

FEARSOME 2

Part 1

Chapter 1

Incoming

Activity was brisling from every corner of the newly constructed Solar Defense Force base, Home Plate. Over sixty million metric tons of lunar soil and rock had been bored from deep within the Moon providing the site that would house the command center of the multi-nation effort to save Earth from the incoming Atrochen starship. On the upper most level was the ten completed Tiger Two fighting ships along with the prototype Tiger, which had only recently returned from deep space. The new ships gleamed brightly in the high intensity discharge lighting of the hanger bay, contrasting distinctly beside the veteran TRRA-1 which hadn't even had the scorches of battle washed from it's skin. The large over head pressure doors that looked out into space were due to be closed for the last time and sealed permanently in just a few more hours as the last of the long term supplies were off-loaded from the orbiting shuttles. All burden of future transportation to or from Home Plate would be placed upon the growing fleet of Tigers silently awaiting their crews.

Major Leo Fearsome and Colonel Rex Hawkens stood behind a thick control booth window that overlooked the hanger floor, watching the pressure suited figures hard at work below them, moving the various containers to ingress airlocks.

"So how long has the base been open for business Colonel?" Leo asked the battle hardened man that had stood looking out motionless for the past half-hour.

"The first company of deployed personnel arrived last month. You and Captain Sands arrived in perfect timing. I bet the boys down at Freedom Two had a litter of kittens when you appeared on their scopes."

"Yah. The first thing approach control said when I checked in on their frequency was, 'Where the hell did you come from?' It was kind of embarrassing though."

"How's that?"

"Driving the single most expensive piece of equipment in orbit and have to be towed into dock."

"Oh that's right. When are they going to install the deep-vacuum thrusters?"

A female's voice answered his question. "We'll start work on it tomorrow. If that's alright with Major Fearsome."

Leo spun around at the distantly familiar voice and hugged her until she gasped. "God, it's good to see you Linda. You don't know how much I missed you and Margret." He held her back at arm's length and looked her over from top to bottom then hugged her again. "Have you seen Keven yet?"

Major Linda Willams P.H.D. hadn't changed a bit. "No, I just arrived. I saw you up here and thought I'd surprise you."

"It worked. Come on, I know where he is. Colonel, if you'll excuse me."

"You bet, see you later Major. Major." He tipped a shallow bow of the head to Linda.

"Colonel." Linda returned the gesture. They turned to walk away and she said to Leo. "I still haven't gotten used to the title B.S."

"Same old Linda." As they walked out of the control booth Leo said. "Damn you look good in uniform." She mockingly brushed at the gold cluster on her shoulder with over emphasized pride.

Colonel Hawkens watched his colleagues depart and a memory triggered in his tormented mind.

The troop ship rolled heavily from side to side as the storm driven waves crashed down on the superstructure. He stood braced between the Helmsmen's seat and the Captain's command chair.

It was unusual for a husband and wife to be on the same ship together. But his wife was the Captain. She had pull at the top in Hawaii and had been able to swing it for this cruse.

He held onto her arm tight as another incredibly huge wave slammed into the ship, shaking it to its keel. The First Officer smiled at him with confidence. "First time in rough seas Captain?" He asked.

His wife snapped her head in her officers direction then realized the subject of his inquires and looked at her husband. His knuckles were white as he fought to keep his balance. He nodded his response as another wave challenged him to stay on his feet. "I'm used to flying at about fifty thousand feet over this shit."

"This is the third typhoon in a month for us." The First Officer complained. "We've been on this damn blockade for too long."

"I heard that." The helmsman agreed.

"You fly boys have it easy." The second in command continued.

"I'm not a pilot. I'm Special Op's. My team's never had it easy." Hawkens defended.

"Skipper! Combat on the horn!" The junior officer called from his station. It was his first cruse as well.

"Put it on the speaker Ensign." She ordered.

"Combat here, our picket destroyer S-4 reports positive sonar contact relative bearing: two, seven, six degrees. Range: five nautical miles. At standard attack depth."

"Sound general quarters." She pressed a button on the armrest of her chair. "All hands. Man your battle stations. This is not a drill." By the time she finished talking into her microphone several other crewmembers rushed onto the bridge, the last man closed the watertight door behind him.

"Combat here, tracking multiple incoming surface to surface missiles. We are the target!" The young man's voice cracked under the pressure.

"Remain calm. Helm, take evasive action."

"New heading: two, six, five degrees." The helmsman reported.

"Combat here, tracking second salvo. ETA of first wave nine seconds."

Hawkins had forgot all about the raging ocean storm and focused his eyes on the tactical display above the windscreen showing the missiles in an unnecessarily high-resolution animation as they streaked inbound.

"Activate Agiss Two system and bring all point defense guns to bear." He admired his wife's control and clear mind as she barked the orders to her crew.

"Combat here, picket S-4 has launched anti missile missiles. Four intercepted in first wave." The side of the ship facing the threat seemed to blaze with flame as the gattling guns spewed tens of thousands of rounds of hyper-velocity sub-caliber armor piercing projectiles at the supersonic anti-ship missiles.

Two large flashes erupted just a few hundred feet from the ship. So close, he could not see it directly because the side of the ship

blocked his view. Then the concussion rattled the thick bulletproof glass.

"Jesus Christ, that was close!" The helmsman cried as he picked himself up off the deck. "Coming to new heading: one eight nine degrees." He spun the wheel hard to the left.

"Combat here, S-4 has launched an anti-sub missile."

Again the guns threw a ton of depleted uranium at the warheads. Through the sheets of water and heavy rain Captain Hawkens saw three distinct explosions flashing one after another several hundred yards from the starboard bow of the ship as they crashed through the angry, storm driven waves.

"Captain! Agiss Two tracking malfunction!" The ensign cried.

The woman that Hawkens had loved all of his adult life slammed her fist down on the intercom button again. "Damage control teams stand-by! Prepare for impact!"

Hawkens watched in slow-motion as the wave skimming missile seemed to be surfing towards the forward upper deck of the superstructure, as the bow plunged deep into the oncoming wave. He could remember very clearly how surprised he had been at its long length and how long after it penetrated the armor-plated bulkhead until the explosion sent the upper decks rocketing into the sky.

It wasn't until after several weeks aboard a hospital ship that he regained consciousness and was informed of the loss of his wife and that he had been the only survivor out of eight hundred crewmen and fifteen thousand combat marines, including his ten Special Operations Strike Force personnel.

That had been during the Japanese conflict and had almost started open war between the two countries. But documents recovered from the sunken sub revealed that the Japanese Captain had violated direct orders

to not engage the American ships. But Hawkens had never forgiven them for taking so many lives then and also those resulting from their support of the Ragheads.

The two young officers laughed and expressed their joy at being together as they disappeared around the corner. Hawkens remembered Keven and Linda's relationship. It broke his heart to think that anyone else might have to exist in a life like his. Deep inside he felt that men and women shouldn't be allowed to fight together or even be allowed to work in the same unit if they were intimately involved. He knew he was right, especially after the way Linda responded when Keven became MIA after the Hanger Eighty-Two incident.

Keven was confined to the infirmary. After his arrival a routine physical turned up some unusual results. The doctor said it was only a precautionary measure, however it had been three and a half weeks and he hadn't given any clues as to when Keven could return to duty. He hadn't felt bad or shown any symptoms at all but still he was forced to remain in quarantine.

The isolation ward was so white Keven said to Leo that he could see even in the dark. The closest he had come to touching another person was when the nurse, encased in vinyl, came to check his vital signs once a day. The only saving grace was the state of the art multi-media entertainment center that gave Keven a chance to catch up on the moviegrams that had been released over the last four years. The news grabbed his attention and he became an expert on current affairs after the first week.

One story, that he had taken special notice of and made every edition of the hourly news programs, dealt with a rash of governmental overthrows and assassinations of high-ranking political leaders.

Africa was in a state of total anarchy and disarray. The New Soviet had sponsored a peacekeeping effort but it had been too little too late. They lost five hundred troops within the first few months. That combined with the death of their president sent a wave of protest and the majority of people out into the streets of Moscow to bring the troops home, so Africa was left to die in it's never ending droughts and deacease.

Europe had, as always, done nothing to try to stop the growing epidemic of global violence for within their boarders chaos was building to the point of overflowing into Central Asia. The true power in Europe, Germany, had been working itself out of a decade long recession and was about to see the light at the end of the tunnel when things started falling apart again and was now disintegrating head first into a full blown depression.

Japan was the only country that had been able to avoid the destruction that was plaguing the rest of the world. It seemed that nothing that happened on the planet affected their economy or their politics. Nationalism was growing at an alarming rate and the code of bu-she-do had reawakened in the schools and social circles. A militant group known as the Rising Sons was making a push for power and gaining a considerable amount of support among the wealthy industry leaders.

In the Reformed United States things remained fairly stable in spite of the increased level of tension. The inter-cities, where the citizens were forced to live through another round of gang terror sponsored by the same old instigators, the Drug Lords and the Zooers.

The military was on top of things this time and had agents planted in most of the more dangerous groups. They were kept busy searching for the Atrochen spies also, who as it turned out were the same people orchestrating the violent gang activity.

Captain Keven Sands was overjoyed to see Linda again. When she and Leo turned the corner from the hallway he nearly broke through the isolation barrier trying to steal a hug and kiss.

Linda pressed her body against the transparent barrier and could feel Keven's conducted heat touch her fingers. She was afraid to speak for fear of awakening from the long awaited dream she found herself in. They gazed into each-other's eyes and could all most read one another's minds as the long buried passion fought to be liberated.

"I'll see you at the General's briefing Linda." Leo said as he slipped out the door. Neither Keven nor Linda heard him or cared as they continued their silent reunion.

It was a long time before they started a conversation and before they had got into it very far Linda snapped her fingers in an expression of recollection.

"Hold that thought." She said, holding out her hand, indicating for him to stop. She walked briskly over to the visa-phone and typed in a code. When a face appeared, she ordered. "This is Major Willams, have container LW-45 sent to the infirmary at once."

"Right a way Major." Replied the voice on the other end.

"What's that all about?" Keven asked.

"You'll see."

They rehashed old times and talked about how much they had missed each other over the past four years and took turns telling about their lives while they had been separated. When the small container arrived.

Linda pushed the cigar box, shaped metal case through the decontamination airlock slot in the corner of the chamber.

"What's this?" Keven asked, baffled. He hefted its weight.

"Just open it. A friend sent it to me about four years ago and I've hung-on to it for you."

Keven released the hidden latches on the front of the case and the top opened revealing a satin lining that was molded around a handgun that Keven knew better than he had known any person. He gently set the case down on his bed and removed the cold steel, feeling the weight in his hand. The Colt semi-automatic pistol that was his grandfathers brought with it a cold reminder of campaigns of days gone by, when it had never left his side and had saved his life on more than a few occasions. "I knew that old Posy could fix it. He always was the best. If you could have only an idea of what this means to me Linda. Thank you." As he looked up at her through the plastic wall, he realized that she meant more to him than anything else in the galaxy. "Linda. Will you marry me?" The words had a life of their own as they reached Linda's ears and tears streamed down her face.

The nurse regretted her daily duty of collecting vital signs from the, far from model, patient that had been locked up for weeks in her ward and she had to psych herself up every time she entered the room. As the door slid out of her way she took a deep breath preparing for the lack of cooperation ahead of her. She stepped into the small outer room and saw the female officer standing near, looking through at the patient. "Visiting hours are over now. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Linda looked over her shoulder to see the intruder. Her eye make-up had run down her face in long dark streaks. She had never been able to bring herself to having the pigment impregnated into her skin as most women did.

"Excuse me I'll come back later."

"That's alright. You've got your job to do and I've got mine. I'll come back in the morning." She said as she sniffled through the

tears. As she walked passed, the nurse handed her a sanitary towel. "She blew a kiss to Keven as the doors swished closed.

Major General Sherman Whitfield had been on the visa-phone all day with the different House and Senate members trying to raise support for the emergency funds he needed to continue the Solar Defense Force buildup. He was sitting expectantly waiting for the President to return his call. There was plenty of opposition to his branch of the military and he had to fight for everything he got. Sherman could only see the vital priority of his mission. Nothing else on the torn planet meant anything to him except the defeat of the Atrochen threat.

The screen suddenly changed from the intense colored pattern that was displayed, when the terminal was not in use, to the old and very wrinkled face of the President of the Reformed United States. "Hello, General. How are things proceeding on the Moon."

"We're on schedule and the base's outer doors are to be sealed in just a few more hours."

"Tell me General... How long until the alien ship arrives?"

"We think we have two more months. But until operation Home Coming is complete and the Atlantians are here, we won't know for sure. We are doing everything possible but without more flexibility from the Pentagon and more money we're in for big trouble.

"What kind of problems are you having in Washington?"

"Without saying names Sir, I'm not receiving the recruits that have singed-up and the Organization won't release alien prisoners for interrogation. They're holding fifty of them at Langley for medical testing which includes tests that have been against International Law for decades. And besides we need the information that they have."

"Ok, I'll take care of that today. What is the current level of active personnel?"

"As of seventeen hundred tonight we have twenty two thousand production related personnel and two hundred thousand combat personnel. All but seventy are in zero gravity training. The others have been qualified for quite some time."

"When will Doctor Beil file her final report on the Atlantians?"

"I'm expecting her call any time now. Her window opened about five minutes ago. We've been trying to keep traffic to a minimum for security reasons and it sure has kept the code writers busy. Another problem I've had in a big way is the United Nations. I'm afraid they're going to leak all of this to the press. That would blow this whole planet sky high." He bit into his soggy cigar with visible force.

"We've been working on that through the State Department. I want you to deal only with the British until we get this under control."

"Yes Sir."

"In fact, I want you to get a hold of their boys and start training with some of their units as soon as possible."

"I've got a spot already set up for them but until Tiger One is out of the mod' bay we won't be able to ingress anything."

"When will that be?"

"Major Willams has indicated next Wednesday." The microwave communication direct link with the Whispering Wind in orbit around Io cut in on the conversation leaving a perturbed look on the President's face as he was phased out, one pixel at a time, and replaced by the elegant looking Doctor Margret Beil. When the entire video data stream was decoded by the computer the audio channel was completed and he could hear the sounds of an interplanetary spaceship crew hard at work in the background. Because of the vast distance between Jupiter and

Earth the lag time between asking a question and receiving a reply was long and tedious.

"Sorry about the slow integration Doctor." A voice said from out of view.

"Is the channel open?" She asked the unseen person.

"I've got a complete hook up Doctor." The General said. Margret was unsettled and squinted at her screen.

"General there seems to be some interference blocking your transmission again so please bare with me."

"Have you finished your study Doctor?"

"Yes, I have the report ready for visa-faxing."

"Ok, I'm ready to receive so send it on through. Do you have any comments to add on or off the record?"

"No Sir. Everything is complete and self-explanatory. Can you give me any idea when we'll be leaving for Earth?"

"The Captain has his orders so don't sweat it Doctor. I'll contact you if the need arises." He could see her spirit sink and he didn't want to get her all excited in case there were delays in the Tiger mod' program. "Just take a break and relax. We'll be getting things together here soon." He said, trying to reassure her. He failed but she was gracious enough not to let it show. Her face slowly dissolved and was replaced with the multi-colored pattern.

He called up the type written report Margret sent and began reading it.

Subject: Project Homecoming

Doctor Beil reporting; below is the list of candidates along with their personality profiles, who are most likely to be of benefit to the services and most able to adapt to the culture shock exhibited by most humans when removed from, and placed in a totally

unfamiliar environment. It is my judgment and recommendations that all of the subjects be confined to a restricted enclosed structure as all have demonstrated strong tendencies towards agoraphobia.

I have developed a scale to rate the abilities and deficiencies demonstrated by each of the subjects. The scale is relevant only as a means to get an idea of where they fall relating to our perception of certain areas of personality. Let me make it quite clear that this is only a comparison profile and in no way explores the true potential of the subjects. The scale ranges from one to one hundred with one being the lowest encountered and one hundred being the highest rating of all the subjects. As an example a rating of fifty in any category would place the subject in question as average among all the other candidates. Health was not included in the rating as all subjects are in excellent physical condition. Age is listed as apparent as no one knows the actual birth age, which is surely several hundred years in most cases.

Name: Janious Age: 32 Gender: Male

Intelligence: 100 Social compatibility: 78

Combat tactics: 100 Extrasensory perception: 52

Name: Bateira Age: 20 Gender: Female

Intelligence: 91 Social compatibility: 23

Combat tactics: 54 Extrasensory perception: 100

Name: Zora Age: 15 Gender: Female

Intelligence: 43 Social compatibility: 100

Combat tactics: 01 Extrasensory perception: 81

Name: Gardo Age: 90 Gender: Male

Intelligence: 85 Social compatibility: 56

Combat tactics: 32 Extrasensory perception: 95

Name: Donnice Age: 46 Gender: Male

Intelligence: 01 Social compatibility: 01
Combat tactics: 10 Extrasensory perception: 54
Name: Bern Age: 39 Gender: Male
Intelligence: 62 Social compatibility: 76
Combat tactics: 15 Extrasensory perception: 01
Name: Pernicus Age: 27 Gender: Male
Intelligence: 47 Social compatibility: 98
Combat tactics: 73 Extrasensory perception: 33
Name: Fonna Age: 26 Gender: Female
Intelligence: 05 Social compatibility: 21
Combat tactics: 92 Extrasensory perception: 75
Name: Bradley Age: 67 Gender: Male
Intelligence: 20 Social compatibility: 48
Combat tactics: 16 Extrasensory perception: 88
Name: Judustan Age: 52 Gender: Male
Intelligence: 41 Social compatibility: 77
Combat tactics: 25 Extrasensory perception: 100

Please keep in mind that these ratings are for comparison only and do not indicate the overall levels of capability of their race. A low number in any category is not a bad figure, it only relates to the rest of the group.

End of report.

After reading the report, General Whitfield gathered his hard copies for his presentation that he had scheduled.

The briefing room was packed from wall to wall and he was glad to see Leo and Keven present; even though Keven was only present via visa-view.

He had sent Berry down to Earth as soon as medical released him from quarantine to over see the programming of the computers for the new Tiger ships, it was the only aspect of construction that had to be done off base.

When the General looked through his papers one last time and was certain he hadn't forgotten anything, he cleared his throat of all the built-up cigar smoke. No one could remember a single meeting that had been started any other way. If he had thought about it he wouldn't have ether.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Major Willams, will you please begin with the status of the Tiger production line and then continue with the mod' update on the prototype?" The General asked without looking up at the officers before him.

Linda took the General's place at the podium. "We are, as of last night up to rate in all bays and the eleventh Tiger will roll off the line in one more month then one will follow every two weeks. With what we've learned from Major Fearsome's extended field test we have been able to avoid and or correct all operational glitches on the first ten ships and every ship to follow. The problems surrounding the main computer's unexpected personality traits have been circumvented on the follow-on models with a programming modification designed by Captain Berry Johnstone. Major Fearsome has elected to leave the main computer on TRR-1 intact with only minor programming updates. In closing as soon as Project Home coming is complete we will begin testing and simulations on the TRR-2 through 11's higher functions. We will be ready to begin regular operations with TRR-2 in twenty-four hours or less. The TRR-1 is in final check out and all combat mod's have been completed. We've been working around the clock to have it ready for

operations today and the team should be finished by the time we're done here. Thank you, General." Linda returned to her seat.

General Whitfield introduced a Colonel in the medical corps, a doctor named Hap Ferguson. He had been a Golden Gloves boxer in his younger days and liked to stay fit. His gray, short trimmed beard and bushy eyebrows gave him a grandfather look that shined through.

He tested the microphone and began his explanation of the problems with Captain Sands' health. "...What delayed our investigation's diagnosis of Captain Sands' was the failure of the holographic magnetic resonant imager to detect the four micron size cancer cells in the Captain's temporal lobe. That of course is a part of the brain. The cancerous cells have been localized in the vicinity of point three millimeters above the second temporal sulcus and two point two five three centimeters from the fissure of sylvius. My staff and I plan to do a fiberoptic laser, neural tissue, vaporization as soon as the equipment can be transported up from Earth. I've already started him on a wide-spectrum chemotherapy. We don't expect any complications that will further inhibit his duties and he should be released after a short recovery."

"Very well Doctor. Major Fearsome, will you report for your first permission briefing at fourteen hundred hours and proceed with transportation activities until further notice. Dismissed." With that the General lit one of his cigars and stepped down from the podium.

Leo reported to the small briefing room adjacent to the hanger where he met with the officer that was compiling a list of flights that were to be completed within the next few days.

The officer was a young Captain with bright red hair that was on the edge of regulation breach it was so long. He greeted Leo with a

friendly smile and a sharp salute. "Captain O'Tule reporting as ordered, Major."

"As you were, Captain." Leo said as he returned the salute. "What have you got for me?"

"Well sir, I thought you would prefer to do your own prioritizing so I have just compiled a list of destinations along with the payloads. I am prepared to give any level of assistance that you may require."

"Fine." Leo turned the visa-view screen so that he could see it more clearly and realized that there were more than two hundred separate sorties listed. "Holy moley! Where do we start?"

"That's what I said. If you'll look at item number 00163AX I think that's as good a place as any."

Leo was glad the Captain had had the time to study the tasking list and recognized the equipment for Keven's surgery. "Defiantly. That's where we start. Good job. Go ahead and set-up a sortie profile for the next week and down-load it to TRR-1 and if there's any problems I'll get back with you as they arise."

"Yes sir. Oh Major, I have arranged for orientation with the new Advanced Environmental Combat Suit. I'll have Lieutenant Jas meet you in the Prep Area." The officer saluted as Leo exited for the modification bay AND Leo hurriedly returned it.

Linda was finishing her inspection of the Tiger ship as Leo entered the mod' bay. "All seems in order. Good work Tim." She said to the British engineer.

"Thanks lass, me crew busted their kazoos to have it ready for your deadline. Well, well, if it isn't the flyboy himself. Good to see you son." He shook Leo's hand long and hard. "You boys did one hell of a fine job on those dogs of the stars."

"We did our best Tim."

"And that's all anybody could ask of ya son. I'd love to chat with ya but I must be getn' on it you know."

"Want the nickel tour Major?" Linda asked proudly.

"You bet."

They stepped through the oval hatch that doubled as the airlock and Leo could see some of the changes to his beloved ship. "I like the multi-purpose fixture rails. That should expand mission envelope."

"They'll allow the fitting of seats too heavy equipment tie down. Check this out." She pushed one of the many new buttons located on a large panel and the entire aft bulkhead dropped away forming a ramp the full width of the compartment.

"Nice. I wondered why that wasn't included in the original design."

"Good old General Donnols rejected it out right at the time."

"Figures."

They went through to the cockpit and passed multiple weapons racks that would hold at least a full squad's selection with replacements. "Hay, what happened to my killer window?" The area forward of the pilot's seat was a dull gray that replaced the rap-around windscreen.

"It's still there but you won't need it." She answered as she activated the virtual reality holographic projection unit and the walls disappeared.

"You've out done yourself Linda. This is almost as good as on the Atrochen ship."

"One of the benefits of the information that your computer returned with. Look at this. Computer activate weapons systems, command override, Willams."

"At once Major Willams. Good morning Major Fearsome."

"Good morning to you as well Tiger. All systems secure?"

"All systems are in perfect working order. I am looking forward to proceeding with the mission profile Captain O'Tule downloaded at O'five hundred this morning."

The view outside was enhanced with a composite overlay of radar, thermal, inferred and laser scans highlighting and targets were marked with bright icons that indicated what weapon system would engage it. Leo took notice that there were other systems available besides the ten-megawatt laser and the forty-millimeter vertical launch missiles. A twenty-five millimeter gattling cannon for point defense and fire suppression was coaxially mounted on the laser turret but had independent azimuth and slew control. A multi threat, defense hardware deployment pack with ten remote piloted recognizant vehicles and twenty drone decoys was fitted to the top just aft of the vertical launch missile tubes. The phased array synthetic aperture multi-band radar had been replaced with an upgraded version with a wider bandwidth and kilowatt jamming capability. There were also two state-of-the-art electromagnetic warfare computers installed.

"This new seat looks real uncomfortable."

"You'll never notice it's been redesigned for the new flight suits." She pointed at the receptacles and ports along the back of the seat. "This is where your suit integrates with the ship's functions."

"Cool." Leo turned to Linda and asked. "When can I have her?"

"Just as soon as I sign it off."

"Great. I want to start preflight in one hour."

"No problem. I'll have it moved to pad one on the double."

Leo proceeded to the equipment prep area that housed all the tactical gear where he found Lieutenant Jas. With him was a Specialist grade Instructor.

"Major Fearsome." The two men saluted Leo and he returned the gesture. "This is Specialist Sokoeve, he will check you out on the AECS Model 2090. If you will excuse me now I have other duties."

The Instructor had a certain all business look to his disposition.

"Of course, Lieutenant you're dismissed." Leo saluted him and turned his attention to the instructor.

The soldier typed a code into a visa-view on the wall and an automated robotic handling system brought a rack of suits from deep within the storage facility. The suits glided silently on the rail system and lowered to arms reach hanging just off the floor.

The Specialist began his presentation. "This is the Advanced Environmental Combat Suit Model 2090. It is fully self-contained and integrated. It is intended that the individual will wear the suit continuously until the long duration mission is terminated and at no time should it be necessary to remove the suit or break any of the seals for a period not to exceed thirty-five days, however with supplemental cartridges mission duration can be extended indefinitely. The only difference between this model and the one you will be issued, the AECS Model 2090C is the suit interface ports that link your suit to the systems and stores aboard the Tiger ships." He turned the two different suits around so Leo could see the backsides and compare the differences.

After Leo examined them to his satisfaction the Specialist continued. "Beginning from the ground up. The integral self-adjusting foot protectors, which contain a passive sensor array are capable of

detecting anti-personnel mines and other booby traps such as tripwires and the like at a range of ten meters max and has a ballistic protection level three rating." He raised one of the boots up slightly and pointed out the rigged lines that marked the telescoping adjustment features in the soles. The top of the boot ended at mid calf. "Located along the outboard side of both calves are fixed bladed knives, the left is a survival/field utility type design with a modified bowie point constructed of a ceramic nonconductive material impregnated with a micro-diamond cutting edge and extends ten inches in length it can also double as a bayonet and mounts on any weapon that can accept one. The right side blade is a combat design featuring a modified tanto point and is double edged with the spine serrated from the mid point to the guard. The base material is a single crystal titanium alloy coated with a friction reduction polymer. It is equipped with a hypersonic oscillator enabling it to cut through most body armor and bone with little effort. Both weapons are held in place by a passive restraint system and is effected in this manner." He demonstrated the technique to Leo and handed the fighting knife to him.

Leo checked the balance of the blade and flipped it around in his hand quickly changing from a hammer grip to a reverse grip and then to a saber grip getting a feel for the well thought out design. "Perfect balance for throwing."

The Specialist recovered the blade seemingly unimpressed and replaced it in its protective sheath.

"The suit material fits like a glove and provides full nuclear-biological and chemical protection and can perform as a pressure suit in a reduced pressure environment rated to one hundred thousand feet MSL. It is impregnated with refracting crystals that when activated provide superior camouflage that adapts to surrounding surface's

colors. The base ballistic protection is level five and is impervious to typical small arms. The gloves are integral as well and self adjusting like the boots."

Leo looked closely at the soft material that resembled wet suit neoprene. He opened his mouth to ask a question but never got the chance.

"A compound sandwiched between multiple layers of the material acts like a liquid until a high energy impact then it instantly becomes solid until the force is dissipated then it reverts to a liquid again." He thumped the leg of the suit with the butt of his sidearm illustrating the effect.

"Humph." Leo found the concept intriguing.

The instructor continued. "Located on the thigh and reversible to either side is a sidearm holster, which can be configured for any inventory handgun with mounted accessories and the empty location on the opposite side can be fitted with a Universal Equipment Rack or pouches.

"The backpack is integral and houses the following modules: First is the Power Unit. It is an ion discharge reconverter with a storage discharge cycle of thirty days with all systems activated with no supplemental recharging. It is nonreplicable but is continuously recharged by the photovoltaic cells incorporated in your helmet and on the pack outer surfaces and also by the Waist and Water Recovery Unit, located here." He pointed to the bulge on the side of the pack and the locations on the helmet and along the top of the pack.

"The Waist and Water Recovery Unit collects all moisture and excrements produced by your body and stores them for use as power or to replenish your fluids."

"You mean it recycles my own waist products and feeds them back to me?" Leo was used to the concept, it had been in use from the beginning of the space program, but the thought always turned his stomach.

"That is correct."

He removed a cartridge from a receptacle along the very bottom of the pack but was within easy reach of the user. "This is the ultimate meal on the go. It is the Field Nourishment Unit containing meal pellets that are dispensed to the helmet and each pellet supplies all a growing boy needs for an entire day. The unit has a thirty-day ration that can be extended to forty days in a crisis.

"Along the right side of the pack is the Atmosphere Generator. It produces oxygen chemically and scrubs carbon dioxide providing forty days of breathable air with normal exertion. It also can supplement that supply by filtering outside air to two-micron particle size and filters all bio-chemical agents as well, it does this fully automatically with no user intervention needed. The filter can be replaced when it becomes clogged while in a contaminated environment.

"At the top of the pack is the Multi-comm. It is a multi-band, multi-mode communications and navigation transceiver that provides networked links to every combat unit in your section as well as uplink to any available communication and navigation satellites, beacons or repeaters. Attached to the sides are Mission Configurable Mounts that can accept anything from heavy weapons to extra miscellaneous equipment or electronics packages. This port on the left side is a data and power link for belt mounted heavy weapons and when in use, ammo canisters mounted on the underside of the pack at these hard points are automatically made available." He pointed out each of the features as he described their function. "On the forearms are located tactile data

input interfaces that give the user access to all of the different functions of the computer and com gear as well as the suits controls, most of these functions can be accessed with the helmet by the Verbal/lingual Interface. The arms have a ballistic level three, protection rating.

"The helmet is the real jewel." He handed one to Leo. "As you can see the functions can all be controlled by using your tongue with the lingual scanning joystick to steer the curser on the projected screens at the top and bottom of the face shield, where all situational awareness info is displayed along with system status and other important data. Data is limited until you ask for it to decrease sensory overload. I'll go into more detail later. "There is a 3D surround sound field generated from the acoustic sensors located around the helmet and these sensors are integrated with a passive acoustic target tracking system and an active ultrasonic vision system. Light intensification and magnification to power twenty, LIDAR and thermal vision enhancement compliments the target acquisition and tracking systems as well giving you the ability to see in total darkness or in a fog environment that would other wise blind or reduce your visual range. All of your target information is passed to the network automatically so everything you detect is available to everyone else in your sector. You can imagine any number of scenarios that would benefit from this capability."

The Command Channel Structure is controlled automatically when the suit samples your DNA enabling clearances allowed to you. It also has intuitive function so communications is only directed to units that are intended too decrease com. traffic on unintended channels. All communication is encrypted and secure being transmitted by laser, line

of sight, when possible and Extreme Long Wave when a satellite or repeater is not available."

"Wow, so any unit in the sector can act as a repeater?"

"As long as they are linked in the network, yes. The network is updated with hyper-burst data transfer only when needed to decrease traffic that might expose the unit's positions. If the unit doesn't need the information it is not sent to them unless they are required as a repeater. That pretty much covers it. Do you have any more questions? If not I'll demonstrate how to apply the suit."

"No, continue."

The Instructor undressed to his birthday suit and worked his way into the small opening behind the helmet attachment ring and in front of the pack. After working his feet and legs in place he carefully fitted the suit's waist collection devices around his genitals and along his butt crack inserting it into his anis. It looked very uncomfortable but as he pulled the suit over the rest of his body it all conformed neatly giving him total freedom of movement. He observed as Leo applied his version of the suit and made suggestions and advice as Leo wrestled his way in.

By the time Leo had locked the helmet in place he was out of breath and sweating. He could feel the suit absorbing every drop as it exited the pores and it felt like ants crawling all over his body.

The specialist could see his distress. "Don't worry, the sensation will pass and you'll get more proficient at applying the suit with practice. After awhile you'll forget you're even wearing it."

"Yeah right." Leo had his doubts but the irritation was already subsiding.

When the helmet was locked in place the systems came on-line automatically and the network was activated. "Major, you have been

detected on my network. Welcome." The Tiger computer sounded glad to be able to communicate with him from a distance.

"Hello, Tiger. It'll take me some time to get used to this thing."

"Yes, I would think it would. You will need to exchange your AECS 2090C helmet with the AECS 2090C-B to have access to the mind-link computer."

"Ok stand by." He removed the helmet and typed the requested item into the visa-view and one was delivered in a few seconds. He locked the new helmet in place. "Is that better, Tiger?"

"Major, you now have total ship's systems access."

"Copy that Tiger, I'm on my way to you now. Specialist Sokoeve, you're dismissed." The technician saluted and departed out the door.

"Yes, I have your telemetry and am tracking you."

Leo moved to the ship, when he sat in the seat the suit interconnected with the ships food and water supplies and all of the tactical systems. He was surprised that the seat was as comfortable as it was and he quickly settled in and began the preflight checklist.

The medical equipment Colonel Hap Ferguson had ordered was the first shipment delivered by what was to become known as the "Flashing Delivery Service". The GW-HS-RDS (Gravity Wave-Harmonic Skip-Resonance Drive System) functioned perfectly. And proved to be very reliable.

As Keven was being prepped for surgery, Hap was trying to explain the procedure to Keven in as simple of terms as possible. "Captain, the operation should require no more than two hours in the Holographic Magnetic Resonance Imager. You will be conscious through out the entire procedure, however we will administer a nerve blocker that will prevent

you from moving. Just like the one you received the first time in the imager."

"I hate that shit." Keven detested drugs in general and anything that incapacitated him even more.

Hap ignored him. "After the nerve block is in place we will insert a catheter into the internal carotid artery, that will act as a guide for the glass fiber. It will be used as a course directional guide until it is well into the cerebral portion of the artery. The fiber has been coated with a magnetic shroud, which will allow it to be steered with a weak magnetic field. After winding around in the various parts of the carotid artery it will end up in the parieto-temporal where we will then close in on the cancerous cells and vaporize them. It's really not that bad, with the equipment we have here its pretty much a matter of following the map and taking the shortest route to the problem. So don't worry and we'll get started in a minute or so."

"That's easy for you to say Doc." Keven's *favorite* nurse entered the room. It was the first time he had seen her up close without her protective vinyl suit.

She brought with her a syringe with a dramatically long needle. She wore a devious grin and took great pleasure in perforating his backside.

"You didn't have to enjoy it that much." He said.

She just smiled and slapped him on the ass and she left the room. The prep injection took effect quickly and Keven felt extremely relaxed.

He was loaded onto a gurney and taken into the operating room and placed in the foreboding magnetic device. As the power level was increased, a strange warmth flowed over his upper-body and head. The nurse and two doctors pushed the fiber laser device into position and

administered the nerve blocking agent into the base of his skull. Keven immediately lost all control of his bodily functions.

He thought to himself. *I sure am glad I followed the doctor's orders and didn't eat or drink anything.* He couldn't have talked even if he wanted to.

They positioned a visa-view in front of his face so that he could watch the procedure as it was happening.

Hap was in a separate room with a large window that looked out into where Keven was lying. Hap loaded the computer with the program that outlined the operation's procedure and turned on the imager. When the equipment came on-line Hap slipped his virtual reality visor over his eyes and put the controlling gloves on. A three-square foot, visa-view screen lit-up displaying a high-resolution picture of Keven's head. Ferguson typed commands into the keyboard and the top layer of skin was peeled away revealing the tissue below. He zoomed the image and then peeled another layer off revealing the bone structure then another layer was removed which only left the carotid artery and the pathway he intended to take to the cancerous tissue that flashed on the screen. He then instructed the other doctors to insert the catheter. Out of the corner of Keven's eye he could see Hap contorting strangely as the fiber entered his neck. Every time Hap would move the robotic fiber guide would react.

Keven watched however unwillingly as the wire like fiber worked its way up his neck and after leaving its large sheath behind, into his brain. Every now and then it would stop at an intersection and he would feel a slight increase in power as the fiber would be pulled one way or the other and then continue on its way towards the unwanted cells. It surprised him how long it took for the fiber to work its way into position. He was also surprised by the fact the whole thing was

virtually painless. The only thing he really felt was the penetration of his skin by the needles.

When it looked like the fiber was about to touch the cells that were highlighted in red, Hap zoomed the image again so that the screen was filled with only the cells and the tip of the fiber. The view rotated and showed the exact impact point of the laser beam as a small cross hair. Hap activated the laser and the small portions under the cross hair began to disappear. Hap then split the screen so that he could see the progress from three different angles simultaneously. It was critical that there be none of the DNA of the rogue cells remaining or the cancer could regenerate and spread to other parts of his body like wildfire.

As the cells were disintegrated Keven could feel an emotional stress vaporize as well. Soon all trace of the cancer was gone and the fiber was drawn back into its protective shroud and removed from his neck. He was given a sedative and returned to his room where he slept for several hours.

Keven briefly opened his glazed eyes to find Linda's head resting across his chest. He rapped his free arm around her and fell asleep again to dream about his future with the woman he loved more every day.

Leo hadn't spent as much time in alpha state since the testing program four years ago as he was now. The Tiger was either being loaded or unloaded almost continuously. After several days of full loads to and from the Earth, the list had worked down to receiving the supercomputers for the in-process Tigers yet to be completed.

Leo's ship materialized and the cold fusion reactor was still powering down when Leo heard a familiar voice approach the cockpit from behind. "Leo, my man. Next stop Home Plate."

"Hay Berry, I didn't know you were riding up on this trip."

"Got my orders about ten minutes ago."

"Captain Johnstone, I have missed your regular scans of my data banks." Tiger's digitized voice contained a vague hint of sarcasm.

Berry sensed the attempt at humor and played along. "You want me to run a quick diagnostic Tiger?"

"Not unless you care to allow me to probe your brain as well."

"That's okay, I'll leave that joy to Fearsome."

That sparked a good laugh from the two men and the display that monitored the Tiger computer's logic functions flipped and swirled.

Berry marveled at the advancing human like interaction of the computer. When the traits first appeared they annoyed him, then as they grew they frightened him, now they just amazed him.

The tiger grew from a collection of opto-tronic components to a true friend and colleague. The rivalry that had developed on the Atrochen ship evolved into a mutual respect, but Leo was the only person that truly related to Tiger.

Leo's Comm unit's persistent beeping interrupted him. "Tiger one here, go ahead Home Plate." Leo said.

"Home Plate to Tiger one. Stand-by for updated orders." A voice cracked over the speaker.

"Tiger one to Home Plate. I copy, standing-by and ready to receive." Leo typed a series of commands into the computer and waited.

The Tiger computer spoke next. "Major, the new orders have been received and filed. The conformation codes check-out and match the verifier."

"Okay Tiger..." He opened the channel. "Tiger one to Home Plate. Message received and verified."

"Roger that, Home Plate out."

"Tiger one, out." He set the Comm unit to the stand-by mode. "Tiger, display new orders on main screen please." The large visa-view screen mounted in the middle of the control panel flashed the short message across its black background. It was only an up-date telling him of Berry's orders.

"I would have thought they'd have sent the orders to you first Fearsome."

"Typical military operation." Leo said.

"Isn't it the truth." Berry agreed.

They returned to the base and Leo was exhausted. He began his post-flight checklist.

"I'll go and check in with base security then I'll come back and get you and we can go see Keven together. How does that sound?" Berry said as he left.

"Sounds like a plan to me." Leo agreed.

He continued to clear system after system following the routine of the checklist. He was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his eyes open and found himself blinking his eyes repeatedly. Leo felt strangely compelled to close his eyes, to relax and he drifted off into a deep uncontrolled sleep. He failed to finish turning off all the ship's systems including the mind link and the GW-HS-RDS. As he slept a familiar voice that he had not heard in many years crept into his subconscious world. At first his mind twisted and played games with the soft youthful beckoning until his higher level perceptions became aware of the outside stimuli and slowly brought him out of his sleep and into a restful meditative So Shin Do concentration. He precisely tuned his brain into the thoughts that were penetrating the thick layer of lunar rock and soil and bringing him the sweet visions that were focusing in his mind's eye. It had been so long sense he had seen Margret in person

that he was over whelmed by the reality of her image and as he sat motionless in his pilot's seat a single tear slowly trickled down his cheek.

It was the only clue to Berry, who had just returned, that Leo wasn't just asleep. Berry sat down in the padded seat to Leo's right and noticed the mind-link computer had locked-on to a new location never before entered into it's memory. He began a log of the brainwave patterns that were being generated and entered new code into his monitoring program.

The image of Margret faded and was replaced by Zora in the ancient temple where they had first made contact. "You sure get around Leo." She said with a smile of a long sense seen friend.

Leo noticed that this time she was wearing a white gown that covered her much better than her long flowing hair had done the last time they had contact. "I see Margret has taught you a few things about our culture."

"Yes, she has been very patient with all of us and has taught us many things about your way of life. You have been moving around so much lately that as soon as I would find your life stream you would vanish just as quickly as you had the time before. I was growing tired of chasing you all across the galaxy."

"I tried to contact you several times after our last encounter but I didn't know how. Do you know what happened?"

"Janious, our leader, was afraid that the Atrochens would somehow trace my mind walking and find us before your people did, so he blocked you from finding me until now."

"I understand, it was a wise decision."

"When will you come for us? Margret is very anxious to be with you again and we want to fulfill our promise to help your people."

"I can't answer your question. It's not my responsibility to make those decisions but if it were up to me, I would now."

"Come soon and show me your home." She said as he found himself spinning around and around in his head as he opened his eyes to see the reflection of Berry in the large monitor in front of him.

"Hay, where you been Leo?"

"What do you mean?" Leo asked, still not feeling quite himself.

"Check out the Mind-link readout." Berry printed out a hard copy and tore it from the slot as it appeared.

"This system never ceases to amaze me. Do you think it really did lock-on to a real location?"

"You tell me. I wasn't there."

"Neither was I. At least I didn't think I was. It seemed real enough; but how could the Mind-link fix a position to lock-on to?" Leo was more than a little confused about the whole thing.

"This is too much. Linda has got to hear about this." Berry said with excitement overflowing.

General Whitfield called a meeting with all of his senior staff and was exploring this new phenomenon with cautious ardor.

"Frankly General, I'm dumbfounded. Astral projection has been a part of metaphysics for centuries. But it has never been confirmed. I can't say that's what has happened here with any certainty but that's as good an explanation as I can come up with." Linda ran her fingers through her hair and pulled it back behind her ears as she spoke. "I couldn't find any malfunctions or anomalies in the equipment and Berry, uh Captain Johnstone, assures me that no glitch resides in the programming."

"So what your telling me is that: Major Fearsome is able to mentally travel to places he has never been to and the computer was able to pick up on his thoughts and trace the location as an actual location."

"That just about sums it up, General."

"What are the dangers involved in using this ability and him actually going there?"

She through her hands up. "I have no idea. Doctor Biel is the one to ask. She has more experience in this field than anyone else. This is totally unbroken ice. I can't even speculate on the out come. Leo was never in orbit over Earth before either but that was where the Mind-link directed the GW-HS-RDS when they returned from deep space. It would seam that he has remote perception abilities that enable him to experience a reality separated from his body as though he was really there."

"It would be foolhardy to act on this as though it were perfectly natural and proceed with manned experiments, especially with the Major being our only way out of this tome. Is there any chance of developing an unmanned transport vehicle in our life time."

"We began our research six years ago. Working with that goal in mind and the computer technology couldn't support the artificial intelligence required to bring the program to even partial phase test. It wasn't until Major Fearsome appeared on the scene that we moved out of science fiction and into reality. We've been devoting all our resources towards the production of new ships and haven't addressed the possibilities with new data technologies. With the new parallel processing optical superconducting supercomputers it may be feasible. But you're talking about developing a totally new science with all the

cost and time involved with high-tech research. It could run into the billions of dollars. Berry what do you think?"

"I believe it is possible in the long term but it would take a major breakthrough. The Tiger computer might be able to interface with the mind-link at some point, but I'm not even sure that the conditions that awoke his intelligence can be replicated. He's an anomaly that has never been explained."

"What else is new?" The General said with frustration. "Ok Major Williams, I want you to do a preliminary study on the subject. The Tiger concept was fine as a research program but I find it dangerous, if not down right stupid to rely solely on Major Fearsome for all our contact with the outside world. I never should have gone along with the Secretary of Defense on this one. There are to be no experiments relating to this subject until further notice."

"Yes Sir." They all chorused.

"Dismissed." Whitfield would not even entertain theoretical discussion of the matter after the meeting.

Leo was disappointed with the General's decision because he had a feeling deep inside that gave him full confidence in the out come of a test transit. The thought of a failure had crossed his mind and the consequences to the future were grave, but still he felt confident that he would go directly to where ever the strange place in his mind was. He would never believe that it existed only as a hallucination. He sensed a presence of a higher power that was leading him, opening his mind one lock at a time. Expanding his realm of influence beyond what others thought of as tangible.

As the weeks passed he spent all his spare time, not working as a cargo hauler, gathering data to support his hypotheses so as to try to

persuade General Whitfield to allow him to try the dimension jump but when he began his presentation, Whitfield cut him off short. Leo's attempt at a scientific approach was dismissed out of hand and dropped where it was on the visa-view screen.

With the arrival of the alien ship expected any day Leo was driven by the horror he knew faced his people. He stopped Whitfield in the hall outside his office and begged for permission for him to attempt his well-prepared plan.

"Please Sir, if we don't get the Atlantis pilots here soon it may be too late. We can't fight them with just one ship. We need them now, not when it seems safe to try. I realize the risk and the fact that all of you," He swung his arms in a big ark. "Will be trapped here if I fail. But you've got to understand that you'll only be the first casualties among our entire population of Earth. A race that may stand a chance if we can get the Atlantians here in time." With all the words out in the air Leo studied his face for any weakness.

After several seconds Sherman gave his final order. "Leo... I haven't had the time to get to know you as well as I would have liked. You see son. I would not have put up with as much bull shit from anyone, bar none. Except, I have seen a quality within you that few possess. You have shone a selflessness that is truly heroic."

Leo knew that the General was wrong about his motives. Someone close to him had always been as much a force behind his actions as the Atrochens were but he hoped he didn't betray himself now.

"I'll try to show the courage worthy of your attempt and allow you, your chance to save our world. What becomes of us is in your hands now. God be with you son." He put his hand on Leo's shoulder. "You have done something that few men live to do Fearsome. You have stepped into your father's shoes and carried his name with growing honor. He would

be proud of you." General Whitfield's speech took Leo by surprise and left him speechless. "Carry on Major."

Leo stepped up to a visa-phone along the wall and typed in the code that connected him with Captain O'Tole. When the young officer's face filled the screen Leo said. "Operation Home Coming is a go."

"Kick ass, uh Sir." Captain O'Tole burned the midnight oil working on the mission profile and logistics in hopes than the General would give the green light. He had worked hard over the past two years earning the privilege to be onboard with Fearsome. He knew all of the systems inside and out and made sure that every detail received the necessary attention to keep the Tiger on the Active Rotation List. His job description could have been replaced with that of a mind reader's in that he was expected to guess ahead to what the Tiger's mission task might be required to perform. He was good at predicting the next mission and he always had his ear to the ground at Intelligence so as to remain ahead of the power curve.

Leo disconnected the signal and headed for the hangar bay.

He completed the systems checks and was powering up the cold fusion reactor when the main hatch opened and Keven, followed closely by Berry, clamored up the ramp, loaded down with an assortment of combat gear. "You didn't think you could get out of here with out us did you?" Keven laughed. He noticed that all the equipment racks were already stocked with his usual gear. O'Tole had done his job well once again. He stashed the extra weapons in the few empty slots and jumped into the seat at the Mission Control Station.

"Not for a second. It may be a one way ride." Leo wasn't kidding at all. He had no proof positive that he wasn't just delusional and that the mission wouldn't send them all to Hell in a hand basket.

"Hey, I got my orders." Cried Berry as he slid into the seat at the Programming Station.

"Welcome aboard Captains. Stand-by for GW-HS-RDS engagement." He snapped his helmet in place and closed his eyes. "Next stop, Io." Once the hatch sealed itself the Tiger vanished from the bay in a thunderous clap.

Chapter 2

Rude Awakening

Passing through space at several times the speed of light, the Atrochen ship had been hurling towards the Sol solar system for more than four years as measured on earth. Its photon drive was hard at work and they were outside the ninth planet's outer most orbital path as they rushed inbound. The outer hull was cold as death, very near absolute zero from crossing the void between stars. The entire interior had a thin layer of frost that covered the ship from stem to stern. The only activity was the occasional maintenance drone that went about its duties whether anyone noticed or not but even they would be hard to find in the miles long, living interstellar ship.

The bridge of the vast ship had remained empty and silent for all but the first few hours of the long journey until a single light source blinked, so small it might have gone unnoticed anywhere else but on this dark lonely bridge. The consoles were laid out in a way that insinuated direction of fore and aft and a reference to up and down but with gravity being as alien to this vessel as the ship itself there was little need. Only for short periods during accelerations were the effects of inertia noticed and only then might it be sensed as gravity. This effect was an annoyance to all of the regular crew as they were well designed for this environment and for the others there were special decks to accommodate their limitations.

An incoming message had toggled the auto-maintenance computer out of its Rest mode into its Wake mode. In this condition a predetermined list of activities were initiated starting with the deactivation of the

Commander's and his Command Crew's cryogenic sleep systems. While the Atrochens were being thawed out, other parts of the interstellar ship were being prepared for the rest of the crew in case the Commander chose to awaken them as well.

The starship was at the edge of short-range detection of their destination. The Commander swam onto the bridge and activated the holographic view of the world he had been sent to destroy. His fin-like appendages fanned the atmosphere providing him with stability. As the solid walls became transparent to the point of invisible due to the fine quality of the holographic projection, he relaxed at the sensation of floating in free space. The view was total void except for the small point of violet light that was caused by the Doppler effect of their closing rate towards the star ahead. Only the light from the stars in the direction of travel could reach his eyes and it was compressed and distorted making short blobs of blue and violet color that shimmered with the cosmic winds. It would still be many cycles before they would enter the solar system and even at maximum magnification only planets could be detected as of yet. No defined images could be scanned for his inspection with any fine detail.

The rest of the Command Crew filed onto the bridge and took their places along the line of consoles in front of the Commander. Looming above the small Controllers that more resembled disembodied brains with slug bodies and long thin tentacles was the Lord's Enforcer. He took his place beside the Commander and sang his whale-like intonations. "Have you called up the message that has brought us out of stasis?"

"No, I wanted you here so that I wouldn't have to answer a lot of redundant questions." He turned to one of the Controllers. "Access the communication log and play it back." Bio-illuminant cells sent shades of green flashes along his jaw line.

The wall changed into a view of their home planet Seaside and a voice sang its message. "What you are about to see is a recording of the events that transpired as the mission ship, ZX-501 entered the pattern for orbit around Seaside as scheduled."

The screen changed to a view from an observation satellite around the planet's orbital defensive moon station. As the starship approached Seaside it deviated from the normal lanes to enter orbit and began to accelerate dangerously. It then turned toward the planet and dove into the atmosphere. The maneuver had been unexpected and it took the defensive systems several seconds to react. As they opened fire large sections of the ship began to rip away and break-up in the thin, high altitude air. Their efforts to destroy the, out of control ship were too late and it plummeted to the surface in a blaze of fire and electric arks that reached out hundreds of miles in all directions. When it impacted the ocean's surface a huge mushroom cloud that could have covered a continent followed the multiple nuclear explosions and ascended high into the stratosphere. Even from the vantage point several hundred of miles above the planet, the flash seemed to dim the systems white dwarf star.

The voice returned and explained. "It required many cycles to determine the cause of what was at first thought to be an accident. But after an exhaustive investigation it was concluded that the true cause was sabotage." The Enforcer looked at the Commander with wide eyes filled with suspicion. The voice continued. "We have linked a Prozacken to the final moments when the ship was steered manually into the Scientific Center and Space Port complex. We have also discovered the involvement of humans leading up to the series of malfunctions that allowed this to happen. It is still unclear how the humans gained access to the ship after cryro-conditioning, it is suggested by some

investigators that they may have boarded after the Lanthera went hyper-light but this hypothesis is highly debated. The damage resulting from this act of aggression has run terribly deep. Among the losses were this sector's Gene Pool and our entire scientific research community in this sector. We are completely cut-off from all other star systems, as we have no Lantheras in this sector. Seaside, as a strategic facility has been reduced to a burden to the Lord and we do not expect any relief within ten hexcycles. You are to contact the Lord as soon as you have viewed this message for further orders." With that, the wall went blank and the view was replaced with the site of the star field ahead.

"Establish a dark matter hook-up with the Lord and then transfer it to my cabin." The Commander said with a somber tone that echoed morosely down the passage as he left the bridge. Dark blue and purple waves of color rippled up and down his jaw line reflecting his somber thoughts.

Across the vast expanse of interstellar space, near the outer edge of the galaxy where the Atrochen home once reigned supreme. The Atrochens struggled for life in ways that had been regarded as creations reserved only for the "lower life forms". Billions of years ago the Lord pleaded for a combined audience and was refused now it was they who begged for attention as an integral facet of their existence was vaporized on Seaside.

The Lord watched the plight of the surface dwellers and could almost remember the early days when he was the first of the composite lives to be created. The Gene Pools had watched his struggle for survival much like the way he was watching the masses now. That was four billion years ago and he didn't have any more pity for the others during this crisis than he did any other time since the early days. He

had ruled with an icy heart and the Gene Pool as their reward for uncounted generations. If he were to set foot on his home planet he would be devoured by the hundreds of millions waiting to be saved. And as they wait for rescue, the defense satellite prepared to engulf them in a cone of neutron radiation so that the new colony of beings designed for the radioactive world won't have any burden or wasted effort trying to help the doomed parasites.

For the first time since the beginning of the Herds the Gene Pools were joining their combined intellect to form the ancient Mind Web. They had snared the Lord's thoughts long enough to instruct him to destroy all life left on Seaside. They had said, "To prepare the way for the future Herds to come." How many times had he heard the phrase, "For the Herd"? And how many times had he said it?

He thought to himself. *"If the Gene Pool had listened to me and enacted my plan for the humans when we discovered them, we would not be sterilizing my home now."* High-resolution optic scanners produced a holographic scene of the doomed world below.

The Lord watched the twisted, radiation burned faces of the Atrochens that floated helplessly in the ocean currents. There were so many of them that a land dweller could walk across them and never get his feet wet. Few of them were dead but they all were dying, some faster than others but they all would be dead soon enough.

"This is the Lord." He called to the unseen computer. "Give me direct control of the neutron generator aboard satellite, Defense Eleven." The hologram changed to a targeting display that directed the weapon. "Full intensity wide dispersion beam." The display showed the footprint of the beam as it would cover the planet's surface. "Energize the emitter. Discontinue the visual display." The hologram was replaced by the beautiful art that covered the walls of his stateroom.

If he had not been aboard his private starship he would be among the billions being put to their deaths now. Somehow the thought had a certain sweetness. The Lord did not know if death was a condition that even applied to him. He was the oldest living organism in the galaxy other than the Gene Pool. He had suffered injury before but he regenerated every time. He had redundant vital organs that helped him survive a rebel assassination attempt and his recovery would have been considered a miracle had he been any other species.

The Atrochens had no government as such only the Gene Pool and the Lord to carry out the Gene Pool's orders. The bureaucracy that formed was directed from the top down with specialist playing their roles as they were designed to do so. Every creature knew their place in the system at the cellular level and carried out the function without question or reward. However the Lord had his own agenda.

He was not the same being that the Gene Pool created. His original persona was kept in a dark place, repressed by the evil that took control of him early on in his existence. The evil that took pleasure in destroying the millions below, the evil that looked forward to the coming end of the Chosen Ones. He was the exception among the Atrochen, greed and lust had no meaning in their language but he had goals that came to him from the other dimension. Everything that drove the Atrochen culture revolved around providing for the Gene Pool and its infrastructure. Only a small amount of technology was unique to or invented by them.

Billions of years in the past, when the galaxy was young an advanced race of beings had developed the ability to travel to its neighboring star. The journey took several generations. A planet was found there. The planet had but one inhabitant species.

The singular life form populated the entire planet and survived in all climates in the oceans and on the land. They all shared a common mind that drifted along the needs of survival. Though there were a few individual creatures it was of one conscientiousness. The Gene Pool assimilated all other life on the planet. The animal intelligence was spread among them all and one and was collected for transport back to the alien's world for study. There were only nineteen of them then. Soon after the sample was returned to the home world it absorbed the alien DNA and gained true intelligence. It took centuries for the entire race of aliens to be absorbed.

The wars that followed the first mass assimilation were long and hard fought. The weapons to fight the Gene Pool's creations drove the technology at a fast pace as all wars do. Because of the Gene Pool's ability to alter the genetic patterns at will it had the advantage, a technology years ahead of the defending culture. Once enough knowledge of the alien science had been captured and the manufactured creatures had taken control of it the founding race became expendable. Viruses deadly to the indigenous life forms were produced and the end was quick. The products of the Gene Pool were triumphant and their expansion across the galaxy was close behind.

A thousand years was little more than a day's toil for the Gene Pools. Death was a phenomena reserved for lower life forms who only deserved a short span so they could be controlled and not out live their usefulness. If the Gene Pools needed a warrior it produced a fighting machine with the physical attributes necessary to carry out the mission at hand. When an intellect was needed a brilliant mind was created but as with all designed creatures a short life span was in order.

As the Atrochen influence expanded across the galaxy other life forms were encountered. The standard procedure was to observe from a distance and gather information about the life forms to determine its usefulness to the Gene Pool. If the life form was too primitive to be of use the Atrochens would contaminate the social development and control the technology that was invented. Once it was determined what could be gained from the life forms the Atrochens would drain the world dry. Eventually the peoples of a given world were either made slaves to the Atrochens or destroyed. Either way, all genetic variations were returned to a Gene Pool for absorption.

The Lord had witnessed the act of genetic absorption millions of times in his lifetime. Many absorptions were used as a form of capital punishment. It was a gruesome scene to witness and an even worse event to endure. One would remain alive for hours as the cells were broken down at the protein level and membranes drained away the solution of amino acids and chromosomes.

The Lord broke his melancholy state and called to his computer. "Set a course for the Sol system and make way at once."

The computer controlled ship accelerated out of orbit around Seaside. As it pulled away a message scrolled across the Lord's holographic display.

The Lord activated his cold matter communicator.

It was the Commander of the earth bound ship that appeared before the Lord.

"Lord, I am reporting as ordered."

"Commander, what is your position relative to the human home world?" The Lord demanded.

"My ship is nine cycles inbound. We will begin the deceleration phase in four cycles."

"You will begin bombardment of the planet with the neutron generator as soon as you are at sublight speed. All life is to be terminated."

"Yes, Lord as you order."

"I have set course to oversee operations myself."

"With all respect, Lord. The operation will be complete long before your ship could arrive in this system."

"I do not share your confidence Commander. I want your entire staff involved in the planning of contingency operations. I will have all of the data on the humans beamed into your database. The humans are not to be underestimated. If they have perfected their transportation device, they could contaminate this entire sector and we do not have the resources within reach to carry out an extended stellar war with several systems."

"I understand your concern Lord, but how would the humans find the other worlds to unite them?"

"Your question is irrelevant. It is for this reason that I am using the experimental Refracting Photon Drive to reach you in one-tenth the time expected. For the Herds!"

"My life for the herds!"

Chapter 3

Intercity

Jack Tanner had grown up looking at the impoverished neighborhood and he knew nothing else, still he had a calling. He could hear it best late at night when the only sounds were the distant gunshots and sounds of poor people with poor ways.

There was the occasional drive-by shooting, but only the ones with the "big bitch," hung around long enough to draw fire from Widal Dane. He lived above Jack on the tenth floor. When he came down on someone all hell would break lose. His thirty-five millimeter Gattling machine-gun could spray twenty-five hundred rounds per minute and there was no one that lived in the hood that hadn't seen it do it at least once. That left only the Asian suicidal "blood squads" to deal with once a month or so.

All Jack could dream of was getting his mother and little brother out of the city where they could breathe fresh air, if there was any. He would close his eyes and see in his mind glacier lakes surrounded by pine forest and blue skies. It was strange though, when he did think of his special place, it soon would turn to a beautiful frozen crystal lake with many feet of snow every where. Jack had never been out of the hood before or seen snow but he had always wanted something different than the Gang life style.

The Echelons had ruled the hood for more than fifty years or so it was said. Their symbol was an inverted "V" with fire rising up in the center. Everyone in the project apartment building, that covered

the entire city block, was a member of the gang. They had to be. Or they were already dead except for Dane. When he mustered out of the Army he came straight to the hood.

He had killed so many gang members in the Gang Wars that he felt compelled to move there and carry on the battle to make it a safer place. But he was more than a little touched, and his form of safer was to shoot anyone that came around wanting new turf to deal their drugs on. He tolerated the Echelons because he knew that the members needed protection when they were not at the project and there was safety in numbers. He also didn't want to open a vacuum that would start a blood bath when other gangs fought for the territory. No new gangs had pushed in sense he arrived a few years ago.

Jack went to the Civil Relocation Center in his hood every week to see if he qualified for job training and future relocation out of the city. There were only a few hundred spots open every year and as they became available, those who lived long enough after they figured out the way to survive, to old age, were given a new lease on life and a good job.

There was one catch thou. Once you wore the "Colors" you were a member for life and if you were caught at the center you were put on the rebel list and your life expectancy became very short. It usually ended on the steps leading into the center. One had to be very careful.

On one of the cool fall nights, Jack was sitting in the corner window of his three-room apartment, dreaming of his special place. He could hear Dane pacing from one side of his apartment to the other on his nightly vigil. It was quite late and few people had walked past on the dirty sidewalk below in the last hour as the clock crept into the morning portion of its face.

The pacing stopped abruptly directly above Jack's head. Jack turned the small lamp off that sat on the old plastic table beside his cot, and squinted his eyes towards the street below to try to see what Dane was about to blow away.

Several hundred feet down the littered street, movement caught his attention. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he could make out the outline of an antique car as the dim light reflected off the rusty chrome bumper. It was the typical manor that most of the drive-by's occurred. They would start way down the street with their lights off and slowly cruise towards the building trying to determine if Dane had them in his sights yet, then they would scream by with guns hanging out every window blazing away.

Jack sensed the kill and knew that if he let his brother miss the action he would have a hard time in the morning. Jack hurriedly woke his sibling, Andy and they rushed over to the window. "Five bucks says they don't get off more than five shots each." Jack said.

"You're on." Andy said with confidence as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. The car smoked into a fiery torch of lead. They had moved about five feet when the floor above Jack began to drop large chunks of plaster down on their heads as a stream of high-explosive projectiles carved the old Buick into a burning heap of steel.

Their mother jumped straight up out of her bed when the shooting started and before it had stopped she was pounding on the ceiling with an old worn-down broom handle shouting obscenities in four different languages at the crazy man above.

Andy snatched up his jeans from the floor and pulled a bill out of his pocket. When Jack claimed the prize he held the bill in both hands and popped it between his index fingers as he said in a big brother way. "Like taking money away from a baby."

"Yeah, baby this ass hole." Andy said as he grabbed his crouch.

Jack promptly tackled Andy and a wrestling match was about to get serious when their mom turned on them and demanded that they cease at once and return to bed as she shook the broom handle at them both.

Andy couldn't just do what his mother asked. Something inside himself drove him to dispute any act of authority displayed by her. A rage that was always there but was sometimes silent refused to submit to her now. "God damn mother, you don't have to be such a bitch all the time!"

"Andy, some of us have to be at work in the morning. I don't have the privilege of laying around the house all day selling coke or what ever it is you kids are into now."

"You call that shit you do down at the laundry work? Get a life." He said as he put on his clothes.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't have to take this shit. You don't mean a damn thing to me or anyone else! You're just a whore whose too old to sell it any more and can't do nothen'. If it wasn't for the bread I bring in you'd have been on the street a long time ago. And I didn't hear you bitch when me and Jack was supported' your five hundred dollar a day fix."

"I was hooked! And you know how that Ice was. It had everybody by the vane!" She cried as a stream of tears burst from her eyes, she unconsciously rubbed at her arm along the old needle scars. Just thinking of the drug would spark a craving for it that was almost impossible to resist.

Jack couldn't stand it any longer. Jack swore to his mother that he would stay out from between her and Andy, now that Andy was back home. Andy being there meant so much to her. "You worthless piece of shit!" Jack yelled. He dove at Andy and they rolled around on the floor

for a while when Jack's ten years of age difference took the advantage and he came out on top.

"Stop it, stop it! Please stop!" The sobbing woman collapsed into the corner.

Jack released the chokehold he had on Andy and let him up.

Andy pulled the switchblade he carried out of his pocket and it flicked into the ready position. "You mother f..."

Before he could finish his dictum, Jack had him by the neck again and was holding the knife at his brother's throat. "You think you're so bad?! I could cut you from ear to ear you little dirt bag! Now get out while you still can." Jack threw the knife out the window and pushed Andy towards the door.

Andy finished putting on his shirt and shoes and as he walked out the door he looked at his older brother. For a second, Jack could see a little boy, who needed his mother more now than any time before. But as quickly as the expression swept across his face it disappeared into his hardened street-smart features.

"If you gave a damn about any body but yourself you'd be rack'n the bread from the brothers like the rest 'o the quad." Andy said with a glare and slammed the heavy steel door behind him.

Andy watched his father die at the hands of a neighborhood drug dealer when he was only five and from that point on he became uncontrollable. His mother was a drug addict when he was born and after the Ice almost killed her as well she finally got herself clean. But that wasn't enough for Andy, he blamed her for his father's death and all of his other problems and vowed never to forgive her.

Jack put his shoes on and started for the door.

"Don't go! I need you." She pleaded.

"I'll be back. I'm going up to Dane's for a while. Want to come? He's got some killer smoke a friend in the Services sent him from Brazil."

"No thanks, I'm not much for a party now. I'll be alright." She said as she wiped her face clean of the tears.

Jack went to her and gave her a tight hug. He alone could still see a young and vibrant woman under the city beaten complexion.

He went up the stairs and to the door that had been blown off its hinges more than any other in the building. It was strange, Jack thought, that it had been the gangs that crashed the door so many times and not the *Man* like so many other doors in the project. He learned a long time ago that you never stand in front of a door when you knock on it, at least not in this part of town.

"You want lead, bread or dead?!" Came a growl from the other side of the door.

"It's me Dane! Open up!" Jack pushed his shoulder length hair back behind his ears with a sigh.

"Come on in, piss ant." A buzzing sound came from the magnetic lock.

He leaned on the door hard to force it open. "God, I wish you'd get that door fixed."

"Why? It'll be knocked down again next week." Dane said, truly not understanding the logic.

Dane was still sitting in the control lounge seat that targeted the big track mounted gun unit. The laser imaging system gave him pinpoint accuracy as well as remote control of the gun. It also featured thermal enhancement of the target for the use of heat-guided weapons. Over the years he had shot out almost the entire outside walls of his apartment to the point that he had an unobscured view along the

two streets that intersected in front of the project. "Look at this Jack. I could get him now if you want. I heard what went down." On the visa-view screen mounted in front of the control lounge, Jack could see his brother crossing the street below heading towards the burned out car.

"That's not funny." He said as he turned away from the screen.

"All it would take is one push of this button and you and your mother would be free of the gangland slime." He wiggled his finger in little circles around the fire button teasingly as the targeting system swung the multiple barrels to bare.

Jack stomped over to the console and flipped the power button to the off position. "Knock it off would you. I'm not in the mood."

"Think fast!" Dane spun around in the lounge and tossed a joint of marijuana to Jack, who caught it clumsily after several missed attempts that batted it higher into the air. "Yea Jack! And the crowd goes wild! Reminds me of my high school days in football."

"You mean your football days in high school. Don't you?"

"No way man. It was football or no life."

Dane didn't say anything for a long time. He sat looking at Jack with understanding. "So fire it up chief. Suck on that and tell me all about it."

Jack never could open up to Widal completely and never expected to, still Jack felt the attempt at friendship and respected him for it. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and lit the joint. "That's alright Dane, I'll think of some way to get to Andy." He puffed the joint until it glowed brightly.

Jack passed the joint to Widal.

"What he needs is a good ass kicking." Widal said as he took a deep inhalation of the intoxicating smoke. He coughed a few times and his face turned cheery red as he tried to hold it back.

"Give me that." Jack took the burning ember out from between Dane's fingers. "What a light weight!" Jack chuckled.

Between gasps for air Dane said. "I got your light weight. *Cough...Cough*"

They sat and talked about the hellish ghetto life they both lived and Jack could never understand why Dane stayed when he wanted nothing more than to escape from the city sludge. Dane collected enough from his service pension every month to live virtually anywhere in the country but instead he chose to live there, in an apartment that poured water when it rained and had no walls on two sides. Jack deduced that it must be the duality of their desires that made them as close to being called friends as Jack had ever known.

The other leaders of the Echelons called the Quads protested when Jack returned from his mission without Widal's head and instead accepted Widal as a member of the project.

Jack was one of the eldest of the Echelons, which made him one of the most powerful of the Quads. Just the fact he had lived as long as he had proved he knew the streets and when the chips were down no one could best him in a knife fight so if he stood up for something he was rarely challenged. The other three Quads voted for Jack to be the one to take Dane out and Jack agreed with them at first. The thought of allowing the "Man" to live in their project flared the tempers of everyone to the point of meltdown and to keep the peace Jack went to deal with him.

When Jack smashed through Dane's door he found Widal setting his

big gun up in the corner window, it was then that Jack realized Widal's value to the project and to the Echelons. Jack was lucky that Dane didn't kill him outright but Widal had other plans and killing off the Echelons wasn't part of them. After Widal explained why he was in the project Jack took the information back to the Quad and supported Dane's position, which made more than one enemy for Jack. But the Quad was finally persuaded into following Jack's logic that they would never have to worry about insurgency by rival gangs again and Dane hadn't let them down, the smoking car at the end of the street was proof of that.

Andy could feel someone was watching him and after he retrieved his knife from the sidewalk and took a close inspection of the burning Buick he returned to the safety of the project. Inside, Andy went to his section's Quad to pick up the next day's supply of goods that he would have to sell for the Echelon leader. Following a different Quad other than his brother was his way of slapping Jack in the face without getting a broken nose in return.

Bumper was a mountain of black muscle and commanded respect from all who encountered him. He kept his head shaved smooth of all hair except for a thick moustache that extended to the edge of his sharp chin line. He had been a Quad for many years and had a good percentage of the project's inhabitants as loyal followers. Andy was one of them.

The heavy steel door was opened by two of Bumper's most trusted guards as it swung open a heavy cloud of vapor from the popyah that was being smoked rolled out into the vestibule. Andy held his breath as he entered the apartment and hurried through to Bumper's plush office. The four women that were smoking the strong hallucinogenic narcotic were huddled around a tall hookah pipe and were totally nude as fellow Echelon men fondled their stripped bodies. It was well known that

people would do anything for popyah once they were addicted. Andy had no desire to become one of its faithful zombies.

Bumper's office was lined with lithographs from the late nineteen hundreds that depicted demonic scenes in graphic detail.

The carpet was a deep plush pile, mauve in color except around a stark wooden chair that was forever stained by blood. The bloodstain expanded from the center of where the chair sat to a radius of two or three feet. The smell of, not quite dried blood hung in the air. Andy knew that if he were ever asked to sit in the chair that his life would have reached its end.

The big black man sat behind a large cheery wood desk in a padded leather executive's chair. He looked over the desk at Andy when he entered and motioned towards one of the other padded chairs in front of the desk. Andy always resented the fact that all the other Quads lived like kings compared to himself and his family and the fact that Jack wouldn't do the things necessary to retain enough credits for them to have the easy life too.

Only after the door closed behind him did Andy take a long awaited breath and sit down.

It was several seconds before Bumper broke the silence. "I've been keepn' a close tab of yo sales tis' month Andy." He looked away not revealing the purpose of his statement.

Andy's cocky attitude forced a response from him. "So?...The numbers are straight." Andy sat up in the soft chair.

"Course they is. If they weren't yo'd be burnn' da hot seat." He didn't have to indicate which chair he was referring. "I was gon' to tell ya how pleased I am of yo' load and give ya a prize." Bumper tossed Andy a sizeable roll of cash.

"How am I supposed to spend money? I need credits." Andy tossed the roll back to him.

"Cool, I'll wire a grand into yo' card then."

"Great." Andy stood and was about to leave.

"Not so fast, blood. Sit down." Bumper ordered.

Andy flopped back down into the chair.

"I got a business deal to cut ya." Bumper stroked at his moustache.

"A deal with me?" Andy couldn't believe his ears.

"How old are ya?"

"Fifteen."

"Don't ya think it's time ya took yo' place in da Quad?"

"I don't understand." Andy said as he squinted his eyes at Bumper.

"If ya do a thing for me I can guarantee ya a place."

"How? I'm not even as old as the Hanson twins."

"If I push it everyone will follow."

Andy knew that was true but it frightened him to think what he might have to do. "Okay, so what do I have to do?"

"One of my homeys says Jack's been gon' to da Civil Relocation Center. Take him out and his place is yo's."

"No way! I don't believe it."

"He goes every Wednes', that's in da mornn'. I know ya two don't have any love loss between ya and ya've only been back in their coop a few days so do it and ya can be da boss for a change." Bumper smiled wide and shone his gold-capped tooth at Andy and it made Andy's skin crawl.

"I'll find out for myself and if he is going there I'll kill him for my own reasons, not yours and I'll take the Quad too if its true."

Andy walked out not sure if he could carry out his orders, not out of love for his brother but because he wasn't confident he had the ability to deliver the *big bitch* to Jack.

Jack left early and used his secret underground route to get to the Civil Relocation Center so no one would see him. He was exposed on the street for only a few feet going across the sidewalk and up the stairs after he left the sewer.

He met with the social caseworker that he had been assigned to for the past year and sat in front of his desk. The caseworker was an old man in his late eighties that volunteered for the job because nobody else would come into the hood and risk their life for the scum that lived there but he figured his life was almost over anyway and he wanted to give something back.

"I've got good news, Jack."

"Don't play games old man." Jack said in a non-threatening tone.

"A slot has opened up in the High Speed-throughway construction crew in Canada. Interested."

"This can't be happening. Did you say a slot for me?" Jack asked just so he could hear it again.

"Yep, you'll be relocated to a training center in Quebec and then assigned to a road crew." The old man's wrinkled face twisted into something that vaguely resembled a smiling face and walked around the desk and handed Jack a packet that contained his mag-lev train ticket and his Relocation I.D. pass that would get him inside the training center.

All of Jack's dreams seemed to come into focus and his heart pounded as he looked through the packet of information. As his mind settled into the reality of it he began to cry for the first time since

his father died all those years ago. The water trickling down his face surprised him and he wiped it away as if he had never felt tears before.

"How can I thank you?" Jack asked as he grabbed the soft aged hand.

"Just grow old my friend." The old man reached out and put his free hand on Jack's shoulder and patted it gently. He suddenly felt his years and hobbled back to his chair that creaked loudly as he sat down in it.

"We like for the relocatees to leave straight from here because of the danger on the streets."

"I can't do that." Jack protested. "I can't leave without saying goodbye to my mother."

"Now Jack, you're the first person to transfer out of this office in six years and I want you to make it. So don't get yourself killed by making a big farewell scene."

"I won't but I have to see my mom one last time before I go."

"It's your ass. I can't stop you."

With that Jack gathered the contents of his packet and hurried out of the office.

He was very careful to check the street before he left the safety of the government building but before he could reenter the sewer system a familiar voice stung his ears.

"You traitorous scum! When Bumper told me you had been coming here I didn't believe him."

Jack turned to face his brother.

"I almost didn't come because I just knew that you weren't that low. Not *my* brother." Andy's voice cracked with hate and anger as he drew his switchblade from his pocket.

"Andy. You can come with me. You don't have to stay in this hell any longer." Jack pleaded. "I got my relocation today."

"Wrong, Jack. You got your funeral today." The eight-inch stainless steel blade snapped open as Andy slashed at Jack's throat.

Jack jerked his head back as the cold blade sliced across his cheek. Blood ran down his hand when he instinctively grabbed at his face and side kicked at Andy, a move that served to only step Andy back long enough for him to regain his composure.

Andy made another deadly thrust towards Jack's exposed ribs but cut only air as Jack spun around avoiding the blow.

"I don't want to hurt you Andy!" Jack yelled in pain and anger.

"Screw you!!" Andy lunged at Jack leaving himself overextended.

Jack parried the knife stepping inside Andy's attack radius and delivered a stunning blow to the back of Andy's neck sending him to his knees. Sounds of pain echoed down the street as Andy collapsed on the hard concrete slab. Jack kicked the knife away from Andy's open hand before he could recover and resume the attack.

"I knew da little worm couldn't handle it alone." Bumper said, as he stepped out of an open doorway nearby. Several of his guards loomed close behind him.

"I'm surprised you had the balls to come down here and face me yourself Bumper." Jack said.

"Oh, I don't intend to face ya Jack, I'm not as stupid as yo' blood. I jus' wanted to watch as da two of ya tore each other apart." One of the guards produced a sizeable machine pistol and motioned towards the open door of a car as it slowed to a stop beside Jack.

"Get in, or he'll turn ya off like a bug." Bumper said.

"What about him?" Jack asked, indicating Andy.

Andy was just now shaking his head clear and looked around surprised.

"I don't give a rat's ass about him. He can go." Bumper said, as he climbed into the car.

Jack was surrounded by the guards as they road back to the project and there was no opportunity for escape. He knew he was going to be brought before the other Quads and would be found guilty of desertion and be labeled a rebel then put to death. His entire future had looked so good for a short time and he felt as though he had lived an entire lifetime.

They unloaded in front of the project and hurried into the building with Jack at gunpoint and everyone who saw came running inside to be a part of whatever was going to happen. The noise was loud as everyone speculated as to Jack's fait. Everyone loved him but they also felt betrayed. Like animals they rallied to the smell of blood. It looked like it was going to be a lynching if Bumper's guards couldn't keep them off him. Bumper laughed at the sight and began selling chances to see who would be the one to fire the first shot that would kill Jack.

Soon the other two Quads arrived at Bumper's apartment and sat down along the wall of the inner office, ready to begin the trial when Dane burst into the room and sprayed the ceiling with automatic gunfire. Everyone dove for the floor except Jack who ran for the door. Dane continued to hose the room down, the belt fed automatic's barrel was smoking before he backed out and then tossed a concussion grenade into the center of the large room.

"Judge this Echelon elite!" Dane yelled as he slammed the door behind him.

Just as the door closed the explosion turned the wooden door into toothpicks. Dane still had the doorknob in his hand as they raced past the two limp guards on the floor and through the heavy steel outer door and up the stairs to his stronghold.

Jack's mother met him at Dane's apartment entrance and rapped her arms around his neck. "What's gon' down son?!" She cried as she searched his bloody face and blood soaked shirt for answers.

"I'm getting relocated mom. I don't have time to explain just know that I love you and I'll be back to get you when the time is right."

The sounds of the gang could be heard as they clamored up the many flights of stairs.

"What about you Widal?" Jack asked as he looked over the railing at the mob below.

"Don't worry about me I can handle them same as always. I'll take care of your mom too. Now get the hell out of here while you still can." He pulled the pin on another grenade and let the lever fly. He waited several seconds before dropping it down the center of the stairway below them. It was timed perfectly; the grenade blew in mid air, right in the faces of the Quads and their followers sending them sprawling back down to the next flight.

Jack gave his mom a kiss and hugged Dane in friendship as he hurried up the stairs to the roof where Dane's Ultra-light airplane sat waiting for just such an emergency. Jack had never flown it before but Dane told him everything about it many times in the past when Jack would help him perform maintenance on the sail cloth covered bird. He was glad that Dane had shared the computer simulation game with him. They would compete for the highest score in the aerobatics section.

Jack wondered if Dane had somehow known this moment would come but he didn't have time to ponder the thought now.

He climbed into the hard plastic seat and started the small engine then cut the lines holding it to the roof with his knife. As he pushed the throttle to full the motor buzzed like a bee and the plane lifted off almost immediately leaving the project behind forever. He pulled the stick around and flew along the streets using them to navigate.

When he over flew the Civil Relocation Center he realized that he would have to land somewhere, somehow. It took several passes down the street before he got everything in line and setup to touch down. When he did touch down, it was on one wheel with a hard bounce that broke the main gear out from under him and he careened into a parked speeder but managed to avoid any serious injury. A passerby helped him out from under the broken wing and steadied him while he regained his wits.

A crowd of people was gathering at the scene of his impromptu aerobatics, he pushed his way through the group of onlookers and ran up the stairs as three carloads of Echelons slid to a stop at the curb. He forced his way into the building as police cruisers arrived to quell the small riot. His social worker met him at the door and whisked him into one of the offices to the yells and taunts of the foiled gang members. His journey out of the inter-city had begun at last.

Jack boarded the mag-lev train bound for St. Paul, Minnesota at ten o'clock at night and was making his transfer to the train that would take him to Quebec just three hours later including the other stops. He had never been on a train before, except for the monorails that crisscrossed his home city and the six hundred-mile per hour ride left him with the feeling of isolation from the world around him broken

and forever shattered. With every passing second he could feel the freedom he had yearned for all of his life speed closer and closer to reality.

The St. Paul terminal was packed with travelers as the ski season at the environmental parks opened. The air this far north gave Jack a chill he had never felt and he was wishing that he had a coat to block the strong breeze out with. Winter was still a couple of months away but it was down in the forties already. He could remember feeling this cold only once in his life when a strong cold front brought freezing rain that left everything coated in a silvery sheath of water. It all was melted before noon the next day but it left a strong memory.

Because the train was an express run Customs and Emigration set up the check point at the entrance to the loading ramp for the train instead of on the other side of the boarder. Jack had been briefed on the procedures but he was still unsure about how to do it so he just fell in line behind a young woman who seemed to know what she was doing. As the line of passengers hobbled slowly forward Jack had time to really notice the women ahead of him.

Her perfume was what got his attention. It was a natural sent. He soon realized that it was just the smell of a clean body and freshly washed cloths. She wore a tight thermal body suit that was an iridescent green. It contrasted with her long dark hair and complimented her strong muscular figure. She was holding two large bags and pushing with one foot, another smaller camera case. When they reached the check point the column split into two lines and Jack stood opposite of the women and for the first time made eye contact with her and saw how beautiful she was. The inspectors and their scanning equipment separated them but Jack could feel electricity arcing between them. He had never been so attracted to anyone before and felt a little

embarrassed. He sensed that she must have felt it too because she stared deep into his eyes for what seemed a vary long time.

When he broke the trance he found himself confronted by the inspector who was waiting for an answer to a question Jack never heard.

"Uh, what?" He said puzzled by the expression on the man's face.

"Nationality?" The inspector repeated.

"Uh..." Jack had to look at his passport. "American."

The inspector frowned and took Jack's passport out of his hands and looked it over closely.

"Name?"

"Jack Tanner."

"Purpose of your visit?"

"Civil Relocation Program?" Jack said unsure of his expected response.

The inspector waved his supervisor over to the gate and showed him the passport and they talked out of earshot.

During the interruption Jack's attention was again focused on the women across from him and he could just barely hear her answer the inspector's questions.

"Sophiea Qorteze."

"Purpose of visit."

"Visiting a friend in Quebec."

"Length of your stay?"

Jack's concentration was again interrupted, this time by the supervisor.

"Mister Tanner?"

"Yes."

"What is the purpose of your visit into Canada?" The older inspector asked with no expression on his face.

"I'm going to the training center for the High Speed Through-way I'm part of the Civil Relocation Program."

"I see. Do you have your green card?"

"Yes... Oh, I forgot." Jack dug through his packet of information and produced the card in question. "Sorry, I forgot."

From down the line behind him he heard someone call out. "Hey, what's the deal? Hurry the hell up."

The inspector ignored the unseen person and passed Jack's card through a scanner. A message appeared on a visa-view screen and the card was returned to Jack. "Do you have anything to declare Mister Tanner."

"Uh, I don't know what you mean."

"Do you have any drugs or alcohol, guns or other weapons?"

"Just this." Jack laded his stiletto knife on the counter.

"We'll have to keep this for the duration of your stay. Have a good trip and welcome to Canada Mister Tanner." The supervisor stamped Jack's passport and returned it to him along with a boarding pass with his seat number on it.

Jack was relieved that he was through the checkpoint and glanced around for the women but she was nowhere in site.

He boarded the long streamlined train and found the warm car he had been assigned too and located his seat. He sat down and closed his eyes and began to relax. He tried to picture the lovely women in his mind when he heard her voice.

"Excuse me please." She said to Jack as she stretched to put her bags in the overhead compartment above him.

Jack strained not to look at the shapely form that threatened to rub against his shoulder. He noticed himself holding his breath afraid to even breathe as he sank lower in his seat to give her more room.

The lovely woman took the seat directly across from him and began digging through her camera bag. Jack was frozen in his lounge and wondered how he was going to cope with this incredibly beautiful woman in front of him all the way to Quebec.

The train began to pull away and accelerate smoothly; soon it was up to speed and traveling at well over five hundred miles per hour.

Sophiea pulled a high-tech digital SLR camera out of the bag and changed lenses to one with a short focal length. She then raised it to her eye. Before Jack could react she had taken his picture. The bright flash left him with blue and green dots that interfered with his vision and he wiped at his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but the look on your face was too much to pass up." Sophiea said as she changed the lenses back to their original configuration. "My name's Sophiea."

"Hi, Jack Tanner." He reached out and shook her hand and was surprised by her strong grip. "Damn." He rubbed his hand. "You're not a transvestite or anything are you?"

"Not the last time I checked. You're not one of those wimps who can't handle a real women are you?"

"Not the last time I checked. Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that the last time I met someone as good looking as you it turned out to be a man in drag." He explained.

"Well, thanks for the compliment... I think." She said. "This your first trip out of the country?"

"What was your first clue?"

"You look like a fish out of water." She said with a smile.

"This is the first time I've been outside my old hood."

"I'm originally from Chicago. How about you?" Sophiea asked.

"Houston. Lived there all my life." He said. It all seemed so far away to him now as if he had never really been there at all.

"So what brings you North for the winter?" Sophiea asked out of curiosity.

"I've been relocated."

"Oh, I'm so glad for you. What are you going to be doing?"

"Building highways."

"Do you mean the trans-Canadian through-way?"

"I think so. I'm not sure. I'm going to a training center right now."

"Well, good for you." Sophiea sat back and looked at him with a genuine pride. "Not many people make it out of the big cities any more I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Thanks. Why are you on this ride?" He asked Sophiea, to change the subject.

"My friend Willy has some time off and it was kind of slow around the school so I decided to visit awhile."

"I bet your boy friend will be glad to see you."

"Oh, Willy's not a guy. She's a helicopter pilot out of Toronto." She explained.

"So why are you going to Quebec?"

"I'm going to open a new school there and we agreed to meet."

"I see. What do you teach? Math, Science, what?"

"Martial arts, you know self defense, that kind of stuff."

"You must be pretty good, huh?"

"Well, I haven't been in any competitions for several years but I haven't lost anything."

"Boy I'll say." Jack agreed referring to her world-class athletic physique. He looked out the window as the train broke out over Lake Michigan and raced along the shoreline to Lake Huron.

When they arrived at Quebec Jack helped Sophiea carry her bags. She hailed an autonomous taxi that took them first to Sophiea's hotel. They hit it off good and agreed to get together as soon as Jack got the opportunity as he had no idea as to what his schedule would be like so Sophiea gave him her hotel room number and he pledged to call her soon.

As she stepped out of the cab she gave him a light kiss on the cheek opposite the bandage. He was startled by her contact and she grinned a happy smile.

"Till we meet again."

"Yah, great." He thought to him self. *Yah, great? What a women killer. She deserves someone better than me. But what the hell? If she doesn't know it, then banzai!*

All the way across the modern city, he could think of nothing else but the phrases he would use the next time he talked to Sophiea. But when the taxi left the city behind he began to wonder what his future held and if he would ever see her again at all.

The training center was comprised of a large compound of gray barracks that housed all the trainees and instructors. The other buildings that surrounded the perimeter were multilevel workshops and classrooms made of the same gray concrete. The tall barbed wire and chain link fence that marked the outer edges gave the complex an ominous prison like texture.

Jack arrived and was indoctrinated along with fifty other relocated men and women from around the North American continent. He was given a supply of toiletries and bedding that consisted of two wool

blankets and a fitted sheet along with a comb, a bar of soap and a toothbrush with a small supply of paste. Jack was then led to the three-story building that would be his home for the duration of his training.

A ramp led to the entrance that opened to the basement. There he was instructed to remove all of his clothing and stand in a line with other men and women that were moving into a long tunnel. A laser device that only burned the hair away and left the skin undamaged removed all of his hair, from head to toe. The conveyor he was standing on transported him into the next chamber where he received an ultrasonic shower and was bathed in a strong disinfectant that left the sensation of bugs crawling all over his body. He knew that feeling all too well and hoped it would be the last time for him. When the process was over the conveyor proceeded to the next phase which, to Jack's relief, was the end of the torture test and was given a clean uniform that was surprisingly comfortable and fit very good though his shoes were a bit tight.

Jack adjusted the hook and loop ties on the slippers as he inspected the other trainees as they exited the processor and made a mental note, it seemed to him that they were being treated like a herd of cattle about to be slaughtered. The women were not even separated from the men as they left the processor and received their clothing. By the time they were spit out of the end of the machine everyone was so humiliated that being exposed to the others didn't seem out of place and didn't bother anyone too much, they were just glad it was over. He over heard one of the other trainees complain to the attendant passing out the cloths.

"What's next? The gas chamber?" The thin, white skinned man asked.

The attendant just rolled his eyes. "Next."

Everyone was given a chance to settle down after their ordeal and were led up to the sleeping area where they were divided into co-ed groups and assigned to their individual bunks that were stacked three high. Only the men were given the top bed that was the only consideration the women were to receive for the duration of their stay.

The next day they were all fed and taken to a meeting room where they were given their training schedules. Jack was to become a Ceramic Composite Surfacing Specialist. He had no idea what that really involved but it sounded better than the guy next to him who was given the title of Slurry Compound Injection Technician.

"What the hell is this?" The man said with confusion written across his face.

A woman behind him answered, "It means you're a wad shooter and he's a grinder driver. Could be worse, you could have my job." She held her card up so he and Jack could read it. The card read, Vacuum Prep Operator. "That makes me a mobile blowjob."

"How do you know so much about this stuff?" Jack asked the woman.

"My uncle worked on the trans-Florida though-way when I was a kid and he told me all about it."

"You should have no trouble learning this shit then." The other man said.

"Hell, they had a crew of chimpanzees doing this on the Utah expressway until they built a section through a hospital. Killed about a hundred people." She said.

"You mean we're nothing more than trained chimpanzees?" Another man asked in a disgusted tone.

"You got it pal."

Everyone groaned but any of them would have done anything to escape the hells they all had come from.

The instructor entered the large room. He began by dividing them into groups of ten. Each group made up a team that comprised all of the operators necessary for one road crew. A road crew could clear, level, compact and lay a stretch of highway eight lanes wide and two thousand feet long per day.

After a brief lecture each road crew was taken into a building that housed a huge simulator, exact in every detail to the machine they would be taught to run. The incredible machine made strip mine equipment look small. It was painted in a bright yellow with wide, black diagonal stripes across it from one end to the other (as if someone wouldn't see it coming). Across the front was a mouth, a football field wide and half again that high that could swallow a small hill without even a belch. Around and inside the mouth were row after row of rotating augers that started out about six feet in diameter and were reduced in size the further inside they were. They had jagged diamond cutters on the leading edges of the blades that could cut and or grind the hardest rock into bite-sized pieces. Running the full length of the mouth, up the sides and across the top they could scoop up hundreds of tons of product per minute. Way back in the throat was the rock crushers that started out big and got smaller deeper in. At the top was a bulge that housed the main control station and was rapped in glass on three sides. Behind the mouth on the sides were caterpillar tracks that were twenty feet high and reminded Jack of the pictures he had seen of the first rocket gantries. Behind the terrain reducer was the material refinery where the same soil and rock that had been crushed was used to make the road's ceramic compound. As material was processed it was diverted and used as a fill for leveling the grade.

The organic material was spit out into hauler trailers and would be taken to recycling plants off site. What didn't fill in low spots got moved to a storage bin that was the size of a shopping mall. Only the high quality materials were sent further back to the following stage of the machine. The next section applied the compound and formed it into the rough shape of the highway. The fourth section was used to form bridges and tunnel walls. The fifth in line was the finishing section that prepared the surface and provided the texture that thousands of vehicles would travel on daily for years before it would need reworking. The last segment was a microwave oven that operated at two thousand degrees and cured the ceramic material into harder than rock permanent structures.

Jack was led to his station inside the machine and shown how to put on and correctly adjust a protective environmental suit that was necessary to prevent the raw slurry from eating his skin as it contained high levels of acids.

Although it had been only a few weeks it seemed like months spent at Jack's station. When the constructor was in operation the floor beside Jack's console lifted out of view and the raw slurry was exposed as a wide river slowly flowing by. Jack's job was to monitor the impression tools that left small grooves in the road surface and repair any imperfections as the slurry flowed past; of course it was the machine that was moving and not the slurry. He was being taught every aspect of his phase of the process including maintenance and repair of the equipment. It all seemed simple to him, though the credit went to the relocation center for matching his aptitude so well.

Jack had only two problems. One was developing the coordination and dexterity to use the hand tools with efficiency and the other was

how to contact Sophiea. As one of the "never break" rules was no outgoing calls. He could think of nothing else but her beautiful features when his mind was allowed any rest from the intensive training.

Jack was hard at work trying to solve a simulated break down when his visa-view screen switched from the diagnostic mode to the perturbed face of his instructor.

"Mister Tanner, you will report to the administration building at once." Just as quickly as the screen had changed from the simulation, it went blank and the resolution to the problem was displayed.

"Oh man! I knew that." Jack said to no one but himself.

Jack had never been inside the stark multi-level administration building before and was surprised to see so many people working at jobs he would have thought would have been done by computer. He approached a woman sitting at a desk near the door.

"I'm Jack Tanner, I was told to report here."

"Have a seat Mister Tanner." She motioned to a chair at an empty desk next to hers.

He sat down and the visa-view blinked to life.

"Hi, Jack." It was Sophiea.

Jack was so surprised to see her that he couldn't think of any of the ten thousand things he memorized to say. "Sophiea... How did you get through?"

"I've got connections."

"You look so good." Jack thought to himself, *"I've spent weeks thinking about what to say and I can't think of shit!"*

"Thanks." Sophiea brushed at her hair with her hand. "How's things going?"

"Fine."

Her expression suddenly became very serious. "Jack, I understand you don't know me at all really but times running out and I need your help."

"Help with what?"

"My friends have done their homework and they tell me that you have family back in Houston that you would like to get out."

"I don't think I like you checking up on me, Sophiea." Jack could feel his stomach tighten. "What's this all about? Who are you any way?"

"Please, Jack just listen. I can help you get your mother out of that little apartment and you'll be helping your country at the same time."

"You better talk fast."

"Look." Sophiea took a deep breath. "If I get you a pass will you meet with me?"

Jack would do anything to get his mother out of the slum and wondered if Sophiea knew that as well. "I guess so but..."

"Great, I'll be there faster than a dog can scratch a flea."

Sophiea terminated the call and pressed a hidden button on the back of a small lapel pin she wore on her collar. "Black Dog?"

"I'm here."

"I've made contact with the man Tanner and I believe I can trust him."

"Be careful, those city refugees will do anything for drugs or money." The Organization Operation Leader said with obvious prejudice.

"I'll keep a tight rein on him. It was your man that brought him in. Besides it's his mother that is his weak point." Sophiea didn't believe Jack was like most of the people Black Dog was referring to but she wouldn't turn her back on Jack until she was sure. "I need a pass for him to be released right a way."

"He'll be waiting at the gates." Black Dog said, his voice squawked as the last syllable was cut off.

Jack was told to wait just outside of the tall chain link fence under the only light around for several hundred feet down the fence. He hadn't stood there for more than a couple of minutes before a dark brown speeder pulled up beside him.

The window slid silently down. "Going my way?" Sophiea said with a smile.

"I don't know. What's this all about?"

"Come on and get in I'll explain everything." She said as she motioned with her head.

Jack reluctantly walked around the front of the car and sat down in the deep bucket seat. The gull-wing door had not even begun to close before the speeder screeched away from the gate.

Sophiea drove to a remote campground that was just inside one of the wilderness preserve areas.

She had not said a word the entire distance. The site was guarded closely on all sides by tall pine trees and the northern lights shone brightly in the star filled sky. The moon was just beginning to peak over the tops of the trees to the east.

"Let's get out." Sophiea said.

"Its to cold." Jack replied showing his stubborn streak.

"There's a coat in the back if you need one." Sophiea said as she close the door behind her.

Jack reluctantly climbed from the tight interior of the small speeder. Sophiea was leaning on the cold fender as he circled the front of the car. When he stopped in front of her he looked deep into her dark eyes and could see the intense aurora above them and his displeasure with her disappeared.

"What do you want from me Sophiea?" He asked, knowing full well he would do anything for her.

"I'm going to go out in the open for you because I don't have time to play games. Your relocation, our meeting, it was all set up. I'm working with the government. There are many departments involved at varying levels. Some have more responsibility than others. The one I'm with has a pretty large chunk. That branch is called the Organization. It's one of those black programs that used to be run by the C.I.A. I don't know that much about it, I doubt that anyone does. It's one of the more reclusive programs.

"I was recruited to arrange transport for groups of children and other family members to a safe location here in Canada. I need your help. There is going to be thousands of people that need to be moved and you have the expertise required to make contact with some of the people we'll need to do business with."

"Bull shit! What do you take me for?" Jack yelled. He turned and took several steps towards the forest shaking his head.

"Look Jack, you're going to have to trust me. Surly you'll trust me long enough to get your mother out of Houston. We've been in contact with Widle Dane and he's making preparations now. He's one of ours."

Jack spun around. "You know Dane?"

"Not personally, but I've had contact with him. He's the one that recommended you for this assignment. You want to talk to him yourself? Will you believe me then?"

"We'll see. Let's talk to Dane first." He said with his arms crossed.

Sophiea opened the door and wiggled into the contoured seat and activated the sat-com visa-view. After entering a code into the handheld unit she handed it to Jack.

"Dane here, channel's secure...Jack? Is that you?" Dane said with a surprised look on his face.

"It's me Dane."

"What the hell are you doing on this freq? The Zooers are trying to hack in and track. Got'a go. See you soon." The screen went blank within seconds of flashing Dane's face.

She took the visa-view. "That's one of the reasons why I've come to you. The Zooers have infiltrated the gang culture at all levels. They're even working with the Echelons. They have state of the art equipment and are giving us a run for our money. We are spread real thin and my support operatives are trying to handle five times the operation count as usual. I don't have the tact to deal directly with gangs. If I blow my cover it will endanger hundreds of people. Will you help me?"

"I stand a lot too lose. I have waited years to be relocated."

"All of that means nothing. We have to make preparations that will insure the survival of our race." Her voice revealed how important her mission was.

"What are you saying? What is it that you're not telling me?" Jack walked up facing her and grabbed her by the upper arms tightly to interrogate her. But before he knew what was happening she had broken his grip, spun him around and placed him in a painfully tight chokehold from behind that had one of his arms trapped behind his back as well. He was feeling more like a pretzel than a tough city man now.

"Don't ever try to be forceful with me Jack." She said with icy coolness. She slowly released her hold.

Jack took a step forward and turned around. "Let's try that again." This time he reached out to grab her wrist but instead he found only air as Sophiea sidestepped and performed a leg sweep that sent

Jack sprawling on his back. "Damn, you're quick!" He climbed back to his feet.

Sophiea was still in a graceful stance when he faked a lunge one direction and rushed the other only to find her foot inches from his nose but not quite touching, her leg was fully extended and she was in perfect balance.

"You are something else." He said. He knew when he was over matched and was smart enough to know when strategy was a better weapon than brut force. "I surrender, you win." He held his hands up in submission.

Sophiea relaxed and resumed he spot against the fender. After several minutes of silence she decided the truth would shake his resolve. "You're going to find this hard to believe but I hope you'll listen till I'm finished. It's a long story." Sophiea told Jack about the Atrochens and how they had taken her captive, that they intended to exterminate all human life on Earth within just a few more months. And that it was her job to escort the families of the Solar Defense Force to a place code-named Sanctuary.

The founder of Beyond the Edge Inc built sanctuary with his first fortune. He was also inventor of the GW-HS-RDS concept and worked closely with the government for many years on various projects. Sanctuary had been his hideaway when the pressures of fame and fortune become too much. No one but a select few had ever been there and only he and Sophiea knew its exact location and that secret would become harder to keep as the refugees were scheduled to begin arriving soon.

Sophiea's presence in Canada was not a coincidence, for hundreds of people from all walks of life were gathering in staging areas with no knowledge of their destinations or their compatriots. They were traveling in secrecy. Many traveled the same roads and train routs,

some had traveled by air, others had walked hundreds of miles along the continental divide trails that followed the Rocky and the Appalachian Mountain ranges within touching distance of one another and never knew of their common destination. Every effort was being taken to provide the tightest security possible. But with thousands receiving their walking notices a new kind of Underground Railroad would be needed to make the move possible.

"Why are you bringing me into this equation?" Jack asked.

"I need a negotiator. I've run out of time. Many of the staging areas are in large cities and the organization is buying hotels as a cover. Many of these hotels are located inside gang-controlled areas and let's face it. Gang leaders don't take a woman very serious."

"So why not just kick their ass' and take over?"

"It may come to that with some of them and I can do that job myself, but we need to keep a low profile so that the Zooers don't target the Safe Houses. We'd rather find a way to work with them than start war with our own people. We're spread too thin for that anyway.

"It's possible and very likely that the only people left on Earth after this is all over with will be the ones at Sanctuary. Now if you want your mother to be one of them this is her and your only chance. So what will it be? In or out?"

"Count me in. Under one condition."

"Your mother was your condition Jack."

"I want my brother brought with her."

"Dane has indicated that he would be a problem."

"Not if I am there to explain it to him."

"I'll have to get clearance from the top."

"I understand." He said, knowing that Andy would be a big problem for anyone and that only he would stand any chance of bringing him in alive.

Sophiea returned Jack to the Compound and on the way Jack could not take his eyes off of her as she drove the speeder. He did not know what love felt like other than that for his mother but something inside him told him he would love Sophiea forever.

As he climbed out of the speeder he leaned back in across the seat and tried to kiss Sophiea on the cheek. She pulled away and looked deep into his eyes searching for a truth that she had not found in any other person but a lost love many years ago. She was under orders to kill Jack if he could not be brought into the fold and she needed to keep the right perspective, but this man attracted her in a way that she didn't understand.

Jack started to retreat with a feeling of disappointment in his heart. He wanted something from this mysterious warrior that sent a burning through his sole. He knew that any relationship with her on any level was going to be complicated at best and she was probably just as dangerous as she was beautiful.

Sophiea felt a fire burst forth and she could not contain the heat. The pain and distrust from the ages would not stop the yearning in her heart. Her mind could not stop her arms from rapping themselves around Jack's shoulders as she dragged him across the console that separated the seats and kissed him long and passionately as their hearts melted and united.