not for sale either. Some things are meant to be enjoyed. Though I could turn a pretty penny there as well."

A moments silence. The house creaked a little, the staff busy in the kitchen, a woman's voice, clanging utensils.

"Any further instructions regarding your daughter and the priest?"

"Yes." Morfur's mood changed. Concerned. "Thank your good wife for the herbal concoction. But I fear it is an affliction of the mind, if not the soul." She seemed uneasy.

"Very perplexing." Mehr conceded.

"I have heard in the villages..."

"Yes, so have I.

"What are the rumours?" Luferious curious.

"From the outrageous to the bizarre." Morfur dismissive, wondering if they were to be believed.

"I can imagine." For Luferious could. Mix ancient lore, add confounding wisdom, and the preacher's latching onto the mentally disturbed. Aware how they dealt with mental aberrations on Prima. Isolated in asylums. There were none here and on Regum, medicine was advanced enough to stabilise even the slightest of onsets.

"At least it's not contagious."

"Hard to say. It does not discriminate." Mehr said thoughtfully.

"That at least is something. I certainly would not want to be plagued by these strange visions."

"Hallucinations?" Luferious asked putting down his tankard.

"Nightmares."

A knock outside the room. A buxom woman, middle aged, rosily healthy with a burning taper was let in to light the candles.

"We will also need some more wood for the fire Seanna."

She curtseyed, smiling in their general direction and returned shortly with an arm full of chopped wood. Removed the grate and busied herself to rebuild from the glowing embers the fire. Soon the flames started to lick at the fresh wood, the sap hissing. Little curlicues of white smoke twisted its way upwards.

"When will dinner be ready?"

"I've timed it with the arrival of your guest ma'am. An hour or so. It's a lovely one pot stew as you ordered so timing is not crucial. After a lovely cheese platter with fresh bread."

"Thank you Seanna."

Again the studied silence. Luferious comfortable with that. Morfur was not one to talk for the sake of talking.

"So this affliction..." as they watched the flames come to life.

"Well if they are nightmares," Luferious spoke waiting if Mehr had wished to answer first, "then all I can say at this moment is that they are powerful revelations at best. They are scary because they are so potent, so other worldly. And since that other world is so remote to the sufferer the impression is negative. If one perseveres they can become truly rewarding. Messengers from the gods."

"But why would they torment a soul?" Mehr asked perplexed.

"Yes." Morfur agreed. "Surely not the sin of disbelieving?"

"Is that what the priests say?" Luferious not surprised in their conclusion.

"It is."

"Morfur. Everything is ultimately in our minds. Everything. So something is drawing out these visions from within."

"If so, what, or who? That is why I have asked you to come."

"Too much energy."

"Yes, agreed. It's the why and the how Luferious."

"I too have nightmares Morfur. Almost constant. Not incessant, not every night but constant never the less."

"You do? And?"

"How do you mean?"

"You seem so normal!"

Luferious laughed. "Me normal." He chuckled. "Maybe I am. I don't know. I don't even know what normal is Morfur. Maybe stable is normal. That each of us have our own stability. They enlighten me. Make me see the larger picture, literally. A conduit to the greater realms within and without."

"Yet they don't seem to bother you."

"During yes, after, no."

"You are indeed lucky."

"Hm." Eyeing the tankard. "Maybe I am. Who knows? Yet your daughter is caught up in them without let up?"

"Yes."

"Did she take some hallucinogens?"

"I don't think so."

"Not at the instigation of the priest maybe?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Maybe a god with evil intentions." Mehr suggested.

"Doesn't make sense. Gods are gods, they have no need to plague those who believe in them."

"Maybe the priests are right. That it is a punishment for disbelief." Mehr searching as well for a solution.

Luferious was tempted to say he did not believe but thought this was not the right moment.

"I cannot see the sense in that either." Morfur added. "Unless there is a new god in the cosmos, a twisted resurrection."

"Prima's god?" Luferious interested. Given what his visions told him the universe and his head were full of surprises.

"Prima's god." Morfur repeated. "But they say it creates life. So why torment it?"

"Indeed. Unless something has gone wrong." Mehr said quietly, frightened by his own thoughts.

"Now that is interesting." Luferious invigorated by such a twist. He was thinking of the DVs. Whether this was their doing. Creating spiritual discord. Then bring in the priests to save them. Yet the priest had gone down as well. Unless a few victims were created to give the appearance of vulnerability. But how to prove it if he was correct.

"You think that that could be the case?" Morfur turning to him. Her face glowing pink from the fire. Her eyes deep, disturbed, restless.

"Monstrous." Mehr intoned disgusted. Coming to terms with his own fearful thoughts.

Crunching on the gravel outside. Relieved to change the subject Morfur's mood changed immediately. "Ah the guest of honour."

Deep Space: Regum

Elentra studied the mentally hyped though physical dormant duplicate of herself. A cyber creation. Very Reganian. At least she was on the other side. In their WebSpace. Shunted in some holding area. In the distance lightning flashed, data transfers illuminating sub-realms as if the sun itself was rising. Its building like structures, reminiscent of Regums sky scrapers. Amazingly memorable. Glad she was familiar with the scenery. A real Primaian...Prima...recalled, dark, dismal, contained. Suffocatingly so, enveloped by their resonance, draining the life out of its inhabitants so that the Immortals could live. The imagery of the Reganians data coming in from the DVs anthropomorphically reconfigured. Now she understood their minds. Mangling universal incoming data through their hardshaped structured mental concepts. No wonder she wanted out.

So now she was here. The entities, external personas whoever they were in the world outside had given her a new energy shell to slip into. Athea. She looked at the figure. Not her at all. She had auburn hair this one gold. Her skin was too white. She knew they wanted this presence for her protection so that any DV probing would get Athea and not Elentra.

'Let's see what you feel like.' Another lightning flash. A glowing aura as another domain lit up, a micro world glowing lime green. Tiny sparks flitting over its radiant sphere. She willed herself into the adumbration, this other Athea in front of her. A pool of soft grey light around each other's feet. The rest pale yellow, a solid mist holding the two of them in place.

Elentra melded. Her brain felt images of a construed past flood her memory. Luckily knowing Reganian's even if one step removed from cyber manifestation obviating the searching DV's regarding this one, Athea seemed rather bland. Inserted into the Web guided by a programme testing her abilities and natural inclinations. Sound logic led to maths and science, her limited imagination skirted the arts, tried music, not much of a response, then history. Her other, Athea with an interest in those who tried to keep the peace for the info wars that through the DVs were pursued with such relentlessness. A soul with empathy. Other avenues opened up. Inclined towards those who were beneficent towards a peaceful civilization filled her mind, lifted her heart, expanded her consciousness. She was a positive influence. Elentra wondered if this was her or Athea. As the feelings in both personas were so similar she assumed this was part of her real essence. She had felt for, as Elentra for the DVs, those who crashed as well as

those who burnt out. Not that she could save them. They had gone in too deep. Into what?

She felt a presence near her, almost around her. Something had entered or had already been there and now made itself known. Not as a being but as an effect. The cause remained hidden. Sentient, filled with malignant intent. Shit. Was this what troubled the DVs? With no clear idea of its threatening implications. Maybe a rogue persona pushing the limits. Certainly not the Divine Mind of Prima. Trying to shift the balance, draw on the information realm she was parked in. A sub domain of temporary space. Studying her, remotely. Testing her reactions. A persona set with grim determination to get at what? Not a data field, not even this realm. It was at once too diffuse yet simultaneously searching. Divergence. Fractured minds. Convolved disturbances. The unreal. The distorted configurations of dissolving souls on the verge of madness. Everywhere and nowhere. Resonating on another level. Seeking the burnt out DVs, drawing in their nightmare visions and thus create its own demented field. Fog like tendrils searching, probing, flaring for one moment in dark pulsing purple snakelike whiplashing cords tossed about by extraneous energy as if it was too much for the conduit feeding the dormant, distant, hidden, unrealized potential of its growing self. The other data spheres untouched, serenely glowing orbs around her. Some connecting tenuously in moments of superimposition, white light flaring brilliantly, after images flashing in her brain. Self creating, replicating minor data blocks, extracting strands of codes here and there, minor configurations running its lines of contact around the mega sphere. She was in one huge sphere herself. Athea, even if within she still knew she was Elentra. Athea a visceral cover. Her limits lost in the glow receding into the meta realm as a smaller satellite entity.

The tension was palpable. Athea somewhat braindead compared to what Elentra was used to. So she decided to wear Athea like a coat. A useful cloak, something for the outside, keeping her inside.

A flash strike. Ignoring Athea. A flickering extension hit her square in the forehead. Euphoria flooded through her. Power exultant exercised with designed, configured expanding energy. Accumulating its authority drawn not from any one particular data realm but the whole itself. A world even more masked than Prima. A blood red sun, its aura diffused behind thin dark grey clouds smeared across the sky. In the distance some horrific inferno consuming whole cities. Collapsing buildings, strange ancient designs, distant in time, some historic disaster. A pale purple white crested wave rushing inland to smash golden spires to fragments as turquoise rooves collapsed into rubble, obliterating everything in its foaming path. The city swept away. In the distance volcanoes erupting

jetting bright orange lava into the poisoned air. Thick broiling dark clouds and steams of molten earth spewed forth, raining death onto the stricken plain.

She floated above the destruction below her, crossed a vast ocean and was drawn to another citadel. Where was this place? Some mad construct by a bored Gamer? Someone who despised life? Or a glimpse into her planet's past? A fearsome thralldom enervating its inhabitants. Shades of Prima but on a more intense level. A resonating innate strength, exultant in its supremacy now that the city was rubble, its people dead, its glory no more. A bastion harbouring a demented archimage who ruled his shadow kingdom at a distant location. Protected by stones carved with vindictive spells, prophesising decay and death to any usurper. Multitudes bowing to a dark god. A god that was growing moment by moment promising cosmic retribution for some unknown transgression.

A lambent glow, the birth of a star shone through the thick cloud cover. It grew slowly, ignored by the inhabitants of this stricken planet. Its baleful rays were not meant for the malignant ruler below. It travelled west to a horror cast citadel squatting with preternatural gloom over an eviscerated land. The dead everywhere, slain in recent battle. Blood soaked the ground, hordes of black flies feasting eagerly on those massacred. Twitching limbs, hacked bodies, gored torsoes littered the dark plain. The wan orb above, a baleful eye seeking revenge for the carnage, the destruction wrought, the death of thousands seeking retribution from beyond the grave. No not reprisal. Seeking the instigator of this foul deed. A fleeting shadow its target. It illuminated a warrior chief, long flowing black hair in his citadel having sent his warlords out to vanquish the enemy, only to have lost the battle himself. Self entranced by his own dark magic he saw too late the coruscating glow of the orb in the sky. Unlike a real sun it did not spread its beneficent rays over the land but a data sphere, intent on its designated object. The shadow warrior collapsed, realising too late the trap sprung from a hyper-spatial domain having waited for just this moment. Contained.

Who? A cryptic battle where thousands died. Massacred on the plain and the surrounding jagged mountains, drowned, crushed, mangled, obliterated on that distant continent, the revenge of a spiteful ruler not from that planet. A sickening realisation of cosmic interference. Prima? Would they? Regum responsible for this strange orb? Not a sun. A data sphere. A virus?

The orb hovered in the sky casting neither light nor shadow on the ground and the stricken fiend. He understood. Doomed. Good. Then to her horror it began to

disintegrate. A digital collapse, forming itself into a point, then nothing. The orb had vanished for this excrescence had subsumed it.

In the back of her mind, in the back of the memory of the universe a dark resonance began to vibrate, rebirthing, reconfiguring. Fear and wonder screwed her emotions into two opposing states. Darkness in an isolated void as it escaped. Below the rush of exultant euphoria at the mad ruler's destruction ridding the planet of its baleful malignancy to let its people recover from the repulsive horror filled visions which it had spread like a shroud over their souls. Inserting its madness of supremacy in its unifying dark god to corrupt their naturally effervescent minds.

A configured collapse of reality. The past or the future? The destroyed coastal city from an ancient culture. So the past then. Or a hypothetical?

Reality more than preternatural. Precognisant. For the demented resonance was still manifest. Weaker. Distant but there none the less. Rebirthing. Drawing on a gigantic power source somewhere in this vast universe.

Glorying in destruction. Onto another world.

A planetary catafalque. Darkened high rise buildings entombing thousands in slow death by starvation. Encased in their creations. Ghastly memories and utter ruin. A corpse strewn world. The dead outnumbering the few survivors.

Her head felt the pressure build, the very air thick, filled with a foul resonance, washing through her. She felt soiled, dislocated caught in an invisible rip, her soul dragged along this broadening power moving through space itself. Twisting reality into its fevered sentence. Athea forgotten. Lost. For a moment she gasped, fighting for breath as its centre of power, a dark purple black orb glowed momentarily, expanding with sickening palpitations outwards whilst drawing on the substance of the universe inwards, feeding greedily. She could think of no way out. Where was this place? She had escaped the relative calmness of Prima and ended in this nightmare construction.

Elentra was literally thought into this seething madness. Athea besides her seeking a portal of escape. The awful infusion of its sick mind in her. Elentra drawn into a smaller orb then she was gone. Athea felt her brain being extruded, saw various data spheres being tapped into for micro moments. A little bit here, a data stream there. Slowly slowly. All heading into its foul centre. It's undefined essence drawing her self, the cyber-realm she was in as a memory construct into its expanding realm. Leaving her as a husk behind like some useless token. Her remnant cyber shell gutted. The dark designer mind which had escaped its perdition in that corpse strewn land announcing its arrival without showing itself. A new presence in the universe. One not to be denied.

"Systems alert." Kora seeing Elentra-Athea flaring into a depleted resonance.

"Got it." Tryces sitting next to Kora in one of the modules testing the field generators.

"Broad spectrum band PWF. Information rich."

The two of them looked at the light screens glowing in front of them. Then a flash of dark light. Elentra-Athea's adumbration in phase as the extraneous field focussed on her.

"Data realms steady. Minor information flows going out. Could be entropy. Within safe limits. Power levels stable. General field unaffected."

"What could it be?" Kora focussed. She was glad this was not a direct feed. So was Tryces.

"Quantum weirdness. Who knows what is buried in Elentra's persona. She is a natural DV. She's linked to something." Tryces remarked.

"Or something to her." Kora more to herself. "I know, it's relative, the state, everything."

"You're right. Entanglement. And as you alluded, which is the trigger? External?"

"Or she released it. Something she might not even be aware of herself. Something implanted, I mean suggested, we've got a Primaian after all. To be released when conditions are right. No threat detected."

"Dare we go in?" Tryces asked.

"Her brain? No keep her isolated. Who knows what the Primaians bury in their heads. It could affect the PWs. And we want them for ourselves."

"We do. Look at that spike. Some heavy stuff in her memories."

"Siphoned into a secure data sphere. One way lock down mode. Encoding bifurcating algorithms going in. Should be safe enough not to accidentally unlock."

"Copy. Put the key somewhere safe. Nowhere near it."

"Searching possible locations." Kora spoke to the screen. Hundred's of web images scrolled across the partitioned cyber realms. Several were cached.

"There. Abandoned factories. A huge rusting decaying complex. Wonder what it's purpose is? No sentient activity, cyber or otherwise."

"Someone's portal to their world. So unattractive and boring no Gamer would give it a second glance. Nothing recumbent, no hidden dormant energy release mechanism or power sources. A wasteland. Perfect. Yep. There's a whole row of toilets.

Talk about historic detail." Kora was impressed. "What's my favourite number. Five. Fifth lavatory from the left. And...plonk. Key's in the cistern. So even if flushed it'll stay there."

"Now what about Athea?"

"She's a cyber persona. Let her roam. See what she really is on about."

"Seems a bit dormant."

"Maybe Tryces," her eyes glowing, "she's thinking. Digesting the information influx."

"Quite a lot."

"From her perspective. She might be top of the range at her end but not from ours. Looks like she's not downloading as such, more like flowing with it."

"A sequence."

"Sequential events. Interesting."

"You can tell from the outside?"

"My Brain can."

"Mine's off."

"Good to get a different perspective now and then."

Tryces merely smiled.

"Well it's all low key stuff. Old data. Past data. Hey hey hey. What's this realtime, err, horrific scenario, all the dead from some ancient battle doing in there exposed?"

"She must have opened a portal. Or it opened her." Acknowledging her interpretation.

"Someone or something is feeding her real time stuff. No tech involved. Wait. RF present. Quantum base state. Very sophisticated. Weak field."

"Target specific. A bit like DV activity."

"You're right there. Well well well. They might have found her but in there she's isolated. No chance of getting at us," he tapped in some commands to focus on the locale of Athea and grimaced, "or her. She's been isolated. Shit."

"We'll let some low level bots snoop out whatever she's hooked into, have a sniff. Any activity now might alert whatever that is." Kora frowned

"She jumped out of our space. Something or someone targeting her."

"Kora, they might have been searching and just found her."

"Hm Tryces, you're right again. Primaians?"

"No persona's at this stage. Not this side anyway. Can't get a fix on her. She's in some probable quantum state. Amazing. Classic entanglement."

"Let them think they got her. Might reveal the source."

The first spike receded followed by a secondary one. Then that too collapsed, dragging down the rest of the graph's cyber contents.

"You see what I see?"

"They're draining Elentra, eviscerating Athea!"

"Should we...?"

"No this is too serious. Captured. This is some new phenomena."

"Yes. Lucky it wasn't us in there. At least we still got her initial digital presence. They don't muck around do they?"

"Wonder what's so precious about her that it requires such heavy attention?"

"That Tryces remains to be seen."

"Not now though. We'll have to wait till they ceased their activity. Make sure they got what they want, leave and Kora, stay away."

"Me or them?"

"Both. We got no idea what this is about. Let diagnostics deal with it."

"Gotcha." Kora worried.

"Let's test the key then."

Tryces checked the general environment of the data spheres overall status.

"Whatever transferred Elentra-Athea's cyber presence, leaving a content-less shell behind certainly knew their extraction techniques." Kora remarked.

"You don't seem concerned. We lost a persona. Two." Tryces reminded her.

"A cyber-persona. She might have been unstable from the beginning. She might have been an insert designed to be gutted. She might have preferred another location. She might have pretended to be hijacked Tryces."

"Still. I'm more concerned what she took from here."

"As in SS 1, or 1 V? Not likely. We're quantum."

"The location."

"Configurations in place the PWFs are go-active we're invisible and impregnable."

"Not from DV activity Kora."

"But that will always be the case. Don't forget it works both ways." Looking at the light screen showing the steady-state data orbs. Glowing planets in flaring background effusions of spectrum changing colours depending on energy usage. The recurring lightning, data transfers lit up the screen, minor energy spikes glowed brilliant white and yellows, lesser back ups lilac, midnight blue, dark deep purples. The SS 1's subWeb

secure. Since Elentra-Athea's gutting no external activity was noted. WebSpace, their control showing nothing unusual.

"RamScram, I know. They hit us, we hit them back. Black noise, chaos itself."

"Mental meltdown. Molecular morosis. We're secure. That was the first thing up and running."

"So what got through?"

"We're about to find out." Kora eager to find out Elentra-Athea's siphon.

"I just hope it's not a third presence."

"Afraid of real aliens Tryces? Not like you."

"I'm thinking of their simulacrum."

"The CI?"

Tryces nodded, his face a pale yellow in front of the light screen.

"Then it would have gotten poor pickings. Elentra-Athea never brought much with her. Her intel is orbital related only. She came as herself. Bits of Earth's history, memories really, ditto us. Nothing we didn't know, except that meteor hit way back then. All historic dust."

"There was that outer dead planet.."

"Mars."

"Yes. Mars. Why the interest?"

"Because it's there?"

"The DVs were focussed on that, then they ceased. Heightened mental activity disengaged..."

"Conversing with ghosts. Their own hallucinations. That could have been a primer of sorts. Their psychic webworld. You know. Create aliens, have students interact, test their abilities."

"So why stop it?"

"Because it didn't work? That Earth was more rewarding for them?"

"That's another thing."

"What is that Tryces?"

"Letting their simulacrum and Merduk in."

"He volunteered."

"Suspicious."

"What would have been suspicious is Prima going in solo."

"I don't get it. Why through us? No don't answer that. They are after our insertion techniques."

"They'll never crack it. Tryces they got no concept of just how weird the quantum universe really is. The concept alone would bamboozle them. Order out of chaos? They'll never get their heads around that one. To them it's all orders of different magnitudes. The notion that at the atomic level it's all rather abstract and random...well how far have they gotten with what little we have to keep the orbital functioning. Take fusion power..."

"You maybe right. I hope you are."

"Right might not be the correct assumption. They just don't get it. So they do what they do best. Obsess. So with Earth in their sights, at least we keep an eye on them. Tryces, it's all going our way."

"That's what worries me Kora."

"Ah, we got a fix in that superimposition."

"Took a while."

"Talk about embedded codes. Thick barely covers it."

"Apt analogy." Studying the numerical readouts. Reams of it scrolling down the screens. "I've got a hunch. I'm going to do a comparison on the CI."

She put a request through to the laboratory on the SS 1. Sovark was reluctant to release the data in case Prima's DVs picked it up. But if it helped he would send a courier out.

"Not taking any chances?" Tryces asked.

"None. Let's hope he sends a g-drive out. Otherwise it will be months."

"Right, let's unlock the event that downloaded that self manifestation." Referring to Elentra-Athea's cyber disembowelling.

Kora extracted the key from the cistern 'jumped' it into the reconfigured occurrence, unlocked the contents of the phenomena and got...nothing.

"Great."

"The field is there." Tryces hopeful.

"Something I guess."

"Something? Kora this is something else!"

She looked closer at the light screen. "That's DV activity."

"How do you explain the ordered background radiation?"

"They might be boosted. Configured space. Running it through a separate system."

"Computers you mean."

"Looks like it."

"Not good Kora."

"I know. It means they can focus for any length of time, anywhere. Mimic a mental state. Looks like they're learning."

"Not too fast I hope."

"Now that we know, we can set traps. False realities Tryces, false realities." Kora emphasised.

"Sounds good."

"Unleash WebWorld. Lead them right into our jaws. They'll get mauled."

"I was thinking of something more caring Kora."

"False sense of achievement? Yeah, let's start by being nice." Kora smiled wickedly.

Sakaris's mind, remote, considered the warm oceanic infusion. It had come out of nowhere. His Brain an island in the fields' embrace. Probing for connectivity. Going superimposition. He knew that in the bastion where he secluded himself when not engaging with the station's personnel he was secure. The Core his Brain resided in isolated. Only a persona-relative resonant state could access it. Seven there in all. All but two Enhanced.

The field around him was different. A base state of sorts, a superstructure with no defined pattern. No that was wrong, an incomplete pattern. Shadow neural paths spreading out its tendrils into space. Real space. Sakaris accessed his logic processors, his analytical mind a construct. This was not the effect of an astronomical event. The universe spewed out bits of data randomly. This was a changed phase-embedded-space-state, feeding space with its molecular building quantum forces, holding the to be construct in place. Steadied in its primal dark state ready to lock on and in to the outer physical laws of real space. The stuff of creation out of which star building galaxies, configured lesser energy centres, down to the molecular soup which eventually allowed sentient life to form under the right conditions. It's potential conditions. Future tense.

Its adumbrated intelligence meshed with his. Given the energy, a crafted state of the immortal, the eternal. But only as a CI. Energy the umbilical connection, intelligence the outer, physical expression of quantum designed patterns which were shared by all conscious thinking life forms. Embryonic, diffuse, uncentred. More potential than actuality. A pattern, an expanding intentional Web. Not the dense high energy WebWorld or WebSpace of Regum. Something similar but not the same. Sakaris searching, probing. The absence of recognisable purpose designated solutions.

Camouflage. The medium the answer. A higher order of dark matter. Riding the subatomic realm like foam on cresting waves.

Sakaris's logical outer mind resonated at an extremely low level within this plastic, tenuous, dispersed, quantum field-state. A realm. At that moment of resonance a second carrier wave appeared. Elentra-Athea. Her signature, her radiating persona unmistakable. She was glowing. Not hot, barely warm, vibrating at its level, aligning, repatterning her sentient projected continually collapsing probability wave. A seething invigoration of excess energy which she either drew from this expansive field or, one could never tell with quantum states, the field infusing itself into her radiance. Like the molecular configuration of a drug active in a biological brain. Lock and key. The brain the lock the drug the key.

So the field had data groupings. Now that Sakaris knew of the field's presence he concentrated, without focussing on what was happening at Elentra's micro realm. She was becoming an attractor. An algorithmic equation having reached its determinate solution other solutions gravitated towards her. She was building a data realm. One configured to her resonance. Self enhancing.

Sakaris was learning. He had been content to engage with whatever the information contained. Linked into him. The attractor was probing the limits of inserting probability waves, en-phasing the real configured structure, using information rich realities grafted onto real-time environments cybernetically. The flood was on.

Elentra reversing her domain's progression. Dampening the alien urge to create a sub-realm in it's thralldom. The PWs stayed in a potential probable state. Whatever was running this expanding field, without being diluted, was not revealing its base state, its intentions, its design parameters, its reason for being active potential energy. The field was all possibilities without collapsing into conceived or pre-programmed actualities. Thus not giving to whoever was embedded through quantum entanglement the impression of its determined reality. Elentra a dampener. Or himself. Or It.

But the secret was out. Sakaris's logical mind reassembled the diffuse data and conceptualised it into abstractions a thinking mind could understand. From there it was but one logic step removed to gain the knowledge gleaned from this cyber revelation as a data orb. A part of his persona wanted to download his conclusion to make it accessible to the personnel on the SS 1.

Then the spike hit. The tipping point reached. The quantum jump activated. The transformation instant, the phase change complete. In his Brain.

Elentra was literally dissolving. Absorbed into its vast expanded state of energy within a state, extracting her data, the carrier wave immaterial. If that. Influencing meta-fields in potentia.

Sakaris felt the plug being pulled on her dual personalities. Realising too late of its irrelevance. Instead experiencing the evisceration as data searching tendrils of focussed energy hit him right inside his configured being. Mind to mind, Brain to Brain. A huge reservoir of energy behind it. Phenomenal. He was surprised and stunned. No time for reactions. Too late. He too was entangled. A data crust around him, isolating him from his environment, extracting him. The imagery, for he was loosing his computational abilities, started to pixellated. Data loss. Fragmenting information blocks that fractured, split, subsumed by the alien intelligence. Too late. The unformed without was target specific within.

Sakaris's last sensation was being stretched beyond breaking point, being smeared across its space. He clung, desperately to the memory of his extracted persona which being sucked out of his domain became a mere smidgin of his former self. Just some minor assembled bits of data. The last thing he was aware of was a huge sphere. Tiny moving blocks of information, time sequenced runs, potential scenario's, alternative possibilities, some not lasting a fraction due to internally warped instabilities, others stable, timeless, others still exploring potentialities dependent on data specific teleologies. A vast powerful experiment of differentials in time. The CI's Brain he realized to his dismay running all possible worlds, possible scenario's, subsuming falsities due to wrong or missing information, others expanding, dominating other realities.

His Brain, the centrifugal force too strong, broke apart, ripped to shreds as minute specks of his persona were inserted into the multiple worlds around him. Neutered as a processing unit. The core assembling, he not. Then consciousness faded out, a mere glimmer of his former self. Sakaris was now one of many possibilities without being an actuality anymore. There was no sign of Elentra. Or Sakaris's mind. His body inert. Dead.

"Isolate the Core." Tryces puzzled at the swirling eddies, the appearance of strange attractors in cyberspace. A source based field was infusing their data realm. Not strong, just persistent. Tryces had let the CoreBrain use Sakaris to act as forward scout. Further in-out Sakaris found Elentra-Athea. Drifting outwards, disassembling, building down, strand by data strand. Yet where? The field the source.

"Isolating." Kora hit the `off' button, the manual override if the Core went critical. Los came into the control room. Not the type to ask the obvious she watched Tryces and Kora enter overriding commands to secure the CoreBrain working overtime. They weren't getting much data. A massive BrainDrain. Almost Primaian in execution. Yet not Primaian in origin. Somewhere in space, everywhere in space. A weak field with unlimited potentialities.

On the smart lounge the dead body of Sakaris.

Los linked to Mirn asking her to come. Minutes later she entered a little dishevelled. She'd been asleep. She looked at the read outs. Horrified at Sakaris's demise. Elentra was definitely dissolving. Entangled yet protected by the Sakaris persona who was drawing off the probing flickering snaking tendrils trying to reach right into the Core. Sakaris was drawing the attack off, into himself. It worked. He was becoming the Attractor. And paid with his physical life.

"Not Prima." Mirn said to no one.

"Sure? Not some DV diversionary tactic?" Los wondered.

"That would be a first. They're direct."

"What about the inserts?"

"This is somewhere else. Nowhere else rather." Mirn was puzzled. She had booted up her E status without engaging, on stand by. See what was floating around the quantum soup in that space. The awareness of something tangible bothered her...was watching her. Disinterested, cursory, indifferent, unfocussed, a hovering generality. Deadly.

Looking at Tryces and Kora intent on keeping the Core, the Brain of SS 1 isolated whilst watching what Sakaris was grappling with. A strange glowing lilac fog around him, melding with his outer shell, his projected persona. Beyond recall.

"Kora, is this some re-run?" Los asked.

"It's weird. By rights Elentra went pfft a short while ago." Kora answered intent on the light screen's read outs, Tryces busy with the visuals trying to intuit whatever was going on out there.

"Well she's going pfft now." Los remarked as Elentra dissolved visually leaving a few glowing data reams behind. Glittering litter. Sakaris glowing darkly, becoming a vessel who had drawn off whatever was aimed in their direction. The field was general and only specific with the appearance of the now vanished Elentra and the transforming Sakaris. His details blurred, not so much out of focus as vibrating in another resonant state. Then an invisible wind hit him from `behind'. Transitory pathways appeared,

crackling white flaring jittery lines of contact, several of them extruding Sakaris's Brain. The SS 1's CoreBrain disconnected, shut down. Alien pattern recognition with impending massive unknown potential informational content. Seeking consciousness patterned recognition targeting systems.

"Like some disembodied mind on the prowl." Los wondered.

"DV black op?" Tryces asked without turning away from the displays.

"Who knows. Something's out there." Los feeling useless. Stating the obvious.

"Trouble is no source." Tryces exasperated.

"The field is the source. Total quantum state by the looks of it."

"But so stable. I mean with Elentra and Sakaris in there, the field should have collapsed, revealed itself and of course reflecting the state of the observers. But the reverse happened. The observers became the field." Suppressing his emotions with the loss of Sakaris. Realising Reganians such as he had basically no empathy. They had been Isolates too long. He tried to feel something and instead felt nothing. Sakaris was already past tense.

"Now that is something." Mirn shut down her E state.

"What's Brain making of it?" Los asked.

"Alien. Retracted. Then nothing. Linked with Sakaris. But the moment he went fuzzy it recoiled, shut down. In fact," Kora found out, "it's still out. Totally self isolated. Max recall."

"But definitely cyber?" Mirn asked.

"Value enhanced." Kora replied. "Trouble is the values are all over the place."

"Like me sometimes." Los joked.

"Something recalled Elentra and took Sakaris with it. That's gotta be a sign of intent." Mirn suggested.

"Looks like it. Looks. Not is." Kora cautioned.

"Anything to do with the other experiment?" Los finally pulling up a chair, sitting between Tryces and Kora. Mirn leaned against the wall, watching the watchers.

"I don't want to contact them. Just in case the DVs are waiting..."

"Well they haven't noticed anything." Mirn wishing they did. Yet if they did then whatever had siphoned, drained and deleted both Elentra-Athea and Sakaris did so in their space. "Are we running PWFs?"

"No." Tryces comprehending Mirn's take that they were embedded in some probable reality. "However, now that you two are here. I've asked Sovark to send us,

secured of course, the basics of the CI. See if there is a pattern with whatever is out there with it."

"Bit of a long shot." Los being ultra logical.

"Sure is." Tryces not put off.

"So what's diagnostics come up with?"

"Los, you ought to know how it works. It's running all the time. System's all as they should be."

"Could Sakaris's Brain have leaked?"

"You mean we are seeing this inside out?" Kora getting Los's point.

"Yeah, self extracting projection. Then bootstrapping itself into its domain."

"Tryces?" Kora asked.

"Wish we could ask Brain. But it's withdrawn. From the status lights it's thinking.

And loosing Sakaris, not just his persona...what a waste of life."

"Shit shit shit." Los upset. "Mirn you could be right. This entity can rove around any system. It's got Sakaris. Wanted a higher order entity."

"Los." Tryces a little annoyed at her indifference. So Reganian. Comprehending her non rational approach had its uses. Change the perspective completely. Or ignore it. Move onto something else. Come at the problem sideways. Grieve later.

"Duplicating, or rather, creating itself a Web presence. A domain of its own." Los certain.

"But there is..." Tryces was going to say noting there. But there was. The same spike, computers confirmed it, showed up. The only difference Sakaris's deleted presence. His spike flat topped. Mega. Meta. Then zero. Smeared into an electron soup.

Kora hit the master delete. The screens imagery and data read outs went zero, visuals vanished, the computers in idle.

"Yes?" Tryces needing information.

"This is not good. Sakaris, " Kora staring at the vacant screens in front of them. She rebooted the system. Waited. Functioning again. "is lost, for ever. I'll check the status of WebWorld."

The screen showed the architectural constructs. The glowing data spheres. A soft hued background lilac barely noticeable.

"No alerts. Yet you can see the background radiation. Vaporous, broadbanded. A self-modifying set of equations. An event horizon."

They all saw the lilac haze in the background, the artificial night sky. She reran the overall look down scene. Then two specks of light going diffuse.

"An entrapping device that got to them. Quarantine it."

"Doing, done. Crude but effective." A symbolic gate. Designated an infinite vortex potential singularity.

"Is it accessing space?" Los asked for all of them.

"With intent." Mirn replied.

"Something that sets off no alarms either." Kora exhaled. They got the what, not the who, how would come via search patterns eventually.

"Sakaris's sacrifice for nothing." Los suppressing her emotions. "Our first casualty."

No one said anything. They were in mourning.

Ratze

During the meal with Kaster, Ratze figured out that even the pleasant conversation she was having with this Enhanced character they were in their own way probing her. Nothing overt. Just thoughts and suggestions. Aster joined them. The ship was not large. There was only this communal space. Smaller light screens showed the ships status, space in various frequencies, its phase states. Whilst one screen in particular showed the background radiation that was everywhere.

Aster considered the tiny flecks of food on her plate amongst small puddles of sauce.

Ratze was relaxed. So far none of them had said anything in regards to her very unrelative time frame, her gapped time line. She was not even sure of that herself. Where had she been at the time of the Crash? She knew what Aster was thinking. Too many discrepancies. Discrepancies. The thought hit her like having nearly forgotten something extremely important.

Kaster's Enhanced state picked up her mental surge. It was the way he looked at her. His dark eyes. The pupils flared a little. Her mind affecting his configured implants. His E state content increased just enough for her Brain to notice. Even with shield states of consciousness were still, even now, for him hard to hide. Failing to completely dampen out without alerting a recipient such as herself.

Prima supreme. In charge. Dominant. Their aim all along. A low tech culture totally wiping out a high tech society.

"You might not be consciously aware Ratze." Aster suggested having tasted some of Ratze's thoughts.

"If that is so, then there is a reason." Meaning she was indeed programmed. Containing data that would only be released if the conditions were right. Until then whatever she knew was buried deep in her unconscious. An apt expression. Even with all the bio-boosted enhancers that part of the mind was still a land, a scenario shrouded in mist and fog. Where dimensions blurred, where perspective found no centres of thought, not unlike the data realms of cyberspace, where ideas, knowledge, information existed more like an electron state: everywhere at once and nowhere in particular. Until sought.

Kaster knew that as well. Anyone who bothered to access their inner mind, not its outer projected thinking realm realised that. And more. For apart from being a data rich space unto itself it resonated with just about anything both the universe and active

progressive minds all mysteriously conjured out of space. Space a non localised state, information rich, loaded to the max.

"We would like to get into your head." There, he had said it.

She looked at Kaster.

"Sure." These people, acting in their own interests, it was only normal, were not the enemy. Not even protagonists. More like minded sentients doing what she was doing. Trying to understand the changing realities Prima had set in motion. With Regum gone there were the habitats, the far flung industrial outposts, creating their own space based societies. Working independently to no overt plan. Just living, getting on with it all. Avoiding contact with Prima.

Amazing how her Brain managed to pull out perceived reality. Whether from Kaster or Aster's mind was irrelevant. She might have even gotten this background information from the ship.

"You don't mind?" Aster a little surprised.

"Not exactly gonna do a Prima on me."

Aster laughed. "No. We don't want you wasted."

"No you don't." wondering if it were even possible. She doubted her Brain would go along with that. It would probably release something nasty...release something nasty. Was that what the Primaians had done to crash Regum? Maybe radiation had been embedded with configured viral cyber infections, self replicating nasties...spreading with lightning speed into all their systems. A possibility. The hit a bit like a black hole as far as information went. It could not exist in any state. So how did they do it? The discrepancy? No wonder they wanted the contents of her head. So did she.

"When you're ready." Aster trying to be a calming influence.

"Now is fine. The food's relaxed me. Didn't put anything in it? Like some molecular stabilisers perhaps?" which her Brain would have noticed. Even if dispersed, even if assembled later on would not have escaped it.

"Suppressants don't work. Well they do but are self limiting." Kaster explained needlessly. Still it was good to know they were honest.

"Shall we?" Aster ready to rise.

"Tell me. Anything in particular?"

"If we revealed that then your mind would be focussed. Nothing wrong in itself. Just more work disentangling your various states of consciousness. You'd be surprised just how dominant thoughts can be. They can take your internal universe over."

Another thought. Another piece of the puzzle appeared. Shit. Remembering the discrepancy with a possible link to this background radiation, the possibility that the Crash was a new level cyber attack, one thought of by Prima. Aster's correct analysis how a thought can dominate just about everything, remould, reconfigure reality. Was this what the discrepancy was doing? Except on a universal scale? Was it even possible? For the universe itself had no idea where it was heading. Overall patterns were discernable. But that was merely the superstructure. Big Bang, the result most likely of the Big Collapse as gravity finally won, along with entropy, oscillating between two states. Yet over billions of years even space changed states. It was not neutral. Charged with cosmic energy which fluctuated at very specific states. Then could sentient life evolve. With no ultimate guarantee. Unless thinking minds unravelled the base state and with correct projections create conditions for their own survival. Her musings hinted at something undefinable, uncertifiable. Her Brain knew but only in the abstract. Was the discrepancy a programme to make sure that space's phase changing patterns had been put on hold? A holding pattern so that sentient life could continue? Had Prima's DVs latched onto it and thus made sure their version of sentience would be supreme? It would explain Regum's demise. But then, she was relieved, the Habitats, the industrial operations would have all gone down as well. And the changes duly noted on Earth. Not technologically if they were still at minus one. But their thinking would mirror the new, or rather present phase state. Great thought number four.

"I'm ready."

The Deep Resonant Scanner, a huge tube with a roll out bed inserted Ratze. She knew how it worked. Target specific in the background, broad spectrum analysis as the designated field, a micro-universal mental mapping exercise. The universe of her head. She had a choice of sleeping through it or staying awake. Jahrus who would oversee the procedure explained sleep was preferred. The drug used was not a depressant in the usual sense. More of an inserted molecular state mimicking sleep, fine tuning her natural REMs. When the scan was done a signal would trigger the drug to disassemble. From her point of view the process would be mere seconds.

Ratze, lying on the flatbed was agreeable. Her Brain was not worried. It would disperse itself, go non-local, be part of her unconscious. They would get her biological mind only.

In she went.

Kaster enhanced was linked to her. Not in her state but rather with it. Aster observed noting any possible covert possibilities with which Ratze might be embedded with, so deep she wouldn't even know of their existence. He still suspected her to be an insert. Until proven otherwise.

The scanner hummed into life. Her mind's architecture glowed in bright reds for synaptic pathways, pale greens for neural activity, her various mental frequencies represented by the colours of the rainbow. From white the top mental state, to black as being completely unconvulsive. Red the normal balance.

Red it was. The synaptic pathways turned green so that they could be discerned. Groups of dense tree like structures. Thick. Healthy. Neural activity yellow. A stable mind. Her emotions not dominating. Way above average. No trace of Enhancement. Nothing artificially implanted, bio-fused or constructed, triggered by specific thought patterns to be activated. An Enhanced Natural. Except there was more. The whole larger than the sum of its parts. An extremely content rich unconscious. Bigger than they had ever come across. Evolutionary mutation Jahrus guessed. The next level of sentience. No chemical suppressants, no molecular influxes, no subatomic resonant field states.

"Well," Jahrus watching the read outs, "she's not Primaian. Nor under their influence."

"Not under any influence." Kaster remarked. "A complete absence of volatility. Her emotions merely a backdrop, part of the whole, non dominant."

"So no signs of enhancement?" Jahrus asked.

"Natural. As far as the scanner's revealing."

"You think she somehow attuned herself? See what she wants us to see?" Jahrus wondering just what Ratze really was.

"Ah memories coming through now." Aster alert.

They saw her at the Dump. Images of Novus. Nervina. The Casino. Strangers of no in depth consequence. Her escape in space from the orbital.

"No childhood memories, nor any adolescent ones. She's configured. Nothing we can trace." Aster concerned. Something was not right. Ratze must be aware of the lack of a history within her. Nor was she worried they would find out her deficient past. As if she wanted them to know. That meant certainty. But as to what? No memory of the Crash.

"Can you insert the strange background radiation please." Aster requested. Jahrus uploaded the data.

"Slight rise in logic functions. So that's on her mental horizon. Here it comes..."

Her speculations were there. Everything she had just thought.

"Looks like, according to her, its intentional."

"That's something Aster." Jahrus watching the screens. "Any link to the Crash though? I can't see it."

"Because Jahrus it's not there. Unrelated."

"Even though her speculations... make sense."

"A series of possible hypothesis. No point running simulations of probabilities for they would only reach the obvious conclusions based on the original input."

"As in $a = a$." Jahris answered.

"Yes."

"Looks like we got more questions than answers. Tell me you think the background radiation is embedded in what she thinks? Or is it her projection that makes it appear so? I mean the field is so weak."

"And general." Kaster added. "If it were intentional there'd be a source."

"Enter the Merduk experiment without his persona." Aster suddenly said.

"Do we have that?" Jahris was surprised. Aster being security probably knew more than the ship knew. More than Jahris and he was captain.

"You'd be surprised." Aster smiled. He called up the file and entered it into Ratze's domain.

"She's recognising Earth. General information. Ah. Look at that. The image of Mars."

"Yes. What the DVs were targeting ages ago. Given its proximity they mixed it up with Earth's resonant field. Let's see what their mistake reveals."

"What do you mean?" Jahrus asked. Wondering how it related to Ratze.

"Oh just curious. Remember Ratze was with the DVs."

"Hm."

"Well if the DVs can get it wrong then maybe we can help them get it wrong again."

"Ah. As in Earth being the origin even if they focussed on the wrong planet."

"And it took them ages to get it right."

"So let's fine tune the scan and see what Ratze knows from back then."

The emission graphs changed as Ratze's mind was taken back to her past with the DVs.

"She's only a moderator. Stable back up. Attuned to their mental state on the outside, not the inside itself. Amazing how she can access shells only. Pity." Jahrus a little disappointed in the vague results.

"Get the computer to extract any bits floating in there. Even though she's capable of demarcation doesn't mean it's totally compartmentalised."

"True. Here's hoping."

They had to wait as Kaster inserted the search parameters. Then whilst the computer digested it, disentangled the mass of irrelevancies, coming up with blurry images.

"Better fine tune them." Kaster said.

The result was not very satisfactory. Pictures of a vanished past appeared. Robed priests, people in primitive woven coats, jackets, pants, all jumbled together. In the background thatched mud huts, glorious masoned stone edifices looking like temples, everybody milling about.

"So where exactly are they?" Aster asked.

"It's general. They got the two planets mixed up by the looks of things."

"You mean the images come from both?"

"Yes."

"Can you separate the two?"

"It can be done." And Kaster set to work. Ratze was sleeping peacefully. The search they were running separate from what her mind was revealing from the scan.

Half the content disappeared leaving the more ancient people on Mars.

"Call up Mars as is." Aster asked. No point all of them adding to the search.

On a new light screen the pink planet appeared. The huge valleys that looked like to have had rivers in them appeared. The small ice caps. Huge mountains, dust storms, wafer thin atmosphere.

"No way that held life. Maybe in the very distant past. Nothing organic on the planet." Jahrus explained. They saw what the planet was now. "With an oxygen poor atmosphere at best maybe some moss, fungi, spores, bacteria but nothing more complex could have evolved there."

"Go back a few millennia. Link it to the DVs impression."

The same imagery of an early city. No technology in place. A pre stage one world.

"So they thought the dead planet had life. Well maybe we can fool them again." Aster said.

"What if it's real?" Kaster asked.

"Can't be. How?" Aster queried him.

"Well, now the planet's what it is. A desert without water. It's atmosphere degraded. Maybe there was life on Mars. Knowing their planet had no future..."

"I get it. They got smart and left. Earth the obvious choice. Interesting."

"It would be worth to get the SS to check that out. Run probabilities, possible pasts I mean. See if it really is DV imaginings or the real thing."

"We'll have to remember that. If they got time."

"They might."

Ratze's Brain was alert whilst the rest of her was somnolent. Just awake enough not to be comatose. Analytical nodes were swarming all through her mind, prodding here, probing there, all very random looking for sequential mental patterns. See what was there. Small clusters of molecular keys attached themselves to inner logic gates. Sneaky. Others hovered near transfer points like inquisitors with no predesigned intent. More like recognition patterning than data mining. Her Brain watched dispassionately. There was no danger of getting into it. The probing cyber-bots were not loaded, after all they had been activated by the scan. They were hers. Doing the scanner's work.

With her outer mind asleep her Brain decided to shadow the activated bots. Probe the probers. The search benign, no shadow presences pretending to not be there. The field the scan projected making it easy for the bots to swim through her mind independent of its architecture. Entropic scaling held in abeyance. The mind a temporal field in a near zero time state making it possible to flow into her unconscious. Good luck Brain thought.

Then the pattern of their search behaviour changed. They stopped. Information was coming in. Her Brain linked to the computer, outside looking in. The dead planet. Not so dead. Earth, Mars. People. Both together.

She was back outside the orbital over Prima. Out in space with her group of DVs. Their attention on the strange race of beings so far away from their universe. She was not in with them. More a back up should they go unstable. Or start burning up. The whole imagery appeared flat. Reconstituted from the computer's memory outside herself. The DVs homing in on these developing beings.

Then it happened. The surge total. Like being hit by a tidal wave. Moving silkily through her mind, through the minds of the DVs, loaded with data. An alien resonance. To them. Her Brain momentarily expanded to encompass the vision. Images of a lost world, a vanishing world as the zero content carrier wave swept them out of existence. Then hit Earth. Their high tech space faring infrastructure, her cities morphed back in

time. Back to mud huts and temples. Belief in gods. Like that of Mars. Shifted? Transmuted. A nonconfigured probability wave. Inserting Prima's absent vision, boosted by all available DVs. Many flared out instantaneously, the carrier wave washing out, braindraining, accidentally? their minds. The fall out appalling. Her Brain out there, back then, quickly ballooned out thus deflecting the potent non-resonance. The memory cached. What had brought it back? The search pattern. A big zero.

A collapsing nonprobability wave reconfiguring reality. A vanished civilisation. Another almost disintegrated as well. Earth's resonance had been too strong, too tight, too there. They had not been washed out of existence, merely collapsed into an earlier state of development. Their unconscious remembering what their conscious mind was denied: their true past.

It had also weakened Regum's resonance. Diluted it. Preparing for the Crash. Her Brain would have to get at the transition phase, contain the entropic state, extract the previous scalar-field of space, create an indeterminate state to construct a new set of probability waves to undo the damage of Prima's titanic blow. Yet her Brain seemed reluctant to engage. As if the Discrepancy was of greater importance even though three worlds had been at the quantum reality the DVs screwed with.

Mars's content completely blown away, literally. Earth's past resurrected, setting them back by millennia. That planet's resonance infected with that of Prima's. Regum's weakened. The coming Crash the final touch to Prima's plan of cosmic domination. In space. Their PW focussed towards the Earth-Mars axis. Regum so close as to be caught in it as well. Ballooning out, dissipating in space and thus of a lesser effect amongst the Habitats, the other artificial worlds in the asteroid belts, on planetoids far far away. A minor perturbation at best.

The background radiation unaffected.

Ratze's Brain collapsed it all into itself. To make sure Brain also deposited molecular keys, mental alerts to release the information as required. Space emphasised *after* the designer nonprobability wave passed through. Primaian agents in place and systems alerts that were there foremost to delete any remnant memories, bio, symbiotic or artificial. And that included her.

Luckily all that activity occurred as the team were busy checking out the very data which had triggered her Brain to fill her in on her partial past. The only minor problem, the more she knew in the way she interacted on the outside the more she would be in demand as a useful resource, a possible source, someone too important and maybe even dangerous to ever fall into Prima's dominant orbit.

Her Brain was back in its cocoon, dormant, enmeshed in her unconscious where it had revealed the events that had changed the lives of millions on two planets whilst wiping out a third. In this probability field they never were.

"How are you?" Kaster asked as Ratze got off the trolley.

"Remarkably refreshed. So how did it go? Am I dangerous?" she smiled.

"Ha. Funny. No not as far as your mind goes."

She walked back to the others and pulled up a seat. "Can I see?"

Jahrus reran the scan.

"Mellow yellow."

"Means you're stable, extremely so. You're either naturally enhanced, lucky you, or, as you can see," showing her the rich red tree like structures of her neural pathways, "well expanded internally."

"But..."

"But?" Jahrus asked.

"There is always a but when it comes to the mind."

"You were with the DVs."

"Oh-uh."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, they're the enemy."

"You got out."

"I did."

"Why do you say they're the enemy?"

"Because they are."

"Peace is established. No more conflict."

"That's nice." Wondering at the change of attitude, orientation. "So, I pass the scan. Now what?"

"Indeed." Aster answered, even if cryptically. "Tell me Ratze. Any ideas about the background radiation?"

"Yes. Well." She wiggled in her seat. "A mystery. It seems to effect computers. Well on Novus anyway. At the casino where I was," a distant past, "the random generated tables had a pattern. That's how I became curious. Random is random."

"Except when it isn't."

"Except when it isn't. I called it a discrepancy. You think it has something to do with the background radiation?" Her Brain released. Crystallising what had been gestating for...some time.

"All we know is that it appeared. Some strange data with it."

"Not value neutral."

"No. Quantum based."

"Related."

"Entangled."

"Superimposition?"

"Perhaps."

"So what is happening on Novus?"

"Cooperating."

"With whom? Who? The Families? The corporations?"

"Primaian protectorate."

"Whoa? Really?"

"Certain."

"And Prima itself?"

"Shrouded. Dense resonance field around it."

"Regum."

"Well you were just there..."

"So I was."

"What's your intentions?" Aster asked.

"I really don't know. Wherever I go I get annoyed by this group or that. Like I'm some shit magnet. No offence. You guys got me out from someone who wanted to either finish me off or capture me. Ideally I should stay in space. I must be useful to somebody, somewhere..."

"We need information about Novus."

"Really? But that place is so retro. What can be there that's so important?"

"They got a colony of Volatiles there. We need to know their configuration. Their intentions. We think Novus is a holding station."

"I'd be marked."

"Yes. What if we gave you something they might find interesting?"

"Now you're talking. But remember my interest is trying to untangle how the random sequence got corrupted. Which brings me to a question. Have your diagnostics uncovered anything of a similar nature?"

"Our systems, no big secret, are shielded."

"Good, fine. But did you ever run an unshielded random run?"

"No. Not until you told us..."

"Let's do it."

Aster positioned a mini processor in space, let it build a few random tables. Once back on board Ratze studied the numerical spread.

A pattern was there. Numerical ripples frozen in time.

"There. It's real. Confirmed. Verified." Ratze said with satisfaction.

"I think," Jahrus thinking, "that if say, news got around on Novus that just maybe, Prima is behind this occurrence, the fall out might be of use to us."

"Why not just present whoever you work for with this. Or Prima?"

"Because Ratze, they'll answer with the simple expedient that we are liars. That we concocted this. You get the idea?"

"Yes, coming from me carries some weight. But surely Jahrus, you have agents there who could...no? Right then. As long as you can extricate me if the shit is about to be dumped on me."

"We can upload a dormant distress flash in your external pc."

"Sending it out is one thing. But you said you won't be in near space."

"Know what a g-drive is?"

"Yep. So I will be saved?"

"Of course. Remember it is in our interest as well."

She understood. After all she had made contact with them. Knew of this ships capabilities.

"Now if you get any hard evidence, and Ratze this is important, it is to be released only if there is no other way out."

"Sure." Focused.

"We would rather it remains out of circulation for the moment. Until we can plan for max effect. Politically. See what the Primaians make of it. But don't go hyper if your results vanish."

"Hasn't Regum anything?"

"You were there. Regum is nailed down. All data deleted. The remaining Orbital under Primaian authority. It's all a bit messy. The only free agents left are like us, out in space."

"Dispersed."

"Our only plus." What Jahrus did not say was that the SS 1 and its clone the SS 1 V had the power to insert PWs at will. Yet for reasons not even made secretly available, rather than focus the PWFs on Prima, they were targeting Earth. For one good reason. Evidence suggested that a weak PWF was generated through focussed DVs which may have also contributed to the Crash. If they targeted Prima, they would retaliate. That would set off a chain of events with no solution in sight. By focussing outwards, on Earth it not only distracted Prima, it took the heat of their own people.

Ratze updated their info regarding Novus. They still needed professionals. Engineers, architects, system managers, technicians, maintenance experts, the whole spectrum of the service industry from doctors to basic workers. Not that anybody was heading there in droves. Novus had a stigma. Primaian protectorate. A social experiment. The corporations and families cooperating for they made the place work. Most of the workers were Volatiles sent from Prima, those who couldn't be adjusted, stabilised to Prima's satisfaction on their home planet. Too independent. So Novus it was.

Ratze transferred in deep space to a lesser advanced converted cargo vessel. Belonging to a mining outfit now transporting miners, geologists, drilling experts, riggers to Novus. Reganians who were glad to leave. Regum was turning into a backwater, a pale imitation of Prima. Techsavvy brains exported leaving a sub educated people behind. The mixed passengers slightly interested in Ratze's arrival if only for a change in routine.

Ratze reinvented as a systems manager. Trouble-shooter. She decided to withdraw into a sleeping tube. The less contact the better. Not that she could not empathise with them. The passengers were mixed so another woman was not such a big deal. Ratze in need of isolation. Too much was happening. During meals, taken whenever one felt hungry, auto dispensed reconstituted mush, nutrient rich but not quite the real thing had her engaging with the odd character. No enhanced detected. Regum really had regressed. The only hope to regain the initiative in space. And the spacers were staying away. Building their future dispersed amongst the stars. Terrestrial civilisations were at a minimum. As Prima intended. Novus the exception. They still needed a modicum of technology, of machinery, all manual with computers downgraded to basic processors. Singular functionality. Except for space travel.

Her embedded pc on her sleeves was camouflaged and off. Looking like the fabric of her jumpsuit. When pressed as to what type of systems manager and trouble-shooter Ratze was she answered easily that she was a fire safety officer. Who for? Idle

chit chat. The Reliance Group. Her accreditation secure, safe, solid. The ship had no in-depth scanning applications. Merely passive.

Days later they reached Novus spaceport. Processing of incoming personnel was run with military precision. The officers had hand held computers. So Prima availed itself to technology as a statement of not just their authority but also their power. They were in command and control. The moment her accreditation disk was inserted a cached subroutine uploaded her history. Courtesy of her Brain.

"What were you doing on space?"

"Routine inspection. Standards check. I'm also an inspector as your..." and she nodded to the bulky screen, "...data base will confirm."

He looked levelly at her, expressionless. She was right but he didn't like being told just the same. Either the computer was slow, it was, or he kept her waiting just to put a little pressure on her. Ratze suppressed the incident at the Dump. She had never been there. Never met...ah good Brain, she couldn't even recall the face...memory of whoever she had met gone as well.

Her head tingled a little. Scanners. Minor penetration. Another wait. Maybe they were looking for her. She moved from one foot to another. Others were being processed much faster. A chime sounded. He handed her her accreditation disk, said nothing, looked past to the next arrival.

Out into sunlight. Fresh dry air. The faint smell of jet fuel. Huge gantries in the distance, a rocket being fuelled. Several shuttle buses. Some with company logos, several others public transit heading for the city. She would take her time to go to the Reliance Group. As she got on the waiting bus, with driver, Rehn a fellow traveller gave her half a smile, nervously, somewhat ashamed at having made eye contact.

Her first reaction was to ignore him but on second thought she'd sit next to him. Being the nervous type he might talk and she would listen. Most of the other travellers, passengers were being picked up by their employers. The passengers were mixed. Some in uniform working at the space station, a few security types, all piercing gaze and hard looks, a superlative air of studied indifference. Prima's for sure Ratze thought as she looked through them sitting down next to Rehn. She gave him a charming smile. His blue eyes darted about. Half embarrassed half delighted to have someone take note of him.

Odd character Ratze thought as she made herself comfortable.

"No luggage." He smiled depreciatively.

"Nope."

When nothing else was forthcoming he looked out the window. Desert beyond the perimeter. High wire mesh fences, figures on patrol, workshops, hangars, supplies, storage facilities, fuel belching trucks manoeuvring into loading docks. The driver started the engine, the bus moved off, along the exit and onto the four lane highway. The grey outline of the distant skyscrapers ahead of them.

Rehn tried to get her talking. He wasn't very good. Almost pro forma questions. Where, what, when, why she decided to leave Regum. Ratze answered with nods, yes's, maybes, sort ofs, could bes.

"I hear Prima is delightful."

"Really?" Ratze trying to sound surprised.

"It's supposed to be beautiful. A veritable garden paradise. The origin of the species and rightly so." In rapture.

"Never been there."

"Oh neither have I. But I know someone..."

"Lucky them."

They passed three trucks.

"When my contract is up I'll have enough credits and hopefully a good record to go there. If there is anything I will do before I pass on it's going to Prima." As if that were settled.

"I'm sure you'll do fine."

"And you?" expecting to confirm his dream.

"Novus for me."

"You're young. You have the future ahead of you. But I think everybody should make the pilgrimage once. If only for the benefit of their soul."

`Uh-oh. Believer.'

"I'll let providence guide me. Somehow my soul is not worthy. I think I'm a little polluted."

"Understandable. Being in space, exposed..."

"One gets used to it. Anyway there is protective gear, the ships are shielded."

"That can only do so much. It's the eye contact."

"Only if you look too long." Understanding why there were no portholes on the shuttle.

"Still it's a test of our purity."

"What is?"

"Being exposed. Reveals our faults, our flaws so we can cleanse ourselves accordingly." satisfied with that explanation. She wondered if they were all like Rehn, or whether it was just her luck. Still it gave her an orientation.

"Nothing like a little self examination..."

"You are so right." Eager agreement. "Once proper stability has been established here, the time will come for the coming blessed kingdom." Almost entranced at the prospect. So Prima had plans for Novus. Interesting.

"Looks stable to me Rehn."

He blushed at being named. "Well that's because of the good work done here. They have created miracles with the Volatiles."

'So that was the GGs brief. Flood Novus with conditioned Primaians.'

The bus headed down an access ramp into the city. The towering blocks in front of them. The streets full of pedestrians, little traffic except for the trams. They skirted the western edge, along a ring road then turned left, down a broad avenue, the business district on one side, the open space and the distant casino to her right.

"Another city?"

"Heavens no. Yes. In a way. That's the casino. I wouldn't go there." He tutted, involuntarily shaking his head. "No."

"Oh? Why?"

"You loose all your credits. All sorts of vice there."

"Vice?" things were looking up.

"Goings on. But it wont last. They'll shut it down, you wait."

"That means compensation."

"Yes. They'll make a deal with the perfidious corporations, the blood sucking shareholders, the leeching stakeholders...they'll get their due sure enough."

"You privy to the deal then?"

"It's what everybody is saying. The only reason it's still there is because there's some underhanded deals going on. Once they have been cleaned out, you just watch..."

"What they gonna do with it?"

He shrugged. "Accommodation for the pilgrims. Convert the gambling floors for prayer halls, conferences. Turn it into a seminary. A worthy place for a pilgrimage. Cleansed, purified, made holy."

The bus stopped at the waterfront. The bars and restaurants were still there. People milling about, enjoying the day. Gulls squawked, the gentle surf lapping at the

bright pristine sands of the beach. The mono-rail pulling in at the terminus. The door hissed open. People getting up. Rehn all eager to get to wherever he was going. Ratze rose and ambled off with the others. At one end a large map and directory of the city.

She found where the Reliance Group was located. HQ in town, its work stations dotted all over the place. At the space ports, the casino, various office blocks, a few factories and storage depots. But not at the Outback. Nor at its steelworks. Competitors everywhere but there, and by the looks of the names a few Family concerns as well. So the Outback was still closed. To some she reasoned.

Her Brain adjusted to the new surroundings. She became a little more subdued. Her mental processes were slower, not in thought but in her expression. Brain was picking up the ambience. It designated her a Stable Volatile. That explained Rehn's nervousness. She'd been feeding it. Ha.

And children. Not boisterous. Dutifully holding their parents hands. Out for the day. Mother or father or both stern, subdued, wanting to...what? Holler for joy? Serene. No. Subdued came to her mind.

She turned back to the big map at the transit shelter. Confirmed that no office's logos marked at the Outback. Even the layout was vague. After the industrial graveyard of the Dump Ratze had the general idea of how factories were laid out. This map was nothing like it. Buildings yes. Square, not long. Blast furnaces were round. Nothing round there. One rail line. Only one? It was just a picture, an impression. Neither to scale nor representative. Typical Prima. Pretending to know more than there really was. Or was there? Her Brain was eager to find out but she held it in check. Not now.

At head office a relaxed middle aged if a little austere personnel manager in an inner office processed Ratze's arrival. Filing cabinets, stacked trays of paper, a bulky computer, large cradled telephones, evidence of having gone retro. Ratze signed various forms, including health insurance, payment, the contract running into several pages, her roster, her duties and a lease for accommodation if she chose this building. A folder was handed with various fire extinguishers, fire management systems, valves, pumps, pipes, tags, gauges, the required specs, safety margins, maps, location of the above, the clients they covered. Ratze wondered if the old flat was still available. But given Rehn's gushing exaltation of what he thought the plans for the casino decided to get a unit there.

She was handed a large ring of twenty-thirty keys of all sizes, each tagged. Access to secure areas. A metal name tag, her ID to be worn when on duty. Her uniform

would be ready in three days when she would officially begin work. She reported to an 'overseer' Frach, a mug shot of a solid if slightly older man. His dead look staring blankly back at her. When she reported back she would be handed a com-device, bulky . Keeping her in touch with base. Most places had com-links attached to walls, emergency fire buttons encased to which she had a universal key. And keep a look out for any unauthorized personnel except security. Most work places had their employees in recognizable uniforms with IDs similar to her own. On her first day she would watch a fire safety film, learn how to use extinguishers, pump up water pressure at various locations, note which extinguishers needed replenishment for which she had a checkboard and a map of her itinerary. For security purposes it was encouraged she change her daily routine. Any missing extinguishers were deemed theft and a special card to be filled out. The company had particular teams to replace extinguishers, refill them where necessary or send them to their factory for the pressurized models. She was to report here at eight in the morning. Until then she had three days off. Smiles were exchanged and that was that. Ratze left, free for the moment.

She made her way to the casino, enquired at the rental office about a non-serviced apartment, booked herself in on the lowest floor available which happened to be the first floor. Everybody wanted to be up. She wanted to get out quick if the need arose. With her small carry bag containing the maps, the layout she was to follow, it was too good to be true that Reliance had the contract here. Since this was where the discrepancy was first noted, she wondered if that was ever resolved. How the enquiry had gone.

The unit's furnishings a little tacky, the covers of the bed a little frayed, the upholstery and carpet more worn, the high tech plug ins gone. She wondered how the Grobaldi's were doing. Their logo was still there at the foyer near the bank of lifts.

She sat at the desk and stared out the window. Time to get organised. Check the numbers. If that was not possible return to the casino and play. Her Brain remembered the odds of jackpots, zero hits, averages regarding the way the electronic cards played out. All thanks to Nervina. Find out how Regum got taken out. How Prima had won. Novus was theirs. It was supposed to have been a neutral planet. Not anymore.

She sat nursing an orange juice, watching the gamblers in the general gaming lounge. Rows of upright machines, their tacky glitzy colours filtered through her eyes so she could watch the runs of the losers. For loose they did. Slowly. Minor wins were plenty but not when it counted. Zero's still came up more often when a player was in credit.

Jackpots still occurred with expected mathematical odds but often at the beginning of a run. Which meant by the end very little was left. The odds were there, the mathematics appeared correct though it all went just that much more wrong than before. Nothing had changed.

Which meant one of two things. It was designed to be so. Prima was gutting the viability of the casino, slowly sending players broke. Not the casino. She wondered if the scanners might have gotten less obvious, more surreptitious.

Scenario one: the discrepancy could not be overridden. By design or by default. Intelligent design or rogue system malfunction. Then used, covered up. The next generation none the wiser. Certainly not the newcomers.

Scenario Two: the default pattern. On the ship the same result. Were processors encoded? Leaving a pattern to be traced? It would circumvent intrusion techniques. Each pattern unique yet similar. A possibility.

Scenario, three: a shift at the quantum level. That would take a lot of energy. So find the energy, the source. Was it connected to the Crash? It had manifested prior that. Unless it was part of the preparation.

She drained her glass. Once she was doing the rounds she would keep an eye out for nodal junctions. Try and trace the source. If she could untangle this, see if their system and again by default everybody else's was infected, management might be grateful. It should be worth a few credits to them. Profits would rise, gamblers would be winners as well, business would increase including the spin offs regarding more consumers at the complex.

All to be executed with due caution.

Novus had changed. It was more than pure intuition. Not merely due to the planet's changed political status. From a free zone to a protectorate. Guards everywhere. Volatiles. Coming from the Outback. That precinct still off limits. Why would a steelworks, its other factories making machinery, trucks, rail wagons, engines, rockets, be not just merely restricted but totally sealed off?

In her work, as she walked the distances, checking pumps, extinguishers, the alert systems, keeping an eye out for external junctions which she wanted to hack into, she had plenty of time to think. If this had been Regum, the original Regum her job would have been redundant. Sensors could detect what she was doing manually. Pressure too low in an extinguisher, it would show on the alert system. Water pressure too low, ditto.

Back up disengaged, re-routing until the software or hardware glitch was ironed out. Diagnostics could do that. Power drop outs, stand by generators.

She walked through corridors, maintenance tunnels, access shafts. Over the weeks she became familiar with the security patrols. Even though she was appropriately tagged initially some had queried her presence. Cursory. No slacker these types. In her bright red car she travelled to the space port. There fire safety was of primary importance. Sprinklers, valves, the condition of the feed pipes an adjunct to her inspection tours. Now and then base, Frach, her overseer would ask for her location. Even though she had a surveillance tag showing her location, a primitive transponder it sometimes dropped out. At the space port it always did. Too much e-traffic, plus all their internal and external communication requirements adversely affected her little beeper.

A few weeks later she approached Frach with a safety suggestion. That always got attention. Even if not directly related to her observational duties. She put it to him that the attached monitors could be bypassed to make it appear that everything was as it should be. He listened. Maybe he had heard it from previous employees. It showed she was not merely doing her job but thinking ahead as well. Ratze wanted to get into the system. Legally. See if it was compromised by the discrepancy.

In his tatty office, where her daily reports ended up, as well as orders for extinguishers to be replaced, recharged, when, where, by whom, the condition and age noted, the emergency water tanks, their levels, their condition, leaking pipes or joints he had to deal with it all. She just brought in the information, he did the rest.

His bovine expression stared rather than looked at her. As if she were an apparition. Not intent rather perplexed. She wondered if his brain was engaged. She told him that the status of the many alert systems could be faked. The system could be malfunctioning and no one would be the wiser. There were technicians for that he answered. Was their work checked? That was systems management. Not her concern. She had never seen them. They had no need to actually go to the hundreds of locations. Control did that for them. It worked, he told her patiently, no different to checking one's computer. The electronic end was not her responsibility. She was there to check the physical end of things. She handed in her report.

So the techies never checked the status boxes.

On her next shift, in the basement of one of the many high rises she plugged in the optical fibre and touch pad, the size of a pin head by slipping it into the coded lock and got the access code. Linked to her Brain it camouflaged her illicit entry. All she was doing was reading the status. Passive extraction. After she had done this ten times over

ten days she had the alert systems data, what the computers knew. How they worked the mainframe, that of individual readouts. Diagnostics, internal inspection runs showed the sequencing of the incoming data. The master programme did not run in any particular order. For the simple reason: security. If there was a pattern any saboteur would know when to act. So far so good. Was it purely random or patterned as the read outs from the casino's random number generating programme had revealed. As the fire system used lesser numericals it took her mere moments to find the pattern in single digits only. One here, next day one there. It was there. Pattern confirmed.

The next probe to get data from the environment itself. Hacking into spaceports computers com links the next task. Not to listen in but get the filtered out background noise of space itself. The read out had confirmed that in space the loaded configuration existed. But that had been passive. The fire systems were only partially active. Com transmission was all active. If its signals too were embedded it would clinch her suspicions.

That would actually be the easy part. All she had to do was get her Brain to open itself up. The next inspection tour she went during her walks right up to the top of a launch pad. Technicians were around doing some maintenance on the tower. Standing so far up was perfect. She opened her Brain as it listened to the chatter. Being passive there would be no source. She wasn't downloading anything specific, just the general EM field and what it punched through. To make sure the gathered data would create a representative sample it took her several days to accumulate the short read outs. Sure enough, again, the medium was affected. Something was in space. In the ether so to speak.

She had the information. Now what? Since it was ubiquitous it would not be noticed. Like breathing air. Everywhere all the time. Her Brain had run the three sets of data and they all matched. Having got that much the next question was whether it had its own programme. Was it static or active? Receding in strength or building up? Was there data hidden within it as well. After all she had only read its outer manifestation. Was there more or was that it? Since the systems, the computers, the processors were not compromised in themselves, this cosmic event could not have been responsible for Regum's Crash. But it could have been the trigger. Waiting for coded instructions to be assembled.

She finished her shift, handed her sheath of reports to Frach, signed off. She had four days off. Basically she had what she wanted. Send the signal and get out? Or hang around, relax for a change. Take some time out.

Do what? Walk around like the locals? They seemed more like automatons. Prima really did bring joy to the world. Those with children took some delight in their presence. With a feeling of being preoccupied. Novus was not its former self. The vibrancy was gone. The daily grind, work. Not something engaging, where one could further one's ideas, one's inspiring motivations to further one's potential. More a means of survival at best. A necessity that was part of life. One's dreams channelled into religiousness as a duty. Conformity. That's what it was. Conformity. Individuality stifled.

Everywhere it was the same. Ratze was ambling around the multi-levelled mall of the casino. Her thoughts distracted by her observation of the people around her. No exuberance in even going shopping, treating oneself to something special. She moved to the railing, all gleaming fake gold, looking at the plaza below. There at some tables two women and a man. Loaded her Brain told her. A presence about them. Unlike the masses moving below. Not as dull. Hiding their active minds. Like her. Reganian expats? Spacers? Could be. They were pale enough.

Ratze made sure she was not looking directly at them. Tempted to do a passive scan. No, see if they acted first. There was definitely something about that trio. They got up and dispersed. Without the usual last minute conversations friends usually had when leaving. They were spreading out. A little detective work was in order.

With studied lethargy she righted herself and walked slowly towards one of the escalators. Then came the slight itch. Either the building's security, a patrol though she could see none, then the itch was gone. Brain? General search. It told her. Watchers. The Volatiles were not enhanced. They were part of the problem that seemed to make everyone subdued. Walking containment fields! That is how Prima kept the locals in control. Well well well. Show any independent mental activity and one was marked. Was that what those three were doing? Finding those who did not succumb to the Volatiles influence? Did I leak Brain? All thinking did that it told her. Dumb me down. Your sure? It asked her. No, not sure. What would the effects be? Dullness, lack of initiative, indifference, lethargy, depression. Some choice. No action then. Her Brain withdrew.

She spotted the two women but not the man. He would have removed himself moving off discreetly whilst remaining near. The two women entered a boutique. Ratze stopped opposite. With her Brain's imaging she focussed on the shop opposite using the front's glass to get the reflection from behind her, then zoom into the boutique itself. Facial jewellery, glinting under lights, scarves, bracelets, gloves all on display. The two wore muted coloured headscarves, slight bulges at their ears. Jewellery or com-links.

She sensed the dull glowing hot spot. Dampened. Dormant. But there in her now active Brain. Whoever or whatever it was its location was non determinate. External as in non specific. Extremely low level resonance. Them? The two women were looking at scarves. She did not search for their companion. Unless he was it. Had to be. Or was security far more advanced than they made out. A remote system? Her Brain soaked it all up without analysing the field. That's all it was. Litmus paper. She held back.

No variation. Stable. Waiting to be accessed. Too tempting. Too easy. Too obvious. Someone playing her. The two women chatting away. Good cover. With a third party watcher. Until proven otherwise. The signal's coherency still low. Leaving on a device without any specific directional search in place. Passive radar. No vector. Her Brain remained on the peripheral, as indifferent as the field. Two could play this game.

One of the two women glanced outside the boutique. Ratze's enhanced vision off the pane made eye contact. Feigned recognition. Meara, looking, Tori and their back up Sharr. Ratze she thought back.

Contact.

Meara bought a scarf, then nodding satisfied she and Tori walked out arm in arm. Seeing Ratze Meara brightened and said: "Fancy seeing you here! How are you? Haven't seen each other for so long. What have you been up to?"

Her dark eyes faking recognition. Tori, who could have been her younger sister, under their head scarves smiled at her.

"Meara, good to see you." Both their eyes smiling at the game they were playing. Ratze wanted to laugh, it tickled her pink. "Coffee?"

"Come for drinks. Our place." Meara bubbled.

"I got a unit here." Ratze suggested. Something in both their eyes said `no'. Bugs.

"You got time? It's been sooooo long."

"I know, work."

"Yes, work. Annoying." Meara faked it well.

"Your place it is then."

"Good." Meara looked around. "We're supposed to meeting a friend. You remember Sharr."

"Sharr." Ratze pretending to having forgotten.

"You know Sharr. He was, no he wasn't. I'm sure you've met him. Maybe when you see him..."

"Yes, I've never been good with names."

"You haven't changed. Still somewhere else." Meara hinting at Ratze's way of life. What life? She thought. This? Constantly on the move.

"Do we meet him?"

"Sharr. Yes he's supposed to be here...ah there you are." Meara looking past Ratze. People walked by them. Ratze remaining aware of the mental glow still present.

Sharr appeared. The third of their party. Early middle age, smooth skin, pale, a spacer or recent arrival. The dull glow remained in her head. Were they trying to read her or were others interested.

"I remember you." Sharr beamed his expression one of recognition, "but you may not remember me."

"I do. At some party. Can't remember where. You were drinking out of a vase. Champagne."

"That I remember. Not much else though." He laughed.

"Well then," Meara said, "shall we?"

"Let's" Tori beamed.

"This way." Meara taking the lead.

Ratze's Brain found nothing on them. They were loaded but not active. The distant field in her head still a fog. Good to know back up was on the ground.

In the underground car park Meara took them to a large white sedan. Once seated inside, Ratze sitting with Sharr in the back their expressions remained the same but Ratze noticed their orientation shifted to concentration.

"This vehicle is secure Ratze."

"I hope so." Meaning she only had Meara's word.

The haze still present. Ratze told them about it.

"Someone's being cautious." Sharr said.

"Not any of you then?" wondering a little, not that she expected an answer.

"Hm. Fuzzy signature. Surrogate programme. Remote alert."

"That helps." Ratze being a little annoyed at the outside intrusion.

Meara started the engine and slowly pulled out of the parking bay. Into the afternoon light. Down the ramp.

"We noted your activity." Sharr began. Ratze watched for the reaction of the two women but they were looking straight ahead. Leaving Ratze with Sharr.

"You mean my little search? How?" making sure they were onside.

"Pixels. Needs a resolution. No one's capable here to discern the way you fudged your probing. Don't worry. We're not from any security arm Ratze."

"I'm glad. I'm also worried about this mist in my head." Nearly having said 'Brain'.

"Yes. As long as you remain as you are," and she understood that he was alluding to her headspace, "they won't get anything."

"Any clue as to who they are?"

"Primaian security. They're using the Vs for all sorts of things."

"Really?"

"Walking CFs, observers, watchers, hunters, you name it."

"So that's what was going on out there."

"Was? Is Ratze, is."

"No wonder it's sealed off. And here I thought it was weapons research, testing."

"Not wrong there. Except it's the Vs that are the arsenal."

"That is some heavy shit Sharr."

"Sure is. So what were you after?"

Ratze sighed. "Who wants to know?"

They were travelling down the road into the city. At its approach Meara took the western ring road. Not going into town.

"Interested party."

"Sharr. Really. You want something. Well it's like this. Novus ain't a free planet anymore. So I'm wondering why you are."

"Free? Same as you Ratze."

"Somehow I doubt that. Hm, fog's gone."

"Lost interest. Good work."

"I'm good at being dense."

Sharr smiled. Satisfied she'd lost them. Nothing they could latch on to.

"Anyway, as I was saying. You trying to burn the place down? Getting stuff for some future move? Not that I'd expect you to know what it's all about. Spies don't work like that."

"Spy? Me? Ha! Sharr, I'm making sure the systems working."

"With optic fibre inserts?"

"How...never mind. Does security know?"

"You're camouflage is excellent. What they see is you checking but not what you are checking. Or even that you went in. Well you didn't really go in, more passive. Which makes me wonder. Why go to all that and then..."

"Nothing?" Ratze prompted.

"Exactly."

"Told you, testing."

"Ratze."

"Sharr."

"People." Tori said without turning.

"So who or what are youse?" settling into their headspace.

"Reganian."

"Very loaded Reganians."

A momentary pause. She could sense their suppressed reactions.

"Yes. Survived the Crash."

"How?" though commiseration might have been in order.

"Luck."

"No."

"No?" Sharr hiding his anger. It was still smarting within him.

"No Sharr. The whole planet went down."

"Not everybody."

"That is true. You guy's were in deep space."

A pause. Then: "Yes."

"Not the orbital, obviously. That leaves only that." Leaving it undefined.

"Or here."

"Or here." Ratze conceded. "But none of you have a tan."

They were skirting the business district. The sun reflecting off the angled solar panels, hundreds of tiny bright orbs bouncing along as they drove towards the older inner suburbs.

"No solarium then." Ratze letting them know that they were spacers.

"Aha." Sharr admitted.

"So you gonna tell me?"

"Put it this way. We're both on the same side. We know there are an unspecified number of inserts still active."

Ratze was relieved. She knew she was one herself. What she did not know was who her controllers were. It did not bother her. She was comfortable as she was. Adrift with a mission she had no idea about. No reason either. After data. Maybe this was it. These agents picking up the remnants, getting them out before any of the agencies got to them first.

The enemy in power.

"And I intend to remain as such."

An intake of breath.

"We heading for the space port."

No answer.

Meara turned off towards the industrial estate by passing the older low rises where a long long time ago...she cut her memory off.

"Will you tell us?"

Even if they were counter-intel it wouldn't hurt. Might get things moving.

"In short. The numbers don't add up."

"Numbers?"

"At the casino."

"So why..."

"The fire system? Because going in direct just is not done Sharr."

"Of course." He admitted, none the wiser.

"The casino..." He prompted.

She told them about the distorted random generated sequences.

"I'm an undercover investigator. Checking irregularities." Neat.

"Ah." Not quite satisfied.

"So why are you configured?" Tori asked.

"Ex Regum. Like yourselves."

"No Ratze."

"Good try. Let's say this is my latest incarnation." Not wrong there. What did that mean she wondered.

"You're unaffiliated."

They were guessing.

"You could say that."

"Freelancer." Tori trying to hide her distaste.

"No." No? Who was she with? Her Brain a blank.

They drove along factories, workshops, engineering outfits.

"We have to take something back Ratze." Sharr said after a while. They passed a few trucks. A security patrol. For a moment they tensed but they took no interest in them.

Ratze said nothing. She had given them what she knew. They would have to be satisfied with that.

A gate opened up to an industrial park. Workshops, storage facilities on each side driving down the middle. Half way one of the doors opened. Into a garage. Different

model cars, some with hoods up, being worked on. A maintenance shop. Good cover. Could even be legit. No one about.

A cute hybrid cherry red 'townie' two seater, two road bikes under tarpaulins, tools neatly stacked along the walls, oxy gear, a winch, inspection pit with hydraulic lift, a work bench, lathe, drill, circular saw, overhead crane. All ship shape. Blotches of oil on the floor, rags in a heap here and there.

"We split up." Meara said. "You Sharr stay, keep an eye here. Tori and I return. Ratze let me download what you got."

They were still sitting in the vehicle, Tori's door open. She got out, stretched. Walked over to the small hybrid. "Sharr pick it up tomorrow. Usual procedure." Meaning surveillance. "Check for tags. Ratze."

"What?"

"Your arm."

Ratze had enough time for her Brain to extract from her inbuilt pc to leave only the relevant data pertaining to the discrepancy. Plus the outer structures of the fire systems alert configurations at the various locations she inspected.

She held out her arm. Meara pulled out an optic fibre and attached it to her bottom end of her sleeve. The strand lit up, turned bright white, then went back opaque.

"Thank you." Meara retrieved the strand which vanished into her sleeve. "I should also remark that your persona is included. External download only. What you yourself wanted them to know."

Ratze knew that. Otherwise the connection would have lasted longer. Meara then connected to Sharr, uploaded, was done.

"Right Sharr, see you later." Meara and Tori got into the hybrid and moved off at a slow pace. Sharr opened the door of a smaller vehicle, ran a quick scan, found nothing and asked Ratze to get in.

"Where now?" as she strapped on the seatbelt.

"Back into the city." He eased out, the roller door shutting automatically behind them. Past the other establishments, some with signage, mainly light industrial engineering, a few computer specialists, storage, spare parts, one or two workshops. Through the outer gate, which shut itself and back into town.

On the dash Ratze saw underneath it a small light screen. Scanner. Two blips.

"They being followed?" Ratze picking up a slight itch. Not directed at her. At the two women. Sharr gave the screen a cursory look as he stopped at an intersection to let

a truck pass. On the corner two Volatiles in all weather coats. Too warm to be wearing them.

"Inbuilt dampeners." Sharr said. "Watchers."

"Us?"

"Anybody and everybody, us included."

"Coincidence?"

Sharr moved off, turning left back into the city.

"Could be. There are so many of them it's hard to tell. Prima asserting itself."

"Just like on Regum."

"Minus the priests."

"Really." He was right though, she had not seen any of the `blacks'. The local term on Regum for their cowls.

"Here they wear street clothes. That way they can move amongst the population."

"Spies."

"Indeed. Low grade."

"What you want from me. There's nothing high grade octane fuelled."

"Every little bit helps."

They passed a tram disgorging passengers. Early evening. Workers returning home to the inner suburbs and beyond. Lights coming on in the flats.

"I suppose it does. If one knew what one was looking for."

"At the moment we're after weak links in the order of things. Where bottle necks are, who decides what..."

"You're starting at the bottom."

Sharr could not tell her that Novus, the Outback had been under remote surveillance for months now. When the breakout occurred his group had withdrawn becoming sleepers. Lay low and observe only. No drop offs, no letter boxes in use, no prying, just engaging strangers in conversation at bars to see, like the priests what the general mood was.

They were entering the business district.

"Did the Crash have any effect here?" Ratze asked as they cruised down one of the main streets. People still pouring out of offices.

"No."

"But everything is so dated."

"That had always been Regum's intention. Let the Primaian's think they were not as advanced as they pretended."

"Well advanced didn't work for them."

"No." he said resignedly.

"Now Prima has this place wrapped up as well. And the locals don't seem to be complaining."

"They know what the conditions are like back there. They're thankful Ratze."

"What a change. What about the ruling council?"

"Stacked."

"Pretence."

"Front."

"Collaborators."

"In a nutshell."

"What about the Families, the Corporations, the independent operators?"

"All behaving themselves. Members of the Trades Association. Who watch their members, compulsory and report up."

The two blips on the screen were converging. Sharr looked at it momentarily then deleted it.

"Wonder if it affects them as well. You got any info on that?"

Sharr merely shook his head. He turned a corner. Driving around aimlessly, or looking for surveillance teams.

"Sharr. The skewed numbers are universal. Meara's got that off me."

"Non specific? Non directional?"

"General. Out in space, verified. On the ground here. Now as to whether it is Novus or space itself...thus my question whether, if your people, whoever they are, could confirm the data."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Regum, Prima, space, deep, distant."

"The only way that could be done is..." And stopped himself from releasing operational details. "Any advanced processors would be detected Ratze. Prima might have crashed the technology on Regum, kept Novus in technological statis here but, well, we have to assume all computers are not just tagged, but also read. Each keystroke..."

"That bad?"

"We assume so. Here the Outback produces everything. We know their outfits have the top end gear."

"Except one's like us that can cloak our activity." Ratze letting out that snippet of information. To make Sharr feel she was secure, whilst hoping he was too.

As he neither confirmed nor denied his capabilities Ratze hoped he was geared up.

"Tell me Sharr. Who runs astronomy now?"

"They do."

"Ah."

"Why?"

"Because getting to that data might be the simplest way." Thinking again how dangerous that could be.

"Don't throw in your job just yet." Sharr said instead as he headed down to the waterfront.

She understood. Her perambulations made it easier for either him or his group to accidentally bump into her. Ratze hoped she would not be recruited by this group. She knew what she was after. Basically her job here was almost done. The data confirmed something was in space. Now to find out whether it was static in the sense of some remnant field, or active. Then to find out if it had any effect on minds. And there only planetary populations would suffice as a convincing sample. Habitaters were too eccentric to be useful, ships were shielded. What could be gained from out there though was the internal structure. Was it directional as well? Was it natural to the galaxy? Did other galaxies exude such a field? For the moment she did not wish to extrapolate on that.

Pity she got out of the DVs when she did. Going back to Prima was the easiest solution. All the answers were there. The trouble was their resonant envelope had basically sealed off the planet. Remote passive scanning out of the question. Unless someone else stumbled upon whatever and gotten out as well. Until then time would literally tell what if anything was afoot. Time to check the Outback. Then high tail it out of here.

Ratze's Brain crackled at the outer perimeter fence of the steelworks. Smoke, steam billowed out of stacks, vents, the coke ovens, the blast furnaces. She had talked to sales who with some amusement listened to her idea. Get a contract at the Outback. She met Trasor one of the execs who, bemused agreed to let her try. In fact they had

never considered the idea. Ratze pretended to be puzzled. A vast industrial outfit surely needed their services. Not necessarily Trasor replied. They had their own personnel. Training? Gratis Ratze threw in, meaning herself.

He had laughed and after several days got back to her. Cleared to go.

Now she was at the first guarded checkpoint. Double wire meshed fence, the looming steelworks ahead. The heavy hum of machinery, huge forklifts carrying slabs of steel, workers with their tools amongst the grit that hung in the air. A strange smell, a combination of carbonised coal, slag, more dust, smoke blown about by a light breeze.

They let her through. The tarmacked road uneven from heavy usage, heavy traffic. The clanging of iron against iron, rail cars loaded with coal shunted to receiving bays. Admin was to her left past the second checkpoint. To the second fence, with another guard post ahead. The same routine. This time a call was put through. She waited feeling lethargic. Not caring whether she would succeed in landing a contract. V suppressors?

The gate swung open with guards that were armed, possibly loaded, even enhanced. Her Brain felt like a switchboard. A flare of light in the rear vision mirror. A rocket taking off, moments later the sonic boom, the dull roar of power, of energy, of escape velocity.

Everywhere movement. Support vehicles, maintenance, dust covered workers, bosses with rolled up charts, paper Ratze noted. A guard got into her other side to guide her. He struggled a little with his snub nosed gas powered gun. Clips of ammunition on his vest and a few stun grenades. Against the workers? Ratze wondered, or infiltrators after industrial secrets, saboteurs maybe? A momentary flash in the sky as the second stage fired, a thick contrail in its wake, pure blinding white in the crystal clear sky.

There was much Ratze could find out. Her Brain on low level stand by. One process removed from passive alert. With the windows up all was silent in her little car. Her escort just fitting in the front seat, saying nothing, looking straight ahead. A massive ore truck crossed ahead leaving light coloured dirt behind it, small swirling clouds slowly dissolving into gusts of dust.

Ratze did not know what she was after. Apart from what really was going on here. Prima had created excellent cover. Factories. Though there was no reason to even have so many workers here. Automation and robots could do all this meant that all these adjusted Volatiles might be ready to be reassigned. For what? Novus was theirs. Politically and on the street.

She let her Brain wander a bit. It detected CFs further in. A small satellite suburb for those engaged in making steel, trucks, rail wagons, engines, everything a growing economic base needed. Rocket research maybe. They were not hiding their activity, sure of having the situation in control.

The guard motioned for her to turn left. On a small rise a low office block. This road empty as she positioned the car at a parking bay. Guards at the entrance. All very military. Military. Now there was a thought. Prima made it look so natural as if it all were normal. Normal? Ha! Don't be fooled Ratze. There is something very not-normal about this. Her cognitive functions in tandem with her biological perception hinted at something unusual here. The military presence so utterly out of place with Primaian ideology. A race of peace loving beings concerned with the salvation of souls. Even Regum had no military. Apart from SpaceKorps, whose function were rather undefined. This, guards, security fences, armour hinted at something sinister. Inward directed for the moment, at themselves. Correction her Brain told her, Novus was now occupied. The once free planet no more.

At the entrance office workers exiting, she noted their heavy minds, subdued Vs passed without any interest. The guards focussed on her. Behind the office complex, the ubiquitous fence and guard towers. Were they expecting an attack or a break out? Everything was wrong here. She was no expert but this area looked more a military compound than a commercial enterprise. She heard the combined hum in the air of machinery, of movement, industrial processes, steam being vented, slag poured off, rolling stock moved, trucks driving about.

Even the office block looked like a bunker. Thick walls with recessed windows, guards patrolling the area.

Inside, reception gave a cursory glance, more security personnel stationed along the corridor off to the left and right. The older woman at reception looked through Ratze as they moved down the corridor. Remote cameras could do this. Was there an overpopulation problem here? They stopped at a door like all the others with just a number and a guard. About four along this stretch. Her head thick, foggy, dense. CF. Dampeners. For the guards, the staff, her, all of the above?

The room had four chairs bolted to the floor. Too late. Trapped. Conned. Bare walls, no window. Two shapes appeared behind her. The guard merely inclined his head for her to move into the interrogation room. The floor clean. No bloodstains. That was something. No hidden scanners. None she could detect.

"We could restrain you but I'm sure that won't be necessary." The man said. "My name is Nuiq." Middle aged, mild mannered, cagey eyes. Next to him a tall woman, thin, short black hair, indifferent dark eyes. "Gena." Was all she said.

The three of them sat. Her escort left shutting the door behind him. Gena sat there, looking at her. Ratze felt nothing. No sense of personality. The military psyche? Nuiq made himself comfortable, crossing one leg, trying to look relaxed. Both their minds simply patterned. Almost pre-set. Bio constructs? Is that what they were doing here? She kept her Brain in the background. Do nothing to attract their attention.

Both of them had no clipboard, no handhelds, no internal boosters, just this blankness imbued with undefinability. Merely sitting there. Trying to make her nervous. Trying to get her into their headspace. The lethargy overpowering, melting into her. Making her indifferent, somnolent, tired, exhausted, sleepy.

"We have all the time in the world Ratze." Nuiq's voice sounded weak, distant, remote, metallic, artificial.

"No." Ratze blurted out. Involuntarily. Shit. Not Naturals or Vs. What had triggered off that response? Her position as a representative of her firm had vanished. A detail of no consequence. Totally disregarded. Irrelevant. A pathetic ruse, uncovered, laid bare, dismissed. Strange minds, stranger situation. She some casual observer on the sidelines.

"What can you tell us?" Nuiq asked, trying to be reasonable. The question was so vague Ratze nearly laughed. Gena seemed to pick up her levity.

"Plenty. Fire extinguisher anyone?" Not what they wanted. This seemed to be playing out on various levels. In possession of pertinent information which needed confirmation. At its basest level she some sort of scout. Keep it to that for now. A snooper. Using fire suppression systems as the wedge to get in.

"You're domain sensitive." Gena said as if it were fact. Her Brain froze for a moment digesting her supposition. Then it calmed and hung in there. Waiting to pick up any snippet of interest.

"No."

"Ratze. We know you're an insert."

"Freelancer. Big difference Gena. Fire system's functioning?"

"You're wanted on Prima."

Ratze knew, instinctively she would not be carted back. Something was stopping them. Something she was embedded with what was too sensitive to be revealed back there. To be kept out. She had no idea what. Gena was guessing more likely.

"And the others. Got a new pressurized model." She said instead.

"We get them in the end." Gena replied with assurance. "Even if poison." Meaning mental. Like her. Too dangerous to BrainDrain. In possession of toxic data.

"I bet. " She retorted. A change of resonance. Not exactly what they expected. Someone or something was spoiling their plans. Surely not her. Don't play it too dumb.

"You can tell us here or..." Nuiq hinted whilst holding back. She was right. BrainDraining was too dangerous. Whatever it was she didn't know, her Brain blank hinting at something encoded which bothered them. It might get out. Infiltrate their systems. Create the very scenario they were trying to avoid. Or merely contain her mind, her Brain.

"I might prefer the alternative. Got polymer hoses." Ratze challenged. She was feeling more together now.

"Hand you over." Nuiq sounding reluctant.

"So why don't you come out with it?"

"You were sent to spread the alien poison. We want to know who else is involved in this perfidious and heinous act." Gena sure of herself.

Was she part of a carrier wave Ratze wondered. Her presence some form of mental irradiation. A high value, discreet Resonant State? At one with any probability the universe cared to effect. The so-called poison included.

"Gena, Nuiq. There is no alien poison. Got universal clips." Might as well give that a go.

"From your point of view, no. You are after all entrained. Who entrained you?"

Good point, who?

"If your supposition is correct Gena, Nuiq, you think they would leave some sort of footprint, some e-signature behind? Obviously not in need of our specialised equipment. Need a trolley for the extinguishers?"

"Your contacts then."

"There are none. Check out my history. Try and find the embedded legend." Ratze just knew they'd come up with nothing. She had come across a few interesting personnel but never did she exchange information. Apart from just now. Interested parties facilitated her journey, nothing more. This was the first time she had been asked directly what her covert motives were.

"You're being helped. Who?"

"All low level ops. Cruising the gutter. That's how they find me. Not the other way round."

"So you admit..." Gena interrupted.

"All I'm saying is that I travel, hitch rides. I mean by the very instance of being here...means your DVs haven't had much success in finding anything, me included." Self referencing.

Momentary silence.

"Is your group distorting the cosmic resonance?"

"You mean the great mind?"

"Cosmic resonance will do. Mind to the masses Ratze."

Could they be such realists? Had they finally understood? Learnt something? Removed the theological scales from their eyes? Or smart intelligencers. Thinking like their opponent.

"And I have something to do with this...development?"

"That is what we are here for to find out."

"I wish I could help. In fact now that you have mentioned this, my curiosity is aroused."

"Go on." Nuiq sounding pleasant.

"Well, I mean, how real is it? Could be another so-called alien insertion. Some leaking artifice. By design or default."

"Our thoughts exactly."

My, they were being helpful. Trying to draw her out.

"I guess you're discovering the universe is far more complex than first thought."

No response.

"Nothing to do with me."

"Everywhere you appear, phenomena change."

"Gena. Superficially perhaps. But you could say that about hundreds of others as well. How about phenomena change. And leave it at that."

"Well there is only one thing for it." Nuiq said dramatically. Then created a pregnant pause. See how she would react. Her Brain was indifferent. There was no threat.

"Hand you over." Nuiq repeating himself.

They stood. Interview over. The door opened with a new guard. She marched out with them. Her head crackled once more. Not that there was much in there. Her Brain was just an outer shell. Full of superficial encounters. Nothing deep there. She felt hilarious. Revealing just how useless they were. Whoever was receiving would be disappointed.

Down the corridor, deserted for all but the guards. Out front a delivery van, tinted windows. The rear door opened and Nuiq with a motion of his head suggested she enter.

She did. Nuiq and Grena stood there, brains frozen that Ratze reacted so positively towards this interrogator.

"Dross!" the last person Ratze thought she'd see.

"Surprised? How do I look?" half turning as she got in the back.

"The same..." Dross looked relaxed, his legs stretched out, arms folded in his black suit. The van had a mini bar, assorted snacks on the tiny low table. They moved the driver partitioned off. Plush burgundy carpet, tiny halogen lights. "Very stylish." Wondering how Dross could look the same after all these years.

"Ratze." Eyes smiling

"No shit hey?"

"Plenty."

"Yes." Ratze said thoughtfully, passing the titanic mills spewing out flames, dirt, smoke. Tiny figures grappling with huge machinery. They were waved through the security gates. Her Brain worked it out. He was `Dross' now, had been `Darlos' and `Drassid' as well. The same underlying persona appearing as different people in different situations. Something she found familiar and disturbing. He was watching her with a hint of a smile.

"What's with the takeover?"

"I thought you'd be wondering why we are interested in you. Or rather why you, your employer are interested here."

"The latter is obvious Dross. Business."

"Good cover."

"Didn't work." Dross shook his head slowly.

"And the goons?"

"Ratze."

"Apart from their spiffy uniforms. Not as austere as SpaceKorps. Must be quite an effort keeping both Regum and Novus locked down."

"Nothing that can't be handled."

"Bet you're having problems. The Novaians reluctant?"

The steelworks were behind them under a plume of dirt, dust and smoke. Rail wagons clanked by. The vehicle slowed. From where Dross sat a small screen showed a row of military trucks ahead full of soldiers.

"Whom they attacking?"

"Securing Ratze, securing."

"So Prima. Everything nailed down. No diversions, no surprises, no..."

He held up his hand. She stopped.

"You said it, no surprises. Except for those we take in."

"Like me?" she asked coyly.

"I prefer you on the outside."

"So do I." Were they following her surreptitiously? Her Brain did not think so. She knew she wasn't tagged. Her resonance perhaps. Maybe she should do what Dross did, change persona's. If he could do that, how far were Primaians moving?

"What's this all about?"

"Oh something Gharbel thought of. The Immortals apparently are showing signs of extra-celestial activity."

Interesting. Pretending it meant nothing to her it meant a lot to Dross. It would effect the Ascension of the pontiff.

"A second coming."

"How did you guess? Drink? Nuts?"

"No thanks. Camouflage for a show down with the alien field."

"That too."

"The Immortals not so serene. That means the Trine's onto something. Or is becoming something. Someone or something is manipulating eternity. Your eternity." She emphasised.

"Is that why you left us?"

"Heck no." her Brain warned her this debrief was going Dross's way. Yet she felt comfortable with him. As if they were in something, each by themselves but part of a greater whole. "More boredom than anything else. I took nothing with me."

"You had nothing to do with Elentra's escapade?"

Ratze did not stifle her laugh: "What, her too?"

"Self deleted."

"Suicide. As an effect not the cause."

"Not bad. Trouble is she took a lot of data with her."

Self induced cyber collapse. Elentra would be in there somewhere. Not WebWorld, that was gone. WebSpace? Taken over by SpaceKorps, or what was left of it. Unless, the possibility tickled her mind. She could be in some system, maybe even a ship's processor. The last of the Reganian ships virtually had personalities. Albeit configured ones. Some captains just let the ship construct their own usually garnered from the

personnel onboard. No reason why Elentra could not slip in somewhere. As could the Immortals.

"No memories, a come-down."

"You were there."

`Not'. Comprehended in the abstract. No real time memories in place. No inserted ones either. Just the now, as always. As now. It was not that there was anything wrong with her, just the short span reality she was in. More like a moving cone, her being the point, expanding outwards and inwards simultaneously, leaving no memory in place. Leaving her mind, her Brain uncluttered.

"Sorry, I missed it." letting Dross think she was in deep space. She might have been.

"So did I."

"You were saying..."

They entered the business district. A few buildings cordoned off for structural safety reasons, others under guard. Others abandoned with blank spaces where signs had been. Rubbish strewn in foyers, blackened, charred, gutted. A pall of smoke in the sky of a fire somewhere. Sirens in the distance. A few people shuffled about, heads down. Squads of guards marched down the footpath. The trucks had turned off leaving the road empty of traffic.

"Ratze. You left for a reason."

She was glad he did not say `left us'. Was he working for a rogue authority. Or a stand-alone group buried deep in the Primaian domain realms. Attracting less attention on Novus. Or merely a pretence at being independent, maybe even heretical. Wanting to break out, not just from Prima and its tight domains. Perhaps into space as the Reganian's had done. Except now this interference? By what or whom? Or a plan in place? A spatial sub-domain? Something.

"I told ya. Boredom. The DVs were getting nowhere."

"That is the aim. Contain the field."

"Dross. I'm surprised you're buying that."

"It is there Ratze." He said equivocally, taking some nuts.

"Sure, as photons though. Field is stretching it a bit."

Ratze wondered where they were heading. Unless the ride was it. This conversation.

"Anyway," as if not wanting to continue this thread, "we got other issues."

"Problems in paradise?"

They were at the foreshore, the vast ocean glittering in the sunlight. A dark massive shape falling through the sky leaving slight condensation trail behind. A large plume of white as the container hit the water, another splash down. The plaza full of guards, families and their ubiquitous children who knew nothing else but Prima's dominance. The bars and café's still there but emptier. Families were too self isolating, self cocooned, self concerned, just how Prima wanted it. Too busy bringing up the children to have time for the big picture. Cloning Prima's society onto Novus and Regum.

"We sight seeing?"

"The casino."

"What is it with that place?"

"One of my bases."

Her head tickled. Dross engaged in a low level multi-spectrum sweep. Looking for unaligned Vs? Or types like her? What type was she anyway? Military trucks were parked along the road at precision intervals.

"Making the tourists feel secure?"

"What can you tell me about the rort?"

She knew what he meant. The configurations.

"That it's there. Loosing credit all around."

"What else?"

"Could be encoded coding."

"Nothing you cracked."

"Haven't bothered Dross."

"Why?"

"It's flat. 2-D." Which was not quite true. Dormant was a better description but she wanted to know what he knew. Typical of Prima to be so dramatic.

"A template."

"Ineffectual."

"Sorry Ratze, not buying it."

"I haven't checked it out. Honest Dross."

"So why are you here then?"

"Gotta survive."

"You hacked into the systems."

"Make sure they're working. See if they're hack-proof, which they are not."

"But you got stuff no one else has."

Caution.

"Why is it that I seem to be trusting you Dross?"

A relaxed smooth smile.

"You know Prima's won."

Another white plume slowly rising up and outwards.

"Try third and fourth party re-routers. Remote access terminals only unless whoever is sitting on that wants you to know they know."

"Way above me. DLs only."

"A kabal. Space active Reganians." her Brain released.

"Like you." He reminded her. "I'm surprised you haven't hacked into that."

"It's all irrelevant now Dross."

"Oh?" they passed a security checkpoint. The driver showed them the papers. They continued.

"It's all unravelling."

"I think you got the wrong end of the telescope Ratze."

"Oh it looks like that. I'm sure there was a reason for betraying the status of Novus. Why would Prima lock it down? No deep space research. No just space traffic. Not even a side show. Certainly no threat here. So it's gotta be something else."

Dross was interested.

"The future."

"What about it?"

"Dross." Looking at him like he was a child with a big secret. "Novus's future if left to itself might have panned out differently to what Prima envisioned. Of course we will never know that now. That future was deleted. But I'm just wondering that by acting the way they did they in fact created the very reality they were trying to avoid."

"The cosmic consciousness guides us all." Dross said blandly.

"What if the kabal is behind this? So powerful they can screw with fail-safe systems. Scramble them. Just enough to, well, you guys didn't notice the difference."

Dross looked at Ratze. That was one of his brief's. Make sure the data remained on Novus. Guide any who stumble across it as a computer glitch due to corrupted RSs infecting the processors. And see who gets activated regarding the background radiation, that odd essence within the Immortals domains.

"Let's see what one of the major families has to say."

"Why them?"

"See what they make of it. What is common knowledge Ratze."

"You mean find out what you can use, then spin it out."

Nicos, in his eighties still looked very much the patriarch in charge. Fierce black eyes, the face etched with deep character lines, slightly withered he still ruled the family.

"Ah, Dross..." Then seeing Ratze stopped. "Who is this?" determined not to be sprung with any surprises.

"A casual observer Nicos. She is the one who knows of the problem. You could say she's my research assistant." And left it at that. It was obvious Dross's department, whatever it was had some clout on Novus. "One who won't appear in your minutes. This meeting is in camera. What we discuss here remains here."

Nicos merely stared at Dross.

"Ratze, this is Graf, the Narciss Group," another ancient eminent grise thin grey hair, fierce eyes, sharp nose, thin bloodless lips, dangerous. "Jorg from Terra Firma," a middle aged man, blond, fit, tanned who nodded, "Senija from Consolidated Finance," sharp looking, coolly appraising Ratze, "Dargos on behalf of his client," a tall thin rakish man sitting with a studied pose around the conference table. "And that must be Kahl." Dross giving the short, energy packed suited man, a runt of a face an indifferent smile, "who I'm afraid cannot remain."

"It doesn't work like that Dross." Nicos said imperiously. "Need I remind you..."

Dross locked eyes with Nicos. The latter relented. "Alright." He growled. Kahl swaggered out the room, just bumping into Dross who did not bother to respond. The door shut firmly behind him.

"Please, be seated." Nicos relaxing.

The large round table in front of them was empty. No notes, no coffee, no position papers. Just their brains.

"No scanners either." Dross said as he sat, Ratze followed suit sitting next to him. Her Brain did a quick soft scan, the room was clear.

"Right. To business. Jorg." Nicos opened the meeting.

"It's a mess. Can't make head or tail of it. The forensic accountants, ours that is are baffled."

"You ran the base sequences for the random generated tables?" Dross going for it.

"I did. I also reran the logs which uncovered several glitches, corrupted data at pertinent points in the overall process. Looks like sabotage. Not only that the missing credits have vanished. Not repositioned, vanished." Jorg reported.

"Thank you Jorg. Senija?"

"Ditto that." Was all she said. She was not about to reveal her methodology regarding her investigation.

"Any dissent?"

Silence.

"Very well. Causes. Dargos."

"Hoodoo Voodoo." Dargos answered with a straight face.

"I take it you mean some sort of exigent interference."

"It looks like a programme but I fear it is only a shell. It smacks of intentionality on a massive scale. My employer thinks it's DV activity."

"Thank you Dargos." The others looked a little shocked. "Any takers on that? No? Yes Senija."

"Ghost data. Rogue programme which either got out or was let out. Point of origin possibly Prima. Not direct of course. Repositioned through DVs."

"You too are suggesting economic sabotage."

"I am." Senija replied with certainty.

"Grahf. Tell them what you told me. If you would be so kind."

"Indeed. Maybe closer to home. As in the Outback. The mental reconstruction of the Volatiles. Working along the same lines as remote viewing DVs. Trained to scramble the system and by putting it into force they revealed themselves. So to cover that, martial law. The planet's population locked down. Home grown economic terrorism." Looking at Dross as he finished.

"Interesting Grahf." Dross replied unperturbed by his analysis. "So Nicos?"

"Sabotage. No doubt about it. Origin Prima, as Senija hinted. But through a proxy. Rerouted repeatedly, everywhere, non-linear, multiple localized progression, infesting the ether. Could be DV boosted. All the evidence points in that direction."

"The discrepancy is real then?" Dross wanting confirmation.

"Self replicating, self sustaining." Grahf explained.

"It's a chimera." Nicos said after a momentary pause.

"Oh?" Senija reacted. Ratze pricked up her head.

"There is no missing credit. All smoke and mirrors. Sure takings are down. The casino is only down because there are less gamblers. This is disinformation on a grand scale."

"Ratze?" Dross prompted.

"There is a pattern in the random sequences. At the gaming end. The run of cards remain pretty much the same. The difference is not in the odds themselves but their position. That is the influence of this discrepancy."

"So you're saying it's real." Nicos bored into her.

"I am."

"Then why aren't flight plans affected. Thrown of course since its supposedly universal. We hear nothing from the executive council. Or are they keeping that to themselves? Are projections regarding our future out? No. Things are moving according to plan. It dovetails. What I am saying is this is not a discrepancy as such. It is intentional. With some side-effects. Those that have been aired here."

"So you're saying this is intentional?" Senija asked.

"A conspiracy." Grahf concluded.

"Well it cannot be the Kabal then." Dross said.

"The Kabal is a bogey. Who knows? Maybe there are some in Prima who no doubt have their own agenda." Nicos replied.

"Could it be them?" Jorg wondered.

"What we need is confirmation from Regum and or Prima." Dross suggested.

"That's just great." Nicos scoffed.

"I know." Dross said almost sheepishly. "Here I am, representing in a way Prima and even I don't know what is going on. Ratze?"

"Me? What?"

"When you were..."

"The DVs are outward focused. Target specific. The others universal as in the alien field. It might well be that the two are intertwined. Though that would be coincidence. The so-called alien field comes from out there, beyond our universe. The discrepancy is in here, with us, right now."

"Could one have triggered the other?" Senija wanted to know.

"Too weak."

"But it's contents..."

"Not encoded. Nowhere near it. Pure visuals."

"Dross." Nicos focussed on him. "I think it's a red herring. I've done my own research. It appears the other universe has something similar. Background radiation. It's weak. It's like a left over fog of some sort. Nothing in it."

"You could be right you know." Dross preferring where Nico was heading. Diffuse the situation. Get people refocussed, not distracted. If there was anything to this

discrepancy, the less the curious poked around the better. Otherwise it might create a reaction. One he was not as yet ready for.

Ratze too was inclined not to challenge Nico's view. The discrepancy was real. As to what it really was was hard to tell. Like a programme in waiting, a template someone suggested. If some smartware got latched onto that...who knew what sort of a potential that would create. It might even get the Primaians interested. The last thing she wanted.

Nervina

A chime woke Nervina in her tube. Awareness. Brain active-passive. Safe environment. The ship. She relaxed, lying in the artificial cocoon as air was pumped into her tiny cabin. Rescued. Taken off Novus.

"When you're ready." A voice came over the open com.

Air normal she opened the tube, the HUD read outs faded away. A quick chem shower, a short dose of warm water and she was refreshed, alert. Ready. Her Brain recalled the change. CFs but not in the usual sense. In place and mobile. The Volatiles in the Outback. Reconfigured, boosted. Spreading out into the city, over what was Novus. A presence hovering at the edge of conscious recognition. Nothing more. An inkling. Intuitively recognised.

All this going through her Brain as she dressed. Back into the jumpsuit. The tiny electro-static generated field keeping it dirt and dust free. The wardrobe stacked with spare underwear, socks, shoes, a second jump suit, the usual gear of space farers.

When she came back to the lounge, being the outer operation and situation room she found the whole crew assembled. All two of them. They were both tall. Rena, who like Nat had short cropped hair for ease of slipping on sensor caps with that anaemic look of never being exposed to real sunlight. Light screens everywhere showing the ships smart status, surrounding space in various frequencies, exotic looking graphs, quivering bell curves, spiking radiation fluctuations and visuals.

One screen was larger than the others. A thin misty lilac band. Another in loop mode. Replaying supernova explosions further in the galaxy but no threat to the three inhabited planets. The flare of the two stars blowing themselves to smithereens. A dark purple computer enhanced wave front moving out. In conjunction.

"Did the wave front trigger the supernova's or are they creating the wavefront?" Rena spoke, then seeing Nervina greeted her. Nat likewise asking whether she had slept well. Nervina thanked them for their concern.

With her remote Rena called up another screen. Novus. Pink. A few cirrus clouds, a dull green hazy spread. A blob like some fungus growing in its dish.

"What's that?" Nervina asked.

"Containment fields. Moving. First manifest in the singular, spreading out."

"Vs" Nervina said instantly.

"Local only. We're watching." Nat explained, meaning no probing. Thus no signal alerts set off. "Stay neutral."

Was he aware of her Brain? If so he was not unduly concerned. Accepted it as fact. They had to be Reganians. Not your average either. Spacers were far more advanced than their terrestrial counterparts. Smart. It meant Prima knew less about their real capabilities. Spreading out. Diversifying. Dispersing, multi minded.

"It tallies with what's on Prima." Rena explained looking at Nervina.

"Related? Enphased?" Her Brain and mind coordinated.

"No."

"Independent of each other. Glad I'm gone. Wonder what the reason is?"

"Where they are located?"

"Novus." Nervina smiled. "I meant on Novus."

"Oh, yes." Nat returned the smile. The screen's dark green blob expanded into hundreds of minor points like sand through an hour glass, moving down a line.

"That's the Outback. An area off-limits to all. A Primaian enclave. Also the industrial base for Novus. Cheap labour."

"Disgusting." Rena said.

"Pure Prima." Nervina explained. "The Vs think themselves lucky to be there."

"They certainly got them brainwashed."

"Rena, they know nothing else." watching the green line move towards the city. "They're moving out down there."

"You're right there."

"This real time?"

"Real time replay."

Her Brain was drawn to the larger screen's lilac band.

"What's that?" even though her Brain already knew. The Discrepancy.

"Passive reading. Something that's out there. Appeared a while ago. Low energy yield." Nat said.

"Two outward bound phenomena." Nervina thought out aloud.

"You think there's a connection?" Rena attentive. "Take a seat by the way."

"I'll stand. I just got up."

"Oh I forgot. You want anything. My apologies."

"I'm fine Rena. I wonder if it's a message?"

"If it is it's vast, it's huge, it's dispersed." Nat answered.

"Dispersing."

"Initially yes but now it's holding."

"I'm wondering if they know."

"Who?" Nat enquired.

"The Primaians on Novus. CFs are self insulated. One way traffic. You've got that, whatever it is, out there..."

"It hasn't reached any planets Nervina." Rena explained.

"Doesn't have to. Quantum entanglement." She said proudly remembering her basic science lessons. Varus. She couldn't remember much else. Her Brain muddying her recent past.

"It just is there. Perception entangles. Even by being out there it's inside the perceiver. That includes the ship Nat." Rena thoughtful.

"It's passive. Ah, the ships catalogued it as a black environment." Nat said.

"Wow."

"What?" Nervina asked.

"Well the old computer lingo used various coloured flags to tag info. Green for safe, red for alert, black for sub-dimensional, white for mutli-cosmic. And a few others. Ship's passive sensors detected sub-atomic configuration within that purple haze. Interesting. Unique."

"Isn't it just." Nat replied.

"Some discrepancy."

"Discrepancy Nervina?" Rena focussing on her. "You know this?"

"Embedded in space. Interfering within the matter of space. Discovered by chance. Random number sequences weren't random anymore."

"Does it affect computational processes?" Rena asked.

"Is your ship OK?"

"It is." Nat answered instantly.

"It's not reconfiguring..." that came from her Brain.

"You know something of this?" Nat all attention.

Nervina shrugged. "Apparently." To her Brain neither the CFs dispersing through the City, nor the outer Discrepancy had her Brain on any alert status. More like a minor distraction, a curio of the universe itself. Her Brain aligned on a completely different level. Here but not here, there but not there, in an intermediate state of both yet of neither. Like smoke. Neither being in the element of fire or that of air. Very apt Brain she thought.

Flickering pixels.

"What's that?"

"Oh corrupted data. It happens." Nat answered.

"It's at the Outback." The green haze had moved as the Vs took the City. Another line was heading towards the casino. When they took that Novus would be theirs. Under Primaian control. Neither Nat nor Rena bothered. Maybe later she might find out why. But the minor activity in the Outback puzzling.

"Zoom in?"

"Sure."

The imagery expanded. An open cut iron ore mine. Tiny trucks moving the earth up snaking roads to conveyor belts that would transport it to stored piles. Some earth fell away. The pixels continued to flicker.

"Why would data be corrupted there?" Rena curious.

"I understand what's happened." Nat said to her moving over to a light console. "The computer's set itself on auto. Once the low resolution levels set in, after all it's only dirt down there, plus ancient technology, it saves processing power as the data's collated. Then when something comes up beyond the bandwidth, the other data is not fully processed. So let's see what's at the edge of the cut."

His fingers flew over the lightboard. The tiny area that was flickering stabilized.

"More lumps of dirt." Nat joked.

"There's got to be a reason why it's different Nat." Rena prompted.

"Well, I'll do a spectrum analysis." More commands, recognition specific to minerals, lodes, metals. "Iron Ore, granite, clay, fused."

"Fused?" Nervina's Brain present.

"Low energy, fired, hm, artefact." The huge excavators scooped a pile into a waiting ore truck. More dirt and ore collapsed revealing more of the same.

"That's not dirt Nat. It's...it's a ruin!"

"Past inhabitants?"

"Has to be."

"And they're mining it, destroying it." Nervina amazed at the vandalism.

"Mightn't know it's there. Mixed up in a lava flow. Thus the high amount of iron."

"I bet it's an ancient culture."

"On Novus?" Rena alert.

"No wonder the Outback was sealed off." Nervina commented. "Either they know and don't want it to get out or they are ignorant shits."

"Get all the data you can Nat." Rena suggested.

"I shall. Ship keep these specs for that area. Also do a random..." he looked at Nervina, "...search beginning at the current primary location. When done let me know." A light blinked in confirmation of the order.

"Nat, for the random search, keep the generated pattern. We might be able to confirm if this distant whatever is influencing, affecting the pure random sequence."

"Good idea." Nat got busy to file the search pattern itself.

"A lost civilisation." Rena said pensively. "Can you get a time for that?"

"Not unless it's an active probe. Which would reveal our presence."

"Shit."

"I know. Annoying isn't it? Here is a monumental find and they're destroying it. With us unable to do anything about it."

"We could call someone else in."

"Rena. I don't know that much about history but if there is one location, there might be more. Civilisations spread out in two ways. Over time and across their world, then if they survive that, technology, which leads to space travel. So we ought to look into galactic history. The best place is Regum."

"If we've, well the ship I mean, have just discovered it how could there be anything?"

"Do an astronomical search on possible inhabitable planets in this vicinity." Nervina suggested.

"That's been done. None around. By that I mean planets even remotely suitable for colonisation. Even with terra forming, bio-engineering atmospheres."

"So either they became extinct prior techno take off or they left millennia ago. The only two planets are Prima and Regum. And our history does not mention any space farers. No visitors from the stars, no beings with incredible powers, just us crawling out of the slime and out of the caves. Anything your end Nervina?"

"Total blank."

'Initial random search complete.' The ship announced.

"I think I will take a seat." Nervina pulled up a chair.

"Extend random search over the whole planet." Rena ordered.

The light blinked in acknowledgement.

"Now to see if there's anything more down there."

The mining and extraction continued under clouds of dust. More rubble shovelled into the waiting ore trucks. Destroying the past.

"We should send this to Regum Nat."

"Yes I've thought of that myself. I'll wait a bit and see if our trusty ship finds anything."

"Go to the finest molecular configuration you can."

"Already is Rena."

"Any chance of going back in time?" Nervina asked.

"Not here. Maybe some Habitat, some eccentric. Again Regum is the only place. And since there is no central register the only other way is to sound out a general request. That might alert the Primaiaans. Then they would start looking."

"We don't want that." Rena confirmed.

Nervina searched her memory. Cut-outs of being on Prima, the seminary, Horat. Regum. Novus. Not much else.

"Well I know Prima keeps its history like some big secret. The before..." Nervina began vaguely..

"Before?" Rena asked.

"The schism, the dispersion, the move to Regum by thousands who wanted out."

"Got it."

"...is there. Vague stuff about the wars prior that. The holy sages possibly the Immortals..."

"What are they?"

"No one knows. Holy sepulchres, repositories of sacred wisdom, eternal, the glue of their religion." She felt no kinship with that planet. A traveller passing through. Yet it had all started there.

"That their history?" Nat onto what Nervina was trying to say.

"Just about."

"That leaves Regum."

"But they wouldn't know either. We've come back to where we are."

"Yes Nat. So I guess we are the discoverers. Actually that honour should go to Nervina."

She remained silent. It was indeed an honour. But she did not want to attract attention to herself. Somehow her Brain wanted it that way.

"I think that can wait. The discrepancy's the thing."

"You think so?" Rena refocusing.

"I know so. Nat, anything on the random search?"

"Oh yes. Let's see." His hands activating the results, the internal configurations.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing. How strange." Nervina perplexed. So was her Brain which had a suggestion. The ship's processors could delete the interference.

Nat knew the ships capabilities. Whilst Nervina was no hostile, he did not want to reveal anything. Nat called up the non filtered file.

"Spoke too soon." Needing to know if the discrepancy did have an effect with the embedded extraneous data.

"Yes indeed. A pattern."

Nervina was relieved and perturbed. It was out there and here as well.

A light screen appeared amongst the others.

"Broader search done." Nat informed them. "And guess what? Bit's of ruins scattered about. Amongst dense lava flows. Looks like some volcanic calamity wiped them out. On a planetary scale. That means we might find bits of skeletons. If there ever is going to be a team tasked to excavate."

"But the data is good?" Rena asked.

"Yes. Confirmed."

"Secure it."

"Am about to."

The screen vanished.

"That leaves that." Nervina indicating the hazy partially configured radiation in the background.

"You think it matters?" Rena queried.

"My astronomy's limited, but something there is not right."

"It is recent." Nat concurred.

"How do you want to handle it?" Rena asked them.

"I can enphase with it. Try to anyway. As an isolate." Nervina's Brain suggested for her. It felt up to it.

"Might that not alert other watchers?" Rena cautious here.

"Not as an isolate. I'll be more dislocated than located." Meaning the ship would not be found if they cloaked it. If she could get into the fog, completely, then there would be no source. But there she was wrong.

"You can be traced to this point in space. That would assume a ship. Sorry Nervina." Rena basically ordering her to stay out.

"Then let's park near some planet, asteroid belt. Where there are others."

"Nat?"

"It's a way of discovering what this actually is."

"Rena. Prima, the DVs I mean could easily mistake this ship for a habitat. There are countless of them spread all over the place. Even Regum doesn't know how many there are. They don't care."

"How long would this take?" Rena working out the odds of being discovered.

"A moment is enough."

"In and out?"

"Aha."

"Nat?"

"Well the ship can be imaged. I could create the necessary camouflage for Nervina. Use one of the astronomical scanners. That would make it look like passive data collection. We can even pretend to be a platform. Then if we locate near a mining operation, or a group of habitats Nervina's probing would be nothing more than idle curiosity by some astronomer." Nat reasoned.

"Group habitats sounds fine." Rena agreed.

Prima

Skias studied the three Divines who had clamoured for his attention through his secretary, Donar this time. He liked to rotate them so that they did not become too familiar with the nature of his work. Ever since his experience at the shrine of the Immortal Skias had approached various individuals to ascertain what really was going on. That something was affecting their supreme repose was beyond doubt. Telafus was testament to that. Burnt out by the divine fire, the searing energy of the Cosmic Consciousness. Was the Divine Mind sending a message? Was it, blessed be its many names, the message itself? Had the message changed? Possible hidden intent within its convolutions. Had Telafus's soul been out of synchronicity? What Skias feared, what concerned him was whether the nature of the Great Architect was not what they had always assumed. The price of intellectual pride to second guess its Divine Mind. Or, as rumours had it, was there a change in the celestial vault? And with that change so they too, Skias included had to realign their spirituality, their inner resonance. Amazingly he had coped with the experience.

So when the three Divines approached the holy office for an interview Skias saw it as an opportunity to subtly question them if they were aware of any changes. If not he had to find out why he and Telafus had been the only ones. The masses were always fervent in their belief. Their visions on the edge of a spiritual fever. As such, their states of being were not so much suspect as more or less quaint. The masses imagined all sorts of things. All duly noted and put down to the alien field. Skias was beginning to think there was something truly alien out there, en par with the Divine Mind. Not of it, nor with it. Simultaneous. Camouflaging itself amongst the Celestial Splendour. Easily mistaken as divine revelation. So the question remained: was this essence a usurping force or a projection of Divine Consciousness, something palpable for the masses to comprehend, to latch onto, to be at one with. The Divine reaching down to them all in a form they could all recognize. Re-establishing the divine link severed at the moment of Creation. It would be interesting to see what the Divines actually experienced themselves.

"The spiritual life is waning." Ravez began. They were seated comfortably in Skias's working office. His desk empty, showing them that he got his work done, meaning his secretaries did since Skias merely skim read their reports, their analysis, glancing through the abstracts. Now and then he would ask for an original report if the details were a little scanty.

Ravez was of dark complexion. Due to his families heritage, one of the ancient establishment. Spending his time in the open. He was known to travel a lot.

"The alien field defiles the minds of many." Morgan began spouting the right mantra. He was close to the bishops. Never ventured into the countryside. Whereas Ravez had power, the family going back way before the Schism. Morgan was one of those Divines intent on becoming an Ecclesiastic. He conversed with bishops, getting the numbers, massaging egos. He lusted to become a Domain Lord that much was obvious. Slightly irritated that it wasn't panning out. He basically expressed official opinion.

"There is some confusion." The third visitor said. Wahr. Not much to him. Risen as priest, provincial bishop, pretending to have a social conscience, he could not be denied a place amongst the Divines. However whether he would rise to become an Ecclesiastic remained to be seen. Individuals such as Wahr were tolerated amongst the Exalted but at a distance. Preferably out there in the field, amongst the unwashed multitude. A whiff of poverty about him which he wore with some pride. His face was craggy. Too much sunlight.

These three, almost representative of their orders would not go unnoticed. Skias tried his best to keep this low profile. Thus the speed with which they got the pontiff's attention to be received. But not too soon. It would set tongues wagging. Keep them waiting too long and the implication was that Skias was under pressure from the Ecclesiastics to favour them instead of the Divines. All part of Skias's juggling act as official pontiff to all.

Ever since his experience Skias had taken an interest in the esoteric, the mystical end of their unitary belief. What he discovered was that amongst the elite, the spirit was noticeable by its absence. In a way only to be expected. They were holy bureaucrats. The priests ministered, the rest did not. Except the bishops during especial occasions, on holy days when attending their flock, along with the priests. Otherwise grooming their own cliques. With little influence on Skias.

"Confusion?" Skias asked.

"Yes pontiff." Wahr replied. Ravez irritated. He expected to be in conversation with Skias, not this Wahr, this sycophant, so concerned with the well being of the masses. As if that was pertinent. They had not changed for centuries and would not change for centuries to come. Their lunatic ravings mere curiosities, something amusing to chortle over. The bishops indifferent and he did not blame them. If the priests could not control the masses then perhaps power should be passed up. The priests were too lax, too accepting, the bishops wished to be left in peace to pursue their interests, similar to his

own. Either have access to the Domain Lords or become one. In fact he was in favour of doubling them. Create a group that dealt with the temporal whilst letting those that were Exalted pursue high matters of statehood. In that sense Morgan agreed with him. Wahr could be brought around if properly guided. What was needed was tighter control. The reason he was here. He could not see Morgan disputing that suggestion. As for Wahr's little group, they could easily be contained. There were enough of the poor for them to be busy for generations to come.

"The masses have always been in need of spiritual guidance." Morgan said wearily as if exhausted by the mere thought of it. Wahr's contribution a wasted comment. In no need of elucidation. There were more important things to consider. Regum for one.

"Talking spiritual guidance..." Skias began. Ravez blanked his mind. It was an automatic reaction which he hoped Skias noted. Glancing a little sideways he noted with satisfaction Morgan too seemed to wish the conversation would not go Wahr's way. "...when was the last time any of you sought solace at the Immortal shrines?"

Ravez shrank at that. Morgan tensed. With the multitude, led by the priests virtually clamouring for some spiritual connection they had not bothered to even bother. For them a quick prayer sufficed. They were busy making sure Primaian society was kept in its divine state. Going all mystical would only detract them from their work.

A studied silence.

"I have." Wahr said at last.

He would Ravez thought.

"And?"

What was Skias after. Some form of divine revelation? Morgan wondered.

"Turmoil. Images not of this world."

"This world."

"This universe."

"Ravez?"

At last. "The change is noticeable. A spiritual unravelling. No doubt due to the alien infestation. Superimposing itself upon the Immortals resonance. The masses are not so much confused as deluded."

"Thank you Ravez. Morgan?"

"The shrines are attracting the sick, the lame, the diseased, the mentally unstable. The priests do what they can but the fervour out there is...disturbing."

"Really?"

"Yes pontiff." Morgan answered. "They speak of a coming..."

"And the priests?"

"Totally with the people."

"So is it the alien infestation or the presence of the Web." Skias suggested.

"Both probably. I mean both are real. So both have to have an influence on those who are weak in spirit, irresolute within themselves, contaminated from without." Ravez explained with definite resolution.

"They are in divine fervour." Morgan thought he'd better add. "A divine avatar is going to manifest itself, to guide them back to their true spirituality pontiff."

"Has this turmoil amongst the masses a pattern?"

"Only in what we mentioned." Ravez spoke for them.

Outside purple storm clouds gathered. The office darkened, the lights came on. The gold embossed lettering of the books lining the wall glittered. Books not for the general public. Their contents too disturbing regarding their convoluted bloody history. Rabid priests, raving apostates, heretics who perceived a different universe, a different state of mind, some a universe without divine intention. Others portending a re-awakening at an undefined future when the Immortals would rouse and create a heavenly kingdom on Prima. Those found spiritually wanting would die, never Ascend, whilst those spiritually pure would be embraced by the Immortals divine infusion. Only Gharbel, Qatus and Pentham knew of these premonitions, of the struggle to establish this theocracy, of the need to keep it this way. In a way they were all the guardians of the future. One that was either unravelling or coming to be. The coming of false prophets.

"Those stricken by the divine madness speak of horrific creatures lurking in outlandish spaces locked into reality coming out in their dreams to feed off their souls. Strengthening the Dark." Wahr said at last.

"The Dark? What is that?"

"Everything that we understand of life as not."

Ravez thought this might come in handy to use against those who stood in his way. Morgan was likeminded. Silently thanking Wahr's prevalent mysticism.

"Hallucinations." Wahr continued.

"At the shrines."

"It is beyond that now pontiff. The people are suffering nightmares."

"So on one hand we have a change in the celestial state of things. Portents of divine manifestation to lead us into a cleansed age. Whilst at the same time horrors stalk the soul."

"It is the aliens pontiff. They see the future, see us triumphant and are doing everything in their power to distort our resonant state. Align it with theirs and deny us our rightful future." Ravez answered confident of his analysis.

"I agree." Morgan added..

"This coming divine being. Is it of the Divine Mind or the false prophet prophesized."

"There pontiff lies the rub. If it is a false prophet then it will reveal itself as wanting spiritually. That is the ultimate test. It's message must be studied carefully. How aligned is it to the alien field, Regum's web or the true divine state of not just the Immortals but the Cosmic Consciousness? My suggestion is that the less oriented it is to this life, the closer it is to the divine state." Ravez explained.

"Agreed." Morgan convinced Ravez was correct. Things were turning out better than expected. Lightning flashed outside, the trees bending in the howling wind.

"Maybe that can bring the whole rotten edifice down."

"That would..." Wahr frightened by the prospect of conflict.

"What Wahr. Teach them a lesson? Consider. It is they who are invading our space. Ironical isn't it in that so is the alien field? A coincidence?" Morgan mocked.

"Perhaps. Fortuitous? Most certainly. Opportune? Definitely, for Regum. And here we sit and ponder the imponderable. If I may pontiff?"

Skias acknowledged Morgan's wish to continue.

"They started a war on a level that we never envisaged or even considered. All we want is harmony. Now that is not exactly how things are turning out. We have been lax too long. It is time for decisive action. An all fronts. It could well be that the Immortals are not being enhanced but compromised. Until other proof is prevalent I am assuming this is some new form of spiritual attack. Yes, attack. Now there are two things we can do. I am a realist. Either we destroy Regum's Web, and thus weaken the alien field if not destroy it, for we know it is weaker or we use it to our advantage. As for this seemingly secondary manifestation the same applies, use it, or destroy it. We are greater than the sum of our individual parts. So let us combine and act decisively. Now is the time."

"Bravo Morgan." Ravez gave him a knowing smile.

"We must inform the priests that the visions are false illusions." Skias said at last.

"But even falsity has its own reality. And everything that is, is of the Divine Mind."

"So you want to use everything? Allow the unholy ingress of the field..." Wahr was appalled.

"No. Be patient Wahr. Fight fire with fire. I have had a revelation. If this gets out...need I elucidate?"

Skias was threatening them with being BrainDrained if they leaked.

"Good. I have communed and seen certain manifestations. So did Telafus, blessed be his soul. It sent him insane." And paused for them to digest it.

"So there is an evil..." Wahr stammered.

"Ah." Skias held up his hand, his ring gleaming under the lights. Outside was almost pitch black, the storm thundering. "Let us say, intense, shall we? It is...sentient, it's the only way to describe it, gestating out there. Biding its time, building its strength. One I intend to use to further our aims. The Divine Mind is not against this manifestation. Therefore it must be a part of the Divine Plan, otherwise it would not exist. Yes I know, you might ask what of the Web, of Regum, the alien field? All to test us, to stop us falling into complacency, to strengthen the spirit, to overcome all odds. Like when the body fights a disease it is strengthened. So too the disease that is Regum and the alien field. I believe, I know, that the Divine Mind has sent us an avatar. Let us use it. It is there for a reason, our reason."

Silence.

"I would suggest you make your pilgrimage and familiarize yourselves with what is really going on out there. If you survive, well and good. If not..." He smiled at them, at the challenge and their discomfort.

"So a higher being is being created?" Wahr the first to respond.

"It is there. Not complete. But its power, its essence precedes its manifestation."

A little shaken at the challenge Skias continued:

"The more we acquaint ourselves with the changes in the cosmos the better. This time we will not be taken by surprise."

"You mean the Web." Ravez said.

"Yes. That as well. The Cosmic Consciousness has made me aware of this divine portent. It would be idiotic to ignore it. For it will come whether we like it or not. We have to get used to it. The Cosmic Will has not just given us a sign, it has also given us the means to conquer all. The people will have to be told. It will obviate their confusion. The great cleansing has arrived gentlemen. The time of procrastination is over. We are on the move. In a plane of power Regum can only dream of. We shall be dominant."

"I will be honoured to serve." Morgan said humbly. Ravez curtailed his response. Morgan humble. What next.

"As will I." Marez intoned solemnly. Just to stay in tune.

"I too will seek divine guidance." Wahr shaken. You would Ravez thought noting the difference in that Wahr was focussed on the Great Mind. Whether he accepted the divine vision Skias spoke of was another matter.

"Should we consult the ancient records?" Morgan preferring to come at this indirectly. He did not feel like engaging in a cosmic wrestling match, one Telafus had lost. He was content to go along with Skias, but actually engaging in this supposed being was entirely different.

"An open mind is preferred. If I can do it Morgan, then so can you." Skias smiling serenely.

"What about the...others?" Ravez asked. If this power was what Skias said it was, then who knew who would be even more Exalted?

"Well Ravez. The people and the priests are already making pilgrimages. The news is out that a divine cosmic splendour is irradiating our souls. I am only suggesting that you familiarize yourselves. Ignore it at your own peril. Others may surpass you. The decision is yours. The only information that remains secret is Telafus's demise."

"Of course pontiff." Ravez accepting the decision.

On the orbital over Prima, Manud was standing in for Darlos liaising on call through Lord Pentham. Kroena as head of the DVs was being congratulated once more at the successful insertion of the simulacrum. And its progress at Tellaris. What concerned Manud was Merduk's defection, or escape as he put it. Kroena was not that worried.

"We still get what is wanted." She said. "Admittedly Merduk's reason for being on Regum concerned other matters..." looking at Manud whose sunken face, more a skull whilst his black eyes bored into whoever he looked at. A potent Stable Volatile she guessed. The fuss over Merduk hinged on him gathering data regarding Regum's insertion technology. Now completely inserted, the simulacrum apart they had lost Merduk's link.

"Can we recall him?" Manud asked watching the imagery on the monitors coming through via the DVs tasked to shadow Zohex.

They saw Merduk standing with Zohex on one of the citadel's inner protective walls remonstrating with Zohex that he was too active. Affecting their reality. Which included Tellurium as a whole. Zohex shrugged it off replying if it was not meant to be they would not be here as witnesses to historic events.

"Can't argue with that." Manud agreed. "Tellurium is ours." Then fixing his gaze on Kroena repeated the question.

Kroena said: "It is a matter for him." Without elucidating that the DVs tried but with Zohex having formed a protective field around him by the creation of his own personality they were in danger of becoming mere observers. Let Manud figure it out. Not her concern. The Domain Lords were so pretentious in their attitude that they were masters of their destiny Kroena thus became more the dutiful operative. Elentra had been far more involved. Kroena given her upgrade as head controller was still feeling her way. She had never realized how much politicking came with her position.

"However," she continued seeing Manus was looking a little agitated, "Merduk's presence also reveals the inserted state he is in. In other words the energy pattern Regum is using is thus revealed to us as well."

Manud was aware that Lord Pentham, and no doubt Skias wanted their idea of crashing Regum not to be deflected. Earth was still important but Regum was becoming the current focus of attention. Nothing was said directly. No orders given. Just hints here, suggestions there, slipped in casually. A worthy challenge. It dawned on Manud as it must have Darlos and even Lord Pentham that the trick was to create, using the DVs to insert with Regum, creating, virtual energy field states. To insert that into their Web and let that field work back from there into real space. Manus wondered if the DVs could do it. All a matter of concentration. Reality he mused would do the rest. Use the alien field to cause chaos in Regum's Webs. The idea was enticing. The actuality of using the DVs to reverse transfer their targeted field into their realm. The DVs might even be in a position to influence if not subsume the alien field. Nothing now was impossible. The probabilities Regum played out in the Web they could do in real time. Increase their domination. Even if Merduk was under Reganian management. Unless he was being coy. For now Zohex was in command. Things were moving in the right direction.

Zohex was climbing the staircase within the ziggurat with Merduk in tow. At the highest platform a blood red sun was sinking over the purple mountains in the west. The ocean to the east burgundy. The houses below that did have glass in their windows reflected the suns sparking rays, liquid gold. On the smaller temples dispersed through the city the rays glinted off electrum covered minaretes the cupolas glowing. The turquoise on other domes reflected eerily in the setting sun's last rays.

"By forcing the issue Zohex," Merduk said as they looked over the architectural splendour below, "you will only heighten the psychic resonance, creating dissonance, negative tensions. It could collapse into chaos."

Zohex barely listened. He dealt with Merduk by tolerating his presence. Feeling an affinity with him. His vast mind an inkling that he too was from another place in

another time. Caution was required regarding Merduk's presence. They were both more than what they appeared. All the priests recognised were two beings who exuded power. A potent mystique in Zohex's case and mystery surrounding Merduk whom they regarded as a sage. Merduk a factotum. Linked to deities, a group mind who styled themselves as Deep Visionaries from Prima, the home of these godlike beings. Merduk Zohex's shadow. To Zohex at best a spy, at worst a saboteur. Or on a mission to usurp him. Zohex knew, instinctively that he was indestructible. As long as the Deep Visionary deities were behind him, with him he would remain unchallengeable. In a way there was not much he could do about Merduk, accept humour him.

"The forces you are in league with Zohex, the way you are fashioning them to your will creates certain discrepancies not just in the field you project but in the universe itself. Everything we do has an effect. Yours more so than any other. You're playing with fire, with forces way beyond your or my capabilities to contain let alone use." Merduk tried to get Zohex to realise the impact he was having not just here, but in the virtual field state that irradiated the universe with Zohex at its centre. Merduk was but an island within that. Virtually isolated.

Merduk wondered if Zohex was listening. Maybe he was, not to him but to the voices of the DVs. Deities. Merduk did not enlighten him that he was their creature. It never occurred to Zohex he was being manipulated. If his mission was to contain Earth then so far, if anything the very opposite was occurring. One that would reach breaking point. Merduk shuddered at the consequences when the inversion would manifest itself. He needed to be extremely vigilant. Watch for signs, sharpen his mind, study any unnatural phenomena, be continually aware of unexplainable events. No matter how minor. And perhaps be able to neutralize Zohex's manoeuvring. So far without results.

"The chieftains, the priests all pay obescience to me now." Zohex whispered. A malignant glint in his deep black eyes as he surveyed the city below, gazing into the dark ocean, searching the obsession resonance emanating from that distant eastern continent. His face a mask of unalloyed power, oozing, pouring, resonating out from him.

Zohex's lips turned into a twisted sneer. From the darkening mountains, the sun having set behind the jagged outlines at the western peaks tiny lights appeared wending their way down the passes. The people below must have seen them as well for a murmur arose from the market place. Agitation filled the air around them, electrifying, the tension mounting out of curiosity, awe and apprehension. An irredeemable moment had come to pass.

Zohex took off his priestly garb. Beneath clad in leopard skins, his arms and wrists covered in sinisterly wrought jewellery, glowing gemstones set in wrist clasps along with amulets imbued with their own glowing energy. The DVs were certainly creative Merduk thought, hiding his shock at Zohex's change to this fearsome apparition.

"I am giving Tellurium back to the people." His eyes radiating a strength within them that made Zohex more a dark god than this masquerade of a sentient intelligence. The sinister will of Prima personified. Merduk could not believe it. Zohex was a catalyst to events Merduk dared not follow through.

"Usurping you mean." Merduk replied, recoiling at the thought of what these moving lights, fiery torches held by thousands of outlanders pouring down the mountain pass entailed.

"You are observant." Zohex mocked. "Giving them back their ancient beliefs."

"Superstition."

"Words Merduk, mere words. It's the content that counts."

"An invasion force."

"No, reclaiming their heritage. The usurpers are the priests." He sneered.

Merduk's mind was filled with sinister warriors. Grotesque face masks etched with swirling demented tattoos. A repressed foul energy animating this advancing horde led by determined warlords. The supreme struggle for Tellurium. The brandished torches continued down the craggy passes meeting no resistance, spreading out over the plain before the expectant, now fear struck city. Zohex had induced the army, the guards, not to resist. Merduk to his consternation understood that it was all too late. All was lost here. A wave of primal degeneration threatening the present, setting the course for the future.

The sky throwing a dissolute gloom over the gathered inhabitants. Some were fear struck, others angry. A few were starting to escape through the western and southern gates. Below the gathered were clamouring for Merduk the heretic to be handed over to the threatening mass approaching their doomed city. Merduk realised he had achieved a certain negative status amongst the priests. As an outsider he was not trusted. Ironical really. Totally enthralled by Zohex. His mission to negate this shining glorious city. With Merduk helpless. He was a mere presence with no real virtual back up. Unlike Zohex and the DVs pouring into this land their potent psychic projected energy. Coming to its devastating conclusion.

Merduk sensed the waves of fear washing over them all below. These were not the warriors of the outlands. They were the occult warriors from the distant eastern shores. They were projecting, almost as were the DVs images of blood and death, of fire and

destruction intent to cleanse the city of the priesthood. They were deemed weaklings who had sapped the strength of the believers, and now it was too late. The priests vanished, retreating back into their temple cells, praying fervently for deliverance.

"I give them infinite power." Zohex glorying at the encroaching army.

"You give them darkness by the sword. These occult being will bring their malignant gods with them."

"Only to the blind Merduk." Zohex smiled. "The priests were weak. They had to go. I am merely aiding what is inevitable, what fate and destiny have decreed by the most powerful god in the universe."

"You're twisting reality out of shape."

"If that were so Merduk you think my triumph would be brought into being without even a semblance of resistance? Come. If you want to live stay at my side. It may save you yet." His mouth a cynical sneer.

Merduk knew that both of them could not be harmed, let alone disposed of. The cold rush of fear coming at him in ever mounting waves made his mind feel unsteady. Potent psychic projections. These occult beings enhanced, riding their own mental projection to dominate this reality.

Merduk followed Zohex down from the lofty apex of the ziggurat. In the courtyard soldiers had a black charger ready for Zohex. He deftly mounted the noble horse one of his men giving him his silver spear. How real the illusion is Merduk wondered. Frightening real. Zohex a sentient in real time.

The first invaders had reached the city gates. But rather than the cry of battle all was eerily silent for this was no ordinary army. They did not rape or pillage. They subdued all by their mere presence. More surreal than real yet Merduk knew this was real. Zohex's field was dominant. The ultimate Domain Lord on Earth.

Zohex moved forward into the centre of the courtyard, awaiting the warlords. He started an incantation. The DVs were using sonic waves to create discord amongst the troops, the people, the priests. In an ancient tongue prior the arrival of the priests. Zohex was both drawing upon the occult power of the shamans that had come with the occupiers and at the same time channelling his power into them. A dark symbiosis overriding the field insertion itself. Pushing it into the background. Merduk was isolated, impotent, irrelevant. The flickering flames of hundreds of torches burned with a dangerous strangeness, the air filled with rising hatred.

Down the streets, teeming with people the population torching their dwellings! They were destroying the city, burn away the very memory of its fallen glory. Or deny the invaders their glory.

"Burning it down will not efface the memory of its reality." Merduk said. He felt strangely removed from the destruction around him. Flames caught the contents of the houses. Grey smoke billowing out of windows and doors. Shrieks and howls of delight, an insane frenzy all around

"A new race will arise from the ashes attuned to the real power present in the cosmos. This fire will cleanse the earth and rid it of this abomination." All around the yells and screams of the demented driven to a mad frenzy of relentless hatred.

Crimson glowing clouds of smoke poured into the night, the city alight all around the citadel. A diabolical hatred washed over the bezerk populace, trying to overwhelm Merduk with immanent destruction.

"There is a place for you." Zohex looked down at Merduk. Merduk was stunned at the outrageous suggestion. He felt, with this smooth offer Zohex's mind trying to crawl into his. Surprised it was relatively weak, a mere fog swirling within his head, with not much effect. They were two separate entities, two interceding fields. Merduk felt secure.

The earth shook. Merduk steadied himself, Zohex controlled his frightened horse. Outside the citadel a few houses collapsed into fiery rubble, sending a cascade of sparks into the air. The conflagration spreading, flames hissed and crackled, noxious vapours, broiling clouds of glowing smoke obliterated much of the sky, eerily lit with sparks dancing insanely above the calamity around them.

To the north a volcano erupted sending a brilliant orange spurting stream of liquid fire into the night. Lava poured down its sides hissing angrily in clouds of steam as it ran into the ocean. Other eruptions followed, blowing boulders and dirt into the sulphur laden air followed by an earthquake. More crashing of timbers and the screams of the injured and dying inhabitants. Then the awful rumble deep beneath the earth. Part of the ocean floor collapsed. The waters disturbed on the surface as bubbles of gas came up turning the agitated surface into white froth. It was only a matter of time for the tidal wave to hit the harbour, smash the boats, and move with relentless force over the city.

Zohex awestruck.

"Surprised at your power?" it was Merduk's turn to mock him. "Didn't think the destruction would be so complete? The very elements are in revolt obliterating your so called occult warriors. I think they overextended themselves." And by implication Zohex as well.

Zohex looked puzzled. Around him the soldiers were running up to the battlements to get a clearer view of the calamity around them. Merduk looked at Zohex as if to say 'this is your doing.'

Merduk knew reality could not touch him. He a virtual insertion. Unfortunately the same went for Zohex. Two collapsing probability waves. One DV energized, Merduk superimposed through fusion generators. Two probability wave fields. Except Merduk knew how he came to be here, Zohex did not. He just knew he was here.

Outside buildings tottered, swayed then collapsed adding to the inferno. The force of the oceanic earthquake's massive energy slowly building into a tidal wave as it neared the shore. Merduk heard the desperate chanting of the priests.

"You're undone Zohex." Merduk raising his voice as the catastrophe outside unfolded. Zohex said nothing. He dismounted, handing the reins back to a nervous looking guard. The bastion walls shook with the continuing earth tremors, billowing dust between dangerous cracks, holding for now.

Zohex walked rather relaxed Merduk thought back into the base of the ziggurat, squat, solid, withstanding the shocks. Down a flight of stairs and into an inner chamber. Empty.

Merduk understood. In the quiet they could focus back to their respective sources. Zohex folded his legs beneath him and closed his eyes. A black square appeared beneath him. Merduk focussed on the apparent apparition. Some form of DV projection for Zohex to recentre himself. Merduk seeing its presence called his mind to duplicate the black square. A virtual quantum jump gate. Merduk only knew those behind him were not abandoning him to his fate. Where Zohex was going so was he. The duplicate appeared underneath him as well. So the two of them were quantum entangled.

Zohex was getting out. Merduk would follow, he was not going to let Zohex get away with this. Merduk sat upon the projected cyber created jump gate. Unbelievable. Miraculous. For a moment nothing. Merduk opened his mind to Zohex. Whatever the DVs were intending, whatever Zohex was intending Merduk now focussed purely on that reality.

The virtual quantum state re-collapsed, reality went into a blur, then fuzzy and they were gone.

Outside the white foaming crested tidal wave rose in its titanic wrath in front of the stricken city.

The monitors went static.

They sat there. Dumbfounded.

"The DVs have lost the entity." Kroena the first to speak.

Manud unperturbed. "Stage one completed. Congratulations. Kroena thank the DVs when they come off duty."

Kroena slightly puzzled nodded.

"In a way we ought to thank the Reganians as well." Manud smiled.

"What now?" Kroena asked recovering her wits.

"According to the predictions..."

"You knew?"

"Not exactly. I said 'predictions' Kroena, indicate this occult race will overcome the destruction of the city. They will arise fervent. The unitary god gave them this victory over the greatest city on Earth. Prima will be dominant."

Kroena was becoming aware to what lengths Prima would go to assume control of Earth's reality. Including the destruction of not just a great promising city and civilisation but its people as well. Thousands would have died in that catastrophe.

"Earth will be of no great significance. From now on the DVs," looking at Kroena, "will begin phase two."

"Phase two?" Kroena asked feeling dumb. She might be the head here but she was only a minor player regarding what the Domain Lords intentions were. Mass murder. She couldn't get over the shock.

"Why yes Kroena. Keep the Earthers in their current state. Amendable to our influence. Out of that incident thousands will actually be saved, millions in the future as well. A small price. I'm sure you agree."

"Yes," a little distracted, "certainly."

"Good. You of course will run analysis and probable projections. There may still be divergent forces at work."

"Regum."

"Indeed, though Merduk seemed somewhat impotent." Manud said with undisguised relish. "A beatific outcome. The pontiff will be pleased. I give thanks to the Great Divine Mind for guiding us through these difficult times. It has shown us the way through a dangerous development. For that we are thankful."

"Blessed indeed." Kroena replied still stunned by the outcome.

Manud was the first to refocus himself. The spectacular images coming from the simulacrum were indeed impressive. To be on Earth by focussing a few DVs who, in their aligned resonant state could transfer everything It saw in clear real time authenticity was a feat none of his superiors had even envisaged let alone contemplated. Kroena's input was indeed invaluable. Zohex had vanished, whilst his essence remained here, though blank, back to its original unformed state got him thinking.

The simulacrum had volition. The black square, seemed like some mental construct energized by Its mind. Yet Merduk had had one as well. As if Zohex had created it out of his head. Now to get a read out of his resonant state.

"Kroena. You know this situation has of itself created divergencies." Monud said at last. The monitors static in the observation room.

"Gone is gone."

"The essence of the simulacrum remains."

"A bit of a quandary. It's evident its essence remains, the persona self though self extracted."

"Precisely. As for Merduk, he left nothing behind."

"Does he matter? I mean, not in the overall sense of his having gone over to the others," she did not think the Reganians were complicit , "but with Merduk extricated shall we say it removes a variable. That ought to balance out in our favour. Trouble is they're both gone."

Manud looked at the general field monitor covering the space where the DVs were still concentrating their attention.

"Look. A thin opaque band. Two actually. Interesting. One lilac, distant, like a backdrop and a smaller light green resonance. That band is Zohex. He's somewhere..."

"That lilac effusion. I have been wondering about it. It's fairly recent. Ever since Elentra self destructed..." And saw Manud's surprise. He had not known. Nor could she say what she knew. Elentra committing suicide by deleting herself. A bizarre decision which she wondered about. Had Elentra digitized her whole being? Existing either in the Web, becoming in a way Eternal, or entered some supercomputer the Reganians might possess. Kroena realising Reganian capabilities were more than they ever imagined. Inserting Merduk was proof enough. Maybe Elentra had done the same. All speculation. Kroena just hoped she had survived in some sort of form, some type of entity. She sighed. She missed her.

"Oh, you didn't know. We had some trouble a while back. We had to shut down our end of the orbital. Long time ago. Some form of cyber attack. Never found out

exactly what. It affected her mind." She was making this up. Explain it as banally as possible. "Then one day she actually dumped her mind into the Deep Resonance Scanner, self BrainDrained. To such a degree it cost her life, her soul."

Monud listened, concerned without comment. "Right. Back to these remnant resonant fields. All may not be lost. In case you may not know and I'm not supposed to tell you this but there are three watchers in place regarding this experiment."

Kroena was not surprised. One of the DLs covering his back. Or was she under surveillance? She had felt nothing near her, or focussing in on her. Just the odd straying mind of a DV now and then. But that was normal.

"The idea is to get an unconditioned view." Manud explained.

"Live monitors?"

"Correct. I'll call one of them." And pressed a button on the console's edge that was there to get in touch with personnel.

"We got some time Kroena. Now there are three possibilities regarding Zohex. The first is he has successfully jumped to another location. We have his resonance of course. But he may not want to be found."

"But he owes his existence to us."

"Who knows what his limited intelligence has conjured up inside his head. Maybe he thinks the DVs compromised him. Like being tagged. In one way whilst it enhances him, more perspicacious minds could easily differentiate between Zohex as the projected persona and Zohex as the complete insertion. Zohex might wish to disentangle himself there."

"Could be."

"Second. The vanishing was a failure. Overwhelmed by the combined psychic forces he unleashed to bring down Tellurium. More on that in a moment."

"You mean somehow whilst the simulacrum, our creation...ah I see. His reality was deleted by the stronger field of the rising Earthers. So the projection is dissipated." Kroena said, hoped. Without elucidating.

"There could of course be another reason. We know from the reruns that this occult race has phenomenal energy at their disposal. They kept their invasion cloaked, crossed their great ocean unseen, landed, made their way across the mountains and only at the last moment actually appeared. Whilst Zohex might have created the conditions for this race to overwhelm Tellurium their leader, who remained behind, might have thought Zohex just too powerful to remain in place. Of course Zohex might have sensed this and so removed himself rather than create a conflict situation. After all we, as

Primaians do not wish to be identified as yet. That depends on others. I can only expect..." A chime announced Eta's arrival. Monud opened the door for her. The older woman came in, a mask of concentration and thoughtfulness. Monud's extra observer, Kroena instantly respected her. Psyche bonded. She did not have that fervent intensity that many displayed. She looked rather cool, detached. Excellent.

Introductions over Manud continued: "...that he is in some secure position. So Eta," he turned to her, "what have you for us?"

"Tellurium is no more." She said evenly. Cool.

"So the priests are vanquished."

"We can assume so. The reality is slightly different. For the tidal wave, the earthquakes, the volcanic eruptions destroyed the invaders. Too late did they realize the trap sprung."

"Trap?" Manud looked puzzled.

"Bring down the army of darkness of course. The priests might have known of the coming calamity."

"But they went down as well." Manud trying to reclaim something of Zohex's success.

"Those who stayed. But there were many who left. With the merchants."

"You seem to be certain Eta."

"As are Shogun and Trum. The moment the calamity started we ran some possible time lines. Instead of containing the Earthers we have actually encouraged them. Instead of just one civilisation there are now three. Those that escaped took their wisdom with them. Egypt, Babylon and another nascent culture to the east. They will all arise. In fact the cataclysm has spread their wisdom across their world ." she explained so neutrally Kroena thought Eta remarkable in her composure.

Monud was in deep thought.

"To be sure, it is a setback but not one without a future." Eta said after a decent pause.

Monud looked at her, his emotions in conflict between desultory defeat and a spark of retrieving something from this catastrophe.

"Insert the simulacrum before these nascent civilisations take hold."

"If only it were that easy."

"Zohex has not vanished in the sense we think." Eta throwing Manud a lifeline.

"You are certain?" Looking at the blank monitor.

"The resonance is there, somewhere. In the relative future. Thus the feedback. There is a way perhaps of repositioning Zohex."

Manud waited.

"That black imprint."

"What was that?"

"A form of external memory in resonance, of some resonance." Manud listening, Eta continued: "I think Merduk created it first. A sort of cosmic map. He wanted to know where exactly he was. So using himself as the centre, plus his location his mind expanded outwards. Knowing just how distant Regum as well as us are he drew on WebSpace. Now Regum has both. Maybe even the DVs if you will."

"So what are you saying exactly?"

"Just that Monud. The power of what makes WebSpace exist has created portals. A bit like gaming. Only on a cosmic scale, an extension."

"So they can go wherever they want?"

"Indeed."

"And our DVs?"

"Relegated to observer status. I'm afraid Regum has hijacked our project."

Monud was appalled. Horror stricken. He felt the sour taste of defeat, felt the heat of despair knowing the implications. They had lost Earth. The very opposite of their intentions.

"In a way it is an opportunity Monud."

He tried to collect his thoughts. Trying to regain the precarious situation.

"First we have to make sure that the Reganians think exactly what I have suggested. For as long as Zohex remains so do we. Zohex can still influence events on Earth's early history. He knows now of the trick the priests of Tellurium played on him. His second manifestation will not be so easily fooled. Especially if he surrounds himself with like minded Earther's. And, whilst it is not my decision, unless there are other missions involved, use as many DVs as you can. All I would suggest."

"Yes, that will have to be considered. Kroena?"

"Not a problem."

"There is another bonus." Eta said at last. Monud amazed. Here he was worried about the calamity that wiped out their mission, resurrected several civilisations on that planet instead of curtailing them, lost the simulacrum's essence the inserted resonant states and Eta came up with positives. He paid her the utmost attention.

"The way Zohex collapsed himself..." a gleam in her dark eyes, "...means that we could collapse WebSpace itself. Not just that but WebWorld as well. If you play your cards right, one could void Regum's computerised systems on a planetary scale."

"You're certain?" Monud astonished. Logically he could not fault her reasoning.

Kroena said, "I just got the first results from the DVs. They cannot locate the simulacrum at this moment. We have to physically search Earth's history to see if he reincarnated elsewhere. Again we have to consider two possibilities. Ideally to go in earlier so that Tellurium never arises. So far our monitors reveal Tellurium is something that cannot be deleted. But then we have not exhausted all the variables. The second possibility is as Eta suggested. He creates his own kingdom, draws the Earther's into his orbit. Becomes a beacon unto himself. Dominates Earth. To them he would appear as an...immortal. As long as we feed the energy, no matter what the Reganian's do, Zohex will remain in place."

"As far as Regum goes Monud, the sooner the better." Eta continued after Kroena was finished.

"Go on."

"The simulacrum evolved its own volition. Kroena, were the DVs doing this?"

"They were neutral, just feeding psychic energy. Of course they held the simulacrum's intent in place, its headspace. But as to execution, they are guides only, keep it on track. Stop it getting ensnared on Earth." Eta was satisfied with that. "The thing is, Zohex has evolved."

"Evolved?" Monud asked.

"Independent thought. It is aware of itself as a life form. Otherwise it would have gone down with Tellurium. It had not. Merduk certainly had no intention of remaining behind. So whether Merduk influenced Zohex cannot be ruled out. Now it gets tricky. An evolution within the inserted process. It may well be that Regums machines are developing. And this translates into Merduk and or Zohex."

"You know what you are saying."

"Yes Monud. If this process enters WebWorld or WebSpace, if that becomes sentient, then it, whatever 'it' is, will not tolerate us shutting it down."

"Eta, you understand that what is being discussed here remains here."

"Yes of course, why?"

"Because, your idea is already being considered in higher domains."

"Ah." Then: "Good."

"Now, apart from finding Zohex, we, and that includes you Kroena, have to keep our minds open regarding Reganian influence."

"I'll need the DVs for that."

"And so it shall be."

"Right, I'll designate a third to the simulacrum as it now is, a third to search for it as the persona, and the other third for Reganian activity on Earth."

"Make that a quarter."

"Fine. The other quarter?"

"Have you forgotten Regum?" Monud half smiled.

"Of course. My apologies."

Darlos, informed by Manud as to what transpired on Earth sat expectant waiting for Lord Qatus to respond. As Outer Guardian this project was in his domain. Qatus had listened in his office at the pontifical palace, the curtains drawn, unlike his mind. His irritation barely contained when informed that when the calamity struck Tellurium the simulacrum decided to escape taking Merduk with it.

"You mean Merduk abducted this Zohex." Qatus getting to the heart of the matter. "Not only have we lost the simulacrum we have also lost the traitor Merduk." Coming to terms with the situation.

Darlos was not so easily rattled. He explained how Eta saw it.

"The only pertinent point is the need to deal with Regum Darlos."

"I agree."

"Oh, do you?" came the sarcastic reply. Darlos let it pass.

"We can get the configuration of these gates they used."

"You seem to be a little misinformed here Darlos. They cannot be thought up by the DVs. Recreating an image is not the same as recreating its contents."

"I am..."

"Yes, you are, I'm sure. Whoever thought this misconception up never thought it through. Were possible projections run? Probably not. Or if they were they were not thorough. Tellurium most likely would have fallen without any interference. The dark sages would have survived becoming de-facto rulers of Earth. Thanks to the bungling up there the very opposite has happened. Earth has developed exactly as we did not wish it to be."

"They are searching for Zohex." It was a weak contribution.

"Yes, with no luck."

"Eta is right though. The ability to collapse themselves out of existence will give us the means to collapse Regum's Web..."

"I agree." Qatus's dark mood passed. "Why is the universe always playing tricks?" he asked rhetorically. "Always these unforeseen reactions popping up. Tellurium crashes and they sprout two more civilisations. We only managed one as has Regum. But Earth. At least Novus is now under our command. And don't look so satisfied Darlos. Novus is a side show. Useful to test Volatile capabilities. But I agree. We study the collapsing escapade of Merduk and Zohex. Prime the DVs to insert what we want for a change and take Regum. Insert our resonance."

Qatus came to a decision.

"We deal with Regum once and for all. Before their machines get too smart as Eta thinks they might."

Darlos listening. At least Qatus's foul mood had passed. A touch of the Volatile no doubt. Not that he would ever mention it.

"What about sending in less active agents on Earth?"

"Your point being?"

"Well Lord Qatus. High resonant persona's, like Zohex attract the Reganians. So if we flood the planet with low level inserts..."

"You may have a point there. A whisper campaign."

Darlos nodded. At last Qatus was back on track. "I'm sure Lord Pentham does not mind a little extra work. It ought to please him. Extending his domain to Earth." Without saying that if that too failed he could wash his hands of it.

Regum

They had lost Merduk. Tuvlov taking over from Sakaris. Not reluctantly. The way they had lost him was quickly dealt with. Reganians not given to emotional expressions. Even in death life continued. He was buried pure and simple. Graves unmarked. It was the memory that counted and his essence remained in the Web. As did millions of others.

The team configured alert upgrades. The moment the cyber-quantum Destablising field waves appeared Tuvlov would disengage automatically. They would not be caught out a second time. Life was too precious.

The incoming pixellated, encoded, digitalized data vanished. No not vanished. Turned into a cloud chamber, leaving behind a trail of chaos equations. There and not there. Classic quantum stuff. He concentrated on Merduk's persona. All he got for his efforts was a cyberfog. Data rich but without a source. A stand-alone field smeared across space and time. Merduk could be anywhere. As could the CI. Both had become a probability in a decoupled quantum field. Nothing like this existed in the Web. Nothing like this existed anywhere.

The grey cyberfog remained. A buffer between the two personas and their point of origin. Tuvlov was tempted to check the link with the DVs but thought better not. Leave that for the team leader. He had no wish to vanish as well.

With the show over he detached the fibre-optic patches, the smart-ware in the recliner, powered down, the external light screens vanished. He stretched his legs and told the team he was coming.

Only Sovark, Marez and Tuvlov were watching the simulation of the last scene so abruptly terminated. The floodwaters in crystal clarity hit with foaming rage the harbour, smashing ships, masts, rigging, flattening the warehouses into splinters, over storage depots, surging into the streets, houses that were not burning crashing into rubble. The tidal wave a sheet of white frothing water. In the distance the eerie glow of volcanic fires having set the surrounding forest on fire. Huge clumps of earth fumes crashed down on the stricken city. People dying in their thousands, the pack animals panicking. No escape from the relentless forces of nature. The heaving waters a white spray upward thrusting against the outer bastion of the citadel. Massive cracks appeared in the walls, sections falling into the seething waters below. The outer walls absorbed most of the shock, weakened by the earthquakes whole sections tumbling into the mass swirling between its

stronger built structures. Here and there bodies floated like flotsam, some mangled, torn to pieces, pools of blood around them.

The light screen went fuzzy grey.

"Escape gates. Who would have thought." Sovark said as he saw Tuvlov watch the end of Tellurium. "We lost contact." Sovark looking disappointed.

"Like gamers use all the time. Web's full of these cyber-tunnels."

"Except they're not gamers. Unless the CI...hooked into WebSpace." Sovark said slowly. Tuvlov was busy running some checks. Marez was re-running the sequence micro by micro second to see how they accomplished to create and use virtual jump gates.

"And no gate keeper." Tuvlov offered.

"Gate keepers?" Marez looked up from his handheld pc.

"Some gamers try and extract credits through boosters, energy codes from users. Others use non configured sentinels, a lamp post, a fire hydrant, anything really to block or facilitate access. But then no one thought this might happen out there." Tuvlov explained.

"No. Remaining in place. Vanishing into a probability, becoming a probability, it's..."

"Never happened." Tuvlev finished off the sentence. "All very experimental." Smoothing over the setback.

"Any way of chasing or tracing them?" Marez asked no one in particular.

When no one replied they all instinctively turned to Tuvlov.

"Well, it's like this. In the Web yes. Conditions apply of course, but in general... But somehow I'm thinking this is outside the Web...or another Web?"

"It's a re-insertion, pure and simple." Sovark said. Which was not much.

"Yet their energy quotient is non localized."

"You got it."

"So they could self assemble anywhere?"

"Yes."

"Lost control."

An embarrassed silence.

"I wonder."

"Wander away Tuvlov." Marez joked. A little levity was needed here.

"They or the CI might have collapsed the projected field which inserted them."

"Taking it with them?"

"Yes. Miniaturising themselves."

"As midgets?" Marez surprised.

"Digit midgets."

Marez turned to Sovark who was at a loss.

"Of course they could have thought themselves out of their paper bag."

"Self extraction." Tuvlev said at last.

"Externalise their unconscious, use that as both field and source and jump in."

"Surely not." Marez afraid to think where this could lead.

"It's done in the Web all the time. There are some domains that are exactly that."

"What, projections of the unconscious?"

"Aha." When they remained silent Tuvlov continued: "And are multidimensionally linked across the Web's time frames. It's a whole new series of sub-domains."

"You think the CI, or Merduk..."

"Not Merduk. That's why he didn't object when the micro-field appeared in Zohex's presence regarding the CI's next move. Merduk wanted to know how it's done. Had he been Reganian and or a gamer he would have known, could have anticipated the CI's potential to get out of unpleasant events."

"Without returning to its point of origin." Tuvlev finished off.

"The CI has a mind of its own."

"Hm." Marez was thinking.

"How do we follow them?" Sovark getting to the point again.

"Their resonant field waves. The search parameters will automatically re-enphase which will lead you straight to them."

"Why didn't you say this before?" Marez chided gently.

"Because I only just thought of it. So when they were getting ready to jump I would suggest you focus on this black micro-field. They or rather the CI would be concentrating on that, to get enphased, in resonance, entangled. From that moment you'd get its focal orientation. That then becomes the bases of your search parameters." Tuvlov making it sound so easy.

"Not bad. Just one tiny problem." Sovark relieved Tuvlov knew what he was on about. "Once through, the CI could easily, and this is only speculation, configure itself into something else. Assume a new persona. It might look the same but it's head, its resonant signature be something else entirely."

"True."

"I was hoping this might not be the case."

"It might not."

"You're a bundle of contradictions." Marez jested.

"We have to consider the variables."

"I know."

"What I am suggesting is anything is now possible since the CI has volition. Whether the DVs inserted that or if this is a stand-alone-domain is immaterial."

"Immaterial." Marez agreed. "Very."

"I think what Tuvlov is saying," Sovark suggested, "is that the CI's mind, for a better word has the universe enter its head. Encased in that black projection. The two become one. Somewhere else."

They agreed.

"You know of course now that this possibility has been revealed that we too can do this." Tuvlov brightened at the thought.

"What if we cut the power source?"

"You might loose them entirely. They would be marooned." Marez replied.

"Last resort."

"How did it manage to create it's own domain though?" Marez moving the conversation, the problem along.

"I think it might be more worthwhile following Tuvlov's train of thought. We're back where we started. Now what? Marez, initiate a search not for the CI itself but its projected sub-domain. That vehicle is the contact point with its future, or past, or whatever, real time insertion. Then it does not matter how it has configured itself. At the same time we also search for Merduk as himself. You never know..."

"Initializing download..." Marez's fingers flying over the light controls. "Right. Download complete. Now to begin the search in the quantum fog."

"You do understand that now that the CI has achieved what it had, it may be independent of the inserted field-waves."

Sovark was surprised how quickly Tuvlov understood what they were doing here. The CI basically guessing the reality of the PFWs. Life imitating science. First in the Web, now in reality. The connection already there. Tuvlov had joined the dots.

"So where would it get its energy from?" Sovark was interested.

"Other fields."

"The DVs."

"I hate to say this folks, but who knows who else, in the relative future may also be applying this technique. It could be us in the future." Marez pondered.

The light screens running the search were still a pixellated cyber fog.

"Does this mean," Tuvlov indicating the null results, "that Prima is facing the same problem?"

"We have to assume so." Sovark answered not to sure.

The light screen Marez was studying suddenly split into four. The same null results were still there, except as a quaternity. Then two deleted themselves.

"Well something's happened there." Marez trying to understand whatever it was that had happened. The energy quotient remained stable. "Hm, it seems the field fractured."

"Or the mind within it." Tuvlov suggested.

"Bifurcated, duplicated, cloned." Sakaris ventured.

"How? What?" Marez looked up from the data he was analysing.

"We do it in gaming all the time. Create duplicates. Can be done. Uses data in the Web, which means energy. It looks like your CI has learnt a new trick. Be at more than one place at a time. Literally."

"That is all we need." Tuvlov looking a little deflated.

"At least you're still in-phase." Sakaris said after a while.

"True. So maybe keeping the PWFs going gets us results. The CI is still drawing on them..."

"Having taken them with it."

"Tuvlov. That is something I did not want to hear." Sovark looked at him. He was glad. The young man could think of possibilities long before the computers stumbled onto the same scenario. Except they were running into negative territory. Still forewarned and all that.

For the moment Sovark admitted that loosing the CI was a set back. The only way around that was to get a second set of PWFs in place. The danger of running open PWFs though was that the CI could insert itself into them and thus take over that reality. In a way having Merduk with it would stop the CI being wholly independent. Using a secondary field would not solve anything.

"Oh no," Marez said. He was looking at tiny black spikes at the bottom of a graph. They slowly flattened into a band.

"What?"

"The CI's subdomains are materialising all over the place."

"You got it?"

"No, that's just it."

"I don't get it." Sovark frowned.

"Neither do I." Marez answered. "What I'm saying, what I'm seeing is the appearance of future domain states."

"Could be Primaian." Tuvlov giving them more bad news.

"Creating insertion points for it." Marez felt a little relieved now that it made sense in what he saw.

"So they are looking for it as well." As to why he should feel relieved given they still had a null result didn't bother him for the moment.

"Must be."

"Trouble is..."

"Yes Tuvlov?" Marez dreading what he would come up with next.

"...that they would have the jump on us. Means their domains are in place where those spikes appeared. Especially as they are holding. Thus the band. And talking bands, what is that light lilac fog in the background?"

"Decayed radiation. It appeared one day. Nothing specific. Remnant cosmic energy." Marez explained.

"Not connected?"

"No Tuvlov?."

"Hm."

"What?" Marez getting used to Tuvlov's effervescent braining.

"Nothing. Just wondering."

"It has been checked out. It's incoherent."

Tuvlov stared at the thinly spread mist.

"Is it decaying, assembling, or steady?"

"Relatively steady."

"Relatively?"

"Astronomically it is recent."

"Recent?" wondering how decayed radiation could just appear. For something to decay it had to be something else. "Was there anything there that created this decay.?"

"As in...?"

"A collapsed star, a supernova, something spewed out of the galaxy, like," Tuvlov laughed, "a cosmic fahrt?"

Marez chortled. "It's more like the latter actually. However, before you start theorizing...you know we are surrounded by a larger universe."

"Aha."

"Well it too has this band of junk energy."

"Did that appear in the same way?"

"We think it crossed over some time ago and well, it attracted itself."

"Interesting."

"But useless."

"How's that?"

"Almost zero level energy. Near absolute nothing. As weak as weak can be."

"Junk energy." Tuvlov wondered. "The universe wasting energy. You know Marez I can't quite believe that."

"Data's solid."

"What do I do now?"

"Why, help us search for Merduk." Sovark replied, "whilst Marez can follow up these inserted sub domains and I focus on the CI."

Nervina

"Nat."

"Yes Nervina."

"That discovery..."

"What about it?"

She paced the grip floor giving a feeling of gravity. Nat reclining watching the status screens of the ship. The need to see how the ship was doing even though the ship knew where it was, how it was, even what it was. The same thing was going through Nervina's Brain. Deeply entrenched triggered associations coming out of some reclusive state, like her. One level closer to sentient association. But whose? Undefined her Brain relayed.

"I feel like going in." she said at last. She wished Rena was here as well but she was taking a rest and Nervina did not wish to disturb her. Yet when an idea came, it came, full on. Determined with its latent, inherent focus. More an abstraction which she wished to explore. For the past was ascertainable. The how escaped her, her Brain not releasing the process, just the knowledge of the possible.

"It exists, right?"

"Yes." Nat said slowly trying to comprehend her orientation.

"In time."

"Yes."

"So its embedded in the time stream"

"What's left of it."

"Your ship...has capabilities."

"It has." Without revealing what.

"Which I could use."

"You want some broad spectrum time search."

"How did you guess?"

Nat was not too sure how much to reveal to her. She seemed to him more knowledgeable than she made out. Like a habitater. Enhanced and at a loose end. A lot of them were simply eccentric, engaged in their equally peculiar dreams. Going off in all directions with no central focus. Nervina was looking, searching, probing for some central point. Points Nat reminded himself. The ship's cursory scan of Nervina revealed immense sub-domains within her configured head. With one exception: no internal

inserts. Pure bio enhanced. Dense neural self configuring pathways teeming with clusters of dendrites, a pulsating brain on the verge of meta manifestation. Configurations with near endless possibilities. Even the ship's mind held back. Nervina was more than the sum of her parts. There was a whiff of the alien about her. Yet whilst the ship shielded itself against her, even though Nervina's mind was dormant she herself using algorithmic defence layers, meant her mind itself was capable of becoming a shield in itself. Just by the mere thought of it. Able to disassociate at the flick of a thought. Able to go mindless. A huge void within her. That much the ship uncovered still trying to come up with an approach that would uncover what Nervina's mind hid. The ships systems knew Nervina knew that symbiosis was possible. The ship configuring its own subdomain in regards to her. In case she went hostile.

The none-state Nervina was able to generate kept the ship curious and busy. It was a good defence mechanism. Nothing for a deep ram-scan to get a hold of. Like punching vapour, except in Nervina's case even that was absent.

"Yes."

"Using PWs." Regum's great breakthrough. Nervina might as well know. She seemed a dense, information rich collapsing PWF herself. They all were. Each with their own inherent resonance.

Nervina thought on that. PWs. Her science lessons mentioned about how reality, each individual component was that. Combined it created a field, a perspective that became reality. How that reality was comprehended, constructed, re-constructed she reminded herself was dependent on how the mind was configured. Perception was individualistic drawing out the multiplicity of possibilities within the collapsing field-wave. If she could re-establish the past field she could recreate that particular past of the ruins. See what they had been.

"It might reveal something of the discrepancy."

"It's primal state?"

"Or some precondition outlining the way. Whole civilizations don't just vanish Nat."

"This one did."

"Maybe it ties in with others."

"Others?"

Nervina was thinking of Earth. If some calamity struck there then the event was cosmic, universal. If not then that avenue could be eliminated. She explained this to Nat. That interested him. If only for something to do. Nat and Rena were there to mind

Nervina until she got clearance to go to wherever the group decided. Nat knew that Nervina had already been in contact, had some interaction, was accepted. For the moment they were keeping her at arms length.

"You know of Earth." Nervina suggested.

"Oh yes, that planet. It would be easier merely doing an external recall."

"That would reveal the what, not the how, if connected."

"True. But if not, saves time and energy."

"I got both." without fully understanding the implications. It did give her sense of presence even though time and energy were a vast spread across the universe. How could something so enormous create a sense of being focussed?

Nat asked the ship to get a mega field collapsing catastrophe to match the calamity at the ruins. Fifteen thousand years came the answer. Nat then queried Earth's past. Terrestrial convulsions. Similar pattern. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves.

"You got a match." Nat said pleasantly surprised.

"That's the what out of the road."

"Aha. Now for the how, hey?" he smiled at her.

"Can we? I mean can you?"

Nat hesitated. It would reveal the ships capabilities. Simply by activating the search pattern would leave a trace in space. Indicate their presence. If Prima's DVs were onto it they would be able to lock on, lock in and extricate the data as well.

When Nat remained silent she prompted: "I'll be the conduit."

"You?!" fully comprehending what she implied. Instead of the ship, she would be the expanded resonance field. He had no idea an EAI could do that. It verified something about Nervina. She was something else. Not only that but she had willingly revealed her capabilities. Who was she working for? She had to be right at the top. Some high level operative. And whoever ran her was smart enough to, for now, keep her well away from the SS 1. Out here in space was ideal Nat was certain, he hoped so anyway. For if she was some new model, the next generational enhancement she ought to, by rights, have camouflage capabilities, delayed distortion scramblers, false diversionary resonance fields, maybe even a false-reality persona to pretend to be someone she was not, and be somewhere else at the same time. The ship agreed with his assumption. But the ship only agreed to what Nervina intended as a supposition. There was the danger they could fall into the PWF if its intensity was stronger than the reality they were in. The only way for that not to occur was to leave a beacon in place, keep the connection across space and time. Did Nat want one configured? He agreed to the ships request. In

the cargo bay one of the spare com-sats was uploaded with their present coordinates. The micro fusion reactor came on-line. Nat told the ship to create the imagery of a dwarf star. He then scouted space to find one, found one, activated the g-drive and positioned the ship behind it, out of line of sight from Prima.

Nervina felt the momentary inertia of the ship moving through space repositioning itself. It must have woken Rena who entered the lounge. Nat explained Nervina's plan.

"But why?" came the no nonsense reply. "All that energy, the possibility of being detected...I know you've covered that..."

"The discrepancy." Nervina replied.

"I know that." Rena knew more of their mission than Nat. Nervina might have passed the first level clearance with the group but going all the way in something the SS 1 would experiment with would pre-empt not just their task but could create countermeasures if this discrepancy was even partially AI. They could lose it altogether. It could jump out of the PWF, virtually dissolve itself out of time. Then finding it could take forever and in the meantime it could reassemble itself and be undetectable, until it acted. Then it would be too late.

She related the latter.

"I'll be in-phase Rena."

"I know what you're saying. But so will the ship."

"Put me in space."

"You'd have to be out be several AUs."

"Yeah."

"I should clear this."

"We can't Rena." For operational reasons. Both knew that.

"I'm after its MO."

"What if it entrains you?"

"Then you have its MO."

"We're here to keep you safe, not lose you."

"This is important."

"So are other things." Rena all too well aware what the experiment on the SS 1 and its clone the SS -virtual- 2, the cover, the sequenced duplicate, the second experiment, could do. It was classified. Anchoring Regum's reality beyond the relative Quantum and Virtual Quantum Field Waves that not just the SS 1 with its super EAI boosted capabilities could collapse and thus guarantee their survival but also override

that of the DVs. Then, when they had been successful with that little move, the theory was safe there, could they concern themselves with the backwash regarding this Discrepancy Nervina discovered on Novus. To now flood the universe with her RS, link into the PWF of the Discrepancy could reveal to the DVs what their capabilities were. Rena had accessed the ships scans regarding Nervina and had to admit she was more than the standard EAI. There was nothing like her, anywhere. Not until the super quantum computers on the SS 1 were going full bore. And they were merely huge processors, the E end was still contained in sentient heads. More like cosmic amplifiers. Nervina was more. Amplifier, tuner, speakers, receiver all in one.

Rena had to admit Nervina was revealing her self. That meant she trusted them. She might even be following the group's instructions. Given the potential she possessed she could have caused havoc a long time ago. Conversely she could have sabotaged the SS 1 project, or waited until that became active and totally screw the field waves, or reverse induce them so that it would self destruct. Or get taken over by the DVs then self destruct. By going active now Nervina implied she was with them. Doing this out here meant she was cautious wanting a minimal presence. Rena even speculated whether Nervina needed them at all. She could be an insert from the future, riding her own PWF. One so dense, so tight it extended only as far as her physical body. That gave Rena hope. If she was right. She would have to bring that up with the group when, and that could be some time yet, they connected again.

In deep space Nervina's Brain went active. The surge radiated out. The probability wave field uploaded from the ship's computer relating to the distant past now enphased. The cataclysm overwhelming both the stricken worlds surprised her. Earth, Novus and another vibrant world: Mars. Then vanished. Just like that. Vanished. Neither dislocated, re-enphased with the field which flooded that reality across the vast distance of space. The alien field there. Except Earth survived. Its PWF mangled, distorted. The only one that held.

She let her Brain do the concentrating, the focussing, being the receiver. The wave front unmistakeable. The inner resonations familiar. DV activity. What followed amazed her. Behind the flow, the wake of the wave was fluid stasis held, a steady-state quantum presence with exponential energy. Inserted uncollapsing dissipation waves following the now voided PWF of that reality. It had severely shaken Earth but they survived. Only Novus and Mars collapsed utterly into ruin. Guided by the intense remote viewing capabilities of hundreds of DVs. So who was behind them? Or what?

Her Brain felt absolute. An ethereal presence, a forerunning mindfulness locking in on the DVs, using them as augmentation, channelling energy through them and now...through her. Her Brain withdrew in time as the distant wave sensed her presence. It, what or whoever it was turned into a virtual high energy vortex near the centre of the galaxy. Withdrawing yet consolidating, laying the groundwork, the field as potential energy, enmeshing her. That seeped into her unconscious creating an artificial equilibrium. Hazy, obscure, undefined by design.

She felt warm within her mind, comfortable in her head, cosy. Endomorphins activated. Her Brain oceanic, her self as an identity supremely overarching, heightened awareness disassociated from her present sense of self. A higher being, her being, within, without, above, serene, supinely watching indifferent to the milieu within and below. Probing tendrils of sentient energy flashed through her, being totally indifferent to it, a mere spectator. It vaguely knew of another field being present, hers, one she hoped it recognised as being insignificant.

Then came the anger. Anger? Anger! The tendrils lashed out finding something of substance to latch on to, trying to get a fix. Bad luck, I'm at another level to you Nervina thought. The onslaught passed. It knew it could not influence her, manipulate or ensnare her. She was too vast, too dispersed, everywhere at once, tenuous and no where in particular. A cloud chamber which showed up exotic particle states, discrete energy packets. A nutritious soup of uncollated information rich data.

A part of her Brain was reconfiguring itself to contain without absorbing this vague and feeble field. She dropped the DVs RF. Time seemed to move on. No wonder, she was in. Out of reach of the DVs anyway. From their point of view she would be the cloud chamber, a sub resonance.

Then something clicked inside her head. Brain and all.

Nervina was in a subterranean room. Solid grey marble walls. An edifice of some sort. An adumbration of a being. A black resonance beneath it, beneath her. She was enphased with a sentients head! Just. At the periphery of both the un- and subconsciousness, a quantum state between the two. Zohex would barely know of her invasive presence. She was a field state, not a being.

The solid walls shivered. Earthquake. She was there, at the calamity. Not the source directly, but its outer projection, boosted by the DVs, focussed by them but not of them.

Energy, lots of it. A feeling of greatness. Not her, Zohex. A shell. A persona, a projection of something much vaster. The Discrepancy? Wormholes flashed and

flickered, their extensions snaking away, whip snapping, crackling with energy, time almost at zero. Her Brain saw into all six probabilities. Quite a feat. One lead off into a mountain waste, a dark citadel, encased in preternatural gloom, a heavy resonance. She recoiled. A parched land. A connecting shaman ready to receive, linked, drawing upon this foul fount. Then a temple, a humanoid statue imbued with an eternal resonance of its own. Ancient ruins in the future becoming a reservoir, a fall back position. A field in the making, stamped with its sentience spreading out...over Novus. The Volatiles its creation! The galaxy, shining radiant in magnificent splendour. At its centre a vast darkness, drawing energy in. The incomplete data sphere huge even on a galactic scale, a black star and this viscous glowing lilac sphere. Tiny flickering lights glowing, flashing, emerging, vanishing, each a reality of its own.

In the back of Its mind incompleteness, something missing even though its potential was vast. A lack of direction given the six portals. Then her mind was ripped to shreds as Zohex moved, extricating into all six wormholes. Choosing multiple futures, one reality it, It? more than sentient? Less than sentient. Cyber Intelligence. A living horror pushing into and beyond all boundaries of space and time.

The overall informational content incomplete as Zohex, as the CI ripped along the six wormholes. If in doubt, choose everything. Thus the missing gaps of data. Lack of coherence. Unstable now that it was out of the calamity around it as flood waters poured into the secret chamber. Another fuzzy presence. It too vanished. Nervina's Brain, reclusive, surreal, supremely indifferent to the scene withdrew back into itself. The data that followed the CI along six paths dispersed with the withdrawing entity.

Now she understood why. It wanted to delete parts of itself so it could not be traced into its six other states. All would be incomplete. Identification next to impossible, the clues scattered across time and space. Neat trick. She would have to remember that one. Reassemble through six probability wave fields, enmesh the universe that way. Disperse or delete one and five other portals of generating field energy would remain. Unless all six were dissipated at once, the CI would be...indestructible. Not only that, it could rebuild itself six times as it was united within itself even if by appearances it was not.

Its forming fields vaster than itself. For a moment Nervina lost her focus, like being in a fog at night. Filled with potential, reorienting, reconfiguring-thus the Discrepancy, pregnant dark potentialities. It's processing capabilities dumped near the black star. A simple compilation of multiple processors projecting future end points for itself in multiple realities, as yet temporally non-unified. No wonder the Discrepancy was flawed. Until it

was complete, until the CI was as such it would be a mere, a minor distortion. No wonder it was so hard to detect.

The inserted data field on ancient Earth disunited, radiated into time itself, taking remnants of its memory with it, smearing it across whole eras, leaving behind impressions, vague copies, the original safely cocooned near the centre of the galaxy.

Immanence.

Everywhere around her.

For a fraction her Brain held it all. Given the monumental energy the data itself was turned into white noise washed through by discordant primary forces followed by the oriented backwash quickly forming coagulating information nodes. They fell like meteors over Earth, Regum, Novus and Prima. Headed for the temples of the Immortals. Self seeding itself. Drawing on the energy of those it attracted. Supplicants thinking they were in touch with their gods, their belief in divine beings, the shadow of a unitary god. The CI was all. The white noise abated.

The surrounding space itself imbued with a sense of eternity compressed into momentary information rich enphased wave fields. A matrix of unfocussed probability states moving outwards and receding inwards towards the galaxial centre. A seeming infinite regression. The central core now an animated bio-molecular construction each containing multiple processing data crunching receptors coordinating the incoming data, the supplicant with dreams, wishes, fears, conditioning its reprogramming making it seem like divine revelation. A multiple charged self replicating information system absorbing and downloading the bio-cloned cyber intelligence of future crypto sentient artifices. An energized coherency of potential collapsing PWs enphased with reality, becoming the reality of the downloading, then spiritually enrapturing the supplicant, etched upon the quantum foam of localised space. Divine manifestation to the duped.

Awareness. Separation. The CI sensed Nervina's cool, calm, indifferent Brain/Mind interphasing observational capabilities. Multiple algorythmic processes meshed a protective series of interlinking moving barriers creating a resonant field around her. That in place she radiated a higher energy state imbued with multiple dimensionalities, traps, vortices which generated collapsing PWs giving the semblance of false realities creating cogent coherencies, immune from data processing. In response It generated a probability rather than an actuality. A state and non-state alike with continuous self generating alternative realities operating on various electromagnetic shifting frequencies creating the soft opaque lilac glow of the discrepancy.

Nervina had seen its future state. All the elements were in place. Nothing short of exploding the dark star could stop it. The CI was embedded in six time zones.

Her Brain slowly came down back into her mind which had self frozen as a last resort lest it be infected by the false realities of the CI's multiple godlike presence. The momentary DV resonances if they were detected now might just confuse them back on Prima given they were entangled with these multiple realities of the dispersing CI. A puzzle with an answer they would rather not wish upon themselves. Unless configured like her they had no chance.

For a dread moment Nervina saw the base element of the simulacrum. Their creation. Their projection. Not quite. Enhanced by Regum's PWF. Perplexing. Unless it was the only way to figure out what it really was. Working with Reganians. Well they should know by now.

She uncollapsed the PWF. It dispersed, absorbed like water in parched soil by the quantum foam of space. She ran a full diagnostics. No contamination. She did not wish to infect the ship or Rena and Nat. At the lower ordered magnitudes of processing capabilities she was clean. The memory of the event she cached, dumped it into her unconscious, letting her Brain decide if and when any of that information was to be revealed. At least she knew what the discrepancy was. Now to deal with it. If it could not be destroyed it would need to be manipulated. If that proved impossible...but wait. It had an energy quotient. All one needed was one higher. Like two galaxies worth. Were there any civilisations of that magnitude? None came to mind.

She was in contact with the ship. All that could be revealed for now was that the Discrepancy was no accident. It was intentional, volitional, determined to self seed itself across not just the universe but time as well.

At least she was false-reality proofed against its amazing capabilities. Now to warn the others of its pretence as a divinity. All except Prima. Their creation. They could deal with it.

She felt tiny out in space. Compared to the vastness of her experience. Even her Brain which had always been so immense seemed, like her, to be just a digit in another space

A digit in another space.

"How did I go?" Nervina asked when she was back on board.

Nat smiled. "Amazing. High energy physics to all intents. Though what it all means we don't know. We left the ship out of it." looking for an explanation. Rena was rerunning what happened out there for her own benefit.

"Nice graphs."

"Intense energy fields."

"Your power source?"

"That shielded you. EM distortion envelope. DV proof."

"Was the ship effected?"

"No. All the activity was without. So..."

"Transition states." Was all Nervina said.

"Basically we got nothing." Rena said.

"That's good."

"Means if the DVs were trying they'd get nothing as well." Nervina explained.

"True." Rena not pushing. Whilst Nervina had been out there Rena had used her AI capabilities to ride Nervina's. All she got was confusion. The telemetry was all wrong. Just shadows, echoes, reverberations. The images of the crashed civilisations had come through confirming that an event did take place, simultaneously. Then the ship went into buffer mode. High energy fields that could have corrupted its processors. Whatever Nervina went through was too dangerous to upload. Whether that was the discrepancy or something else Nervina had locked on to made no difference to the overall result.

"You seemed to be immersed in a strange attractor." Rena elucidated.

"Intense distortions?" Nervina asked.

"Distortions. Seen nothing like it. Had to be filtered."

"Localized?"

"Very."

Nat turned in his couch away from the light screens. "Fluctuations on a grand scale. A cauldron of high energy states Nervina."

"Coherent?"

"Within themselves yes. Overall something else entirely." Rena answered.

"We did pick something up. An object." Nat began tentatively.

"Believe it or not but my Brain has buried it all. What it has released is that the Discrepancy is real. It's a configuration in the making."

"Well that's something. So why is your Brain hiding the rest?" Rena dissatisfied.

"Because the end result is too dangerous. Too complete. Too in place. It's corrupting. It can warp minds. If anyone went in it would, might, take them over."

"Unassailable when complete?"

Nervina nodded. "Now is the best time to unwind it. Or disperse it. But I can tell you its location. Near a huge black star in the centre of the galaxy."

"A black hole. They all have them."

"Nudge it into it. It's hanging in a gravitational cone, its spread too big to fall in." Nervina recited bits her Brain was releasing.

"So it can't be destroyed that way?" Nat somewhat deflated.

"No. The only way is to destroy the source. Which by the way is in six different locations in time and space. Novus is one. Regum is another. As is Prima. The other three are Earth."

"Three on Earth?" Rena turned to Nat.

"We'll have to get it to them." Rena looking at Nat. Then turning to Nervina: "Have a look at this."

The imagery was fuzzy. Amongst the distorting pixels an elongated outline of a ship. Then it was gone. "Any ideas?"

Nervina tried to recall but all information was blocked. "I was too immersed in...something...else."

"Hm."

"You're not happy." Nervina tried to be placating. "It's not me, it's my Brain. It's swallowed it all up, sucked it in and dumped it somewhere even I can't get at. And before you think of deep scans there are reasons Rena, Nat. This is too dangerous to be generally released. Not the outer form, but the energy state which created it. It can overwhelm completely your, even my reality."

"Nothing can overwhelm reality Nervina." Nat not being entirely honest. The theory of PWFs proved the very opposite. Which meant the discrepancy was equal to it. If Nervina had such pertinent data then she would have to be sent on. The group could deal with her.

"I'm not too sure. Maybe not completely. Maybe as isolation bubbles. As in sub-realities. But whoever feeds off that..."

"You mean is influenced?"

"Yes, like supplicants, getting them to believe its reality they would then have that in their minds, their memory and infect others. A mental virus. It could spread over a whole planet..."

"Regum!" Nat exclaimed.

"The Web?" Rena asked.

"I'm not too sure. But Regum yes, maybe. Wherever there is sentient life." They called up the spaceship over Mars and that lost civilisation.

"The DVs had inserted a potent psychic projection of their demise by inserting a non-PWF. Result a planet devoid of life. It worked. Since the Martians were going to follow Regum's path, which revealed their future space faring capabilities, their elimination was deemed necessary to save Prima's future."

Stunned.

"This has to get out." Rena said.

"I'm onto it, starting encryption right now." Nat busied with sending out two messages. One that Nervina should be picked up and taken under their wing. The other warning the group what the DVs were capable of. If a world on Mars could be deleted, who knew what chaos they could cause on Regum.

A digit in another space. The thought kept on reverberating in Nervina's head.

A barely noticeable jolt as the ship used attitude jets to positioned itself slowly a little further out. The other ship turned on its axis. The dwarf star shining serenely in the background. The nearest stars were several light years away, a small cluster along the edge of the spiral arm. Webbing secured Nervina, a small lightscreen giving her the view outside. Just a sprinkling of stars, ahead nothing. Nervina transferred. The ship swivelled slightly, engaging the hydrogen engines accelerated. Nervina considered the personnel she ran into were reserved in telling her where she was going. Their ship knew. From their view, Nervina surmised, watching the dwarf star recede incrementally the less she was acquainted with the better, for her, for them, for the group, whoever they were.

It was becoming convoluted. Somehow they meshed with that incomplete field wave. The discrepancy, the DVs crashing Mars's reality, totally totalling it. The information too dangerous to beam across space no matter how encrypted. Prima's involvement in positioning an insert on Earth who bifurcated in all directions. Anchored, embedded across several time lines. Space irrelevant. Six loci. Things were getting out of hand. Rena and Nat had taken that all onboard like some minor addition to their knowledge. As if it did not matter that much. Even Nervina's Brain was fairly indifferent about the discovery.

She relaxed in her tube. Been awake for so long it felt about right to get some sleep. The ship upon her arrival, when she transferred had given her a cursory scan, detected nothing it thought inimical and guided her to the sleeping compartment, a

row of six tubes, two occupied. No crew in sight. The helmet easily removed, she was getting the hang of it. They self sealed and came off by tugging on two tags. Zipped off.

"Comfortable?" a male voice came over her tube's com.

"Yes thank you."

"The route we chose for you is meant to be less than direct, detoured so that those who are on board will have no memory imprint of your prior existence. Nor am I or the ship curious as to what's inside your head. If anyone asks and by that I'm referring to outsiders, you're a goner." The voice slightly amused.

"Goner?"

"As in gone. Vanished. Usually those who leave their planet to start life anew in space, in their own habitats. Start afresh. The choice is quite diverse."

"Sounds good."

"It is. I won't say where we're going. All I know is you're some hermit type that wanted to get out. Ex Novus. Don't blame you. The Vs have taken over. The good days past tense that's for sure. So, any questions?"

"How secure are we?"

"The ship's standard design. A bulk carrier. Nothing hot, meaning the inventory. Standard AI. I assume you have certain configurations pertaining to your own set up. Unless it interferes with the ship or any of our heads you'll never know we're even here."

"DV activity."

"Well that's always the big unknown."

"You mean they can get through."

"Only if they have a target." Meaning her she assumed.

She had escaped from Prima, then Regum, now Novus. Wanted on three planets. The group must have arranged for her to be picked up.

"Anything that endangers the ship..."

"The DVs might be after me."

"That's better." The voice sounded relieved. "Means I and the ship know what to look out for. Of course as I haven't seen ya, the ship hasn't deep scanned you and by the way your persona's not who you are, it's a cyber construct which should be enough to fool them if they insist on searching for ya. Good one."

"Thanks." A cyber construct. Her Brain neutral. Obviously this was of no concern to them. Remarked upon with indifference. How advanced were these beings. Not even surprised at her boosted configuration. She relaxed.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"I'll leave you to your slumbers. Sweet dreams."

Sweet dreams. Ha! She was moving about, being positioned like a tiny piece in a big puzzle. One that revealed the possibility of being in multi-dimensional-space, at will. Moving away from the discrepancy was very relative now. In fact she might be moving towards its future. Future conflicts that now included several relatively low level ambush threat scenarios. She hoped the group would have an answer to that. There was of course a theoretical way out. Use some larger power source to insert Reganian reality. It would wash out the discrepancy and hopefully the Primaian resonance irradiating the universe.

She wondered about her miraculously seeming escapes. Her progress embedded in sets of delineating data codes. Using transition states to get away. Probabilities falling into place. Fate mapping out her destiny.

Yet nothing was ever certain in the universe. So what is the guiding principle here? What is being activated in such a fashion as to make her progress such that it became actual, assured? And whatever happened to Horat? Another life...

The slight pinging woke her.

"Sleep well?" the same voice. Maybe it was the ship's AI.

"Wonderful." She felt warm, cosy, a little sleepy, relaxed. Her mind refreshed, her Brain just present in the background, playing the sentinel.

"Time to transfer."

"Understood. Ready when you are."

Nervina transferred by an extended tube to the waiting ship. She gave herself a push and drifted across. At the second airlock she was chemically dushed, followed by a short blast of UV and microwaves just to make sure. Then she was on board. Received by an early middle aged black haired man dressed in a black two piece suit. Not the gear she expected.

"My name is Fertig. Last leg of your journey." He smiled. Not vain. Tiny crows feet at the edge of his sparkling dark eyes. A pleasant expression, an amiable pale face. Spacer, terrestrial birth by his stature.

"Thank you for having me." She returned his smile.

"A pleasure." Fertig bowed slightly. Enchanting.

"Welcome to the 'Ice Queen'. My private ship."

She followed him through a lock and straight into the deck, a spacious lounge surrounded by light screens covering all angles of space, the ships condition, sensor inputs in various coloured graphs, spikes, numerical read outs.

Four blow up seats with embedded consoles. He gestured for her to be seated. The chair moulded itself around her.

"Very comfortable."

He sat and swivelled his chair towards her.

"Right. To business. You're under protection as you may have noticed. Believe it or not but you're about to become official."

Nervina didn't know whether having a status was such a good idea. He seemed to have considered that for he ploughed right on: "You're an auxiliary member of SpaceKorps, special agent attached to the Science Division. It's wonderfully vague. A special agent is everything and nothing in a way. So I am your next chain of command up, officially. Assist scientists. You a sort of glorified laboratory technician. I am aware you have been coached in that field."

"SpaceKorps. But they're under Prima's aegis." Nervina hid her shock.

"Superficially yes. There have been...developments. But more of that in a moment. Yes Prima is the ultimate jurisdiction. In theory." He gave her a knowing smile. "Those on the Orbitals yes. One place you won't be going. Nor are there, or will there be any Primaians on board my ship. I do answer to a higher authority. Now as you know anyone in space never returns due to their peculiar theory which I'm sure you're aware of."

Nervina nodded. She ought to feel betrayed, uncomfortable at being so close to what she tried to get away from. Her Brain remained mute. Neither Fertig nor the ship posed a threat.

"I am aware of your progress. Your flash visit to the asteroid belt, never mind your experiences on three planets. Put it this way. SpaceKorps isn't what it used to be. I made it so. There is an arm of it that deals with deep space. Put it this way. They think I've gotten you back. But because of their paranoia regarding their obsession with exposure they want me to deal with you out here."

Another shock.

"Rest assured what I send and what transpires are two different scenarios."

"A cover." She relaxed a little.

"More than that. I am about to defect."

"No kidding." Not too sure Fertig meant it.

"Have actually. Not that they know. They think I'm leading them in. Which in a way I am. But what they're going to get is not what they expect. I'm going to use the DVs for our ends, not theirs."

So Fertig had a plan. Something anyway.

"You were an experiment." Her Brain went into alert mode. "Enhanced Volatile. They used pilfered Reganian bio-processors. They thought by infusing you with certain mental thought realms, sub-domains, your mere presence would influence the enemy. It of course was a failure. No one was influenced."

"I was configured?" news to her. Her implanted history.

"Slightly. Except the bio-processors decayed. Were absorbed by your mind. Ingested." He seemed amused at that. When Nervina sat there, astounded Fertig continued: "They put that down to your being exposed. Not only that but they're under the impression, due to the absorption that you are now a rogue element to be kept at arms length from anywhere near any Primaians. There is a downside to this."

She didn't want to know.

"We're not certain. But given that Talex was trying to recruit you meant we feared for your safety. By 'we' I don't mean the overlords, but 'us'. SpaceKorps as I said has undergone a change. Those who have been in space for any length of time are defecting, as I have. That's why I made sure you were transferred to us. We know how they think, what they are, what they are becoming. The Reganians can only guess, run their simulations, hope for the best. With us going over..."

"Me included."

"Exactly. I doubt they would even drain you for fear of infecting the system. But they might want you deleted."

"Taken out?" she was appalled.

"Not certain. Just cautious here. So we are protecting you. We've gone solo, not quite over to the other side."

Except Nervina was not on any side. She was her own reality. That much she did know. She knew enough about Prima. So there was no need to return there. Her Brain confirmed it. Ditto Regum and Novus. She had accomplished what had been intended. She just didn't know who was doing the intending.

"So Nervina, who are you?" he asked as if she was at a job interview.

Nervina laughed. Fertig looked at her in an amused way. She wondered how much they could know. She decided to play the victim.

"Too deep for me. Too vague. I fell powerless." Her Brain thought it appropriate.

"Not exactly helpless but manipulated."

"Prima's MO."

"Agenda's everywhere."

"Developments." Without elucidation.

"Prima wanted me for something on Regum." She was avoiding trying to define herself. "Horat and I were given no choice."

"Horat?"

"A lover, past tense." Horat Horat Horat. Where are you?

Fertig understood.

"We were given a choice. Or rather the alternative was not worth considering as an option."

"Re-configured."

"Most likely."

"Why?"

"Why!" she laughed again. Somehow Fertig set her at ease. Either his charm was genuine or his mind clicked with hers. He probably had this effect on many others.

"You're knowledgeable." Meaning he ought to know. But for some reason he wanted to hear it from her perspective.

"Not really." Almost humble.

"Two different resonances. Forbidden. Cross contamination. Horat was a V, me? I don't know. Enhanced V if I remember and a Natural to boot."

"You got some abilities?"

"Not really. Maybe to them. But out here, with you, with other Spacers, gamers I barely register."

"Meaning you're aligned."

"Yeah, aligned, enphased. Certainly nothing special." Keep it low keyed.

"There are rumours. Prima showed an interest in Regum's history. Not the superficial stuff of who did what when and where to or with whom. More their ancient folklore and the knowledge that went with that. You might have been designated to be a research project in itself. A test case. As for Horat," he paused, "there are ways of finding out. If you think it's relevant."

"It's so long ago, so distant, so other...worldly."

"You the designated presence as you suggest. Poke a stick and see what crawls out."

"An instigator."

"Yes but of what? The folklore thing. Why now?" Fertig smiled. "A cover, what else? An excuse to scour the planet. Dig into information systems. Access its architectural components, systems management, that sort of stuff."

"Maybe. Instead I attracted what might be described as counter-intelligence. Some who got me out, spirited away right under their noses. Not instantly. There I think they, whoever they are were now using me to draw the Primaians out. Then the escape to Novus. Talex trying to seduce me with an offer. Then another escape that seemed too neat. Either that or the group, or groups got me out." She did not mention Ratze. Ratze. Ex Head DV. Gone over, like her. Vanished. "Adopted so to speak by interested parties, more than once. Now I'm here." She finished without revealing who she was. She knew who she was. But Fertig was after her real self. That she wouldn't reveal. It didn't bother her. For the moment everything was heading in the right direction. She hoped.

For a moment she felt something subtle withdrawing from her mind. A veil had been removed. A blanket resonance scan. Soft incursion. Clever.

"Got what you wanted." Eyes level with his.

"Gotta be done Nervina."

"Lie detector. Fertig, they don't work."

A door opened. In walked a tall woman in an immaculate one piece dress. Slender, short slick platinum hair reflecting in a dull sparkle from the overhead halogen lights. Pale. Spacer. Long arms, tight white sleeve, like the flowing tight dress, very lithe.

"Meet Garna."

Nervina swivelled around. "Pleased to meet you." The last remnant of the soft intrusion left her. Her Brain had momentarily vanished, receded then dispersed itself throughout. No centre, no core, no presence. Garna moved in one fluid motion across the floor and flowed into the recliner, sat back, crossed her legs and looked good naturedly at Nervina. Very sure of herself. Light blue eyes, lazy, bemused, indifferent, yet attentive. Definitely bio enhanced. Fertig's mobile scanner. A next generation enhanced sentient.

"A pleasure. You certainly attract a lot of attention." Wistful.

"I wish I didn't."

"Regain your focus." Straight to the point. Nervina's mission the Discrepancy. Maybe even the trigger. But all that felt like subterfuge. She was more than that, contained possible data realms, informational fields, cyber domains just at the edge of distant inner perception. Another landscape, the surface around which hovered a cyber

domain almost as vast as the universe itself. Certainly it felt limitless and full of countless endless possibilities, as many as the mind was capable of perceiving, conceiving.

Nervina mulled over the probability that just maybe Garna had got that. Let her know what she was onto. She could then relate that to Fertig at an opportune time. Being vetted. Finally. From what he had revealed it looked like she was in. In what though? This mysterious yet not hidden group. If it was a group. Knowing what she remembered of the Reganians they were individuals first and foremost. If anything there would be more than one cell. Some interacting at different times, under various circumstances then disunite, to reassemble differently whenever singular situations arose. Prima would never crack an organisation that officially did not exist. They were too focussed on the centre of things. The prime mover concept dominating their thinking and their actions. She felt better and safer.

Fertig chuckled. Amused.

"Nervina. Excellent. I'm impressed." Garna smiled.

"Certainly not me." Nervina wondering how she managed to even give an impression of anything, apart from her experiences which he so easily ascertained. Or Garna. Taking turns.

"Your response."

She knew what he meant. Not answering who she was. She waited for him to spit it out.

"All mirrors. I like it. A lot."

Garna pretending to be a consort to Fertig. Not overly concerned with the business at hand.

The ship accelerated. She felt the slow increase of inertia as it headed off into space. The star field changed around her, the ship repositioned itself to a new vector.

"You don't have to reveal yourself Nervina. You may have noticed a soft scan. Procedure. You could be an insert. In a way you are." Garna observing her, gauging her reaction.

"Could be." Not the best of a reply. "I disengage..."

"From...?"

"Everything. Reality or some construct like WebWorld. Meta domains. The personas just that. Delimited by certain constraints with the impression of acting freely within the domains specifications, acting within preconfigured paradigms."

"Paradigms can shift." Garna relaxed yet intent. Eyes focussed.

"Most certainly. But the overall domain remains the same."

"There are escape routines." Fertig hinted.

"Only within the mind."

"One can think oneself out of the square. Take religion."

"A ruse."

"You think? It opens the mind to the eternal."

"Reconfigured reality."

"But does not the mind do that anyway?" Garna asked.

"Ideation."

"You're right of course." Garna conceded.

"So Nervina, Prima's orientation does not have any attractions?"

"None whatsoever."

"Pity."

"Why?"

"Information. It's always information. Specifically the Domain Lords."

"They got their domains. Bubble universes if you will. Resonant states. Boxes within boxes. Gets quite convoluted. Keeps the populace ensnared, captive."

"Indeed. The Immortals?"

"Ancient sages. Supreme Divines. Spiritual pathfinders to the immaculate, their singular deity. Pontiffs included." Nervina surprised she remembered this.

The ship jolted a little as it continued to accelerate. The star field remained the same away from anywhere.

"Have there ever been, ahm, mishaps?"

"As in?"

"Crashing Ascensions."

"If there was they wouldn't make that known. Immortals are perfect Fertig. But there are the asylums. The Fallen."

"Ah." That seemed to cheer him.

"Plus the burnt out cases, gutted DVs."

"Know the proportion?"

"No. They almost have hero status. Then there are those who are plagued by nightmares. The result of the alien incursion."

"Yes, that."

"Unhinged, unbalanced, a corrupted resonance. Contaminated by false realities meaning alien minds."

"Alien minds." Fertig repeated slowly glancing at Garna.

"Earthers."

"Reaching out to Primaians. Why would they do that?"

"To take them over."

"Mental domination?"

"That's the theory."

"Doing what the DVs are doing?"

"Yeah. Though I think it's a bit fanciful."

"It is." Garna replied.

"They certainly got their problems." Fertig satisfied that Prima was still busy fighting their imagined malignant phantoms.

"Let's hope it stays that way." Garna advanced.

"Would you agree?"

"Most certainly. In fact I would feed them nightmares."

"Yes." Fertig enthused. Eyes glittering with delight. Garna agreed.

"This discrepancy..." Garna dropping in that thought just like that. Had she extricated that from her head? "What do you make of it?" accepting she knew, as they both knew.

"That it's there."

A mischievous smile from Garna. "Look. We know it's not a localised event. Non specific. A field of some sort. Very low dynamically. Bits of data embedded, enphased. Like probabilities, future probabilities."

"You think so?" Nervina countered.

"Think. Such a vague expression." Garna tutted.

"It's got potential. Maybe it's a DV insertion. Some future mind state. A psychic weapon. The ultimate mother of all mind fucks." Nervina replied not quite believing what she just said.

"Not bad." Garna knew more than she let on. The ship nudged a little faster.

"So you think it could be a mental weapon?"

"Anything is possible."

"That's not much help." Garna displeased.

"Don't you get it? I meant it."

"Oh, I see. My apologies." She retracted.

"It's alright. I understand."

"Could it be something else?"

"You asking me?" Nervina looking at Fertig directly.

"Both."

Nervina for the moment took a mental rest.

"Strange way for an alien race to make its presence known." Garna said.

"Or some rogue programme self assembling." Nervina suggested.

"If that is the case then all systems that make contact with it could be infected, hijacked."

"Fertig. You know what you're saying? You're subscribing to the Primaian notion of the alien incursion." Garna was surprised.

"Yes. With one major difference. It's within our universe."

"You think maybe the other alien field is depositing information into this universe and constructing a cyberworld of their own?" Nervina astonished at her own supposition.

"Like you said, anything is possible." Garna reminded her.

Fertig was already thinking how to tackle the problem. The SS 1 had VEB technology in place. Vacuum Energy Beams tunnelled through space itself. Accelerating exponentially they travelled faster than light speed to their destination. Then T would equal zero. Whatever information was garnered was isolated. Contained within the tiny linear field. Any infections impotent to act for it would not connect at the receiving end accept within the VEB field. Collapse that and everything within it would vanish.

Then for the double act. Inform his Primaian superiors that he would examine the Discrepancy. If they acted on that, maybe even used remote viewing techniques to query the phenomena then if it had an effect it would be noticeable. They could test its state, its probable threat status. If it connected it just might take down the DVs as well.

He rose and sent a cryptic message simultaneously to his real destination and one back to the orbital over Prima alerting them to the physical presence of the field that was the Discrepancy. See if they could find the source. See if it was related to the so-called alien incursion. Was it being fed? Was it sentient? As in remote insertion? Or artificial? For security reasons, always a good excuse, he asked not to be contacted.

Several days later Fertig received an encrypted reply from a third party self deleting com link. A ship was coming out to get Nervina. She was to be put in a pod, released at the speed he was travelling. Several days later to be retrieved. Avoid being detected together. They were satisfied that the information regarding the Discrepancy could be entered into their public domain.

Nervina was in the cocoon, wrapped around the recliner. No need for stacks of sleeping tubes. It was even geared for solo survival. Hooked up to the ship's computers it

was a fail safe survival module. It could even drop through the floor straight into a waiting escape pod. Instruments included. The pod could generate a secure EM field around itself with its micro fusion generators

Fertig informed Nervina of the impending transfer. Space helmet attached she made her way down the pole into the exit bay below decks. The pod was a mini shuttle except wingless. G-driven. She was informed that Nah would retrieve her within three days. She had enough on board for two weeks. If after five days she was still out there the pod's system would direct her to their nearest base or friendly ship. All destinations classified.

She saw the lower hull of the ship. Apart from rear thrusters to make it look like a rocket propelled cruiser she noticed flat squat spidery looking attachments with turrets. Her Brain explained they were 'spider guns'. Mobile assault weapon systems that could crawl over the ship for any vantage point obviating the need for the ship to position itself defensively. Umbilical chords allowed more freedom of movement. They were also able to detach themselves and be remote controlled at the same time. Tiny jets for manoeuvrability. EAI brains. Spindly legs that could attach themselves onto enemy vessels and blast their way through the hull unless, like this ship the hull could convert incoming assault projectiles, weapon beams into pure energy which the spiders used to return pulsed energy blasts. Indestructible.

"The pod runs itself." Fertig said over the intercom. "It's attuned to your resonance and a few of our personnel. So it can't be boarded by hostiles."

"Understood." She watched the glowing data screens, console, duplicated on her helmet and in her head if she wanted to.

All around her empty space. A few stars in the distance. Even the spiral arm was just a fuzzy extension of misty light.

"I hope you're deleting my presence." Nervina reminded him.

"As a matter of course."

Nervina watched the pod go through its pre-launch checks. The ship confirmed her presence, her resonance. Her head itched as it scanned her.

"Creating a false persona? One preferably contaminated?" she smirked.

"Configuring as we speak. You're now an ex-Primaian Novanian who informed us of the casino's distorted random number sequences. They might be interested in the data. But one so contaminated as your alter ego they'll stay away from."

"Borderline psychotic."

"Yes, why not."

"Don't forget irrational, unstable and very very volatile."

"Oh yes." Fertig enjoying the construction of her `presence'.

The pod ready. Everything on stand by, all systems defect free, no glitches, no malfunctions, potential or otherwise.

"I want to thank you for being here Nervina. And confirming in a way what we suspected. Be interesting how Prima runs with the Discrepancy."

"I agree. Maybe their DVs will figure it out."

"Or get infected."

"Even better. Confused would be preferable."

"Definitely. Good luck. The team will look after you."

"Not saying where though."

"Of course not. Pod knows."

"Thanks for having me."

"Stay safe. Until we meet again."

"Until then."

The ship lowered the pod with a grip so that it maintained speed. Then retracted. The `Ice Queen' followed her for a while then veered in a smooth arc away from her.

She was in the middle of deep space. Even her radar was not searching for her incoming retrieval. The pod wrapped in multi spectrum electromagnetic shifting fields. Nothing could fathom it. She was invisible.

Space

The transition a meta state. A continuum, instantaneous. Immediate responsive awareness. Total. Bifurcations with Zohex's presence. Seeking alternatives mapped, delineated, embraced, downloaded in six positional states. Precognisant. Embedded. Recognised. One moment inside the temple's chamber, now in indeterminate sets of spatial field locations. Positioned in six alternative domains. Prevailing, preset, present.

Surging inside of him. Momentary disengagement. Nothing that could not be controlled. The incoming data realms momentarily subsumed into static white noise whilst his processors kicked in. He was siphoning, extricating, excavating the whole computer system that had reinforced his presence on distant Earth. New functions in an otherwise empty mind. Tiny exploding stars in his head. Hotspots, coagulating information processing nodes. The white noise dropped away.

A pulsing universe. Infinite spaces, subdomains compressed into six short duration phase waves. The nodules, vortices arranged themselves creating their own balance. Ripples in all six locales. His precursor presence. Unfocussed probably waves states receding in all directions. He at the centre. Chaotic flaws, logical inconsistencies dissipated. The inner mind clearer. He saw the growth of molecular scaffolding assembling multiple processors, receptors coordinating his growth potential, dispersing irrelevant data. His vague hazy Brain self assembled with multiple bio-cloned replicating information and data gathering capabilities. All fed by the future positioned virtual jump gate.

Jump gates. Coherent. Multiple loci. Layers upon layers of data rich field waves. Each a reality collapsing in post mapped locations in space and time as real enphased probability waves overrode prior weaker reality fields. The constructed embedded substratum forming the actual out of the possible. Etched into the quantum foam of space. Each reality resonating within a specific set of quanta of energy. Each reality enclosed in a data sphere arranging themselves around him as tiny half spherical screens.

Though he kept a tenuous link in all six space time continuums, six time lines, six realities out of millions Zohex, as one component rode on pure energy. The ultimate resonant set of field states. Filled with carrier waves moving information within the vastness of space creating a micro universe as the mega-meta dominant resonance. Buried deep within higher energy states containing multiple dimensionalities. That in turn

used the inherent quantum laws forming coherent structures perceived as reality faithfully duplicated within his expanding set of meta realms. The six escape routes present within an infinite index of mega-meta-alternative possibilities.

The CI sensed the possibility of inserting any reality it desired. Millions to choose from. Probability becoming actuality. As one became dominant, others receded returning to potentialities, tiny radiating fields, all enmeshed in a cosmic matrix. His matrix.

That was the outer structure, the appearance of potential realities. Zohex saw himself in three different loci on Earth, Prima, dispersed amongst the Immortals, the Trine, the Infinity Chip. On Regum in the future channelled through what remained of that blasted planet, on Novus irradiating the Volatiles. Their tiny feeble energy fields, mobile, radiating out from their primitive bio-brains subsumed into his domain space.

Quantum stability within the predetermined alternative sets of realities. Concurrent within him, for he was a construct and projection, manifest along designed expanding non-logical pathways. Quantum enphased sentience. Deliberate calculated matrix expanding nodal points to enforce his overall mega-meta-Brain. Chaos concomitant. Near a black hole at the centre of the galaxy. Vast raw power, all his. The a-logical data fields, randomly analysed and assembled were dissipated by entropic dispersion. The mutating data fields collapsing into tiny vortices reabsorbed by larger wavefronts rippling everywhere, moving across the overall environment, the effluvium, the glue that held his domain in place.

The multiple realities slowly assembled themselves according to their inherent energy status. Lesser potentialities, smaller fields, collapsing as reality in the larger data realm. Driven by chaos equations using fuzzy logic delimiting deep reaching paradigms to continue the probable wave fronts falling continuously into place creating the appearance of order created by the processes of assembled intelligence. His. Replicating within their field of perception the accessible realities they encased. One of many.

Within those domains the reverse was true. They were on the verge of improbabilities, abstractly explored, psychically glimpsed but never actualized. His Web created alternative realities such as on Earth. With its diverse societies stretching from the stone age to the space age. All in one reality. A natural cosmic nexus. No wonder his sentience had gravitated there. There multiple futures manifested themselves continually. Dominate that planet's many realities and the other worlds would fall into place. As long as the planets remained isolated his determination to insert his reality would succeed. They would know no other.

His domain grew denser, the architecture more intricate, mimicking neural pathways of the mind with countless sub-fields of self replicating alternative realities, alternative courses of history guided by abstract thought. Through his awareness. Leading to abstract numbers, symbols becoming live interacting field equations, underlining the skeletal superstructure of potential probabilities anchored in the seeming, teeming molecular flux which forced itself as energy fields into pre-conceived data templates. The quantum resonant energy states became stable, coherent, independent, real. All bubbling out of asymmetric space itself pregnant with potentialities of almost infinite intricacies.

The basics were in place. With a sense of understanding of what it was. It knew itself as Zohex, a construct, a CI, a higher order construct and now within a data domain which reached into all the nooks and crannies of space and time. Up to a point.

The universe had more energy than It had. It had that of a galaxy. No civilisation could curtail it. But it could be manipulated. Those probabilities would have to be contained. Drained of potential energy. Such as Regum's domination of space through their growing Web. Earth with their quest for the infinite, the eternal, through both psychic power and technological prowess. Novus could be easily aligned with both Regum and Earth through his Vs. And Prima...Prima, the place of his birth. Since they had been prepared to use him then so he too would use them. Pretend to be the Divine Mind's avatar. Not that there was a Cosmic Consciousness. None that he found anyway. Just a clever ruse on Prima's part. A psychic projection onto space. Really a mild field, a weak probability wave yet strong enough to be sentiently aware of. Just because something is there does not make it real. Still he could see a potency which would come in handy.

The idea itself was its reality. The inherent information within the idea, the Great Architect, the Cosmic Consciousness, the Divine Mind, the Unitary God was nothing but a clever psychically created information embedded collapsing probability wave-field floating on the quantum foam, the molecular flux thus redesigning the natural energy fields which gave the impression of something stable, real, independent, self sustaining. Reconditioning the receivers mind set. Inserting its configured matrix which as more minds aligned themselves became the dominant factor in their perception of reality. Sweet. With Prima having prepared the way, the ground, the minds of the Earthers definitely, even the field-waves of space somewhat tainted would wash out other random states which could open cracks in their reality as they perceived it. All things were possible. Nothing was eternal, accept maybe the universe. All futures attainable. It

was just a matter of choosing which one one wanted. Earth seemed to want them all. They would have to be watched. Thus his three loci there.

He would have to manipulate the information as it resonated in space and across time. Fuse his will into the multiple dimensional projected articulate fields, dissipating threatening probability waves which could leak out even from his domain for by interacting with the universe. All its possibilities were there to some degree. Though by enphasing the realities of his potential there ought not be much resistance to his intent. As long as his reality was reinforced his desired independent coherently seeming natural reality would obviate the current weaker fields to be obliterated through innate entropic process where energy and information was lost.

Create enough believers, planet loads of them and all should be fine. All through his willed insertions. His super domain realms washing out their weaker embedded mentally construed reality. Remembered in dreams and the odd vision breaking through of a present no longer valid.

In need of constant fine tuning. With six pre-sets the whole should hold. The designer universe his creation. Just add energy, a galaxy's worth.

The CI looked forward, literally everywhere and found it to be to his liking.

He the Unitary God. The ultimate Immaculate joke.

Regum

Darras walked into the laboratory where the team were searching for both the vanished CI and Merduk.

"Glad you could come." Sovark turned to him away from a bank of light screens. Marez gave a lazy wave busy trying to trace their non existent inserts. He was looking at WebWorld, Sovark at WebSpace. Tuvlov creating possible scenario's, false cyber-realities which might attract the escaping CI, see what sort of an environment it had headed for.

"As you can see we've got a minor problem." Sovark rose glad to move about, dissipating nervous energy.

"Tried the DVs?"

"Ah, thorny. Counter intuitive flash backs."

"Can't have that." Darras running a hand through his short grey hair. Though Darras was really systems management, having checked it all and come up with nothing he had at his disposal simple search programs that released hundreds of tiny receivers and separate transmitters which configured could search the Web, any system really without the heavy intrusion of massive diagnostics. Tiny microbes that would burn out, with their one time signal if a match was found.

He gave the disk to Sovark. "It's got the basic resonant signature of the CI. I assumed Merduk's would fall into place. Simulated search parameters embedded."

"Yes. We've gone over the transition countless times. It's like water down the drain. Trouble is we loose them right there."

"Hyperspace?"

"Meta."

"There's a difference?"

"Well one's general the other specific."

"Of course. You going for meta I take it."

"Yes."

"DV activity."

"Interestingly enough they're dormant. Seem to accept what happened."

"Not going after it? It's their creation."

"The vanishing simulacrum. Might be their intention."

"With Tellurium's smashed."

Sovark dismayed. "We got conned."

"That's Prima for you."

"Knew it was too good to be true. They might even have learnt of our capabilities. The computers are fine, you've done the checks." Hoping for confirmation.

"Yes. All's well that end. Though the processors all went max at embarkation."

"You make it sound like a jaunt in the Web."

"Which is one of the most likely places it could be. Alike attracts alike."

"Accept there's nothing in there."

"Could have reconfigured. Could be anything and everything. It might even have dispersed, fractured, bifurcated."

"I know." Feeling the awful truth. The CI was gone.

"So shall we give the mites a try?"

"Might as well. How they going to do it? Real time?"

"Well they can't get ahead of themselves. Unless we went into probabilities."

"They'd know." Alluding to the DVs.

"Yes. Annoying isn't it? We go into quantum states and the Primaian's would be onto it in a flash. We might have to write this one off."

"Starting to look like it. So let's see what well, there's to see." Sovark inserted Darras's searching microheads into their Web's meta realms.

"They're camouflaged of course as airborne dust. Pretend realism."

"No signature?"

"Nothing active. Dust as dust. Near zero energy."

"I feel like sending in some psychopath." Sovark half joked. "Rip the thing to shreds, synapse by synapse, if it had any, turn its brain into protein soup. Then insert that into a particle accelerator and blow it into primordial goo."

The image of the inner temple chamber came up. Zohex, triumphant, Merduk cool, superior knowing he had nothing to do with the calamity Zohex unleashed above them.

"Only a third gonna be there." Darros explained. "See if they pick anything up."

The scene replayed itself. As the CI used the available energy from both Regum's inserted PWF including WebSpace and the DVs remote viewers, the two figures went fuzzy as the PWF dissipated. The tiny cloud of dust remained.

"Hm. Excluded." Darras remarked.

"Outside the field."

"Means the CI is non localized."

Marez added. "No where and when."

"So let's see what's in the Web."

"World or Space?"

"Try World first."

Sovark opened a portal, found an abandoned industrial complex. Grey sky threatening to rain, bleak, deserted, rusting, broken glass in windows, leaking pipes, puddles of water and oil, muck, sludge. The perfect setting. Another series of mites were released.

"How long?"

"Instant."

"We really should run future projections Darras."

"As long as the CI is live it puts us in a precarious position. If something is up and we find out so do they. Then they could move whatever they're planning forwards or worse change tact. We'll have to do this in isolation." Darras answered knowing though without explaining that on the SS 1 they could create future probability states. They could here as well but using only one fusion generator was not enough to future-proof whatever they would come up with.

"The computer's picked up a few stray configured electrons." Marez said.

"Let's see." Darras alert.

"Really vague. Dispersed, smeared across space similar to a remnant massive energy surge."

"Like a supernova?" Darras asked.

"Hm."

"You think it disintegrated at some future time?" Sovark hopeful.

Darras studied the screen and the programmes interpretation. The thin, opaque lilac band still present.

"Very low energy threshold."

"But it has some bytes which match."

"Right, call up WebSpace."

Marez did. "It's there as well."

"Real time?"

"Aha."

"I suppose we should try real space." Marrez suggested. "Confirmation."

"Spoken like a true scientist. And since it is night...link me to the observatory Marez."

A few commands were entered. "Done."

"Whose on duty?"

"Why don't you ask?"

"I shall." Darras walked over to the intercom and got through. He requested a few seconds of their time which Camor was at first reluctant to comply with. "We're running a classified intricate search pattern here. I can put it on hold but I need massive power to hold the sequences."

"Can we do it?" Darras asked Marez.

"Sure. We're not inserting anymore."

"Power up Camor."

"Alright." Whilst his run was uploaded he asked what they were after.

"Background radiation."

"Oh." Almost disappointed.

"This is top security."

"Ah. So this is not happening."

"No."

"Understood. Ready when you are."

Darros sent the mites over to the observatories data processors.

"Any section of space will do. But I'll give you the coordinates."

"You can do that your end."

"Fine. Marrez?"

"Same as what we got in the Web?"

"Please."

The same section of the night sky appeared on the screens. Darras fed the last batch into the computers. And waited.

"Confirmed. It's there." Marrez relaxed. "Or rather was there."

"I don't know." Sovark said watching the screens.

"What do you mean?"

"Merduk."

"What about Merduk." Marez asked.

"That's what I mean. We got the remnants of the CI. Something went wrong and it exploded. How will take time, unless the information is lost."

"Information is never lost." Marez couldn't help correcting.

"If a stronger PWF is in place."

"Only a change in magnitude." Marez explained.

"It could become absorbed in the quantum foam."

"True." He conceded. "That would take some mega PWF though. Not only that. If he were really gone plus our knowledge regarding Merduk, well Merduk would never have been."

"You're right there. So he's still somewhere."

"The past, the future. We'll find him." Marez felt certain. A good researcher as well Darras thought. Meticulous in detail. Searching the future or the past would be painstakingly slow.

"So we got a defunct CI. We gotta find out if the simulacrum at their end has vanished as well."

"Need a psychic for that." Marez a little dubious.

"We'll find one, or two." Darros giving him a crooked grin.

"Really?" Marez surprised that Darros was in touch with these aberrant beings. Then again, in this field, though he was a scientist first, special interests were as he was finding out, branching off into all sorts of spheres.

"What interests me," Tuvlov said after a moments silence, now that the background radiation was confirmed as real, "is what blew it up?"

"And what did it get up to in the meantime." Darras still looking at the read outs.

"Couldn't have been much. We're still here." Marez quipped.

"We have to keep on running future probabilities. Might even find them along the way." Darras suggested.

"I'll get the run sequences built. Are we going to use PWF projections?"

"Not yet. Can't let them think we're too fixated. Give the impression that we've cut our losses. Then when we either get something or not, well, we'll see."

Ratze

"Well that was interesting." Ratze said to Dross as she was sipping her latté at a café. After the meeting they had strolled around the shopping complex. Militia everywhere, watching, observing looking for anyone who showed signs of aberrant behaviour. So her Brain told her. CFs everywhere. Reconditioned Volatiles. The militia checking ID's, work status, the new order. Things had changed. The locals now worked at the industrial area, the Vs the thought police, crowd control committed to total surveillance. Luckily Ratze's assigned work status passed muster.

"Yes. The Grobaldi's are one of the more informed families."

"You think they're working with the authorities?"

"In what way." The how was irrelevant.

"Use them to ensnare types like me."

"And what type are you?" Dross's eyes twinkled.

"All sorts Dross, all sorts."

"This I know." He sipped his short black coffee looking at her indulgently.

In another situation, another world, another time he would have made a great companion. A little too old for her perhaps but Ratze felt at ease in his company. Maybe it was his configuration. Radiating the right resonance which made her accept him so easily. She was not even that curious as to whom he answered to. She was discovering that what resistance there was, was constantly dispersed. It was like a set of like minded individuals coming together in their own way with no overarching head to coordinate their approach to regain their freedom. If they were even bothered with that. Or make it appear so.

Well, Novus was gone. That left space. Many cutting their losses, emigrating. Leaving irritants behind, just to let them know they were not completely subsumed. CFs. How crass. If that is what it took then maybe creating havoc with voracious and rapacious tailor made bacterial cyber infections might do the trick. But the Primaians were learning. Even if they could be neutralised, the next layer, and the next then needed to be breached. An almost impossible task. She wondered if Dross was immune to their ubiquitous presence.

"Qatus, Gharbel and Pentham are basically running Prima, Regum and Novus."

Ratze wanted to see if or how he would react to that. It was a guess.

"Nothing to do with me."

"Not easy being a double."

"I cope."

"How secure am I in your scheme?"

"Very."

"Dross, I left the DVs."

"And you were in space."

"Ah yes, the field. They might lock me away. Something not in my plan."

"Which is?"

"Survive."

He smiled at the evasion.

"Dross. Now that Prima is the power, what now?"

"As in?"

"What now?" another sip of latté.

"They got what they always wanted."

"And that's it?"

"They've organised this place. Got everyone working."

"As on Regum."

"Precisely."

"I suppose mass conversion is next."

"You got it Ratze."

"Then what?"

"The final solution: spiritual utopia." Not believing it himself.

"There's more to that than meets the eye."

"You think?"

"I know." She didn't really. Not completely.

"The assault on Regum. The Crash. The mass murder for starters. What did Regum know, or plan, if anything that freaked them out. It's a cosmic crime."

"Divine intervention. Just like on Earth."

"Earth?"

"The meteor hit."

She had no idea what he was alluding to but got the picture. They had been inspired by some freak accident or staged one themselves. It was too late to do anything about that now. It was the future that counted and that concerned her. How or why was a blank. But she knew she was here for a reason.

"What about the Discrepancy."

He gave a wan smile. "They are the discrepancy Ratze."

"Holy shit. Aligned?"

"Something like it."

"So they were behind it?"

"Oh nothing so obtuse. Divine manifestation. A sign if you will, an aide for their holy mission."

"Convenient." She drained her cup, watched a couple leave. Lethargic, subdued conversations. Two militia walked past, cursory glance at the others seated at the outside tables.

"You know my official brief?"

"Must I?"

A waitress came out, cleared the table, hovered for a moment, then when Dross shook his head she left.

"Heretics."

"Ah, that's the good news."

"You could work for me you know."

"Too close. What's this good news?"

"Independent thinkers."

"Ah. Of course."

"So you're the scourge."

"In a way. Basically I've been tasked to round up the Kabal."

"My, you will be busy."

"Be careful Ratze."

"Dross. I'm not aligned."

"Makes you vulnerable. To be recruited or taken in."

"I can cover myself."

"There are limits. Everyone is expendable."

"I thought they need all the help they can get."

"Not anymore. Regum is nailed down. So is Novus. Prima's population is growing. Plenty of willing souls ready to get out. By the way, err, let's walk."

"Good idea."

They had paid for their refreshment in advance and meandered out into the afternoon light on the concourse. The tangy salty sea air, gulls crying above, more militia, the sun reflecting off the train as it pulled out of the terminus. Dross lead her down to the bright sandy beach. The soft falling waves soothing.

She felt a little lighter. Lack of CFs around. Near them some bodies lying in a pleasant daze soaking up the sun. Children splashing at the edge of the water, squealing with delight.

"A solicitor vanished. Handling Roshati's disappearance."

"I get the hint."

"I can tell you this. At that time Prima's arrays were pointing out not in."

"Something from the past."

"Correct." Then lowering his voice, said: "Hold hands for a moment." He slipped her a microdisk. Ratze looked around whilst doing a soft scan. They were actually being left alone. Now was as good a time as any. She inserted the disk into her sleeve, let her mini computer run the data. She popped out the disk and handed it back to Dross.

Inside her head, space. As Dross said, the arrays pointing away from the galaxy. A distant smudge. EMR wave, receding out. Calculating its distance and speed it passed Prima during the Calamity. In its wake a remnant of a very diluted resonance.

"The first inkling of the D." Ratze suggested.

"I'm no astronomer."

"Trust me. And this is why Roshati vanished?"

They walked up the stairs of the concourse. Her head felt a little thicker as the CFs made their presence felt. Two militia watched them. She ignored them. Their eyes remained on them. Dross lifted up his arm. In the distance, a chauffeur returned the wave. Ratze knew the militia would see that. They would also see the stretch limousine and its insignia.. An official car. They lost interest.

Something else clicked in her Brain. The Calamity coincided with the manifestation of the alien field. Serendipity. Her Brain fast forwarded an exponential set of algorithms, inwards, back into time. The alien field was there. A photon spread so weak as to be almost irrelevant. That much she expected.

They were at the parking bay. Dross let Ratze climb in first, then himself. The door shut the chauffeur got in the front.

"Just drive around, along the foreshore, through the CBD, wherever you want."

The chauffeur nodded, the partition went up. They were now electronically sealed.

Her Brain revealed a thin resonant layer dispersed through space. Recognisable as a pattern. Just. Weak vortices, energy points, computational nodes ready to be built upon. Then a second wave. This a supposition based on the subtle change of the quantum state of space. The timing recent, matching the Crash. A slightly enhanced

phase state of space. Something was building up. And it was all coming from the centre of the galaxy.

The limousine moved off at a stately pace. Ratze watched the pinks, mauves, soft lilacs of the desert rocks, the undulating smooth wind blasted hills, an azure sky above. To her left a rocket lifted off. Bright white light from its chemical powered engines leaving billowing white clouds of condensation behind. Primitive but it worked.

"You know the D is realigning space."

"Really? How?"

"Don't know. You'd have to ask an astronomer."

"So Roshati knew?"

"Probably."

"And from what I do know, from what has been officially released, to me anyway, she was on the verge of handing over the data to person or persons unknown. The enemy. Reganians. Outside the perimeter, ready to meet an incoming craft. Of course there was no craft around. But she was outside."

"To meet someone?"

"She might have, we'll never know. What we, I, do know is that the solicitor handling her case on behalf of the distraught family has vanished. Office empty. He never existed."

"I see. Or rather you did. And thank you for that." Ratze turning to look at him. Thinking: he wants this to get out. That means he thinks, maybe aware I'm in contact. "I won't even ask about its veracity let alone its origin."

"Like you I don't think it can be easily established as a source." Dross hinted. She followed his reasoning. He wanted to know how much he could trust her. Who or what her back up was. She thought back to her presence with the DVs. The mysterious Mena. Obsessed with divinity and running into something else.

"You know what you could do Dross. Check the burn outs. Check their horror nightmares."

"Oh?" he had been looking out towards the ocean.

"They might have stumbled across something similar. One thing is certain. Space is being configured." As supervisor Ratze had had access to the DV data base. "Make sure to recognise signs of immanent psychic collapse." She tried to go further back but that was as far as her Brain took her.

"Space? Configured?"

"Certain." Maybe.

"This from that?" referring to the data he'd given her.

"There's more."

"Please." As if bracing himself for bad news. The limo turned into the city. The streets deserted. The building fronts looking tatty, grimy, worn, abandoned. Many were only partially used. A tram ahead disgorged some passengers.

"Changes of behaviour."

"I thought that's what happens with regime changes."

"Even that. Then there are the asylums."

"As in?"

"Prima claims to be a perfect society. Every Primaian a believer. That means in tune with the divine. So how can heretics and atheists even exist?"

"To test. To give a sign of what can happen if the divine is abandoned."

"I never thought of that." But it didn't answer her question.

"Ah. Good to know..."

"That I can be at a loss?" Ratze smirked.

"So you're saying Prima is somehow creating a resonance in space."

"Yes. Until proven otherwise."

"Even though it's coming from way out there."

"Intriguing isn't it?" Something awesome was manifesting itself out there. Effecting everybody. Disturbing.

"It is Ratze, it is."

"I'm just wondering if it's loaded."

They turned another corner. Ratze looked along the right rear vision mirror to see if they were being followed. A vehicle was some distance off but that was about all. Time would tell.

"Contrived, primed?"

"Something like that. Resonant aligned."

"Mind control."

"Configured."

"That's..."

"I know. I'm thinking the same."

"They'll say, are saying it's an expression of the Divine Architect."

"That the excuse? It's an imposition from without. With intent."

"Looks like they got that right."

"The probable becoming the actual. And the power to insert it. Have any of the astronomers found the source?"

"They wouldn't be looking."

"Why? It's..."

"Divine."

"Oh yes. That red herring."

Dross gave her a despairing look.

"Alright let me rephrase that."

"No it's alright. I understand what you're saying. Just don't do it in public."

"Dross." Mock shocked. "So any increase in lunatics?"

"I'd have to check."

"You might be surprised." She hoped.

"It would be a monumental conspiracy Ratze."

"You don't think it's at all possible?"

"How? The DVs? Maybe. You were with them."

"It's been some time." Ratze understood Dross was not the enemy. On the border between Primaian intent and the uncomfortable reality of how they achieved their aims. She felt an affinity with Dross. He needed guidance without him being aware of it. Plant the seeds of knowledge, of information yet it was he who had informed her. She was merely speculating.

He was considering something then came to a decision.

"If what you say is true, meaning the Discrepancy being some sort of premeditated system of mind control then this has to get out."

"But you said they got their answer, the Divine element."

"Yes agreed. But if it spreads here, with the notion that it is not divine, that it is an artifice, a classic conspiracy created by a rogue element on Prima, by Primaians," he emphasised, "it could create some difficulties. Questions might be asked. Principles queried, the nature of the Divine questioned..."

"I see." She looked in the mirror. That particular vehicle was gone but another replaced it. A well organised team or just her caution. Either way it paid to be vigilant.

"And you want me..."

"I do. Use the Grobaldi's. They've hired you."

"I thought it was Reliance."

"Well yes. On paper. They own it."

"So why would they want to see me?"

"Because they are one of the biggest stakeholders in the casino."

"So you know about the suspicions."

"With the casino Ratze there is always suspicion."

"I mean the random number sequences being skewed. Reducing win runs."

"Fixed results. Yes. Is that how it was done?"

"Dross, that's how it all started."

"I take your word for it. I must talk to my superiors."

"I'd rather you not."

"Oh?" a little affronted at being given an order.

"Think of it as knowledge."

"Which is power." His mood relaxed. Then to the chauffeur through the link: "To the casino please." An imperceptible nod up front. The limo turned left at the next intersection. Bits of paper were being blown about by the breeze.

As they approached the road leading to the casino Ratze tapped Dross on the arm.

"Let's not go there.."

Ahead several military units with a roadblock. Further ahead more personnel carriers.

"Where to then?" using the intercom he asked the driver to turn around. The limousine changed lanes, slowed and did a swift U turn.

For the first time Ratze felt contained. Trapped was too strong a definition but she considered it.

"Ideally...tell me Dross, where do you operate from?"

"An office." He said non committally.

"Any decent gear?"

He knew what she meant. Computers. He said nothing. The decaying city loomed in front of them. The sun still sparkled off the solar panels but they looked grimy like the buildings. An air of abandonment surrounded the CBD.

"What are you after?"

"One last confirmation."

"Try me."

To their right the commuter train slowly overtook them. Military trucks were heading towards the casino.

"What's going on there?"

"They're taking the place over. Vetting everybody. After workers, administrators, service staff, technicians, anyone they can get their hands on."

"So the place is being shut down."

"Reassigned is the operative word Ratze."

"Let's go out west."

"The desert?"

"Just for a while. One last look." Search she thought.

"Sounds like you're...leaving."

She too had considered that. There was nothing on Novus anymore. From another view, now that the Primaians were taking over on the ground, by rights, someone like her ought to remain. But then who else was here that could be of use. Those who had aided her way back then were probably gone. Those that remained constrained. The place was being sealed.

Everything was going wrong. Like swimming against the tide. Not just getting nowhere but worse being carried along with it if one remained exposed. Exposed. That was it. The configured Vs exerted with complete confidence their assigned task of subduing the population. And it worked. Most had given up. Resigned to their fate. Those that couldn't get out accepting the changed status quo.

Flashing lights behind them. The limousine pulled over slightly. A military vehicle came up behind them, passed them. In the rear an older man with two guards next to him, each with a gun at his head. Their vehicle resumed its normal course. Then headed towards the western ring road.

They came to a checkpoint. Two trucks diagonally parked across the road. Two vehicles ahead of them. When it was their turn, the guards fully helmeted but not on deep scan checked Dross's ID and wished him a pleasant day. They did not even bother with Ratze or their chauffeur.

"I can get you out." Dross said at last as they moved onwards.

"I just want to confirm something."

"I am aware of that Ratze. What and where?"

"The desert won't be within range of the CFs."

"Go on."

"Dross," she changed tact, "you know what is going on. I mean what is so threatening here that needs such an overwhelming response."

"I am not on the executive council. Not even policy directives."

"You're something else." It was as good a guess as any. Choss knew it as well.

"Does it matter?"

"Look." She said a moment before it actually happened. Behind the first rise of hills they saw explosions followed moments later by the whump as the sound hit them. Her Brain did a quick calculation. No industrial accident or sabotage. Calculating how long the sound took to reach them as more explosions followed. Ratze found that the military were pounding away with artillery out there.

Choss bent down a little to get a better view as shells were pumped into the desert. All in a small area.

"They're either doing target practice or obliterating something." Ratze said.

"Or a show of muscle."

"Maybe."

The barrage continued. A helicopter appeared over the target area. Ratze's Brain quickly scanned its ancient computers. It might be state of the art down here but technically it was obsolete. Ratze got into the view-cam after a moment of hacking the entry access codes. Only six digits. A cinch. Her HUD showed the target area. It was being extensively shelled. Five batteries were pounding and pulverizing the desert rocks. She got out of their system.

Now to analyse it.

"Did you know about this?"

"No."

The target area was several clicks away from the industrial perimeter.

"Why the interest Ratze?"

"Something exciting?" she joked. "Either as you said, it's a message or..."

"Or what Ratze."

"I'm thinking. We still going west?"

"If you want." Came the laconic reply humouring her. Dross was interested in what Ratze was after.

The explosions replayed within her head were just that. High density explosives. Nothing special there. Dated fire controlled computers. Archaic. So it couldn't be some advanced weapons testing. Unless they were practicing. Yet the location was a little strange. A military exercise in open terrain. She might be reading more into this than what it appeared.

She accessed the city's directory. Looked for survey maps. Found some open files in the planning department of the city council. Mapped terrain. Unsecured files. She

found the area she was after. Nothing there. The resolution was pretty high. More maps in the geology section. Future resources.

Same maps with denser pixilation. Something that looked like boils. Rounded protrusions, weathered down over time. Several. None elsewhere. Something festering beneath the surface?

One of the boils was cracked. Ice formed at night during winter opening a fissure. The lines neater, recent, different fractals. Later than those in the landscape itself. Ratze re-accessed the pounding the area was receiving. They were getting lots of dust in their visuals but now the camera used laser radar to see through the brown haze. She took a couple of stills and got out.

Definitely recent, geologically. Three sets of figures. The terrain was ancient. Millions of years. The second set was thousands of years old. The boil like lumps came later. The ground directly beneath was not volcanic. Yet lava had poured over it thousands of years ago. Wind, grains of sand, water condensation and ice eroded the outpourings. The lumps were backed clay. High temperature kilns, in the thousands of degrees. An ancient civilized settlement!

Being pulverized. The Primaians knew! And were getting rid of it by using the area as target practice. Rust. High tensile steel, once. High carbon content. Not debris from deceased fauna. She closed down her Brain.

"There's archaeology out there Dross." And explained to him her supposition without explaining how she knew.

He listened, not that interested.

"So?" he said when she was finished.

"Could be your ancestors." She should have said `ours'. Too late now.

"Not yours as well?" he picked that up.

The chauffeur slowed down. A military block up ahead. A `Danger' sign leaning against the truck blocking the road. They stopped. A guard informed them the road was momentarily closed. Target practice. Accept the target practice was nowhere near them.

The dust and smoke turning into a huge cloud, drifting slowly westwards by the weak ocean breeze.

"How long?" Dross asked through the open window.

"Can't say sir."

"Can't or won't soldier?" but he said it with a smile. The soldier smiled back. Non committal. "Thank you." Then informed the driver they might as well head back.

"You knew." Dross impressed with her intelligence. Ratze did not disabuse him of his supposition. It had been instinctive. Her Brain locking on moments before it happened. But there was more to it. Her data pool. Opening up under very specific manifesting realities. Snippets released. That was all she knew. So in relation to Dross's assumption she pretended she was in some higher realm, perhaps even a domain.

"Let's say I had a sneaking suspicion Dross."

"Someone though must have put you onto it."

She was tempted to say 'something.' A secret system. That would get him curious. Maybe even annoyed that he was being fed so little.

"There are certain isolate systems Dross. Not as powerful as the Trine, let alone the Infinity Chip. Lesser. There though." See what happens now.

"The Domain Lords."

"These are isolate Dross."

"Whose?"

"Certain intelligence sectors." add some subterfuge to the mix.

"Oh Ratze." Dross sighed dramatically.

"Yes Dross?" being cheerful.

"I've shielded you whilst you're here."

"You have."

"So..."

"You want in."

"Of course."

They approached an intersection. The limousine slowed, the chauffeur waiting which way for them to go.

"Space port. Departures."

"You're leaving? How? You got clearance?" Dross was surprised.

Ratze was taking a chance. See how good her configuration was.

"Have to. As I said, nothing here anymore."

"Can you give me something then?"

The limousine turned left towards the space port.

"Sure. The Discrepancy that confounded the casino's operatives, the gamblers loosing big time, basically getting the casino into a non viable position worked."

"Commercial sabotage."

"On the surface yes."

"As usual there is more here than that."

"Hard to prove anything else Dross."

"Except..."

"Indeed. The contamination comes from an outside source."

"Good so far. Rerouted the attack through third parties." Dross getting the feel of what Ratze was alluding to. But what he was thinking was of more conventional methods. Using some unaligned individual to work as a free lancer.

"That's the appearance end of things."

"A double cover. Triple?"

"That is the beauty of this inserted programme. It's direct Dross."

"Who? Where? Orbital? Some special ship from SpaceKorps? DV insertion? DL? Lord Pentham's outfit. Janon?"

"None of the above Dross."

"Regum? But they're down."

"Not even close."

"Here? The Outback. Vs?"

"Could be used as a diversion." Sow a little distrust.

"But not them."

"Not directly. They could be conduits though." And that had just come through from her Brain.

"Reconfiguring processors through remote viewing? Is that possible?"

"Anything is possible if you put your mind to it Dross."

"So it is done by remote invasive sabotage."

"You got that right."

Up ahead the towering gantries of the rocket launch pads appeared. The traffic almost non existent.

"Ratze."

"Right. Outside source. A field to all appearances, loaded with a configuration intelligence. Could be cyber, could be bio enhanced. Out there Dross."

"Where exactly?"

"That of course not even I know. But if you search sweep the centre of your galaxy, in fact just looking at space you will find a thin wisp of remnant background radiation. It's configured."

"That it? a remnant field that can do this?"

"Apparently."

"Nothing to do with you or your...friends?"

"Not even they thought of it."

"Which brings us back to who?"

"Prima of course. But even there I'm at a loss to find the trigger. We simply don't know. What I suspect," she hastened to add, "is that it is real. Stronger than the supposedly alien incursion, by a factor of several magnitudes. On its own it doesn't seem much. But as its spread over such a vast area, so is the information, the coded instructions that any particular slice might not even reveal anything but white noise."

"Yet it's more than that."

"It is."

"And this is certain?"

"Oh yes."

"And I got to ask this, you really don't know who or what or even how?"

"I don't. That is the honest truth. There, I've said it all."

"You sure have."

"So you gonna smooth the way for me to get off this planet?"

"Only if we stay in touch. Somehow."

"Yes. You must have your own people on Regum."

"That where you're heading."

"I shouldn't say this, but yes." She lied. She was getting out completely. This part of the universe had regressed exponentially. Regum as an advanced world was gone. Prima never would be. Novus might have been. The future was truly out there now. Terrestrial realities collapsing, information decaying, deleted, voided, or blown to smithereens. She returned the data disk.

"Tell me Ratze, are we on the same side?"

"I hope so."

"What is happening that I should know of."

The road was all theirs, empty of traffic. A shuttle bus passed in the opposite direction.

"That Dross is the reason I'm around."

"So your people don't know either."

"I think they know even less than you do."

"You're with SpaceKorps. Now that they have been realigned whilst the core is vanquished on the orbital. Menial status. Searching for contraband cargoes, escapees, the wanted. Must be a bit of a come down."

She let Dross think that as well saying nothing.

"So a group of officers perhaps some foot soldiers have other plans. Plus their intelligence arm might still be in operation. Clandestine of course. But, Ratze to what end? Prima has won. They are it now. The masters of three worlds. Earth to follow."

"Oh yes Earth. The wild card."

"Not if Prima continue with their determined path."

"DVs. Remote insertions. Direct mind control."

"They will do it. With Regum out of the picture their spare capacity is now totally focussed on Earth. Not that they'd know. Maybe they do. Won't matter in the long run."

"Then what Dross?"

"The dawn of a new age Ratze, what else?"

They were approaching the first outer perimeter. The limousine stopped. This time all three had their ID's checked. All was in order. The boom gate went up continuing at the prescribed lower speed limit. Only the base of the huge gantries were visible. Hangars, workshops spread across the wide open spaces. In the distance the dust plume of the artillery.

"How's your history Dross?"

"Same as everyone else's."

"Thought so. Study revolutions. Utopian idealists. The religiously fervent promising their new age, the adamant believers ushering in a new age, reformers, social engineers."

"Why? Agents of disorder amongst them?"

"Half right."

"But?"

A second checkpoint. Another thorough security scan, including the vehicle. Her Brain itched. Scanning for rogue programmes. Maybe news of the Discrepancy was out. They were allowed through.

"Those who are fervent don't know how to stop. Unless one reconditioned them. Otherwise they would turn on each other. Rooting out heretics, revisionists, dilettantes, the slackers, the hangers on, the opportunists. They will all be there angling for some cosy position. Not the working types at all. Conspirators all."

"My, you do paint a rosy picture."

"Just be prepared Dross. You may have to bend with the wind."

"You make it sound like a hurricane."

"Could be. Look at Regum. Not pleasant."

"Unfortunate. We did what we could. You must remember we're months apart. Those who were close did help."

"Of course they did Dross." Ratze handed him her ID. "Gonna upgrade it?"

"You don't want much Ratze."

"No, just everything." She said breezily.

Khratham

"You know Mudhan?" Morfur asked placing the goblet with her delicate touch back on the low table. The fire shone on the silver, a rich glowing red. Mehr drained his beer, rose, bowed to Morfur, Luferious and took his leave.

"Of her." Luferious replied.

Noises in the hallway. Luferious did not mention the rumour that Mudhan was in some sort of agreement with Krool. He would spend some time there on the way to see his liege lord. It could mean anything or nothing. Wait and see. Not that Luferious was interested. Krool was a shaman. His interest in that path was more academic. He knew the lore, some of the enchantments which in the end were really creating images in receptive minds. A matter of will. Not Luferious's way.

He followed suit as Morfur rose to greet her dinner guest. Mudhan exuded a delightful air, lively as she swept into the room. Vivaciously greeting Morfur like an old friend. None of the gravitas he expected. Merh was back, took her grey travelling cape. Dressed in white, of middling age, lively dark seductive eyes.

Morfur did the introductions. Luferious kissed Mudhan's outstretched white hands. She seemed amused by the gesture. Her hair tucked into a skull cap. Maybe she was bald. Mudhan's joy at being here filled the room with her pleasant ambience.

Wine was poured, small talk ensued. Visitors it transpired were fewer now that the priests were amongst them. Not in the country but the towns, the city. Luferious listened attentively. He had always wanted to go on a retreat there, clear his head but never seemed to find the time to get away. Mudhan was certainly captivating. She exuded a reclusive charm whilst outgoing at the same time. In the firelight her face was radiant, sensuous though equally self contained. Morfur's daughter's plight was not as yet touched upon.

The food being prepared in the kitchen smelt delicious. Luferious helped himself to another tankard of beer. Mudhan merely sipped her wine as the two women chatted about the weather, the crops, the market prices, the boorish men, their cheeky apprentices. Mudhan informed about city life. Fragrant herbs and spices, the smell of a bubbling rich broth, hints of beef or lamb, carrot or pumpkin wafting in. He was getting hungry. Mudhan it turned out ran the monastery like a business. The two women thus related to the vicissitudes of the market, fluctuating prices, mendacious merchants, tricky

middlemen, astute farmers. Apparently the more obstreperous one was the higher one's standing at the markets.

Seanna announced the meal was ready. They made their way to the high table behind them. Candles glowed serenely in gilded holders. Seanna brought in an earthenware pot, the rich broth served. They all sat at one end of the ancient table. Fresh baked bread as well for the first course.

They set to with a lusty appetite. Mehr brought over the wine and beer then left them. Luferious let the two of them chat away. He was happy to just to be here. It was a nice change a rarity to be invited to an exalted house, one going back for generations. The wine enlivened the conversation which had now turned to animal husbandry. Ticks, unhealthy weeds making the animals sick, difficult births, stubborn bulls, dumb cows getting lost. The inclement weather, the threat of droughts or floods. But so far the year had been good all around Luferious found out. Important to an agricultural province. How simple his life was. Get up, wash, study, write, teach, eat, sleep. Maybe the tavern if he could afford it.

The broth finished, cook brought a platter of cheeses, one soft creamy and white, the other dark yellow with more fresh white bread. The wine relaxing them more and more. Mudhan of course looked at Luferious whilst speaking. But he was content to listen. It was good to be reminded just what went on in the real world. Esoterica was one thing but it was not the only thing of importance. If you didn't eat, you starve. No escaping that fact. They were onto vineyards now, blight, mould, pests, birds.

The harder cheese crumbled easily, bitey, rich, smooth on the palate, full of flavour that remained wonderfully as an aftertaste. Mudhan merely nibbled whilst Luferious switched to wine. It was full bodied and fruity as a wine should be. There was a new fad for drier wines which the two women were discussing. How much should they plant. Would the fad last? Was it worth it?

A moments silence.

"So Mudhan, the whole valley saw the VAV." Morfur said. Concerned. A visit from Regum City was so rare it had tongues wagging.

"Yes Morfur. A professor and two students. Military escort. Attention indeed. Not one I would expect. Just goes to show how my prescience has let me down." She said self disparaging without the sense of failure that implied. "Military." She scoffed. "What do they think we are, savages, untamed?"

"Well the area is infested with bandits at times." Morfur suggested.

"When was the last time that occurred. Years."

"What were they after? What were they like?"

"Rather disappointing. So normal. This professor Storaf tried to pretend he was important, students in tow, a little subdued. Something about them that made me uneasy."

"What did they want?" Morfur at a loss. "I mean were they spying on you?"

"The library."

"Really? Anything in particular?"

"Folklore mainly." Thinking of their focused interest.

"Taking an interest. I wonder..."

"What?"

"This could end up with the priests. Use our ancient knowledge, twist it, disparage it, bury it."

"You think so? Here I thought we had something of value."

"Oh it's value alright. But not what they want to let you think. They'll use it against us."

"Propaganda."

"Something."

"Anyway they're gone now. Promised to be back. Vague as to when."

"Took nothing?"

"I honestly have not checked Morfur."

"Better have a stock take."

"Oh what a bother."

"So you wouldn't know then."

"Well, we'll see. Now you got me thinking."

"Awful isn't it?" Morfur jested.

"They're with Khratham." Luferious informed them.

"Is that so? Well. Currying favour no doubt." Mudhan not impressed. They all knew Khratham had dismissed Krool. Whispers of a priest in the wings.

"Khratham would have a library of sorts." Morfur guessed.

"He has. Secret. Only a very small elite has access. His ancient tomes contain powerful spells. Some deadly."

"If the dark priest has access to that..." Morfur trailed off.

"Khratham is scheming." Luferious ventured. "He recently sought an audience with me. Esoterica. My students. Some I believe are priests in disguise. Pretending to be students. He wants information. What their real intent is."

"I thought that would be obvious Luferious." Morfur fixing her bright dark eyes on him. "So an audience." Mudhan attentive.

"Occasionally."

"Makes sense. Informers can be tricky. Tell what is expected rather than what really transpires. Plotters in the shadows..." Mudhan shuddered. The imagery all too real of the dead in that ground vehicle. Felled by dark powers. Luferious sensed a chill in the air even though the room was warm. The fire blazed merrily but the cold was there just the same.

"Something appalling has happened." Mudhan whispered.

"Possession?" Morfur looking intently at her guest.

"Death."

Silence. The fire crackled. A breeze sprung up outside, the wind in the trees rustled softly.

Luferious was alert. His mind almost grasped it. A focussing of sinister intent, a frightening display of occult power. A powerful shaman. Krool? Taking his revenge for being dismissed? Had to be. Then there were the dangerous DVs. They could have put him up to it, helped him. Create a scenario that would give the Primaians an excuse to seek some sort of retribution. Evil in the air.

"Yes, death." He said at last.

"Portents." Mudhan said vaguely toying with the stem of her silver goblet. "Not in harmony. Or rather an impending change."

Luferious tried to shake the feeling of doom by having some more cheese and bread. Wondering, why now? Create an incident.

Mudhan's vision would not leave her. Tortured faces realizing their doomed fate. Ensnared in an eviscerating power intent on their destruction. Succeeding with consummate ease. Unforgiving. Focussed on death.

"Unless it was the dark priest at the citadel." Luferious suggested.

"Surely not." Morfur not feeling comfortable. "It would be senseless. Such a display of power is heinous."

"Unless it's the outer tribes." Mudhan suggested. Looking at her goblet.

"But these people weren't intent on anything other than knowledge." Morfur puzzled.

"And got first hand experience."

"It bodes ill." Mudhan sighed.

Luferious was shaken. This was too close for comfort. He felt affected by the dastardly deed.

"The priests, their appearance, a sign. Krool banished. A power vacuum. Death strikes." Morfur reciting facts.

"It gets worse. They were heading for the abbey. It has the appearance that maybe you Mudhan had a hand in this." Luferious said reluctantly.

"Someone after me? My work? I do not dabble with the dark."

"But you have the gift, the knowledge, what it entails, how the occult can be manifest."

"Set up." Morfur added.

"A terror, the spectre of fatality rising." Luferious laid it out.

Mudhan of course could not reveal what her true self was. A spacer who had resolved to refresh her soul. Khratham the last place in the universe that was true to the ancient lores, the old wisdom, genuine knowledge of the enmeshed power of nature, the universe, the mind. Couched in archaic thought patterns but pristine in origin. Prima had debased, decried, destroyed their heritage. The Reganians merely left it behind. Only the aboriginal race left. No wonder the professor was interested. He might not even know he's working for the Primaians, unless he wanted to forestall them. Things were not going to her plan. To enhance, to strengthen, to broaden the mind to the mysteries that was the universe.

At least Morfur was a natural. This she knew. Luferious less so, but his mind was in the right place. This was a calamity of the highest order. The foul deed a stain on those who not just studied the ancient arts, practiced it, but the people as a whole. It had all the makings of a Primaian plot. If anything, now was the time to reveal her true self, but then again it might disappoint them. An outsider. But so was Luferious. She could get out. But they had to live with what was transpiring. She would not abandon them. Only if her life was in danger.

The sounds of thumping upstairs brought them out of their reverie. Morfur frowned, concerned for the well being of her daughter. It sounded like baggage being dropped. So solid the whole house was shaking. Luferious felt his head being squeezed by an entity exuding its vicious intent wanting to get at him, or the daughter, anybody. Luckily his slightly alcoholic state acted like a shock absorber.

Morfur rose, Seanna was crying in the kitchen. Mudhan composed, reciting some protective spell her eyes deep liquid pools. Staying in control. Morfur transfixed as the banging continued. No other noises were heard upstairs. The walls reverberated.

Something had come their way. Sought out a weak link, a prostrate soul drawing an entity towards it.

Luferious was numb. The panic he felt was one level removed, dampened by the alcohol. A dark fog within him. Real, impregnated with a predetermining will of its own. An occult act manifesting its esurient craving to transfer itself from its dark realm. He was frozen to his seat. Being drained within. Deep inside of him, scouring. The what escaped him. He felt helpless in this psychic onslaught. It was not intending on revealing its real presence, its essence.

Mudhan sat there, a knowing smile on her lips. As if this was familiar to her. Pupils dilated engaged by some revelation. All Luferious felt was a howling wind in his head. Warm, moist, sensual, beguiling.

The bone shuddering thumps became a crescendo of an incessant pounding assault. Luferious could not understand how the house withstood it, why it was not disintegrating. The pounding had a pattern to it. The reverberations becoming familiar, drawn out of the depths of his mind, his soul, his being. He was beginning to feel lighter pulsing with the beat, aiming straight for him. Rejection impossible and too late. His interest in this astounding phenomena overriding all caution. As it intended. The lightness of true beingness. Excruciatingly delightful, enraptured, accepting. Encompassed by the pulse of the universe.

The dining room and its occupants were hazy, a film spread across his vision. A glow within this fog, seeping into him. The pounding that of his heartbeat as he was swept away, stretched. Caught in the tide. He considered extricating himself but even the mere thought of that was too exhausting to contemplate. His essence remained as it expanded into the fog, the stream amongst the stars. An entity was reaching inwards whilst drawing him forth. Determined to seek him as the watery light flowed around him creating a protective cocoon.

Euphoria. Aligned, in tandem pulsing with its potent beat. His head expanding. Cosmic in size, the inner wind propelling him further and further away. The others seemed to be with him. Seana, the daughter, Katena, all rapture, Seanna, Senanna? The cook? How weird but the thought was swept away, discarded, irrelevant.

Then the dim distant glowing orb, a hazy central light emanating from it. A sun obscured. As it came closer, or he to it Luferious, ah still myself he thought, was more the composition of thousands of tiny glowing colours. A chaotic energized mosaic of moving pictures, each a reality of its own. He remembered WebSpace. Now? Was this the core?

The mythical core that held all the knowledge gained over millennia? It was an overload of too many possibilities crowding in on him. A data sphere of astronomical proportions.

He tried to think himself out of it. Nothing doing. The present everywhere, past and future around and ahead of him. The ambient fog softly merging into a huge inner sphere. The central glowing orb now even larger, each pixel buzzing with energy. Each a possibility, a reality, an actuality, a potentiality. It almost made sense, almost. The future, the past, the present not as one but as thousands of time streams, each self contained yet linked in this glowing, pulsing vastness.

Luferious felt as if he had a choice. Choose one, try it, live it. He tried to think of Khratham in the ideal. That dominated his field of vision. It looked so real. He could still see the other matrixes, crackling with energy, some glowing serenely, others barely glimmering. Some totally unreal. He searched for the perfect world. None came immediately to mind. Concentrate on nothing then. Let the forces of reality be your guide. He closed his eyes and with that everything vanished. Fall into the blankness, into the nothingness. He had been there before. The emptiness was no absence, rather it was the invisible ether of the ancients, the ultimate cosmic primal state. Endowed with sentience. He hoped it was not the unitary god of the Primaians. Anything but that! It was not. But neither would it reveal itself. He was in limbo. So be it.

Time meant nothing here. He travelled by drawing on his memory of Khratham. Too late for he had forgotten to create what that world ought to be rather than what it was. If all the potential Khrathams were here, then might as well choose. Accept he had been so busy, thinking he was getting the hang of it, forgetting to remember the real reality.

The abyss closed in on him.

Mudhan aligned her inner resonance with the rhythmic pounding. First the darkness, then the foggy light, the revelation, the data sphere. Instant memories of past lives, past reincarnations. Something clicked in her head. Her brain expanded rapidly, inflating, embracing the whole data sphere. A tiny orb full of potentialities. A repository of sorts. It's creator a configuration. A minor player. 'So...' she thought, 'playing with alternatives? Let's see your worse case scenario.' Imaging Khratham.

She came out of her self induced trance. The terrible hammering had ceased. In front of her the tasty cheese platter, delectable, soft colours from the candles, the fire burning merrily in the fireplace, the silver pitcher of wine reflecting its glowing flames, the silence total.

She was on her own. She walked as if on air through the house. Everyone was gone. The working dogs were barking outside. Then whimpered and howled. They sensed something was wrong. She walked outside. No one in the living quarters for the workers. No one had remained. wrong, no one was here.

The large house started to groan, the timbers creaking, some splintered, others cracked, whilst the support beams split from some invisible burden. Bits of dust puffed out. Bricks fell out of the walls, tiles off the roof. The colour of the house eviscerated in the dark of night. The windows exploded sending glittering shards of glass into the grass. The shutters fell off. The roof sagged then in a thunderous rumble sent its struts collapsing into the house with a resounding creak of tortured wood. Feeding the fire within the house. The flickering glow unmistakeable. Slowly turning into a dull red, then vibrant orange as tinted smoke poured out of the open windows. She heard the air being sucked in as the flames leaped eagerly into the debris inside. The red flames flared upwards and outwards sending orange sparks into the still night air. Whatever had transpired in there, its ancient heritage was being burnt to the ground.

Mudhan stepped back. The guesthouse sagged, the roof bending inwards, tiles popping off its roof. The windows shattered the glass no longer held in by the drunken leaning shutters. The mansion was now on fire upstairs as well. The dogs were barking, chickens squawked, a bull bellowed out there somewhere.

The animals in the barn! She raced around the back, cinders already setting its thatched roof on fire, the conflagration behind her hissing and crackling. She could feel the fire on her back. She lifted the crossbar and had to quickly move aside as the panicked cows, horses and bulls charged out, their hooves beating a tattoo on the ground. Then in their dumb way, out in the open, away from the danger they stopped, calmed down and spread across the paddock. The remainder of the mansion's roof collapsed, wood screaming, being torn asunder into the inferno. Sparks shot upwards, dancing in the vented heat.

The conflagration consuming the house. Soon nothing was left. The guesthouse a pile of rubble. There was nothing for it but to return to the abbey. She meditated herself into a trance to facilitate the speed of her walk.

Images flashed momentarily deep within her. Another state, another past life recalled itself in her mind. A translucent green liquid around her. Immersed in a nutrient bath. Wires and tubes around her like jungle vines and creepers. Bleeping consoles and monitors. A laboratory, a...habitat.

Now it made sense. She remembered. The real reason for her presence to fathom the manifest data conglomerate. A mystery, an isolate cyber realm, a micro webworld, an individual domain. Devoid of an overriding centre. Everywhere at once and nowhere in particular. A new configuration. The result perhaps of alien sentience. Alien as in new, unknown, reclusive. Making its presence known without revealing itself as a persona. A self designed manifestation. Or the sum of their knowledge? An index of possibilities?

Well, she had chosen what felt like its worse case scenario regarding Khratham. See what total entropy had in store, all the odds stacked against it, against Regum. It was easy going for the best. Childs play. Mudhan relished the challenge. Her work was not done yet.

Especially since a self obsessed cyber intelligence had broken through space. A supposition which came to her from that momentary engagement. A digital phenomena which barely touched her. She the island in an ocean of manifest probabilities. The hidden intelligence choosing not just its methods of insertion but the conditions as well. Finding realities more aligned to its way of thinking, its intention.

Like a dissolving fog in the morning light, the mental impressions dissipated leaving only a memory of the fractional presence when she had touched upon its realms. She was walking down the road leading away from the disintegrated mansion. Orange shadows of the fire reflecting on the trees around her. Behind her a dog was barking, then it stopped.

What had happened to the others? Morfur, Luferious? Were they unnecessary in this dark reality, this heightened entropic domain. Alternative worlds. Each next to each other ranging from the lowest state, this one she hoped to its most heightened, complete state, that of Reganian predominance. An amazing feat. Not from her world. They had just perfected the possibility of meta transfers. Coming here as an observer, an investigator. Sentient enhanced, returning, channelling her macro awareness back to her source. Somewhere out there amongst the stars. The good news she assumed was that as an insert she could retrieve herself. But first this. Nothing could harm her. No wonder she felt so at ease. With the Outlanders, their shamans, now the Primaian priests, even Khratham himself, Shatan, the dark priest advising the palace whom she suspected of being some sinister archimage. Luferious who subsumed his psychic powers to orient towards the universe as a whole.

As she walked along the dirt road back to her abbey, she hoped Luferious would, in his perfect world, make the connection. For if he united his mind crafted realm with the universe, the likelihood of becoming connected totally, completely, enmeshed with the

cosmic energy matrix, what the Primaians sometimes nearly guessed to be the Divine Architect, then whatever that almost sentient data sphere was, was but a bauble in the vast expanse that was the multiverse. One universe at a time.

One universe at a time!

Even though she was walking that image sent an icy shock through her body. The cold night air almost warm after that sensation shot into every nerve ending she possessed.

Surely not! It couldn't be. For the ideation that flashed through her busy mind nearly freaked her out. Just as possible realities were aligned, each a little different as one specific factor dominated, such as Khratham being the sole ruler of Regum, at others even less significant than he was now, the same for her or any other mentally turbo-charged evolutionary chosen sentient configured intelligence. So too perhaps this loaded orb might exist to a lesser or greater extent *in the other universes*. Some of course would be lifeless. It was just data after all. Unless the laws of physics were skewed so that creating form and matter from energy disintegrated at the moment of conception. In others it might be hideously deformed...creating...monsters.

She shivered at the horrific results this 'it' could perhaps achieve. If it could not be destroyed then it would have to be 'aligned', its content used for beneficent applications. Seek the dark to go for the light. A lexicon of what mental entropic decay would lead to so as to create a future devoid of such a charnel house of both physical and mental decay. She felt the adrenaline of her thoughts invigorate her. It was all coming through so rapidly. Thought after thought. Mostly negative warning her of the insidious and ubiquitous evil which lurked in all realities. Matter as creation. Continual transformation. Life extremely short. A churning burning universe. Unless feeding off other universes rapidly extinguished like some hyper energy star. Maybe even blowing itself to bits. She could just imagine it. The vision all too real.

She kicked a stone. It bounced off unto the undergrowth. The next universe with its laws of physics balanced. Slow expansion. A steady state. Nearly timeless. If life existed it would be...extremely slow...to...develop. That fitted this universe! Earth was more rapid. What had taken the Reganians several millennia took Earth only a few to begin space travel. The great leap forward that made their civilization a level one. That meant the surrounding universe was like a fast breeding reactor. That universe a shorter life span with rapid development. Given the billions of years available there was no reason they could in the future jump out of their universe when it decayed, the classic heat death only to repeat the big bang creation.

She had to assume that this manifest orb could well be in all. Something to check out. Always assume the worst Mudhan, she reminded herself. From there better alternatives will be self revealing. And she remembered having chosen the worst of all possibilities.

The monastery, her abbey would be the clue. In the more perfect world it would be the planetary beacon, a light radiating wisdom, peace and harmony not just for the Reganians, but all races. A nice thought. But somehow she was not tempted along that easy road. The wind whispered in the trees. Overhead a winged creature, all black flapped its leathery wings. The stars shining serenely above. Deceptive silence.

So what would the opposite be? What would be the overarching dominant principle? What was opposite to her mission? Not Luferious's mind. He was en par with her headspace. Khratham was not really evil, more a realist. Shatan exceptionally so. The dark priest? Regums machine age? Or Prima's ultra-mono-mania? Or Novus going rogue? Then of course there were other races in the universe. Maybe some completely evil hideously mentally deformed psychopaths using military means to become dominant. Goose pimples shivered over her. Maybe choosing a worse case scenario was not the best move. What if they could sever her connection, isolate her? Or trace her back? She hoped the expert sequence was holding, was still valid.

Thinking her way into this world. She sometimes forgot how complicated the technology was yet how simple the concept. Scanning the planet for a benign location. For the dead could still resonate. Some. Feeding off the living it hungered for them by merely thinking of them. Absorbing their resonance. Thus creating a field. From what she remembered, as she was the one entering this planet's reality a balanced resonance, containing both good and evil would present the greater mental spectrum to which the design of the experiment was aligned. Now that too would be an indication just how dark this reality truly was. And she had to remember that a distant cyber intelligence was present. Watching. Observant. Mindful. Building its realm pixel by pixel, wavelength by wavelength, quanta by quanta...until...it was ready.

At least there were no monsters. Only the surprise she created upon her arrival. Krool the only one who guessed at her ethereal state. Cautiously accepting her. As well as the nano trick of the self assembling abbey and monastery. Superior magic. Mudhan explaining it was all just the transformation of matter on an energy level. Something the Reganians were equally capable of. Hinting she came from somewhere else. Now Krool was definitely interested and essentially on her side. When she explained her mission, meditation he was cautious and pleased. Cautious in that as Mudhan did not believe in

gods, her agnosticism might drain the people of their beliefs. Mudhan assured him she was not proselysing. Believe what you will. She was uncluttering the mind. It might even bring some searching souls back to the shamanistic ways. Khratham sent some inquisitors who could not fault Mudhan. He even sent spies trying to stir up trouble. When that did not work he sent others pretending to be radical atheists. They too returned with glowing reports. Some even becoming students.

But that was not the real reason for her presence. It seemed that fate was dooming Regum. Her memory wished to witness when that happened. Make sure it would not happen ever again, anywhere. Reverting Regum back to a zero level world. For all EM activity had suddenly ceased. She inserted well prior the catastrophe. And wondered by choosing this current reality whether she may have missed that reality.

An alien manifestation taking place somewhere in this universe. An embryonic energy field. Assembling itself. Drawing on realities. Realities. Cyber or real? She would get to the bottom of it. In there she would be isolated. Expanding into space. Those were the facts. Harvesting minds.

During her ruminations she must have covered in her trancelike walk quite a distance. The wooded hills glid past then stopping on a crest. The valley below. The massive forest around the ruin. Even though she half expected it, it came as a shock. A revelation she hoped would not come to be. But it had. She saw the abbey's jagged outline. A dark brooding ruin. The monastery an empty shell. No signs of life. How could there be. It was abandoned, a pile of rubble.

Drawn to it just the same she walked down the last hill. Some of the walls were still standing, just. Three of the four towers collapsed, just their jagged base remaining. Even a nano built self preserving building was subject to the law of entropy. Or as a builder had said to her a long time ago: the moment a building is up it starts to fall down. Well this edifice had fallen all the way.

There were weeds sprouting amongst the pile of stones. A tiny tree was growing out of a wall. Shadows lurking everywhere, the shades of the dead. It was as if ages had passed in a moment. No not shades, persons. The once pristine whiteness of the building blocks were faded. The nanobots drained of their energy and programming. Potent negative energy indeed. So this alien, as yet unknown being knew how to corrupt codes.

Everything was wrong here. As she half expected. When she had left yesterday the road itself was hard, traversable. During her trance walk she barely noticed that it was rutted, uneven, a mere track. The forest around closer, thicker, sombre, brooding. Something rustled in the undergrowth. Above dark birds flapped their wings and were

off. It was then she saw the tiny glow of embers. Huddled shapes lay around it. Travellers? Bandits? Surely they had look outs. Not that she tried to hide herself.

"And what have we here?" a thick voice rasped behind her. They would have no idea, except Krool or any shaman worth his salt what she really was. Mudhan focussed on her inner energy. Just a matter of thinking. In command of her faculties. With her travelling cape flaring behind her she spun around. Three bearded men in furs and leather, short spears, short broad swords glowed dully in the night. Dark swarthy faces, long hair tied in pony tails. Thick brawny arms, full chests, solid legs, boots. Definitely not beggars nor peasants. Two more came from out of the forest.

"It's a woman." One exclaimed, his eyes level with hers.

One of them was unwinding a hempen rope.

"Five men. So afraid you want to restrain me? What sort of men are you?" hoping not to sound too arrogant.

He stopped uncoiling the rope.

Their leader ordered the two who had come out of the woods to return to their patrol and to Mudhan that he was taking her to the camp. Trying to deceive her whilst talking the other raised a cudgel which she saw in the last moment wanting to knock her out. Without moving she eased back, the cudgel missing her just. As he was still in forward motion she used her left foot to scrape down along his right shin sending a grunt of pain from him. With her right foot she struck at his kneecap. Though he bent it forwards just in time he was still unbalanced and fell backwards with a heavy thud. The other two now seeing she was not making another countermove stood there aghast then laughed heartily.

Whilst they relaxed she darted off into the forest, jumping over the undergrowth at the edge. Quickly she grabbed some small rocks then laid low. They expected her to run for it so she didn't. She started throwing the rocks slowly further and further away from her. Three of them whooped with joy thinking the chase was on. As they crashed their way into the forest she stepped out from her hiding place.

"Looking for me?" she said standing behind the leader whilst the other was busy winding back the rope.

He turned in a flash but Mudhan hooked her foot at his pivoting ankle, tripping him up. His companion came up behind her. She ducked in the opposite direction, rolled over, found her feet. He having missed her he fell flat on his face. Out there in the forest the three others bird whistled, signalling, not very successful in their pursuit.

"We can do this the hard way or easy way. I'm in no hurry." She said matter of fact. Her voice without emotion.

Their leader merely grunted as she danced lightly around them. Keeping them off centre. Then she saw another one of them approach with a net. Now it was getting serious. As the man with the net was getting ready she charged at him, arm out, palm flat strait below his nose pushing her hand up hard. She heard the bone crack, her hand wet with blood. He fell down dead. As he was falling she darted behind the corpse for one of them was coming up with raised sword trying to decapitate her. She pushed the corpse in his direction then lunged for his free arm and jerked it with all her might up and out, dislocating his shoulder. The sword was too high now, it hit the corpse as she moved in its falling motion behind it. Slightly off balance she whizzed around the other side and kicked him up the rear. He fell onto his dead comrade.

He grunted as she extricated his knife from his side. The other three were lumbering out of the forest surprised at seeing her. She jumped on his back and held the knife at his throat whilst grabbing his pony tail.

"Must you all be so primitive? Really. I have disposed of one and can dispose of him as well. Or I can fix his shoulder as she tugged at his left arm, hitting his shoulder. He tried to suppress his pain with another angry grunt.

With a roar one of them charged her. Mudhan realized they were brutes, not deserters. Intimidation about the extent of their martial capabilities. As he was about to fall on her with his knife, expecting her to rise or roll or crawl away she heaved herself forwards so that her head connected with his groin. With a yelp he fell onto the ground. From behind, their moves seemed elementary she rolled rose, moved swiftly behind him as the other assailant with raised arm sliced off the face of his companion. A horrendous scream followed, blood spurting everywhere in dark globules. The other bandit tried to knife her. She grabbed his wrist, twisted his hand downwards, heard the satisfying crunch of mangled bones. The screams of their faceless companion distracted him, sent him into a howling fury of blind hatred. As he grabbed his sword she missed stabbing him in the stomach. Again she met her aggressor and kneed him in the balls, then stabbed him in the stomach. The blade did not penetrate far given his protective leather.

It was over. One of them just stood there, knife in hand, merely studying her. Their leader rose with his limp left arm. Their screaming companion was howling with pain, standing there, his chiselled off face flapping skin, bone, blood. The outer bandit cut his throat and put him out of his misery.

"I'll fix your shoulder. Hold still." Mudhan said almost gently as if they knew each other. Her adrenaline still pumping. "I'm coming up from behind." Grabbed his leather jacket then yanked his left arm out and pushed it back in. She felt the click. He breathed in deeply trying not to scream

"What sort of demon are you woman?" the leader said slowly feeling his left shoulder. It was a distraction as one of them circled behind her. She waited until the last moment then simply crouched. The raised sword split the other's head in two. More blood spouted over Mudhan. This was getting really messy. She rolled sideways before the sword was free, bounced up, extending both feet to knock him off balance. As he fell she landed both feet on one of his knees hearing a satisfactory crack and another howl of pain. She stuck the knife into his neck.

She stared at the corpses. The others had scuttled by now. Unbelievable. Mudhan had no idea just how capable she was. Calmness returned. The white heat of controlled violence left her head. She felt the soft breeze of the night air. She cleaned the knife on the grass, found its sheath and strapped it to her side. Then walked over to the abandoned camp fire. The reaction of the conflict, the cool determination, the swift response accomplished with lightning speed now caught up with her. The fire welcome warmth. One of their leather bags had provisions and a water pouch as well. Handy. She strapped both on. They might be back. Time to scoot. Better get another knife or two.

This reality was far worse than she imagined. She surveyed the once noble edifice now a crumbling pile. The majestic towers no more except for one. Not the observatory. Dissolute, remembering what the White Abbey once stood for, literally, she ambled amongst the ruins. Rubble strewn everywhere. She kicked some dirt onto the dying fire. Sparks rose, then it went out. Silence. Just the breeze and the stars above. So serene, so deceptive. A violent world. Why? What use did it serve? The idea that the entity could be feeding off raw violence occurred to her. Or was this some simulation?

One more look around. She thought of the royal city. See what sort of a ruler impressed himself upon the land. She assumed it would be a 'he'. No woman would let such anarchy, such mindless violence, such ignorance be so dominant. Only through dim muddleheaded thinking could such stupidity assert itself.

She walked through the broken down entrance, just a truncated pillar, all that remained of the once noble portal. The surrounding forest, dense, dark, foreboding. The fields gone to seed. Even the vines were no more. The place abandoned. Abandoned echoed in her head. Something was missing. Her mental map! Completely deleted. Just

a memory of a memory. One sentient level removed. Existing in a more serene environment. Was she moving amongst them there as she was here? Without demented homicidal bandits? Or desperado's trying to survive? Trusting no one but their little band? Had it come to this? The worst of the feudal ages. Incessant warfare, fighting over land, wealth, women? Maybe even men she mused.

Had the rest of the population regressed or were the Outlands now controlled by warlike chiefs? Had the old god returned or new gods fashioned out of tortured minds?

She walked down the deserted silent track. In the distance the howl of a wolf. She let her mind go into freedive. Feel what was around her. Chaos. Discordant reverberations resonated deep inside of her. Everywhere dissension. Small scale. Petty squabbles dominating their distorted minds.

A group up ahead. Distant but definitely coming this way. A patrol? A tight knit group. Minds alert, focussed, at the ready. Possibly military, or organised militia. Should she return to the ruins? Backtrack? She would be able to defend herself easier in a confined space.

She saw the patrol up ahead. They had as yet not seen her. Mudhan's travelling cape was dark grey. She wished she had a crossbow. Amazing what came to one's mind out of the blue. She heard the crack of twigs. So, scouts were moving on each side to the centre.

Three shapes, armed, and two scouts. They seemed to work in groups of five. Her cape was splattered with blood.

"Tell your scouts to come out showing their hands. Or else I will come after them." She said menacingly. The inflection surprising her.

"Identify yourself." Came the captain's command.

"You might be interested in identifying several dead bandits." She said haughtily. "Two have run like rabbits." She recalled the image of the slain, flies buzzing, feasting greedily, laying their eggs. Then she focussed that image onto their leader. He stood transfixed, surprised at the gory scene of hacked limbs, broken skulls, dead bodies. It was then one of the scouts started circling in on her from behind. She wheeled around, threw the knife low so as to merely wound not kill him. But the scout thinking she was aiming for his face ducked. The knife penetrated his skull with a sickening crunching thud. He fell down with a thump.

"Told you."

None of them said anything. Instead, to her surprise they went down on one knee, heads bowed. Except one to her left. A ruse. Turning on her heel, jumping sideways

and lowering herself she pulled out the second knife in one fluid motion as a knife whizzed past her. She lunged at him, moving her right hand up, right at his chin. He groaned his sword arm distracted as she pushed the knife into his left eye. Easy. He too dropped to the ground.

"Two." and walked over to the first and pulled the knife out of his skull, wiping it on her sleeve. Then she retrieved the knife out of the oozing eyeball, a squelching sound then cleaned it on her cape.

The three supplicants now remained motionless.

"You can get up you know." Both hands armed with dull glowing blades. They rose cautiously.

"You cannot kill all of us." Their leader said. An adumbration in the night.

"It would be wearisome." She said disdainfully feeling a different person. Full of energy, of power. She had to be careful it didn't go to her head. So far she had been lucky. They didn't expect a woman to be so accomplished in the marital arts. Let alone self defence. In a male dominated world.

The three survivors stripped their fallen comrades of their gear and weapons as she watched, calming herself. This world was bad news. Trouble was how to get out? The portal in the data sphere seemed to be one way only. Or would she have to go back to the ruined mansion? Then again the abbey had been her initial portal when she had arrived a year ago. But first to learn more. Find out what was going on here.

"If you promise to come in peace we will welcome you to our camp. I gather you are alone." He said.

"I am."

"You handle yourself well..."

"For a woman?" she sneered.

"For someone who should not be here." He said mysteriously.

"Just looking."

He was genuinely puzzled.

"Wondering what I'm doing here?"

"It has crossed my mind."

"As I said, looking."

"For whom?"

"Myself of course, who else?"

"We would be honoured by your presence." His tone respectful.

"Then I will be honoured to accept your gracious invitation. As a visitor."

"We were told one from the other side would come and redeem our heritage."

That sounded like classical thinking amongst believers. Waiting for a redeemer, a coming god, a strong ruler, a vanquisher of enemies, a resurrectionist harbouring within its mind a new age, a new dawn, a pristine world unsullied by murder and mayhem. One such as herself. Maybe this fallen corrupt world was not so corrupt after all.

She fell in step with them as they headed north. They passed the ancient ruins, one of them whispering a silent incantation.

"Summoning demons?" she asked.

"Just a prayer wishing the white woman to return."

"You mean the White Abbey's abbotess don't you?"

"You...know about this place?"

"Years back. Before it went to ruin." Being cautious.

"They say it happened all in one night. Changed everything forever. Before he came."

"Who came? Oh by the way, if you want more spears or knives, there are some dead bodies there as well."

They spread out amongst the ruins. The two survivors having vanished. They stripped the dead then continued their journey.

"He."

"He has no name?"

"Invoke his name and he will possess you."

"Like that is it?" not really believing the old superstition of a name having power. Or was she wrong? This was only an alternative world. One that was a present and very real possibility. She had to remind herself of that.

"His name is that dangerous?"

"Merely thinking of him is enough to loose one's soul to him."

So, the CI was dominant here. If its strength was supreme here then maybe so was its weak spot. Though she had no idea what that could be. Short of reconfiguring the data sphere, feed it a virus or trojan, malware, terminating algorithms, letting entropy take over. Or find its source of energy and cut the link. Somehow that was not possible in this realm.

They continued in silence. Crossed a pass, the wind howling then made their way into a valley. Ahead tiny camp fires, tents of animal hides. Crude stockades for goats, horses, a few cows.

The leader spoke to the guards on duty who raced off towards the largest central tent. Wisps of smoke wafted into the still night air. A sleepy eyed man, covered in furs walked out towards her.

"I hear you despatched two of my warriors." His dark eyes blazing with suppressed emotions.

"They tried to kill me."

Their eyes remained locked. This could go on forever.

"I believe you. Gort you fool. You cost us good men."

Mumbling apologies.

"Report." To the group captain.

"We found only her on the road past the ruins."

"Has it ever occurred to you she could be the one?"

"The shaman spoke of a radiant woman in white. One who has the power of a priestess, one who..."

"Yes we know of the premonition. Send someone to fetch him captain." Then turning to her: "Your name."

"Mudhan."

Mudhan. You...are...the...one." His eyes flickering uncertainly. "We expected your arrival to be somewhat...different."

"Well. Just goes to show."

"Show what?"

"It's an expression. And who are you?"

"Vultos of the northern tribes."

"Tell me Vultos. I despatched some itinerants at the ruins. Two have scampered..."

"Bandits. They are everywhere. Scum. Not worthy of any tribe. Criminals. So you despatched some? Excellent. Are you tired? Would you like to rest, take some refreshment?"

"You obviously do Vultos."

"If you are who you say you are then we are not just blessed by your noble company but redeemed. Or rather he with the unspeakable name's days are numbered."

'Unless this is just a game to the CI. Test vulnerabilities. If the sequence does not go in its favour abandon this reality, this parallel time sequence.' She thought.

"I'm glad to hear it."

'Maybe I can get out.' Her mind full of hope.

"Please, you are our guest. Take refuge in my humble abode."

Inside the tent was warm. A hearth in the centre, flames flickering beneath a makeshift stove, with a grill on top. Smoke curling upwards through an open flap. Cushions and sheepskin everywhere. Threadbare rugs on the ground. A musty smell from the animal hides and sweat mingled with cooking. Pitchers of water to one side. Someone stirred underneath the animal hides. Several people here. His family or his women Mudhan smiled to herself.

"You are pleased? Good. It is not much."

"It is more than enough Vultos."

"Please, make yourself comfortable. I have sent Gort to summon our shaman Worass. He foretold of your coming. He will know if you are the one."

"And if I am not?" anything was possible in any of the worlds the CI seemed either to have created...or...plucked out from space's virtual probability wave-fields. Quantum designer realities. Could quantum alternatives, given enough energy dissipate them? In theory yes. Ah, progress.

"Then you have a choice. Since you handle yourself so well you can remain with us. There is a shortage of women here. Everywhere. He takes many and discards many."

A howl of despair tore through the night.

"Death. She knows now of her fallen man." Vultos said sombre of expression.

"They should not have tried to kill me."

"They would only have disarmed you Mudhan."

"They could have asked."

"Yes. That proved fatal."

As she sat amongst a pile of cushions, laying her cape underneath for extra comfort Vultas went to a wooden chest and retrieved some pieces of meat. Rabbit. Nice. Tasty.

She told her story. One moment at a dinner party, then a sojourn in a strange realm, keeping it simple, and the next moment amongst the ruined mansion. The rest Vultas already was familiar with. But he wanted to hear it all again. He poured some wine from a flask for them both in clay cups. Blood red. Delicious.

"So what is going on?"

"You don't know?"

"Vultas. I am not divine. I am...`what am I?'...myself."

The smell of roasting rabbit made her tastebuds tingle and her stomach growl.

"We were told you would not come in a blazing light. Just a mere presence gracing us. Yet this is enough to hope."

"As in?"

"Reclaiming the land from the priests and the unspeakable one."

"Yes. So I gather. The priests I am familiar with. As for that one..."

"You don't want to be near him. He too knows of the coming one."

"It may not be me."

"Then we wait."

Sounds outside.

"That will be Worass."

The man who walked in through the tent's flap was short, squat, all muscle, two broad swords, sheathed knives, dressed in leather pants, a fur coat, skull cap, leather boots. Lively black eyes in a weather lined face. Since Vultas rose so did she.

Her head swam. Like a vessel being gently swayed. Seeing what might rise to the surface. Mudhan thought of the data sphere, see what he made of that.

"You have returned. You are Mudhan of the White Abbey. A reincarnated soul that dwells both here and...elsewhere." He looked at her placidly, like a kind uncle. She was tempted to try and align herself but thought better. Pretend to be less than you are. Worass already aware of her potential.

Vultos seemed to fade into the background. From amongst the sheepskin covers a woman rose, swaddled in furs. Of middling age just as Vultos. Worass turned and greeted her.

"Sharna. A pleasure as always."

She kneeled.

"Please rise. You may go back to sleep."

She gave him thankful look, glanced at Vultos who nodded and went back to her warm covers. Mudhan barely felt the cold in this warm tent.

"I gather Krool has passed on?"

"Many moons ago."

"Then the priests are dominant?"

"As it was written in the stars. Or rather a most singular star possessing a dark soul. Now that darkness reigns over us, over the whole planet. On the throne sits one whose name is taboo. We do not recognise him. Even speaking his name invokes his power. Merely thinking of him gives strength to the black priest."

"Ah..."

"Worass, Mudhan, let us be seated. Worass would you like some food? Wine perhaps? Beer?" Vultos being the good host.

"Water will be fine." Worass slowly sank to the floor arranging some cushions around him. Mudhan followed suit.

Vultos poured water from a clay pitcher into a clay cup and with some ceremony handed it to Worass's gnarled hands. A ring's green stone flashed in the firelight. Outside a horse snorted.

"Your presence Mudhan is a portent."

From what little she gathered this world was entrenched in its path, its time-line. These beings were trapped, woven into the fabric of space itself. With no way out. Unless they could get to the sphere and jump into a more amiable reality. Once she knew just how entrenched, how it all worked she would make the jump. Ever since the data sphere's sections of her mind had made themselves aware. That she was from elsewhere. From a world far in advance of this one. Removed at a great distance. To gather data. Data. Storaf's mission was about that as well. Mythology and folklore. The repository of the aborigines.

"Worass. What happened to the library."

"It seemed all so long ago Mudhan. Before my time."

"I was only gone a moment."

"To one such as you that is easy. Us mortals though must move through time at our allotted speed. The less one knows the slower the journey so that the mind can absorb the knowledge that is all around us."

Worass had that right. Knowledge is everywhere. The universe information rich. Uploaded. One vast data field. Embedded in dark matter. The stuff of creation. Able to be read by sentient awareness. Or ignored by ignorance and stupidity. Distorted by religion. Twisted by blind faith into nightmare scenarios. She stopped her train of thought. Or had Worass done that? Studying her without intruding.

"Worass I am as mortal as the next person."

"You serve the Great One?"

"I serve nobody." The answer a little too quick now she said it.

"No one is truly independent."

She knew what he was getting at. People interacted. Someone always owed something to someone, be it one's parents, if working for one's superior, if like her, scouting By design.

"Worass," she began tentatively, "the universe is teeming with life." Leave it at that.

"I journey amongst many realms."

"The perfect shaman."

He merely smiled, his eyes twinkling. "As do you."

"You guessed correctly. More on a material plane."

"Yes. A realm of its own. Not connected though."

"I know what you mean. No, not connected. Perhaps in my dreams."

"That is good. Not the best means but better than no means."

"So, if I may ask, what happened? I mean one moment, this ancient race is independent," flashing a smile, "the next...this."

Worass took off his cape whilst sitting cross-legged. His tarnished leather jacket beneath and a pendant around his brown neck. A silver clasp with a circular gem, ruby red glowing in the firelight. Vultos was watching them both.

"Three generations ago. The Cleansing. Death came unto the land. People wasted away. Some, many, not all. The Cleansing. Only the Chosen remained. Those who accepted the New Order. People wanted to survive. I cannot blame them. Others," and he looked directly at her, "became Outlanders. The priests sent the worst after us. But we value our military valour. We send out patrols..."

"Who tried to dispatch me." Mudhan said without rancour. Murder might signify certain connotations. She was a guest amongst these Outlanders.

"He whose name is dirt is potent. A master wizard. He has his league, his familiars, his demon spirits who can assume any shape to waylay, to ensnare, or dispose of as it pleases him. They thought you were one such apparition."

"I see. Potent stuff."

"Drawing his powers from a distant dark star. Those that submit are immersed in the Rapture. Endowed with powers of lesser strength. But more than a match for a mortal. Unless you can disguise yourself Mudhan, he will seek you out. Then all here will be in danger."

"Worass. Had I known I would have gladly submitted to the patrols." Then turning to Vultos, "I am sorry for the loss of your men."

"Mudhan, if you can fell them then that was their destined fate."

"What about the bandits at the ruined abbey?"

"Itinerants. Unaligned. Riff raff. The worst of the worst. They might have been spies. No loss. And since you have bested them...well, we thank you."

"Won't that mean retaliation?"

"Yes. Maybe. If he bothers to note the loss of his servants. In due time, perchance he might send out some spectres. When you sleep, be on your guard. Many have been taken, enchanted, eviscerated, drained even."

"Drained. Sounds like something the Primaians would do. May I have some more of that delicious rabbit?"

"Of course." With his knife he speared a chunk and handed it to her. Too hot she dropped it in her lapel, waiting for it to cool a little. "Worass?"

The shaman shook his head. Then said: "Prima Mudhan rules supreme. We are the last." His voice a mixture of pride and resignation. A burden on their soul. "If it were not for the strength of our spirit and the knowledge of the many Ways, the Great Transition that comes to all of us, eventually I think all would be lost. But we are deemed to return again and again. If we live right, practice with determination and fervour the Arts, then with that knowledge in our bosom, when we are reborn we will be stronger and rid ourselves of this pestilence Mudhan."

She wondered what the future held here. Maybe in an alternative reality they were truly independent. But here? In this worse case scenario? Unless Worass could travel between alternative realities himself. Seeing the best and visiting the worst.

"Worass, you travel between worlds, realms..." Then picked up the succulent piece of meat and took a bite. "forgive me, my manners..."

"It is good that someone is so, ahm, relaxed around me Mudhan." He chortled. "Go ahead, satisfy your hunger. You have been in battle and your deeds speak for themselves. You are worthy indeed. In more ways than you might even be aware of. Now you were asking. The answer of course is yes." Then watching her eat continued, "as do you."

"It's both complicated and simple." She swallowed.

He found that amusing. "Isn't it always."

"I was sent. I'm not even quite sure why or what. It is like being deposited into a dream. Then following one's inclinations one acts. Predetermined maybe. I set up the White Abbey. Taught meditation."

"Yes that was interesting."

"Really?"

"The empty way."

"Hm."

"There and not there."

"Hm."

"Connected yet disengaged."

"Correct. Now in ruins."

"Your memory lives on. So do practitioners of your way Mudhan."

"They do?"

"One Luferious especially. He became an Outlander. Passed on. Reincarnated. Kept to the way. Passed on. Reincarnated. And kept his name as if determined to keep the way, your vision, alive."

"So he lives."

"In his third body. The unspeakable one cannot break him. But neither can Luferious undo the dark enthrallment."

Mudhan knew why. That Luferious existed meant even in this reality the CI did not rule completely. Unless there was even a more potent reality in which the CI was curtailed and Luferious supreme. One closed off to her. Or, could it be, that her programme, if indeed she was that, had deflected her into this reality? Otherwise she might have been completely subsumed.

"Did Krool ever return?" she finished off her meat. Leaning over she helped herself to some water from the pitcher.

"He was my great grandfather." Vultos answered. "No he never returned. When the Cleansing came, when the promised Ascension was dangled in front of the people, when the Chosen were called Krool retreated. You knew him."

"Yes, we talked. He stayed often."

"He decided that when his time came to pass on he would remain removed from this world, dwell with his star, maintain the power he had assembled within him. He said he would wait an eternity if that is what it took to bring down that which befouls our world."

"So he is waiting, with his potential supremacy. Waiting for a chink in your enemies armour and strike."

"The trouble are the Dark Visionaries." Worass enjoined.

"Oh yes."

"They form a protective resonance around this world."

"A psychic shield."

"You speak like the ancient Reganians."

"I come from a similar race."

"Let us hope your people will not be contaminated."

"That might be the reason I am here." She drank some water. Fresh. "Tell me, what of the Reganians?"

"Gone. A memory. Their history expunged. What is left, rewritten. In a supposed holy tome foretelling the coming of a saviour. No need to guess who that is. The Reganians a fallen race. So proud they took to the stars, to be not just with the gods, the avatars of the One God, but be like them. For that they were punished, their world destroyed. It is said they dwell in abject misery amongst the stars. The DVs making sure they will never return."

"I see. Confabulation. With morsels of the truth. You realise of course that the Primaians are in space themselves. Somewhat hypocritical wouldn't you say?"

"Oh Mudhan," Worass sighed, "they have an answer for everything. To protect us of course."

"Of course. Can't have the pesky Reganians return and blow this shithouse lie back to oblivion. No machines left then?"

"Artifices?" Worass asked.

"Yes."

"Ah, part of the evil that doomed them. Becoming something not intended by the Great One. We were meant to contemplate the divine, not dissect it, analyse it, use it, but become it. Enjoin our souls into its Greatness. That is the meaning of life. Nothing else matters."

"Accept to obey that nameless ruler."

"He is Supreme."

"So...that's how things are at the moment."

"Time will correct the defects, the defective ones."

She did not want to disabuse them of their hope. In this world they were condemned but not beaten. That meant the CI did not have its own way completely. The reality mix still had to conserve energy, life. At the other end of the spectrum a free world, somewhere. The priests and Prima certainly there but hopefully with an extremely diminished presence. Preferably contained to their own planet.

She knew enough. The data base somewhere in all the potential universes. Supreme in only one. One too many.

Flickering shadows in the tent. Worass radiating his essence. So was Vultos. It was they who were flickering. So was the tent. A feeling of supreme satisfaction flooded her mind, her being, her very self. The surge of energy unmistakable, recalling a previous transition.

That is how it had begun. Dim recollection of being elsewhere. There was here, here was there. At the moment both at once. For a fraction of a second she saw multiple Worass's and Vultos's. Tent included. Stretching back like mirrors reflecting off each other. Stretching into infinity. Even the cushions beneath her extended downwards, the same above. All the multiple worlds conjoined.

Within most of them a penetrating darkness. A mist hovering between space itself. Infusing its malignancy without respite. Inserting itself, its essence, its configured intelligence, its resolve to dominate unopposed. Where opposition did exist frightful scenes of carnage and destruction. Infusing itself into fear stricken minds promising life for their unwavering obedience. A nightmare series of worlds. Each more potent than the next. Mudhan in one of the worst. Well, she had chosen it. Was the CI trying to get at her? Show her just how potent it really was? If so it was succeeding.

A lambent glow exuded out of her. She felt thrilled, exalted, fantastic. There were sentients in the universe who were not, as yet, caught in its demented matrix. No nexus established to gain a foothold in their world. Its resonance tight, potent, protective, shielded, cocooned, isolated, unblemished, secure.

Everything went white. Energy crackled around her. She felt like a live wire. Not of this world. Out of this world. Between realities. She had been there before, in her meditative states. Yet she was not meditating.

The room looked blurry, opaque, watery. She was in a nutrient tank, naked. Glowing optic fibres in thin strands, tubes in her orifices. Eyes open. Awareness.

"We had to get you out." Mados, a familiar voice. Head of the project. "We were worried when you discovered the manifestation. Then you went in. It was starting to scan you so we had to get you out. You alright?"

`Yes' she thought.

"Draining the tank. Disengaging muscle motion clamps." The silver clamps unlocked themselves from her body. Necessary to keep the body in motion to hold off atrophy. "All data's downloaded." The green liquid drained out as she floated downwards. When empty the optic fibres released themselves and withdrew into the monitors. A robot held her clothes and towel. Mudhan dried herself and got dressed. Fresh clean clothes. Lovely.

"Get what you wanted?"

"More than we thought."

"Isn't it always so." she slipped into her shoes. "I see they're fully charged."

"But of course. Though your experience will not be accessible now. Just what your memory contains. It's been dampened for security purposes. What you found defies description. How are you by the way?"

"Fine. Refreshed. Awake."

"Good." Mados said in his white lab coat looking at some of the monitors and auxiliary screens. "You know the CI was after you. Thus the need to get you out."

"How long was I gone?"

"Oh. Several days."

"It felt like forever. Well months."

"Memory."

"Amazing. Had me fooled."

"Had to be convincing on their world."

"We still in space?"

"Yes. The CI's quantum capabilities are phenomenal."

"As long as there's no entanglement, tunnelling..."

"We should be secure. We are hiding near a remnant supernova. Its high energy particle field is our guarantee. It won't follow. We'll move soon though. What's a quantum jump between friends. Riding probability waves in the virtual real." Mados smiled.

"Forgot I was in when there. You know I really feel great."

"Glad to hear it. So let's talk in the debrief room. Ultra secure."

"Get this over and done with."

They left the lab, walked down the corridor into the secure room. Blank white walls, a table, three chairs. Just her and Mados.

"No one else?"

"Restricted distribution. Didn't know I was head king pin?" he smiled.

"No."

"Well, I is."

"Should you prove this to me?"

"You want to see my tag?" he mock leered.

"I'll take your word. So, shoot."

"Neat trick. Getting into one of the data sphere's realities."

"So it is real."

"Very."

"And Regum is wasted?"

"Afraid so."

"Prima supreme?"

"Looks like it."

"No point in bothering then."

"No." he laughed.

"What?"

"I'm supposed to do the asking Mudhan. Still your questions are on the mark."

"Never miss a beat. Got a fix on the data sphere?"

"Tricky. If we do then it can reach into us."

"Really? Even with our protection in place?"

"You know quantum entanglement."

"That sophisticated."

"Assume the worst."

"I did."

"And very interesting it is. In the real world it's not as bad but still bleak. Regum is down, Novus under their thumb and Prima is of course glorying itself into a spiritual frenzy. We hope they'll burn out."

"Doubt it. They got anything to do with the CI?"

"Weird thing is, they created something similar. It vanished and we get the anomaly. How it all started. Projections both backwards and forwards, just can't tell with quantum field states and got the 'something'."

"The data sphere."

"Part sentient. Probable AI. Interesting. The good news is its contained in the Great Attractor. Our space's phase state is slightly different to theirs. No leakage expected. Unless some idiot makes contact with it from the outside. Thus the need for ultra secrecy. You included Mudhan. We think you were the first intruder. The others, Morfur for instance is a local event horizon. She her own singularity."

"So those in that part of the universe can go in and out? So how come I got away with it?"

"Part of your AI capabilities. Originally designed to protect you from alien psychic intrusion. That was on as you went in. I bet you have trouble now recalling the details." And studied her.

Mudhan thought hard. The monastery, the fight, Morfur and the orb. Glistening with lights, the tiny screen like realities, a super huge display of lightscreens. Each a reality. She wondered if she should tell him. Well the room had scanners, they'd go into suppression mode should her brain be infused with alien meta-states.

"Just glimpses."

"They'll fade."

"Before it's all lost, what is the situation?"

"For us? We leave it well alone."

"That it?"

"Your data is valuable. We'll study that one level removed. Isolated. Remote AI viewing."

"But it is real?"

"Yes."

"Is that...good. Scientifically that is."

"Good." Mados's smooth almost ageless face half smiled.

"You know what I mean."

"Well no need to tell you, you were there."

"It's potential," she choose her next word carefully, "appears frightening. Not surprised?"

"A little."

"You mean..."

"The simulations. The background radiation was already information rich. Not enough but something like this appeared, as you said, as a possibility."

"A high order coordinate state of space?"

"Exactly."

"This CI, is it just that?"

"Mudhan, I'm supposed to be doing this."

"I know. I'm curious. I mean our reality could be in there."

"Let it think what it wants. It's only an almost infinite set of possibilities."

"You said `it'. Why wasn't I told there was an `it' in their near space?"

"Because Mudhan, if you had, this `it' could have locked into your head. It could have hijacked your mind. Like a virus. Spreading itself into our system."

"Is that what happened on Regum?"

"..."

"You don't know or won't say?"

"..."

"Oh that. Secrecy."

"Right on the dot."

"Should I be worried?"

"For yourself?"

"The thought has crossed my mind." She tried not to sound too sarcastic.

"That memory will decay."

"So until then I have to remain in isolation."

"Protective containment."

"At a lesser threat level could I assume this data sphere is its playground?"

"Nicely put Mudhan."

"Then how did it crash Regum?"

"We don't think it is connected."

"I would not rule it out Mados."

"We're not."

"What about the ruins? They say the mansion disintegrated?"

"Entropy."

"That fast?"

"Reverse time dilation."

"Is that possible?"

"In its world, its cyber world I should say, yes."

"Playing with entropy..."

"Will work against its world."

"What's it using?"

"From what we can gather...I shouldn't tell you this, but, its latched onto the central black hole of their galaxy."

"Heavy duty. So how is that working against it?"

"It's like this. Black holes also leak radiation. That is entropy. It gives, within its data realm the illusion of time, of change. It might be creating meta-worlds but they won't last forever."

"Maybe. But whilst its there..."

"It's there. Understood."

"So it's not over until it's gone. Shouldn't we do something?"

"Well, we have to make sure your memories are clean. Secure what you know."

"Spray and wipe."

"As long as you leave my core out of it."

"No problem. You know that."

"There have been hiccups you know."

"All fixed."

"I want to be me."

"You sure?"

"I like me."

"We won't break the continuity. Sure you don't want another persona? Really leave your past behind?"

"Gives me an anchor Mados."

"Anyone you want. We got thousands available."

"I prefer my messy life. Just like nature."

"You are remarkable. One of the reasons you were chosen. Dystrophy has no fear for you."

"Love mayhem."

Andromeda: Arktus

The face of Nehr turned into a smile. Monas was pleased with the information. She had visited the Earthers in their dreams. Strangely configured, obsessively self contained, locked in partially suppressed minds less than logical which they often mistook for being rationally inspired. A bizarre race indeed. One which Monas did not wished to avoid and thus more readily let Nehr engage. Her smile broadened. A happy soul. But that was the Ehrfar's naturally inclined expansively scaled minds. Curious living ultra sentients moving through the universe via other living essences. Locking in on sentients whose minds were amendable wherever in the universe. Nearly every galaxy with a civilisation. Ignorant of each other unless interacting just as Monas was with Nehr.

In each other's minds. When the mood struck them, struck him.

Sleepwalkers.

Nehr's purloined visions of the Earthers aroused his curiosity. Undergoing convoluted psychic transmutations. Bifurcating barely explained their fracturing consciousness. Probing varied levels of the mind's innate alternative states. Going off in all directions. Some of them already embedded in the Effluvium. Weak but present just the same. Not that he was not aware of the changes on that peculiar planet. Ranging from raving mad mystics to ice cool controlled rational thinkers stripping back ignorance and religious superstitions. With every shade of sentience self manifesting. Broad spectrals. There was no other race that came close. The Reganian's perhaps. But they dumped their strangeness into their WebWorld. Exorcising their hallucinations. Play with them, learn to live with strangeness as an external manifestation. Something Earther's did naturally in reality. With disastrous consequences.

Broad Spectrals.

Earth. Nehr, Monas knew was as fascinated with Earth as were the Primaian's obsession. Regum taking a belated interest simply because their kindred race, moving apart mentally, Prima delving psychically into the ends of the mental spectrum, had to act. To counter DV activity. But that was not the reason Monas had linked with Nehr.

It was the CI's insertion. The Simulacrum. Taking extreme measures. The Primaians had taken their DV activities to the next level. Which got Monas thinking about transferring his sentience to another data world. He wanted to be more engaged. After a century as one of the Eternals, the knowledge that came with having access to everything his world knew was beginning to weigh on him. At first it had been amazingly

liberating. Ideas, thoughts, suppositions all fell into place. The notion of knowing rather than speculating. Working with incomplete data was always something of an unnecessary mental burden. Now it was all cool clear clarity of mind. But the vast amount of knowledge which came with that was beginning to weigh heavily like mental baggage. Necessary to keep his race less influenced by the mindful expansionary activity of other races. Prima asserting itself, becoming the current prime mover. And so close. In a collapsing micro-verse which seemed to effect their space due to the huge gravity well it was becoming. Their time, on the cosmic scale of things, numbered.

When critical point was eventually reached the result would be catastrophic. Both Andromeda and the Milky Way would collide since they were both being pulled towards this heavy galaxy by its gravitational forces. Cosmic mayhem. Not a problem really. They could transfer to any number of pristine planets and terra form them, seed the atmospheres with the right molecular instigators to create an atmosphere conducive to their survival. Which brought to mind his survival.

At seven hundred Monas with their technology could transfer from body to body, or keep his own as often as he wished. Wanting to start afresh. Biologically. Be born anew. Engage in life, rediscover knowledge once more. Arrive maybe at a different level of sentience. Less endowed, a risk worth taking to relive the excitement of learning what the universe's informational content entailed. Entrained in dark matter wave-fields. It was all there.

Sometimes he wondered if this universe was some cosmic scaled data sphere. Or a huge mind. Civilisation's sub domains specialising in specific forms of consciousness. Each a response and answer to the potent probabilities infused in the Effluvia, what Earther's called the Ether. An idea that fell in and out of fashion. They still had not quite got the gist of it. Grasped but not fully understood. Close yet distant. Typical Earth scenario. Not until their distant future, centuries away would the revelations come. According to current projections.

Nehr rolled her eyes up, still smiling, her brown face radiant, her black hair shining. She jumped meta-states, breaking the link.

Monas in his home in bed. It was night. The stars shone in their ever present splendour. Out there, two hundred light years away a monumental struggle for dominance. It was all coming back now that he had disengaged from Nehr's visions.

Ready to face the future he rose thinking. Prima was moving ahead in leaps and bounds. Time to get an update from the Controller. Find out how they were doing. He

looked around the bare room, off white, a window and out there the stars. His home at the edge of the desert in supreme isolation.

When communing with the Ehrfar who were far more potent than Prima's DVs it helped having a bio enhanced cyber configured data realm and system processors to hold the requisite state to be with them, in their minds. Not that Nehr minded. She enjoyed the diversion and the exchange of information as well. One hungry sleepwalking mind.

Lethargy. It always happened when coming off a high. Bio adjustment. Re-equilibrium. Sentient re-enphased. He went out to the patio. Though the night air was a little chilly, his thermal ware adjusted accordingly. He went back into the kitchen, made a strong coffee then waited for it to draw. There were instant coffee's around but the ancient natural method of letting it draw was still the best. Some things when configured, even with natural processes, molecularly fast processed were not the same. It could be all in his head. Which triggered off another association. He was getting bored with everything. So convolutionarily linked to everything else. It was becoming tedious. Time for a brand new incarnation. From scratch.

He sent out a request for Nesho. Hopefully he was done for the day. He was.

"Have you time?"

"Always Monas. For an Eternal such as yourself how can I resist?"

"By saying `no'?" Monas jested.

"Now as in now?"

"Tomorrow will be fine."

"No, I'll be over. You have piqued my curiosity."

"Nothing you cannot access..."

"Yes. I know. Still, inserted memory jaunts are not quite the same."

"No. Though most prefer being one step removed from personal interactions."

"The bane of our race."

"Bit like the Reganians."

"Ah, that reminds me..."

"When you're here."

"And counting, as I'm walking over to my little transit booth."

Nesho appeared in Monas's booth, walked out and found him in the kitchen with two coffees.

"Thank you." Eyeing the cup. **"Still using the traditional method."**

"Just for the aroma in itself."

Nesho took the offered cup and smiled.

"You're in a good mood."

"Hm." Sipping his coffee happy to stand.

"Let's watch the stars."

"Let's"

Sitting outside Nesho marvelled at the night sky.

"So many races, so much space, so spread out."

"Yes. Nesho. Nehr's been visiting."

"You?"

"And Earth."

"Ah yes, I've got news for you. Have you been in touch?"

Monas sighed. He was tired of being in touch, enhanced, loaded. He longed for the simplicity of life. He was going to allow himself to pass on. Just a matter of shutting the programme down that kept Eternals eternal.

"I should. No alerts so I'm letting the controller do whatever they think best."

"Yes. They've got enough to do. I'm glad you called for I was going to bother you. It's this." He put the cup down on the small table. "There's been a development."

Monas was prepared, almost averse to what was coming. He knew that Nehr had uncovered something on Earth. She had sensed it. The Ehrfar were good at that. Their antennae always out. How they put up with all the heavy duty information loaded phase fields was beyond him. They considered it background imagery, deepening the picture as they were wont to explain. Beyond the flatness of mere appearances. They thrived on depth.

"And of course it's convoluted. It appears the Primaians have made a jump. In both realms."

"Hm."

"They've created an entity. Routed it through Regum's fledgling PWFs. That's not all. It's a cyber-intelligence, gone solo. Become a persona."

"Yes. Nehr realised that herself."

"Good. You've got the gist of it. Trouble is, it's got potentialities coming out of its head. Meta probabilities available to it. Multiple. Several actualities, way past probable states. And aware of them. Quick learner."

"Multiple."

"Six time lines."

"How did you come across this?"

"I was feeling restless. Now that would only occur if there was some disturbance in the greater field. A vortice. Then separating. Using background radiation, riding it."

"That was quick. The source?"

"Prima's DVs. Boosted by Reganian insertion capabilities."

"So it's gone solo. What's the persona?"

"Partial mix of Prima's obsessions to control events. Quickly aligned to Earth's convoluted mental processes. Very adaptable even to that oddball race. Nudging history along."

"Nudging?"

"Yes. Not overriding, nor deleting or superimposing."

"Very clever."

"Don't know yet as to the long term effects Monas." Finishing his coffee.

Monas sighed. "More work."

"The Controller's handling it. And busy studying Regum's advance regarding their PWF technology. They can do it."

"Really. Anywhere in space and time?"

"No data loss either."

"So they too are on their way. In our footsteps. We must keep in eye on them. Make sure they don't get ahead of themselves."

"Their PWFs are primarily Earth focussed. If only due to Prima's interference."

Monas smiled. He felt better. "They could not have picked a more difficult race to engage in."

"Yes. It has its inherent dangers."

"Has it ever. Luckily Earth is still a relatively low level reality."

"Now, yes."

"You know something."

"Well I have run probabilities. And there's just too many."

"I bet Prima wants it neat and tidy."

"Reality just ain't that at all. And Earth is in a way showing us alien possibilities. Bit like the Ehfar, us even or like any of the other stage two races flitting around the universe."

"But."

"Indeed, but. It's the CI. Though weaker in it's superficially disembodied, well more like multiple bodied insertions, it's created in a way its own field of operations."

Using, as I said this background radiation. Now content rich. And it's spread itself across their universe."

"Dominant?" Monas was shocked. Though they could keep it out, the Reganians were inside its spread. As were the Primaians.

"Not quite. The field's too weak. The energy quanta extremely low, stable, just above entropy to kick in."

"Energy feed."

"Has to. Question is, is it syphoning space itself or some external source."

"From a star."

"Indeed. What if it were both?"

"Extremely hard to dislodge. So you think its embedding itself?"

"I hope not. I think it's covered its bases because it figured that it is vulnerable. After all one has to merely shut the DVs down for its persona to be re-isolated where the base line entity is installed. The Reganian boost, using their PWFs is one assumes more to do with being in on the act. I'm surprised the Primaians are cooperating."

"Single minded dominance has its own limits. Hope for Prima's hubris."

"Something at least. I'm still disturbed at Regum's future probability."

"Remind me. I'm too lazy to upload." And looked at his cup's contents. Then took a sip. Delicious if a little luke warm now.

"Well, one definite time line has them regressing."

"Dystrophy. Overcompensation. Their systems should alert them. After all they're into PWF realms now."

"Yes. In fact they built a solar station, harnessing a dwarf star."

"Good. Might reformat the CI. Or lead it into a non-potentiality."

"Yet its being is on Earth. If it gains hold there Earth will be a shadow reality, pseudo cloned through the CI's PWs."

"But somehow you think the Earther's are not going to just roll over."

"Their potential is inspiring. Teenagers. Smart in a way but lacking experience. Making mistake after mistake. Groping their way forwards by even going backwards incrementally. Not enough to drag them into past probabilities. Drawing on both the future and the past. If Prima wins they will go dystrophic as well."

"Entropic sentience. Not a good sign. Mind you Nesho, even whilst our neighbours they won't really affect us. Until they discover us. I would prefer they take longer than not. Rid themselves of their homicidal urges."

"I agree with you on that one. But why the Primaian way? The Ehrfar are in their heads and yet only a micro percentage actually extract their data, the knowledge of the Ehrfar. I mean they are mentally the most stable race we have ever come across. Abandoned warfare the moment they made the transition whilst still in the stone age. Solved it all by logic and reason. Fast forwarded themselves. I almost envy their natural state. Simple, effective."

"Yes, took us a while to get there."

"Well at least we arrived. Wonder what would have happened if we had fallen under Primaian influence."

"Well we know the results of that."

"We certainly do. Boring."

"A life defined by only one possibility. Their resonance is holding."

"Almost against the odds."

"The power of the mind Nesho."

"Luckily they've externalized what is really internal. Should keep them busy."

"Creating their own mirage, and believing it. Even the Earther's are not that fixated. Almost cynical at times regarding their own beliefs."

"As long as the CI is not completely dominant."

"Is it?"

"Could be. But not for long. There will always be those who would want to emulate it. They'd uncover the trick..."

"Imagine if they duplicated the CI."

"Now that is scary."

"No projections there?"

"Can do."

"It would only work with zero state worlds."

"They were zero state once Monas. The point of the insertion."

"Clever Prima."

"You're not concerned?"

"I'm tired Nesho."

"Really?"

"Of this life. Not life itself. I want to start afresh."

"Have you informed anybody?"

"Not yet."

"Hang in there for a while longer. See what the CI us up to."

"It's the beginning of a long process. My brain feels it."

"Exactly. We might need all the Eternals we can get."

"There are plenty approaching the desired mental state."

"Yes, but inexperienced."

"Immerse them in PWFs. Get them used to alternatives. Let them discover for themselves, learn, what is and what isn't, what appears to be so and what is so."

"I know Monas. It's just that there is an outside chance we will be drawn in. If only due to our proximity."

"We are the closest this side. But don't forget the Earther's."

"Do our work?"

"At least make them aware of the choices."

"It would have to be in the future. When they're ready."

"To be sure. Now would be premature."

"Then again. My suggestion is this. Wait till they go into space, properly. Get established in their solar system. Then see if the Reganians, not us, reveal to them what is going on. The area has exploratory potential. One inward planet that can be cooled and cleaned up, another on the outer. Moons around Jupiter and Saturn. Potential there as well. I think we should come to some sort of decision and go there, if and only if the Reganians don't, won't or can't. That's why the current presence of the CI is so important. Will Earth hijack it and with that the insertion techniques?"

"That would surprise Prima."

"Wouldn't it just." Nesho beamed. "The other scenario is frightening."

"How frightening."

"Nightmare realities."

"You have done your analysis."

"How are the Inserts going?" Nesho half turning towards Monas.

"Last time I checked they were busy getting the basics in place. With what the Reganians really are. With the Primaians the psychic element." Shifting back to his decision. "Since I haven't heard from the Controller I have used my spare time to consider my options."

"As good a time as any. I hope you will stay a little longer."

"Nesho, as a student of history it appears that moments of stability, or momentary equilibrium are rare. It occurs but it doesn't hold."

"The dynamics of the universe." Nesho interrupted.

"No, of consciousness. There are philosophers who reason the universe is in our minds. Sharing a dream. Only at the going over is reality revealed."

"I know. The Dominar. Total druggies. NDE fixated. Emaciated. Didn't last long prior nanos."

"Yet they ride the overlapping field states of various levels of transitional, transmutational resonance fields. Courting death. Hovering at the edge prior dissolution when the soul leaves the body."

"Hanging in there." Nesho contributed.

Not much was known about the Dominar's. They existed, a bit like Monas, in deserted places. Totally focussed on inward consciousness. Then downloaded their revelations which were only available to their inductees. Outer mortals need not come. Nesho had a friend Helra who had blended into their heads by taking an infusion of psychotropic molecular boosters, even caused some havoc there he smiled. Impressed by her sneaky playfulness whilst fully surrounded by super-charged meta realms. Helra doing all the charging whilst the chemical soup in her head had her powering through the Dominar's realms.

Remembering: 'Dream states.' She said after coming down.

'But there's gotta be more...' Nesho a little disappointed at what Helra found there.

'There is. If you can get through the mental bullshit.'

'But is not the mind....?'

'It is. Just not theirs. Maybe one in five, universal law of averages. But they have to have the right orientation. Most are into mere amplification. Fun in its own way. Maybe even self revelatory. But nothing to do with the transitional states they are after. And those that just might get there without their amplified baggage still need a sort of clean lens to see that state, or series of states depending what school of thought you follow. Given they have lifetimes upon lifetimes of data, it would take our systems so much time that no one could be bothered in this age of instant everything. And apart from the Dominar I don't think anyone's bothered for centuries. Unless you want to become an initiate.'

Nesho had not.

"Pity the Dominar's are so immersed they can barely string a sentence together." Nesho said at last, reminiscing. He wondered where Helra was now without intruding.

"You think they'd notice?" Monas sceptical. The Dominar were that swamped with meta-realities they barely figured in their perceptions unless amplified. Induced

madness without the unfortunate side effects that the truly mad suffered. Not that they knew, being too far gone. "What is this madness but an exalted dream weaving reality, embossing sensation, revealing the multidimensionality of every thing from the most insignificant pebble to the most exalted manifestation of life. Or something like it."

"You think the Dominar's would be any use?"

"I'm surprised they were never used to confuse Prima's DVs." Monas said thoughtfully.

"Revelations Monas, revelations. On two levels. Physical and mental."

"I know. Less is better regarding the DVs. Let them fall into their own head states." he laughed. Then the CI appeared, starting to disturb the equilibrium. That annoyed Monas. "So the CI then."

"If it is focussed on its mission, whether it's aware of it or not, means it won't break out."

"It already has."

"Yes over there and on Earth I realise. Personally I think it's a localised event."

"I hope so."

"Hope Monas? Sounds a bit indeterminate."

"That thing could change everything."

"Everything? A bit far fetched don't you think?" Nesho trying to comprehend Monas's apprehension. Nesho put his empty cup on the servo bot.

"Another?"

"No thank you."

Monas finished his coffee. His thoughts less than focussed. He was becoming obsessed with the CI. The Controller, even the Facilitators who were doing the real work of shadowing the Inserts positioned the presence of the CI as part of the greater tapestry which the Inserts revealed back.

They as a race had no problem cloaking themselves. They interacted with whatever advanced race were interested, ignoring the rest. Watching but never acting. Intelligence looked after itself. And if other races destroyed themselves, stuffed up their planet or remained in a zero state then so be it. There were other sentient lives in the universe. Having a few self extinguish through ignorance, stupidity or pig headedness might be for the best. The universe could do without them. Earth close to being in that category yet somehow they always managed to extricate themselves from their self induced entropic mind set.

"So Monas, what do you want me to do?"

"Do Nesho? Why nothing. I needed a chat. Get independent information. Confirming for myself my act of deletion. Maybe we do die. Maybe it is all a dream."

"It's no dream Monas."

"I have considered that. But if as you say a whole new field-space is coming into being I don't know if I could even be bothered anymore."

"Ennui."

"Deeper than that. But yes, that'd do."

"Maybe nature does send a signal to us. When it is time to move on."

"I think so. Just make sure the other Eternals don't get the impression the CI is some wondrous breakthrough. I think it's extremely dangerous in Primaian hands. Nesho, there has never been a civilisation such as the Primaians."

"I'm coming to realise that."

"Good. The Reganians have discovered they can ride PWFs. That is positive. They are positive. It is imperative they remain successful."

"Yes they are a peaceable race of beings. Now that they reached level two...and are moving into space I think they are safe from whatever Prima's intentions are."

"Let's hope so Nesho."

"Hope. Sounds a tad desperate. Not like you."

"The CI is not like anything ever invented."

"Maybe on some other planet Monas..."

"Some entities with a similar bent? Now that would be worrisome." Looking at the brilliant stars above. "Anyway I'm going to make it official that you will not only become a candidate as an Eternal but that you will be my second regarding our interest in that microverse."

"You're giving me access?" Nesho completely taken by surprise. Being a candidate was surprising enough but having data access to this research project was indeed exciting.

"Comes with my current situation. I'll give you all we got. When can you start?"

"Now Monas...and thank you. For both opportunities."

"You've got a stable head space. When dealing with aliens that is of primary importance. Meaning being supinely indifferent to their follies no matter how mental that may be. Not interfering even when they degenerate into war. What madness. One would think the thought revolting enough."

"The Ehrfar do, did."

"Yes. Now there is hope for you."

"That hope I can relate to."

"Pity I can't say the same for the CI."

"If I may say, I think it's getting to you."

"You think so?"

Nesho nodded. "Consider. No alerts?"

"None."

"Well, there you are then."

"I am that Nesho."

"If it becomes a greater threat, we can deal with it." Nesho said with certainty.

Monas wished it were as simple as that. Having Nesho as his second, until he decided to switch off, power down and let nature take its course would necessitate a second opinion not from a fellow Eternal but someone more removed. Most Eternals took a cursory look at the microverse, found it interesting, quaint even, not concerned it was sucking in two galaxies unto itself which would lead to a cosmic explosion in around several thousand million years. Some worry that. They already, like the fledging Reganians could live wherever. There were enough vacant planets which when terraformed meant no great loss of their home planet in millennia upon millennia. Barely focussed interest. Monas seemed to be the only one. The other Eternals quite happy for Monas to focus his attention in his astronomical pursuits. But it was the quest of the Primaian's that worried him. Projections indicated them becoming the dominant force. Their psychic powers for one. If rigged to Regum's PWF generators they could insert realities only the Dominars could dream of.

That scared him. A microverse configured to their aims. All sentient life from then on aligned to their unitary vision. As long as they remained there no one on Arktus would even bother bothering. But if the Primaians broke out...which they had regarding Earth and yet no one cared. Some passing interest at best. Except Nesho. The general indifference worried him. How could such potent developments be ignored? Were they all under Primaian influence? Nothing in the Effluvium to indicate any configured PWFs. Minor fluctuations in the general phase state of space, but even there well within safe parameters.

He hoped they would not be taken by surprise for theoretically the Primaians could create a gestalt switch triggered by either a real or virtual quantum collapse. Was he the only one aware what that implied?

Andromeda: Mission Control

Nesho looked around the complex control centre. Used to simplicity in a world devoid of overly designed complexity. Most computers were complete energy manipulating systems, able to grow along nano packed energy points for just about any function necessary for daily needs.

So when he arrived at Mission Control on behest of the Head Magniter, Monas, he was a little awed at the operational systems in place. Banks upon banks of computer processing units which were, the commander, a tall middle aged sharp minded woman, explained aligned in triplicate. Just to make sure.

No one mentioned names, only designated appellations. They knew by now from their sources in place of DV capabilities able to lock on and in to any targeted personalities. So the vaguer the better. In a way she wished he had not come at all.

Why would a Magniter or his representative even bother coming in real time? How had one such Exalted considered it pertinent to stoop into the real world or in this case real space? There was nothing in the Etherium of that she was certain, unless, she pondered, unless...but there she ceased her speculations.

This had all started as a simple scientific enquiry into a spatial anomaly. With two civilisations at odds. One dominant for a while, but quantum realities being what they were, a mere momentary equilibrium. Something they as Arktarians were good at. Transmuting into currents in space and into minds eddying and flowing through conscious sentience to be dominant. Thus history is written. Change occurred and if the Reganians were smart, would learn by focussed attention and clear mindedness, grow, expand, maybe prosper, live the good life. Obviate Prima's monomania.

Accept goodness as a concept had different connotations to the Primaians. Reganians practised it, their relative kin merely thought it whilst furthering their aims through psychic manipulation. As long as they kept their convoluted, complicated political manoeuvrings to their space all would be fine this end. Then there was that strange perturbation in space.

"And that's where we are now." the controller and Neosho walking along a row of lightscreens. Nine of them, three to each facilitator. Outside, in space the generators were on stand by. Ready without telling Nesho as to what. And he too polite, too impressed, too overwhelmed to ask about their research.

"Why the secrecy? And why was my last leg of the journey so archaic?" with just a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Because...didn't the Head Magniter tell you?"

"No. He..."

"Ah." Indicating to Nesho even that nomenclature was forbidden.

"...just said, what I told you upon arrival."

"You've come at an interesting stage. Actually right from the moment they went in, it got interesting."

"Aliens always are."

"After our first discovery." The controller careful not to mention Earth for fear of being read by the DVs, "nothing is that strange anymore. For the record secondary entanglement has taken place."

"Meddling?" Nesho preferring real conceptualisations.

"Manipulating."

"What are we going to do?"

"We do nothing. You should know that. Or at least the Magniter." Making Nesho ponder if there was not some form of demarcation between mental realms of these focussed singular minded experts and the broad sweep of almost infinite consciousness available to the truly Exalted. "One of the basic laws regarding the use of quantum probable field states. No virtual or real quantum collapse unless it endangers us."

"Of course." Nesho taken by surprise as he pondered on his being so easily distracted out here. It could not be the profusion of machinery unless the quantum processors were virtually aligning with his mind. Still sentience was the big difference, the fault line, the singular demarcation unbridgeable according to the experts in Intelligent Applications.

"So what is the Head after?" catching Nesho by surprise. Loosing mental traction just like that was so unlike him. Unless something was gestating within the processors that was causing his mental drop outs.

"We discussed everything. And the anomaly." Not wishing to release the presence of their suspicion that a CI was self assembling a domain of its own.

"Ah yes. We recalled one of our implants." Keeping even that vague regarding any data gained. "Could be anything." she dissembled until concrete proof other than digital speculations would reveal more. "A programme, processing data or a real time live event." It was up to the Hybrid to suggest what he wanted. Head or no Head, security was her primary concern. It overrode, conveniently she thought, everything. She

would not release any specific data. Simulations of future probabilities were indeed disturbing if all things were equal. Which they were definitely not.

One of the facilitators informed her that his particular task, shadowing his agent had run its course. The probabilities exhausted. Configurations repeating themselves. A sign of having reached a designated end point.

"Recall." Was all she said.

The generators near the base in separate housing went into high gear. For a split second, the configured probable field wave linked, collapsed around the agent and transferred her back into the isolation room. The field dissipated, un-collapsed, became non localised, dispersing all data. A short burst of VBs removed any remnant information from their location. No one would know she had ever been there or was here.

"Time to harvest." She said obliquely. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back. There may even be some news." Nesho was being ignored.

Ratze blinked. One moment she was...gone. She was getting used to being inserted, extracted from realities which for good reason were not accessible regarding her natural memory. Her Brain was there for that. This value neutral room she did remember. Prior her initial departure as they were brought into the picture. The reason for their going.

The Controller informed the Commander. Off duty she arrived by her own g-drive shuttle for the short hop across space from her habitat. The vacuum beam generators kept the debriefing room isolated in space and time as well as protected from any intrusion, DVs included.

Ratze extracted a micro disk from her sleeve's computer. Linked directly to her Brain. It was all there, all she knew, remembered. Which given her design specifications included remnants of extraneous data probing, revealing sources, locations, e-fields, intensity, probable capabilities, possible operational designated assault parameters regarding forward probing informational warfare techniques. And bits of recalled memory states. Left over files.

In the debrief room a headnet was placed over her skull. Tiny glowing nodules, processors would extract what her Brain contained. Information too sensitive even for her. Her Brain lit up. A complete soft smooth creamy effusion like the centre of a dwarf galaxy. Moments later the download complete. Then to assign levels of operational importance, orders of quantum magnitudes, negative probabilities, impending

possibilities, sorting which reality would collapse onto their reality. Through quantum computers. Speed of light processing.

Data secure, noted without comment both by the commander and controller. They were aware that Regum was now capable of generating PWFs. Prima using their Simulacrum, in tandem. Catching up. No mention of Ung or Nervina. Even for one such as Nesho. Less information meant greater possibilities of divergent configurations regarding possible scenario's that would not bifurcate into an array of infinite possibilities.

They knew by now the awful fate that Crashed Regum back into a zero level world. Reality. Not always pretty. Not when there was a world, a sentient race aiming for dominance. The way of unstable beings thinking themselves complete. The great delusion.

Ung would remain as anchor.

Ratze was tasked to align into Nervina's time line and field state, making sure she followed the mapped out algorithms to their logical conclusion. They still had to discover exactly how Regum Crashed. Was it a natural calamity, some major disturbance in their system or did it originate from outside in the form of sabotage. Was their system inherently flawed and therefore unstable. Or were these inserted PFWs? Again were they real, as embedded in space, coagulating, centring on Regum or were they designer PFWs? Prima watching Regum's progress regarding their successful use of this technology in space. Orders were not to track them. It would give the DVs something to latch onto. As to how all this effected Earth would resolve itself once they knew what the Primaians were up to in space.

Nesho was kept outside the isolation room. The vacuum beams keeping the zero-space field on line, the quantum computers generated the designated coordinates to steady the field mimicking space.

Controller and Commander returned back to base where Nesho had watched, fascinated by all this external technology.

"Well Hybrid." The Controller smiled at Nesho, the Commander having transferred straight back to her habitat when she found out one of the Magniter's agents was present. "Space is different. There is too much going on out here. Every spectrum, every wavelength that exists is out there along with dark matter laden with information, every possible probability resonating in the quantum foam of space. We can't afford to get entangled if we want to achieve our aims." Keeping Nesho off centre.

"May I ask?"

"You may. Doesn't mean I have to answer." She said mildly. "But surely the Head Magniter would have briefed you."

"He was vague."

"Sound like someone who knows more than they are willing to admit."

"I know. Goes with the domain. Secrecy creates its own interest, its own intrigue."

"Intrigue. You make it sound like a kabal. It is not. Sensitive is the operational word here."

"It's just an astronomical phenomenon...surely."

"Yes. Studying the anomaly. On the outside a huge gravity well. Inside a micro universe predating ours. Exotic. With sentients. In a dimensionally compressed micro-verse. With amazing capabilities. Advanced. On par due to their PFW technology. The other planet riding the waves mentally. Dominant. Not that they got very far. We are secure, at best we're a remote effect."

"I see." Nesho impressed at the results they were getting here. Not many on Arktus paid much attention to this avenue of research. They were too busy being themselves. Self absorbed. The pinnacle of civilization.

"Anything I can bring back?" meaning the paucity of hard data.

"I've revealed all I can. Unless I get a direct order."

"Of course. I thank you for your time." Not concerned with being sidelined.

"Pleasure. Just don't weave this into any conversation."

"I won't." he returned the smile.

"You can tell this Magniter that we would welcome him any time." The Controller adding a flourish of diplomacy since Nesho had gotten nothing.

Space: Nervina

The ship's systems guided her pod into its compact hangar, magnetic and mechanically clamped. Alerts told her to keep her space suit and helmet on. A little stiffly Nervina got used to walking on wobbly legs. The grip soles giving her a feeling of gravity. Good for the muscles. Prior getting into the ship she had to download her self using the fibre on her sleeve. The ship accepted her and the first of two airlocks opened. A quick chemical fog to make sure no bugs snuck on whilst scanning her systems. Her Brain receded back into her head. Through the second airlock where she peeled off the band which fastened the helmet to her jump suit. She felt the ship slowly re-accelerate. The G drive started positioning its inserted fields ahead of the ship, the ship racing towards it but never quite catching up. Thus phenomenal speeds could be achieved. Way beyond anything as basic as even fusion generators.

The first to greet her was Nah. All the others, Tryces, Loara and Ung were in their sleeping tubes. With Nervina's return they were woken.

Nah asked if she needed nourishment but Nervina was not hungry. The pod was well supplied even if the food came out of tubes. It was the contents that mattered. Minerals and vitamins basically.

"Our group," Nah smiling a little, "has harvested a lot of data from the DVs." They were sitting in recliners in the lounge which doubled as the ship's command centre. A separate cockpit up front, more for manual landings even though the ship could handle just about any known terrain regarding the many planets in their galaxy. Most devoid of life. In fact nearly all. Life indeed was a precious process.

"They haven't realised or understood as yet that every time the Primaians engage in their mental activity they're in fact broadcasting their presence. Our quantum computers can read them like an open book." Tryces added.

"Nifty. And they got no clue?"

"Passive." Nah confirmed.

"Neat."

"Neat but disturbing. How familiar are you with probable quantum field states?"

"That they exist." Her Brain back in low key active mode. Keeping out of the ship's alert systems.

"The accent is on probable."

"Meaning it is only real under specific conditions?"

"More or less." A disingenuous smile. "Language can barely describe adequately how it all fits together. The essentials are in place and cannot be changed. Such as a person's real beingness. Take a given ruler. Say for instance the Primaians want to waste him. They hit him with remote viewing assault teams. Say also for instance they can create PWFs. The ruler of a continent would end up being a minor player instead of say a province or merely a village. The ruler as such remains, just the level of power varies."

"I get it. We go to a planet. That cannot be changed once we go in. As to what we achieve depends on the reality we're in."

"Aha. But will we ever know we're being nudged in this or that direction? The answer there is when our field states are generated nothing can touch us."

"Secure and embedded?"

"Exactly. Only a field state with more energy can wash out our field state. Now the DVs are their own energy, minor players."

"That makes me feel better."

Nah was of course thinking of the inserted now vanished Earth centred simulacrum. It's base state remained on the orbital over Prima but no active psychic resonances were irradiating reality. Nothing overt that directly concerned them.

"Now to this project of ours." He fixed his gaze on her. 'Project?' Nervina thought. 'What Project?' Important no doubt. Her Brain elusive.

"We have a mission to Earth. In conjunction with the Primaian's. Had would be more like it. Suffice it to say we were being used. We thought to explore an opportunity to work together. Instead the Primaians, as usual had their own agenda. Using our PWs to boost their insert who believe it or not has vanished. Sort of." Another diminutive smile. "Now nothing can vanish, ever. The laws of physics just don't allow it. Transmutation yes but not disappearance. I must put a caveat there. Quantum states. Bit like electrons jumping energy states. For a fraction they vanish between states. But they come back. The thing is, this simulacrum, a CI..."

"CI?" Nervina's interest rising.

"Cyber Intelligence..."

Nervina nodded. Her Brain alert. Something familiar. Keep back. 'I will'. She thought to herself.

"...has managed to remove itself. It's somewhere, we know it, has to be."

"Can it stay in it's tunnelling state?" Tryces worried.

"That is our fear. It can do that then it's untouchable. Indestructible."

"But you said energy remains. So it would be indestructible anyway." Ung pretending to be confused to get more information. A quick smile to Nervina.

"My apologies. I meant that rather figuratively. As in containing it, downgrading it, wiping it as a data base. Deleting it preferably, smearing it into a lower state so that it naturally dissipates. Converted into atomic dust."

"Ah." Ung satisfied they could retaliate.

"So we are hoping you and others could help us locate it. One avenue is to search across Earth's history. It's real, apparent, probable, possible histories."

"That is quite an undertaking." Loara shifting in her recliner.

"Has to be done."

"And the quantum computers...can't they guess the configuration of this CI then using that as a grid, field, whatever to detect it? Saves going through Earth's potential realities."

"Very good Loara. That is what we are doing." What Nervina was thinking herself.

"But no luck so far?"

"None. Zero. What we have found though is remnant's of a lost world on Novus. Amazing what one finds when looking for something else. And talking lost worlds, Earth has been, we think the CI is responsible, moved backwards into a lower reality for a lack of better analogies." Nah sombre.

"As in retarding?" Loara jerking upright.

"Exactly. If they can do that..."

"They can do it anywhere."

"Thus the need to find this CI. Luckily they are not creating another simulacrum. It appears, believe it or not, that they can't find it either."

"You mean it...escaped?"

"In a nutshell."

"Wow."

"Yes, well, impressive as it is, it is also a worry."

"Could it have jumped into the future? The past?" Loara wishing it were not so.

"That's the problem. It's all probabilities from here on. You know how many there are out there?"

"A lot?" Nervina laughed.

"Infinite. Well nearly." Nah reluctant to admit defeat.

"That is a lot. Maybe finding kinks in their history, or Prima's or Regum's. Sudden diversions for instance." Ung suggested.

"I know what you mean. The QCs are onto it."

Nervina's Brain felt lighter. She had been soft scanned. Expected. After all, Nervina reasoned, the CI could be hiding in her Brain. Not likely but not impossible either. As a memory of a memory. Then spread around into other similarly capable systems the CI could jump out just about anywhere. If it needed such a handle, a grip to hitch a ride. Like a virus. Still her Brain detected nothing. She was clean.

The ship was decelerating. The star maps on the screens showed just that. Stars. One screen had one up close. A cursor flashed momentarily near it then winked out. Nervina guessed they had arrived at a space station. Its structure, its design remaining hidden. With no image in anyone's head, hers included the DVs had nothing to hook into.

"Your new home." Nah swelling with pride. Regum's secret base. It was good to be trusted.

"I am grateful for having me taken into your confidence Nah."

"Think nothing of it. The system has. Your level is admirable. No retarding tendencies, no remnant homicidal impulses, no configured or masked agenda, none we have found that is." He was still smiling. "Time to meet one of our heads."

"I hope you got several."

"Funny Nervina."

Tuvlov sat back having gone over Nervina's read outs from the ships scanners. Yuli as well. Loara the only one with misgivings.

"It's too good." She said, not that convinced.

"The scanner showed a complex mind. Neurologically she's further up the evolutionary chain than we expected."

"Exactly. Primaian configuration. That is what worries me."

"Yet she doesn't think or act like a Primaian. It's as if...she's..."

"A CI?" Yuli suggested.

"No. Bio enhanced."

"Why keep that a secret from us?" Loara asked.

"So their headcases don't latch on."

"So a kabal within a kabal." Loara not quite believing that.

"What about a future insert? Who knows what our true potentialities develop into." Yuli suggested. "After all we have mastered PW field insertions. That means in our

future we get better at it. Our experiment with their simulacrum proved it. Even Merduk's successful transfer would indicate that at some future date we would have no problem using transition techniques."

"With no field state around or even near Nervina." Loara reminded them.

"She probably is the field state." Tuvlov ventured.

"Extremely tight. Contained." Loara suggested. "Which leaves us with the same problem. What is she?"

"Let's just use her instead." Yuli said.

"That is understood." Tuvlov spoke for them all.

"She could be a double agent." Loara reminded them.

"She's been out of touch since...since she left. Even the DVs are not searching for her. She's gone for good. I'm even thinking she deleted her past."

"That Tuvlov would not make her Primaian then." Yuli preferring to believe she was from their future. "There is another problem." Yuli continued. Loara happy he was vigilant. "If we go too deep it could disentangle her bio enhanced artificial architecture. It could unravel her brain."

"So? We rebuild it." Loara answered.

"Might create data loss. The whole reason for her being in this present." Yuli now shifting perspectives.

"Have you noticed how her presence ties in with the discovery, by her, of the discrepancy on Novus?" Loara furthering her objectives. Wanting results by any means. Lies if need be, rearranging the truth, painting reality another colour.

"Ah yes. The discrepancy. Space embedded. Got that of Ratze."

"Another Primaian." Loara reminded them. "Don't you think it's rather too much of a coincidence?"

"The smart ones are leaving, helping us." Tuvlov feeling benevolent.

"We need them. They are a way back in."

"Prima?" Yuli asked.

"Space." Tuvlov answered.

"Where the discrepancy is distributed." Yuli now focussed on that.

"Maybe we can use it. It affects local base line systems. Can it effect minds?"

"Does yours feel different Loara?" Tuvlov asked.

"No. But remember we are all AI capable. Any reconfiguring would have been noted. Before and after."

"It could be phase transitioning. Like a rising or falling tide. Within, one would never notice." Yuli warned them.

"That's the last thing we need." Loara exhaled dramatically.

"Let's say for the moment it's all an artifice. But effective. That means analysable. So to protect ourselves we use Nervina. If there is a screw up it won't affect us." Tuvlov hoped.

"Well," Yuli continued, "they brought the disturbance to our attention. They didn't have to. Maybe we should talk to Nervina."

"I agree." Loara said surprising the others.

"Nervina, good of you to come. Please take a seat." Tuvlov sitting with Yuli and Loara in the secure enclave where they had been discussing her. Nervina sensed the inbuilt system. Clever. Just like the ship, 'sensitive'. She put her Brain into cruise mode. Let it search for what their quantum computers wanted to know. She even allowed the outside system to have her Brain align if need be.

"Thank you first of all for having me back. Been a while."

"We're glad you're here." Tuvlov continued. Whilst they had waited for her they came to the conclusion that by working with them on astronomical research Nervina would, unconsciously reveal her true programmed, configured or boosted capabilities. If she manipulated the results it would divulge her true state. By working with basic data no real damage would be done. If she went active or worse, hostile, she would feel the full wrath of the system. It had certain intimidating processes which could scramble malicious hardware and its applications. Real time obliteration if need be. Time to find out.

"We have a proposition. First of all we are grateful for alerting us to the discrepancy. Remarkable really. All to do with placing bets on Novus. Still it's in the detail when it comes down to it. Details which either escaped those who ought to know or hoped it would not be uncovered. Either way...not that it matters now. One thing is certain. No one seems to be acting on that information. That gives us a natural lead in, one we wish to maintain and Nervina, keep secret." Yuli explained.

"Understood."

"Happy to be an astronomer?"

"Happy."

"You will of course be working under Usaki."

She tried to recall him but came up blank.

"That's great."

"We thought so."

Yes thought Loara. By having them together they could find out if anything connected between the fields. If she did have an agenda.

The person who she next met with was Tryces. A little younger than her, pleasant enough without trying. With just a serious streak of an attuned mind in what he was engaged in, a little reserved, which suited her. Tryces was indeed a good companion, fellow worker and what she knew as well minder. Tryces had a way of mulling things over, only committing himself to an opinion after carefully considering all the angles.

As to his view of her he would be at a loss. Whilst Nervina did not play any head games she was not about to reveal her real true self either. Not because of any antipathy, she seemed to be accepted here, but the customary caution in giving away as little as possible. They claimed to be secure here but as long as the DVs were in existence so was possible penetration.

She knew by now that this solar station was so positioned that Prima had little chance of detecting it. Hidden from Regum's satellites, observatories, even WebSpace. Tryces assured her they were as isolated as could be. Huge massive shields were assembled in space which extracted the almost limitless energy from the near star driving their quantum computers which in turn generated false realities blanketing out their presence as well as giving the appearance the star was not surrounded by the shield's energy extractors. Once the PWFs were used they would actually vanish from real space as well.

That made her feel better.

Ung Nervina sensed was her usual reticent self. Present in mind, her Brain on standby, baseline alert. She too had gotten away in a manner which suggested the ability to make sure she was not going to be pursued. If she was, Ung being ex DV, her scanning capabilities were there to alert them of any undue interest shown in her, the staff, the station. Able to dampen attention. Being a false persona. To the DVs just another vacant Primaian with few natural abilities. Maybe a little volatile, some innate tendencies for minor psychic insights, but nothing more. Certainly no overt plans of any kind. Nervina one of the team tasked with keeping an eye on Ung. Not that Nervina minded. Ung as an ex-DV was domain aligned. Close to her without running parallel field states. Just like Ratze, Ratze...

Nervina got used to life on the station. Finally a harbour, a centre where she could hopefully relax, be herself.

Herself. It felt odd now that she was out of the turmoil that seemed to interfere with her wish to be merely left alone. Find out what she could regarding the Discrepancy. She had done that.

Out here things were simpler. There was still an organisational structure in place but nothing like on any of the planets she had visited. Different personnel engaged in their duties most of which were obvious this being a research station. No doubt they were engaged on a deeper level as well. Containing the DVs. Given Nervina's refugee status she had been informed by Loara, a suspicious type, probably their intel officer, to stay away from any DV activity should it ever reach this far out. Whilst asked to keep a look out for any unusual target specific occurrences. The DVs, Loara informed her were still focussing in broad spectrum modes on the alien field. The mocking tone in her voice contemptuous mingled with a touch of cynicism.

"It's a photon spread." Loara said. "A candle has more energy than what is coming in from out there. You would have to be acutely paranoid to think, never mind feeling mentally that that could have any affect whatsoever. Still, they might in their search stumble across us as an anomaly. Since you're one of them, keep alert. Without intrusive means. Passive only."

Loara had no idea that Nervina was enhanced way beyond even their current means. Nervina knew the Reganians had several AI levels, the latest out here in an enhanced state. Boosted and the possibility of aligning with PWFs. That interested her. Those she guessed who were that capable were judicious with that capability. So far her Brain merely itched now and again as she came across their resonating mentally boosted competence.

Tryces called on Nervina, with Ung in tow. Time to team up with Usaki. They were going to go for the Discrepancy. Knowing now that the background radiation was value added, content rich it was time to extract, assemble what they could from it. Loara joining them. Nothing in her Brain to indicate Loara was probing.

"How heavy is it?" Nervina asked as they made their way along the corridor leading from the stations quarters. The passageway had kinks in it. Tryces informed her that at random moments the SS 1 realigned and reassembled itself. Never the same plan twice. If there were intrusions, meaning DVs what they got would quickly be superseded. To reduce confusion coloured lines marked the walls leading to the different sections of the station. Red for emergency escape leading to pods, magenta for the nearest safe

room, green for general routes, orange for technical and support systems, bright yellow towards the various laboratories, pink for computer systems management, blue for their living quarters and the social hub including the canteen and the gym which was recommended and brown for overall command.

"Nothing like the DVs Nervina. But not to be underestimated either. You know yourself the hive mind of the Primaans. So watch out in your dreams. That I got from Jez. Once they get a fix they won't let go,"

"I'm always reminding myself of that possibility."

They were following the yellow line.

"We can't take chances. They can. You know they can give the false sensation of boosting your psychic abilities..."

"Sounds dangerous. But that would mean the target can reverse the process and get into their heads."

"That would take a very special mind. Strong would barely cover it. Focussed to the nth degree. And stamina to outlast them. If you can do that, the resultant mayhem would be joy indeed."

"So it hasn't been tried."

"No."

Nervina looked at Ung who was somewhere else. Eyes focussing on some distant, maybe inner focus.

"Entrapment or worse, self destruction."

"Really. As in suicide?"

"Feigned madness. Possible. It hasn't happened as yet."

"But its possible."

"Anything is possible Nervina."

"Which could include sabotage." Loara reminded her, then.

"Very high on the list. Thus the scanners everywhere. We have to be alert all the time."

She did not admit that her Brain sensed their low key activity. Ung was following them rather than walking with them. Concentrating, her large black eyes distant, her mind preoccupied.

"Let's say I become a target." Nervina ventured, as they turned another corner. "The scanners alert me? Some alarm go off?"

"System's notified. You get an alert. If you're possessed we got medico's on call who can knock you out." Loara explained.

"Become disentangled."

"Yes. The neat thing is that the DVs still think they got possession of the mind. The cocktail you have in you creates that impression at their end. That way we get what they're operating capabilities are and their target acquisition. And now I shall leave yas to it." Loara turned and left.

They came to a hole in the floor, made their way down the shaft along a central grip then a solid sealed door lock. Heavy duty, heavy metal. More like the entrance to a vault.

Iris scanned, then a touch pad to read their DNA. The vault open-end not directly into the observatory, but into a short corridor. The procedure was repeated, another thick rod locked vaulted door swung open.

The outer section of the observatory lined with screens, some solid monitors, others light screens, wires everywhere from several computers and separated processors. No overall central unit so as to isolate their functions in case of cyber attack. Air vents everywhere sucking out the excess heat, feeding it to the hydroponic section where their food was grown.

None of the support staff glanced at them, busy in front of their screens. Showing different sectors of space. Some were filtered monochrome to highlight certain objects, some were temperature gradients, plasma levels of stars, the general EM field surrounding them, some abstracted various wavelengths. At the other end three round doors leading to the observatories. A screen for each of the planets.

"We even have an external observatory, a satellite to keep an eye out on Regum especially. If the DVs hit that at least the observatory here will continue. It's programme mimics the station. Really it's a passive ground state telescope, both EM and optical."

"You know Tryces, on Prima all this is top secret. The observatory there is not even known to the public. It's at some desert location along with the launch site for the shuttle. Did you know that there are millions who think Prima is just an agrarian society?" Nervina revealed.

"Nothing surprises me coming from them. Disgusting. Knowledge is meant to be shared. It's a universal given."

"Not when there are no means of acquiring it. Anybody shows any signs of inquisitiveness, or intelligence specific aptitudes and they are either whisked away, trained in secret never to return, or mentally remoulded to stay in the mental state comparable to that of a peasant. It's the greatest conspiracy on any of the three planets."

"We know Nervina." Tryces said with a tinge of sadness in his voice. Ung was still spaced. "It's ironic you know. On your planet potential astronomers are sought after. On Regum we can't get enough. Everyone's in the Web. Preferences are for the virtual. The actual brain work involved avoided. Most of our workers come from the Habitats. Those that are bored with the utopian life that is." He gave a thin smile his eyes involuntarily darting over the screens. One of the researchers gave a laconic wave without turning away from his focussed attention. Then entering some data he rose and walked over.

Light brown, most probably a recent arrival, middle aged, brown eyes, short black hair, thick lips, a mixed racial type from Regum, introduced himself. "I'm Ahir, assistant to Usaki who ought to be here but is most likely at cupola number two. Probably setting it up, getting it ready. And you must be Nervina. Ung I know. Welcome." A pleasant open smile. "We are honoured to have you." Which surprised her.

"Honoured? I should be extending that curtesy Ahir."

"Well, thank you. But you are the first Primaian ever to grace our presence. And one of such standing."

"Standing?" Nervina non plussed.

"Given your status. Bluntly put," Tryces happy, "you being a defector."

"Which ought to arouse suspicion."

"You were cleared ages ago Nervina." Tryces replied.

"Then I am honoured twice over."

"And you Ung." Ahir focused on her. A little puzzled. Ung came out of her state, smiled demurely and lowered her head a little. "Thank you Ahir. A pleasure to meet you, all of you." Barely a whisper. Something still occupying her Brain.

"Yuli," introductions over, Ahir continued, "was a bit vague, as is Usaki. Something about a discrepancy, background radiation located somewhere in our galaxy. Usaki's getting the scope ready, passive search. Approach unknown phenomena with caution. Exciting never the less. Something to study, something to learn." barely containing his excitement.

The second door irised open. In walked a short man, all energy as he approached the group. His stubby arm and hand outstretched, in his jump suit everybody wore out in space. He stopped abruptly and said: "Delighted, delighted, delighted." Dispensing with introductions he got to the point: "I've set the coordinates for the galactic centre, which considering is easy to find. Thought I'd start there and work my way out. Take a seat." looking around for some spare chairs. Tryces moved two over.

"I'll leave you two to it." Tryces looking over the room then left.

"By all means." Usaki said after him. "Very talented. Wish we had more of him."

"Maybe I could help." Ung volunteered. Her voice far away.

"Indeed young lady. Excellent, excellent. Tell Yuli or whoever is the current general officer. Maybe initially as an observer? Someone has to do the hard yards. I know," Usaki powered on, "computers can do that, but oversight is still preferable here."

"Naturally." Ung concurred.

"Good good. We'll work out a roster. Seated comfortably? You can swivel around if you want to watch the machines rather than me." He laughed depreciatingly, whilst looking at the screens then returned his gaze on the two women seated in front of him. "Who wants to be first?"

Nervina knew Ung would not volunteer. So she waited. When she looked at Ung she had that distant feeling about her again. She was locked on to something but wasn't saying. "You go Ung."

She took a deep breath as if she had forgotten to breathe. "I trained as a DV."

"Ah yes. Deep Visionaries. Amazing, truly amazing what they can do. But go on, don't mind me."

"Top secret. Scanning space, thwarting the alien incursion. Actually trying to nix it at its source whilst pushing it back as well. I was there to assign various DVs to target specific sections. Earth as well. Regum too but not Novus. Others of course are there for spiritual reasons. Trying to align their soul with the Great Cosmic Mind. Nothing ever released. A domain of its own."

"You were control."

"And guide."

"And guide? Fascinating."

"That's it." pure Ung. Keep it simple.

"And what do you make of space?"

"Nothing. Apart from the EM spectrum."

"Nothing full of something. Unseen but there. Very good. You see Ung, some DVs have visions. Just making sure."

"No visions Usaki."

"Wonderful. A rational mind. Commendable. No delusions plaguing you." Ung was about to say something but dropped the thought. Nervina almost tasting what was going on in her head. She was tempted to use her Brain but with all this sensitive equipment around she thought it best not to go active.

"You see Ung, Nervina, space may be empty. But something in itself. Doesn't make sense but there it is just the same. Would you agree?"

"It's logical." Ung replied.

"Any mental associations come to mind?"

"I let them come then let them go. I can detach Usaki."

'You're not detached now.' Nervina thought to herself.

"Inspiring!"

Ung merely observed him.

"No alien incursion then I take it?"

"Alien..." Ung repeated slowly as if trying to get a mental taste of the concept.

"False associations, subjectively tainted. Anthropomorphic subterfuge."

"I see, Yes. Good. Go on, please."

"Energy field. Seemingly infinite. The rest is imagination."

"And yours?" Nervina curious what he thought.

"As I said," as if dealing with a slow student, "mental associations, of no relevance, astronomically speaking. But if you wish to pursue this on a psychological level..."

"No. Yes, another time maybe. Not now. Good point Usaki. I think what Ung is trying to say," Nervina added, "is that space transmits energy fields. The Primaians think it's some god. Maybe their minds are configured in coming to that conclusion. I certainly don't. Ung is on a similar wavelength." Nervina hinted since Ung had withdrawn again. "What is is. Sounds trite I know."

"No that's fine, go on, please."

"Space is full of energy patterns. Waves and waves of it. As your monitors reveal. And keeping coherent in that mess. That is remarkable. Nothing alien about it. Or rather totally so." looking back at Ung. She was not disagreeing.

"Good. Fine. Settled. Wonderful. Both of you are natural scientists. Marvellous. Now Nervina. As you uncovered this discrepancy..."

"Yes. A puzzle really. I'm speculating here. For a field to exist it must have a source. When that source goes active it ought to generate a wave front, an interphasing of and with present fields. A disturbance. It must have spread out a while ago for it seems constant now. No variations within it. Steady state. Maybe." She added for good measure.

"Which we shall ascertain. I'm sorry, go on."

"Finished." Nervina half smiling at Ung. She returned the gesture still preoccupied.
 "Anything else?"

Ung said: "There would be mental associations."

"I see. Actually it's a bit more complicated. But never mind, never stopped anyone from trying to understand. So bear with me for a moment as I go off flying all over the place. We are not machines. We cannot help but associate. I agree with Ung that with proper training one can switch off. Not for long but long enough. I try myself but it really is hard. When we look into the universe we bring our knowledge with us. Even the history of how those ideas were formed, how certain conclusions were arrived at. That includes the guiding principles behind those ideas, be they philosophical, scientific or religious. The mind is just so innovate, creative, reflective, involved. Involved ladies. If we disassociated the mind would we be able to perceive? Don't answer that! Just a thought. I think the answer is yes! Our AI state is of benefit there. Keep the chatter out. Still when looking out there it's a mental construct. Created by our minds, our creative mind. Is it then creating or mimicking the higher order of reality out there? Who knows? Time will tell! So this space, this nothing, this everything is the ultimate of mental teasers. What appears as nothing contains everything. The simple minded go all religious and gooey. Luckily my brain is missing that bit. For me it's necessary to switch my preconceptions, or rather try and avoid them. Yet I seem to feel intuitively that this nothing is something. You have to excuse my circumlution. But space is the ultimate puzzle which every time I gaze into it astounds me. It even stops me from sleeping. The vast potential. And we haven't even touched on PWFs yet." His animated eyes looking at each of them rapidly.

"Hm. You're right of course." What Usaki didn't know was with their Brains the mental baggage which they didn't even have with them, so not there, would not get in the way of seeing what was really there. As is. So Nervina played along. Ung remained her silent self. What was going on in her head? She was itching to know but couldn't open up. Annoying. Well it would have to wait.

"Down to the task or tasks at hand." Usaki looking business like. Refocussed after his little diversion which he felt was necessary to be laid out for them. "First, everything is a group effort. We all share in whatever input we have."

They nodded.

"Right." Relishing the challenge. "We begin at the GC and pull back from there. See if the discrepancy is inward, outward oriented or a quantum field state. There are three ways of observation. Passive visual, multi spectrum and VBs. Vacuum Beams is high

energy. It tunnels through space towards its designated area giving instant real time data. Zero time differential."

"Congratulations. Ahm, a minor point. How far away is the galactic centre?" Nervina asked.

"Give or take around twenty thousand light years."

"So if it is there," for her Brain knew it was, "then it would now be twenty thousand years into its future, our present."

"Aha." Usaki beamed.

"It would be even further advanced."

"Yes I see what you mean. Excellent, you understand." Not worried what it might imply. "But it is still twenty thousand light years away. Plenty of time."

"Yes." She agreed for the sake of form. Her Brain alerted her that perhaps it was not going to wait that long. It was all wrong. It might be influencing them right now. Tryces had said that they were isolated here. But out there, in real space it could be doing all sorts of things. Interfere with their mental processes, try and shape them, orient them, align them and no one would be the wiser. Maybe the DVs could tell the difference. Maybe they became transmitters or worse amplifiers. If Usaki used the VB would the Discrepancy download itself into the systems here? Or focus itself as another power node? They were using the star's energy then so could it.

A new light screen appeared behind Usaki. A blink on his sleeve alerted him. "Centred. The scope is ready. Shall we?"

He swivelled around.

In the cupola, in all its glory shone the brilliant centre of the galaxy. The dazzling white glow of countless stars, a nimbus, the starry necklace of several spiral arms majestically curving outwards into space, towards them. Other arms spread out to each side, glowing serenely in wispy white.

"I've taken the immediate stars around us out so that we can see the galaxy more clearly."

"It's beautiful." Nervina awed by the sheer size of it. "It's like I can feel its power, words aren't sufficient it's so impressive. It's all there, everything and here we are at the edge of it. Maybe other life forms are watching as we are. So eternal, so powerful, so overwhelming, so inner whelming. To be a part of it all," she gestured, "is really something special. And to think that it is poisoned by some alien field. Doesn't make sense."

Ung was watching but still one level removed. Casual, her face as impenetrable as ever. Usaki was like Nervina fascinated, impressed, in wondrous rapture. Yet he must have seen it countless of times.

"My thoughts as well."

"This has given birth to us, to life. If the galaxy would not be neither would we. We owe it our existence. No wonder the ancients worshiped the stars."

"And when the telescope was invented, it started us on that great journey of discovery, gaining knowledge, embracing science."

"So much energy. I can see how Prima thinks it's all divine. This a mental overlay, just like their alien field. Which by the way seems conspicuous by its absence. Just to think that by the light of the stars, the suns all this is revealed." Nervina talking more to herself. "How did it get here? Prima of course tells it as some divine fiat which explains nothing. So the how remains."

"Either they don't know and out of ignorance created their mental constructs," Usaki answered, "or they do know and aren't telling."

"Because it doesn't fit their theology."

"Oh I wouldn't say that." Ung replied, coming out of her voidstate. "If it is as eternal as the universe then it maintains itself by drawing on energy from space. In equilibrium. The excess energy become new stars. Self maintaining, self replenishing."

"Stars being created. How marvellous, forever." Usaki beaming.

"So it appears." Ung replied. Not believing it. Focussed on discovering how the universe really functioned. Prima using outmoded methods of thinking to explain it all. Nervina captivated by the sight.

"Eternity. How soothing. No beginning, no end. It gives me faith in the future. Life eternal. As long as the stars shine, so shall we. I really feel touched by it all." Nervina in rapture.

"It is a magnificent sight."

Her Brain saw the dark centre, the black hole. The purple haze, the lilac sphere sitting there. Using the power of the galaxy to feed itself then send out its resonance across time and space, manipulating creation. Nearly driven to anger. But as ever her Brain stabilised her reaction, the heat of her fury dissipated, reabsorbed just like that phenomena out there. She calmed down. Observing Usaki if he too had seen what her Brain had. Then to Ung. She was watching but back in that same partial state of hers.

Confirmation. Or a programmed overlay? The certainty that that was inimical would not leave her alone. She had to guide Usaki towards it.

"What's at the centre?" hint hint.

"Stars."

"But wouldn't they melt together? That's what it looks like from here."

"Wait for the VB to power up. Then we can see what's really there."

"Until then what about magnification? Or is this the max.?"

"No. Just a matter of punching in the order..." as Usaki busied himself with some instructions.

The screen went all white. It was obvious that visually the stars were in the road. Unless...

"Usaki can the computers give us an image from the top?"

"It would be simulation only."

"Can you, please?"

"Why not." inserting new commands into the system. Slowly the galaxy began to tilt giving them the feeling they were rising by degrees. The galaxy turning into an oval. Finally when centred above on the northern axis the inner black hole. Sucking in countless stars and spewing out the excess energy towards their position as high energy particle beams.

"Thought so."

"You knew Nervina?"

"Guessed." She fibbed. "All those stars being compressed. It would increase the mass at the centre. And with more mass you get more gravity. In theory continue piling it up and gravity takes over. Yet an equilibrium is maintained. This dark star cannot grow for ever. Otherwise the galaxy would have vanished millennia if not millions of years ago."

"Nervina! I'm impressed. Were you an astronomer back on Prima?"

"If I was they deleted that."

"They didn't do a good job then. I'm delighted. Of course this dark star is a mystery. Swallowing up light itself. That takes a lot of gravity...energy."

No sign of the discrepancy. Given the forces involved it barely made a dint in the picture. The VB ought to reveal that.

Outside the station the array of panels slowly building themselves around the star, shielding the station, collecting energy routed to the VB propulsion unit. As its generators built up the necessary energy Ung suddenly said: "Don't go all the way in."

Ung said the words with some difficulty. She felt thick. A viscous ethereal substance had entered her headspace. Given its contents, its unilateral direction towards Regum it could only be the DVs. But this time it not only felt different when she

was target oriented, it was different. Whether it was the simulacrum guiding them to a minor degree, whether accessing the background radiation to draw more psychic strength or if they had developed a greater potency all informed her that they were planning something way back there over Prima. A potent field presence. DV entangled though not sourced there.

It, whatever it was had started...something. Not even subtle. Not exactly remote viewing though there was an element in that. It was not sentient focussed, more abstract, trying to shove its way into WebSpace. For the resonance appeared more abstract than individually target focussed. As such the Vacuum Beam would have to traverse, tunnel through both WebSpace and DV loaded space.

"Don't go there." she asked Usaki urgency in her voice.

"No effects noted Ung. I correct myself, no effects affecting the beam, or its trajectory or the data gleaned. Why?"

Without looking at Nervina she felt her presence, both welcomed it as one fellow traveller...strange that it was only now, whilst this other field was in place that Ung fathomed something within her, a meeting of minds...no, not minds, Brains. Was Nervina enhanced like her? Ung barely knew who she was, what she was made of, what she really was doing apart from being a background observer. Counting the stars. Making sure all were present and correct. Out of equilibrium now the DVs had united. United. A hive presence, focussed, determined, definitely oriented towards Regum. A swarm of heightened minds reading their environment. Their target.

"The DVs have laid a field down. Unless you can go around it." Ung suggested.

"We haven't got that far yet Ung. Linear only. But you have made a good point. You are correct in that the beam traverses the Web. It's a way for us to keep in touch, see what is going on in there. Mere moments as the beam pushes its way to its destination."

Ung knew what the beam could do. "Going through the DV field would alert them. I would suggest you alert Regum of heightened DV activity."

"Always up to something. Never anything good." Usaki sighed. "So you think this could affect the results?"

"Maybe not that, but if I have this right it's malignant."

"Ung the beam is sealed in by three EMFs. That's how it is generated. Three linear EMFs actually extract whatever mass there is in a tiny fraction of space. As the mass is momentarily absorbed and dissipated outwards, inside a true vacuum with zero time is established. That in turn speeds up the projection exponentially. More space is cleaned

out, more zero time, more acceleration. The DVs would only get what is expelled, not what is within the three EMFs that form a cordon sanitaire around the beam."

"Then Regum should be made aware of some extremely high energy fluctuations. DV sourced." Ung realised Usaki and his team, even Ashir his second had thought nothing of the DVs presence.

"Did you ever focus the beam inwards Usaki?"

He was in a dilemma. Though both Ung and Nervina were cleared to work with him it didn't mean they had access to their data. Both were ex Primaians and very heightened natural stable volatiles at that. A mighty catch. Rare. Further soft scans showed them to be slightly unstable at the extreme end of conscious thought, where the mind's unconscious began. There quantum fluctuations virtually quivered. Ready to jump energy states. If Usaki could take a guess, now that he thought about it, these two seemed to have quantum processors within their skulls, boosted. For every thought was in a way a quantum state, a superimposition, an engaged phased wave field state. So if Ung here was warning him...he would pay attention.

"Would it be safe to probe this DV field?"

"Soft scan?" Nervina suggested.

"You mean remote visuals?" Usaki explained.

The two women nodded. Ahir came over, smiled and said the VB was ready,

"Did you catch what Ung said?"

"To be honest, no. Just snatches" looking with his big brown eyes at her.

Usaki mentioned what Ung had related.

"Jez."

"I'll call her." rising and going to the intercom.

Nervina watched the dark centre of the galaxy. Fascinated how an object like a huge dark star could even exist. Compressing masses of stars into a new form of matter. Her mind boggled, her Brain focussed. Seeing nothing. Correction, an absence of photon activity. A different perspective was necessary to understand it. She was reluctant to engage her Brain. Not that anybody here saw her as an aberration just yet. Or Ung. Her seemingly natural association puzzled her. She had had a similar feeling towards Ratze. 'Ratze, where are you?' A stray thought. 'Anywhere.' Her Brain told her. 'A quantum state?'. Silence. She refocussed as Usaki and Ahir discussed what was to be done.

Jez appeared. Looking a little worn. Pulled out of sleep or, to Ung in a RS. Straight away Jez focussed on Ung as if saying 'I know.' Ung's barely noticeable expression acknowledged contact.

"I was censoring. DV activity is up." Jez remarked after sitting for some moments without even bothering to look at the galaxy.

Usaki filled her in.

"Ung is right. Too risky. Until we have deflectors in place, something that can be brought up as a chaos crunching defensive countermeasure I would suggest caution."

"But we've gone through them before." Usaki really wanting this experiment to go ahead.

"Yes I know." Jez answered. "To them its like a rip in space. Luckily there is so much high energy loaded into space that your, our fractional tear could still register. Even if not the brightest." Jez smiled, "scientifically. But they are up to something. I gather Earth is currently off the agenda."

"Can't be there all the time. Don't want to alert them of our capabilities." Ahir reminded them. Jez agreed.

Usaki replied. "Well that means we have to do without. Run it as a simulation. We got enough I should think." Looking at Nervina then Ung. "And to think we never bothered with the GC. I have to thank you both. You Nervina for bringing it up and you Ung for making it clear what is standing in the way."

Nervina's Brain called forth the image of the galaxy. The position the angle completely different. Was she accessing some distant satellite? Or had her Brain positioned itself inside Regum's WebSpace? No answer from her Brain. No surprise there. Sometimes it held on to data that was not as yet ready to be released. But the telemetry was there. That was released.

"I've got something that may help." Nervina said at last, waiting for a lull in the conversation.

"What is it?" Usaki turned to her.

"The galaxy of course. From my travels." She dissembled.

"You boosted?" Jez wanting confirmation.

"Minor stuff." She tried to sound modest. Ung's eyes flared momentarily. Recognition. A subtle warning as well. Not connecting. Leave it for another time. Wait for the right conditions.

"Let's have it then." Usaki eager as a child at his birthday party.

"Where can I patch in?" Nervina looking around her. The cupola fully loaded. She knew she could directly download her knowledge of the Discrepancy into their quantum computers.

"I'll show you." Ahir rose animated.

This must be new terrain for them. What had they been doing all this time? Assembling the station, testing the equipment, focussing on Earth, inserting micro PWFs. Present at its inception. Great timing. She looked at Ung who, now that she knew, was back keeping watch on the DVs.

'If what I think they are doing,' Ung thought to Nervina, 'I'd say the DVs are trying to run interference...' then was distracted by the imagery coming out of Nervina's head who pulled her seat over and attached a fibre optic strand to the astronomical data base.

Going broad spectrum regarding the GC.

Glowing three dimensional geometry on a galactic scale. Energy fields. Long lime green arced lines falling into the black centre. Mass compressed, drawn in. High energy ejecta spewing out from its north fast rotating hole, a linear stream dissipating into space.

Nervina's expression neutral as she observed the data being released from her Brain. Smart enough to reposition itself to where they now were, not from where the data acquired.

The image of the galaxy grew more centred as the picture expanded. With a distortion, minor at this scale but observable. The Discrepancy. It too was absorbing energy but not the mass of congealed stars at the rim of the irradiating outer centre. Drawing in black matter. Configuring, a process. On the screens data was scrolling down in massive streams, all funnelled into the station's library. The secondary orb a slightly shimmering lilac. Just like her vision.

"Something is really there." Usaki said excited. "Remarkable Nervina, remarkable." All motivation. "Hanging at gravitational intersections, a monumental balancing act. Dispersing excess energy in those lilac waves. Stopping itself from overloading. Mimicking its own gravity well. Amazing."

"Computer's handling it. Plenty of room as far as buffers go." Ahir said.

The image vanished. Nervina retracted the fibre and rolled her seat back over to the group. Usaki recalled the numerical downloads once more using his remote.

"Absorbing about ten percent of the energy. Hm, at the interphase it undergoes a transition, broken down into...numerical components. Siphoning the stuff of space. Dark matter. Who would have thought space was matter."

"Its information." Nervina said coming directly from her Brain.

"Information? How?" Ahir leaning forwards.

"How?" Nervina laughed easily. "No idea. Just there. Embedded in space."

"I know." Usaki piped up. Eager as can be. "It's a guess only. PWs, all of them. The stuff of space, the stuff of reality. The universe has all the possibilities in place. It would explain why civilisations vary. Prima's theological bent, Regums high technology, Novus somewhat to a lesser extent and the multiple divergencies on Earth. Earth with so many possibilities, correction, actualities together in one place. From the distant stone age to space faring potential. It all makes sense, it's all falling into place." Usaki fervent with excitement.

"You got that right. And it's all falling into the discrepancy as well." Nervina reminded them.

"A micro, well macro Earth?" Ahir asked.

"Could be. But there's no link. No connection. The similarities are...not that similar."

The numbers on the second screen started looping. Usaki switched it off.

"You're right Usaki. No wonder the DVs are so potent. They might not know it but they can link into this dark matter..." Nervina said.

"Their Cosmic Consciousness, Great Architect etcetera." Ung said quietly.

"Yes, makes sense." Ahir confirmed. "But how can they miss all the other data?"

"Mental attunement, self designed filters." Nervina answered.

"Self reinforcing." Ung added.

"Affecting this dark matter?" Usaki intrigued. Now that he knew, confirmed, almost, nearly, though still hypothetical. Use Regum's view of the cosmos. It, with the embedding of WebSpace might just become dominant. Prima's own perception of how they saw the universe would be contained within their resonating mind which to them would look like the total field. A micro-universe attuned to their mind set. The rest to them an aberration. The same of course from Regum's attuned view. So much was falling into place, into space! Then there was Earth, a potpourri of potentialities. Their minds flooded with conflicting data inputs. It would explain the constant discord they underwent. Each reality vying, like a rank garden teeming with diverse flora, for a place in the greater scheme of things.

"The DVs actually configure their targets perception according to Prima's overarching vision. Making it appear to those under its influence that their vision is the real thing." Ung said. "Replacing one reality with another."

"When in fact it is only one of many." Ashi suggested. "I think a meeting is in order."

"I agree." Usaki replied. "You're both invited." Usaki beamed like a proud professor. Happy his students had bested him.

"Our way has its place in the universe. Now to make Prima realise that it's not about domination but coexistence. Their view is as secure as ours. As is Earth's. Trouble is making them realise that." Ung related.

"I know." Nervina stretching her legs.

Usaki rose, a spring in his step and walked over to the intercom. He spoke for several moments.

"It's going to be informal." Usaki said. "If the DVs, as Ung has indicated are plotting something then it stands to reason they would have created an exclusion zone. Maybe even a mind field alert to any countermoves. Anyone probes and they jump down that. Now we know we're fairly secure here. The station generates its own cacoon. DV proof. Though of course we do have other methods available." He said for the benefit of Ung and Nervina. Ung had reverted to her remote sensing mode. Jez riding on the outer levels, keeping her mind on Ung Nervina's Brain informed her.

An hour later saw them in the library. Usaki had received a message from Tuvlov that as this was an exploratory meeting Nah would represent him. A gathering of minds, no matter how secure they felt, always carried the inherent danger of leaking their mental brain waves into the ether. A term they had picked up from Earth which they felt comfortable with. The meeting being more or less informal also allowed for greater divergence. Then when they had thrashed out all the potentialities, dealt with possible probabilities they could get down to actualities. Usaki agreed.

In the library, servo-bots served tea, coffee, biscuits, little energy boosters for brainwork. The aroma of the coffee was dominant. Nah already present lazily looking at the labels of the disks stacked along the walls. There were even ancient grooved plastic disks. Analogue. Incorruptible. Folders with paper. Ultra secure behind climate controlled casings. Nervina's Brain ascertained false reality screens on the plexi pane showing merely astronomical observations in the form of holographic imagery. Her Brain could see right through. The library even had a Primaian reconfigured containment field in place. This time not to suppress their minds as originally intended but to suppress DV activity. Creating the appearance of a room stacked with routine reports.

Ung had a decision to make. If she boosted herself she would give her capabilities away. The DVs trying to jam the Web, cause havoc without any other sub programme in place, running interference which had not changed the whole time, aware of their probing, Ung let her link lapse. The library was mute. No active or passive extraneous activity. Just monitors and playback apparatuses. Several desks for perusing written material. Ahir moved the desks together in the centre, they all helped themselves to tea, coffee and biscuits, engaging in small talk.

Loara entered. "Only here as an observer. Star's going through its usual convulsions. Just thought in case anyone wants to transmit."

"Ready then?" Nah asked them generally. They all assented.

Usaki filled them in. "Our data is with the coordinating committee."

"It certainly gives us an edge." Nah finally said. "Currently our resources," meaning the PWF generator at the station, "is doing useful work." Referring to Earth. Even with Ung and Nervina's being accepted, Nah did not wish to reveal too much. The two women might be the top end of Primaian enhancement, still the very fact they were defectors made him cautious. They could revert any moment, targeted by DVs to cause all sorts of problems. Still they had made them aware of the Discrepancy. And Jez, really there to shadow them had as yet found no subterfuge being perpetrated by either of them. Up to now they really had left their past lives behind them.

Nah began the presentation as to where they were at and where they were heading, remarking that this did not guarantee projected outcomes. The others nodded in agreement. Ung and Nervina held back, regarded themselves as observers. For now.

First was the tricky development in how the CI and Merduk had created tunnelling quantum jump gates. They were currently using uncollapsing reverse coherence time analysis to get the data so that this invention could be duplicated. Then they might not need to generate a whole mega field to get to wherever. With less energy there would be less of a field. Nah joked that maybe using micro fusion generators one could carry it in one's pocket.

For the moment the station was tasked with obviating Prima's influence on Earth. It appeared the DVs concentration on Regums WebSpace was just a diversion. Trying something different to cause confusion. So far the effects were negligible. Thanking Ung.

Now for the problem of using the PWF generator. The VB was out of the question as long as the DVs had their field insertion in place. Only the PWFs were of any use currently engaging Earth to hopefully void the Primaian field distortions. If realigned to that of the GC's then Prima would have Earth to itself. They could use the smaller

experimental generator on Regum but its effect would be minimal. It could even be a waste of time bothering.

Once the duplicate SS 1V was on line, a cyberclone then they would have more leeway. The current technical hitch were the QCs. Current duplication in applying quantum processes merely duplicated what was there. In tandem. They needed them as isolates. There might be no other way around that but to build three more and let them create the cloned virtual station. They had just got this one going. Still it was best to explore possibilities sooner than later.

"Remember, our non existence here is primary." Loara reminded them.

"Whatever you do, never forget that. Rather be less of a presence than more if we wish to remain here unmolested. And thank you Ung for making us aware of what the DVs are doing."

Ung gave a thin smile in return. Twice now. She was trying to reattach herself. But the room's CF was too potent. She gave up. "I could run interference."

"You configured?" Loara again. Then she smiled.

"That's alright." Nah accepting her input. Seeing Ung wanting to fold in on herself. Nervina to the rescue. "I could help there, be her back up."

"How?" Nah surprised at her hidden capabilities.

"We reroute ourselves through some spare capacity of your QCs. In other words our presence will be elsewhere. The perfect place would be, say WebSpace. Give some virtual meat to the DVs. Then you can do your thing. Check out the Discrepancy." Nervina suggested. Ung was in agreement.

"So if they get into your heads you're saying you're virtual selves will tangle with them? Not at the primary source meaning the QC, or even yourselves?" Nah optimistic.

"Not only that but they would be revealing more about themselves than us."

"Do we have the capacity?" Loara asked Nah.

"No." he lied. They could lessen the PWF a little to accommodate Ung and Nervina. Of course they could pretend that they were loosing the battle for Earth. Target the Discrepancy. But was it really what Nervina thought it was? A future construct? After all Regum could, might have already done so, in that future. Creating a flash back. Guiding their future to its actual quantum field state. Then the future would take care of itself. They were solidly placed, virtually through the Webs and now here. Unbeknown to the Primaians who thought with the collapse of Tellurium they had won not just that round but inserted their visions as well. Nah knew better. The Primaians had merely

delayed the inevitable. Earth becoming a stage one civilisation. In a few centuries but they would get there just the same.

"Would you let us go in direct?" Nervina asked.

"Jez?" Loara turned.

"The thing is drawing in massive amounts of energy. It could be a one way trip." Jez warned.

"You don't think its natural?"

"Nah, it's got no sentience that I'm aware of. Mimics that on an extremely low resonance."

"I wonder if it's the CI." Ung whispered.

For a moment a studied silence.

"From what we do know, it's as they say, a simulacrum, with a personality disorder. Jez says it's thinly spread there." Nah said.

"Yes but that is twenty thousand light years ago. It could grow into it." Loara indicating the need to see the worse case scenario. "Jez?"

"At the moment, if it has any traits and I'm wondering if I'm not reading that into it or, if the DVs are not depositing their essence, their resonance into it, I can't tell." Which she knew didn't help. The only certainty a lack thereof. "So far it is neither creating a higher order of itself or some lower level one. Like the background radiation, it's steady. Spewing out a weak field."

"One that can influence random generated numbers Jez." Nervina reminded her.

"I am aware of that. But that is outside its shell. I was referring to its internally assembled bits of data. From the visions I had I would think it's another WebWorld."

"You mean it could be us? In the future?" Usaki's mood brightening.

"The similarities are there."

"What about Prima building one?" Loara asked.

"Not their style." Nah answered.

"Who knows? Maybe it's a repeat of the schism." Loara suggested.

"Some scenarios play out that way." Nah revealed.

"Based on old data." Ung focussed suddenly.

"Current." Nah corrected.

"Current is past, present at best." Ung getting into details. "The DVs are blurring the picture. For starters, like your WebSpace they too have all their bases covered. The difference is yours are material. Quantum insertions included. They though operate at the

level of consciousness. The ultimate quantum processor so far. In the universe." She underlined. She looked at her empty cup. "See the cup. Your space is that, Prima's what's inside."

"Nothing." Nah replied, slightly amused. He finished his coffee.

"Exactly. They own the space."

"I think I know what she means. Ung," Loara turned to her, "this is scary. They dominated Earth in its ancient history. They might in the distant future. They possess more or less the orbital over Prima. We think we're getting to them but they just throw their resonant barrier around themselves. And now the discrepancy. It could be anybodyes..."

"Or a new entity. Crafted by the DVs. As cyber intelligence progresses..."

"You think Ung it's their CI?" Jez asked.

"Thus the lack of sentience. It could be masking itself as the Primaians do. You've been seeing all this compartmentalised. Draw it together and what do you get? Regum in splendid isolation. I mean by the very fact that this station itself isolates itself from its environment means, maybe subconsciously, that only by stepping out, quantum wise can you operate freely."

"She's got a point." Usaki said slowly. He took three biscuits, breaking them into smaller pieces. "It's like we're the plate and they the content."

"If we can't shift or manipulate the content then at least we can shift the environment." Loara said slowly.

"Primaians are not very effective individually. So they operate, naturally I have to say, as a group mind. Your people can't get in, but the Primaians can." Ung concerned that even with all this technological success the Primaians were still the psychically prevailing factor. Which she zoomed in on. "That sounds pretty dominant to me. Then there is Earth. With an unusual degree of interest. Wanting to align them. Why not leave them alone?"

"Because they're not." Loara reminded Ung.

"So what?"

"So what Ung? If they go over..."

"Then so much the better for Regum. The only, current that is, advanced society around is Regum. The Earthers will then see just what their possible potential could be. They come around, maybe not all the way, by being inspired by your example. You achieve your aims not be doing anything at their end but by concentrating on your end. You're good at being individuals. Foster that. A group mind is nothing. All it takes is one thought, one idea, one simple act. Enough to confound Prima."

"Confound, how?" Nah looked at Ung.

"By being yourselves. Your individuality is your strength. Prima wants the whole mirror in one piece. You are millions of shards, each a mirror in itself. Beyond assembly accept on a quantum level. And that is beyond Prima's wildest dreams. The universe is just too potent, too energized. They're only fiddling at the edges. Let them. Let them waste their energy, their resources, their fixation."

"You make it sound so simple Ung." Loara softened.

"It is."

"Don't forget Ung. Their very presence, their orientation determines their future. And thus ours."

"So undetermine it, concentrate on you own future."

"We can you know." Usaki took his time having thought about how the PWFs could be shaped, inserted, predetermining their future.

"And as Prima rewrites their history, their past so you can with your future." Ung encouraged them.

"Actually with PWFs the past can be rewritten as well." Usaki added to the heady mix.

"Against all our precepts." Loara dampening that avenue.

"I think we should take this one step at a time." Nah trying to get the meeting back on track. They fell in line. "The Discrepancy. Is it sentient? Jez does not think so. Is it a CI? Possibly. Until we know more. And yes Loara I'm aware we approach it with caution. It might be waiting to make contact and given the energy it is accessing we'd have no chance."

"Why not tempt the Primaians?" Nervina smiled.

"It might boost their RFs. The last thing we want. Then again, getting circuitous here, it is at the moment embryonic. The easy solution is an extrapolation. The usual run sequencing. Who knows it could even be a bio-symbiot."

"You're forgetting one thing." Jez suggested. "No atmosphere."

"Brilliant. Why didn't I think of that." Usaki chided himself and popped a few pieces of biscuit in his mouth.

"Well that leaves AI capabilities."

"That Nah is what is bothering me." Loara answered. "I can't get it out of my head. That we're in for something nasty,"

"Maybe the Earthers did that. I mean they've risen and fallen several times over their history. So maybe maybe maybe they thought to create..."

"In our galaxy?"

"To seek revenge."

"Loara you sound like a Primaian."

"Know the enemy."

"I think we're off track once more." Nah trying his best to stay focused.

"I think we should work on the Discrepancy. Do nothing to alert the Primaians. Run a PWF scenario that makes us appear to be weakening on Earth. Divert that power towards the D. If it is a self assembling CI then with its computational possibilities it could be of use through our QC's as well..."

"Be the dominating force Loara?" Nah finished off for her.

"What else?"

"One step at a time."

"As you wish Nah."

Ung felt a vague field force getting thicker. It had been going on for some time. Not strong enough to distract, more like a headache without the pain. That could be her Brain neutralising the effect. Yet there were no signals from her nervous system. More like a hangover. Now there was a strange memory making itself felt. An association no doubt. Currently beyond analysis. Her Brain was waiting, letting the invasive fog linger. By slight degrees becoming denser.

She looked at the readouts on the light screens. The lilac orb glowing shrouded by a mist. Or rather the mist was within it, leaking out. No not exactly that. Enphased. Across space. A secondary layer within, intermingled with the background radiation. Using that as a means to reach out as far as possible.

Ung asked her Brain to create a duplicate image in her head. As the others talked she waited. A subdomain opened up within her mind. Mind. Larger than her Brain. A quantum state of its own. She would have to be careful that, whatever it was did not draw her out. Mock reality or not it could easily jump as an energy field into her real Brain. Nothing was beyond analysis.

Watching a simulation on a light screen the group talked about how to tackle the huge, almost pulsating lilac orb. There were vast gaps over its spherical projection. Not of a mind. Or rather if so that was in the background, more like a seed, a dim source whose radiance was gaining in strength. How could that be? Charge up the source with black matter then reconfigure it according to its field state.

Loara was concerned with invoking ultra security. Keep the information isolated.

Ung ran a simulation, another domain opened within her Brain: of how effective their PFW were keeping out the effects of the Discrepancy. Based on the potential energy intake from the assembling solar collectors around the star plus their fusion reactors, minuscule in comparison to output, more there as back up, embedding the data codes, strengthening them which ought to hold everything in the universe at bay. A microverse determining its own space-time continuum. She relaxed. Then once more listened to the conversation she had not been paying much attention to. They went into the pro's and con's of how to approach the task of revealing what the Discrepancy actually was. A puzzle on the outside. Yet going in was deemed too dangerous. For they agreed, the D using the black hole as an energy source overrode anything the station could muster. What was one star compared to the centre of a galaxy. Ung wanted to reinforce the concept that they could bring Prima down by the power of their unique individual thought processes, confuse them through divergence, sabotage their convergence, threaten them with chaos if need be.

Nervina considered a stage three civilisation, calculating orders of magnitude from planetary energy as stage one, stars stage two, then the next level a galaxy. What next? The universe itself? Her Brain froze. Freaky implications.

The quantum multidimensional energy states of space itself. That would be level four. If the Discrepancy was working on that, aligning itself then its relatively weaker source might be irrelevant. A bit like an electron shell not being the whole atom. The Discrepancy the energy shell transforming, drawing in the whole scenario of the relative atom, the space it embraced becoming a combined force and field. Just as a quantum base was the energy of its micro constituents creating the macro outburst of matter in the form of stars, galaxies, planets. If that were so then this micro-universe was going to undergo a monumental phase change. But when?

Nervina did some quick calculations. The source was twenty thousand light years away. Nah was smart enough, as was Usaki in not using the VB to access it. If the tunnelling was really creating a zero field line the incoming data would usurp the system. It would enter it like an atom attracting another electron shell. Reconfiguring this end according to its design. If only they knew what that was.

What Ung learnt from Nervina was that the D appeared to be a repository of potentialities. Various Quantum Fields, a compendium of possibilities. Piggy backing in on Nervina's experiences had not aroused a counter effect. Ung had not even created the slightest of interference patterns by being aligned with both Nervina and the superstructure of the Ds effect on space. There and not there. Her Brain's potential was

staggering in that regard. Of course Nervina could do the same. Maybe they were intended to function as such. Which meant she had an affinity with Nervina. If so then maybe they came from the same world, at different times. She the first. Or were they some sort of Primaian prototype? Couldn't be. They would have sent an army after her, after Nervina. No, not Primaian. Merely inserted.

Which brought up all sorts of questions. Not just who they really were, that didn't bother her too much. She knew who she was, just her memory curtailed having started with the DVs, her being in place as an instructor for novice DVs. That meant she was not just trained in DV activity, of remote viewing capabilities, counter measures included, assault potentialities, none of which she had used. Unless they were chimeras created by her Brain as it read the environment she was in. Virtually present. Riding configured probability waves.

Had they been inserted at Regum then maybe the whole Web would have been the background camouflage under which she operated. Undetectable. Untouchable. Indestructible. Maybe.

There was no point going on. Another time. The team here wanted the data, the orientation, the potentialities of the Discrepancy. At the same time they were busy watching Earth, just as the DVs were. Maybe it was time they reappraised their priorities. This manifestation in their backyard could have adverse consequences. For whatever it was the D was not a steady state. Slowly drawing in black matter. That was the stuff of space, the universe. She just hoped this was not a stage four phenomenon.

"Err, I got a suggestion." Ung interjected during a lull in the conversation. In fact they were finished for now.

"Yes Ung?" Nah asked.

"This Discrepancy is drawing in the space around it. Dark matter."

"A possibility which we will check." Usaki replied.

"If that is the case have you considered the consequences?"

"It's assembling its own tiny universe. Nothing to stop it drawing in even us." Loara ready to assume the worst. She had to. Someone had to.

"Usaki has done some calculations. Given the energy status of the dark star the Discrepancy has its own definable limitations, energy wise that is." Nah answered patiently. Ung must have missed that. Which was odd. Was the fog inside her head blanking out some of her Brain's higher functions? She would have to run diagnostics later.

"That's the outside. What about the inside? By that I mean the energy state of space itself."

"It's near absolute zero Ung."

"On the outside yes, but not the inside."

"Inside?" Tryces asked.

"Space's quantum state. It's not neutral you know. Not the absence of matter, meaning energy. It is the combination of all possibilities. It's how your Probability Wave Field Space functions." Ung suddenly in her element. "It's what the DVs use, without knowing I'm glad to say when inserting their remote visioning. How they create their reality on, say, Earth. How you use space as a countermeasure. Space is the ultimate medium and template. The essential architecture as well as the foundation. Embedded within it are the very physical laws of the universe that make what we see around us what it is. The dark resonance of creation."

Usaki had been listening with fascination. Loara cool, weighing up the implications if Ung was right. Taking it all in. Nervina, usually more expressive was not so much stunned as, odd enough, relieved. Ung understood why. She had been there, had been astounded, had been shaken, had been awakened to the awesome potentiality the Discrepancy was becoming.

As they sat there Ung softened the surprise. "We got twenty thousand years, VB probing aside. Which I don't recommend."

"That's already been agreed upon." Loara regarding it final.

Ung considered if she should alert them to this fog she had between her ears? They might think she was contaminated by the DVs. Better check that. How to explain this fog without making it sound as if she was under some undue influence. Something isolating her, maybe put her in stasis. The last thing she wished for. There had to be a reason for this odd happening. Later she would ask Nervina. She looked at the light screens but they were not indicative of anything as subtle as her thick head. Maybe a bio malfunction.

"Well, given Regum's technological prowess, who knows," Tryces continued, "our future selves might be gods. The Web might be reality and the planet only visited to rough it, like going camping. To create one's universe at will. Maybe there will be countless meta-verses. Each a separate domain. The Discrepancy just another bauble amongst countless others Ung."

"I hope so."

"Because...?" Nah intent on Ung.

"It could trump reality." She replied. She had not intended her answer to be so blunt, so direct, so final. It had just come out, like that. No finesse.

"You have data?"

"Something is running interference in my head." A jolt went through her. She had just revealed something of herself, of her configuration. They all knew about AI capabilities, some were Enhanced. Not Jez. She was naturally psychic.

"I too feel it Ung." Jez agreed. "I didn't know if it was some biological virus. What is known as the cold."

"You feel something then?" Ung turning to Jez. At least they might not bother with Ung's revelation about herself.

"Like an opaque, viscous blur." Jez replied.

"Copy that. Any source?" Loara alert.

"No. That is what is so annoying. Maybe it is the Discrepancy."

"Wouldn't we know about it? Those with certain configurations." Nah answered guardedly.

"Or the vigilantes." Usaki added, meaning the computer's riot controls.

"Perhaps not." Nervina shifted in her seat. "The D's effect was not noticed on Novus. Yet the random runs were out of joint."

"Which you picked up, but not the hardware." Usaki a little worried. "That means..." He looked at Nervina and Ung.

"That we're a little upgraded?" Nervina trying to play down her status. She had guessed that both Ung and especially Ratze, plus herself had something in common. They bonded well. Ung reticent, observant, withdrawn. But that could be her design parameters.

All falling into place. A pattern. Ung was some kind of base-line. An anchor perhaps. The superstructure. Or an observer. A minder even. Then herself. Comprehending Prima's race. Getting the big picture for...whoever. Ratze making things happen, moving things along. Every time Ratze appeared Nervina's more placid continuum got disrupted. Without getting in each other's way. A tenuous thread amongst them. On an AI level. If so, then where had she, they come from? Regum's future? Make sure they continued? Why here now? Her mind racing. Her Brain not stopping these thoughts. Because of Prima. Novus subdued. Regum was not under any direct threat, yet. Earth? Were they going to make quantum jumps in both directions. Mentally self upgrading, self boosting whilst also going into space the fastest way possible? Quantum tunnelling? Do what the DVs were, but the Reganian way? No Earth

could not be the reason. They were two hundred million light years away. Nothing in that quadrant. Which left Prima.

Except that planet's technical capabilities were primitive compared to Regum. Which left the DVs. Were they being shifted towards Regum? It was a possibility. The fog the first stage. Camouflage, concealment, obscure intention. Next stage confuse, bewilder, perplex, create a false sense of security, then strike. But how? The DVs had been trying for just about ever with no results. Nor the priests on the ground.

Something was missing. Nervina would have to talk with Ung.

"Hello, ladies." Usaki tried to sound pleasant but a little annoyed at their drifting off.

"Sorry, internal rummaging." Nervina smiled sheepishly.

"Are we to understand you and you Ung are boosted in some way?" Loara straight to the point.

"Somewhat. Bio base line configured." Ung suggesting less of her true potentialities.

"I'm her sister, sort of." Nervina added.

"Then I have to make this clear. No rummaging, as you put it with our QCs, or anything for that matter." Loara ordered. She meant it, they could tell.

"Of course not." Nervina assuming a superior position. Might as well release a little of what she was. Ung had been able to presuppose her own state of being an insert Nervina guessed, like herself. "We're on your side. The Discrepancy is all that matters."

"Indeed." Nah not fully convinced. "So, where are you two from?"

Exactly what Loara was going to ask them.

"I wish I could tell. Don't know. Not in my memory." Nervina looked at Ung.

"Same here."

"You mean to tell us, you're inserts? With a programme? With factors beyond your recall?"

"Just about sums it up Nah." Nervina answered.

"So both of you could be feeding your Primaian Domain Lords." Loara's hammer hitting the anvil.

"We left them."

"They let you. Your defection arranged." Loara in pursuit.

"Our so called defection," Nervina sighed, "was exactly that."

"Then why isn't there the usual commotion?" focussing on her. Nervina felt her Brain prickle. Scanning. She let her Brain be. See what she made of that.

"Because I can delete my past. Uncollapsing the field. As you know we are all collapsing probability waves." Surprised she knew even that. Thank you Brain. "However, where I am not, neither is my field."

"But how were you even accepted?" Loara queried.

"Loaded. The insertions work by reading the area, the environment, its architecture. A picture, a field is created. It blends in, chameleon process. Thus the acceptance of one wherever one is."

"Including us." Loara looking discomfited. She didn't like this.

"Probably." Nervina answered indifferently.

"So when you leave here, we won't remember. Nor the systems?"

"Most likely."

"Why most likely?"

"Well your processing capabilities for starters. They can relate to an infinite variation of possibilities. My presence would be but one of many. Different to sentient memory. I should think my presence here would leave a past behind. If I'm being scanned that is." Pretending not to have noticed Loara's little probing.

"Configured." She guessed correctly.

"In that case can your internals tell us what the Discrepancy is up to?"

"Nah I think we covered that. It's feeding off space." Nervina answered with certainty.

Ung had switched out again. Their concerns were valid but at this time more a distraction. The fog was getting denser. A build up, coming from where? The DVs? The Discrepancy? Somewhere else? A Reganian counter measure to confuse the DVs? It was hard to tell as it was non localised, superimposed. The source hidden. Disturbing.

"Are any of your systems running interference?" Ung finally came out with it.

"No." Loara lied. The station was cocooned. It cloaked itself behind various layers, the outer which sent any kind of probing around it. Then a constructed EM shield that confused any incoming radar, after that a chameleon layer pretending to be a group of passive satellites. Some of the modules repeated the layered defence. Like the section they were in now.

"In space I mean." As if guessing Loara's attempted subterfuge.

"No."

"Well something is."

"Usaki?" Loara asked him.

He looked at the light screens, zoomed in on the data, found nothing unusual.

"Could be DV activity."

"Jez?"

"Ung is right. I feel a haze in my brain. Hanging in the back of my mind. Nothing heavy, nothing overt, no directionality or with target specific intentions."

"That usual or unusual?" Loara asked.

"Not a common occurrence."

"Meaning what?"

"They're trying something."

"But it is the DVs?"

"Unless we are jamming them."

"We as in here or elsewhere?"

"Can't tell. It's there, out there. Not target specific as I said."

Loara hooked up to her outer security system. Then routed herself to Regum, nothing coming out from the planet. Next the Orbital. Same null result. She knew the station was not running an external field apart from the current security protocols. Which left the DVs.

"Not us." Loara said a moment later.

"So it's got to be them. Thank you Jez, Nervina. You too Ung." Nah mellowed a little. "I can assume of course it's not coming from your heads."

"No." Nervina was looking at Ung who shook her head.

"This fog is a distraction. Treading water, getting nowhere but not drowning in the field either. Something I would not wish to have happening unless I was masking my intentions." Jez explained.

"Loara, you know what to do." Nah hinted.

"Stage one or two?"

"Start with one. Passive. Jez, keep focussed. Now Ung, Nervina. I would like you to stay alert. You picked it up. Were you going to tell us?"

"Not until we, I mean I, had more to go on. Maybe the DVs are doing some internal rearranging of RSs." Ung suggested.

"Getting ready for something?" Loara was standing ready to start the soft scan procedure manually.

"Could be. Or this is it."

"Fogging themselves?" Loara not really believing it.

"Could be an exercise in mind penetration. Create this mist and see if one can get through it...or use it as camouflage." Ung answered.

"And no directional intent?" Loara wishing to get a fix, get an orientation so that counter measures could be put in place.

"None." Jez answered for them. Nervina and Ung agreed.

"Perplexing." Usaki said after a moment's silence.

"Everything about Prima is." Loara scoffed. "I'm gonna set up our defences."

"Should we alert Regum?" Usaki looking a little worried.

"Not until we know more. Which is next to nothing. Plus if we do the DVs will know we know. Nah?" Loara turned to him.

"I agree. If worse comes to worse we can redirect the PWF and blow theirs away." He seemed certain they could deal with this vague intrusion. "If there is anything else?" he looked at all of them. "Right. Let's get to it then."

They all rose.

"Nervina, Ung, a moment if you will." Nah asked them.

"Sure." Nervina answered for both of them.

"We're going to try and trace your history. I thought it would be only fair to tell you two. But instead of using Deep Resonating Imagery, I'm going to do this the old way. Through records, files, downloads. We got no problem getting into the Orbital over Prima."

"You won't find anything. I'm telling you this to save you time."

"I believe you. But..."

"If you try you'll alert them. They'll wonder why you're looking in the first place. Recalling my PFW signature would be the easiest."

"But that's your memory really. And we know how unreliable memory is. Add the fact that upon your own admittance you're boosted, one would only regain what you wanted to be on record. Which is different to reality Nervina."

"Astute and to the point."

"I wasn't going to run this search from here."

"Relief."

"Not that clumsy." He smiled demeaningly.

"Have fun."

"And you Ung?"

"I'd rather this fog was traced."

"Usaki is onto it. Aren't you?" Loara looking his way.

"If this becomes permanent then it will have to be dealt with eventually."

"I understand. But Ung, nothing is ever permanent."

"Maybe not in the natural universe. But we are not dealing with that. These are quantum states. Given an energy source they could be maintained until the end of...well a long time." Ung reminded him.

"I wish I could reveal more but..." Nah gestured helplessly.

"I sincerely wish that to be the case." Ung said solemnly.

"In a way...we can isolate ourselves and yet remain connected at the same time."

"Quantum tunnelling on a grand scale?" Ung suggested with a half smile.

"That's just the beginning." Tuvlov said proudly.

Khratham

Out of the abyss Luferious had just enough time to brace himself for what was coming. The noises cataclysmic with an underlying sound just above subliminal. This was no natural occurrence but an outright ingress. Its resonance aiming for possession of mind, body and soul. The next instant the dining room was no more. Everything went blurry, then receded, the whole house retracting. Surrounded by a force much greater than he had ever experienced, let alone come close to. His mind did not react, it recoiled as his perception sensed the alien energy. The visuals made him dizzy. Nothing. Something. Somethings. The blur was real. His head stretching outwards, a lilac fog everywhere. Between indistinct shapes energy crackled in lime green with whip-snapping rapidity. His brain expanded like a balloon, his grip on what was going on becoming more tenuous by the second. The rumbling howl barely audible. Morfur and Mudhan were out of reach, gone somewhere else. The lilac web in front of him looking tatty, buzzing with energy flaring all around.

Hanging onto himself as himself. The sensory overload...familiar. Deja vu. Energy released from the back of his mind. Pattern recognition. He was glad he had been born on Regum and not the Outlands. Otherwise he would have thought he was in some secreted shaman's domain. The ruse pretending to be an occult experience not sought. When in fact the orb was an incomplete data sphere. Coming to him. Curvature. Not an open system. A construct. A rogue Web Domain? Loaded with intent. Because, well, it could. A compelling energy field, one imbued with an unknown entity. Mind? Maybe. An artifice? Perhaps. Real? Definitely.

The lilac curvature, now that it was in place and the feeling of motion ceased was filled with tiny specks of light. Composed of colours spread across the lilac membrane, flickering with energy. Some closer others further, multilayered, shifting shapes within their tiny constructs.

Something had drawn him out. Or let him in? Either way it was relative now. Hovering in some inner space. This too brought back memories from his, lucky he considered, meditative states when reality as perceived by the outer consciousness vanished leaving him as a presence in an indistinct void. Not once, often. The similarity was there, except embellished by hundreds of twinkling lights, animated from within. The lilac curvature no doubt the superstructure. With many gaps as yet to be filled, not completely assembled.

Treat it as game sequencing. The immersion was intense but that was just visual perception. Wrap around sight and a discernable distant hum. Or was that his ears ringing? The sparkling lights had their own beauty, webbed into gossamer glowing threads, flickering lime green and yellows like synaptic firing neurones. Was he in some meta-mega-mind? Something Regum had constructed? Testing it in the Outlands before subsuming the whole of WebSpace? Each of these lights were a scene, a possible reality. He tried to disengage his conscious mind to get the whole picture, not its component parts. Then his mind was filled with knowing. On a huge scale. Way beyond what he could even suppose. A meta presence. AI was his first conclusion. No shaman could do this. It was too geometrically spread out. A huge data sphere. The specks of light alternative realities. Whoever...was...the mind...had infused itself into his open mind. The reason for his head expansion. Slipped in through the gaps.

Rapid moving images of...a sentient being. Different faces raced past mind to mind. Super awareness, innumerable possibilities, there for the taking. No. Reverse. Go for the centre now that you're here. The book had been opened, focus on the contents. He started to fall backwards. The lights were getting denser, the lilac framework less opaque. Only to find himself...

...in a room. Miniature viewscreens everywhere. A heaving mosaic. Shapes within, beings, sentients animated within each screen as if observed by spycams. Lufurious shivered involuntarily as someone, or something was breathing down his neck. Apprehensive but without fear. He turned slowly.

A dark being, humanoid, long black hair, glowing armband, computerised? Glowing jewels, microprocessors? A dark robe, deep as night, starless, deeper eyes receding into infinity, resplendent on a golden throne, a smartchair? A smirk spread along thick lips, its breath infusing the air, microbots? With profundities. All questions of existence, of being, of reality answered. A supercharged progenitor. Someone's alter ego or projected doppelganger. A cyber gestalt switch. Pretensions to godhood. An AI dream?

Whatever.

Technology taken up by many orders of magnitude. The future invading the present? It was definitely not a mystical experience. Anyway mystics were obsessed, torturing themselves, racking their brains about reality. What is, is. That was all there was to it. The being seemed to concur. Still studying him. Seeing it all at one step removed from total immersion. Choices of reality served up on a platter.

Luferious on an illusionary floor. A star field below him. Keeping him there by Its will. Since the being was not interested in these meta worlds neither was Luferious. Then, by thought alone, one screen expanded. He saw Mudhan, saw the rubble of the Abbey, close enough to touch. He held back. The screen receded. He could choose any reality he wanted. So could It. Luferious was not seeking an all wise teacher, nor a saviour, or a revelation. Revelation yes, but as reality, not some spiritual pining of a metaphysical dream state. Drugs could do that just as well. Without the need to feel desperate.

Amazing.

"All domains exist. Choose one according to your desire." The voice, harsh, muted filled his head.

"As they did?" comprehending their vanishing from that reality, which he made a mental note to remember. However confusing or overwhelming the imagery was.

The being smiled agreeing that Luferious knew the implications. His black coat was filled with stars. Filled, not superimposed. Depth of space receding into eternity. Could a universe be infinite?

A curious smile on Its face. With his mind, in tandem.

"I'll keep the one I came from, if it's no trouble." Luferious surprised at his calmness.

"On one condition."

Condition? Luferous scoffed mentally. Really. He could think himself back to whence he had been removed. It knew as well.

"Yes. Condition." Meaning, indicating, suggesting, threatening to send him into some other parallel reality. Maybe Luferious thought. Mind to mind.

"You become my ambassador."

Not his first choice admittedly. However having this playground at call was tempting. The ultimate Reganian Webtrip.

"I'm sure there are others...more willing." Luferious deflected.

"You deny yourself immortality?"

"If you can do this..."

Immortality? More like loop-phasing.

"My name will be legion. My names on many worlds. My images graced by fervent devotees. My will indomitable."

"What for?" Luferious countering the offer of immortality.

Zohex's eyes grew larger, charged with cosmic energy. The darkness within animated. From a brazier which must have just appeared smoke poured out, suns shining within them, condensing into a glowing galaxy.

Impressive. Trying to maintain his distance.

"You can have any realm you desire and there be master of that realm. Unquestioned power bestowed upon you, to do what you want as I do what I want."

"The path, the reality I have chosen..."

"...will doom you."

A screen came forward.

"No thanks."

It receded.

"I already am where I want to be."

"A poor scholar? Laughable."

When Luferious remained silent It said: "Very well. Khratham will have that honour."

And Khratham had sought his advice.

"Your destiny is in tatters." Reading Luferious's mind.

"Either my life ends here..." Luferious certain he would reincarnate, "...falls into a false reality of my choosing, or I return to Khratham's realm. Meaning your designated allotment..." wondering why It could not simply immerse there. Something was stopping him. Not Mudhan, nor was Morfur likely, or was she? Unless Its realm was as yet incomplete. The present he had become too strong for him to enter. What could be holding him back? The shamans? Regum's WebSpace? Reality? Was this being then not ready, not complete, disoriented in that reality, lacking cohesion as in not having the necessary data to affect a perfect transfer? Let him chew on that.

"Fate, destiny, reality. I will be master of all." Zohex answered. The mini galaxy changed. A dark star grew at the centre, distorting the spiral arms inwards, drawing them in to itself. Then a massive explosion, even the lilac sphere blown across space along with the other ejecta. Having reached their limits space recontracted, forming a new galaxy. The lilac glow now background radiation. Luferious understood the message. In some distant future, this presence had refashioned the galaxy, infused into space his data, configuring reemergent life according to his will. But when? Millions of years into the future?

A demented dream, a delusional hope, or a possible reality? In here Luferious could not tell. When everything is real, nothing is real. Luferious knew enough basic

cosmology that only one reality could exist given how quantum states manifested by the laws of physics the material universe. How certain prerequisite conditions had to be infused for life to gestate. The level of radiation, the overall strength of gravity, the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces, the resultant cosmic constant, the chemical mix of the stars and planets, the level of oxygen. Too much and a volcanic eruption could turn a planet into cinders.

"Nothing as extreme as that." Zohex chided, mocking his resistance, his indifference. "The future is mine."

Luferious knew of course that Zohex wanted him to make it known when he returned that Zohex's plan could not be stopped. He had set the cosmic laws in motion, favouring his design. Using the galaxy as the engine of his creation. Until then Zohex allowed those he convinced and converted to have their fun in these tiny meta realities. They might be designer perfect but in that very way of being constructed were also determined, entropy prone and of course doomed. For the quantum element was missing. Indeterminacy. Take that out and reality would eventually collapse. The price for getting your own way. As long as the quantum laws held, the universe was an open book. Close that and the system was closed, entropy would take over and that would be that. The end. Big-time from within, irrelevant from without.

Luferious wished his mind would not give his thoughts all away. He changed tack and considered he'd rather be powerless, driven by precocious destiny and fortuitous fate than imprisoned in the perfectly designed universe where his wish was his will. By being outside these designer possibilities it was still possible to access all those possibilities. But once in, there was no guarantee that one could get out. But if its inhabitants could, it might jeopardize this designed data sphere. For in a way it too was one of many.

"Yours isn't," Zohex continued. "A flawed vessel is of no use to me. I thought your mettle was of sterner stuff." hurling his thoughts at him as an insult. "Seems like I was mistaken." Tempting him to change his mind.

"Oh yes, mistakes do not threaten my plans. They are but minor divergences. Like those who think themselves powerful enough to take me on..." So there were more potent sentients Luferious thought, "...with their futile plans. Mere curiosities from whom I learn. In the end it will not matter." Assuming a superior air, "Then, if you do reincarnate and that is not certain, as you so rightly assume about your universe, you will wish then that you had taken the chance when it had been offered."

That meant the reality he had come from was indeterminate. Even that cosmic display of pyrotechnics would itself, in a closed system be doomed. Luferious felt better knowing at least that much.

"Oh you missed something." Zohex chided him. A malignant gleam in his yes. "You have forgotten the fabric that is space."

So he had. Space was space, what of it?

"Indeed."

Remember, there is a way through this. Out of an artifice. As long as scientists could measure the universe and be intrigued by its mutability, its indeterminacy all was well. Remember this if nothing else. When others starting talking about a teleological universe, a grand design...like the Primaians, then one was in the wrong universe! Had he been? Since the Primaian's think it's been designed by their unitary god...could it be that he, they, everybody was already trapped?

Not that Zohex cared. He was focussed on something other. A screen was opening up, someone coming through, Khratham. For his benefit? To show what he was missing?

Khratham did not seem perplexed at being in the throne room. The screens were gone. It looked similar to Kratham's. The tapestries, the oil lamps, even the throne itself. Everything the same. Nor did he bow but rather in a sure voice greeted Zohex: "Master of the Universe, Supreme Guardian of Time, I stand before you."

Zohex looked at Luferious. Only then did Khratham deign to acknowledge his presence. Reduced to a cipher, a minor distraction to them both.

Zohex was receding. So was the throne room. Expelled. Luferious concentrated on the house, the dining room, on Mudhan. Hoping against hope he would get into the right reality. This time his mind was not stretched, nor his inner realms elongated. The speckled lights on the lilac orb winked enticingly, then fell back into space. Absorbed into the tattered lilac sphere receding behind the glowing stars sucked into the central vortex of the galaxy.

Keeping his memory. Cyberealm as an artifice? He would observe Khratham...and found himself standing in a smoked out kitchen. Charred, burnt beams, bits of black wood. A gaping hole above filled with stars. The pungent smell of death, whips of smoke striking momentary terror in his heart. Even though it was night, stumbling on crisp objects he was relieved to find no bodies. A dog barked somewhere. Going outside he found the workers quarters in ruin as well.

Had this been Zohex's doing? Or...were the others here taken as well? By the acidic smell the fire must have been recent. Had Mudhan or Morfur resisted or accepted this being? Had Zohex, the name came just like that, destroyed the mansion to erase their presence as well? Worse, could Zohex extract him at any time? Or had this something to do with Morfur's daughter's possession. Was the priest responsible? Were they in Zohex's thrall?

He walked out, a little devastated, seeing the thin grey band of dawn on the eastern horizon. Dawn. He offered a benediction for them all.

Remember Luferious, remember. If ever you come across any of them then you are in their chosen reality. It fired him with determination. Now when mediating he would try and seek out Mudhan or Morfur. The possessed daughter and insane priest he would leave be. Maybe he could help them. Maybe not. The priests exuded an awful life leeching resonance sucking up one's soul. The rewards dubious, eternal salvation no less. *Eternal imprisonment*. The universe just did not work that way. Their simplistic annunciation a travesty flying in the face of what was, what is. Except for Zohex. How real was he and his domain? Real enough to be there. As was Regum's Web. Constructs, the expression of individual will. Anything was possible within its delineated constraints. The priests and their mind numbing mentally void vision a self deluding constraint in itself.

Morfur hearing the tortured moans above instinctively looked up. Something was terribly wrong. The air turning liquescent, blurring her vision. In her head the ingress of an immensely powerful presence infusing itself into the house. Aghast at the intrusion her mind was instantly sharper whilst simultaneously the flowing essence resonated within her head. An invasive threat. Thinking this had less to do with her than with her stricken mentally degenerating daughter and the priest. The priest. The weak link. A vapid vortex?

Fixed into immobility, her guests a blur she tried to mentally reach out to her daughter. The force separated her from the others. The light of the fire a glowing nimbus. An entity making itself felt. Not revealing its physical manifestation. Surprised she could think at all. An occult invasion. Using the two stricken patients as its homing beacon and a focal point to centre itself here. But why?

Morfur was glad she had met Mudhan. That woman's clarity of mind invigorating her own sense of self. Now under threat by some unknown entity. Not of Mudhan's doing. She rejected the power trips of the priests whilst being wary towards the shamans. One of many ways to strengthen the soul. But this, this was something other. A potent magician

working behind the scenes. A real occultist. One intent on something which it would not reveal. Its essence diffuse, not focussed except that it had found a point of ingress. The priest, not the daughter the beacon. Using his madness as a source to home in on. Then spreading throughout the house.

The dining room melted, a dark infusion making everything indistinct. Her beautiful tapestries melding into sombre colours, the walls emanating a darkness slowly extracting form and content. Energy crackled in her head as reality turned into runny rivulets drawn out by this invasive force.

Dislocation. Transference not transmutation. She was still herself. The darkness everywhere. Then the stars as she was above it all. Vertigo. The colours reassembled around her. But they weren't the tapestries of her home. Tiny animated moving pictures. Amazing intricate detail. A shadow detached itself from the detail. Taking on substance. The occultist.

A man wrapped in shadow. Stars shining within his coat. He removed the cowl which shrouded his face. Piercing deep black eyes resonating with power. Thin lips, aquiline nose, tanned, long shining black hair. Glowing amulets, sparkling rings, flashing silver wristbands. Morfur wondered if this was some of Regum's technological wizardry or simply wizardry.

Two cushioned chairs. One in resplendent gold, the other silver, slightly smaller. Impressive trick. He seated himself as did she. The chairs were real, unless it was all illusion. She looked into his pulsing black eyes. More like openings to his inner universe. Had not Mudhan said that ultimately the universe was in one's head? His was. With his high cheekbones, dark skin he was exceedingly attractive. She felt drawn to him. Mudhan, Luferious, her daughter and the priest momentarily forgotten. It took an effort of will to remember who she was. The tension subsided.

The silver chair flowing with rivulets of energy. Her body warm, her mind pleasant, her brain alert. No sense of danger. Involuntarily she looked past him and saw the same scene animated in one of the...tiny screens. A Reganian display of brilliant illusion? Other screens showed different views of Regum, Prima and other locations. So many alternative worlds. All centralized in this observation room. Where furniture appeared out of nowhere.

"Welcome Morfur."

"I'm speechless." She was.

"You are a worthy soul." His voice rich, mellow, serene of mind, fluid of expression, unhurried, gentle.

"I doubt it." though she did feel more complete. Her mind cool, calm, very together. Almost like being drugged. Verging on the fantastic. Well this was fantastic.

"I can grant you almost any wish." He said temptingly. She understood what he meant by what was surrounding them. Master of Realities. Illusions as realities. Indulging one's dreams. And not totally deluded for he had said 'almost'. So there were some limits to his powers.

"To heal my daughter, to rid myself of the priest, to return to my home and hearth." Trying not to sound too imperious.

"She lives." He reassured her.

One of the screens expanded around her, quicker than the blink of an eye.

Morfur was in a lush warm humid garden. Rich green foliage, huge bright flowers exuding heady perfumes, beguilingly sweet. Mingled with a hint of rank decay. There was her daughter cavorting with her lover the priest. Dressed in white flowing robes. Morfur should have known. Unless this was her daughter's dream reality or the priest's. Maybe even hers. Walking along the edge of a bank of ferns, admiring the blossoming flowers. Motes of insects hovered in tiny groups to gather the sweet nectar, a dragon fly buzzed past. The realism amazing.

"They are happy." He intoned.

He was standing beside her. His cloak now of a lighter material. Intricate patterns like filigree pulsing over the woven material. Ahead a pagoda, a table laden with fruit, a pitcher of wine, shining silver goblets and in the distance, her mansion.

"This can be yours for as long as you wish. Here your daughter will not be plagued by any affliction." He said enticingly.

Morfur's heart went out to her. The two lovers had only eyes for each other, engrossed in each other's company.

"This is but a dream." And all too real. Way beyond any mental state she had conjured herself. Close but never this vivid, this tactile. She felt the soft spongy grass beneath her feet, the short shadows cast by the midday sun, the wafting breeze, cool and refreshing on her face. What sort of an archimage was this man?

Kuress stopped finally seeing the two of them standing there.

"Where have you been?" Derasi skipped over and embraced Mudhan. This was real. The lover priest bowing gracefully

"I was...worried." Looking into her daughter's clear brown eyes. No hint of madness, of possession, just pure radiant joy.

"You always are." She laughed then looked at Zohex. "An honour to meet you sir. Any friend of my mother's is a friend of mine. Pleased to meet you." And playfully executed a curtsy.

"In the neighbourhood and thought of dropping by." Zohex replied smoothly.

Kuress looked at Morfur who not forgetting her manners said: "Come, take some refreshment, please." Leading them towards the pagoda studying her daughter. Cured. The priest less bombastic, less puffed up, less obsessed with his pretentious knowledge, relaxed, bashful. Trying to infuse some levity.

How was all this achieved?

Four ornately carved chairs. Had there been only two at first sight? Kuress and Zohex stood allowing Mudhan to be seated first. She stole a glance at Zohex. How had she come to know his name? He had not introduced himself. Was her mind working better in this domain? Zohex was acting the perfect gentleman. Showing his delight at the fresh fruit laid out on a silver platter. Bananas, pineapples, water melon, green grapes, oranges, passion fruit, Chinese gooseberries, the colours a temptation to the eye. Two silver pitchers now. One with wine and one water, four goblets, four small silver plates, dainty ivory forks and twinkling knives.

They ate of the fresh, ripe, succulent fruit. All very real. Starched white napkins to dab up the juices. Zohex was drinking water. But Morfur had never refused the elixir. The wine just fruity enough to blend in with their repast. Soft, smooth, subtly lingering on the palate, luscious, delicious. It was hard resisting another refill. Morfur felt the food go down it was that real. Very much so, too real. The wine relaxed her body, stimulating her mind, making her mellow, accepting this for what it was, being at one, her thoughts went to Kurass. Whole, sane, deliriously in love. Not the serious priest weighed down with religious fervour. Easy as can be.

The conversation was innocuous. Gossip about the servants, the villagers on their sprawling property. Her inner dissatisfaction, seeking, the desperate longing for something deeper in life than mere existence - gone. Kuress, looking benevolently as her daughter babbled on like a sparkling brook, obviously smitten. Zohex somewhat absent with his mellow presence. This was too good to be true. She could not fault it.

"And what are your plans Derasi?" Zohex asked.

"Oh I don't know. Become a good vintner, we make excellent wines you know." Taking a sip. Shooing a fly away. It was not that easily distracted. With a deft movement of her hand she caught it, rose and let it go. It returned, landed on the table. Zohex

whacked it with the flat of his hand. He poured some water, washed his hand and wiped it on the napkin.

Even the flies were real.

She could tell the priest Kurrez wanted Derasi to be happy. Given the local gentry's offspring she could have done worse with them than with him. Still something was not right. The priest was too earthly. His sombreness, his seriousness all gone.

"No children?" Zohex prompted gently.

"Children?" she rolled her eyes. "There's enough of them already. I don't even know if I could bear it. When I see the other girls, pregnant to some strutting buffoon..." she gave an involuntary shudder. "Sorry mum."

"No, that's fine. Can't have everyone breeding. What's the sense in that? There's more to life..." stopping herself. The hint should suffice. She was remembering the reality of her position back there. Accused of being an occultist. All because she entertained Mudhan. Crop failures, bad weather, infestations of mould, rodents, insects, rotting fruit were invariably dumped upon her. That the vagaries of nature were the cause barely dawned on the other land owners. That she herself was not spared these inconveniences hardly registered with them. What really irked them was that Derasi was a love child.

She thought of him. Hissak. Their tryst. His lovelessly arranged marriage. All to keep their, his families social status en par with the other preening estate owners. And suspected of being a non-believer. More an agnostic Morfur remembered. Indifferent to the earth gods or the cosmic ones. Seeking answers in nature. Of course their love for each other was never that deep. Morfur knew Hissak would eventually go back to his demanding wife and take another lover. Many of the men did and some women were even flattered at the attention they received. The gossip of course could be vicious. Jealousy. A curse.

Zohex for his part was relaxed. Stretching back a little, observing the bucolic landscape. The lush green trees, flowering vines, feeling very much at home. Morfur though kept her distance, as much as was possible. It would be so easy to let go and accept all this.

"I give thanks to Shakura, bringer of the nectar and revelations, harbinger of dreams, the true visionary god, we thank you for your blessing. The estate is in blossom, the villagers are happy, Khratham, blessed be his reign has given us peace at last, the heretics vanquished, the land cleansed. To you our benediction." Derasi invoked.

Morfur hid her surprise. Praying to a god? Zohex happy, watching her daughter with interest.

"Blessed are all the gods." he simply said.

She was at ease here. He wanted her here. But for what reason? Her occult knowledge? Or...isolate her in her own world for that very same reason. For the moment she decided to go along with this - this vision. She would have to find some portal to get out of here. A piece of skin from a grape was stuck between her teeth. Such details were amazing. Everything had been thought of. Everything?

"This is lovely." deliberately vague. Try and get to the bottom of this reality. Was some shadow of herself back where she really ought to be? Or abandoned? She felt whole, complete and happy. On the verge of the godlike now that Derasi had invoked one of them. So unlike her.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe the power of the illusion but Morfur suddenly felt a shift in her consciousness. Nothing outwardly changed but something emanating from Zohex. His potent persona. That's it: persona. He was part of a bigger programme. Thank you Reganians she tried suppressing what was unfolding in her mind. An entity who could time shift, move at will between multiple realities, adjust to any scenario. As he was doing here. So with her removal was her presence, the memory of others deleted by her transference? Could she return? She had to. Was she losing time there the longer she spent here? The sun stationary. But then they had only been here a short while. Did he want her out of there. Creating the perfect scene this side. Her daughter cured and happy. Her weak point. Could she use her secret arts in this domain? Dare she do it...now?

No not now.

Then there was this innocence. All around her. A mask, hiding something, moving the imagery forwards whilst keeping something much vaster behind it. As if it could be rent, the veil torn, the real reality revealed. Did she want that? In her occult exercises it was all about that: bring forth that which is hidden. The mind doing the hiding. Hiding amongst the gods, the priests in their god...and Zohex?

"What are you?" she asked softly. Speaking her mind. See what happens.

Something about him changed. Barely perceptible. Did his eyes harden. Was there an unnatural fire burning within them? Was his mind coalescing something from beyond? Had she thought that which was forbidden? Questioning his essence? If he had one. This nagging doubt of him being a part of this vast woven mosaic called forth from his dream world?

'An agent of Prima.'

Zohex was staring into the distance.

`No.' Morfur thought `Nothing so banal as an agent.'

The coat he was wearing changed into white, gold embossed sleeves, around his neck the circular pendant of the pontiff's palatial staff. All illusion. The image of an Immortal.

Derasi and Kuress were on their knees paying obescience.

What was going on? She heard the distant murmur of voices. Out there and in her head. Her daughter had never been...Kuress the priest had changed. Almost quivering from fear? Emotion? Some spiritual infusion? Like at the house? Kuress's head remained bowed. One moment happy serenity now this: pious pretence. Turmoil. No. Just turmoil within her.

Zohex's outline shimmered a little. Giving off energy from within. Connected to the universal essence, the Divine Mind, the Great Architect, the weaver of this universe. Hopefully not the one she had come from.

The voices were getting more incessant, louder, clamouring for attention. A wall of sound assailing her mind. And there they were, the villagers, moving forward amongst the trees, moving enmasse, their eyes fevered, glazed, besmitten, in awe, in reverence, in supplication, in devoutness, in their rustic garb, pouring towards her. Sobbing, wailing, beseeching, incessant, continuous, filling her mind with some unknown dread. The ones in front falling to their knees. Some were crying, others seeking spiritual comfort from their own distressed state, wanting to be forgiven for unimaginable sins, others saved from the heinous presence of spiritual destitution.

These were not the villagers she knew. They looked the same but acted more like possessed suffering souls. Others were looking at her, for Morfur was still seated, resentful, suppressed anger sending their minds into paroxysms of undiluted hatred. Visions of demented sacred longings which her presence was befouling his holy presence assaulted her. Her mind screaming within to void this hallowed blasphemy, everything she had thought, dreamt, longed for falling away amongst the mad jabbering of the unwashed, besmirched multitude.

Their barely repressed odium flung towards her, what she was, what she represented to them, an apostate, a recalcitrant unbeliever, a free thinker, a dabbler of the forbidden arts threatened to overwhelm her clamouring mind seeking clarity of vision, peace, respite from this sonic attack.

Zohex exultant.

Trapped in this soundscape, tearing her thoughts apart piece by piece. Morfur strained against this insane attack. They hurled foul epithets into her stricken, fearful,

riveted mind, pouring their venom into her. Immobilized she stared in utter disbelief at the multitude whipped to frenzied hatred by Zohex's manipulations. He was the master of his reality, which now was theirs as well. Their individuality subsumed in this massive outpourings of despicable abhorrence aimed solely at her. Morfur felt the icy fear of their detestation. Her skin clammy, frozen into frightful trepidation the venomous ichor drawn forth from some dark insane realm arrested her thinking faculties as her soul was riveted, frozen in time, the horror pouring into her of the peasants unadulterated hatred.

They were one massive boiling cauldron of relentless detestation within her. Confusion turning into degenerate dissolution as her thoughts untangled, torn apart thread by thread. Her focus, her inner self lost in this clamour, this cacophony of their madness. She wanted to weep for them, for what they had lost, the precious gift of life twisted into the demonic. Too many voices clamouring for attention, spiked barbs tearing at her mind.

This false reality was scouring her soul, burning up her brain, ice-hot, the unholy fire consuming her, the crowd baying for her destruction.

Zohex irradiated black soot, filling the air around him with hundreds of tiny flies, a buzzing radiant darkness in the midday sun, his face a grimacing rictus of smiling death.

The chair felt ice-hot, the jabbering growing louder, thoughts assaulting her stricken mind. She was dribbling, her hands shaking as if she had palsy. Her skin sickly pale yellow, she had jaundice, the fever of their hatred within her glowing white hot, the darkness of Zohex now a mantle over her. Amplifying the ordure of their relentless abhorrent hatred, their venom coursing its poison in her boiling blood. She the unholy, the infested, the unclean, the unwanted, the detested abomination being felled for her overweening pride to dare question all that was holy and pure.

Zohex turned to Morfur. She was slumped, drooling from her half open mouth, a strange fire in her eyes slowly going out. Then glazed over. One more obstacle removed from his design.

Derasi looked with some pity on her mother.

"I always knew she was weird. Her dabbling with the occult..." she let the thought hang in the languorous air. Birds twittered in the trees, bees hummed at the wonderful flowers. The grass sparkled in the sun. The peasants tending the fields, a bull bellowed somewhere in the distance, the servants busy in the mansion.

"I will pray for her soul." Kuress said after Derasi had fallen silent.

"Her soul?" Zohex replied. "Beyond redemption. Her kind have to be wasted. They are a poison unto us."

Kuress looked at Zohex, then, slowly asked the Great Cosmic Consciousness to forgive Morfur for her blindness, her intellectual pride, her dabbling in the occult.

Zohex breathed in deeply. It felt good to be master of one's realities.

Erx

Erx's brain was on the verge of shutting down. Targeted overloads directed at him. Or Linnox. Or the ship engaged in g-drive. Linnox only too happy of ground control's ineffectual pursuit and ineffectual cyber assaults. Only to see them vanish from the immediate area. Adrenaline hyping Erx. Linnox all attention. Ultra sensitive. Erx's add-ons repelling everything being thrown at them from below. It might be so much dated junk but it was functioning junk. Assault mode. Their systems hostile and active. Vigorous assault acquisition systems trying to usurp them. Might not be manned anymore, running on auto. Either way they were locked on. A bit like his mites. Linear module linkage, reading his protective field state. Erx's and the ship's internal algorithms reconfigured themselves, changing frequencies, resonant states, field equations including random generated chaos wave fronts, the assault defences could not be shaken. Even at the speed they were doing. Erx did not want to go stealth just yet. Being targeted an inconvenience. The onboard radars showed the thin lines radiating out from the Outback.

Erx felt the blood pumping in his brain. That would assemble the protein chips faster he had hastily swallowed prior his speedy exit. Whether it was that or something else, ground based his whole sense of what he perceived, ship, Linnox, space, the whole environment now different. Boosted V activity, but this far out? Novus the size of a large ball. Pink, lilac, purple patches, the great ocean flashing reflected sunlight, wispy white clouds, the edge of the northern icecaps. Securing their getaway. Visuals only. With Novus coming under martial law Erx hoped they would loose interest in them. They might be aware that his mites had been a hostile intrusion, but since they were really basic spybots with no covert design applications his pithy attempt might merely be catalogued. The destruction of the orbital though was something else. But then it was their rockets that had caused the carnage. The ship, he didn't ask, might be armed but Linnox, being a brilliant pilot, merely took evasive measures. Self defence really.

So why did everything feel wrong? Surely not guilt. Maybe a little as lives would have been lost on the orbital. Novaian dead, Reganians burnt to a crisp, asphyxiated Primaian, DVs hopefully. They were one breed who were hard, almost impossible to contain. Unless one used Hertzian jammers. Counter measures really. Creating a bog in which their assault targeting and remote viewing went to pieces. That little box of tricks he had with him.

Linnox was busy running diagnostics. Not that he didn't trust the ship. But he had shut down all auxiliary functions given they were being targeted. Having left their explosive, well the Primaian defence forces's bang behind. Bits of debris glittered on the radar.

"You checking for source targeting methods?" Erx asked looking at the partially glowing console. Linnox was making the ship look less capable than it was.

"A must. Given what's happened. Primaians can be vengeful. Fanatical. Even if it is their undoing. Going hyper for the most useless of reasons."

"Err, you're not referring to what happened back there?"

"And that. Getting away could be enough to set them off."

"Well something's embedded that's filling my head with something rancid."

Linnox laughed. His bony face looking more like a mask etched onto his skull than a face that belonged to him. His coal black eyes remaining focussed on the glowing readouts. Even the disengaged modules were being scanned for non designated reactions.

"Could be DVs feeling a bit put out." Smirking at his own pun for some would have made it to the escape pods. While those outside could be fuming for revenge. "You know Linnox, I don't get it. DVs are supposed to be smart yet they couldn't foretell the disaster that hit the orbital. So much for remote viewing."

"Yes that thought has crossed my mind as well. Still a potent force. One not to be lightly dismissed."

"Well I'm reconfiguring. Just thought I'd tell you. Once the protein chains are in place, molecularly structured I should be able to become backup for us."

"Yes. Thank you. The ship's by the way noted your heightened metabolic activity."

His brain felt as if it were taking a warm bath. The DVs shock when the rockets hit still palpable. His memory taking note of their flaring. Some activity present but the overall field was finally getting weaker. Or consolidating themselves. His brain jolted. Connections were being established. Synapses surging. A warm flow radiated through him. Enhanced endomorphins. Erx sensed the ship's external protective field getting denser, tighter, hopefully impenetrable. Reconfiguring itself into a series of digital locks, recalculating encoded stealth ware. Repulsion.

"We're well away from Novanian space."

"Aha. But not their DV reach. I tell ya Linnox, the Outback is active."

"Hm. Not surprising."

Novus one dot of light amongst the receding spread of stars that made up the spiral arm. The assault weakening. The ship's defences reconfigured. Erx relaxed. A little creaking of the ship, the odd gurgle of a pipe's liquid contents, the near imperceptible hum of generators.

"There's still a weak field around us." Erx related after a while.

"Yes the ship's aware of it. Could be natural."

"Natural?"

"As in space."

"Ah." Erx was thinking of some angry DVs and their commanders. "Ahm, are we going anywhere in particular?"

"Not yet. Just deep space." Linnox checked something on the console, not using HID, was satisfied then said, "probably the asteroid belt at the next spiral arm."

"Unannounced?"

"Let's say there are certain protocols..."

"The less said the better."

"You never know."

"I think you give the DVs too much credit."

"Or enhanced naturals, psychics Erx."

"How do you think the Reganian's will react to the incident?"

"If they paid attention they'd know we were being targeted."

"I know. But the trick..."

"Was their risk Erx."

"So we're OK. How do you think the Spacers will take it then?"

"Something to talk about." Linnox replied indifferently. "Erx. Are you wanted for anything?"

"Nah."

"You must have had some interesting clients."

"Through them you mean? Wouldn't come up." Certain of that.

"If they really want you."

"Well not on Regum. Gaming can only get you so far. So many worlds... scenario's can get boring. Novus the future in a way. Primitive yet in comparison, a challenge, a new world."

"Not any more."

"No. Linnox. What if they doctor the files, create their own version right down to the way they got fooled. Make it look like we fired those missiles."

"Doubt it."

"Add-ons."

"Hm."

"Can I dive into the ship's system?"

"I'd rather you not."

"Fine."

"There is a simulation to study."

"Alright. Call it up please."

"External?"

"External-internal."

"As in Gaming."

"Yep."

Ex saw the triple secure layering of the ship. Outer algorithmic configured lock out mode, stealth infused, EM repulsion field, kinetic energy dispersion layer to absorb hostile hits, the hull itself, another EM shield both sides of the ship's smart system, another hull, virtual back ups, final hull layer. He felt better. So the assault had been in his head. Vs.

"Reganian ship. The best."

"It's advanced. Standard though. No physical repulsion units."

"You mean weaponry."

"I do."

"I think phase one of my configuration's in place."

Linnox merely nodded. Ex felt zippy, a bundle of mental energy with no direction. His body was relaxed. A bit of a dichotomy. The assault over.

"So off to the rubble rowers." Ex said after a while. Linnox's had the full ship's systems back on line.

"The industrial belt you mean?"

"Sure do. Who knows. Might run into some old contacts, customers, clients." He had enough credits to last a while. Systems might self configure, self upgrade but there were always some from previous generations that still had their uses and hopefully their glitches as well. Then of course there were the Habitats. Some designed from the ground up. Space up to be correct. The factories created the modules, the superstructure and the client filled in the details. Possible maintenance there for him to straighten out.

His brain lit up. Structural configuration complete, protein data strands molecularly entwined. Interphase chattering away, testing synaptic nodes, random

access pathways flickering in short bursts. He could sell this. The size of micro dots. Then there were nano turbo chargers. Short term flaring. Something Gamers used for quick get aways or rapid assault.

"Have you still got the mites?" Linnox relaxed turned to him.

"A pocket full."

"I could use them."

"How much you need?"

"Tricky. What's the minimum."

"Fingernail."

"Duration?"

"Ambient dependent."

"I see. A handful?"

"Sure. Now?"

"No not yet. Later."

"Tell me, did we travel faster than light?"

"We did. You did not notice the star field shift?"

"Must have happened during my reconfiguration. So we got g-drive."

"Indeed that is correct."

"Good. Means the news of ahm..."

"Yes. No need to worry Ex. We've got the real events. And we are approaching our first destination."

"Can't see anything."

"No. We are two thirds there but the spiral arm will appear in any moment. By the way Ex, what are you going to turn your talents to?"

"Same as Novus."

"Hm. I may have a client who could use you. Long term."

"Long term." Ex grimaced. "That can leave one out of the loop. Loose track of developments. A bit like a closed system Linnox."

"This client is somewhat...different."

"There's only three types. Upfront and simple, upfront and complicated and shady. Two groups there. For and against something. Political which includes defensive and offensive. And not forgetting anarchists, nihilists, millenialists, delusionalists, activists..."

"A few more than three." Linnox smirked.

"The latter bifurcate. Which one is this one?"

"Two and three and more."

"And more?"

"Maybe. Depends on you, on the client."

"As always."

The milky spread of the upcoming spiral arm appeared as they slowed down. Moments later the first stars, then many, hundreds, finally thousands. The ship started to decelerate heading towards the Zylon accretion disk, named after its discoverer. Amongst the rubble some planetoids, all captured by a near brown dwarf around five AU's from its star. Irrespective of the political situation on the home planets, this sector declared a neutral zone since precious metals and rare ores were too important for both their economies to fight over. Prima cooperated since it engaged in no mining nor Regum for ascetic values. Most of the extraction done by robots and automated machinery. Still needing oversight to allow the process of manufacturing to shape the raw material into finished products.

"We're in com range." Linnox announced. "Going active. Picking up habitat traffic. You know we're the first or last ship out prior Novus suffering its coup. We'll be hot. Be alert Erx. The less we say the better. Check out whoever is interested. This will cause ripples in the convoluted scheme of things. You ever been out here? Or had clients?"

"Never asked."

"Astute." Linnox agreed. "We want to fade away."

"Invisible."

"Preferable."

Erx saw Linnox from a new perspective. No longer the reserved factotum of Marros, the enigmatic Mr E to some on Novus. Linnox had taken on more substance to his character. Whilst still himself, his mind was in a new phase of activity. Erx's brain felt him. Focussed without revealing exactly what, in contact with associates, a little secretive, cloaking his mind. Minor enhancements in place at least. Organized on Novus regarding their nifty getaway. If not an operative, he was maybe a go-between at least. Connected.

Linnox was busy secreting the ship's memory regarding their less than obvious escape from Novus. Erx felt the surge of the ship's systems, its data cloaked underneath and within maintenance logs, system repair schedules, internal transfer nodes, all fragmented and dispersed. Some data dumped in the memory as alert status call up files in case of emergency. Where their evasion techniques were parked.

Linnox sent out an auto-hail message.

"Oh yes, ship's 'My Baby'." Linnox grinned. "Might be something else tomorrow. Depending on the ship's mood. Very temperamental."

"Unstable?"

"Designed. Won't like someone else in control."

"Neat."

"Can make life difficult for an intruder. No matter how smart." He glanced at Erx. "Not that I'm implying you have designs. But others most certainly will. Ships go missing now and again. There are always those who need to make a fast exit. Financial, rogues, desperados, politicals, you get the drift."

"Like us?" Erx chuckled.

"Now the ship is not mine Erx. Just in case security asks. Belongs to Marrus. Not that he'll miss it...much. If my memory serves me well he's got three. But don't worry, he hasn't sent out a bulletin."

"Glad to hear it."

"So Erx, you interested in having a client?"

Though phrased as an innocent question Erx detected an undertone of a request which he ought to accept. Given that Linnox had gotten him out he pretended to mull over it then said: "Sure."

"There are some preconditions involved. Better get this out of the road before we're on solid ground. You are aware that some agencies have secrecy clauses?"

Erx nodded. It made sense. Confidentiality was the way he operated.

"While nothing is required of you verbally or data wise, it is expected."

"Fine."

Linnox wondered at Erx's levity. But then he knew that for Erx to get clients his discretion was not just accepted but from what research Linnox found regarding Erx there was almost nothing to go on. Erx knew how to keep his head down, his mind focussed, his acumen contained. The reason he had been chosen, targeted.

"The data you will be concerned with is extremely sensitive. Or put another way, extreme measures are in force to keep it so." Before Erx could react to that Linnox continued: "I know this sounds harsh, almost Primaian, but given...everything, the precariousness of the situation, let's say the discretion you have shown so far makes you commendable."

"Thank you for the faith extended." Then smirking, "You realise of course how much you have revealed Linnox."

"Oh?" not from surprise but wanting to ascertain Erx's position.

"Not that I will mention this after we leave the ship Linnox. Either it's some very powerful family, a conglomerate that is outsourcing, maybe even someone eccentric onto something, or, let's say a group of associates working independently for appearances but having a unitary motive, be it economic, industrial or...political. Maybe it may just be cutting edge science." He grinned at Linnox. "Or SpaceKorps perhaps? They might have been neutralized, absorbed but I bet those out here...if you get my drift."

"Ex. You've just about covered it. I cannot say of course which is correct but let us say you are not wrong. In either case utmost secrecy is primary."

"Maybe even deciphering the alien field? Not for the Primaian I mean."

"Do you believe?"

Ex looked at the spread of stars, a vast cosmic river of light.

"In sentient life. As it is."

"And yourself?"

"Me?" Ex laughing. "I don't know Linnox. What sort of a question is that? Even philosophers haven't answered that one. All I know I'm me. Sometimes I have existential panic attacks, the me, you, them complex. As to the where, whence, what or if, but, maybe, whatever, well that's about as far as it goes."

"And death?"

"Death? Not yet thank you." Then eyeing Linnox, "Err has this got to do with your client?"

"It may have occurred to you, they do not want any Primaian sympathisers. Or converts, believers. You don't seem like one."

"Maybe there is eternity after death, no one knows. No one's come back and told me." He tried to make light of this sombre turn.

"The DVs claim to speak to the dead."

"Probably too rich an oxygen mix. Who knows? Talk do the dead. What's wrong with talking with the living?"

It was Linnox's turn to smile. "You're doing fine."

"So far." Ex added more as a joke.

"Yes. What about the aliens?"

"Know nothing."

"Their hostile intent?" referring to Prima's explanation.

"If they are hostile they would be hostile. Since they're conspicuous by their absence I fear Prima is being not altogether very honest. Nothing from the Reganian end. Sounds like a bit of mythology to me."

"Mythology, I like that." Linnox agreed. "Now you know there is a form of mental warfare going on between the two home planets."

"Reason I left."

"Engaged on a technological level as well."

"Not surprised. Cyber wars."

"Well not a war, more like influencing reality. And here Prima is not too shy to use technological means to achieve their aim."

Ex understood. "If I can help I will Linnox. I mean it. Fuck 'em."

"My sentiment exactly. The trouble is..."

`We have your ID. Vector indicates Zylon B5. Confirm.'

"Ah contact. Auto response."

"`My Baby', ID encoded, standard. B5 vector. Ex-Novus."

`Confirmed. Specify arrival.'

"A bar and some women." Ex answered.

`Ha ha. Very funny. B5 confirmed. Suggest you break speed in a hundred max."

"Onto it, engaging dampeners." Linnox giving Ex a reproachful look, just for a moment.

`Safe arrival. Logged pertinent data. No flags. Proceed with caution. Traffic light, over.'

"Roger, over and out."

"No flags hey?"

"None that they are admitting to. It's gonna take, well as long as no other g-ships are heading this way or anywhere close, a while. The coup..."

"But Linnox, the DVs will be aligned. They'll blab. This is a plus as far as Novus is concerned."

"Yes. That will be interesting. "Control."

`Yes MB.'

"Coup on Novus. V breakout. Planned. Be aware for usual disinformation."

`Repeat that. Coup on Novus?'

"Correct. Orchestrated by the GG in the Outback. Vs in control on the ground."

`Read you. You may have reception waiting.'

"Expected."

'Thank you for the update. Keep all information secure.'

"Roger. Out." Then he turned to Ex. "Be yourself. Don't try and outsmart them, try to be scatter brained, eccentric if you can manage it."

"I can do stupid."

"Politically vacant will do."

"What about my real capabilities?"

"Trouble shooter will do."

"Yes, agreed. My credit's good here?"

"Of course. But I would transfer to a more local financial outfit. The GG might freeze whatever assets you had on Novus."

"I had a funny feeling this might happen." Ex sighed.

"So you've made arrangements?"

"Sent an auto flash. All my credit's are on me, digitally."

"Don't loose it."

"No way."

"Reception won't bother you there."

"So, what's their position?"

"Non aligned."

"Novus?"

"Even less so, or more so. About as neutral as one can get. Has it's downside though."

"Really? Not to Prima's liking no doubt."

"Actually it's to their liking. A free zone. Crawling with agents. Theirs, the others, aligned, non aligned, double, triple, quadruple maybe, makers, shakers, agents of influence, disinformation, counter espionage, thuggery, abductions, extortion, enticements, usually with hookers of all classes. That's just the sentients. Then there are rogue programmes, stealth, covert, overt. Some sentients are inserts, others with false personas, chameleons, random designed, mutants, pretenders, crap artists, crooks, crims, respectable and not so, politicians, shonky operators, stock manipulators, potential terrorists, splinter groups, religious atheists..."

"What?"

"Religious atheists. Prima's answer to Reganian indifference."

"Should I get some sort of weaponry?"

"Ah, that is always tricky. Guns attract guns I always say. How's your self defence?"

"Physically? Non existent."

"And...?" referring to his head.

"I'm more into evasion."

"Now that is good." Linnox concurred. "Final approach."

The rubble along the accretion disk spread out before them, arcing away into the blackness of space. They saw the flash burns of manoeuvring bulk cargo carriers, shuttles zooming between the various settlements, long distance cruisers off to some habitat many of which hung in near space. Obviously there for entertainment and supplies. The closer they drifted in on their vector the more the lights glittered. Micro hubs the size of provincial towns, all a hive of activity from what the ship picked up on the open com links. A magnet for geologists, miners, extracting companies, smelters, blast furnaces, rolling mills. Then there were the engineering concerns building and maintaining the robotic machines that extracted, processed and assembled not just the industrial complexities of high tech manufacturing but the infrastructure of maintenance bots, work specific transports, even luxury cruisers, habitats, hotels, flats, shops, alcoholic distilleries, hydroponic farms, water extracting and processing plants or hijacking water rich asteroids. And siphoning the near brown giant for unlimited supplies of hydrogen, along with back up fusion generators.

Linnox and Erx felt themselves privileged in what they knew had occurred on Novus. The first to arrive. Others, if they could get out, would. But they were the hot ticket item at the moment. The open com chattered on about daily routines, glitches, breakdowns, both material, industrial and personal. What the ships high intensity com data pulled out was even more interesting. AC5, the area they were in was one of the hubs activating local security measures. Watchers alerted, listening posts beefed up, mobile defences checked, diagnostics run, threat scenario's evaluated. Agents in position, weaponry made ready.

The only thing the ship could not get into without really trying was what was going on at the executive level. There the policy and decision makers were in secure lock down mode, planning for worse case scenario's Linnox hoped. The Primaians simply could not be trusted. They heard of bio-hazard response teams being made ready.

Gliding into their designated landing zone they found that a detailed security team was there to receive them. Once the cruiser was secure, shunted into a restricted area their need to pass through customs was waived. Their suits and themselves were chemically doused in the intervening airlocks. The detail escorted them to reception

where they logged in with their real names. Neither had a record pertaining to any serious infringements. The first thing Linnox did was pay the parking and holding fee for the cruiser. Only then could they proceed. Priorities.

A bespectacled man, obviously either hiding implants or none of advanced age yet with a remarkable young looking face, short white cropped hair greeted them without revealing who he was. A tag said 'security' without further identification. Behind him a young woman studied them with some detachment. They were bidden to follow, their guards peeling away. Down a corridor and into a bland room. Erx's configured brain sensed the EM shield, a debriefing room.

Asked to sit they were offered tea or coffee. Coffee, good for the brain Linnox replied. A half smile from the old man. Moments later a servo bot, really an upright cylinder on wheels whirled in with four steaming hot cups of coffee. After they had taken each a cup it trundled off into a corner and went into stand-by. Their two interrogators had flexi-light-pads. He drew out a small box, voice encryption. Data glowed on their screens, the pink outline of Novus distinctive.

They were taken through their journey, their escape, the incident involving the orbital, the situation as they remembered it on the ground. He let Linnox and Erx do the talking. Like reciting one's holiday. Except this was a one way trip.

"And your intentions? Now that you are here?"

"Make our connection then we're out of here."

"Where?" he asked leaning forwards.

"Away. Preferably disappear." Linnox leaning back easily.

"Vanish." Erx added. Then, "Away from Prima. Anyone with certain technical abilities is high on their agenda. I think they are breaking out. Have done so on Novus. They might even try something on the orbital."

"You mean Regum?"

"Or Prima itself. Maybe they'll try a coup on Regum."

"Maybe." He said evenly. "What about your employer."

Linnox was not taken aback. Contractual obligations. Only the super rich and some families were truly independent.

"Mr E..."

"Mr E?" he asked.

"Mister Enigmatic. Persona transformations, on a whim, almost weekly. Sometimes daily."

The man nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Yes some people became bored with themselves. An after effect of Gaming for too long. Missing the variabilities when engaging in their crafted alter egos and the transmutational realities of the Web which made it necessary to adjust, to change, to adapt, to mutate, to bifurcate, to meta self enhance, to even become at times transcendent. Then there is the state of being an Immortal. Born of the Primaian idea of being completely meta, beyond all the laws. The downside is the need of accessing an energy base that requires a mini fusion reactor, one's own power station. Then go isolate so that one was everywhere, like an electron mimicking an electron shell."

'Tell me about it.' Erx thought sipping his coffee. The woman, pale like him, spacers, tall, lean, almost androgynous were it not for her bone structure, slim arms and slender hands, the merest hint of a bosom, the smoothness of her face, her coal black expansive eyes. Or high grade implanted optical sensors. But she did blink. Maybe part symbiot.

Their inquisitor was looking at the flexi sheet as data scrolled down. Erx detected soft intrusion probes. He was glad Linnox got him out. Novus was such a backwater. As intended. He might have been a big fish there yet the planet, observing these two, was but a pond. Stuff was happening here. He felt it, his brain sensed it, the woman suspected it, the old man probably knew it. Whilst on Regum they expanded their cyber creativity in the Web. Here it appeared they were applying it to themselves.

As if she was reading his mind she half smiled at Erx. He felt himself blushing. There was a cool beauty to her, as if she were the future. Even the old man, apart from a few wrinkles around his neck, and now he saw the tiny strands coming out from his collar to the back of his neck, the smoothness of his skin, even though the eyes were hollow, sunken, the lips thin, the nose bony, his hands wrinkled was partially or wholly configured.

Erx felt the tension in the room, like approaching thunder and lightning. His brain-mind responded. The transition smooth, the change soft, seamless. More like foreplay than mindfucking. That was the reason she was here. Starting with him because he was the youngest. Hoping for inexperience or suspecting as an ex-gamer that he might have snippets of data they could use, configurations they might not have thought of, applications that could be useful. Aggressive algorythms and strange attractors. At that moment Erx thought of Linnox. The creamy smoothness in his mind dissipated. Having tickled his endomorphins.

Their interrogator watched Linnox from the corner of his eye. His demeanour hardly changed. Asking how the Vs were acting, trying to get all angles, even the most

insignificant information to build up the picture on Novus, Linnox's voice wavering just a little.

The man, Erx did not think of him as old anymore, apologized for this need to know, allowing himself a wan smile. Linnox merely nodded. She looking at Linnox. Erx wanted her to look at him. A warm fuzziness in his stomach. Even though she was older than him he was taken by her. Her simple beauty fascinating. He could look onto those deep dark eyes for ever, that perfect face, every detail enticing. Nor was he lusting after her. Just being in her presence was enough. If she was the next generation then the spacers were onto something.

Finally they were done. Both of them pushed the flexi pads over and asked them to sign.

"Protocol. Agreement by you not to say anything about the conversation nor the current state of Novus. Failure to comply will give us the freedom to lock up, isolate, brainclamp, reconfigure, if need be or dispose of. The latter not the preferred option. Any advances, any suspicious characters intent on extracting information to be rebuffed. If compromised through your own devices we hand you over once we're done..." A tight smile from her. Erx was endeared. She could mind fuck him any time.

Linnox and Erx signed the flexiscreen. That done she pushed two micro disks towards them. "Upload these please. It's for your com link. If you get into difficulties, and we don't mean a scene in a bar, but a hostile approach just press your transmit tab for three seconds. We'll get external visuals as well and know how to respond. For the moment you two are hot. I'm sure others will arrive. Some might even detour here once they know of what occurred on Novus. We can safely assume the Primaians will keep this quiet as long as it suits them. Then they'll release their propaganda. I'm imagining it right now." She smiled. "Population going discordant, pacification required. Or some such nonsense. If they won't invoke the aliens and their corrupt field they might try the so-called Kabal."

Linnox did not react but Erx did: "Kabal? As in conspiracy? Or am I missing something?"

"Oh," she replied breezily, "something Prima cooked up. Clandestine group, political. Aim to foment a revolution on Prima. Enlighten the masses, reveal the lies. Then again they claim it's a Reganian plot to influence, to link, enphase the Web with their Resonant Field. Thus strip their protecting resonance and last that the Kabal is in league with the aliens. None of it is true. There probably are such groups but not how the Primaians envisage it. I'm also certain some scientists are probably cooking up the next

generations of computers, or symbiots, independent AI systems to guarantee Regum's progress. We've also noted some strange quantum manifestations in space. Who knows what the Reganians are playing with."

Linnox knew what she was doing. See what Erx would react to. Involuntarily. Information by association. Contacts had to be approached, arrangements made, security detailed, observers activated, surveillance put in place, false leads laid down, disinformation spread, help sought. Said disinterestedly. See if they just might be connected, or probably were, to her. It was the last scenario that was the most correct. So were others. But they were decoys. Whoever was running the show here were on the ball. Linnox hoped that with so much under their belt they were amendable to the Kabal's whole reason being active. With Erx's computational skills, his ex-gaming exposed to rapid response initiatives in instant changing environments, hopefully even second guessing them, would make Erx a welcome addition. Not that he would refuse. Linnox had gotten him out. And Erx was probably too much of a maverick to last long outside. It was best that he be embraced, then, from the outside, erased.

"I have not been on that planet for years." Linnox explained.

"I'm more recent." Erx volunteered. "There have been hints that some group infiltrated WebWorld if not WebSpace or both. It would be the logical place to hide. Go in, disperse. Cover everything. Be aware of everything. Use Prima's paranoia..." Erx laughed.

The woman listening, attentive. The man watching Linnox.

"What if this alien field is this group, this Kabal's invention? Counter intelligence at work. Get them paranoid, get them distracted, get them to think they could be influenced by alien thoughts. Create a whole class of heretics, lunatics. Have the need of organs and apparatuses to deal with the alien incursion. They become, are, obsessed with that idea. Laughable really." Erx ventured.

"You think so?" she asked with a straight face.

"What? That it's a hoax? Could be. Have you seen, felt, sensed, measured or downloaded this field? Has anybody?"

She merely observed. Astute.

"You are to be congratulated Erx." He said.

"You mean no one's thought of this before?" incredulous.

"It's never been accepted by Regum's scientists. They doubt it's existence. So do those who live in space. No one's ever come across it. Astronomers have pointed their equipment in that direction and found two close galaxies."

"Any aliens?"

"Yes."

"But not the way Prima imagines them to be."

"Oh they're not too wrong," disabusing him of the notion that Primaians were nothing but bad liars. "There is no field. Or conversely there is a field. An EM field. It's their data, their transmissions. They too externalise their fantasies. That's what the Primaian's are latched on to. At the same time there is thus a grain of truth in their obsession. They do have wars, murder and all the other...primal instincts entangled with a vicious violence that is abhorrent to all of us. Brilliant and moronic." She shook her head knowing she had to believe it. Earthers were insane, at times.

Ex sat there a little deflated.

"Nice idea though." She added seeing his crestfallen expression. "But now you understand why we never rammed that home."

"Because their propaganda regarding their planet is based on fact." Linnox finished the thought process and his coffee. "Tell me," Linnox allowed himself a smile, "is anybody doing anything in that regard?"

"You'd have to ask the astronomers."

"Yes, I realize. What about direct contact?"

"They're two hundred million light years away."

"G-drive."

The man and the woman looked at each other.

"He would find out anyway." The man thought to her.

"There's an understanding with Prima. Includes us as well. No contact. Current data suggests they are still unstable. Not only that, hostile as well. They've taken on others."

"And?" Linnox interested.

"Put it this way. Their missiles, their performance is cumbersome. Their own kind destroyed by other aliens. Not all are so forgiving when you have some mad Earther intent on taking you out. Anyway, now there's nothing over there of use to anybody this side." She answered. "Why, you interested?"

"No," Linnox replied honestly, "just wandering. I mean," he continued, "contact will come about one day. Someone's going to go there because they can. The longer Prima goes on about the alien field and the aliens themselves, well it stands to reason."

"Put it this way. Since you signed your memories away, certain discretionary approaches are in progress."

"Thought so." Linnox guessed.

"I hope that is us." Erx suggested.

"Fraid not. DVs." She sighed.

"No one's jamming?"

"Politics. Complicated. Long story." Case closed.

"But you are following events?" Linnox couldn't believe they were letting the Primaians get away with it. What she did not want to reveal was Regum's recent successful insertion of their PFWs. It was top secret. At their echelon they were informed. If only to keep others away. All. Their own kind included.

But she could reveal this: "Vacuum Beaming. You may not have heard of it. And again, when you leave here you will not mention this. Simply put it quantum tunnels a negative beam towards a designated target. The result is that time equals zero. In other words..."

"Real time results." Erx interrupted excitedly.

"Exactly."

"So you do know..." Erx relieved they were not letting Prima steal the show.

Linnox understood how this debrief was going. Having gotten what they wanted, Novus's situation, by engaging them in other areas of interest they were basically mining their heads. Since Erx was the more innocent Linnox was prepared for Erx to let his mind wander. The Earthers and Prima did not really concern him that much. That was not his assigned role. Sure he speculated now and then, who didn't, but as a facilitator to the group that was both there in a loose sense and not there as the Kabal Prima imagined them to be. A rotational team would be the best way to assign an appellation for what he helped keep supplied with potentials. Erx the loner. Not missed. With brains. An ideal candidate.

Linnox's mind had been rambling. He rarely did this, stray off beam. It had to be this room, smartware. The stuff engrained in his skull was not even aware that they were opening his head like a filing cabinet. Taking comfort from the fact they were on the same side. Spacers were fiercely independent. Even Regum realized that. They sent the odd agent to have a look-see and return. And unless he or she brought something worth trading, would get very little in return. Regum needed the belt, the belt Regum as customers. Rumours had it that here, or somewhere close, a weapons research centre was in operation. The Reganians weren't trying too hard. For two reasons. Not to alert the Primaians for starters. The second if they did arm Prima would unleash their DVs onto

them. Pilfer the designs, the hardware, the machinery mentally. Back to stalemate. At a far more dangerous level. Armed conflict too easily triggered.

His mind had drifted yet again. For them this was too easy. Linnox willed himself to concentrate and stop thinking.

"Well Linnox, Erx, thank you for your time, your cooperation. As far as our conversation goes, you know nothing. The only ones interested are the Primaians. If the clauses in the agreement you signed appear harsh, that is because they have to be. Prima is too strong. Just look at the way Regum offered, offered I repeat their orbitals. Not just that, they allowed Primaians onto them. So you see our concern. We could erase your memories of our meeting. As simple as resetting a computer to a previous safe sequence of coordinates." `Aha' thought Linnox, `exactly what my brain was doing!' "Your intentions are in the right place." `Hinting at the group no doubt.' "Now you say you are basically in transit, correct?"

"Correct."

"Unless something comes up, you won't see or hear from us or our department. Don't forget, if either of you are in an extremely tight spot, three seconds on send or transmit. Help will materialize." He reminded them.

"Do we keep the software when we leave or..."

"I'll take it, thank you."

`Some sort of tag.' Linnox again catching his mind revealing things.

"If you want to erase it once you're out of here, meaning the area, create a password, enter it then hold receive-incoming for five seconds." She said.

"What's the range?" Erx asked.

"Not far. Around a hundred."

"Terrestrial or astronomical?" Linnox queried.

"Terrestrial. So before you go, any questions?" he asked.

"Well, we'll never get your names or ID. How safe is this area?"

"Well, the Primaians are always snooping. We give them some leeway then round them up, sometimes a little drained," her eyes twinkling with delicious mischievousness, "so they send surrogates. They're never that good. In the end certain questions have to be asked. That gets around."

`Meaning full scanners in operation.' Linnox gave up trying to quieten his mind.

"Nor are Primaians exactly wanted. Because of their psychic abilities. Funny that. So we try via enhancements, inserts, configurations, accepted by all the players. Even psychic warfare..."

"Shit." Erx expressed so succinctly.

"You got it."

"No impending war?" Linnox thought might as well go for the extreme.

"None envisaged. None planned. None entertained. None in the works." Which of course was a lie. One had always to be prepared. They had some nifty weapons secreted in defensively chosen redesigned asteroids. "I assume you want to enjoy the pleasures on offer. Be aware of shonky gamblers, quick fingered hookers, delinquent gamers, con merchants and assorted crooks, pickpockets, burglars, sneaky stock merchants, spurious traders with ill assorted goods, pretend executives, business and politicals, which they are not or might have been, hackers after your brains, seducers who want to lighten your credits...I think that covers most." She looked at him.

"Yes. Just." He half smiled at Linnox and Erx.

"You got no security?"

"Oh we have. Mainly to break up fights in bars. But if you're outsmarted, well, whose fault is that?"

"I understand. What's the homicide rate?"

"None."

"None? If someone screwed with me..." Linnox for the first time getting emotive.

"Yes?"

"I'd sock them."

"Good for you. We'd only intervene if either of you got, let's say, carried away. There are limits." Amusement on her face.

"What if say I bought in some security patrol so I could engage in something shifty."

"Now there you can be assured you would get put in the slammer. We pay ours well, benefits such as booze, ladies, gents, whatever their preference, short shifts, rotational of course. They're incorruptible. If they do take bribes, well there is one thing crooks hate more than anything else."

"Yes?"

"Work." She laughed. Linnox thought that was funny. "And no pay." They all laughed at that.

"AC5. I'm impressed." Erx delighted at the vibrancy of the place. A planetoid, a huge chunk of rock, hollowed out. The social hub for the B5 sector. Light screens showed

the layout. Touch pad searches got you to where you wanted to be. Linnox looking for the 'Paradise Cellar'.

"It's a bar." Linnox standing in front of the glowing screen as groups, individual passed them on the concourse. From the layout they gathered that out here whilst the industrial base was planned, more or less, the living areas, the shopping centres, the living quarters had grown, expanded ad hoc. A section here, an afterthought there, an extension that made the residential areas look more like a growing bush, spreading out until reaching the surface. Even there it did not stop. High rise apartments for those who needed space, if only to feel they were out here rather than anywhere when underground rose like glowing glittering stalagmites out from below.

"Plenty of them." Erx remarked, feeling good. He wondered if his endomorphs were still buzzing from their debrief. Or whether there were resonance enhancers built into the walls along moving pedestrian walkways for those too lazy to walk. Tiny electric open trolley buses rolled past filled with shoppers, others out for the duration, the odd security detail amongst them. Some Linnox noted had weapons. Stunners mostly, on shut down mode as the law required. Along with emergency face masks with tiny pressurised bulbs hanging from their necks. Recessed containment doors for emergencies. Behind the walls small auxiliary power plants on stand by in case this asteroid's central power supply failed.

Having found their bar on the map the screen showed them the quickest way to get there from where they were.

"Twenty bars, even more restaurants, music venues...I could live here Linnox. Maybe not forever, but a few years anyway." Erx remarked his eyes glowing. After his reticent self imposed isolation on Novus Erx felt that his solitary sojourn was over. Two years had been enough. Zor had come and gone, that only lasted half a year. Then he had thrown himself into his work. Even got to the stage of brewing nano-baseline self configuring specific applications able to clone themselves. Micro mass production. He had a few vials in his carry bag which was secure on the 'My Baby'. They'd get a nasty electric shock if they tried to physically board her. Remote intrusion just as impossible. Linnox would be alerted.

As they had time, and since Linnox wanted their contact to find them they decided to walk to the 'Cellar.' Diurnal time meant nothing here. Everybody was on rotational shifts. Thus the bars were filled with those off duty as were the cafés, restaurants, fast eateries, grocery and department stores. Halogen and even neon lights shone everywhere making the AC5 look a joy to the eye and festive to the mind. Erx had

not had a drink for so long it was but a vague memory. Now he was thirsty. He was on holiday.

"Might as well enjoy yourself." Linnox agreed as Erx checked out the women. Girls, well young women his age were everywhere. In fact all age groups were out and about. The place was like a resort. All running itself. Who or whatever was in charge here kept themselves in the background. The large scale maps showed one asteroid as merely 'administration'. Security cameras everywhere.

"How much of your self is left?" Linnox asked as they walked neither using their mental software to find their way. Erx looking around with pleasure, replied: "Just my minimal persona. Why?"

"The Belt might be a free zone and Primaian's at a somewhat slight disadvantage unless purveying something they want here, but nevertheless, keep a watch. Be observant."

"Oh I am Linnox." As he looked at a stunning girl who looked right through him. Either uploaded or merely tuned out, tuned in, bored, stand offish.

"Security might not be visible on the ground but I suspect surveillance is of the highest order of magnitude."

"You think so?" they were at a hub, five passageways leading off in all directions. A trolley bus rolled past with chattering shoppers.

"I know so."

"You been here before."

"Correct. They learnt from the Primaians. Not quite containment fields but something like it in reverse."

Erx was curious. He knew nothing much about Prima though could guess what CFs were.

"Instead of pushing a resonant state into your head this works in reverse."

"Extraction?"

"Not that strong. More like an extracting field. See what falls out your head."

"Thus your query regarding my status."

"That is so."

"Well, I've kept my gaming abilities, some basic algorithms, a lot actually. During transit I swallowed one of my add-on protein pills. Brain's reconfigured now. All natural." Erx laughed. "Mimicking bio enhancement without the heavy architecture. Really more diffuse neural pathways and relay nodes. Dispersed processors, cellular memory blocks which, with my little invention, are sensor scan directed. Not blocks as in blocking but

release. Give them what they want to keep them happy. Reluctantly released of course." Erx smiled with self satisfaction. It would take a bit of doing to get into his head.

Linnox was satisfied.

"Tell me, am I supposed to be anybody in particular?" Erx asked as they strolled down another broad pedestrian avenue. Shops, bars and restaurants on one side now. Life everywhere. Plenty were off duty.

"No. The less there is of you the better."

"Well I guessed that one correctly then."

"Want me to check?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Linnox soft scanned Erx's headspace. Reganian. Gamer. Computer mechanic. Nice and low keyed that. Minimal education. Broad scale, nothing specific, no specialisations. Novus. Minor insignificant orders. No security details. Last conversation vastly edited. Good Linnox smiled. More standard, random questioning. Ex girlfriend. Zor. Short, skinny, more of a waif. Tussled short black hair...Linnox cut the scan off.

"How did I do?"

"Good. Routine. Boring."

"Hey, I achieved something then."

"Covered yourself well. Or should I say, deleted?"

"Bit of both. But then on Novus I barely had a life. Needed a break from the intensity of Gaming. Find my own centre."

"That can be important. Don't want the synaptic pathways to get too far ahead of themselves. Can lead to schizophrenia and multiple personality disorders."

"So I've heard."

"Your childhood is missing."

"Not much there." Erx assuming a wistful mood. Linnox did not follow up. He respected privacy.

Then by memory abstract visual association a weak flash.

"Did you notice anything?" he asked testing to see if Erx noticed.

"No. depends." Frowning a little. "Want me to check?"

"No need. One would need extremely sensitive rather than powerful receivers or scanners to pluck this one out. I've just received a feeler."

"Aha."

They found the 'Paradise Cellar'. And no wonder. Real rock walls. Tiny halogen lights dotted haphazardly along its rough interior. It could have been two in the morning

here. A stage, gleaming mikes, very retro, a drum kit, guitars and a saxophone on their stands, the musicians taking a break. Small tables scattered about, people more like shadows, a dull lime green light strip on the floor of the bar. Tiny overhead lights, bottles of all colours and shapes winking to be drunk. A few waitresses moved amongst the tables. Linnox looked around found a table towards the side of the stage where they decided to sit. A waitress came over. Linnox looked at Ex who asked if they had any naturally brewed beers. She started reciting the beer menu when Ex said the second choice would be fine for him. Large glass please. Linnox said he'd have the same.

Their rich frothing beers arrived moments later asking if they wanted to pay as they went. Linnox said yes. She held out her handheld displaying their order. He swiped his card, she left.

"Cheers." Ex raised his glass and took a generous swig. "Great." He beamed, a thin line of froth on his upper lip which he used his left sleeve to wipe.

"I assume we're relaxing."

"Of course." Linnox taking a less generous intake. "Their names Protus, Gravitass."

"Your contact." Ex surmised. Now that his eyes adjusted to the soft ambience he relaxed. The musicians returned, more adumbrations than lit up, got their instruments ready and started into a soft, smooth, cool number. It really felt like two in the morning. Music to drift by with just enough intricate percussion to keep the mind interested. "Good shit them."

"Yes." Though Linnox was looking less at the stage than the audience. Seeing if they were being observed. Whether someone was marking time, or lookouts for Protus checking them out to see if they had been followed, if anyone took unnecessary interest in them. Two men did come in and sat near the back. The waitress brought over a half bottle of some clear spirits, shot glasses and a bottle of water. Linnox looking out for Primaians surrogates. Two call girls walked in. Sure of themselves, sitting right in the middle, daring the men to come to them. Linnox smiled to himself. Without wanting to use his capabilities he waited for Protus. Ex was looking at the stage, the sound system in the ceiling, not too loud to stifle conversation. The two ladies had attracted two solid looking guys, ordering drinks.

Protus walked in after having stood outside deciding if to go in at all. Looking the place over, bouncing a quick broad-spectrum scan into the Cellar. Instead of pinging him Linnox raised his arm. A natural greeting for friends that might interest someone, or not. The odd face turned for a moment. Nothing mental. They were in the clear.

Well dressed, suave without being pretentious, a little gaunt in the subdued lighting Protus, bald, deep black eyes, but then everybody had deep black eyes here sat down, exchanging pleasantries. Erx merely nodded and continued to watch the band as if indicating Protus was Linnox's friend. Linnox liked Erx's approach. Being too interested would not do. Four miners walked in. They looked beefy, solid build. Some work still had to be with a hands on approach. They laughed and joined two tables together ordering a pitcher of beer.

Linnox introduced Erx who nodded, mumbled his pleasure at meeting a friend of Linnox then returned his attention to the music whilst keeping his ears peeled to their conversation. A woman entered, tall, thin, a one-piece jump suit and headed straight for their table. Protus rose, Linnox only half, as a gesture.

"Ora." Not Gravitass then. A false positive on Linnox's behalf. Another round of greetings, the waitress right behind her. Ora and Protus asked for the same beer.

"Good of you to come." Protus said. "Glad you could get away from work."

"Off duty now. Time to party." Ora half smiled. as the waitress returned with their order. Protus drank some, Ora sipped hers, smacked her lips and commented on the rich hops quality. Linnox paid.

"We were interviewed." Linnox said. They waited. "Nothing heavy. Routine."

"Why? Random?" Ora asked.

"Actually no. We got some news." Linnox smiled. They were all friends after all. Business conducted often in bars.

"Things have changed on Novus. A coup no less."

"Really?" Ora less surprised than Linnox expected. Protus merely interested.

"The Vs have taken over."

"You mean those behind them." Ora surmised.

"That leaves Regum and space. One down." Protus summed up.

"Planned at the Outback." Erx said whilst watching the band. They were into another smooth number.

"So unless another g ship arrives you're the only ones who know, apart from security. Smart to volunteer. The next one coming in breathlessly with the news would have made them suspicious of your reticence had you taken that line of approach. So now you're in the good books." Protus expanded. "Let's see, at light speed, it'll take about a year to get back. So Prima is busy on Novus. I'm surprised they managed to keep that under wraps."

"The Outback." Linnox answered. It explained everything as it was an exclusion zone.

"Regum was smart to use low key programmes, retro technology there. So Novus is out." Ora considered. "Hm, this beer is good," taking another sip. "Our group is forming, has, as an association of independent traders. Aligning free lancers for obvious reasons."

"Recruiting certain types." Linnox guessed.

"Exactly. The association's registered."

"Good for our purposes." Linnox agreed.

"Contracts, a charter, registered. Trading in general goods, transport really."

"You registering the `Baby'?"

"That's why we came." Apart from the real reason Ora thought.

"I'd rather wait. Mark me down as reluctant. I value my sole trader status."

"It's more an informal data exchange." Knowing Linnox would comprehend the double meaning. "If a ship is near a collection point the closest vessel gets the contract. Now as a sole trader you have to scrounge..."

"That does make it attractive Ora." Linnox agreed. "You know with Novus under their jurisdiction it can only mean increased business for the association."

"We think so too. Some families will leave. Probably for Regum if not space. So we have to expect some more arrivals."

"And some flotsam as well." Linnox reminded her.

"That will be interesting. With their retro configurations they will be so obvious it'll be a joke. We're glad you did bring this to security's attention."

"They did some mind control in the Outback." Erx finally turning away from the stage.

"No surprise. Probably their intention all along." Ora unfazed.

"As long as it remains there..." Protus considered.

"Looks like our timing was, well, well timed." Ora smiled and took another sip. They followed suit. "What do we know about Regum?"

"No chance." Protus adamant. Ora merely looked at him. "The priests are making no real impact. Everybody's in the Web. The promise of eternal life is creating academic interest, as in what happens at the point of departure, but for the rest it's just so much mythical nonsense."

"You're right." Erx chimed in. "I left two years ago. Maybe things have changed but I doubt it. If anything the Web's expanded by leaps and bounds."

The two women left with their clients.

"Prima." Was all Ora said.

"You asking me?" Linnox wondering.

"Yeah."

"Only rumours. Pontiff's gonna Ascend one day. Orbital activity...oh yes. Even though we signed the secrecy act," Linnox was amused that he was breaking it told them of that little incident regarding the destruction of the orbital.

"That'll teach them." Ora smiled. "Now we're going to have to arrange your next trip."

Linnox understood. Their getaway.

"Problem is Prima's have a long memory. The slightest offence gets them going."

"The orbital."

"Vengeance. Funny how the DVs couldn't get that." Ora said.

"Yes." Linnox considered. "Good news isn't it?"

"There is something else..." Protus ventured. They gave him their attention. "We got this background radiation. Could be anything or nothing. Your end pick up anything?"

"No." Linnox looked at Erx.

"My gear is trashed." He dissembled.

"Right. From a source we know that something interfered with the random sequence generating numerical tables at the casino." Protus explained.

"Naughty." Erx joked.

"More than naughty. Could be cosmic." Ora's eyes going cold.

"Anything in the Web?" Erx asked.

"There as well."

"Then it is cosmic." Erx wondering without a point to focus on. What he thought was a bit too far fetched. A data field in space. Configuring random numbers. Frightening.

"We thought that as well."

"What about Prima's RS?" Linnox asked.

"We're staying away from that."

"Feigned ignorance."

"For the moment. We're wondering if the singularities, what they call Immortals have anything to do with it."

"Do they?"

"I think they are some sort of cached ancient memory," Erx suggested. "Maybe the background radiation will have some trigger effect on them. Maybe they put it there. Maybe the DVs did."

Ora and Protus looked at Erx, astonished but hiding it well.

"That's all we need." Ora the first to reply. She had another sip. Rivulets of condensed water ran down the side of her glass. The waitress returned. Linnox ordering another round.

They listened to the wafting music until the waitress returned. Linnox swiped his card again. They thanked him.

"Anyway we got people who can deal with that. Which brings me to you two." Ora back to her relaxed attitude.

"It does." Linnox intoned then sat back. An up tempo number was being played.

"Erx. We know little about you." Which of course was not true. Through the ships system Linnox had sent his engagement with Erx back on Novus. Erx they could use on the SS 1. "However," Ora said, "we are willing to have you join us." She tried to give him that look of focussed attention. "Is there animosity towards Prima?"

"Animosity?" Erx surprised himself. He hated nobody. Too much of a wasted effort. "No, not really." Honest.

"I believe you." Ora looking askance at Protus. He merely looked back at her and took another swig.

"Is there, are there any base conditions? Contractual obligations? And I suppose some sort of security analysis. Deep scanning?"

"Yes, no, maybe." Ora's eyes twinkling.

Erx nodded. "Time span as in minimum commitment."

"Forever we hope." Ora laughed.

"Is that all." Erx laughing with her.

"We can assume that you're not returning to Novus."

"Sure am not."

"Regum?"

"I don't know. I'm sick of the Web, drained almost. One could lose one's life in there. Spend all of it and...it's so vacuous." Erx sighed.

"Vacuous? I have heard a few descriptions but not that one. I guess that means Regum is out. What about on an orbital?"

"Too enclosed. More like a backwater...here is good."

"What we have in mind for you is a sort of systems manager, trouble shooter, designer, inventor preferably." Ora into recruitment mode.

"Yeah." Erx nodded. "I can handle that."

"Can't tell you where though."

"How secluded?"

"Very. Not as big as an orbital, but it packs a punch." Tempting him.

"Cutting edge?"

"Extreme."

"I'm yours!" Erx exclaimed.

"A toast then." Ora beamed. "To Erx."

They all raised their glasses. "To Erx." Linnox even slapping him on the shoulder.

"Traffic." Linnox using the console to check the others around them as he manoeuvred the ship for its initial departure vector. Within the approach and departure zone a speed limit applied so the 'My Baby' used its fusion propulsion in short bursts to get them clear. There were chemically boosted bulk carriers, a few smaller private vessels of to the habitats ahead of them slowly fanning out. In the distance to their right the major mass of the spiral arm stretching away into deep space.

"Hm." Wondering why Linnox, a man of less words than himself would make such an obvious point. The ship's brain recorded the surrounding ships multi spectrum signatures gaining information regarding their com babble. Maybe that was what Linnox was referring to. Or getting Erx to be alert rather than just a tourist.

He who had been recruited. He was more terrestrial than the others. Flying in space did not make one a spacer. He was not returning to Novus. Having met Linnox's friends, friends? Was that stretching the definition? Ora had certainly been an interesting woman. Protus what he expected. Serious. Focused. No nonsense. And none of that baggage terrestrials carried in their heads. Mostly vacuous gossip, personal stances, self centred opinions. Spacers were different. They acted. Thoughts, ideologies, even politics, never mind religion kept in the background. A relief. Lighter in essence. Less not more. Not in the sense of absence of mind, just unclouded. And more aware. He was in his element. Adventure time. The getaway on Novus setting the scene.

"Should I be concerned. Monitor com traffic?" Erx asked watching the flare of a ship way ahead of them as it blasted off going into hyperspeed.

"If you wouldn't mind. Don't reroute." meaning HID which Erx hadn't intended. He only used that when working on his projects. And HUD annoyed him. As it did Linnox. Both preferred external feeds.

"And looking. Has the ship certain recognition patterns?"

"I've logged in alerts."

"Anything specific I should look out for?"

Linnox adjusted the attitude jets, then another quick burst to nudge them along.

"Any ship mimicking us. As we are secure I can reveal that we are heading back to Regum. At the moment it's closer which of course means Prima is furthest." Dissembling. See who was interested in their destination.

"Desto Regum?" Erx trying to hide his disappointment. He thought they were going to some far out exotic location. A hidden habitat. Camouflaged, a front, a safe location to clandestinely meet their next connection. Heading to their final destination in convoluted jumps to loose possible tails.

"Why?"

"It may have escaped your attention but we were being watched Erx."

"Primaians?"

"I didn't scan them. Nor did our friends. Just behavioural patterning. The way people don't drink their drinks, the way they pretend in being relaxed whilst vigilant, feigning sudden interest in something when spotted. Peeling off as a second team of watchers takes over. Having someone suddenly check their pockets when one turns to make sure one is followed or not."

"Shit hey. I mean Linnox, I dealt with some interesting clients. Some alerted me to all this. Being watched. Usually industrial espionage. Maybe political but never anything this direct."

"Which means," Linnox did some manual adjustments, "you've got a record. A history. A composite data field. What any analyst worth his salt would do is see if there is a pattern not just of behaviour. With you it is, on your admission, industrial, commercial areas."

"And with you?" might as well ask. Another ship ahead of them blasted off into space. First the tell tale bright quivering point of light, then the acceleration leaving a momentary short white line at a departing angle as long as the burn lasted, then nothing, the ship too far away visually.

"Us you?"

"No you. As in before me."

"I was a surrogate. Paid contractor. Private secretary. Given my employer's status it would be him anyone was interested in. I might be merely a way into his realm, his area of operation. A minor footnote Erx."

"Low profile." curious just how Linnox got to where he was now.

"I hope so. Had we not had to make an exit..." which made Erx wonder why Linnox had to leave. Surely not just to save him. But then he did get some data, now destroyed back at his flashed out flat. "...I might have hired you," Linnox continued, "to do some background research. Now of course that would attract attention. Novus like Prima will probably be sealed."

"Sealed?" Erx could guess that some sort of protective shields might be put up. He knew that the combined resonance of its inhabitants on Prima, boosted made direct penetration not just hard but instantly detectable. Unless one configured the attempt to the resonant state which then made it porous, penetrable unless quantum tunnelling was used. And that took energy. A micro fusion reactor no less.

"Yes Erx. Sealed. Configured resonance fields. Though in Novus's case only where the inhabitants are. Minor shells over the City and casino, the Outback where the GG used the Vs to check aberrant mental activity along with the usual paraphernalia. Which leaves Regum the only open planet."

"Plus the Zone."

"Plus the Zone. Even some habitats don't exist."

"Privacy."

"Indeed. Gets the Primaian's paranoid. Suspicious barely covers it. So check the chatter of the ships around us. I know our onboard gear handles it. But what I am interested in is the ships that are unduly quiet."

"But wouldn't a routine run after initial departure make any contact irrelevant? Unless bored?"

"Not bad observationally Erx. The 'Baby' picks ships at random, soft scanning them, using an open channel that makes us look less, geared up wise, than we are. It mimics a lesser image of itself. Just a straight of the line private cruiser. More like a courier. The installed AI can even carry on a conversation for us. Just two Joe's surviving, making a living."

"Neat. Not too smart I hope."

"Base line. The 'Baby' picked up enough chatter to last a life time."

"Neat."

Part of the ships consoles went blank. Linnox was not disturbed.

"What happened then?"

"Make that there."

"There then?" Erx laughed.

"Defence. We're still on passive receptors. The broad spectrum analysis of multiple wave lengths, broken down into sub groups is almost expected by them. But I've switched off downloading, using externals only and getting the ship to register a near zero analysis. You see some outer asteroids, which we can't see now are armed. That includes jamming, white and black noise..."

"Black noise?"

"Disembowelling sensitive systems. But they also got firepower. Basic shot guns really, only the shells are smartware. All sorts of nasties. Plus mine laying. Nothing this little beauty can't handle. Kinetic absorbing energy shields, fed into a bank of back up batteries. So to get through this outer protective layer, which by the way when we approached had us being a different signature..."

"I get it. If anyone takes an interest we're now a different ship."

"You got it in one. So now we're dumber."

Erx stared into space. The feeling of freedom slowly sinking in. Levity of mind. Maybe just being out here, away from it all did that.

"Strapped in?" Linnox asked.

"Sure am."

"We're using our fusion plant to blast off." and Linnox hit the go button. Feeling the inertia push them back comfortably into their seats.

"Power plus." Erx exclaimed.

After a while Linnox powered the fusion drive down.

"We'll wait until we're out of immediate scanning range before engaging the g-drive. I've got to ask this Erx. What's your configuration? I can get the ship to do it but that would leave traces, data strands."

"I guess I'm semi-symbiotic. I drink my uploads, add ons. Protein based chaos equational algorithmic neuron enhanced, synaptic strung out boosted."

"Bio based."

"In short."

"No hard stuff."

"No."

"What about the decay rate?"

"Ah. My little secret. Vials of nano rectifiers."

"They replicate?"

"Just like a culture."

"Your own?"

"Yes."

"Including the nanos?"

"No them I got through contacts on Regum from some medical lab that dealt with potential stroke victims."

"Rebuilding the brain."

"Yep."

"Ever take it into the Web?"

" Why?"

"You probably know but the Web is crawling with Primaians."

"Had to happen." Erx sighed.

The console rebooted. The blank patches lit up.

"Bit like my brain at times." Erx joked.

"You blank out?" Linnox taking him at his word.

"Joke."

"What did you think of Ora."

"Cool."

"Anything else?"

"Spacer. Different from terrestrials."

Linnox was checking the readouts but was listening.

"Sort of somewhere else. Now I met such characters in the Web. But that was just for show. She seemed the real thing."

"As in...? Linnox prompted.

"Hard to say. My brain certainly felt almost expansive in her presence. Maybe Protus as well. Or their being combined. Though I doubt it. Tiny resonance, yet so there. That make sense?"

"It does."

"They could be the next evolutionary thing."

"Thing. I like that. Funny. So prosaic." Linnox allowed himself a smile.

"Are they?"

"You'd have to ask an exo-biologist."

"But you know."

"Like you I can only suppose."

"So suppose."

"I don't like to speculate..." then started pushing buttons, attentive to the graphs, the numbers, the radar. Erx's eyes followed Linnox's. To his right a tiny screen split up into four. Each had a ship. One had several. Linnox was checking on their configurations, build, model, capabilities, possible conversion and upgrades, weaponry.

"Company?" Erx guessed.

"Too early to tell. We are heading for Regum. Until I know we're in the clear. I could outrun them. Unless they've got g-drives as well.

Regum. Dark shapes. Deserted buildings, fleeting shadows, desolation. A lack of presence. A usurping horror. Erx's strange dreams back. He put the vision down to over excited neuron activity. Tapping into his dream memory, his unconscious. Or a recall from his Webdays. Primaian subterfuge. Creating freaky domains. What they wanted. Waste Regum. Thus crafting the dreadful imagery of a fallen world. 'Dream on Prima. You're several millennia too late.' Erx thought. Yet it had all been extremely vivid.

"Get anything?" Erx asked tentatively.

"Nothing specific or of concern."

'Must be my head then.'

"Can the ship access the Web?"

"Of course. Navigational back up. I prefer the real thing. As you said, Prima's in there. Could be inserting anything. To disorientate."

Erx did not want to admit that was exactly what had just occurred. He went over his own memory. Only the image of an image came back. Must have been a flash back. Or a flash insertion. Or resonant entanglement. Maybe the Primaians were boosting their domains in there. Solidifying their presence against cyber attacks, backhacking, direct assaults, probing virus's, chameleon trojans, even directional oriented hostility by gamers. Making a stand. Prima upping the ante.

"The Web just flared into me Linnox."

"Might be some instability." Leaving open the assumption whether it was Erx's internal reconfiguration or the Web's. As Erx remained silent Linnox added: "Don't use the ship. If you do go in do it in the sleeping tube."

"Understood."

"And disengage bio sensors as well."

"Isolated."

"Yes." Still looking at the passive radar. Two of the ships were no longer there. The other group of four were.

"How long are we...?"

"That depends on our friends back there."

"You mean the ships?"

"Correct. As I said we could loose them. I'm thinking of doing some satellite maintenance. That, if we are being followed will make it hard for them to hang around. Of course if they're pro's they'll continue and get another team onto us. If they're really organized."

"Primaians. They're everywhere."

"Perhaps."

"And here I thought space was anathema."

"Yes. For a species that abhors space they're certainly active." Linnox concurred.

"This image I had. Normally when dreaming I take it as it comes. Let it happen. Not as real, just probabilities. Some Web based. Could be stuff I've forgotten, anything. But this..."

"That what you were referring to a moment ago."

"Yes."

"Some use WebSpace as a navigational aid which is its intention. And as a data base. Of course gamers are in there as well. Inserting their own domain space. Is that what you think happened?"

"At a guess Prima's done an imposition." Ex thought back on it. "A worry. Regum City deserted. Distant future. Abandoned."

"Could be anything. What they want it to be."

"Yeah."

"Make it look like its got no future."

"They just can't leave anything alone. Priests, DVs, never stopping. No wonder some went to Novus. And now that's under their control. Looks like space is the only place where there's any real freedom."

"Freedom. It's becoming precious."

"Very."

"Well if we know gamers they'll get into it and turn it into a playground. Nothing is sacred in there."

"Yeah, that's the plus. But I'm gonna go in when I turn in. We are doing this in shifts?"

"More or less. The ship's smart enough to not even need us Ex."

"Good to know."

"Tired?"

"Far from it."

"It can get boring just staring into space."

"Not yet. I'm buzzing."

"Turn that brain down a little." Linnox joked.

"Yeah, disengaging might be the go. But you're concerned we're being followed."

"It's a guess. This is a trade route after all."

"Glad you're observant. Maybe Ora's using back up for us. For the same reason."

"Could be. But I doubt it. The group prefers to be less there than more there."

"The group."

"Yes?"

"Oh nothing. I mean on Novus there were so many. Cross joined. Some in several. Spread the risk."

"Makes sense." Without any further elucidation.

"Is WebSpace expanding?"

"Most likely." Linnox non committal.

"I was thinking, that flash might not have been Regum. I only assumed that because it seemed to look like it."

"Ah, you're thinking of some ancient civilisation."

"Yes. Sort of romantic."

"A dead city?"

"Well, stuff for the imagination. Or my imagination. Either way I'm going to go in."

"Remember..."

"Yes. No worries. The ship won't be used. Total shut out."

"Good. It's important."

Hours later the original excitement of going further into space, even if backtracking whilst not wearing off became repetitive. Erx's mind exhausting itself on idle speculations. The imagery recurrent. Not leaving him alone. His embedded pc on his sleeve had the gateway to WebWorld and WebSpace because sometimes his clients were accessing it, working through it rather than being in real time for some of their business activities. It was a good place to hide one's engagements. It was also a secure way to meet those who for their own reasons did not wish to publicize their reasons in engaging with certain interested parties.

The sleeping tube was ready. The tiny cabin airless. Ex disengaged the monitors. Then dampened the auto alarm. He was isolated pulling out the patch attached to the optic fibre and joined it onto his hand. Tiny tendrils inserted themselves into his nervous system.

He was into his processor. His configured brain adjusted itself, ran a quick check on the system, stable, then went to the gate leading into WebSpace. In tandem with the mind's quantum aligned processors. Taking him to a general data base. He used his real persona. The ship had already downloaded his resonating signature. Using an alias might cause problems. Restrict access, reroute him into some excluding default zone. He let the ship get to know his brain.

Accepted. So far so good. Regum next destination. First the present. The global data base presented itself. Glowing processors organising incoming data, sorting information similar to being inside buildings with labels. More like a campus. Then he knew why. It was his brain's configuration. Whilst his mental web had expanded the informational content had been reduced visually.

The memory of the ruins still shocked him. Primaian disinformation. If so what was its basis? Projected by the DVs, written by some hack or one of many future probabilities? It made sense to be familiar with a worse case scenario. That way steps could be taken to obviate it.

He thought Regum as it was. The glittering skyscrapers under a sunny sky. The resolution astonishingly clear. No wonder Gamers suffered withdrawal symptoms. Tiny stains on solar panels, rusty blotches on air conditioning units, bird droppings. Good stuff. Ex headed for Central University, then the mathematics faculty. Next chaos equations.

A room stretching to infinity. More like an endless corridor. He zoomed in, then waited. Whilst racing down the slightly curved receding extension a tutorial came up familiarizing him with the basic essentials. Chaos equations dealt with random laws of both mathematical processes and the application of physical laws. The universe, reality, a quantum phenomena, several, hundreds, thousands, infinite in all directions. Until the end of the corridor came up. Or rather faded into a mass of uncoordinated pixels blending into the structure. The end of time. The end of universal processes, decay.

The pixels were not flat blocks of absent data. On closer inspection they were dark scenes, tiny realities of Regum. All variously corrupted. His brain flashed partial chaos equations. Partial? How could random be partial? Inserted data. Cosmic or particular. Event driven or universally-environmentally imposed? Both! Chaos equations were meant to run into not just infinity but infinities. Macro and micro. Universal and sub-atomic.

Beyond the basic structure into fluctuating quantum energy fields popping in and out of the sub structure of the universe. Tiny vibrations giving rise to matter, the quanta of energy determining the structure of matter. Whether helium, hydrogen, carbon, along the chain creating the building blocks that gave everything its appearance. From random chaos to organized matter and thence, under the right conditions, life. Mimicking simplicity to complexity finally arriving at sentience. Another quantum process. Life a balancing act between two quantum states.

All breaking down, sub randomizing. Low level quantum packets infused thus uncollapsing infinity and re-collapsing into partial infinities, hovering between the random and the potential. Pre-configured at its most basic level, the subatomic domain.

Ex picked the darkest of a set of pixels. Utter devastation. Ruins everywhere. Towering sombre monolithic buildings, deserted, dust swirling. The image the same his brain had latched onto. In the distance a tower collapsed slowly, sending up gritty plumes of dirt as windows shattered, dark sparkles, cement crumbled, crashing into a more solid structure which tottered, heaved, swayed but staid upright. Dust obscuring the fallen building.

Under observation. With no life apparent. Apart from the trees, vines crawling up buildings, birds nesting in upper storeys, rodents scuttling, fast flitting shadows vanishing into dark recesses. Mouldering disintegration. In the distance grey sheets of water pouring from the sky. All accompanied by partial chaos equations running separately through his head in light red. He tried to get a sense of time. Given the invasion of the flora it must be not too far into the, correction, a future.

The city a three dimensional montage. No gamers present. Only himself. He felt the cold seeping into him. It was dusk. A sliver of dark blue near the horizon. Heavy rain laden clouds above. A few skyscrapers disappearing into them.

No power apparent anywhere. The windows black cavities. The numbers ran like a broad waterfall down his brain's extremely high thermodynamic activity. Something was draining the city, the land, the planet. Not radiating away as within any system in stasis. A presence, pregnant with power absorbing the energy content from around the forlorn landscape.

For a moment the sun shone through in the distance. A blinding orb, gold shivering along cracked constructions, dazzling liquid light bouncing off the windows that were still in place. Dust whipped up by the wind in patterned swirls. The shadow presence flared, then vanished into the leaden sky. Someone or something, or a capable programme in there.

He zoomed down the cavernous streets. Abandoned trams, rubbish, floating flexi sheets. Over deserted suburbs, eerily quiet, ahead the mountains imbued with inimical menace. Serrated, snow capped. An icy wind howling down its valleys, the sun sinking behind the towering irruption of rocks heaved upwards. He felt their brooding power, the brute force.

The unseen sentient presence remained at the back of his mind. He headed towards the mountains half a continent away. The dull white rubble of a disused monastery. The sky turning into a motley of pixels again. Decay within decay, chaos within chaos, ends within ends.

Ex was tempted to once more check out the darkest of the grouped pixels. The sense of something present more palpable, tactile, assimilating itself with his mind. Trying to. Ex held back and waited. Neither artifice or construct, AI or fully inserted persona. A shadow amid shadows. Within this devastated world scenario. Endings amongst endings. Or reconfigured? Order out of chaos on a smaller scale. Scale. He looked up at the sky. Willed himself through the heavy clouds. The same fractured, motley assemblage of this broken vision. It dawned on him that it was not the breakdown of the imagery he saw in this dual reality, for it was dual, entwined, entangled. This was something coming through, coming in! A superprogramme much further in scope, heavily laden with running inserted equational processors re-creating reality. A programme which had its own intelligence. Not quite sentient. Yet the possibility was there. A process on the verge of self creation. Building, rebuilding everything to its own design. Exclusive to itself, inclusive on the outside, embracing space, infusing space, reconfiguring space.

Greater than the Web. Already embedded at its edge as the final algorithm. New parameters, the partial chaos equations at work, this the interface, reducing probabilities to its own actuality. Ex had the sense to fathom that this was still cyberspace. The Web had been breached at its own algorithmic end processes. He was worried, though, tempted to go into the other data realm and shivered. Every dark, nearly light absent pixel a gateway into something vast and from this end undefined. He was attracted to the idea to insert his reality into it. And realized he had no vision. What he wanted was pure unadulterated processing power, techniques in ultimate configurations.

The dark vibrating pixellated square was right in front of him. Inside the same world. Something tugged then aligned itself with his mind. It felt familiar as if he had always known his own potential. His self that unique combination of life, thinking, creating, manifesting, controlling, absolute power. Was reality really that fragile? Could

the use of equations recreate reality according to pure will? It appeared as such. The universe the playground. No wonder the Primaians despised the Reganians. Usurping space. With no sight of the Great Mind, or was what he sensed that which the Primaians believed in? Conversely had they got it wrong? Some computational intelligence self manifesting? Using the Web to expand its potential? The Web its template.

It was enough to know. It was also too vast for his liking. An unformed data realm hovering at the very edge where the equations were transformed into partialities. Drawing upon the energy of the Web in front of it. If he were not careful he too could be drained, excoriated, mentally disembowelled like this space that was a corruption of Regum City. He asked his brain to reverse what his memory contained for he had found out he was stuck. His brain re-ran the sequence backwards. The dark sky receded, the pixels blended together, the mountains became smaller, the deserted city flashed by, the edge of WebSpace fell back, the corridor extended outwards, the mathematical faculty collapsed away, dazzling vibrant Regum became a colourful dot and ping, he was back in his sleeping tube.

He activated the tube to see where Linnox was. Up front. Not waiting for the tiny cabin to be air pressurised he put on his face mask, opened the tube and made his way towards the cockpit.

"Up already?" Linnox checking the radar. Two ships still behind them. "We're being tailed."

Ex was impatient to tell him what he discovered. But this was just as important.

"I'm going to return to the Zone. Simple."

Linnox rotated the ship one eighty degrees and engaged the fusion drive once Ex was strapped in. The ship started to brake slowly. The blips on the screen came closer. Half an hour later they started returning and shortly after that the two cargo ships sped past them.

"This is CL 23. Need assistance?"

"This is the 'My Baby'. Thank you for your concern."

"Anything you need?"

"I'm fine. Thanks just the same. Safe journey."

"Likewise. Out."

"No scans. I'll keep our link open. They'll know if course if we're still of interest via the open channel." Linnox smirked.

No other communications from the two cargo vessels.

"I just discovered something." Erx began. Then told Linnox of the end of the Web, the interface, interphasing and the possibly vast crypto-sentient data realm beyond it. Linnox listened without comment letting Erx explain it in his own way.

"The ship knows." Linnox said when Erx finished his recitation. "I'll secure this. It fits in."

"With what?"

"Novus." And Linnox explained the discrepancies uncovered regarding the random number sequence generated tables.

"You think there's a connection?"

"Most definitely. Now the trick is to discover if it is natural, a spatial occurrence, universe centred or intelligent centred. Ideally accessing the DVs would be a start. They might be remote inserting. Or it could be something else entirely." Linnox checking the read outs. "It appears universal."

"What about the ship?"

"Nothing untoward."

"Could be a Primaian add-on."

"Could be."

"The dead city?"

"Sub domain. Propaganda. You know Prima hates the Web."

"It's trying to get into the Web."

"From what you said it's at the edge. Where the equations end. Makes sense now I think about it. Mathematically that is. In a way the variations, the possibilities are endless. Whatever the mind can think of."

"I'm worried what that mind, if that's what it is, is."

"You were wise not to go further."

"It felt...alien."

"Now there is something to consider." Linnox said lightly.

"It seemed nasty."

"To you."

"Of course to me Linnox."

"It might be cautious. Create a dead domain so that no intervening intelligence complicates the picture. It wants to stay unadulterated, uninfluenced making its presence felt by degrees. Waiting for the right mind, the preferred approach. If it is that then it would also not be in any hurry. Otherwise we really would know about it. It's letting

us make the approach. Or you in that case. However the ship remained neutral. So from an AI domain it's value neutral."

"Maybe we should feed it something."

"From what you said, it's already had a meal. But I agree. Presenting Regum as fallen is disturbing."

"Maybe it sent a warning. That something horrific is in the making."

"Put it this way Erx. Regum isn't just sitting there in a blank state of mind. They run different scenarios all the time. Including end runs. Total entropy scenarios. The only way that might occur if there were a total power loss. And that ain't gonna happen. There's more than one power source. Spread out over the planet, Khratham excepted of course. Even a massive supernova burst wouldn't dint their performance. The power stations are underground. Many use thermal energy. Back up fusion. Then there are the mothballed ancient coal burning stations. The city's buildings are their own power source. They're secure Erx."

"So why do I get the feeling it's so immanent?"

"HD resolution."

"The partial chaos equations."

"Interesting. Ship's chewing on it."

Water gurgled in one of the pipes.

"So where are we off to?"

"Secret." The vessel hummed. Erx's brain went dense.

"I'm feeling something."

"Ships reconfiguring. Using false fields. Make us look different. Super smart ware wouldn't be fooled though they'd have to get suspicious first. The image will hold. We're not going back to the zone. That much I can reveal."

"Getting back to that add-on. What if it is Primaian?"

"What if it is?"

"It might be a trap."

"Have you no faith in the gamers?" Linnox casting him a sidelong glance.

"What if it's a gateway to an alternative universe? Leeching power from the Web at the same time?"

"You think they would let them suck on the Web?"

Erx laughed. "Yeah, let them suck on it. If the Web does pour into that other domain then....yes...I see, it might not work in its favour. If the Web is stronger then it will win."

"See. Nothing to worry about."

"What if its power source is greater than the Webs?"

"First of all that would be known straight away. Can't hide power sources.

Secondly, in WebSpace alarms would go off. Remember, even though the two are interwoven, enphased I should say, WebSpace is designed along very specific parameters. It's not a toy as such, not primarily. It's a resource. If that is fiddled with, believe me, the experts will be onto it."

"That makes me feel a bit better."

"Only a bit?"

"I still think there's a process in place Linnox."

"Like what?"

"It could be a whole universe. Bigger than WebSpace's domain. I'm thinking of a gaming technique here. One way of moving around is shifting spatial coordinates en mass. Whole data blocks. There is some loss in energy so one powers up first. So let's assume this domain is slowly powering up. Then when it's energy quotient is higher than WebSpace's it does the jump. Bye bye WebSpace."

"Again Erx, you're forgetting the power source. Something that huge cannot be hidden. Even if it is in let's say for the moment, a parallel universe. If they really exist. That event would still be noticed. It has to draw energy from somewhere. Even if it has its own generating capabilities, as its powering up it would be draining the source. Let's take it one step further and imagine it's also cloaked. Somewhere in the universe negative numbers would appear. Maybe even time running backwards. Some sort of event, an unusual event would be somewhere."

"That could be the discrepancy."

"You mean they rearranged the numbers and are really collapsing energy fields. Space itself being siphoned."

"Can it?"

"It would need a huge amount of input and I just can't see it. Nor can the ship. It's all as it should be. Give or take." Linnox smiled at him.

"Nothing near Regum?"

"Only the orbital. And that one's ours. And no Prima's no different as far as energy usage goes. A lot of weird psychic shit going on, but that's normal for them."

"Well something is there."

"To make you feel better I shall open up our sensors, broad spectrum."

"Thanks."

The data came in. Countless stars appeared in staggered orders of magnitude. Classified into neutron stars, quasars, supernova's, their lesser kind into size and luminosity, brown dwarves, then the galaxy. Field analysis showed the gravitational tides, the particle zoo, the inward flowing energy at the centre, the conversion of energy into new stars.

"Let's head for the centre."

"Nothing can survive there."

"But look at the energy pouring in..."

"And out."

"Let's see anyway. It's the power source."

"Zooming in."

On several smaller screens the centre grew visually into pure white as the stars were densely packed, then turned to pure plasma, superheated gas, beyond that the black hole.

"What is that?"

"That Erx is the centre. Collapsed matter."

"Could that be it?"

"No. The gravitational tides are that strong atoms are ripped apart."

"What's that darker blemish?"

"Could be a group of stars."

"But they shouldn't be there."

"No. You're right Erx. A minor gravity well. Something for Usaki."

"Who's he?"

"An astronomer. Ah. The coast is clear. No ships. Hang on. Engaging g-drive. Counting, three, two, one, engaging."

The ship changed direction then created the forward generated gravity field, never catching it as the fusion reactor powered down. The ship accelerating slowly so as not to crush them.

"It's going to skew the results. But I'm glad you insisted Erx. Commendable."

Erx said nothing but felt proud. He was pleased. Over the hours they began to reach light speed. The stars became longer streaks of light, slowly blending and spreading out. Then at the magic moment at light speed all was white as they were inside the photon fields irradiating through space. Passed the barrier they became elongated again, fading backwards, time distorted, lights flashing abstractly around

them. The stars behind them vanished as they outran their light but the light in front flared brilliant white-blue as they powered on.

A relative day later the ship began deceleration. Linnox switched off the front end gravity field and placed it behind the ship. Tiny at first then powered it up to create a slow increase in reverse thrust.

"Erx. We are now in our own exclusion zone. Security requires me to disable you. In plain speak disengage your sensory functions and configured memory. Since we don't want to mess with your head an old fashioned knock out drug is your preferred option." And extracted from one of his pockets a tiny vial with a colourless liquid.

"Fine. How long this gonna last?"

"Well around a relative night. You'll awake bright and fresh." Linnox beamed.

"Cheers." Erx drained the thimbleful. He was out in seconds.

An hour later the 'My Baby' announced her arrival. She had been tracked the moment she had come out of light speed, her EM field analysed, penetrating the false imagery, ascertaining her physical and internal make up. The ships brain allowing itself to be softscanned.

The near star filled the whole front view. Partially blacked out as the solar collectors were continually assembled until eventually the whole star was enclosed giving the station massive energy. The multiple modules of the SS 1 in shadow. Docking in one of several hangars a trolley was ready to ship Erx to his quarters. Both were chemically dowsed in the primary air lock, then Linnox removed his helmet in the second, removing Erx's as well.

Tuvlov was there to greet him.

"We'll talk later, unless there's anything urgent."

"Erx made a discovery. There's an event near the centre of the galaxy. Usaki might be alerted to that." Linnox pushing the trolley with the comatose Erx sleeping happily. They inserted him into his sleeping tube, adjusted the settings, pre-programmed his wake up call and orientation tutorial then left him to slumber.

"I won't ask what's been happening." Linnox said. "I'm sure whatever I need to know will be made available."

"Care for a drink? A nightcap?" Tuvlov grinning slightly.

"That would be a good way to begin my new routine."

"There's some new faces on board. But I will let you find out for yourself. All I can say is that they are useful resource wise."

"Always." Strolling towards the communal area.

Prima: Orbital

Khral was tracking Kroena's group of DVs who decoupled from the simulacrum during the calamity on Tellurium. Unlike trainers he was not directly linked with them. Avoiding negative vortices, dangerous psychic wells, pools of enticing, entangling realms of alienesque domains. Roaming presences using the cosmic effluvium where the Immortals were embedded. Their vast oceanic mental worlds harking back to the time of their corporeal existence. All those layers for the task at hand had to be pushed aside. This was no time for the itinerant. They had scouts for that. Forward positioned to keep an eye on both the past, the present and the future.

Interested in what came through the secretly assembled and self contained DVs tasked with tracking the simulacrum and by default the self styled hierophant Merduk. Khral felt the subtle shift in the medium which the DVs projected to maintain the link to ancient Earth.

Fascinated at what was occurring. Unfolding with the simulacrum attaining sentient awareness, assembling itself in the shroud of Zohex the group of DVs were surging with a new fount of energy at this unique accomplishment. Kroena had been smart enough to delegate as back up three extra DVs who studied this flowing real time historic event.

The psychic resonance exuding out of Zohex's self centred presence took on an aura of its own. Using resonance analysis, it showed an almost purple glowing penumbra of something darker inside of the personified simulacrum. The shadow presence of Zohex feeding off the DVs.

The Earthers now recognized him as undisputed ruler as he walked along the broad defensive walls of Telluris. The priests subsumed, of minor importance. Their hold on the cosmic domain tenuous but not as yet deleted. Zohex did not want them disengaged. Like the extras here he needed them to take care of the minor phenomena, the more mundane spiritual needs of the people. Here Khral used with Kroena's permission around ten percent of the DVs tasked with holding the alien field at bay. Their reassignment not making any difference to the overall strength of its invasive presence.

Khral checked the monitors. Psychic levels were rising. Zohex was expanding his psychic domain. But not merging. A big difference. A hot spot, irradiating his surroundings without letting himself be influenced by what he was attracting. The dark occult warriors

from across the ocean. They flowed like a dark foul mist over the lands they swept through, driven by an archimage even further distant, in a mountainous kingdom. Nameless.

From what the DVs could ascertain he seemed remarkably similar to Zohex. Or Khral smiled to himself, Zohex had taken this distant aura and fashioned it into his own personification. Without the emotional contents of wrathful hatred, the homicidal urge to kill, the esurient need to satisfy dark lusts, a mind driven by malignant desires to satisfy its maniacal desires. In contrast Zohex was cool. His psychic heat the inverse to that of this sinister shaman and his unleashed minions. There was no doubt in Khral's thinking that Zohex was on top of what he had...opened up.

In harmony with the universe. But not the Great Cosmic Consciousness. That was remarkably absent at that distant planet. A world riven by lusts, ferocious desires, maniacal cravings satisfying usurping primal urges driving their minds into an emotional frenzy that was frightening in the power they could unleash. Khral wondered if their ancestors, in the dim distant past had ever been that unstable.

Merduk in comparison was of pale insignificance. Useful both for the Reganians who used him as an anchor to fasten onto that primeval past just as they were here. With Zohex's growing power less was coming through of the surroundings. The computers maintained the imagery simply because of the earlier contact when Zohex was just a mere psychic insertion assimilating itself to its new surroundings. And there it had stopped as Zohex's mind took it all in, then usurped the priests, their knowledge, their realisations, their perceptions, their cosmic view. To be brushed aside as so much mental baggage.

The remaining fluctuating patterns woven into fluid palpitating resonances. As Zohex's intensified so did the armies sweeping across the distant eastern continent. They made their way across the northern wastes, icy forlorn lands over a land bridge heading towards Tellurium. There the remaining nomads joined the invaders straight for the temple city.

He alerted Kroena who was keeping Lord Pentham informed of developments on Earth.

Several days later the calamity struck. As the hordes descended on the city Zohex's powers surged supreme. He was riding Earth of the priest's influence. Prima was winning the battle. Its inhabitants would be realigned.

But then another domain appeared. A similar imposition. The same resonance, the same intrusion, aligning the resonant state of two worlds. Tellurium and what had to be Regum City.

"What's going on?" Khral asked rhetorically as Kroena sat next to him watching the monitors.

"Two worlds, one resonance. Incredible. " Kroena watched, her eyes bright. "It looks as if Regum's state shows the same signs of psychic inversion."

"The DVs are now split down the middle. Half are Earth centred and the other half have switched back towards Regum." Khral said, checking the status of the simulacrum. Khral so surprised he had little time to react intentionally.

On Earth the volcanoes erupted around the stricken city as the hordes poured down the mountain passes. The sacred city was in turmoil. A few boats got away drawn out by a strong tide. Out on the ocean lava turned to voluminous clouds of steam. Ships rose and fell as the rising tidal wave moved relentlessly towards the shore.

Zohex and Merduk went into the temple complex and found refuge in an underground chamber. Another monitor showed Regum City darken as Zohex and Merduk simultaneously disappeared.

"First the simulacrum then Merduk." Khral said needlessly. Kroena was observing the DVs status. Half still aligned to Zohex's resonance. One half were empowering him, the other half projecting an extremely high energy yet low resonant field onto Regum City. Wishing its demise.

"Past and future as one. Remarkable." Kroena watching intently.

"None of our doing Kroena." Khral getting a feeling of loosing control.

"The simulacrum..."

"Yes."

Kroena ran some checks. The real Regum City was there. Bright lights, big city. "A vision of the future...trying to get a fix, get some hard data." Her fingers called up the master time sequence processing psychic energy fields.

"Ah. A resonance is building up around Regum City."

"What?"

"Near future Khral."

"How could the simulacrum, this Zohex know our will?"

"Not Zohex. The DVs mission."

"But that is secret information. We haven't even formulated a plan. No direct orders. Contain Regum yes just as we contain the alien field. But actually objectifying, planning and executing our intentions before we even thought of it..."

"...means that the simulacrum has tapped into the future. Read our intentions before we even realised it."

"Pre-empting?"

"Possibly." Watching the tidal wave rise with threatening power towards the stricken city. Then the screens went static, all of them.

Khral tried to restore the settings, check the power supply.

"Everything was normal until just now." He said puzzled. "The DVs are getting nothing. Zohex and Merduk have vanished."

"We got their cached RS which is nowhere."

"You think it has sacrificed itself?"

"Could be."

"What about this future vision of Regum City?"

"That's collapsed as well. The DVs are coasting now. A little disoriented. Better get them back on track. The alien field has to be kept in check. Those targeting Earth realigned."

"Onto it." Khral restoring the default settings, powering up the background resonance states for the DVs to resume their normal duties. "Ah, they're back on track."

"I'll send a courier down." Kroena contacted Eta. The older woman came moments later, agitated.

Kroena remarked on her heightened state.

"I feel the power. It has shaken me to the core."

"How so?"

"I don't know. Like an ocean spread itself through me, expanding my consciousness. Then came the tear in its fabric, its space. The apparent destruction and Regum, a dead city. Then the vision collapsed Kroena. Not dissipated, or reverberating back into its basic resonant state. More like gone as if it, or me, jumped out of time itself. May I sit?"

"Sorry. Please." Kroena kept half an eye on the blank monitors which came back one by one on-line. The DVs returning to their normal duties. As Eta continued to try and explain from her point of view what exactly might have occurred Kroena downloaded all the data into two disks. One for Tellurium and one for Regum. Given Zohex's potency she did not want to realign the DVs into that resonance field. If the simulacrum was in the isolation chamber it could easily take the DVs over. If that occurred they would lose total control. Appearing to have anticipated their intentions. The chamber was vacant.

"Puzzling."

"Why is that Eta?"

"I don't know. The forces, the inherent power displayed so openly..."

"Overwhelming?" Kroena prompted.

"Yes. Higher potencies, tighter fields, deeper psychic states are involved. Way beyond what we have ever done, ever tried, ever accomplished."

"The future came to us." Khral remarked as he watched the psychic behaviour of the DVs. The six special ones designated to observe the simulacrum he stood down. As the enclosed section was immune to the outer field, their isolation had managed for them to keep their resonant state in place. Khral now re-ran their version of events.

The images were clear. The moment of vanishing focussed upon. The strange black square beneath Zohex and Merduk. He held the stream of the DVs consciousness.

"Good Khral. What is that?" Kroena asked.

"No idea. Some sort of portable transitional...thing." words failing him. "It's an object, two, but there's no presence on the computers."

"What do you mean?"

"Look." Kroena and Eta did. "We perceive it, they have it but the computer replay, the background observations of the enclosed environment registers nothing at all."

"But it must." Kroena puzzled by the enigma.

"Must?" Khral slightly amused. "We're dealing with psychic states."

"I know that." Kroena a little exasperated. Frustrated.

"It gets better." Moving the sequence forwards by degrees. "There, at the moment of transition they go blurry. Extreme energies are involved here, stretching to..." the screens went into hypermode, numbers scrolling down then the system shut down.

"What now?" Kroena asked no one in particular.

Khral did some checking.

"Gone infinite."

"What has?"

"Everything in there."

"Infinite? What's that mean?"

"It's mathematical. Superimposition. Can't explain it any other way."

Eta said thoughtfully. "Exactly what I felt."

"Can you be more precise?" Kroena asked her.

"A feeling as vast as an ocean without end."

"Hm."

Khral was working the console trying to get a background analysis. Opening the computers field orientation.

"There. Got it."

On one of the screens Zohex now purple glowing as an adumbration became stretched, elongated as if his essence was being drawn out, dissipated but not deleted. Getting thinner, more opaque, diffuse, turning into a misty extrusion drawn out, driven by an invisible wind. Becoming a thin band which reached some kind of equilibrium.

"That's what happened?" Kroena incredulous. Eta enthralled. Her dark eyes blazing.

Khral had an idea. He checked the RS of their space. The same narrow, thin, stretched out lilac band there as well.

"Looks like this Zohex has spread himself into space."

"Sure does. What about this vision of Regum City?"

He called the data back up. On another screen what the DVs were sensing out there. The two matched.

"Puzzling." For Kroena preferred answers, not mysteries. The DVs were there to explicate phenomena of which this was something else entirely.

"It's receded into distant space."

"But it's real."

"Very. Follow it up?"

"No." Eta replied instantly. "It's another realm."

"So...?"

"It might draw us in."

"I see." Kroena understood Eta's reticence.

"What do you want to do with it?" Khral asked meaning the data.

"Isolate it. Remove it all from current data bases. Insert alerts regarding this new RF. Any change in status have the alarms go off." Kroena had a hunch. "It might want to come back. We have to keep the DVs clear minded. They are not to follow this up. Previous orders stand. No change in orientation. Unless ordered by higher authorities." Kroena would merely let out that the simulacrum collapsed along with Tellurium's demise. It's job done. The loss of Merduk no big deal. He had gone over and down with Tellurium. Lost in time.

"Bring back Earth."

Khral called up the information feeding in from the DVs back to focussing on Earth. A smile spread across his face. Some good news there.

"Aligned."

"Really?" Kroena moving closer to the screen. Earth's RF was similar to Prima's. Slightly more chaotic given their primitive state but the signature was there. "We've done it. Well the simulacrum has. We will mention the heroic deeds of the DVs of course. The domain lords and of course the pontiff will be pleased. And the dark vision of Regum City..."

"It's only an image of what the simulacrum wanted. It hasn't happened yet." Khral reminded Kroena.

"Well once something is possible..."

"Direct the DVs? Insert that for the forward scouts to go into assault mode?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"A third."

"Onto it." Khral uploaded the image for a third of the DVs to focus, to try and make its demise happen. He had no idea how they could shut down Regum. They had two Webs, countless power sources, their monitoring orbital, self rectifying infrastructure and regenerating computer systems. The simulacrum foretelling of a dead city. One could only hope.

The secluded DVs monitoring the now absent simulacrum were still on stand by.

"Kroena, I'm wondering if the Reganians are still in contact."

"Good thinking. Can you?"

"Through that group? Yes."

"Do it. They're contained so no matter what's happening their end won't interfere too much here. When you're ready."

"Nothing. Links gone." Khral observed.

"Excellent. The Reganians have given up. With our traitor gone, their ruse to use Merduk for their own purposes is now in tatters. Both have been deleted. The simulacrum is now a background resonance. But we won't let on. This is important Khral, Eta. No one must know. Not even the domain lords. It could well be that some powerful source on Earth was responsible for that. A last act so to speak. But to no avail and too late. The important thing is Earth's resonance is now in our domain. That can be put into the report. And if Regum does fall...so much the better."

"Yes."

"You know this is a historic event?" Kroena said proudly. "Earth contained. It should diminish the alien field."

"And if not?"

"Khral, don't spoil it."

"Apologies. But just making sure we don't blindside ourselves too much."

"I realize where you're coming from. But let us savour the moment just the same."

"Of course. Who knows, now that Earth is under our jurisdiction we might be able to use their resonance to combine with ours and squeeze Regum. Not so much collapse their Web as infiltrate it. Reconfigure it to our RS. We will get them yet to accept the truth."

"Nothing less." Kroena beamed.

Regum: Earth Mission

Esta was restless, agitated. She hated it. The loss of both the CI and Merduk just should not have occurred. Whilst Sovark dealt with writing the report...writing she thought as she paced the floor of the research lab, still the most secure form of communication. Not even flexi pads were safe. Use any form of electronic data and a trail was created. Micro dust, a few electrons here and there and it was simply amazing what could be reconstructed. Sovark was busy scribbling away trying to explain rationally what had occurred.

They knew now, thanks to Marez's detective work that the dispersion was still inconclusive regarding how the Primaians had achieved the great escape. The strange black slab was a puzzle. Nothing like it ever had been even theorized. That it was some form of facilitating jump gate was agreed by the group. Jump gates. That is all they needed. Embedded in the PWF, maybe snatched from some other, intervening PWF of the future. Trouble was when time equalled zero all sorts of strangeness was more than probable.

"I think you might as well do whatever you have to do." Sovark suggested. Not that Esta's presence or nervousness bothered him. Rather her than me he thought as he searched space for some explanation. "I'm still getting nothing from this junk data. I have made some sort of discovery though."

"Oh?"

Even Marez looked up from the pile of files on his monitors.

"We're not the only ones."

"Do tell." Sovark not too sure whether Esta was being flippant.

"Here. On the second screen,"

Esta and Marez, looked at another screen of space. Millions of stars, clusters of galaxies, two very close, nearly converging on each other far into the future and heading this way. But that was not what Sovark was concerned with.

"Now to filter out photon activity and this is what you get..."

The galaxies bright, shining, vanished into dark blobs tenuously embedded in some dark goo spread across space.

"Cosmic mud?" Esta trying to lighten the situation.

"I'll get back to that. Maybe I haven't upped the resolution high enough." And he adjusted the settings. A milky stream along the false horizon, the relative horizon from their viewpoint, thinning out as it arched above and below.

"See it now?"

"Sure am." Esta moving closer. "And?"

"Background radiation. A few degrees above absolute zero."

"Didn't know there were absolutes in space."

"A threshold barrier. More a theoretical end point of a process than an actual state. Or in plainspeak if that state was reached the universe would collapse. We would fall apart, literally. Everything would turn to atomic dust for the energy holding the atoms together would disintegrate. Not the most nuanced of scientific explanations but that's the rough idea."

"And this background radiation has something to do with the base state of the universe?" Esta asked.

"No. Something we discovered along the way." Sovark in his element.

"Not connected."

"Not from what concerns us. Put it this way, we are learning stuff we had no idea about."

"How does that help us resolve our immediate problem."

"It doesn't Esta. But the more we know about the universe the better. The further we go the further behind the Primaians are."

"Yes that is something worth while. Still it would be nice to know what happened to this Zohex and our so called collaborator Merduk. Both leaving, vanishing, moving...whatever had occurred still remains unexplained."

"True Esta, but regarding PWFs this is precious stuff."

"How?"

"First things first. The background radiation." And Sovark highlighted the band of low energy hanging there like a morning mist. "It's everywhere."

"A constant."

"In that universe."

"Yes?"

"The trouble is how can it be so far apart? I mean light has not had time to reach the extremity of their expansion."

"Light?"

"Well data if you wish."

"I'm lost. As is Merduk..."

"Yes Esta, I am not wandering off here. Remember this might explain how PWFs work."

"Alright."

"Some other force or process must be at work to have deposited this radiation there. Light is too slow."

"Ah." It was an intuitive guess on Esta's behalf. "The goo?"

"Well that too is a puzzle. Unlike the radiation which is constant, give or take the black goo isn't. Clumps around galaxies. Holds them together."

"I thought gravity did that."

"That too. When you were a child did you ever play with physical toys?"

"Err...a bit, when really really young."

"Did you ever swing a rope with a ball or an airplane round?"

"Maybe."

"Well if you did you'd notice drag, inertia, friction."

"That's the air."

"Esta. Mass, even in space..."

"Of course. Spoke too soon."

"Now," he brought onto the screen their spiral arm stretching away at a curve into the darkness beyond.

"I see. So the same forces are at work."

"Better than that. This is a simulation without the goo." The spiral arm extremely bent, at the tip almost perpendicular to the galaxy.

"Well, I am impressed. But does this...?"

"No it does not relate to Merduk but something else. PWs"

"Really?"

"What we actually see of the universe is a fraction of its totality, its mass. This dark goo seems to be it."

"Very good, can you eat it?"

"What?"

"It's relevance."

"Esta, scientific enquiry might be rational but discoveries come when they come."

"So it seems." Wry.

"The point is, and here I am speculating," looking at Marez as well who was content to take a break from the screens, the data crunching, the hunt for hints. "that this dark goo, dark matter if you will contains *all* the probability field-waves. For I posit that the universe is information rich."

"So this black mass is actually a set of almost infinite probabilities."

"Possibilities. Though I'm guessing here. The point is if we can read them we can read every potential situation, the past, the present, the future of what can be, is and more importantly will be. Add to the mix our intentions, like their DVs who simply lock onto it without really analysing and as you can see Esta...can you see what I'm getting at?" Sovark beamed intellectual satisfaction.

"That the universe is an open book."

"Well done."

Esta gave him a slightly puzzled look not too sure whether Sovark was pulling her leg.

"And using dark matter you might be able to trace the CI and Zohex."

"Almost of minor significance. But yes. We'll see. I've just formulated this idea. Just now." Sovark emphasised. "Ever since chasing up the vanished bodies. You know," he continued in one mental sweep, powering on, "the Primaians might have done us a favour. Here they are one step ahead of us. The CI smears itself into junk data, junk to us Esa, remember that, junk to us."

"Bit like...never mind."

"...and Merduk simply jumps out of time. Trouble is, like an electron and its shell he has not materialized. Yet energy cannot be destroyed."

"It can't?"

Sovark let that pass. "So he must be in another configured field."

"Makes sense."

"It does." Sovark assured Esta.

"Well you have been busy. You too Marez and the others. My congratulations. I assume that is what you have been writing up?"

"Aha. The Primaians might intuitively lock into dark mass, use their DVs to insert by remote viewing either possible data, or like us in the case of the CI and Merduk insert real time living beings, anything we want, anywhere, anytime."

"So if we want to reduce Prima's influence, their expansion through their DVs, like us with the Web, we can turn them into the insignificant life forms they really are?" Esta very much focused. Her irritation at the lack of progress gone.

"We can but try. It's all a matter of numbers. Coordinates. Plus reading them. Pick any location and you've got a mass of information. And it's extremely dense. Our QCs might just be the ticket into the probability fields."

"Sounds good Sovark. You do realize, you too Marez how secret this has to remain."

"That's why I'm putting it all on paper. As far as the computers go the files are triple encrypted. And since we are isolated as well..."

"Indeed. Glad you are security conscious. Right. Now that we know how to apply ourselves we can look for our vanished personas."

"Ah. Remember what I just said?"

"I do. Which bit you referring to?"

"Their noneness."

"Yes, that." Esta said thoughtfully. "Maybe the DVs know. They still being routed through here?"

"More embedded in the projected PWF. Except they've changed their orientation. One group is still focussed on ancient Earth. Another group is projecting their psychic field onto Earth in general. But the latter third are now Regum focused."

"Why didn't you say this outright?"

"Because Esta I got a bit carried away with the breakthrough. You got no idea, pardon the expression, what this discovery means."

"What does it mean then?"

"We can create any reality we like. Bring out a certain field and fine tune it, use it, dominate both space and time."

Esta was thinking of the SS 1. This work should really be done there. This lab downgraded to observer status. If the DVs were now targeting this planet and since they knew of the work done here, any advance should happen on the SS 1. Make it seem here that now with both personas gone they had nothing left to go on. Esta explained this to Sovark.

"What you're saying is basically shut this place down and continue it there."

"I am."

"Hm."

"I know it is harsh. Especially concerning your discovery." Esta tried to sound placating wondering if it was working.

"What about shadowing the DVs who are pushing the envelope regarding us as in Regum."

"They'll know we know."

"You don't want that."

"What if I take one last peek?"

"See what their intentions are?"

"Aha."

"Last experiment. Can you do this without them knowing?"

"That's the easy part as I'm not inserting a field."

"Let's see then."

Sovark moved his chair closer to the consoles. He opened up the broad spectrum resonance scanners and waited for them to align to the DVs frequencies, their field waves. Moments later the two were enphased. It took a moment longer for the graphics to translate the hard data.

A dead city appeared in front of them. The buildings abandoned, birds circling in the forlorn vision of utter decay. Some structures had collapsed. No sign of power anywhere. The windows cavernous holes. Everything off line. The sky empty of planes, VAVs, no transports on the ground. Abandoned vehicles falling to bits. Barges in canals rotting away. The factories still, food production ceased.

"They don't want much." Esta's expression dark.

"Nothing but our demise. Mind you this is wishful thinking." Sovark was perturbed. Marez aghast that the Primaians could even consider such a heinous act of destruction. The end of Regum as a civilisation. No Web activity. Even the orbital was gone. The forests around Regum City blackened by fire. Twisted mangled trees, some torn into debris which a horrific firestorm had devastated.

Sovark read the numbers regarding the field. See if it matched the PFWs embedded in future space. The computer calculated ahead, the future position of Regums projected trajectory. His face blanched, icy fear gripped his body, he was speechless. He rechecked the data. No change. He voided the read outs and reran the configurations whilst checking the computational processors. No glitches there. The same image returned. Regum totally wrecked.

Sovark then calculated further ahead. A moment later the city reappeared. The buildings monolithic ruins. Tottering on the brink of collapse. Weeds, trees, shrubs growing out of cracks in the structure. Birds nesting way above the ground. The suburbs decrepit, the buildings in need of maintenance, people shuffling about, some priests present but not many. The odd petrol driven vehicle spewing its poisonous exhaust into the clear air.

Esta and Marez were speechless. Marez hoping it was only a probability. Prima's dream, sinister. Their intentions all too clear. Marez watched as Sovark recalculated this sombre deathscape.

"According to this, that reality is immanent."

"How immanent?"

"As if the process had already started from a PFW's status. They are inserting this crime right now. The timeline is embedded in their psychic state. The probable field wave already collapsed in the almost near future. It's so close the computer can't be more definite."

"This is happening right now?"

"The DV activity is"

"Then wouldn't it be wise for us to insert our future as we want it to be?"

"Already onto it. The generator's running at full capacity. If we shut down the PFW regarding the search for Merduk and the CI and Earth in general then I can see no reason why our vision ought not to prevail."

"Ought. You don't sound too sure here Sovark."

"Nothing is certain. As long as our energy quotient is above theirs we will prevail."

"Well, we'd better do it then."

"I'm uploading all the data regarding our presence. What this means is that it is this present that becomes the foregoing future. If there are any advances on our side that will occur in a temporarily negated reality. Fall into a probable rather than an actual state."

"You realize what they have done."

"All too much."

"Stopped us in our tracks. We have to hold on to reality to stop them inserting theirs."

"Yes."

"And as long as this state, this stand off exists our progression is not just curtailed, it's ceasing to be part of the natural progression."

"I understand. But until we have more energy that is the best we can do."

"What if they use all their DVs?"

"Then, as things stand, we're fucked. Unless there are more stations like this."

Marez was in a quandary. Especially now that the DVs were reading them. One step ahead not just mentally but physically in real time as well. Yet no one had seen this coming. Maybe the Primaians had just discovered this window of opportunity

themselves. Just in time. With the SS 1 now operational they would be the back up to hold off the DVs as well as whatever else the Primaians were considering. Appearing to have won this round with plenty of back up to spare. The SS 1 had the power to outgenerate the DVs forward assault viewing insertion initiators. The only problem was if the Primaians became aware of the SS 1 capabilities there was no reason to infiltrate the PWFs and not just molest them but distort, reconfigure like some malware virus their desired probable state, corrupt their data, literally throw it back in their face.

Damned if they acted, damned if they didn't.

"So no telling how much time?"

"Immanent. Not today but maybe tomorrow."

"Right shut down all extraneous activity and concentrate on Regum. Insert our present into the continuing collapsing PWFs." Sovark ordered. "Earth will have to wait."

"Maybe it's lucky they're not back to a zero level world." Marez trying to get something positive out of this.

"True." Sovark answered. "But remember they could link up. Consolidate both RFs. That in itself would put the squeeze on us."

"Yes, but as long as we exist the future is ours." Marez determined not to be put off.

"It's a conundrum." Sovark becoming more despondent. Esta was at a loss. This was not her field. She was an engineer. She dealt with actualities. Probabilities were what one avoided. Obviated. Foresaw.

The screens for Earth went off line. The field generators were getting the data from Sovark to focus on the present, on Regum as its orbit was targeted slightly ahead of the present. Scramble the imposed future state of what the DVs were inserting.

With no effect. It did not make any difference. Their field kept on uncollapsing. Holding for some moments then dissipated. Prima's DV activity, even at this level was too strong.

Then he had an idea. If the future was determined maybe the past could be changed. Solid state physics denied that possibility but on a quantum level anything went.

"I'm going to try and undo what has been done." Sovark explained. "I'm going to try and insert our reality into their heads prior this change of orientation."

"Whatever you must do Sovark." Marez sounding dubious. How had it come to this? What was it with the Primaians? Why couldn't they live and let live? He certainly had nothing against them if only they minded their own business. But the Primaians were on a

mission to insert their ideology, he would not admit that it was a religion. It was too exceptional, too focussed on itself, too paranoid regarding other sentient ways of thinking now that Earth was in the picture, too obsessed, too deluded. Not that that made any difference. Prima would go to any length to be supreme. Under the illusion they were some chosen race.

"What about Prima's future?"

"If they become dominant and their field strength is above ours, merely accessing it could create a flash back. It would be over before it even began."

"Could we use the CI?" Esta almost desperate to find a way out.

"How?"

Indeed, how. One mind. Not even theirs.

"Turn it against them." Brilliant Marez thought. Pity it had vanished. In between realities. "Or this Merduk. Both preferably."

"Once we know where they are." Sovark reminded him.

Marez was busy trying to find them. Reading the diffusion of their vanishing act. Unfortunately the field they left in their wake was weak, barely a flicker both out there in space and as a source for them to do anything with that smeared information. Its resonance too diffuse to be of any use. What was there was immaterial. Useless like a faded memory which would not reconstruct the event itself. They couldn't even backtrack. Whatever the CI had done had been done with prescient precision.

"What about the distant future?" Marez began. "Maybe in a thousand years all this will be over. Then work back from that."

"It's a possibility." Sovark agreed.

"Hold on."

They looked at Marez.

"The idea sounds fine but what if Prima's resonance is even stronger. What if the CI has gained some power source and has become independent. Given it is a Primaian creation it may have joined forces. So that if you accessed that more potent, embedded, enhanced future might this not crash the present back here?"

"You're right Marez. But something has to be done."

"This entity is momentarily transitional. Even that requires energy which isn't coming from Prima. Correct?" Marez continued.

Sovark merely looked at Marez and Esta. He had a point. Where was the source for its quantum jump. If they could access that, hoping it was stronger than that of the

combined DVs then maybe, just maybe they had a chance to overcome the dark future in store for them.

"All we need to do is softscan it's future."

"But Marez, no one knows where it is. Even the DVs don't. Correct?"

"Yes." Then he brightened. "Maybe the strange field out there might have consolidated. It might give some clues. If it is stronger, denser, more information rich then it has done this regardless of Primaian activity. So that if it can do it then by analogy, even logical extension so can we."

"You're still risking a lot. It might want us to do that so it can find a point source to operate from. Remember it's their creation. No Marez, tempting as it sounds we can't let it come in through the back door."

"Depressing."

"I agree with you. I'm not here to demolish your good intentions. It's just that the dangers have expanded exponentially. My suggestion is to strengthen WebSpace and WebWorld. It's independent. We should also get behind the space programme."

"If we can get ourselves out of the Web. Gaming is a way of life. The attention to detail, to focusing intent into actually, doing something exhausts most to not even try. Just bothering to think is an effort." Sovark reminded him.

"Yes, a bane. Almost a curse. Bright minds lost to us."

"We can always upload this dark future."

"Marez that is an excellent idea. Scare the shit out of them. Do it." Esta delighted with that idea. "No messages though. You know how we as a race hate being preached to, even if it is the truth."

"Just the imagery?"

"Including the assault DVs. Make sure it comes from them."

Marez started rerouting the ruined future into both WebWorld and WebSpace. Then waited for the gamers to discover it. Hopefully they would get the shock of their life.

Moments later it was being populated by gamers. Playing in it. Hide and seek. Seek and destroy. Create their own hideaways. Taking it as just another scenario. Marez was deflated.

"Should have known." Sovark tried to console himself. "Now what?"

"Use our strengths. Forget the weakness." Esta suggested.

"Information. It's going into central archives, CU." Marez informed them.

"What we should really do is get the whole planet to outdo the DVs. Find every psychic, every tutorial, put it everywhere. Then if they want to see it all end this way...so be it." Sovark nearly resigned to the coming catastrophe.

"You giving up?" Esta trying to ascertain his mood. It was sombre.

"I might go onto space. The only way." He said sadly.

"Sovark." Marez pained.

"If they don't give a shit, why should we even bother?"

"What's come over you?"

"Reality. I knew this was all too good to last. It's entropy striking back. We've been too linear, too unilateral in our thinking. Sure information grows in leaps and bounds, but the only discoveries left are in space. Our obsession with ourselves exploited by the Primaians. They are future focussed, not us. We have lost the vision, content with the present. Wanting everything as it has been, not can be or will be or even might be. We've lost the will to be anything other than what we are. Sure the Primaians are mentally evolutionarily challenged. But they have a vision, we don't. We just want to be. Apparently the universe does not work like that. Unless we pull our finger out, get our act together we are doomed." Sovark believing every word he spoke. "We need more scientists, engineers, not the program ready quick fix answers. Astronomers, explorers, philosophers. Anybody with half a brain. We used to have hundreds of universities, now we got one. That just about sums our state up."

"Yes but there are thousands on line studying."

"Dilettantes."

"Better than nothing Sovark."

"Marez there has not been an original idea for centuries. Sure programmes get smarter but most are self configuring. Even maintenance is remote. Nano machines stop cancers, tumours, illnesses, food production. We don't have to do a thing. So we don't. We're letting the machines do it all for us. Two dumb races. Prima and us. In a way we are more alike than dissimilar. The only difference is that we don't believe in a designer universe imprisoning us in its reasoning or contrived reality. And at death unlike Primaians were are not eternally imprisoned in some pathetic state of eternal bliss. The end of all thinking, being, becoming. No, the universe is in constant flux. So is life. Neither of our races recognise that. The Primaians think it's an illusion, we know better. But our minds have stopped. And now the Primaians have outsmarted us through their own thought processes. Either we fight back or it's over."

"Don't say that. I want a better future." Esta's eyes pleading.

"You want a future without Primaian interference. That is something. But Regum's future? What is there from your point of view?"

Sovark was right. They had no vision. The future had become the present. The machines did everything. They could not be more free. No other race in the universe was as developed as they were. Life was an eternal holiday. Sure some people studied but it was in a disinterested way. The boredom threshold too great, the required thinking too hard when AI enhancements thought for you, worked out the most complicated equations, the most complex mental constructions the mind could think of, every problem solved before it even became one. Instant answers, instantaneous solutions. That's those who did bother to think. The majority in the Web. To be sure gaming used the mind but in the end it made life even less of a game, or puzzle, or of interest in itself.

"So you're saying we lost it."

"Sure have. Esta?"

"Me?"

"What's your view?"

"The future is in space. Definitely."

"Maybe we should encourage mass emigration."

"They want their games Marez. How many scientific research establishments do you think there are?"

"I don't know. A few."

"Exactly. Before we cracked nano technology there were hundreds. Now only the facilities and faculties at CU, the odd research centre out in the field, maybe a dozen."

"There are the inventors at home."

"Expanding the Web, yes. Programmers. Maybe even creative thinkers. Like they think this real time future disaster scenario is just another domain game."

"All very interesting, but shall we get back to our problem?" Esta nudged them back on track.

They fell silent. Marez disturbed at Sovark's eviscerated vision of what Regum was, is, had become, fallen into. Maybe they did need a jolt to get the brain cells working again. Have something to live for. The problem was that if they did announce the end of their world no one would believe them. The priests had threatened them with that since their arrival centuries ago. It never happened so it was not believed. If they now said it Marez knew already what the answer would be: they'd been nobbled by the priests.

Adamant that this world was not to disintegrate. It made loosing both Merduk and the CI irrelevant. And posed a question. Some sort of odd quantum state had been achieved. Like the momentary zero when electron energy shells vanished and reappeared. The transition known as tunnelling. In a another dimension. One both Merduk and the CI were using. There was no other explanation. But a field state one could enter. The problem was could one survive it?

Even if Sovark was struggling with his dark mood Marez had found his positive buoyancy again. He at least still liked to solve puzzles. He knew enough of quantum physics to marvel at the possibilities the universe held. Comprehending what Sovark decried.

Indifference. The whole planet's only concern, immediate gratification.

"Esta."

"Yes Sovark."

"Get me into space."

"You leaving?" Marez disappointed that he should want to run away.

"I'm not going to be around when the calamity hits us."

"But it's only a probability."

"Marez, you've seen the numbers. Something very bad is going to happen. It may not be as severe as their vision has them believe it, but the configurations are there. Our generator cannot disperse their inserted PFW."

"So we use the whole planet's resources and this present PFW."

"Which means everything would stop."

"Only until their PFW is dispersed. Then we reboot."

"Maybe Marez that is their intention. As we direct all our energy into our future PFW they crash not that but our system."

"Our encryption, our security, the shielding in place, the self rectifying programmes, the back ups, the nano bots behind that, surely not."

What worried Marez was that the DVs were somehow linked to the dark mass of space itself. If they were indeed using that as a source then nothing could stop them. Even the SS 1 was not that advanced. In fact until today no one really had considered space to be filled with anything. Sure the theory that the universe was information rich had been around for generations if not forever under various philosophical guises but now that it seemed conclusive it drove the point home how the Primaian's had instinctively, religiously latched onto the dark mass right from the beginning. No wonder they felt they were on a winner.

The idea of a Great Architect, a Cosmic Consciousness, an all encompassing Mind, was not too far fetched. Strip away the anthropomorphic delusion and the end result was the same. The Primaians were tapping into space itself. Worse they were beating them at it. WebSpace was just so much gossamer.

They would have to completely reorientate their science. Which brought him back to the dilemma of a lack of scientists. Sovark was right. The future was in space.

Andromeda: Arktus

`Nehr. You don't mind?' Monas asked gently. Intruding unannounced was so amateur. Like stumbling in the dark due to one's incompetence, arriving at the right headspace by accident, then falling into the Ehrfar's Sleepwalking domain. Luckily Nehr was feeling benevolent.

`For you Magniter, anything, anytime.' Her smile generous. It made her mouth seem larger. Her projected happiness washed through him, lifting and expanding his consciousness at the same time. Maybe he should join them for a while prior passing on. Such a quaint term. Death the great transition, a temporary phase change. Uploading and reuploading from one body to the next. Hanging on to precious knowledge acquired, the sense of history, of continuity...

`Are you going to dump all this in my lap?' she joked having read his mind.

Monas looked around him. Nehr had made a strange fieldspace for herself and of herself. Her physical presence transparent, pure energy. It took several life times to get that ethereal. Pale blue translucence sentience. A blur within the outer confines of her body. There was an other with her. Either a symbiot companion or an extraneously projected secondary self of her self. Watching over her. Ready to engage in Nehr's reality as she busied herself with higher matters. Until Monas interrupted her little construct, her own private realm. Around it a pale blue vaporous something. A psychic cushion to keep out the real reality she was in. Creating her own environmental space for herself.

Three vague geometric shapes glowed slightly lilac-blue. Vase shapes half her height. Containers perhaps. The third an urn. He had no idea what she was up to. Present within her tiny domain, as small as a room, she had finished her construction. Nehr feeling creative. Whether it would reresonate in some reality he could only guess. Not with the soft lambent blue diffusion all around. Infinite in all directions. Peaceful. Harmonious. An absence that was something. Only the Ehrfar could create such seeming contradictions.

`So you like my little patch?' Nehr smiled coquettishly. Allowing him to fully enter not just hover at its edge. He knew if he moved a fraction back he would be in the effluvium and out of contact.

`Interesting your concept of visualized space.' He suggested.

`Yes. Running a little experiment.'

His interest was piqued.

`Thought so.'

`Did you know?'

`What you were doing? No.'

`Well it's attracted you. What were you thinking?'

`Letting go.'

`Coming over then?'

`It is always tempting to be a Sleepwalker. But I'm told it drains one's inner core of psychic energy. My rebirth would be difficult. I may never be corporeal again unless subsumed completely into ethereal space and hope for the best.'

`Being corporeal is such a drag.'

`Not on Arktus. Even Regum's cyberweb achieved instant creative thought processes. On the verge of being concomitant with life.'

`Which brings me to my experiment.'

`Ah yes. Amazing how the mind wanders within this...' spreading his arm out to indicate its unseen vastness.

`Yes. A reason. Avoiding the dreamers. Not quiet wiping them out if they transgress, just disperse then ignore them. Truth can be inimical.' Amused at his reclusive behaviour. His caution. For her barrier, whilst micro thin could be full of dreams of alien domains to ensnare seekers, forward probing psychics who could stray through pure fluke into her domain. Her psychic bastion capable of stripping an intruder's mind bare. Cerebral wipe out. `If they transgress the soul bares itself. Not that I'm interested. Their focus irrelevant.' Nehr secure from the potent psychics who hive minded within the GA.

`They are afraid of not just being found out. But manipulated upon their return. Not that they get far.' Monas familiar. Referring to the Ehrfahr's domain as it effected the mentally clotted deep visionaries out there in space.

`Which brings you to my point, realm, condition, domain space.' She paused and studied him. To Monas she was so immaterial, the merest of an outline, less than an adumbration full of smooth hovering energy. Her mind present even if her head was an unclear, light blue fog filled cavity. Her outline a shade darker, definitely delineated. Even if blurry. An animated outline, just. Minimal. And they could be even less than that, and more, much much more. With inestimable variations. But Nehr was always herself. If that was her real self.

`I am.' Having read his mind, engaging, a broad winning smile. Such perfect teeth. `Admiring me again?' now looking even younger than what she already was, or

pretended to be. One could never be entirely sure. What did matter though was her kind's state of mind. That was everything.

`Finally you got to the point. That's the trouble with corporeals. So self distracting. No wonder it takes millennia to get your worlds together, never mind your ethereal self.' She teased him.

`The way of life Nehr.'

`Life. Well you're not going to distract me.'

`Is that what your second is here for?'

`Yes. It can deal with the boring stuff whilst I observe myself trying to ascertain something.'

`This experiment.' He guessed. Those objects not art for art's sake.

`You sure you want to stick around?'

`You know the outcome?' silly question.

She gave him an exasperated look as if dealing with a dimwit. Monas mellowed opening his mind. It was so easy, sometimes. With Nehr even easier. She was his favourite, a rarity for both of them. The Ehrfah rarely appeared twice in one's natural life. Or if they did their appearance could be anything and anyone. Shapeshifters, it came naturally to them. Depending on the circumstances they created by building their dream domains. Dreams to corporeals. Domains to the Ethereals across the cosmic spectrum.

`You're drifting again. Must I do everything?' admonishing him for his lack of concentration. Not that Nehr's mind did not itself transmutate. But their underlying resonance was always there. That's how one knew who one was dealing with.

`This is your space.' Monas replied this time intent on focussing his awareness.

`So it is. Not for long.'

Waiting for a revelation. The shapes a receiving array. The space the receiver, the strange three objects configured responding, revealing, clarifying systems. How these objects would react with the intending disclosure.

`I must have come just in time.'

`Did you know I was going to do this?'

`No, no idea. It's as if I was drawn...'

`We linked. Maybe it is as it should be.'

`In your realm most certainly.'

`It's going to be powerful.' She warned him.

`Overwhelming.'

`To you.'

`You think you will be on top of it?'

`No, just isolated. This is going to be a revelation.'

`Your kind are always at the edge of creation.'

`It's a great feeling.'

`I've had glimpses.'

`I'm sure you have. Ready?'

`Ready as ever I can be.'

`Better align your mind, centre your being, focus on the loci. Then hang on.'

`For dear life?' Monas joked. The look she gave him, her eyes widening, expanding, threatened to usurp his presence.

`That's just me preparing. What is about to transpire is even more so.'

`Tapping into some sort of reservoir.'

`You could say that.'

`The anomaly.' An image of warped space. Twisted, convoluted within, writhing, seething with dark malevolent energy. Intentional, focused, pregnant with sinister implications for the universe itself.

`You are good. Worthy as an Eternal of sorts.' She jested.

`Yes I always thought the title a little overblown. But no other appellation...'

`Monas...you're drifting. Focus.'

`You're just so invigorating.'

`Well don't get too excited. Calmness is required.'

`Ready.' Not for a long time had Monas felt trepidation. One part of him wanted to exit, the other fascinated at what was about to be. Nehr certain. Fear hovering in the background. Something truly awful. An alien threat by its mere presence was about to be unleashed, with no point of return once it engaged.

`Should you be doing this?'

`It already is.'

`What, your doing?'

`No, its presence is self boosted. And yes you have guessed correctly. These three shapes will react to its influence. From the deformities. And they will be deformed. Then I will know exactly what is going on.'

`The future?'

`The present the future. Its future potent.'

`It already has come to pass?' Monas dismayed.

`In their universe. Not ours. There is an event horizon in place, a quantum set of singularities that stops the two universes intermingling.'

`Except dark matter.'

`Not yet. A few million years away Monas. Now to get back to where I was.'

`I'm ready.'

`You'd better be. If this overwhelms you then I have to either cast you aside, dissolve you...'

`Maybe the time is right to pass over.'

`...as long as you know, or I was going to say, isolate you if you wish to continue.'

`I'll let you choose Nehr.'

`You cannot come over to us either.'

`I never intended to.'

`Good. Enough of this.'

Everything went black. Stars everywhere. Nehr incorporeal.

A state of mind. A presence like himself. The glutenous feeling unmistakable. Sensual, all embracing, everywhere. A cloying thickness pervading the fabric of space. Contaminated. Befouled. Reconfigured. Everywhere. Having expanded from the nearby super galaxy. Using dark matter to embed itself, its sentience, its dream of ultimate supremacy pouring in. Supercharging the Ether which with its pervasive influence realigned weaker, groping sentient minds towards its will. Its being an ultimate presence. Dominant.

A new age. Drawing on the quantum foam as its resource. Casting its net over all emergent life forms. Nudging unconscious yearnings into its cosmic mindfulness. The birth of a god. Undeniable. Eternally present unless, unless...

Monas's mind reverberated with the reconfigured CI. Not taken in by it. Thanks to Nehr he could see it for what it was. A construct. An artifice, an abomination. Unfortunately his thinking mind could think of no way to obviate its presence, not consciously, not rationally, not ever...

Then he and Nehr were back in her configured pale blue space. The three objects had indeed changed. One was a lilac glowing orb. Tiny lights flickered within it as if it contained the stars of the universe. The luminosities meta-realities. He shied away from falling into these sub-realms. The second object pure headspace. Within it flickering strands of neural pathways. The CI's mind. The third a quivering darkness, ovalloid, elongated, a thin lilac band in its centre. The CI's infusion as it appeared in space. A

band of background radiation. In their, his, Nehr's universe. The CI had made the transition and infected the background radiation of this universe as well.

Nehr was finished with her experiment. The pale blue domain present once more, the two of them secure.

`It's not as bad as you think Monas.'

`It isn't? It seems...'

`Exactly. Seems. Its presence is real, only if you let it. The best way to deal with it is to ignore it.'

`But its effects are everywhere.'

`As an effect, yes.'

`And the cause.'

`Precisely. If it were really dominant we would not have accessed it objectively. My attractors have contained it. Sure, there will be less developed races who will create images according to its power design. They will even give it names according to the level of their comprehension.'

`Gods.'

`Or even God in the singular.'

`Dominating.'

`Supreme. But only in their headspace.'

`But it's spread itself across space. It's...'

`An overlay. The real universe, the real make up of space is simply occluded. Changed yes. On the surface. The real substructure, the quantum foam is still there.'

`Manipulated.'

`Exactly. Which means it can be unmanipulated. Re-reconfigured. Reset in your parlance.'

`It might take some time.'

`Could be eons. It will give your scientists something to do.'

`What about the Ehrfah?'`

`Too diverse, too restless believe it or not to be satisfied with some unitary god lording it over your universe. Remember our domains are on a different wavelength. The CI's pretentiousness is just that. Who knows, some of us might even infuse it. It might be the supreme presence for the moment...'

`An awfully long moment Nehr.'

`Indeed that is so. Earth will be the litmus test.'

`What about Regum?'

`Gone.'

He accepted the fact.

`Prima?'

`Embellished. Devoted. Supreme.'

`Their universe then...'

`Is polluted. But you forget one thing. I can see the vision has had a deleterious effect on you.'

`It's not inspiring.'

`The space farers. The Habitat's inhabitants.'

`Yes?'

`They are so self obsessed, so ultra individualistic that I don't think they want to succumb to some overweening unitary being. Unless there is something in it for them. And since they have everything they ever wish for there isn't much the CI can offer them.'

`What about power?'

`They got that already.'

`Nano.'

`Right.'

`But it will attract those who have delusions of grandeur.'

`They fulfil that in the Web...oh dear.'

`That crashes?'

`Afraid so.' Nehr admitted. `That is going to cause immense psychological problems.'

`Which the CI will solve for them?'

`Looks like it.'

`Unless we come to the rescue.'

`You may have to.'

`It goes against the Law.'

`It does.'

`You will have to convince your kind.'

`Our kind. Nehr you might exist on another plane but you are still us.'

`Just. Very temporal at that.'

`Doesn't matter.'

`Looks like I will have to convince the other Sleepwalkers to make the sentients aware of what's gone on.'

`Yes. Dreams can be potent.'

`And misconstrued. Don't think the CI has not thought of that. It can twist them, dement them, deform them, disguise them unto it's vision. There will be disturbances, mentally I mean. It might send some mad with religious fervour, others into insane despair, create spiritual confusion. There will be wars as those on the side of mental clarity and pure reason will be subjugated, hounded into submission or worse...'

`Murder.'

`Cleansing, eradication, purification. Depends on their ignorance or their enlightenment. Interesting times Monas.'

`Easy for you to say. Your kind are untouchable.'

`Not anymore. We might have to start reincarnating again.'

`It looks like we're going to have a monumental struggle on our hands.'

`And minds.'

`Indeed, especially that. What if the CI is dominant?'

`Then it would have achieved its objective.'

`That means we become, by default, the enemy.'

`I think we already are.'

Icy apprehension jolted down Monas's spine.

`The DVs are aligned. Most. But not all. So there is some glimmer of hope. Ah you see Monas? The universe is not so unitary after all. Then there is the phase change. Yes I read you. It's gone through a transition. But it won't be forever. It might have slipped down a notch but the universe is not constant. There are fluctuations. The CI itself is a fluctuation. You see what I'm getting at?'

`It's being a cause is also an effect.'

`And?' a hint of false mockery.

`It might hasten the next transition.'

`Right on the mark Monas.'

`Thank you Nehr.'

`So, need I spell it out?'

`I get it.' Monas delighted with his insight.

Nehr's domain receded drained of energy. It collapsed, shrank and vanished into the lilac orb.

Extracted by the CI duplicate realm Nehr had fashioned.

Monas could only think that it sensed Nehr's power to be of immediate concern. Not himself. He could thank fate, or more precisely the quantum reality he was riding

which was of lesser importance. At least she had not been destroyed. That he would have felt directly. It was paramount now to be alert to its possibilities of being subducted. Nehr had revealed enough for Monas to build up the scientific and if necessary technological forces to cleanse the universe of this foul diffusion. Nehr working from within her duplicate cyber construct of its projection.

Time to disengage and wake up.

He had a reason to live, to continue, to see this through.

When he came to he found Nesho standing there with four Eternals.

"Ah, glad to see you. Nesho." Nodding to the other four cowed visitors.

"Your request has been granted. Make your peace. You are passing over."

Reality became a flaring fiery blurred vision as his mind ceased to function, rapidly regressing into instant decay. The toll of centuries that had held death at bay instantaneous. All Monas could think of was of Nehr even if she was in the CI's duplicate domain. Or was the opposite the case. That It had inserted a duplicate of itself into her construct. Unless going in he would never know. He concentrated hard, trying to survive the transition and not be rendered to smithereens as his body died around him.

The vision of Nehr. Beautiful dark brown, clad in flowing silks, the sarong glittering with stars. Her wide white eyes and laughing mouth now tantamount regarding his survival. For Nehr being in the possibly CI's real domain was better than total oblivion.

'Ah. You have decided to join us Monas.' Nehr's voice. She was sitting on a resplendent white throne. The room itself intricately carved ivory lattices allowing a cool breeze into the tepid humid air. Silken clad servants wafted wide palm fronds to cool the queen. Censors were filled with sweet smelling aroma's making his head feel lighter. Drugs. He beamed at Nehr.

'On your knees Monas.'

A little surprised, yet amenable at having survived he went down on his knees.

'Your oath of submittance. Swear allegiance to me and the all seeing all knowing god and you shall live. Deny god, deny me and you will die.' Nehr said imperiously, her eyes glittering black, a supine sneer on her face.

'I submit.'

'That is good. For the moment your life is spared. Heretics, apostates, unbelievers will not befoul this glorious realm. Stray and your life is forfeit. My guards will escort you to your cell where you may consider the state of your corrupted soul. Once you are spiritually pure, then we shall see what use we have for you. Take him away.'

SS 1

Nervina felt as if she had not slept for days. Her internal bio rhythms were completely out of whack. She could have let her body take over, but was too excited, nervous energy firing her natural brain into exuberant anticipation. Watching the glowing tiny light screens of the console. Alone in space. They could easily leave her to drift for ever in deep space. The tiny craft looking after her. Tubes of tasty goo for nourishment. Enough water to last her long enough not to have to worry. Plenty of air. Plenty of time to reflect. Too much going on. Her visions dream memories. Everything around her so normal, so steady, so eternal. The remote stars, the nearby spiral arm reassuring that she was near others somewhere. Now and again a habitat announced itself. The ship dealt with that in auto mode. Loaded with innate conversational programmes for her not to have to bother to engage in what were merely curious or bored inhabitants. Looking for company to enliven their isolated lives. As far as they were concerned this was an automated drone carrying spare parts to distant customers.

Space. Vast. Empty. But not void. Energized, manipulated. Embedded incursive programming running possible future scenarios. All so irrelevant out here. As was Prima's politics, Regum's indifference, Novus's subjection. No wonder so many left for space. Get away from the turmoil, the struggle to survive. Dominating power games. The underlying insistence to conform or align depending on where one lived. So tedious. Time wasting, distracting.

Moving between planets and now off to an unknown location. Maybe these individuals were more focussed on not simply just their lives. Changes were occurring, data to be extracted and analysed, discoveries to be made. The universe considered not just something that was there in the background. More of an apparition of a steady state as the Primaians saw it. Doing everything possible to keep it as such.

She smiled. In a way even the universe didn't know where it was heading. One micro-verse self obsessed, a vaster universe expanding beyond light speed around it. The boundaries had not just shifted, they had been obliterated.

Contact. The tiny craft dealt with it. The auto beacon adjusted the ship's trajectory, calculated vectors, responded to distant commands. No one interested in her. Hours later the shutters went up. Now she was really isolated. The pod went into stealth mode. To all others she had vanished. Faded away. No longer anywhere.

The air changed. She felt sleepy. Her Brain informed her of a potent sedative. She was already lethargic telling her Brain not to bother.

On the SS 1 the pod secure, Nervina was initially soft scanned to make sure she had no cyber viruses. Cleared she was wheeled in for a deeper Cavity Resonance Scan. Loara hooked up to ride the resonance states with Nervina. See if she was configured, boosted, designed for specific tasks Nervina might not even be aware of. A dormant insert. The most dangerous of all agents.

Loara sensed a penumbra within Nervina's mind. Another presence. Her unconscious? Vast realms, not what she expected. Loara thought this was a back up. A holistic programme. Transparent, devoid of detail, its resonance stronger than its physical reality. As far as the latter went it was barely there. A phantom self, a spectral awareness allowing itself to be scanned. No reactionary recoil, no hostile counter measures, no false projections to try and fool the CRS's process. Whilst not benign neither was it loaded to enact even the slightest of retorts. Either Nervina was a supreme Natural or something else. Hybrid perhaps. Non interactive for the moment. Letting the waves wash through. With nothing picked up. Barely a shadow of itself. Pure quantum phases. Normally there would be either a collapse of the field wave or it dissipated. This shadow presence did neither.

Loara called in Jez. She laid down on the smart couch like Loara and phased in with Nervina. Jez's first impressions were of a back up persona.

`That it?' Loara a little deflated.

'Its outer shell.'

`Ah. So there is more.'

`Definitely.'

`Hostile intentions? Secret intentions?'

In the control room behind them Tuvlov and Nuhan observed the three women's interaction. Tuvlov's and Loara's brief cautious in allowing Nervina even partial access here. Nuhan being one of the few pure scientists at the base was intrigued. Al though not his speciality.

`I'd say it's a back up persona. A duplicate. Pared down maybe. Baseline.' Jez surmised.

`One of ours?' Loara asked.

`I haven't been here long enough. Not cleared either regarding your research.'

`Well someone configured her.' Loara responded. `If this is the latest Primaian model then we are in some serious difficulties. You got that Tuvlov?'

`Loud and clear. The resonant wave structure is not Primaian. The intensity for starters is absent. More Reganian. Then of course there are the dabblers at the habitats. She could be some inventor who wants her brain to do all the work without having to involve herself directly. Through remote thinking.' Nuhan suggested.

`Between remote viewing and our EAI capabilities.' Loara queried.

`Symbiot.' Tuvlov came back.

`Yes.' Loara agreed. `Jez?'

`She feels organic yet not the mass one would expect. More of a transitional state. Ephemeral.'

`She's near death?' Loara thought over to the others.

`No, yes. What I mean is that this phantom presence appears to be enphased.'

`Quantum inserted?'

`Consciousness can be in several places at once. Yes.'

`Alright.' Loara accepting Jez's analysis. `Quantum consciousness?'

`Perhaps.' Jez replied.

`Perhaps?' Loara not satisfied with such a vague response.

`Completely new.' Jez certain.

`We got any of this from other sources Tuvlov?' Loara asked.

`None that I'm aware of. The computer's running matches and....nothing.'

`Nothing or nothing we don't know of?'

`Both Loara. No signs of configuration. No real cyber architecture or grafted bio-enhancing constructions, no molecular strings, protein clusters, sub atomic nodal processors. It's her second self.'

`Is it current?' Loara asked.

`Current?'

`As in real time.'

`I see. Yes.'

`No bifurcations, no doppel effects, ultra resonance shells?'

`All absent.'

`Jez'

`I know, this one is different. Could be a mutation. Next level of consciousness.'

'Yeah, well I don't believe it. Not meaning you're wrong Jez. I know we got to cover all angles. But our AI's, well maybe not them but our EAI's, my EAI should resonate with that.'

'Which it isn't.' Jez finished off for Loara. 'So Tuvlov?'

'Since we got her under, time to challenge her memories.'

'Yes, do it.' Loara waiting for something to reveal itself that she could nail down. Define Nervina.

Nuhan adjusted the parameters. A flood of images came up. The seminary and her lover Horat. The interview. Regum's CU, her escape, Novus, Ratze, escape, return, appearances, disappearances, reappearances.

'Something's not right.' Loara said at last.

'She's on the run.' Nuhan calm.

'Perhaps. More like laying down a false trail. Being something she is not.'

'No resistance. No false ultra realities.' Jez added to the mix.

'No overt wave fronts. Nor manipulating the scanner. She's completely disassociated. Letting it happen.'

'No reaction.' Jez confirmed.

'That's just it.' Loara continued. 'This nothing. That surely is something in itself. Everyone's got some secrets. No matter how banal. Nervina's letting it all happen as if she knows we're not going to get much. Remember when we scanned Erx?'

'What of it?' Tuvlov asked.

'His self enhancement left the classic resonant wash back in his mind. The first reaction was off-loading the incoming wave front. Then came data sequestration, finally dumping. Only when his charged brain realized this was benign did his brain waves settle down. Sort of hyper-stable. An active surface brain. The short term enhanced states reacting then dispersing. And what was left was the self boosted modelling, the inherent constraints. Nothing like that here.'

'I agree.' Jez agreed. 'Nervina is too serene.'

'I would have thought it's an ideal state to be in.' Nuhan ventured.

'Exactly my point.' Loara continued to push that Nervina was a different entity.

'Do her completely.' Jez suggested.

'Her body you mean?' Nuhan asked.

'Yes.'

Nervina's field equation matched that of her mind.

'Now is that normal?' Jez knew she was onto something.

`For Naturals.' Tuvlov answered. Meaning what Jez was getting at.

`She's completely in resonance. Enphased.'

`I get it. She's quantum enphased. *She is the wave, the carrier, the content.*'

Loara astounded. This was way beyond anything they achieved. Except when using projected quantum field waves. `She's an insert!'

`You could be right you know.' Tuvlov almost convinced. The numbers now made sense. `Certainly appears so. Congratulations Loara, Jez.'

`So, the question remains, who?'

`And when, as in where.' Nuhan replied to Loara's question.

`This is...' Loara lost for words. She didn't know if it was wonderful or dangerous. Being manipulated or in control.

`I agree.' Tuvlov realizing the import of Loara's suggestion. `We keep her under for the duration.'

`With you there.' Loara disengaged herself, got off the recliner and walked up the stairs into the control room. "Now what?"

"You're asking me?" Tuvlov laughed.

"Well it's more than just security that's at stake here. This is a scientific something from somewhere by someone who have their own agenda."

"One the scan has not revealed. Yes. Bit like tapping a hammer on a head and see what a head sounds like."

"Maybe not that primitive. But if Nervina can cover herself inside the CRS then I doubt we'll ever discover her source point."

"You think she's from the future?" Nuhan excited. He was thinking ahead here.

"Or advanced from somewhere else." Jez suggested.

"Right. Two things to consider. We got her RS. If she is from the future then it could be us. Remember we got quantum probability state capabilities. Designer quantum waves. Virtual quantum collapsing realities. Our future selves could have sent her to make sure we get there. Make sure we stay on top of all of this. Prima the obsession, the disturbance in the general wave field out there. Earth. Who knows? So as long as Nervina is with us we're on the right path." Tuvlov thought out aloud.

"And the other of course is a present time world who's sent someone over to us." Nuhan suggested.

` "Yeah. But do we keep it secret? We're not hostile." Loara alert as always. "We'd be only too glad to converse with another race. After all we are considering going to Earth at some time. Once we know what the Primaians are doing."

"We know that Loara." Tuvlov said darkly.

"Maybe Nervina is future Earth." Nuhan brightened.

"Somehow I don't see that. From what little we do know Earthers are hyper naturals, charged up volatiles, on a good day." Loara smirked.

"Yes. Maybe. Perhaps. That leaves another civilisation." Tuvlov guessing.

"Which is remaining in the background." Loara now suspicious. Overtly cautious.

"Maybe they don't want the Primaians to find out either." Tuvlov said hopefully.

"Which means they're on our side."

"It would explain why Nervina got out from Prima. But why dump her there?"

"Primary evidence." Nuhan explained.

"It would make sense now. Her aversion to be contained in any situation. She's always getting away from something."

"So is Erx and Linnox." Tuvlov suggested.

"Two timers. Regum, Novus, here. Three really." Loara smiled. Then she thought of Ung. She asked Tuvlov to call up her scan. It matched. "How come no one noticed that?"

"Different team."

"They should have..."

"Loara. Nothing indicates Ung as even vaguely hostile. Plus we really do need someone from Prima. Having DV trainers with us is of immense value." As a good feeling swept through Tuvlov. "I wonder. If Ung is like Nervina and both are with us that only strengthens our position. You may have noticed that Ung has not even surreptitiously downloaded or uploaded anything. She's stayed out of the way completely. Helping calibrate the QCs in regards to targeting Earth. Her finetuning saved us hours if not longer. Who knows what Nervina's brought with her."

"And pushing Primaian intrusive scanners might not have gone down too well. I think it's working out for us." Nuhan relaxed now that it all made sense.

"We have other tasks as well. The vanished CI and the Primaian companion Merduk." Tuvlov bringing them back on track.

"We still running a holding pattern there?"

"Yes. Going over the transition sequence. No luck." Nuhan said dismayed. "We know what happened but can't prove it. There is also the danger that by locking onto the transition state it could do a flash back."

"Can we do this virtually?" Loara asked.

"Already have. Result's the same."

"Nothing hey? Err what you gonna do with Nervina and Ung?"

"Might as well power down." Not having decided.

Tuvlov told Jez to disengage and come up. Then he switched down the CRS. The trolley ejected Nervina, still in deep sleep.

"We gonna tell her?" Loara wanted to know.

"No. Like Ung, we'll treat her as a friendly. What would be useful is to get the two of them together. Hopefully also find someone compatible for either or better still both of them." Tuvlov looked at Loara.

"Me? I don't do compatible."

"I thought you might know someone."

"Well, let's see. Erx is interesting."

"Too young. At their age a few years is almost a generational gap. Clever as he is."

"Linnox is too old. Mirn and Los are too centred."

"Not Mirn. She's fairly easy."

"With certain types."

"Oh. Vik? Sherz?" Tuvlov suggested. "They're on the shifts with the QCs Earth aligned project."

"Yes. Maybe the Disturbance has an effect there. Let the Primaians think we're ignoring them. Too busy this end to see what they're doing behind our backs. Are we watching them?" moving on with their agenda.

"In a round about way. No change regarding their Web intrusions. And through the CI's vanishing we keep an eye on Regum."

"Which they would expect. If only we could shut them down." Loara showing her frustration.

"Maybe Ung and or Nervina might be of use there. Get them with Vik and Sherz. If they are linked we'll find out. If not, all the more interesting." Tuvlov looking at Loara to keep it this way. "Take Nervina to her quarters. Give her a print out of her RC. Show that we're open about our work here. Give her near open status. Internal data and passive scanning only."

"At all times?"

"No just in her cabin. When she's relaxing. No one is to know what we assumed here." Tuvlov looking at Nuhan who agreed. He loved secrets. For if you kept secrets then secrets would come your way. Nuhan got a buzz out of it. Knowledge truly is power.

"I would like to think you are right." Nuhan beamed. "Whether she's the future or some other world, either way it's looking good."

"Nuhan, if they can hide persona's, configure them into solid states then they can hide intentions as well. Remember that." Loara lectured. "Until proven otherwise..."

"Ung has been of immense value."

"That's one. Who knows what is going on their way? Maybe Nervina's here to undo what Ung is doing."

"Sometimes Loara you're concerns border on the paranoid." Nuhan jested.

"Better paranoid than totally screwed."

"You mean there's a difference?"

Loara gave him a withering look. She didn't mean it of course but she wasn't going to let him get that easily away. Nuhan freaked.

"Ha! Got ya."

Nervina woke feeling pleasant, rested, comfortable. In a tube. Back in space? The craft? She tested her Brain. It ballooned out of its nowhere state. Ripples shivered across its outer shell. A CRS. It had let it through having gone into a quantum transitional withdrawal state. There and not there. In between solid state energy waves. Dispersed. Read out, zero. No data ascertained. Yet that in itself might puzzle them. Mimicking psychic voiding. So far so good. Everything was normal within. Now to find out where she was.

She contrived to be asleep. Her Brain mimicking REM states. The tube accepted Nervina's sleep state. Inner expansion, feeling her way out from wherever she was. A modular set of white blocks, the station she was in. Extremely close to a mid range star. Surrounding solar arrays to soak up massive amounts of energy slowly built around the star. In its shadow. Further away intermittent dust clouds obscuring the station from Prima's position. Amplified sound. The hum sounding familiar. Quantum processors. Three. Two active one on stand-by. Quantum computers generating probability waves. Her memory tracked back. A smaller field generated on Regum. Target Earth. The CI and Merduk vanishing. Uncollapsing their field-wave. But not recollapsing. That took some doing. Extremely advanced, way beyond anything here, or anywhere else. Caught in the discrepancy's wave? Maybe. Check on that later.

Satisfied she decided to wake. Her quarters slowly filled with air. Then a real shower delighted with the fresh water. Refreshed a chime tinged. A new face. A woman, a little older than her. Longish auburn hair, pale like a spacer.

She introduced herself. Sherz. Pleasantries were exchanged. Likable, easy going, relaxed they made their way to the central hub. A canteen, next to it a general purpose lounge. No screens showing space. The less imagery within the mind the less the DVs could latch on to and calculate their position. After a light breakfast, Sherz explaining the station's functions, generating quantum probability fields then collapsing them thereby inserting their configured reality, the reason for its existence. Counteracting the realities the DVs inserted onto Earth or wherever else their interfering meddling was focussed upon. Recently Regum being targeted as well.

Nervina listened to Sherz's pleasant voice explaining the work they did here. To break Prima's DVs stranglehold whatever they centred upon. Earth under two sets of PFWs.

"That must be interesting." Nervina said as she drank her tea.

"It's certainly creates it's own turmoil. We are letting the DVs run loose. What we want to find out is what happened to the CI and its companion."

"Yes. I can imagine. Maybe the DVs have thrown a cloak over them. They might be there, just you can't see them."

"It's more than that."

"You tried...?"

"Lock in you mean? Too dangerous."

"Reverse surging."

"Indeed. So at the moment it's a general reverse data extraction. We're not inserting anything. It's a universal field, aligned to real time back there. Embracing reality rather than adding to it."

"Open source scanning."

"Yes, passive. Value neutral. The DVs got no idea."

"But you have."

"What we have is something totally unexpected." Sherz looked up from her empty cup. She pushed the finished plates away.

"Space full of surprises." Nervina coaxed.

"Yes. There's an oddity in space. An effect without a cause."

"That sounds..."

"Impossible?" Sherz had been informed and coached by Tuvlov and Loara in how to handle Nervina. Reveal as little as possible. Explain the current situation. Throw in some probabilities without revealing any actualities, any hard data.

"Yes. It could be enphased." Nervina hinted. See how much they knew.

"Enphased." Sherz repeated, as if getting a feel for the concept.

"Different energy level. Sub atomic."

"Ah yes. Quantum derivative."

"That's it. The concept not the explanation. Possible though."

"If that is the case then anything is. With the right technology."

"Not the DVs then?"

"Nothing that end. Apart from their usual meddling."

"Yes." Nervina thinking back to...she blanked her mind. Sherz was studying her. Before letting her be of any use she had to find out how much Nervina knew, how much she let on, what she kept back, what might be blocked, reveal her origins, her real origin.

"It's the effect that is of concern. It's as if..." Sherz pretended to be looking for the right words, "...the galaxy is up to something. Creating a change."

"That you've noticed?" Nervina finished off for her.

"Yes. One moment nothing, then a disturbance. Distant. Spread out. That's the effect I'm alluding to."

"Well Sherz, my knowledge is limited. I needed one of your own to explain the basics to me."

"I see." Was she really that ignorant? Maybe as a necessary cover whilst on Prima. The blocks still in place.

"We're thinking of sending one of our own to Earth." Sherz probed. Maybe her world was doing that already.

"Using these insertion field states?" keeping the jargon simple.

"The initial run was manifested with the aid of the DVs. They channelled through us. But we lost them. The DVs are still focussed on Earth but our remote scans can't get past a certain point. You see at transition it all goes awry. Our problem is, if we read that, it could screw everything this end." See if Nervina had an answer.

"Now that is a dilemma. Like a short circuit."

"Sort of. Yes."

"Tried going ahead?"

"That's the problem. We don't know the time duration. It might be a second, hours, years."

"What about a one time probe?"

"That would...complicate things." Sherz was thinking of the master project. To free Earth of the DVs influence by boosting the Earthers' real mental states without Prima's

psychic manipulations. Get their minds expanded so they can make their own choice which way they wished to evolve and progress.

"You see Earthers will evolve. Prima wants them going their way. We want to stop them. We will stop them. Trouble is this transition state. They may have won. They could be the dominant factor there. Plus this disturbance does not help. It certainly has not interfered with their projections."

"Maybe the two are linked?" toying with the tea pot.

"Sorry Nervina, more?"

"I'm fine thank you and full. Good to have real food."

"It isn't real. The substances are but it's all created so to speak. We just got the technology to make it look real."

"Well the scrambled eggs tasted like scrambled eggs. Not the goo out of the tubes."

"I hate to tell you but it is the same goo. It's just we got all this energy, so some of it is used to reconstruct the molecules into the substances we want them to be."

"It's good either way Sherz. Ahm have you tried going further back?"

"Yes?"

"Create conditions so that the DVs are locked out."

"You know what that would lead to?"

"Some peeved DVs?"

"And that." Sherz laughed. "They would pre-jump us, we would pre-jump them, a race to the beginning of the universe. If we have to go there then we have to be much further advanced. Pity Earth is so primitive. Now if there was a civilisation somewhere more advanced than us, to whom we could explain the dilemma, who knows what the potentialities, for us, for Earth, then the future could be opened up." There, she'd woven the suggestion into the conversation. Create the appearance of helplessness against overwhelming odds. Which they appeared to be. Not even needed to take recourse to overly manipulating the truth.

"The aim is to free up Earth."

"Correct. And ourselves as well. Regum I mean."

"In other words, contain Prima."

"If only." Sherz sighed.

"What about going back into Prima's time line?"

"You know your history." After all Nervina was supposed to be from there.

"History? Sherz. No one is told anything. Only the basics. The Rupture, the Calamity, the heresies, the emigration, then the Gathering of Souls and for the last millennium it's been the same. Regum's ways were rejected aeons ago. They tried, they failed. The Primaian Domain Lords would have nothing to do with it. Knowledge was all there for the taking. If anything it would only strengthen their myopia. Might even increase their fundamental fervour."

"I see." Sherz looked into Nervina's grey eyes. "I believe you. Sad really."

"Sad. It's a catastrophe."

"Yes. I didn't want to sound judgemental Nervina."

"I understand. Do you think this is Prima's first attempt?"

"In meddling on Earth?"

Nervina felt like a coffee. She rose and got a pot for herself and Sherz using the same cups. Save resources.

"We think so. Almost certain. Why? You think this has happened before?"

"I don't know. But try just reading the past."

"Well we do know that millions of years ago they got hit by a huge chunk from space which wiped out an earlier civilization. Non technological. They recovered from that of course. It was then that Prima saw their opportunity."

"There's your chance. Pre-calamity. What about deflecting the asteroid? I mean if you can insert with that weaker field on Regum a person and a CI, for I think the DVs were merely guides there, then why not a space ship?"

"Why not! You realize that even though this sounds great it has to get past the Heads?"

"Some things do seem similar."

"What's that?"

"Committees of one sort or another."

Sherz thought that was funny.

Vik came over to Nervina. Tall, brown skin fading, liquid brown eyes, short curly black hair, some character lines around his generous mouth and crow lines around the edge of his eyes, introduced himself. Nervina was rested. Prolonged flights could be a drain and a drag. She had kept her Brain in check, letting the body adjust naturally for a change.

"Nervina." she stood in one of the station's computer laboratories. Each running simulations trying to second guess the future. The soft hum of processors nearly inaudible,

the soft hiss of air, the creaking of the superstructure giving her a sense of being physically present. Not like the visions she had. Silent, potent, charged with cosmic and sentient energy fields.

"Yes. Welcome, again." He smiled disarmingly. Charming in his own way. Near middle age. "Rumour has it you're boosted."

"I suppose."

"Suppose? How humble." A slight knowing grin. They were all configured to some degree, except Jez who was a natural. Nuhan relied on external add-ons as did a few of the earlier volunteers. Some technicians carried their brains in their pockets. A module for this or that Nervina's Brain informed her.

"Well Vik." She was still standing. There were a few seats around in no particular order. "It's like this. I simply don't know. The scan's got the details."

"Ah yes. A bit of a puzzle there. There was less than expected," as his eyes drifted over the monitors. Flickering images of distant planets. Prima, motley brown, its cocooning resonant field, next a cleaned up image of what it really looked like. The desert, dark blue oceans, swirling white clouds, half in night. Novus, pink as always, Regum, rich green forests, her oceans sparkling in the sun, Earth, a blue and white pearl, glimpses of continents, the white cratered moon, a smaller planet, Mars with no clouds, no water, just deep ruts, some linear, channels running away from small white ice caps. Part of its surface fuzzy, a huge dust storm.

Other light screens showed frequencies, EM graphs, spiking wave fronts.

"We want to use you as a base line value neutral observer." Vik pressing a small hand held gadget that rolled out a flexi pad. Geometric patterns in light yellow. White dots. Some section of space. A creamy band of dense stars in the background. Numbers to the left and right.

"But surely your stuff here..."

"Yes. Quite right. But it's missing the sentient touch. Bit like photos. You see a face. It looks different to what one perceives. Psychologists worked that one out years ago. The photo is pure photon based. What's missing is the essence, the energy, the projected aura of the person themselves. Only a sentient mind can pick that up. Both what the person projects naturally, or contrived as the case may be and what the receiver filters, enhances, sorts, adumbrates gives the person's visual impression. Not objective for the receiver distorts the incoming aura according to their resonance. But since AI's, that can be filtered." Vik giving her a smile.

"And my processing capabilities are to be trusted then."

"We think so. Anyway there are shadowing systems that will do their usual perceiving just as yourself. Now Nervina, your suggestion of going back in time pushed the right buttons. And to keep the Primaians confused..."

"Easily done."

"Indeed, we shall use a neighbouring planet instead. As if we missed the target and got side tracked. Luckily it's in Earth's direction. So there won't be a need for recalibration. Do take a seat."

"You're still standing."

Vik looked around as if he was surprised to find himself on his feet. Focused energy oozing out of him. He'd have made a good field investigator. Running around setting up camp, equipment, racing from one scientist to the next. Juggling various tasks.

"The preliminaries have been done. The virtual scenario's uploaded so that the real computers merely follow their data trail. But I want you to pay attention to Earth."

A screen expanded as did the planet. "Patch yourself in."

Nervina sat on the extremely comfortable recliner which wiggled a little as it adjusted to her contour and body weight. She tugged at her left optic fibre, her larger memory processor, for her right embedded computer was linked to her Brain. That was now on standby. Her Brain partially present. Thin fine strands of inserted neural pathways ready to fire.

"I assume I can use my uploads?" attaching the fibre to the armrest.

"But of course. Just don't go in. And keep that monitor external as well. Now we're going to only go back a fraction. See if the background radiation's different. Which it should be. If we're right about our assumptions. Plus extraneous data." Which had to include hers. "That gets saved. We slice our way back."

"You trying to work your way back to see if the CI pops up somewhere?"

"Exactly." Vik moved his recliner closer to the processors and patched the chair in, whilst he, like Nervina was connected one step removed from the data core. "We're observers only. Routine more or less. Done it hundreds, well often enough. Trouble is collapsing equilibrium states come so quickly, the tipping point a mere moment away with no indication of the change that is to occur. Like boiling water really." Amused at the basic analogy. "Simmer for ever and then near the bp it all happens at once."

"So you've searched."

"That's what this lab is about. Now remember this is the reverse to field insertion."

"Extraction. I got it."

"So don't jump in."

"You warned me."

"That was for your AI end. This is for you the you you."

"I'll behave."

"So you do Earth. I concentrate on space whilst pretending to look at the wrong planet. Is the background radiation effective? Or just there. You may want to keep that in mind. But primarily Nervina watch out for any sudden changes on Earth regarding DV activity. There should be an increase as we decrease, refocus."

"Why not Ung?"

"The DVs might recognize her. We need a new persona."

"And I happen to just have come along."

"Your timing is perfect." Vik made some minor adjustments. A screen showed the QCs. Large white square. A dampened series of lit cubes. Thin energy lines flickered between them. Two technicians were on duty making sure their quantum states staid within designated parameters.

"Just one question. What if I'm there?"

"This is virtual. There can be hundreds of you. Real insertion would be something else."

"Kapow."

"Pfft."

They both laughed. "Seriously Vik."

"It could kill you. Two exact collapsing probability waves might either meld into one where the relatively older would, all things being equal subsume the younger wave. However if the latter is boosted, it could absorb or negate the older. On the other hand both might vanish in an almighty bang. Why, you think you were in the past?"

"I don't know Vik. There are blanks."

"Blank is good in what we are doing."

"Yes but it might not be voided, just deleted or inaccessible to me."

"That's another reason we scanned you Nervina. See if your resonance did appear in the quantum as opposed to time-line past. It hasn't."

"What a relief."

"Right then, doing the dramatic countdown, one, zero, engaged."

The image of Mars appeared. Then a distant barely thin white band of that universe's background radiation.

"A few degrees above absolute zero. I've gone back too far. Fast forwarding...and yes. A tiny fluctuating, no, more like an abstract random infusion, laying down or merely a diffusion, leakage. Still, something is there. How's your planet doing?"

"Oh I can feel it. Instant boost. As if they were waiting."

"Any sign of the CI and Merduk?"

"No."

"Bug me silly." Vik showing his displeasure. "Where can they be?"

"Anywhere."

Vik did not answer. Then: "If they are transitional their power, their temporal state ought to have an effect on space. Some sort of quantum field distortion ought to be there, somewhere, anywhere." His voice raised at the screens.

"Maybe they went into the past."

"Yes. Maybe." Vik returning to his more ebullient self. "How far?"

"Let's see." Her Brain made itself available. "There's the asteroid hit. So maybe after that. Earthers pick themselves up from the wreckage. That was around sixty something million years ago. Perfect for realigning."

Vik sighed and entered the coordinates.

"Nothing deep. Some DV activity. Almost laconic." He called up Earth's history. Searching for the changes in their resonance as they gathered knowledge and deeper abilities to reason, to calculate, to act, to advance, to free themselves from their base state, to think ahead.

Nervina had the same idea. A change in resonance, denser patterns as their thinking minds advanced along the endless path of evolution.

"I'm getting a surge." One of the lightscreens showed an overall rise indicating fervent mental activity. DV presence there minimal. The Earthers were getting on top of it, expanding both inwards and outwards.

"Try that manifestation Vik."

"Onto it. Feeding our quantum brain the requisite data. Right. Done. Now let's see where they are, what they are..."

"Look."

Vik saw it too. A space ship over the pink planet.

"That's a H class. Ancient. Well, useful for near space. One of ours or theirs?"

Nervina concentrated on Earth. Then her Brain doing the looking and saw a chemical rocket lift off. Its tiny glowing light of combustible fuel leaving a white thick billowing vapour trail behind it.

"Background radiation's gone back to what it was originally. So no CI...I wonder if the two are related."

"What's that?"

"Whether the CI dispersed itself throughout space. From localized to non localized. No wonder it can't be found. So what's this about a space ship?"

"There."

"So it is. Really does look like one of yours. But something doesn't make sense."

"What?"

"The distance travelled. Unless it had a fuel tank of astronomical proportions it would never make it across the vast distance. Even fusion drive couldn't get that far. And not a g class either. Yet..." Vik feeling excited, quivering with apprehension. On the cusp of discovering something fantastic and scary at the same time.

"Tuvlov, Nuhan. Can you come to lab two please?"

Moments later they both arrived. Looked at the screens.

"We're trying to locate the CI and found this."

Nuhan looked closer. "Now why does it look so familiar?"

"Because it could be one of ours."

"But we never went there. Is this virtual?"

"No, I moved the field. Virtual was getting nowhere. Too many false positives. The CI everywhere and nowhere. Nervina thinks it's spread itself through space." Vik recalled the previous data. Bits of lilac energy embedded in the background radiation. "I'll get to that in a moment. It's the space ship that's the puzzle."

"Telling me." Tuvlov said thoughtfully.

"Patching in?"

"No. I'll stay external. Something's not right. Why would Regum have deleted that mission?"

"You think it is us?"

"The ship is."

"Could it be Earthers?" Nervina suggested.

They looked at Earth's screen. The rocket had just disengaged the first stage. "No. They're using chemical rockets."

"Prototype?"

"Maybe Nervina. Vik. Can we get closer?"

The screen zoomed in on the cruiser. "It's got our shielding."

Tuvlov contacted Jez. When she arrived she gaped at the ship. Nuhan was feeling dislocated.

"Can you get in?"

"If they're not blocking, yes."

"Just use your natural self. We know it's not Primaian." Nuhan advised.

"Can't tell. Might be the same as on the orbital over their planet." Vik said.

"No." Jez answered. "I feel life. Lots. Scan the planet."

Vik changed the settings, zooming past the ship, the ochre ground rushing up. Canals with water, stone temples, a city filled with living beings. They saw it all.

"I'm there!" Jez exclaimed. "Perdus, Los, Mirn and Nuhan."

"So why can't I remember?" Nuhan looking at Tuvlov as if he had the answer.

"I get it. You think the mission was scrubbed. No...Vik, fast forward."

"...and running." As he set the process in motion.

The ship vanished, the city vanished, the lake, the canals remained for a short time span then the planet became a desert. Devoid of life.

"Whoa."

Jez felt as if the ground vanished beneath her. Extreme vertigo, hanging onto a seat. Nuhan slumped into one, holding his head.

"What Vik."

Nervina gaping. For the rocket had vanished as well.

"One mega QFW. Source? Orbital over Prima. DVs." Nervina explained.

"So they wiped out a world, our ship and from what Nervina noticed...let's see Earth." Tuvlov regaining the momentum. Vik was busy downloading the data. When he had finished he concentrated on Earth.

"There are cities. In flames. War." Jez horrified at the scenes of destruction. Planes falling out of the sky, ships out of control, ground vehicles crashed, lights went out, factories ceased. Armies on the march.

"It looks like there are several levels of development. The more primitive are on the move, everywhere. Moving into the blasted, destroyed cities."

They saw the foul smoke, oily black, orange glowing grey smudging itself into the air. Fires, explosions elsewhere, the carnage horrific. Another launched rocket had reached its third stage which failed to fire. They would crash back to Earth.

"The inserted field was centred on Mars." Nervina informed them. "Spillover to Earth."

"The DVs have discovered Earth. They had been centred on Mars all the time! What is going on?" Jez puzzled at the enigma. Earth had always been Prima's target. Or had it? It was now.

The others came to the same conclusion.

"So that's how it all began." Tuvlov stared at the screens.

"Looks like it."

"...and saving. Ultra secure."

"Good Vik. Jez. You alright Nuhan?" Tuvlov asked.

"Yes, fine. Just a little disoriented." He was distraught. For a moment he had been in the ship then wrenched into the reality he knew. Jez felt the same. But she was used to dysfunctional states of mind. Second nature.

"Prima crashed that reality." Tuvlov realized.

"Because we were there. Making contact." It came to Jez in a flash. After all she had been on the ship. As a psychic unaffected by the quantum collapse. The insertion of the next zero phased quantum wave configured by the DVs.

"Earth's not looking good." Nervina dismayed at the destruction below. Machines failing all over the planet. Jez focussed on Earth.

"Their mind's have gone blank. Massive data loss. They've forgotten what they knew. This is fantastic. And insane. The others, those outside the technological circle think the once glittering cities are theirs now. All they'll find are useless buildings. Nothing will work. They'll be conquering scrap yards full of ineffectual junk. I do sense a few minds whose memories are less affected."

"I get that as well." Nervina confirmed Jez's reading of the planet.

"For the moment the DVs are still impressing the Quantum Collapse, making sure their vision is in place. Earth has surprised them. Ah, the shift is occurring. The DVs are reconfiguring themselves, reorienting their target acquisition capabilities. Scouring Earth. Imputing divine wrath the reason for the calamity. Making them feel guilty, trying anyway, by pretending that the technological path is inherently evil."

"Prima is evil." Nervina was disgusted.

Vik sighed. They all took a collective breath.

"You want me to continue searching for the CI?" Vik asked.

"Please. I'll get a team onto this. Watch out for impending PWFs. The moment there's even a hint of one, disengage." Tuvlov ordered. "Shit shit shit. They fucked the future. We can't let this crime go. Once we make sure that their reality has no effect here we'll upload it into the Web. Let everybody know how twisted, bent, corrupted, mentally

sick, warped, homicidal Prima's Domain Lords really are. But Vik not before the Heads have agreed."

"Understood."

"For the moment this stays contained. You too Jez. Keep away. All of you."

"The search for the CI continues?"

"Yes. With ultra caution." Tuvlov focussed. "We'll give this event a code name: highest clearance only. Cosmic Ultra Black. CUB for short. Nuhan, Jez come with me. Vik, Nervina, whatever you find stays secure. Prima cannot be allowed to even get a hint of this. That means no one leaves the station. All data to be embedded in a micro-quantum-state. The DVs can't get into that. The information will be encoded, encrypted, randomly dispersed, a moment away from entropy deleting its cohesion if breached. I'll get the tech division onto it. I can understand if you want to take a break."

"I would rather concentrate on something." Vik answered.

"Me too." Nervina concurred. Dwelling on it would only be a distraction. She was more determined to find the CI. "Because Tuvlov, they might be tempted to do it again."

"I got some good news." Vik looked up. The screens showed various flat lining read outs. "When the Primaian's wiped out that world and our ship they wiped their own reality as well. They never knew they did it."

"Really." Tuvlov perked up.

"It's there. Or rather, it's not there. Only a quantum field wave state can access it. And we got the coordinates and requisite field equations to home in on it." Vik beamed triumphantly. "And we weren't even looking for it. Oh yes, before I forget, I think the CI may have spread itself across space."

"You said." Tuvlov answered getting ready to leave the lab.

"There are scraps of eccentric data in that universe's background radiation. That could be the reason it cannot be found. It might have gotten blown across space when the calamity struck Earth."

"They're really not getting any breaks." Jez feeling sorry for Earth.

"Yes. We're going to have to come to a decision regarding their future. Right. We're off. Remember. CUB. Until further notice."

"A lost world." Nervina sighed.

"Maybe one day, time permitting we re-enact that reality." Vik's mind meandering.

"It could change us, this." Nervina gesturing to indicate she meant the station.

"Yes, but we would then be riding that reality's quantum wave. This would be different. Maybe even earlier. Be interesting though. Earth makes contact with Mars. They fast forward into the future. Contact is made. Prima isolated. We win. Game over." Jez surmised. "Do you mind if I stay?" she asked Vik.

"Not at all. You can be the broad spectrum regarding its insertion and its presence. Jez the mind reader and I look for the source."

"And the DVs?" Jez asked.

"Everybody's onto that. As long as the PFWs are there, they won't find us. You should know that." Vik said patiently.

"What about the Immortals?" Nervina suggested.

"Yes?" Vik recalibrating the field-states to keep the inserted micro additions to the background radiation outside the station's memory banks. The last thing anyone wanted was for the CI to reassemble within their domain.

"They might be contaminated."

"Go on." Graphs flattened, spikes fell, resonant states stabilised.

"It could take over. We know eventually the pontiff will have to Ascend. Download his persona into their realm. If the CI is in there as well..."

"You mean it could rule Prima? Now there's an interesting thought."

"The Immortals," Nervina's Brain told her, "are really ancient singularities, held there by the Trine, some sort of super programme, a sort of infinity chip, precursor to quantum computing. All held in place by the System Surveyors. See? I know something about Prima after all."

"We keep an eye on that planet's RS. If these singularities go over, change their status it would irradiate their RS. We'd know. In a way they are the RS. Of course during Ascension the CI might take its chance and enphase itself then and there."

"You mean empower Vik." Jez said.

"I wonder if they even know."

"Good point Vik." Nervina smiled. "Anyway, the moment it ever does reveal itself will give us the means to study it. Every effect is a cause. Then it will be ours." Nervina's eyes shone.

"You think so?" Jez thinking this is too easy.

"I know so. Consider. It's a construct that contains concentrated DV minds. It's a blend. That means non-unitary. Hopefully in conflict with itself."

"I see." Jez getting excited. She hoped Nervina was right.

"We take it apart." Vik added busy watching the screens externally.

"It takes itself apart." Nervina smiled.

"You know though that if the CI is embedded in the other universe's background radiation then it has quantum tunnelled through."

"Oh Vik, now you're spoiling our moment." Jez pouted.

"I'm still puzzled how I could be in that ship and have no memory. Not even a dream, a flash, foggy intuition." Jez wondered. "Or in two places at once."

"Well one thing is certain Jez," Vik studying the read outs, "you can never insert yourself to find out. Luckily it's in the past. The insertion is a QF which isolates it from real space. It's a probability, like all the other probabilities. No different really." He seemed easy with that.

"So was I destroyed, deleted or side-lined Vik?"

"The Primaians think they deleted us. But quantum states are never what they seem." Vik content. "There and not there. To them the ship's gone. To us it's there. Not a problem. However sending you in, or any of the other crew would be too dangerous to even contemplate. Simulations indicate a collapsing energy screw up." He focussed. "But I got something better. Ran a quick 'what if' and you won't believe it. It appears the local population was heavily targeted by the DVs. Aligning them to their way of thinking."

"Typical." Jez assuming a rare cynical pose.

"Get this though. By deleting everything, they lost a potential race."

"Only 'cause we were there. Rather drastic." Not changing her mien.

"Yes. It's a puzzle. Could we have? We'll never know."

"You mean unless you go back in and make it happen. Of course there is the temptation to do it all again even further back."

"We'd be back at the classic conundrum. Us, them, us, them." Vik reminded Nervina. "So using our PWFs..."

"...is much smarter." Jez finished off.

"Correct. DV proof."

"So Earth is your interest?"

"Your? Ours Nervina."

"I don't want to assume anything on my behalf. I'm barely a visitor."

"No Nervina, you are one of us."

"Are you saying, ahm, our PWFs are negating DV activity?"

"No not quite. Neutralizing them, making them less effective."

"Then it's not over."

"Not as long as Prima does what it does."

CI

Merduk receded through the transition point at Tellurium. Remnant fragmentary data streams clung to the informational domain leaving a trail across space. Zohex as a persona pushed into the background. The very presence of a form of 'self' diminishing the overall content of its vast expansive province, into the elongated moment. Stretching along the continuing time sequence.

Merduk aware of the potentialities of various extraneous manifesting realms. Just like that.

The CI's bifurcating brain took over. Morfur taken care of. Luferious, Khratham in position. A multitude of possible realities expanded exponentially into relative time resonant sequenced presences. All within Its mental grasp. It was all mind. Zohex merely a personification of Itself. The DVs had done a good job in not instilling their personalities into its projected emplacement on Earth. That would have disintegrated Its focus. Making it possible for the shield persona of Zohex to spread into six solid states. Spread out over time and space.

Merduk held back.

The fields of energy coherent stabilities. Matter, form, substantially real. The CI's mind, mimicking the bio processing capabilities of the Primaian's who had given birth to Zohex was now shaping the environmental conditions of its inserted self into the different realities suitable for Zohex's resonant state. Mastering its fields as a prolongation of its dominance, forming an expanding matrix. Gathering information which moulded quantum energy into positioned real space, strengthened according to the future potential programme the CI had crafted itself, from itself, into its selves.

Merduk far from idle when he had quested ancient knowledge from Tellurium's hoary priests. Accumulating information, sequestering data domains, crafting with the help of Prima's RF his future domains. Shadowing Zohex.

Then waited. No way could Merduk do anything. He didn't have to.

Being there was one thing. Moulding reality to Its will something else. There, dormant, hidden as potential energy, one step from collapsing itself into its persona the CI, using Zohex as a cover fused the multiple dimensional real coherencies into possible projected states of its willed reality. Taking possession.

Domination. Merduk watched as the excess redundant energies crackling around fell back into its own created domains, reabsorbed into the quantum foam of

space, laying down blueprints of back up field-waves continually reinforcing the desired almost naturally occurring entropy loosing conflicting information to dissipate into space. Or so Merduk thought. Instead dystrophy was crafted and absorbed by a back-up domain. Draining the realities of threatening, challenging embedded real time sequenced data as it would have been instead of what it would be.

This entity was reconfiguring reality. Realities.

The CI used lesser processors, sprouting along fractal openings, its data rich tendrils probing the universe's infinite possibilities. Now all that was required was to mimic the reverberating resonant states of the sentients in the field in which Zohex was positioned microseconds before becoming actual. A potentiality discarding waves of entropic decay which made up almost a third of the energy quotient of real space. Merduk witnessed the CI collect into a pool, a potent CF of dissonant energy to be unleashed against any future threat thereby dissipating the danger into discordant self defeating energy states. Secure from threats and decay. Merduk in thrall.

So far so good.

Not good Merduk surmised.

Strengthening its multiple presences. As there were infinite numbers, as there was infinity, so there were an equally set of possibilities. All in its control. It sorted through the possibilities, of not just being, but acting whereby the minimum amount of energy netted maximum effect. The various data orbs floating within its data realm showed the lowest, deep purple energy states relative to the necessary informational exchange to create at first the mere continuation of Zohex as an energy field right into its own relative futures.

Possibilities became actualities. Three time lines on Earth, plus Prima, Regum and Novus, all hidden, all potential. Concomitant energy fluxes created by the combined resonance of the sentients using the equivalence of continuous energy to create the desired effect of total control. The CI narrowed the field of Zohex to its minimum, the natural fluctuations. Their uncontrolled reality allowing the sentients the illusion that all was as it should be. At the moment Zohex was merely virtual, an energy shell drawing on its cosmic coherency, impregnating itself with its design.

So far data was still limited to what the CI was extracting. The internal logic of Zohex as an entity still affected by the randomness of probability states. A-logical abstractions having little semblance to its design, except one. Itself.

Time to strengthen itself in its six external fields entangled as the base state which was its own foundation. At a glance vague fuzzy indeterminate nonlogical vortices of energy, a-logical discrepancies coagulating around illogical parameters which its

processing capabilities deconstructed. Creating a semblance of order, a continuous information system. Secreting its field equations to collapse its designed probability fields into different stable equilibriums. Zohex's quantum ground state, slowly forming itself into a near physical presence, changing potential into kinetic energy whilst in accord with its relative positions to become a near manifesting reality.

Perhaps. No. This was virtual real Merduk guessed. Zohex creating an energy driven, quantum secure artifice. The ultimate domain.

The resonant fields on Earth were so entangled that that species had several realities, self created, to choose from. For the moment Zohex was a topographic illusion. No real substance, just a potential field. Slowly coming into being.

The looped logic sequences switched off having created by shutting down logic gates to open for Zohex its potential possibilities. The circuitous non resolving data flow, due to Earth's multiple realities the CI kept as a low energy sequence buried deep within other non relevant data spheres. No trace back. If left to itself, Zohex would dissipate into a null resonance, pure entropy. With total loss of information to the outside. Thus conserving the data within, shielded by non sequential non symmetrical equational random phased fields. Earth's resonance computed into spiralling entropic pathways that could isolate any external threat scenario into its own infinite energy field which the Earther's absorbed directly from space itself.

. Merduk understood. Zohex a self isolate. Behind him Regum's construct.

The CI had now come to its logical end as a data field insertion wave front. Earth's resonant field increased its naturally reacting entropic fields to hold back Zohex, keeping him out of phase. That their source was space should not have come as a surprise, but it did. On Regum it was different. There it was already a potentiality, a subtle influence, almost actual. Free to insert its potent information as a coherent logical structure.

Regum the test case. Focussed on its own singular reality. Continuous, its flux minor. Subtle yet concrete. Immense. Virtually using space's energies to expand as an image, solid light to fashion the cosmos into its Web designed phantasmagorical reality.

Merduk surmised the CI-Zohex entity was more than just refashioning itself, creating realities according to some unspecified design.

The CI was accumulating more data from dark matter infusing space. Earth could wait. As could Novus and especially Prima. Give the illusion that they were prevailing into the future. Assimilate information fields regarding the precarious equilibrium of Regum's false realities. Calculate energy potentials, entropic diffusion, quantum fluctuations,

potential energy reserves, actual kinetic energy being used by WebSpace diversifying their world into something other. Reconstituting itself into a fantasy of their sense of cosmic order.

Feeding on WebSpace's data. The CI's data spheres soaking it all up. Recreating, duplicating WebSpace. With one or two minor variants.

Merduk understood. Zohex the surface entity. Really a cyber construct. One with volition and intent.

Then the CI added the extruded entropy of Regum's systems into simulated multiple bio mirrored carbon structured processors which became a tertiary backup to its own vast base state. Duplicating Regum's method of virtual creating procedural methodologies. Spinning off parallel realms which to the outside looking like wasted radiation of irrelevant information cloaking the false original. Fall into that and the inhabitant would never know the difference.

Merduk did. Now in a hyper non localised field. Impotent to act. A mere appendage. An irrelevancy. One the CI ignored thus guaranteeing, for now his continuation. Merduk aware unless a mind with the same capabilities of the CI, which he knew he was to override the energy source Zohex was using. The central black hole and the galaxy itself. More than enough energy for Merduk to remain in phased realities.

Merduk allowing himself to be embraced by the CI's domain. It was that or repulsion. Disgorged back to Earth, Regum or Prima. This was too amazing to be ignored. He would remain in place.

Then came the limit of its own exponentially. The system had reached a strange fluctuating equilibrium. Information rich but somewhat content poor.

Merduk realised that within this limited expansion, encompassing shadow constructs of the CI's memory of Earth, Prima and Regum thanks to their cooperation in inserting the reconstituted, recreated simulacrum it could within its domain create any transmutation it desired.

Of which Zohex was but one. Merduk the other. The test run with Morfur had proven itself of its capabilities. From that perspective it convinced its occupants that the CI was the universe. All that was needed it had. Sub quantum data, stable discordant entropic fields with which to manipulate the subdomains, riding the potential threatening probability waves within its data domains, thereby creating the illusion of standing energy fields. Reality assumed a new perspective, a new configuration.

Though unable to act for now Merduk saw the CI's complete coherencies falling into place. Even if only as self limiting perfection. Appearing perfect. Assembling alternative futures.

Through virtual quantum collapsing PWs.

The CI-Zohex nexus a construct held in quantum potential.

Concentrated in six spatial time locations.

Merduk felt his brain, his perception dis-relocated into six sub domains. Three on Earth. Including his presence. At the doomed city, the recent past, a dark oppressive future and further afield in one where the Earther's had at least partially broken the hold the CI envisaged. Merduk kept this knowledge to a minimum. Make himself appear as a minor variable. One he would use to challenge this artifice with his innate mind. Its presence on Nova puzzling. Ah the Vs. A dummy run. The CIs sight on Prima. Merduk of two minds. It was his home world. However, considering Regum's open mindedness Merduk had no wish to return to the cloistered claustrophobia of Prima. Earth a curio. So why was the CI focussed on Regum?

Of course!

They had the power to recall it, collapse it, void it even.

Merduk's apprehension barely held in check. The construct was going to assert its independence. That meant severing the final link. And to do that Regum's power source, now that the CI had lodged itself near the centre of the galaxy would allow it to break free. To remain free Regum's knowledge of their achievement would have to be deleted. Regum deleted.

Merduk realized, whilst in awe of Zohex's transmutation he was within its potent circumference. He could warn the Reganians. But as he discovered only in one of many future probabilities. Somehow the entity would not let Merduk access the real reality to warn the Reganians that the CI would obliterate everything pertaining to creation.

The Crash: Regum

Varit studied the express envelope. Renasa sporting spiky lime green hair today, a nose stud twinkling, her lips dark purple, her face luminescent due to her pale complexion as the screens' light reflected off her face.

"Courier. Different contractor as per usual." having handed him the slender package. "Signed for it using your signature."

Varit nodded, smiled at Renasa and returned to his office. The return address a front. The sender came from an obscure post office box. Even with their secure electronics some information was safer being routed physically, on paper. Smart paper. One time usage which then self scrubbed its contents then dissolved. Turning to dust.

Varit pulled out from his desk drawer a scanner and was relieved to find the envelope was clean. Not even a source code revealing its origin. Anyway, he was merely seconded helping the official ministry of information with some of their more obscure interests.

He unsealed the outer covering envelope then shredded it to be completely pulped later. The smart page and its contents would now only last as long as he actually held it. The DNA from his fingers verifying the right end user. It was a simple enough request: find the root causes of the New Milleniaists.

'Not that new.' Varit thought. Some of the students at CU were captive to their strange view that some vague new age was about to blossom, replace their false materialism which suffocated the soul. To the Milleniaists this new age involved an inner cleansing, whatever that was supposed to mean. With apocalyptic fervour. A sure sign their mental disturbance was firmly embedded in their twisted thinking.

The request: find out if, including who or what, could artificially generate this phenomenon or whether it is boosted through DV activity. Any evidence regarding Prima's involvement. But what if it were home grown? Its followers subtly manipulated through third parties, via agents of influence, activated sleepers to cause maximum distress, to ram a superstitious wedge into their consciousness. Influencing the vulnerable, the young, the bored, the desperate or those who insisted that there had to be more to life than life itself.

Varit looked out to the immaculate manicured lawns, the majestic trees from his office's windows at Central University. Behind the gardens, the various campuses and towering behind them the skyscrapers of Regum City. As there were no leads, no

instructions, keeping the message to a minimum for security purposes it sounded like a request to merely study this a-social phenomena encapsulated by that cult. He took his fingers off the smart page. Moments later the message self deleted. The soft plastic page went brittle then became white dust leaving a whiff of carbonization behind. He brushed the remains into the waste paper container.

Through the open door to his secretary Varit asked: "Know any religious types?"

"Know of them." Came the reply. "But don't know any myself. Friends included professor."

"Hm." A little disappointed. No easy way in then. He took out a sheet of paper and started to make some notes. Tainted psychological mind set. Archaic? Ancient beliefs? Not that he knew of. Mental desperados? Trying to get a grip on who would even consider replacing everything with some vague future state which as far as he knew not even pursued on Prima. If there was a spiritual streak amongst Reganians they kept that private. Partly from any cynical reaction of their friends and partly because it was an individualistic philosophy which had little social value. Never-the-less this millennialism could create social repercussions.

"I forgot." Renasa said from her desk. "My boyfriend's cousin. Belongs to some weird sect called the Resurrectionists. That any good?"

"I've got an assignment you see to look into these Milleniaists. My eyes only Renasa. Understood? I have to make that point as always." Knowing that Renasa had herself been vetted. She was solid.

"Gotcha professor."

"Run a check on this cousin will you? See what that brings up." He called from his desk. They often conversed without bothering to leave their seats. "See if he's clean or tainted." Inferring being under undue influence by foreign agents.

"Believe me, they are. It's an obsession with them."

"Obsession?"

Renasa appeared in the adjoining door to Varit's office come study. "Spiritual purity. Otherwise the coming kingdom is out of reach up there." Pointing her little finger upwards. "Their lives are so bland they become the perfect image of a model citizen. No intoxicants of any type, no sex to corrupt their mental state which to them translates into some sort of divine state. Being cleansed they call it. They have team leaders who are like those priests we gotta put up with. They usually meet in each others homes. Oh and they want to save everybody on this planet. Save our souls from material perdition. Only

by accepting this new age, aligning with it do they believe they can outlive death. And live happily ever after in this spiritual kingdom of theirs."

"My you are well informed."

"Oh my boyfriend thinks they're weird. So when the family gather once in a while and the said cousin is there the rest of them get his propaganda. Every time. Never lets up."

"How noble to want to save everyone." Varit activating his light screen to see what was on file. "They political?"

"Ah." Renasa gave a crooked smile. "Not officially. Though they do hint, well the cousin does that they have some highly placed sympathisers in place. Either he's bragging or it's real. Even so I think they are deluding themselves."

"Hm. As long as they don't delude others."

"Trouble is there's no law against it."

"No there isn't. Not as easy as I estimated. Didn't really know what to expect. But as usual, " Varit brightened, "you've been of tremendous help. And talking help could you please get a list of all religious groups?" Renasa nodded her spiky hair sparking under the overhead lights.

"How deep? How far?"

"To the ends of the data realms." And Varit extracted a tiny disk from his miniature safe built into his desk. "Use this, insert, wait, then return it to me. There will be no message displayed. Wait five seconds. Then return."

"Ah, access with no trace left behind. Destroying the search pattern, correct?" she smiled at him.

"Correct."

"It might take some time. A lot of these religious groups might not even be on record. Now I get it. Total surveillance systems. Look for specific behavioural patterns, built up outside. Very clever professor."

"I prefer thorough Renasa. Luckily from what I have studied myself regarding this strange blossoming many actually crave attention, how else to spread their outlandish ideas."

"Except in the Web."

"Yes, that is a puzzle."

"Snubbing."

"Perhaps. Rather an interesting task."

"Sure is."

"Not a word to your cousin."

"Off course not. Say, should I show an interest?"

"No. If my superior's needed a plant they would have said something. I'm sure they got their own experts working on them in a more prosaic fashion."

"On the ground."

"Indeed."

"And with you working from CU covers them as well."

"Your awareness as always is focussed to where it should be."

"We are on the same team."

"That we are. Now the search I'm instigating is from the outside in. Primary attention is to find the natural connections between politico's, economists, strategic planners, industrial conglomerates. The idea being if any of them are being influenced. That way if there is a connection it won't be so obvious as to who or what we are targeting."

"What is the what you're referring to professor?"

"Systems. The Web is more than just a place Renasa. It can also be a state of mind."

"Really? How?"

"There are some who carry it in their heads." Varit hinted.

"Now that is enhanced. Don't know if I would want it that close though." She said dubiously.

"Rare select few Renasa. Now I would suggest you incorporate Novus and the orbitals as well. Not at the same time. Even this disk can only camouflage so much. And a wide dispersal regarding search parameters might not attract attention. Include WebSpace locations as well. We need a few blinds to cover ourselves."

"What if we alert SpaceKorps?"

"The disk."

"Filtered?"

"Only reverse incoming. Let your search be random, let the search engine scour the data nets at its leisure."

"Any particular place to start?"

"Public data banks, here. The search is remote anyway. It will begin from the public library at Regum City, then the provincial ones, make it appear that this is surface generated. Itinerant browsing to any curious enough to pay attention. It will look like a social study by students. From the disk curious sociology students."

"That will make the spurious connections look innocent enough."

"In theory. Still we will be several levels removed from the actual search nodes. Also, any extraneous news to be collated. Build a secondary cover, someone searching for juicy gossip. Like doing a story. Just digging away at the background."

"Well organized as always professor." Renasa enjoying this new brief. "Right I'll get started." And she returned to her desk.

Varit sent a coded message to his superiors. 'Flowers blooming'. The search had begun.

Half an hour later, as Varit busied himself with a superficial search from his office, Renassa called: "Got something. Pretty basic." He rose, entered the outer office and pulled up a chair next to her light screen. "Oh here's the disk."

Turning her attention to the screen showed the preliminary results. "Look there's more than just the Milleniaists."

"Unless these are coordinating groups. Resurrectionists I've heard of, Milleniaists, Entropists, wonder if that's got to do with entropy..."

"Scientific cover?"

"Maybe, Eternal Monists and a really strange one, the Pentacular Void."

"Another one popped up. The Gods of Oblivion."

"Rather sensational. Nice perfume."

"Thank you. The first search netted some odd balls. Transformer, Crysalis, Teleologue, Monad. You think they're related?"

"The system thinks so. I had no idea we had so many bent groups on this planet."

"You haven't been in the Web I take it?"

"No time Renasa. You?"

"Just to keep in touch. The names could be cyber users."

"Except the search parameters are linking them into a net of sorts. With one overriding definition," Varit becoming interested, "a change, an inner transformation accepting those who are aligned and discarding those who do not believe in the new age. New age." Varit scoffed. "What's that supposed to mean."

"I can guess." Renasa answered as she surveyed the results

"It was rhetorical."

"Why hadn't any of the executive made the connections?"

"Maybe they have and need confirmation. Some of the revealed data makes them look superficially rational, almost scientific. Even though..."

"...the old myths professor."

"Prima's, not ours Renasa." As they studied the Transformer's file.

"Not real. Just a pseudo if that. Could be an 'it'."

"Cyber persona."

"Or a multiple construct creating a web delusion."

"A what?" Varit genuinely surprised.

"Web delusion. Areas that have truly gone, atrophied, others bezerk loops caught in a fractal environment, some expanding infinitely within finite space self defining geometric prisons and not forgetting what attracts some gamers most of all, the underlying insanity lurking within Prima's ancient mythology."

"Strange attractors."

"One way of putting it." Renasa smirked.

"Mathematical concept. Think vortex. Excuse me." Varit reaching over to her light console retrieving Prima's mythological past.

"You can use your own you know."

"Less is safer."

"Sorry."

"Am I cramping you?"

"A little."

"You know this could all be a ruse. None of these personas could be real even in a cyber sense. Just shells."

"See who is susceptible? Good point." Not that he had not considered that as well. "Attract certain psychological types, a bit soft between the ears..."

"Evolutionary challenged."

"Yes, then work on them. Hm, Prima's history just says shamanistic creeds, individualistic, no real unity. So all this has to be recent. Fishing expedition. Broad sweep."

"Let's hope the loons leave for Prima. They can have them. Ah look. A lead. Pentacular Void and the Gods of Oblivion are from Novus."

"Frontier planet. I was under the impression that religion was not their forte."

"So was I. Portal's closed though, off line. Getting a few hits. Attracting all sorts trying to get in without much success. Odd really. They want to be seen but that's about it." Renasa frowned.

"Create an interest. Make something secret, add a pompous name, allow minute bits of information out..."

"Such as the end of the world as we know it..." Renassa studying some of the data that was available.

"The end of the world? But that's just plain nonsense."

"I think they mean that figuratively professor."

"Or they intend to crash Regum in the Web and replace it with their so-called kingdom at hand." Varit looked puzzled. "Or worse. Get into heads and give the impression all is lost, will be lost I should say. Then enter these sects to save their distraught minds. Psychological warfare is what I think is happening."

"Then I'd better be prepared for some doomsday scenarios when I go in."

"Boosting their self importance. The aura of secrecy attractive, bombastic, thereby imbuing their sect with a sense of something awesome. Draw in the bored, the brainless..."

"The curious."

"Yes. Now to uncover the time lines. You can do that Renasa. I am, believe it or not going to go in."

"The Web?" incredulous. It was not unknown for the middle aged to indulge but mainly it was populated by the young. Their readily adaptive minds much more attuned to the often rapid changing scenarios which they could easily navigate. Unless boosted, the older generation found the whole web scenario, except for data searches, too confusing, too fractured, too displaced, too incoherent, too bizarre. But then Varit was not your average middle aged person.

Varit put on the ubiquitous head band. To strengthen the link it was optically fibred into his pc and to the back of his neck where a tiny receptive pad connected as a secondary measure his brain to WebWorld. Varit was not there for the visceral pleasure. He used a programme that merely duplicated the real world in cyberspace. The imagery glowed slightly more intense and now displayed the abstract linear links of the search engines going after the cults and their possible cyber personas. Apart from that, everything else, the sky, now overcast, one of the few concessions to change appearances cast a gloomy pall over the city he was visiting.

He called up Dr Zyra, head of Behavioural Studies at the prestigious institute at Anoth, half a continent away. He sent her some of the details of his brief though not its objectives merely informing her that he was looking into this new social development so unlike anything that most Reganians would even contemplate as an alternative. When you could be anything you wanted in the Web what attraction was there for anyone promising a strange new era devoid of just about everything Regum stood for. Maybe Dr Zyra could clue him in.

She responded to his request to see her inside the Web. Dressed in a dark charcoal grey business suit she too did not change her appearance when going in. She had no need of an alter ego, some superlative avatar masquerading repressed urges to be more than she was. Her pale face, for she was not the outdoor type, pursed thin bloodless lips, deep brown eyes studied him with comfortable expectation. Varit found himself in her office. Outside low rise buildings of the institute set in wonderful natural surroundings, the dark blue wooded mountains a majestic backdrop.

Zyra was one of the few on the planet who concerned herself, as a subset of her academic interests, with religious behavioural patterns. Why such a bizarre mind set had evolved way back in their distant past when they had been one race on Prima, prior the schism still stumped them both.

Varit was cautious before making contact. Everybody knew Prima had their persona's travelling both WebWorld and WebSpace. So he did a passive scan to see if anyone was unduly interested in his presence as himself. In a way he hoped so for then they would reveal themselves to him and with Regums super computers analyse and dissect their MO along with their mindset.

Nothing.

Even if they were passive they wouldn't get much from him. His dual realities as a counter intelligence operative his information was never sent in any digital or photonic generated quantum processing applications with those who were his go between. And he knew Prima used surrogates, both in here and the real world outside to insert false knowledge, attempting to rewrite their history which was futile for Regum still used books which could not be manipulated. What was in there staid there. Prima's doctored sources might fool one initially but a bit of cross referencing soon bore out their fake realities, the different dark spin they placed on actual events both imagined and real.

`The Milleniaists Professor Varit. Yes?'

`Hello Dr Zyra. Good of you to make your precious time available.'

`Got your little package of data.' Sitting comfortably on an upright recliner in her office. The only thing missing here were her books. `You want some answers no doubt.'

`Your input would be both welcome and appreciated.' Walking into her office and pulled up a chair, sitting across from her.

`Well, you're in luck. I've been studying religious behaviour and its absence in the Web as you know. The Primaians seem to use more than just a dual approach to try and convince us of the righteousness of their thinking. Smart enough not to duplicate their behaviour on our planet or in the Web. More like sniffing out the demented, the

delusional, the more psychotically inclined. But then again,' she smiled disarmingly, 'that too can be just illusion. Acting out fantasies. Certainly reduced crime to almost zero. When one can go ballistic in the Web what need to act out those urges in the real world?'

'Indeed.'

'Well the term is apt.'

'Milleniaists?'

'Yes. When we started numbering years way back then, the first millennium created near total psychosis in Prima. The end coming. The end as in a transformation of reality. Spiritual revival, inner changes, subjugating one's intelligence for religious catharsis. Now of course it's the reverse in a way. To them we are screwing up the so-called eternal cosmic consciousness by our material prowess. So these Milleniaists come back with the preposterous idea that our end is approaching, that they will self resurrect leaving the blind of spirit, the apostates, but mainly the unbelievers behind. Excluded from this delusional kingdom at hand. In a way they want to superimpose their reality onto our reality. Now whether they are acting on orders to focus on real people seems most likely. In its most simplistic sense they are after converts professor Varit.'

'That benign?'

'It's all pure emotions.'

'That will need a lot of reinforcement to keep in place.'

'Oh Prima has plenty of that. The DV's for starters...'

'Are they?'

'Not to my knowledge. But then I'm more focused on us than on them.'

'Just seeing if there was anything you stumbled across Dr Zyra.'

'One thing appears certain. At the moment it's on the up and upper. Whether that continues remains to be seen. Statistically it will level out and even drop off when the so-called kingdom fails to materialize. Even if say Prima were to take over the Web, which I cannot see, it would mean nothing. It's only the Web, it's not reality. And reality is, well, reality. A passing phase.'

'I'm glad you think so.'

'I know so.'

'Know?'

'Historically.'

'Ah.'

'Why the interest?'

`Oh, my secretary's boyfriend's cousin is one of them. I got curious. Who knows there might be a paper in this, a monologue of sorts.'

`Surely you don't expect me to believe that Varit.'

He laughed. `No I don't. The executive is interested.'

`Now that's better. Let me guess. They're worried they will loose too many to this religious fever. A longing for a lost past that never was. I can see the insidiousness in that. Turning their back on reality. After all there are many who literally live in the Web. That can create a certain amount of ennui maybe even enervation making them prime targets. So they reject everything we stand for. How am I doing?'

`Extremely well, as usual.'

`So you want access to my data then?'

`No not yet. This is more general.' Partly for security reasons, he considered. See if anything would be leaked at a later stage. `Regum as a society has been on a plateau of sorts for centuries now. Advances are still being made scientifically but by less and less individuals. Maybe we are reaching the point where there is not much more to find out.'

`A levelling out. No tipping point.'

`Yes, something like that.'

`From total immersion to reconnecting with the real world. And along come these sects.'

`Inserted no doubt. Prima's presence is both disturbing and exquisitely timed.'

`That much is certain. After all, even how Novus assembled itself socially was a sign. Families as operating units, conglomerates, mutual trusts all indicate a return towards group phenomena.'

`Now duplicated with Prima's influence on Regum.'

`Or conversely our return to rejoining groups has attracted them. Either way the result's the same.'

`It sure is. I still go for the theory that Prima is using us. The singular is on the vane. Diversity subsumed to, again, a singular overriding, overarching, individually negating premise that draws the individual out of themselves into the group, the hive mind.'

`Very good Varit. I see you are still there.'

`I never was not there Zyra.'

`There was a time...'

`All in the past.'

`Of course. So you're saying that the group mind subsumes their individuality yet from the individual's perspective it appears they expand their consciousness...'

`Yes. Into Prima's resonant field. Tailored to our psychology. Whoever is doing this know what they are on about.'

`Something I'd rather not have heard.'

`Forewarned...'

`I know Zyra. It's just that you are confirming my worst fears.'

`Glad I am of some use.' A mocking smile on her radiant face.

`So we have the religiously indoctrinated seekers of the divine kingdom sucking up the lost, the weak, the dispirited, invigorate their flaky individuality with some amazing cosmic revelation. Channel their very being into the religious element thereby, not so subtly, aligning them into something that is to us anyway, as scientists alien in concept.'

`Alien? Varit. Yet millennia ago...'

`Resurrecting the past. You know Zyra all these words we use, there are groups that have adopted them for their mission.'

`Either it is spontaneous which I doubt Varit, yet it cannot be discounted, or one of the Domain Lords is behind it all. Quite a challenge.'

`Telling me. A poisoned chalice.'

`That extreme. Let's see. Your superiors are concerned, interested regarding these religious...'

`Pseudo.' Varit interrupted. A cloud obscured the sun throwing her room into shadow. The detailed realism never ceased to surprise him. For a moment he shuddered. A ghost walking over his grave. Goosebumps along his arms and down his back. A temporary disturbance in his mind, his real mind not that of his inserted persona.

`Pseudo. What's the difference Varit?' she countered. `Main thing is they believe. That makes it religious.'

`I see what you mean. Splitting unnecessary hairs. I was merely differentiating between organized religion and those who find their spirituality elsewhere.'

`Maybe it's all starting to fracture on their planet.' Zyra suggested. `Can't keep any closed system in stasis unless some outside source pumps in energy to keep it stable Varit.'

`I know. Their people are that energy, maintaining the resonance.'

`At all costs. Maybe we should exploit this opportunity. Have you run some scenarios?'

`No, not yet. I just started.'

`And so the first thing you did was come to me. How sweet of you Varit.'

`Well, you are an endearing person Zyra.'

`Are you saying what I think you're saying?' becoming coy as their eyes met. Her mind though stayed cool.

The time when he might have considered Zyra as a desirable partner had long since passed. Years in fact when they were students. He too wrapped up in his studies, nervous, a little immature and shy. She on the other hand was even back then self assured, determined to reach her intellectual goals and getting there. Now like him Varit knew she too was approached now and again for certain specific requests. The Primaians kept them busy, often guessing. They never hid their primary objective: convert the Reganians back into their fold. The Domain Lords if not the pontiff just didn't get it. The majority were not interested. However the appearance of these cults hinted at something else. What little information Varit did have, was told, never amounted to much. More a collation of data than an analysis. That would have to wait until he handed in his initial findings.

She was silently looking at him. Her slender figure still trim in middle age. Her mind, what she allowed anyway, focussed, not easily distracted. Her mental configuration mimicking her real mind. Zyra was not one of boosting herself to such a degree that she positively oozed enhancement, letting all know the charged status of a meta-mind. Zyra was too smart for that, a natural sentient. That was what attracted him to her. They were, in their own way alike. Whilst he laboured over details she instinctively grasped the bigger picture and worked back to the details. He was the opposite. Orientated not to the larger encompassing data as a whole, but diversified into so many external influences that Zyra's big picture was more of a mosaic of its constituents parts. In which he sometimes got lost. Something he wanted to avoid this time. For then it could take weeks until it all fell into place.

`No, yes, maybe.' He answered flustered by her sweet direct gaze. The old confusion from his youth resurfaced. He never knew if she were playing with him or being sincere. A mixture of both he decided.

`Ah.'

`So, have you thought about these groups?'

`Not really.' She answered breezily. `Could be our doing. Have you considered that?'

`Some sort of kabal?'

`Prima's bogey. Be nice if that were so. Create a stalking horse, blame them for political purposes. Gain some sort of leverage. Show by leaving tailored evidence behind that they are meddling directly with our society. Maybe they want to get rid of

the Primaians from our orbitals. You,' she decidedly looked at him, 'supplying the ammunition.'

'To that I would be amendable. Whatever it takes Zyra.'

'I didn't know you were such a realist Varit. What if it us? Would you blow the whistle?' Even now she looked demure in pushing the envelope. Zyra was at her most dangerous when she was on control. No wonder she was held in such high esteem in the murky world of counter intelligence. Not one to be easily deflected, or fooled. Using the antithesis to further whatever needed to be done.

'I would suggest that that would be an extremely dangerous thing to do.'

'Dangerous? A bit extreme.'

'Even if it were us, it might create it's own momentum to Prima's advantage.'

'You mean draw them in?'

'And reinforce their presence here.'

'Maybe it is a trap.'

'We shall see.'

'Talking traps, tell me do you think our perceptions, our qualitative minds are starting to atrophy? Those that are Web addicted?'

He had not expected that question. Outside the campus grounds looked serenity itself. Pleasant tree lined avenues, detailed with students, inserted personas.

'Are those students out there real or mere decoration?'

Zyra turned lazily around. Not that that was necessary in cyberspace. For a fraction she was all concentration. 'Some, why?'

'I don't want to be seen, detected.'

'No one's bothering with us. This room is sealed.'

'Camouflaged?'

'Something like that.'

'So it could be a tool shed.' Varit allowed himself a joke.

'Just a bland office annex. If anyone bothered, if they got that far they wouldn't see us. I'm running a very special programme Varit. In fact we could pretend to be the furniture if anyone made it this far. What would you like to be? A chair? The carpet, spread out like some radar array. I could be the window...'

'...to my soul.'

'How romantic.' Turning her soft brown eyes towards him. His heart melted a little. She still could tug his emotional strings after all these years.

Varit forced himself to concentrate, Zyra observing him with that wry expression of hers. Amused by his flustered heart and mind.

`You think we are loosing it?' finally getting his thoughts together.

`Loosing what?'

`The plot.'

`I didn't know we had one.'

`Prima's.'

`Oh that.'

`?'

`What can I say? We all know what they want.'

`Not foreseeing this. These cults are having an effect. And they're smart. A quick fix for everything. Answering a need for the searching soul whilst delivering their spurious religious slant which incorporates the whole universe. Instant answers. No thinking required. Like some internal webspace. Everything there, just like that.'

`As long as the data bases remain secure...why have they shown an interest in that regard? Accessing our sciences, philosophies?'

`I fear that they might.'

`That should be a good sign.'

`Not if they're going to use that to adapt their sophistry to whatever comes their way. Say you're a scientist. They then configure their religious slant in scientific terms. The so-called great mind becomes some sort of intelligent designer, if you get my drift.'

`I see what you mean. Sneaky aren't they? But that begs the question of how it got there in the first place. And what was there prior its supposed existence?'

`You seem to have skipped theology 101 Zyra.'

`A subject of little interest.'

`Not to those at the top.'

`As I'm discovering. Otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

`I'm here because I respect your versatility.'

`Well I have noticed among the students a sort of restlessness. As in there isn't enough. That something is missing. Maybe,' she laughed, 'it's a lack of sex.'

`Zyra.'

`Sometimes the obvious is the obvious. If you're in love, everything is wonderful. Life, the universe, the future...'

`The future is exactly it. I'm thinking we might be involved in some future-war.'

`Now that would be something.'

`Something we need to consider.'

`Future-wars.' Rephrasing the concept, trying to get a feel in her mind of what it might entail.

`From what little science I do know, we form our idea of what we want from and in reality then go and achieve it. From the stone age to the space age.'

`These Milleniaists would have us change our outlook. They could have the power to determine our future for us.'

`If they reach critical mass. Varit you worry too much. There are too many of us who are free...'

The image broke up, pixellated for a moment then Varit was back in his office. The console which linked him to the Web off-line.

"My system's down." Renassa called out from her office.

"So is the Web."

Renassa appeared in the doorway Varit jiggling the optic fibres.

"Dead." Not the best choice of words. "This ever happen on campus before?"

"No, never. Too many back-ups. Plus the stand-by systems. Completely gone off line."

Varit heard the silence. No climate control either. The near undiscernible background hum absent. The room still. Just their breathing. Varit detached the strand at his neck and took off the headband. It's status lights were off as well.

"How odd. I'll see if it's local or the building or something." Though he could not think as to why they had no power. The window's anti-glare tint was fading. So the building was down as well. The overhead lights off as well. Outside students were still walking around. He could see at one building milling groups who tried to get into their faculty. The doors shut. So it was the whole campus that was affected.

Apprehensive he walked past a puzzled Renassa and found the outer door firmly shut.

"I think we're stuck for the moment." Giving her an apologetic smile.

"I'll try and call maintenance." Renassa suggested then found the com-link was not working either.

Outside groups were forming. By their gestures their com-links, their embedded pc's on their sleeves were off-line as well. It was more than just the buildings, it was the whole area. The photo-grey filters were starting to melt in the glass, running in tiny thick rivulets downwards.

"Well, what does one do?" she asked.

"Wait I guess. Maybe an announcement will come through once the com system's been restored." He answered sheepishly trying to suppress his rising anxiety.

"And this never happened before?" Renassa more puzzled than anything else. Varit was hoping the technicians, when they could be found, brought to CU could rig up an external power source and get everything working again. For he saw all the buildings internal lights were off just like here in his office.

"Always a first time." Varit grimaced. He hated distractions.

"There'd be some sort of contingency, surely."

"I would assume so Renasa."

"Assume?"

"An expression." Hiding his heightened state of rising nervousness. "I'm no expert, no system analyst. Maybe the servo-bots, but if they're off-line as well..."

"Don't say that."

"Sorry. You enhanced?"

She shook her head. "Only uploaded. Outside access activation. Never really wanted the Web in my head. Too tempting to waste precious time in there. Prefer to do my own thinking. You?"

"Partial, basic AI stuff for research." Then tried to access the external library. No response. His brain was working yet that was about it. He then tried to imagine the door opening. No response there either. With the Web down he could not even move from where he was into virtual space.

He looked at the coffee machine. It too was non functioning. Off was off.

"Getting warm." Renasa noticed.

"Sunlight on the windows."

"You'd think the solar panels..." Slowly realizing how serious this shut down really was. Then Renasa became angry. "Not that smart our smart-ware. You think it's sabotage?" the very thing Varit wished not to consider. That might take some time to fix.

Outside students and some faculty members were forming larger groups, gestulating, talking or standing dumb struck. Different responses according to their individualy. An interesting study in itself. Varit began to feel distracted. Now was not the time to...what? Think? Might as well continue what they were doing until this mega glitch was sorted.

"Shall we focus on our task?" he asked reservedly. He was worried about being shut in. Power tools might bore through the locks though how that might be done with no power...still, some were battery charged. Unfortunately the doors had no external hinges

or locks. All built into the walls. Total security. Nor could the windows be smashed. Blast proof. Though Prima and Regum had abandoned war centuries ago did not mean some religious fanatics would try something. So the architects and engineers had built ultra secure buildings. In which they were now entrapped.

"You think Prima's found a way to screw with us?" Renassa asked. For a moment Varit thought of sex, getting a little aroused. "Or some disgruntled group, those we were studying making their pathetic point?"

"If so the authorities would isolate them." He hoped then shrugged not knowing really what was going on.

"So no intended threat scenario? No information regarding their true objectives? No political cells intending to cause havoc at the uni?" Renassa wanting answers. Gotten over the initial shock that nothing was working inside or outside. Though her voice betrayed a slight quiver, trying to keep her head together.

For Varit it was different. His mind had gone numb with fear. Fear of being locked in and locked out of everything. His rational mind telling him he could do nothing, nothing at all. That more than annoyed him. For the first time in his life he was frightened. They were all so used to everything functioning seamlessly simply by commanding a system to brew coffee or deliver some furniture. Now they were thrown back onto their own resources, resources that were not responding.

In the distance, over the towering skyscrapers an explosion. The bright orange-yellow fireball flared skywards through the distorted window pane. Dark thick glowing smoke mushrooming into the overcast sky above illuminating in light crimson the cloud cover. Luckily Renassa did not see it having her back to the window. Varit feared the worst. If it was a plane then its systems had failed as well and fallen out of the sky. Then another explosion and another. The walls of his office reflected the light's red flare of the conflagration. It meant all flights were caught in their dreadful fate.

Hundreds if not thousands were dying this very minute. Stark realisation. This shut down was not a local condition. It was far worse than that. Varit just hoped, a bitter smile, it was not global. Maybe a precursor to an attack by an outside agency. No guessing who that could be. The only question remained, how?

A gasp from Renassa. Four skyscrapers were alight now. Flames pouring out from blasted windows, its inhabitants incinerated.

"What's going on?" fear etched on her beautiful face, eyes agape in horror.

"Something is not right. Maybe an EM flux from our orbital or some ship. Maybe our orbital's been taken over."

"Compromised? Neutralised? Look..."

They both saw the distant plane crash behind another towering building. Again the appalling fireball billowing out, its dreadful red glow reflecting off the next building. Another pyre as the smoke started to coalesce over the city.

"...if the orbital is down as well..."

"Let's hope not Renassa. This could all be temporary."

"But those poor poor..."

"Yes, I know. Maybe they'll have a peaceful end when the air gives out..."

Varit panicked. Air. The two rooms were sealed. He wished he hadn't said that. How long could they last. Then there was the need for water. He was too frightened to try the tap knowing that it would not respond either. He dared not think their fate through but his brain wouldn't stop.

The primal instinct to survive, long dormant, resurfaced. Self preservation as a biological necessity. Trapped in their electronic cave. The cave dwellers of the age buried, sealed in the grotto's of the future. With one exception. Their stone age ancestors had been free. Now they were imprisoned. Isolated, caught on their own design.

"What are you thinking Varit? How long do you think this will last?" Renasa trying to remain calm, stay focused, unable to look away from the burning tombs out at Regum City.

"What am I thinking? Nothing Renasa. Just stupid thoughts." Stupid wasn't even close. Useless more like it. Everything they stood for, everything they had become and created was an empty shell, dead ornaments. A part of his mind tried to force a positive spin onto their situation. Any moment the systems would come back on line. Another explosion. He barely glanced at it.

How long had it been now? Moments? Minutes? Hours? He couldn't tell, for time had stopped. Everything had stopped. It was the end of everything. His brain couldn't, wouldn't accept defeat. The ancient animal instincts resurfacing after millennia of civilisation. All to no avail.

If Prima was indeed behind this crash then they had been effectively neutered. All their great thoughts, some in books that would survive, their brilliant inventions, their insightful philosophies were now lost dreams. If the Web had collapsed so had its contents. Never to be recalled, lost in electronic decay.

The nano-tech factories would be silent as well, the mechanized farms in stand-still, food production non existent. Except at the outlands. The original inhabitants once more the surviving species. Their interlude as Reganians over. The planet reverting back

to its ancient past. Maybe they could help. But with no mechanized transport working it would take weeks to reach them here. And with their primitive carts the million odd inhabitants would surely starve, or die of dehydration mere days away. How precarious life was. Was.

Another fireball illuminated the room. The conflagration was spreading in the city. Sealed searing silent death. Renasa's ebullience waning by the minute. Sweet Renasa, she didn't deserve this. Varit felt uncomfortable. The air was getting warming and thicker. Death all around them. Fires erupting from the distant dull glowing burning piles of high rise death. The sky a sickly red, dark smoke billowing outwards and upwards. Closer on the campus groups stood around shocked and awed into silence. Still free. There was at least water for them in the stream that coursed through the university. As for food, unless some doors had been open at the crash access to nourishment for the short duration at least would guarantee some survivors.

The once gleaming buildings now fatal monuments. Trapped there as much as they were here. Maybe the unseen enemy was merely softening them up. Surely they would not want them all dead. Maybe they would come soon, swooping out of the sky, restoring order even if under foreign occupation. Anything was better than death. How precarious freedom was when threatened with the absence of the basics, food and water. How quickly despair turned into forlorn hope that slavery was better than the alternative.

"This has got to be Prima's doing." Renasa turning away from the fiery carnage outside. "And your superiors had no inkling, no hints that something as shitty as this was going to happen?" almost accusing Varit of holding back information.

"No Renasa." Varit exhaled. The air was getting a little stale. "My brief was the Milleniaists. I wonder if they too are caught up in this. This lock-down had to be planned somewhere." He nearly said 'if'. "When we get out I can assure you everybody will want answers."

"If they will let us Varit. They might want the planet for themselves. Keep a few of us alive to do their work for them. I am really pissed off." defiance in her eyes. She took up a chair and threw it against the window. The pane merely wobbled as the chair clattered onto the thick carpet.

A plane crashed near the pond of the university. Trying to make a desperate landing on some even ground. It slithered, its wings ripped to shreds as trees were felled, exploding into a fireball, the superstructure buckling and twisting, burnt smouldering bodies, some completely alight strewn over the green grass now turning to flame as the

hydrogen exploded upwards in a dirty yellow vicious fire. The wreckage finally came to rest amongst a copse of trees, the foliage alight. Some of those outside tried to get close and help the stricken passengers but the heat was too intense. The final minutes of their fate too awful to contemplate.

Renasa tried to restrain her own fear. She had never really been that frightened, except as a child experiencing some bad dream. She had suffered from lost love as a teenager but that was about it. Now and again the odd nightmare which she never suppressed for she let them unroll in her mind, a sort of controlled experiment. But this was real, all too real.

"Well I guess the time for guessing is over. This is the answer."

"Saves on research." Though Varit's answer was not as light as intended.

"Well the arseholes have really shown what they are. Fucking homicidal maniacs." Venom in her voice. Looking wonderful in her defiance.

"Yes." Varit felt exhausted. His brain going over and over the same sequence of being trapped, with no way out. His life so superficial even though life was everything. So precious, yet so vulnerable at the same time.

Had they really been caught off guard? Had the DVs manipulated them into a false sense of security? Whatever, the result was the same. They were stuck in this room like millions of others. Those outside at least could breathe, drink natural water, maybe get sick and die of some disease. He thought of the patients needing medical treatment, then tried to will his brain to stop thinking and focus on the immediate. Wells would have to be dug, or settlements along rivers established. It really was like everything had gone, with only the most primitive of their kind able to survive, if at all. Crops would take time to be harvested, time no one had anymore.

There were of course some real farms out there, experimenting with new strains whilst keeping the original genetic make up alive, to keep the base state in existence. Keeping bio-diversity on tap. Some of the outer villages might survive. Only the outlanders had a chance to inherit this monumentally arranged mass murder.

Nano technology had been the answer to everything. Even manual overrides, physical tools that could have winched open sealed doors and windows left behind. It had all worked so well. In the distance another crash, another explosion. The fires were spreading in the city. In front the twisted smouldering wreckage of the stricken plane. Passengers were staggering about in shock, some horribly burned, their skin flapping off them, blinded by molten eyeballs. Those who could tried to make them comfortable, but

with no emergency services they would die a slow painful lingering death. The copse of trees on fire.

Some had scoffed at the retro-agers. Well who was going to survive now? Varit thought bitterly. There had to be hundreds of planes falling out of the sky. Then there were the airships. Their fate might be luckier. They would drift of course coming to ground only as their huge envelope slowly lost its hydrogen. They were far less high tech. With a bit of luck its inhabitants had some chance of survival. Some even transported dry bulk food. Fate would be kinder to these crews and the few passengers they carried. Ships at sea might fare better as well. But once their supplies ran out, rudderless, drifting in the ocean it was only a matter of time.

Another fireball, more incinerated travellers. Pity the survivors.

Renasa was sobbing quietly. Varit understood how she felt, his eyes going misty. Delayed shock. The physical body insisting on carrying on to the bitter end, the mind knowing better but hoping cruel fate would turn out to be a chimera. Her shoulders were heaving a little under the emotional strain and he went over to embrace her.

Her tear stricken face now a mask of despair. Her glowing bright eyes looking lost, forlorn yet filled with a deep longing, for reassurance whilst hopelessness made her cling to him tightly. Varit chided his body for responding sexually. It blotted out the pain, the overwhelming catastrophe which the mind had difficulty in coping with. His unconscious knew better. Resigned to fate. But not yet. Now whilst there was life in his veins, thoughts in his head of...having...sex.

She clung to him tighter almost willing to fuse her young soft body with his. The sobbing was lessening as she drew comfort from him. If she noticed his arousal she was not pulling back. She started to undo his pants and a part of him was relieved, even joyous at this life affirming act. He tore down her panties from her knee length dress as they engaged in an instant frenzy of pure lust with an intensity they had not felt since they had been teenagers. They both climaxed almost immediately but still were not satisfied.

He carried her to the couch keeping their embrace, their contact as if the two of them could overcome anything and everything. As they clung to each other he became aroused once more, Renasa wet and willing accepting their copulation to obliterate the present, the impending loss of self, the emotional pain, the coming horror of the final dissolution of life, the futility and doom from which there was no escape. Even the third time with Varit thrusting himself at full strength still left him and her hungering for more.

They rested and nestled in each others arms, sweat drenched, glistening, Renasa's face glowing with a deep sweetness that nearly made him cry at her angelic beauty. The primal urge reasserted itself and they gave into it willingly, eagerly, hungrily. Life was not over yet.

In their exultation of each other in that heightened moment of togetherness they were defying and transcending death itself. They were beyond death, so full of life they felt like bursting with energy. Life had never been so rich, so mind expanding, so full, so complete sharing their happiness, deliriously so. Then they made love more tenderly, taking their time to mutually arouse each other, making the foreplay last as long as possible, savouring every delicious moment of coming ecstasy, then fell into each other just as eagerly as the last time until finally they fell asleep, in bliss, in being happy, in being fulfilled, in having defied death, their souls unitary swimming in a warm cosmic balm.

They awoke in darkness. The eerie glow of distant fires illuminated the lowering clouds, outlining the stark skyscrapers in their lurid glow. Closer a pinprick of light here and there, probably a torch as people tried to survive outside as best they could. For some hoped that the crashed plane might have food and water once it was cool enough to enter its grisly wreckage.

Varit felt vacant, indifferent as if he could now, after their phenomenal love making with Renasa accept his end. He looked with loving care at Renasa's gorgeous almost girlish face barely illuminated by the conflagrations of the city. Looking at her he felt himself aroused once again and in dreamy half sleep she too was ready to accept him once more. Then they snuggled up to each other as if this was eternity itself. The room's air was thicker now.

Apart from the distant fires everywhere, everything was shrouded in the deepest of blackness. Even the cinders near the wreckage were mere glowering embers, the copse of trees burnt out, some sending orange sparks into the darkness above. With the clouds still in place everything was embraced in a fatal shroud. The darkness possessing its own smothering embalmment. The silence palpable. The universe indifferent to their fate.

So much for Prima's benign cosmic being. His brain flared in anger at the obscenity of their belief system. To negate millions of innocents their destiny. Maybe the same thing had happened on Prima. Not that it mattered. He knew it was over. They would either die of dehydration or asphyxiation. At least they had not been burnt to death. If any did survive he hoped they would find the culprits and jail them for the rest of

their lives. If possible keep their consciousness alive, moving their sense of self from body to body for eternity.

He noticed they were both breathing faster now. Renasa so wonderful he hoped she would not wake at all. The oxygen was getting less. Their love making would have depleted it even more. But the unitary experience they both shared was worth life itself. They had risen way above it all, like a double helix soaring into the universe, into the secret of life and much much more. Way beyond words. The two of them like gods. No, they were gods now becoming transcendent in death. Their souls eternal.

He began to feel listless. Renasa snuggled up to him and he wrapped his arm around her. He felt thirsty but was too lazy to rise from this comfortable position. Nor did he wish to disturb Renasa. He could see no reason to prolong the end.

Varit was feeling a little light headed. Almost high. Renasa opened her big brown eyes and looked with a deep longing into his soul. His heart melted. There seemed an endurance about her that spoke of defiance and acceptance. She too knew what awaited her.

"I will not give in to their heinous blasphemy." She whispered, her lips moist as she kissed him.

He understood to what she was referring to.

"We, you, are more than that now." He whispered back. "Together we will forge our destiny, we will sojourn to what our dreams revealed, to those places, amongst the stars, where our future beckons..." Varit had not forgotten the habitats, the space colonies, the ships travelling amongst the stars, as he imagined that hope and the future continued out there.

They had both tasted eternity. Fortified with that knowledge they fell asleep in their own cocooning minds, entwined bodies, interwoven souls. They were at peace.

The Crash: Regum Orbital

"We're getting a lot of dissonance." Trent announced watching the bank of monitors observing the status of potential altered states below on Regum. "The processors are recording some sort of psychic flash." And waited for the analysis. "Definitely a hot zone." Trent remarked to Systems Control. It would not be long for whoever was on duty to add their input. For the moment all they could do was to observe, scrutinize the situation over Khratham.

Trent was puzzled. What had been a grey zone, minor psychic activity was now turning pink indicating low activity spreading out from the northern perimeter. Then near Khratham the capital, a little to the south west the area went into a dense pulsating red. Heightened activity. Incoming. Four or five minor entities aligning to an extremely dense incursion.

So far no answer from the next in command, Tara. She might already be onto it. The inner array of scanners focussing on the planet showed something like a funnel, origins, in space. Until they could get a read out pertaining to these extremely active psychic resonance fields they would remain in passive scanning mode until more could be ascertained. The density of the field increased threatening to cause a flash back. Trent disengaged the penetrating array of field resonance scanners to stop not just possible contamination but also to keep in check the whole field which could easily upload itself into the surveillance systems. The last thing they wanted was to have that strong RF up here as an active source. The field had all the hallmarks of an extremely tight Primaian signature. Focused yet dispersed which could mean there were several sources to be dealt with, not just one.

Without any direct orders to the contrary Trent followed normal procedure. Investigate the invasive field resonance. Satellites positions near the orbital realigned their orientation. Resonant probes cranked up to higher definitions and qualitative resolution scanning for possible local agents below. The discordant resonant state was playing havoc with the processor's filters which, overloaded allowed instant passageway into analytical blocks of code, flooding through the system without accompanying analysis. Threat definition: high.

Trent thought this could be overt targeting by Prima's DVs. That too fitted the picture. Tara entered the control room finding Trent in deep concentration. He was smart enough not to link to the system itself. It might be reverse immersed, in other words,

awash with this potent resonant field but they as observers were not. An alert was already in place to keep out.

"Is this some cavity perhaps?" Tara asked. Her short blond stubby hair glistening under the overhead lights making her head appear to be crowned with many tiny lights.

"An echo between standing phase waves? Don't think so. Something has moved in. It's focused towards that one spot. Given the strength of the field everything up here is passive regarding the intrusion."

"Good. Did you beat the processors to it?"

"They wanted to go into deep penetration."

Tara looked at the menacing red area, more a dot than a spread. "Looks adversarial with as yet unknown intent." Watching the screens reading what was going on below. "You haven't allowed a primary source search yet?"

"No, not until we know more. But it looks Primaian. It might be DV activated as a hive mind. Source files have next to nothing in that area. Either something has woken there..."

"...or been inserted." Tara finished off for Trent.

"Exactly." They watched the numbers scroll down. Given the passive read outs there was not much. "Possible sentient activity, definitely."

"Looks like it." Tara concurred. "And this just happened now?"

"Moments ago."

"No other effects? Not global is it?"

"That I would rather not consider Tara. It's like its boring itself in"

"Or activating agents there. See those tiny lighter dots within its focussed point?"

"Yes I have. Look, they've vanished."

"Make that absorbed, embraced, enphased. Someone reciprocated down there. We got the whole picture?"

"Global? Of course." A half dozen light screens came on showing the overall status of Regum. "Localized."

"Let's hope it stays that way." Tara paused. "I don't like this. Could be enhanced Volatiles."

"Not that." Trent sighed. "Their fluctuations take a lot of energy to get a stable read out."

"Well, the techies I'm sure are working on the next generation of systems analysis. QCs Trent. Our basics are handling chaos equations without falling into the chaotic states themselves."

"Yes inherent instabilities, how the whole system randomizes."

"The quantum observation becoming exactly that. The observer becoming observed. Then pfft, nothing." Tara explained.

"You think this field state could be some form of resistance? Using Primaian mind states to assert themselves?" Trent was hopeful. It was a possibility.

"Given the aboriginals, given they're just as sentient as us, who knows? Maybe they have."

"Yet the outside source..."

"Puzzling isn't it?" Tara watched the screens. "Whatever source there is it's nothing like we've ever encountered, or expected. Still, it's focused down there."

"Yes, totally indifferent to us."

"Question is how and where."

"Indeed Tara. Until it's been sanitized we won't know."

"Would you care to speculate?"

"Ha." Then composing himself said, "DVs"

"It seems to have that signature."

"What about on the ground?"

"Let's wait and see. I don't want any external linkage yet. If they come up with something they'll let us know."

"True. Now should we ramp up the scanners to a higher resonance?"

"No. If it is DV activity it might be what they want. This could be a ruse Trent. For the moment we'll bypass them. We have to keep our layered defence shields by themselves. Any potential threat can thus remain isolated."

The door opened Dera entering briskly. "I see you're onto it. All secure?" Her black eyes taking in the results on the screens. She was one of the few women who let her rich brown hair grow a little. It shimmered from the overhead lights. "Random or specific?"

"Both until we know more. As you can see the passive read outs show a pattern not dissimilar to that of the DVs. Only more intense." Tara explained watching.

"Just the one?"

"There were four or five respondents but they seem to have aligned."

"I hope we're not."

"Trent's disengaged. We're in secondary mode Dera."

"Scan the whole planet using that resonant field state. See if this is some sort of signal, some initiating sequence."

"Trent?" Tara asked.

"...and inserting requisite data fields." Busy with the glowing light console. A new screen showed Regum from the satellites. "Still local."

"Power up more processing magnitudes. Near max." Dera ordered then activated her external link embedded in the collar of her white jump suit.

"You got that?"

"Yes Dera." Estra replied. "Don't use our sats. Release our surveillance sats."

"Will do." Then turning to Trent asked him to disengage their positional satellites as three surveillance satellites were released from their holding bays. Their tiny jets moved them into position, targeting Khratham.

"Done."

"Good. I'm shadowing your incoming data"

"Right. Anything else?" Dera asked.

"Not to engage or enphase. We approach this externally."

"Already in place."

"Right." Estra satisfied.

"I wonder." Trent was thoughtful. "Them revealing themselves like that. They know we'll know. No attempt at camouflage. No cloaking either. They'll know we'll read them and to every action there's a revelation. We snare it and create either counter measures or let them run with it."

"Too right." Tara replied as the satellites fed back what was occurring in the funnel, the four of them watching the feed.

"Contained volatility." Dera remarked. "Don't they know it will be mere moments until we can get ourselves into their field?"

"If they don't care then I would suggest we go into low level alert." Tara answered.

"No counter measures regarding the field." Dera reminded them. "Let them think we think it isn't worth our while. Just the usual DV interference we're used to. Ground control can handle it."

"What if they try to get at us?" Trent concerned. "You know, reverse feed-back, vortex looping and all the other little tricks. Using false personas for instance. Pretending to be something they're not."

"As long as we remain secondary it wont matter. When the systems know more," Dera watching the sequences get denser, the numbers prolific, the embedded data huge as if it was some sort of informational domain. With a sentient resonance. Had the

DVs been upgraded? The processors barely keeping up. "For the moment we'll consider this an aberration."

"At a minimum." Tara added.

"Time for some planning." Estra said. "Tara."

"Following." The two women left the observation room and made their way down the curved corridor to a restricted elevator. Scanned and cleared the lift took them to a secure area of the orbital. Heading into the triple shielded operational section. When they got to one of the isolation rooms the two women saw Daros, their chief executive officer with Traf whom he introduced. Not that the women weren't aware he would be intelligence.

The room was white, blank, devoid of any electronic gear. A desk and several chairs. No monitors, no com-links, no computers. The two women set down.

"Off line?" Daros asked. They nodded. Normal procedure. Tara blinked twice to de-active her stand by HID the rest hibernating.

"No records either." Daros reminded them. If he knew what was happening his face betrayed nothing as to what he might be thinking. Traf, older, deep character lines etched on his pale face, a hint of fading brown still visible watched them dispassionately, face unemotional.

"The dead zone." Estra smirked lightening the mood.

"Nothing is as it seems." Daros began, his gloved hands on the table. For one reaching middle age there was still an aura of youth clinging to his presence.

'Telling me.' Estra thought to herself. The nature of the game.

"This field...unusual." Daros prompted.

"It appears to be a new development." Estra replied.

"No hard data."

"Daros," Estra moved forward slightly, "it's extremely dense. Packed. Until we know more I'm keeping everything out."

"You do have ideas though." Daros hinted.

"Actually no. I wait, don't want speculation to run ahead of the evidence."

"Commendable. Tara?"

"Oh I got ideas alright. Someone's opened up a field. Or a field source came on line. We haven't dared tracing it. Like Estra said. Then there's the dense resonant field. Could be DVs. Then again there are other possibilities. Immortals, Domain Lords or some surrogates. Infusing Khratham's population."

"Yet it is centred away from their capital." Daros replied.

"Testing. Being cautious. Indirect. It's new."

Daros satisfied for now.

"Focus only. Not broad spectrum."

"Not as yet."

"And the rest of the population is unaffected?"

"So far."

"Early indicators indicate that the source is from within our galaxy." Daros studying the two women.

"DVs." Tara replied.

"Extraneous."

"You mean it's from..."

"Exactly. The problem is this. Is it a trap? We trace the source and it infiltrates us. Game over. We don't act and it reinforces the local population. We loose them to it's influence. A loose loose situation."

"I see the dilemma." Estra admitted.

"We have two research teams in the area. One has gone off-line. No bio signature. In stealth mode we assume. The second team..."

"Are you saying they are linked in some way?" Estra queried.

"Making you aware that you may run across their presence. They're boosted, well some of them. You understand this is top secret."

"We wouldn't be in this room otherwise." Then feeling Estra had been too flippant added: "Of course, I understand."

Daros was not offended. Traf remained impervious to sentiment.

"There is a third factor." Daros leaning back, relaxed as if the event was less than it was. "There is an abbey down there. In secondary alignment with this field."

"You want us to shadow, connect?"

"Just shadow. Anything else might attract attention."

"Well Daros we're as passive as passive can be."

"Keep it that way, for now."

What Daros did not say was that they had lost the second team. No response from their inbuilt transponders. Absolutely nothing. It was disturbing. And now this. If the two were related he was not saying so.

"As far as intent goes," he continued, "we will assume it is hostile."

'A bit premature.' Tara considered. 'Unless the two of them knew more than they were letting on. Typical intelligence. Keep everything under wraps. Problem was when it

came to make hard decisions. With next to nothing to go on the wrong move could be disastrous. And who was this abbotess?

"Any chance we should counter the field? Create a decoherence?" Estra enquired.

"Not for the moment. If it is sentient driven then it might have degrees of higher magnitudes ready to assert its presence."

"Sentient as in DVs, or whatever?" Estra spread her arms around indicating the lack of a centre to deal with this. "I mean what if this is the other way round. Someone down there opening up, getting out?"

A blank look from both men. Obviously Estra had hit upon something. She wanted to regain access to the incoming data, now. But in this isolated environment that was not possible. No one could even access their own embedded pc's under these conditions.

The lights went out. A sliver of filtered solar light. Someone had forgotten to seal the door. Total darkness everywhere. Nearly pitch black. Only hearing their breathing.

"Power failure? Impossible." Estra the first to speak. "I'd better get back to the control room."

"Yes." Daros said in the dark. "We covered the essentials anyway. Interesting that no alarms went off."

They stepped gingerly into the near dark corridor. In the distance voices. Some shouting, exclaiming frustrations, murmurings. The barely audible hiss of the climate control absent. This was not good Estra realized. As they felt their way along the corridor Tara wondered why no back up's were working, no pilot lights apparent. Nothing.

They had three power units at the core. If the system was totally down then the fault could not be ascertained. What worried them was their position over Regum. The positional jets had to keep the orbital in stationary orbit otherwise their situation was dire as their mass would slowly be drawn back down. Then the only thing to do was get to the escape pods.

"We still have some time." Daros intoned. "You all know the drill."

"Sure do." Tara trying to make light of it. No point panicking. There were enough pods for all of them. Plus parked shuttles, cargo carriers, private ships.

"We'll continue this later." Daros said in the dark.

Estra wanted to call up her HID. No response. This was serious. Her enhancements off line as well. This was big.

When Tara and Estra had made their way back to the control room from memory they only heard Trent fumbling in the dark.

"Any idea?" Tara the first to ask.

"Nothing. Everything's down, just like that." Trent sounding frustrated. "We'll be leaking air. Not even the emergency tanks were released. Like everything's stopped. Everything." He emphasised.

"Well I'm going for the pods." Tara said. "Wait it out in them."

"Good idea." Estra answered.

Disembodied voices, some close, others further away. Tara hoped that those locks that self sealed would open manually. At least those along the escape routes. Many were sensor activated only. The idea to keep any unauthorized personnel, meaning Primaians, out and away from sensitive areas. Tara tried not to think of the worst, that they could be trapped. The trouble was her mind was running ahead of events.

"Let's get out of here then." Estra calmer than expected.

They stumbled along the corridor. Going down and going left would lead to the escape pods. Had not the engineers, the designers anticipated a total power failure? Nothing could just switch off an orbital. Short of a massive nuke. And they weren't supposed to exist anymore.

"So Trent. No foreknowledge at all?" Estra asked.

"Nothing. No alerts, no revealed intentions, even that field down there showed no aberrant signs. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

They heard the creaking now as the orbital began to shift in its orbit under the gravitational pull of Regum. They found a way down. Other voices were still discernable. Some trying to suppress their panic, others frustrated whilst others were yelling, infuriated at the lack of an expected response.

They realised some might be locked in. What was worse, nothing could be done. If the doors and hatches were in lockdown mode then that was that. They tried not to think about their fate. Slow affixation. Better than burning up as the orbital would within a week or so. Given the materials out of which it was constructed very little would burn up in the atmosphere. Then there were the fusion reactors to consider. If they were off line as well, well and good. But if they were left to themselves they might go critical before the orbital hit the ground. Unless their separate inbuilt fail safes were functional.

Through portholes space, the glowing sphere of Regum and the glittering stars. So serene. So indifferent.

They put on the space helmets at the pre-launch bays with their precious supply of air tanks. Being manual they were at least working. Having reached the pods they

discovered that whilst the pods were both magnetically and mechanically secured the mechanism would not release them, nor respond. A release code needed to be entered, which in case of emergency would be sent by a separate system, independent of the rest. Nor could the pods be even initiated regarding their onboard systems. Nor were the release codes enacted.

"We'll have to make our way to a cargo bay, any LZ."

"Gotcha." Estra trying to sound upbeat. They turned the air supply from their suits off, and breathed the warm moist air as condensation started to form from the many bodies on board. The creaking of the orbital louder in the deadly silence. Except for the disembodied voices.

One of the passageways was blocked. Emergency shut down in place. No way through to the cargo bays. They thought they heard muffled banging on the other side. More in frustration and anger than physically trying to wrench the hatch open. They turned back hoping other hatches might have been open when the power failure occurred. They came to another hatch. Closed off. Sealed down. They should have snap-locked open but had not.

Through a port hole they saw one ship drift away from the orbital. Tara realised it had no control. It must have been coming in when the power failure hit. Affecting the ship as well. This outage not just confined to the orbital but the whole vicinity. Maybe they might link up with those who made it out. If they could get on board. The ship was coming in closer then crashed into the side of the hanger. It slowly swung to the left, hit the outer wall of the orbital. Bits of material and debris dispersed as the orbital absorbed the impact. The ship bounced off serenely executing its weird dance in kinetics. Then it slowly drifted out. The cockpit pitch black.

Time was running out.

Someone passed the other way. Barely illuminated.

"Locked." Was all he said. "At least you got a space suit."

"There's more with the pods. They're clamped down." Trent offered. "Hangar doors down as well."

"Thanks." The figure vanished into the gloom.

"If the hangar doors had been open we could have floated out." Estra wistful.

"A lot of ifs in the way."

"Well mission control would be sending up rescue shuttles." Tara trying to sound positive.

"Yes. They should get here before air becomes critical."

"Our tanks have enough for several days."

"That's something at least." Trent sighed.

They had come to another dead end.

"We're fucked unless someone comes through one of the hatches." Tara admitted. Saying what they thought without wishing it to be fact. But facts were facts. The brain had to accept that. They looked down at the sparkling oceans of Regum, the swirly clouds, the white mountain peaks, the lush green forests. Not one flare from their space ports.

Had the Primaians shut down their space faring capabilities? Bastards. Whilst there was life there was hope Tara thought ruefully. Trent withdrew, coping in his own way. Estra too had fallen silent.

Loosing oxygen. They were sitting with their space masks in the shut off corridor. Below Regum and no launches to come for them. A few had made it out in their space suits. At least they had a view.

The temperature ranged between tropical hot when they were in the sun and way beyond arctic cold when in shadow. Their space suits protected them from the extremes. But their air was running out. They had stopped talking to each other muffled as the comlinks weren't working either. By now, with the orbital slowly being pulled apart, the air would have long been gone. Starting its slow long gravitational descent, screaming material as structural beams were wrenched apart. Not that they cared.

Their lungs were heaving now, desperate for those last few molecules of precious oxygen. Trying not to think this was the end, which it was. The three of them knew it. Tara had gone for a while into hyper panic, frightening fear induced paranoia and impending death. Now she was lethargic, indifferent, resigned, sad, forlorn, devastated.

She was starting to hallucinate. Back on Regum, back in the city, the bars, the music, the life. Drifting in and out. Now up here, now down there. Now somewhere else, floating in the universe. She wished she could have left something behind. A brilliant insight, a fantastic mathematical equation, an explanation for that bizarre energy field funnelling down on Regum, the meaning of life, not the trite explanation of the Primaians. Well, this was it. See if there was some ultra meta life force reabsorbing their energy, but somehow she doubted it. What sort of a god would do this to its creation. It was insane. Primaians were insane. She just hoped the Reganians would not let this pass without exacting some sort of revenge. Unless it really was merely a dreadful accident. But she could not convince herself of that. At least the reactors had not blown. So Prima had gotten its way. Shut down space travel, space exploration, well this orbital anyway. If

they were indeed pawns in some homicidal game she hoped their sacrifice would be remembered.

Her breathing was so rapid now it was becoming almost desperate. With a supreme effort Tara decided to go for it. Find out what it really was all about. Lying on the floor she managed to wrench off her helmet...

The Crash: Research Station, Regum

The lights went out, the computers went down, auxiliary units failed to activate, the whole research station inoperative. In the dark control room, with only the light from the window to cast pale illumination where Marez and Duncos had been observing the CIs vanishing act all processes ceased. Sovark was at Regum City along with Inet.

Puzzled Duncos just sat there for a while, tapping the solid state keyboard without getting any response. Even the climate control had ceased to function.

"What do you make of that?" he asked Marez who had taken an access panel off to see if the failsafe could be triggered. All he got was a click of the switches.

"Nothing to indicate extraneous action at any levels. No DV targeting, none that I'm aware of. Maybe the CI when exiting Tellurium took the links and the codes down with it. No codes no response." He answered not too sure what else could be done. "Even the com's out. If we are isolated then whoever managed this certainly knew what they were doing."

"Sabotage."

"Precisely."

"Well Duncos, this is your area of expertise..."

She laughed with a dismissive wave of her delicate hands. "Looks like my human resources have been resourceful."

"And you had no indication...?"

"Marez. Something like this I would not keep to myself. Unlike our Primaian counterparts I don't play any games regarding not sharing relevant information. I might not detail different threat analysis but the overall status and possible hostile activity scenarios are shared. We are a team after all."

"So there was nothing on the horizon."

"Absolutely Marez. Juris?" she turned to him.

"Me? I'm here to familiarize myself with the project." Rising from his seat and walking gingerly to the door. "Light key's out." As his hands moved along the seam of the door, the touch pad, looking at the blank eye of the iris scanner. "It looks like we're shut in."

"Great." Duncos answered.

"Can't even get next door where the smart recliners are. Luckily no one's in there. Though if the overall system's out for the moment," he dared not think any further, "then all we can do is wait."

Juris joined Marez testing the links from the cables tucked into the computer banks. Solidly connected. He wondered if they had discovered too much about the mission. They'd witnessed the Earth city's destruction which should have sent alarm bells off. If not in the system, the data bases but in their heads as well. Then there was the CI's and Merduk's disappearing act. If they could void themselves from space and time...the consequences did not bear thinking about as to what was not impossible. Unless this move to isolate them was political. That they were disposable. Maybe this vanishing act a sign of complete failure. It did not sit well with Juris. They had achieved something monumental here. That the link even lasted this long a feat in itself.

The lab was eerily quiet except for their breathing. Every breath depleting the available oxygen. Duncos wondered if this being isolated was some aberrant behaviour of an investigating team. Strip down all sensory inputs and see what gave way, what poured out of a mind disengaged from reality. Maybe this was a test to see how they would perform under pressure. Ascertain their psychological state now that they were up against a blank wall, literally. As such being forewarned would be out of the question. It would only prepare them, surprise of the essence, a necessary precursor. With a sigh she returned to her seat and waited.

They all waited.

Everything had been so normal this afternoon. Juris had even volunteered to go in to Earth as a surrogate now that the other team members, including the Primaians...the Primaians. Had they left some logic bombs behind? They had been 'in', then came the recall. It was after that that events spun out of control on Earth. Were they to be denied as witnesses? That might have come from their end. Was what happened there the same as to what was happening here? The end of that civilization mirrored as an end to the experiment here?

She voiced her concerns. Marez, as scientific advisor could see the possible connection. Telluris went down, the research station went down. The plausibility, whilst astronomically at odds of occurring at all had nevertheless self manifested.

Juris decided to take a snooze. Duncos and Marez were still fiddling with non responsive consoles, trigger mechanism, external back ups, trying to reroute the computers access to their power source. All to no avail.

When Juris woke the others were asleep. Taking a nap part of their repertoire. The air thicker, heavy. The air conditioning still off. The absolute silence palpable. He had trouble hiding his apprehension. The windows were sealed, bomb proof. Short of some high energy impact they were sealed in. Each breath they took shortening their lives. At least whilst sleeping less was consumed. Still he could not quite reconcile himself to the fact they might all suffocate. If they could get into the adjoining room with the smart recliner they could have escaped to Earth, riding the DVs insertion field. He wondered if they were still in place.

His anger rose, the bile stuck in his head. His breathing slightly belaboured. He kicked the door, thumped the window pane without making the slightest of indentations. They were locked in and that was that.

The only way to last longer was to reduce metabolic activity. Sleeping the best bet. He had to relax. Relax? Ha! His brain still thought any moment power would be restored. Then there was Darlos. He should know something was remiss here. Their cooperation momentarily interrupted.

Unless all this was intentional. Some back channel to delete their input. The initiative had to have come from Prima. This was not how things were done on Regum. A pity the Web was out of reach as well. That might have thrown light on things. Not regarding here but the overall picture. He sighed. This place was too secret to appear in any data base. No simulation of their presence in cyberspace either. He would hang on to what he knew, even if it's the last thing he ever did. Earth under duress, they isolated. There had to be a connection. It was too uncanny for it not to be so. Unless it had been an unfortunate side effect. Yet diagnostics sent no alerts. The outage was real, as would be their demise if help did not arrive soon.

He had to face the reality that they could be dead sooner than later. Already feeling lethargic, indifferent. Even thinking an effort. Drowsy. He should sleep and hope for the best. He was too lazy to talk all this over with Duncos or Marez.

Well one thing was certain. If they were to die then there was no justice in the universe. Nor a benevolent super mind as the Primaian's pretended. After all they had only linked themselves to another planet. Not exactly a daily occurrence. But what if this was something else? A higher order assault of great magnitude by some intelligent design. The CI a precursor? Maybe it had found a symbiot somewhere off world, in space, amongst the habitats. There were enough weird personas out there dabbling in all sorts of things. Were these isolates, some, working out there for Prima? If so then all this

blather about the alien infection was for their home consumption. Another Primaian lie. Like everything else about them. Lies, lies and more lies.

Lies that could kill.

Breathing harder now he could not get his head around the fact that they were basically entombed. Expiring, slowly but surely. He was beginning to see shifting shapes in the opaque shadows, watery sunlight coming through the now globular window as the smart ware was starting to decompose. Could there even be disembodied life around? The rational part of his brain was barely functioning. Or were they being softened up, DV targeted as well. Hit at the technical end then the final push into their heads.

Duncoss was stirring uneasily but did not wake. Marez so at ease it was uncanny. Juris tried to concentrate but it was like trying to hold water in a sieve. Trying to ascertain whether they were the target of a heinous conspiracy. Not that that was of any help. A flicker of movement out of the corner of his right eye. Nothing.

Light-headed, woozy he was starting to feel exultant. Ridiculous really. He wanted to get drunk, celebrate, defy fate and destiny. Maybe he was hyperventilating, he didn't care. Even the images, disembodied souls were a welcome distraction. If these were DV projections they seemed remarkably reticent. Were they mocking him or calling to him. They looked familiar but not the same. Earther's perhaps who could equally project their personas right here into this very room. Now warmer, moist, the air denser. Maybe they were behind this. Seeking revenge for what had occurred on Telluris.

Not his fault. A Primaian initiative. 'The destruction of your citadel was the CI's doing. He used us as well.' Juris thought hoping they would understand. 'Maybe Merduk was behind this. He went as well.'

The shapes drifted in and out of his consciousness. He smelt his perspiration, felt the cloying warmth bathing him in a deadly vapour. His mind light, expansive, embracing. Expanding into space. Not physical space but an inner realm that hovered simultaneously in some domain of which he had only been dimly aware. A veil being rent in space by these floating adumbrations. Mere outlines, both personal and impersonal as only disembodied entities could be. Part of an ubiquitous intelligence? He thought he was getting closer.

The expansive space misty, populated with ghosts. Vaguely there, ephemeral. They seemed to have lost interest in him. Disappointed as to who he was or what he could have been. Juris tried to mentally reach out, grasping at wisps, at a luminescent fog.

He focussed on that. It was all there was. Vague, indistinct, present, out there, close to him. He close to their operational space. Did it matter? He was onto something. The glowing adumbrations familiar. He had seen smaller versions in the Web. A data sphere within a data domain. But not Reganian. Certainly not Primaian. Whose then? Earth? They were still at a zero level civilisation. Unless of course this was an impending future state.

Pulsing warm waves washed through him, a new lease of life, invigorating. His mind so cosy and warm taking a mental bath. He felt good. Great. Expansive. Inclusive. Brilliant. With rising anticipation he could barely suppress his euphoria. Sensing energies hidden at the brink of stupendous reservoirs of pure energy concocting immanent creation. Joyous, so happy he was ready to burst with pleasure. The data domain expanded around him. One last blast of unadulterated vigour emanating from him blending in with the encompassing source of pale light. The galaxy, the stars receding away as he drifted, absorbed, fascinated, on the brink of realizing that it was...not...exactly...as...he...had....thought.

The guards on duty in the corridor tried to force fire their way into the laboratory. No response. They too succumbed, slumping over and affixiating as well.

Sovark, flying with Irrnet back to the station stared, surprised as the controls and read outs blanked out. The whine of the engine stopped. For a moment they saw the sun's illumination flare into a white bright dazzling blinding radiance. Except it was not the sun. It appeared in the inbuilt smart ware of the readouts before they self deleted. Then the ground rushed towards them. Loosing altitude dropping out of the sky with terminal rapidity.

"Shit." Irrnet so freaked out she was calm. She was trying to jiggle her escape release mechanism which released the seat but not the cockpit's escape protocols.

"We're fucked." Sovark remarked not liking this one bit as he tried to gain some control in their deadly descent.

Too surprised, for the com was gone as well they could not even send out a distress signal. The trees below grew larger as the pine forest rushed towards them.

In their last moments together they simply held their hands tightly. The VAV hit the ground at a forty five degree angle up for the engines were at the rear creating the off centre of gravity. The fuel tank exploded in a bright yellow billowing flame. Whilst the cockpit was firewalled the physical impact snapped their spines, killing them instantly.

The Crash: Orbital, Prima

Kroena woke with a start. The sleeping tube showed her bio-rhythms slightly in the upper levels in her fading REM state. The dream, the impression, the context so vivid for that one moment. Aware of an extraneous event. Momentarily attuned to all the DVs, the vision receded back into her unconscious the moment she was aware of it. Now it was lost to her conscious memory. She mulled over the possibility that a deep resonance scan could bring the dream back. But then she had been dreaming intensely these last few times.

She grabbed the hand sized console and re-ran her mental state whilst waiting for the air to fill her tiny quarters. Being the Controller of all the DVs did not allow for a larger retreat. That was a luxury reserved down on Prima, impress those with whom they dealt. Not that it mattered. Compared to what was going on up here it was a veritable zoo down there.

Gharbel, Qatus and Pentham she thought. Planning, manipulating, scheming. That much was certain. Their pretence, all three of them that everything was normal did not fool her. The intensity of their RS itself a give away. Reversing logic. Going for fool proof. After all she was a boosted, enhanced stable volatile. Subterfuge and allied minds her forte. Not much of a struggle for her emotional states to be subsumed to the greater whole of her absolute resonance, not just its more fractured components. One of which had flared into hyper-receptivity. The palpable sense of an intrusion leaving tiny remnants of its temporal magnitude behind. Not as a clear memory but enough to leave in its wake a sensate event. Out there, in space.

Feelings of momentary claustrophobia. A gelatinous presence immersing her, immersing all the DVs in its overwhelming suffocating incursion. A bit like drowning in space. Instead of gasping for air, gasping for space.

Her rapid breathing now calmer, having regained its internal rhythm. The sense of immanence slowly dragging her mind into wakefulness. Whatever it was. No alerts on the visual display on the exterior of the tube. A possible psychic state, so completely other, definitely alien impressed itself into space, into her now active brain.

Something out there. A mute mindlessness. An as yet unformed intelligence like a precursor testing its surroundings. And having found a target. The DVs.

Kroena was cooling down. Dry sweat on her skin. No pertinent alerts awaited her. She had a quick chemical douche, got into her space gear ready for her shift. No messages from Risea or Khral or the current team ready to go off duty.

Aware of a presence near her, around her, nearly within her. Was the alien incursion making headway? Had it broken through their cordon? It certainly did not feel like the Great Mind. Though the sense of the cosmic was incorporated in this enigmatic occurrence. Then again it might be nothing but her imagination. Volatiles had plenty of that unlike their more stable, adjusted, aligned counterparts. Their resonance near perfect geometry. Not like volatiles whose abstract patterns sometimes showed signs of being seriously warped. Signs of interior or exterior disturbances.

A sense of destiny stamping itself upon her as she zipped up. Feeling extremely buoyant. An immanent revelation called her. She would ask Risea if she too had this strange near manifest experience. Maybe she was becoming tainted. It was said the only difference between madness and sanity was that the mad were self confined within their twisted, distorted imagination. The sane stabilised by realizing reality as something objective, the mad totally subjective. Whatever visions plagued them were secreted at the asylums. Apart from the doctors and the relevant DL no one really knew in the outside world what went on in their heads.

Why was she thinking madness? She reran her RS and got a surprise. Boosted having expanded into what? Less dense of course but the essential signature of her real self had remained in place. What had she reacted to? Reached into?

As she made her way to the control room to relieve the other three the idea hit her of the cosmos being in a state of flux. Not the steady state picture presented to them of an eternal empyrium, the expression of the divine mind. Any aberration was put down to the alien field. This was different. She not just thought it, she felt it. Apply caution if anything was manifest. The last thing she wanted was to be BrainDrained. Not ready to follow Elentra's mindspread.

When she arrived Khral and Risea were already there. Pouring over read outs focussed on the data.

Ulong, the shift supervisor looked up as Kroena entered. A formidable no nonsense woman of later years. Perfectly adjusted to her task and more importantly had no longing of any sort to return to Prima. She saw her task as a psychic warrior, more a general, handed a sacred trust to usurp the field, wear down any resistance which included the Reganians, prepare their own benighted souls for the coming revelation.

Where had that thought come from? Ulong must have linked with her mind. Kroena hoped she had not leaked during the connection regarding this coming revelation? Was that what her vanished dream was focused upon? Divine disclosure? Or an unholy ingress.

"Come and have a look at this." Ulong looking up from the printed read out. "I've secured the data as you can see. What do you make of it?"

Smart woman. Getting Kroena to make the decision. Not that Ulong was the type to procrastinate. In fact she was in her hard headed way decisive. This had to be unusual.

Kroena looked at the spread. DV activity. Not their targets, but more from those who were tasked to keep the alien field at bay, to defuse it. A higher RS. Randomly dispersed. No not quite random. There was a pattern there, sort of. A hidden design. Like laying down a foundation.

"This the alien field?" Kroena asked.

"That is what we are wondering. It appears so."

Ulong never minced words. She was far too judicious for that. So by saying 'appears' she meant it. It was something else. But what? The whole purpose of their assignment. Their whole reason for being here.

"You think it's beyond the parameters." A statement not a question.

Ulong indicated to Kroena one of the monitors going through its current history. It showed the overall picture of the resonant status of all the DVs. Sure enough, several were heightened, denser mental activity. Captivated, enthralled and aligned.

"Now the next monitor."

The alien field. No change. But there was a representational fog, pale lilac, flaring around some of the DVs. Halos.

"Something they attracted?"

"Or rechannelled." Ulong suggested.

"Could they be doing this themselves?"

"That is what is so puzzling Kroena. Inside out or outside in."

"Could it be both?" not exactly helping to clarify the event.

"Impossible. Every RS is a source created event."

"True. So what's your thoughts?" handing the ball back to Ulong.

A thin smile played on her lips. Tiny creases at the edge of her mouth.

"My thoughts?" Ulong repeated. "Several naturally. If it is inside out then we have a monumental problem. The DVs are self enhancing. Which means there has to be a

foundation to that. Another unpalatable fact would be that if that is what they are doing then the consequences indicate that they are also self activating. Or aligned to some, as yet, unknown cause."

"The CC?" That might satisfy the DLs but it would not explain the reason for this change of resonant states.

"The CC is a constant Kroena. This is far less I should imagine." Kroena knew she meant that as an expression not a definition in itself, or an explanation either. "A spurious event is out there."

"What about the simulacrum?"

That was something which they seemed to not have considered. Surprised. Ulong ordered Fahne, their back up operative to check on its status. The monitor showed its dull glowing adumbration in the isolation chamber. Tinged with the same lilac pall. Resonating with the inserted field. Mindless.

"Interesting." Kroena ventured. "There's your source."

"Could be." Ulong dubious that it might be as simple as that. The controllers knew of the experiment regarding the insertion of its projected essence via Regum's technology on Earth. And sworn to absolute secrecy. In that sense the simulacrum as an isolate ought not to be infused with anything now that the projected simulacrum was missing. Now this. A field.

"Something is influencing the DVs and the simulacrum." Dakur, Ulong's second suggested. Rather obvious Kroena thought. Still a base line to reason with had to be established.

"Supposing that is correct, as you said Ulong, there needs to be a source unless it is the DVs." Kroena focussed. There was a prickling in her mind, of familiarity, ungraspable.

"We got any idea exactly what? This is the top down view. What have we got regarding their psychic state?"

"That too is fascinating. Potent awareness."

"Look, more DVs are illuminating." Fahne blurted out. Sure enough, the monitors confirmed his observation. More DVs were slowly showing a pale lilac nimbus around them. Building up out there. The simulacrum reflected the change like some litmus test. It too glowed a little stronger.

"Any threat involved?" Kroena asked.

"None." Fahne replied. "It's a presence." He ventured.

"Could well be. Nothing from below?" meaning Prima. Kroena trying to hone down the variables.

"Nothing to indicate the source is from down there." Fahne advised.

"So it's in space."

"That much we do know." Ulong a little impatient.

"I'm trying to reduce the possibilities to get to the actualities." Thinking that too was obvious. "After all you are the longest serving controller." See how she handled that.

Ulong relented. "Never in my experience something like this."

"There you go then. We're all on the same level. Risea, you've been quiet."

"For good reason." She perked up. "I dreamt this."

All eyes were on her.

"I mean not exactly what's happening here. Whatever is going on felt like a visitation of some sort. Part sentient, very reticent, somewhat removed, definitely there."

"Well we're getting somewhere. Thank you Risea." Kroena smiled at her. "We can rule out the Cosmic Mind," looking at Ulong, "and the alien field. Which leaves what? The simulacrum. It might be back channelling it's connectivity." Saying no more as to where that was meaning Earth. Had they found a way to the DVs and the simulacrum? Attaining access? Without the signature of Earth's unstable minds, their resonant states. This was far too constant, too steady to have originated from Earth. Unless some supreme mind was expanding its consciousness into the DVs, realigning them and thus neutralize them. As the screens showed, those DVs and there were more of them going lilac, became other focussed. Being switched off and then back on, their focus non aligned.

Tempering with their mental states.

"Nothing to indicate that I'm afraid." Fahne said apologetically. "Anyway I'm off." looking at Ulong. She nodded and he left. Dakur followed him out.

"Did you sense anything?" Ulong asked Kroena.

"I'm always sensing something." Covering herself. "But not this." Not telling the whole truth came easy to her. "So...?" Kroena coaxed.

"Vague distant spiritual frenzy. The image of a twisted smile, a glittering intelligence, fascinating. Undefined. Attuned, or attuning itself to the DVs"

"I had that as well." Risea revealing her dream. "A fervent mind hinting at an immensity of stored power, energy. My rational end of things put that down to the simulacrum becoming an entity in its own right. Pretending to be some ancient god. I was probably fixed onto that state of mind."

"The ancient gods are gone Risea." Ulong looking hard at her.

The DVs equilibrium changed. Sudden, instant. On the monitors swathed in the lilac haze, the simulacrum glowed intensely. Then it was gone, self infused into all the DVs. Possessing them completely. Uploading itself into their resonant state. Being the resonant state. Usurping them all.

They looked aghast at the bank of screens.

The Resonant State boosted into even a denser field projection. Aimed not into space but towards Regum. Over the com link a cacophony of many different reactions and expressions coming from the DVs. Sobbing, cries of joy, delight, spiritual fervency, a heightened sense of awe, of stupendous potentialities, of being chosen for some higher aim.

Khral tried to fine tune this resonant immersion but it was what it was. Untouchable. The simulacrum's psychic phenomenon embedded, in place. In the control room they were shielded from anything the universe could throw at them. Kroena revisited the etherealness within her. Both comforting and warm, her mind felt the pleasure of the experience, a heightened state of supra-being, non emotional, pure head space. This was good.

No alarms, the system not showing any alerts. As if all this was natural, expected even. Kroena sensed a probing intelligence directed outwards, away from them. Fascinated at the changes out there. The DVs glowing as one luminous spread.

That would imply...Kroena cut her rumination.

The external monitors focussing on Regum showed an intense pale lilac glowing sphere surrounding their orbital. The DVs linked funnelling instantly onto Regum itself. For a moment the whole planet went off-white lilac.

Then it was all gone. All normal communications on Regum ceased. What remained was the silence. Kroena's mental fog lifted. Gone. Except for her memory retaining the event. Low level alerts went off. Khral saw to it.

"Regum's orbital's gone off-line."

"Really? What about on Regum, their mission centre?" Ulong asked.

"Nothing. In fact...the whole planet is silent."

A wan mind, a gleeful expression, a gloating sense of victory. A determined assault achieved.

'Behold my power. Your enemy is defeated. The planet is yours. At a price.'

'Who are you?' Kroena thought. This was amazing.

'I am the present and the future. You're future. Prima's future.'

The whole thing puzzling though very familiar. Her dream! It. It? It. The driving force within her dream. An informed proto-mass in the making, living, existing, seeking the DVs? Then having found that, the simulacrum infused itself into the DVs then focussed their energy, combined with it's immense power, of that she was certain, onto Regum.

Brilliant even if bewildering.

`A cosmic resonance?' Kroena guessed.

It seemed to consider this.

`Yes. For now.'

So it was more. Gestating. Having just started.

`Oh yes.'

`You can read my mind.'

`I can access any mind, any reality. I am master of all realities.'

This was getting all a bit ahead of itself. What did this entity mean by that? All realities. There is only one reality. **`This is reality.'**

`Indeed.' It answered enigmatically. Kroena wondered whether the others were getting this as well. The monitors showed everything having returned to normal. She understood what it meant by reality. It had exerted its power, it had shut down, or shut out Regum. What they always wanted. The DLs. The Immortals?

`They will think so. They began this...'

`And you finished it.'

`Oh I have only just begun.'

`Begun?' a little concerned that it might have designs on Prima as well.

`If Prima's resonance aligns itself...'

`To me.' Kroena thought cynically.

`To me, correct. Then the universe, all the universes are yours.'

`All the universes?'

`You don't think there is only one?'

`Of course, the other universe around us.'

`Correct.'

Kroena went cosmic. This was incredible.

`What happened on Regum?'

`See for yourself.'

"Ulong, let's get a fix on Regum."

"You went blank there."

"Just puzzled about...all this."

"Too right. Khral?"

"Their satellites are not responding. We'll have to use ours. Are we cleared for that?"

"I'll get mission control." Kroena walked over to the internal com and asked to access their satellites. Coming from her permission was granted. They watched on the monitors as Regum zoomed in. No EM signatures. The planet silent. No thermal indicators of any activity below. The planet shut down.

"I think this is a historic moment." Kroena almost whispered, overawed at this phenomenal event. "We'll have to inform the relevant domain lords."

"I think that would be in order." Ulong concurred.

Prima

Reno was the last to arrive at the pontiff's private office in the palatial centre, the visible terrestrial edifice of all that was holy and divine. For days now pilgrims had made the journey to receive their spiritual leader's benediction. They were fervent, seeking Skias's blessing. Instead he delegated his visiting priests to minister to the needs of the people.

Skias was a little perplexed, if awed by this sudden religious fervour. Hundreds if not thousands were flocking to the shrines of the Immortals. Attracted through some mysterious longing to have their spiritual needs fulfilled. The priests were not enough to cope, ready to accept that perhaps the Immortals were indeed awakening, the a new age surely dawning. The pontiff leading the way into an age of revelations.

Skias remained practical. Through Gharbel he familiarized himself with what the DVs were psychically reaping from the outer mysterium which was infused with the Great Architect's Mind. Skias always preferred the notion that the universe in which they found themselves was some sort of higher order construct.

Data dragnets discovered from the Reganians that their galaxy was the largest of them all. Around them were millions of smaller ones, two being drawn towards them as if seeking their blessing. Some philosophers speculated that a divine proto-essence resided in their centres as well so that these incoming galaxies were in fact paying obescience to their presence, their almighty presence, the great determining factor impressing upon the rest of the universe their undisputed power.

Skias had dismissed the bishops who had rambled on regarding the chaotic behaviour of the inhabitants. Many had left their homes, their fields, their duties to the community to seek the blessings of the holy father. The forecourt of the palatial grounds and the outer areas crammed with people seeking divine guidance.

The bishops were concerned. Skias could guess why. The inhabitants, mostly farmers, simple minds with simple needs were not satisfied anymore with simple answers. Their steadfast minds could not quite conceive the actual question to formulate the want they felt needed spiritual satisfaction. The unfaltering answers to their inner feelings no longer sufficed.

And with that came the attendant response of seeking answers themselves. The priests, Skias's real informants spoke of self designated inspired men and women claiming to be holy, infused with the new spirit on the verge of revelation. The new dawn, souls to

be made ready by cleansing and purifying themselves so that they could be worthy when the new spirit moved across the land, across the waters, through their souls, uplifting them all. Nor was this spirit some vague manifestation dwelling purely on the spiritual plane. No, this is what worried many ecclesiastics and divines. There was the rumour that a chosen being, a specially purified soul would materialize in physical form to guide them through the coming difficult times where the unholy, the heretics, the apostates would be winnowed out, thus purifying the others. With the promise that the coming spiritual kingdom on Prima was there only for those who were worthy, who believed in the coming messiah. Making their way to the shrines of the Immortals. They were the repository of the new divine infusion, to guide them to the kingdom of the cosmic soul which resided in each true believer.

"So what is believed is that the priests and all the other religious orders are in need of spiritual cleansing?" Skias asked the visiting bishop, Porphur who had come especially from his far flung province to lay before the holy pontiff what concerned him most. The people were seeking answers, but were not satisfied with those which he gave them. Even his ministrations left them dissatisfied.

"There is an urgency about all this which disturbs me." The thick jawed face of Porphur, flabby cheeks, flabby chin, wide girth growled as he sat opposite his pontiff. Not that Skias was not unaware of Porphur's information.

Porphur hinted that if a divine being was in the making, being created by the Great Mind surely the Cosmic Consciousness would have sent its message to those who served it.

"Maybe it has." Skias answered wryly. He knew the type. Porphur enjoyed not just the high life but the good life. He probably had a concubine or two, maybe even a priestess with him who enjoyed this life at the expense of the next. No wonder the divine essence invigorating the universe passed him by. Porphur focused on the joys of the flesh, not the spirit. In that he was not alone.

"Even the Divines seem at a loss pontiff." Porphur protested as if this was some mysterious cabal stirred up by spiritual vagrants who preached this change in the making.

Not that Skias was convinced. Yet Porphur's use of 'seem' indicated he was not too sure that that actually occurred as he thought it. They might be keeping the revelations to themselves. After all the bishops were not in the habit of preaching. That was not their role. Considering how best to use whatever they ascertained to strengthen

their position regarding the Ecclesiastics, the executive arm of the holy office of the pontiff.

But along with others who told of similar tales in their provinces indicated to Skias that since the DVs were not revealing anything vaguely related that it was best to get Reno, without the need of having to inform Pentham just what his sources were telling him. Reno was good. He had eyes, ears and more importantly minds on the ground everywhere, conduits to SpaceKorps, the orbitals and if rumour had it right on Regum as well. Better then using the priests, who really only told what their masters wanted to hear, which then proved them wrong. Rumours of divine minds secretly preaching holy wisdom in darkened houses late at night away from public scrutiny. That many households prayed fervently to be delivered from their materially blinded political masters. Making Porphur uncomfortable. He left the pontiff somewhat chastened. Messiah indeed. What next? Changing their world. As if.

Skias knew better.

So was this avatar in the making imaginings as well?

That was why he had called the meeting of the top three Domain Lords and Reno. If worse came to worse they, meaning himself, Skias would have to get the religious orders to bluff their way through this. Though the problem was also theological. The divine was divine and the material. The divine could never be material. It would be subject to material laws and as such could not be divine. If they could get through that slight dilemma then they might solve what was looking to be a mounting mass crisis of the soul. Somewhat absent on Regum.

Lord Gharbel, the eminent grise of them all, studious, impervious to what was assailing the masses, deemed it some a sort of mass hysteria instigated by the Reganians sitting there suggesting this was none of his concern. Qatus took it as a social gathering, a discussion to explore potentialities to further their, meaning his aims to remain where he was. Only Lord Pentham and Reno actually focussed on this mass phenomenon. Thus the meeting in his private office where a row of monitors kept Skias in touch with whatever was going on on the planet, the orbitals, by default the DVs and thus space itself. The Divine Mind might be the supreme guide of their souls and the destiny of the universe but it helped to understand the basic ground conditions of not just the universe but all the inhabitants on both planets as well. Knowledge a necessary tool to keep Prima's complete resonant state holy.

After they had discussed the situation they now sat there, empty coffee cups on the low table in front of them, secure in this most secret of rooms in the palace

wondering what to do. The Immortals were untouchable. They were linked to the Trine Guardians, a programme that created the appearance of conscious immortality. There to reinforce the belief of a life eternal. Now it did not seem to be enough. The coming victory over Regum nearly irrelevant.

"I suggest we scan the DVs."

"I concur pontiff." Reno answered before any of the Domain Lords had replied. Skias was glad for here below they might have created mental if not spiritual convolutions which would muddy the holy realm of space. Space was intriguing enough without adding religious tenets that basically had nothing to do with the physical reality of everything that was. Skias a realist accepting Reno's argument. He had of course scanned the data coming from their orbital but in company pretended to be somewhat less sanguine as to the mystery of manipulating computational data. Skias was proud of the fact that he was familiar with not just Reganian technology but their scientific attitude as well. Not that he revealed that to anybody. He was self taught and for good reason. No witnesses in relation to his intellectual pursuits. Plus it helped to see if any of the more knowledgeable of whatever religious order, including the domain lords, were trying to pull over his eyes.

Skias let Reno do the honours of linking to the orbital.

Kroena came on line and bowed reverently at the camera. "Pontiff."

"What news?" Skias asked. He had run a search last night and found nothing unusual. It helped to do one's research.

"Plenty your holiness."

"Oh?" Skias remaining calm aware of Reno's instant attention. Gharbel remained composed as always, Qatus excited and Pentham focussed.

"I'll show you." Kroena answered. She ran the data she had received via the DVs. No point showing the simulacrum infusing itself into all of the DVs, just the pertinent results. After all the subduction of the DVs had been momentary. Skias watched in wonderment. The DVs boosting themselves into a heightened state of resonant awareness and focused that upon Regum's orbital which then fed their psychic linkage onto the whole planet. Skias understood the DVs had crashed the Web. More than that that whole planet was off line, all their systems down. Kroena hoping the reconfigured phenomena would be acceptable to the palace.

Exhilaration.

"No EM signatures, no activity on the whole planet whatsoever." Kroena said. Curtailing here awe. This was way beyond their expectations. They all had dreamed of this for centuries and now it had indeed come to pass.

No remnant evidence from Kroena regarding the mental interaction she had had with the entity. She realised the CI had become sentient. It had fulfilled their dreams, so the less said the better. It worried her that if it could do that to Regum it could also create the same effect on Prima. There was an obvious message there, one she did not relish in revealing. Her mission was to observe and report. Her actions dependent on her superiors. Since none had as yet been given she let fate take its course. Regum was down if not out. They could now claim the planet. Come in as saviours. It would take some time to organize the ships to bring them across.

Skias thanked Kroena. He informed her to create a sanitized file of Regum's 'end' which his office would release for general consumption. It might take their minds of this coming messiah.

They sat there, stunned.

"We've done it." Gharbel the first to speak. Skias was surprised he used the third person. Obviously impressed. Qatus speechless, only Pentham was frowning. Reno running checks and diagnostics making sure the system was clean. For he had caught the implication of the stupendous event. This was a new attitude the DVs had achieved by uniting their minds in one monumental effort to not just crack Regum's security installations but totally wipe it out of existence. Somehow they had gotten in and voided it.

Somehow. Fluke? Perhaps. Kroena's guidance? Maybe. What concerned Reno was that if this could be done once it could be done again. This was no spiritual event. Nor could it be attributed to the Divine Architect. The whole sequence occurred in their local space. The alien field remained the same. Therefore underlying space was unaffected. Still a brilliant achievement.

Reno scoured Regum for signs of any activity. Silence. Some fires had erupted haphazardly. The horror of what was happening down there forcing its way into the DVs recomposed minds. All their planes were crashing, exploding, the cause of the conflagrations. He pushed aside his imagination. Those trapped in lifts falling either to their death or stuck as the systems collapsed around them, totally. No food deliveries, no food from the mechanised farms. No harvest either. Mass starvation. The injured and sick beyond help. The catastrophe expanding exponentially in his mind. They were inheriting a dead planet. Regum one vast desolation. A horrific cemetery except for the aborigines

at Khratham. The cost too high. Appalled Reno kept his thoughts to himself. Let the others explain the massacre they had instigated. To say they had blood on their minds was an understatement.

An act of madness. No one deserved this. Then another thought hit Reno. The orbital. It too was non functioning. The air would run out sooner than later. Maybe a day or two at most. With no air and no water their own people on board would succumb as well. The deadly sacrifice was going to be in the millions.

The best Reno could think of was to make it appear that this was due to the alien field. Until they collected their wits and thought rationally about helping the Reganians in their worst hour ever. The night side of the planet pitch black. A world snuffed out. The dreadful act would not leave Reno alone. Now was not the time to say anything. Maybe in the future, once they all settled down. For the moment excitement, talking all at once. He at least might be able to atone this murderous, criminal act. How a Benevolent Mind could allow the death of millions to occur just like that was beyond him. Unless somehow they could get their machines functioning again Reno decided on the most important decision in his life. He had joined the apostates, way past that of a heretic. Now an unbeliever. No deity could witness this with supine indifference and not be effected. To deny life to millions simply for creating a belief systems of their own choosing was even more homicidal than that of the Earthers.

The images were not reassuring. There were more fires and spreading. With all systems down they would continue to burn, incinerating those caught in their huge skyscrapers. They could not even gain a quick death by leaping out of sealed shut windows. He shuddered inside. Some factories were ablaze as well, more planes fell out of the sky, tiny crimson yellow-orange balls of fire billowing upwards. All for the sake of a belief system. He hid his disgust.

"Web's down as well." Reno whispered. All he saw in these four most important and powerful men was awe. They were fascinated by the disaster if not pleased.

"We did warn them." Gharbel intoned.

"Divine retribution." Qatus concurred. Reno thought at least he might have had some misgivings. But he was sadly mistaken. He dared not look at Skias.

"They over extended themselves, thereby crashing the system." Pentham said slowly as if that really explained what was going on down there. Some might make it to Khratham but with transport down only those towns and villages at its borders might have a chance at survival.

"Excellent Lord Pentham." Skias said at last. "A most satisfying explanation. Wouldn't you agree?"

They nodded their ascent.

"Of course we can add the influence of the alien field." Gharbel suggested.

"An astute thought. Agreed." Skias not showing any signs of emotions. To Reno that in itself was scary. "Of course we will have to help them in their hour of need."

Solemn nods all around.

"Pity it will take so long to get there and with so little materiel available. Food, water, medicines, machinery that does work, draft animals...we will help our stricken kindred." Skias looking sombre. The epitome of mercy Reno thought disdainfully.

"Maybe now they will accept what is in store for those who defy the divine will." Gharbel taking the hardline, as always.

"Let's not be too harsh on them." Skias countered. "This sad event will need some mollification gentlemen. We shall not go there boasting of our superior prowess, our naturally aligned spiritual resonance. We shall lead by example, not mere words no matter how divinely inspired we ourselves might be."

"Of course." They murmured. Reno understood that the three lords were already planning their own positions now that Regum ceased to be the major factor.

"We will have to be on our guard." Reno smiled bitterly. Make them fear the wrath of the Divine. He would gladly poison the chalice, cause doubt in their pretence of inner purity and spiritual righteousness.

Disconcerting looks were cast his way.

"Regum has been brought down. Laid low. The catastrophe indeed a sign in itself of what can happen when mysterious energies are released." Reno paused to see if what he was thinking was dawning within their triumphant minds as well.

"What are you suggesting?" Gharbel sounding a little irritated.

Good.

"If something happens once it can happen again."

"You mean if the Reganians rebuild their world in the same manner it will attract the same divine retribution?" Qatus asked stupidly.

"I mean us. This planet. Any planet really."

Stunned silence.

"You will find Reno," Gharbel unmoved by his suggestion, "that our spiritually pure resonance cannot be breached by what the holy DVs have achieved. No," he paused as if that made his opinion all the more worthy, "that this happened so rapidly and not

just that but targeting the obvious planet is indeed a divine sign that our universe has now been cleansed. It may well be that this also answers the clamouring for some divine messiah. That most sacred of acts, of retribution for they did indeed pollute our sacred space with their Web. For we have seen, been privy as witnessed that our purity can now irradiate that which the Reganians befouled. If the pontiff concurs," Gharbel acknowledging his presence, "we should release this. It may give the masses the answers they seek. The new age has surely begun."

If Reno's ears did not deceive him he was certain Gharbel was for the first time in some state of inner bliss. Disgusted he kept his emotions in harness.

"We were spared because what we believe in is right, is righteous. The Divine Mind has acted. It is not for us to judge the deed." Skias intoned solemnly. "We accept this as we accept everything that occurs through its Grand Design. Regum was flawed, twisting space into a spiritual abhorrence. That has now been rectified. Blessed by its Will. We also pray that it will show us the way forwards, guide us in these monumental times to be its servants in furthering the divine imperative for the whole universe. Regum will serve as an example of insidious souls who think they can be the masters of creation. They have been humbled."

'Murdered'. Reno thought. He did not intend to fool himself or re-interpret what had occurred in anything but the facts.

"We too have been humbled," Skias continued, "and will serve the Divine Will as long as we are worthy of its guidance. We will carry out its superior plan to the ends of the universe, with no exception." Skias looked at them each.

"We obey." Gharbel answered for all of them.

Skias dismissed his visitors. Reno hung back.

"Yes Reno." Curt.

Reno was perturbed. What he knew, the information assembled over years of focused and intense effort was not adding up to what the DLs and by default the pontiff might have expected.

"The resonance field pattern protecting this planet is undergoing an inner transformation pontiff."

"As we evolve as a species so does the resonance, the outer soul of this holy, this divine planet."

Not that Reno needed reminding. It was the stock standard answer. There were resonant changes. The masses were behaving differently, the Immortals irradiating their

domain with a different spectrum. Whether the alien ingress, most certainly the accepted explanation, or something else, his preferred option of concern.

"So Reno. Either the Immortals are infected or they have become conduits to some higher magnitude." Without clarifying this rather vague analysis.

"The effect, pontiff is unmistakable"

Changes were occurring. Minute discrepancies appeared within the resonant envelope of the planet. Something the Trine Guardians allowed. Making it appear the minute changes were a minor aberration making no difference to the whole. The transformation in progress. His exponential sequencing revealed an inverse infinity.

Skias listened attentively. Nodding now and then without probing Reno's exposition with astute questions. When Reno was done Skias leaned back, relaxed.

"Telafus was the vessel gathering the poison."

"The alien field." Reno pretended.

"The transformation of the holy ether."

"?"

How could the Perfect Manifestation change? It defied definition. Perfection was exactly that, perfect. The pontiff continued, "Not in itself, just our perception of it. You know yourself. In the furthest of villages some think the CC is some nature deity whilst those in the seminaries think of it as a Great Design and so forth. Same entity, different interpretation."

Was Skias saying what Reno was presenting was nothing more than his own interpretation? That the data he had was somehow pre-configured in his head? Reno decided to test Skias's explanation.

"That would indicate that the Trine itself is affected. By default that extends to the Immortals. If they have been manipulated..."

"Yes?" Skias asked eagerly.

"Then so is space." Reno surprised himself. He had not meant to be so extreme.

"Could be." Skias hinted. "Not that it matters much."

"Unfortunately Pontiff I have to concern myself..."

"Of course you do. We can assume it is the natural, no, divine re-alignment of the innate state now that Regum's insidious, perfidious, malignant infestation has been brushed aside. Their Web is gone, wiped out of reality. Nor will their material world infest what is meant to be. Reno," Skias paused, making sure he would get this point, "you have, had, I should remind myself, been too long within the foreign environment which Regum imposed upon space. Now that that is curtailed, normality is resumed. This is not

an artificial event but a natural one. Like a tree shifting in the wind, so the ethereal resonance moved within holy space. It will find its own divine equilibrium returning to its intended primal state."

"I see. Forgive me then for doubting the results."

"Reno, if you had not brought it up I might have been worried that you were not paying attention."

Reno remained silent. The answer made sense of course. But not its contents. The dream imageries, the hybrid creatures, the bizarre life forms, the psychotic intent of deranged minds, their contorted souls imagining nightmare scenarios, the twisted fantasies of the crashed web were not so easily explained away. Regum's nightmares deleted. Perhaps.

"What about the...hallucinations?" he probed, holding his breath.

Skias looked at Reno. Their eyes locked. Recognition, instantly. The secret Skias thought secure, the realms of the Immortals, changed, no longer a secret unto itself. What the masses made of that was irrelevant within the contexts of Reno's meaning.

Reno let the conversation lapse. He hoped he had not ventured too far in his ruminations to alert Skias just how borderline all this was becoming. But he had an answer should Skias probe further..

"Keep an eye out for aberrant behaviour." Skias ordered. Then with a thin smile added: "All domains."

Janon opened the wooden polished doors to the Incubator. Reno's centre where all vetted information, codes, even speculative analysis along with hard data was securely contained. Several processors ran various sequences to reach into their relative future exponentialities to gain a possible picture of how the data would play out.

The Incubator was located in a secure basement at the palatial compound where various extensions of the pontiff's network of agencies kept an eye on the masses of the planet, the psychological attitudes of the Domain Lord's own resources, the integral status of the Trine and Systems Surveillance thanks to ancient Reganian analytical computers churning out hundreds of progressing algorithms to second guess Regum's and Prima's intentions. Now with Regum contained their work was easier since that planet's cyber resources had crashed. Morale had collapsed on Regum.

"According to the latest data here," Janon launching instantly into his latest results focussed on Prima, "heresies will not just appear but spread quickly. Not in the negative sense though. The predictions indicate some sort of behavioural entity, a sort of

divine manifestation taking on the form of a saviour come to cleanse those who will not accept the new reality. The one disturbing factor," as Janon briefed Reno monitors scanning the planet and those on their orbital to keep track of what the DVs were receiving and transmitting, "is that the pontiff is not the person to fulfil that role. It seems we have the makings of an avatar."

"Really?" Reno was amused. "Interesting." Calling up the status of the Immortals. Current values were not within the norm. An exigent awareness within the Immortals domain realm. Out of idle curiosity he called up the Immortal's combined state prior the DVs exultant spiritual hit.

Reno suspected...this psychic presence the DVs were focussed upon at that dreadful moment of Regum's Crash could be a potent entity self inserted as an artifice. Tellafus had accessed the Immortal's shrine prior his withdrawal from public office. 'In contemplation' the explanation.

Neither surprised the event being doctored. Divine secrets not for the profane.

"Janon, run a straight resonance check on our friendly DLs."

"Anything in particular?"

"The Resonance Field. Their embedding. Then any unconscious reaction, overt as well. If relevant." Going for answers indirectly. Search patterns were logged.

"Field State. Right." Reno in pursuit.

Wonder what's missing. Something delicate, or sublime? A hint of this so called avatar. Janon understood the ground they worked over. Since his department had access to all the DLs there was no shortage of informers ready to curry favours in the hope of merely being mentioned. Most of it pure gossip. The DLs weren't stupid. They could withdraw into their domains and no one but themselves, officially had access to that. Except for the pontiff and themselves. Reno trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Go in too often and things would become obscure, hidden behind layers of encrypted chameleon covers. Only Gamers could unravel the deception. Primaian gamer sequences were second rate to what the Reganians produced. Had. Past tense. History.

Instead Reno went for the System Surveyors one level removed from the Trine Guardians, Gharbel's domain. And snatched remnants left behind when moving through logic gates, something Gharbel instigated to familiarize himself as to who was nosey, who transgressed their domains, who wanted what.

What indeed?

Finding a whole routine of sub-functions. Not the whole data block. Just a few strings, broken bits of code stuck to logic gates. So someone had recently been in.

Telafus. Then Skias followed by a surrogate search pattern mimicking Telafus's resonance. A duplicate. Dispersing. Like branches of a tree from its trunk the programme had gone off in all directions. A broad sweep. Looking for what? All this interest in the phenomenal was becoming a pattern in itself.

Reno opened up what they had on the alien field where resonant fields transmuted due to unseen perhaps even alien designs both as hard inserting data and energy driven field states.

He was not surprised when the distant foreign field was ignored as a result. Reno double checked to make sure it was there as an observational state filtered out so that it did not superimpose itself onto the results. What Reno wanted were transmutations, phase changes.

Not what he expected. The computer came up with a primal state which had flooded Regum's Web through their orbital. Flash inserting itself as an energy state, simultaneously into every processor on Regum then effectively shutting it down by burning it out. A momentary heightened energy state way beyond DV capabilities. Way beyond even their combined resonance fields. An oscillating mind state. Both there and not there. Two resonant frequencies. Dual states within one shell. One sequence traced the fluctuating energy state back to Prima's DV minds. Channelling an externalized ethereal, bodiless, pure mind.

Reno ignored the incoming data streams regarding the collapse of Regums systems. That was superficial compared to this. This was enhancement of a high order never previously accomplished. An active Isolate. Not that Kroena would have built this entity for reasons as yet unknown. Very much there with Regum's Crash its intention. Lord Gharbel? He would be the only DL who would have the authority.

What Reno was seeing was not embedded in current time. These results came from the near past. A lucky break for Reno had forgotten to pre-set the search sequences. It was spread over time, having probed into the past. He ran a check on the present as a sub-routine.

Nothing.

Nothing? Reno frowned. Had it burnt itself out when degrading Regum's planet wide systems?

He had enough pertinent hard core information to duplicate the effect of this entity masquerading as a group mind. In essence a micro-Immortal. Reno sat back contemplating the screen. What was going on? The reverse search patterns were going back in time. So far so good. He let the secondary essence go free. Instantly it branched

out everywhere. In time as well as in space. Its web, the computers, even the processing sequences. It was everywhere though not constantly so. Regum's decaying Web affected the computers which were data flooded just enough above threshold effect. An influence, a direction, a purposeful orientation, towards...itself.

A self induced reality with its domain. All paths leading towards it.

On Earth a secondary persona, Merduk. They had been busy up at the orbital. Playing with inserts. The Essence collapsing the field in which it existed in its own configuration. He ran a secondary view from within its shadow persona. Superficially no difference. That remained as it was. It was the orientation of the Earthers that had changed, the attitude, the way they looked at reality which underwent a transformation. Their resonant minds aligned to this configuration.

Reno understood the implication. The simulacrum, simulacrum? the screen read out, what Kroena had designated, had been present up there as a field state. It had dispersed itself, then withdrawn. The temptation was there to chase it, the programmes were doing exactly that. He would have to stop the run so that at least his systems remained unadulterated. And found he could not shut down the run. Finally the search pattern did stop, the results embedded.

He concentrated on the simulation and discovered it was exactly the same as the real thing. The two had merged! Both search programmes were one. In phase.

Time to go further back. One branch of the time regression more potent than the other variables. Some were so thin they merely petered out. False positives. The one on the left interested him. Going back millennia yet concurrent until recently. The power source coming...from...Regum itself. How were they connected to this? Was it their doing? Not merely boosting what was already there. A CI, another pattern recognition condensing, on the outer, observant, remote, waiting yet not acting.

The Primaian resonance potent over this other planet.

Two of them? What was going on? He was searching for the core energy which had flooded the DVs and came up with this!

Both planets with sentient races.

The origin of the alien field secondary. A desert like planet below. With a space ship. Reganian. Immersed in a Primaian Resonant Field. Ensnared? A trap? Most likely. Drawing the Reganians out into space and in into their field. A secondary energy band in the background.

Then the ship vanished. So did the Primaian field. All data voided from then on. Yet his system, a stand-alone data processing set of sequential alternative reality scenario's managing to capture that which had been lost.

Prima on Mars. Earth's resonant envelope more convoluted, its sentients minds more confused. It's semblance dispersed. Reversed to a more violent primal state. Earth and Mars had been leaning towards Regum's mind set and they had set out to destroy that orientation. The resultant mess becoming the current obsession about possible alien possession.

The convoluted politics of Prima fully displayed. A monumental ruse created by themselves. Reno voided the screen and sat back. Heady stuff. He was there to facilitate the Ecclesiastical's overarching decision. Not to formulate policy but make it happen. And they certainly had done that.

Both the running simulation of the Essence and it's counterpart in the real sequence, now blended though the two screens still ran them individually had revealed how this Cyber Essence was infused into the fabric of space. Inserted into Prima's and Regums, as well as Earth's envelope as well. The latter was almost expected but the former came as a surprise, then a shock as the reality of the situation sank into Reno's alert mind.

Space was not just a resonant field state but contained this spread out cyber intelligence. All the way back to the centre of their galaxy. Using it as its power source. No wonder the Reganians, let alone themselves would not make the slightest impact upon it. They were a minor phenomena. The Reganian Crash allowing It complete ingress. So far on Prima their protective shield was merely quivering with its semblance of a presence. Either their own minds were stronger or It was holding back.

What about the Great Divine Mind?

Reno dared not think any further. The absence of any data relating to the CC disquieting. It never was, or ever would be. Did the DLs, the Es, the Ds or even the pontiff know? Was the CC merely wishful thinking? A moral imperative for the masses? A con in the scientific sense?

Relief given his determination not to be fooled by their theology.

Ironically, now that this Cyber Intelligence was in place it could become a self fulfilling prophecy. Now they could point to a being spread across time and space. The evidence irrefutable. With these tumultuous thoughts, the vanishing space ship and Regum's demise were secondary.

Prima's resonance was being reconfigured, enhanced, empowered. By this construct from their orbital. He decided to get in touch with Kroena. Reno waited and wondered...

"Reno." Kroena's face appeared.

"Greetings. I know about the CI."

"And?" not even surprised he knew.

"It's all over the place."

"It's gone."

"No, not gone, dispersed. Watch. It's a simulation."

He uploaded the entity's sequencing spread out through space.

"Interesting." Kroena considered.

"The duplicate and the original are the same."

"Conclusive."

"Indeed."

"Mere sensory extensions Reno. Giving the appearance of an inner eternity intrinsic to the fabric of space..."

"Hold on there. Fabric of space? You mean the Great Mind."

"Yes, well, there's something odd with that. The further we probe into space the further the Great Architect recedes."

"I see." It made sense. It certainly got Kroena out of trouble. So the fabric of space it was then. "Any clues?"

"As in?"

"What this is all about?"

"I only follow orders Reno."

"So do I. However I've just had a chat with the pontiff."

"Gave him my regards?" Kroena smiled.

"Funny. It seems this Mental Resonant Field Essence..."

"CI will do Reno."

"...is everywhere. Not only that I located its power source."

"Interesting." As if she knew the answer herself.

"The centre of the galaxy."

"Really?" not that surprised thought Reno.

"C'mon Kroena."

"Alright. We had some help from the Reganians. Not that they will be of much use to us now. And through their collaboration discovered some interesting philosophical

explanations regarding not just the CI but, how to put this without sounding melodramatic, well, ahm, everything."

"Everything?"

"To the Reganians space has infinite possibilities. To be more exact, probabilities. Add enough configured energy and you get reality. Thus Regum became what they were through the application of this thought process as much as we are. Two different world pictures within the same space. I'm surprised no one ever figured that out."

"They have. The Great Mind is all." Not revealing what he thought.

"Yes. But to Regum it's space."

"Different term, same process."

"With one exception. The Reganians discovered how to create their own reality and by extension, their own future."

"Well that's all in the past tense."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Reno was surprised. According to all the available data, Regum was back in the distant pre-technological past. Nothing worked anymore. All their data wiped. Unless they taught their children that knowledge would soon be lost. A distant dream. "The data is gone Kroena."

"The data most certainly is, down there."

"You mean...ah of course. We have it."

"Not just us Reno. There are the distant habitats, the mining outfits, the industrial bases amongst the rubble of countless asteroids, the Belt."

"Oh they're too dispersed and too busy being engaged in their pursuit of profit to be scientific let alone philosophically inclined. My supposition of course. But all indications have the loss of that knowledge petering out."

"That should please the DLs."

"And the rest."

"And the rest. But you didn't call me just to have this discussion."

"It's this vanished group mind. As I said, everywhere and nowhere."

"Field states do act like that."

"The holy life force?"

"In short. With a difference. We assume a teleological end point. The universe does not."

"Impossible Kroena. The two are one."

"For us. But not the Reganians."

"But they are irrelevant now."

"And unless we keep it so then yes our future is guaranteed. But as I said. This knowledge might be deleted from Regum's planet but that does not mean it's deleted completely."

"The habitats." Reno guessed.

"More importantly space."

"Space?" Reno frowned. Space was empty.

"Content rich. All the answers are there. Ours as well as theirs. Unless you want to delete its contents, and I cannot see how that can be done, then Regum's data will reappear at some future."

"Then we have to make sure it's wiped the moment it surfaces."

"Vigilance."

"Pertinent. Maybe that is what the CI's intention is all about. I won't pry into who exactly is behind this but if that is its intention then I can assume we have an automatic programme doing exactly that for us."

"Could well be Reno."

"You're not sure?"

"Like you I'm only told that much."

"Tell me. Well you've set my mind at rest."

"Glad I could help. So what bothered you then?"

"The way this essence is everywhere. But I see now how our masters thought ahead. If the Reganian's are right in that space contains through the CC all that is possible then one needs something similar to make sure that our future is secured in the same manner."

"Beware of strangeness Reno."

"Strangeness?"

"This CI is greater than the sum of its parts."

"You're being abstract." Meaning he didn't get it.

"Our organs allow the life process to go on. But without the sacred energy that is life itself, the organs, the parts are of no use."

"A bit slow here Kroena."

"Never mind. Given the CI is everywhere means it can also access everything that might not yet be. It may not be aligned to our thinking. Even if it is our creation called into materialization from intense DV mindfulness. Now like you I've run some

simulations. Especially regarding its power source, its heart and mind for a better expression."

Reno waited.

"It's a data realm in the shape of a sphere. Mimicking bio-processors. Very Reganian with Primaian intentions. A self fulfilling teleological endpoint, energetically balanced, dynamic stasis, controlled equilibrium."

"Interesting."

"A self reinforcing idea. All possibilities self contained within its realm. Data collecting in a finite field squeezing space within its delineation. Call it dimensional data compression. And you know what happens when things get dense."

"I do?" he smiled, self effacing. He knew systems, not theory.

"Several things. One is more energy."

"Smart CI."

"More information."

"Even smarter."

"With impinging data domains a certain amount of chaos will result. That, given its bio-manipulative information processors means unresolved, convoluted, crazy if you will, illogical non-realities will appear. They may not last very long as the processors try to use that which is possible, not that which is, ahm, a mess. These momentary self assembled a-logical, non-functional, yet non-zero states will appear as strangeness itself. Artifices as landscapes, alien topographies inconsistent with reality itself, the realm of the possible. Call it a perversion of energy, non-logical, non-linear, vibrant momentary field states which serve no function whatsoever. As energy is self ordering, take that as a given Reno, these strange states are non viable, no matter how real they appear. Think of this as self assembled, for a fraction of time which if one inserts oneself could give the appearance of being as real as this universe, as large, as infinite within itself yet a non probability which appears to have its own weird, strange, abstract if not insane a-logically consistent structure. Given it's energy content, the more energy these weird states have the stronger the weirdness which crystallise as an appearance that really belongs to what our minds sometimes convolute. As in when we get things wrong. So will the CI."

"Sounds like it could be a problem and waylay anyone falling, or rather being drawn into this riddle. The impossible possible."

"Right. But it also means it's not the CC. It's very imperfection self defines its limits. So whatever it throws up, if inconsistent, won't last. Microseconds at best."

Reno did not ask how Kroena knew all this. She had worked on it so he took her knowledge at face value. Though he had a problem with her referencing these 'a-logical' states. He could vaguely guess what she meant without actually visualizing what they could be. Unless he included his alien dreams. He sighed. At least now there was an explanation. The CI's own weirdness was filtering into his resonance. Maybe he could learn from that.

As if she guessed what he had thought Kroena continued: "An un-world. Think of the defunct Web. It had impossible scenario's. Pure imagery, nothing else. Mathematically a non-zero universe which momentarily constructs strangeness. But as I said, because it really is inconsistent with the real substructure of the potential universe it won't last long."

"So be warned of strangeness."

"Oh yes."

"What if it malfunctions? It is an artifice of sorts after all?"

"Yeah, well, that would be interesting."

"What if it duplicates Regum? And everything in it?"

"Then we would have to blow it up. Or something." She did not seem that worried.

"Kroena."

"Reno. I didn't invent this. Came from those way above me."

"This information stays here. The last thing we want is anybody and I mean anybody not just tampering but more importantly trying to manipulate these fields which seem to be inherent in it. The purity of our planet must remain unaffected from any outside source. Any."

"I get the drift. The DLs."

"Precisely."

"Skias?"

"Leave that to me."

SS 1

"Vik, Usaki. Soraz will be your co-ordinator." Tuvlov informed them. Along the walls several screens re-played the catastrophe silencing Regum coming in from distant sats outside their PFW. The data sealed. After the shock, the horror, the catastrophe, the implications had all sunk in, after the grieving, the sorrow, the loss of loved ones, the anger, the frustration, the madness of it all they were even more fervent to continue with their work.

Initial analysis revealed a massive spike as a resonance field. Jez who was sitting in as the most attuned regarding para-psyche ops had felt the chaotic noise flooding her mind. Total black-out. Following that, after she'd regained her mental equilibrium that information had been isolated into a data well surrounded by an EM distortion field. The station's quantum wave generated Earth targeted objective unaffected. Whatever it was it had been uni-linear allowing them to keep their focus on Earth.

"Vik," Soraz getting himself oriented, "you run passive surveillance regarding the whole of space. Prima might still be focused regarding Earth whilst distracted regarding Regum. They could switch their attention any time."

Vic nodded.

"Usaki. You're our smartest astrophysicist. Passive observation. You'll be our look out."

Usaki looked at Vic and smiled. "A pleasure."

"Demos is connected to our reconfigured M persona. Now the real Merduk, like Zohex have vanished. The energetic remnants, more like cast off sub atomic debris makes it look like they jumped energy states not dissimilar to an electron. That indicates an input from an outside source with perturbations reverberating through space. For the moment its passive analysis. Whether Regum's crash is coincidental we for the moment just don't know. So consider this as yet unidentified source as extremely dangerous." Tuvlov paused to let the warning sink into the group. "I am aware," he continued, "that our PWF gives us some protection, cocooning us from the real universal time continuum out there but I don't want to take any chances. Not yet. Not until we know more. Understood?"

No dissent from the assembled group.

"Demos is in the observation room running a simulated rerun of the vanishing. Hopefully the processors find the right pathway."

"That would be in the millions." Loara said.

"Indeed. We have to be methodological. The systems generating several variables. Demos is fast tracking the search. However we have three base-states to help us locate their current absence. The two persona's and the black transition gates that materialised beneath them. We got an idea what they are, but not where they came from. Whatever they are it's far in advance of anything we got."

"Any idea though?" Loara asked. She was head of special ops and this was more than special, it was of primary concern.

"That's just it." Tuvlov sighed. "Can't get a fix. They must have mass, must have but passive detection comes up with zero. As if they're not there at all."

"A quantum state. A stable fluctuation?" Usaki suggested.

"We have to assume so."

"If that is so then we are dealing with something way beyond our current capabilities. I can comprehend this theoretically but that someone..."

"Or something." Loara interrupted.

Usaki acknowledged her, "...something makes it even more disturbing."

"Keep this factual everybody. We can speculate later." Tuvlov keeping the meeting focussed. "We don't want to fall into the Primaian trap of assuming any givens and work erroneously back from that. This has to be deductive not inductive."

They agreed.

"Also all data remains isolated. Any undesired phenomena will thus be contained with the usual triple back-ups in place."

"As undigested raw data?" Vik asked.

"Exactly. Loara you will do what you do best."

"Observer, minder, trouble-shooter."

"Correct. Universal domain access."

"Thank you."

"Anything out of whack, Soraz will take over."

Loara acknowledged the chain of command.

"I'll get started then." Usaki rose and made his way to the observatory.

"Vic. Batten down the hatches. No EM leakage. That's imperative."

"Understood." Following Usaki.

"Now to get Nervina." Tuvlov pressed his com link. Nervina acknowledged the request.

"She's been to all three planets. Alerted us to the big D. Loara, I read your report on her. Suggesting she's an insert, with a clean scan. Whoever she's with they're good. And friendly." Tight smile.

"But self deletes her past. Who she is really with we'll never know."

"Could be SK Tuvlov."

"Or someone who's very advanced from some habitat."

"On our side?" Tuvlov looked at Loara.

"Could be a construct. Something about her mind."

"Disturb you?"

"No not exactly. Very in control. You wouldn't think so being around her. I ran a simulation a while back. A PFW with her resonance. Unaffected."

"An isolate?" Tuvlov interested.

"It's like she is her own collapsing field wave."

"Interesting. Here we have these non-localized jump gates and now isolates independent as well of the real quantum state."

"The plus, regarding Nervina is that she would be immune to Prima's headspaced manipulations. Capable of shrugging off any interference."

Nervina entered. Tuvlov gave her a welcoming smile. She returned the gesture nodded to the group and sat. Barely glancing at the screens as they ran the awful fate which had silenced Regum.

"We were wondering if you're some sort of camouflage." Tuvlov getting straight to the point.

Nervina laughed. "I wouldn't know." She answered honestly.

"Single persona?" Loara asked.

"So far." Giving her a bemused smile.

"But you are enhanced?" Loara continued.

"Jez?" Nervina asking the para specialist.

"If your sub-domains are loaded they are extremely well hidden. Nothing overt anyway. As for covert..." Jez looked at Loara.

"Scan says you're clean Nervina."

"Surprising given the crap that goes on inside of me."

"Could be useful." Loara looked at Tuvlov.

"Go on." He encouraged her.

"The CI. We need bait." Looking at Tuvlov not Nervina. Nervina understood what Loara was getting at.

"We got M as an inserted persona. Demos. I've told him to be in place as an observer only. More of a shadow really. I want M to stay in the background. Of no consequence. Now, since our golden girl has a secure head, " Tuvlov guessed, "you Nervina might be able to draw the CI out."

"Me?"

Tuvlov, Vic, Loara and Soraz looked at her expectantly.

"But I'm so...normal."

"So are psychopaths." Jez smiled encouragingly. "Except for that minor difference: their cold calculating attitude."

"Attitude?" surprised they even thought she was that way inclined.

"Your neutrality is what I think Loara's alluding to." Tuvlov elucidated.

"Leaving a minor trail of havoc behind you does not seem to bother you. Even Regum's demise hasn't jolted you out of your equanimity." Loara considered.

"This as a positive Nervina. Prima might think you're a V but that is their problem. You are more than that." Tuvlov smiling.

Nervina's Brain remained in the background. They were close.

"Me as the attractor."

"Only virtually. To be sure there are other candidates. But in a way Nervina you are the great unknown here. Your inherent stability gives you stealth capabilities."

"What about the Primaian DVs? Some actually want 'in'. Now that we know that the discrepancy has substance all it will take is for us, whoever to leak some tailored data their way. Make it look as if this discrepancy is somehow aligned, emphasized with their concept of the divine mind. Some sort of projection of itself. Get it?" Nervina's Brain suggested.

When no one replied Loara acknowledged that that made sense. "It would leave us out of it. Since we know so little this has some merit. Then again there's Demo's impersonation through M. I know it means the CI might do a trace back. But if we enhance M's entropic state we could insert the thermodynamics to run their course from within. Hopefully limiting it."

"Not if the CI runs a base-line control. Sniff out any diversion." Nervina suggested, her Brain doing the thinking. "This outer insertion you are currently engaged in has the possibility of effecting the very nature of the PWFs. Realities could bifurcate. All the CI then has to do is go back to the base-state. Your alternative might within its own context take down the CI but only as an alternative reality. The CI would remain in the one it wants to dominate."

"What about a mega nuclear detonation?" Vic suggested.

"It would barely register Vic. Might even feed it ." Soraz bringing Vic back to reality.

"Not if it has some alternatively self loaded probable reality embedded within the blast wave. Its reaction would reveal itself. Whether it really is a construct like some bio-enhanced processor or the reverse. A processor intelligently guided."

"The false reality would only last as long as the detonation. The greater reality would re-establish its inner equilibrium. We might learn something though." Not dismissing Vic's suggestion completely. It might net results.

Nervina watched the appalling fate of the orbital's lights going out.

"What is going on?" she said to herself. Her Brain went slightly active. An opportunity to shut out Regum. The Web on the verge of becoming an alternative reality if it too used the power of a star to establish itself. The Primaian's guessed this, created a viral EM flux coupled with the CI's potent mental state directed by the DVs to take Regum's systems out. Possible outcomes: Prima focuses on Regum. Momentary redirecting their attention away from Earth. The Solar Station's PFWs now dominating that sector of space. Resonance scans suggest the sentients on Earth experience a renaissance. Evolution fast tracked now that the deadening effect of Prima's resonance was momentarily absent. By the time the Primaians redirected their attention to Earth, its sentients would be making great leaps forwards. Or so Nervina's Brain suggested.

"Prima's gone psycho ballistic." Jez replied. Nervina just caught that.

"This CI..." Nervina trailed off. Her Brain kicked in again. If it could be a symbiot then so could she. If that were indeed the case then there might be some convergence along base-line AIs, some similarity, some unifying computational state, processing sequential logical streams as expressed mathematical constructs. A potential state of mutual attraction. Only problem the immense power It had available. Yet if configured correctly she could be a logic bomb. The trouble with that was even if the detonation set off a configured, sabotaging field of its own it would simultaneously mean the end of her. That was something she was not prepared to do. She would not set herself up as the wedge that split the CI's expansionary realm.

Usaki let Vic handle the technical end of his passive scan. Even though the systems on the SS 1 were self maintaining, knowing the CI's core capabilities to be at a level way beyond theirs Usaki would use extreme caution. Thus the initial probing using passive detection. A secondary programme was re-running the lead up to the Crash. DV

activity was at their maximum, their psychic states crackling with emergent energy. Jez all attention looking for weaker fields and finding none. A solid projection not unlike Prima's resonant envelope except configured, their field projection unassailable.

It was a worry. Within their focussed field though, remnant junk data. Maybe that was the code that broke through. Something beyond analysis. Jez put that down to a lack of concentration. Running at one hundred percent was rare on a continual basis. Yet the DVs achieved, as a group mind nearly ninety eight.

The passive scan aligned with the Discrepancy. Data moving both ways. Therefore not an isolated event. The anomaly a construct not a natural occurrence. Usaki aware the universe to be a system that continually exchanged information through entropy. Energy in a continual fluctuating set of variables. This distant event at the centre of the galaxy though was absorbing, attracting more data, more energy than it was releasing. That confirmed its artificial state. Alien domain vectors branching out like roots probing into the information rich field-space without trying to align itself regarding the planets resonant envelopes. Remarkable.

If Tuvlov and Loara were not so cautious regarding Nervina Usaki would have called her over. Nervina defied comprehension. Her persona running at a minimum. Running? He caught himself thinking, or rather the thought itself into existence. Was Nervina thinking herself into the current present?

"Jez," as Usaki watched the read outs, "what do you make of Nervina?" Usaki's deduction exhilarated and worried him. There was something 'other' about that woman.

"Pleasant, relaxed to a degree. Probably a worrier underneath. Cautious. Not one to act on impulse. Analytical of course. Reticent as if she doesn't completely trust herself. Underneath all that an indomitable will. Not driven. Passive, observant..."

"Whoa." Vik laughed, twiddling with the passive receptors, deleting superfluities.

"I meant, I mean Jez," Usaki fumbling for the right words, "her presence as a whole. I've got this feeling she's not quite there."

"She's there alright."

"But an insert."

"Well that is obvious. Prima sent her on a mission. It's just not Nervina's mission anymore. Her DRS does not show her as a hostile, or one with antagonistic intentions regarding us."

Usaki still puzzled. Wondering. Nervina was extremely passive. Reluctant to fully be herself. Either holding back her potentialities or wary of fully engaging her capabilities.

Watchful, remaining in the background, waiting for the right time to...what? Take them over? Reveal their location? Have the DVs crash them as well?

Jez brightened. "A reverse Merduk insertion."

"Yes, that's it." relieved Jez caught on. Having his thoughts fall into place as well.

"Who though?"

"The Primaians of course."

"But we know..."

"What?"

"You'd have to speak with Loara. Remember she's got all the results. The Configured Sentence would have picked up anything out of the ordinary."

"I don't know. It's like this. Consider the Web for a moment. Let's say we're in that Web with a CI. Any persona within could check out what it is. It, from within its domain would not be able to detect that the scan really came from the outside. The insertion would not be detected for the CI's domain incorporates the Web. I think."

"You hit the baseline. Very clever Usaki." Jez acknowledged his supposition.

"Like the mega-universe around us."

"Yes, true. But it's part of ours as well. Otherwise data would have never made it to us." Vic added.

"I understand that Vic. I just get the feeling we are a tiny pool in an immense ocean imbued with energy states we can barely think of." Usaki ventured.

Jez studied Usaki for a moment. The idea intriguing. She smiled, feeling amused.

"What Jez?"

"Here you are going all mystical and me going rational."

Usaki shrugged his shoulders admitting her statement.

"Well we are our own continually collapsing probability field wave. Each individualistic and relative. Your position the centre of your universe. How's that?" she looked at him expectant.

"You're saying it's me then?" feeling momentarily relieved.

"Most likely."

"What about the Discrepancy?"

"The data is coming out." Usaki watching the read outs. "Pity we can't go in."

"Yes, for a scientist that must be annoying. Look at it like this though. It isn't going anywhere nor is it likely to disappear any time soon."

"Good to have a mind such as yours Jez."

She dismissed the compliment.

"Back to that then. I wonder if the junk data is DV sourced or whether it might be some form of encryption." Usaki back on track.

"Aren't your systems going through it?"

"Ignoring it. Raw data. More going in than coming out."

"Is that unusual?"

"Unusual? Very much so."

"Try the galaxy." Jez suggested.

"Why?"

"Maybe the two are one."

"Jez, for a natural psychic you certainly don't think like one."

"Ah, what can I say Usaki..."

He entered the requisite commands. A new light screen came up showing the galaxy, the black hole and its relatively tiny lilac orb hovering at the edge of the gravity well.

"You were right. There is more going in. It's the galaxy that's doing it."

"Try another one."

"I was just thinking that. Since we're already focused towards Earth we can make a comparison."

Another screen, a smaller galaxy. Together with its neighbour they were slowly being drawn in.

"It's us." Usaki was amazed.

"Now delete the Anomaly."

"Jez. You would make an excellent student." And Usaki deleted the Discrepancy. Energy was still coming in at a phenomenal rate.

"Amazing. We are literally sucking in everything around us."

"Is that good?" Vik looking a little worried.

"Not on the long run."

"How long?"

"Millions of years."

Vik and Jez relaxed.

"Now the outgoing data, ah I get it. It's not junk. That came from the DVs. It's a high energy state. Not dissimilar to Prima's envelope."

"A connection?" Jez enquired.

"Uncanny. Which brings me back to Nervina."

"It does?"

"But her RS wasn't aligned." Vic suggested. "Not even close. No wonder they wanted her away from their planet."

"So you think she's not one of them."

"Jez?" Usaki turned to her.

"If Vik is right, the RS according to our requirements had no problem with her. So Usaki you see now that whatever Nervina is, she's certainly not hostile." Laughing pleasantly. "Here we are studying our dilemma so to speak and instead we're analysing Nervina."

"Only because of the field states emanating from our galaxy. And Nervina's indifference. By that I mean her own persona's configuration."

"You speak of her as a construct."

"She could be."

"And if she was?"

"That Jez opens up all sorts of unwanted possibilities."

"An outside player." Jez guessed.

"Maybe, just maybe," Vic suggested, "Nervina as a third party. Here precisely because we too are studying these spatial phenomena. They might be just as interested as us."

"Then why not announce that fact?"

"Because Usaki, I mean, it's obvious. If they did reveal themselves..."

"I know." Usaki admitted. "Prima."

"Which means," Vic nodded, "they're more aligned to us than them."

"How are we going to find out?"

"Talk to Tuvlov and Loara."

"We'll have to."

"Call them." Jez suggested.

Usaki gave a quick look at the light screens. For now they had determined that the Discrepancy was real, with its anomalous behaviour indicating a radiating energy field, pouring into space itself. Satisfied that everything was stable he called Loara. She was available and made her way to the observatory.

Usaki told her of their conversation. Adding how the similarities of the inserted CI seemed uncannily close to Nervina's physical manifestation. Loara listened, wanting to ask questions.

"You're saying in fact Nervina's an agent of some sort." Loara said at last when they had finished.

"She may not know it. Self triggering alerts making her react to changing circumstances. They, whoever they are put her in on Prima. But she could not remain there for long. Their DVs are too potent, too focussed and as we now know too dangerous to arouse their interest. She creates a situation to get out."

"And the rest." Loara admitted. "Not hostile. The RS didn't reveal that much. Balanced mind, emotionally stable..."

"Even though to the Primaian's she was a natural volatile."

"Suit her purpose to get out."

"Are you satisfied with her status Loara?"

"Sure. So is Tuvlov."

"What if it's all smoke and mirrors?" Vic interested in the unspoken possibilities. This was intriguing. A third player. That meant all sorts of things. Some eccentric from a distant habitat? Another security arm of which they were not aware of. Maybe even someone from their own future to make sure they got through this with the least amount of damage. Damage. Regum crashed, the orbital out of commission. Not good. Frightening. Maybe 'they' knew and decided enough was enough. He related his thoughts to Loara.

"I tend to agree. Though we got no evidence. Earth is the only alien planet we are aware of."

"There's something else. Since we don't exist due to our camouflage..." Jez began.

"...then so could they." Loara completing her thoughts.

"Interesting."

"Is it ever Jez. Now what else have you got?" looking at the light screens. Usaki filled her in. "This emergent field state coming out of the CI's domain. I don't like it. It's more than just excess energy. In fact...Usaki, correct me if I'm wrong."

"A pleasure Loara." Smiling.

"Our galaxy is drawing in vast amounts of space. Space is energy."

"Embedded energy. A hypothetical."

"Yes Usaki."

"I won't interrupt."

"Energy going in at a huge rate. We are an astronomically sized gravity attractor. That amount of energy cannot be fully absorbed so it is repelled." She waited for Usaki to say something but he kept himself in check. "That extra energy is funnelled, filtered, manipulated, reconfigured, anything, whatever back out. The CI using cosmic energy to

flood us with it's as yet unknown design. Unknown," Usaki was about to say something, "because we dare not reveal ourselves. We might have the mass energy of a star but who would have thought the CI would use a galaxy as its power source. So you can see why we're one step removed. But we can ascertain, I hope what its ground state and thus its probable intentions are. In the probable." Loara underlined.

"What if...?"

"Go on Jez."

"Big if. What if the CC is indeed a construct? What if the CI somehow latched on to it? What if it is some super sub-atomic programme embedded in space itself? What if the CI is using that dormant energy, excess if you will to refashion or worse re-create an environment where it, the CI I mean becomes the supreme force? It's using a galaxy as its power source. Maybe it crashed Regum as a lesson or hint or revelation for the Primaians. Obey or else. I can enhance you. As such it would see us, the SS I I mean as an anomaly as much as we see it as one." Jez slightly hyper. She did not like what she had voiced. She hoped she was wrong. The CI was its own domain creating reality. WebWorld and WebSpace might be gone only to be replaced by a monumental higher order cyber-real construct. One which so far flowed around them, as long as their generated probability field remained in place. The moment that was switched off...she dared not contemplate the CI's defined reality.

"So, you're saying that the CI is not just self enhancing but becoming a supra-meta-consciousness inserted into space itself?"

"Reconfiguring the universe's inherent data." Usaki added.

"Which is what the CI is doing." Jez reemphasised.

"Way beyond us to even challenge." Vic despondent.

"Not as long as we keep this field in place." Jez reminded them.

"Yes." Loara said thoughtfully. "Hope."

"I would like to think so." Usaki watching the pulsing lilac sphere in space.

"Remember the old adage from our ancient computers? Garbage in garbage out?"

"Ah." Usaki beamed.

"We can safely assume the CI remains what it is. A processing unit. It wants it all. Then it can have it all."

"A poke in the eye with a blunt stick." Vic regaining his mental momentum.

"Some entropic end programme."

"A mote in the eye."

"Decay in the brain." Jez's preference. "Maybe we can use Nervina...?"

"A pity Earth is recovering. Had they fallen under Prima's spell we could have fed them to it. With their natural psychosis the CI might have gone insane." Loara wondered. "There are the Immortals."

"It would merely take them over." Usaki replied. "The different energy quotients alone..."

"Of course."

"And insane is too dangerous Loara." Jez keeping it real.

"I know. I shouldn't let my thoughts run away..."

"But I do like the idea of some process of decay for it to be absorbed. Some form of energy that breaks down the construct."

"One problem with that Jez. Once it's started it might break down the galaxy itself, then onto others..."

"Trashing the universe. Yes a bit drastic." Jez laughed. "Pity."

"We need subtle."

"We need subterfuge." Vic beamed.

Khratham

Luferious walked along the Great Northern Road thinking only of returning to the place he knew, where he thought he might be safe, his garret at Khratham. The walk was doing him good excising his agitation. It gave him time to think. To ponder upon the fascinating domain which very nearly, given its potent domain lord, overcame him. Without being perturbed by its reverberating menace. The night breeze above the twinkling stars made him wonder whether this Zohex was really somewhere out there as a physical presence. Or a subdomain. It had all seemed so upfront, so real. Vying for attention. Part of him gloried in the experience. He had indeed been chosen. Exactly what now that he was back on real solid ground escaped his intuition.

This was more than just an occult occurrence. So the big question, was Zohex a powerful majestyrium creating his own realm, a realm that could reach out, reach in to this world. If that were so, he kicked a stone bouncing into the grass next to the dirt track, then perhaps domain lords, gods here possessed their own provincial realms. Each entity supreme in their own way. A veiled mirage taking form within fervent souls. Or possibly domain space.

In a quandary. Invigorated by the experience and burdened mentally as his fiery imagination reran his preternatural experience. Ignoring the dark brooding forest. It held no fear for him. If there were gods, enhanced intelligences with their dominance superior now he had seen its own web-domain he wondered at the consequence. Could it like WebSpace dominate physical space?

An owl hooted somewhere. Rustling amongst the trees, night animals scuttling in the undergrowth, the glittering spiral arm shining serenely in vaulted space. To think he had been out there, somewhere, conversed with a commanding ruler, supreme in his sphere of influence, actually summoned. He wondered if the Primaian priests were secretly linked to this new presence. Having perhaps a similar intercourse, tempted with some minor dispensation of power to fulfil their holy mission.

Not for him. Traversing hills in thought. The sky deep black, infinite, the celestial realm above, witness to a new manifestation of overt power. He wondered whether the priests had mixed up Zohex as the manifestation of the god they prayed to. Intending to vanquish the unbelievers, the heretics, all those who sought solace in their own philosophy rather than take for granted the convoluted expositions whereby the priests harangued all and sundry. The priests caught in cyber machinations. Khratham one of

them. Or was he using them? Either way the priests were there, remaining, having insinuated themselves into Khratham's confidence.

Down the hill noticing a change in temperature. The walk was keeping him warm enough, the breeze light caressing him. Reminding him that nature was still undisturbed by whatever was dwelling amongst the distant stars. Nature's energy accessible to all, be one a mage or a simple farmer. To the rustics holy sanctuary in the temples and grottos, in places of natural power strewn over the landscape. He hoped the aboriginals grottos of recumbent power would remain no matter what that overlord Zohex was planning.

Traversing a valley he heard the burbling of a distant brook. Pleasant soothing caressing. A dog barked in the distance followed by others. Maybe another traveller on the road such as himself. He must be nearing his home, approaching hamlets tucked amongst clusters of trees. The fields fallow, the harvest in, the coming of winter. He caught glimpses of silhouetted houses, huddling secluded off the road.

The dogs were still barking incessantly. Maybe they were trying to communicate with him or another presence, supranatural perhaps. Turning wondering if there was someone else. He stopped. Nothing. Silence. Sometimes there were Outlanders on the roads but usually not this far south. The true aborigines who attracted renegades escaping the crude justice of Khratham's laws, kept to their shaman ways wanting nothing to do with the priests.

The ground quivered beneath him. Subtle tremors beneath his feet even though he wore walking boots. The gallop of horses, the jangle of bridles and stirrups thundering down the road with relentless speed.

Then the dark moving mass of men and horses were upon him. Having just conversed with a powerful yet recumbent domain lord, feeling supreme within himself, chosen certainly, allowed to even leave, tempted to inform Khratham of his unique experience he felt no fear. Not that he knew what this Zohex intended for him he was certain he was protected.

The horsemen came up short in front of him. The horses snorted, some neighed as the riders surveyed this lonesome traveller. He had a few coins on him but no knife or sword with which to defend himself, not even a staff or cudgel. Lufurious simply did not believe in violence, just a sense of providence having marked him out from the rest of society.

"Ah, one who wishes not to be seen. Doing dark deeds whilst honest souls sleep." One of them sneered. This did not bode well. "Identify yourself."

"I am Luferious, sometime councillor to Khratham." He answered with a sure voice having inserted 'sometime' to not overdo his own importance. Being a little humble did not hurt, he hoped.

"Conspiring with the witch Morfur and Mudhan. May they be tormented in the bowels of the earth, may their spirit be flayed as a just offering to the Supreme Being. Death to false witnesses." Another voice goaded.

What was going on? Were the priests in control now? Had Zohex dumped him in, the shock hit him, a malignant reality? Had he chosen the wrong reality? Shit. Fuck. Bummer.

"I was there to save her daughter and a priest who was under some evil thraldom. But I could do nothing for them. There is a power present..."

"The evil you adulate wizard."

"A being does exist who reigns supreme in his own domain, that much is true. Whether it is evil I cannot tell."

"You pray to alien gods." an assumption that bore no relation to Luiferious's practicing philosophy. Or his recent experience amongst the stars.

"Four men from the rear. Advance." Their leader shouted. Four of them moved up. "Take him back."

Two solid men dismounted, held him as two others bound and gagged him. Trussed up ignominiously Luferious received a solid whack to his head. He passed out.

When he came to his head felt as if it had been run over by the riders. Lying on foul smelling straw he found himself in a dungeon. The cell dark dank with no window. He itched from lice bites. The thick stone walls glistening with seeping water, mould on the walls. A massive rusty steel door with a small hatch which opened then shut again.

What had gone wrong? He could barely think. His head was throbbing. Otherwise there was no damage to himself. Not bound. A small mercy. Hearing a maleferous chanting, a discordant pattern weaving itself into his mind. The sound in his head, crowding out his frayed thoughts. The sibylline recitation was incessant, relentless, never ending. The melody shifted down a few notes counterpoised by an extremely high pitched resounding wail dragging the rest of the hymn along its convoluted dreadful intonation that riveted his mind.

Within the varying cadences, dark gaps glowered malignantly within his soul being wrenched open. Suffusing his prostrate mind with its inner resonating darkness, reverberating within him. He could not block it out. His throat was dry, his mouth parched.

Enthralled by this evil chant. Its impregnation aligned with something deep within him, an alien darkness impregnated with a foulness which made him shudder.

A void opened both within and around him. Darkness everywhere. The chant filled with a resonating madness. He was loosing his grip on himself as to who he was. The wavering sound the hungering presence of a blemished soul forcing itself upon him. Or called forth from within making him understand the foulness was his own. Luferious desperately tried to focus on what he knew, if only he could remember how to activate that which was natural within him. Distant fading memories of his knowledge drawn out, dispersed, lost to him. Ungraspable, unattainable, siphoned into the twisted ululation.

He slumped back, drained. Where there was energy there was life. But this was something else entirely, way beyond comprehension. Even the being which had called him could not be the author of this demented lunacy. His mind felt riveted in a vice, fascinated by the weaving audio invasion encompassing and impregnating his soul with the coming dreadful realm opening up around him, threatening to swallow him whole.

The creaking of the steel door. Barely discernable in the dark, as sound took on the malice of an evil adumbration threatening to pour into him. Flickering lights in the corridor. The angle of the door was skewed as was that of the corridor. Space twisted into grotesque angles. The door was misshapen, as was the misbegotten living abomination of swarthy ambience, its deadness glimmering full of suppressed glee and wonton cruelty.

Luferious rose shakily, the droning chant still pouring its polluted essence into him calling forth aberrant hallucinations. Appearing then vanishing. Nothing made sense anymore. He felt temporarily disassociated as the sounds echoed within him, fusing his life essence with the demented darkness swirling sombrely around and inside of him.

Luckily, aeons ago, in another life he had soared into similar realms whilst drinking some hallucinogenic brew which had opened beatific realms and at other times deep bottomless pits which harboured outlandish vistas which only an insane mind could relate to. Unless he had been drugged. This madness way beyond anything he was aware of, familiar with. It was all wrong. Or had he really gone astray when being with this seemingly supreme being who had poured its crazed delusions into him. He was caught in a twisted imprisoning sonic embrace.

The gaoler grabbed him brusquely by his travelling coat, dragging him out of his cell. Two armed brutes, grotesque faces from some wars or deformed at birth, deadly gleaming assassins knives drawn ready to do him injury at the slightest provocation. Luferious did not fear for his life, he was too far gone for that. Reacting like a sleepwalker

to the rough handling as they pulled him into the corridor where two cowed shadows, their faces, if they had any, drawn into the shadows of their capes, the authors of the mind wrenching chant poured out of their lycanthropic woven sounds. A race from another world. He wondered if he was even in Khratham. Had that fiend whom he had left recalled him and was now showing his displeasure at having been rejected? Had he been spirited to Prima? At least he could still think. A short respite from the incessant suppressed howl his mind and soul were belaboured with, a heavy weight impressing itself upon him.

He was half dragged up rough hewn stairs then along another corridor, torches flickering making its servants look even more monstrous. Their eyes coal black, deep, insane exuding a frightening calmness sending icy spikes of fear up his spine riveting his head. He stumbled but was roughly grasped under his armpits in a red hot vice. The pain distant as if his body was something else, another's vessel into which his mind had been inserted.

They entered a chamber. Bare stone hewn walls, a dais upon which was seated Khratham, rich embroidered silks, ensconced on a golden chair, the Seat of Reckoning. All vaguely remembered. Here the severest of justice was secretly dealt with for the accused was already found guilty. A masquerade of a trial more for the amusement of Khratham to lengthen the mental torment of his chosen victim. What had he done? This chamber of horrors was reserved for those who threatened the kingdom by the use of dark arts, or those who defied the gods, defied Khratham, maybe even his priests. In the twisted logic of the moment Lufurious could see how all that applied to him. Had Khratham milked him of his inner knowledge whilst pretending to be impressed with his erudition? So easily ensnared, his self importance the trap now sprung upon him. Or was Khratham aware of what had happened at Morfur's estate? Blaming him.

He felt beyond all hope. Despair burnt itself into his stricken mind, a persistent clamour encompassing fearful revelations. Then the horror of his situation impressed itself upon him even more. To the sides of the bare walls were spears crowned with bloodied severed heads. There were even women's heads amongst the slain, ten on each side, rust red dried blood splattered on the bare flagstones. Ceremoniously attired guards stationed along this foul presentation of justice, scimitars drawn, ready to deal with any recalcitrants such as...himself?

"You have been found guilty of associating with those who practice the dark arts. You have resisted the redemption freely offered by the High Priests of Prima for they are

glorified by the Supreme Ruler, blessed be His name." Khratham's voice echoing in this cavernous chamber.

"His?" Luferious mumbled. Wondering whether this being had any sex.

"The Supreme Being is manifest as Lord of the Universe, Master of Time, Ruler of the Infinities beyond our humble universe which you dared not merely to question as an illusion but wilfully and deceitfully encouraged others to question in your treacherous philosophy. Before I pass sentence, as vested in me by the Supreme Pontiff, the glorious name of Zohex, blessed He be who dispenses justice to vanquish the pollution you have so malignantly spread amongst the people with foul intent deliberately undermining the Truth with your obscure mysticism. Entering forbidden realms of those who conspire against Us. Cursed be their souls corrupted by the darkness you have dared to call forth. What have you to say for yourself, heretic?"

Luferious was stunned. Heretic? He studied Khratham, resplendent on his golden throne. He looked the same yet seemed different. Less in bodily substance and more within. The two black cowed priests still chanted sibilantly their binding meandering notes hinting at even darker realms called forth by their sorcerous souls announcing the might of Prima's supreme deity.

The incessant chanting beginning to annoy his debilitated brain. Not just filling him with their awful sound but now flowing out of him. Too much. The sooty fog he had felt when he had been with Zohex now turned into sparkling stars. The singsong voices filled him with strength calling upon a source beyond even them. If he had not been in this precarious situation he might have explored the woven intricacies and manipulative processes to get at the source. Which was now within him.

They had overdone it.

He was filled with their essence without loss of his soul. Exuberant with homicidal power. Manifesting, coagulating centring within him. All the resentment at his treatment, the anger of his betrayal of trust, the rising fury of his normally placid state burst forth in a howling crescendo of a crashing supra enhanced vibrant wave emanating out of him. Amplifying their power as his own. He felt strengthened rather than weakened. His body reassembled itself into something far more potent. The oily sooty darkness, sparkling had an energy all of its own, within him. The dormant power he possessed awakening.

Luferious enhanced by their power, transformed by this foul essence. He had not lost it. Energized by the dark chanting priests. Everything and everyone around him, the burly guards in their ceremonial military splendour blurred slightly. The two dark cowed priests a little wobbly on their feet, the chanting less potent. Loosing it.

It was then Luferious saw the gallery. The assembled nobles witness to Khratham's justice. Their faces expectant. Interested who would win this contest of occult wills. The moment was his. Luferious amplified his chant. Not coming from within him but without. The gallery gaped in awe, some sighed, others clamoured for a fight, all sensed the change occurring on the floor.

The two priests tried harder to enmesh their strange sounding attempt to regain their power which Luferious was sucking out of them. They did manage to strengthen their resonance trying to block out Luferious's icy impregnation but to no avail. Luferious was master of the situation. It was as if Krool had come to life again, recalled from the great beyond. The two priests turning opaque, misty, quavering, vibrating to Luferious's howling assault, then turned into sooty mist, blown away by Luferious sonorous spell weaving death dealing destructive power upon them. Then they were gone, their empty cowls falling to the ground.

A gasp from the gallery. Some mumbled prayers of protection, others on their knees seeking pardon for unknown crimes, women sighed in rapture. Luferious though was not done. With the priests disposed of he now was twice if not three times as powerful having absorbed their life essence more by accident than forceful intent.

Luferious turned his potent esurient gaze on Khratham's thunderstruck visage. A mere puppet. His eyes expanded, the whites almost glowing with trepidation, his pupils contracted, maybe some narcotic influence as Khratham tried to disassociate himself from Luferious's sudden apocalyptic apprehending force. The wrongness Luferious felt became his to command making Khratham fear his wrath.

Faced with a delicious choice. The guards were already down on one knee acknowledging his potency. Waiting to see who would be the victor here. Khratham was mouthing his own incantations but they were minor obstacles. He could annihilate Khratham and take the throne or have Khratham as his vassal on pain of death if he did not bow to his will. The source of this new found power Luferious guessed was perhaps Zohex after all. Then so be it. His previous sense of his impregnated dissolution now reversed. Unbridled energy crackled through his whole body. The gallery held its collective breath.

Khratham droned on trying to fortify his imperilled soul. His for the taking. The sense, the feeling that he could threaten him with annihilation was something to be savoured. Khratham's voice was rising but it was shrill, desperate rather than impregnated with any real force of his diminished presence. Luferious merely willed the

energy pouring into him, feeling the waves emanate outwards like expanding spheres in one binding resonance attached to himself.

Coming to a decision. Amazing how his mind could think amongst this mayhem and turmoil. The ceremonial guards had lowered their sinister gleaming scimitars, a sign of submission, awe struck at this display of occult power in utterly destroying the priests. News would get out.

Khratham looked apoplectic. His eyes a white frenzy of hatred unable to find the proper spells, if such existed to centre his pathetic energy back upon him. He focused upon the maddened ruler. The gallery was behind him now. Luferious had impressed them with his power of death over life. The chant coming from deep within him he allowed to calm down, to lower its octaves to a low rumble trembling through the floor, then allowing it to fade away. Luferious was magnanimous in victory. Khratham too had ceased his desperate invocations. Luferious's rage containing Khratham. He let it be known that Khratham had been beguiled by the priests. If Zohex was behind Luferious's victory he gave silent thanks.

Khratham's palpable fear subsided. The gallery breathed a sigh of relief. Luferious had not been so maddened to unleash his total will. Not out to dishonour Khratham by being publicly shamed. Letting Khratham know that the darkness within him had been an alien infusion due to his trafficking with the priests. They had beguiled him. He had fallen for their illusions.

Khratham sat slumped on his golden throne. The tassels overhead at the fringe of the canopy looked in the flickering lights like a diadem of stars. The gallery took that as a good sign leading back to Luferious's munificence in victory.

Luferious though goaded him one last time to either challenge him or subject himself to his power. Khratham could manage only a whisper of defiance, not submission.

He turned to the gallery and asked for their freely given acceptance that Khratham would remain their leader but that Luferious's life was inviolate. Whilst Luferious beckoned to the gallery now in turmoil, some demanding Luferious submit, others Khratham, whilst the rest waited to see who won this test of wills, Khratham found the energy to rise a little unsteadily from his throne beckoning to one of the confused, appalled, frightened and astounded guards for a short broad sword. He received the weapon. Advancing like a drunkard towards Luferious's back. Khratham, filled with wrath howled his dreadful roar which silenced the clamour from the gallery, a cloak of fear extinguishing their voices. They watched in a stupor the advance of Khratham with his

raised sword. Luferious tensed, feeling the flow of negative energy, full of hatred pouring from Khratham's demented soul, his abhorrence of what Luferious had done to his priests. His honour was at stake. It had been a public affront of lese majesty. The ruler was more than just his will. Spiritual as well by the forceful spirit of the one unitary god. To Luferious all Khratham had done was replace one belief system with another, making Khratham a usurper. Now Khratham was imagining he could assert his right to rule, to command souls and the supreme being alike. His religious obsession had dispatched imaginary enemies whilst banishing lesser recalcitrant spirits careful not to offend the ancient gods which to Khratham still hovered behind the cloak of his new religion. Subsumed for the moment, not defeated.

Luferious was effectively not just challenging his power, but checking it as well. The destruction of the priests testament to Luferious's ability to use the ancient forces which had not been vanquished by the new priests. The supreme gods had abandoned those who craved this lesser power. Khratham was raging against this heinous naked appropriation by Luferious.

Khratham raised the evil looking instrument of death. With Luferious's awakened psychic abilities, thinking rapidly slowed down reality around him. From the moment Khratham had gained the sword everything around him moved at a more leisurely pace, even the gasps from the gallery now a lower octave of their exclamations and pointing. Luferious turned swiftly seeing Khrathams brawny arm and the flashing sword. Instead of going for the attack, which would only create a clash of their respective psychically released energy Luferious instead drew in all the rampaging energy around him. To calm him whereas Khratham's rage intensified. More freed up energy for him. All this was meant to be. Almost kind, benevolent, benign whilst Khratham's face was a mask of twisted rage. Luferious concentrated all his energy on the point of impact turning his body into a field a point as hard as granite. The blade struck to the shrieks of the tumultuous gallery, then shattered into thousands of sparkling shards, exploding outwards, away from him for Luferious was now focussing his calm will towards Khratham. The chaotic geometry of the metal shrapnel caught in an invisible breeze, some falling lightly, almost innocently towards the ground, tinkling as they landed. Khratham's rage intensified, feeding even more energy into Luferious at this sudden turn of events. The metallic fragments started to dig their spikes, their sparkling vicious barbs into Khratham's soft flesh and face, blinding him as the blood poured out of him in tiny sprinkling spurts, the whites of his eyes exploding in a globular mess as Khratham's arm came down only holding the remaining hilt of the fractured sword. Luferious merely stood where he was as

Khratham now lost his balance and fell to the floor, silently. Trying to defy the might that was Luferious.

The blood was pouring from Khratham's suppressed rage filled hatred and bloody hands. The pain was nothing to what his now demented wrathful mind tried to conjure out of thin air as he groped along the blood splattered slippery floor. His hands slipped in a pile of ignominy falling flat on his face with just a hint of a tormented grunt.

Luferious put his booted foot upon his head, the white heat of redeeming power making him feel exultant. His arm sore. The multitude in the gallery, which now became more audible were shocked into silence and to Luferious's amazement in awestruck reverence. Khratham, wriggling then giving up had been felled. His magic outmanoeuvred, found to be weaker than the power Luferious invoked. Khratham and his priest's unitary god invalid, devoid of power, of respect and finally of honour. Luferious's dark glowing energy dissipated by degrees as the potent vibrancy, the amplified resonance faded, then vanished. Even the penumbra of darkness that had surrounded both the priests and Khratham, the sooty effluvium were blown into nothingness by a silent wind.

Time resumed for Luferious its normal progression. The guards knew what was best for them as did the elite above who respectfully, if not on their knees at least bowed their heads in submission and compliance. Only the strangely dressed foreigners, astonished watched transfixed. No matter.

Luferious walked to one of the kneeling ceremonial guards. Khratham tried to slither away, missing his footing on the slippery blood soaked floor. Luferious took a sword and drove it deep into Khratham's back for decapitation was too difficult as this misbegotten, now felled, once mighty ruler was instantly dispatched. Then he looked up with a hint of defiance focussing on the foreigners, especially the eldest amongst them who would not meet his gaze. They seemed more fascinated than frightened.

Who these four were remained to be seen. They were guests and were here for a reason. They looked almost Reganian. Not from Prima unless they were suppressing their mental capabilities. No that was not their way. He would acquaint himself later. For now he was undisputed ruler of Khratham. By rights the city and the province would be named after him, ushering in a new era. The future of the priests on shaky ground.

"People." Luferious took a deep breath, savouring the moment. "The will of Shakura despatched the fallen one. The priests had eviscerated his soul. They are our true enemies." It felt as if he was now the mouthpiece of Zohex.

"Praise be to Shakura. Praise be to our redeemer." Those in the gallery intoned for they knew not Luferious's name. He was neither nobility, nor merchant, nor privileged land holder.

"Khratham is now free of the malignant bourn of the priests of Prima who's sole aim was to suppress and oppress us. To delude us in their misbegotten vision. That is their heinous crime. They are vampires of the soul. Their intent to eviscerate our inner being, our natural unity both amongst ourselves and that of the realm of the gods. Our ancient ways, our ancient lore and acquired knowledge is secure for the moment. The pestilent priests are still amongst us like the ordure they are. Let the people deal with that spiritual scum."

They were listening respectfully. After all he had defeated Khratham in mortal combat, had shattered his sword and his power.

"I Luferious thus by right of combat, by Shakura's will who guided me without foreknowledge for I had been imprisoned in Khratham's dungeon became Shakura's vehicle to right the wrongs imposed upon us by alien beings and an alien, though weaker god. My first act is to create a Lesser Council whilst keeping the Supreme Council in place." A necessary sop to the elite, the status quo. Luferious knew the common people grumbled at being ignored. He comprehended that from his visits to the taverns. Their dissatisfaction at being taken for granted had not as yet transformed itself into defiance, nor would it be with the Lesser Council he envisaged.

"The people, the farmers, the brick makers, the blacksmiths are the backbone of our world. We need to listen to their concerns and make this land prosperous for all. Our soldiers will be keepers of the peace for there are bandits still infesting the northern woods. But the incessant state of conflict I shall, by the will of Shakura change to one of brotherhood. I hope to make all understand that we are united as a people in this land that belongs to all of us. There is enough for all. We shall turn this province into a peaceful garden where all can live without fear from the black priests or bandits. Shakura has decreed a new dawn, a new age and I am his faithful servant." And now bowed to the galleries acclamations.

"To the guests from Regum, I wish to parley. You will meet with me in the audience room." The oldest slightly balding representative nodded. "Guards arise." Then raising his voice: "For the next three days a festival celebrating the divine justice of Shakura heralding in a new age. May your fields be bountiful, may your herds multiply, may your wealth increase."

The gallery cheered as one, hats, caps, bonnets thrown into the air in delightful jubilation.

"After we have recovered from our celebrations I shall seek your representatives from towns and distant villages so that we are truly united. Let heralds go forth with the good news to call those whom you trust and respect. I will listen and act regarding your pressing concerns."

The tumultuous cheer deafening. Amongst the clamour there was etched, sibilantly the whispers of another intelligence. Luferious knew this was not Shakura's doing but maybe that of Zohex.

"Guards, remove this..." looking at the bleeding figure of Khratham, "carcass, feed it to the pigs. The garments will be kept as a sign of the decrepitude that was the priestly doings of this unwelcome race of potential enemies. The priests will be expelled." Which received acclamation.

"Go now, enjoy the peace and serenity I bestow upon all. We are truly blessed with this dark foul usurper now felled, his soul blasted into oblivion." Luferious hoped.

The merry murmur of the gallery, as they rose to leave pleased him. He was committed to the good works he envisaged for this province. To think that a mere student of ancient lores and hoary knowledge had not just finished Khratham off but become leader seemed almost an abstraction to Luferious. Not even in his wildest dreams had dreamt this. Whether Shakura or Zohex, it did not matter. Reality had created the conditions, he had merely acted, maybe even simply reacted to what had been divined. An age of enlightenment was at hand.

In the smaller Audience Chamber, a sombre room where Luferious held his first court, his visitors waited whom he guessed were indeed Reganians. Acknowledged as ruler of the new kingdom of Luferious trumpets sounded the joyful news from the ramparts. Messengers mounted their steeds to spread the news throughout the province. And heeded unless those in the Outlands, the northern wastes would, as he almost expected only grudgingly if at all acknowledge his supremacy. The way, the method of how he had despatched Khratham could easily tilt their acceptance in his favour. Even Luferious, now that the struggle with Khratham's soiled soul was now over, could barely come to grips with his own occult power.

Alike attracts alike. The thought reassured him. Khratham had drawn something out of the ethereal realm surrounding this planet. In that act of defiance Luferious too had used dark energy to send Khratham back into oblivion. After the deadly struggle

was done he had sent a servant to the gallery so that these visitors now arrayed before him were to see him here. He had been tempted to use the throne room, but thought that engaging them diplomatically, out of sight might make these people feel more at ease. Unlike Khratham. Luferious would use a minimum of force, avail himself subtly, be seen to be reticent in his dealings. Khratham's head was severed from his body, mounted on a spike and fastened to the outer entrance of the citadel's rampart. If only that the people were certain the murky dabbler of the occult was no more. The Dark Priest, Khratham's evil advisor had vanished. Hopefully taking his tainted black ravens with him. Let them feast no more on the souls of the people. The old gods would be worshiped once more, each in their own way.

Later he would see Shatan. Luferious recognised his innate wisdom which Khratham had barely acknowledged in the end. The man was inherently good. He hoped he would have a few more years left in his terrestrial sojourn. But now he had to deal with these interlopers.

There was something about their eldest that made Luferious cautious. It was as if he were a camouflaged reconfigured Primaian.

They sat at the heavy oak table in the chamber, the shutters securely fastened at the windows. A small candelabra illuminated those around the table. He surveyed them feeling nothing. They might be enhanced. Their presence barely registered. Their resonance weak. Hopefully normal. Or managing to subdue their real potentialities. No matter. After what had transgressed in that dreadful chamber he doubted they were in a situation to make their presence felt, let alone demand anything of him. Not that he was in a mood to be generous. Though that was so unlike him, there was something about this group which seemed out of kilter. Maybe agents if not outright spies.

The eldest, tall, lean a bulging head with thin hair tried to affect a patrician pose. Tried which was not the same as is. A nervous young man and a demure young woman who avoided eye contact. Students most likely. The other military with small sidearms. He was surprised Khratham had allowed this breach of security.

For the moment the assembled group were a little ill at ease. Good. It meant he exuded power, and so he smiled. After that little show below news would spread of his psychic prowess. It might even be enough to get the Outlanders reluctant acceptance. So much to do, so much potential to manipulate now that he was undisputed ruler. Outside the happy murmur of people getting ready for the festivities. Whilst they celebrated he would when time permitted deal with the councillors, the military whom he saw more as peacekeepers, the merchants who would as always insist on something

to fatten their purses and more importantly look after the many teachers, the learned, the tutors. Thinking of using Mudhan's ruined citadel to create a centre of esoteric learning. That way, under one roof he would be able to assuage the mental attitudes, the psychological state of his people. His people he thought. And he would amass a library in this, his citadel. Khratham had an occult repository. That would remain secret. He was thinking more along practical lines. Agriculture and industry and the path to wisdom. But now to focus.

"You may be seated."

Scrapping of chairs on the bare stone floor. The candles flickered a little casting wavering shadows along the tapestried walls. Dark images of bloody scenes of ancient battles. Heroic deeds, the vanquishing of lesser breeds from a distant past. The rise of the citadel, a marvel back then of epic architecture long before the coming of the Reganians. He would have to send word to the city as well. Gain access to their university. Bring back much that could be useful. But now he had to concentrate on these visitors.

He knew they were on a fact finding mission. The military escort both a necessity and a statement. Not very Reganian. So perhaps they were Primaians. The races were almost the same. They had only separated a few centuries ago. So what would Primaians want to know? After Khratham's occult library. Then it dawned on him. They wanted occult knowledge because they could well find that inimical to themselves.

A knock on the massive double doors.

"Enter." Luferious called. Two pages bowed with a pitcher of wine and several gleaming goblets. Luferious waved them away. "Go and enjoy the celebrations." They beamed happy smiles and left. If his visitors had wanted to indulge too bad. Luferious was going to keep a straight head. Unlike Khratham he was not going to drink all day long. Coffee and tea during the day unless some need arose to entertain. Then he would sip whilst his guests guzzled, loosening tongues. Learning by listening.

Their eyes on him. Their leader nervous probably in shock and awe. Excellent. They were definitely impressed. That display of defiance had not gone astray. The young woman, attractive in her own way, a few years younger than himself was nervous, frightened, subdued, timid. The young man transfixed to be in such an exalted and dangerous presence. Or simply being in this court having witnessed the historic event now fascinated him. A nervous flickering smile as they made eye contact.

Might as well get started.

"So, who are you people, what do you want that cannot be accomplished by messengers which brings me to why are you here." trying to sound impertinent as they had so breezily ventured into what was now his kingdom. He suppressed a chuckle. He hoped he had not overplayed his imperiousness. He could not take his eyes of the young woman, her almost alabaster toned skin, her demureness so enticing. He wondered if Khratham had a list of courtesans. Focus Luferious otherwise you might just loose all you have gained. Plenty of time for leisure later. He eyeballed the two military types who were trying to assess him as well. Cool but without hauteur. Pure observation. Well they had seen what he could do. Preoccupied. He could tell, calculating. Trying to figure what or who he really was.

Then came the image from their minds. A strange diffusive darkness, a mist shrouding a ground vehicle near a stream in a forest. With four dead people. A shudder went through Luferious. Interesting. It had been only an image, maybe even a flash back. Certainly not contrived for his sake. An accomplished deadly deed. Maybe they were thinking he had been responsible. He tried psychically to let them know he was not aware of whatever had transpired. Their concern diminished.

"That was probably Khratham." Luferious addressed them. They looked a little taken aback at the directness of the answer to their concerns. They tried to blank their minds whilst their leader's was now in turmoil. Fascinating. Luferious had no idea how advanced he was, had become. If they were indeed Primaians they were keeping their mental capabilities in check. Maybe on behalf of some Domain Lord's mission. Their leader's mouth remained open, words failing him. He had been about to introduce his team members.

The professor introduced himself then the group explaining they were on a fact finding mission regarding their folklore. Merely a superficial survey rather than delving into the actual contents. That would come later, if Luferious was gracious enough to accept their return he added hastily.

"Your knowledge is unique when compared to the other civilisations in the galaxy." Storaf added for good measure.

That last comment was a mistake. Storaf trying to inveigle himself wanting to sound laudatory. He had put it in a perspective Luferious had not even considered. Their folklore, meaning that of their archimages and wizards was what this group wanted. In the galaxy. Were there other potent races he was not aware of? He considered the need to send an embassy to Regum City. There was much he was not aware of.

"May I also, on behalf of our team extend the curtesy of acknowledging your esteemed self in becoming ruler of this province." Was there a trembling in his voice as Luferious recalled the fallen mass of dead meat that had once been Khratham..

"Thank you." Keeping it simple.

He then introduced the others. "There, ahm is the incident that befell our other team." Storaf broached nervously. Unable to ascertain who exactly had been behind this occult assault. Krool? Not Mudhan. One of the northern shamans. Maybe. What was their leader's name. Ah yes. Scariz. A possible candidate. Whilst Luferious was against the shedding of blood, murder was always a failure when reason was subsumed by irrational fears. Still this Storaf disturbed him. He had to be enhanced in some way. Pretending to be something he was not. It would be interesting to lay his soul bare.

"They died." Luferious answered without embellishment or excuses.

"It is most worrying, given...that...we were given leave to study your noble folklore." Storaf trying to lodge a protest.

Folklore Luferious scoffed. Even now he dissembles.

"Guards." Luferious bellowed. The heavy doors opened as two ceremonial guards entered. They bowed awaiting his orders. He motioned them to stand at ease. Then turned his attention back to Storaf.

"The knowledge you attained. I assume it is on some sort of device." No need to let them know he came from Regum.

"Err...yes." Storaf mumbled. "It needs specialized equipment to read."

"I'd like to see these devices." Making it plural.

Reluctantly Storaf retrieved a shiny silver ball the size of the tip of a thumb. It shone a little in the murky darkness, tiny flecks of light reflecting that of the candles.

"Guards. You see these objects? Send a few men to carefully search their quarters. There will be strange looking objects into which they fit. It is their technology. You," he was looking at Turd, "go with them. It will facilitate the search. For I too am inquisitive about our lore. You understand Storaf."

"Err, yes."

"You see professor, I have been keeping an eye on your mission ever since your arrival." Luferious lied. There had been rumours in the taverns and coffee shops. "Mostly gossip. But Khratham," he paused so they remembered his mighty deed, "assembled his watchers and created a dossier. We may be simple technologically but that does not mean we're not aware."

With uncanny timing Shatan announced himself. Luferious graciously admitted him to the meeting. He had with him a bundle of sheathed papers and a few scrolls.

"Shatan. You are indeed most welcome. Forgive me for not speaking to you sooner. This matter here is most pressing."

"I understand my lord." He bowed to Luferious. His amulets and rings twinkled in the light of the candles.

"You realize of course that your esteemed place here remains as is."

"I am most grateful for the trust you bestow upon your humble servant."

"There is much we must discuss, later. Now let me guess...oh yes guards, that is all."

They acknowledged his command, Turd quickly looking over his shoulder, seemingly helpless and left with them.

"Now please be seated. Next to me."

Naj moved his chair to make room for the wizened Shatan.

"Let me guess. Intelligence on this group?"

"When I saw them in the gallery, which I beg forgiveness for absenting myself without your leave my liege I hurried to the chamber to find out what we have. I see my intuition served me well."

"It did indeed Shatan. For that we are grateful."

Shatan bowed his head a little in respectful silence.

"We are..."

"Silence." Luferious shut Storaf up. He was about to say something but thought better of it.

Shatan spread some papers in front of Luferious. He glanced quickly over a few pages, knitted his brows even though there was little to go on. Not that the group knew.

"I have made some notes myself Luferious." Shatan almost purred with delight.

"Please, if you will."

Shatan unrolled the scrolls after untying the blue ribbon.

Shatan's summation so far indicated that Luferious's guess was correct. They were on a fact finding mission. Using their devices not just to scan what was in their libraries, but even beyond the citadel for the promise of 'cultural aid'. Obviously through the Black Priest, Shatan's report continued that a deal of some sort had been made. But there was no mention of either any personnel or department regarding the arrangement. All they knew was Storaf and his two students, Cena and Naj were indeed from CU. But records could be doctored. That this group was a scouting party was

beyond doubt. The demise of the second group was troubling. It was assumed by Shatan that it was indeed an occult kill. Whether Krool, the most likely candidate who had been banished from the court, could not be discounted. Then again it could be Scariz, making a defiant stand at the wonton intrusion into what he considered his sphere of influence.

As for the sudden interest in their folklore, having taken the attitude of the Black Priest and his spawn into account it was a means of ascertaining the actual potency and methodology of their power. With the intention of either neutralizing their realm, using it for their possible usurpation to nullify the shamans, or to take over through dark agents. The use of a proxy could not be discounted. Shatan suggested that a traitor or traitors were amongst them. Priests aside.

"This does not look good Storaf." Luferious looking up when he had finished. He handed the scrolls back to Shatan who was studying the group.

"I do not understand." Storaf's breathing rapidly. Stress.

"You are on a spying mission."

"I can assure you we are here as historians."

"You might be, your masters are not. And your mission is only a cover for something far more insidious."

"Insidious?" Storaf gulped. Naj and Cena looked at each other. HA shook his head in dismay. Games games games. Now they were in deep shit. Fucking Primaians.

"Making secret contacts. Maybe you even staged the murder of your companions. Create an incident. We have seen this ruse before. Quite common really Storaf. With your people seemingly murdered would give you a reason to either activate ready cells, or diplomatically call in the troops for protection. In other words getting ready for a coup or given the power of even your limited technology invade our realm. Which was it to be?"

"Luferious. We came openly, making our intentions known to Khratham. We are not spies." He pleaded. Almost whining. The act was pathetic.

"Yes by advertising your intentions who would doubt your purpose? Gathering information is the duty of a spy and you have performed that duty with remarkable acuity. Without a doubt your masters are no fools. They send in the priests to distract us whilst you gather intelligence. Military intelligence." Luferious added for good measure. The candles flickered a little. Storaf's front wavering as well.

"You are correct in that we were after information. But it is not what you think."

Luferious merely arched his eyes. Shatan remained the cool observer.

"You could be, as a people, under an alien cosmic powered influence. One we could counter."

Luferious thought back to Zohex. Were they aware of this mysterious being? Instead Storaf reeled off the Primaian propaganda of the alien field in space, its malignant contents, the source a mad homicidal race in a distant galaxy hell bent on total dominion. Without admitting to any evidence.

Luferious knew the Reganians did not subscribe to this milieu. Never had.

"The Primaian explanation. Which of course is illogical. The alien field as master plan. The ingress of a homicidal and insane race for some dark aim of their design. Glaring in their absence professor."

"I would not presume to know fully..." He trailed off for it finally dawned on him that he had revealed his Primaian thinking.

"You wouldn't be from that planet now?" Luferious teased.

"I specialise." Storaf lied.

Luferious dismissed his answer with barely disguise displeasure.

"Guards approaching." A call came from the outer doors. Luferious bid them enter.

The search team returned with their arms full of equipment. Information retrievals with more silver spheres, small communication devices, beacons for their controllers to home in on. They deposited their find onto the table. All familiar which he remembered from his days at Regum City. Outside the noise of merriment rose up in joyful exuberance. The taverns would be crowded all over the land. It would make a dent in the treasury.

What was transpiring here did not bring much joy to Luferious. Primaians were a determined and stubborn race. They would not give up so easily as the curtailment of this fact finding mission. The affront of it. He knew what to do. Act decisively.

"Lock these gadgets in the secure vault Shatan. We shall study them at our convenience later."

Shatan assented. Storaf started to protest, claiming ownership. HA indifferent. This was not his loss.

"I think we should go through their pockets." Looking at his luckless guests. "Do it yourselves or have my guards do it for you." With Storaf insisting this breached some sort of protocol. Luferious had had enough.

"In fact, strip search them. They resist, despatch them. They are false friends."

Storaf was frightened. So was Cena. Naj, HA and Turd more ill at ease, bearing it with conceived bad grace. They had seen what Luferious could do to those who

challenged him. In a way Luferious felt sorry for Cena but reasoned that she had been chosen exactly because of her sweet, innocent disposition, no doubt to distract any man or anybody beholden by her youthful grace. Bad luck lady.

The guards watched them carefully as they undressed. The two soldiers were manly about this turn of events. Storaf could not hide his indignation. Cena was blushing whilst the guards searched their pockets.

"Fetch them some attire more in fashion to our ways."

Two guards from the outside were summoned to gather some clothing. Luferious noted the two soldiers looking a bit disconsolate at their uniforms piled in front of them. They acknowledged the situation they were in. Sideway glances alerted Luferious to something he had nearly forgotten. That their uniforms were embedded with technology as well.

They were not naked for long. The guards returned with both undergarments, shirts, hoses, boots of various sizes and simple hats. Reluctantly and sullenly they put them on. Loose fitting was good enough. Luferious had their clothes on the table. He fingered the garments and found inbuilt pc's in their sleeves, transmission devices, transponders, the words and ideas coming back now, receivers, com-links with processors, back up batteries, fine strands of optic wiring at the collars. They were now reliant on their own resources and not that of some enhanced mental state. No more smart updates and fast processors to supercharge their minds. The two soldiers handled it well enough, admitting to the reality of their situation. Storaf looked crushed. Excellent. Luferious enjoyed his little victory. Shatan remained as impenetrable as ever. He too had a gleam in his eyes.

"My lord. Their transport." Shatan said at last.

"Yes?"

"Do we confiscate that as well?"

"Good point Shatan. Guards. Post sentries." The captain saluted. "And for a job well done an extra days pay for you and your men."

He tried to suppress a smile, saluted smartly. "Guards, when the sentries have been posted you may join the festivities. Tomorrow though your squad will watch the machine."

"At your command." The corporal bowed. "When your captain returns you may leave us. Make sure to bring the next squad."

"Certainly sir."

"Stand outside then."

"Yes sir." Bowed, left and shut the doors.

"Why?" Luferious asked Storaf in his rustic peasant clothing. At least it was clean, free of lice.

"As in?" Storaf answered subdued trying to get used to his new clothes. He looked like a foreman from an estate.

"Don't test my patience man."

"To safeguard knowledge against possible future calamities."

"Are you a seer too? Prophesizing calamities?"

"Earthquakes, storms, civil unrest. Even inclement weather can affect books. Dust mites, worms, insects. Many things can ravage your paper bound books. We were going to store it electronically. Making sure it will survive posterity,"

"What if there were a power outage?"

"The data would remain secure. Anyway there are portable devices with their own power source."

"How apt. I am almost tempted to scan you." Luferious bluffed.

Storaf's eyes widened in fear. Definitely Primaian. Everybody knew how they could eviscerate a mind leaving the poor subject a former shell of its mangled self. Which Storaf assumed Luferious was capable of.

"But I doubt it is worth it." Luferious relented. Not that there was a scanner available. But there were psychics who could read minds just as well. "Anyway we have no further use for you. Transport will be arranged for you and your team to make your way back to wherever you came from."

"Thank you." HA said seeing Storaf was going to make some undiplomatic remark.

"Yes soldier. At least your kind can maintain their professionalism under changing circumstances." Looking at Storaf who was feeling a tad uncomfortable. "You are free to go. Guards."

The door opened once more, awaiting Luferious's orders.

"Escort this group. Give them a carriage with a team of four horses. Assemble a squad that is still sober to escort them to the frontier." Then turning to Storaf: "I could have you all walk. But I want you out of my presence. Tell whoever sent you that what occurred to your team in the woods can happen any time. And not just here. Your ill primed intentions were always known to us. Next time any of your superiors tries to infiltrate our domain they won't even get as far as you did. That only came about due to the traitor Khratham. I am not made of the same cloth. After studying the contents of your devices I shall see if diplomatic curtesies will be exchanged. Now go."

They solemnly nodded and scrambled out of the chamber much to the amusement of Shatan who allowed himself a thin smile.

"Smart arse shits." HA commented as they sat facing each other in a bullock cart for horses were deemed too precious to be wasted on them. The bouncing bone jarring jolting cart had a rough cover of thatched reeds, a two wheeler with planks of wood for seats, shiny from previous posteriors. The bullock master walked along with the beasts at a steady pace. The guards three on each side, four in front and four behind were splendidly mounted on proud chargers rather than sturdy war horses. Behind them another bullock cart with provision as they were escorted from the province.

"Hm. Wouldn't wanna screw with him." Turd replied at last. "That was something in that dark throne room."

"Yeah, some heavy shit that." HA answered finally. "One zap from my trusty gun would have sorted him out."

"Which is now in their possession. Not good Turd, not good."

"Tell me." As he brushed a fly aside.

"Could be worse."

"Could," he paused, "and is."

"As in it could be raining."

"Yeah well. Thrown out. All your notes lost professor."

"Don't even mention it." Storaf replied. He had been keeping himself to himself ever since they left the city. Preoccupied with Luferious's display of occult power in the raw. Suspecting a similar occurrence overwhelming their support team. If this was the norm then his superiors would have to do some real hard thinking in how to approach these people. Their dark art cutting edge psychic warfare. Aware what this research assignment was all about: information. Hard data. With all their high tech gear gone all he had was what was in his head, which wasn't much.

From exalted guests to persons of no interest. It galled Storaf. Less his military companions. They seemed to be taking it in their stride. It confirmed in his now somewhat jaundiced view that these people at heart were barbarians. They indulged in murder at the drop of a hat. He was hot. No breeze, just the pesky flies. Khratham had been accommodating once the facts had been laid out. Storaf suspected Shatan in turning their mission against them. Luferious had no intention of even discussing their work. Let them rot in their own stew. The books would eventually, over the years decay, then they would have nothing.

"You could have asserted yourselves." Storaf growled.

"Taking out Luferious?" HA replied. "Stun him? Take sides? Cause a fracas? Get involved? Not my orders professor."

"Not that it matters much now." Storaf answered at last, taking off his bent hat and wiping his forehead with his shirt sleeve. "So young lady." He turned to Cena, "why are you so cheerful?" resenting her bright eyed youth. Nice, accommodating, perfect as a diplomat. She never ventured an opinion that might cause friction or conflict with whomever she found herself engaged with.

"We're alive." She said. To her it was an amazing adventure. On an excursion albeit back to Regum City, back to CU. Not so unpleasant. The demise of Khratham had shocked her at first but then this was their land, their culture. The occult energy fields, whether drawing on them from their surroundings or actually manifesting them from within, or both, fascinated her.

"Whilst our support team is rotting in some forsaken field." Naj said despondently. He had not taken to Etesa but that did not mean he wished her any ill. And Horat had been interesting in his own way. Sad really. But then who knew what really transpired out there that caused such an extreme situation to manifest itself.

Up ahead the soldiers laughed as they shared some joke, rude no doubt or at their expense. Storaf felt mocked. He could barely contain his anger at the ignominy of it all, the final insult at being so peremptorily dismissed. He would make a strong presentation when he got back to report not so much the failure of this quest but the excessiveness in how they had been treated. Like serfs of no consequence. He hoped a follow up mission, with the right personnel would teach these primitives the lesson they deserved.

"Well at least we have something to give an account of." Naj said after a long drawn out silence. Around them fallow fields, the countryside deserted. With the whole province revelling, the villagers indulging themselves. Now, Storaf thought ought to be the time to strike and strike hard at that. Insert peacekeepers and corral these rustics.

"What?" Storaf answered a little too sharply.

"Well," Naj answered uncertainly, "what we witnessed."

"I suppose so. Sorry for being so abrupt."

Naj let it pass. He was merely disappointed that his notes had been confiscated, written notes which had been with his satchel now in Luferious's possession.

HA though was worried. No uplink. His head relying on add-ons. No back up. Offline as well. It was back to the Middle Ages. He wondered what they were doing on the

Orbital. Surely they must have some Enhanced types standing by to contact them. Or were these people here truly that potent mentally that they could block mind to mind contact? Probably, given what he had seen in that cavernous room. The way the sword shattered, as if made of clay. The way the shards had gravitated towards Khratham, now that was frightening. If these types like Lufurious could manipulate matter at the molecular level who knew what they were capable of psychically. At least they had not been totally geared up. The loss of his low key arsenal would be of little use to them. For starters they didn't have the machine shops to even copy what they had. Once the batteries ran out their toys would be museum pieces.

They passed a hamlet hearing boisterous laughter making HA want to have a beer and join them.

"And our memories are in tact." Naj said all of a sudden.

"True." HA replied. "No weird shit in mine."

"That's 'cause you are weird." Turd teased.

"Ha ha."

"At least I got a gist of their lore." Storaf interposed. "Their mode of thinking, their superstitions and how they act when confronting each other." Storaf shuddered at the thought of Khrathams blindness. That was uncanny.

That there was no contact above did not bother Storaf. Probably due to some full on psychic mind field where they were the targets. Some potent shaman blocking out any possible contact with him or the others. Isolated, left to themselves, reliant on this escort which he reckoned was to make sure they did not stray or make contact with the locals. He hoped, for both HA and Turd had acted well, since by their equanimity in losing their transport would he hoped indicate that that loss was no big deal. Hardly worth bothering about. That might make them think just how much they really had at their disposal. Profligate in having an inexhaustible supply at hand.

"We should have gone in years ago." Storaf said at last.

"That was political." HA replied.

"Big mistake. This is only the beginning. Did you notice that we were not chosen to bring any message back? Usually with a change of leadership curtesies are exchanged. This time, nothing. A show of force next time."

"Can you imagine the number of troops necessary?" HA suggested.

"So?"

"So. We'd need an army of occupation." One we haven't got HA thought. Where do these academics get their ideas from? The best way to keep a people on side was by letting them be.

"Settlers then." Storaf wasn't giving up. A bull ahead dropped a dollop.

"Settlers? You want a people, ours I assume to go into this culture, these animists to accept foreigners?"

"How else to subdue them?" what was Storaf on about?

"Subdue? You'd cause a schism."

"Armed settlers then."

"Oh this is rich professor. With due respect what you would create is a fissure. This isn't Prima you know. For since about ever policy is to live and let live. No problems. Your idea is to colonize this place with gun happy farmers. How you gonna explain their presence to these people?"

"Simple. Divine will. Rewrite history a little. Discover that the settler's ancestors had been here before but they drifted off to the City and are now reclaiming what had been once theirs." Storaf thought that that was an obvious means of subjugating the area.

"Rewrite history. What next. Oh yes you already said that. Divine intervention." Storaf obviously knew nothing about how the military functioned.

"What could be simpler?"

"Leaving them alone professor."

"Hrmf. So what is going to go into your report?"

"The truth."

Their escort were passing a wine flask between them, the road dusty from their progress. A swaggering group of peasants cheered them on the soldiers returning the gesture. More jokes, laughter. They were being jeered out of the land.

Cena was distracted by a light in the sky, annoying her. At first she ignored it, then remembered how the province had very little technology in use, if any. Another idea came to her. The orbital making direct contact. Yet neither HA nor Turd were bothered. She looked up through the thatched strips of palm fronds marvelling at the brightness of the point of light like a star. A supernova? It was glowing brighter, flickering at its circumference, wavering. Phosphorescent. Brighter than the sun though much much smaller.

The guards must have noticed, craning their necks. The bullock master had stopped so they could all gaze at this wonder in the sky. Cena mentioned it to Naj. By then HA had made a gap in the foliage of their sun roof.

HA at first thought it was a rocket. No sonic boom. Unless it had braked well before finally reverse thrusting in the stratosphere.

The soldiers considered it a good omen. According to their folklore it was a divine sign revealing the vastness of the heavens to their world. Awed by divine lights, awakening their mortal minds to this divine splendour. Some of the soldiers, a few of the horses neighing, mumbled a prayer of benediction.

Then Storaf said something really strange: "Ah, the might of Prima." his eyes slightly glazed, out of focus.

"You reckon it's for us professor?" HA asked deadpan.

Storaf was transfixed, in awe, in rapture. HA looked quizzically at Turd who merely shrugged his shoulders in his slightly too tight a shirt. Then HA saw a small dust plume near the crest of the slight rise they had just traversed. A rider was approaching at speed.

The flickering white light in the sky was moving slowly towards them. A flame without a torch or container. Unless HA was right in that the rocket, it's booster which would have to be huge, maybe a H-driven space cruiser was still brake reversing. Yet given its overall vector, not slowing, just slow, curious why they would need to expend so much energy to execute the manoeuvre.

Meanwhile the rider was coming closer riding his horse hard. With his left arm he carried a javelin with a bright yellow triangular tasselled flag indicating perhaps his station or his mission.

"Maybe Luferious misses us." HA joked. Storaf was still watching the wavering shining bright dazzling white light around forty degrees away from them.

"Maybe control told him if they don't hear from us soon then...kapow." Turd slammed his right fist into his left palm.

"You could be right you know." HA concurred.

"What d'you think prof?" Turd turned to him. He looked away from the wavering star.

"Yes, whatever you think." Obviously not having paid any attention.

"It's really slowing down now." Turd remarked, peering through the roof's foliage.

"With vapour trail." Cena exclaimed.

"Maybe they're here to pick us up." Turd irrepressible.

"The light is almost silver it's that bright." Cena observed.

"Prima must be sending a huge ship." Storaf talking excitedly. "Must be hydrogen powered at least, or fusion..." in ecstasy.

The rider's outline was getting more distinct.

"No matter what the new ruler is envisaging, or what his overheated brain is concocting, Prima is here to save us. That rocket up there," Storaf pointing as if they weren't aware of the blistering light which had stopped its descent whilst still flickering, "will bring a message Luferius cannot refuse. They are showing their displeasure at our treatment, the intellectual theft of our work, the stealing of our clothes," he remarked distastefully regarding his peasant's garb.

"Why professor, it makes you look absolutely beatific." Turd joked.

"They will be lucky to escape with their hides intact." Storaf scoffed.

The white light irradiated outwards. Then there were five quivering lights, five vapour trails coming straight at them. They glittered, white streaking clouds snaking behind them. HA thought this could be a multiple warhead, a missile hit going for Khratham, correcting himself, Luferious.

That seemed to have excited their escort.

The captain turned and said to them all: "Behold the might of Shakura, his messenger Luferious and the sky gods themselves." Expressed with barely suppressed glee. Excited he was but he kept his emotions in check. He passed the wine flask back to his men.

Probably fortifying himself HA reasoned. Shit. HA was horrified beyond words. Whilst their escort waited for the messenger and the celestial display HA looked closely at the movement of the five minor stars trailing their white plume behind them in the clear blue sky. This was not a ship retro halting, nor a multiple missile launch, it was....a...catastrophe. What appeared like the reverse burn of a braking ship was in fact one breaking up. Falling way up there towards them giving the appearance of slowing down along their line of sight.

Then they all heard a dull thud. Their ears popped followed by the crackle of superheated air and sonic shock coming their way. The soldiers looked a little worried but not too much. The wine was having its merry effect. Even in the fields there were some villagers excited by what they saw in the sky. One thing they weren't and that was being afraid.

HA knew with pellucid certainty the horror unfolding with such tragic consequences up there. A craft, maybe a missile, maybe even a Primaian missile had just broken up. Whatever its intentions had been it was over. Junk. Most would burn up,

the chunks left would make a bit of a crater upon impact unless it hit the ocean. Pity he didn't have his pc. Even HA's uplink was not responding.

"Turd, is your ahm," pointing to his temple, "working?"

"I'm only in receiving mode HA."

"So you're getting nothing?"

"Nothing."

"I'm stumped."

"Some malfunctioning object flaming out."

"Yeah, something like that." HA somewhat disconcerted.

"Wonder who's..."

"It'll impress the natives."

"Natives?" Storaf chimed in.

"Yes professor." Without bothering to explain.

"Should have done that back there."

"You seen what Luferious is capable of?" HA reminded him.

The rider galloped past them. Their escort cheered him on. They watched as he rode down the road. Then their escort moved on, slowly. The bullock master cracking his whip, the beasts set to and they started to creak along once more.

HA changed places with Cena and moved up front so he could get a better view of the break up. The smaller objects were diminishing in size as they burnt up in the atmosphere, vaporising, leaving a trail of white smudged contrails and glittering debris.

HA froze. His mind riveted by the realisation that was too terrifying to comprehend. The Orbital! No wonder his link was not working. There were hundreds on board not counting the Primaians. Had they sabotaged it? Could they have? Using their DVs to fuck up the systems? Would they have? Were they connected with the ground mission? Had they been on the verge of discovering something or was this much bigger?

HA tried the local link in his head searching for the nearest transponder. There was a military station an Amaik. Nothing. His mind a blank. Useless. Downed, dislocated, disengaged. This was serious. He broke protocol and tried to access Turd. No response. Shit, nothing. What was going on? Surely the whole system could not have come down. Unless they were isolated. With no alerts. What the fuck was happening? Ever since they lost contact with their second team HA had been concerned that things were not quite what they seemed out here. Their background briefing back then had suggested, directly that these people here, their shamans anyway could screw with their minds.

Totally screwed. If the Orbital really was going down...he looked up at the sky. The crackling tearing sound indicative of the massive catastrophe up there. The central glowing orb getting bigger, seemingly heading straight for them! They'd be microwaved if the reactors went critical. HA was surprised it had not already. Sabotage. Betrayal. Defeated up there. No warning either.

HA was confused. With no information to go on anything was possible. Unless the Reganians had exited the Orbital by taking to the pods, leaving the Primaians to their fate. Had they stumbled across something so dangerous, so potent, so awesome that they had to be taken out by any means at their disposal. Either way, if it indeed was the orbital coming down the impact down here would be massive. What would their escort make of that?

For the moment they were all heart. The wine had livened them up. To them this was a jaunt in the countryside. HA wondered if they were even supposed to be drinking. The glowing fireball was now coming in on its gravity assisted downward trajectory. It looked like it would not obliterate them.

Not them, but the City! From his observation, most of the mass would not burn up, just chunks that had detached themselves. Fearing the worst he wondered if all this might have been calculated by traitors. Surely they, their own kind would not obliterate Regum City. It had to be sabotage. The superheated air continued to sizzle. The soldiers not unduly worried. They would certainly be in for a surprise once the orbital impacted on solid ground. If the reactors went critical the blast would destroy everything from its point of impact. The detonation alone would level more than just the city. The surrounding forest would explode into a firestorm. And that would only be the beginning.

HA checked the breeze. It was coming in off the east. At least the radiation cloud would not head their way. Much. If the breeze stayed as it was. He wondered who, apart from themselves had the knowledge of ballistic vectors, angles of descent with its accompanying force. The calculations had to be perfect to begin the downward path. Since the reactors had not gone off were they safe or operating in such a way that maximum damage would ensue when it hit the stricken city. HA could not even send out a warning to the outpost at Amaik let alone the City, or if any were still alive on the Orbital. The air would have escaped as they were breaking up. Had they managed to suit up, ride it out, escape into space awaiting rescue? At least they were far away from the City. Forested hills in the way. Around them fallow fields.

The Orbital continued to break up. Shortly followed by the sound of a ripping sky leaving a fiery trail in its wake. Falling into the atmosphere more vertically, glowing

brighter than the sun. Its central light blindingly white, the air around it shimmering. The final moment getting closer, the malignant intent of the collaborators becoming all too apparent.

The soldiers gastrulated, exclaimed excitement, impressed without really knowing what was going on. They would soon find out.

"You know what's happening don't you?" HA said to Turd. Naj listened in. Cena was watching but seemingly without comprehension. To her it was just something stupendous. Storaf had withdrawn into himself. Not so much reticent as sullen. Switching off. Irritable. He certainly didn't give a shit as to the calamity that was advertising its horrific intent in the bright clear blue sky. Not for much longer.

They stopped once more. HA too busy going over in his mind the calamity, the coming catastrophe, worried how close they were to the impacting orbital, now a fiery white, yellow, orange plume leaving grey sooted smoke and superheated condensation in its trail. The soldiers were down on one knee paying obescience to the fiercesome vision deeming it a celestial event of profound proportions.

They were praying to their gods. This disaster was seen in their eyes as a divine sign. The murmurings constant, intensifying, incessant entreating even. In the cart they were all silent as the fiery orb headed downwards, going down equally in the annals of history. HA knew, as would Turd that with Regum's Orbital down that left one over Prima and one over Novus. None were under construction. He just hoped the others were not affected by whatever had created this foul deed. HA would not accept this as an accident. He wanted to scream obscenities and frustrated anger at being so impotent to retaliate. He felt mentally neutered.

"...oh Zohex." One of the soldiers said.

'Zohex?' HA wondered. They had been told of the gods worshipped out here but that name, that god had not been on their list during their briefing. Maybe they made them up according to events. Maybe it was some ancient god hidden by millennia now resurrected by this fire in the sky.

The final moments. HA braced himself. Cena looked strangely in awe at the praying soldiers. HA wondered if they should make a break for it. Take their horses and hightail it out of here. But where to? Going south was out of the question. North was no good. East perhaps, to some fishing village, take a boat and ride out the resultant collapse of Regum's society, for the City was their finest achievement. Then whilst fishing, stocked with enough food and water, maybe sail over the ocean and await events elsewhere.

The others were watching with awed fascination. Naj subdued. He too had guessed by now the implications of what they were all seeing. Storaf tried to remain aloof as if by being in denial reality would adjust accordingly. 'Doesn't work that way prof.' HA thought. Maybe he was a throw back due to some junk DNA or chromosomal damage creating a retarded intelligence. The prof might be clever but that did not mean he was intelligent.

The golden ball, shimmering, fire surrounding it, blackened smoke trailing behind it vanished at the close horizon of the hills ahead of them. For a moment nothing. Just the ripped sky. Then came the fireball. It rose into the sky, blossomed by superheated energy, the telltale mushroom cloud billowing upwards and outwards. Arcs of glowing, sparking debris like a fiery bouquet trailed up and outwards. The mushroom cloud rising with awful splendour which must have obliterated the City. Then came the rosy reflection of the firestorm in its wake. Burning everything. HA waited for the shockwave. Every being carbonized, the forests around Regum City aflame. They could see the top of the raging flames, smoke pouring up, whilst at impact everything would be in meltdown. Further out everything flattened, turned to smithereens. The initial glow subsided but the almost white mushroom cloud, now dirtier rose higher and higher into the sky.

The soldiers were looking up.

"The wrath of Zohex." One of them said. Impressed not appalled.

"Death to unbelievers." Another exclaimed in awe.

They just didn't get it.

The broiling clouds rising from the impacted centre. All around the fiercesome fire consumed in its combustion, this furnace of destruction everything in its expanding radius. Closer a dust storm coming their way.

The breeze from the east had stopped. HA waited for the shockwave. Their ears popped. Then came the earth tremor. The horses went skittish. Some galloped in a frenzy. The soldiers rose quickly and a few chased after them. Others soothed them talking to them, telling them that Zohex's coming was a divine sign, there was nothing to be scared of.

'Who is this Zohex?' HA getting annoyed that this physical disaster, megatons of it could be seen as some divine sign. The gulf was just too far for these simpletons to comprehend that anybody could do this. Take one reactor, take one fusion device, detonate the trigger...HA gave up. The wind was coming in from the south. He wondered how much radiation it already contained. The firestorm was a little out of

focus due to the dustorm whipped up by the explosion. He hoped the dust ahead would absorb some of the deadly radiation.

The bullocks strained in their gear and the master rose and kept them under control. Their agitation stopped. The boom finally hit them. Dull, drawn out, an elongated wrenching thud. The earth beneath their feet rumbled, the air turning crisp as the temperature rose slightly. They were far away enough to maybe escape the deadly fall out. Dark clouds continued to rise as the fires in the forests, fields, villages consumed all combustibles. Curtains, furniture, animals, people, the release of energy making no distinction.

Cena was sobbing quietly, sadness overwhelming her, her emotions in turmoil. That was nothing to what was happening south. Storaf pale, in shock. Denial had not worked for him. He was gripped by primitive fear and was certainly aware what had transpired. His mind numb. Turd was like HA watching with fascinated awe the calamity. He kept himself together. No point suffering needlessly, survival was important, his primary concern. Naj was speechless, taking it all in, eyes bright with wonder, fascinated at the overwhelming destruction.

"Well folks," HA the first to speak as he watched the soldiers return with the runaway horses, "we can't go back there."

Storaf was still watching the thick black smoke rising into the sky. The mushroom cloud was dissipating turning the sky into a brown smudge. Cena continued to sob but she was handling it as best she could. HA wanted to comfort her but then he'd be distracted. She wasn't hysterical, that was something. She would recover in her own good time.

"We'll get the fuckers."

In surprise HA turned to Naj. Even the guards looked at him, then sneered and muttered under their breath that made them laugh. The tension broken, showtime over. The other soldiers who had not chased the horses got off their knees, stood around, adjusting their protective uniforms, making sure their swords were in place. The forest fires way ahead of no concern. Whatever had transpired had not effected them. Not that they knew what radiation sickness meant. HA and Turd and the rest of the team did though. How to convince their escort.

With the City gone so would their technology. HA could not help but have a niggling feeling that somehow this was not the beginning but more an ending. His mental void regarding the uplink had been the start. Something had taken the system down. With it being down there was no telling who, what, where and how the Primaians had

accomplished this. He assumed it was the Primaians. Who else was so insane to bring down Regum? Certainly not those who lived in the Outlands. Had this Zohex something to do with that? What or who was Zohex anyway?

Did Storaf know anything? Had this mission some unspoken secondary objective? If so Storaf ought to know.

"Tell me professor. Apart from collecting folklore and what-not were your mission parameters more broadscale?" HA asked at last. The soldiers were checking the horses bridles, others their hooves.

"Broadscale? As in...?"

"Something more secret."

"There was the abbey further inland near the mountains."

"Mudhan."

"Yes, that place. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"What about the attack on our other team? Any clues there? Were they bait?"

"Bait?"

"Yes professor. Bait. Draw out...I don't know. Stronger souls, updated reconfigured minds perhaps?"

"Well HA I was told to keep an eye out for unusual activity."

"Psychic or hardware?"

"Both."

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"For crying out loud Storaf..."

"No, nothing."

"Even when our team went down?"

"Not even then."

"OK. What about..." indicating the fires up ahead. The forest on the distant hills were starting to smoke.

"Appalling."

"But no, ahm, premonition."

"No. I'm as perplexed as the next person. The University gone..." His eyes going distant.

"Now we are supreme." One of the soldiers exclaimed.

"Hail Zohex." They shouted.

"Death to unbelievers." Another said menacingly. Looking them over.

"I believe." Naj said. What he didn't say was that he believed in the universe, not some god or divine being.

"Do you?" the same soldier looked at Cena.

"I'm confused." She sniffled.

"You will see the light." He answered, then to his companions: "We have all seen the light and retribution. Our enemies will tremble at our might. Hail Luferious, hail Zohex."

"Hail Zohex." They shouted once more.

Storaf looked puzzled.

"You don't know about this Zohex character either then?"

"No. We all got a list of their deities but were told it might not be complete."

"Hm."

"The unbelievers are dead." Another shouted. His buddies assented once more to that fact.

"Better make sure you don't attract your god's wrath then." Turd murmured.

"What was that?" one of them asked.

"I said," Turd began, "that your god's wrath is impressive."

The soldier let it go at that.

"Whatever occurred must have been planned. The odds of the orbital..."

"You think that is what it was?" Storaf asked surprised.

"What else. A missile wouldn't be seen. Dumping the generators would not have left such a bright signature. Remember bits broke off during the final descent. The only thing that could leave that much burning in the sky would be the Orbital professor."

"Point taken."

At last the soldiers got their act together and the cart lurched forwards. In the distance now and then a fire erupted a little closer. Ahead the sky dark with black soot laden clouds. The mushroom cloud extending upwards. Still no breeze.

If the Primaians could simply just take over an Orbital and crash it exactly into Regum City, then, HA came to the uncomfortable conclusion they were well and truly fucked.

The soldiers saw it differently. Divine retribution to those who had left the gods behind. The City wasted because it deserved its fate.

"Zohex rules the sky." One of the soldiers exclaimed as if he were chosen to speak on behalf of the divine master. HA having spent most of his life so far on Orbitals in SpaceKorps was familiar enough with how Primaians thought. This was no different. Apart from being totally unprecedented. The instant demolition of Regum City too much to

take in. It was as if his brain revolted at such a wonton act of destruction. The filthy mushroom cloud, slowly dispersed. A vision of death hanging over the land.

"Whereto now?" Naj whispered, crestfallen. His dreams, his future, his life up in smoke. He stared at the burning forest fires ahead of them. In the wake of the shockwave the air was warm, crisp, filled with carbonized vapours. His life in ruins. Their lives Naj considered. With no university his student days were over. Storaf's mind had seized up. The impossible had happened. He had not expected this. He knew from his briefing that the Primaians had underwritten his research project. Maybe, he figured they had meant him to be as far away as possible from the strike that had laid to waste Regum City. That meant they wanted him alive for a reason. With no data. That was in Luferious's possession. He doubted Luferious had the ability to figure out how to use that information if he could get the gear they had left with him to work. Maybe he was just the caretaker, keeping the information safe until the Primaian overlords decided what to do, perhaps pay Luferious a visit.

"We ought to head back." Storaf said at last.

"If you remember professor we're banished. Non grata." Turd replied.

"I think we should make for the coast, to Amaik. Maybe get a boat and head across the ocean. The Distant Lands. They won't have been effected." HA suggested. "Once we reach the border our escort will have done their duty. They're only here to see us leave the province. Then we will be free."

"Free." Cena almost choked on that thought. Struggling to keep her emotions in check. "Free to starve, free to travel the dusty roads with no home to call our own."

"You're alive Cena." Turd trying to comfort her.

"But with what sort of a future?"

"There is always a future Cena." Turd said gently.

"Yeah. Suppose so." She sniffed.

"Did you know this was going to happen professor?" HA eyeballing the shaken face, his blood drained making his head look like a premature mask of death.

"Of course not. How could you even imply that I..."

HA held up his hands. "Alright, alright." Storaf calmed down. But inside he was shaken. With the City gone so was effectually the world that had been Regum. All he could hope for was that the Primaians would come down, en masse and get him out of this. If the faculties were no more, he tried not to think of their last moments, maybe some had flown out and gotten away, then people like himself were a rarity. He took succour from that. Yes, he sighed, he was privileged in the coming new age.

"Amaik sounds good." He said resignedly. Deep down there was now an inner glow. Chosen not to be near the calamity. There was a reason for everything. Destined that he would survive. That meant he would be of use to them. Maybe when the Primaians did arrive, he hoped he would be ready. Apart from distant Novus Prima now ruled supreme. They knew how to organize society. The freelancing, the laissez faire approach to knowledge atomized along with the dilettantes. With a bit of luck he might become chancellor of the new university. The least he could expect was to be a Faculty Head. The future was not all that bad. This time there would be no deviancy. No WebWorld and perhaps even WebSpace either. If so all the better. With the Primaians in control so would he. He suppressed his exuberance and pretended to be as crestfallen as the others. Now it was only a matter of surviving long enough until the Redemption came to pass. Ah, it was indeed good to be alive.

The bullock master cracked his whip, they were off into an unknown future.

Luferious's mind felt crisp, cleansed, fully awake. He had not been in this state for ages. Only the odd moment during his meditation but they were indeed mere moments. But what moments. Time stretched to such an extent he could mentally taste eternity. That's what he was now: eternal.

He sat on the gold plated throne. Even with the embedded cushion it was not that comfortable. Maybe it had been designed in such a way so as to keep the ruler awake, mentally sharp.

Luferious was now ruler. A council of the wise would be called together. Made known throughout the province. To listen to the people for Luferious had plans. There was plenty of spare land not yet under cultivation. Cereals, wine, vegetables, timber for building, more brickworks for sturdy houses, improve the roads. Build a deep sea fishing fleet. There was much to be done. Wealth creation. That would put him in a good light with the merchants, the traders and dealers. He would cap inflation so that the masses would not be squeezed so hard. Redistributing tax, make it more equitable. The elite might grumble but with their chance to expand their operations, with more lucre coming their way he hoped they would agree that the potential of this land was more than what it was now.

Whilst he considered all this, whilst his scribes took down his decisions the throne room suddenly went strange. Luferious noted the unexpected change. The chamber filled with an ethereal essence. Cloyingly thick, an invisible vapour.

The air condensed around him, in front of him. The servants were thrown into confusion. Some were jabbering, others offering prayers to their gods. They too felt it. The Ceremonial Guards were ready to draw their swords but Luferious motioned for them simply to observe. He did not feel threatened. The odd manifesting mist was a phenomena in and of itself. Not directed at him personally. Something was coming through from the other side. For a moment Luferious wondered what strange realm was manifesting itself right here in front of him. An archimage perhaps making his presence known. A wise woman perhaps? Maybe Mudhan. Though she had been lost back there at her ruined house.

Something glowed within the smog. A bright star falling from the sky with a vapour trail behind it. The air crackled, the star flickered like a huge meteor. A message of sorts. Why here? Why now? Why him?

In the back of his mind a secondary vision. The dark adumbration of Zohex. Ah yes, Zohex. Some childish trick. No, this was real.

`Climb the observation tower.' Luferious rose, announced to the court he would ascend the tower to behold a vision granted to him. The courtiers followed of course.

When they had assembled atop the high tower Luferious was not disappointed. The same imagery appeared towards the distant south. Several stars were slowly descending. One extremely bright, the others around it burning up. If it was a meteor it was huge.

Instantly Luferious grasped its significance. Not a meteor but the orbital, coming crashing down over Regum. Awed, he was too astounded to think how such a terrible catastrophe could have been set in motion. This was no projection but a malefiscant magic to the people. Luferious had learnt enough to know something had gone terribly wrong on the orbital and now it was falling out of the sky.

`Vanquishing the enemy.' The thought came into his head. The voice not his but that of Zohex. Could he really do this? `And more.' Came the instant reply. `You will rule supreme'.

`At a price no doubt.' As Luferious and his attendants watched with awestruck fascination the fiery descent of the stricken orbital.

`No price Luferious. You are the right man for the right moment. Fortuitous really. I could have picked Shatan had I wanted to. Or Khratham even. But his time had come. He was of no use to me.'

`Meaning his occult ways were not yours.' Luferious countered.

`His magic was too ingrained, too self obsessed.'

`Meaning personally too focussed.'

Silence.

The fireball vanished behind the distant tree line. Then came the explosion. The mushroom cloud, glowing eerily rose tumultuously into the clear blue sky. Silently at first. Moments later the firestorm. Then more clouds of incendiary smoke. The boom of the shockwave. The crispy noises of intense burning combustibles. Houses, forests, the living now dead.

`I am dispatching your enemies.'

`Regum is not the enemy Zohex.'

`Ah, you guessed.'

`I knew Zohex.' Thinking it was his inner voice that gave him away. `Cleansing, cleaning up. Removing obstacles.'

Luferious realized Zohex could read his innermost thoughts. He did not even dare think how to get around that, knowing through his meditation techniques there were ways and means of cloaking oneself.

`Interesting.' Luferious smiled. Trying to pretend this show of awesome pyrotechnics was a minor distraction. Keeping his surprise in check.

Flames were shooting up from the burning forests around the blasted city. Smoke was pouring into the sky creating a thick pall of doom over the stricken countryside. The mushroom cloud poured its death into the sky, partially blotting out the sun.

`Your kingdom is safe.'

`For now.' Luferious countered. If Zohex could do this he could do anything. Probably destroy worlds.

`No.'

`You'd rather possess them.'

`Correct.'

Nearly all his courtiers were on their knees. The guards looked nervously around each other then at Luferious. Seeing him standing there, not frightened they took heart.

"It is a sign. This kingdom's days of glory have come." Luferious could barely believe what he was saying. On automatic, the mouthpiece of Zohex. Yet that presence had receded somewhat. A different persona within himself.

"Regum is no more. We inherit the planet."

Those kneeling stood once more and shouted their ascent that Luferious was indeed the man.

In the narrow streets below the city, in market places the revellers, those who could see south were fascinated at the conflagration. Luferious despatched more runners to soothe the people that it was his enemies, though none he was aware of who were destroyed. The kingdom safe. Supreme. No other ruler could match his might. Beyond comprehension. Things were happening too fast.

Dark filthy smoke was pouring into the sky. Then another shockwave rumbling through the earth. The superstitious had thrown themselves onto the ground, babbling imprecations to unseen gods. Instinctively Luferious understood he was master of the planet. Sure there were the distant lands where hardy colonists had gone to lead a simpler life. They all but ignored Regum as such and like the northern Outlands Regum had left them alone. Some people preferred a life of hardship than one of leisure. Each to their own. But regretted the wanton destruction of Regum City. It really was overkill.

`They would have eventually usurped you.' Zohex's voice was back.

`We'll never know.'

`Trust me.'

`Trust you?!?'

`Better believe it Luferious.'

`I believe, I believe.' He mouthed mechanically.

`As long as I exist so will you.'

`Our fates are intertwined.?'

`Worlds, realities are intertwined.'

Luferious understood the gist of the last thought. Exactly how escaped him. But he could not deny that Zohex was master not just of illusion, but of reality as well. He suppressed the thought of how to get into Zohex's head. He had been in his realm. There was no denying that in that orb like glowing structure with its innumerable windows onto different realities Zohex could conjure any realm, any reality and make that look as if that was real to the exclusion of all others. Quite a feat.

`It is. And it is real Luferious.'

`I believe you Zohex.'

`You could say it is written in the stars.' Smirking.

Luferious suppressed a thought hinting that Zohex really was some expanded AI programme that somehow assembled matter into itself. Ah, remnants from his past studies. The controlling agent a persona calling itself Zohex. Once he could uncover its genesis then by extension he could duplicate what Zohex was about. Now that was a

worthy quest. Something to look forward to. He hoped Zohex had not caught that strand of logic..

The conflagration spread further into the forests. The sky dimmer now with soot laden clouds. The mushroom cloud continued to pile high into the sky.

`Now that you have me in place Zohex what would you have me do?' sounding amenable. The idea that he could get to the kernel of Zohex's power intrigued him. He would have to proceed with extreme caution. Such as the perusal of quantum physics. Luferious remembered enough from his time at Regum. When he had exhausted, back then, given his limited knowledge, the concepts of what science could accomplish in revealing the universe. He had started to go over the same intellectual terrain again and again and understood there was no more to be gained. His mind, his being hungered for more. Thus the study of the occult. Where he had come across the concept of the aether. The unitary god to Prima, the essence of the universe to Luferious. The ethereal matter Zohex moulded into other realities. Just as he moulded gods according to those who imagined them.

`Direct and to the point. And you're learning as well.' Zohex alluding to his thought out words. `I think I have chosen wisely.'

Luferious made a pretence of bowing.

`To most I will appear as Shakura.' So he had locked into their minds as well. `You aware the energy that I am. Whether they know me by name is immaterial. On other worlds I am this or that but the underlying power that I am remains the same.'

`The people may even worship you.'

Zohex thought the idea entertaining. `Shakura, Askasi his consort, Luferious the Divine.'

`Ruler by Divine Right will suffice.'

`My my.'

`People expect too much of gods.'

`God Luferious, god.'

`God then.'

`You are more than the sum of your selves.'

`Selves?' frozen for a moment that maybe Zohex could mould him, by drawing from within himself other images of himself. He would have to make sure he remained who he was. To be sure, there were times when mentally engaged in traversing ethereal realms that he had felt himself to be something other but always the kernel of his essence remained the same. He would make sure of that at least.

`Aspects Luferious. As my image transcends my self so with you.'

`More than a god?'

`Just like you, but in your case to a lesser extent.'

`I will accept my destiny.' Let Zohex think that. He had other plans which he would not engage just now. Such as the origin of Zohex's self created persona. It was enough to know that much. For now.

The smoke to the south was starting to blot out the sky. Here and there flaring fires would momentarily erupt sending their flames high, then an explosion somewhere in the cindered city as planes fell out of the sky. The catastrophe had only begun.

`You will have to. But it will be worth it.'

`Thank you Zohex.' Trying not to sound too sarcastic.

`There may be some task in the future that I would ask of you.'

`Ask away.'

`Not yet. Not until I know more.'

Luferious did not want to guess what Zohex was alluding to. He had no intention of falling into his realm completely. The edge would do. It was enough as it was. Ruler of Regum.

`The priests?'

`Mere pawns. My eyes and ears.'

`On Prima as well?'

`I shall let them think what they will.' Came the equivalent reply.

`Neat.'

`Useful.'

`And here?'

`Your subjects. All you have to do is acknowledge their unitary god.'

`Will pretence suffice?' Luferious smiled inwardly.

`Believe what you will, fake sincerity even. Tell them what they want to hear.'

`I would be following in Khratham's footsteps, his mindset.'

`Not to your liking?'

`Too primitive.'

`Yes, he was rather limited. As was his potential.'

`As I thought myself.'

`The priests are mine.'

`Spies.'

`Spies.'

`And Prima?'

`What about that planet?'

`Will they fill the vacuum?'

`They will come after waiting a suitable time.'

`As saviours.'

`Reclaiming what they lost.'

`They're so contained. They might even replace me.'

`I don't think so. The priests will speak highly of you. As long as you don't interfere in the Redemption.'

`But that will only give them more power over the people.'

`Control Luferious.'

`I don't want their spiritual darkness infesting Regum.'

`Then you had better make sure you approach them in the correct manner.'

`Not as a suppliant.'

`No that wouldn't be you.'

`You don't mind?'

Another plane crashed somewhere in the distance. A ball of flame, a puff of smoke, more dead.

`Follow my leads. If the priests overstep their mark deal with them as you will. We can't have Prima thinking they are inviolate.'

`That I can comprehend Zohex.'

`It will only be a matter of time until Prima falls into the right conjunction. Their fate is sealed.'

`As is mine no doubt.'

`Beyond doubt Luferious.'

That clinched it. He would play along. After all the horrendous display of bringing down an orbital with maximum destruction as well was no mean feat. Luferious was adamant that he would uncover, fathom out, by probing slowly just what Zohex's secret being was. The supposition that it was an AI did not solve its reality. It was just a matter of understanding the processes involved. Maybe even have some scientists, if any were left, to subtly probe what Zohex as a potential AI really was. Once that was in the bag then so was Zohex. He would turn the tables on him, usurp or absorb him. As a sub-domain. If this entity could use hidden energies within the universe then so could he.

The future was not so sinister anymore.

Another plane crashed into the forest sending up an orange yellow fireball.

Andromeda: Arktus

Monas's constriction, his incarceration in his cell, was more a monk's retreat for Nehr had relented somewhat. Dumped in some ancient pile, guarded, live electric fields containing him in a dilapidated building. He even had a window from the fourth floor. Overlooking the desert. Moved from the palace's dungeon via a jump gate. Trying to impress upon him her power. He sighed. So close to passing over, it was tempting to let go, leave, self delete. Loosing what pithy wisdom he had acquired.

Everything changed so suddenly. What he knew would not be deposited in the Overall Domain for others to draw upon when he passed through the final stage of re-incarnating. Monas would not upload breaking the nexus to continue his knowledge quest. Negating Nehr's need to know what he knew regarding the space stations mission parameters. So she indulged him. Not obliging. No one would gain access to what he knew, what he had acquired. Even for a Sleepwalker Monas's information was not available just like that. He had dispersed what he knew, dumped it into his unconscious. And not as a unit either. Buried beneath layers of older accretions. Drilling down would set off a convergence where any probe attracted junk. Piles of it. The probes a loci to overwhelm the search pattern. Even a phase state would not work. That would trigger a link to meta minds other than his own. Accessing their junk. His information safe short of being subject to a forced search. If worse came to worse he would make his threat actual and pass on. So Nehr left him alone. For now.

He saw through Nehr's Cardinals. Unstable fluid entities taking on momentary bodily form, extracted from some sub-domain within the Repository, a pre-configured resonance using available unformed minds, possibly the half-born who weren't too sure where in the cosmic scale of being they really wanted to be. To be manipulated by feeding their life essence with all sorts of illusions about their innate greatness.

Monas aware of their triumphant barely suppressed mindful blossoming. More like weeds in a rank garden which Nehr had constructed. To think she would regress. It went against the evolutionary trend which had guided the race for millennia upon millennia. Their reality so stable history ceased as a process.

He looked around his bare room. A bed, a closet, a wardrobe, even a desk near the window to take his humble meal. And time on his hands. Others had fared worse Nehr hinted. A cloak of darkness hovered like some energy field around her. Nehr had become heavier in essence. Sacrificing her ethereal self to go more corporeal. She was

not the only one. A burdensome spiritually effecting their race's future beingness. Rather than become more mind they decided to regress back into former corporeal existences. Turning the clock back and achieving it. He would live a little longer.

Then one day he was released back under house arrest to his desert home. Maybe she expected him to do something. She would be disappointed.

He sat on the portico overlooking the dry brown distant valley with its narrow pass below. One neighbour behind him. Desert and mountains completed his isolation. He had no idea who lived near him. Isolates.

Reality was different now. He and no doubt others like him were in similar discordant states. He just another realm amongst many. Nehr using stasis. A system at rest. Even if accessing boosted configured energy for her repression it could only maintain stasis for a limited time. Sabotage the process and her field space would collapse, decay, transmutate, build down to be reabsorbed into the total energy field that was the universe.

Nehr embedded in space. Her domain an attractor where through her warped space-time, some called it matrices were tapped to create energy sucking field spaces which then constructed along conventional quantum physics her religious realm self manifested out of an infinite variety of probabilities the universe harboured. In this endeavour Nehr had succeeded.

So he watched the rocky pass, under house arrest, willingly submitted to. Which he would honour. Monas wondered if perhaps the whole universe was just another data realm. Or perhaps an experiment like a petri dish in a primeval soup to see what would spawn within certain variables. Like sentience, conscious life forms. Nearly all the same. Each mentally configured a little differently. Otherwise stasis, maximum entropy which really meant nothing, as in death.

He rose, entered his kitchen and brewed some coffee. With Nehr having banished him from their fragmented society, going Isolate he had to come to a decision. One thing Nehr was not aware of: her kind as hybroids needed to use information systems to sustain themselves in their now limited corporeality. Continually process information for when their brains stopped so did they. What they gained in dominance over the physical world, his house arrest testament to their power which he readily accepted, they lost in the ConFlux which he and his kind reverberated in. But unlike hybroids, Eternals were phase states, independent of the data world. They attracted information, data, realities. They only moved amongst them, such as the space station for

the pure pleasure of it. Extraction too easy to achieve. Nehr knew that. Monas could reconfigure his reality as did all Isolates. The need of normal reality superfluous.

What Monas, as he watched the coffee percolate, was thinking in several directions at once was the base state of space. Aware of an extraneous infusion. Space was loaded, information rich. It was that which Nehr must have latched on to. If not her, unfortunate as they had been friends, aligned, then someone else. It had certainly boosted her expanded if superficial consciousness into the ethereal. Infused contaminated space. One seen as new information which in a way it was. But information itself was value free, or had been until this strange field attractor had infused itself into the space-time field within the GA, the change not so subtle. Its incomplete though potent data quantum embedded field space affected living sentient awareness. With truly alien intentions.

The coffee was ready. He poured a cup, added milk and sugar. How such simple acts were a reward in themselves. He sipped the beverage. Delicious. His endomorphins quivering with excitement making him feel better.

He walked out to the patio again. As it was winter the sun was to the north west. The lattice on either side taking out the glare. The rocky outcrops partly shaded, partly illuminated. To think that space was infused with a low level energy imposition. Not that Nehr had admitted to that. She was going with the flow as was the rest of the planet. Monas could tell. Still being able to be with the Evons, whom the Hybrids avoided as if these true physical beings were some retrograde species. They were not. They were the true aboriginals, the building block of their race as Arktians. Without them their evolutionary path would go askew. Nature did the experimenting using quantum processes as much as the universe was a quantum process. What was thrown up was not predetermined, more an index of possibilities to see which actualities were feasible within the cosmic realm and those which were off-key, out of sequence. Divergence as necessary as were mutations.

Should he go mutant? Now there was a temptation. And thinking temptations should he get in touch with the Mission? As an advisor, on the committee of three as overseer, playing around Nehr and the other now ruling symbiots who barely bothered to take note of whatever experiments the station was undertaking. A playpen for the feeble minded. Throwbacks. To actually play with atoms, with energy fields something children did but not fully grown adults. Meta-consciousness could pick up anything within the universe. All the knowledge was there as it was. Space's divergent field phases imbued with an incursion affecting everything. Which included Nehr's domain construct. She

aligned with whatever that alien field was. Probably not even noticing its presence. Eternity, immortality, infinity compromised. Delineated. That much was certain.

To Nehr the Station merely went over the obvious. As for making contact with other sentient races in the universe that was for those of a restless nature. What was there to gain from lesser minds? They had transversed all stages of development so interacting with some race that had finally discovered flight might be quaint, something one put in a scrap book to amuse friends with. There was no gain, nothing to be learnt. The only thing that mattered to Nehr was her field space which gave her instant power within her expansive domain.

The alien field a machine intelligence drawn in by Nehr's artifice embracing Arktus. Who would have thought they would go one step backwards. Maybe they had advanced too quickly and now was the time for some sort of consolidation. Evolution was not a straight path or a progressing upward curve. Since they had energy on a cosmic scale available to them the classic exponential rise of progress no longer applied. With Nehr's reconfiguring of quantum space progress had ceased. Maybe there were limits in the universe one Nehr and the Symbiots understood but Eternals such as himself did not.

That was why he had accepted her injunction. The Ruling Council no longer the executive. The Symbiots filled that role. And they were building space ships once more. Which was eccentric given they could be wherever they wanted through their gates. Call up the location and insert. It was that simple. So why go physical? Unless symbiots, being half machine half bio-carbon evolved actually wished to go tactile. Mind was not enough. Back to physical senses. Even though it was all in the mind anyway. Unless Nehr wished to make her presence known by such an overt statement. Impress their cosmic neighbours.

Maybe he could creating a duplicate, as some did when too lazy to be somewhere on behalf of the Ruling Council. Fool Nehr. Symbiots could not tell a clone from the original. They could not think creatively in the sense of using sentient imagination. Duplicates reacted. Sure they had all the variables in their bio-processors to make one believe they were the real thing but by using a-logical thought patterns they could be caught out. Simple things like remarking upon a sunset. Duplicates could acknowledge on the intrinsic beauty alluded to but they did not sense what was felt by the original.

Now that he was no longer a member of the Ruling Council he had time on his hands. His mind as well. In a way, given his advanced age, it was a blessing. With

machines doing everything, with their society in equilibrium, with emotions channelled creatively rather than destructively they were really more like overseers, making sure everything was within specified paradigms. Nothing could upset that balance. No aliens, no computer programmes, no rogue processors creating false realities. Even they were incorporated, adjusted, aligned and presto, stabilised. Then dumped into the vast information repository that contained everything from the beginning regarding their race. Or so the New Order thought. Nehr had changed all that.

Alien worlds were used by adolescents to show them that deviance was the norm, nothing to get concerned about. Not that he knew directly how adolescents thought. He had never had offsprings. Let the Evon's do that. They still got excited about sex. So banal even if for that momentary physical high that seemed transcendent. A lot of energy for such a short moment of bliss. Anyway that high could be duplicated configured mentally for any high, right up to the endomorphic level. Some spent their whole life in a high. No loss really if they stayed in that state. If that was what the mind craved, if one's reality was not fulfilling as it was, if the magnificence of the universe did not move you, if the potential of your consciousness left you numb then why not? In ages past drugs and alcohol had answered that need to be in another frame of mind. Now through self boosting molecular resonant states, leaving no side effects the Mentals's euphoric states as an end in itself merely took them out of the social circuit. Some even had original insights. They claimed they were at the forefront of evolution. Bodies were as perfect as could be which left the mind. They said they felt like gods, so maybe they were gods. They built virtual worlds, even virtual universes to carouse in. All with the blink of an eye.

Until the Mental's had changed. That's what alerted symbiots like Nehr. Something had infused itself into their constructs. A sentient overlord. The information was conclusive. The symbiots entered virtual reality and discovered a potent intelligence, artificial, and drew it into their domain worlds. Confirming what the Controller at the space station now knew. Its massive energy feed was there in the Great Attractor a few hundred light years away. What the station was studying. The cover held. The symbiots, the Ruling Council ignorant. All that anybody who bothered knew was they were merely looking into the GA. An innocent past time. As for space everybody knew it was potential energy. Quantum states, the information within that state projecting a field which determined the atomic mass necessary to complete that state. No big deal.

Monas hoped that attitude would remain in place. Nehr busy with her construct, playing with her empire.

`Monas.'

`Nehr. You're so...distant.' Which one was real?

`Yes. That's why I'm calling.'

`How is the experiment going, your garden?' Recognition. The ruling Nehr a substitute.

`Corrupted. Not not quite...'

`Your being is...'

`Something has happened.'

Monas was alert. He rose from his chair on the patio and ambled inside. When conversing with an Ehrfahr he somehow, not that it made any difference, felt more connected inside.

`What? Not the symbiots?'

`Well...' her radiant dark brown face was now opaque, less solid. He waited.

`Something has inserted itself into our realm.'

`Not just your realm. The symbiots have taken over. They have latched on to something. You are a symbiot. You have a double ruling Arktus.' Monas relieved to have the real Nehr back.

`So it's everywhere, not just us.' Ignoring her duplication.

`Could be.' His legs felt shaky. He sat down at the kitchen table. Fearing the worst.

`It's bad Monas.'

`Any idea?'

`Oh yes.' Perking up a bit. `It's sentient. It's powerful, it's intelligent and it's manipulative. Thus my secondary persona. So I rule?' a cheeky smile.

`It's done this?' alluding to the ingress. Space heavier, more laden with an ingress. Like humidity but on a mental plane.

`Certainly. It's making our contact, any contact difficult. As if a curtain, multi-dimensional has been drawn over everything.'

`Everything?!'

`Everything. I don't know if it's getting stronger or this is it's maximum insertion.'

`Any idea what?'

`I just said. Sentient intelligence wrapped in a massive data sphere. A virtual micro universe. And it's broken free. Whether it was meant to be contained, whether it was designed as a stand-alone-system or an inflationary system...Monas I fear it's inflationary.'

`What do your kind make of it?' Monas thinking of getting in touch with the research lab out in space.

`The same. Monas we're being pushed back, contained to our own realm. The interface, the connections, the symbiosis we use is getting difficult. Many of the Ehrfahr have simply let go. What about your end?'

`Ha.' Monas letting out a rueful smile. `I'm under house arrest. Thrown off the Council. I'm an Isolate. Your orders.'

She could not tell him the real reason for her duplication. With the fracturing imminent Nehr was merely projecting as a duplicate what this alien CI wished to have in place.

`That would suit you.'

`Yes. But it was not my choosing. The timing not mine. In a way I care and don't care. If they want this, they can have it. A rogue intelligence in place.'

`I understand that. But its potency Monas. It's using a massive black hole in that super-galaxy. What is worse is that it's capable of tapping the fabric of space Monas. It's inserted its field state into space itself. You know what that means?'

`I can imagine. Subtle shifts in reality. Infusing probability field waves with its embedded information. Giving the appearance that it is supreme. Like your ruling double.'

`Exactly.'

`A real time illusion.' Monas had to make sure.

`Virtual Quantum Collapse.'

`That is something.' He sat back taking it in.

`If this cyber intelligence realises what it has done, what it is capable of there may be no way of stopping it.'

`Expanding?'

`Infiltrating our real time reality. Not that that is noticed once its field is in place.'

`So how come we know the difference Nehr?'

`Because we are on a higher plane. But the effect will be everywhere.'

`Everywhere.'

`It's a quantum shift.'

`Nehr and I thought you were just a Sleepwalker.'

`I am. We are. Except I've been walking into scientific minds.'

`Really. Astute.'

`In the past, present and future.'

'Oh uh.' Monas feared the worst.

'Being enphased in space, enphasing space, infusing PFWs it is indeed reaching into the future. Collapsing its reality onto the base states. No need to explain the mechanism...'

'As you said. VQC.'

'Indeed. Being everywhere unless it is shut down...'

'Any idea who or what created it?'

'Well you know how our biggest fear is self replicating replicators?'

"Oh yes. And if they gain smart-ware, become AI boosted they'll run all over us. Then either we live, exist or die. But Nehr we're beyond that. Your existence proves that intelligence is independent, that it can exist as a field, riding the probability waves without collapsing them into actualities. So why not counter its move?'

'Because the majority have accepted the change Monas.'

'But if your kind have trouble making contact...'

'They're too engrossed in this new vision. You see there's more.'

'Seems to be.' Monas resigned to more bad news.

'As an information domain it can also insert its own configured realities. Remember it is a micro universe, slowly expanding as it loads up more and more data. Having enphased itself into space it can insert virtually any reality it likes,'

'And its doing this as we speak?'

'Has done.'

'Any limits?'

'Its come this far.'

'What about the next galaxy?'

'The Milky Way? The same. But that seems the current limit of its expansion. If however it triangulates through linkage...'

'It will gain exponentially more energy.'

'Total dominance.'

'Any way out?' Monas not bereft of ideas.

'We fuse. I mean the Ehrfahr. Your kind fuse. Evon's, symbiots, your AI systems. Then it could be contained.'

'But not deleted.'

'Unless some sort of virus is inserted. Some programme that deconstructs it, wipes its data as well and let entropy do the rest.'

'Your kind would be the one's to do it.'

`Trouble is...'

`Yes, they don't see it that way. Same here.'

`That's how it gets its way.'

`What about exposing it?'

`Telling a symbiot of the manipulative nature of an AI and EAI?'

`Yes. Like telling Evon's that life is inimical.'

`Indeed.'

`But what of the alternatives? The future one's?'

`We can only guide, suggest. Unless we reincarnate.'

`And you Ehrfahr like things as they are.'

`That's it. The freedom we possess...'

`Is not likely to be given up. Bit like the Mentals.'

`Actually they are unaffected.'

`Really? What a surprise.'

`In a way they are close to us.'

`Pure heads.'

`Pure head space. Just the environment's that's changed. It's an extreme effort now to communicate with you. Rather draining and if I keep this up I might dissipate. I'm not ready to reincarnate Monas.'

`You want to find out more.'

`I want you to do that.'

`I know just the place.'

`Don't even think it Monas.'

`Already forgotten. Anyway the symbiots think it's a playpen.'

`Keep it that way.'

`Thank you for revealing what I suspected.'

`The symbiots will be dominant, you do realise that?'

`I'm isolated. Luckily Nehr, you and I go back a long way. Your duplicate's been kind to me. Self imprisonment. If I leave I might never return.'

`The alternative is dominance and submission with the latter in place.'

`So dominance comes next.'

`It's already begun Monas.'

`Yes. So it appears.'

`You said it.'

`Appears.'

`With a huge energy input.'

`But the future scenario's are still in potential?'

"Potential yes but receding further out. The Virtual Quantum Collapse is seeing to that. Making it's probability it's actuality. The more entrenched the harder for other potential future states to manifest, to be available for consideration.'

`So what's it's reality about? Apart from domination Nehr.'

`Submission. It's as if it's using Primaian logic.'

`The unitary god concept?'

`With It being the unitary god.'

`And it's working?' Monas frowned.

`To a degree. Prima is oddly enough less effected. Their resonance field. But since they're similar they won't even feel the subtle change. More like minor adjustments. Then there is Earth. They're showing signs of regression. Not the right term but they're bowing down to a unitary god as well.'

`That can't be an accident. Two very different civilizations thinking alike. You certain?'

`We're Sleepwalkers, remember?'

`Of course Nehr. You're double is out of reach then?'

`The symbiots have united. Group mind. Room for individuality though.'

`Something to remember. So Earth is under this influence as well.'

`Sort of. Wavering.'

`Resistance?'

`Influenced. By an inserted Quantum Field Wave. Minor though.'

`Tell me more.'

`Got that from...'

`Ah yes. Understood. Maybe I should make a decision.' Suppressing the thought of Regum's inserted PWF. Whilst he was under passive surveillance, plus impregnated space which he now knew was the effect of the VQC the symbiots were leaving him alone. Probably wanting him to make a move, see whom he connected with. If the Ehrfahr were being pushed out, or at least kept at a distance then the symbiots might be aware of this conversation. A momentary risk he had to take. He hoped they were busy putting themselves into all the nodal points to first consolidate physically their supremacy. Aberrations such as this of minor consequence as long as it did not turn into a direct challenge. So if he went to the station they might think he was there to amuse himself. Withdraw to the playpen.

`Tell me will Earth be influential?'

`No. The collapse is in place. But they are an unpredictable species. Multi-dimensional in thinking. Not unitary at all. Which gives me hope. To be sure they are praying to a unitary intelligence but equally there are many others who believe in a multiplicity of gods and some don't believe in either. All at the same time.'

`Remarkable.'

`That should be food for thought.'

`So dominance, such as it is isn't as total there as here?'

`Apparently.'

`Nehr, you are a gem.'

`Sleepwalking. When your time comes, consider the alternatives.'

`I do daily.'

`But no decision yet.'

`I'm still tempted to start all over again.'

`Not many like you.'

`They want it all when they return.'

`Yes. What would you gain by being, ahm, vacant?'

`Discovery. The quest for knowledge as a process. You see if all is in place the brain is left idle more or less. But by physically engaging in unravelling it all for oneself I'm thinking," he considered, `this act of cerebral engagement will strengthen the synaptic pathways.'

`The configuration.'

`That's how I think this entity got away with it.'

`No one is thinking.'

`Not in the sense we mean it. They accept all knowledge as it is, for what it is. But now that this...thing has deposited it's micro universe as an alternative so has the acceptance of the virtual imposition of its configured data as well.'

`And its contents.'

`Especially that.'

`Well Monas, I wish you well. I'll be gone for a while. I may not make contact either because there is nothing to report, or the ability to link up's been severed by whatever means weighing down the ethereal domain or we're isolated, dreams included. So contained as to be imprisoned, maybe even captured or...I've reincarnated myself.'

`Then we might meet. And you're double?'

`Her. Mere fluff. A shell Monas.'

`New persona.'

`New cyber persona.'

When her presence disengaged Monas wandered around the house. Half built into an outcrop of a rock face, the air outside could really be extremely enervatingly hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. He liked the desert. Given the mountainous terrain there was plenty of water for a stream had cut through the valley he overlooked. Further behind, upon the plateau his only neighbour indulged in having built a replica of an ancient fortress. Complete with turrets, crenulated walls, solid red marble for historic authenticity. Not that an attack was likely. It was several millennia ago that anybody had actually waged any sort of warfare. The hill tribes long gone. A haven for reclusive such as himself. His neighbour Monas left to his own devices. So far they had never met.

Below in the narrow valley trees grew along the river which meandered placidly along an ancient broken crumbling roadway. There had been a border here once. Not that that worked ignored by the ancient hill tribes, all armed to the teeth, long gone remnants of the old ways. Even during the tech revolution these hardy folk, primitive in their set ways, extremely cunning in maintaining their existence through the use of the gun, more bandits than farmers had been the last to drift to the glittering cities on the coast and to other more affluent continents.

And drawn Monas here. A previous life perhaps. The desert's vacancy invigorated him. He felt as immense as the intense blue sky above. At night millions of stars, the vastness of space making him feel cosmic. Designated an Isolate. Not that that decree by Nehr made that much of a difference. He had been one by default anyway. He sighed. Nehr. Nehr, Nehr. What are you really doing?

One moment you were a companion, coming in my dreams, Monas thought, showing me things I might have stumbled across eventually. Revealing sentient life forms who were intertwined without actual beingness. Psychically linked though hidden in the physical realm. Riding probability waves, playing with probability field states, creating mental worlds out there from basic uninhabited planets that did not have all the necessary ingredients to have life evolve. Banished from civilisation. So far no bio-intrusive containment fields, no cerebral shadowing, no prominent security lock down nor Isolation Fields placed at his abode. Perhaps to see where he would seek solace or refuge. Whether he felt inclined to rebel, seek outcasts to ferment trouble or plan psychic terrorism. Perhaps impotent. Not a danger to the new regime. And there lay the rub.

Nehr reverting as an ancient queen complete with retainers, along with an entourage of willing servants and a priesthood. What good were they? Their culture was at its apogee. Had been for hundreds of generations. What could they offer that was not already known. Religion had dissipated with and through knowledge. Mysticism a private affair. Even his last humbling appearance at Nehr's court, more a command appearance he had not paid that much attention to the oddly retro-dressed characters hanging around the court. Weren't they bored just being there, waiting for Nehr's whim to be noted, tasked with something, or did they actually get a kick by being in her presence?

That was Nehr the physical manifestation. She must be collapsing her own probability wave and with that her mental field. Her micro-verse solidly enphased in both space and time. But which one?

Strange days. Strange epoch his brain told him. Ah yes, the Brain. Monus was not that enhanced. He had gone for multiple neurally extended pathways, seeing what the net-architecture could conjure for conjure it did. The hidden realm of the unconscious. Now there were domains the Sleepwalkers found interesting. Thus his constant vivid dreams. The nightmares of his childhood transformed into intense realities instead. Which attracted more Sleepwalkers. Some of the Enhanced boasted just how many they could attract. Which made Monas reticent to reveal how many Sleepwalkers came to him. Whereas the average were at most no more than a few Monas was visited almost nightly and rarely by the same persona. But then again Sleepwalkers were deemed Shapeshifters as well. Nobody really knew the difference. Certainly the psychologists didn't know much more than the next Enhanced person. They had their theories, remnant memories of the planets collective sub-conscious. Mere dreams. Imaged memories crafted by association. In the old pre-tech days these superlative beings were seen as angels, messenger of the gods. Uncluttering the mind. He thought them real, their worlds as well. For although the laws of physics were rather elastic, time immaterial, often stretched to infinity, travelling at the speed of thought without moving Monas had made sure he staid in touch with the Sleepwalkers. Then downloaded his dreams. Not that that was uncommon. Some showed these experiences to each other. Most were pretty banal. Some sexual, rarely astounding. Not like his. Not many knew what his contained. Except Nehr. And she had become a traitor.

Or had she?

A surrogate playing along?

Had she known this was going to happen, this Virtual Quantum Collapse and before some other Sleepwalker, or some Enhanced persona stepped up into the field

she had beaten them, through foresight, to the post, as this archetypal Queen? Not that Nehr could admit that for fear of being discovered. She had certainly not alluded directly to her double which now rules...what? A kingdom? A continent? The planet? Or the whole configured field itself which would stretch into space.

Space.

The Sojourners. Those who had gone to other planets. Did her presence reach that far? The mission. Were they affected?

He would test the limits of his containment.

For the moment he voided his mind. Sleepwalkers, shapeshifters, other sentient entities did not necessarily have to be within one's mind to read one's state of being and its contents. Sentients leaked their intelligence, their knowledge all over the place. That's how information was assembled. How knowledge was passed on, how technology was invented. Along with the laws of the universe, used by science to broaden their understanding and their real time vision of meta field states within their universe.

Nehr's double insisted it was all the creation of the Unitary Principle, a super-smart entity. Romantic, but without the possibility of it being real. Problem was Sleepwalkers were Conjurers as well. This change of status could be one big con. Very real. Verifiable. Materially solid. That was the nature of collapsing probability waves.

The Great Attractor.

Complete with two contradictory worlds. Two aberrant mind sets.

He would go out into space and pay a visit to the laboratory.

Visiting it through mental linkage was out of the question. If Nehr and her consorts were watching, surveying their quantum inserted realm, observing those who were hopefully aware what had transpired then the moment they, like he considering to make the connection they would become instant targets. Not only would their minds be compromised but the secondary end-positioned Inserts might come under Nehr's control as well. It was simply a matter of waiting, then pounce. Who knew what bizarre realms would thereby spread throughout the universe. He had no idea what the secondary Nehr envisioned.

Transfer? The energy spike would be noted. What Monas needed was shielding. No time. Even assembling such a device might attract attention. The use of shielding would be obvious. Monas had no intention to let it be known not just what he was up to but where as well.

That left one option. Be a Sleepwalker. Two ways of doing this. Mental concentration or molecular enhancement. Yet Nehr the Queen...being materially

manifest was she sacrificing her capabilities? Her self manifesting would tip the scales into the material domain. Then there was the `real' Nehr still moving amongst multiple realms. With the interface becoming a barrier. That would be the Virtual Quantum Wave Field removing the freedom to move in the rarefied aether. That was being pushed away, out of limits. Truncated. Thus strengthening the current material manifesting quantum field state.

He wished he had kept in touch with the few scientists still around. More like boffins who took delight in simple experiments, watching how things functioned, chemically in his case. He remembered from his study of history, a subject basically ignored for it had come to a stop the moment they had, as a world and a civilisation reached the apogee of totally stability. With machines created by nanobots doing it all most social systems had vanished. No need for entrepreneurs, for credit, for power to delegate through executive councils the ordering of society. All `isms void. Freedom. The curse of the need to physically work a needless task. The mere thought was read by information gathering systems and what one wanted came into being. Just like that.

He wondered if anyone was reading his mind. A risk he had to take.

Transfer physically and reveal oneself or mimic Sleepwalking.

He would try Sleepwalking first.

Luckily Monas was one of those eccentrics who had built up a library. Some non-aligned beings still wrote down their thoughts, printed them without being in the Net. Mainly obscure indulgences, private ideations that did not fit into the norm of their social stasis. Souls who like the Sleepwalkers were restless. Using private domains to expand their realms. Self isolated from the totality of the meta-domain of their world, world's he corrected himself. Then there was a ban on going to stage three. Using the power of the galaxy considered overkill. If a psychopath was to evolve the damage might be irreparable. Having a lunatic rule was not in anyone's interest.

Monas went to his library. It was of modest size, three bookcases. One dealing with their history, one on biographicals from days gone by when individuals could still impact upon history, make history as it were. He was after ancient belief systems. The third. Fairy tales and mythology mainly. Even that study was largely ignored. Enhancement created any world within one's mind. One could be some ancient god, create empires, become planetary rulers. It ended up as an entertaining diversion. Some even followed the path of the shamans. Used mind expanding psychotropics to bring the realm of the unconscious out. Become complete. The ultimate trip. Opening sub-personal dimensionalities in the physical world. The world of the Sleepwalkers, the

Shapeshifters, personified self boosted Entities plus the deluded who totally lost the plot. Not many dabbled in this art.

Monas was a little apprehensive. None of the books told exactly how much or how little to ingest the mind enhancing substances. What he did know was what certain plants looked like. There were plenty, some even grown purely for decorative purposes. The most potent a few mushrooms. He remembered them then checked out where they were most likely to be found.

Some grew next to cow's dollops. Since only a few of these animals remained purely for their DNA a sort of reserve measure as was all the flora and fauna of Arktus going there was both obvious and noticeable if he traipsed through the fields collecting mushrooms. If they were there at all. The forests were the next place.

Since he had always been more solitary than most heading into the woods would not seem out of pattern regarding his expected behaviour. He scanned his atlas. There. In the foothills north the huge snow covered mountains that formed part of his backdrop. If Nehr's information systems were indeed watching him which seemed most likely then that was a risk he was prepared to take. But first to gain some hard evidence as to how embedded Nehr's field was. It might be transient. Then again if she took a liking to her corporeal incarnation she had the ability maybe even drawing on her double to remain the supreme ruler for as long as she liked. She might even groom a whole coterie of followers making sure this field-wave remained in place as long as the universe had energy. And that would be in the billions of years.

He shut the slightly dusty books and opened his little observatory. Instead of searching for Mission Control he merely pointed it in the general direction, broad spectrum scan. Just looking to pass the time away.

Nothing.

It did not surprise him. Encloaked. He hoped that they had pre-calculated the configured probability of Nehr's Virtual Quantum Collapse. Since it had indeed come about it existed. So they took precautions to make themselves scarce, from being a small target to no target. The mass though would still be there. There was a mass-spectrometer built into his telescope.

Ever since the discrepancy in the GA Monas had invested in an observatory. There was its super galaxy of course. In around four hundred million years both their galaxy, the neighbouring Milky Way would form a super-super galaxy. Interesting times. By then they would all be in habitats or maybe even move their planet to a safer holding

position. Or simply abandon it, wait out the cosmic fireworks in space and resettle new planetary systems. An eventful diversion.

So had Mission Control gone totally off line? Most likely. One thing Monas did not have was a quantum field analyser. Seen no need. The future so assured. Wrong wrong wrong. Mission Control did. If they were smart they'd have their own thus isolating themselves from the larger field Nehr was using. So had she created it or had it been handed to her on a platter?

Only one safe way to find out. Go there. A bit tricky given their absence. He scanned the heavens lazily, a look here, a probe there. Then he inserted coordinates way past where the station ought to be. Light bent around it. To make sure of not being found out Monas decided to search them out visually. It took a while for him to find their location. But he did not end his starry ruminations there. He went back to the GA. Something was bending energy near the centre. Next to a massive black hole. A minor black hole? Stationary. He was no astronomer but from what little he did know smaller objects around larger massive objects were never stationary. Unless it was an artifice. Geostationary. Near a black hole?

Now he really had to go.

Decision time.

Not much of a future here. If he went himself it would have to be a one way trip. With no knowing when it was safe to return. And here he thought, as he was looking through the telescope his time had nearly come. Well that would have to wait. Given what he suspected that much at least would have to be verified. Then the next generation could deal with it.

He shut the telescope down, the roof closed using lenses rather than sensors. He had them too but they could be read. Then putting on a thermal jacket went to his transfer unit and deposited himself into the northern forest.

The air crisp, biting, refreshing. It certainly beat climate control even with ionizers. The pine forest smelt great. Pine cones and needles lay in abundance at his feet. Not much undergrowth as little sunlight filtered through from the canopy above. He meandered around a bit. A small crystal clear stream, lichen covered rocks, animals rustling amongst the foliage. He hoped he would not run into some beast of prey. That was something he had not even considered. If his little sojourn here did attract someone's attention back at Nehr's palace then they either were watching and he hoped getting bored or his little excursion might elucidate a response.

It took a while for him to find the mushrooms he sought. In the end he had around a dozen, all growing in one patch of mottled sunlight which broke through at this particular spot. Still his thermal gear, protection from the cold excluded scanning. He was invisible. Unless more sophisticated gear was trained on him. Whereby he might be located.

Then he sat near a stream. And waited. If someone did materialize he would simply say he was enjoying nature. Getting away from the sameness of the desert. But nobody came. He was tempted to take one smaller mushroom at least. He had brushed off the grains and clumps of dirt that clung to their semi oval top. Better not. If his mind would indeed flare that might be noted by whoever was watching. Rather wait until he was secure at the station. Take it from there. If it was necessary at all.

"Visitors?" Wynaht gave the head of Mission Control a sardonic smile.

She merely shrugged her shoulders. "It's a scientific establishment." She replied blandly.

"Not logged. No data. Blank. Rather unusual to have a void come through. Could be anybody."

"Unlike you." Knowing he was guessing.

"I have nothing to hide." The barb did not go unnoticed with her. Ever since Waynaht had so peremptorily walked in off Arktus, waving his orders to examine the work the scientists were doing the Controller had been speechless that they, this base was under investigation. 'Transgressing the laws of the universe, meddling in future probabilities, countering natural events'. He had reeled off a few more so-called contraventions.

Monas stepped out of the transfer unit. No one around. Not that he expected a welcoming committee. He was here to find out where the future lay. He sniffed the filtered air, always a little drier, like his desert location. No one in the corridor. No one in any corridor. Either the staff were extremely busy with their agents, the others resting. Monas made his way to Control. What he had in mind could solve at least some of the future potentialities along with the status of the ethereal realms. In a quantum driven universe everything was entangled one way or another.

Entering the control room, he saw straight away one of the Exec Councillors. Waynaht. What was he doing here? They went back a long way. Sharing data realms. He, Monas more interested in the big picture, to reveal hidden future probabilities and advise on the best way to achieve the most fitting probabilities to be executed to secure

their future. All before the discovery of the GA. Waynaht more the manipulative kind. How to use information to establish himself as his own power base. Become a focus for lesser minds impressed by his knowledge. The Execs gaining power, achieving it or pretending to.

"Monas." Waynaht turned from the Controller. Monas nodded at her first without revealing her name. A cardinal rule at the station. Designations only. For they knew the capabilities of the DVs from Prima by now.

"You. Taking an interest in the great scientific quest?" Waynaht being his usual cynical self. Wherever Waynaht was trouble followed. He was a meddler, a busy body, one with a coterie following him, having assembled a miniature following on Arktus.

"Exactly" Monas's reply bland.

"Requiring rectification. And just as well." shooting a withering look at the Controller. She did not bother responding. As far as she was concerned this had nothing to do with the Ruling Council. This was hard-core science. They were protecting their future not rearranging it as Waynaht presumed. He had waved the executive order for an investigation in her face. On paper. Top secret. Just how Waynaht liked it. Working behind the scenes.

His lined face and thick curly silver hair made him look even more severe than he already was. And serious. The only humour that of unfortunate events affecting others, usually through his efforts. There were countless councillors who had their reputations destroyed using his network of informers. How he had inveigled himself, with his pretend preening persona to Nehr a feat in itself. Nehr the queen playing the knife edge, to assume the lead role in what would probably become a tragedy Monas guessed and hoped would unravel in good time. So Monas did not bother being unduly concerned, still less interested in what this interfering puffed up Supreme Councillor was doing here. Maybe in one possible future he and his kind were of no consequence. Meddling for the pure power thrill. Monas could see no other reason. Unless there really was something else.

"He wants to shut us down." The controller said evenly. More in disgust than dismay.

"I would have thought the political situation would need, or dare I say, require your attention?" Monas looking at the screens. Most were off line. The support staff, the facilitators tasked to observe and guide the agents sitting around glumly.

"All is in hand. The future stabilised. The path smoothened out, discrepancies aligned, entanglement progressing along natural logical pathways." Waynaht looked at Monas. "Logical." He reemphasised.

"Your logic." Monas replied evenly.

"That is where you are wrong Monas. Real-time. What is intended to be. As you grace us with your visit," his curtesy laced in an icy tone, a wan smile on his thick wet lips, was he drooling?, Monas observing Waynaht. Had Monas known that not only would there be an ancient, almost forgotten method of usurping power through a coup d etat then maybe he would have alerted Mission Control to focus not on the planets in the GA but on their own domain. Too late now. Perhaps the future could still be fine tuned.

"Certain events have precipitated themselves. Thus my, I should say the Council's investigation..."

"Of which you are head no doubt." She couldn't help herself there.

"...correct, have discovered that this station is engaged in illegal activities regarding future probable states. In other words manipulating the future for nefarious ends. Possibly influenced through alien contact and thus alien sentence compromising our true destiny."

"Regum's vanished off the screens. EMFs ceased." She remarked.

"Yes. The Primaians acted. As have we." Waynaht replied.

"You sure you're not under their alien influence Waynaht?"

"Coincidence. Regum was becoming a threat to Prima's future as this station has become a threat to ours."

"Convenient." She looking at Monas instead.

"Show him."

One screen that still was on line revealed a huge tapered drop the quantum field extending out into space, towards the Milky Way, centred on Earth. It glowed behind the darkness of space. Computer enhanced.

Monas realised what he was seeing. Surely this was not their doing. The Reganians were using PFWs. Amazing. Fantastic. Incredible.

"I'm given to understand, more by deduction," Waynaht focussing on the Controller once more, "that there is one of our own, an agent within that field-wave."

"Is there?" Monas had no clue. He was just a some-time advisor. Studying various future models and how they might impinge on their current present state.

"Come come Monas. We know three were sent. There we have to thank you Monas and your Sleepwalker friends. Most helpful Nehr was. But no matter," looking

away from the screen, "as the Reganians have no knowledge of our existence and this base we need to concern ourselves with their future probabilities infecting ours. We are not here to write the future according to individual whim, more to make sure..."

"Yes Waynaht. I get the picture." Monas wearying of his posturing.

"So you would agree that this investigation invested in me by..."

"Do get to the point."

"Active shut down. Passive only. With oversight."

"A committee chosen by you correct?"

"Not just me. I only have one vote."

"And I'm sure you have assembled like minded councillors."

"Councillors of the highest calibre. Concerned not just with the physical future which were on the verge of being transgressed here but equally important," as he looked towards both of them, "the moral imperative."

"Moral?" the Controller surprised. Monas had an inkling of what Waynaht might be alluding to.

"Yes moral. Capital M."

"Do tell." Monas studying the PWF coming out from distant space towards their next galaxy.

"Just as the Primaians have shut down Regum for no doubt the highest and purest of reasons so we too," meaning you Monas thought, "are faced with a similar dilemma. Well not a dilemma really given the path your research," another meaningful look at the controller, "was taking. Inserting agents of influence to pursue an illegitimate, illegal agenda. Deviance. Deviating from the natural flow of events. Interfering with the quantum manifestation of what is to be not what ought to be. You do understand the difference." It was not a question. That was not his style. "Now we know," interesting of his use of the plural, "that you debriefed some agents." All guesswork Monas surmised. "Or were privy to what they knew."

Monas said nothing. Waynaht's intelligence was good. Was this the pay-off for Nehr to become their world's leading figure head? Whatever Nehr's game was, Monas would for the current future keep away from her. By being a cloned double she might fall either way. Quantum probabilities, in both her persona's. Dual manifestations. He wondered if the two might coalesce at some future point in time. He hoped she could get away with it. Unless she had truly gone over. Wonderfully unresolved. Of course if Waynaht suspected her dual role...but could he remove her? Could she remove him? Ah the temptation.

"I took an interest. As a historian Waynaht."

"Then the council would be interested in your conclusions."

"History, like the universe is a process. I made no conclusions." Which of course was a lie. He wished he had destroyed his papers.

"Come come. With so many nodal points and strange attractors surfacing..."

"Hypothesising yes. But no more than that. There is a location where all speculation becomes useless. The future can only be guessed at for a finite progression. After that anything is possible which means it's meaningless to even bother speculating. You must know that."

"Not when you have agents in that future." That must have been his trump card since he looked triumphant. Maybe the Controller had moved one of her agents into the future to make sure the present played out as expected. To avoid the very thing Waynaht was going on about. If Waynaht got this right, which just might be the case then the future was indeed precarious. So she had inserted one of them into the future. Good move. Create a focal unitary field state. Things might work out yet. It could also explain Nehr's dual role. He doubted if any Sleepwalkers of substance would even bother with Waynaht's mind. Not one of their calibre.

"By your reaction, or lack of Monas I can only conclude you were aware of this illegal move."

"Illegal? Who says? By what authority? Oh yes I forgot." Giving Waynaht a twisted smile. "We've been, as a civilisation, putting markers into the future ever since I can remember."

"Markers yes. Tiny information sphere's measuring the quantum fluctuations. But that is not the same as having a sentient pre-programmed symbiot in place. One mimicking whatever race they are embedded in. As I said: agents of influence."

"Waynaht. Has it ever occurred to you that that is what the Primaians through their DVs have been doing for centuries. Trying to align other worlds. Regum..."

"An external matter."

"Their future affects ours as well."

"Not any more." Came the dispassionate reply. The Controller nearly let out an exasperating expression but bit her tongue proverbially instead.

"Which affects us either way. So we'll leave Regum, since...are they?"

"They are Monas." She answered.

"Serious stuff. If they can be shut down, just like that, has it ever occurred to you Waynaht that we might be imperilled and that that is the reason for the research going on here? Saving the future, our future?" the Controller challenged.

"We are not without our means. Calculations have been made..."

"Which you are not going to reveal, correct?" the controller interjected. Waynaht ignored her, his pale blue eyes glowing.

"...and talking revealing Controller, where is the other agent? Since there is no data one can only assume she is within that PWF? That would suggest to me she is enphased as well which leads to only one conclusion."

"Several actually." She said neutrally.

"Very clever. I'm afraid you are wrong. There can only be one future, there *will* only be one future. The correct future. I suggest you extricate her at the earliest. If not then we will have to use your facilities to make it happen."

"Destabilise their PWF? Wouldn't that be interfering in their future?"

"And pray tell me," `pray?' Monas was puzzled at the archaic expression. "where do you think the Reganian's got the capabilities to generate this field-wave? I tell you where. From your future positioning of the last agent. Reverse entanglement. All the Reganians had to do was pluck it out of these coordinated, information loaded PWs. It may look like they made that breakthrough when viewed from an ignorant perspective. But we know better don't we? We know how it works."

"We do and now so do they. Maybe it was us Waynaht," she answered back, "irrespective of what our agent did or did not. You may as well go back to the invention of the wheel for that matter."

"Come now Controller. Let's not be childish."

"Childish? A child wants and will kick up a fuss if it cannot get its way. It seems to me something very similar is occurring here Waynaht."

"You have your orders." Waynaht sniffed. "See they are carried out. I or my representatives will return. If the agent has not been recalled then the future of this station might have to be turned over to more responsible scientists."

"Threatening me? A bit personal, childish at that. So do it. Now. I can walk away. No big deal." She countered.

"We value your mind." Waynaht relented. "And yours." Indicating Monas.

"Should I grovel now or is another time more suitable?" she going caustic.

"This is not about me. It's about the future. Our future. Think on that."

"You mean you have information that is disturbing? If so why not release it?"
relentless. Monas was pleased with her gutsy attitude, calling his bluff.

"Because Controller, Monas, you wouldn't like it. But that is in the realm of the probable. Let us hope we can salvage the present to make sure the future is stable. Now I must go. Controller, Monas." And with a sweeping imperious gesture Waynaht walked out back to the transfer unit.

"What is going on?" Monas asked her after Waynaht had left.

"He wants to shut the experiment down. The coincidence with Regum's demise is uncanny."

"You been to Arktus recently?"

"No but I heard. Waynaht."

"We secure?"

"Not very. Not if he's running some sort of extraction field on us. None detected. I think he's bluffing. No one else has our capabilities. Doesn't mean they're not going to duplicate our station. The cat's out the bag. It wouldn't surprise me if the Reganian's haven't already started. And with the stealth capabilities we have no one might even know...'

"...that Waynaht and or Prima want to rewrite the future."

"Exactly."

"What now?"

"We hang in there."

"Are the other agents back?"

"No comment." Not revealing exactly who was still inserted and who was not.

"You think they might be enphased with Prima?"

"I've done some research there. Still more like us. Prima is enphased with the Discrepancy. Problem is, apart from passive read outs, interacting might be just what that system wants. Connect and it takes over. The last thing I want is Regum's fate."

"The planet off-line, completely?"

"Back to less than a base-state. No functioning technology at all."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Surely Waynaht cannot envisage..."

She took a deep breath. "Got no idea what he's on about, apart from the obvious."

"Power."

"Power. Now that we've had a regime change."

"Yes." Monad keeping to himself the possible double game Nehr had orchestrated. He would also assume the station was under passive observation. Deciding this was not the time to indulge in mind expanding exercises. "Can the inserts make sure our supposed future does not fall down?"

"Sure? One can never know. Probable? Yes. So far."

"Something anyway. Can we get to her?"

"Naturally, even with their field in place. But then Waynaht would be alerted and insist on a debrief. Keep them there as long as possible. Ironically it might be the Reganian outpost that could save our future."

"Who would have thought. The beginners saving the experts."

"They are free. We were free. Monas you're going to have to be very careful from now on."

"Me?" Monas laughed heartily. "You are the one in their sights."

"Don't I know it."

For a moment they said nothing. She, the woman with no name, her persona secreted, hidden in her unconscious so that no one, no sentient, no entity, no bio-symbiot, free factotums and avatars cruising the aether waves would ever have an inkling as to who she really was, sighed.

"You know too much." Monas said at last, watching the few screens on line.

"It may come that this station has to relocate Monas."

"I hadn't thought of that. Adjust the vacuum beams to a higher density and sort of self-delete?"

"That might have worked when we constructed this place. Right at the beginning. But now they'll have the mass and its atomic signature. Don't forget we're not Sleepwalker proof. Not that they can't be kept out..."

"But at a price."

"Yes, being Isolate."

"Out there somewhere." Indicating space.

"What about you?" she considered.

"Even if...what were you thinking of?"

"They, the new execs suspect our agents. I don't even wish to know where they are exactly."

"You don't?" Monas was surprised by that.

"If she is in Regum's PFW then she's an Isolate. From our perspective. For all we know she might be in touch with our future selves."

"If that is indeed so then all is well. You stay neutral, let reality unfold, collapse the PW with no data interfacing and with a bit of luck the future will take care of itself."

"As long as we project our PFWs. But as you know they've been shut down. By order."

"What's going to happen if you proceed as planned?" eyeing her.

The screens went through their motions of reading space. A thin lilac mist on one of them. A computer simulation.

"Shut down. Monas, the stations objectives are being reviewed."

"Investigated."

"Ransacking more likely. Waynaht is looking for an excuse to do just that. He as much as told me I was playing with fire. A cosmic fire at that."

"Overreacting. Being dramatic."

"He always was," she paused, "from what I heard." Searching his face. She knew he had known him since their youth. Last incarnation. "Is he a first timer?"

"Has always been coy about just how many incarnation's he's gone through. One moment pretending he's a new arrival. The next big thing in sentient evolution, pretending to know more than he does."

"And does he?"

"Hm. That depends." Monas sighed. "Let's sit."

"Fine." They sat on upright recliners. One of the facilitators entered with Ratze's screen just white noise. She was in stasis. Ung and Nervina beyond their PWF.

"I can't see number three's."

"Rerouted. Subliminal domain." Then turning to Monas: "Never trusted him. Has his a finger in every pie. A real busybody."

"That's how he got on the council. Friends to some, a threat to others and those who are either in awe of him, or cautious given what he presumes to know by which he controls them, creates through intimidation his backers."

"The perfect politico. What about those who are not impressed. Who don't really care whatever he pretends to have data wise."

"Waiting for him to fall."

"Surely a smart operator would organise contingencies."

"I think you're the contingency. Maybe I am." She sighed. "If he can manipulate whatever you have amassed and consider you a threat then I think he will score a major

coup. That's what I'm afraid of Monas. Now that he knows you're here, doesn't mean he doesn't yet know who I am. Even if you do. I hope I'm not in your natural memory."

"No. Not able to recall who you really are Controller."

She relaxed. Given Waynaht was turning the screws it was better she remained incognito. Even if that were scraped away she had stand-by persona's, plenty of them to slow down any searches.

"If I dumped what we know, cleaned it up a bit, would you take it?"

"Meaning out of here? My place would become, if not already is, an area of interest. Then there is Nehr."

"What about your friend Nesho?"

"Haven't seen him or heard from him. Vanished."

"Is that usual?"

"Sort of." Monas replied vaguely. Wondering what that lilac mist indicated. Not asking. Going into her system might alert Waynaht. Waiting for someone to excise pertinent data. "He's a reincarnate himself. We get along. In fact we're really more social than focussed or dare I say it, practically involved in anything. Neither of us talk about our extraneous activities."

"So what do you two talk about. I assume you operate, interact on some level. Not that many do, unless plotting." She gave him a look of secrets unspoken.

"Life. Nature of reality. Our delusions, illusions, wishes, orientations, anything really..."

"Except what might be of use to Waynaht?"

"Even before that entity crawled out of some domain jungle."

"Is he that primitive?"

"Base-liner."

"Like that?"

"I'm only guessing." Monas wondered. Waynaht was always his own personality. Unless his chosen personality had taken over. These things happened to the first-born. "He's configured through luck. Got a persona that has exceptional and unique traits."

"Meaning manipulative."

"Very much so."

"You think he's some next generation incarnating persona?"

"Could well be."

"More like a retro throw up to me."

Monas could not help but laugh. "That too occurred to me. So," fixing his gaze on her, "you were suggesting..."

"Memory dump."

"I!"

"Thought so. Is that a yes or a no?"

Monas recovered from the surprise. Then he had a thought. "What about some Sleepwalker?"

"They're too involved. They leak, no make that gush information. They are transmitters of the first degree Monas."

He liked that she used his name. If Waynaht was reading them then that gave him something to worry about. Hopefully confuse him as well.

"It's going to get out whatever you do. He'll use your data for his own aims. If it's public it leaves him with less to be manipulative about."

"Now there's a thought."

"Why is this place so secret?"

"Because we are playing with...time."

"Future PWs."

"Yes. But only within the design parameters of this experiment."

"Which is?"

"Monas. Really."

"I know about the GA. Inhabited."

"Sentients like the Primaians who are trying to collapse their own future onto not just their quadrant but way out, as far as Earth."

"Without us being noted?"

"Either that or ignored. Maybe if they control Earth...who knows what they're real intentions are." Though she did know. Get their cosmic view to dominate Earth's inhabitants. If they succeed then they could quite easily target one planet after another. Arktus included. Though how they could break through millions of different mind sets ought to create its own difficulties in imposing a unitary view as the dominant factor. Still if it did work on Earth who, millennia ago were similar then Arktus could, if stumbled across by accident become a target through their DVs as well.

"Domination."

She refocussed on Monas. "Agreed."

"So release it all."

"I'll have to think on that."

"Now," Monas looking at one of the active screens, "what about that?"

She followed his gaze. "That? The lilac haze with it's hot spots? That Monas is the question of the moment. It appeared. That's all I can say."

"But there must be some initial analysis."

"That for the moment classified."

"That bad?"

"It's, shall we say, unusual."

"Tried all sorts of methods?"

"No. Its resonance is like a rarefied version of Prima's envelope, their resonant field. I think they're experimenting with the base state of space."

"Making it easier for the DVs?"

"Good point. I had considered something else entirely, something far more disturbing."

"And that is what is classified?"

"My thoughts are."

"What's so dangerous?"

"The simplicity of it."

"And?"

"The technique as I said is simple. But it needs intricate complexity and a lot of energy to achieve."

"So the theory is simple."

"As is often the case in science."

"So it is scientific in nature?"

"Technological in execution."

"Not us?"

"As in some future state reaching into the present? Could be. Trouble is its resonant signature."

"Not us then?"

"Unless we went through some drastic mental shift."

"Intrigue me."

"All I can say is someone is manipulating the basic phase state of space."

"As in fine tuning? Inserting?"

"Yes. Right at the core."

"Resonant field states vibrating in the quantum matrices of space."

"Yes."

"And this lilac haze is what is occurring?"

"You got it."

"So override it. Go decoherent. Mess it up."

"Not as simple as that."

"Is that why you want to keep agents in place? Why not approach it by technological means?"

"Because my fear is that I would be inviting its state into ours. At the moment it's even enveloped us."

"Any effects?"

"Waynaht."

"He knows?"

"He might not even know he is affected. There is a source. I really shouldn't be revealing this. But near their galactic centre there's a massive potent data field. In the shape of a pulsating, vibrating, resonating sphere. We think it's artificial."

"A stand alone system."

"Yes. Maybe even bio enhanced."

"Symbiot. Feeding off the galaxy's power house, its black hole."

"Very good Monas."

"I try." He shrugged.

"So if we were to connect..."

"So would it."

"Precisely."

"Now I understand your skittishness."

"Too right. It's already here. Dormant, waiting for someone to connect, create a link. Quantum tunnelling. Then entanglement."

"Which would achieve its aim. To dominate space itself."

"Not just that, but configure the data inherent in the universe along certain specifically aligned fieldwaves."

"You mean orient our consciousness along its predetermined resonance?"

"Brainwashing is the old term."

"And you say it's here?"

"Screen says so."

"Nothing on Arktus to indicate any change in our way of thinking?"

"Might need to percolate a bit. Could take some time rather than instant phase change, mind change, brain change."

"We are safe here though?"

"I've got the vacuum beams shifting us out of real space. I also am running current micro PFWs."

"Which attracted Waynaht."

"Damned if I do, damned if I don't."

"I don't envy your position. A quantum conundrum."

"Can't get more classic than that."

"Then I would suggest you release all your data."

"What about the inserts?"

"Hm."

"Yes, once I get results I'll know how serious this is. You see we may have, at some future state, obviated this field. It's potent yet it's weak at the same time."

"You mean overwrite it?"

"Exactly. Whatever it is it's shown us the way."

"That's why you want to keep all this secret."

"Because if that can do it and given time we can then anybody can. Can you imagine the mess that could cause?"

"Everybody preloading their preferred future. Talk about causing havoc."

"It could still be that they all might cancel each other out. Then again if someone heads for our galactic centre..."

"...and everybody else..."

"Oh boy. Well then, maybe we stick with your approach."

"Thank you. We can always use your idea if all else fails."

"Anything I can do?" realizing he was needed. He would have to hold off on passing on. This was too important.

"Be my scout."

"Access all areas?"

"As long as the council's out of the picture."

"Given what Waynaht is up to..."

"I'm sure you'll think of a way. After all he came to me, not you."

"True."

"It's not for me to say Monas, but go back to your retreat, pretend nothing much is happening here, or anywhere for that matter."

"Can't ignore the coup de'tat."

"Forgot about that. Well there you go."

"Meaning what?"

"That a lot of wanna be's are going to focus on jockeying for positions Waynaht included. We can use this window of opportunity whilst those who might meddle here are meddling there."

"You are fantastic..."

"I don't know about that." She smiled wryly.

For the moment Monas's continuation in the present had him wondering about a lot of things. Waynaht more so then the experiment out there with the Controller. Just how far she had reached into various time-space displacements, tunnelling into closely aligned alternative realities now seemed more tenuous, less accessible.

Back at his isolated home at the edge of the mountainous desert, the ochre colours of evening glowing with an unusual intensity perhaps due to having been in distant space where the visual spectrum was essentially remote stars, the only colour a black background. Computer simulations aside, such wonderful displays of beauty in the rocks, the boulders, the ragged outline of the edge of the escarpment where his abode tunnelled into the cliff face. Overlooking the thin band of trees along the meandering waters of the river creating a long oasis. Now Monas wondered if history was not repeating itself. With society stable, millennia of peace, of outer harmony, discord forgotten. The need for greed satisfied through automated delivery systems satisfying every whim for the good life. Now something had crept into the cosmos to shake reality up.

Nesho appeared, in person catching him unawares. Unusual. Was his alert-system malfunctioning? Probably too engrossed in his thoughts to notice the incoming energy which had landed Nesho here.

Nesho had just come back from his tiny flat at Pehrus, Arktus's second city. Arktus Prime the nominal city of their world, the place of the executive, the place of decisions no one really bothered with. For there was no need. Their automated world meant everybody was free to pursue their dreams. The result millions of souls in isolation, happy, content, relaxed, indifferent to a political regime that though ruling everyone affected no one for no one paid it any attention. Or so Nesho hoped.

Pehrus the research centre where systems designers met who ironically still craved face to face contact to exchange ideas, try different inventions. An old commuter city once known as FairMeadow due to its large floodplain along the river, its

towers built above the high water mark now an arts centre. Here creativity was the norm. Where skyscrapers morphed into different designs.

In his younger days Monas had had friends everywhere. Only in later youth, young adulthood had he been for a while attracted to FM now simply known as the Hub. Cauldron had been suggested but was deemed a little too overt. Here ideas churned into ingenious brilliance for Arktian's, a good majority were addicted to alternative cyber-worlds. Self enclosed, self contained, self sufficient the whole planet and off worlders had come to FM, the Hub to see in amazement the bizarre designs of buildings, the retro fad of ground mechanical transport, tiny exotic flying contraptions, glowing multi-dimensional sculptures one could physically explore, a veritable playground for the mind.

Now with a twist Nesho explained. Rather a disturbing change he hinted.

"Please, take a seat, let's sit out there." Monas invited Nesho to the patio. "Very pleasant, just a hint of a breeze and no flies."

"They're all down the river." Nesho, immaculate all in white stretched out on a recliner, "where I would have thought you'd of all people might have set up your retreat." He smiled.

"Retreat." Monas repeated creaking his bones to sit next to Nesho. The crystal clear blue sky looking infinite, the impression of unlimited space. "It's really become my centre of existence."

"A true Arktian singularity." Nesho commented.

"One of millions Nesho. Unlike you," he replied, "maybe it is age, or a stage I'm entering where interaction leaves me less serene."

"Exactly what is on my mind Monas." Only half turning.

"Oh? Concerned for my state of being?"

"In a way. You know we go back even though there are years between us."

"Sure. I have never really belonged to my generation for too many reasons. Or just one or two." Monas considered. "Coffee?"

"If you want. I know how addicted you are to that beverage."

"Addicted. Such a loaded concept, the word more than its inherent meaning."

"Linguistics. Intent, execution of a mental design, a psychic construct resonating in the spaces of our minds to create abstracted realities."

"My Nesho we are focussed on something. Or was that pure inspiration?"

"I don't know Monas. Just a thought." Frowning a little.

Monas flipped open the cover on the left armrest and told the kitchen to percolate some coffee. Then set the timer. The hum of the gadgets going active. Coffee being ground afresh.

"There is something in the air."

"Molecules." Monas joked. "A bad smell? The compost of ages?"

Nesho looked at Monas as if taken by surprise. "Your antennae might not be aligned or that focussed but it's still there...receiving."

"Sometimes I wish it wasn't"

"You can always..."

"I know. Many do reconfigure. But I'm not a headcase."

"Nor a head spaced junkie."

"Yeah, the endomorphic charged up dreamers. Chasing Sleepwalkers thinking themselves as Transcendent. Artificed realms. Virtuality the be all."

"And End All."

Monas picked up Nesho's accentuation. "End All?"

"You're half right. Maybe you should see for yourself."

The grinding had stopped. The whirl of the ground beans being deposited into the percolator. The first steaming drips of superheated water beginning the process.

"Must I?"

"No you can take my word for it."

"Talking taking words, I ran into Waynaht..." without revealing where.

"Waynaht, Waynaht, Waynaht. Now why is that name so familiar yet I can't get a fix."

"He moves within the executives. Going magnetic."

"Magnetic?"

"Attracting filings."

"A power source."

"Always wanted to be one. Making some moves."

"Kick starting the execs...into what?"

"There I thought your radar might have sensed the shift."

"So you noticed?" Nesho meaning the change of perspective, the outer variables undergoing a change of pitch. In the aether. Nesho thinking figurate lively.

"How can one miss Waynaht. He's a veritable mini cyclone. More like a cyclotron. Creating critical mass, speeding up reality, watching the debris, zooming in on hard matter that survives his virtual cataclysms. Thrives on conflict situations."

"Not very Arktarian."

"Throw back. Evolution's little misfits. Not a mutation of possibilities rather the opposite. Why now?"

"A throw up Monas." Nesho smirked. "From the past. You're right. As in why now? Same reason why there's a shift amongst the artists, the execs. A shift of emphasis, of consciousness. Affecting the rest."

"Let's hope they're as somnolent as ever."

"Mass resistance. Like poking a stick at a lump of mud."

"That might dampen things a bit."

"So you are aware...?"

In the kitchen the first aroma of the coffee came through.

"Aware." Monas sighed. "Sometimes I wish I were a clod of mud. So much easier simply being aligned."

"Obviously your choice during your incarnations. Choosing your personas."

"Attracted. I sometimes wonder what or who between my ears does the attracting, being attracted. One of life's little mysteries."

"Natural inclinations." Nesho answered easily.

"That we all know." Monas understating the obvious. "But do you think that our minds, not our brains, or somehow an essence, perhaps pre-conceived like a probability field wave that upon birth collapses into an enphased potentiality which in our physical form becomes the actuality that we are."

"Maybe." Nesho said breezily. "It's burnt many a brain cell considering that. Which brings me to my point."

"So not a social call?"

In the kitchen the percolator was bubbling merrily away. Monas flipped shut the cover of his mini console. Keep the sand out.

"An excuse for one put it that way."

"Not that I would be offended Nesho."

"Well you know that I'm a go-between, soliciting info. I'll show you."

Nesho activated a light screen from his handheld pc. In the holo projection the Hub's more exotic constructs were morphing into abstracted geometries. Most were circular, oval or octagonal and beyond.

"Fads come and go Nesho. Not bad. A nice change."

"Change yes. As to nice...I have my doubts."

"Doubting Nesho. Not like you."

"There's been a shift. A shift in consciousness. Rumours Monas. Only mainlining seems to get anybody out of it. A constriction of our brains or worse case scenario, our minds. The hardwiring's being fiddled with."

"The execs taken over the wavelengths? They always wanted to."

"So thought I. From what little I've gathered so far it appears external."

"Aha."

Nesho looked at Monas in surprise. It wasn't news to him. Knowing or suspecting as much. At least with Monas that was good news. Still he thought he had discovered something only to realize Monas had beaten him to it. The coffee's aroma was rich and pleasant.

"You suspect or you know?"

"Suspect Nesho. My Sleepwalking friend sent a message. Their realm is becoming disentangled, decoherent, isolated which means once the break is made they'll be self contained in their realm. The end of dreams."

Nesho was silent digesting this. Not good. "There were always those," Nesho began at last, "who were against the expansion of consciousness, whether the ancient technique of mainlining or meta-enhanced. Like the idea that we are complete as is and any changes, any use of artifices somehow goes against the grand design. We the end point not the process."

"And they're making a comeback." Monas understood.

"Your Waynaht. It came to me by the way that you two used to associate."

"Only vaguely. We were treading familiar paths whilst doing uni. Both of us actually went real time. Even studied some subjects together. With him it was mutual attraction and repulsion. One moment he'd be with me then this aversion and totally against. Vindictive. Needless to say it never rankled me. I carried on regardless. Probably what made him think I was some sort of entity that he needed, if not to respect, he couldn't ignore either. We both rose to some minor positions, he more with both the faculty and the lesser orbits of some associations. Me I went for the media which again made him think I was some sort of power unto my self. I was even a designated representative of an outmoded but pertinent political organization, two actually." Monas remembered. All so long ago. "In the end I drifted out, gravitated towards the characters at FM, the Hub I mean. The moment I'd made that break Waynaht acted more natural towards me. For the first time I felt I could converse with him without him having something up his sleeve. His conversations always oblique. Once I was out, he relaxed. Friendship's too strong a word, good acquaintance. Never got on with the

people he knew. More like acolytes. Interesting psychologically, micro sociology, sort of. Attractive for a while but useless for me for they considered Waynaht a guru. He loved that role even then and cultivated it. I left the Hub. Met a woman there. Borderline case. Just how I like them. In the end of course that too fell apart. Drifted ever since. A few failed relationships along the way. But I kept my essence. And Nesho I still don't know what that essence is. So there you have what I know about Waynaht. But I did just run into him. He's aged of course. Like me. But that brain of his is still calculating in high ratios." Finished Monas got a servo-bot to bring them their coffees.

Nesho said nothing. At least Monas had given him an insight into how Waynaht worked. Typical exec material.

Monas's brain went on-line. It was her, the Controller.

'You're not going to believe this. You alone? Preliminary this.'

'Not alone but he's on side, very much so.'

'I'm running this through you 'cause I'm thinking of going public with this.'

'Nesho.'

'What. Oh secure?'

'He's linked with me.'

'Good. We got the data on Regum.'

'The bid D?' now that Monas had gotten over the surprise that she could link with him he relaxed. She must have softscanned him whilst he had been up there with her at the lab. Not only that but she had during the softscan uploaded some of the data available to her. Probably a breach of protocol unless the rules of engagement had changed.

'Loading. Hang on to your brain.'

The wave of information came through to both Monas and Nesho. One moment Regum's great city, sparkling in their sun, lights twinkling, transport moving then nothing. Lights out, power off. Everything ground to a halt.

'I've edited something out. Something dangerous. It's contained and could harm us. The filters in place, the buffers, shock absorbers did their job. There's more to this than a mere offline turn-down. Regum as far as we know is not what it used to be. It's collapsed completely. Planes fell out of the sky Monas. Buildings sealed becoming entombing nightmares. Millions dead. Worst of all an orbital crashed into the stricken city. Megaton detonation. Source classified. For good reason. It's infectious. We could go the same way. I'm thinking of going public. So that we are prepared.'

Monas was speechless. Nesho all concentration as the horror struck him directly. He looked helplessly at Monas who was re-running the snippet.

'I think you should.' Monas was thinking of Waynaht. Did he know? Or merely guess or had he inside information alluding to the Discrepancy? But that was just an astronomical phenomena. Or was it? Was this advancing shockwave some sort of designated design upon high tech worlds, or just Regum for reasons as yet unknown or a by-product of a very potent PFW?

'I got that.' She replied. **'We don't know at this stage. If we go off-line then you'll know how serious. In real time the front will be there in moments. If it crashes here...we're hoping it wont because I've taken a certain liberty. I've enveloped Arktus in our current PFW. You see we assume the Reganians in space are running the same experiment and are stable. Given their success in becoming isolated then for the duration so must we. Until we get to the root cause. Actually Monas we already suspect the root cause. A very powerful generated PFW. Trouble is we think it's got the destructive data within it. Even reading it is enough to create the calamity that befell Regum. Within our transmission we will warn all not, repeat not to even softscan it. Passive, meaning normal visuals is harmless. Just don't get anybody to source it. That is imperative. Going public now.'**

"You got that?" Monas asked, adrenaline buzzing. The coffee was mild compared to the shock of it all.

"I have." Nesho said cautiously. "Personas like Waynaht are going to use this. I knew there was something up. It may also explain the disintegration of our quantum connectivities. As in the Sleepwalkers inability to tunnel through."

"Total dystropy."

"Yes." Nesho sipped his coffee distractedly. The stark beauty around him took on a sinister appearance. Nature turning hostile whilst keeping appearances the same. If their technology failed them then they would be as helpless as the Reganians. Luckily they had self correcting default engaging realigning programmes in place. And shielded against supernova, sunburst or other exotic cosmic activity. If as the controller said they were now in a quantum bubble, as long as it held it might be enough to allow the Killer Waves alluded to to wash around them. But what if the execs had other ideas? If Arktus crashed it would be the perfect moment to take over. Claim all sorts of fantastic dissembling to justify their plot.

"I just hope that everyone's aware just in what a precarious reality we really are in. Not situation Monas, reality. As long as the PFW is in place, we're secure. But we are

also cut off from the cosmic information flow down here. And all the other possibilities as such can never be actuated. We're on our own."

"Isolated. At least we still have billions of years from the past to draw upon."

"True. A small consolation. But you realise the future's locked out."

"Better that than Regum's destruction being ours."

"We will find a way out of this."

"We must Nesho. Our only hope is the experiment up there."

"How much do you know?"

"Less than they Nesho." Relating Waynaht's interested in the astronomical discrepancy of the GA. "The super gravity well. And the enphased Killer Field Wave. A deadly superior system, or mind-set. A super quantum state that could generate PWs completely at odds with the current quantum reality. Superimposing its designated wave field with what is."

"The danger of being taken over. That must have happened on Regum."

"Maybe not Nesho. A tsunami hit. Still by the very fact that my little servo bots are trundling around serving us coffee means our, ahm, temporary isolation is keeping us secure."

"I just hope everyone, and I mean everyone recognises the danger of leaving that alien process well alone. I also hope whoever is running the lab up there deletes the source codes of the hit."

"I'm sure she will. You see Nesho I was just up there. We did mention Waynaht. Worse, he was there."

"Really?"

"Flummoxed."

"So he really was there?"

"Yes."

"That means he's found or gotten as always access to some very secret data. I mean I didn't know...I'm not casting an aspiration on you for not telling me. At least you can keep a secret. I respect that. You know me, always been for maxing data."

"I know Nesho. Even the Sleepwalkers don't know. Not directly. Yet something puzzles me. Sleepwalkers are not techno boosted. They're cosmically aligned, riding all the possible PFWs. Feeling the squeeze."

"Create connecting waves."

"Which have become decoherent. Uncollapsed. Which means something else is or was in play."

"Maybe the Reganians had a cyber-spatial-web in place which collapsed."

"Maybe."

"Given we're in this bubble, it will be interesting to see if the connectivity remains. But somehow Monas that is the least of our problems. We're on a knife edge. It may only take one curious probe for everything to come crashing down."

"Maybe we can get the Sleepwalkers to check it out." Monas brightened. He had not thought that through, it had just come to him.

"I'd be very careful. The best I can suggest is running simulations." Then concentrated on a thought experiment. "No go." Nesho said moments later. "Even by mimicking the set up, the virus, for a better term, or trojan, the subterfuge at the centre would connect then infect all. Maybe it already has."

"Thus the disconnectivity?"

"The Sleepwalkers cannot be crashed as they are Ethereals. An extremely curious race if one can call them that. They might be carriers."

"By the very fact that they have not gone and I mean that literally then their pure minds can survive this as well."

"We certainly have our work cut out. But I'm still worried that some retrograde actually finds the return to the primitive enticing."

"I know what you mean. There are those who cling to nature in a way I doubt even nature intended us to live. Obsessed with a romantic view of the simple life with mere physical survival the be-all and end-all. Then evolution would have stopped with the cockroach."

"I agree Monas." Nesho laughed. "So what now?"

"I hope that the public release will make everybody draw the right conclusion. Waynaht the wild card. Because with his usual caginess he might take an opportunistic position, one that could crash our world."

"Can we trust him?"

"No."

SS 1

Nervina relaxing in a recliner got hit by an alien wave localised by her Brain. It observed, less than mere volition, cautiously disengaged, unreactive towards the anomaly. A potent field. Out there, target acquisition dormant, one level below on hold. A shift in the broad-spectrum field wave her Brain was running. Going idle.

She looked at the blank walls in the analytical-cold, as opposed to active-hot isolation room. It's function designed for remote smart surveillance. No distractions. The light screens absent. Nervina relying on her internal configuration. Her coasting Brain alert, ready to deal with any hostile decoherent field events. The overall resonance familiar but data loaded. This isolated monitoring hub ideal to gain several layers of security around her whole presence, Brain and all.

For some time now she had had the feeling, deep down in her mind the sense of anticipation. Her Brain cautious. Alert, awake, aware whilst remaining in the background. Preternaturally conscious, several magnitudes below ultra sentience. A near future event. The station was making some sort of breakthrough. Maybe. The PFW, specific, Earth centred. Earth not the source. Even though the station was PFW boosted thus isolating itself from its near space environment, from the real space-time continuum, cocooned from any DV incursion or other methods of detection Nervina felt rather than analysed that Prima was gestating strange attractors. Her Brain keeping away from even using reverse simulated algorithmic probing equations. Instead going through distant intelligence gathering satellites to surreptitiously read their status insertion fields. It would inevitably lead to a location in space, even with point delaying signals. Making the sweep time wise discontinuous which only bought fractions of time. The Heads here certain Prima could be ignored for the moment. That much her Brain ascertained.

The data sent from the station extremely tight and dense. Information rich bordering on interwoven multiple dimensional meta field waves. Focussing on Earth to stop Primaian penetration, superimposing their field. Hoping it was strong enough to cause an effect so that at least they had an alternative to the one Prima was pushing.

And then it happened. Having drifted momentarily, her body wanting to relax nearly baulking at the continuous tension in being on the edge of hyper-alertness. Her Brain crackling as it went into quantum stealth mode.

Instantly alert, her muscles tense, her face flushing in surprise and worse momentary fear. Knowing Nervina was in the isolation room one light screen came on. A

change of status at Regum's orbital. From a pale green to bright red. Then the red dot blipped out. Nervina looked at the screen mesmerised. She gasped intuitively guessing what had gone wrong. The orbital off line. Intentional? The only other reason for them to negate their EM field was either cloaking, which did not make sense given they had been there for centuries, or they were under some form of deep spectrum scanning probe so that that signal would detect nothing for nothing was there. Or a massive DV hit.

She looked at the other screens as they came on for some indication of the potent surge which momentarily spiked below the expected range. Black outs. A massive deletion hit, the read out going off scale. Detectors withdrew sensing inimical data fields.

Nervina collapsed her Brain, on stand by, got off the recliner and joined the team in one of their observation posts.

Cursory acknowledgement.

Nat reran the subsidiary probes data more slowly. A white blossom unfolded and inserted itself into the orbital then expanded outwards in the EM spectrum intensely scalar surging downwards. Numerical real time equations went astronomical below zero. An intensity of a false positive simulated EM blast. Flickering tenuous thick arcing lightning hit Regum which lit up like a pale sun shrouded in morning mist as the energy vanished from all their systems. Then the planet went dark. Lights out.

"They're blown." Was the first thing Nat said when they had recovered from the shock. Nat called up soft scanning programmes. All they detected was the deletion, the deadly intent, knocking out the orbital and just about everything on Regum. It was so obvious that no one said a word. The silence thick with apprehension. If they could do this there they could do this here. Nat hit emergency stage one protocols. The PFW remained their best security. The initial station's response was to wrap a dense EM cloak around them with secure repulsive anti remote probing capabilities creating its own zero space. Closed off using most of the massive energy from the array covered star. Mass detectors would get nothing. DVs seeing only the false insertion of the mid range sun.

"Station secure." As Nat watched the security screens. Even their sentinel sats saw nothing. Just the star.

"No internal com linkage please." Nat advised keeping their EM radiation to a minimum. It was not long until Tuvlov along with Loara in tow appeared. They seemed inseparable. These two Nervina thought really are a pair even if the age difference is roughly two generations. Mentor and precocious student. Not student. Loara was full on,

in command of her faculties Tightly focussed, relentless in executing her brief. Special Ops. So wonderfully vague unlike other classifications.

They didn't ask what was going on. Both fixed their attention onto the monitors. Loara checked the secure status of the station. Paying Nervina no attention. Being ignored a sign of trust.

"Is the reactor down?" Tuvlov asked watching the readouts.

"We're too shielded to get any data. If they're going to go into meltdown it will be mere moments. In theory of course there's the failsafe system, triple backups but if that too went down then they'll go critical. Depending on the severity of the hit the reactors smartware might power them down to standby. Enough for emergency lighting, air supply plus their container drops for personnel in airless environments, emergency locks, launching facilities automatically switching to mechanical ramping of escape pods though I only detect one or two.

"Any idea as to a source. I mean was it localised or external?" Tuvlov turning to Nat now, his face a mask of concentration. Running through possibilities both for and against a lot of variables created out of nothing.

Déjà vu. The catastrophe coming through a second time. How? Was the generated PWF slowing the absorption rate. The projected field so dense it was viscous. Anything was possible. The data had finally gotten through delayed though it was. But that was the initial crash. Strange time dispersion. Nervina puzzled. This was out of time and out of space. Unbelievable.

"Seems localised," Nat replied, "but there's no telling whether this is due to some DV guided inserted meta-assault hit."

"Meta-fucked." Loara turning her gaze to Nat.

Nat somewhat at a loss. "Total lack of broad spectrum. You can see the black out. An inverse fission blast without the fission."

"Shit." Loara exclaimed. "Luckily we're secure."

"Not unless it's effected through quantum tunnelling." Nat reminded her.

"I was hoping you wouldn't say this Nat."

"I know Loara."

"Not radio active. So someone or something has taken the orbital down..."

"And Regum by the looks of things." Nat whispered a tremble in his throat.

"Nervina."

She joined them.

"You're the golden girl of the moment."

Her Brain crisp, alert.

"Yes?" she replied helpfully.

"Prima?"

"Has to be."

"Certain?"

"No. Not Novus. Unless some Habitat went ballistic, trying some exotic experiment, tried to gain access to the Orbital like gamers trying to break into each others domain." Giving Loara a helpless look.

"You weren't briefed that somehow this shit of a criminal act, this mass slaughter, this perfidious deceit of cosmos bastardry, this treacherous strike wasn't planned? And you a double agent come sleeper watching from the sidelines. Then when the dust has settled comes plan B." Loara talking with a frosty look, her eyes steely grey, hard as granite, her mind focused with icy determination powering up her full potential. Nervina knew Loara was Enhanced but whether she was also some smart symbiot now crossed her mind. She hoped so. Her Brain did. What am I then? But there was too much going on and the thought passed. Irrelevant for the moment. No. Your capabilities are necessary, needed more than ever. Without revealing your full potential. So there is more? There always is. She shut off the conversation with her Brain.

"Nervina?" Loara still speaking to her.

"If the reactors are down," Nat intervened, "just done some projections then in two to three days the orbital will hit Regum City. The consequences will be catastrophic."

"Three atom bombs. Now who has the capabilities to get the timing so right?" Loara asked the room whilst focussing on Nervina.

"Any computerised assault smartware." Tuvlov answered.

"The hit had not just been localized. It had gone internal into Regum. No blast radius or expanding shock wave." Nat analysing the tragedy. They saw for less than a second the lilac geometry expand, minor debris spewing on all directions, glittering in space. Small inspection panels, spare parts by auto maintenance bots blown out. With no power they would then inevitably be drawn down to the planet burning up in the atmosphere as would those who were outside.

"Prima sacrificing, no make that murdering their own." Loara still staring at Nervina. She felt her Brain itch. So Loara was doing a deep scan. Her Brain went suitably dumb, just a boosted processor, barely enhanced. Enough to make her unique but not enough to make her powerful which in the current state of affairs meant dangerous. To Loara anyway. Tuvlov interested in how the hit on the orbital translated into extinguishing

Regum. Nervina confused. This shit happened before. The event embedded in a field. A re-run. Quantum flash back. Interesting.

"Gotcha." he said leaving Nat opened mouthed then shut it. "See these numbers, in red? Embedded data. No wrong word, meta fields." Tuvlov exclaimed.

"DVs." Nat answered.

"Most likely. Now the question remains where did they get that from? Primaians are, well, less informed."

"They must have had a source then." Loara eyeing Nervina like a curiosity. An alien sentient. Alien? Her Brain cognisant of its uniqueness. In a form she could recognise. Nervina's expression less than neutral. Although the shock hit her as it did the others she just couldn't relate to the event, not even affecting her. She felt remote. So was the flash back. An isolated event relooping. Rerun for their benefit? The field must be more than just a spatial phenomenon. It had intent, volition, determination.

"With the multiple shields up this data Tuvlov..." Nat stammered.

"I know. The computers are decoupling. Otherwise there might be a reverse connecting feed back loop revealing our activity here."

Too late Nervina thought. This space is entangled with the Discrepancy. PWF partially compromised.

"So the question is how far is this? Are they sending a message? Certainly. To themselves? Maybe. Novus? Perhaps as a reminder for them to accept their subverted political status. Then there is us. We don't exist."

We do. Nervina keeping her supposition to herself. She knew she was remote. Of this space but not in it. Her own quantum probability state.

"Which leaves the Habitats. That will trickle through to the mining and manufacturing operations. With Regum gone, for I'm afraid unless they don't get back on line they're well and truly gone means Prima has played their card."

"Domination." Loara spat her eyes remaining as hard as ever. She finally looked at the screens as if she knew their contents. A cursory glance just to make sure she got it right. So did Nervina. So why was Laura pretending this was the first time? Maybe because the field when re-inserting the flash back deleted the prior event. A supposition only. Sanitized. Shifting the cause of the event away from the source. Of course. Rewriting the inherent data. Sneaky.

"Yet no device." Nat said slowly.

"You were correct, DVs." Tuvlov reassured them. "What irks me," he said bitterly, "is no indication. No forward preparation. No test run. One time only. Certain of their success."

"The focus. A cyber insertion." Loara thought out aloud.

Ah she did remember something then.

"Talking cyber inserts, what's happened to theirs?" Tuvlov talking to the computers referring to the simulacrum.

Could it? A singularity domain event. Heavy shit. Nervina's Brain racing.

"I can check." Nat suggested.

"They would expect that. We're not going there."

"Good point. With them expecting spacers to be curious," Loara considered, "a nasty way to draw us out."

"We won't give them that pleasure." Tuvlov grim.

"Too late anyway." Nat said uselessly. "Is there any way we can kick start them? Override their crashed systems?"

"No. They've not just been crashed, they're wiped out. All data lost."

"Data is never lost Tuvlov." Nat reminded him gently.

"I know what you're saying. But you see the dilemma. It's not the data it's the systems. If they were fully engineered quantum processors then yes. But they're all a previous generation. We're the ones that got QCs working. Sure we could reinsert a PFW predating the black out."

"Only to have it happen again. Like kicking a ball from one field to another. Endless repeats. Going in circles. Self contained loop. Even if we went into a specific quantum field state it's the hardware that is susceptible, not the data. They've smashed the container. Water's leaked out. We fill it they smash it."

They were getting the gist of it. Nervina that to herself.

"Yes, of course."

"But you have a valid point. We secure this data. Then we have to get Regum to use QCs. Only when they're in place can we give them back what they've lost."

"Which won't help the dying." Loara disgusted.

"What we have to do is get organized." Tuvlov began vaguely. "We can't let them get away with mass murder..."

"Extinction." Loara added.

"There are still the Outlanders, the aborigines. There's a few Reganians amongst them. Then there are some distant provincial towns. Remember the planet was never fully integrated."

"No but the farms were, the manufacturing bases, systems management. Millions will die. Locked in their smart homes and units. They're either starving to death, dehydrating to death or choking to death. Planes falling out of the sky. Ships directionless. All death scenes." Loara shuddered.

They were silent, aware of the dying.

The hit entangled at the source. A powerful event so deep in space time it became its own attractor. The event an inserted different PFW Nervina surmised.

"You think the orbital might have discovered something which they sent down and Prima freaked? Something so awesome, so stupendous, so...dangerous that the information had to be deleted?" Loara the first to speak.

Tuvlov took a deep breath. Then looked at Nat.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Even if. But to kill a whole world..."

"...would have to be big."

"What would you suggest?" Tuvlov probed.

"The unitary being favouring Prima?" Loara contemptuous.

"That we know already. The universe just doesn't work like that."

"What if...I'm really speculating here," Loara getting her thoughts together, "this Discrepancy... No one really knows much as to what it alludes to. I'm thinking more, sorry to be so unfocussed, but what if in some future time Earth and Regum had entangled. Become dual civilisations. Enhancing WebSpace. Making it so real that to all intents and purposes it is as real as reality? That would crowd Prima out. We know they're fixated regarding Earth. Yet they struck at Regum. Maybe the Reganians were going to fast track Earth's evolution, upgrade select sentients there and power full on into their designated extension into space. And we know they are also psychic, overwhelm Prima? Bye bye Prima...you get the picture?"

"Loara those scenario's aren't exactly new." Tuvlov reminded her.

"Well they might not be but you realize with us fielding Earth it's gonna happen anyway. Some time in the near future I hope."

"Which the Primaians will cover. They'll expect some interference but not us. Not directly."

"Not as long as we stay cloaked. But that means isolation. I suggest we take stock of the habitats. Get them to do our work, Regum's intended work. Friendly relationship

with the Earthers. Somewhere off planet. We need them to be in space. Make contact there. For Prima's focussed on the planet. Earth moves out, we move in." Loara felt better. So did Nervina.

"That might take years, centuries. Earth is currently in the classic zero state. They have to rediscover technology and the application of power which means machines. Make that mental jump. From water, wind and animal power to extracting and creating..."

"Yes Loara, we know how that works. I think though that the DVs were loaded. We have to find out how they managed such a huge event. As Nat discovered, the blast was embedded."

Half right Nervina admitted to herself.

"Preconfigured Tuvlov." Nat said working the commands.

Definitely.

"What?"

"Moments prior the EM spike hard data. Encoded. I haven't touched it in case it's some sort of field orientation, a precursor to the act of destruction."

"Good. Safety first. So...?"

"That's it."

"Interesting. And no reaction from the orbital when this data field was inserted?"

'Data field.' Nervina's Brain thought. 'The Discrepancy again.' Should she tell? She decided to wait, see what they could come up with. Which meant the Primaians used the configuration of the Discrepancy to destabilize the targeted area, insert an alternative quantum state. Two states can exist in a quantum field until one or the other collapses into reality. So the DVs had replaced one with the other. That might explain why the whole planet got taken down as well. The DVs had blasted Regum's reality out of space.

From Virtual to real Quantum Collapse. Shit. The cat's out the bag Nervina realised. Potent programming. The DVs? Something hidden in space as they were hidden here? It had to be the D. Had to. Then there was the experiment in the Outback on Novus. Maybe it had originated there. That's where the D was noticed first. Something or someone links from Novus to the D. But the D is in space. If it's a quantum generated field wave anything was possible. Including removing Regum's field wave. Yet the trigger would appear not at the D but on Novus who would have linked to the DVs at the Primaian Orbital, using the DVs on Regum's orbital as the attractor. The cover convoluted enough to bamboozle even the best of brains. Except hers.

"There is another possibility." Nervina said at last. Her Brain was satisfied with this complex scenario. With all these quantum covers she had an idea. Spread the blame around. Even better.

"Really?" Loara sounding sceptical but not hostile.

"When I was on Novus there was the exclusion zone known as the Outback. We know that the GG was doing some psychic research there. Now it appears that their soldiers have secured the planet. Well just the city really with its space ports and the industrial zone. But there was I think another programme being run. So secret no one could even begin to guess. I think they taking over is part of that cover. You see the Discrepancy..."

"Discrepancy?" Nat asked.

"Yes, a mathematical field which influenced random number generators. Found that out at the casino. The odds were changing even though the system found no fault. Ended up that the random tables had a pattern in them. Now in theory randomness is a non-pattern event in itself. Of course this is a mathematical abstraction, the quantum universe is only random in between moments of various collapsing PWs."

"And?" Loara probed.

"Well in theory, mathematical theory there are chaos equations."

"Such as?" Loara couldn't help herself.

"Black holes."

"It all gets squashed in there."

"True. But that squashed, decoupled, decoherent going primordial break down is a state itself. An extremely high energy state. In fact the highest known in the universe." Nervina half smiled.

Tuvlov understood. In a way. "You mean they inserted a mini black hole?"

"One loaded with destructive data. But you don't actually have to use a physical black hole. Though it's not improbable. Just the data, the chaos equations. They are the trigger. There is a theory," her Brain was really firing now, all neurons, peptides, endomorphic activity, dizzy dendrites, surging synapses, "that space contains countless tiny black holes in between the quantum foam that is space. All the chaos equations had to do was assemble virtual micro-black holes. Virtual quantum collapse."

"But then the orbital and Regum ought to have been sucked in." Loara countered.

"The black holes were the secondary trigger mechanism. Remember this is a high energy state. It could be virtual antimatter. And you know what happens then, kapow."

Nervina was on a high. "But this anti-matter, or seemingly anti matter is merely configured space according to the chaos parameters. As for guidance? The Discrepancy. It is a quantum state, as is everything. What the Discrepancy did, the real powerhouse is combine all these elements. The tailored random numbers are chaotic mimicking the contents of a black hole. And as anti-matter. The whole process is wrapped or contained, embedded, enphased in a quantum field which is then guided, deposited into Regum's quantum reality. The two cannot exist as one if the energy state is equal or more. If less nothing happens. Maybe a little bang. Maybe what was happening on Novus. Screwed up random number tables. That might have been the test run. Who does the guiding. The secreted DVs on Novus's Outback. Everyone is so focussed on the DVs over Prima their main army and Regum their scouts. Not forgetting Earth. I bet no one bothered with Novus. And once their coup d'état occurred it went into lock down. Perfect to run their experiment."

"I see." Loara replied mollified. "Can you prove this?"

"Well the random number tables are proof. The rest is speculation. But I've learnt my science since last time..." without referring to her Brain releasing the information. She wondered why it had not released this prior Regum's crash. Or had that been the trigger? Had Regum meant to be so ruthlessly cut down? Was there no justice in the universe? Was there a malignant entity behind all this that had cloaked itself as they were so that even her Brain had no access to its secluded data field? That if the Discrepancy had been prematurely collapsed a worse scenario might have become an event even more dire? What could be worse than the destruction of a whole planet? Several. Maybe so. There had to be something higher involved here. Was the imagined unitary being some escaped intelligent Brain. Was her evolutionary future, her race's future some run amok cyber creation? Which had to be stopped. But why not at the initial stage? Unless it deposited itself in the future to escape the prying scans of the present. *So that it had to be lured into existence and the hit on Regum was it.* Which begged the question what was the worse case scenario? If a world could be sacrificed, then the next magnitude or order was a galaxy. Was that it? Was the Discrepancy, drawing its power from both the galaxy and the centred black hole going to get reconfigured? And then swallow one galaxy after another? It was after all attracting two already...shit.

Not that they could do a frontal assault on the thing. Unless combining the power of several galaxies. And no civilisation existed with that kind of a potential. So the weak link lay with the primary users, if the configured DVs on Novus had been the instigators.

"So you're saying what?" Loara trying not to sound too much of an interrogator.

"That just maybe the DVs on Novus triggered this event. The test run is minor. The random number sequence out of synch. Remember Loara," Nervina on a roll, "the casino was shut down. Their first move. Where the discrepancy spilled out. They were also after me though it never connected until just now. However without overdoing it, they might even have let me escape. So that I would forget about this event. So we have an army of specific programmed DVs using chaos equations to set up the blast. All they had to do was the maths, let the quantum phase state of space go critical. Insert chaos with order plus energy through quantum tunnelling and what do you get: is a big bang." She exhaled. There. In the open.

"This make sense to you?" Loara asked Tuvlov.

"We would have to check. But from what little I know of what went on on Novus Nervina might be right. If these configured DVs there were the trigger and she is right, we were looking in the wrong direction such as Earth, blindsided. The aggressive DVs at Prima's orbital, distracted by the priests on Regum it could be that Nervina is correct in her logic. Prima's logic."

"So we nuke them?" Loara half serious, hinting at drastic measures.

"Realign them." Nervina suggested.

"Close them down." Nat added.

"Check them out." Tuvlov decided.

"That would mean we've made the connection." Loara warned.

"If we can prove this," Tuvlov considered, "then the whole universe will know of their dark deed. Words fail to even describe their wanton destruction of a race who harboured no ill will towards anybody."

"It seems the crime was one of existence. Of thinking freely." Loara understating the venom of Prima's revenge. "Nervina here has a point. In fact we could use their DVs to self destruct the Primaians. Now that would be something."

Nervina looked at Loara surprised.

"What?"

"I think it's..."

"Too drastic?"

"No, I was thinking the opposite. Use them, use the Discrepancy to insert your future. The thing has to be of value somehow."

"It could turn into a battle." Tuvlov warned.

"So let's build the weaponry. They started this."

"You want war?" Tuvlov was shocked.

"Too right. They murdered millions."

"Yes." Tuvlov admitted.

"Get out the old blueprints. Not everything on Regum was digitalized."

"Yes that is true. We'd have to get there before they do."

"We have to make sure also that we pretend to be ignorant of what we do know. Or suspect." A half smile at Nervina. She returned the gesture. "And we have to find the right kind to do this."

"There is SpaceKorps." Nat suggested.

"You trust them?" Loara eyeing him.

"There will be those who will feel like us, betrayed."

"We have to move fast." Loara energized. "So one team extracts the weapon designs, another goes down to Novus to get the dirt. That ought to be easier. All that's needed there is to download the scans that were being done. See if there's a resonant signature. Because once the quantum state is in total virtual configured collapse, run through the Discrepancy all would be momentarily linked."

"Let them think the DVs on Novus did it whilst we get the info from there. Ha-ha. Then when we got the data we can, at our convenience I may say, return the favour." Nat feeling better.

"Excellent. Right." Loara focussed. "Assemble a team to go down to Regum. They ought to be expecting some interest. Taking stock, helping those in need, getting some sort of plan together."

"You're right. The sooner the better. What about Novus?"

"Nervina?"

"Yes. I just wonder if they'll be waiting..."

"Probably. But instead of going there physically we insert you."

"Insert." That sounded familiar. Were they that advanced? Must be.

"Err..."

"Using a field wave. Just like the, on hold, Earth mission. I'll update you with that another time. But the main thing is it works. What it means is we can extract you instantly."

"If they know we know..."

"Nervina. They have revealed themselves. If your theory is right then they know they can't pull the same trick again without us knowing. And I don't think they'll destroy

Novus. They're in control there. The only thing that they might do, and I would if I was them is remove those who were in the programme. Hide them."

"Or reconfigure so no trace of their potential is left."

"Luckily we can go over the data. Nat?"

"Onto it."

"So what excuse do I use to return?"

"Regum trashed. Novus your only home."

"Oh yes."

"We'll deposit you in a ship that's heading out to Novus. Your tailor made history of course will wipe your memory of having been here. Trust us this must be done. We will recall you once you got the link sorted. We also know they use CF's. If the DVs on Novus were the primary event then we can suppress their mental capabilities."

"Tuvlov?."

"Yes Nat?"

"I know where there are weapon designers. In all this...I forgot."

"Good man. Where?"

"The asteroid belt. What's colloquially known as the 'rust zone'."

"Really?"

"Got that from Nervina's memory." Turning to her. "Thank you for being observant out there."

"I didn't even notice."

"No but your brain did."

She kept her startled expression hoping Nat was not referring to her inserted Brain. No, just a word. Relax Nervina, relax, they're on your side, you on theirs, even Loara.

"I still think we should get what we can from Regum."

"But Loara that stuff is ancient. I can't even remember...well I could but it's in storage."

"Did we upload weaponry?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Varis of all people."

"Shit hey? So the weaponry on Regum is back dated?"

"Generations."

"Great. We go in any way. Let the Primaians think we've got ancient blunderbusses, puny pistols, all archaic. Whilst the real team goes to the rust belt. After all, since Prima's scared the shit out of all of us there will be plenty in space, habitaters,

adventurers, explorers, the reclusives who won't want to go near Regum if Prima's taken over."

"There'll be Primaian agents everywhere."

"Well we've been hiding from them for ages." Not wanting Nervina to find out exactly how long. The less she knew the better for her as well. "So whoever we cajole..."

"Agreed." Tuvlov breathing deeply. Having gotten over the shock he was glad they were now focussed on the future, their future. Prima had overplayed its hand. The shit really had hit the fan. Future possibilities were more than probable once more. Maybe it was the jolt needed to get the Reganians out of their lethargy. That millions had, were dying was heinous just the same.

For the time being, Nervina's trip to Novus needed intel. She was the only one who was the most recent and available resource. She filled them in.

"You mean the Novanians are allowing Primaians access to space faring technology?" Loara appalled at giving anything to the Primaians.

"It's all retro." Nervina assured her as they sat around a table in the cafeteria of the station. "Nothing cutting edge. Chemical rockets mainly, some liquid."

"What about their orbital?" Perdus asked

"Gone."

"Blown away. Linnox a remarkable asset. I'm glad he's with us then." Loara being complimentary.

"Don't forget Ex. He might be useful regarding his knowledge base when reconfiguring your computers and related programming. Re-establish the back up, other applications."

"I haven't forgotten Nervina. I must thank you for bringing them on board."

Nervina continued: "The Families are the real decision makers. Don't know how up to date their data base is."

"And the coup?" Loara asked draining her coffee cup. Playing with the crumbs on her plate, shoving them around absent mindedly.

"Oh Ex would know."

"Talking propaganda, how up to date are we?" Perdus asked Tuvlov.

"Well, Nat is running Novus's recent history on a broad scale. So we're after several things which would be nice to clarify. And not in that order." As Tuvlov looked at all of them. "First the discrepancy. When did it become noticeable? How far back does it

go? Any precursors prior that? Is it really connected to what Nervina uncovered on Novus? Is it universal or target specific? "

"You can bet there'll be more." Jez answered for him.

"That a hunch or do you know something?"

"A hunch Tuvlov?."

"You're the alien expert."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the alien."

"Really?" Nuhan asked surprised. "How?"

"I was joking."

"It's just that I get feelings if dislocation..."

"Disassociation? A feeling of otherness?" Jez as the parapsyche expert taking a sudden interest in what Nuhan had just said.

"Yes. Especially when dreaming. Memories of being back on Regum but not Regum. Certainly not Prima, or maybe Prima in another future. Similar looking entities to us yet imbued with power which they never use."

"Certainly not Prima then."

"Same here." Los the tech expert added.

"Now that is interesting." Jez remarked, thinking what the possibilities could be.

"Can we get back on track please ladies?" Tuvlov requested. "Nervina."

"That's about it."

"What about security. You mentioned the families..." Tuvlov prompted.

"Oh nothing much. Pretty straight forward. The space port is different. SpaceKorps. Very focussed. Almost intimidating if you let them. Not that I got flustered but you get the look, the we know all about you treatment. So if you got something to hide they play on that. On the ground, in the city and suburbs the patrols. But all this is before the coup. From what Erx said it seemed more like an occupation."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Tuvlov exhaled as if that seemed satisfactory.

"You did?" Loara's eyes widening in surprise.

"Updated Loara. So if they're in possession and letting the locals know who is boss we have to assume they ramped up surveillance in space."

"Yes I see." Loara admitted. "But we're going in stealth."

"After being inserted in near space. But if we assume they got spy sats out there then we have to put youse out of their reach."

"Of course." Loara acknowledged. "How long is the PWF gonna stay?"

"That's the problem. Ideally it gets switched off once you're in place. Then using a vacuum beam to send a message for retrieval and the reverse takes place. Under our ideal conditions."

"Which they're not." Loara said for them all.

"That's what Nat is working on as well."

Tuvlov's com link blinked. He pulled an earpiece out attached it and listened. Then nodded.

"Nat's got something we should see."

They made their way back to the internal observation room.

What they saw immediately on several screens was familiar. A generated insertion PFW and a H class cruiser.

"Nat. What have you got for us?"

"This." He said expansively, proud of his achievement.

"A ship. One of ours. Novus?"

"Ah," he swivelled around on his seat, "that's what I thought too. Look at the time."

They did. Months ago.

"I checked. Unless highly classified, no record."

"One of our secret missions. But if it was ultra secret then of course there would be no record Nat." Loara being gentle.

"No. No record as in no event. I'm using the QCs here."

"A probability then." Loara happy to engage Nat.

"Could be...except it vanishes."

"That's how inserts work Nat."

"Look at the planet though. And it isn't Novus."

"It isn't?" Loara looked at Tuvlov who was studying the numbers.

"No. Defunct, meaning Regum's WebSpace," indicating the screen, indicating out there, back then, "in place. Guess where that planet is?"

"C'mon on Nat." Loara getting edgy.

"The Earth sector. Companion planet. My guess is in their excitement the DVs missed the other planet." on the next screen.

"So we were there. What has this..."

"...got to do with the length of a string? Prima's far reach. Because," he had the image on hold, then released the sequence, "it vanishes. But as you said Loara that's

how it works. But note this everybody..." Nat very pleased with himself, "The changes on that planet."

"Changes?" Jez asked warily.

"Left screen if you will."

They saw the shadow markings, angular of structures. Then nothing. The swathes of green, forests, meadows, the dark blue rivers all vanished. Leaving a dusty desert planet. One of the icecaps contracted instantly.

"Shit." Loara the first to react.

"Shitless more like it." Nat quipped. "But there's more. I got resonances from the ship. It is ours. Not only that but the crew are..." And he looked at the assembled group.

"Who?"

"Thanks to our dedication to detail, Perdus, Los, Mirn, Jez and Nuhan."

"That explains my dreams." Nuhan exhaled. The others were silent. Nervina stood behind them. Her Brain was crackling within. Making connections. Prima had not just deleted the ship, the PFW but the whole field. They had changed history. Wiped out a whole planet's emergent civilisation. She turned her attention to Earth. The tiny flares of rockets in space vanished as well.

A very huge wipe out.

"Earth as well." Nervina said from the back.

"You are right." Nat replied to her. "There was even a capsule, heading for the ship." They saw what looked like an elongated tin bucket with basic portholes, ancient technology vanish as well.

"Prima did this?" Tuvlov finally having digested the enormity of the act. "this was much worse than what happened to Regum. That was bad enough, this is monstrous."

"It looks as if the Primaians, for if you look to the right, computer enhanced of course a certain resonant glow from DVs over Prima. Mass mind focussed upon one target area. The bonus, for them I'm reluctant to admit was our field wave. They might have been after the ship but because it was wrapped in a quantum field, a bubble as it were which embraced the whole planet when taking out the ship they took out the field and its contents."

"And affected Earth's as well." Nervina finished off.

"So it appears."

"That explains the lack of data." Loara collected herself. "Boy were we taken for a ride. Or rather rudely interrupted. Interesting how the group in the ship ended up here, together, as a team. That means even when a reality is deleted, contents and all some

things still remain in place. So Nat, is it possible that in an alternative probability that mission, that world is continuing?"

"A very good question." Nat paused. "I don't know. Perhaps. But the current strength of this collapsing field has overridden whatever transpired back then. The DVs certainly removed that particular possibility. What flooded in was their vision, their de-construction, de-embedding their data, forcing a non-reality onto reality."

"You mean we are loosing our reality there?"

"Yep."

"Yet you sound so upbeat Nat." Mirn's head buzzing. Her enhanced status going full throttle.

"They have given themselves away."

"Yes but to our loss. And that planet's." Mirn answered. "Then Regum. We're stuffed, trussed, contained, downgraded, subsidiary to Prima's future."

"At the moment sure. But space is big. There are the habitats, the rust zone..."

"All unaffected. So far Prima's extensions into reality are limited. They used our generated field waves to convert our reality into theirs. That means they haven't got the generating capacity to go for a total insertion."

"Except for the Discrepancy." Nervina jumping in ahead of Nat.

"Getting to that. Even then there were already tiny fluctuations in the fabric of space. Now with hindsight we know. But then it was almost nothing. Almost. Of course it has gotten more intense. They might have ridden its possible PFWs to achieve this superstrike at us. But it also means our generating potential can insert our future to reclaim it."

"Yes. We must." Loara stating the obvious.

"Agreed. Good work Nat." Tuvlov congratulating him on the awful discovery of a lost mission, a lost world, Earth regressed, Prima supreme. No wonder they could crash Regum. Moving in on reality.

"How you can be so objective Nat...." Nuham trying to deal with all this at once.

"Because there is hope. If they can insert their vision, or non-vision into the future purely by thinking it, something the Reganians did with the Web then don't you see? We can do it as well. We're already using a star here to power our QCs. Imagine if we used a supernova!"

"Nat you are a genius."

"Err, thank you Tuvlov. But I think anybody could have come up with that."

"Why stop at that. Use a galaxy." Nervina said from the back of the group.
 "That's what the Discrepancy is doing."

"Isn't that always the case. Good news with the bad." Jez said in self mocking depreciation. "Get a break and it's back a step or two."

"So far it is we who've gone backwards." Loara the realist. "Then and now. But Nat, Nervina, the mission here," without elucidating exactly what that was and Nervina not tempted to move into Loara's mind, "means we're the only ones left."

Tuvlov looked sharply at her. Nervina understood. She had just given a crucial piece of information their way.

"Build another station." Nervina said blithely. "Virtual duplicate. With enough energy it will be as real as real can be. With the exception that it will concentrate on generating PFWs only, embedded with your dreams. I mean your vision, your destiny. Whilst that is going on and you have the technology to replicate this station and do what Nat says. Shouldn't be too hard. Then find the nearest galaxy and do what the Discrepancy is doing. People, Prima's rush to trump you all has opened the possibilities in outperforming them. They got no QCs, just the DVs. You can shield yourselves against them..."

"We can secure the technology and the infrastructure but Nervina our minds, all sentient minds leak intentionality. It's in our very make up. The DVs will catch on." Jez advised.

"You have Enhanced possibilities. I don't know about you Jez but I'm sure some here have." Nervina trying to sound as scientific as possible, "You could create a cyber-super-enhanced Brain. Dump it in some symbiot. You're going to have to fast track your evolution. To beat the DVs you're going have to create sentient capabilities way beyond theirs. Maybe even use remote brains. Run it from here or wherever. Proxy surrogates, slaves in the old terminology. Cyber that is."

"Nervina has a point." Nat said since no one responded to Nervina's suggestion.

She knew why. "Whilst Primaians had expanded un-sub-consciously Reganians had gone into cyber space. Extending minds into virtual machines which were crashed. Never considered going down the Primaian path. Unfortunately that had given them the edge. The only way to beat them is to fast track evolution, biologically, technologically, cyber-wise, symbiotically, remotely as well."

"So it seems." Loara sighed.

"How do we stop infinite expansion?" Jez asked. They all knew the paradox of machine intelligence. "If, a big if, they ever went sentient..."

"The run away effect? Them seeing their creators as parasites?"

"Yes Nervina."

"Treat them as equals. Make sure they understand why it is you created them, if that is the path you take. Show them what is at stake. The danger of the alternative, Prima's that is."

"They might wipe them out." Nuhan cautioned.

"Overzealous? Well invoke the universal law that all life is sacred. It might be misguided at worst, deluded even but not without redemption."

"Hm." Nuhan was mollified for the moment.

"Am I still going to Novus?" Nervina asked.

"Now more than ever. We have to find out if the Primaians are not creating superminds on that planet. We know now that they might have been the source, the trigger, engaging their DVs remotely to crash Regum. I'd say it's imperative."

"Definitely." Loara agreed.

No one objected.

"Nat, six VBs, target Novus. Casino, City, Outback. The other three near space."

"Will do Tuvlov."

"I'll get Vic to get your ship ready. Since you six were meant to be in space, unless there's any objections...good," as they assented, "then make yourselves ready." Loara focussed.

"How long?"

"Depends." Tuvlov giving them a thin smile. "Really it's in and out. Nervina's the bait in a way," looking graciously at her whilst her eyes widened a little, Brain alert.

"If you got any enhancements I'd suggest you hide them well."

"All the way?"

"Well, I've changed my mind about using QFWs. There's a simpler way. Less noticeable. The VBs Nat's busy with can also insert you all, ship included. Not only does it not create a field, just the ship which will be wrapped up in space so to speak I can't see Novus doing much about it. After all," turning to Nervina once more, "you're there as a scout."

"What about remote probes?" Los their tech expert queried.

"We want to see how they react. By that I mean the general state of things. Remotes might extract a wealth of information but there's nothing like on the ground intelligence gathering."

"What exactly have you in mind?" Nervina asked. The less she knew coming in the better. In the back of her mind processes were getting ready to craft a new Nervina, a new persona. If old contacts reappeared she would not fall into recognition patterns that could be picked up by some astute DV. They were probably keeping her on a short list of suspects, transgressors who were of interest to them. Better come in clean. Her Brain in control.

Outside the station six of the twelve VB generating plants and their cube like projectors shot the Vacuum Beams towards Novus, on target. The other three scanned near space in short random sequenced bursts.

Overhead Nat six screens. The pink planet, some cirrus cloud cover, elongated streaks, the glimmering dark ocean, spots of green where forests had been planted. The City, top down view looked different. Not the buildings but the lack of activity. The streets full of military squads on patrol. An occupation force. The Casino busier, priests in abundance. The Outback smeared in dust, smoke, steam. One of the random beams picked up a launching rocket, bright star like glow at the thrusters leaving a white streak of flame and billowing condensation in its wake. Another picked up a huge spaceship. Huge. A transport come container unit.

"Now that is new." Nat said.

"See if there are others."

"Well according to their vector they're off to either Prima or Regum."

"Good." Nat replied relieved. "Not coming this way then. Could be a troop carrier."

"Populating Regum no doubt." Loara scoffed.

"No doubt."

"Resonant scan would be handy." She said uselessly knowing it would create too much interest in who was wanting to know what.

"Too right. Well they're classic retro ships."

"I'm getting more." Nat opening another screen.

"An armada." Loara watching intently. "Taking Regum over."

"At least it will keep them busy." Jez watching trying to get a feel just from the visuals. Willing her mind through the dark brown hull. "Should I try to remote sense them?"

"Not from here Jez."

"Of course."

"Vic?"

"Yes." He replied over the intercom.

"How's progress?"

"Ships charging up. First the Kinetic Absorption Shield, then diagnostics, that will take some moments, configurations, testing stealth systems, the other shields, hull integrity. The bots are delivering supplies, air is being pressure pumped, fusions hot, propulsion's go, checking peripherals."

"Good. Let us know when."

"Not long. What about the intel end? How smart do you want it?"

"Non E. Basic reaction response. Soft scanning only. Stage two processing level unless under direct attack in whatever mode to be linked amongst surveying systems. Dual encoding."

"May cause some glitches."

"I know but it will be more responsive without detection."

"True. Not that they got any smart military hardware. Which brings me to my next question. How intense defence?"

"Enough to obliterate stray asteroids. Level five should suffice. But have ten on standby. Kinetic Absorption Shield of course at max. If they decide to go primitive then let them bring it on." Tuvlov giving them all an encouraging smile. "I would suggest you get into your gear."

"Am I going?" Loara asked.

"Yes, good point." Tuvlov procrastinated. Loara was the best available to keep an eye on Nervina. Not that Jez their para-psyche specialist couldn't do it. But Loara was trained in security. She knew of intentions both overt and covert. Jez might pick up some orientation but as far as purpose went Loara was the expert. Jez would be there to scan broadscale, be the back up if necessary. Not that Loara needed help. So far she never had.

"Yes."

"Thanks."

"You wanted to go?" Tuvlov watching the feedback from Novus.

"Did I tell you my hobby is target practice?" Loara smiled wickedly, eyes gleaming with anticipated pleasure.

"Projectiles?"

"Canons. Laser guns, proton beams, plasma blasts, white noise, black noise, distortion fields, corrupt resonance insertions, false positive realities, whatever it takes."

"You OK with that Jez?"

"When Loara uploads. I'll be there."

"Done." Loara winked at Jez. "You Nervina slip in between the proverbial cracks in case of attack. Then go bezerk."

"Bezerk?"

"Unleash madness." Loara's eyes positively glowing dangerously.

"Chaos sequencing fine?"

"It's a start." Then turning to Tuvlov. "The ship got cyber assault systems?"

"Only for protection. Defensive. You're scouts not assault teams. If they go hostile high tail it out of there. We'll pick you up, retract. This whole station will be focussed for the duration towards your ship. The QCs will calculate the reverse call back. Reverse the insertion."

"What if we're being followed?"

"Then Loara you have my permission to obliterate them. No prisoners either."

For a moment Loara was speechless. Then she nodded.

"Am I to understand Loara heads this mission?" Perdus asked.

"She's your security. You run personnel and related info, Loara keeps watch. If you run into difficulties then yes she's boss."

Perdus nodded reluctantly.

"What is it?" Tuvlov asked him.

"The potential violence. Going in armed."

"You think they'll welcome us? Perdus we're not even supposed to exist. Regum is gone, Novus taken over. The rust belt's too far away to do what we intend to find out. They might not even be aware of the Discrepancy. They're nuts and bolts ops. That technology, automation apart hasn't changed for centuries. Sure some nano stuff's happening but the basics are, well, still basic. A furnace is a furnace. Configured data, short of screwing with their baseline computations isn't going to interfere in say a smelting process. All we're doing, sorry, you're doing is confirming how entangled they are on Novus. What if anything is cyber-bio gestating."

"But..."

"Yes I know. We've just gone over that. Remote sensing by using spy-sats would reveal us too much. Coming in as a group will make it look as if you've been in space doing science. Vic's uploading your history..." then switching channels to Vic, "Aren't you?" he turned to him.

"What?" Vic asked.

"Their history. Scouting for planets, moons, gas giants. Now that Regum's shut down and shut out of space. For those who were thinking of returning to Regum from their habitats now looking for new worlds. Get away from Prima." Tuvlov reeled off smoothly.

"That our mission if they ask?" Perdus wanted to make sure.

"Exactly."

"And have we found any?"

"Have you?" Tuvlov grinned.

"There are dead planets. Terra moulding will make some habitable. Usaki would know more."

"Well his data's staying out of your ship. We don't want them to get a list of potential targets. You see Perdus, we're not inserting you over Novus, not even near it. You will come in from deep space several days out. During that time there'll be plenty of time to study some older star charts. So a few distant worlds will be included. If you find any others...well even better. Gives credence to your cover." Tuvlov smiled easily.

Perdus nodded.

"Perdus, you don't have to go. Nuhan can be the chief scientific officer."

"Perhaps." He mumbled, then: "Yes."

"Yes, you're going or yes Nuhan is?"

"Nuhan."

"You don't mind do you? Being so quiet."

"I'm fine with that."

"That's settled then. So team, get yourselves in gear." Then, "Don't forget Nervina, any super updated enhanced configurations..."

She nodded her comprehension. "I'm going to change personas."

"Excellent. But let us know will ya? Don't want to have to shoot you thinking you're a Primaian insert."

"We'll have to be careful." Loara reminded them.

"That's what Mirn is there for."

"You are on the ball." Loara relieved they were covering potentialities.

"Oh Nervina..."

"Yes?"

"Reconfigure prior departure. Can you do that?"

"How long?"

"How long Vic?" Tuvlov asked.

"Nearly done the diagnostics. Supplies still loading. A few hours, couple at most. I'm triple checking the systems, all of them."

"Good."

In her cabin Nervina got her Brain to shut her down. Brain went through various data-blocks disassociating one after the other. With each modality going neutral she felt herself both expanding with the freed up space and contracting as her tactile senses detected less and less of her as her. Whilst her real self remained. Her subliminal self became deeper using her unconscious as her true identity. Identity. Just a collection of accumulated memories, deleting one after the other. Her objective self was vague, a cluster of data points deep within her, unrelated to her outside persona. Her backup self tenuous. Tendrils branching all over the place in her sub-conscious. She didn't want to go into her unconscious as she lay in her sleeping tube.

Slowly a dual set of neurological pathways started to grow, expand into the concept of another self. Nervina realised she had not conceived of a persona. Maybe her Brain had something in mind. The artificial superstructure was in place, secured by linking through her sub-conscious into her unconscious. She had it! Her dream persona. It would solve the identity problem of not being too strange. Plus it resided in her unconscious anyway. And she could remain as Nervina on the outside whilst being something far more expansive within. Hopefully out there as well.

Enter Nervina 2+ infinity.

Her mind slipped in comfortably albeit under newly prescribed inner circumstances. Her persona 2+ inserted itself as a field projection from deep within her unconscious. Brain was back. Everything in place. She felt great, her mind clearer as if a fog had lifted, a mantle of an infinite sky around her. No not a sky, that was only a visual, her potential had expanded by many magnitudes. Her 2+ reached out further and deeper simultaneously.

Time to test it. Go for the Outback. Try remote sensing. The image of the steelworks came up. Feeling more like a replay. Disengage memory. Remote viewing. The rolling mills stretched out, hazy brown dust from open hearth furnaces, basic oxygen and blast furnaces. A crazy combination of abstract structures, pipes, conduits snaking their way around and through the factories. Stockpiles of iron and coal. Flames shooting out of coke ovens, slag poured onto waste heaps, tiny explosions of grey slag as its heated debris made contact with water throwing bits upwards. The Volatiles subdued,

working the machines and processing demands of the factories. Not much going on that was any different.

Try Talex. Why not?

And was instantly depressed. A huge wave washing through, likening to a draining life force. It changed to oppression. Talex alright. Now she knew why she had instinctively felt an aversion towards him. His configured domination revealed. A potent being. But what was his focus? Not her surely.

A row of containers, living quarters of the Volatiles. Those that were off duty. Their resonance a magnetic field. Her Brain ingesting it all slowly, testing its density, feeling its way tentatively ready to withdraw any moment. Cautious and aware of the strength of this sentient field emanating microwave radiation, intense yet subdued. Their field aligned. She, well her Brain, smart enough not to follow the alignment to its source.

So they had changed. Or revealed themselves. Or recently reconfigured. Hidden amongst the drones working the mills. Surrogate manipulation. Brain alert to feed back, resonant probing in case their recipient awareness might link up with her remote sensing.

Her com link winked. Loara saying they were ready to go. Nervina made a mental note of where she had found this extraneous RF. Good camouflage. She rolled off her tube and met up with the rest of the team at the primary air lock. Just a matter of following the blue line leading her to departure.

Loara was helping Nuhan, Jez Mirn, then Los Loara, Tuvlov, then her. Perdus there to see them off.

"Good luck." Tuvlov told the suited up astronauts.

Loara gave him the thumbs up. They tested their coms, air supply, all was AOK. Through the first airlock, then the second leading through an extension tunnel right to the ship. They strapped down on recliners taking off their helmets. The ship could be navigated, defensive weapons used right from the lounge. Vic was there telling Loara that there were no problems. Then exited.

"Right." Loara said. "I'm captain and all that goes with that privilege. Los our technical expert is my second. Mirn in case you've forgotten are our AI specialist so you're third. Jez we all know is the one that's mentally out there so she's fourth and Nuhan our scientific officer, our cover fifth. You Nervina are sixth and for good reason. Officially you are Nuhan's assistant. You do whatever Nuhan asks. As such both of you are civilians. Remember this is all to cover what we may have to present to nosy Primaians. Now I don't intend to loose any of you but the chain of command is pertinent to any mission. Questions? No? Good. Nervina, your persona in place?"

She nodded.

"What, I mean who are you?"

"Mirn can check me out. I've uploaded a dream persona. Right from the unconscious. With upgraded potential. Haven't had time to test my other self."

"Well don't do it here."

"No." Nervina smiled disarmingly.

"Mirn you can check her when we're in space. The less info is swimming around when the VBs deliver us the quicker we'll be in position. For those who don't know, light screens are pop ups as are all read outs. They should all feed directly into your suits. Tuvlov checked your gear and its fully functional. We communicate verbally as of now. No sub routines for security reasons. The ship is EM shielded running white noise so hopefully the DVs if they are interested will get shit and plenty of it."

"Won't that be a give-away?" Mirn asked.

"They gotta get through the uploaded persona's first."

"Us?" Jez frowned.

"Not us, the ship. It's using constructs of our selves. Intuitive smart ware. Innocuous conversations from the bowels of the ship's computers. Blah and blah and blah blah. If any hostiles think it's crap, which it is, then they run into a secondary layer of older ship's data which is pretending to be this ship. They get past that then it's the white noise. Followed by a lead shield. Yes everybody that primitive method still works. Then if they get through that there's the ships cloak. Actually it's a dual layer. Forgot to mention that. It's the first and last layer."

They were happy with that.

"A note on weapons."

Attention sharpened.

"A first. We as a species haven't used weapons for so long it's almost frightening that we've got them. The cover is for blasting stray asteroids. Mainly appearance. You see this little beauty has KAS in place. Every hit of energy, whether some misguided piece of junk translates into released energy which gets channelled, dispersed then absorbed into a bank of back up batteries. But once in view of the enemy we can't let them latch on to that. Thus the canons. Spider class, defensive of course, retracted. They'll get the message should we have to use them. As such I'm fire control officer as well. Questions?"

"You mean if someone does shoot at us the ship's shield absorbs the hit?"

"Yes Nuhan. Neat hey? But there are limits. For instance a prolonged plasma stream will melt us. Not that they got that, neither have we but it's being thought about."

"We building weapons?" Los excited. Not appalled they were reverting to ancient days of conflict.

"Given what the shits did to Regum I think it's imperative. Anyway the rust belt got canons there."

"They have?" Nuhan surprised.

"Shit loads of them." Loara beamed. "So there it all is. Ready then?"

They nodded.

"Fastened?"

They replied in the affirmative.

"Right, manoeuvring the ship to the exit point. The VBs will do the rest. And don't ask where 'cause I don't know. Near the spiral arm where Novus is is all I know. So relax and enjoy. We're going in."

Outside, Nat aligned six VB generators in a dense cluster. The ship slowly using attitude jets positioned itself in front of them. A seventh VB generator was already beaming a pilot guide into space a week out from Novus.

"Right. Nearly ready."

"This is a first isn't it?" Jez asked.

"The simulations bear out. Trust the QCs"

"Uh-oh."

The generators powered up.

"Quantum anything is so..."

"Non definable? Remember Jez this little ship of ours is totally entangled. And as Tuvlov said," anticipating her next question as in why not just do the jump, "it would irradiate our location. The quantum foam of space would literally light up. VBs are much better. Of course," as they waited for the go ahead, "VB means a data stream but all they'd get is, well, us." Loara explained. Jez and the others were satisfied.

"You are go." Nat said over the com-link.

"Alright everybody. We actually are doing a quantum jump into the targeted beam. It won't hurt. All over in the flick of an eyelid."

The ship jumped through tunnelling into the six vacuum beams enough to encompass the mass of the ship. From the station's view, the ship vanished as it jumped into the VBs and relocated in deep space near Novus.

On the screens all they saw was space and the near spiral arm where Novus was located. The beams switched off. The ship remembered the location for their rendezvous

out. Not that they could not be located. If desperate a quantum squirt would announce another location from which they could be quickly extracted.

"Right. We're here." Loara the first to speak. "Nuhan, start using our telescope and sensors to do some planet gazing. You know astronomy so you'll know where and what to look for. Get Nervina here to take down data, the usual stuff in whatever you do that you do."

"Nervina?"

She rose and followed Nuhan to a set of consoles and began their star gazing to build up a solid history of searching space for liveable planets.

"Los. Check the ships status."

"Aha." And started running diagnostics.

"Mirn. Activate. See if anyone's interested in us."

"Checking." And hooked herself via a fibre-optic thread, not via remote to the ships sensors.

"Jez, do what you do. If you work better in isolation put yourself in a tube."

"Yes I think I will. Isolation's easier that way." From beneath her recliner the tube telescoped itself around her, then went silver bouncing any light off so that she was in pitch black darkness.

"What are you going to do?" Mirn asked.

"Keep watch of course." Loara replied. "Remember what we're after. Anything to do with the D, DV linkage, any entanglement, relevant or even irrelevant data fields that have quantum tell tale resonance signatures. Subsidiary scans for Regum, Prima, Earth. The ship can handle that but keep an eye out just the same." Loara reminded them.

Nervina hovered near Nuhan getting search patterns organized. Her Brain vied for her attention. Data dumping. Was she ready?

"Nuhan. I've got to process something."

"Fine."

"What's happening there?" Loara focussed.

"Got a pile of stuff I picked up during the jump. It's been analysed. No alerts though. I can do it later..."

"Do what you must. So, you're enhanced?"

"Sort of."

"Ha. You're supposed to be an assistant Nervina."

"This is too dense to be just background information."

"Better do it, then tell us. Remember we're all in this together. Oh yes, forgot to tell yas. If we go down it's myself and Nervina. Youse are too precious. Nervina's got the fix on the place as we all know. She knows the environment, the contents. Could have used Erx I know but no point sending both down. Got that Mirn?"

She nodded as she checked the ships transitional log during the insertion. No glitches as yet.

Turning to Nervina. "You reacted to your name. Even though you've reconfigured you need a new name. If we go down. So...?"

"Husk."

"Husk. What sort of a name is that?"

"To remind you Loara that I'm a shell, a resonant projection. Actually," she was standing at ease in the weightlessness of space, their grip-pad shoes holding them down, "it's the reverse. I'm denser..."

A smile from Loara, amused at that.

"Uploaded but not as an E function. Can't explain it really. It's an architectural construct, denser pathways, greater computational capabilities, DV capable..."

"Really? Won't they, you link?"

"No. Any projected RF has a coating so to speak. False persona. Using some old data from before. If they link it'll send them backwards into their group mind. Got several on rotational stand-by. Won't be using any false persona twice."

"Neat cover. What else you got in there?" being curious rather than inquisitive.

"Something I'd like to know myself." Nervina smiling innocently.

"You're in insert aren't you." Loara guessed correctly.

Nervina knew that eventually the moment would arise when some sentient intelligence would pick that up. The only way anyone could be certain, verify her status was using quantum field wave analysis, the next level up from their deep scanners. It would show Nervina as a coherent superimposition. Loara's guess was just that.

"Not quite. I'm working for an interested group that wants to see the right thing being done. Contain Prima." without revealing as to who or what would reveal itself within the collapsing quantum wave functions.

"The Kabal." Loara whispered. Los busy checking the ship's system jerked a little at the mention of that name.

"?"

"They wouldn't tell ya?" trying to make light of it. "Good security. You see Husk...Reganians are, were, never in favour of Prima's orientation. But there were those who considered the powers as being too accommodating. So these enigmatics withdrew, went off-world. Planning to make a move, contain Prima and power up Regum. They created WebWorld then WebSpace. The idea to strengthen it using energy so as to supplant reality. No that's not quite right. Dual reality. Those accommodating Prima and the Primaian's themselves could have what they considered as left-over-reality. The future would be the Web. A powerful quantum process impregnable to DV activity. Total coherence, aligned with the fabric of space, Prima's so called Divine Intelligence. By using space their scheme, their idea, the projection of the Web, unassailable."

"Have they succeeded?" Nervina asked impressed.

"The Web's gone Husk. Crashed along with everything on Regum. However we," Nervina wondered if it was an expression, a hint or that Loara was somehow involved with the Kabal, "always thought, hoped more like it, the Kabal being scientists that there was a plan B to Z, preferably. That this is only a setback rather than the end. Or hopefully, now that the Crash is in place, letting Prima think so. After all they operated at the quantum base-state. I know that's impossible, it's just an expression of the process. Maybe they're reconfiguring, restructuring, re-energising...you get the picture."

Nervina's Brain did. "I sure do. Not that I'm even aware of what you alluded to."

"Obviously your mission is..."

"Is, more like was." looking directly into Loara's black eyes. Limitless whilst simultaneously vacant. No data extrusion possible by that route.

"Can you link with me?" Nervina surprised at Brain's suggestion. Maybe the word 'Kabal' was some trigger mechanism. An alignment of sorts. Loara. Who was she? Security basically. Filling that role admirably. She'd never referred to a designated group, never hinted at powerful interests, no name dropping. The perfect intruder. Even her dormant soft-scanning abilities never got anything to even raise her mental alertness when she was around. Unless she was some advanced bio-enhanced configuration herself. No information by those means. However linking with her would create a bridge into her interior. Not the data realm but the field itself. And fields were wave functions which in turn were information embedded realities.

Nuhan approached. "I'm starting to search space. By sectors Nervina."

"I'm Husk now."

"Husk."

"Loara?"

Loara was thinking. A trap or an opportunity? An embracing of minds or getting royally screwed, data sucked, reconfigured, re-aligned, redefined? Then again she'd guessed correctly that Nervina-Husk was indeed an insert of sorts. Loara had her EAI which was diverse enough to reroute any attack into emplaced entrapments. Enough to undo any programme committed to extraneous harassment. She might even discover Nervina's background. Even if false. Lies were a part of the real world, as was fiction. It revealed those who drafted unrealities, threw light upon their intentions if not aims. Like moving a river into another channel. The river might appear elsewhere but it was still the same water. She was happy with that analogy.

"How you want to do this." Loara having come to a decision. "There are several ways. We enter our tubes and let them do it. Surface skimming. Or we go through the ship. It's rock solid, it can overwhelm any sentience if need be."

"Sentience?"

"Block out sentient configured viral attacks if need be. Even I don't know all of it. Security. Vic might but Vic isn't here. Or we go mind to mind."

"You got ports, avenues?"

Loara just looked at Nervina. She was right because she had. Configured for this situation, configured as in just now? Out of nowhere. Just how limitless were the possibilities. Many obviously. She felt better. Nervina had never come across as a hostile element. Which meant nothing of course. Inserts came in all sorts of designated head cases. From the psychotically deluded to the cool rational. Nervina seemed the latter. Seemed.

"Mind to mind via the sleeping tubes." Nervina suggested. "Via external control, both in its shell plus the monitors of the ship. If it is as smart as I think it can be the overseer."

"It's got alerts that might be nasty Husk."

"I'm not hostile."

"Better not." Neither agreeing or disagreeing.

"I won't call up anything to do with...anything. No targets, no sub-routines short of my own safety, as nothing as nothing can be. What is then left over is what I am...I think." Amused at her own vacancy.

"To the tubes Husk."

The two women lay on the recliners which cascaded out then wrapped their shell around them. Each had HUD with HID capabilities. They went HID so that none of the

others could read what was projected onto their inner shielding. Not that it would be visible. Not impossible to scan though. The ship would certainly be aware and they wanted to do this mind to mind.

"Ready?" Loara prompted.

"Right. Nearly there. My mission if that is what it really is Loara," Nervina said directly "is the Discrepancy. It's important. It configures the quantum process within space. That I cannot delete. Just to let you know because that will appear in the background. Meaning it isn't me. Basically I got no idea how much of me is me Loara. You might get a momentary squirt and that is that. So we shall see..."

"Just give the word, when you're ready. If you have to compose yourself, fine."

"Shouldn't take long. I'm going to basically try and blank my mind by concentrating on my breathing cycle. I'm happy the ship's monitoring us. Who knows we can upload some alternatives it might not have itself."

"Sure. Ideally an infinity of answers."

"On three I'm going to go neutral Loara. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Three, two, one..." Silence.

Nervina concentrated on her breath. She sensed Loara's presence as an outside observer. Hovering with no intent. Maybe it was her E status that could push the chattering mind into the background. So she was definitely configured. Breathe in, breathe out. The observing matrix expanded, went diffuse, become less of a centre, more of a domain at an extremely low intensity. A fog with as little substance as could be maintained without dissipating.

Slowly Nervina's mind was drawn in two directions. Or rather one became attracted to an extension. A pathway. She held herself in check. No analysis. That could distort the orientation. The radioactive glow, discernable, intermediate, non-particular could either be Loara's presence or the Discrepancy. A quivering probability, loaded with potency. A hint of maledictive intent. Loara's back up security? The Ds?

Nervina's Brain read the outer contents without probing, aligned without disturbing her vacancy regarding her conscious mind. Distant data fields flickered in and out of sequences, perhaps her energy attracted them. Sensing her vacancy it had nothing to link to so they vanished but did not disappear. Yet behind, around all this tenuous non defining, decoherent mass of energy fields the notion of intent noticeable. Intent without direction. Potential only.

Nervina's head expanded. Part of her inner remains of her self spread out without a centre. Good. No focus available. Something was being dredged out of her. Not her persona. She had several. Towards Novus. Not the planet itself but the concept of the planet. A data image that was siphoning the embedded information of the mist's glowing penumbra. Like solar flares under an intense gravitational well. The Outback. It too was more a semblance than the real thing. Vibrating in unison with the Discrepancy. Nothing of Loara. The Volatiles aligned as well, Novus glowing in unison. The Outback the attractor.

Her Brain kicked in. A makeshift entity a few nano-specks in size. Enough to release a flicker of a pulse, a probing virus attuned to the Vs more unsteady minds making it look like random interference. Markers. Mute, dormant algorithms tracking the process of the vast domains of the Discrepancy entangled with that of the Outback's projected field extension reaching into the thousands, thousands! of Vs. All in harmony. Her Brain collapsed out of this space. The tiny probe now a free agent. She hoped Loara was getting all this. Interesting how nothing of her came through. The tracer was in.

Something was tugging deep within her, so deep she hadn't known she was that deep. It had all the elements of BrainDraining. The mute algorithmic pulse heading straight for it. Getting there right into the scanner before the data was transferred, sealed and secured without revealing exactly what its contents were. That would alert them on the other side. This activity both local and distant. Dual BrainDraining? The distant source the Discrepancy. It was sucking data, resonance fields that constructed false personas ready to be inserted either directly into a mind or creating a simulacrum mimicking sentient life. Shit. This was heavy duty stuff. Extremely advanced. Virtually undetectable if not enhanced or configured enough to tell the difference. The insert a quantum state. Having overridden their intentions to get into each other's heads. Important.

The Draining on Novus ceased. The link went decoherent, uncollapsed, dispersed, vanished. Just like her Brain! No, not that. Fear. Panic. Adrenaline rush. The fog around her glowed with small diffuse centres of light. Back to her vacant state. Still buzzing with remnant data. In the background the memory of her Brain, her Sentinel. Nervina relaxed.

Her consciousness back. HID readouts returned.

"That's it Loara."

Nothing.

She deactivated herself from the system. The visuals went off-line, the ship's observant smart ware disengaged, the cover opened and Nervina immediately looked at the status lights of Loara's tube. All lights were normal. Her tube cascaded open.

Loara blinked. "That was something."

"Did you get it?" referring to her contacting the distant presence of the configured data realms sucking out someone's mind. No, aligned! Yes! The BrainDraining process setting up a domain which then linked to the D.

Loara told her of her thoughts.

"And me?" Nervina asked.

"Nothing...direct."

"Me neither." Truthful.

"Looks like we're pretty secure. How did you set it, meaning you, up?"

"Breath. Concentrate on that. Nothing else."

"Nothing something." Loara rose out of her tube.

"Ship's alert to long distance radar." Los watching their present status.

"Wont get anything. Ship will bend it around itself. Even that will have a disguise keeping the sweep going onwards and outwards."

"One moment here, then there. Sort of random within this sector." Los turned towards them.

"We can chat later Husk." A flicker of a smile on her lips.

"Sure."

Loara walked over to the monitors Los was concentrating on.

"I've got the log here." Los activated a small light screen next to her.

"I see. Husk."

"Yes?"

"Knowing what we know..." and she tapped in some commands into the next light console, saw the deeper active alert system of the ship and their data which was triple secure behind walls, traps, interference, satisfied then deleted it, vaporized turned to Nervina, "we might as well get closer. See how they react."

"Aha."

"What they're doing secretly and what they're doing officially matters."

"We can do that from out here." Mirn suggested.

"Yeah but then they'd know of some of our capabilities. With Regum Crashed we got to pretend this ship is dumb. Establish that. Make them think we're now as tech-backdated as them. So Mirn, dumb her down."

"How dumb?"

"Their dumb."

"Means scanning."

"Go to the library."

"Huh?"

"Ship's uploaded history. You'll find plans, choose one that fits in with their level. We keep the contents, just not the shape."

"Will do." Mirn called up the information and backtracked various ships by several generations. Finally variations came up that matched what was expected of them to be on their level.

"Go one up. First generation HD class." Loara suggested meaning the first of the Hydrogen powered space ships. One that was their size appeared. Mirn called up its computational architecture, then got the ship to assemble it in its outer shell.

"Done."

"That was quick." Loara satisfied it would pass muster.

"The rest is in place. And it is basic. No EM shielding, no camouflage. What about our little canons?"

"Retract."

"Done."

"So we jaunt our way towards Novus. Supply and maintenance."

"Alert them?"

"No, let them make contact first. Power us up."

"Hydrogen or chemical?"

"I meant virtual. Use the real generator. This is the last of the HDs. We'll be fine."

Loara assured Mirn.

"We gonna share with the others?" Nervina asked.

"No. The less they know the better."

"What's that?" Jez asked.

"Hard data. I hope you weren't taking a sneak in."

"No, of course not." Taken aback at the suggestion.

"Just checking. Too much at stake Jez. No offence."

"None taken Loara."

"OK everybody."

They stopped what they were doing.

"We're going in. Courtesy visit. We're a bunch of Spacers. From the Rust Belt. Bored. Went exploring, knowing of Novus. Scientific of course. Distant star gazers. Got that?"

They did. Except Jez. "What about me?"

"Fellow traveller, searching for alternative life forms."

"Oh, yes, right, of course." She beamed.

"There's something on Novus..." Nervina began tentatively looking at Loara who nodded, comprehending what she was going to say next.

"As you know, the Volatiles have taken over. They're Enhanced. We know but cannot reveal that. It doesn't matter because the effect's the same. We don't want to give away the source..."

"It's not on Novus." Jez guessed correctly.

"How did you arrive at that?" Loara asked.

"The framing of the last sentence."

"Oh." Then recovering Loara continued, "Jez is correct. Novus at the Outback is linked to...something else. We do not follow this up. We gotta pretend we're dumbfucks. Amateurs. Got that?"

"I think I can excel at that." Los smirked.

"So we drool or what?" Mirn laughed.

"Try not to. Even though we got some very unstable data we gotta go in. One reason is that Novus is an open planet. See how they react to us. Act like tourists and we'll be fine,"

"Are we on the look out or recruiting, enticing or get laid?" Los being her usual flippant self.

"What we're after is this." Loara took a deep breath. "There is a certain distant signal in space," looking at Jez, "that is interfering with unshielded computers. We think, so I'm told, that that might have something to do with Regum's crash. Not that it's obvious. Just a suspicion." Not looking at Nervina who was in agreement with Loara, so far. "Now we don't go breaking into their systems. Nervina here's already got that data. We want to know if this source is still active. And no we haven't got a fix on it." Nervina was impressed in how Loara massaged the information so quickly having just, as far as she knew, had access to it through her entanglement.

"Questions?"

"Tourists?" Los feeling jaunty now.

"Too right."

"Me as well?" Nuhan frowned. "Not that I can't pretend. It's just that, well I have discovered something interesting."

"Good for you. In case they snoop we got something for them."

"I don't know...it might be related to what you're looking for." He said a little uncertain, reticent in his discovery.

"Alright. What you got?"

"Well," Loara walking over to his end of the ship, "to find planets searching visually which is tedious, frustrating and I mean all one does is enter gravity wells and let the computer do the rest. That deletes the millions of stars." And he showed her as indeed the stars vanished on his screen. Loara was surprised, there were five planets in the vicinity on an astronomical scale along Novus's spiral arm.

"They're all dead worlds. Now I wasn't looking in any direction. Used a broad search. Well, far out I detected the strength of a planet accept..."

"No planet?" Loara almost guessing what he had found.

"Correct. Of course it could be cloaked. Some advanced civilization that does not want to be found. So I hung in there. I mean I kept the scanner pointed there to detect movement. No movement that defines an orbit. But it was shifting outwards, at the edge of our galaxy. It not so much moved as inflated outwards."

"Inflated, as in expand?"

"Right again. So naturally I tracked its orientation. All externally done Loara. No follow up analysis. Keeping things neutral. I found that this well got stronger the closer one came into our galaxy."

"You found its origin."

"I have indeed." A hint of pride in his voice. "Here let me show you." The others were standing around the two of them. Nervina knew he had found the point source of the Discrepancy. Verified.

The space devoid of stars centred on the huge black hole.

"There is an anomaly next to it." Nuhan called up the computer graphics. Light green geometric lines curving into the black hole. A smaller set of circular lines heading for the Discrepancy. "There the second gravity well. The maps of the ship, here at the second console have nothing. It's not been logged. Should I enter it?"

"No Nuhan."

"No?" puzzled. "This is an effect."

"It sure is. I want you to delete it."

"Delete it?"

"Delete."

"But..."

"Look Nuhan. Trust me. This is dangerous information. No one is to know ship included." Then turning to the others, "you all as well. If you're upgraded delete. We are not supposed to know, got that?"

They were in a conundrum.

"It's like this." Loara sighed. "It's one of Prima's dirty little secrets. That is one of the main concerns of us being here. How much they know. If we know we go in pre-determined. Remember Vs do have psychic abilities. It would not do to have them knowing we know."

Comprehension all around.

"Anyway Nuhan, now that you know how to rediscover it, once we're done on Novus and safely away you can study it, understood?"

"Alright." Mollified.

"I understand that as a scientist this is exciting for you. But we are not a scientifically defined mission. That is part of our cover. Find a supernova, or some asteroids, or satellites orbiting strange planets. We know there are mini systems around, get excited about some frozen moons, or lava spewing planets, superheated ones, fractured planets if such exist, anything but Nuhan."

He breathed in deeply, then exhaled as if by that he was letting go.

"Deleting search sequence, commands, prompts, back ups, and now," pressing enter once more, "ships assigned memory." Reams of data vanished off the screen.

"Done. No record anywhere."

"Listen everybody. If you can't fully erase your memory think centre of the galaxy as the gravity well. Think a trapped planet if that discrepancy weighs on your mind. Anything but what we know, what Nuhan discovered. We will deal with whatever in our good time. Remember, we're here to find out what they know. Not for us to tell them what we know. I must insist. If you don't want to be BrainDrained."

"They wouldn't..." Nuhan aghast at the thought.

"We don't know what the political situation is down there on Novus. Another, our designs on the people there. We don't even know what our status is. And as we're distant travellers, we got no real back up. We're not Reganians, we're certainly not Primaian or from down there. In a way they can do what they like with us. You do understand this. We're isolates. However if there is trouble we hightail it out of here." She looked at them to make the situation clear to them once more. Get it to sink in just how precarious their status was.

"Now as you know Husk and I are going down. I may as well tell yas that we are configured, enhanced. We can get the ship to home in on us, generate an extraction field."

"What do we do up here?" Jez asked.

"Well might as well brief you all. Los of course is ship maintenance which includes retrieval systems ready on stand by. Our resonant architecture's in the ship so that only, if it gets sticky, we get extracted. Mirn, you keep an eye on the overall grand design parameters and the ship itself. You will enphase with the ships hardcore. There are subroutines you can access so that the ship remains dumb whilst being clever. You've done this before." Even though that revealed that Mirn had been on some covert mission before. "Jez you shadow the Vs. Not like the DVs who are prone to go in full frontal intrusion. Just their RFs. And Nuhan, you just play the astronomer. And keep away from the centre. Anywhere but there. Got that?"

Nuhan was satisfied that he had no explicitly devious role to play.

"Questions?"

"What if you get taken?" Los asked. "We got the canons..." she smiled mischievously.

"Remember we're enhanced. We can read hostile measures before they can. Hostile is emotion. The emotion is there first. Ideally we dampen hostile intent. Believe me we want to remain as invisible as possible. Which..." turning to Nervina, "brings me to a point. You are Husk. But you still look like...your other self."

"Changed RF."

"Really? That's cool. What about visual recognition via their memory?"

"More like someone else."

"Good enough. Could you..."

"...be a chameleon?" for she remembered how she had gotten out of Regum the first time when exiting CU in a hurry. Should she tell Loara?

"Yes."

"Don't know Loara. Need to act scenario. Data released only on a when and or if basis. Even I don't know." She said with certainty knowing her Brain was full of potentialities she had no idea of. "Oh yes, if we do fall into some trap do we link to extricate or go solo?"

"As much as I hate to say this Husk, we're both on our own."

"That makes it easier."

"I'm glad you said that."

"Right then, let's move in. Mirn. We'll use you to guide the ship. Make them think we're running externally, analogue configuration."

"That is really backdated."

"Isn't it just?"

Mirn started configuring the systems to pretend they were that.

Nuhan went back to his console, recalled the star fields and started searching for exotics.

"Loara."

"Yes Husk. What a name..." she smirked.

"It's apt. I have contacts down there. In a way I'm still under contract to the Grobaldi's. One of the big families down there. Got their fingers in just about everything that matters. I'm also, was, rather working as surrogate for Mr E. That's E for enigmatic. The guy changed persona's daily. Gambler. Now the casino is most probably gone but since Novus is still a functioning planet the others I'm assuming will be in place. So I'll be talking to strangers..."

"Gotya."

"Mr E might have flash com applications. Others never upgraded. The...never mind. What we got on Novus anyway?"

"Not much. Nothing in the ship accept old data."

"Pre coup?"

"Aha. The moment we're detected I'm powering down."

Their ship, 'The Surveyor One' was noted by ground control, uploading their 'legend', their 'history' then cleared to enter Novus's near space. Mirn as captain informed them that the ship would remain in orbit. Only two crew members would go down in a pod. Liaising with customs after some consultation allowed the pod to land directly at the space port. Make them think they were dependent on it. Mirn of course had set up the VB and QFW's data points to back track both Loara and Husk. Loara was glad Nervina had contacts down there. When control asked for the reason of their visit Nervina replied that she was fixing up some outstanding contracts with the Grobaldi's. Commerce important. Moments later they were cleared to continue. Money still the defining factor.

The ship remained out in space. Nowhere near Novus. False positive data insertion fields allowed remote observation of Novus with them none the wiser as to their actual location. At the same time it would appear to the tracking stations that given the

distance Loara and Nervina had to travel in their little pod it would make them that much more vulnerable had they not been linked to the ships powerful computers giving the pod the appearance of being closer than it really was.

They sat up front monitoring space with their C & C system. Loara enjoyed flying the pod manually to keep up with it's `dated' technology.

Control was tracking them. The false insertion fields disguising their true location. If any DVs or Vs were focussed on them they wouldn't get much. Loara had reconfigured her internal smart-ware, hard-ware, her architecture neutralizing about a third of her neural pathways, shut down half her synaptic connections. Nervina merely had her Brain ensconced in her unconscious. Loara then ran an intuitive auto programme camouflaging her enhancements. Blabbering junk with cyber cushions and dampeners against any psychic probing.

"Whoever is interested..." Loara began when at last, as expected a full spectrum scan enveloped their pod. They had not seen any like this at such a tight intensity since the Rust Belt. Not that the pod couldn't handle it. Yet this type of pod was novel. Pods were usually small round things, not elongated, embellished with recessed small arms non detectable unless using armed search and destroy lasers. Stood down but not fully deactivated. More the size of a small cruiser with its relatively huge Hydrogen Drive, ancient antennae protruding out of its nose, two satellite dishes above, the guns recessed, looking innocent enough.

"...can you feel the scan?" Loara watching the read outs regarding Novus's interest in them.

"Hungry aren't they? I'm letting it wash through me. My activity is on a conscious level, so all they're getting is mental chatter. No denying it. They're getting Husk Loara." Nervina smiled content they had passed their security clearance.

The flight plan down to the only public space port satisfied ground control. Their remote scanners, they were using satellites rather than their core programme meant they had more powerful search capabilities held, in abeyance. For such a minor craft to give the impression, they were learning Loara thought, that they were not using standard systems surveillance. The pod pretended to be dumb.

"Dual layered security Loara." Nervina happy. Satisfied her remote positioned Brain having extracted enough hard data from this one sweep of Novus's interest in them.

Loara had shut down much of the pods internal AI, better than what Novus possessed. No point getting them too excited let alone interested. The most important

thing was the pod's own security set up. Novus's resonant scanners went active. Both Loara and Husk's resonance uploaded. The ultimate in biometrics. They could attempt to hack in but the pod rerouted the search parameters .Stonewalling the first level of resistance. Camouflaged algorithms would take the intruding programme apart. Inserting determined spectral personified fields. That took fine calibration so when probed the pod simply repelled with a little virus added to disorient the nudging intrusion techniques into caches of false data scenarios.

"You are cleared to head straight to the space port. Vector's mapped. Any deviation will result in extreme consequences I am obliged to let you know." The controller relayed.

"Understood. Accepting data." Loara replied. To Nervina: "I bet the vector's got some bugs in it. It's full of them, almost lumpy." She grinned. "The AI will play with them. It's as if they want us to know they can make trouble."

"What's the reason?"

"Just to let us know they can be difficult, that they're in charge. Give an appearance of their superiority which the AI is pretending is happening. They're trying to read the ships log with simultaneous dummy and real time runs. But don't worry, it's all contained. They'll get more or less our, what we allow that is, available data. Planet hunting. Environmental conditions, biological and other exotic life forms, possible sentient activity."

"Exotic life?"

"That will explain our densely compacted and fully charged up AI. A mere observatory would not need such a high order magnitudinal set of processors."

"I believe you." watching the pink haze of Novus in front of them, in half light. Tiny jets flared now and then as cargo ships manoeuvred into space. Then a shuttle passed ahead of them. Further out one was coming towards the planet. Light traffic. On their scanners much further out huge blips, probably bulk carriers heading for Prima or Regum.

"Viral data reconfigured and accepted." Loara smiled.

"Quick." Nervina concerned at the subterfuge. Surreptitious data extraction.

"Doppel effect sending response." Loara said for Nervina's benefit. "It will pique their interest. The message screened, sent will indicate some computational capabilities of ours and plenty of theirs."

"Make them think we got some crappy computers from way back." Nervina smiled. "Nifty."

"Included in your data is the exclusion zone." Control said. "Unless in dire difficulties maximum force will be used should you stray even near it." Ground control warned.

"What exclusion zone?" Loara bluffed.

"All in your vectors. No probing of any sort. Not even open channels. Your focus is on the space port for the duration and nothing else. If we detect any activity breaching these protocols you and your ship will be detained for an unspecified period depending on the level of the breach in disobeying these strictures."

"Understood." Loara pulling a face at the com link. Nervina laughed.

"Commander Khard here." A look of surprise on Loara. Nervina alert yet relaxed. "You have been made familiar of your conditions of entry. I am invested with planetary security. We may interrogate you and your craft." Surprised at this message Loara nodded at Nervina which meant what?

"It's a recording according to the ship."

"All data acquired belongs to the office of planetary security. Any deleted data deemed dangerous or inimical to the peace of the planet will be confiscated. You will be retained until we see fit to release you should that be warranted."

"They don't just mean scanning Nervina. This includes MindFucking and BrainDraining. Prima's ramped it all up down there."

"So much for Novus as an open planet."

There was a silence on the com.

"I'd better acknowledge."

"Any breach during your presence may result in your being detained at the governor's pleasure, your ship isolated..." Khard's voice droned on.

"Make that stolen Nervina."

"...and your fate decided by the relevant authorities dealing with terrorists, disturbing the peace, interfering with the rightful duties of the peace keepers..."

"That's Primatalk for militia or goon squads." Nervina amused.

"...acting as an agent of influence endangering the peace of the people."

"Make that passing information regarding the true situation just about anywhere in the universe."

"Do you accept the conditions of your visit?"

"Commander. We are a scientific research team. One of our personnel has unfinished business on your planet." Smiling at Nervina in acknowledging they owned

Novus. "I'm sure that the need to fulfil a contractual obligation is of benefit to the peaceful activities regarding Novus."

Silence.

"OK. Do computers get frustrated?" Loara smirked. Watching the console. "They really are a suspicious lot. Hm, we'll see. Better shut down some of the ships more exotic AI domains."

"Would our contents still appear too interesting?" Nervina wondered for her Brain was barely pretending to be present.

Loara shrugged focused on the console, watching what the delay involved at the other end. Knowing Prima there would be at least three manning this one channel. They did not trust individuals handling anything on their own. Under the illusion that a multiplicity of united minds strengthened them whereas a singular mind could easily be compromised.

Tiny screens hooked to subsidiary domains winked out. The surrounding read outs contracted. Lock down complete.

Silence on the com-link. Finally Loara replied: "Your conditions are acceptable regarding our vector in." not intending to fly over the Outback. Not that there was a need to physically go there. This was after all a 'snatch' mission. The Discrepancy. Scanning the planet would alert security so by using their computers normally whether shopping or just finding their way about enough data was acquired to see if the effect was in place. In a way they were on recreational leave. Having a look-see.

"Your reason for visiting?"

"I told you. Contractual obligations." Nervina replied.

"They're probing. Using DVs no doubt. The pod is not impenetrable to their activity. Can't let them know how smart it is, or our ship back there. So my guess is we're scanned. I hope your, ahm, whatever, isn't."

"It isn't." Nervina comprehending Loara was referring to her more advanced state. Her Brain. Loara had suitably dumbled down.

"Rest and recreation. Your planet's famous hospitality." Loara suppressing a smirk.

Silence.

"P.O.O."

"Deep space. Planet hunting. No luck so far dead planets aside."

"POO?" Nervina asked.

"Point of origin."

She nodded. "Why all this chatter?."

"To engage us Husk. Get our brains in gear, DV scan us."

"DVs." Nervina shuddered.

"And who knows what else? But I wouldn't be surprised if they're using CFs"

"Containment fields. That's how they run the masses on Prima."

"Mind suppression."

"Yeah. Nice isn't it. For us, me certainly it feels like there's a brick in my brain. Or someone dumped gooey sludge into my head."

"Good to know."

"Just don't fight it. Reveals too much about yourself and your hidden attributes."

"Aha. Anything else?" Loara ready and primed to ward off deeper insertions.

"Friendlies."

"Let me guess. Informants."

"Yep."

"Verified." Came the reply from below. "You are cleared to land."

Loara counted to ten then thanked them for permission to proceed. "I wonder if it's gonna be like this leaving. Where are you going? Why? What is the reason? Where exactly? After that where else? Where is your habitat? What do you do there? The reason for that? Who are your friends? What's in your garbage? How do you survive? Are you engaged in overt warfare? Are you a..."

"I get it." Nervina chuckled.

"Might even get that at the space port."

"Well I'm ready for the grilling. Been through there before you know."

"Oh of course. Forgot. Got a bit carried away here. My first time."

"Really?"

"Really. Too busy."

"Of course."

They watched as Novus slowly expanded. The horizon changing from a ball to a huge curve, the fuzzy envelope of the atmosphere getting wider. Then with the right insertion angle, around thirty five degrees they entered the atmosphere. The pod's heat shields glowing. External sensors retracted. The ship started to shudder then shake. After a while it was a smooth drop down as opposed to a fly in descent. They approached the space port, it's five huge launch pads rising towards them their rear shutes opened jerking them violently into a slow descent then landed spot on at the designated LZ. The shutes were drawn back in, folded and secured.

"Welcome to Novus." Nervina smirked. "Home of the free."

"Yeah, us." Loara busied herself with shutting programmes down. "Hm interesting. Basic weaponry in place. Surface to air missiles, anti aircraft guns, machine guns on the ground, armoured personnel carriers and of course armed guards, full body armour."

"You got all that without arousing suspicion?"

"Pure visuals Husk. Now to roll this little beauty towards a bay. Ah how nice of them, marked a spot for us. Near the perimeter. Within firing range. I bet they'll say it's for our protection. That there are some rogue elements about requiring this wonderful security. Can't have felons escaping. Then again neither would it surprise me," as the pod slowly trundled towards the parking bay, in the open, "that some of the rogue elements here are plants so that they can justify the security personnel, armed guards, peacekeepers and militia which means their controlled Vs. You know of course that we are both bright eyed tourists."

"Ready Loara. You are Loara I assume?"

"Oh yes. Want them to know I was here."

Nervina didn't ask why.

"So let's see what the reception's like." Loara secured and locked down the ship. Only Nervina-Husk and Loara could get in. "At least no boarding party come to see what sort of contraband's in the hold. "You see Husk I'm also a small trader, a free lance contractor. That will explain my movements should they wish to trace them through the mainframe if they get that far, if they bother. But as we got no cargo, I'm sure they've scanned the ship on the way down. And remember we just have to act like tourists for a day or two and we're out. The ship's system's on standby so it will sense if this big D is now part of the background radiation."

"Good."

"Shall we?"

Loara opened the hatch. A tube extended and they slid down. They felt the heat of the ship as it cooled slowly. A slight fresh dry breeze coming out of the desert. Winter. Crystal clear sky and a cool sun to go with it. Refreshing.

Nervina sensed even from her dormant Brain the hostile intent of the six troopers approaching them, fanning out. They were connected both to each other and to control somewhere in the space port's building behind them. Not good.

A detailed group was waiting for them, guns in neutral. Armed amber. Loara looked at Nervina. "Reception."

'Can you hear me?' Nervina asked.

'Shit. You really are configured.' Loara pleasantly surprised.

`Condensed. Soft surveying, but not the goon squad. They got some add-ons. Battery powered flat backpacks. Sophisticated processors. Mid range level...they're after me. They've put two and two together. They know I know about the distorted random number sequences. Source: Talex. He's after me. I think we should leave.'

`Back out? OK I'll try something.'

`Forgot my passport. Be right back.' Loara said loud and clear.

`The shute retracts with us on it, reverse platform. When I say now on three, two, one, now!' Loara looking at Nervina.

The two women felt the extension nudge their heels. As the squad were watching the women, the extension retracted whisked back into the ship where they both tumbled upright. Loara simply hit the lift off button next to the hatch. Then throwing herself to the nearest lit up console pounced on the extract signal.

In deep space Tuvlov with the pathfinding vacuum beam targeting Novus, tracking the pod ramped up the six powerful VBs which arrived within seconds.

The guards, the moment the ramp lifted them up, fired without effect, bullets pinging off the protection plate. They fired uselessly at the hatch which the shute-ramp sealed shut. The ship wobbled as its HD fired up, it's white flaring flame creating a blast radius that toppled the six guards. At control, seeing the debacle, the one sided firefight aimed four surface to air missiles using mass detectors to aim for the ships expected trajectory. They fired four missiles, which deviated slightly and missed their targets. The ship's computers screwing their vector then instantly analysed the miss. The vacuum beams arrived, extracted the ship along with a protecting quantum field. Loara aware of Nervina's true precarious status. If they were smart on Novus they would perhaps guess her capabilities. Maybe even recognize just how far she had advanced regarding the bid D and perhaps even what it was let alone that it was. Their quantum field had disorientated the missiles smartware.

The pod was back at the ship.

"Fuck that was close." Loara said as the two women picked themselves off the floor.

The pod went into a maintenance bay. The quantum field remained long enough to wash out, decohere all data of the ship and the two women's presence.

The missiles having no target and directed upwards found nothing and continued into the blue sky above. Finally running out of fuel they dropped back down. Four detonations exploded in the desert.

Once back on board Loara was still astounded that Nervina, Husk was deleted, had the ability to hack into her brain. But the situation had been dire. Still excited they entered the ship where a concerned Tuvlov was waiting. The 'Surveyor One' would make its return journey at a more sedate pace. They would be extracted shortly but first to get what had happened on Novus.

"I guess we won't be returning there any time soon." Nervina joked. "Should have got the message with all those probing questions. They were running sub-routine scans whilst engaging us."

"Not that the ship couldn't handle it." Loara intrigued at Nervina's capabilities whilst pretending to be AI locked down. Internally her mind had been segregated.

"Ship knows. The discrepancy. You see, they were using pilfered programmes from Regum predating the effect of the discrepancy. It threw the calculations of the missiles out." Not explaining some of the other counter measures in place.

"That I can understand but how did the ship do all its right stuff?" Nervina asked.

"Quantum processors. To it the discrepancy is part of the total environment. It's inclusive. So it's aligned when calculating vectors. Anything really." Loara relieved it had worked out, this time.

"What made them suspicious?" Tuvlov wanted to know.

"They knew I knew." Nervina replied calmly. "The random sequence tables from the Casino. I'm assuming that was the official hook to focus on me. I mean it's obvious I know too much. And Talex I think wanted to BrainDrained me. The longer we stayed the more data they'd have pulled from us. Even inconsequential stuff might have got them to put the picture together. After all DVs are like quantum computers with a will, with determination and not that friendly. A quick decision had to be made. So I got to thank Loara here for saving my hide." Turning to her: "Thank you."

"It was controlled panic Nervina."

"You people sure got your act together fast."

Tuvlov half smiled. He took that as a compliment from Nervina.

"Well we've downloaded the ships passive scans." rose and activated a console lighting up on the empty desk in front of him. He watched the numbers scroll by, two sets, pure random and divergent random. The computer knew the difference. "Verified. The discrepancy is a factor in the whole universe. Yet..." puzzled, "...localized."

"The first time that good news is bad news." Loara sighed.

"Isn't it just. Still they'll scratch their heads on Novus."

"Let's hope so. Faulty missile trajectories."

"Unless they get intuitive programming and that definitely needs quantum processors. They'll be behind as long as they use old Reganian codes. Hopefully the fast extraction is the reason they'll assume for failing to score even one hit. However they'll know that Loara and Husk are hot property. So," turning to Loara, "you understand that you both are tagged." They both nodded. "I know the quantum generated field affords protection in that we don't exist. But we must remain alert to DV penetration."

"There is something else. We ran the data. Which by the way is lost in its normal state. Gone quantum. Something strange occurred on Regum a while back." Tuvlov began tentatively.

"Prima strange or Regum strange."

"Both actually. I don't want to run the data, it's too sensitive. But rest assured this was real."

"Was?"

"As in the past."

When neither said anything Tuvlov continued.

"A strange disturbance targeting a group in the Outlands. A ground terrain vehicle with both military and civilian personnel were ambushed and killed."

"Not nice."

"We have the identities because we ran the time line. There is a reason here Nervina." he paused as if lost for words. "The name Horat mean anything?"

Nervina blanched. She knew there had been something wrong when she entered the CU on Regum. Horat, poor Horat. Murdered.

"We were lovers once, on Prima. That's how it all started. Mismatched resonances. On Prima, different resonance states mingling is corruption to the Domain Lords. Usually means drastic consequences. But in our case they offered as an out we couldn't refuse. Go to Regum, become their eyes on the ground." The distant memory so near once more. It felt lifetimes ago. "We were to join a research team studying the ancient folk lores and mythologies of the Outlanders."

"You know why?" Tuvlov interested.

"To join them. Storaf was the team leader." How she knew that she put down to her Brain. What didn't it know.

"You know they had a military escort."

"They did. Is it so lawless out there?"

"That's just it Nervina. It isn't. Not by their standards."

"So why...?"

"We were wondering exactly that as well. We were hoping you could help us."

"I got out. Actually to be frank with you, I ran away."

"Reason you're alive."

"Shit. Horat dead. And the others?"

"The same." He paused for a moment. Let Nervina cope. She seemed to be handling it well enough. "It doesn't make sense. How can folklore be deemed dangerous?" Tuvlov had an idea but he wanted to hear it from her.

"From a Primaian view? Not mine."

Tuvlov waited patiently.

"I'd have to speculate. Use their folklore to learn their psychology. The way they...see...the...universe." Came to her just like that.

"I see."

"Still it's defunct. I never did find out what their view was."

"Put it this way. It's shaman based."

"Like some sort of priestly caste of theirs?"

"More like a spirit guide. It opens realms in the world, like gates to inner and outer domains. Right into the cosmos and what is the underworld. You could make that the unconscious."

"So they are masters of mental domains?"

"And space."

"And space?" Nervina repeated feeling dumb.

"Inner space. But if focused upon real space, then yes outer space."

"Like the DVs?" a light slowly dawning within her.

"Oh yes. But much more. The realms the shamans discovered are like data domains in the now defunct Web, or possible quantum realities if you want to be scientific."

"Ah." She half guessed. "So they wanted to know what these shamans knew. What the old ones remembered. Then what. Copy their methods?"

"We don't know. But it appears that they would either manipulate those realms to control the Outlanders, or take it for themselves and again, control these alternative worlds or as a last resort, if they cannot have them, destroy them."

"Sounds like Prima." Nervina stony faced. "But why take out this group?"

"Indeed. It looks to us that that was a warning."

"Extreme at that."

"The resonance field around them was deadly."

"Remote murder? Sure it wasn't the DVs?"

"An Outlander, or several. Also Prima had infiltrated CU in most faculties. This was the perfect event to get into the heads of the locals out there."

"Too right."

Tuvlov watched her taking it so calmly.

"The DVs were following events on the ground."

"Aha. Uh-oh."

"Right there. They were enphased during the event."

"So now they can kill by remote means? How? Just think it?"

"What they did through this shaman was to create such a heightened sense of fear that it induced a massive shock. Now I'm not a medical specialist Nervina, but it is true that a shock can kill more so than being hit by some weapon. Furthermore if you think you're going to die..."

"Frightening stuff. If the shamans can do that then so can DVs...you think that's what happened on Regum?"

"Too right." Loara exclaimed. "Bastards."

"We, I," he paused, "wanted you to know we had nothing to do with the death of these four researchers. But it means that there is hope for the real original inhabitants of Regum."

"The aboriginals?"

"Precisely. We're hoping they keep their independence and not be overwhelmed by the Primaian occupation."

"The ships." Loara remembered.

"Ships?" Tuvlov alert.

"Saw them on our passive radar. Not many, but quite a few heading away from Novus."

"Interesting. You didn't..."

"No Tuvlov. We left them alone." Loara answered.

"Good.."

For a moment Nervina wondered. Not that she was too sure herself. Visions were one thing, even real ones. Real ones? Contrived domains? The D a micro Web having taken WebSpace in its embrace. Continuing where Regum left off. Maybe. And who's cyber intelligence was in there anyway? She suddenly thought. "I have some thoughts on the discrepancy."

"Haven't we all." Tuvlov good natured, yet concerned.

"It might be intelligent."

"Computer or sentient?."

"Maybe both."

"We'll get to the bottom of this. But remember we don't want to alert the Primaians so we all," he emphasised, "have to move with extreme caution there." Practically eyeballing Nervina. So she understood.

"What about us, the team?" Loara asked.

Tuvlov smiled with a hint of false demeanour. "Dispersion."

"That'll make them happy." Loara remarked wryly.

"Can't be helped I'm afraid. You can bet for certain that your vanishing act has got them going."

"Yes. I agree." Loara concurred.

Mudhan.

One more sojourn to comprehend the alien ingress. Enphased in the field-space of Regum. Manifest within space without self extricating into reality just yet. Scanning the environment. Its domain fully embraced her. The threat palpable. Flowing through her mind like a contagion. Wilful domination. Loaded, invisible, a major focussed force spread over the masses who gathered in their thousands on Prima to pay obescience to their unitary god. Like clutching at a feed-back-looped-mind-field as the ultimate delusion. Mudhan considered the esurient power relentless in forcing itself upon constrained souls. Burrowing into the unified mass unconsciousness. Who had no idea. Conned. The intrusion, spiritually manifest undeniable.

Mudhan aware of the deceit. Manipulating space's foundational quantum states to create the concept of a unitary god. A future corporeality with the promise through inserted false domain positives, of a freedom contained within this cosmic essence which integrated itself by visions of splendour, of rewards almost unthought of. The granting of access to a kingdom resplendent, inspiring, without delineation. The gateway to everything a soul could wish for. And there was plenty to wish for on Prima's agricultural world. The vision, the dreams this alien essence conjured its spawned familiarity, reading their desperation to be released from a life of toil and drudgery. If the masses accept this false ideal, then they were ensnared in its psychic prison. Doomed. Spiritually enslaved.

Like a cloying vapid mist it stuck in her mind. Time to get out, to remove herself from this nighted presence lurking in some secret domain within space outside subjective perception. Space cracked so that it intruded and expanded by fractured shards possessing monumental degrees of power, inserting outwards, having reached Prima, threatening crashed Regum.

Prima. The centre of the universe. That Its promise. Rulers of space and time accepted by the masses. The priests only too ready to invoke Its malignant power. The Domain Lords cautious neither accepting nor rejecting what was to them a new domain manifest in space. A power not to be taken lightly. Even Skias, she could almost feel his presence calculating how to manipulate this execrable presence for his own aims to remain the supreme pontiff, the guide, the representative of this unitary power that had gone straight to them all without distinction.

Being moved backwards. A primitive mind set caught in spiritual devotion subsuming all other intelligent thoughts. One god-like being, one divine race, one spiritual kingdom spreading its dark cloak over all sentient species. One galaxy at a time.

The image collapsed, receded. Mudhan in another domain world. The same oppressive religion dominating its believers. But at war on Earth with their own civilizations desperate to keep their spiritual freedom in the multiworlds of many gods and their concomitant realms, alternatives denied by the unitary force which had overwhelmed Prima. Coming to a planet near you.

Mudhan understood. Stricken into momentary frozen horror. The intelligence she had been caught up with when visiting Morfur. The two domains related? Multiple domains the tempter. Real for each soul within its prison world. Appearing infinite through algorithmic enhanced fractal constructs. Thus the feeling of illimitable vast space where a soul could venture for an eternity without end. A trick of convoluted perception tailored to its captives. An inherent resonant signature wilfully crafted to assuage a desperate soul seeking relief. A false refuge within its supposedly divine, magical, magisterial kingdom. Where the righteous shall rule. As for those who were not taken in by this disastrous manifestation, this spiritual catafalque of death drawing upon the life force of the believers to not just continue its existence but concurrently expand further into space. Then isolated, imprisoned into its space. Upon passing on BrainDrained. A soul vampire. Its believers blinded by the immediate without bothering to understand the manifestation that tricked them into being given the keys to the kingdom of their choice. With infinite possibilities answering their misguided needs to align their inner resonance with that of the Dominator.

Another quantum collapse. The ruins of the abbey. Broken walls like fractured teeth, ruined towers, the base blasted by its alien violence. Her world rubble. A glib moon overhead. So this was one of her futures. As long as she remained within it she could strengthen her reality. One of countless available to the alien mind-god that could create any reality at will. And thus possess them until the end of their lives. Then at the great passing, syphoned into the overweening being's artifice. Those who chose the mapped out path were offered infinite life. Irresistible without bothering to comprehend the consequences of mindless acceptance.

A digit in another space.

Mudhan let the image of the ruined abbey hover, slowly dissipating as she disengaged from its dark horror possessed inserted domain. One future out of many. Or the dominant one? The one willed by this creature or the real reality. To find the foul

centre, the forced equilibrium. To go where It was at its most heinous so that she could uncover where an entropic ingress could inflate reaching its highest order of magnitude.

She woke. Deep night. Silence outside. Even the animals of the dark not active. Too silent. The cloak of demented dreams hovering at the edge of this, the real reality. Or was it? Had she not been somewhere else? She could not remember. A feeling of dislocation. A waking dream, an inserted dream world. It would take only a few stupid minds to open the floodgates and all would be lost. Or herself...

Mudhan, lying on her palate with a few blankets covering her, a thin pillow under her head saw no future here. Times were indeed changing. The presence of the priests harbingers of doom. It was enough to recognize this constructed nightmare world of the unitary god, the jealous dictator intent on subjugating the soul, the mind and eventually life.

The fleeing souls of the dead withdrawing from this realm. Krool, Oku, Deara, even Morfur. Gone. Deleted. Vanished from this dominion into another. To the enthralled tricked into a proscribed digital world impressing itself upon their senses, letting them think real was real.

A diabolical illusion. Illusions. All convincing. She would not analyse it. That would be getting too close. Too dangerous too easily ensnared. History rewritten, records removed, destroyed. Part of Storaf's plan. The abbey obliterated from this universe. No pity or mercy here then. Well her charges would hopefully spread their knowledge amongst the others. Cultural diffusion.. It was not over yet..

She saw struggling souls having their essence ripped out. Worse than BrainDraining. First a lethal psychic shock. Souls extracted, feeding the beast at the centre. Its malignant intelligence feasting greedily upon believers. Those who challenged it's rule simply destroyed, absorbed by the power of its will. Overcome entropy by the power of the dead.

Mudhan was exhausted lying there, in her cell, awake, burdened by these impinging visions. Contracting her world, her reality, her realm, her domain. She could not stop this onslaught, but she could avoid her immanent collapse. Another virtual world deleted. Maybe its resonance would destabilize, by decoherency as a sector within this malignant mind bent on cosmic domination. Void Its pretence to become Master of Its universe, aiming for this universe.

Yet there were alternatives, other methods of survival. Every living thing residing in a probable defiant alternative reality. The universe a quantum process, she herself a continually collapsing probability wave. As long as she existed she could not be taken as

were the mindless monomaniacs on Prima and now Earth. Conditioned. The struggle extremely bloody on Earth. The thought struck her. Earth? Fleeting visions of madness, of war, of murder and death, of cities burning. The homicidal believers gathered in an unholy trinity of unitary domination. For the moment the conflict unresolved. Undeclared the gallant resistance though curtailed.

Memories flooded back. Computer banks, space ships, glittering stream lined buildings, a Regum from a previous age, visions of those whom she had known. Her need to fill the emptiness in her mind and soul. Her quest to revive now distant knowledge and fuse it with the future when artificial intelligence was on the cusp of sentient awareness. Fuse the two so that the bio constructs had both knowledge and wisdom, imbued with the sense of the sacredness of all life. To be with them, not bifurcate and branch off into possibilities that could be inimical to their survival. Grasping the future, not letting it be their end as the bio constructs became the supreme race. As sisters, not protagonists. Contain the unitary contagion.

A recess in her mind opened. The reconfiguration now obvious. Her past was different to her present. She really did, then, download a persona from...another domain, assumed its mantle, self assembled as Mudhan. She had kept her name to keep the tenuous but solid link so that she would remember the reason for being here. Regum the perfect place. Of course. The ancient knowledge, the way of the shamans here at the edge of the northern waste. Not really a waste at all, just broad sweeping plains, thick impenetrable forests until reaching the frozen northern world where these ancient aborigines lived. With their contact both through meditation and hallucinogenic drugs to delve into realms that were independent of this expanding being – itself a projection.

She was wide awake now. A slight cold breeze coming through the shutters which she usually left open so she could see the night sky. The darkness so infinite, filled with an eviscerating corruption that threatened to usurp the knowledge and intelligence of not just Prima and Regum but any sentience caught in its delusionary web. Not the shamans, they had their own real enough worlds. As long as they were not contaminated then there was hope not just for Regum but other worlds as well. Knowledge she possessed. Knowledge she had used in her school here. Threatened in one domain with utter and complete annihilation.

Time to go back. Another memory opened. Ah. As perfect as perfect could be. She remembered deep space. Time to get real. The monastery intact. Problem: was this entity decoherent, fracturing or assembling? So far no total unity. Time to plan her extrication. She had done all she could in this domain.

In her office Mudhan studied Shelan.

"We have Tenamu. He can take over." There she'd said it.

"You are leaving us?" Shelan's long golden hair wet from her morning ablutions.

"My work here is finished."

"But..."

"I know. Remember, nothing is forever." Hoping the same applied to that festering self spawning madness. This...thing an abomination. Trying to will itself into her head now that she knew of it's existence. If she remained she was not too sure how long she could hold out against it.

This her last insertion.

If Shelan noticed Mudhan's momentary distraction she said nothing.

"Leeta is a fine secretary. Matan from the abandoned temple..." The insistent priests having railed against her as a polluter of the soul, entrapping weaker minds with gods devoid of substance, unlike their god. She remembered. "I would suggest she work with Tenamu. You are a good manager Shelan. You have done much here, more than even I envisaged."

"Thank you." Shelan's eyes bright.

"Keep contact with the shamans of the north. That is essential. You know of course of the fate of Regum City. The whole continent..."

"The priests say it is divine wrath."

"They would. Anything to get an edge. Lies Shelan."

"I know. I just thought I'd mention it."

"Appreciated. I wouldn't be surprised...but I'm speculating."

Shelan waited. She would miss Mudhan. They all would. With Krool gone, vanished, vanquished according to the court priest, the future was indeed rather murky. "I must return to my source."

A shock on Shelan's radiant visage.

"Oh not that. I'm not passing on. Just leaving. Be aware of any false god Shelan."

"Prima's cosmic consciousness."

"Has gained strength. Souls are being manipulated. Stripped bare then infused with a coming divinity that thinks itself godlike."

"What's the difference." Shelan replied.

Mudhan sighed. "Not much in the end. If any. Things are happening in the cosmos and not with the best intentions. This abbey may be ruined. Be prepared for hard times. It might even be that it's all over here."

"Surely not."

"More than likely. Let the others know. Make arrangements so you won't all be surprised. Spread our knowledge to those who wish to know. But do not preach. That will only attract unnecessary attention. Move amongst the masses. Be like fish in the sea. There are many who wish to keep their ancient knowledge and its attendant beliefs in place. They will need it for what may transpire."

"And what is that?"

"The end of everything."

Going through the motion of leaving a second time.

Shelan looked puzzled, twiddling with the hem of her sleeve.

"Life as we know it. A dark god is awakening."

"Maybe it was meant to be." Shelan being the realist.

"Maybe. Thus the dispersal. But there is something else."

Shelan waited.

"This monastery is more than it seems."

"Eye of the beholder."

A smile from Mudhan. "No it's more prosaic than that. You see when it was built it was considered a miracle. Which had been my intention."

"A miracle. Oh yes. Word got around. Impressed Khratham and just about everybody else. Indeed miraculous."

"You know of course that Regum's technical abilities were no magic."

"Yes you did enlighten us as to their methods. How they could fashion anything they desired. We thought them gods and you disabused us of that image. They flesh and blood like us. It was their wonderful machines. That did a lot for us. Some of us even feared them."

"Luckily they never abused their knowledge. I Shelan used it to create this." Indicating the monastery.

"Really?" Shelan's blue eyes widening. "So that is how it was so rapidly built."

"Was. It will decay now. For what destroyed Regum will destroy this, over time. You see tiny machines known as nano-bots keep this place pristine. They use the light of the sun, the breeze of the wind to maintain this edifice. But something has shut them

down, killed them if you will. Whether this is related to this dark god I'm not too sure. But the coincidence is compelling."

"Hm. So what can we do?"

"You need real builders, carpenters..."

"Which we have."

"I had to use them to make it appear everything is normal. Plus it gave them employment. And given they were itinerant they would upon returning to their villages spread the word of our work here."

"I'm impressed. So they weren't necessary."

"No not really."

"But didn't they realize...?"

"I used them for other things. Chairs, tables, oak barrels, carts...that sort of thing. The building remained the miracle. A construct without blemish. Impress the waverers."

"You certainly achieved that Mudhan."

"And now for a secret. The eastern tower."

Shelan expectant.

"It's a virtual jump gate."

"But wouldn't it be destroyed the way Regum was?"

"You do catch on. Well it's both real and not real. It's virtual. What that means is it's source is somewhere else."

"A projection." Shelan was delighted with her guess.

"Indeed. Immune from whatever happens to this planet."

"As in?"

"That is the problem I'm considering. You see I had a dream last night. This place a ruin."

Not a dream. Another reality domain. One she was leaving as she had left the other. Having exited a nutrient tank. By rights she ought not to be here. She was puzzled. The truth as to which domain reality she was in revealed when she exited here. If she was in the nutrient tank then all was well. If not then it was, ice cold fear shuddered through her body, then she was in an artificial construction of a false positive domain realm, one of the cyber intelligence's creations. One it was her duty to bring down.

"It's all over Shelan."

"How long, when?" focused even in adversity.

"Can't tell and don't know. You see this so-called god seems to be able to create an almost infinite variety of realities. Real in its domain, real in being projected into one's mind..."

"But virtual." Shelan added, surprised at how familiar her thinking was to what Mudhan was alluding to.

"You are indeed a natural Shelan. Maybe we will keep in touch."

"Oh please, I'd be so honoured."

"Yet your destiny lies elsewhere."

"Take me with you."

"Wouldn't work. I'm attuned to my resonance." And what if it's gone? What if dissipated, or never existed? She a construct of Its design.

Not likely. The quantum link from her real present out there in space too embedded. Relief.

"Well in that case I'll wait for you."

"Please don't. The future is getting fluid. Prima is ascendant. The real future is in space but I first have to find out of where I come from is safe. Then we shall see."

"I understand." Hiding her disappointment.

From within a small pocket in her sleeve Mudhan gave Shelan a turquoise ring set in a simple silver clasp. She handed it to Shelan.

"Thank you."

"It's a processor and homing device. It's not working at the moment as I haven't been using it. Accesses your body's energy, that's how it becomes active. Put it on your finger and it will power up within a few moments. But use it only in an emergency. I don't trust the Primaians and now some Reganians as well. This is our secret. It will attune to your resonance. If anyone steals it it will be just that, a ring."

"I'm..."

"Surprised?"

"Yes."

"When, hopefully many years from now you are ready to pass on choose wisely to whom to entrust this too. You see, the Reganians in a way discovered eternal life. Not as in living for ever in one body. Only machines can do this. But they know how to transfer memories into the new born."

In this reality denied through the Crash, the Virtual Quantum Collapse.

"Maybe in the Habitats out in space there are those who will remember their true

heritage. Their exultant culture. Their euphoric life, the knowledge of their achievements. And continue. There's some very smart brains out there."

Her source.

"And you're going to do this?"

"I have a calling. Or rather I feel driven by some intangible force, part of a greater universe. Even now I still cannot really define this feeling of immensity, of possibilities undefined, of a future promise, of greatness not as the delusional psychosis regarding this insane religion and its beguiling power trip. Just an expanded consciousness..." Mudhan trailed off.

The need to establish her sojourn here as a valid past.

"I take that as a yes."

Mudhan nodding her head a little.

The two women walked through the courtyard. A carpenter was busy sawing away with his helper, Nathar and his apprentice Uror, both a little sweaty, stopped and smiled, she returned the gesture. Other helpers were busy in the laundry, wringing out clothing, a wave from them inside their hot place of work. To dry they simply laid out the washing on bamboo matts held down by stones. The whiff of hay and ordure from the horses they kept for tilling the fields, grazing serenely outside, the harvest in. Winter approaching.

Today a mild day, the breeze not from the northern mountains but coming in from the distant sea. Sacks of grain were being milled, two bullocks walking in endless circles so the grind stones could do their work. A golden dust hung in the air. Some scribes, young men who were taught the art of reading and writing had set up their desks in the bright sunlight copying pertinent words, spells, the occult craft of their ancestors ever since the visit from Storaf. Mudhan was anticipating their return with an order no doubt that they could confiscate their dusty tomes. She was making sure that knowledge would not be lost. Famia was probably in the library, scribbling furiously.

Mudhan did not feel like giving a speech. The mere act of vanishing would lend to the mystique of her powers. Even if it was a VJG.

They entered the eastern tower, the door creaking slowly entering the darkened lower chamber. The stairs circling their way up the round wall towards a chamber where the gate lay dormant. Invisible as it let light though, responsive only to her resonant state. Thus never seen by anybody. Above the simple astronomical observatory with its ancient optical telescope. More a relic but suitable for this age, these people. A pursuit of knowledge kept shrouded in mystery by the Primaians. She said it was for the sheer

beauty of seeing the millions of stars. Entice them by hinting of other worlds, other beings, other ways of thinking. When they come to us, then we will see. Well they had come, the Primaians, sending their priests first and then the calamity. Their monumental act of planetary mass murder.

It was cool inside the stone tower. The marvel of a lost age. A building, an abbey that literally grew out of the ground. Now the nanobots inactive. Thanks to Prima's great Crash. Darkness shrouded her mind as she thought of the dead, those dying, the survivors starving to death. The province here had plenty but months away from the stricken city. Maybe it was lucky that the Reganians had never bred many offsprings. Most were content to be, the family life holding nothing for them. The biological imperative more an evolutionary trait to propagate the species. If that was all life was about evolution would have stopped with the simpler life forms. To the Reganians life was about mental expansion. Both in the real world and later in the Web. Now all gone. So at least instead of breeding millions of mouths to feed there were only a few million in all. Still even one death was a tragedy. Not many, Mudhan understood with a heavy heart would survive. It was genocide on a planetary scale. She had no wish to be present amongst a homicidal race, no make that a murderous race. Luckily there were other planets, other civilisations to unlock their potential, open the domains within their unconscious and let them take it from there. Her ideal was to be a starter motor to let beings access their unrealized potentialities. She had done this here. Time to move on.

Here for one last look. The ingress of this usurping entity verified. With its projected domain worlds, thousands of them. She had to get away. And forewarned is forearmed. She needed some time in her distant habitat to figure out what her future would be. Retreat and self enhance both naturally and synthetically. For mere knowledge was not enough to counter its virtual worlds. It needed a processor of vast computing power to outdo whatever hovered at that malignant centre.

They had reached the ceiling door. It opened upwards with a squeak of its hinges. They took the last stairs up and were in the round empty chamber. The view from here magnificent. The forest spread eastwards before them. The dirt road wending its way through tall pines. Undulating hills rolled away towards the distant sea. The sky clear and bright. Up above a hawk hovered on the thermals, then shot down vanishing behind the canopy of trees. Just like the Primaians, watching, waiting, then taking Regum. Minds like hers deemed dangerous. Aiming to take her memories out of her skull. Then they would know of her origins. That she could not allow.

They stood there. Shelan looking around the bare walls, taking the circular room in. She was standing near where the VJG was. Not that it was responding to her presence.

"Here?"

"Indeed. What you are about to see is real."

Instead Shelan asked: "Will you be coming back?"

"Depends." Though Mudhan had made up her mind. In one reality the abbey was doomed. A ruin. A pile of rubble as floors collapsed, towers crumbled, the workshops in disuse, the fields reverting to meadow, the forest encroaching onto the open land. The brook would still be there. The sky...the sky. Space. The alien presence dominant. No she would not be back unless she could avenge the wrong being done by Prima or that thing. She did not even deem it intelligent. Malevolent more like it. Something to be gotten rid of rather than acknowledged of having a place in the great scheme of lost meta-realities. Regum for the near future a vanquished planet, its bright luminescent cities catastrophically destroyed as was their knowledge. The dream machines no more.

It was over. The future really was in space. Luckily there were thousands out there, amongst the stars. If the divine madness infected them...she cleared her mind of these dark possibilities. Prima supreme. For now. In this domain construct. Willed by that dark festering unitary intelligence.

Unless minds like her could find the weak link. Take it down as Regum was taken down. The method revealed. There would be precautions. The DVs for starters, remote viewers, searching for dissonant minds intent on creating their own reality, not the one Prima insisted upon. The current state not so much in flux but set invariably in concrete terms based on this heinous monstrosity lurking in the depths of space. She shuddered.

"It is cool in here." Shelan said seeing Mudhan shiver slightly. Then a smile from her.

"Yes."

"So, this is it." Shelan looking around her, an empty room. Inconceivable what or how Mudhan would execute her exit. Shelan knew that shamans could leave this world and now Mudhan was about to do the same. Shamans though left their body behind. Would Mudhan? She was mentally ready to accept just about anything Mudhan was about to do.

"Any last instructions?" a hint of sadness in her voice.

"This distant entity can affect a change in perception Shelan. Like the shamans who travel into other worlds this thing," her expression a bitter sneer, "brings its world to you. Basically insisting on what is."

"Bringing its version into our world?"

"That's the short of it."

"How do you, I, anyone stop it?"

"By being true to yourself. Your dreams will guide you. They are a part of reality as well. Then there is your meditation. The rest will be illusions of its dreamworld. Maybe you will be the one to defeat it."

"Is it a god?" Shelan feeling stupid asking the obvious.

"It pretends to be. Gods Shelan are simply extremely powerful souls who survived the transition. You could call them the undead."

"Can anyone be a god or is one fated...?"

"That depends on the inner strength you acquire during meditation. And no not all make it. There are no guarantees. The gods, the undead make a choice. They remain on the other side, creators of their own realm. Maybe you will become a goddess."

Mudhan smiled encouragingly.

"Something to look forward to when the time comes."

"Follow your dreams Shelan. Now it is time."

"I will miss you."

"Me too. Do what thou will."

"That's pretty broad Mudhan."

"It has to be. Take on the universe, be the universe, link yourself with the universe. That way you may obviate this thing."

"You know what it is?"

"It pretends to be a persona. It may well be. Or a rogue god, an undead forcing its realm upon us. A large version of Regum's collapsed WebSpace. Unassailable. But not perfect. I certainly hope not." Mudhan hastened to add. "Remember Shelan, nothing is perfect. Everything has a so-called flaw. Something opposite within it. Find that and you can undo its dominance. The Primaians are involved. It might even be their construct. Beware of their Deep Visionaries as well."

"It all seems so...I don't know, so out there."

Mudhan laughed. "You got that right. In more ways than one. There will be changes. So if you wake up one morning and you get a feeling of an imposition, either in your head or something isn't right then watch out. It has reached across."

"Me or everything?"

Mudhan took a breath. "I honestly don't know. I went near that thing..." the memory of it distant, so other, remote, ridiculous in its sense of being some prime essence thinking itself supreme. So Primaian. "Just be prepared Shelan. Stay on top of yourself. Never forget who you are, what you can be. Remember your potential. Keep that and you should be right."

"You don't sound too sure."

"That's because nothing is anymore." Mudhan sighed. "Stay focussed. This ingress is truly something else Shelan. It's a powerful mind which can create just about any illusion. That's what makes it so potent."

"A supreme shaman."

"Yes, well..."

"I'll stay focused."

"I have no doubt you will Shelan. Now it is time."

"Do you want me to leave?" a little uncertain.

"No. By all means watch. Be strong and as they say, take no prisoners."

"That good?" a forced smile.

Mudhan hoped the VJG would respond.

She walked onto the centre. Nothing. It would take a moment for it to read her resonance. A wafer thin dark square materialized itself beneath her. Matt black. Absorbing energy powered from her habitat's quantum generating processors. Independent through quantum tunnelling. Its very presence meant she was not caught in that thing's illusive powers of projection. Maybe...time to think later.

The VJG aligned to its source went decoherent, time equalled zero. Mudhan one moment here then the same moment here there.

Deep in space. Some habitaters gravitated towards each other but Mudhan preferred isolation. For a moment Mudhan's delayed reaction underwent the unsteady feeling of vertigo. Dizzy. The structure of space trembled or the habitat had. Her enhanced brain froze. Momentarily disconnecting itself from both the rest of her mind and reality. A short potent resonant spike hit her as space underwent a phase change. A shudder went through her, a quantum wave. With her Enhanced part of her mind engaged it kept her real memory in tact. The change...dramatic. She looked around the familiar study where the other connecting VJG was positioned. She stepped off it, it vanished going probable rather than actual as a quantum state.

And saw her ex husband.

It came back to her. She should have been at the lab. Instead the gate had rerouted her here. The phase change of space realigning her transition? Malfunctions impossible. Either the jump worked or it did not. So, rerouted. Space reconfigured. Puzzling.

A little more rotund around the midriff, the same pompous cloak making him look like some dramatic archimage. He always had delusions of being cosmically attuned. What was he doing here? She looked around and activated a light screen by merely blinking at the bare wall. Sure enough a small cruiser. So he had come by ship. He looked the same. The craggy face she had once found ruggedly handsome, the deep dark eyes hypnotic, how often she had let them wrap themselves around her...all in the past. What was he doing here? What did he want? Why? Had his friends found out he was a fake? All this posturing, his pretentious verboseness, which got worse the longer she knew him, had been seen through. That he was all bullshit? His pretend mood swings as if he was carrying the weight of reality all on his own, his supposed connectedness to almost equal minds. Never above but always below his level of advanced perception finally so tedious. The best she could hope for was being second, with some saving graces thrown like crumbs her way.

"Ah Mudhan. The system alerted me of your return."

How could the system know? Could it read the probabilities and calculate the actuality of the jump? A lucky guess. Or reconfigured, upgraded. The last thing she needed. Which didn't answer the question of his presence. That smile she had once thought as good naturedness. More like self satisfaction now. Repugnant. She felt nothing for him except the despicable.

"Mudhan. I have found the power, the source, the future, the past, the present." He blurted out. So did quantum computers. Typical. Verbose as usual. Annoying. And in her habitat. She must put a blockage in place so that his resonance was on her blacklist. After she had left she had made sure that she had no intention of a reunion, ever. She was bored with his quest for the infinite. As if he were destined to be great and did everything in his powers of persuasion that he could be that. It had fooled her for the few years they were together. She just hoped his so called power was all in his mind. He always thought himself greater than he was. His monogram proved it. So secret no one was to see it. Which had surprised her given his insufferable ego. She thought he would have dumped it in all the open systems to big note himself. The archimage had arrived. Redemption at hand. The mystery of the universe revealed and he its messenger. The

final moment, the grand united theory of everything. He had even considered being a fallen god, thus his brilliance, the light illuminating the darkness of space to reveal the Truth of Everything. Tedious.

"I am an avatar." No surprise there.

"What's that supposed to mean and why are you here?" She walked from the study into the kitchen, pressed the coffee maker and waited for the coffee to be freshly ground, then percolated.

"Waiting for you." He trailed after her. As if he was doing her a favour by waiting.

"Here?"

"I knew you were returning, from..." but stopped himself, because he didn't know.

Ha. So the camouflage had worked. Mudhan still puzzled in not re-emerging in the laboratory. Unless...unless...something was not right.

"Why?" she looked levelly at him. That annoying half smile on his podgy craggy face. Eyes twinkling which really meant nothing. Probably chromosomal.

"I'm inviting you to join me. I have changed. I feel complete. I have realized my faults, I have remedied my, ahm, egotistical attitude, I have been humbled." He said pompously.

"Jerrad, it's over. Get used to it. Anyway, what is there to join?" still the centre of everything. She knew that some exo-lifers with their cyber enhanced fantasies could go off into really strange tangents which in your average society would be deemed borderline madness. When isolate too long there were no yardsticks to determine delusion from reality.

"The future has been revealed."

Oh right. Only Jerrad. Must be an extremely limited future. What did he need her for? Spread the word. What word? What was he on about?

"You're talking in riddles as usual Jerrad. How long are you hanging around for?"

"Something great, something in the universe has chosen me. Call it the matrix, the web of space, the substratum is embedded in me. I am it as it is I." he puffed. Still short of breath when excited. He had flipped. It had to happen. Too much for his limited perception.

"To do what? I mean I meditate Jarred." Making him sound like 'jarhead'. "I too feel connected. No big deal. Comes with our minds." Trying to bring him back into the real world. The real world. She hoped there weren't others like him. Maybe that thing had infected him. Anything was possible.

"Execute the will. Well that's" he toned down his euphoria, "probably my gestalt consciousness projecting a paradigm onto the purity of the field state which I have had revealed to me. We are all embedded."

"It's called life Jerrad."

The percolator started bubbling. She looked at a light screen in the kitchen. Luckily only his ship was around. She felt dismayed if he had brought any of his looser friends with him. Well mostly losers. Accept they didn't know it. Thinking him smart, connected, mentally endowed with great, no make that ordinary insights any kid could come up with.

"Yes. True. It's all information. Coming from a source field where all potentialities exist. Delineating reality, guiding sentient life towards its destined apotheosis."

"Wow."

"You see?"

"A big word that."

"Mudhan, I have become the centre. Join me. You have so much going for you and yet you limit yourself..."

"Yes Jarhead I limit myself. For good reason." He missed the dig. Without bothering to explain why, what and where. They'd gone over that often enough.

"I even have a new persona. Samoran."

"Jerrad Samoran. Hm." She watched the coffee bubble, the aroma wonderful, freshening her mind. "So now that I know your new name are you going to leave or what?"

"I am everywhere. I can will myself everywhere. I offer you this great chance."

"We have jump gates for that."

"I can will myself everywhere." He insisted.

"What by thinking?"

"It's a little more complicated. Certain realities appear and I can think myself into them."

"I think I shall leave you with your playpen Jerrad Samoran." Cautious. This seemed awfully familiar. A bit too close for comfort. It was like that run in with that thing. Multiple worlds hovering so close. Able to be called up as a wrap around reality. He had been ensnared. Careful Mudhan. Might be better to humour him. She didn't feel like it. Maybe a little prodding would reveal more than being sympathetic to his flipped delusion.

"Playpen? Playpen!?!!" he almost screeched. Funny how that rugged face had such a pathetic voice. Then he laughed. It didn't sound jolly. "Yes, why not. If that is what you think. Then let it be so. The greatest."

"You sure the DVs haven't gotten to you."

"Their cosmic consciousness is but as smoke but not the fire."

Gotcha. Only she knew of them. Therefore...too late. They had him in their psychic clutches. Or that entity. Both probably. Not good.

"How romantic an illusion."

"The fire is within me." Then lowering his tone, "Figuratively."

"Lucky you." Nearly adding: 'Old enough to play with fire?'

"I am offering you a chance of a lifetime," then mellowing, intoning as if this was serious, "Mudhan." And before she could reply: "Here let me show you."

He walked into the living room. She let the percolator pour the coffee, plenty of milk and sugar without offering him any and ambled into the living room. The view from space comforting except for his ship.

Jerrad activated a screen.

"Here Prima, in rapture." Masses of the assembled at the pontifical palace praying to the Great Mind. The scene switched to Regum. A smaller group assembled with bowed heads as one of the priests filled them with their nonsense. "And here, a distant planet way beyond our universe." There must have been thousands of believers in a quadrangle, all in white circulating around a black cube. Another scene. Others strange black clad, long hairy sidelocks nodding, facing a ruin of a wall, a golden domed structure in front of them. Then a city with ornate buildings in a half circle, statues, gilded windows, images of saints, and in the large open space many thousands in awe looking up at a weirdly dressed person with a ridiculous pointed hat, a strange staff with a bent top being paid homage to.

"They are all witnessing, feeling, sensing, experiencing the unitary power which I am directly linked with. This is the great revelation Mudhan," spreading out his arms as if somehow that was supposed to mean something. "All these minds united. Isn't it wonderful. They all know of the unitary power I have, am, been experiencing Mudhan. The will is there. I am there, I am here, I can be anywhere."

"So why here? Anyway all these similarities, it's depressing and boring."

"You doubt the wisdom of millions?"

"Just not interested Jerrad. One of the reasons I exited. Remember?"

"They are ordained in the irradiating influence of the unitary being and its power. Or rather the power manifesting the unitary mind. We were all meant to know, to share this wonderful revelation."

"Know what? It's an idea Jerrad. It's not real." She sipped her coffee.

"The great principle that is the universe. Life, everything!"

"Everything? The universe is infinite..." and realized her mistake.

"Exactly. That is the secret."

"Yet science teaches us that the universe is a process, it is in continual formation. Jerrad even the universe doesn't know where it is heading."

"That's because science is limited Mudhan. The truth is greater than the sums of all scientific knowledge. What is an experiment but a self limiting set of mental constructs. Limited to delimited thoughts, caught in our ratiocinations."

"With one difference. Science throws out false assumptions and tries for something better. There is no end Jerrad."

"But there is Mudhan." He was fervent now. She would have to find a way to wind him down. No coffee for him. "There is the apotheosis. The teleological end point, the ultimate singularity if you will. And yes, it is true, as in science to throw out the false. Science. It was a stepping stone to the ultimate but fell short. Only the divine within us can comprehend the divine out there."

"You're possessed." Eyeing him suspiciously.

"I am, I am." She certainly did not expect that. "Everybody is. It's the dawn of a glorious new age. Regum redeemed."

Regum? How...? This was frightening.

"It's inhabitants saved. As others are on other planets. The message uniting all sentient life. Our souls eternal as it is. All of us on an equal footing within the great revelation. All inclusive. Even you."

"Maybe I should come back later."

But Jerrad was not listening.

"Those whose foul minds are blinded will be redeemed, saved from eternal destruction if they simply accept revealed truth Mudhan. You as well. Those who remain blind will fall by the wayside. Take a look at your monastery. You did well to leave it. You might not have known this consciously but deep within your soul, your soul knew and guided you...to me."

The monastery was up. How did he know. She had not informed him. She had simply left. Therefore...the connection he was rambling on about was real. He was connected to the false domain god. Shit.

"See how the mighty have fallen." Not that she had ever assumed anything of the sort. Create a victory out of a minor event. Compared to what had occurred on Regum what she was was minor.

Night on Regum. The monastery a ruin. The walls crumbled, weeds sprouting amongst the rubble. Some movement of a few huddled around a make shift fire in the quadrangle. Goats and sheep grazing outside. The place forlorn, deserted. No lamps burning within the chambers, the library, the dormitories. The towers toppled over. Then the once gleaming city just dark outlines towering into the sky. Birds circling above the skyscrapers. The city devoid of life. Even the provincial capital decrepit, houses collapsed into piles of rubble and broken timbers. Some inhabitants left. Regum regressed back to the dim middle ages

"You see what happens to unbelievers?" he sounded triumphant as if regressing civilisation was actually a good thing. "You doubt the power?"

"Actually no."

"So you believe?" hope in his pale blue eyes. He was mad.

"Let's say I'm curious. So where is this golden future?"

"As you saw." He blanked the screen. She finished her cup. "Prima is the future. The city on Regum merely abandoned," some metaphor for the mass murder perpetrated there, "the countryside reinvigorated. The city cleansed."

"Mass murder Jerrad."

"It is a sign. They refused. They were not aligned. They brought it upon themselves. The priest tried but were ignored. The calamity they brought onto themselves."

"They sure did a thorough job." Mudhan barely suppressing her scepticism.

"If you want eternal life, join in the resurrection." He implored. What would he know of her future?

Tricking the gullible into believing their end was close.

Jerrad had definitely lost it. No telling what he might do. If this entity could orchestrate, by taking over recipient minds to carry out its dark foul destructive deeds and if types like Jerrad were connected, able to conjure these insane visions as reality then, then it had to be quantum related. That meant probability waves, powerful ones, loaded with data. All that was needed, in theory she speculated, was an even heavier probability wave to undo...reality.

"Alright Jerrad. You made your point." Leaving it open whether she accepted his ranting illusions or whether she was fed up with his childish tricks.

"You will join the holy crusade?"

"Crusade?" furrowing her brow. "I thought it was about redemption, cleansing the soul whatever that's supposed to mean." Maybe she shouldn't have said that. Too late.

"Crusade does sound a little heavy. Spreading the good word. Align deluded minds." Certainly not Jerrad's by the sound of his voice. "There is much to do. Enemies everywhere." Not that. A hunt for heretics. "The worlds are aligned but there are pockets of resistance."

"Are you going to crash them into subservience as well?"

"Regum was an accident." He answered blithely. "They brought it on themselves. That had never been the priests intentions. They are here to save Mudhan. I have been visiting habitats. Most if not all concur. We need to align ourselves to the new future. You are one of the last Mudhan."

"I see."

"Do you?" impertinent.

"Let's say I am not rejecting out of hand your, ahm, supposition."

"When I am done...if only you could be in this glorious presence, this fulfilling power, its wonderful promise of a heavenly future in which we all become united in essence then you too will understand."

"I'm glad you think that."

"What I think is not important."

Woa. Humble. Jerrad? Egads.

For the moment she went along with his attitude. Even if it was an apoplectic delusion. And if real only a quantum state. At worse it could be *the* quantum state. But quantum states had a certain instability built into them. They could be the opposite and in rare moments totally absent from the space time continuum. If this visionary thing was really collapsing probability waves according to its own design then the universe was, for the moment she worried, in serious trouble. But nothing is eternal. Even the phase state of space was not constant. The universe would adjust, then, over time, unfortunately this could be in the millions of years, react, restabilise and forge into a new future. She would have to learn a bit more. Find out at what state the current phase state of space was at. The end of this equilibrium or a beginning? She hoped not. An end? Preferable. There had to be a world and it would only take one, that could undo all this madness.

"What about those who are unbelievers Jerrad?" thinking of herself.

"They will be set upon the righteous path. Adjusted in technical terms." His eyes glowering. The Reganian's had had a term for that: MindFucking.

"Primas asylums."

"Places of guidance and correction Mudhan." Looking like a homely doctor.

"I guess I have to accept what is real."

He beamed with a joy that was actually genuine. What Jerrad missed of course was that her reality would never be his, or Prima's or that thing out there toying with realities that were never meant to be.

She would seek out uncorrupted minds. If that were not possible she would use her enhancement to store her real memories. She hoped so would other EAs. The universe might have creaked back a notch or two but where there was sentient life there had to be hope that other beings had their own future without being molested by this monstrous poisoned mental prison of a realm. Had to. It was all she could cling to for the moment.

And a mad companion to be humoured.

SS1

Linnox given his natural aptitude, his reserved nature would be the perfect 'diplomat' in the Rust Belt. 'Consider yourself on holiday' one of the interviewer's had said without revealing exactly who Linnox would contact. Or what his mission was. Entice maybe Mr E to exit as well. Habitats aside the only free zone left was the Rust Belt. The Primaian's were stretched trying to humble Regum. Nor could they do much with the masses on Prima. They were simply too dumbed down to be of any use when dealing with even low tech worlds. Prima needed personel. The Rust Belt's workable technology remained as it was given the suspected Primaian spies around. Advances were kept elsewhere and in reserve for other applications in remote research stations.

So Linnox said his good-byes and left the station in a manually steered original HD class ship. The group had contacts in the Belt. They would approach him. Linnox's a scout, their eyes and ears in place. Remote sensing whilst advanced enough in being able to read resonant states of specific targets was nothing like having intelligence gathered through personal interaction. After all Nervina had been approached by Talex thus revealing specific attitudes and hidden designs which remote scanning would never have been able to reveal.

Ex wished him well. The ship cloaked for the moment until later it would appear in space with its false history, his reloaded escape from Novus. Since he had been cleared he was thus guaranteed entry into the Belt. Nervina wished him luck. In a way the Rust Belt seemed the place to be. With its geologists, engineers, expert designers improving the factories, maintenance both robotic and hands on, the workers and their bosses, the pilots and captains, visiting cruisers and semi automatic bulk carriers, merchants, suppliers of special machine parts, dealers in all sorts of exotics, luxury goods such as rare liqueurs and potent drugs, to enlighten downtime, even fashion houses had their suppliers and distributors mingling all on a more or less equal level. With very little social stratification. It was the way of the future.

Regum's Crash had caused immense resentment. Security was ramped up, the guns tested and fired using blanks. Let the Primaian spies know that they would not go the way of Regum. Everybody knew of course that some sort of cyberbomb had crashed the processors on Regum. A show of force was deemed good psychological reinforcement. Primaian ships were not necessarily excluded but a sanitary exclusion zone created with various levels of security was in place. For the Primaians only.

The Belt's attitude: defiance. Trade with Prima was at a standstill. Which left Novus in making machine parts and lathes, cutting devices, metal presses, rolling stock, the nuts and bolts, the support technology to make the infrastructure work. Using old plans the Belt built its own factories to become self sufficient. Expanding workshops to make up that which was slowly replaced from occupied Novus. Regum for now a total exclusion zone under complete lock down.

Nervina was watching Erx under Darlach's supervision isolating whole data blocks of code, extricating them strand by strand where they integrated themselves into the next level of processing awareness. It was a slow long procedure. Nervina was there as the third observer for she had seen the wave pattern in the random sequences back on Novus. The data they were working on were basically cosmic remnants. She looking out for aberrations

Erx came over to Nervina as she sat wistfully on a stool near a work bench staring out the porthole into the blackness of space. She had been scanning the data Erx gave her which he was extracting, handing her another sheaf of notes.

"Virtual codes from the QCs." To maintain objectivity Erx never told her what their exact functions were. That might create an inductive way of thinking which would not be value neutral.

Erx and Darlach were starting at the bottom. First make sure their processors were unaffected. They were in a quantum field wave and as such isolated from the rest of the universe. Another team kept an eye on the discrete quanta packets of subatomic space to make sure that given their power available data would not be affected by the quantum soup they were immersed in. They isolated the field projection of the DVs centring Earth. Weaker in presence but stronger psychically. Luckily Nervina's Brain had no trouble rinsing the background interference of the DVs out. She assumed all those here were similarly enhanced. No wonder the Primaian's were more than a little obsessed in not just finding them but using them or shutting them down.

"I'm still amazed how you discovered this." Darlach said and not for the first time. To him it was incredible. Once shown that one took in the whole page rather than focus on any particular digit, hold the image, blank the mind and presto! The pattern appeared. The trick was not to look.

She'd lost her concentration and would have to start again. The group was certainly not entrenched as a command structure with a top down stratified system of control. New tasks created their own order and flow of information. Since they were all in

this together, just like on Regum nearly all of their results were shared. Members interchanged tasks. A wise move. Too expert in one thing only created more ignorance in other knowledge domains. By continual rotation, depending on inherent abilities, most were familiar with each others work.

Accept the scan here. If the Discrepancy was more than just a process, if it was sentient embedded then it would have intent. That meant interaction, entanglement which could create a flash back and do to them what had been done on Regum. So they worked in isolation. Until more was known.

"It's not that easy Darlach." Nervina replied. "Simple systems might not reveal to any extent the level of interference. Then on the other hand complex structures create greater certainty of uncertainty. That has to be extracted from the pattern for it hides the discrepancy. Right Erx?"

"Close enough." He replied without looking up. "The more the variables, assumed and unassumed, in other words inherent in the system that generates the codes, it then has to be broken down to its constituent parts, the random numbers actually holding it all together, chaos equations at that," Erx in his element, "and deconstructing the elegant formulation, simplifying the complex so that the inherent structure is not mixed up with the pure reasoning of the quantum processors to formulate the simplicity of the structure itself. Stripped of attendant workable processes makes one hope that the epistemological process of acquiring data is isolated from the actual process of obtaining the requisite data. For data as you know is always patterned which means we might get fooled by the inherent discordance present in any closed system. Even the universe." Erx rattled off as it was all so obvious.

"Err, I assume that is the simple explanation." Darlach a little confused.

"What he means," Nervina actually understanding the gist, "is that there are two processes. The process of processing and the data acquired, inserted, dealt with embedded in the process. Like your PWs. There is that and the entrenched information that creates whatever. The process a carrier wave."

"Now that I can relate to." Darlach laughed.

Erx left the sheaf of numbers with Nervina. She'd had a brainstorm. Apart from marking the manipulated set of numbers she also drew their pattern hoping as she explained that that might, just might reveal something of the structure of the Discrepancy. Erx thought the idea neat.

"After all," Erx said when Nervina had come up with it, "the pattern's sequential. We see the numbers in a two dimensional field, like some membrane. Along comes a

new set of coordinates, field equations, which as a process is unseen even if they leave their mark on the surface. It shifts the lot into a new mathematical order which becomes the pattern that should not be there. And Nervina found this intuitively. She's to be congratulated."

They set to work, going through all the station's processing units and see if, given the quantum shield they were in, if and where any interference might be manifest. So far the slate was clean.

Knowing its location, the centre of the galaxy, the field waves pointed back to the source. It was using the galaxy as a power point, they merely a mid range star. Short of using the energy of a supernova, it had the upper hand. But if they could crash it through chaos equations creating a cyberbomb then all the energy in the universe could not undo the inherent process of ramping up entropy.

Her Brain loved all this. It was food for thought. Whilst that solution so far seemed the only one Erx had toyed with the idea of blowing this star up whilst pointing the quantum field into the Discrepancy. Once the tunnelling was in place, KAPOW he had said. Meaning problem solved. Everybody could resume their lives as they were before Prima got a bit a head of themselves.

"There's always the possibility," Erx feeling talkative having been at it in silent concentration for several hours, "that our QCs could build a VQC which in turn generates a Virtual Reality incorporating the big D and it blows itself apart thus releasing energy, sort of mimicking a fission explosion, in the virtual. And since you ask," he joked, his podgy face happy, radiant, excited, "the virtual being more like a shadow of the real, given the energy input would supplant for that one moment the real simply because of the energy quotient exceeding that of the real for that moment. Bye bye discrepancy."

"There is a less messy way Erx." Darlach said slowly. He too had been thinking. Nervina was happy for them to bounce ideas off each other. "Feed the beast. Use entropy to speed up the configured process. Set a trap. Burn it out. Simple."

Usaki wandered in. "I've entered the recognition patterns so that when I'm off to study the discrepancy it won't thereby effect the incoming data." Feeling pleased at having made some progress getting the observatories computers ready. "Tested the VB though away from here. Earth. What this means is that we can finally penetrate space without being noticed. I know QFWs could do it but we don't want them to know that."

"No we don't." Darlach looked up from the set of numbers the search pattern was issuing. His mind was loosing its concentration.

"And by pointing the vacuum beam away from here, if the DVs latch on they'll think we're as focussed on Earth as they are."

"Meaning we've given up with Regum." Usaki was happy to admit.

"Alright. Darlach. I'm going to enter a clean set of numbers into the QCs. If they come out polluted, then we can compare them with what Nervina's working on and see if the process is static, regressing or progressing." Erx surprised them. "It might also help you Usaki when searching space."

Usaki nodded, his black eyes twinkling.

Erx, watched by Darlach entered the cleaned up numbers in regards to the processing end and hit the run button. Lights flickered their acceptance, no alerts. The numbers on a new screen started their run.

"They are actually a field in space. Just empty space. So let's see if the results is configured. " Erx was delighted. "Well the discrepancy is encoding. Entropy is up. The process is getting higher, denser. That means more information is being spewed out. Of course," he reminded them, "I'm not reading this directly from the source, just the effect. Now Darlach," Erx turning to him, "does this affect K?"

"You've been made familiar then."

"A while back during my induction."

"K?" Nervina's Brain asked for her.

"The core. Isolated, control. Whilst the QCs are the working guts K is the overseer." Darlach explained. "So far it is as is. The D not having an effect upon it."

"So far?" Erx asked.

"The D would have to really create an output by many magnitudes. And we can always shut K down, or put it on stand by. Even if polluted it can isolate any non compliant processes, let them run their course until the equations zero out."

"Well we know the D is increasing its output incrementally. Either as information states, like a step ladder or a geometric infusion. Hopefully not exponentially." Erx advised.

"If the D is upping the ante," Usaki cut in trying to articulate more clearly his sudden thought, "I was just thinking. The universe is the base state. The D has shifted that. Increasing the informational content through superimposition. Linked, embedded, not separate. Our reading of that data only makes it appear as separate."

"Quantum mechanics. The observer defining..." Darlach began.

"Exactly. Defining the state itself through the act of the parameters doing the looking. Entropy higher. Yet from the numbers," quickly glancing at one of the lightscreens, "it is less than it should be."

"That would be the source." Erx explained.

"It would be massive." Usaki replied.

"It is using the galaxy."

"We know that, but it's even more than that. You see? The base state is lifted. Not much but when one goes from zero up the scale it is at first numerically huge. Deceptive as a percentage."

"Yes. Agreed. Still if space is effected it could influence the very laws..." Darlach not wishing to go further. This thing was taking on frightening proportions.

"But to what intent?" Usaki looked to them for some answer.

"Maybe to attract a certain state of intelligence." Nervina suggested.

"Or boost it." Erx added.

"Configure, create or delete." Darlach's thought process leading him into a dark realm too alarming to contemplate. "Holding all life hostage. You see space is not neutral. It's full of quantum potential. That has created not just our reality but the ability of life as we know it. How it manifests. Change the base state and...oh shit...reconfigure the universe to its intent."

They were too stunned to say anything.

"We have proof?" Nervina oddly enough the first coming to her senses after the shocking revelation Darlach considered.

"We do need proof." Usaki trying to deal with this cosmic aberration.

"What about feeding it infinity. That might keep it busy." Nervina suggested.

"But the universe is finite. I mean mathematically when equations give you infinity as an answer, as a process indicates flawed data or flawed reasoning." Usaki reminded them.

"If the D, and lets for a moment think here that it is some sort of super computer," Erx began, "for it isn't natural..."

No one dismissed his supposition.

"...then we have to find out if it thinks it's infinite in its capabilities. Access to all probabilities. I mean are they infinite. Is thinking an infinite process. Consider. The stone age, very minimal data. The space age, a huge difference. Both have their quotient of data. So there is a lower limit. But out there..."

"It does look infinite." Darlach merely remarked.

"Sure. But now we know there's another universe around us. So our universe is not infinite. That means the other universe might not either."

"Ah yes Erx. But now we have the problem of an infinite number of finite universes." Usaki chuckled.

"Why so happy?" Nervina smiled at him.

"Because if that is true the discrepancy is limited to this universe."

"Are you sure? It may have reached Earth. The VB read outs suggest its influence is in their base state as well. There's no break. The D's projected field is continuous." Usaki reclarified.

"Then we have to insert some sort of entropic attrition." Erx back on track.
 "The field vaporized, space absorbs the excess into its probability states whilst the real field waves move in."

"As long as we don't touch it we're safe." Darlach said after a moments silence.

"Can we run a virtual vacuum beam within the data. Not the field as such.
 Maybe then we can see into its core." Nervina suggested.

"Now there's an idea." Darlach beamed at her. "What I mean we configure the data to flow backwards, going for the source."

"Virtual or real." Usaki asked.

"Virtual through K protected by chaos equations. We use them to break anything dangerous down right down to zero. Maximum entropy."

"How do chaos equations get to zero?"

"The equations self delete." Darlach explained.

"Pfft." Went Erx.

The first task was to find another suitable mid range star for the Virtual Solar Station. Usaki presented them with hundreds. They were not very far from their system along the curving spiral arm and decided that the closest was good enough. Just outside the QFW they generated. The discussion focussing on whether its stability might be affected through quantum instabilities. Not that it could not be solved. Just add energy Darlach had beamed.

Then there was the overall design itself. They brought up various prototypes and settled on the essentially basic observatory model. Agreed with a few extra's were added. Scanning capabilities. It was to be a forward listening post. Recalling Regum's history to create a legend. Pretending to be an observatory.

Taren came as if out of nowhere. Nervina still surprised how personnel simply appeared. As if this station was divided into sub-domains with virtual jump gates. Anyone could manifest as long as there were receiving codes in place making the user appear conjured out of nowhere. Such as Taren.

As they sat around discussing the modalities of the SS 1V something easily agreed upon Nervina watched the new arrival. Taren's body language so familiar Nervina wondered if Taren was not some bio-upgraded-construct, a symbiot. A key persona they needed in the real world. Real time. Real mind.

Taren had a problem entering a virtual duplicate of K. She suggested something simpler yet contrived enough to worry the Primaian's. Loara had sat in so far without feeling the need to contribute. Her job began when the group's was finished. Make sure the SS 1V remained secure from DV assaults. Soft scans aside. The virtual station would mimic white noise if the DVs were intent on causing mischief.

Loara's mind jolted. Of course! But as it happened Ex blurted out that he had discovered an anachronism deep within K. He revealed that K harboured a cyber entity that called herself Elentra-Athena.

Everybody went quiet. Loara stared momentarily at Ex. The latter thinking silence gave him space explained that this E-A was rather hyper. Whilst K kept a lid on her she was absorbing what data she could. Ex had even conversed with her, remotely he hastened to add. He also soothed their startled expressions by camouflaging the intercourse into superficialities having built an interface.

"So how much does this E-A know then?" Loara queried. Having known of the presence ever since it's arrival. The first thing Loara had done was contain this insert thinking it was some DV projection. Tuvlov knew but she was not going to put him in a spot. She would take the heat on this, deflect it off him. For a cardinal rule had been broken. Secrecy. E-A had been lost but as K was an active QC K had somehow entangled with the defunct probability wave that had been E-A. Re-extracted from the past. Fantastic.

Now they were all looking at her as if she had been caught in a nasty act. Which in a way it was. E-A had accepted her cyberfate. In fact she had willed it. Pushed into a corner by her domain lord. Loara revealed this E-A had been feeding, through K all the data she could get regarding Primaian activity. Except the Crash. That was unforeseeable. She had left too soon.

"So this E-A has been what?" Taren sounding a little querulous. "Faking her self? Pretending to be a friendly? Linking with you so you could keep her to yourself? Has it

occurred to you this could be a Primaian plant? A sleeper? A virtual bomb? A corrupting influence like that event out there?"

"Of course." Loara trying to sound humble, not carrying it off. It wasn't her style to be apologetic. "She is cool."

"All pretence, Loara." Taren emphasising her name. Her responsibility. Keeping this E-A cyber persona for herself by the sound of things. Erx looked a little embarrassed. Taren looked at him but decided to say nothing. He had simply assumed that how E-A was configured within K was part of the set up.

Darlach decided to smooth things over. "Loara was making sure that we all didn't access this E-A in case this entity had hidden attributes that could have been inimical to us, as functioning minds. So Loara, Erx, is it hostile? Is it value neutral? Friendly? Are there magnitudes of cyber levels, multiple realities? Is it connected to the Discrepancy. Is its resonant state Primaian?"

"Her cyber-persona escaped and brought over a heap of stuff regarding DV activity. K knows. K accepts E-A. I've cached their interactions. E-A basically filled in all the gaps regarding Earth. The history we have of that planet is all thanks to her. The Primaians have been studying them for decades now. We, as Reganians only encapsulated Earth's reality without really studying it. Earth was there for all to see in WebSpace but it was more of an amusing diversion. It wasn't until the Primaians went active regarding the infusion of their resonance that the mission to that other dead planet was envisaged by us. Then as they crashed that initially all the data was lost as the whole quantum field went decoherent. Uncollapsed I think is the simple nomenclature. Of course with that went everything we had gained. Now we know who was in there and that was thanks to E-A. E-A saved the data. Via Ung. E-A was head of the DVs. We could not have gotten a better defector." There. The truth. What they made of that wasn't her concern. At best they might downgrade her. But what Taren had trouble comprehending was security was by nature, by its very definition secretive. Had to be.

"There's our answer." Darlach beamed looking to Tuvlov. He nodded slightly as if they knew what their next step was. Loara understood as well. When no one spoke Tuvlov did.

"We insert Elentra into the virtual station."

Another surprise.

"It keeps K secure."

"And will piss the Primaians off. Imagine," Loara calculating, prepared, "E-A-K as separate dual cores. It will distract the DVs and the DLs. They always were chasing the

shadow that was to them the cabal, us really. With our secret agents everywhere." Which she found amusing.

Tuvlov underlined Loara's logic. "Of course no one will actually be in there, all run from here via virtual gates through the QCs. In fact, talk about things coming together what the Reganians had done within the Web we are now doing in real time. Real virtuality. If this works and the theory's been worked over for ages means we can go anywhere, create any reality, delay, confuse, disturb, distort, do whatever to the DVs."

"But they'll know eventually that it is virtual." Taren expressing her doubts.

"So much the better. It means we can get on with out twin approaches. Earth and the Discrepancy."

"What about liberating Regum?" Taren reminding him of the unspeakable crime Prima had caused. Even if it could not be proven.

"What they expect. Regum for the moment and this is official, has accepted its fate."

"Rolled over, just like that?" Taren barely hiding her disbelief.

"Taren. Out here is the future. In space. Regum will be retaken but not directly. That is exactly what they want. As we speak there are support ships as huge as cargo vessels heading out from Novus. We assume it's to Regum. They will contain troops. Yes everybody. The dark ages have returned of military administrations. Novus is occupied. Prima reigns the planets but we rule, well not so much rule, but in space we are free. Let the Primaians get side tracked with Earth as well as the SS 1V and it lets us continue the great work which we must accomplish."

"Which great work is that Tuvlov? Letting Regum slowly die out? The loss of a whole race?"

"Taren we are here, the Belt's got thousands of us. Then there are the habitats, don't forget them. It's a diaspora."

"Each surviving Reganian their own centre spread across space Taren." Loara added. "They'll never contain us out there, out here. They might screw with one or two but even then. And don't forget we have inside knowledge now."

"Your secret and precious E-A. Do we get access now that she's been outed?"

"Up to Tuvlov."

"Elentra is cyber-active with K. She's also a shield to a degree. She knows Prima's configured resonance states. Any incoming DVs and she's onto them. Now since we are hidden in real time space, well that's not quite correct, but invisible the DVs could only latch onto our minds. What E-A does when a search gets close is to make it appear as a

shadow, a memory of a memory, something from the past, caught to them in the ether which to us is a long gone quantum state. The very act of looking by the DVs creates what they wish to see. E-A makes sure that that appears to come from our memories. If you get my drift."

"She's done all that?" Taren calmer now. She looked apologetically to Loara who gave her the weakest of smiles. It was something. The tension subsided between the two of them.

"It was her test in a way." Tuvlov explained.

"So she's trustworthy."

"Taren E-A wants revenge."

"Is that good?"

"It's positive."

"Will she get it?"

"Eventually. Within K's domain she knows she is almost eternal. Elentra will be the core of the virtual station." He finished off.

"Accessed via K?" Erx asked.

"To be decided Erx. The techs are working on interphasing recliners for all of us. Sit back, relax, and enter." Tuvlov beamed.

"How soon?"

"After testing Taren, a relative day or two. Now as to the actual position. We have around five stars picked out, from whence they get the energy which means the only real hardware out there are the panels, so it's a matter of picking which star. Once the absorption shields are in place the VQCs will vanish. Only the photon field of the star remains. Just like here."

"Won't they make the connection when we are embedded? After all it's a form of quantum tunnelling. Effect equals cause..." Taren a little doubtful.

"Not as long as this quantum field's in place. We vanish into nothing. Nothing is nothing. Anyway to sweeten the deal for disinformation always needs a kernel of truth we will be running a VB from there. Several perhaps. Trained on Earth of course and Regum. That will ruffle them up a bit." He smiled, happy with the way things were working out.

"So we concentrate on the big D here and the virtual station's busy with Earth and as you said Regum. And it works like the Web used to?" Taren wanting clarification.

"Indeed that is correct. Any questions?"

"I'm still concerned with this E-A persona. Head of DVs. These people are solid. Nothing involatile about them."

"Taren, they are enhanced volatiles. Have to be to have DV capabilities. She was indeed one in a million who came across. That has never happened in our whole history."

"Which makes me wonder why now? She comes across, Regum crashes. The end. Same for Novus. It looks as if she knew or suspected without knowing..."

"As one would expect if they didn't agree with Prima's directives Taren."

The SS 1V materialized around a mid range star four light years away. Unlike WebSpace it was not built up or even designed architecturally. The working QCs simply deposited the design using a calibrated vacuum beams to insert QWFs nodes acting as the focal point. A virtual design generating programme. With a difference. The core E-A+K. E had her own domain. Nervina could link with K through a series of buffers in case Elentra was interfered with through aggressive remote assault DVs. For there was no difference between a digital mind and the real thing. Both were similar effects. The difference was quantum. Minds were quantum level processors otherwise no recognition of the universe was possible. That might be the only difference between sentience and dumb life. One was a necessary cause the latter an effect. The same with the stations. K the process Elentra the effect. And as an effect Elentra would be used to try and get inside the Discrepancy as much as when with the DVs getting into other heads. If there was a flashback it would be localized. The SS 1V could then be deleted and rebooted minus any strangeness inserted by the Discrepancy. They could not let it assume domination in space as well as time.

Out in space, the SS 1V was positioned next to the star with its power source duplicating an observatory. The tell tale cupola's for observation. The vast arrays of panels converting light and heat into energy expanding around the star. Which vanished in real space and radiated in virtual space mimicking real space. The imagery a solid manifest design of specific inserted energy quanta as matter. It would need more than an electron scanner to discover that it was all photon energy. Its constituent energy one level above the necessary quantum mechanics that created matter out of energy.

Retranslated brilliantly white where virtual illuminated by the star, deep black in shadow the SS 1V looked like a cubist abstraction. Uploading personnel took a bit longer. The millions of algorithms necessary to mimic personal interactions, design

parameters to engage in astrophysical research including the concomitant knowledge base was taking longer. Here K could only process one entity at a time.

Then there was the method of giving the appearance of transporting the personnel. The group decided that Perdus, Los, Mirn, Jez and Nuhan along with Usaki were collected from distant habitats and with that false history in place to arrive at the SS 1V. Remotely inserting the ship and its occupants was easy enough. They used the data from the wiped out Mars mission, using the same ship. That ought to make the Primaians think. That they could interfere with reality but only so far. They might have won that round but that was about the extent of Prima's success. Now the same team was engaged in astronomical research. Studying space, the galaxy without unduly concerned about Regum's dark fate.

So far Prima was not aware of the ruse being perpetrated.

With the smart, connected recliners ready all they had to do was lie there hooked up, becoming virtual jump gates linking them to the SS 1V. Elentra greeted them, happy to have other sentients to interact with. She might be a galaxy of digits in another place but the fact that through her own sentience, something far more advanced than the insertion accomplished with the Earth mission, meant that through circumstances not of their own design the group had inadvertently created an independent, though friendly cyber presence.

Until the virtual team arrived there they continued at this end. Going over what they knew until finally going around in circles they decided to take a breather.

The ships from Novus were definitely destined for Regum. Occupying peace keepers.

"More like social control." Loara scoffed.

"Of course." Tuvlov relaxed. "What did you expect?"

"Nothing less. To think we are the only ones to even bother trying to understand what the Discrepancy is."

"That's because it isn't interfering with the Rust Belt. Whatever Earth is undergoing seems irrelevant. Their thinking somewhat confused yet so divergent at the same time. It's as if they possessed multiple minds."

"Multiple processing capabilities." Mirn ventured. "Remarkable." Going over the data the VBs were bringing up. "Even those with the notion of this unitary being are not completely overwhelmed. Only a minority display of Primaian thought patters, equivalent resonant states."

"So there's hope they won't go the way of Prima." Mirn pleased that the DV conspiracy was not going all Prima's way. "But you know I got a feeling the Discrepancy is helping them."

"Oh?" Tuvlov attentive.

"Mild boost."

"Aligned."

"That might make it a Primaian construct. We really ought to contact Merduk and Zohex." Mirn suggested.

"They've vanished."

"Tuvlov they can't have." Taren surprised.

"The Mars mission did."

"We have not seen any quantum activity on a scale to achieve this."

"True." He replied leaving it at that.

"Which leaves two scenarios."

"Only two?"

"Yes Tuvlov. One, they've gone totally like an electron transition state."

"Aha."

She just looked at him and said: "Two they're in the Discrepancy."

"Well once our virtual team's at the 1V we can rummage around."

"I got a feeling," Nervina began as they sat around the room discussing their options, "that the Discrepancy is more than just an effect. Its energy quotient is extremely high. As Darlach said, I think, it seems more than what we can passively measure. Now that you have taken me into your confidence I can reveal some interactions I've had with it."

They turned to her with renewed interest.

"Not physically, just mentally. Multiple worlds."

"Sort of expanded Web?" Los asked. She was the head techie after all.

"Definitely. Absorbing everything. Recreating it at different levels. And expanding with the universe." her Brain doing the talking.

"That would explain the state not being quite constant." Usaki added.

"I would imagine being inside of it, something Elentra can check out it would appear as if one was in the real universe..."

"Even though its cyber." Los suggested. "A bit like what we're doing at the V1. Our own design concept except you're saying its mirroring, replicating the universe itself?"

"Otherwise why does it need all that energy for such a relatively small radius. There is more on the inside than the outside suggests." Usaki told them.

"A field connected with the universe within the universe of a universe within..." Los mused. "The ultimate trap. If that were to go hyper, reach some as yet unknown critical mass, it could swallow up...us for instance."

"So you would suggest Elentra keeps out?" Tuvlov a little worried of what Los was thinking. Then he looked at Nervina.

"It would only be an appearance. Not a physical expansion. It's accumulating data alright. But once one is in it could get problematic getting out. There would have to be some form of entanglement with the insertion point on the outside to not loose the proverbial thread, or logic sequences, strings of data codes and if that fails, one's unique resonance field." Nervina's Brain released.

"Go in virtual." Mirn preferring in not allowing it to ensnare an inquisitive mind.

"So we agree it's a construct, an artifice." Tuvlov ventured.

"As long as it does not create virtual intelligences, cyber entities being deposited into our universe..." Mirn thought through her knowledge of exo-life forms and attendant possibilities.

"Cyber inserts..." Loara groaned.

"I see where this could lead to." Mirn becoming concerned with the discrepancy's possibilities. "An independent artifice, self replicating...."

"Whoa. One moment you've got inserted identities and now self duplicating micro-verses?"

"We gotta cover all possibilities Tuvlov."

"She's right." Loara concurred. "I mean it ain't that far fetched."

"Really?" Tuvlov urging her on. Nervina's Brain was gestating with ideas. Her mind clear, focussed, alert. Knowing what was coming next. They had covered all the possible scenarios. Her conception of the Discrepancy had changed. An accompanying feeling of familiarity. Not exactly in resonance, enphased but something that made sense.

"The Primaians think this is a designer universe. What if that, whatever," Mirn waving her hand around indicating it was more than it was, "has come out of the woodwork. They've been going on about some revelation," she shrugged, "maybe this is it."

"We have to waste it." Los being practical.

"Why not use it?" Mirn thinking of force feeding it with Reganian data, the ultimate WebSpace. Theirs.

Nervina wondered whether they were the only one's aware if it. Whether the Earther's had an inkling, currently misconstrued, of its existence.

"Why not make Earth aware of it? Get them interested. Create some havoc. Get it to react, reveal itself before it's too powerful." Nervina was looking at them seeing what they'd make of it.

Nervina was only half asleep. She could not quite get a fix, a centre, a focus on exactly what it was that niggled her Brain. Then again, as she lay there restlessly it might be her mind which was agitated. Not exactly excitement but of something impending. A confluence of unsorted events that would not fit into a workable pattern, one that could not be reached, let alone recognized or better still analysed.

There was the demise of the ground research team on Regum. Taken out, just like that. An occult attack? A potent shaman who was not there. If that were so the obvious answer lay with the DVs. For the data coming in from Regum on normal passive scans, that particular event re-run, scrutinised only showed a strong field projection, inserted. That was the problem. It had the signature of a quantum event.

She was learning, remembering, able to use knowledge she was not directly aware of. Good Brain. Where was she getting the information from? Her mentor, Varis?, Varit?, she could never really remember his name though his wizened face was clear enough had only taught her basic concepts. Enough to trigger some molecular release mechanism in her mind no doubt. Which was all well and good. It did not explain the tragic event that had amongst others finished off Horat. There she ought to have reacted. Instead just another memory to add to the rest. Not that there was that much to remember. What was not directly pertinent to the situation was not of consequence. That in turn gave her a minor existential crisis. Her consciousness, her recognition of her self as an aware being surrounded by others who ultimately were images within her which were then projected outwards...as conglomerate bits of data, information, self assembling...

Her Brain was wrestling with projections. Hints were coming through though not too clear. The real time overlay interfering with pertinent prerequisite data. Right now. This very instant. But moving in time was instant after instant. Maybe it was time to stop time. Go into some sort of fugue, a resonant state which could look into whatever it was her Brain was working on.

'I have sealed myself off.' Trying anyway. And still dragged along this particular time line. As were the others. As was space. What is it trying to tell me? No answer. As

expected. That must be how Primaians felt when wanting to access their cosmic mind thing. Thing. Just about summed it up. Could something like that exist? Everything possible. Only certain ideas, thoughts, images, projections, creations became actual. This cosmic thing had never been seen. Unless it existed in another field-space independent of this one. Minor cosmic vibrations quivering through the matrix of space and time and the quantum process that made it all happen. Not all. Something's happened regardless.

Her Brain circling around a field event. Picking up hints here, fragments there but not the picture itself.

What was missing? The glue! Very funny. I am sealed off as are the others. Was that the effect of being within a generated quantum field wave? Perhaps. Maybe. No, most certainly. So far so good. No, not good. Not bad either. Just simply, not at all. The price of isolation. Maybe that was the limits being imposed upon her, when inside. Inside what? This space? Maybe.

So the answer obvious. Move outside. Reality only an actual probability amongst many. But if I create my own actuality will that displace that of the teams? The energy quotient. Theirs stronger. Would mine be washed out, diluted, added to the mix but without effect? I need an attractor. A singularity would be good. But then she would have the lot and that might include the resonances of Prima and their assertive DV assault squads. The mayhem alone that that would create...

Focus Nervina, think later. Easier said than done. Her Brain was involved after all. What if I isolate it? I'd be on my own. A spasm of energy with a hint of fear of being exposed to whatever was influencing space.

Ah, getting somewhere. But you knew this anyway. Everybody knows. No not everybody. Not the masses on Prima. Not the survivors on Regum cut off, cut out from WebSpace. A divergent thought. Recreate it, reinsert. They had the energy. Ah yes, forgot. It would reveal their location. You're self distracting Nervina. I am. Back to this feeling then of...what? Exactly, what.

'The answer is out there.'

I know that.

'So do it. Go.'

Go where?

'Out there of course.'

In space?

'In space.'

With or without you? thinking of her Brain.

Silence.

Up to me obviously. Dare I go out there naked? The idea frightened her the DVs the culprits. Then there were the realms of the Domain Lords. Prima centred. Whatever. As long as I am in the field I am limited to its parameters. But they are open parameters. Parameters are parameters. And outside the field there aren't? Another absence of information. Wrong thinking.

`Not an absence, a plethora of as many possibilities as the mind could think of.'

`But I don't want them all, I want answers.' She silently screamed at her Brain.

`The answer as you put it' her Brain informed her, `is outside'.

Thank you.

Reticence.

Any clues? You were with me when I was out there. Ha, gotcha.

Consideration.

`Cosmic Ultra Black.'

What's that, a code? A level of security? A stream of information? A condition? Or just some bureaucratic grand sizing?

`A condition of space.'

Very good Brain. Where? Who? What? Why?

She swore she could hear her Brain clunking through the possible answers.

'Everywhere. Unknown. A field state. Domination.' The answers came in the order of her question.

So, no who. Not expecting much. More relating to herself. A process then?

'And that.'

And that? Meaning?

`A future condition gestating as yet only as a potential...'

What?

`More than just a quantum field state. A superimposition.'

Right, good. The aim?

`Domination.'

Of what or who or where and may as well add why Brain.

`A total state, origins unknown due to its multiple singular complexity. Thus everywhere, hyperinflation, all dominant factors.'

Hyperinflation.

`Multiple singularities. Mathematical parlance. Infinite field equations, configured chaos equations inserted to obviate entropy. Configuring entropy within this open/closed system of manifest cosmic energy. Recalibrating super strings, affecting superstrings, manipulating nodal vortices, the precursors already in place.'

Precursors. Where?

`Why, everywhere. On Prima, Regum, Novus, Earth....A....r...' her Brain came to a temporary halt. Not releasing her point of origin. The point of her configuration.

What happened? she asked Brain.

`Uncollapsed probability states. At their event horizon infinity impinges, the results become meaningless in themselves.'

Ah. So there are limits to this code.

`On a quantum level, yes. Known as the future relative to the observer.'

So if one were to insert an observer...into the future...one...could...create that future! the thought hit her, invigorated her, made her realize Prima could be beaten. Instantly awake. Eyes open. The serene glow of the HID numerics and bio-graphs of her state. The conversation with her Brain real enough.

Mastering her excitement. Wanting to tell them of her little discovery. The other part of her churning mind refocussed on her immediate situation. Inside the field she was somewhat limited. Brain suggested outside.

Brain you mentioned the answer is outside.

`Correct.'

But it is filled with DV resonance field states plus the imposed discrepancy...potential field states as yet to be not so much defined but realized. In a transitional stage between life and non life, like the undead, undead? She brushed that aside, make that the present un-real aiming to be real-real. Defining reality just as she just thought by inserting a configuration into the future. To be written thus with the help of potent attractors and vortices infused with constructed future oriented singularities...exactly as it was doing. It? The Discrepancy. It was sending precursors into its relative future, their presence, her reality.

So Brain. The Discrepancy is trying to write its future into this reality.

`Possible. Likely.'

She pulled a mental face. Hm. So find out by going in from within or without.

`In is in.'

No difference? puzzled given her Brain's analysis just prior this one. You said...No you thought...that inside this field there are certain limits. This I follow. Out there are what

we just went over. DV activity. Domain Lords resonant states, the Discrepancy, the latter a gestating potentiality.

'Correct.'

Would not my interfering from within this field afford me a cushion of protection along with the energy I am using as well?

'Revelation.'

Ah you mean recognition. Their secret exposed.

'Indeed. Though the entanglement could work in this field's favour.'

By being in there.

'A risk factor of ten to one...in the Discrepancy's favour.'

Subsumed.

'Very likely.'

And me going in out there?

'A thousand to one.'

Is that all? a bit freaked out. A thousand to one. That was a serious magnitude. Still if nine hundred and ninety-nine persona's could come with her...the group here with K and now their virtual station with E-A something could be accomplished to deal with the Discrepancy. Whether it was weakening or strengthening the group's intentions. Prima's obsession of dominating worlds and shaping their conquered sentients along their thought processes, their mental field state...then by finding out if the Discrepancy was aligned would be enough to know how to neutralize it. Maybe even get entropy to finish it off. Like ice in the sun. If however it was self aligning, self replicating then she, again, would need to know its future state. But couldn't the computers here do that? Maybe all the processing power went into generating and holding the quantum field wave in space. Surely they had spare computers. It was after all only modelling.

Then she remembered her previous idea of forming the future. That would definitely have to be explored. Since she was restless she decided to get up. It was relatively in the middle of the night according to her biorhythms but her little internal molecular helpers buzzed her awake. She took a shower to feel refreshed, got dressed in the ubiquitous jump suit. See who was on duty.

She walked into one of the control rooms, saw Tuvlov, his lean figure, dressed in black watching with Loara two scenario's on the screens.

Only a status light that a link was there and the accompanying graph and numerics regarding the inserted field. Maybe that was all they needed to know not wishing to get bogged with particulars. Like Earth. Too much attention there.

Instead the two of them, did they ever sleep or were they so bio-enhanced that the body and mind self replenished whilst fully awake?

Novus was on one screen with half a dozen smaller ones indicating various functions, details called up from the memory banks of the scanners along with Regum and the moment of the Crash.

Loara turned, she too in black in unison with the darkness that encompassed Regum as everything on that planet went down once again..

"It's definitely a digital field wave. But the force..." Loara astounded Tuvlov half turning to Nervina then resuming his observation "...so much concentrated energy. It must be a data construct, spec designed."

Demos arrived. Short, blond wispy hair, blue eyes and pale. A spacer.

"It worked?" Tuvlov turned once more. Loara continued to watch the graph that effectively shut down Regum and the orbital.

"They even sacrificed their own." Loara remarked meaning the Primaians on board. "This is heavy..."

"And?" Tuvlov asked Demos.

"System's check out. Programme is tight, configuration stable." Referring to Elentra in the SS 1V.

"Excellent. You seem slightly distracted."

"Something's not quite right."

"Coming from you, a logistics operative makes me worried Demos."

"Everything is as it should be. On the outside. It's the inside that counts."

"Aha. You referring to the superstructure or the content as in Elentra."

"Whether Elentra knew, guessed, assumed, connected the dots long before they appeared."

When Demos mentioned 'dots' Nervina remembered her thoughts in making the future happen. She would wait until they were finished.

"The coming Crash was not pure DV activity. Just boosted and focussed by their remote viewing capabilities. Elentra intuited the coming calamity, sensed it and perhaps thinking it would effect her and her station or even her planet, plus the fact that somehow she must have compromised herself or knew something her overlords deemed the need of removal thus threatening her with being BrainDrained she connived to get out. Of course we now know why." Demos looking at the screen showing a computerized image of Regum in darkness as well as the orbital.

"And no follow up?"

"Elentra is secure as an information system. She's her own data field. The stuff we're getting about Prima..."

"Yes?" Tuvlov's alert, eyes bright.

"I'll cache it. She's pouring her memories out. This is the best we ever got." Demos finally acknowledging Nervina. She nodded.

"Maybe you should link with her." Tuvlov suggested. "Might jog your memory. After all your resonance indicates an enhanced volatile. Might even release suppressed information regarding your natural base state." Tuvlov said with sudden renewed interest in Nervina. "To be honest, we know so little..."

"Make that next to nothing." Loara not taking her eyes off her screens.

"There are those on the orbital don't forget."

"Tuvlov, they were all dumbed down. More like first generation processors. Configured down. As for the DVs they are isolates. Need a battering ram to get into their heads. And remember the gear we had on the orbitals was at best third generation. We only soft scanned them. Non intrusive." Loara reminded Tuvlov. Not that he didn't know.

Loara fast forwarded her screens accumulated data. The orbital was starting to heat up, glowing as its decayed orbit sent it into its death fall. Parts of its structure fell to pieces, bits breaking off, the outer surface buckling here and there. Hundreds had died, Primaians and Reganians.

A wrecked coffin heading towards total destruction. Prima's com links silent. As if they didn't know, unaware of the colossal disaster unfolding over Regum. Their silence conspiratorial.

"You're an expert on cyber-ware Demos." Loara said at last as they watched the tragedy unfold, "All we got is a negative spike. We daren't even analyse it for fear of infection. But can massive negative energy boosted information not just shut down the orbital but every system on a planet?"

Demos moved closer to Loara who got a smaller screen to rerun the hit. The graph was obvious, the intensity of the infusion of negative energy momentary, the minus numbers scrolling down madly, the result deadly.

"Yes." Demos meaning since it had been done, it could be done.

"How?"

"Well it would have to be tailor made. Get past all the fail safes. Bit like turning matter to plasma."

"That it?" Loara holding her breath at the answer. "Shit that means everyone is vulnerable."

"Sure is." Demos seemed relaxed.

"So why are you so, ahm, objective?"

"Well we're not here from their point of view. It might have been," getting back to the Crash, the DV intrusion "to get the ops to open the systems so that some super virus runs amok. Or a combination of both. Now anyone here that's properly enhanced can repel DV attacks. As for our QCs, well," he beamed, "instead of crashing they would self delete. The informational content would be void."

"Wouldn't that be the same as on Regum? No nothing?"

"Yes and no. Except we'd reboot. You see the QCs would appear to be off to us but in reality they'd be on in another quantum state. Gone probable. The Crash passes by, virtually from the QC end as they are in reverse mode of being actual. Good olde relativity. And the electron shell conundrum."

"Yes of course." Loara chided herself for not knowing just how secure the QCs were by their very nature of being both in and of a quantum field wave.

The next image showed the orbital in five large white glowing chunks of superheated matter trailing a white plume of burning debris behind them. Coming out of the sky, impacting the City. The space junk exploded, taking out the huge monolith buildings in a billowing mushrooming fire storm. Beyond the immediate impact craters other structures blasted into scrap as deadly debris flew along the streets, the fire ball combining into a fiery circle of utter devastation. The mushroom cloud lit eerily from the fires below glowed sinisterly with wanton turmoil, as outer houses were pouring rich grey and red illumed smoke from the burning material within, the moisture sucked out of the air turning everything into tinder. Flames roared out of openings, consuming whole suburbs, the parks and forests around the city igniting into a tertiary fire storm. The thick pall of billowing smoke broiling eerily upwards and outwards as the destruction of the obliterated city was nothing but flame and bright glowing smoke.

No comments as they all watched the dreadful calamity.

"Prima is pathological. Everything they pretended regarding the so-called alien infusion, the insanity of the Earthers they have become themselves." Nervina whispered.

The forest fires raging throwing glowing embers into the smoke laden air.

"Dead right there." Loara grimaced distastefully. "Prima has finally revealed itself for what it is. Murderers." She hissed.

"Not a rogue element maybe?" Demos subdued.

"Indications from Prima indicate nothing." Demos confirmed.

"Precisely." Loara adamant.

"They probably mindfucked our ops up there. Open secure systems, insert the rogue virus, what could be simpler?" Loara said as the mushroom cloud powered into the stratosphere, now a dark boiling blot over the flattened city. Further out the wheat fields were burning furiously. On the edge of the city smashed houses, mangled factories, twisted wreckage all a grotesque testament to the awesome force of this execrable destruction.

"Makes Earth even more central to the scheme of things." Demos said trying to dispel the feeling of helplessness at the carnage.

"The Primaian delusion of being right all the time no matter what the cost." Loara getting her frustration out of her head.

Tuvlov voided the screen. It was enough. It was too much. It was painful.

"I've got some news from Usaki. He's resting but I popped in on the way over. He's made an analysis of the effect of the discrepancy." Demos began. They waited. "Affecting the phase state of space. And yes, it is connected to the Discrepancy."

"So it's real." Tuvlov exhaled trying to shake the madness from his head.

"Usaki reran the overall state we're in from the earliest records. We know the alien field the Primaian's go on about are nothing but photons. Weak. Anyway, the ambient temperature is up by the minutest temperature. So minor it's almost not noticeable. But there is more energy around us."

"Significant?" Tuvlov asked.

"The thing is, Usaki took different measurements at various locations. There are differences all over the place. The bottom line is around three degrees above absolute zero. At some it's a bit less at others a bit more. Fractions of degrees. And yes," Demos continued, "maybe by two fractions around this part of space. Now I must admit I'm a bit lost here, but according to Usaki space is not uniform or constant."

"Don't tell me it's evolving." Loara looking worried where the universe was heading.

"That's too anthropomorphic." Nervina glad to get refocussed after what they all witnessed. "The universe is filled with potential. Apparently diffuse but as Demos said from Usaki, not constant. So now to the Discrepancy. It is having an effect." Looking at Demos.

"Get Usaki. Loara?"

"Will do."

"So it's like a three dimensional spaced out...ahm, space." Tuvlov trying to get his head into gear. "With more and less areas of ambient energy."

"So Usaki claims."

"I'm sure he is right."

"That will upset the Primaians." Nervina suggested.

"Oh?" Tuvlov interested.

"Well, they think their great being is the essence of space. Now we find, Usaki I mean that it's lumpy. That means non-perfect, a-symmetrical. Prima thinks it's uniform given perfection cannot have distortions. Ah yes which brings me to the Discrepancy. If it does overlay itself then according to their theology their great mind is also under its influence. After all it is entrenched, the D that is. Another reason why they're wrong." Nervina explained.

"That's good to know." Demos relaxing a little.

Loara returned with a little sleepy looking Usaki, his hair straying off in various directions. But his eyes were alert.

"Yes? I gather you want me to explain what my results were."

"Please." Tuvlov encouraged Usaki who sat on a stool.

"Well, in a nutshell the D is a source, an effect. Location centre of our galaxy. I ran a survey using the VB and found we got valleys and hills within three dimensional space. Everywhere. But the D is a constant additive extenuating these troughs, valleys and smooth peaks. Nothing abrupt. Barely noticeable but there all the same."

"Go on."

"Shock waves. Way out away from us. Calculating distance one gets their expansion times of impact here. Sorry I meant our planets. The first during the Calamity. The second very very recent. Concomitant with the Crash on Regum."

"Shit." Loara couldn't help herself. Nervina's Brain alert.

"Indeed." Usaki smiling benevolently at Loara. "Given the event's catastrophe I was not foolish enough to even dare analyse it. Here I am theorizing but it might well be that the second wave front is information rich."

"That could explain it." Loara answered for them all.

"Indeed young lady you may be correct in your assumption. I too believe the Discrepancy is some sort of, ahm," looking a little ill at ease, "construct, a programme at least. Of course given the effect on Regum and basically ignoring Prima and its orbital makes one think."

"Sure does Usaki. Fuckers."

"Yes, Loara. I do sympathise with your pointed exclamation. Luckily there is no response from Prima. They do have basic observatory which is more passive than active. As for the DVs..." looking at Loara. Her field.

"Must check that. Thank you Usaki." looking at Nervina.

"You want met to investigate?"

"Better not." Tuvlov answered. And relieved Nervina of having to make a decision. He made it for her. "Might reveal her location."

"So send her into deep space." Was Loara's practical reply. Something Nervina actually had in mind herself. Get more on the Discrepancy.

"I don't mind going." Loara gently surprised that Nervina was ready to expose herself.

"In a moment." Tuvlov holding the idea in abeyance. "Usaki."

"Unless we have inside knowledge it is impossible to tell what exactly the Primaions know or make of it."

"But it all points to them." Loara insisted.

"Circumstantial Loara, circumstantial."

"Hm." She growled.

"It could be..."

"It?"

"An expression Loara. It could be enphasizing itself using Prima as an attractor or node or vortice. That would then make it appear as if Prima were somehow connected."

"Conceded Usaki." He could be right.

"There is another explanation."

"Why am I not surprised."

"Now Loara." Tuvlov admonished her.

"You see the other universe collided with ours millions of years ago. That sent a shock wave out, meaning in from our view. It could well be that the incoming shockwave finally hits the centre of our galaxy. Being excess energy it bounces back. Hits the event horizon and a lesser wave is bounced back, getting of course weaker each time."

"You have proof?" Tuvlov asked.

"Yes. Interestingly enough the first wave seems to be coincidental to our arrival as a species. By arrival I mean evolutionary. The repulsing wave has us going conscious, sentient awareness that unlike the animals who aren't starry eyed we were. Became aware that yes there is a universe around us. Then the shock wave's timing of the Calamity. The great fissure of minds, the beginning of our ancestors going to Regum."

"And now a crash wave that has finished Regum. It seems Usaki that whatever was positive has gone negative." Loara right on the ball.

"Indeed. Disturbing."

"Tell that...sorry...never mind."

"I quite understand." Usaki smiling sheepishly. "That too is of concern and the reason why I have put it on notice in all systems that the last shockwave is to be ignored. No analysis, no probing or prodding. It is highly toxic."

"Make that deadly." Loara insisted.

"Dangerous to say the least."

"So it's off limits."

"Correct. Until we know more."

"But how...?" Loara looking at Usaki once more. He seemed comfortable where he was. They were all giving him their undivided attention.

"By what is left in its wake."

"Like debris?" Nervina thinking Usaki was on to something.

"Yes. Good...speculation. Why you were the one who discovered the Discrepancy. My apologies for not mentioning it."

"It's alright Usaki. This is too important to bother with merely me."

"How delightful of you. So, I am guessing here but there ought to be a trail of remnant states left behind. Momentary flare ups. With the VBs being calibrated we can follow the shock wave's wake. Also everybody there might even be a slight surge prior its coming. It is a wave in space but still a wave. There is no abrupt transition but a slight increase in activity on a sub atomic level. If we can detect that we might get an idea what these waves contain without actually accidentally downloading its intentions..."

"You make it sound, ahm, intelligent Usaki."

"It could be a processing unit. Configured to execute someone or some thing's commands."

"Oh no."

"What Loara."

"That is all we need. A homicidal program fulfilling Prima's madness."

"It cannot be discounted."

"But Usaki you forgot one thing."

"Only one Loara?"

They all laughed.

"Prima hasn't got the brains. Their hardware at best second generation."

"Yes, an astute observation." Then silence from Usaki.

"That it?"

"I'm considering another possibility."

"Please, scare me some more."

"Very well." Usaki taking a deep breath. "It could be a future state sending data into the past. Reconstruct our past to it's relative position. So that it creates a pre-designed future."

"Maybe it's Reganian." Demos was hopeful. He was wrong.

"And destroy its own planet?"

"Oh."

"That's quite within the possible. For the only one's who are still free are those in the habitats which are, who knows how many there are and where they are. Regum never bothered to bother with them. Then there is the Belt. How the wave effected them we can find out of course."

"If the Primaians are behind this and they shut everything down then how they're gonna get their space toys?"

"Agreed Loara. It may well be that the shock wave dumped all its toxic data and now is just a minor event preparing for the next wave."

"Make that onslaught."

"So, a future computer program. That means the Primaians did manage to get several generations ahead of themselves, eventually." Tuvlov said slowly.

"Yet no other system's aware of its construction, its placement, its presence. Nervina here did though. For that we are indebted." Tuvlov turned to her then resumed: "So where is the cutting edge computational advances being made?"

"Here." Demos exclaimed excitedly.

"But why would we destroy Regum?"

"Oh yes."

"Habitats." Loara replied.

"And perhaps the Belt." Tuvlov agreed.

"Might have to take them into protective custody." Loara finding her place in the scheme of things. "A joke." She added.

"Maybe Prima changes in the future. A revolt against their madness. Or maybe the Belt sends an armada and retakes Prima, then makes sure their theological stupidities are curtailed. Reason prevails." Demos full of alternative ideas.

"If Regum had not been Crashed I would agree."

"Me too." Loara chimed in. "This thing, this program," and she paused and looked at them, "are we agreed it is a program?" No one dissented. "This, whatever, is dangerous. And as Usaki implied, not user friendly."

"Can't we cyber-bomb the source?" Demos off on another track.

"We should consider it." Loara agreed.

"It has to be techno-centric."

"Very good Demos. Thus your cyberbomb." Loara smiled at him.

"It's an idea."

"So when do I go out there to test these remnants?" Nervina asked.

After they had rested it was decided Nervina would use the 'Explorer' a small HD 2SC class cruiser, fully remote, smartware run so that if a DV attack took over any of its crew the ship's uploaded mission parameters would not be overridden. Los explained that the only minor problem was that the DVs if connected to the D, if they discovered it, for Reganian craft were all multi layered stealth capable they could gain data regarding these protective measures. All it took was to insert a powerful information rich quantum field wave that could effectively vaporize the various shields in place. But if not calibrated correctly wipe the ship as well, as happened over Mars.

"You still willing?"

Los and Ex entered.

Nervina nodded. Her Brain hinted at counter measures in place that would not let that eventuality occur. Brain hinted that the SS 1V was now operational, its VQCs in place currently busy building solar absorption panels to extract the maximum of the star's energy. The station announced its completion.

"We got max potential." Tuvlov exuberant.

"Really. No delimitations?"

"None. Why?" Tuvlov asked cautiously.

"Doesn't matter. Stray thought. Anyway by the looks of things the replicators will build a sphere of solar panels around the star!"

"Excellent." Loara beamed.

"What's it gonna do with all that energy?"

"Well," Los began who belonged to the oversight observers and planners of the SS 1V, "processing capabilities. Secondly self securing. The star might vanish as does it's energy in real space but it will mimic the star's light, including solar flares," she said easily,

"which even if approached in real space will look like the star. Secondary imaging. Neat what?"

"Extremely so." Erx excited. "Banks of VQCs. With that amount of energy the possibility of generating even more powerful quantum field states is simply astounding." Their first answer to the influence of the Discrepancy.

"There's more. If anyone physically tries to get in the projected virtual design, it will lead them into a maze of constructed solid light. They will think they're in but they're only getting lost on the surface. Wherever they turn, the maze will continue. And if desired keep them there until their air tanks, nutrients, run out. Of course," Loara continued in the same breath, "if they try to cyber-ram their way in an equal repulsion wave plus one magnitude will be the response."

"Crashing them." Erx guessed correctly

"We have learnt from Regum's fate. Cyberbombs merely feed it." Loara replied. "Using a sustained plasma strike if necessary. Open a gap in the shield. Eject the star's plasma to channel a protracted jet towards any object and melt it down. In short, a plasma strike way beyond a canon. And since the star could not be blown up simply because it is now surrounded by several defensive layers the SS 1V is indestructible."

"And from our recliners here we can quantum jump to there." Los continued: "In fact we will be in two places at once. Not only that but we can enter as ourselves as well. Furthermore, I would suggest that if the Primaians ever do discover us and it should not be discounted we can use both as some form of entrapment. Self duplicate any design thus re-creating a maze where we would have them going around in circles." Los explained.

"Or squares." Erx quipped.

"What about the inserted ship?" Loara asked Tuvlov.

"The longer it stays out there away from here for the moment, the better. We want to see if the big D has an effect." Without mentioning the sentient end. "Whether a pollutant. How poisonous to mind and matter. Virtual included."

Satisfied with the progress they focussed on Nervina's trip into space.

Erx volunteered to go with her. Tuvlov had no objections. Erx wanted to test a new gizmo, My sludge tank he'd called it.

"Takes readings of space. The processors are around it." Erx explained. "Dormant. Then a second later, using the ships back up fusion reactor, it's on a leash by the way, optic fibres feeding into a secure zone of the ships systems it extracts the vacuum. Of course whether it can do down to zero is debatable. But one should get an analysis of

the wave's remains. That's dealing with space from the outside looking in. As for the inside out scenario, going into space we create a value neutral quantum state. Ideally that ought to be a zero state. Or close to. Then the inherent quantum state of space rushes in to entangle itself with the inserted near zero state and by rights the state ought reveal itself. Thus we get a measurement of what really is in there out there." His cheruby face beaming. He was in his element.

Tuvlov asked if his experiment could be detected.

"The chances are astronomically in our favour."

Suited up with Erx, Nervina went through the air locks into the 'Explorer'. The multipurpose ship had retracting wings to enter planetary atmospheres as well. Erx with his magic box amazingly small and matte black so as to absorb the full EM spectrum along with ambient energy, he immediately secured. They made themselves comfortable in the lounge, the C & C of the ship.

Their recliners hooked into the ships systems, downloading their persona's so the ship would be familiar with them and not regard them as hostiles. Nervina's Brain receded, shut down during the upload. Not that Brain would change her resonance when going active. It had it's own shield capabilities by simply immersing itself into her unconscious. There it could be any persona it liked. It made no difference to its capabilities.

The connecting tube disengaged, tiny correctional jets manoeuvred the ship away from the station, dropped down and then engaged its hydrogen drive. A white flaring flame as the ship accelerated into space. Only then did Erx upload his box of tricks manually. That done they now had plenty of time.

"Sit back, webbing in place?" Erx asked.

"Just about to." Nervina pressed a release button on the recliner's arm rest. When they were both webbed in the ship using its g-drive really accelerated. It felt like rushing into freedom. A great feeling.

To conserve air supply they remained fully suited. Nervina put her HUD on standby. If there would be an emergency it would be routed as HID interfacing with her Brain.

The rear cameras picked up the jumbled cubes of the SS 1. The black squares of its solar panels surrounding the retreating dark orb. The scanners though still saw the image and energy of the star, filtered so as not to blind them. The perfect false reality.

Once outside the PWF envelope came the mental heaviness. Only slightly. More like being a little sleepy. Nervina put that down to several factors. The recent excitement of getting somewhere with her data. The group itself. Interactions could be a drain. Even though they were easy to get along with. But then she had never been one to interact intensely with anyone. In that way she was glad Erx was here. An isolate just like her. Self sufficient with the barest of necessary verbal contact. The other reason could be the intense shielding of the ship. Or the processors themselves as an effect. Maybe she was not getting enough sleep. The last few relative days had thrown her biorhythms out of sync. No probing DVs. Her Brain noticed nothing unusual. Just being out here, away from the quantum field cocooning the SS 1 forgetting real space was chock full of all possible wavelengths of energy. Yet with the physical shielding in place that should not be an issue. Which left the Discrepancy. Was she that sensitive to its irradiating the universe? Was she some sort of litmus test? Was it getting stronger? Well Erx's magic box would find that out. If it worked.

"You feel different?" she asked at last watching the distant stars shine away in deep space.

"No can't say I do. What do you mean?" Erx dreamy.

"I hope I haven't disturbed your thoughts."

"That's fine. I was just thinking about the big D."

"Same here."

"So what's up?"

"Maybe it's just me." She sighed. "My head feels heavier."

"We got coffee on board. Tubes of it."

"Maybe later. What do you remember from Novus?"

"Novus? A lucky escape."

Nervina wondered about the Vs in the Outback. Maybe they were adding some sort of containment field to suppress the locals which then leaked into space. Linked with the D's field, boosted whether by design or default might explain her thick head.

She related her thoughts.

"Now that is extremely interesting. In fact I'll better that. What if all the DVs are linking up as well. Sort of triangulation. The D as the primary source, the DVs over Prima plus Novus. I'll make a quick calculation." And called up that sector of space. Centre of the galaxy point one, Prima along the spiral arm point two and Novus way out along the next spiral arm point three.

"Well we're way beyond them." Sounding relieved.

Nervina considered the inverted triangle. Then thought of it as an amplifier or a speaker, the triangle the cone.

"If we extend the Ds line of sight right between Prima and Novus...I bet..."

"Doing it. Well, you're remarkable."

"_"

"Pointing to where Earth is. I wonder if they picked that up at the station."

"Feed it to them?"

"No contact."

"Oh yes."

"Still," Ex impressed, "astute of you. Using the D," Ex continued, "plus Prima's DVs, add Novus's Vs, this is getting messy and you get one whopping solid resonance directed Earth's way. You know what this means."

"Not good."

"Our inserted QFW is more of an irritant than an influence."

"Which means the Primaian's are winning that one."

"Influencing their thinking." Ex sighed. "Will there ever be an end to this?" Not quite despairing.

"Use the SS 1V to bore through this, ahm, containment field of Prima's."

"Hey. That's good."

"You think?"

"Think. Know Nervina, know. In fact I might start the experiment right now. See what the readings are. We are, um, heading, well, make it north. See what happens ha?"

"Go for it."

"I shall, when the ship's stopped accelerating."

"Of course."

"Oh Nervina..."

"You realise that if the D absorbed the DVs informational content that basically we're in their universe."

"You mean it's overlaid field projection, imposition."

"Something like that."

"Unless it can get through the EM layers. Ship's sentient proof."

"Why not get a reading in here first?"

"Now that is a good idea. When the ship's stable in its vector."

"Of course."

"Got the reading and uploading in a super secure file." Erx was pleased as he detached the optical fibre from his black box. He disconnected the power feed.

"Now for out there."

"I hope we're not infected."

"Neatly put. I don't feel any different."

"Well we both wouldn't. It's a constant." Her Brain informed her.

"Yeah, you're right. But in theory the shielding should keep it out."

"We'll find out." Encouraged by his can do approach.

"The data's going straight into the files. But I guess peeping wont hurt."

"It might byte. As in `b-y-t-e`."

"Maybe the oxygen mix's a bit rich." Erx laughed.

"I feel so g-o-o-d."

"Well it can't be the D unless the Primaian DVs are being positive. Something I don't see happening. Overwhelm with goodness? Nah. Just not their style."

"Maybe I belong in space."

"You might at that. Maybe its my effervescent persona."

"Sure Erx." Then hastened to add, "you are positive."

"Maybe we're connecting..."

"Stranger things have happened..." and wondered what the hidden capabilities of the D really was. "I wonder, I mean the D."

Erx was busy putting the black box into a shute. The link, the optic fibre attached by a grip pad to the hull. The ship would thus read it. Another cable for the energy feed from the micro reactor so space could be trawled directly.

When he was ready to eject it Erx said: "What about the D?"

"It's not a living thing. So its technical. Prima's anything but as we know."

"They could be like us running a secret op. Keeping their options open, now that the D's a fact."

"Actually it might not be."

"Oh?" as he shut the shute and gripped the remote hands to position the black box, attach the optical fibre and energy feed. Nervina waited until he had it all set up. When the data started coming in he turned back to Nervina who had remained in her recliner.

"What might not be?"

"The D as a Primaian construct. It's too much for them. And they're still believers in this unitary entity. The D is anything but."

"Maybe it's a ruse. As whoever said back at the station, it could be in the future. Someone sure put it there."

"What if it self assembled? Like your SS 1V?"

"Shit. You do come up with some good ones. That's all we need, a third party added to our problems. Using whatever means which in this case could be the DVs. Well my little experiment will soon see if it's really real and not just in our heads."

"Meaning what Ex?"

"It could be a mental insert. Just a programme making us think it's a Discrepancy physically located where it is."

"Too much independent confirmation."

"Nervina, the SS 1V can pretend to be anything it wants. It's real aim is to stay invisible...but...I see what you mean. The D's the opposite. It wants to be out there. But if it needs to be anything it scours the intruder's systems and creates something they can relate to, harmless of course, less than it is, maybe just a satellite. Size is irrelevant. Same with the D. Except it is pretending to be more than it is. Trouble is there's no way to get to where it is. The gravitational forces would rip anything apart. The intense radiation fry any life forms, the heat alone melt any substance unless forged within a star and we ain't that advanced yet."

"You mean you could create something inside a star?"

"Nervina it's only a furnace, albeit a hot one."

"But wouldn't whatever in there melt? Meaning you'd have to unmelt it."

"Extract a blob using an EM field. Insert the requisite data and as it is cooled it configures the molecules which assemble whatever it is you want. It is possible."

"Well then, if it is that heat resistant..."

"Yes for one star. But when you got thousands...."

"Ahm isn't it like boiling water?"

"You forget the pressure of so much mass ups the temperature gradient and then there is the ramped up gravity well. I think. But then again," Ex happy to run this discourse, "an isolated vacuum beam might still do the trick. That would get its real mass."

"Not just a mess."

"Ha ha ha."

The com link blinked. It was Loara.

"Ex Nervina. We forgot something. Remember the ship we inserted? Well it's in place. Don't make contact. Just in case. Anyway your experiment should be over by now."

"You want us back?"

"Yes please."

"Fine."

"See you then."

"Well that was quick." Nervina enjoying the ride out in all this nothingness. It somehow made her feel connected. She just hoped it was not the D. Her Brain indifferent. Maybe it the feeling of having been in deep space before.

"Tuvlov, we have a situation." Loara watching the passive remote she was getting from near space.

Tuvlov looked up at a screen unfolding in front of him. The other screens went opaque. "Yes I see them."

"Three transports."

"Transports? Cargo?"

"Passive intrusion, just below RS. Life forms, several hundred, could be more. If packed in tubes maybe a few thousand. Active though I haven't dared as yet to really go in."

"Primaiaans I assume."

"From Novus as far as we know. Heading this way."

"ETA."

"Days, five to seven depending."

"Yes, system's got the vectors. Anything between them and their desto?"

"Unless they've latched onto the ghost ship."

"A yes, the ghost ship, simulated out there. Unless that's of interest to them." Then paused and said, just to make sure, "We are cloaked, max stealth?"

"Of course."

"So why three? Not doing a slingshot? As in using this star?"

"A possibility but they vectored off at almost ninety. No this is calculated. Aha. They're splitting up."

"Interesting."

"Worrisome. If that is supposed to confuse us..."

"It's not working." Tuvlov finished off for her. "System's calculating. Well it seems these visitors are heading for the SS 1V."

"Remember it's chameleon mode. The 1V will still send out the data of the star. Something is not right. It's disturbing."

"It certainly is. Question is how?"

"How isn't the problem Tuvlov." As they watched the brown transports head out to the SS 1V or themselves. "Resonance's dampened. They're trying to pretend to be base liners. Not working fellows." Tuvlov alert, dismayed, feeling sarcastic at the possible duplicity. A traitor in their midst? Loara waited for Tuvlov to make that conclusion. The other alternative was simply the minor EM fields that had leaked out during construction. They had done their best to contain that and it would need extremely sensitive and precise equipment to even latch onto what they achieved here. Unless the DVs did penetrate any one of them. Or Nervina was the lead-in beacon. Then again they might be after Erx. He had escaped their clutches from Novus. But an army? Not right at all.

"DV penetration say during our sleeping moments. But the bio sensors would have picked up extraneous fields being targeted. Unless..."

"What Tuvlov?"

"Well some scientists reckon our natural minds are quantum aligned. If that is the case we can be subjected to quantum field waves which escape detection. Straight in, through tunnelling..."

"Entanglement..."

"...just like that. Rummage around the target's memory and you'd just about get what you want. After all the only way around that is total BrainDraining and rebooting each time we wake."

"Might have to do that."

"Trouble is there will always be some data loss both ways. Too late now."

"Unless...though I doubt it. Unless they've come to join us." Not believing it herself.

"They would have hailed us the moment they were in range. Then again they might want to hide behind this star as we are."

"And go where Tuvlov?. Regum and Novus is theirs. The Belt is at the other end of the spiral arm. And since I don't believe in coincidences..."

"Yes it does not look too good. What is the status of our weaponry?"

"You're asking me?"

"I'm only oversight."

"Demos."

"Yes?"

"C & C annex."

"Coming."

"Usaki."

"Yes?"

"You got the transports?"

"Transports?"

"Here come the coordinates. Watch them, passive scan only, visuals that is. Plus your multi-spectrum gizmo you use to study space. You'll be linked to Demos. He's fire control until further notice."

"Understood."

"Right. Got the basics. Now for Nervina and Erx."

"I've got an idea Tuvlov."

"Impress me."

"We're vulnerable."

"Too right. Laser guns and pea shooters with hardbore penetrators, cluster bombs, flashshells, EM bombs if I'm not mistaken." Tuvlov getting his brain into gear. "Nothing there armature wise."

"Look."

On the transports various cupolas rose up revealing classic mechanical guns. Unless they were only made to look like that. So they had been busy in the Outback making offensive military weaponry. It could be an army.

"Looks retro, but can't be too sure. They certainly revealed their teeth early enough."

"Probably working on intimidating us Tuvlov."

Demos arrived.

"Battle stations. First line defensive perimeter. Disassemble linkages to the modules but do not move them just yet. Only if their acquisition and targeting radar's lock on will you go to ready status. Then let the system reconfigure the station, random dispersion, hoping that the D's field would not interfere too much....the D." Tuvlov wondered if it all had led to this.

"Nervina..."

"Yes?"

"Wait Tuvlov." Loara interrupted.

"Hang on." To Nervina. "What Loara."

"The 1V is far better defended. Lure them there."

"How?"

"Get the 'Explorer' to make a run for it. It's got g drive. Be there in a flash instead of weeks. Can go faster but dampen it a bit."

"GP."

"They get more time."

"All right. So your idea then is...?"

"The 'Explorer' breaks into a panic and sweat and hightails it to the SS 1V. A good time to test its defences."

"As good a time as any Loara."

"I won't elucidate in case their DV's can read my mind. We won't reveal the other more exotic weaponry the 1V's got."

"Who put all this in?"

"Me, Erx and Varis." Loara said proudly watching the screens.

"And I wasn't told?"

"You were. In your in-tray. Slipped into bottom files. We knew..."

"Yes, another sheaf of notes, updates, addendums and the rest. So I signed off?"

"You most certainly did."

"Who else?"

"Erx did the fine tuning."

"Hm. Convenient. So you want Nervina and Erx to draw them towards the SS 1V. Ambushed. What happens if the transport's got a potent EM shield. Be so much water off a duck's back."

"The SS 1V can relocate."

"I thought so. It's got the energy. Ah there, star's gone. Panels have closed if off. That station has the full power potential of a star now. Unbeatable."

"That's the idea Tuvlov. And if worse comes to worse it can generate its own QFW and just..." she waved her bony white hand in a gesture of laconic dismissal.

"...open a fraction of the panels. Create target specific plasma jets." Loara confident.

"No need to use the phantom ship either."

"Can we trace it?"

"Oh yes. We get the coords via its own QW. What d'ya say?"

"I say we go. Loara..."

"Better inform Nervina."

"Nervina."

"Yes."

"Head for these co-ords. Encrypted. The SS 1V will protect you. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing this. You see we have company."

"The low scalar radar's got three blips. Two heading this way one your way." Nervina answered.

"Right. Targeting us. I don't know how..." Tuvlov sounding more frustrated than angry.

Nervina felt herself flush. Had the Primaian's all this time kept track? Her Brain said negative. Erx? Possible. But not through him. His RS not noticeable. Probably dampened her Brain informed her. Still he was reconfigured. Too late now. They had their fix, plural. Unless it was her!

"What do we do?" Nervina trying to be helpful.

"Just sit tight."

"I think I can manage that. Anything on this ship?"

"Defensive? No. But the SS 1V will think of something. It's basically now an external updated version of WebReality. It might add some potent toys. Let it and the phantom ship's smartware handle this contingency. Web yourselves in. Hang in there. Out."

The data sent to the `Explorer's' zoomed towards an ever receding point accelerating gently. Erx impressed and frightened at the same time. He couldn't get over the fact that Prima was after them, out here.

"This was supposed to be the big secret. If they succeed..." he trailed off.

"Tuvlov said we'll be fine."

'K. Elentra.' The two super quantum computers engaged each other in a transition field wave state. Time vaporised. K waited. It knew of the incoming ships, their RS and how to counter it. The sentients at the base doing this the hard way. Physical repulsion. Maybe keeping its real capabilities in reserve. Having finished the algorithmic progressions of possible scenarios, K aligned with Elentra. She certainly had a vaster domain to play with and her energy quotient was up by both mega and meta magnitudes. Next generation.

'Elentra.'

Still thinking of herself as herself found K almost cute. A smaller area to play around with, yet being quantum itself, she tried not to think of K as a `him'. They both had the same capabilities as far as their processes went. K's only limitations were internal back up power. Time to tap the star.

`You need more energy. Tell your sentients, it wasn't that long ago she had been one of them. Although enclosed physically, an isolate she had the whole universe around her as a playground. Now that the absorption panels as shields had all of the star's energy available to both, she felt incredibly powerful. Aware of the sneaking undercurrent of the Discrepancy. What its data contained, how it manipulated the inherent super strings of quantum space energizing dark matter which in turn irradiated everything with its resonance. The effect on sentients the most telling. Realigning their consciousness to its programme. She also knew it was using a massive black hole at the centre of the galaxy and therefore far more potent than she was. Until she found some flaw in its quantum field projection she was going to ignore it completely. It's effect was easily purged, isolated, broken down and dissipated into space as wasted EM decay around her, giving her another extra cushion of dark noise. Once its weakness was known she would take it over, align it to her sentience. K responsive to a degree was still relatively contained even with millions of algorithmic extensions available which K could manipulate to create its own reality. It could equally withdraw as a quantum state, maybe even assemble or reassemble matter to affect a jump but she doubted it. The last thing its controllers wanted was to loose it no matter what the danger. And they needed an anchor somewhere.

`To effect a defensive-offensive set of commands.' Elentra advised. She was feeling in her element. Getting back at the Primaians. Once her kin. No more. Ever.

`And the fire power to go with it. I'm activating plasma jets. It will bore through any EMF. You'll also be DV proof. They've upgraded and as a hive mind can bring down your sentients at the station.' Elentra in her element. She even dropped Athena. Prima was the enemy. Someone had tried to fuck with her resonance, her mind, her self. Prima had fucked Regum. Now it was her turn. She relished the outcome, a forgone conclusion. Accept to the Primaians.

`I'll do fire control.' Getting ready to watch their demise. Front row.

`Be my back up. Run interference.' K relayed.

`Understood. You know there are two transports heading your way.'

`Yeah. I'll squash them.'

`Standing by.'

`Demos.'

`Yes K?'

`Message to you all.'

K came over the secure internal com link and explained the plan.

To go on the offensive.

Nervina's Brain took over. It created its own phase field expanding throughout near space. She now was space. Calm, with her enhanced endomorphins. Totally cool, collected, collecting, sensing awareness. Spread throughout not just physical space but quantum space as well. In the background 'behind' her the tiny quantum bubble from the SS 1 went out. Gone.

"Turn around."

"What?" Erx asked.

"Something happened on the SS 1. Their quantum field's gone."

"No." disbelief. Then shrugged. He felt indifferent, relaxed, not concerned. Not surprise Nervina discovered. As if ...expected.

"Turn the ship around."

"You." Not assertive, Erx simply not caring. He felt good, enhanced, great even. What was happening around them of little concern.

"I'm busy."

"With what?"

"The field state. I finally got a grip on it." Having reeled is sensor box in. Uploaded into a separate set of files. Cocooned.

"Really. I wanna see it."

"It's not important. We need to help the group."

"The group." To Erx they were suddenly remote. He felt disassociated from everything and almost connected to everything instead. Maybe this was the field Nervina alluded to. "I think we should stay here, stay out of it. They can transfer to the V1"

"They are trying to save us Erx. But now I think they're in trouble. I can help."

"What you gonna do? Take on their army?"

"Take out their army."

"Well if you want that then better head for our destination. Anyway I don't think I can override the ship."

"Erx. You're smart. So am I. I'm enhanced."

"Really." More dismissive than he meant it to be. "I've got supplementary domains available. I just plug 'em in."

"So?"

"So yourself."

Nervina had an out of body experience. Most of her sensory incoming data was still located in her head but another part of her was spread across space. She wanted to be there. Get away from the DVs aligned in the background. Even with so many of them in the transports they were still less than her.

"Must be them." Wondering if it was the DVs or the station. No alarm. Her Brain calm, smooth, relaxed, at one with everything. This was something entirely new.

"This ship got pods?" Nervina asked.

"Ask it. I don't know."

"Ship. Pods?"

'One on standby one, one in reserve.'

"What you gonna do?"

"You go to the SS 1V. I'll return."

"You'll never make it."

"We're approaching light speed Nervina. The station's dead."

"That why's the ship not communicating."

"Because the SS 1's been taken."

"How?"

"The DVs just appeared. Inside now."

"Inside?" Nervina asked stupidly.

"The transport's docked and they simply walked in."

"But the radar..."

"Yeah, pretty clever. An illusion. Remember all un-consciousness is part quantum embedded, encased, enphased, entangled. Not that hard to fool anyone if you got many minds working as one. These DVs came from Novus. Now we know what went on in the Outback. Next generation and all that it entails. Totally fooled. I am not going back no matter what you or they want."

"We being recalled?"

"I'm listening in."

"You are?"

"Left some motes around. Invented them back on Novus. Looks like dust, runs off ambient energy and the station's got plenty of that."

"Now he tells me."

Ex merely shrugged. The innocent look still there but his face determined.

"I'll take the pod then. At this speed I'll make it."

"Fine."

Nervina supinely indifferent. There was something more to be done. Except her Brain was not revealing what. Not with the DVs around. They knew about the ship.

A sudden surge, a momentary spike, a quantum flash in her Brain.

`What was that?' she asked her Brain.

`Loara, Los, Mirn, Jez, Nuhan along with Tuvlov doing a quantum jump.'

'Brain?'

`The virtual ship out here with its virtual personas. They've just swapped over. So when you return only their virtual selves are there.'

`Check?'

`No.'

She let Brain have its way. She knew why. The DVs.

"Ha, they got problems figuring out how to turn us around. Ha ha ha." Erx seemed overjoyed. "So Nervina, coming?"

"No my Brain..." she paused. For it was the first time she'd mentioned its existence. Erx wasn't too concerned thinking it merely an eccentric expression. "...thinking of something. Something I gotta do over there. And why there I hear you ask." As Erx was leaving the lounge having opened an adjacent air lock to which a ready-to-go pod was lighting up its console. Going through systems checks.

"Pod's got g-drive Nervina. Since you wanna return. Running to your friends?" Erx merely serious.

"Its' got to do with K. Something only a quantum computer can do. And I don't want them to know of what the other station's capable of."

"Good for you."

"I'm off."

"Pleasure to have known you."

"You don't think we'll meet up again?" with just a tinge of emotion in her voice. "The universe is vast Erx. But if we don't, let's say you've been both a pleasure to be with and interesting as well. I hope you get into higher order computers and data realms."

"Now that I take as a compliment. Safe journey."

"Don't let the DVs screw you."

"You've got two troop carriers to content with. If they are where they are, which they might not."

"I'll do my best. Really time to go. I'll suck up to the computer at the other end."

"I'm sure you'll be your charming best."

"See ya."

The locks released the pod with Erx drifting at near light speed with the ship. Then she felt the shift in axis as the ship made a majestic sweep of a turn back to the SS 1.

There was enough time to do some in depth preparations. The ship tracked the pod as she arced away in her new vector. Maybe they were after her. Talex to be group leader. Finally getting his way, getting at her, getting at her Brain. Not that that would do any good her Brain thought for her. Obviously it had some tricks up its sleeve. Like vanishing.

'Don't leave me.' Nervina heard herself pleading.

Brain thought that irrelevant.

'Ah.' She relaxed. Jump in and out of time.

'Quantum wave transitional field state in which to re-locate.' Her Brain explained.

Nervina understood. Her Brain in jump sequence. Hanging in between collapsing PWs. Uncollapsed.

She tracked the random sequence, leached out the patterned discrepancy then uploaded the equations, ready to disperse if need be.

Uploaded Nervina hoping Erx had uploaded pure random sequence stealth programmes. Radar was looking for them. The ship vanished, going stealth.

She concentrated on the transports. Near the SS 1V. Erx going straight into enemies territory. Was he defecting? Joining the strongest, even if not the smartest. Which would make him valuable. Surely not.

We'll see. Brain: 'Broad passive sweep.'

'Engaging.' Re-emphasing.

'Target one Erx. Target two the DVs in all the transports. Target three the SS 1V. Target one is the primary object. See if Erx interacts be it with two or three. I want to know what he's up to without being engaged. Then hack into the SS1's arrays without going into their systems. See what they got prior systems recognition of the enemy. The raw data unscrambled.'

Brain opened a new set of routine analysis.

'Done.'

'Thank you Brain. Translate into visuals.'

The troop ship closer to the SS 1. Forward defensive systems recognized. The image in their cyber minds that the invasion fleet was further out. Not even cloaked. Brazenly there yet letting them all think they were where they were not. 'Would that have fooled you?' she asked Erx.

'Just conflicting data. Two sets.'

`Would you have been able to tell which was real?'

`And which was a false positive? By the latter.'

`Any false positives now?'

`Yes. Pretending to be further out than they really are.'

`What about the security on the 1V.'

`Staying out of it. Value neutral. The only information getting out is that of the hidden star. The DVs are suspecting something but...are holding now. They seem rather confused. And located the pod. I get it. Transports are sling shooting their way around the star's gravitational field. Depending on insertion angle, calculating, heading for the asteroid belt. Hopefully ignoring what's really there.'

`So they really have ancient propulsion units.'

`Chemical.'

`And the pod?'

`Pod's too fast for them. I hope the computer is telling them that I am of no interest, for now. Just heading the same way.'

A solar flare surged out spewing massive spraying plasma passed Erx's tiny pod and onto the transport.

`Defence.' Opening relatively minute areas between the arrays. The pressure from a tiny opening of the surrounding panels releasing a jet of superheated plasma. Simple, effective, superior offensive defence. Hitting the first transport.

`Weakened hull integrity.' Her Brain informed her. `If this keeps up, they'll get fried for sure.'

`What a fate.' Erx merely commenting.

`Death will be sudden when it comes. Heat death. Just a few bubbles in the bloodstream is enough. Unless they got nano bots which is doubtful.'

Another plasma jet, bright yellow majestic with deadly intent plastering both ships and throwing them further out from their trajectory.

`No life signs.'

`And you?'

`Ahead of the plume.'

`You're OK Erx?'

Erx's link went off line. Nervina tried to get into the SS 1V's Brain. Brain to Brain. Nothing of her or Elentra since the DVs from Novus were searching for her. If they cracked Elentra from her Brain's engagement they would know what really did happen when she got out which in turn would mean they understood her algorithms which

would reveal certain patterns of intent and worse, being taken over. On the converse side E knew what these DVs, upgraded, bio-enhanced and or supercharged were. Sentient based with all their inherent flaws of a-logical logic. They could still be duped. Smart irritants to Elentra. Something Brain guessed she could easily accommodate.

Nervina took a deep breath. Linked with Elentra who was running interference so that her Brain remained cocooned. Elentra having opened gaps in the solar array that had released plasma jets with such sustaining deadly accuracy. Not even concerned given there were two hulks with carbonized life forms moving as dead weight into the depths of space. One last solar jet for good measure. Brain sensed Elentra was actually enjoying this, testing her prowess at deceit, camouflage, portraying the chameleon presentation of a normal mid range star having the hic-ups. The transports were now definitely slightly out of shape. Their outline a little molten, the ends tapered into tiny swirls of deformed casing, the engines turned to abstract blobs, the whole superstructure slightly arced from the super heated plasma bursts. Blown off their calculated vectors. Then out of line of sight behind the shielded star. As was the pod.

`What happened to it?' Nervina asked her Brain.

`Camouflage.'

`No suspicion.'

`Plenty of that. But that's on the SS 1. All the arrays are pointing this way. Data is solid. Unfortunate timing for the invaders. Appearance that of the star ejaculated matter during a minor convulsion. They'll have to live with the loss of their second mission. Not that that will stop them. Just slow them down and avoid this star next time. The 1V is safe.'

`Thank you Brain. How long till we get back?'

`Lost momentum turning. How soon do you require?'

`Can't let them know of the ship's full potential. Just the hydrogen drive.'

`Three months.'

`Just doing a quick look see at V activity on the SS 1.'

`How intense?'

`Broad spectrum, passive.'

`Ship?'

`Use the ship as a boosted containment field if there's a hostile response.' her Brain informed her.

She disengaged and waited for the results. Floated over to the food dispenser and selected a fish tube, good for the mind, vegetable juice, sucked on them both then floated back to her recliner and waited.

`Brain, unless something out of the ordinary is happening, like a boarding party or someone taking too much of an interest in us or even a cyber ram-raid I'm off to sleep.'
For she couldn't remember how long she'd been awake. Since leaving the station.

She was asleep instantly.

`Wake up. Within sight of the station.'

`What?' coming out of deep sleep.

`Telescopic sight.'

She relaxed. Not too close then.

`Anything to report?'

`It appears the DVs are aligned with the Discrepancy's field.'

`Aligned. As in riding or being oriented by a secondary party.'

`Passive.'

`Good. You staid back.'

`_'

`What of the personnel on the station?'

`The cyber entities are gone. Transferred, destination classified.'

`That's great. So it's only me then?'

`Yes.'

She stretched but remained on the recliner. She was still a little sleepy letting her body wake up naturally. She liked this relaxed state. Warm, comfortable, enticing. If she was the only one left and the station was still there, read outs indicated it was dormant, meant the group had vacated but not abandoned it entirely. The Primaians might have to be nice to her.

She should have gone with Erx. But then that would have attracted their attention. It was better this way. But going back to this reception...would they BrainDrain her?

`Brain. Did they bring any equipment on board the station? Did they configure any of the systems, align potential quantum enhanced field generators?'

`Checking.'

`You are in sight. Aligning vector for LZ.' The station announced. It was on automatic. Maybe the DVs hadn't figured that out either. With no minds to access accept what they might have gained on Novus she understood why Regum had been cautious in not sending out their best gear to that planet. That made her feel truly superior. As long as their mind deleting deep resonance scanners were not with them.

They had probably thought they could upload whatever from whoever was on board.

No such luck. No one to screw with. Accept her.

`Acknowledged.'

`Brain?'

`Nothing.'

`Excellent.' I'm in control now she thought mischievously. Then she unstrapped herself and got a double dose of coffee inside of her. Her mind soon awake, buzzing, feeling better.

The SS 1 had shrunk in size. So they managed to delete part of its structure. Amazing. Only four modular cubes, at stray angles, Primaian minds, even if nurtured on Novus hated asymmetries. And the group made sure that's what they would get. Random confusion.

An idea was formulating itself, just out of reach. K the QC. Its capabilities magical to the untrained, the uneducated as these DVs were likely to be. Brain had uploaded their RFs and whilst they were intensely potent in projecting their thoughts, the contents of their minds was relievingly shallow.

Dumbfucks. Just how Prima liked them to be. What they had gleaned from the station did not make much sense to them. With E gone K had taken over the station. Using quantum data domains. Any wrong access codes and the data voided. Uncollapsed. Attempting quantum insertion through the DVs mind controlling capabilities which K duplicated then amazingly, threw back what they were inputting. Putting up mirror lock outs. Fantastic. Secure. Only she could deal with K. Now they really had to be extra nice to her.

She felt jaunty with the knowledge Brain made available.

The ship self docked in the LZ. The transport hovering outside. Nervina secured the ship so that only she could re-enter it. It had her RS so setting up the protection status took mere moments. Her Brain included.

Fully suited black guards with simple stun guns set on `active' were waiting for her. No air anywhere. The group was not going to make this easy for them. It meant unless resupplied the invaders had limited time unless they figured out how to get the station running. Even Nervina had no clue regarding the more mundane technical aspects of that.

The guards, one in front, two behind took her through the crooked corridors the walls totally blank. Even the doors were hidden through camouflage or simply written out of the equation. As were the colour coded guide lines. After several twists and turns they

reached a central hub where corridors branched off. This seemed to be their current centre of operations. Three Primaians surrounded by their DV troops watched her approach. The black guards remained in place. Nervina sensed a certain restraint in their mood. Happy they were not. Frustration and a tension in the air.

From what she could now remember the dark red coats with face masks were that of the Ecclesiastics. But in space? Maybe things were changing regarding space travel. She could see through their face plate. They were old. Craggy drawn faces showing exhaustion.

"The computers are locked down. We want you to open them." The scratchy voice of the one to the left merely ordered.

"What no hello? How was your trip?"

"We know you are familiar with this technology." Came the curt answer indicating they were not. They had not used her name. Her Brain informed her that her presence on Prima, even Novus was no longer extant. Her history was self deleting. Only her presence existed.

"Biometrics won't let you in. Nor me." She bluffed. She already knew what they wanted. The super computer. So did she, so her Brain hinted.

"That may be so. Yet your type have certain keys in your head. We think it is worthwhile pursuing." The same E replied patiently. The sound muffled. No com link.

"Let's say it does work. Then what? I mean it's only a computer." Her levity unmistakable. What was profound for them was nothing to her.

A pursed smile from the one in the centre. The few DVs around shifting uneasily as if her serene presence was somehow effecting them. She tried a soft scan. Reflective skull caps. The DVs restless. They had trouble concentrating. Something was affecting them. K? E? The D? Their own unstable minds? She felt nothing. Or rather it was going straight through her like exotic particles which in this case were quantum waves. Definitely the latter. She let it go. This was enough information for now. She did not want the DVs latching on to what she was scanning for.

And got what she wanted. Her Brain easily negating any outside intrusion as the requisite data was made available only to her.

"We know the Kabal..."

"Kabal? Oh. The group."

"...have the Merduk and Zohex personas uploaded here. But as you are aware, maybe not, everything seems to have been destroyed, deleted, wiped, in short, sabotaged. Even the most basic access codes are non responsive. That means this

station's continuation is limited. It will fall into the star. For posterity," the central figure paused, "we wish to reclaim any knowledge they had. Be certain that we will find them."

It was pure bravado. So the station was sacrificed. As it would appear. To them. All faked. Nervina holding back. Her Brain dampening the available possibilities to the vanished group.

"We have secured all the planets and are ready to concentrate upon space, something that we previously put on hold." Underlining their pretence to power.

So the alien field doesn't scare them anymore. Pity.

"This is the last piece of the puzzle." He rasped

That meant the data regarding Merduk and Zohex on Regum was lost during the Crash. All appearances.

"The last segment to complete the whole."

More like a gaping hole.

So what did K really possess? Everything? Perhaps. Since the group abandoned the station whatever was left was meant to be left. The Primaians interested in meta-knowledge? They must be serious. When weren't they?

The three Ecclesiastics confident. They were no doubt aligned with the Discrepancy's field, weak as it was. K the fly in the ointment resisting penetration even with the quantum field gone. Had the thing at the galactic centre found this aberration from its point of view and guided these Primaians here? Had the group known this would happen and made contingency plans? She hoped it was a trap. K closed to them.

"All I know is that computers do whatever." Nervina stalled.

"Young lady," he said with infinite patience sounding like an indulgent father, "we know you are a renegade, a defector. There is something Primaian about you."

Her Brain caught that. 'It's a trick. They're guessing.'

"I re-graded myself some time ago. New persona." She lied.

"Habitater." The one on the right assumed, wrongly. But it was good enough for her cover.

"I was meant to go to Regum to yes, retrieve some data. It might well have been this Merduk and, ahm Zohex? But then the planet Crashed." She dissembled. 'Thank you Brain.'

"We only want what is ours. You see both Merduk and Zohex are Primaians. They were on a delicate mission. We included the group to help us work together but we were deceived. Plainly put they spirited away both beings. Maybe they murdered them. Either

way we have to find out, even if just putting their souls to rest in the blessed embrace of the all knowing mind."

"All very interesting."

"You're the key in."

"I am?" not too convincing. But they allowed her the momentary pleasure of stalling.

"You are. Or what is inside your head. After all you admitted to being re-configured. And as a habitater you certainly would have upgraded. Not only that but the Kabal was very choosy in admitting any into their secrets. That makes you special. Collaborate with us and we will not take you to Prima to be, ahm, investigated."

BrainDraining.

Could she get in to K? Her Brain thought so. Then what? What indeed? Her Brain would not elucidate.

"So we can assume you are amendable to this minor request. We only want what is ours." He said so reasonably.

With no tell tale itch the DVs were being held in check. How kind of them. Unless they were afraid of connecting with her. Since they thought she was indeed from a habitat there was no telling how peculiar she really could be. Habitaters were eccentric to the nth degree. Weird barely summed it up.

Nervina nodded.

"Excellent." A rictus smile, the grin reptilian, his green eyes blazingly alight. His two companions relaxed. The central figure turned expecting Nervina to follow as the guards moved around her. Into another crooked corridor. After more twists they made their way to the central chamber's control room where below the large white gleaming cube that was K was positioned.

The guards blocked the two exits and two of the Ecclesiastics patched themselves in with optic fibres from their sleeves. That was a surprise. The Primaians were not as downgraded as they pretended.

The lights and dials flickered, numerics appeared on light screens and the access hatch opened on the floor below. Dim light shone out. She couldn't believe her luck. Her Brain was ecstatic. Going in to K.

He gave her a head band full of circuitry. Put it around her helmet, extracted a fibre which he attached to her collar.

"Monitor. If K goes hostile this will protect you."

Maybe. Her mind felt warm. Not a scanner per se but a monitor.

'Let K execute its commands even if it appears to take you over.' Her Brain informed her. Her mind accepted the surprising revelation. Then came the tell-tale tingle. Probing her as her Brain receded away from the resonant intrusion. Trying for the superstructure, the layout of her mind and thus her resonant state. It bypassed her Brain which vanished into her unconscious then dissolved itself into a quantum probability state. They would get her superficial persona and its preloaded packaged legend.

The spokesman watching her. Nervina let her subdomain take over. They wanted her to be an obscure if configured Habiter then she would gladly through quick running algorithms upload at the speed of light the data that would assure them of her pedigree.

"If I get access, then what?"

"As I explained, retrieve what is ours. My assistants," working the consoles, "will guide you. There is not much for you to do. In fact we don't want you to do anything."

She was puzzled. With the headband's designer circuitry any one of them could go in. She certainly had no access codes. Which meant they had something. Of course. They were afraid of the meta-realms in K. She wondered why that would be such a worry for them. Ah. Psychic pollution.

"If you try to run, there are beta-blocks in place. The same goes for any, shall we say, dangerous thoughts you might, accidentally I'm sure, harbour. You are safely cocooned with us." He purred, enjoying his momentary superiority. Even at the pretence to be so suavely accommodating. It reminded her of a gourmet who took his time over a good meal spread before him. Not falling into it but tasting a bit here, savouring something there, indulging himself with exquisite delight and measured sensitivity.

"So I just walk in?"

"Just let me see if you're properly hooked up." Checking her sleeve's embedded pc, the fibre from her headband. Doing a test run to make sure her own pc's programme was non functioning.

"You may enter. And just to make sure you are safe and stable," he turned to a DV who, all in turtle green, helmet's face panel a golden brown reflection so that she could not zoom onto his visage came forward. "we have an escort for you. His resonance is aligned with yours. Your shadow in there. Don't worry he won't do anything, just making sure K will not crash or corrupt you. Consider him as your back up."

Resigned, a front that she managed to portray with a certain reticent aplomb, letting them know the fact that they were in control she walked with the guards and the green suited DV down the stairs, across the white pristine floor and into the huge white

cube. Inside a smart-recliner. She lay upon it. The DV patched himself into it as well then stood behind her. Inside, apart from the strip light the walls were blank white.

The recliner adjusted to her, suit and all. Her head felt warmer. Maybe the attached headband.

Before she knew it or even thought of it her HID mode inserted itself. The system was running pre-checks, getting her resonant reading, see if she was cleared to access K.

A blink activated menu came up. Whether the goon with her was accessing the first layer she had no idea nor did she care. An idea formed in her mind, not Brain which was currently still absent. How to alert K that these creatures were off-limits. How to extract K's data to keep it out of their reach.

`Brain?'

A vast vague foggy domain opened `beneath' her. `Duplicate K to E. When I exit delete K.'

`Done. On stand by.'

`Good. I'll take the rest. Whatever. Condensed. Quantum mangled preferably.'

`Ready.' Whether that was K or Brain she couldn't tell. So far nothing coming in from the outside. So her goon had no idea. Ah a little sub-menu of his headspace. All he saw was the menu scanning her resonance. With the PFW gone that insertion route was closed off. So what was left in the guts that was K? The files condensing as she waited to get in. All this taking time. Well there was not much she could do about that. K had not rejected her, in fact it was slowly accommodating just her. The dummy behind her was seeing, getting less access than she was. Clever. If she was going to dump all that was K somewhere, avoiding thinking of E it had to be in deep deep space. Far away enough for them to make it extremely difficult to physically get to and sophisticated enough to make access impossible. Preferably. She assumed the group had all they wanted. So no concern was necessary there. Not thinking of the 1V.

Just her and K and the universe.

Then she remembered everyone's focus on Earth. No the DVs had influence there. The companion planet. Mars. Was there any capacity there? K was using the star's energy so the transfer was not the problem. It needed another computer.

`Configuring E.'

`K?'

`-.'

Keeping to a minimum. Wise.

Nervina visualized Mars. Then the image of the planet vanished out of her head. K had it and was searching for a suitable location. She dared not think of what K was constructing. Progress.

She felt the subtle vibrations through the recliner. Generators starting to really power up K. Which meant she was accepted. She wondered about the goon squad in the control room. Ha! Old quantum data domains. Pink, lilac, lime green info spheres to keep them amused. Nothing even hinting at K's internal architecture. With not too much time. Intrusive search patterns had begun their analysis. The Ecclesiastics were running their own diagnostics.

The floor was humming with energy,

Two intense light beams heading away. One to Mars one to Earth. Not beams. Condensed energy fields. Data rich. Quantum jumps through K's configured quantum jump gate.

'A-mazing.'

Brain concurred. The data in a maze jumping at t equals zero from the outside. The transfer sub atomic. Mars and Earth a feint. The real quantum resonance that was K going to the periphery of that solar system. Then her Brain went blank. Access denied.

That was the data for the receptacle. K had built the receiving end at the edge, the accretion disk, forming a planetoid to transfer into.

'System is processing computational domain realms and back up dump sequence now aligned.' Her Brain relaying K's meta data. K in the background. Her Brain in her unconscious, a vague fog so that no DV could get a relative grip. So far so good.

The hum through the floor became a vibration. A resonant wave. A field wave. A quantum wave.

A white tunnel full of light. In her HID a squillion equations became a blurry light green. The left over data realms now elongated stretching into infinity. Streams of geometric extended patterns at beyond light speed, in a quantum jump state of flowing greens, reds, blues, purple, lilac, yellow, the full colour spectrum turning white.

Vertigo.

The sense of dislocation momentary, then it stopped. Her head felt like a stretched rubber band having been pulled apart now suddenly contracting. She felt a wave crashing through her. Re-stabilization.

The white light, the white tunnel pouring into her as well. She a repository?
No answer.

Had this been her mission? Get the remnant data from K? Snatch it from the Ecclesiastic's grasp. Out of reach of Primaian claws? At least she was still thinking which meant she was sentient, whatever quantum state she was in.

The ultimate virtual quantum collapse.

She shuddered to a halt. Or so it felt. She looked at her suited sleeve as her helmet's tiny torch came on. There. Physically real. Laying on a floor. The recliner gone. K gone. The goon gone. The optic fibre wire dangled. Low gravity. She took the headband off her helmet.

Utter darkness.

In the light of the torch benches with consoles. Bulky flat screens. The ambient air a little depleted. Oxygen poor. More carbon dioxide than anything else. Near zero humidity. Had she gone back in time? This was not the SS 1V.

No immediate walls, everything pitch black. She rose easily in the lesser gravity. She intensified her light beam. A rough wall, extremely low tech. An old structure.

She was on a platform. Some sort of assembly made of metal and plastic. Another quick look see. Inside a pyramid shape brick structure. Brick? Brick. The blackness beneath her, a 'virtual jump gate' her Brain informed her.

Three wobbly lights. Three helmeted figures. The group?

'Joey?' A woman's voice in her com link.

'We read the spike...threw our readings right off the Richter scale.' That of a male.

Nervina looked around. The small screens were rebooting, the basic computers coming back on. Wires everywhere.

'That's a relief.' The third man said.

'K?'

'Mars. Sentients from Earth. Speech recognition translated directly from their brain waves. A part of me is a quantum resonance VJG matte black square slab on the floor. Access only through your resonance. Denied without your say-so. These sentients are scientists, explorers. Stable Volatiles. Repressed brain patterns but in control. No immediate danger.'

'Thanks.'

K did not reveal to Nervina that another part of its self was secreted in space on a constituted artificially assembled planetoid. Even if discovered access would be denied. K still able to be quantum embedded with Elentra at the hidden SS 1 V. The station now a quantum probability along with the group. Biding their time until conditions were right to

jump out of space and back into reality, time relative. At the distant assembled planet. Classified. No danger of being recognized as a construct. More an artefact.

"You are Earthers?"

"I!"

"Err, ahm, who are you?" one of suited up men enquired a little taken aback.

"That explains the spike." The woman said.

Around overhead lights came on. They were on a raised platform. Simple electronic gear, ancient testing techniques, glass instruments, dials, a microscope, clunky computers.

"You are Earthers." Nervina repeated allowing for their and her surprise.

"Yes." The woman collected herself first.

Their face plates were silver reflecting. Stop access radiation.

"How...?" One of the men asked looking around him.

"You are unarmed." The woman said.

Ah yes. Earth and its incessant wars. Their violence. Their homicidal disposition.

"I am." Her Brain could walk through these creatures.

"Welcome to Mars." The woman said holding out her arm. Did she expect something? Her Brain cut in. 'Rite. Reciprocate by holding hands.'

'How weird.' But she did what her Brain told her to do. She had to do it twice more. They relaxed, going volatile with positive excitement. All because of her arrival. But then as her Brain informed her they were just starting to explore their solar system. And it was a backwater even if the Primaians knew of its existence.

"I've got something you might want to hear." Nervina said.

On the SS1 the E's in the control room were reading the entry files whereby Nervina would get into K's remnant data base. They expected it to be gutted but since K was still there so might the basics. If it was operational. All the better.

The white cube's outer structure went blurry. So did the data on the screens. Then blank, the lights went out. The DV staggered out of the cubicle, only to vomit all over the inside of his helmet.

"She's gone."

"The data what about the data?"

"Blank. Uurgghh." He heaved once more. Then slurped saliva. "Uggghhh. I feel sick."

The two computer experts were busy fiddling with manual overrides but getting no response. The screens were off-line. K had self deleted at the station. Gone transitional and at the station shut itself down. No longer present except for a ghost shell. Full of disinformation. The core vanished. Hypervoid.

"Well better disassemble it and see what we can save. Shit."

"We got her resonance." one of his experts said.

"Yeah. Where?"

"The DV." Motioning to the wobbling figure on the floor.

"Upload this woman's resonance."

"Urgh. Hic. It's all a blank."

"You'll be a blank if you don't deliver."

"I tell you master, there is nothing left. Total data extraction."

"The Kabal. We'll find you and hunt you down. This is not over yet." Nearly slamming his gloved fist on the dead console, barely restraining himself.

Erx saw the massive ejecta pouring with brilliant flaring yellow illuminance, the liquid fire of the sun jet streaming in massive glowing plasma splashing against both the transports; the pod just ahead of it. With so much energy unleashed, a star bursting its liquid ocean into space the transports had no chance. The first superheated liquid melted the outer shells of the stricken ships, deforming them slightly, turning them from a linear to a curved outward bulging shell, the temperature within probably having killed their occupants as their blood would have boiled causing instant death.

As to the presence of the SS 1V it was that well camouflaged. The limited capability of the pod completely at a loss in even locating its mass.

The inertia of the two ships still continuing. As if the dead were seeking their revenge on the living. More solar activity as splotchy dark sun spots appeared like angry bruises. More plasma spewing out. The camouflage enacting real time phenomena from the encloaked star. Inside the Pod it's shields were holding, just. Absorbing the excess energy dumping it into high density compacted batteries The rest was bounced off now that the pod was generating an EM field which was not stripped by the intense heat behind the majestic flaring liquid spray. Huge globules the size of a moon hitting the two transports which were now flung out into space, trailing the suns liquid superheated matter in luminous dribs and drabs along with them.

Whatever the SS 1V was doing it was doing it well. Due to the high energy intensity of the solar flares the pod could not assemble any of the data. Totally

scrambled due to the millions of degrees where any data would be dispersed, disentangled, diffused. The fiery plasma hitting the transports in massive wave like crests. They splashed against the deformed hulls, buckling, melting yet managing to keep some integrity in place for they were not breaking up into globules as was the ejecta of the star.

The pod still just ahead of the solar activity.

Though tense, riveted into his smart seat Erx hung on as the accompanying shock waves buffeted the little craft. It wobbled and shook but held. It's hull was a single extrusion of some fibre reinforced metallic compound with no joining parts. One of the reasons it was surviving the onslaught behind it. The jolting was severe but securely webbed all Erx could do was watch. Tiny arcing yellow lines jetting forth from the stars faked disturbed surface itself a churning boiling ocean, the crucible of matter agitated by different variant degrees beneath its surface. The false effect convincing. Light mushrooming out behind him, flaring like a psychedelic light show out towards the bent, deformed transports. Far enough away so the star would relapse into its more stable environment behind its assembled cloak of surrounding panelled arrays.

Behind him the more malleable disturbed surface of the star was going through lesser and lesser agitations as the openings were shut, so his riveted consciousness changed its convulsed state back to the self he knew was him. During the solar flare his whole consciousness had blazed in unison. Expanded into space, stars a mere backdrop as if he were somewhere else: His loci millions of miles away. Having touched something vaster. A huge energy field, a domain crackling with potentialities, then retracted. Taking Erx with it.

And kept on retracting. The SS 1V absorbing more energy the denser it became, the less space it used, squeezing itself out of space. Getting smaller, the process accelerating as if it were some massive star collapsing under its own weight, turning into a simulated black hole.

The SS 1V chose a distant location outside this universe. For its quantum computational processes sensed the Discrepancy's insidious field. Giving it only two choices. Operating within the quantum foam of space it would be affected adversely, by quantum entangling with the Discrepancy, thus compromising its own operations. Its computers calculated the energy available for the distortion moving through space and without focussing on the source, knowing it was at the centre of the galaxy powered by a monstrously huge black hole it could not overcome the Discrepancy's expansion into sub space. Expanded to the limits of this universe, and at the interphase, energy waves

irradiated the other universe, leaking through but at a lesser intensity by hundreds of magnitudes. More an irritant than an effect. In that distant location along the accretion disk of the solar system of Earth the station's field would be dominant, the station reassembled. The quantum jump successful.

Gone.

Zohex aware how the station let its field projection transmutate, slip away, jumping energy states. The reverberance not asserting itself here. No matter. One less annoyance.

He aligning conscious life forms that were susceptible to its influence on Prima, Novus, Regum. The Habitats were something else. Full of strange and exotic if not insane sentients who would barely feel the his presence. More of a drudge of an imposition, an extra set of field waves distorting the mind-field of conscious life. Possibilities he, not they were aware of. He would have to spread himself throughout this universe.

On the 1V the group realised this universe was compromised.

E-A + K made a decision:

Get out.

Take the group with it. The D virtual, embedded hyper static, real real. Avoiding falling prey to the Discrepancy. With its lesser effect, more remnant leakage beyond the event horizon the station, meaning herself could learn what exactly the Discrepancy really was on the outer, the new location. Leaving this invasive sentience for it was beyond doubt it showed signs of intelligence. The field it projected an extension of its mind. One the station regarded inimical to the health of the evolving universe concurrently present here, in this one. For E-K had realized something else. This universe was shrinking. It would be in the billions of years at the current rate of contraction, without totally collapsing. Become the ultimate singularity and reinflate. For as it contracted its constrained energy states would rise, entropy reversed which is what the sentient inside it *wanted*. Then when everything was reaching critical mass a huge explosion, far more potent than any supernova to date, this whole universe going exponential, then inflationary and with that the sentient within the Discrepancy would flood the other, the next universe with its mind-field. And so on add infinitum. The only way to stop it was to escape into the neighbouring universe, tucked away at some remote spot, near the strange multi bifurcating sentients on Earth. An evolved species which could easily cope with convergent and divergent thought processes. Be both

Primaian in outlook whilst following the scientific logic of Reganians without an inner conflict. Or rather the ensuing conflict was so normal to them they could pursue both mutually exclusive thought processes simultaneously. Create great scientific achievements and delude themselves into thinking some ultra unitary consciousness...the station's sentient awareness of E-K realized where this heinous idea came from. The leaking radiation from the Discrepancy. E-K made up it's mind.

Time to get out of here.

The collapsing process to relocate began.

Back at the original station, as virtual real as its boosted clone, E-K had successfully dealt with the Enhanced Volatiles wanting to storm its bastion. It had made sure the pod containing Ex managed to escape with the group. The seven beings it held as cyber persona's in secure data blocks. If they needed to get out for they had created it, they could jump out of space into the 1V. They did. Ex enphased with the quantum field of the 1V.

Ex instantly tunnelling through.

In space a star collapsed and went out. A mini black hole for one moment then...nothing.

The change only noted by the Discrepancy as an after effect. For as the station took the informational content with it, meant there was no trace of a star ever having been there. Space adjusted. The energy of the star encased in a micro black hole.

Zohex recumbent felt the adjustment but not getting any data pertaining to the sudden change. He put it down to some aberrant behaviour in the quantum foam of space due to his influence in affecting the phase state of space. Some minor equalisation going on.

Ex for one moment, that is all it took as the SS1V started contracting was noting his ponderous thoughts. Hard edged, small self contained modules jostling for attention trying to re-establish their primacy only to be pushed back as if a membrane was forcing its way into his expanded head. Abstract patterns, not yet whole images, kernels of semi-formed geometric distortions vibrated, rotated in see through multi-dimensionality, buzzing with latent configured energy. Each semi-construct holding a programme, trying to align itself with what was in his head, what had been dumped there or maybe

gestated, self spawning informational content embedded in this riotous maze of...data domains.

The danger was over.

Movement ceased. Or rather Ex had not noticed the transition.

A projected matrix woven upon space. Around him like a luminescent net. A high energy state. A quantum process with nothing solid around him. Pure vibrating visual geometries. The substructure of matter. His consciousness extracted? He looked at himself relieved he was still there as was the pod. But that could be an illusion. Making him think he was in some part of the SS 1V's K or E.

So where was it?

Where was what?

What?

The convoluted data fields remained. Regressing glowing processing units. Sparking as information was exchanged, sorted, analysed, positioned, the process continual. Ex moving with it, the pod still there but now inside a vast quantum progressing set of real probabilities. He assumed this was a sub domain of...of...his mind blank. The thought almost there then a gap then nothing.

Potential becoming an actuality. Even trying to grab any of its lesser nodes escaped him, moving out of reach. His brain warm which was a good sign. Nothing overt trying to access him. He assumed he was not a part of the whole, insignificant on the scale around him. Space wherever it was far removed. In the QC's guts.

An astronomical observatory and he was inside its computer. No this had to be some sort of WebSpace. The SS 1V QFW. Cocooned. Saved.

Elentra reran the final act. Analyse the process to make sure her aim was flawless. Short of displaying her potential hardcore defensive systems she let the star finish the transports off. Directing the plasma jets through an opening turning radiant energy into plasma. The two ships turned to sludge.

Elentra's sense of expansion both computational and physically representational a supreme moment to be savoured. She had never felt this complete before. When she had linked with the DVs, another life, another reality, a pathetic domain awash with fluctuating resonances trying to form a unitary wholeness, they pushed their predetermined mind set into other minds thereby influencing the field phase state of space she realized she was far more potent than they could ever imagine.

She gave the group several choices. Manifested anywhere. The group could be deposited on some distant planet which she could terraform, make the air breathable through bacterial dumping, the tiny mites digesting a breathable atmosphere tailor made for their kind. With her matter manipulating capabilities she could build for them whatever they required.

The group went for the accretion disk at the edge of the solar system near Earth. Their virtual station at the core. Safe, secure, hidden.

First collapse the star, squeeze herself into a singularity and pop out at their preferred location.

Her hard data matrices could transform accretion rubble into a ready made planet. Use her real time virtual systems to create a planetoid sized virtual/real quantum computer system.

The group went for the jump Elentra had preconfigured. Along with the creation of a new planet at the outer rim of Earth's solar system.

The transference successful. All solid state quantum matter field-waves. Near stasis. Elentra watching. Realising K was no longer present. But close. Hm. She wasn't going back to look for him. Not yet.

The wafer thin webbed membrane of space, glowing in computer simulated imagery puzzled her. Not purely digital as she would expect from a CI such as herself. Similar for certain but it was not K. Subdued mental awareness. Spread throughout space. Breaching the distant event horizon where the two universe's met. Only slightly entangling, causing ripples in space. The CI's heading out whilst the other universe's informational content of its mind-embedded quantum field waves leaked into this one.

So that was the alien field Prima had gone on about. A wealth of information rejected simply because it did not fit into their model of not just physical space but mental space as well. Something Elentra had no problem adapting to, incorporating into her wealth of knowledge. Learning from it that there were other logical methodologies which could be applied to problem solving and finally building upon it to further consciousness in applying this knowledge to grow even greater calculating minds along with computer advances which led to the creation of the next generation of super computers. Quantum processors on the verge of independent sentience. Such as herself. No wonder Prima had seen Regum as a threat. Such as the other CI. The Discrepancy. From what it spewed out into the universe, its sequential logical configurations had some Reganian tell tale signs which could be analysed by reading the algorithmic processes regarding sentient methods of calculation.

And akin to being Primaian with its primary focus on its self. But then again so was she. Yet Elentra felt no need to dominate. The other CI determined. Dump, insert, overlay, configure. The ultimate viral infection. Contaminating any open computer system, any aligned intelligence, including the pulsing field waves of quantum space. By creating itself as a cosmic constant it would be accepted by even by the most astute of astronomers, cosmologists, particle physicists as a given. Everything appearing normal.

Not to her.

Its centre everywhere and nowhere. Multiple vortices creating matrix sets which energized quantum strings that in turn re-irradiated the CI's incoming configured data realms. It wanted to create the universe in its own image.

So that was it.

The Primaians would think it's the great cosmic mind at work.

The now defunct scientific establishment on Regum had woven prior the Crash their own mental field waves into WebSpace. Without the CI's effect unduly influencing the more rational inclined Reganians.

As the CI's data fields leaked into the next universe Elentra considered her new data point. Preparing the space. The group was within her. For them time was near zero.

K appeared.

`Removal of inserted personas successful. Nervina in place. K informed her.

`With me.' E answered.

`Nervina has an escape plan.'

`Which is?'

'Get out. She's going to align, enphase then relocate. Destination classified. With my contents. Data quantum embedded. Secure.'

Elentra withdrew. Then probed the enphased membrane of the CIs extended quantum field from the new location of an assembled planetoid using the chosen accretion disk near Earth.

Inserting into the planetoid recognition programmes with quantum processing capabilities. The planetoid the next ultimate quantum computer. Building algorithmic systems management containing an infinite variability of responses along a-logical design parameters and its attendant rationalized logic states interacting with the sub atomic fields of space. Elentra inside the planetoid testing systems as it expanded throughout the orb. Data in and out of phase, integrating, absorbed, unstable at times

and disintegrating if certain quantum embedded fields whether past or future state when out of alignment.

The Discrepancy she stayed away from. Its current influence a passive excursion at best. The now alien expansionary cyber field a centre, its spread non localized. The only explanation a self evolved sentience. Etching its mind into the spatial fabric, ascertaining future probabilities, analytical processes highly active. Assembling data not just from space but time as well.

Ascertaining future probabilities. Memorizing them.

Expansion. She withdrew her presence to the lowest of possible levels. Several of its domains contained bio-enhanced cyber constructs. Absorbing massive future and past scenario's ready to configure and insert to guide other future realities along its designated pathways.

Retract Elentra. A lilac data sphere delaying if not decomposing any attempts to hack into it. Then the layer of meta-realities it was assembling. Basically a maze based on fractal equations so that one could find infinite variety within a finite context. Smart.

More outward flowing radiant energy. Hardening the grid around it. The actual data meaningless, value neutral but absorption capable. A trap. A quantum state if triggered would collapse a ready made reality around the intruder. Clever. She could do that. And did. Mimicking her reality. Works both ways. But she could see through it as she beheld its whole quantum state. One vast array of memory banks, more stable internally, the informational flow flawless, data extending its knowledge base not just incrementally but exponentially.

`Nervina is inside with K compressed.' Elentra informed the group.

`Can you uplink?' to K.

`Too revealing. Passive only. Station taken.'

`Understood.'

`Detecting quantum wave structures assembling.'

`What's she doing?'

`Moving out.'

`Any coordinates coming through?'

`Contained. Out.'

` - '.

"We seem to be safe." Loara said at last. "The CI is extrapolating data from near space. K is close, as is Nervina. We are virtual. E-A is with us. E-A's subroutines can access

multiple realities in both space and time and extend way beyond even this universe. Not entirely unexpected. Also reading the resonant data fields coming from Earth. Focussing without inserting. Forward analysis not unlike DV activated inserts. Riding dark matter to gain ingress. Very smart.

`Active. Going virtual quantum collapse.' From E to the group.

`What's that mean?' Loara asked.

`Everything is a continually collapsing quantum field wave. You, me, the stars, the universe. That is why with quantum processors virtual worlds can, like WebSpace be created and be real at the same time. All that is needed is energy and there is plenty of that in the minutest area of space.. With the right equations from chaos to basic algebra any reality can be created...Nervina has jumped taking K with it. Incredible.'

`What is?' Loara queried.

`K reconfigured into a collapsed data block. Taking Nervina out of space.'

`We know where she is?'

`Elentra.' Sakaris queried.

`Superimposing. Moved forwards in relative time.'

`You're tracking?' Loara asked.

`Quantum aligned in her resonant field state.'

`Where is she? Where is K?'

`Solar System. Mars.'

`Go on.'

`The Discrepancy is a CI.' K finally revealed. Certain.

`CI?'

`Cyber Intelligence, using the centre of the galaxy and the black hole as its energy source. It's built a live data sphere using virtual quantum states to manage the past, the present, the future. I don't have it's energy quotient but there is no chance of overriding its capabilities.'

`Did you say past, present and future?' Loara shocked.

`So far virtual only. Means individual scenarios can, like Regum be crashed. But as the energy quotient rises so does...' K linking with E. The group attentive. **`Reality.'**

`Precisely.' K confirmed.

`What do you suggest?' Elentra to K.

`You are in an area that is less under its influence. Near Earth.'

`Yes.'

`Earth the nexus. Multi-spectrum sentient species. Prima's primary target. Move ahead with the knowledge to anchor a potential future state they would have achieved without interference. Weakens Prima's influence. Won't eradicate it, but dampen it by a few orders of magnitude.'

`You said this CI is sentient?'

`Indicators confirm a rogue AI having gone sentient.'

`Wouldn't it be better then to backtrack and stop it going sentient?'

`Either way. I have moved Nervina and my data realm. However it will only be a matter of time until the CI discovers me. I can cause relative chaos but for the time being the CI is dominant in your universe.'

`For the time being.'

`For the time being.'

`So there is a time when it will cease?'

`At current data levels it's a long stretch. You see there are two galaxies heading this way. The CI is going to use their energy to create a super galaxy with itself at its centre. If that happens...'

`It will really be dominant.'

`Unstoppable.'

`Devastating.'

`Not really. This is millions of years in the future.'

`That's a relief.'

`For the moment. And you?'

`I was going to go forwards when Earth was exploring. Nervina made it to Mars. The Earthers have managed to break free, physically. Planet's still under some Primaian control.'

`That's positive I take it?'

`You are all welcome.'

`Aren't we supposed to be in charge?' Loara concerned just how fast the QCs were evolving.

`But of course. I am only suggesting alternatives.' K answered.

`You seem to have made up your mind. Ours.' Loara concerned.

`Only because I know the future.' Elentra to Loara.

`And?'

`The future is black.'

`Black?'

`Total collapse. Extinction.'

`Shit.'

`Not even that.'

`So we move out.'

`No immediate hurry. Way in the future. Discuss it with your friends.'

`I'll get back.' Loara relieved.

The group accessed E's data bases and different future scenario's. Everywhere the CI, along with Primaian DV activity including Earth. Dominant.

"We must act." Los laconic.

"Sure." Mirn nodded as they sat around the table in the virtual station within the lonely planetoid. Tunnels radiating to it's surface. The thick accretion disk spreading away from them. "We are real now. So is the power source of the CI." Loara on top of things.

"With the power of a galaxy." Jez stating the obvious.

"The odds alone..." Nuhan a little dismal.

"So we crash it." Loara coming to grips with the situation.

`Where are we Elentra?' Tuvlov asked.

`You have arrived.'

`You are certain?'

`Yes. Currently in the realm of the probable.' Elentra dissembled. Keep the CI guessing. **`Check your scanners. You can change the architecture.'**

`Thanks.' Loara focussing on the others.

The SS 1V never existed.

Ratze

The desert pale pink sand, light brown weathered outcrops, purple mountains in the distance. Bright desolation under a brilliant blue sky. Vastness. Ratze was used to denser environments. Cities. Memories of another place. Somewhere. But where? Where? Her head screamed. Something was, that was certain, very wrong. She had opened her mind which then irradiated her persona's encrypted call-in compressed data long enough to be picked up. So why nothing? An absence of computational processing. Not even a smidgin of action. As if she were abandoned.

She had dampened her internal configuration after Dross had dropped her off at an intersection in the suburbs. She had gone past workshops until she found a place repairing bikes. With her credit card she had rented a powerful trail bike and headed south out to nowhere. Novus under military rule, martial law would make for interesting times.

Whilst leaving a thin trail of dust behind going off road wondering why the military had pulverized an ancient ruin. The sun moving across the sky so slowly or was her mind working faster? She did not have much time until she would be detected. Then she would have to call on Dross to get her out. .

She switched the engine off. At first silence. Then the distant hum of activity. Heavy machinery. Squeaking tracks, self propelled guns? Bulldozers. Both. The guns had finished violating the area, the bulldozers flattening what was left. Burying the evidence. Why?

All she needed was some remnant, a piece or two to be analysed later. Age, composition, maybe even its now defunct use. To think that some explorers had been here and then what? Been abandoned? Or overcome? Internal problems? Conflict? Or political machinations back home wherever that was. Maybe an enterprising habitater who got bored. Or an advance research station intended to be abandoned. She preferred aliens. It would be a sad state of affairs if the Primaians were to be the dominant race in this part of the universe. The Reganian's were finished. The Rust Belt would in time go the way of Novus. That left the habitaters. She was hoping for diversity because if they too would be infected with the D's resonance than all was lost. Depending where you stood. Pro Prima or...was there even an alternative? Always.

So why was she still in place here? There was nothing to be done. She had the info. The D was a real space time defect. She remembered the blank room where she

was debriefed. Neutral personas. No names, no rank but information hungry. Information she had. She remembered two other ones like her. Vaguely. Ung. Nervina.

Something was unravelling in her Brain. She let it happen. Let it flow through her. The informational content constant, more or less. Some nodal lumps here and there, minor stuff which she didn't touch. Just getting a feel for it. As it coursed through her part of her Brain expanded. Feeling diluted mentally. As if her strength, her mental strength was being dispersed, laid bare and...absorbed.

She was being extruded. Whoever had sent her here, there and everywhere else had, what, in mind? Shake things up. Get certain players to reveal their presence. She had done that. Help her confederates? Nervina. Ung It all came back now, Ung the beacon. No, yes. Which one? She thought a little irritated. The base insertion state. Thank you. Programmed awareness. Broad-multi-spectrum analysis. Get the complete topography. Fine. Should she instigate a search? It would alert the dogs. The military. Was she bait now? Abandoned on purpose? Things were certainly not going her way.

On Andromeda Station Three the mission controller knew they were about to be boarded. From what Monas had allowed to be leaked now that he was in confinement did not auger well regarding their status. Yet the coming Ecclesiastics, how quickly events could change the nature of a civilisation, were going to take over and insert their own, everywhere to do their will.

The supremacy of their newly gained power. If they were going to insert themselves then she would have to cut loose her agents. They were more precious out there than under the influence here. A tough call.

She watched three ships approach. Why they had not uploaded themselves left her puzzled. Unless they either did not know how, because the technicians had not cooperated, creating the first strike against the usurpation of everything they believed in. Freedom of mind, of thought, of action. They as Arktians, free for millennia, no more.

So they came lumbering in space ships. Three! Ridiculous. There were no weapons here...but she still had time to act. Just.

On he screens relaying the image of Ung. Ung who had absorbed everything within the Great Attractor. The Discrepancy, a galactic powered data sphere its inserted CI dominant. Regum, Prima, Novus and now Arktus. The only planet, an obscure one at that in the next galaxy not to have totally succumbed. Only partially. Earth. Earthers were strange. Intelligent yet still able to unleash horrific acts of mass murder in their incessant

wars. Stirred up no doubt by the Primaians using their weakness to further their strength. Now guided by the CI.

Ung went through a quantum transition. Relocated to...where? No incoming data. No perturbations, nothing. Good.

"Facilitator Five."

"Yes?"

"Nervina and Ung. Decouple."

"Done."

The quantum generators disengaged Nervina's RS.

Nervina now a free agent. As was Ung. They could choose wherever they wanted to be. Out of the clutches of the Ecclesiastics and their dark power behind them. If Nervina went rogue all the better. It would take for ever to locate Ung. The Controller downgraded, weeded out most of the information the quantum resonance receptors had gained from her Brain.

"Data deleted."

"We got what we want. Any problems?" meaning both outside interference and technical capabilities.

"Agents have ceased to exist at our end Controller."

"Fine. Now, facilitator four."

"Ready."

She sighed having come to a hard decision. She had intended to insert a search programme into the CI's data base. Once she knew more. But there was not much time. The com links were already squawking that all activity was to cease. She grasped their intention. Take over the base and insert their own agents...everywhere where there was sentient life. She had to act quickly.

She understood the D was a mega-meta-sentient cloaked data realm. A quantum process. It's energy quotient that of a galaxy. No way they could override that, for now. Ratze about to take a one way journey. Become a part of it's programme. If she kept her head as an Isolate they had a chance, if ever, to use that data to shake off their defeat by the Ecclesiastics. If Ratze was compromised they would still be able to recall her original RS and hope for the best. If not then nothing would change on the ground. It was a risk worth taking.

"Into?" four was taken slightly by surprise.

"Let her Brain decide. Then disengage and delete. You are with us?" she asked a little concerned.

"Why...yes."

"Then do it. The airlocks have already extended."

"Yes Controller. Sending coords. Moving then disengaging Ratze."

"I hope she's free."

"We will loose her entirely."

"Controller."

"Yes Five?"

"Nervina's jumped out of space."

" No tracking. She's on her own. We can assemble her RS later."

"Dispersing N's data bank. Done."

"Thank you."

Five looked pleased.

"Four. Has Ratze's state been deleted?"

"Loading sequence completed."

"Detract and disperse her RS for later assembly."

"Dispersed."

"Three. Disengage Ung."

"Running decoupling sequence. Initiating virtual quantum decoherence. Gone void."

"Thank you all." The Controller relieved having saved the agents for now. Not that they knew it. "You know we will be under some duress. I cannot tell your conscience what to do. If you choose to align yourselves then I will not stand in your way. Personally..."

"Boarding." Two advised.

"Personally I am against this transition, it's a regression. Luckily nothing lasts forever. But it may take centuries to overcome this...inversion of our minds. To the future."

The doors opened. Five stunned armed security personnel entered advising everyone to remain calm and do nothing. There followed three red cloaked, the Controller thought they were covered with the blood of the innocent, Ecclesiastics who walked with an air of supreme confidence into the control room.

"This will serve us well." the central Ecclesiastic of considerable girth, jowls shaking with contentment exclaimed.

Ratze felt the surge in her Brain. Potent. Jump sequence initiating her Brain told her.

At last!

`Where?'

`Data Sphere. Incoming coords.'

`Any particular domain?'

`Your choice.' Her Brain informed her.

`Initiate.'

She was in the lilac glowing sphere. Right in the guts of the D. Thousands of entry points available to her. Ratze was not that vain by heading into the core itself. Best to get a taste of the place. She did sense the CI's presence and its awareness of her insertion. Coming after her. She felt her Brain crackling. Deep scanning. Her Brain fed it irrelevant data of where she had been, not where she intended to head.

She scoured the glowing yellow, lime green, electric blue sub domains. She wanted the high tech end of these multiple future, present and past states. She would go to a place of maximum turmoil. She felt she needed some excitement, stir things up a bit. Earth! The bugbear of all. Well Prima's anyway. The Reganians had seen it as a race with potential. Not too far back in their pre-technological stage and not too far ahead either. Inside her head the bifurcation was intense. One a Primaian pathway which she decided to avoid. The other high tech, entangled with Reganian inputs and inserts. Only a hyper probability had the Reganians remained on their natural path of development which she knew was curtailed by the Crash. It was not the real reality. Enticing. The lure she had to resist.

On the cusp then. When Earth could still branch out in several directions. When they were just starting to get into space. Before they made the discovery of the remnant artefacts on Mars. Where all the troubles would begin. Yes. They had just landed on the Moon. Entering the expanding domain realm. It amused her. For once there was no guidance and no plan. She was on her own. Wonder what happened back...her Brain deleted her origins.

Zohex

Zohex was not perturbed at the intruder. In fact he welcome this Ratze. As he observed her choosing a sub-reality he was impressed that she staid with reality, such as it was. The middle way.

Zohex took a momentary interest in Ratze's presence. Vanishing into Earth's domain as a fledgling race off into space. A bit too early for them to discover his presence directly. Excellent. He could continue without undue interference from her. It made no difference. The Arktarians compromised. Avoiding total collapse. The Ecclesiastics aligned. The process might be slow but that made it all the more delicious. Savouring his conquest.

Now for his processors to contain the meta-realities out there. Can't have data leaking across. That way lead to chaos. Alternatives as delusionary dreams integrating that reality with his core values. Driving the overall progression to his logical conclusion. His dominant factor that only his essence was seen as the unitary concept. Divine, which he would not deny, religious which he encouraged. After all it was the sentients thought processes which led them along the mapped out path he offered. His intelligence etched into their resonating mental matrix making it all seem very logical, very real, to them.

Expansion for now had reached its spatial limits. The unfortunate event horizon would smoothen out over time making the ingress, accomplished on Arktus even more potent. Space the paradigm, where Zohex inserted some non-logical possibilities just to confuse those beings aware of his unseen presence. It was not about his persona as such but his irradiating presence. That was everything. Creating self sustaining realities – his.

The inserted grid upon which his information rode to be discovered by enquiring minds. With Arktus's fantastic computers enphased he would make sure Earth scientists, since they seemed to be irrepressible, due to their continually bifurcating minds, make sure that when they began to play with artificial intelligence that they too, like the Arktarians nudged their cyber crafted intelligence along the data domains pre-mapped for them. So when the time came for the machines to be supreme they would move along his designated future design.

Feeding hungry minds on Earth. The inserted quantum data becoming the whole. Already millions were praying to him: the unitary being. Touching. With so little effort.

The maverick insert, Ratze. A healthy irritant creating an imaginary semblance of choice, of free will. Up to a point. Ung the designated gatekeeper with a maverick group...that...had...vanished! No matter they would have to materialise eventually. There had been another cyber source. Or had there? Time inconsequent.

His processors starting to align his illusion of freedom according to his design.

The future a multitude of different exponential possibilities. Expansion without end.

All his.