

# Elis Royd

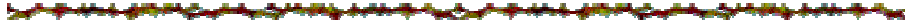


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## *Author's Introduction to Elis Royd*



Life follows a universal, not merely a global, blueprint.

The parameters are basically the same, planet to planet, galaxy to galaxy.

On land: four limbs, two front and two rear.

In a liquid environment, smooth flanks and motive tail

In a gaseous one, forelimbs adapted for soaring and propulsion.

Nothing's cut in stone, and the variations are endless, yet the same *theme* runs through all things living (life cannot exceed its active window), regardless of the fanciful extraterrestrial properties introduced by inventors of new worlds.

Life respire*s oxygen*. Living creatures *age*, and eventually *die* (a world can produce only so much sustenance—so 'immortal' creatures would eventually end up eating themselves out of existence anyway). Everything *fits* everything else. Without *trying* to.

Without *thinking* about it.

Intelligence, and sapience in general, are inevitable *flukes*, not necessities.

Life *metabolizes*. You and I, and anything else that eats and craps, are just *food sources* for everything else that eats and craps. That's *what* we are. That's *why* we're here.

Life *adjusts* . . . gorgeously. Even on an artificially enhanced asteroid like Elis Royd—slightly smaller and infused with a necessarily rarer atmosphere than Earth—disparate beings over many generations found their muscles and vital organs adjusting by infinitesimally subtle degrees. This holds true for all living things everywhere: as long as there is *sufficient* oxygen, *sufficient* heat, and *sufficient* metabolic material, life will eventually do just fine.

The laws of physics cannot be broken. But science fiction just wouldn't be much fun if the rules weren't bent once in a while—even with savagery. They simply mustn't be ignored altogether. So artists, whatever your medium, go ahead and animate the impossible—immortality, invisibility, non-organic life, telepathy, the “living dead”, God, ghosts, goblins and ghouls . . . something from nothing—just take the necessary pains to invent a plausible backdrop before you paint.

In all the galaxies I've studied, I've never encountered a life-form (and there are gazillions) remotely resembling *Homo sapiens* in character. This is because we are unquestionably the most advanced species. Unquestionably. So heave a collective sigh, guys; we're top dog, head honcho, king of the mountain. This superiority comes from social evolution (a herd phenomenon), not from intelligence (a very personal experience). It's how the million *apply* the one-in-a-million that spurs growth, spends populations, and ultimately makes the world turn.

Traits of selfishness, hypocrisy, and partisanship (all *isms*) are adaptive functions. Although they're vilified by figures of authority and the media (arguably the very critters most exemplifying these traits), they are necessary, are imperative, are excruciatingly important survival mechanisms—they are what makes us what we are (not who we are). The system cannot be changed. Woe to the blade ignorant of the lawn.

In many ways it was tough chronicling the rise and fall of Elis Royd—not because it was confusing, but because it wasn't. Turns out civilizations, like the universe itself, have a blueprint. *Everything*,

goddamnit, does. So the asteroid's bittersweet destruction, along with its denizens good and wicked, was unfolding just as I was getting to like some of the characters. Elis Royd, before it crumbled, was a microcosm.

Everything is.

I sure do hope you can enjoy—and, way more important, learn something from—this tight little history, before it vanishes, like you and I and everything else, into the great and bleak and ravenous abyss.

Elis Royd



*“You are a little soul bearing about a corpse.”*

—Epictetus

*Bug*

*The Hoodooman*

*Four Horsemen*

*Emra*

*Human Says*

*The Commander*

*The Curios*

*The Elder*

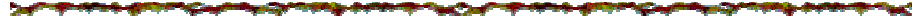
*Mhendu*

*The Administrator*

*Storyteller*

# *Chapter One*

## Bug



Beppo took his time on the final grade. He had to: his hooves were split and bleeding, his back aching and stiff. And his little rhia Gwenda—his life-and soul mate, his constant companion—trembled and wheezed as she hiked. A trillion stars loomed on the horizon, but they weren't the night's visual attraction. What drew Beppo was a burnt gold to deep blue gradient—a heat aura spreading like a mushroom's cap just beyond this last weedy hill. At the summit they dropped in a heap. Far below stretched Earth Administration, the gleaming nerve center of Elis Royd—thirty square miles of glorious artificial light, flue-vented blossoms of regenerated heat, and great fans for stirring the ever-dead air—all run by a miniature subterranean atomic power plant. According to folklore, the gates, walls, and fences of Earth Administration—known by the local species as EarthAd—concealed soft beds, clean water, and delicacies light years-beyond the simple imaginations of Elis Royd's long-rotting applicants.

Beppo unhitched Gwenda's little wood cart. "See, my Gwenny? It is as I told you. No more hedgeroots and kunckleberries for us. We will eat as Earthmen, and for once we will recline in comfort." The

rhia's left foreleg was shaking so badly Beppo had to squeeze it between his paws. "We will rest now, girl." He pulled out his homemade wartroot flute and blew a crude four-note melody, watching dreamily as twilight quickly gave way to darkness along the asteroid's craggy rim.

Elis Royd has an interesting history, though it's now just a footnote in the Solar Annals.

Bear with me: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century's first great wave of Terran conquest and colonization did not produce those eagerly anticipated troves of precious metals and self-perpetuating photo-energy sources.

What it *did* produce was a laughable answer to that ages-old Earth question: *Are we alone?*

Anything but.

The Milky Way is crawling with, is filthy with, is *infested* with life. So much so that kids on Earth now use a crude and immature aside to mock the slow-witted: "Duh, do you think there's life on other planets?" This *rarity of life* idea was at least as preposterous as that antiquated notion of a spaceship reaching planets light years away. *No single vehicle will ever span such distances.* Our solution was to mimic the old course of European colonization: millions of stations were prefabricated and launched into as many orbits, allowing ships to mathematically leapfrog outpost-to-outpost, until the very galaxy was in gridlock, and triumphant man's artificial glow challenged the timeless dazzle of sweet nature herself. The scary part is that we've only begun the exploratory process.

And even as the burgeoning Local Group War was creating wave after wave of refugees, Earth found herself the beacon for countless extraterrestrial species seeking to become democratized citizens of their conquering saviors. Applications for Earth citizenship were a global bureaucratic nightmare.

A naturalization post, based on an old Earth model, was founded on one of the larger asteroids in the Sirius system. This asteroid was given a rotation with an eighteen hour day, and pumped in a re-circulating atmosphere. Once the place was up and running, it was provisioned with vast food stores and outfitted as a self-contained administrative field; a kind of halfway house for extraterrestrial applicants, or *royds*, willing to stick it out over the long haul. To make the place more attractive, and to help prepare applicants for the *feel* of Earth, many species of Earth flora and fauna were imported. Inevitably countless extrasolar viruses and pests were also imported. Great plagues swept Earthmen and non-Solars alike, while Elis Royd,



## Bug

cut off from all meaningful aid, adjusted the hard way. Cadaver-sucking, lamprey-like *bleeders* popped out of the soil, huge warty *leapers* jumped on the necks and backs of walkers, depositing their eggs in fresh sores that never seemed to heal, long serrated *sleepers* slithered from stalks and made their way into the open mouths of slumbering travelers, down their throats, and, through capillary induction, all along their spinal columns. Earthmen desperately turned Administration into a vermin-free fortress with spiked fences and armed gates, off-limits to anything nonhuman, and let the rest of the asteroid go to hell.

As the War escalated, funds for Elis Royd dried up altogether. There was no time or energy for exotic projects; the War took everything. It's shameful now to think of how the asteroid was deliberately neglected, ignored, and forgotten. An abandoned orphan, left to drift generation after generation around Sirius, while the infighting leaders at EarthAd clung to a crumbling, Dark Ages-leaning vision of Christian Capitalist Democracy, and the ignorant adapting species tribalized, learned English, memorized brochures, survived epidemics—and waited for the hallowed doors to open.

All this history, in Beppo's time, was as remote as starlight. His understanding was the same as any other royd's: he was a member of a lower species whose sole purpose and ambition was to be a naturalized Earthman. He'd attempted to finance this dream through hard work: Elis Royd is an ore-rich asteroid, chock-full of prized metals and precious stones for those determined to dig deep enough. But, like many royds, Beppo had spent his life's scrapings on quick 'n' easy naturalization plans presented by various Administration-sponsored organizations. Unfortunately these organizations always seemed to vanish under mysterious circumstances—most likely ambushed, according to Administration analysts, by roving packs of savage royds. Rather than succumb to defeat, Beppo became a student of the Elis Royd Constitution, memorizing an original copy passed down from his great-great-great grandparents, who had perished, he was told, on this very hill, looking longingly on Earth Administration while clutching their cherished applications.

Little Beppo was now two hundred and thirty-seven Solar years old, and Gwenda nearly half that age. Both were hoary and hunched, both were wracked and ridden and almost too weary for words. So it took Beppo all of ten minutes to make it back to his hooves, and longer to right and re-hitch Gwenda. It was easier hiking downhill, and he took heart in the imposing spectacle of EarthAd's

gothic West Gate. His imagination, fueled by Administration brochures featuring grinning lily-white humans toting stuffed grocery bags and rosy-cheeked babes, was way ahead of him.

West Gate's head sentry must have heard Gwenda's tiny lead bell. A cracked yellow searchlight threw a sallow beam all around.

"You," called a voice. "Identify yourself and state your business."

"Beppo of Potter Bogs. I and my rhia have come to expire as Earthmen."

"As *Earthmen*?" There was a bark of laughter, and a muffled exchange with an unseen guard. "You sure don't look like any Earthman *I* know. And what's that gnarly little thing supposed to be—your racing pony?"

"We have Constitutional affirmation." Beppo pulled a rolled parchment from the cart.

"Keep your paws where I can see them."

An older, gruffer voice approached from behind the sentries. A flashdisk illuminated this man's and the guards' faces while the searchlight played over the cart. "What's that you said about a Constitution?"

"Article 72-A," piped Beppo. "Any denizen of Elis Royd who dies on Administration grounds while awaiting due and proper naturalization shall thereupon be deemed a naturalized citizen of Earth."

"Let me see that thing. Post, open the gate."

There was a clatter of iron chains. The big wood gate rose impressively, and light streamed over Beppo and Gwenda. A badged Earthman in loose shirt and pants stepped up, wiping the sweat from his eyes. All Earthmen sweat prodigiously, and all Earthmen stink like pigs. It's not their fault: the artificially-enhanced environment of Elis Royd will never compensate for the natural, sweet climes of Earth. The asteroid's other species are the products of numberless generations of adaptive survival on worlds no Earthman would last a day on, and their staple diets, like Beppo's and Gwenda's, consist of whatever can be gnawed off the plains and marshes of Elis Royd. Earthmen, by contrast, live sheltered lives filled with rich foods and fattening desserts; all provisioned by those humongous underground warehouses stocked by the asteroid's developers, time out of mind ago.

The Earthman, by his badge a captain of the guard, took the parchment from Beppo's withered paw and unrolled it in the light. In

## Bug

a minute he called up, "It's the real deal, all right." He came to a delicately squared and underlined article. "Any denizen of Elis Royd who dies on Admin—" and looked back down. "You'll forgive my impertinence, *sir*, but you don't quite fit the specifications of 'dead'. Not just yet, anyway."

"Very soon now," Beppo mumbled.

The captain harumphed. "What's the difference where you die? Why don't you just piss off with the rest of your kind? Why bother us? You two can die anywhere."

"But not as Earthmen."

The captain stabbed a fat forefinger. "'*On Administration grounds!*' I can read as well as you, and better. Until you're within these walls you're just a pest like all the rest. And what have you to barter?" He looked at shivering Gwenda. "Who's going to pay good money for a faded-out furball like that?"

"Article 74-B3," Beppo said. "Any denizen of Elis Royd seeking sanctuary in relation to any specified clause herein shall be granted entry for due counsel with an Arbiter of Elis Royd."

"West Arbiter cannot be disturbed! Come back in the morning."

"—'due counsel'," Beppo whispered timidly. "Captain, I shall not last this night. Profound biological awareness is common to my species. This is why we have come. This is why we have come tonight."

The captain reared. "You have no legal representation! You and that silly ass can rot right here and who'll know the difference? Where are your witnesses?" He craned up. "West Gate Guard! What did you see down here?"

The two sentries lowered their heads and looked away.

"The bottom of the scroll," Beppo said. "Please."

The captain unrolled the parchment completely. At the bottom was a dated testament to Beppo's intentions, signed by two score witnesses. The ink was still fresh. "I can't read this crap."

"Those are the witnesses you seek," Beppo said. "They retain a copy." He looked up respectfully. "Certainly a member of the Arbiter's court reads trans-species?"

The captain dropped his hands. "I give up." He called to the sentries, "Somebody roust West Arbiter. I know, I know. This isn't going to be pretty." He tucked the scroll under his arm. "I'll hang onto this. Come along, you."

The captain led them through West Gate into EarthAd proper. Beppo's jaw dropped at the numberless shops, closed for the day. There were lights all over the place; streetlamps, advertisements in glowing primaries, large and small blinkers. The roads were sweet, squared, and cobbled; heaven to the hooves.

"Pick it up," said the captain. "Now that you woke him, you sure as hell don't want to keep him waiting. Let's go, let's go, let's go."

They followed the main road to an imposing structure grander than anything Beppo had ever imagined. On a seemingly endless stairway, he was made to bump up the cart one step at a time while the captain glowered, and he and Gwenda had to undergo humiliating full-body cavity searches while their little cart was shaken down. Inside the building stood the Guard, stiff as cardboard cutouts, their eyes following Beppo and Gwenda all the way to West Arbiter's Chambers.

It was dark in the Chambers, and they were forced to cook there for the better part of an hour, facing a caving old desk beside a faded Terran flag. The place was a humidor for body odor—the whole room stank of Earthmen come and gone. The sweat of concentration, of squabbling, of arguing over spoils and shares, clogged the rents in the walls' peeling wood like burnt fat caking a crematorium. Beppo comforted his sagging rhia with a white whiskered paw.

A clammy bailiff walked in from the hall. "Stay where you are. Don't speak unless you're spoken to. Understand that you've come at a bad time."

Now a series of curses rose behind a heavy old oak door. The door banged open and closed, open and closed. More curses, another bang, and then a rickety aluminum wheelchair burst into the room and creaked up to the desk.

West Arbiter was certainly in his nineties; toothless, wattled, and half-blind, but just as tough as petrified wood. The blariness, the wispy white strands of hair—the overall *wildness* of his expression was that of a very old man cruelly torn from desperately needed sleep. The bailiff brought him his teeth and carefully wound him up in a heavy black robe. West Arbiter slapped away his hands. His voice was a toy flute: "Who demands sanctuary?"

"This is Beppo," said the bailiff, reading from the captain's prepared statement. "He claims his Constitutional right to perish in Earth Administration with the guaranteed status of Earthman, as validated by Article 72-A, and upheld by Article 74-B3 in cross-

reference. The clauses have been underscored in red for Your Arbiter's perusal."

West Arbiter gestured irritably. "Where the hell's my eyes?"

The bailiff hefted a device shaped like a fishbowl on a lamp stand, carried it to the desk, and plugged it in. He swiveled the prescription-ground bowl laterally, then wrapped and secured the parchment to the glass. West Arbiter switched on the reading light and stuck in his head. For a while there was nothing to be heard but grunts and wheezes. Finally he popped his head back out and said, "I have seen enough."

The bailiff switched off the device and slid it aside.

West Arbiter gored Beppo with his eyes. He turned to the bailiff. "Has it been properly disinfected?"

"There are apparently time constraints. His death and all that."

West Arbiter looked back. "You. Come forward."

Beppo limped up to the desk and meekly folded his paws.

West Arbiter said, "I'll not waste our time with silly questions. You wouldn't have gone to all this trouble if you weren't sincere. I understand, by dint of that annoying captain of the guard, that you are to die tonight with chronological certitude. So be it. But understand that, by any sane reading of this Constitution, you can only be a dead Earthman. While you live you are merely a lesser species present as our fawning guest—an unlettered, ignoble creature born only for bogs and hollows, an embarrassment and failure; a dirty, ugly, untrustworthy specimen scraping humbly at the mat of godlike sophistication—a foul thing unfit, by any stretch of the imagination, to bear the proud title 'Earthman'. Are we clear on this, sir?"

When little Beppo nodded shyly, West Arbiter leaned back and grinned ear to ear. "So you want to be an Earthman . . ." He snapped his spindly fingers. "Perhaps I am growing soft with the years, Beppo, but since you *are* here, and while you *are* alive . . . would you like a taste of what it's like to actually *live* as an Earthman? A last supper, so to speak."

"Oh," Beppo breathed, "so very, very much."

"Bailiff!" West Arbiter snapped. "Pass the word! Beppo is to be treated as a man of Earth tonight! You will be his personal tour guide. Give him the red carpet treatment. Make him feel at home."

"One other thing," Beppo interjected. "Sir. Such a small thing. My rhia. She too will pass this night. Gwenda is my soul mate. If you look at the seventh clause under Article 79, you will see that family are included in the Honorary Earthmen's provision. Gwenda is all the

family I possess; I cannot exist without her, nor she without me. Our deaths must be as one.”

West Arbiter’s head rocked on his clasped hands. “You’ve certainly done your homework, Beppo. I don’t need to examine the Constitution ad infinitum. What the hell! Tonight Earth Administration is the genial host of you and your rhia, and tomorrow you shall both be interred, together, on Earthmen’s turf . . . as men of Earth!”

Beppo fought back the tears. “Oh, thank you so much, sir.”

“Scat!” West Arbiter barked. “And if I cannot get back to sleep I’ll have that captain of the guard impaled on his own spinal column. Be of good cheer, little Beppo, for tonight you die.”



“This,” said the bailiff, “is the main galley. It’s where we come to eat at specific meal times, but Earthmen are free to hang out and munch whenever they’re in the mood.”

“Incredible!” Beppo said. “The aromas! Beyond my most savory dreams.” Beside him, Gwenda was craning and sniffing like a pup. Little by little a plaintive whine seeped from her wet twitching muzzle.

“There’s a menu over the counter, but it probably won’t make much sense to you. Why don’t we walk along the buffet and you guys just select whatever looks good.” To the lady behind the counter he said, “Stroganoff for me. Cheese sticks and honey crisps.”

“It all looks wonderful,” Beppo gushed. Gwenda’s muzzle slid back and forth below the sneezeguard. “What is this?”

“Milky Way pudding,” said the bailiff. “Baked sweet dough, raisins, butter, cinnamon, sugar, warm cream.”

“Gweny says yes.”

The server smiled with her eyes. “And for you?”

Beppo’s eyes searched the floor. “Just something light,” he said. “Would boiled roots be too dear?”

“Hot butter beans and ham it is,” she said. “Corn bread and mashed potatoes, sweet peas in cheese. Butter pecan ice cream with a side of mixed berries and whipped. Big glass of cold milk to wash it all down.”

“Tab’s on Administration,” said the bailiff.

“And the tip?”

“Covered.”

## Bug

They sat quietly until the server brought their food. Everybody laughed when Gwenda buried her head in the pudding, but a moment later the ice was back.

"I just said you were covered," the bailiff muttered, "so's your food wouldn't come cold. I'm sure as hell not paying for all this. What've you got in that little cart?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What are you using for barter? There's this food, the Arbitrator's fees, my eight percent, your burial plot . . . you got any precious stones, or gold in your teeth? How much could I get for this raggedy animal? He'll have to be tanned; forget the fur. And he'll have to be dried for jerky. No one's gonna want to eat this mangy stuff as-is."

"*She* is to be buried with me. I was under the impression we were to be treated as Earthmen."

The bailiff gave Beppo a hard look. "Okay, *Earthman*. Now why don't you tell me what's in the cart? What's under that blanket?"

"My personal affairs. There are certain things one cannot part with."

"Like rare metals, maybe? Gemstones? Everybody knows you royds hoard what you find. What good's it gonna do you when you're dead?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then you won't mind if I look." He scooted closer to the cart.

An odd little panic gripped Beppo. It was cross-species; for the first time in his life he was feeling violated. "Don't touch that," he managed.

"Fifty-fifty," said the bailiff. "I can fence for you. You've got the goods, I've got the connections."

"No!"

"I'll make sure you get the snazziest headstone. I'm telling you, this is your lucky day." He took a broad step to the cart and yanked away the coarse blanket. Underneath were half-gnawed roots, hand-polished pebbles, various antique Administration brochures extolling the wonders of Earthlings, and Beppo's personal drawing pad and journal.

"What is all this shit?"

"My thoughts and artwork," Beppo said. "Earth Administration literature . . . some rocks I was planning on painting . . . breakfast leftovers."

The bailiff glared for a long minute. “Man of Earth,” he muttered, picking up Beppo’s barely-touched plates and tossing them in the disposal chute. Sensing his design, Gwenda immediately snorted the last of her pudding. The bailiff silently led them out the building and back onto the main road. The little party of three made their way down the darkened streets in a silent file. Shadowy humans, male and female, watched quietly from doorways and hollows; the bailiff flashed his badge and they melted into the dark. Farther on were ramshackle homes, where Earthmen stared from porches; Beppo smiled fraternally, but the eyes slid away. He’d never been so conscious of being a royd. The narrowing streets became side roads, and soon they were following an old dirt path that gave way to a field, a wetland, and finally a marsh reminiscent of home.

Now the only illumination was starlight. Beppo and Gwenda pulled the cart through deepening muck, their hooves slurping in staggered time. To their left ran the circuitous pale of Earth Administration: a high steel fence capped by razor wire and studded every few hundred yards with egress-only spiked turnstiles—entrance to Administration grounds required tandem keys for temporary displacement of the turnstiles’ retaining bars. It was obvious, by the dully shining gristle on the spikes, that generations of royds, desperate or slow-witted, had given their all attempting to beat the system. The bailiff used a multi-stepped reflector to scatter starlight before them, and at last they reached a particularly desolate arm of EarthAd—a place Beppo recognized as just beyond Harrow Bog. The bailiff shined his reflector on a sinkhole and turned.

“This is your plot. You and your animal may die here. As you lack funds, you lack all funerary expenses. That means no one to cover your corpses, and no marker. However, the ground here is soft, and in time your bodies will certainly be absorbed.” The bailiff gave a little flick of a salute. “Vaya con Dios,” he said, “‘Earthman’.”

Beppo bowed clear to the waist. “Goodbye, fellow Earthman. And bless you. And bless all we men of Earth.”

“Yeah, right.” The bailiff receded into the night.

Beppo began guiding Gwenda, but the rhia went straight into seizure and dropped on her belly. He unhitched the cart and lifted her in his arms. She was too heavy to bear outright, so he half-carried, half-dragged her through a turnstile, out of Earth Administration and into Harrow Bog. The two struggled up the incline to a solid hill and collapsed in a pile of paws and hooves.



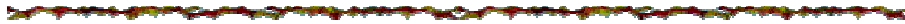
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“There there, girl,” Beppo cooed over and over, while the rhia bleated and shook in his arms. In the ground around them, bleeders responded to her throes by erupting from the dirt and leaping on her muzzle and flank.

“No!” Beppo wailed. “Not yet!” He frantically peeled them off, even as Gwenda’s final shudder ran down his frame. The bleeders jumped from her forelegs to his face and throat, sprouted between his legs, pinned his ankles to the ground. He flailed his arms and rolled onto his back. And the vermin piled on savagely, forming a writhing violet hump. Beppo lurched twice, attempting to rise, but was overwhelmed by the weight and frenzy. And the many sucking mouths passed the precious fluids deep into the ground, to their flopping starving *mater*, her tapering purple limbs clamped to a hundred narrow jags in the black hole that is Elis Royd.

## *Chapter Two*

### The Hoodooman



“Son . . .”

Governor Wilde gripped Lance’s shoulders, pinning him to the bed. “I want you to know you’re entirely safe here. Regardless of what you may have heard in the Hall: those are just rumors. The Hoodooman can’t get past the Guard.”

The scene was as laughable as it was touching—Lance was thirty-one years old, fully bearded and feverishly balding. Physically, he was much larger and stronger than his father; mentally, he was an eight-year old going on six. On bad days, and today had certainly been a bad day, the tantrums would kick in, the convulsions take hold, and Lance’s blubbing yelps would grow in intensity until they tore right through his quarters’ walls. *Once again* the governor would be forced to sing the boy down or, that failing, haul out the restraints before Council, *once again*, played the son’s illness against the father’s office. “Lancey go sleep now,” Wilde sang coldly (this was a proud and independent man, forged with the instincts of a bull terrier) “—splash in crystal streams. All of Lance’s friends now, come play in Lancey’s dreams.”

## The Hoodooman

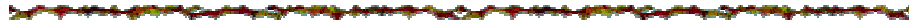
The storm was over. Wilde stepped to the window, placed his hands on the sill, and breathed in the night. His son's room was on the second floor, some thirty feet above the crushed earth and cartwheel-scarred cobbles. The governor looked up, craning his head left and right. No limbs close enough to grasp. Bricks too old to support a man's weight. A number of dried-out vines still stuck to the wall; he shook one and it broke off in his fist. Only an acrobat could reach this window.

His thoughts were interrupted by a series of sharp triple raps.

"I'm busy," Wilde snarled.

"The Council requests your presence. Immediately."

"Tell them I'm on my way." To Lance he said, "I have to go now, sweetheart. You heard." He walked to the door, cracked it, and turned. The face on the bed was staring straight up, eyes frosted from within. "You're perfectly safe in here, son, and Daddy's not going to tie you down this time. So please just go to sleep. Don't call for me, even if you think you hear the Hoodooman; I won't be able to come." The head didn't move. Wilde froze against the door, waiting for the least sign of acknowledgment. A boy in a man's body . . . a vegetable for a successor . . . his genetic reflection—no! He wouldn't go there—the boy took after his mother. The governor ground his teeth and whispered: "Rockabye, pumpkin pie. Sleepy little angel, tucked in a sigh." He grabbed his sash and quietly stepped outside.



Council Chambers: a structurally decrepit room as grim as any in Earth Administration. Blame it on the asteroid's natural oppressiveness, blame it on a thousand and one meetings packed with contentious Earthmen marinating in their own sweat. All throughout the Officers' Complex, and all down the Main Hall, overhead fans barely stirred the stale air. Half the Guard looked ready to faint. The Council triad appeared to have been stewing there forever, but the governor strolled in with an air of complete indifference.

The Elder immediately banged his gavel. "Now that we're all here, this meeting is convened. Governor Wilde, you will please take a seat." He wiped his neck and brow. "You'll notice Chambers is conspicuously lacking in familiar faces—this is not a court in the regular sense; Scribe is not present, and there will be no records kept. Every member with half a wit is already fast asleep—we, however," and he tapped a gnarly fist over his heart, "have business to attend to.

This is a strictly private matter, to be held close to the chest between we four very close . . . associates.” The Elder made a great show of getting comfortable. “Now, let’s get right down to it. We’re all perfectly aware of this growing unrest among the royds. Their having a murderer on the loose is their business, but having one of the victims found on Administration grounds is another matter altogether. Those jabberers outside West Gate won’t be the last—and I don’t care how many times they call it a body of inquiry; those brutes can only mimic civilized behavior. They’re claiming the murders are not the acts of a royd . . . it’s the damnedest thing, but you’d swear there’s a straight thinker among them. Who knew they were even capable of being rallied? Well, they’re now demanding the capture of that same silly ‘Hoodooman’, and, I suppose, expect us to lead the posse.”

The Guard Commander rose angrily. “Doesn’t anyone catch the inference? Why should this ‘Hoodooman’ contain the suffix ‘man’ in the first place? Am I the only one here intelligent enough to realize these royds are attempting to implicate Earthmen by way of nomenclature?”

“Trash and nonsense,” said the Head Administrator. “Implication is a concept way over their heads. This is obviously a word they have transmogrified from our lexicon. Remember, in adopting English as the official language of Earth they received access to uncountable terms and phrases of great antiquity. I doubt even they recognize an inference. Simple coincidence.”

“Nevertheless,” the Elder mused, “this latest instance lends a veneer of credibility to their claims. To be frank, I can’t stomach the thought of entertaining even one of those nightmarish creatures in a legal capacity.”

“No royd body,” the Governor interjected, “may impress itself upon Earth Administration without first introducing into Chambers a duly elected official. That requires focus, research, and at least a little hard planning. As you implied, Elder, they’re incapable of organizing on their own. So if they do get this far we’ll know for sure there’s an alert presence in their midst.”

The Elder said sarcastically, “A ‘Hoodooman’?” He tugged his lower lip. “Still, they’re protected under the Constitution.” He glared at the Commander. “‘The only one here intelligent enough’, are you? Why weren’t you intelligent enough to have your men drag the damn body back *off* the grounds?” He drummed his fingertips and stared at the ceiling. “These are extraordinary circumstances.”

## The Hoodooman

“There is nothing extraordinary about any of this,” Wilde said. “What we have are royds acting like royds. They don’t have the brains to have rights. But . . . *if* this hypothetical presence *did* coerce them into dragging one of their victims onto Administration grounds, well, I’d call that conspiracy.”

“Governor Wilde.” The Administrator swiveled regally. The old man, with his head notched back and his robes clenched about him, resembled nothing so much as a fading eagle with folded wings. “I will be blunt. This body, sir, is preparing a charge of kidnapping and rape to our list of what is now four royd murders. This latest act, involving an elderly Betsu female of no conceivable attraction to any sane man of Earth, took place within the very walls of Administration. That is to say, the female was abducted in the bogs and sexually assaulted and killed herein. We are all aware that any Earthman can exit these premises unmolested: it is therefore within our intellectual purview to entertain the notion, no matter how troubling, of an Earthman doing his mischief off-premises. Re-entering the grounds is another matter altogether; the Guard would have to be circumvented. This would require intimate knowledge of shifts and patterns, and at least a cursory overview of the fortification itself. Gentlemen,” the Administrator turned back, addressing the Commander with his left hand and the Elder with his right, “only ranking officials are privy to that information. A less than scrupulous officer could conceivably, perhaps unwittingly, pass this data to a colleague, a friend, or even a family mem—”

“Do you *dare* state—” Wilde seethed to his feet “—do you mean to imply for a nanosecond that my son would have anything to do with this?”

“We only mean to consider the possibili—”

“For the thousandth time you intend to use my son’s infirmity as a wedge against my office!”

The Elder blew it. “Governor Wilde! I *defy* you to point out *anything* in the Administrator’s statement of a personal nature. This is pure paranoia; no one’s out to get you. Now, I’m sick of adjudicating at this level—sick of it! And it’s precisely why I elected to do this in closed session.” He lifted his glass and drained it in three long, deliberate draughts. When he placed it back down he appeared to have regained his composure. “Nobody’ll lose any sleep over the deaths of a few royds, regardless of the circumstances. A royd rape and murder on Administration grounds, however, is untenable to the civilized mind.” The Elder rhythmically locked and unlocked his

fingers. “Governor Wilde, our resolution was set prior to your being summoned. It is the *earnest* suggestion of this Council that you, sir, find and arrest this criminal forthwith. Upon that act the royds will be mollified, and the air permanently cleared of this most unprofessional innuendo. Take however much support you feel necessary. If you have any objections I suggest you air them now.”

Wilde threw up his arms. “And you wonder why I’m paranoid. So we all ‘agreed’, now, did we?”

“You are not under coercion, and may withdraw at any time. I’m certain there are several good men willing to fill in for you.”

“I can hear them champing now.”

“Decide.”

“You’ll get your Hoodoومان,” Wilde vowed. “And when I bring him in I don’t want to hear any more of this bullsh—this innuendo.”

“Then show up bright and early and we’ll make it all official. Godspeed. This body is dismissed.”

Wilde was almost to the door when the Elder’s voice caught up with him. “And Governor, about your son.”

The Administrator and Commander stopped where they were. Their faces boldly studied the governor’s.

“You will kindly make sure he remains confined to his quarters until the investigation is concluded.” Wilde’s eyes burned across the room. “Should he at any time leave said quarters, the office of Governor shall be held in contempt of Council. Do we understand each other?” He gave a light, perfunctory tap of his gavel. “Consider yourself forewarned.”



“Son.”

Wilde placed his palm on Lance’s hot crown. “I’ve been ordered to go and find the Hoodoومان. Daddy’s going to catch him and chop off his head for you, okay? You don’t have to worry: the Guard is assigned to watch this room, and for your safety you’re not to go out that door. I promise it won’t be for long.” Lance was much improved from only an hour ago. Wilde laid his head on his son’s chest and closed his eyes. “When your mother was alive it was the same thing. She just got sicker and sicker, and they tried to use that sickness against Daddy too, just like they attack me whenever you’re

## The Hoodooman

unwell. But it wasn't her fault, and it's not your fault either. Do you understand, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Some day we'll move out of here. I don't want the stupid position any more; not under these circumstances. And they're obviously not happy with me. I'll retire, soon enough. We'll move somewhere far away."

"Not with the royds, Daddy."

"No, darling, not that far away. I don't like those ugly little things either. Nobody does. We'll find us a place somewhere on Administration's fringes, far from these stale old men."

Lance's head rolled to one side of the pillow. A few seconds later it rolled back. "No royds."

"No, angel. It'll just be you and me, safe and sound." Wilde slid his hand down Lance's forehead and face, using two fingers to close the eyes. "When I come back there'll be one dead Hoodooman. That much I promise. Not for those dusty pigs in Council, and not for the stupid Guard. For you."



The Commander and Administrator had been assigned as the Governor's personal little launching party, complete with gifts of cakes, sheaths, and official papers bound in silk. The Governor smiled down on them, his eyes distant, his head full of fresh sights and sounds. So like the Elder to mask his closest spies as wellwishers. The Commander provided three of his best riders, and the Administrator a short checklist.

Wilde, dressed for the hunt, stroked his steed's shining mane, feeling almost a kid again.

"You are armed and provisioned?" asked the Administrator.

Wilde indicated the rifle slung in its saddle sheath, then showed him his saber and bow. "Don't worry. And the riders are carrying plenty of food and water."

"You were issued maps and a compass? All things must be in order."

Wilde raised a compass and crude map. "Tell the Elder to relax."

"You carry medical supplies? A journal for detailed analyses? Restraints?"

“We’re fine!” He indicated the bags on the last rider’s steed. “Go ahead and check for yourself.”

The Administrator did so, meticulously and repeatedly. “Then you are on your own. On my advice, you will not return without someone to show for our troubles.”

“Advice noted,” said Wilde. He whipped his steed’s flank, the riders followed suit, and soon the Commander and Administrator were just two bitter old scarecrows silhouetted against West Gate.

“Good riddance to bad apples!” called one of the riders, and the others laughed. Getting out unsupervised was a thrill for all the men; it’d been years. They navigated by eyes and ears—the map was a joke, and the compass a useless relic on an asteroid with a magnetic mind of its own. Anyway, royds are notorious for relocating willy-nilly. The riders pressed on until they encountered a group of Ceptu loitering about a narrow steam-fed stream.

“You there,” called Wilde, still high with the moment. “I am Governor Quantis Wilde of Earth Administration. We are looking for an individual responsible for a rape and murder within our walls. He goes by an alien name, a royd name. He is known as the ‘Hoodoo-man’. I demand you assist us in this search, by either fingering the perpetrator or by directing us to someone who will. Failure to readily yield will have dire consequences.”

Ceptu are a wiry species; horned, webbed, and armed with extremely sharp teeth and nails. The group of eleven confabbed, members occasionally staring back at the riders.

Wilde sat higher. “Answer!”

In a minute one loped up to the governor’s horse and showed a long curling tongue. “Hoo-doo . . . *you!*”

Wilde drew his whip and lashed the offender repeatedly. “Damn you! I asked a question!”

The Cept staggered back to his group and hissed threateningly.

“Bow,” Wilde said. The rider to his right handed him his bow and a single arrow. The governor closed an eye, aimed, and expertly put the shaft straight through the Cept’s throbbing green throat. The Ceptu squealed and hopped into the hedges.

“After them!” Wilde cried. “Bring me one alive!”

But the Earthmen were no match for the marshes and brambles; the Ceptu, perfectly adapted to Elis Royd, vanished into places that appeared utterly without cover. The governor bellowed with frustration, stamping his horse in circles. The riders regrouped. “Wing the



## The Hoodooman

next one you see,” Wilde puffed. “We’ll see how tough they are when it comes to a little sophisticated persuasion.”

And they never saw another. The men pushed through a marsh and came upon a broad field of weeds and half-gnawed roots. In the center of that field, suspended fifteen feet above the dirt, sprawled a massive wood sunscreen tied to cornering trees, and beneath that screen were perhaps two dozen bramble huts painted with pitch.

One of the riders commented, “The Xhul. They can’t bear the light. But watch out. They move fast when they have to.”

Wilde called out, “You in there. Come out in the open where we can see you. I am Governor Wilde, here on official Administration business.”

In a minute a hide flap was pulled aside, and a smallish male figure peered out. He was swathed head to foot; even his mouth and nose were covered. “Send in a messenger. We are not free to move around in the light.”

Wilde snapped his whip feverishly. “Did you hear me? I am the Governor! You will stand before me at once!”

A second pair of eyes joined the first. The flap closed.

“*Ingrates!*” Wilde punched his riders with the boss of his whip. “Burn them out! Teach them some respect!”

The riders obediently set fire to the huts, and the fleeing Xhul were quickly run down and cowed under the rearing steeds. Wilde leaned from his saddle, repeatedly lashing any royd within reach. “Who is the Hoodooman?” he demanded. “Where are you hiding him?” The Xhul howled with the torment of direct light. “Who is the Hoodooman? I must know! Who is he?” Wilde brought his horse to rear and stamp, crushing the screaming royds with its hooves. “Who? *Who?* Answer, you bastards! Who?” The closeness of their steeds eventually tangled up the riders, allowing the Xhul to scramble out and dash across the field, arms thrown over their heads against the light. It was impossible to run them down. Wilde was reduced to pressuring a captured female and her infant. He wrapped the whip around her neck and hissed in her ear: “I know you can understand me. I won’t kill you if you tell me exactly what I want to hear.” The female screamed and struggled wildly. “Stop screaming,” Wilde said reasonably. “Who is the Hoodooman? This is government business. You are a royd. I am an Earthman. You must tell me what I want to know. Stop screaming!” But now she was shrieking out of control. “Stop it, I said! *Stop screaming!*” Wilde went berserk with the lash. His three riders cheered him on, then, sensing his official capacity

was no longer a restraining factor, grabbed their rifles by the barrels and got in some licks of their own. The female dropped and went into convulsions. Governor Wilde staggered back against his steed's flank, and it wasn't until her body seized up that he realized it was Sirius's light that had proved lethal. The infant gave one tiny wail and was still.

As the men rode away, the governor gave vent to a brief grudging soliloquy:

"How can the greatest race the universe has ever produced be utterly foiled by the most mediocre? What mad deity invented irony, anyway? Is it possible—can all royds be so low on the evolutionary ladder that even *basic* respect is beyond their ken?"

After that they rode in silence. It wasn't just these two misplays that had the governor so down—a novel resilience in the royds caught him completely by surprise. Wilde was already toying with the idea that he just might be coming home empty-handed after all.

"There," said a rider.

In the slight shade of a rare copse rested a small caravan of Rauna coaches, their beasts unhitched and grazing. The Rauna are royd gypsies; a wandering species that gave up on naturalization generations ago, and now clatter along horizon to horizon in bizarrely dressed coaches pulled by exotically crossbred steeds. Rauna are hideous creatures; all warts and wattles, with ratty persimmon-colored fur lining their limbs and torsos.

"Stay where you are!" Wilde called out. "Men, form a circle. I am Governor Quantis Wilde of Earth Administration. I've been directed to get some answers out of you things, and by the stars I swear I will! Who speaks for you?"

The Rauna hunched and glared. A few moved toward the coaches.

"Who?" Wilde demanded. "Guard!"

The riders unsheathed their bows, pulled arrows from quivers, and took random aim. In a minute a little old female separated herself from the group, stepping up with a dignity that made Wilde almost burst with anger.

"What do you wish to know?"

"You will address me as 'Governor'!"

After half a minute she said, almost inaudibly, "What do you wish to know, Governor?"

"The identity of your Hoodoومان."

Her warty head notched back. "And how are we to divine this?"

## The Hoodooman

“Everybody knows you Rauna are mystics. Your people see beyond the senses. So you can see what awaits you if I don’t get a straight answer. Who is the Hoodooman!”

“This knowledge, Earthman, you can better live without.”

“You old fool! Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you realize what I can do? To you? To your spawn and your elderly?”

The Raun female considered a space between Wilde’s steed and the adjacent rider’s. When she looked back up all traces of compliance had left her expression. “Go back to your plush sanctuary. Your Administration administers only misery.”

The governor went rigid in his saddle. “You’ll mind your tongue, old witch.” He slipped out his saber. “Or I’ll cut it out for supper.”

She didn’t budge. Wilde felt the hint of a stroke . . . the heat—and the moment had passed. His heavy chin dropped to his chest. “Open your mind, Governor. It is your son—it is he who is this ‘Hoodooman’.”

Wilde shook his head sharply. He placed the blade under her chin and pressed up until she was standing on her toes. “Very carefully,” he said quietly. “Very clearly explain yourself.”

The female’s eyes squeezed shut and her mouth twisted halfway up her face. Blood began rolling down both sides of the blade. “I read you,” she managed. “And you know.” Wilde lifted the little female clean off her feet. The blade tore through her lower palate and tongue, emerging between her lips. She shook madly as though being electrocuted. The governor hurled her down.

“Torch the coaches and slaughter the steeds. String these little monsters up.” He leaned down and wiped the blade on her homely burlap dress. “Why are they standing up for themselves? Who’s providing their backbone?” He swung his free hand in an all-encompassing circle. “No matter! I’ll not suffer another disparaging of Earth Administration!”

It was grisly work. The group hanged the Rauna one by one, hoping a weakling would break before they’d gone through the lot. But Rauna are a tough species, and at last the Earthmen found themselves contemplating a dozen swinging corpses surrounded by burning coaches, with barely enough energy to butcher the Rauna steeds. As the group pressed on in their quest, a kind of mania came over them. Newly encountered species were strung up after only the briefest interrogations; after that royds were simply shot on sight, or forced to lynch their own under threat of torture. Mile upon mile the

hangings went on, and when at last Wilde was forced to admit defeat and turn home, he made it his personal campaign to leave whole tribes strung up as his calling card. Most royds were too timid or too ignorant to resist; skirmishes are rare outside Earth Administration. The sharpest fled when word came of the approaching massacres, the slowest were caught unbelieving, and were shot in the back while their property burned. Wilde and his riders hanged royds all the way to Administration's gates, and by that time it was dark and they were completely spent.

The governor came clopping through West Gate barely able to carry the dignity of his office. He dismissed his men and made the long walk to Chambers while slicking back his hair and dusting off his bloody clothes.

The Council of three was waiting for him. "Another late session?" he called. He raised his head and marched up the aisle like a Reformist approaching his execution.

"You come alone," Council Elder said slowly. "From our spires we see countless executed royds along the road to Administration, but no captive criminal. Perhaps we did not make it clear that this was to be an exercise of law, rather than of sport."

"The royds are non-compliant," Wilde heaved. "They're being programmed, I tell you; they won't say a word, no matter how they're pressed."

"Be that as it may very well be," Elder said, "they were *most* vocal at the Gate, not an hour ago. There they complained of a fifth rape and killing; this time a pre-pubescent Hila female. The atrocity took place even as you were gallivanting about the countryside, further inciting our very accusers."

"I was on Administration business," Wilde grated. "At your behest. I can't be in two places at once. And I'll take my sport where I find it."

The Elder slapped down a hand. "You were *not* given carte blanche to engage in the wholesale eradication of our royd population! You didn't pause to consider the ramifications? Our mint depends on a continuous flow of precious metals—a dead royd produces nothing! Then there is this confounding business of a growing royd self-awareness. Who knows what you may have stirred up. Your tactics, Governor Wilde, have proven heavy-handed and utterly inefficient. We have discussed this matter thoroughly in your absence."

"Ah! And let me guess."

## The Hoodooman

“It is the verdict of this body that you very seriously consider vacating your office. The benefits of retirement are a world apart from the rigors of impeachment. We now leave you time to weigh your option.”

Wilde stalked out of Chambers and into the Administration’s Officers’ Complex. Here the Guard stood in pairs, covering each individual residence. Wilde moved up to one and said quietly, “William, I’ll need a firearm. Let me borrow your personal revolver. I’ll have it back to you in two shakes.”

William let his breath hiss out. “Governor,” he said, just as quietly, “you know that’s illegal. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to refuse.”

“Come now, William. It’s not like I intend to put a bullet in the back of that Elder’s ugly old head or anything.” He looked up with a boyish gleam in his eye. “How long have we worked together, William? We’re practically family.”

The guard smiled tautly. “And serving you has been my pride and joy, sir. But this is just one of those professional things—I really *can’t*. You know exactly what I mean.”

“Indeed I do.” Wilde slipped a solid gold Elis Eagle from his waistband, placed it in William’s hand. “Really I do.”

William peered down without lowering his head. He removed an ancient handgun from a hip holster and pushed it into Wilde’s waiting palm. Wilde verified the chambers were loaded. “Sir,” William said uncomfortably. “I’d prefer this little transaction remain private. I’m sure you just want to use it for target practice, but if anything should go wrong, I mean, I’d really feel a whole lot better knowing . . .”

Wilde smiled up at him. “Of course, William. What goes on in the family stays in the family.” He slid the gun under his coat and winked at the guards watching his son’s room. “Just a quick bedtime story to put him out. The kid’s all nerves over that silly Hoodooman myth.”

Wilde cracked the door and peered in. He could see Lance’s left eye gleaming in the light. The governor slipped the gun from under his coat and quietly made his way inside. He closed the bolt, crept to the bed, and went down on one knee. Lance was breathing hard. He’d been out; he smelled of roots and hedges.

“Son,” the governor breathed.

The heaving chest paused. Wilde placed his left hand over the heart. His right hand pushed the gun across the pillow and eased it to

Lance's temple. "Son," he whispered. "Son . . . are you the Hoodoo-man?"

Lance froze. Wilde moved his face up until they were eye-to-eye. Their breaths mingled. Lance bit his lip and his whole body shook. He nodded.

"I love you, son," Wilde whispered, and jerked back his head as he pulled the trigger. The gun's recoil and the kick of Lance's body knocked the governor to his feet. He pulled off the top sheet and wiped away the gore before draping it over his son's head.

Wilde dragged himself to the window. Outside, a billion stars were enough to half-light the brooding shapes of lynched royds rotting over the bogs.

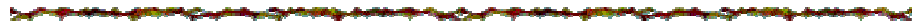
There was a great commotion in the hall as the Guard, responding to the shot, ran up from all sides.

The governor attempted to address the cosmos. Finding the night too large for words, he said simply, "Forgive me. I have failed. Somehow . . ." There was a hard thump at the door, and another. The bolt bent and gave.

Wilde placed the barrel in his mouth, closed his eyes, and calmly pulled the trigger.

## *Chapter Three*

### Four Horsemen



“There’s a good boy,” Carver said, grabbing his big Shep by the jowls and affectionately shaking the head. He tugged on a shredded purplish Symaran foot clamped between the dog’s wet fangs. “Okay, Slobber, let go now. Come on, boy. Let go.”

The dog, so rudely torn from sweet reverie, rolled up his eyes until they burned into Carver’s. A steady growl rose from his depths.

Sheps are massive and naturally vicious; one of the few big canines to thrive in the topsy-turvy world of Elis Royd. Most of the smaller breeds succumbed to exotic pestilences long ago, or were simply stung out of existence by leapers. But Sheps, sturdy animals running chocolate brown to deepest black, are magnificently adaptable engines. A best-of mix of the original imported rottweilers, pits, and mastiffs, they can be impertinent or withdrawn, lazy or restless, amiable, indifferent, or psychotic. So they’re happiest with a master who knows when to chum up and when to keep his distance.

Carver tipped back his second pint of the day.

A Gate Guard’s lot is a good one: long hours basking on a bulwark without a cloud in the sky. Carver had just reclaimed his recliner for the late morning snooze when an oddly tremulous growl made him crack an eye. Slobber was standing almost perpendicular to the bul-

wark floor, his paws on the retaining wall, staring hard at the ground outside the complex. Carver scraped himself upright and peered out at something beyond his drunkenest dreams.

A large group of royds was marching purposefully to the Gate, looking almost organized. There must have been sixty of the things, male and female, adult to elderly, of every imaginable species. Most curious of all: the leader wore a kind of bannered overcoat, and the female at his side carried something like a placard covered with gibberish.

Carver sat straight up. “Well, I’ll . . .” He took Slobber’s collar with one hand and hit the pint with the other. “Hey!” he called down. “If you’re not a nightmare I’m damned. What the hell do you want?”

The royds chattered excitedly. At a prompting from his female, the overcoated male called back:

“We are a committee seeking redress for the atrocities of yesterday.”

“Redress?” Carver shouted in amazement. Slobber whined frantically.

The royds huddled. The leader cleared his long scaly throat. “Reparation, if you will.”

“Redress!” Carver went on. “Atrocities!” Slobber yanked him to his feet. “You’re the atrocities! Atrocious little buggers. Where’s my rifle, Slobbs?”

The dog, whining hard, dragged him along the retaining wall.

Now the leader was fidgeting all over the place. His female smacked his claw until he got up the nerve to shout again:

“We demand redress!”

Carver was able to brake Slobber by slamming into a pylon. He clung there, hanging half over the wall. “You demand re—you . . . *demand?*” His nails tore into the wood. “*You?*”

Slobber’s whine changed gears as a pair of guards edged up from behind. One leaned over and took a hard look. “Messy, man, messy. This is for Council.”

“Council, hell,” said Carver. “We’re going down.”

The second guard broke in, “Let’s not get involved, okay, Carv’?” He laid on a pacifying hand, but removed it at a warning snarl from Slobber.

“One of you guys open the gate.” Without taking his eyes off the little royd spokesman, Carver choked up on Slobber’s collar. The dog pulled him staggering to the steps.

“Oh man,” said the first guard. “Oh man, oh man, oh man.”



## Four Horsemen

“Just keep out of the way,” replied the second, shaking his head. “Don’t be an idiot.” He hauled down on the chain.

Carver ducked under the rising gate. It took all he had to keep Slobber at bay.

The crowd broke into small backpedaling groups, completely unprepared for this bizarre turn of events. There was genuine menace in Carver’s face. “*Who demands redress?*”

The little spokesman hunched, looking as though he’d faint. “Sir, we require—we request a word with someone in authority.”

“What do I look like?” Carver shouted. “The village idiot?” Slobber strained wildly, making Carver goose-step forward.

“Carv’!” called a guard. “Let it go, man, let it go!”

“*That’s the respect you freaks show humans? Insults? You come here to insult us?*” He stamped his foot so hard he almost lost control of the Shep. “*Freaks, freaks—you’re all fucking freaks!*”

The female stepped directly between them. “You—” she said. “You keep your distance!”

Carver’s jaw dropped. She was . . . she was *ordering* him! There wasn’t a moment to waste. He drew back his fist and laid her right out.

Came a space of complete confusion, a crazy space, and then it seemed every royd in the crowd was screaming. Sweet music to Slobber’s ear—the dog tore free and went for the spokesman’s throat while Carver railed at the scattering royds:

“You think you can come here making demands and we’re all supposed to just smile and kiss your ugly green asses?” A shot from the Gate tore through the spokesman’s shrieks. It was a shot fired in the air; a warning shot, meant to restore a degree of order. “You think you can come here mocking a human committee—like you have the slightest idea what civilization’s all about?” Another shot, then a series. The royds took off in all directions. Carver disdainfully threw out his arms. “Aww, run then.” He wrestled Slobber off the corpse of the spokesman and dragged him back to the Gate.

“Bad move,” said one of the guards, hurriedly lowering the gate. “Real bad move, man.”

Carver ignored him. He walked Slobber back to their post, collapsed on his recliner and closed his eyes. He ran his big hand back and forth across his dog’s head and scratched behind the ears. The hand, sliding down the muzzle, encountered the spokesman’s severed leg jutting from Slobber’s jaws. Carver opened his eyes and his expression lit up. “What’s this? Baby’s got a new toy?” Slobber

growled warningly. "Okay, okay," Carver said, wiping his hand. "Just teasin', big fella."

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The inrush of light peeled open Carver's bleary unburied eye. Slobber's head rose slowly.

"What is it?" Carver grated. "I'm on my break, man. Let me catch some winks, willya?"

The light was eclipsed by the guards ostensibly under his command. "I'm afraid it's bad news, Carv'," said one. The door opened wide, revealing a contingent of six armed Administration guards. Four immediately aimed their rifles at Slobber; the other two dropped to their knees and hurled a weighted net. Carver was just able to roll free.

"What the hell's going on? Get away from my dog!"

The Gate guards gripped his arms. "He won't be hurt. Now hold still, Carver. Please."

Carver was squeezed between the four rear guards and walked out of the room. The two others remained inside with Slobber. The door was kicked shut.

"What are you doing?" Carver demanded. "Let go of me!"

"Don't resist," hissed a Gate guard. "*Please* don't resist!"

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Carver kicked and bit his way free. He was just reaching for the door when a pair of rifle butts arrived half a second apart on each side of his skull.

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A massive iron key turned in the massive iron lock. Carver blinked up from his cold straw bed.

"Story time," said the armed black silhouette. "Let's go."

Carver was prompted down a series of halls to Administration's Main Courtroom. Three other men were waiting outside, each accompanied by an Administration guard. The doors were thrust open and the party of eight walked into a big peeling chamber, partitioned into two identical sections of tables and benches. Present were only a bailiff and guards and, pressed into a huddle on the far side, a group of fourteen royd. Carver recognized them as the stupid little pseudo-committee's nucleus, minus one spokesman, who had caused so much trouble at West Gate. In the center against the north wall rose the

## Four Horsemen

judge's bench, and, right in front, an oblong table bearing a plain wood coffin.

The bailiff intoned, "His High Just Justice, the Honorable Wain."

A black curtain was pulled aside and Honorable Wain strode to the bench. Iron-gray, hunched, bilious and lined. And, of course, sweating like a pig.

"Down, down, down. Everybody sit down." He scattered some papers until he came to a rolled parchment. Wain donned his glasses and turned to the roys.

"This is an original copy of the Elis Royd Constitution, brought to us by a royd seeking guaranteed naturalization via expiration on Administration grounds. His body disappeared so his argument was academic, though the Article, 73-A, is perfectly valid." Wain lovingly smoothed the parchment. "Beautiful, is it not? Priceless; in far better shape than our own cherished copies." He wiped his face and neck. "Your argument too is valid, and as you are the first to exercise your right to express it, I congratulate you. You are an organized body legally filing a grievance in an official Court of Earth Administration.

"Now, you claim in your statement that an Administration officer, Governor Quentis Wilde, led an organized party of three riders on a massacre of our local roys while on official business. This is your first charge. You are suing Earth Administration for unspecified redress to be defined as we go along.

"To begin with, you will need to confirm an identity. In that casket is the body of Governor Wilde. Each of you file by now, and tell me you are certain this is the man you witnessed committing the alleged atrocities."

The first royd to peer in was a male Rauxus; pasty gray, with tiny flexible tusk-like feelers round his oval muzzle. He was dressed humbly for Court, in homemade straw vest and top hat, to resemble an Earthman shopkeeper featured in a photospread on one of Administration's archaic welcoming brochures. He looked back up with an expression of horror and disgust.

"This human has no face."

"Governor Wilde," Honorable Wain said impatiently, "suffered an accident with a firearm in his quarters. The surgeon has done an admirable job sewing the flaps and fragments together. Look again, and be certain."

The little male stared long and hard. "He is the one."

"Next."

One by one the royds filed by. Each matched the Raux' reaction, and each concurred with his appraisal.

"Fine. Now I'll need you to identify his accomplices. Guards, bring forward the group prisoners." He turned back to the royds. "Search well these faces, and take your time. Are these the three humans under the charge of Governor Wilde?"

A female said, "We do not need time. They are the ones."

"And you speak for your group?"

"I do."

"Guards, return the prisoners to their seats. Now as to your second charge. You claim that a guard at our West Gate unleashed his dog on one of your own, killing him outside of Earth Administration walls. Do you see that man in this Courtroom?"

"I do." It was the same female. Carver looked her dead in the eye, his blood rising. The Courtroom was still.

"And?"

Their stare went on and on. Carver was letting her know he'd butcher her if it was his last act alive, and she was reading him plain. Her arm rose slowly. Every eye in that chamber was magnetically drawn, every breath held. "He is sitting," she articulated at last, "directly across from me." She pointed her long crooked first digit.

Honorable Wain's eyes followed the motion and swung back. "And you are?"

"The murdered male's widow."

Wain clucked twice, dropped back his head and, addressing the ceiling, said, "Murder is *such* an explosive word. I am considering negligence on the part of a Gate guard, a serious charge to be sure."

The royds grumbled and huddled. The female said, "And the massacre? Also a case of negligence?"

Honorable Wain ground his teeth. "Take another look in that box, ma'am. It is quite obvious that Governor Wilde is beyond the jurisprudence of this Court. As to his accomplices, they were compelled to follow his orders. As to Mr. Carver here, it is evident he was unable to control a guard dog provoked by your mob. And as to the animal, it is presently kenneled and will be put to sleep this evening."

Carver rose before his guard could respond. "*Slobber!*"

Wain looked over with distaste. "Slobber yourself, sir. Guard, restrain that man." He turned back to the royds. "Additionally, Sergeant of the Guard Carver was found intoxicated at his post. For this, there is the fine of one day's wages. As he is no longer employed, the issue is moot and the fee waived." He sighed. "Once

## Four Horsemen

again, I applaud your mettle.” Wain peered over his glasses. “Please understand that your case is not being dismissed. I, like every peace-loving man of Earth, realize that all denizens of Elis Royd are equal under the Law, and must be treated with the dignity, compassion, and respect demanded by our forebears. I am certain all good Earthmen can generously sympathize with your profound sense of loss. But I’m afraid this entire convoluted ordeal is a civil matter.”

“*This*,” the female hissed, “is a case of wanton killing—the heartless destruction of fieldhands, of bystanders, of innocent mothers and children! This is no ‘civil matter’!”

Wain slammed down his gavel. “*You’ll hold your tongue, royd!* This is *my* Courtroom, and it is run by *my* rules, and the verdict will be *mine* and *mine alone!* Do you understand that? Open your filthy little mouth again and I’ll have you jailed for contempt!”

The group of royds cringed, but the female stood tall. Her eyes flashed from Wain to Carver to the three guards. The Courtroom was quiet. Her eyes slid back to Carver’s.

“It is the verdict of this Court,” Wain pronounced almightily, “that these four prisoners acted irresponsibly. I find their conduct wholly unprofessional. It is therefore the judgment of this court that they be permanently relieved of their positions, and replaced by men more able to make mature decisions. Have the complainants anything to add?”

The little female burned against the huddle. “Empur se;” she muttered, “ulis rawn hom pynon.”

“What was that?”

“This is not over,” she said.

“It most certainly *is!*” Honorable Wain smacked down his gavel. “This Court is adjourned!”



A tall thin Administration guard, one of the pair responsible for subduing Carver’s dog, moved easily down the hall to a waiting room reserved for folks with Court business. He walked in and stared coolly at the royd female. “Close the door,” she said.

He did so, took a chair opposite, and placed a rolled canvas bag on the table.

She lifted a pouch off her lap, untied the knot, and set down the pouch so its contents were visible. Showing were maybe a dozen precious stones. She took two of the smallest—a sea-green quartz chunk,

and a brownish opaline pebble—and slid them across the table. “As we agreed.”

The guard in turn slid the canvas bag to a spot beside the stones. The female pulled it between her arms, unrolled it and took a peek.

Inside was the ratty wool blanket off of Carver’s bed, stinking of Earthman and dog hair. The odor was so high she was compelled to immediately re-roll the bag.

“I took a big chance getting that thing,” the guard said.

She met him eye-to-eye. After a long minute she said, “You are a brave human.”

“I could be court-martialed, or worse.”

She studied his face: eager but uncertain. Earthman sweat, the clammy stuff, was gathering at his temples. Finally she said, “That would be a shame.”

He licked his lips, clenched his fists, and tried again. “They could make me talk. They pay us so little . . . what choice would I have?”

“But you are a reasonable human.”

“Yes—I can be reasonable.”

She picked out a tiny violet chip, spotted and pale on one end, and slid it forward. Without another word she grabbed the pouch and bag and stalked out of the room.



Inside the holding tank, reality was just kicking in. The four ex-guards sat one to a wall, commenting in round-robin fashion:

“Booted off Administration,” said the first. He tried to snap his fingers, but produced only a mushy sound. “Just like that.”

“Nowhere to go,” said the next. This was true: coincidentally, all four were bachelors living in Administration quarters. “No job, no paycheck, no home.”

“Out of the Guard forever,” said the third. “My whole life . . . it’s over. I’m too old to look for something new.”

“I’m gonna kill that bitch,” said Carver. “I’m gonna screw her royd ass right up a flagpole and watch her fly.” He turned to his company. “It was *her* what put us in this position. It’s royd logic: work one Earthman against another. If you think I’m gonna rot in the alleys of Administration while those freaks party it up you got another think coming.”

“You have a plan?”

## Four Horsemen

“Listen,” said Carver. “I hate royds. I don’t disagree with them, I don’t dislike them—I *despise them!* So I’m gonna crash that party. I’m gonna break it up and burn it down and ride away with every precious stone and all the gold those bastards have glommed. Anyway, everything on Elis Royd is by Law of human origins and ownership, right? I’m gonna live like a prince for the rest of my natural days, and I’m bringing any man who wants to come with me.”

“But see here,” said the first, “you can’t just run around beating up every royd you encounter. You’ll need weapons, and provisions, and a good horse for hard travel.”

“This place has an armory, right? There’s warehouses, ain’t there? It’s got stables, don’t it?”

“You mean—?”

The door opened and the bailiff strolled in. “Okay, I hate to see you guys leaving out the back door, but you’re free to go.”

“Where’s Kennel?” said Carver.

The bailiff regarded him sourly. “No visiting, Carver. It’s back of Items, but seeing the old slobberer again would just break your heart.”

Carver walked up and affectionately draped his arm over the bailiff’s shoulders. “Y’know, Henry,” he said, “you’re the first guy ever accused me of having a heart,” and threw him into a vicious headlock. Carver balled his fist, aimed, and knocked him out with two crushing blows to the nape.

“I thought,” someone whispered harshly, “we were going to take it out on royds!”

Carver smiled. ““We’?” He stripped off the bailiff’s uniform. “Was that a slip, son?”

“It’s Redrick. Carl Redrick.”

“Maurice,” said another.

“I’m Albert.”

It was obvious they approved of Carver’s take-charge style. “And I’m gone,” he said, edging out the door while buttoning up the bailiff’s shirt.

“Quite the man,” whispered Maurice.

Albert nodded. “A man’s man.”

Carl made it unanimous. “An Earthman.”

They soon caught up, and then all four were quickly working their way down poorly lit halls to a courtyard exit. Sirius had set; the rush of twilight was on. Carver, guided to Kennel by the howls,

marched up to the cages while his men waited in the lobby, peering through a small observation window.

“You guys have a large black Shep in here,” Carver said amiably, thrusting forth his chest. The badge caught and passed the overheads. “I’ll need him for witness identification immediately. They’re holding the Court until I get back. So please make it fast, or it’s my ass.”

Three minutes later he was in the lobby with an ecstatic muzzled Slobber. Carver called back through the door, “Friendly fella, ain’t he?” and waved.

Once they were outside he removed the muzzle and said, “Put forth your hands.” It was already dark. Each man held out a hand. “Down by mine.” The arms were lowered. “Everybody grip.” Carver clasped the three hands, making a knot of four. “*Sniff*, boy.” Slobber sniffed the arms up and down while the three men sweated. “Let go.” The locked hands released.

“Now he knows we’re buddies,” Carver said. “Now you can sleep without worrying your throats are gonna be torn out. He’ll protect you the way he protects me.”

“Smashing!” Maurice whispered, cramming his shaking hand deep into his coat’s pocket. “What now?”

And with those two little words Carver knew he was in complete command. “*Now*,” he said, “*now* we get us some leverage.”

They all knew the location of Armory. Each man calmly signed in, just like a thousand times before. Still in uniform, they marched into Stock. Carl closed the door behind them.

The lone officer scowled at Slobber. “Sorry, sir. No dogs allowed. You know that.”

Carver said, “*Get him!*” The Shep leapt almost without going into a crouch, springing, at a forty-five degree angle, straight to the officer’s neck.

“*Hold!*” Carver commanded. Slobber kept the terrified man motionless on the floor, his jaws clamped just above the jugular. Everything went into a custodian’s cart: rifles, bows, quivers and arrows, various handguns, crossbows, combustibles, boxes and boxes of ammunition. Carver tore down Stock’s faded Terran flag and threw it over the cart. He leaned down to address the officer.

“Be a very intelligent man. Do not make a move or utter a word. Sleep here tonight, with one eye open, and forget whatever you think you may have seen.” To Slobber he repeated, “*Hold!*” and joined his men. They calmly rolled out the cart, signed out on the register, and



## Four Horsemen

slipped into the night. In a minute there came a high trilling whistle. Slobber released his prisoner one fang at a time. He meekly padded out of the building. The officer, controlling his breathing, gently closed his eyes.

“Provisions is on M Street,” said Albert.

“Right.” Carver guided them to bins behind the stables. “So you’re gonna watch the guns right here, Al, and we’re gonna be right back.” They quietly emptied the cart. Albert sat on the pile like a wary mother hen while the men rolled up L Street to M, where Carver had Slobber leap into the empty cart. He covered it with the flag and they wheeled their crouching cargo through the main entrance.

A heavysset woman commanded the desk.

“Delivery,” said Carver.

She looked up, bored almost to inertia. “In the back.”

“No, no,” Carver said, “*special* delivery.” He tore off the flag. “This is Fido. He eats people. But only bad people. Be a good people and order up fifty pounds of jerky; beef, turkey, and pork. Fifty pounds of freeze-dried fruits and vegetables, instant coffee, dried milk, salt and sugar. Oh, and eighteen liter bottles of Kentucky bourbon. For medicinal purposes. Please include in that order forty pounds of dried gourmet dog food, and one roll of strong duct tape.”

The provisions came up unattended on the freight elevator. The men loaded it all into the cart while Carver did up the woman’s mouth, wrists, and ankles with tape. He then taped her entire body, head to toes, to one leg of the heavy desk. They wheeled back to the stables.

“Credit where due,” said Carl, and bowed. “You, Mr. Carver, certainly know your stuff.”

Carver bowed back. “But I don’t know horses. That’s your department. Can you fellows persuade the proprietor to loan us four good steeds, along with a couple of sturdy pack animals?”

Maurice pulled a shotgun from the pile. “Just watch.”

Carver got comfortable with his dog and a liter of Kentucky bourbon. It was the genuine stuff all right, locked up in Warehouse so long the label had disintegrated. A pregnant moment: whereas an hour before he was looking at a dead future without a job or a roof, he now saw an opportunity for perpetual growth, and an escape from the routine of Administration. And in this same vision he saw an ugly little royd woman with a long branch stuck up her privates, screaming like a banshee for mercy, and he saw that bright sticky red branch moving out her misshapen mouth, up her low barrel proboscis, and

straight into her squealing lesser brain. Her death would be long and deep and smooth; as long as his coming reign of terror, as deep as the luster of countless precious stones, as smooth as the rich flow of bourbon now warming his homeless belly.

A compound clatter drew him out of his dream. The steeds were beautiful, running roan to deepest brown. The pack horses were speckled gray fillies, bearing new saddlebags and harnesses. The men provisioned the packers and made their way to a rusted egress-only turnstile that would lead them forever out of Earth Administration. “Just a second,” said Carver, and dismounted. He stepped over to a dismal tree and snapped off a dead branch. He measured it, with his eyes and with his mind: between the legs, out the mouth, up the nose, in the brain.

“What’s that?” called Maurice.

Carver slid it into a saddle sheath. “Oh, just my lucky stick.”



“Knock knock.”

Carver pulled aside the hut’s flap and stared inside. Slobber’s head poked round his shoulder—the dog’s eyes were gleaming, his gums black and foaming over; he looked rabid. To the huddling Besm family, no sight could have been more terrifying.

This was a much different-looking Carver than the man of a week before: his gray-shot beard and mussed hair gave him a wild appearance, and the stress lines of rugged living and three score royd murders made him seem far less sane than he really was.

“Mind if we join you?” He made his way on hands and knees, one arm pressed through Slobber’s collar. He sat cross-legged, and to Slobber said, “*Still!*” The dog grudgingly reclined and just stared: he knew another kill was in progress, and had learned to savor the moment. No scent was headier than royd terror.

“I’m looking for someone,” Carver said, “and was wondering if you good folks could help me out. So far I’ve had no luck at all.” He drew a long throwing knife from an ankle sheath, and used it to make his points in the air. “She’s a royd; I don’t know for sure what species. Ugly as pus on shit. But I thought maybe you guys might recognize her if I gave you some background.”

The grandmother picked up an infant and protectively cradled it in her arms. Carver’s whole face lit up. “Aww! How cute! How old?”

The family was silent.

## Four Horsemen

Carver had a worn rifle sheath strapped to his back, and in this sheath he carried the branch removed from Earth Administration. He'd given it considerable attention in his spare time; whittling, smoothing, engraving designs. He displayed the branch proudly. "See this? It's my lucky stick. It's for someone special; that royd slut I was just mentioning. I'd like to dedicate it, but for the life of me I simply *can't* remember her name. Anybody?"

The family's eyes were all over the place.

"Anyway," Carver went on, "she's the widow of *another* royd; some henpecked pissant who went and got himself killed outside of EarthAd just over a week ago. Seems this husband was trying to start a big to-do about our ex-governor's little hunting expedition, but I'm pretty sure she's the brains behind the whole operation, not him. Sound familiar? Everybody knows you royds are a regular party line when it comes to piss and propaganda." He brought the blade up close to the face of an elderly male, evidently the grandfather, and pointed it like a bully stabbing a forefinger. "You? Any bells?" He moved to a middle-aged female. "How's about you?" Carver's eyes darkened. "Are you monsters mutes, or just idiots?" Slobber began a long low growl that rose in pitch like a cello moving up the scale in legato. Carver screamed at the father: "You?" He tore the infant from the grandmother and held the knife to its throat.

"Emra," spoke the middle-aged female coldly. "Widow Baldain."

"Ah! And how would that be spelled?" Carver carefully engraved the name as the female spelled it out. He looked back up with a smile. "And where would I find her?"

"On move."

"*Where do I find her!*"

"She find you."

"Last chance." He pressed in the blade until the infant shrieked. "Where do I find her?"

The female looked away. "Funeral. Funeral Baldain."

"*Where's* this funeral, damn you! *Where* do I find her?"

"Maert'n."

"North of here?"

"In Maert'n. Maert'n."

"Thanks."

Carver grunted in the sudden spray, though his eyes remained wide and fixed. "Now, was that so fucking hard? *Love* to stay and chat, folks, but I've really got to run."

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His mind was racing as he strode up to his men, the front of his shirt sopping blood. Carver wiped off the knife, snapped it in its sheath, and whistled. Slobber immediately bounded out of the trashed hut. "I think we're getting somewhere now."

Albert glared from his horse. "We're getting nowhere."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He *means*," said Maurice, "that your obsession with this dumb old royd is a dead end. For us, anyway."

Carl broke in, "I think what we're trying to say here, Carv', ol' pal of ours, is . . . how do I phrase this . . . oh, yeah: *just how much fucking loot did you pull out of there*, anyway?"

The three riders were hot, dusty, and dog-tired. Carver looked them over. "How long has this been going on?"

"How long have we been on the road?"

Carver shook his head incredulously. "We're already rich as bitches. What in the world is everybody's big hurry? It can only get better."

"It's like you said," Carl rumbled. "We're loaded. *And now we want to spend it!* We're sick of living like tramps!"

"Well, I've got some big fat news for you, tramp. With a little gentle persuasion, I just learned the location of the royds' Great Hoard."

Carl sneered. "A fairy tale."

"Believe what you want. I just got it from the source."

"Where then?"

"North of here. Place called Maert'n."

Maurice leaned down. "Define 'Hoard'."

Carver spread his arms. "Picture an underground mountain of precious stones, growing since Elis Royd began. Now picture that mountain gleaming with nuggets of gold, and with silver ornaments polished to a high sheen."

"I've heard of Maert'n," Albert mused, "but I've never heard of this underground mountain."

"Then maybe you guys should start taking notes, instead of sitting around on your asses complaining all day."

"I'm game," said Maurice. "But, Carver, if there's no hoard it's the end of the road, okay?"

## Four Horsemen

“Okay. If that’s the case we can head home, keep going, or split up every man for himself.”

As they pressed on, Carver embellished by way of imagination until he half-believed his own fabrication. But it was obvious his command was seriously diminished. The group bent to a more democratic approach, discussing rather than following. When it came to directions, Carver’s straightforward methods were voted down. Instead, Maurice asked passed royds how to reach Maert’n, and by duly following these directions they eventually found themselves moving through treacherous territory filled with softball-sized gnats and vile-smelling fumaroles. A stuffiness filled the air, bringing about a running stupor. The underbrush, a hybrid of a Terran import and one or more species of extraterrestrial flora, snatched at the horses’ passing hooves. As the sultriness grew, the woozy riders were forced to dismount, leaving their steeds to graze on mireweed.

“Screwed!” Albert spewed. “We’ve been lied to all the while. This way goes nowhere. Worse—it goes somewhere I don’t want to know about.”

“I’ve got to rest,” said Carl. “Something in my bones.”

Carver studied them sourly. “So what did I tell you about royds? But no . . . you guys have to play Tourist instead of beating out some solid information.” He uncapped a fresh liter of bourbon.

“Maert’n,” Maurice mumbled, twisting a lip, “Maert’n . . . a nice place to hang, you’d say?” He turned his half-shadowed face to Carver’s. “Now I wonder where we might find that on the map.”

Carver swallowed mightily. “Royds don’t make maps! They don’t think like us. When are you guys gonna get that through your heads?” He watched a leafy tendril creep up a filly’s foreleg. Something misty and bulbous landed on her rump, but she flicked it away with her tail. Carver really knocked back the bottle.

Carl said, “My guess is we’ve been set up.” He ripped open his shirt. “I can’t breathe.”

“We’re mired,” Maurice noted. “We have to get out of the lowlands; look for higher ground.” But he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. “A campfire,” he panted. “Keep away the insects.”

“Capital idea!” Carver blurted. He’d already downed a fifth of the liter. “I wholefartedly agree!” He rolled onto his side, hugging the liquor. “Let me know when we’re cruising.”

Twilight came on like a runaway locomotive. The men watched Carver heaving there, occasionally drawing the liter to his mouth and slurping steadily in the manner of a baby at its bottle. Sparks appeared

in the gathering dark, slowly drifting to the ground to begin their nightly reproductive cycle among swarms of ravening dirtbabies. Every now and then a long pallid tube wound down a stalk and swept tentatively along the ground.

“Mountain of treasure . . .” Albert muttered. “Bullshit like all the rest.” He turned his heavy eyes to his friends. “We’ve got what we came for. Why are we hanging around with him?”

The other two were silent. Finally Carl said, “Maurice is right. We need a campfire.” Curled up next to his snoring master, Slobber watched curiously as the men scavenged tinder and put up a blaze. His eyes, reflecting the light, gradually fell closed.

“I’m done and undone,” Carl said, flopping onto his roll. “This is as far as I go. I’d rather take my chances in the shadows of EarthAd with gold in my pockets.”

“I for one,” seconded Albert, “cannot give you a single intelligent argument to the contrary.”

Their eyes all met. “In the morning, then,” said Maurice. “Before he wakes.”

Carl and Albert nodded. “Before he wakes.” The men stretched out like the dead, their skulls stuffed with mud, their ears singing. Mouths fell open, gulping the hot hanging air.

And the sleepers squirmed and twisted down their stalks. They inched along the ground while the horses, having grazed their fill on mireweed, heaved and swayed on trembling legs. A ruddy mist drifted over the hollow, obscuring the stars. Somewhere a gninr began its piercing guttural call, quickly answered by a female some miles away.

And the sleepers crawled across forearms and crept over chins, slithered into mouths and slid down throats, deadening nerves with glandular secretions along the way.

On Carver’s side of the fire they were absent. The bourbon on his breath kept them away, and Slobber’s rapid panting worked against infiltration.

One by one the horses dropped. One by one the grouped slumberers clutched their guts and went into the fetal position. And the fire sighed and died, and Elis Royd’s vermin-choked shroud fell full on the unconscious four horsemen, three turning fitfully and one snoring well, and on the whining and kicking black Shep, happily mauling royds in a dream.



## Four Horsemen

A Rauna coach clattered up the dirt drive running half-around a low brick and steel compound. An ancient, gaunt Utpua female wheeled out to meet it, just as she did for all callers and customers. Her chair was custom-crafted for Utpua, who possess only stubs for upper limbs, and a single, powerful, tadpole-like lower extremity. The vehicle's point of locomotive thrust lay in the base's geared arbor, rather than in the wheels themselves. Healthy Utpua are able to move upright with vigor, by a kind of serpentine semi-pirouette. Advanced in years as she was, Irith was only able to propel herself with steady arbor-pulls utilizing the great nether dorsal muscle, where she still possessed the strength of her species. The problem, at her age, was standing.

Emra stepped unassisted from the coach. When she was properly composed the driver handed down a sloppily rolled canvas bag. Emra glided up to Irith and bowed. They touched foreheads. "It has been long," Irith hissed. They closed their eyes.

"This cannot wait."

They rolled their necks side to side while their foreheads remained in contact, exchanging pheromones.

Irith said: "You consort with Rauna?"

"The need is pressing." Emra stopped rolling, permitting transmission of a single focused thought. "From now on, *consorting* can only mean 'with Earthmen'." Their mouths were centimeters apart, their brows sopping. "I have overseen Baldain's funeral."

"I have heard." Again their necks rolled. "Eight days. Many hundreds of mourners, of several species. You are honored."

"Yes." Emra straightened. Their brows relaxed; the hundreds of gaping follicles distended, the prehensile nerve stems receded. Emra offered, "You wish?"

Irith nodded curtly. "You may."

Emra pushed the chair over the drive and into Irith's main chamber.

Irith was the asteroid's richest royd female; a clinging legend, both feared and respected. Her success only confounded the royd population, but the secret to her wealth would be perfectly understandable to anyone within the EarthAd enclosure, for although the Utpua were one of the species most unlike humans in appearance, they were by far the most similar in terms of *cunning*, and *savvy*, and in the predisposition to exploitation.

Only one other royd species was on par with the Utpua. These were Emra's people, a matriarchal breed of world-builders and world-

breakers, of which she was a prime specimen. Though Irith and Emra were genetically bound to despise each other's guts, they could still find a strange, cold camaraderie in their exclusiveness, and in their common distaste for passive royds.

Irith's great chamber was an open display case for her goods. Tools, barrows, coach parts, medallions and body rings—all were laid out on tables and wall shelves. There was no security, there was only Irith. Royds do not steal.

"Root tea?" she suggested.

"Thank you, no. I am rather pressed."

"Let us proceed." Irith took over the locomotion of her own chair, while Emra held aside a succession of heavy black curtains. They came to a thick wood door. Irith nodded and Emra drew it wide.

At their scent a terrifying scream broke the darkness. Something large began thrashing about, panting wildly, banging against its steel-rail walls.

Irith, striking a match gripped in her pursed mouth, lit a high twisting candle.

The room was actually an oblong cage containing a single dojhyr, the last of its kind. When it smelled Emra standing there, an untested royd presence, it leapt directly onto the facing bars and slashed futilely with a massive three-pronged claw.

Emra was now only the second royd to view a dojhyr up close and live to tell about it.

In a state of complete repose, the healthy dojhyr resembles nothing so much as a shiny blue-and-green marble flecked with gold—if that marble happened to be the size of a medicine ball, and plated with flexible, wafer-thin scales that tremble or peak according to emotion. When on the move, that perfect sphere takes on a panther-like shape and stride, but in a highly fluid sense. The belly hangs low to the ground, while the long forelimbs and short hindlimbs cock and propel the dojhyr like a projectile. It's a mainly-airborne stride, impelled by great digging turns of those trident nails, and steered with muscular variations of broad, triangle-shaped wings that disappear when the forelimbs retract.

But most arresting of the dojhyr's appearance is its "face." The thing has no eyes or ears, no nose or mouth—only a perfectly round, incredibly sensitive central diaphragm the size of a dinner plate. This diaphragm is a nervous nexus; all sensory activity is focalized here according to importance: sounds are received as tympanic vibrations along the pliant rim, and motion detected by thousands of villi-like



## Four Horsemen

nerve buds grouped about the center, similar to the waving tentacles on a sea anemone. But *scent*, that prime survival mechanism for all large ground predators—*scent* is processed by numberless colonies of spontaneously replicating olfactory glands in the diaphragm's great yearning heart—a purplish taste-smell nucleus that dilates for feeding, and upon direct contact forms a peristaltic funnel for ingestion. The dojhyr also respire through this opening, and produces its one lung-driven sound, a heart-stopping scream designed to stun its prey. That scream is brought to a howling apex at the kill.

"There is no mate." Irith spoke matter-of-factly, but with a poorly veiled and most unbecoming tinge of sentimentality. "He will leave no small one behind."

"A shame."

On a table beside the candle was a dully shining upright musical device, built like a section of spinal column with seven broad vertebrae of increasing breadth. These were bells of xhylum, a prized artifact of Irith's, off-display and not for sale. She leaned in and, using the middle stub of her left prehensile upper limb, awkwardly rang the top bell. The tone produced was high in pitch, ethereal, and cathedral-sweet. The dojhyr's diaphragm vibrated and it leaned toward the sound. Irith rang the next bell, lower in pitch by half an octave. The dojhyr's claws slipped down the bars. Step by step she rang the bells, until the nether tone sang sepulchrally, low and long, and the dojhyr lay in a slowly heaving stupor.

"The last," Irith whispered in the echoes.

Emra turned. "I pay well." She removed her pouch, placed it on the table, and loosened the cord. Nine precious stones sparkled in the candle's glow.

"You bring a scent?"

Emra placed the canvas bag beside the gently shimmering instrument. Irith used her mouth to crack the top and immediately recoiled. "Stench of Earthmen! What is this?"

"The blanket of a guard at EarthAd, infused with his and his dog's odors."

"Of what significance is this filthy thing to you?"

"It is the blanket of the guard who unleashed his dog on our committee, killing Baldain."

"I see. You may keep your stones. This is not a commercial matter."

Emra bowed. "Your grace."

"And yours."

Irith now rang the bells in reverse, low to high, and the dojhyr gradually came to its senses. She motioned to a grasping tool leaning against the wall. “Remove the scent.”

Emra used the scissor-pronged device to fish out the blanket. At the smell the dojhyr went mad, banging against the bars and hooting by way of a furiously oscillating larynx. “Pass it through,” said Irith. “And mind your distance.”

The warning was unnecessary: the dojhyr immediately grabbed the blanket and rubbed it desperately in the diaphragm, emitting little hysterical yelps round the folds. It then curled up into a perfect ball and, with the blanket stuck in its orifice like a rat in a dog’s mouth, went rolling wildly about the cage, smashing against the bars, spinning in demented circles on the floor. When it was exhausted it lay weeping softly, shreds and hairs embedded in its scales. The blanket’s stench permeated the room.

“The release,” Irith said, motioning with her head to a lever high on the wall. “Pull it down.”

Emra climbed on a chair and used her weight to haul down on the heavy steel rod. A catch snapped, and the rear wall collapsed. The last of daylight burst into the room.

“Let go,” said Irith. Emra did so, and the rear cage bars collapsed onto the wall. The dojhyr screamed and bounded into the world.

“The last of his kind,” Irith whispered again.

“You wish?” Emra inquired.

“You may.”

Emra wheeled her out; past the curtains, through the great chamber, and onto the drive.

“You will not stay for tea?”

“I must be at Maert’n by midday.” Emra leaned down and their foreheads met.

After a moment Irith mumbled, “I see . . . would that I could join you—but the years.”

Emra, gripping the pouch of gemstones to her chest, bent lower and gently kissed Irith on the lips. “Thank you, good mother,” she whispered, and held up her hand for the coachman.



## Four Horsemen

Carver was wakened by the sound of Albert puking his guts out. He opened an eye, sat up, and reached for a fresh liter. Carl and Maurice were hunched on their blankets, looking very ill.

“What’s eating you guys?” Carver called. “Or, better yet, what you guys been eating?” He raised the bottle and grinned. “Maybe it’s time you changed your diets.” He took a swallow, mussed Slobber’s head. “You ain’t been in my dog’s food now, have you?” He stood up with a huge hangover yawn, stretched his arms, took a lazy look around, and howled from the bowel:

“God *damn* it!”

He stomped over to the horses’ bodies, absolutely livid. They’d been bled white; their only color was in the hundreds of brown sucker rings dotted heads to hooves.

“Damn it again!” Carver swore. He vibrated his boot on the ground to mimic death throes; an old Groundskeeper trick. When the bleeders piled on his boot he went ballistic with his rifle’s butt, squishing six or seven. Slobber latched onto a good one, tearing it out eight feet before the neck snapped. Carver immediately crammed his rifle into the vacated hole and fired four times.

“You didn’t get her,” Carl moaned. “Maters retreat when they’re wounded.”

“Maybe I did, and maybe I didn’t.” The group’s little experiment with democracy was done with—Carver was right back in command. “We’re moving out. Now.”

“Without horses?”

Carver cocked the rifle and laid the barrel’s tip in the hollow behind Carl’s left ear. “I got me three good pack animals right here.”

“You’d shoot me,” Carl grated, “in cold blood?”

“Doubtful. I’d probably let Slobber have a go at you first. Everybody up; I don’t care how sick you are. Grab the harnesses, grab the gear, grab the victuals. We’re marching back the way we came.”

“But *that’s*,” gasped Maurice, “*miles!*”

“Good for the digestion. Royds have horses, as well as carts and coaches. We’ll snag us a few ponies and be right back in business. And I don’t want any more of this doubletalk and sassafras! I’m the only man with the good sense to lead. Now move!”

Right off the bat the march went sour. Albert pitched into the weeds, clutching his belly and hacking up bloody mucus. Carver kicked his thigh, then the small of his back. “Get up, man. Carry your share. Don’t think you can pull this crap on me.” Albert went directly

into convulsions, remaining prostrate despite Carver's persistent kicks and threats.

"Leave him alone!" Carl gasped before doubling over.

Carver studied both their faces. "No! It's sleepers for sure."

Maurice turned desperately. "Don't say that, Carver! Why aren't you sick, then?"

"Beats me." They watched the men twitch and kick, hands tearing at their ribs and throats. Slobber nosed up curiously.

"Oh God!" Maurice cried, and spewed vomit and blood from his nostrils.

The bleeders were on Albert even before he'd succumbed. Carver tore out their last campfire pouch, ripped away the seal with his teeth, and wrung out half the kerosene over Albert. The bleeders writhed madly but, overwhelmed by their ravenous mater, retained their suckerholds. Carver struck a match to a kerosene-saturated twig, dropped it quickly, and stepped away. The bleeders whipped back into their holes.

"Please, Carver," Maurice cried. "Burn me too, man, I'm begging you. Don't let them suck me, Carver. Don't let them."

"You have my word," Carver said solemnly. "I promise to do you too."

Maurice shook all over. "Man, I—" and his legs appeared to be kicked out from under him.

Carver stepped over to Carl, lying on his back with one hand tearing at his gut and one hand raised in supplication. His heels were battering the ground like jackhammers. A bleeder raced up his trouser leg, another rolled over his throat. Carver squeezed out the last of the kerosene. He looked down into the man's raving eyes just as the sputtering match hit him.

He then turned to Maurice, trembling on hands and knees. Carver dangled the exhausted kerosene pad, said, "Sorry, friend," and put a bullet between his eyes. He whistled sharply, and as Slobber bounded up said, "Keep moving forward, boy. Don't look back."

They marched on for what seemed hours. Carver was now down to just a rifle and shotgun, his bow and six or seven arrows, and a few pouches of ammunition. Man and dog sat in the shade of a warty hybrid waiting for the day to cool, though it was barely past noon. Carver slapped a hand on the back of his itching neck, and brought it back squirming with life. With a little cry he hopped to his feet, hurled the leaper to the ground, and stamped on it twice. Immediately another landed on his left shoulder. They came on like angry bees,

## Four Horsemen

injecting their eggs in every available square inch of naked flesh, until all he could do was run along bellowing with Slobber barking at his side. Carver rolled in the dirt, swatting furiously, and in the end was spared only by outrunning the little monsters. He bit at all the sores he could reach, sucked out the eggs, spat and sucked out some more. The toxins were already kicking in. He thought he'd go mad with the itching and burning and vacillating delirium; the only course for physical relief was to rub in dirt and try to keep out of Sirius's rays. The disorientation would pass in time. Slobber had been spared by his body fur; the big Shep urged on his fading master with nudges to the calves and thighs. Carver wandered in a daze for a while there, and when Slobber finally pulled him out of it with a low intense growl, he found himself tangled up in bushes by a winding country road.

Coming up the road was a rickety little wagon pulled by a single gray pony. "*Still!*" Carver commanded.

When the wagon was almost alongside, he stepped out waving his arms. He must have been a terrifying sight to the royd driver, covered as he was with hot red bumps and dirt, raggedy and unshaven, a wild look in his eyes that belied the broad convivial smile.

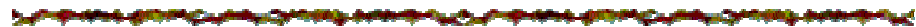
"Thanks for stopping," Carver panted. "You're a lifesaver." His eyes ran over the pony and wagon, then took in the driver's oversized hooded cloak. "I'm looking for a place called Maert'n. I've a rendezvous with a little woman there." He winked and smiled all the wider. "You know how it is."

"This road will take you to Maert'n," the driver fumbled. "This road will take you to many roads."

"But how'll I know it's Maert'n when I see it? I'd hate to just pass on by."

"Steam," the driver managed. "You will see lots of steam." He nervously raised the reins. "I must go now. I am sorry, but I am not permitted to pick up riders."

"That's all right. Your boss won't know a thing." He aimed his shotgun between the driver's eyes. "Now pull off that cloak. I'd hate to get it all bloody."



Even from a distance, Maert'n can be identified by the great broken swath of runoff steam rising from the vents over Elis Royd's subterranean power plant. The vents run along the floor of a gorge a hundred feet deep, and this gorge is perpetually filled with steam.

Maert'n is a royd word, meaning, roughly, *death breath*, so named due to the subtle but incremental effects of minutely radioactive steam. For generations the local royds have obtained drinking-and-cooking water from the gorge—and tradition being what it is, they're not about to change their ways. Their method is to tie gigantic resin-painted tarps from one side of the gorge to the other, with a line secured to an eye at each corner. The rising steam causes the tarps to billow upward. By tying winch lines to rings sewn into the tarps' centers, royds hauling from either side are able to stretch these tarps so they're shaped like tents. The steam condenses on the undersides and rolls down into troughs positioned along the sides, and the channeled water drains into casks and barrels on the clifftops. There are dozens of these peaked tarps running above the gorge. They don't catch all the steam, of course; plenty escapes to give Maert'n her famous hazy horizon.

The man in the little wooden wagon pulled his pony to a halt. He'd been following the long road that runs along the clifftop, looking for a bridge or some sign of habitation. He wiped his face with the hood of his cloak and studied a copse of trees opposite the gorge. There were huts and several spaces for cooking and washing, and what appeared to be some kind of inn. A large black dog jumped out of the cart.

The man reached behind him and, carefully and systematically, reloaded and double-checked a rifle and shotgun. He shrugged on a quiver and bow, then tightened his throwing knife's ankle strap. Just before descending he pulled out an ornately graven three-foot branch. One whittled tip was as sharp as a thorn. He kissed this branch and slid it into a shoulder sheath. With the dog champing at his side, he made certain the weapons were concealed by the cloak, and pulled the hood low over his face. Then, scratching his arms like crazy, he began the slow hike to the inn.

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“Good afternoon.”

There must have been two dozen royds lounging at tables in the inn, and perhaps a dozen more in the kitchen and playroom. Nobody was lounging any more. Every face in the place was cut in stone, and staring only at the giant hooded figure taking up the rear doorway.

“I'm looking for a certain royd female. You'll all know who she is when I mention her name—heck, the way I understand it, she's just

## Four Horsemen

about famous around here.” The figure whistled softly. An enormous black dog appeared behind him and quickly made its way in.

The two moved quietly down the aisle between tables. “Her name’s Emra. She’s a million years old and physically too disgusting to describe. But she took something precious from me. It’s called a livelihood, though I doubt any of you’d be familiar with the concept.” He used his concealed weapons to raise the cloak, placed the rifle’s barrel in a young royd’s face and the shotgun’s barrel in another’s.

“Emra,” he whispered. “Say it.”

Both royds froze up.

“Say ‘Emra’. If you don’t I’ll blow your fucking heads off and my dog will eat what’s left.”

The royds couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, couldn’t think.

Carver threw back his head, bellowed, “Where’s Emra!” and simultaneously fired the rifle and shotgun.

The whole inn erupted with screams. Carver stomped through the place, blasting anybody available and shouting, “Where’s Emra? Where’s Emra? Where’s Emra?” Slobber took care of the slowest runners; Carver pursued the rest outside. “Where’s Emra?” he howled, shooting fleeing royds in the back.

The little figures seemed to vanish in the trees. Carver was able to kill only the ones brought down by Slobber, and, dogs being dogs, the Shep wasted precious time mauling single royds, allowing most to escape. Carver moved out of the trees into the open, halfway between the inn and the gorge. He whistled sharply. In seconds he was joined by Slobber.

“Come on out of there!” he called. “Come on out and I won’t hurt you. All I want is one little answer. You just tell me where I can find that rat whore and I’ll leave you guys alone.”

In response there came the weirdest scream Carver had ever heard. He turned and stared up at a rocky knoll some two hundred yards away, where a round bluish-green thing was bouncing on its haunches, sniffing left and right.

“Well, fuck me,” Carver mumbled, mesmerized.

The thing appeared to catch its bearings. It faced the man and dog, screamed again, and charged downhill. It came directly at them, full-tilt, fairly soaring between bounds. When it was only a dozen feet away, Slobber shot out of his crouch and brought it down.

The two rolled off as a unit, snarling and panting. They fought all down the grade and up to the tree line, clear to the clifftop and back, sometimes thrashing hysterically, sometimes locked up in a

compound death grip. About that grip: Slobber had his jaws closed permanently below the dojhyr's diaphragm, while the dojhyr's spike-like claws had the Shep in two places—the throat and head. There came a moment when time seemed to freeze. A determined peal rose out of the dojhyr, followed in a few seconds by a cry from Slobber that broke Carver's heart. In a dazzling move the dojhyr ripped off the dog's head—tore it, like a strongman sundering a phone book, and hurled the parts down.

Carver immediately dropped to one knee. He didn't waste time: before the upright and fully extended dojhyr could reclaim his scent he pulled out his bow and an arrow, drew a bead, and placed a shaft in the animal's right shoulder. The blind dojhyr felt about, grasped the arrow, and snapped the shaft. Carver tore off the hooded cloak. He retreated a few steps, drawing out his rifle as he moved. This time he lay full-out on his belly, took careful aim, and shot the hunching dojhyr in what he estimated was the breast. The thing screamed and spun like a top. When it stopped spinning it was facing straight at Carver, the diaphragm huffing and twitching rapidly. Carver retreated ten paces and fired again: same result. Still backpedaling toward the gorge, he paused every ten paces to get off another round. But now the bleeding dojhyr was stalking him, and Carver was running those paces before firing. When the rifle's magazine was spent he dropped everything and took off at a sprint. With nowhere else to turn, he ran back and forth along the cliff top until he staggered out onto a little precipice and found himself cornered.

The dojhyr veered as it came on, perfectly following Carver's deliberately erratic dash. Even so, it was badly damaged, its focus impaired. Sensing this, Carver kept low and backed up as quietly as possible. But now he was at the narrow end of a wedge overlooking the misting abyss, and his pursuer had him cut off. He faked a run to his right; the dojhyr moved to its left. He then tried to his left and got a perfectly timed response. The animal went down on all fours and approached slowly, slapping its foreclaws left and right in anticipation. Carver dropped on his belly, and gently used his elbows and knees to walk his body backward until his feet encountered only space. Without looking away, he began to shinny down the cliff.

It was a bad spot for shinnying; a terrible spot. He hadn't managed five feet before his root handholds gave. Carver slipped a few more feet and found himself dangling by a hand and foot, almost obscured by rising steam. He managed to kick out a toehold, but the moist earth gave at once. In a minute the bloody blue and green globe



## Four Horsemen

loomed above him. Carver could tell his scent was being torn by the hot mist; he saw every oozing detail in that obscene diaphragm, wiggling erratically. Now the dojhyr stood erect and dug its rear claws deep into the ground. It spread its forelimbs very wide and, incredibly, began to descend its upper body in an arcing trajectory, inch by inch, using its wing flaps to buoy against the steam. Carver watched its hindlegs trembling with the strain. The billowed body extended almost perpendicular to the cliff, then, lowering in slow motion, gradually tucked into itself until the entire animal, supported only by its rear claws, was pointing downward and away from him at a fifteen degree angle. After hanging there like a bat for a few seconds, the dojhyr used its front claws to drag itself down foot by foot, stretching its body to the limit. When both claws were firmly planted on either side of Carver's head, it abruptly twisted its distended neck and, the diaphragm right in Carver's face, screamed the scream of the kill.

In one move Carver whipped his throwing knife from its ankle sheath and plunged the blade directly into that vital funnel. The whole diaphragm collapsed. Twin geysers of blood blew into the steam, and the dojhyr plummeted a hundred feet to the iron grates below.

Carver was left hanging by one hand while the waving knife bit repeatedly, and ineffectually, into the cliff's side. The hand went numb as blood left his arm. He felt the last of his strength going, and with it his consciousness.

Not two feet above him, a sudden flurry of activity knocked out a crudely plugged aperture in the cliff's side. A pair of odd yellowish hands with long clawed fingers pulled away the dirt, and the narrow, pale-eyed head of a qrtly poked out of its burrow. When it saw Carver dangling just below, it gripped the broken roots around the opening and bobbed its head in dismay.

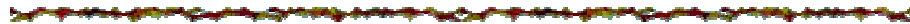
"Please," Carver grated. "Mercy."

The qrtly cocked its head left and right. "Maur-sai? Plees?"

"Mercy," Carver repeated. He managed to wedge one boot into the cliff wall, but the spot was crumbling even as he dug in. He released the knife and desperately scraped with his nails.

"Maur-sai?" The qrtly tentatively moved a hand forward. Its fingers twitched just above Carver's. "Maur-sai? Plees?"

"Yes," Carver managed. "Mercy."



Up on the field, a colorfully dressed coach wobbled to a halt and a small royd female carefully climbed down. Without a word to the coachman, she padded through the weeds to a pair of dark objects scattered some twenty feet apart. The larger object was a beheaded Shep, its body covered with slashes and puncture wounds. The smaller was the dog's head, its contorted muzzle frozen in a permanent snarl. Forty feet down lay an old gray hooded cloak, and a little farther on a miscellaneous sprawl of weapons. Her eyes fell on a deep three-nailed print, then another. The royd followed the trail with great intensity, steam settling on her shoulders and brow.

She came to the precipice and peered over, standing perched only a few feet west of the flagging drama some ten feet below. The disturbance caused a small chunk of loosed earth to tumble and disintegrate.

The qrtly looked up, its whole face pleated by concern. "Maur-sai? Pleeas?"

"For the love . . ." Carver gasped. "Oh, *please*."

The female shook her head sharply. "No. Septu lai mot ennari. No mercy."

The qrtly hung its head and quietly backpedaled into its hole.

Carver's raging eyes locked with the female's. "You bitch," he gasped. His throat seized. He plummeted into the steam unable to scream, still staring up at the tiny figure watching him fall.

Emra studied the rising haze until her eyes were burning. She turned and strode with great dignity across the field, pausing twice to sharply clap her hands. Royds loitering in the trees ducked and scattered; the show was over. When she reached the vestiges of battle, she poked about until she came up with Carver's lucky stick. She grasped the branch in her left hand, picked up Slobber's head in her right, and glided to the coach.

The driver helped her up, then placed the dog's head on the bench between them. Emra wedged the highly-worked branch into a space between the bench and iron frame, so that the top eighteen inches pointed up and to the fore. She and the coachman jammed Slobber's head onto the branch; their primitive version of a hood ornament. Emra twisted and adjusted the head until it faced directly forward.

"We go now?" the coachman panted.

"Yes, now we begin."

## *Chapter Four*

### Emra



Every royd has its day.

For Emra it was the moment of coronation; an event she hadn't sought, didn't want, and wouldn't have accepted at any other moment in her life. But this was a ceremony beyond philosophy or politics; this was coronation by acclamation. A burlap wrap, a crown of thatch, and two thousand, six hundred and thirty-four admirers overwhelmed by the splendor of it all.

The broad field on Maertn's side of Runoff Gorge contains several *knolls*. The largest of these is named *Temur Sam*, or, in Earthman, Wrath's Knee. This knoll has the distinction of capping a rise between diverging cart roads, and affords its climber a gorgeous view of East Valley shimmering in the power plant's dissipating steam. Temur Sam has for generations held a dim spiritual significance for the locals. That appeal is purely symbolic—royds, an awkward amalgam of tribalized species struggling to survive on a godforsaken asteroid, have no religion.

Now, an imposing speaker, with a vital message and at least a little charisma, can readily use Temur Sam to his/her advantage. Emra possessed that charisma in spades: bruised aplomb, a brooding mien,

a dark aura—what all sincere mystics know as *doom*. Used well, it’s much more effective than hype.

Unrolled in her hands was a copy of the original Elis Royd Constitution. She was quoting it now; a demigod addressing a sea of subjects from an island’s lofty peak:

*“All denizens of Ellis Asteroid are citizens of the great system Canis Major, and are the legal beneficiaries of their godmother Earth. We are all grist of the stars, and as such we are equal in every molecule we inherit, in every breath we respire, in every future we dream’.”* She looked down at the rapt, upturned faces. “Heady stuff, is it not?” She went on:

*“Denizens of Ellis Asteroid are therefore by definition neighbors and compatriots. No one individual shall be subservient to another, and no race shall be considered inferior, or treated as such. This naturalization asteroid is intended as a model of democratic efficiency, and, like her ancient Terran namesake, exists as a gateway to a better life for all. Any person or party who usurps this ideal fundamentally acts as an enemy of democracy itself.”* Emra paused for effect. “Again, noble words meant to inspire confidence and trust.” Looking round with the profoundest gravity, she very slowly and deliberately ripped it down the center and committed the halves to a breeze.

“Earth Administration has soiled this fine document since its inception. They are the ‘enemy of democracy itself.’ I have analyzed this Constitution in depth. Little, if anything, remotely resembles the tyranny overshadowing us today. It is time for all royds to come together under a common cause: the reversing of a trend that has persisted so long it has become a straightforward fact of our lives—the cell-deep belief that we are somehow inferior to Earthmen; that they belong in their cushy fortress and we in our bitter swamps.”

To the bereaved sprawl below her—hundreds who’d lost family and homes to a gang of arrogant marauders a long time coming—she stated with resounding clarity: “As your chosen Queen I hereby pledge my time and energy to bringing the monster of EarthAd to its knees. I intend a dialogue on equal ground, and am sending an emissary with that very proposal. Upon their reciprocation of this act, the resurrection of Elis Royd begins!”



## Emra

At night Maert'n's faintly radioactive steam condenses to resemble a glistening fog, lending her low primitive dwellings a presence both brooding and enchanted. The soft yellow glow of her inn's famous candelabrum can be seen for half a mile, surrounded by the tiny single lamps of individual huts. Every once in a while, the whole place just gets swallowed up in mist.

That broad homey inn was now Emra's loaned headquarters, or "palace"—not at all a bad deal for the original keeper, who was entertaining way more business than he could handle. The concept of royalty simply boggled royd minds. They left their ruts and differences behind, hiking from all corners of the asteroid to pay tribute in precious metals and stones. Had Emra the necessary arrogance, she might have viewed her new subjects as a virtually inexhaustible war chest. But wealth and acquisition make very little sense in a world of bogs and canyons, and besides, her heart was set on a diplomatic solution. All in good time, that needed haughtiness would come. Emra was no stranger: she knew grief, she knew hatred, she knew bitterness and resolve—she was already halfway there.

A zobb snuffled through the lobby's inner door, looked quickly left and right, and grotesquely slithered to his queen's feet. Emra tucked in her slippers before he could make a mess of them. "What now?"

"An *on-voy*. An esimessary—" he bounced his muzzle on the floorboards in frustration—"a messenger human. From EarthAd, in response to your summons."

"Send him in." The zobb backpedaled on his belly, sweeping his long speckled nose left and right.

In a minute Emra could see a squat silhouette framed in the main doorway. The zobb flopped ahead, leading this figure across the lobby and into the inn proper. "Withdraw," Emra commanded. The zobb nodded and nodded, grasped the knob in his mouth, and pulled the door closed.

The emissary cagily took in the room, an obsequious half-smile partly lighting his face. He removed his high emblazoned hat and bowed. The man was quite short and stout, with fat greasy lips and tiny darting eyes. The stench of Earthmen clung to his every move. He unwrapped his scarves, bobbing his head like a drowned man at each exaggerated revolution, then used the hat's brim to swat mist from his overcoat's sleeves. "Your majesty."

Emra nodded. "Be seated."

The emissary draped his scarves and coat on the back of an old peeling chair, carefully placed his gloves in a vest pocket, and sat with a great show of fastidiousness. “Such an honor. *Such* an honor.”

“You are tardy in your response.”

The fat little human closed his eyes and nodded slightly to port. “The Council took immense joy in discussing your request for a dialogue, and very great care in considering your most wonderful gift. An act of tremendous foresight, I must say.” He raised an eyebrow. “Such a large and lovely gemstone. The entire Council was quite taken with it. An heirloom?”

“A bauble,” Emra said indifferently.

The eyebrow arched higher. The man languidly locked his fingers and sank into his chair. “Our Council Elder sends his warmest regards, and prays you will show at your earliest convenience. And along with his regards, he also sends a gift in reciprocation.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Certainly not as eye-catching as yours, but heartfelt nonetheless. It is the wish of our Council that you be made aware of the earnestness of their sincerity. The willingness to compromise—and history will surely bear me out—is always best served by the judicious release of political prisoners.”

“Prisoner?” Emra cocked her head. “Political?”

“Yes, of course. The dissident Tarsum.”

Emra sat straight up. “Tarsum!”

The emissary’s whole expression collapsed. He sank even deeper in his chair, squirming and wringing his chubby hands. “You are not pleased? It was felt by Council that this would be an act most dear to Your Immensity’s heart. If there is another article more to your liking . . .”

“No.” Emra stood up. “No.” She stared at the recovering Earthman. “Tarsum is a dead legend. He disappeared two score years ago, while independently attempting to open diplomatic channels with Earth Administration over royd grievances during the Great Creeper Pestilence.”

The emissary flapped his hands. “He was arrested attempting to foment unrest, and has been our guest since. Everyone knows that. And never has there surfaced a shred of evidence implicating Earth Administration in the exportation of a biological agent. Not a fragment!” The human collected himself. The condescending little smirk was back. “As to this royd Tarsum: he has been given many, many opportunities to leave of his own free will, on the sole condition he

## Emra

renounce his riling ways. Administration must protect its integrity, you understand. But always—always he refused.”

“So like Tarsum,” Emra breathed. “And you say he is alive, and now a free royd?”

“Very much so,” said the emissary. “He is, in fact, presently waiting just without, in the very coach that directed me to your inestimable grace.”

“Show him in, show him in.” Emra drifted between tables while the greasy little human picked himself up and scurried outside. Tarsum. Handsome, tall, brimming with intellectual light and the kind of inner strength that average royds can only mock with envy. Every female’s dreamboat. Emra herself, as an insular young royd, had spent long hours in hopeless fantasy. She nervously flitted before the inn’s great smoky wall mirror. He would now be middle-aged, distinctive, graying, no doubt a bit on the aloof side. A suitor fit for a queen. “Oh, shut up!” she told her reflection, and tore off her silly thatch crown. Emra pinched her cheeks and smoothed her sack of a dress just as the door opened and a pair of zobbs wobbled in pushing a rickety wood cart.

Sitting propped in that cart was an ancient, emaciated royd male; eyeless, toothless, legless, covered head to hips with scars, burns, and welts. The zobbs careered down the aisle, and were just bashing the cart between tables when Emra snapped, “Cease!” The zobbs immediately fell on their noses and scraped about the floor. “Stations!” They scrambled in reverse to either side of the door, and there glazed over in temporary mortification.

Emra glided up. “I sought another.”

The old man searched about with his hollow-eyed head. At last he raised his withered hands and croaked, “My queen.”

“And you are?”

“Tarsum of Hopra Hollow.”

“No!”

The wizened head fell. “I fear so.” It rose again. “Bless you, Queen, for this belated reprieve.”

Emra took his thumbless hands. “What became of you, Tarsum? You were arrested for standing tall against the oppression of Administration, for brazenly speaking that which we lesser royds could only whisper . . .”

“Alas, my queen, I fear not. I was imprisoned without cause or trial, and kept in a wretched cell beneath Administration’s Council

Chambers. They tortured me for years, on some days without rest, seeking that one answer I could never provide.”

“The source of your courage?” Emra tried. “The secret to our pluck and drive?”

The ghost of a smile crossed Tarsum’s sunken lips. “No, my queen, you will never understand the mentality of the Earthman. They sought only the location of the great Royd Hoard, and mistook my ignorance for resistance. Again and again they tormented me unto the moment of death, only to back off that I might recuperate, and the process begin anew. They burned me with irons, lashed me relentlessly, gouged out my eyes in their manic passion for information. When I still could not answer, they hung me from chains and stabbed my naked legs until the infections set in, and thereupon commenced amputating them, an inch at a time, that I might not die too soon.” He squeezed her hands. “My queen. You will never impress the Earthman with logic and dignity. I urge you to meet their leader while jewel-bedecked, and with all the trappings of regality.”

“They have no absolute leader,” Emra reminded him. “They cling to a system called democracy, wherein power and leadership are shared amongst the best of their best.”

That same wan smile. “Also, bear arms. Many arms. A great show of force will immeasurably aid your cause.”

Emra clamped his mutilated hands between hers. “I fear there is much to learn.”

“Alas, not from me.” He rolled his head, feeling the room. “Surely I deserve some small compensation for my assistance?”

“Name it.”

“I wish to expire under the stars.” He appeared to pale even as he spoke. “Facing my home world.”

“It is done.” Emra released his hands and clapped her own. The zobbs stumbled up and bashed him out the door.

Emra drifted to the kitchen, and there addressed her standing retinue. “Pass the word. Fine gems are to be imported to Maert’n from Maldea. The jewelers are to provide high-quality cuts; stones that would complement a queen’s crown and gown. Additionally, the smiths are to pass out many nuggets of gold and small silver ornaments. These ornaments are to be impaired to the point of appearing as innocent heirlooms. No finely-wrought or highly polished items. The accountants are to maintain meticulous records.”

She walked back to the great mirror and lifted her ratty hem. A tiny smile crossed her face. “Dola! Find our best dressmaker. Have



her bring her finest satin and lace. Something,” she whispered, “fit for a queen.”



A pair of pony-driven carts came bumping down the narrow road separating Czarshnewigger Pits and West Administration Fence. The road had been there for ages; not because royds are so eager to gush over EarthAd grounds, but because the soil tends to be firmer round the fringes. The guards watched them pass with little interest: there was no way in without slicing yourself to pieces on razor wire. But when the carts stopped right outside an egress-only turnstile, two guards urged their horses over.

One cocked his rifle.

The driver of the lead cart looked up and showed his hands. “You can spare a moment?” he asked pleasantly, appearing to study the rifle.

The guard considered. “Your moment’s up.”

“I am reaching behind me,” the driver said, and did so, very carefully. “I am removing a small article from beneath a pile of folded rags.”

Both guards leaned down for a closer look.

The driver pulled out a shiny sliver of hammered gold.

“Say . . .” said the first guard. “That’s some piece of metal you have there.”

“Yours.” He handed it up between the bars.

The guards passed it back and forth. “What’s the deal here?” asked one. “Who’s screwing who?”

“Yours,” the driver repeated. “We have a business proposition.”

“Go on. There’s nobody around but us.”

“We are interested in purchasing arms. Handguns and miscellaneous small arms, but chiefly rifles. You have access to many such weapons. We have access to many more pieces of metal.” He showed them a handful.

Both drivers laughed. Said one: “Why don’t you just ask for our hearts on skewers? You don’t have enough gold there to pay for our courts-martial, pal. So clop off.”

The driver smiled thinly. “I am reaching behind me. I am loosening this cord, that I may draw back the tarp covering my cart.” He did so, revealing a handsome pile of fine metal: silver drinking cups, gold rings, various chains and pendants.

The guards whistled simultaneously. “Well, pinch *me*,” said one. He reached through the bars for a feel.

The driver dropped the tarp and gripped the cord between his knees. He reprised that sly smile.

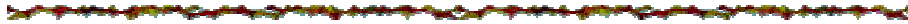
“Forget it!” said the other guard. He grabbed his companion by the shoulder and hauled him back. “There ain’t a thing you can do or say that’ll drag us down to your level. Maybe you don’t know the difference between a human and a royd.”

“There is nothing that will change your mind?”

“That’s right, buddy. You’re messing with Earth Administration now. We’re trained to be on guard against you guys. But it doesn’t matter. An Earthman has something called integrity, and a sense of duty over his personal wants and needs. So clop off, I tell you, before I report you, and your little bag of goodies gets confiscated by someone with a lot less patience than me.”

The driver nodded gently. “I am stepping down from my cart.” He did so. “I am walking to the cart behind me and pulling back its tarp.”

The flash of precious stones dazzled the guards. It took a full minute before either could move, and when they could their first instincts were to simultaneously hand through their rifles. Strange, too, was their intuitive synchronicity, as they dropped their jaws and in near-perfect conjunction asked, “How many more do you need?”



“Council Elder!” called the Court Crier, with a broad sweep of his arm. “Esteemed members! Proud Earthmen everywhere—presenting her majesty . . . *Emra*, Queen of Royds!”

The Grand Arch separating Council Chambers and the Great Hall now filled up with the Queen and her entourage. First through were a dozen silk-dressed zobbs, flopping purposefully to either side of the aisle, dragging a lace-fringed banner in their jaws. There was a savage scuffle in the center as two fought for the handsomer grip, then they’d somehow spilled over one another to facing sides. The Queen’s maids, seven stumpy fghns with hooves stuffed into dainty spangled slippers, bore her hem and train with forced aplomb, and the Queen’s Guard, now outfitted with Earth side arms and long bayoneted rifles, squeezed in tardily, having just lost a fierce staring contest with the standing Administration Guard. So, taken all together, her retinue’s

entrance may have proved less than imposing to the hard-hearted Council, now leaning warily and silently to the fore.

The Queen, however, surpassed all their expectations. Emra wore the loveliest white gown the Earthmen had ever seen, as jewel-bedecked as her crown, with satin and lace runners billowing at the wrists and throat. Her ear lobes were tastefully pinned to matching turquoise shoulder brooches, and a glorious diamond-dusted wart ring dangled from her left cheek. The crown's centerpiece was a blood-orange jewel of great fire, unfamiliar to the denizens of EarthAd, and the crown itself was a finely wrought, sapphire-studded tiara, fat at the bevel with burnished gold. Even in her silver-tipped heels the Queen barely broke four feet, but her dazzling array more than compensated. Emra shone like a trove.

The whole party spilled down the aisle; maids tangled up in satin and lace, zobbs and guards biting and jockeying for position. When they reached the bench the Elder placed down his palms and leaned forward like a mighty ship's prow. "Your majesty. It is with great pleasure that we meet at last. Forgive our lack of respective pomp; we are a legislative-and enforcement body, and thus not well mapped for royalty. There is much to discuss." He gave a small bow of the head. "Let us forsake these dreary chambers for an apartment more amenable to the occasion."

This said, he climbed down from the bench with the other members filing in tow. The Elder paused cavalierly beside the queen and made to offer his arm, but at a snarl from a zobb scratched his wrist instead. Head held high for the sketchers, he led her back out the Grand Arch with his hands clasped at the waist.

Only by ordering the Administration Guard into a flanking procession was the Elder able to squeeze everybody down the Great Hall—there was some vicious infighting between zobbs for pole position, and the rubbernecking Queen's Guard haphazardly swung their bayonets and rifle butts, much to the consternation of proximate Council members. The procession turned left down a secondary hall. At the end of this hall, broad double doors were thrown wide and the royds found themselves gaping at a spread beyond their wildest dreams.

This was Administration Ballroom, the secret rec room and ultimate pleasure farm for high-ranking officials. For this special day the place had been cleaned up: the resident whores, sycophants, and go-betweens were assigned elsewhere, the finest chefs and musicians had

been imported, and the Ballroom decked out to impress solely the Queen and hers.

And boy, were they ever impressed: wide sumptuous treats steamed on silver plates, huge cut-glass goblets sparkled with vintages from the Elder's own cellar. Haberdashers and pedicurists dotted the perimeter, looking on curiously through an ambient drift of frankly staring maids. The royds' eyes bulged round their muzzles. On some unseen cue a small orchestra laid into a lovely, room-hugging waltz. The Elder smiled down at his regal guest.

"Please consider our palace yours, my Queen. Brei crümbe?" He motioned to a waiter porting an ornate silver tray, and had the man set this tray on a richly clothed table. Emra plucked up a soft slender wedge, simultaneously bending back the seventh digit of a reaching zobb. She slid the wedge into her mouth and her whole face melted. "Wine?" The Elder accepted a lily-glass from a fawning server and placed it in Emra's free hand. "A rude number, to be sure, for a palate as discriminating as yours. But we are not here," he stressed, adroitly changing the subject while leading her toward the dance floor, "to make talk." The moment their backs were turned, the zobbs and Queen's Guard went at it like cats over the tray.

"We are all aware of your subjects' distress," the Elder went on, "and are deeply moved over your personal loss of a loved one. The movements of our ex-governor, of his men and this loose cannon of a Gate Guard, are not merely deplorable, they are not just heinous—they are entirely unconscionable to the sophisticated Earth Administration mind. All these madmen have met their due ends, and left it to us, dear Queen, to patch up the differences and proceed with our lives as best we can. In a certain sense this is perhaps a boon. It has brought us to the table, so to speak," and he smiled and gestured at a small banquet waiting in the next room, "allowing us to reach out as neighbors on a most desperate world, at a time when neighbors are most desperately needed." There was an abbreviated scream as a zobb bit into a whipped cream-smothered fgahn, and then the Elder had eased shut the door. "Please."

They sat at opposite ends of the smallish dining table, orienting their respective selves while the Elder made various asides to a few very serious officials in waiting. Emra's head was swimming; the aromas were unlike anything she'd ever experienced. It took great tact to delicately and unhurriedly sample absolutely everything on that table. Discomposing, too, were the several cordials that seemed to arrive in a steady stream. When at length the official men had been

dismissed, there were only Emra, the Elder, and, stationed at a far door, a waiting waiter and waitress; waiting, waiting, perpetually waiting.

“Forgive me,” said the Elder. “I asked to not be disturbed, but business always has a way of finding one, does it not?” He ignored his plate. “To the point. We all inhabit the same small world. The Council feels that, rather than remain at odds, your people and ours should exist in harmony. Too long have we exchanged under a barter commerce; we envision a legal trans-species currency, a system of fair and regulated taxation, and policed trade routes for the betterment of all. Now is not the time to go over these issues in detail; papers have been drawn up, broadly outlining our initial vision.” He handed Emra a handsomely bound document. “Please peruse this at your leisure, and discuss it freely with your subjects. You enjoyed your repast? The spirits were to your liking?” He rose formally, in the pose of a partial bow.

Emra too rose, a bit giddily. Perhaps the alcohol had loosened her tongue; now was not the time or place, but she said, “There is the incidental matter of some two hundred massacred innocents, most left dangling in a meandering line leading to this very enclosure.”

The Elder cocked his head. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to invoke Administration’s wrath upon Quantis Wilde and his henchmen—those scoundrels, however, are forever beyond the reach of mortal vengeance. I beg your indulgence, Queen Emra, in our mutual construction of a finer world.”

“Widow Emra.”

The Elder smiled only with his teeth. “As you importune. I now repeat our offer of unspecified restitution, in a closed hearing, at your personal convenience. Again: the guilty parties are all deceased; one with his head blown off, three sucked bloodless in the bogs, and one, by your own witness, steam-fried at the bottom of Runoff Gorge. Really, Madame Queen; what would you have us do—display Wilde’s body on a pike above the Gate?”

“The food and wine,” Emra said grimly, “were excellent.” She gave the curtest of curtsies and turned. “I will study your offer, but please don’t insult our dignity.”

The Elder quickly made to lead. He’d just reached the door when they were both struck stationary by a terrible clamor in the Ballroom. Tables were heard crashing over, a waitress screamed, shouts rang from the intruding Administration Guard. The Elder tore down a wall-mounted rifle and threw out a restraining arm. Emra was

amazed by the old man's vigor. He cocked the rifle and pulled open the door.

The Ballroom was a riot of royds desperately wolfing down any goodies they could get their claws on. Zobbs were plunged headfirst into cakes and bowls, guards and fghns fought fang and talon over hot buttered morsels. The Administration Guard, freed from their job's grating monotony by the emergency, laid into the thrashing royds with a passion, cracking skulls and wringing tails.

The Elder turned with a smile. "Dignity is so overrated."

Emra stomped through the Ballroom. "Throw these buggers out!" she commanded. "And don't be too gentle with them!" Taken aback, the Administration Guard looked to the Elder, who nodded without taking his eyes off the furious little figure. He coolly pursued her to the front doors and stood watching her stumble down one flight of steps after the other. In a minute the first guards came ricocheting through the Hall, dragging royds by every available appendage. The Elder stepped aside as the offenders were pitched down the steps. "Follow that carriage," he told a corporal, staring at a weeping Emra punching and kicking her driver. "Take another man. I want to know where it goes, how it gets there, and any stops it makes in the process." He turned and thoughtfully made his way to Council Chambers.

Emra's driver was beside himself, scrambling back and forth between the coach and tumbling bodies. "Leave them where they are!" the Queen snapped. "Let them walk back!" She dabbed at her eyes. Speaking as much to herself as to the driver, she said, "It's all a lark, anyway. Right now, the Council are laughing themselves into a frenzy, thinking only of my humility!"



Right then, the Council were weeping themselves into a frenzy, thinking only of her crown.

"Did you see that gem!" the Arbiter General moaned. "A ruby, but not a ruby—impossible! And the gold! Filigree! The workmanship!"

"Forget the gold," said Scribe. "I swear I saw diamonds flash on her wrists. Large as my uncle's gallstones."

"Were we fools to let her go?" wondered the Guard Commander. "A quick tackle and we all could have retired."

“Idiot,” said the Elder. “Where those jewels came from will come many more. Given half a chance, you’d have screwed us right out of the mother lode.”

“You mean—?”

“Yes. The Hoard. It’s no rumor, I tell you! She didn’t guss herself up like that by raiding granny’s jewel box. She’s got her finger on the whole royd population. Don’t you see—she’s made the Hoard her war chest.” His eyes narrowed. “The fog lifts! Now I see how she got those weapons.”

“What about that old troublemaker of hers? The one you let go as an olive branch. If our boys couldn’t get the location out of him, then, damn it, there is no Hoard! It’s a fairy tale.”

“Nonsense,” said the Elder. “That freak’s a patriot. What a fool I was! He’s probably working with her right now.”

“I can have him smoked out and re-arrested in no time,” the Commander offered. “Hell, I can mobilize a unit that’ll take down their entire silly operation before nightfall.” He winked deeply and nudged Scribe. “That’s if we can just get past that fearsome Queen’s Guard.”

“Moron!” the Elder snarled. “Your whole damned brain’s a bludgeon.” He clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace. “There is no more powerful weapon than subtlety. She obviously isn’t gathering it all by herself . . . there must be porters, delivery chains, secret routes . . .” He snapped his fingers. “Gentlemen! It’s time to legislate.”



For generations royds have traveled the Old Jacko Road unmolested. There are no highwaymen; it’s simply not in royd blood to steal that which may be honestly earned or begged. There are occasional encampments laid by the weary, but as a rule they’re temporary—royds are as restless as they are honest.

The Administration Mounted Guard was a real novelty on Old Jacko. The Guard set up command tents every few miles, and the riders became easygoing fixtures on a monotonous landscape previously peopled solely by various worker species, moving to and from the Jacko Mines, pulling their little carts by hand or by pony. The workers were porting crushed rock to smelters at Exxona just outside of EarthAd, where the precious metals were legally bartered for

delicacies and manufactured goods, and hammered into coinage in the Administration Mint.

A new Administration regulation demanded cargo be certified pre-exchange: impurities were creating imbalances at the scales. The Guard, it was explained, were trained metallurgists. They were saving haulers the trouble of bearing inferior material, and grading them in the process. Those sellers with consistently fine hauls received stickers of merit, giving them preferential treatment at the scales, and the best deals going. Right now the lead haulers were proudly bearing those colorful Terran stickers on their carts, and the inspecting Guard were uncovering the cleanest hauls at the fore, but it was the roving riders who found what they were all really looking for, way in the rear, on one of those little turnoff roads that lace the asteroid.

There they'd pulled over an old Cept veteran of the long haul, his back as curved as his three-foot tongue. He was dusty with the road and dog-tired, but his eyes rose fiercely at the sound of the Mounteds' Captain clapping up. He hissed when the human shadow fell on him.

The Captain looked him over incuriously before turning to the little wagon's contents. In the bed were dozens of raw diamonds and emeralds; the camouflaging rocks and clods lay in piles on the ground. "You were not heading for Exxona," the Captain said. He studied the surrounding fields and criss-crossing roads. "My men inform me that you were accompanied by a young one, and that this young one ran at your command." The Captain looked back down. "Would it be all that much of a stretch to suppose this lad was related to you; perhaps your son?"

The Cept dropped his head.

"Where were you bound?"

The Cept said nothing.

The Captain unsheathed his sword. It was a vintage piece, engraved from boss to hilt with fanciful diagrams depicting constellations as animals and people. He placed the blade's tip in the center of the royd's forehead and used it to gradually raise the head. The Cept, blood trickling down both sides of his face, looked the Captain directly in the eyes.

"Where did you pick up these stones?"

The Cept didn't blink.

"This blade will slice your head like embryo pie. I want your destination point. But more important—tell me where these stones



originate.” He pushed firmly. Blood began flowing in twin streams. The Cept’s expression remained stony.

“You don’t like Earthmen,” the Captain said. “Now there’s a perverse viewpoint.” He pushed harder. “Where did you get these stones?” He applied some body weight. Now the Guard could see the royd’s skin parting in the gush, and the gnarly yellow bone underneath. “Where?” The Captain leaned on the hilt. The royd’s fangs showed, and little by little his mouth widened. The nostrils flared and remained distended. “*Where?*” The blade sawed into bone. The royd’s eyes seemed to take up half his face, but they remained fixed on the Captain. Blood painted his entire crown, dripping onto his chest and shoulders. “*Where! Where! Where!*” The blade snagged in the skull. “*Where?*” The Captain ground his teeth and twisted. The Cept’s eyes squeezed shut and his mouth flew open, the tongue curled back into a wretched roll. Blood spurted from the gash. But not a sound did he make.

The Captain backed off. “You’re worthless dead. Get him up and tie him to a horse.” He smiled into those unflinching eyes. “Don’t worry; once we get you cleaned up we’re going to introduce you to a really sweet old man.”



Emra’s coach crashed and crawled through Trummp Marsh, its sinking cartwheels hurriedly tugged free by the skittish ponies. Twilight was seeping past the purple crags, with nocturnal life just a step behind. Every now and then one of the more aggressive marsh tulips clamped on a pony’s hoof, causing it to dance as though its legs were on fire. Phygean dragonflies, one of the few species to retain its native characteristics on the asteroid, buzzed the coach relentlessly, emitting little screams of frustration when snagged in the protective netting.

The ponies were making for a slight grade rising out of the marsh. At the top hunched a huge, smooth-scaled numph, well camouflaged against the rocky terrain by his sloping shoulders, broad midsection, and mottled brown coloration. As he rose erect from all fours, his hindlimbs bowed and his shoulders narrowed, allowing the massive forelimbs to fold behind him and the tiny round head to rear. Thus extended, he tromped downhill to meet the coach.

Emra’s high demeanor was now the only indication of her royalty: the coach was a death trap, her crown history, and she was right back in burlap for the rough ride out. Two Earthmen on horseback

had tailed them upon leaving EarthAd, and they hadn't been at all circumspect—their contempt for royds, and the sense of escalating control over the situation, had brought out the *kinso*, the bully-human. After a while they'd taken to childish scare tactics; one galloping along the horizon with his coat over his head, the other imitating the calls of a ravenous m'laren. The queen's driver had located a Rauna encampment, and Emra had traded away her coach in a clean one-for-one switch. The Earthmen had pursued two crouching Raun in the royal coach, and she'd snuck out, minus her gown and crown, in one of theirs.

But before the coaches trade-off she'd been introduced to Varin, a kind of itinerant tribal counselor. Emra was ushered under a braided parti-colored tent, its corners tethered to wagon rails at the four compass points—this arrangement left the Rauna, a deeply suspicious race, five feet of open vantage space all around. The Rauna were by nature disdainful of Emra's regal status, but they'd lost too many of their own in the Governor's rampage to not take sides. Varin, listening to her tale of awkwardness and abasement, readily divined her lack of royal confidence. He explained the hopelessness of a diplomatic approach, and posited an inherited disposition in *Homo sapiens* to glom at any cost. In the end he was entirely unable to counsel on the whole human thing: Rauna had always dealt with Earthmen by avoiding them; Emra's position as a royd was unique. Oh, she was doomed, all right. But for the meager fee of a jeweled crown and carriage, he just *might* be able to refer her to a higher source.

And she'd traveled half the day to meet that source. She was staring at its caregiver/taker now.

The numph came down on all fours. Emra was assisted from the coach and they stood face to face. When the numph moved in for a sniff she urgently threw out a hand against the stench.

“Stop! I am Emra, Queen of royds. Do you speak Earthman?”

The numph cocked his head.

“I come from Varin. You are hereby commanded to admit me, and none other.”

The numph turned and preceded her up the grade. At the top he motioned to a jagged hole torn from the earth. Emra peered in and snapped her head right back. “You silly monster. How am I supposed to manage that?”

The numph turned, hurt. “I hear well as speak.” He stepped in and began to feel his way down. “You manage somehow,” he muttered. “Silly queen.”

## Emra

Emra followed him down, minding her nails on the raggedy stone. Light filtered in from a hundred surface fissures, creating a spooky half-light that appeared to shift with every step. The asteroid's pocked interior was soon evident; rock on all sides gave away to mini-caverns and tunnels to nowhere. The deeper they climbed, the larger these little caves became; even so, the little caves themselves were riddled with ever-tinier holes. Several of these middling caves showed slowly heaving maters, clinging to the ceilings with their belly suckers while their long bleeders languished in those perforating fissures. Many appeared long-starved and stuck to the rock.

In time they came to a small dome-shaped cavern. Vestiges of cooking fires and a miscellany of found objects established this hole as the numph's home. In the very center was a stinking jumble of rags, sackcloth apparently. The numph bade Emra sit, and himself followed suit.

The pile of rags stirred.

"Make no move sudden," the numph said, and bowed as an afterthought. "Queen."

The pile rose slowly, corkscrew fashion, rim to center. A deep-seated miasma was disturbed, releasing a feculent, unfurling grave-stench that grew in sync with the heap's progress. Now Emra could make out a rough shape, rather like a large cat in repose, altering by the second. The hump became a peaked heap, and continued to rise until a hunched figure was revealed, leaning in a slump like a corpse in a body bag. It began to respire. Each exhalation carried the stench of decay, horrible to endure in that haunted place.

After a long moment the numph produced a series of articulated gutturals—not words by any means; rather an exotic tongue completely unfamiliar to the queen. The tones, low and soft and gurgling, were these:

*"Doo wee gnay ahn mee hum saw."*

The floppy thing swiveled in the numph's direction, and an orifice which could only be construed as a mouth responded:

*"Hwee nah phin da sre um too."*

The numph turned to Emra. "Your want unclear. Must engage." He paused for emphasis. "There is price."

"I," Emra reminded him, "am queen. I do not barter."

The numph lowered his eyes. "Other price," he mumbled. "Price dear."

"Tell it to engage." This was a direct order.

The numph nodded and said, *"Hwee ow nan ki."*

The lumpy mass moved its peak close to Emra's face and sniffed her up and down. The death-stench was so wrenching she had to wince and half-close her eyes. The figure clamped that wide-open cavity on the center of her face, completely enclosing her mouth and nasal apertures, and began to heave with breath. Emra almost fainted from the foulness. Seconds later she was slipping, and her eyes had closed completely.

"You dream now," said the numph. "*Sai ee hwa em tao*. You let go feeling."

But Emra couldn't ignore the icy feelers running over her body, couldn't escape the sense of being violated in ways unspeakable. The thing seemed to melt on top of her, and the harder it pressed, the more pliant she grew. That breath consumed her internally; deadening her nervous system, fogging her mind. Maggots passed from its tongue onto hers.

"You let go," repeated the numph, from far away. "Know you, read you, be you."

Emra lay on her back while the thing pinned her in a copulative posture, burying her in cobs and must and fungal rot. Bit by bit she was opened wide, and little by little her feelings and memories were sucked away. All resistance vanished. Emra was now a conduit; a one-way flue for the expulsion of those ideas and emotions regularly retained by a healthy royd's set of sympathetic blocks. All things essentially Emra passed from her like gas, and she died there, for a heartbeat, but in the next beat was just as fluidly reanimated. Gradually the overall impression of an appropriating force, of *suction*, left her body, from the depths of her being to the downy scales fringing her tough coppery epidermis. The weight upon her relaxed. The mouth unclamped from her face, and with the return of her true breath that rank fog slowly left her brain.

"You sit now," said the numph.

The thing, once again a shapeless heap of tainted rags, rolled off and returned to its leaning slump. Emra sat up. All she wanted was a week's uninterrupted bathing. The numph looked on curiously for a moment, then turned and said,

"*Hai ye hem ohn toa se pai?*"

The heap's reply took a good while. Finally that oscillating drone began to taper, even as the drooping shape further relaxed—the whole event moved in the reverse of its original order: the voice winding down like a slowed tape, the formless pile collapsing count-

## Emra

er-clockwise, rim to center. Then there was only a filthy, raggedy mass, stinking the stench of catacombs.

“You no think Earthman,” the numph summed. “Earthman only think self. Councilman hate you, Councilman see you weak, Councilman seek only royd wealth. Earthman pretend show queen respect, but watch close all time. Earthman depend on royd for gold, silver, jewel. When Earthman find treasure Earthman no longer need royd. Council then order death all royd and take royd land for self. This sure as star in sky. Earthman dream this since Elis Royd begin.”

The numph studied Emra with an expression that struck her as dour. He said, matter-of-factly, “Queen be strong. No peace, never-ever. World can belong only Earthman or royd.” He nodded. “This long time come.” The numph rose to his characteristic, slumping crouch, and offered Emra his paw. “Queen.”



Beneath Council Chambers is a secret place, known only to the High Triad of Council Elder, Head Administrator, and Guard Commander. For any Triad member to betray its existence is for that member to voluntarily face charges of subterfuge in a kangaroo court, presided over by the other two, with the certain judgment of death by hanging. Long ago the Triad made a blood pact to publicly acknowledge the fabricated charge as true, and to accept the penalty without objection. It is the kind of vow made only by desperate men in positions of highest power.

The secret place is an interrogation crypt, as old as Elis Royd. It's dank and dark and depressing; the floor criss-crossed with blood gutters, the deep stone walls still ringing with the wails of slowly ravaged lives. In one cell: six dangling humans, their naked bodies scored and seared a hundred times over. Out on the floor: three robed humans, huddled around a broken and bloody royd.

The Elder rhythmically jangled a massive iron key ring. The Commander and Administrator loomed menacingly.

The Cept raised his bleeding eyes. “I have read Constitution.” He spat out a mouthful of broken fangs. “I cannot be imprison without trial.”

The Elder's jaw dropped. “*Trial!* You want a trial?” He twirled a hand over his head. “Gentlemen! Esteemed Council! This session of Court is in order. How do you find the accused?”

“Guilty,” said the Commander.

“Ditto,” said the Administrator.

The Elder smacked down his hand. “And likewise it is! Do you *understand* that, sir? Is it within your filthy little window of comprehension? The verdict is unanimous! Have you anything to say—*anything* that might sway this noble Court?” The Cept stared back as best he could. “I thought not!” The Elder kicked him for the hundredth time. “Well, you’d better come up with something fast! We’re either going to loosen that ugly tongue or cut it off. Make no mistake about it.” He nodded sharply. The Commander and Administrator stretched the Cept’s forelimbs behind his back. The Elder used the key ring to slap the prisoner left and right across the face, yelling “*Where?*” with each pass. He labored until exhausted, then dropped the keys and collapsed on a low metal bench. The Commander roused the Cept with a bucketful of dirty water while the Administrator retrieved the keys. The Elder took one limb, the Commander the other, and the Administrator began the interrogation anew. “Where? Where! *Where!*” In a few minutes the Commander and Administrator exchanged places. It took longer to return the Cept to consciousness this time, and the Councilmen had to prod him with various sharp objects to snap him back to basics. When the Cept was again aware of his situation, the Commander took over. “Where, damn you! *Where?*”

Gradually the Councilmen sank to the floor, overcome more by passion than exertion. They propped up the Cept’s head and smacked it against the wall. All were at eye-level.

“Where—” the Elder panted “*where* is the royd treasure?” The Cept’s entire face was obscured by blood. “I swear we will let you live if you speak it. You have our solemn word. Better . . . *you*, friend; yes, *you*, will be rewarded with an equal share.”

“Yes,” breathed the Administrator. “An equal share by Law. By Earthman Law! We will draw up the papers right here and now, and drink to our union. No! We will feast! You will enjoy a banquet like you have never dreamed!”

“Better still,” the Commander heaved. “You will be able to spend it as you wish—here, within these hallowed walls, as an honorary Earthman! Palaces will be yours! Chefs and handmaidens and females by the score. Underlings to do your bidding, slaves to lean to your every whim!”

The Cept’s head rolled to one side and his long tongue fell out.

“Dead!” The Administrator struggled to his feet. “No!”

“Not yet,” the Elder snarled, and grabbed the first eighteen inches of that bloody lolling tongue. “Not until I say he’s dead!” He

and the Administrator held onto the tongue and pulled with all their might, their heels buried in the Cept's face. The Commander hauled back on the head until the Cept began to gag.

"Where?" the Commander shouted, directly in his ear. "*Where*, you inferior son of a bitch, *where*?"

The Cept went into convulsions. His thrashing caught the Councilmen by surprise—both the Elder and Administrator lost their balance, and then the royd was flailing on his feet with the Triad clinging to his legs and hump of a tail. It took all they had to bring him under control. With the last of his strength, the Commander delivered a vicious kick to the genitals. The Cept sagged.

"Still want to live, do you?" the Elder cried, snapping up the key ring. He stomped to a rear door, unlocked and drew it open, and hauled out the Cept's terrified son. "Well, here's something to live for!" He shoved the child forward. "The Guard caught him trying to hide in a command tent. Big on the Constitution, are you? Well, there are laws about breaking into a field command's quarters. Read a little deeper and you'll see that parents are accountable for their litter's actions whenever military personnel are endangered—and who knows what mischief this little unsupervised rat might have caused. Okay, I want some answers, and I want them *now*." He threw the child into a chokehold and placed two keys against the eyes, applying pressure until he got the scream he was going for. "*Where!*"

"Do not," the Cept managed. "Please." He dragged himself forward.

"Where!"

The child screamed again.

"In Maldea," the Cept gasped. The Administrator and Commander immediately dropped to their knees.

"Again," said the Administrator.

". . . Maldea."

The Commander gripped the Administrator's shoulder. "I know of it." He looked up at the Elder and nodded.

The Elder stomped over and creaked to his knees. His face was inches from the Cept's. "Then it's true? A mountain of jewels, of silver and gold? Buried for generations . . . to what end?"

"They are hoarders," the Administrator snapped. "Do not over-analyze this." His expression softened. "There must be fortunes beyond imagination."

The Commander rose. "What if he's lying?"

“Then,” said the Elder, “he’ll be one spawnless shut-in.” He stepped back to the son and placed his hands on the shoulders. “Eh, Papa Royd? What do you say? Want to see the kid grow up to be another proud pissant? Then you’ll just sit tight here until he gets back.” He lifted the child and bounced him in his arm. “How’s about you, son? Would you like us to keep your dad alive as our guest? I thought so. Okay, then. This is our Guard Commander. He has a command at his disposal. You’re going to be their guide, and show them the way to the Royd Hoard. When they come back with good news . . . then, and *only* then, will we let Papa go. Are we clear on this?” Without waiting for a reply, he shoved the child back out and slammed and locked the door.

The Commander and Administrator dragged the near-lifeless Cept to the occupied cell. The Elder joined them, unlocked the cell gate, and helped kick the royd inside. He turned with his hand on a bar and said over his shoulder, measuredly:

“It’s certainly comforting to know that the Commander can be trusted with his Guard, and that I and the Administrator don’t have to worry about his yielding to any sudden . . . *independent* urges.”

The Administrator slowly turned to face the Commander, adding darkly, “Yes . . . I shall certainly sleep better knowing that my friends are friends unto the grave.”

“That they are,” said the Commander. He placed his left arm across his stomach and cupped the right elbow with his hand. His right forearm was now raised at a thirty degree angle. The Elder and Administrator followed suit and, standing very close, the three men thereupon locked their right hands so that their arms formed a pyramid. They nodded until their peaked hoods just touched.

The Elder slammed the cell gate and nudged the Cept with his foot. “At least you’ll have some company,” he said, motioning to the hanged corpses. “I know, by our Captain’s statement, that there was a considerable haul of gems in your little wagon. Yet by the time that haul reached home there was only a smattering. Turns out these six sorry dangling gentlemen took a hankering to your cargo, made a pact, and swallowed a number of stones to smuggle them past the rest of the Guard. Unpolished stones can be tough on the ascending colon. Once a doctor exposed the secret, the jig was up. It took a while, but I think we got out most of the contraband. Watch your step, by the way. The floor can be slippery.”



## Emra

“How . . .” the Cept gasped, one arm wrapped around a bar, “how can human be so cruel . . . in all stars, no other race . . . so greedy, so selfish . . .”

The Triad exchanged looks, marveling.

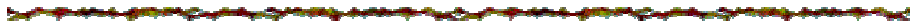
The Administrator said, “That is ‘Earthman’ to you, royd bastard.”

The Commander pawed the air and grimaced, aping a snarling wild animal. All three laughed.

The Elder leaned in with a gleam in his eye. “Oh, you didn’t know?” Shielding his mouth with a hand, he winked up at his fellows and whispered, “*It’s in the blood!*”

## *Chapter Five*

### Human Says



Buhwa and Moony were being over-assertive, as children are wont to be, but it just wasn't fair to little round Luhluh, whose narrower female hooves were poorer negotiators of roots and muck. The males stopped at the top and glared back, wide forehooves on plump hips.

“Move it, Slim!” called Buhwa. “The Earthmen won't wait all day, y'know. Let's get rolling!” To make his point he clasped his knees and went bouncing down the grade like a loose medicine ball. Moony giggled and rolled after him. Luhluh sobbed and dropped to all fours—but no one could see her now. Keeping low, she half-galloped, half-clambered to the top.

Below was just another trough, followed by a small rounded hillock. That show-off Buhwa, inspired by a good push-off with a little english, was using his momentum to go for a clean roll-and-wobble with a half-pirouette finish. “All the way!” cried fat foundered Moony, but Buhwa came up short by a dozen feet, and had to dig in before whirling back. Still, it was a good roll; one Luhluh could never equal. So she went for the quick comic break, somersaulting on her butt and crown, clipping Moony just as he turned to investigate her approaching thunder. She knocked him a good twenty feet, straight

## Human Says

into a rock grybbet's vacated nest. Luhluh nervously giggled over her shoulder while he fiercely chased her up, cursing like a human. But then Moony was laughing too. Not to be upstaged, he made a great show of his navigational prowess, using his elbows for side-to-side thrusts while bounding up titanically on his thick shiny hams.

"There!" they heard Buhwa shout, and quickly joined him atop the hillock.

Below stretched the magnificence of Earth Administration, Elis Royd's original gated community. Off in the distance lay the mall-like weighing station of Exxona, and, farther along, the tiny hamlet of Doopont.

Just outside EarthAd's East Gate was an engaging arrangement, a kind of picnic spread: two long draped tables, one with place mats, bowls, and utensils, the other with steaming kettles. The drifting aromas of mashed potatoes and cornbread almost made Buhwa pee with want. Moony began to hyperventilate; Luhluh speckled furious-ly.

"Look!" Buhwa whispered, pointing at a few human figures moving languidly between tables. The children instinctively huddled. Those humans were dressed surreally—the men in dark outfits with broad white collars and wide-brimmed hats, the lone woman in a full-length dress and snow-white bonnet. "Like I told you," Buhwa panted, "it's a special human holiday, and it's real important to 'em. So don't goof it up!" He punched Moony on the rump, but before Moony could hit him back he'd begun an easy downhill roll, throwing on the brakes every few yards. After a moment of uncertainty, Luhluh and Moony followed course.

Bert was first to notice. He called to the others and, a big holiday smile on his ruddy white face, cheerfully banged a ladle on a pan's copper bottom.

The children came down like gigantic croquet balls; Buhwa still in the lead, Luhluh and Moony close behind and to the sides. They rolled into a group, maybe twenty feet from the tables, and shyly rose to all fours.

"Kids, kids!" Bert yodeled. "Don't be bashful! Today's all about friendship, good neighbors, and, gosh darn it . . . healthy appetites!" The other humans grinned to the lobes and gestured to a bench at the sitting table. It seemed all right; the kids slowly tumbled over.

"I'm Bert!" piped the vocal human. "But just for today it's 'Pilgrim Bert'. And that's Pilgrim Michael, and there's Pilgrim Marianne. Do you kids know what a Pilgrim is, and how the Pilgrims made today so especially wonderful?"

The kids admitted they didn't, and were, to be brutally honest, far more interested in the quivering treats than in their host's marvelous rant. One by one they draped their pudgy limbs over the bench and heaped themselves into sitting positions. Mountains of mashed potatoes peeked back over the cloth. Luhluh almost fainted at the spectacle.

"Help yourselves, children!" Bert cried, even as they stuffed their big round faces. "And don't spare the butter and gravy!" When the plates were slurped clean, and the children were leaning back dreaming only of more, Bert said, "There's plenty to come, kids; all you can eat. Pilgrim Marianne's stirring it up now. But in the meantime, why don't we introduce ourselves, get in costume, and learn what this fantastic day's all about! By the way, thanks so much to your parents for answering the summons and allowing you to come. We'd hoped there'd be a whole lot more of you, but the party's still young."

"Actually," Buhwa muttered, "we had to sneak out."

"Ha!" barked Bert. "Pilgrims already! Anyway, now that you know us, what're your names?"

"Buhwa."

"I'm Luhluh."

"*Moo—ny.*" The first syllable was accompanied by an accidental gravy fart, awesome even for a gamer like Moony. Buhwa and Luhluh giggled nervously, then embarrassedly stuffed their hooves in their mouths.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Bert assured them. "We all know that's just royd for 'thanks'. But before the second course you have to get in costume so we can play a real fun game called 'Human Says'."

"Human says?" Luhluh echoed.

"That's right. It goes back hundreds of years, to the great planet Earth herself. It was a game all the Pilgrim children loved playing, so it's just perfect for today, which is our annual celebration of the Earth holiday known as '*Thanksgiving*'. First," and he scooped some little outfits off the other table, "you put on these costumes."

"Funny!" blurted Buhwa.

"No, son," Bert said. "Not funny. These are turkey costumes, and the turkey was considered a noble Earth bird. 'Turkey' is what you call someone you admire; someone who's a real winner. And today *you* guys—Buhwa, Moony, and Luhluh—all get to be our Honorary Thanksgiving Turkeys!"

"Yay!"

## Human Says

“Now, these fat little hats go on your fat little heads. They have these fleshy things that hang over; they’re called *wattles*. The outfits are covered with what were known as *feathers*, and they include these fun parts by your arms called *wings*. Now go ahead; put them on. That’s right. So, Luhluh, what do we do next?”

Luhluh shyly peered between her dangling wattles. “We eat?”

“No, honey; not yet. We still have to learn the rules of the game. And here’s how it goes: whenever I, Michael, or Marianne—or, indeed, *any* Earthman—says ‘human says’ followed by a command, you guys have to do what he says. Okay? Okay! I told you this was gonna be fun! So if I say, for instance, ‘human says gobble!’, you guys go ‘*gobble, gobble, gobble!*’ That, by the way, is Earthman for ‘eat up!’ Parenthetically, it’s also the patriotic call of the noble turkey. So what do you say?”

“Gobble, gobble, gobble?”

“Not yet, kids. I didn’t say ‘human says’. Gosh, is this *ever* gonna be fun! So, are you guys ready? Well, then . . . human says gobble!”

“*Gobble, gobble, gobble!*”

“Good! Marianne, let’s lay out that corn now, shall we? And look—what’s this? Yams! Yams are sweet potatoes, just as sweet as you little guys. It’s what all the Pilgrims ate when they sat down for dinner with the turkeys. And here’s cornbread and cranberries and heaps of piping hot beans smothered in cheese; all reconstituted from the stores in EarthAd’s warehouses and cooked up by Good Pilgrim Marianne just for today. Take a bow there, Pilgrim Marianne! You deserve it. Aww, she’s blushing. Just like *you*, little Luhluh! Well, not *exactly* like you, of course. She’s blushing a generous rose, but that’s because her complexion’s such a lovely shade of white. You’re more of a grotesque fecal brown, Luhluh; typical of roydal melanimic re-synthesis.”

“Huh?” said Moony.

“Just holiday talk, son. What’s important is we’re white, and you’re . . . not.”

Buhwa impulsively raised a hoof. “How come white skin only comes from Earth, Pilgrim Bert?”

“That’s an interesting question, Buhwa. Something to do with virtue, I suppose. But back when the original Thanksgiving celebration took place, all men of Earth weren’t white-skinned like me.”

The children traded stares of awe.

“You mean . . .” Moony ventured, “you mean they were *royds*?”

Bert laughed. “Oh, no, no, no! They were humans, but they were discolored, and so they needed our help. Of course we were glad to give it to them.”

Bert rapped a knuckle on the table and looked querulously at Pilgrim Michael. “Y’know, Mike, this just might be a good opportunity, on such a very special day, to give these wonderful kids a little history lesson.” He spun back around. “Hands! Hands! Who wants to know how this all came about?”

“Yay!”

“Okay. Pilgrim Marianne is going to pass around some hot cornbread with butter and honey so you can eat while you learn. So human says ‘gobble!’”

“*Gobble, gobble, gobble!*”

“Good. Now, the wonderful white Pilgrims set off across a big lovely body of water called an *ocean*. On Earth, the water just sits on top of the land; it’s not pumped up and recycled like it is here. The Pilgrims drove on top of that ocean to search for hungry children they could treat to celebration days. They traveled in a big happy boat called the *Mayflower*. But they weren’t the first humans to ‘sail’ across the ocean; that honor goes to Mister Christopher Columbus, another wonderful white human. He came with a whole lot of friends on three pretty ships, called *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*.”

“¿Niña?”

Bert leaned down and pinched Luhluh’s tummy until she giggled. “That means ‘little female’, just like you, you yummy little treasure, you. I could just eat you up, you’re so cute. Niña,” he sang, “Niña, Niña, Niña! Now eat your corn, sweetheart.”

“Pinta?” wondered Moony.

“A popular kind of bean. Now eat yours before they get cold.”

“*Santa . . .*” Buhwa tried. “*Santa Maria?*”

“The wife of a wonderful old Earthman who comes down chimneys to bring gifts to hungry children.”

“What *kinds* of gifts?”

“Oh, candy, cookies, delicious yams. Lots of yams. And corn, plenty of hot buttered corn. Don’t forget the noodles. Oodles and oodles of noodles.”

“Oodles!” Luhluh exploded. “*Oo-dles of noo-dles!*”

“That’s right. And, of course, mounds and mounds and mounds of stuffing.”

“*Stuffing?*”

## Human Says

“Sure. Stuff. Stuff you stuff in your chubby little mouths until you’re stuffed. Pilgrim Marianne!”

Pilgrim Marianne, dressed to the nines for the part, came up smiling and balancing a massive platter heaped with steaming stuffing.

“See?” said Bert. “Cooked bread with berries, celery, spices—oh, boy! I see some bright-eyed little pilgrims here! Human says ‘gobble!’”

*“Gobble, gobble, gobble!”*

“So back to our story. The Pilgrims fed all the humans on the other side of the ocean until they were just as happy as happy can be. These red humans, who were called Indians, begged the Pilgrims to allow them to repay all this wonderful, wonderful kindness. But white humans are very timid, and were embarrassed by so much gratitude. Finally they agreed to bring over all their millions and millions of white friends and turn the whole continent into a coast-to-coast megalopolis in honor of their friends the Indians. They even renamed the land ‘America’, which is white human for ‘Our Friends, The Indians’.

“The Pilgrims’ descendants made America into a lovely ‘Happy Hunting Ground’ for the Indians. But they realized it was a super-big country and—clean your plate, Luhluh—there were other non-white humans who would be much happier if they could only join the white humans. So they got in some more pretty ships, and sailed to a big land called Africa, where the black humans lived.”

“Wow-ow!” Moony belched. The children all giggled.

“Oops,” Bert said. “Sounds like you’ve got a hole in your tummy, son. Better plug it up with a biscuit. What does human say?”

*“Gobble, gobble, gobble!”*

“The wonderful white humans brought back as many black humans as they could get their hands on.” Bert ticked off points on his fingers. “They fed them, educated them, showed them how to pick cotton, let the females sleep in their beds, and taught the males how to fight and play sports really, really good.”

*“Wow!”*

“Yep. It was lots and lots of fun. Eventually the white humans even let them drink from their fountains, and gave them their own special bus sections. Boy, were the blacks ever happy. But as the years went by, America became very, very crowded, and the black humans had to go away.”

“Where’d they go to,” Luhluh wondered, “Pilgrim Bert?”

“Well,” Bert said, “we’re jumping way ahead here, sweetheart, and I don’t think it’s something children will understand. But since we *are* jumping ahead, let’s go all the way to Earth’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Century; only a couple hundred years ago. By then Earth was so crowded the bad humans across the oceans said they couldn’t live with the good white humans anymore.”

“So what happened then, Pilgrim Bert?”

“Well, Buhwa, they had to go away too. And plenty of them were white. But they were bad white humans, with bad religions, and bad languages, and bad political ideas. All those bad ideas went away with them, along with all the bad yellow and brown humans, until only good white humans were left on Earth, and the only language was English, and the only religion was Christianity. And Christianity is a good religion, and English is a good language, because they’re the religion and language of the Pilgrims, and the Pilgrims were good. And that’s why we’re all so happy, and that’s why we’re having this super-duper Thanksgiving celebration day. Whew. That was a long story, but I think I got in everything. Eat up!”

“*Super-duper!*” Moony giggled, laughing soup out his snout. He guiltily slurped down his cranberries.

“Pilgrim Bert . . . how come . . .” Luhluh mumbled while tentatively partitioning her stuffing into little snortable piles, “how come all the non-white Earthmen were so bad?”

“Because, sweetmeat, they had all those bad ideas I told you about, and just couldn’t accept that the only right thing to do was whatever the good white humans told them to do.” He glanced over at Pilgrims Michael and Marianne, suddenly very busy with the pots and pans. “Y’know, guys, without their having a basic understanding of genetics, this is gonna be a lot tougher than I thought.” He looked back. “You see, honeyhocks, white humans are forced to struggle under this terrible weight known as ‘White Human’s Burden’. That means it’s their destiny, their Humanifest Destiny, to save all the lower races and species from themselves. Lower races and species lie, scheme, and seduce others into doing what’s bad. Ugh. They even take advantage of children, by telling them things that will just lead them to ruin. But white humans have a special gene that causes them to do only the right things, and the very best white humans have what’s called a ‘super gene’, which makes them organize all their inferiors in the very best ways. Now think about it, tubbycakes, doesn’t it make sense to have the finest species in charge?”



## Human Says

“Um, Pilgrim Bert,” Moony ventured, “did Mister Wilde have this super gene?”

Bert irritably knuckled the table. “Governor Wilde was not a happy man, Moonpie. He knew something—a dark secret, a terrible truth—something way, way bigger than his personal wants and dreams.”

The children leaned closer. “*What* dark secret, Pilgrim Bert?”

“Well, and it absolutely pains me to reveal it—don’t avoid that pumpkin pie, Luhluh—but Governor Wilde, through his diligent research into making a happier world for those living outside Administration, discovered that a dirty gene; one of those hormonal regulators carried only by non-white humans, had somehow been imported from Earth. Believe it or not—this dirty gene had lain dormant for dozens of generations until it finally woke up and infected the local royds. You can read all about it over at Royd Weigh-in—c’mon now, Buhwa, that macaroni salad won’t eat itself—but for now let me just simplify by saying that our dear Governor Wilde, heartbroken over the plight of his beloved royds, took it upon himself and three fellow royditarrians to put the infected locals out of their misery, thereby preventing an asteroid-wide epidemic. A *pandemic*. You see now, kids? Saved from yourselves, saved from yourselves. Dip your yams in honey, Moony; otherwise they’ll just dry out.”

“But, Bert,” Buhwa said, “I mean, Pilgrim Bert . . . how come Mister Wilde and his friends had to torture all the royds and burn down their homes and kill their horses? And why did they hang them from the trees instead of leaving them on the ground? And if humans are so wonderful, how come they keep all the good food inside EarthAd while we have to eat roots and bug poop? And why do—”

“*Human says ‘gobble’!*”

“*Gobble, gobble, gobble!*”

“Now children, there’s one more member of the party I’ve yet to introduce. Kids, this is Pilgrim Chef, or Chef Pilgrim as we like to call him. Chef’s a wizard with the forks and knives—why, he’s the guy who put the ‘cut’ in cutlery.”

A fat little moustachioed man in a big white mushroom hat now peered over Bert’s shoulder, his expression liquid with brotherly love. When he saw the children cringing there his face lit up like a crematorium.

“Chef’s going to make you guys Thanksgiving stars,” Bert said.

“But how about all the other humans,” Moony mumbled. “I mean, you four aren’t the only ones who celebrate, are you?”

“Oh, of *course* not, apple-bottom! *All* Earthmen celebrate this day, every year.” He ground his teeth. “But the *Council*, bless its legislative little heart, yesterday moved all the meat to their Ballroom, and declared the rest of EarthAd a Thanksgiving meat-free zone.”

“Meat!” Luhluh belched. “You mean . . . you mean . . . humans *eat* meat?”

Bert mirrored her expression. “I know, I know: the thought of consuming flesh just makes me want to puke! And how wise of you to see it that way. You’re *such* a morsel. So . . . are you guys ready for another history lesson? Who wants to hear how the noble white politicians saved the universe from the evil brown immigrants?”

“Not now,” Buhwa moaned. “I . . . I have a tummy ache.”

“Me too,” Luhluh breathed.

“Serves you both—” Moony tried, and nearly rolled off the bench.

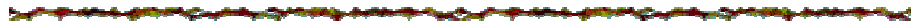
“Children, children! Don’t forget what day it is. Human says ‘gobble’!”

“Gobba—ub\*<sub>b</sub>a—gob<sub>ba</sub> . . .”

“Okay, I think you chubs have had enough. Mike, help me get these little guys up on the table.” The two men carefully lifted the children one by one and gently placed them in nice comfortable aluminum pans. “Let’s get these costumes off—give ’em some air. There we go.” Pilgrim Bert looked down kindly. “There’s only one sure cure for a tummy ache, and that’s a good old fashioned butter belly rub. Now hold still, you three, while we massage this in. Luhluh, don’t lick. There. Now a little salt and just a dash of spices and . . . *voila*, turkeys! Happy Thanksgiving!”

## *Chapter Six*

### The Commander



Forty-five miles of cracked dusty plains, and the horizon remained unbroken. The Commander stared until his vision blurred.

With all eyes on him, he snatched up a piece of parchment and attempted to tear it down the middle. The stuff wouldn't give, so he went for a diagonal rip. Same result. Finally, after trying from every angle, he crushed it in his hands and tossed it over his mount's head. The mass billowed out and gently settled on his saddle. He picked it back up and, rather than try again, used it to grimly mop his face.

"Stupid map's a joke! A farce!" He swatted it off, only to see it lodge in the right stirrup. "This entire asteroid's uncharted—unless those little monsters out there have learned how to fingerpaint." He looked down. "The high price of exclusivity, eh, boy? Nothing to go by but urban legends . . . spontaneously mutating life forms, predatory vegetation, hallucination-inducing micro-spores, the ground opening up to swallow travelers . . ." He yanked the young Cept's neck chain. "You'd better be good and goddamned sure we're on the right track! I won't tell you again." He looped the chain around twice, forcing the boy to face west. "*That's* the way we came." He looped it again and tugged counter-clockwise. Now the boy was facing east. "*That's* the way we're going." He tugged twice more, so that the boy in turn faced

north—“Been that way;”—and south—“been that way too. Almost lost two good men in the gorges, had to shoot a hobbled steed. Broke my heart.” He relaxed his pull, allowing the boy to free his head by looping it in reverse around the chain. “Guard!” he called. “Dis-mount! Take five.”

The Commander heaved himself off his horse. “I want a lean-to,” he told a corporal. “Good water, some jerky, and some honeyed oats. Bring me my vintage.”

Once the hide lean-to was up, the Commander muttered off-handedly, “Always wanted me a son,” and yanked the chain good-humoredly. He handed the boy a cup filled from his jug. “You must be thirsty.” He then gave him a couple of honey-oat logs and leaned back into the hot shade. “Too good for the horses,” he remarked kindly, “but never too good for you.” The boy wolfed down the logs while the Commander chewed his jerky. “How far to Maldea?”

The boy pouted and gestured globally.

“No, damn you. Answer me straight!”

The youngster cringed.

“I’m not going to whip you again, son.” The Commander eased back and smiled. “I just want you to like me, that’s all.” He unscrewed his flask’s cap and poured some brandy into a little bowl. “Here’s something I’d like you to taste; a special treat.”

The Cept boy nervously unfurled his tongue. He lapped some back and immediately recoiled.

“Stings a little, doesn’t it? That’s all right. Can you taste it? Cherry . . . yummy, yummy cherries. That’s the kind of treat you’ll get used to in EarthAd’s great big warehouses. C’mon; try again. There you go. Isn’t that good? Drink some more, son. You’ll feel happy real soon.” The Commander sipped from his flask, laughed, and poured the boy another bowl. “How far to Maldea?”

The boy grinned and let his head roll in ever-widening circles.

“Stop that! You’ll make yourself sick. How many days? Two, three?”

The boy nodded broadly, then shook his head. A second later his head was rolling again.

“*Stop it!* You’re in a military encampment, boy! If you can’t learn to—”

“Sir?”

The Commander looked up irritably. “What is it?”

“We’ve sighted a party of riders, sir. On our westerly flank.”

## The Commander

“Riders?” The Commander pushed himself to his feet and handed over the chain. “Watch him.” He stalked up to a man with a glass. “What riders?”

“They’re royd horsemen, sir. And they’re armed.”

“You’re kidding! Give me that glass.”

Staring back from a large mound were maybe two score mounted royds, each bearing a rifle. “Corporal!” he called back, “send out a messenger. They must be an envoy from their ‘Queen’; they sure didn’t just stumble on us here. I don’t like all those guns around my men; let’s play up the whole Queen thing.” He slapped the sentry on the back. “Fantastic!”

“Sir?”

“Don’t you see? We’re on the right track. They’re the first wall around Maldea.” He mounted his horse, pulled back his hood, and placed an embroidered cap squarely on his head. In a minute a messenger joined his flank, and the whole lot began a steady march toward the oddly staring royd riders. At a hundred yards the grouped Guard stopped. The messenger proceeded another fifty yards before halting.

“Royd Queen!” he called. “I bring you regards from Commander of The Guard, Earth Administration, Elis Royd.”

At length a solitary rider broke from the royd side. It was a gnarm, and an ugly one to boot: forehead pleats dangling round a narrow hooked snout; bulbous, pear-shaped eyes colored lichen green. His compound dorsal hunch caused him to ride in a most ungainly fashion, arms hanging down his steed’s cocoa flanks. It took him forever to clop up, and when he arrived his response was gloriously anticlimactic:

“Queen not here.”

The messenger glazed for half a minute. “Well then, who speaks for her? You?”

The gnarm chewed this over. Finally he said, “Queen not here.”

“I can see that, sir. But I’ve been directed to act as a go-between—for the Commander of our Guard and an officer; that is, someone who serves as an authorized representative of your queen—so that oral proceedings can commence. This is really a pretty standard procedure; a formality, actually.”

The gnarm glowered. His hand went for his rifle.

“Enough!” The Commander clopped up and booted the messenger’s horse in the rump. The messenger rode back to ranks.

“What is your name,” the Commander demanded, “soldier?”

The gnarm squirmed. “Rshxemnphri.”

“Outstanding. Do your people understand the rules of engagement?”

The gnarm drooped his head and peeked round his hump. All royd eyes were on him. A minute passed.

“Well?” the Commander said. “How many of you *are* there, then?”

The gnarm’s snout bobbed mathematically. At last he said, “Thirty-six.”

“Including you?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“That makes your force numerically superior. How fair is that?”

The gnarm blinked.

The Commander shook his head incredulously. He blew out a sigh. “So how many weapons do you carry? Just the rifles, or side arms as well?”

The gnarm shrugged guiltily. “Only rifle.”

“Well, do you have any back-up? Are there any reinforcements coming? *Well?* Speak up, man! Speak up!”

The gnarm’s pride was a red-hot wad. He swallowed anyway, and humbly shook his head.

“So you’re telling me your only weapons are the rifles showing? You’re saying you’re an isolated party lacking communications with your base, with only the rudest of arsenals at your disposal? Is this what I’m expected to believe, sir, or am I missing something overwhelmingly obvious here? I don’t mind telling you that I find this entire situation incredible. Help me out, sir, will you . . . that’s the *whole* picture?”

The gnarm sagged in his saddle.

The Commander huffed. “You really haven’t thought this out, now, have you? The rules,” he said icily, “are as follows: both sides simultaneously drop their rifles on the ground. This shifts the situation from conflict to discourse. Then we all dismount and get to know one another. We *connect*; do you understand? We *network*. We settle our differences like grown men.” He bowed condescendingly. “And grown royds.”

The gnarm sat up straight.

“So then;” said the Commander, “will your soldiers perfectly understand your orders from here?”

The gnarm nodded. “Royd follow example.” He held out his rifle at arm’s-length, looked back, and nodded sharply and with auth-

## The Commander

ority. The entire royd force copied his move, holding their rifles out at ninety degrees.

“Guard!” the Commander called, without looking back. “Rifles away from your bodies; right angle! Imitate the enemy!” The Guard followed the command with enviable military precision. Opposing forces stared across the gap.

The Commander slowly and deliberately unsheathed his rifle and held it out for all to see. “Earthmen,” he said diplomatically, “come from an ages-old tradition embodying tolerance, sincerity, fairness, and goodwill. I might also mention dignity, compassion, magnanimity, humility . . . ad infinitum. But the single most endearing virtue of our species is, particularly in a military situation, *trust*. Fair play and honor are foremost among adversaries—it is literally impossible for an Earthman to take advantage of an opponent, or to mislead him in a way that would result in a skewed contest. It simply is not in our genetic makeup. In this spirit I offer to be first to drop my weapon. This will be a highly symbolic act to the men of my command, who will recognize it as the classic human overture to a real and abiding friendship. You must then drop yours.” He nodded forward and back, indicating both forces. “Then everyone together.” He tossed his rifle.

After a second the gnarm did likewise.

“Guard!” called the Commander. “On my command drop your rifles!”

The gnarm, holding out his end of the agreement, thrust out his arm with the palm down.

“Drop your rifles!” the Commander ordered. The Guard did so.

Half a second later the gnarm let his arm fall. The royds all dropped their rifles.

“Guard!” the Commander shouted. “Side arms! Fire at will!” And with that he drew a huge knife from his cassock’s waistband, lurched forward, and nearly decapitated the gnarm.

The Guard broke for the startled royds with pistols blazing.

Now utterly weaponless, those royds not killed outright pulled their horses into an hysterical retreat. The Guard chased them along a plain and into a small weathered canyon, cornering them in a cul-de-sac of rounded bluffs. There an unexpected turn occurred: the doomed royds came back fang and nail, throwing the Guard from their steeds and savaging them on the ground.

The Commander rode up picking off the scrabbling royds one by one. When the last few were trapped against a bluff wall he calmly dismounted and began the executions, posing perfectly erect and with admirable calm, taking plenty of time to aim and reload. The last brute standing proved a particularly insolent specimen; it took a pair of bullets in the knees to bring him down, another in the groin to teach him respect—and even then he refused to cow. The Commander swore through his teeth. He became very deliberate in his movements, smoothly going down on one knee, firmly but gently caressing the barrel, and not missing a breath as he put a bullet directly between the glaring royd's eyes.

He rose with the aloofness becoming his office and handed the spent rifle to a cheering rider. "Guard!" he called. "We press on!" The Commander cuffed the exuberant rider. "Now go find me my boy."



This time the Queen's entry was not so formal. Her entourage consisted solely of rush-drilled riflemen and a single tatterdemalion court crier. And this time she didn't come all decked out: her rags were simple and sincere, though meticulously scrubbed and expertly trimmed.

The Elder leered from his high bench. "Dressing down, are we?" He was the only Councilman present.

"This time," Emra said, "I did not come to dine. Read!"

The tall unsightly creature stiffly unrolled a new scroll and thrust it forward. He was one of those dreadful marsh sprenks; all scrawny neck, outsized head, and comical hairy paws. Each hem and pose, every awkward attempt at presence, only made the Queen look that much more foolish.

"Get on with it," she grated.

"By the dictate of her majesty Emra," he squawked, "Queen of Royds, matriarch of the unwall'd many, muse of all who—"

"Get *on* with it!" the Elder snarled.

"—The Great Royd Coalition does hereby declare itself in a state of war with Earth Administration!" The sprenk collapsed gasping on a bench.

The Elder smiled down. "You've grown exceedingly myopic in your ambition, Madame Queen." He gestured at her new Royal Guard. "And rather image-friendly in your corrective lenses."

"Oh?"



## The Commander

“I see you’ve spent some time refurbishing your army.”

“Thank you for noticing.”

“You’ve spent some real money on ’em too! Don’t think I don’t know how you came upon all those weapons. I’ll have you know it is now a capital offense to trade arms for non-regulated jewels, gold, or silver within these walls. Miniature gemstones . . .” he muttered gloomily, “. . . battered old mantel pieces.” The Elder rapped a knuckle on his desk’s peeling trim. “So the ‘Great Royd Coalition’ comes to declare war . . . and how have we so displeased you? We’ve met with you, apologized, offered remuneration—on *your* terms—for that messy little scene involving our impetuous ex-Governor. We’ve drawn up a proposal for a new and better world, which you appear to have trashed. We’ve thrown our doors open . . . and you would ‘declare war’! Why must Earthmen always be the heavies?”

“A Queen’s Rider,” Emra asserted, “returned to Maert’n from a massacre in the Canyons. The Rider was mortally wounded, having been left for dead by his assailants. And he mentioned, by way of passing, the Administration Guard.”

The Elder raised an eyebrow. “Our forces are not under any geographical constraints. Are you implying some weird sort of trespass on ‘your lands’?”

“He told me a story of a truce broken by subterfuge, of a merciless ambush, of the slaughter of unarmed royds in a state of helpless surrender.”

“Stories,” the Elder mumbled. “Words broken. Helpless victims. Everybody has a story. What evidence have you? The ranting of a delirious royd rider . . . and for this you ‘declare war’?”

“The marauding humans were reported under the leadership of your Guard Commander, a major player indeed. Always the heavies. The Guard were dragging wagons and excavation tools—this was not a military operation.”

The Elder sat straight up. “Where was this force encountered? What direction were they taking? Did they appear lost, or did they seem to be closing on their goal?”

“I am unable to disclose that information.”

“Unable, Madame Queen, or unwilling?” He folded his arms on his desktop; it was a posture of deepest conciliation. “This is absolutely no way to comport ourselves—our common purpose is to become enriched through our exalted position in the world. Individuals of our caliber would not be having this discussion were we not like-minded, so let’s just dispense with the niceties of diplomacy and roll up our

sleeves. Tell me the location of this unfortunate clash and I'll get an investigative body right on it."

Emra smiled thinly. "Such a roundabout response to a declaration of war."

"My dear Queen." The Elder spread his black-robed arms. "A great number of traitorous men, women, and children—whole families—were recently engaged in a frantic movement to steal and sell Administration arms." He waved a languid hand at Emra's well-armed Royal Guard. "A great deal of crudely hammered gold and silver is abruptly circulating underground. So don't speak to me of the roundabout. A bona fide act of war was perpetrated upon this noble institution long before your silly 'declaration'."

"These hypothetical thieves of yours would have to be most clever to operate right under your executive nose."

"Those hypothetical thieves of mine are now skinned and swinging from gallows just within our gates. It's not too early for a tour."

"No," Emra returned. "It's far too late. I now retire to my war room. Your 'noble institution' will not suffer my presence again."

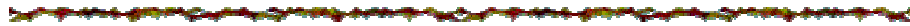
"Where was the Commander apprehended, Queen? I'll find out, with or without your assistance."

"Good day," said the Queen, "Council Elder."

"Where?"

At a brisk order, the Royal Guard turned cleanly and marched her out of Chambers.

"Good riddance," said the Elder, "Royd Queen."



It wouldn't be fair to perpetually harp on the flaws of Elis Royd without celebrating its one true success story. It's a triumph that goes way back, with roots in the bowels of Earth, and with an ultimate destination among the stars. This was a destiny just gnawing to unfold, and its agent was none other than that headstrong visionary, the *Earthman*.

And so it came about that the greatest, most flexible species of all rose to hold subtle dominion over the galaxies. When those waves of colonists laid claim to their armies' conquered worlds, they brought a little bit of Earth with them: no single Earthcraft—be it domestic or cargo, large or small, local or outpost-hopping—did not contain a secret haul of that ubiquitous unbidden shadow, the *cockroach*. This gravity-defying, garbage-wallowing, feces-tracking scavenger trans-

## The Commander

mitted so many viruses, lived and reproduced amongst so many extra-terrestrial imports, and dominated so many unthinkable habitats, that it eventually became the true silent master of Elis Royd.

Roaches evolved concentrically on the titanic asteroid (arguably a smallish planet sucked into the Greater Sirian Drift). The least-evolved bugs lived in, around, and under Earth Administration—rocketing little devils that ate anything under any circumstances, and weren't about to surrender an inch of hard-won ground.

Larger specimens lived in the barren, moat-like ring of crushed rock encircling EarthAd; essentially the communal cemetery (to their horror, the original Administrators found that a plucky Altayne Flesh-er positively thrives on human cadavers, even as it gradually passes its dormant spawn into anyone close enough to infest. The passed spawn, they learned, vitalize and reproduce within their hosts, accelerating their demise for consumption by the tertiary generation. Faced with the prospect of turning Earth Administration into a vast crematorium, the disintegrating government of Elis Royd declared the affected dead, from then on, “In God's Hands,” and had the bodies interred in shallow graves within that flat surrounding ring. Everybody turned their backs in those days, though they all knew the Terran Roach was rapidly *cross-evolving* with the larger Pukenian Slime-sucker, and that the old Earth phrase “In God's Hands” had in fact become an EarthAd euphemism for “To The Roach Delivered”).

This tendency of species to *cross-evolve* on the asteroid produced larger, sparer, and more aggressive breeds in the crags and caves. Sparer because, at least among the Cave Roaches, “omnivorous” now included cannibalism—on their living and on their dead, among the fallen in combat, and in spectacularly ferocious feeding frenzies every third hatching. Cave Roaches were therefore much larger, though much fewer, than the Locals. In the canyons and hills evolved the Great Roaches, the most aggressive and fearsome of all. Bigger competitors need more food, so Great Roaches supplement their diets with cadaver spoils won through savage hit-and-runs in the cemetery, with suspiciously well-timed raids on unsupervised pets and livestock, and with the occasional stolen royd child.

Great Roaches hive in the deepest gorge crevices; some reaching eight feet high when propped on their vertebral buds (a cross-species contribution). Their antennae can number in the hundreds—but no longer as simple feelers. They've evolved into strong and versatile questing limbs that serve for propulsion, for climbing, and for the

fishing-out and eviscerating of maters. A Great Roach will eat almost anything it can mount.

Now, the Commander and his Guard, picking their way through a mushy field in the roaring twilight, might have been caught completely unawares had it not been for their little guide. The Cept boy knelt and demonstrated, by darting his sharp fingers along the spongy ground onto his passive other hand, that the predatory Great Roach was nearby.

“And you *know* this?” the Commander whispered. “How?”

“Royd put here.”

“Why?”

“Defend Maldea.”

The Commander dropped to his knees. “You mean . . . you mean they’re *trained*?”

“Not train.” The boy shook his head vigorously. “Hungry.”

The Commander rose. “Why, you little turncoat. You just got us ambushed for dinner.”

“No.” The boy rolled about in the muck. “You roll too. Cover Earth stink.” He squirmed about until he was painted head to toe.

“Guard!” The Commander’s call was an unquestionably authoritative whisper—he was issuing a direct order sotto voce. “Copy my actions!” He dropped beside the boy and also rolled about, quickly becoming coated. His men obeyed without hesitation, rolling energetically in the sticky mud until the area appeared peppered with natural humps.

“Stand slow,” the boy said. He, the Commander, and the Guard gently rose to their feet. Imported sub-soil adhesives were drawn up by the motion, and upon contact with air rapidly produced a ruddy, porcelain-like transparent veneer on their hulking figures, simultaneously sucking in foul pockets of barely breathable air.

Far away came a scurrying that rattled the ground. In a minute the first antennae were dimly seen, feeling around some of the larger boulders. Ten seconds later the entire area was infested. The Commander watched them through a reddish film—it was the eeriest experience imaginable . . . to be standing rooted in a man-shaped bubble, carefully respiring one’s own body aroma, while one of nature’s ugliest and most successful concoctions scurried up to you with its feeler-arms waving hypnotically. And worried at the muck around your ankles. And tentatively pulled itself up your plastic second skin. And stopped to look you directly in the eye.

## The Commander

The Commander didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't blink. Though its pliant helmet was riddled with compound eyes, there was something in the hardened muck that made the Roach blind to him. His view, however, was only slightly distorted: every supple bristle in that deep brown mask was luridly visible; testing, tasting, palpating. The Commander remained absolutely motionless. A limb lashed onto the veneer directly over his mouth—it struck him that his breath, however contained, was fogging the inner surface, and that this subtle activity had intrigued the Roach. One of its long hooked nails began to scratch at the veneer, patiently digging a diamond-shaped groove. After a minute of this it appeared to grow frustrated. The Roach slowly climbed over the Commander and down the other side. Two seconds later it was gone.

He cautiously turned his head. There were no Roaches to be seen. A stirring caught his attention and he turned back: the Cept boy was digging around his own enclosure's perimeter. In a minute he'd managed an airway. He worked his hands side to side, widening the slot, and, as soon as he could get both hands through, gripped the base and heaved. The whole casing toppled over and immediately began reconstituting with the muck.

The boy grinned and dug out a space for the Commander's fingers, then scampered off to free the Guard. Once all were re-assembled, the Commander yanked the boy aside.

"And you have to do this every time you move a load?"

"Only when monster here."

"Good show. Where do you wash this stuff off?"

"Come." They followed him down to a large standing pool.

In many places the asteroid's pumped-up water does not filter back for recycling. It's caught in surface depressions and, in non-steamfed regions on a world with nil rainfall, becomes rank—supporting only those gnarly specimens able to acquire food and oxygen during pool-to-pool migrations. The bulk of these creatures' lives are spent in a sort of submerged hibernation, waiting for topside motions to signal a feast.

The men could not have known this, of course, and the eager Guard were quite startled at the sudden rush of maniacal snappers, attracted by their footfalls in the gloom.

"No," the boy said. "Here." And he showed them a royd sauna: an enormous hide tent over an old steam blowhole. Once inside, the men were instantly sopping; they could scrape themselves dry and

wring out their uniforms. Although it was now fully dark, there was consensus for getting as far away as possible.

The Commander twisted the Cept boy's chain affectionately. "You get us all the way through this, son, and I might even adopt you. How does that sound? Eh, 'son'?"

"Father," the boy whined. "You promise . . ."

"Oh, don't worry; he's still waiting in EarthAd, I'll guarantee you that much. But if we want to see him again, we have to get all the way to Maldea and back, don't we, son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just call me Dad."

They rode on in the dark until the horses showed trouble negotiating their carts in the rutted earth. The Commander ordered a halt for the night. The men spread out in a rocky field, complaining of soreness, of muddled concentration, of a bone-deep weariness. The Commander felt it too. He reclined on an elbow, sharing his blanket. The boy pointed at a milky effervescence rolling in from the hills. The Commander slapped down his hand; it was a father-son moment. There ensued a quiet, ruminative pause. The Commander sighed.

"Some day, boy, when you're all grown up and have plenty of experience under your belt, you'll learn something about getting along in the real world. Or maybe you won't." He looked off at the stars. "Perhaps natural wisdom is a trait exclusive to the human being. You see, son, as a supremely successful social species, humans have learned that one's word is one's password. And not just one's word—one's gender, one's race, one's financial situation, one's peer group . . . these are the standards by which *Homo sapiens* judges his fellow man. And this is why great men rise above small men, and why those great men are naturally entitled to the bulk of the best." He tapped a fist on his chest. "Small men resort to talk in assemblies, and thereby enlist armed officials to legally oppress the mighty. Great men take what they want, and talk about it later."

The Cept boy cocked his head. "Royd share."

"Exactly my point. Royds are low beings. Your kind will always be our inferiors." He stretched his arms and legs. "We'll continue this little chat in the morning."

Then the boy was urgently shaking the Commander's shoulder. "No sleep!"

"Get your hands off me." And the Commander's brain was turning to mush.

"No! No sleep! Dream bad!"

## The Commander

“*Take your hands off of me!*” The Commander forced open his eyes. He would have whipped him good and proper if not for the tremendous anxiety in the boy’s expression: his tongue was curled in, his mouth all askew, his eyes bursting in his skull. One hand covered his stubby proboscis while the other randomly stabbed the night. The Commander looked around groggily.

A low mist was falling on the men and wagons. It congealed upon contact, clinging in wide sticky clumps.

“Fog,” the Commander gasped. His chin dropped from the effort. “The pumps. The vents.”

“No, not fog, not pump! *No breathe!*”

“Hands off, I say! I’ll beat you bloody, boy . . . wrong with you—show respe . . . show re—” The mist painted his face and hands, forming a bubble over his gaping mouth, weaving his lashes and gumming up his eyes.

The boy hammered his fists on the Commander’s chest; then, both hands covering his face, scrambled for higher ground.

The Commander clumsily threw out a restraining arm, forced himself to his feet, and was absolutely blown away by the scene he faced. The field was ablaze. His men were sprawled on their bellies and backs. Stomping between them were armed grotesqueries—some unknown royd breed—and these monsters were stripping the fallen of their valuables and tossing the plunder into long wooden carts. The Commander shook like a dog out of water. Without a thought for his own safety, he grabbed his saber and ran it through the first he reached. At the sound of its scream three turned and came loping for him. The Commander lopped off the head of one, cut the next down the middle, and lost his footing with the impetus of his final swing. Rolling under one of these odd carts, he was thrilled to see a few of his men rise and successfully engage the enemy. The Commander was able to slice off the feet of one passing royd before the whole fighting mass toppled on the cart. He struggled upright and ran another through, then called to three of his men for assistance. All four heaved the cart over and smashed it to pieces with blows from their swords and rifle butts. They then systematically attacked all the visible carts, kicking savagely with their massive military boots, ripping off cart-wheels, slaughtering the invaders’ strange violet steeds. A shot rang out and a royd keeled over. There were more shots, some screams, and then the sweet and giddy reward of his Guard’s victory cheer. He made to raise his saber in response, but all the smoke and exertion were just too much.

The Commander woke to a disaster of his own making. Most of his men were lain out in a drugged slumber, but many were quite dead—shot, stabbed, hacked to pieces. The overturned wagons were totaled. He gathered his wits and went staggering along the field until he found the Cept boy sleeping in a hollow.

“You didn’t run!” he managed, collapsing on his rear. “You didn’t want to leave me.” The boy rubbed his eyes while he was hugged. “Terrible thing,” the Commander gasped. “Men dead, wagons smashed. All in a dream, a dream . . . but no; it was enemy action! Our transport is shot. It’s what you wanted to tell me, isn’t it? The ‘bad dream’ is a royd ploy to protect Maldea, by making us our own enemy.” He sniffed at the memories. “Stuff in the air. A vanguard of some sort—living matter, sent to put us off our heads. That underhanded, ruthless queen of theirs—she wants us dead.” He gripped the boy’s shoulders. “But we survived her, didn’t we? That’s two walls, son. How many more before we’re there?” The young Cept was hyperventilating. “How many!” The Commander cocked his fist and checked himself. “Come on, boy. We’ve one hell of a mess to clean up.”

There were eleven dead, six critically wounded; one blinded by a rifle butt to the forehead, one with his legs cut off below the knees. Four slain horses; the rest had bolted. The Guard were in the process of rounding them up now. The provisions were trashed, picks and shovels scattered.

The Commander posed, undaunted: once the horses were contained he announced they were pressing on. The Guard would have to carry their loot on horseback. The wounded were put out of their misery, the dead buried in a brief and entirely forgettable ceremony.

He displayed the Cept boy on his shoulder. “From now on we have but one guide! Our goal is nearly in our grasp—prepare to become very rich men! Guard, to your steeds!”



In the very heart of EarthAd’s Administrative Center, not a hundred yards from the Officers’ Complex, stands a huge, rotting, hemispherical building known as *Applications*. It’s a caving relic; most of the glass tarped over, the giant lobby a lonesome, tilted ghost town. But when first in service, the original Administrators maintained a very wholesome *Welcome Station* featuring brochures, posters, and a thousand family-friendly artifacts of Planet Earth.



## The Commander

In the rear of this building are archived folders containing everything a model aspirant was expected to absorb, real and invented, about that distant dreamlike planet. Only two scholars have ever haunted this place; only two men know the various locks' combinations:

Here the Council Elder and Head Administrator became the savviest humans on the asteroid. Each, unbeknownst to the other, spent endless hours perusing files intended as civics propaganda for serious applicants. Here the Elder and Administrator learned of an Earth nation called the United States; a great and respected power that had succeeded in political globalization, and eventually galactic dominance, through an insidious system known as *capitalistic expansionism*. The bad news was that the system methodically ground up and regurgitated the planet's cultures, its poetry, its *feel*; its very soul. The good news was that a radial aspect, *democracy*, smoothed out the inequities that surely would have accompanied a less egalitarian push.

And the two dusty old men learned, from Elis Royd's own archives, how the asteroid's intended government of executive, legislative, and judicial branches had collapsed during the Second Great Pestilence, and been transmogrified into a mock-tertiary system of *Council, Administration, and Arbitration*, with the Arbiters perforce relegated and replaced in the Triad by a *Guard*. Elis Royd was a *de facto* oligarchy.

To impress and encourage applicants, her warehouses had been "infinitely stocked", her atomic plant vaunted as "eternally powerful". These exaggerations weren't all that far from the truth: the self-sustaining economy of Earth Administration was geared, just like its producers and consumers, for glomming rather than for survival. A man with real wealth could have anything he desired. The basic citizen was ignorant, spoiled, and entirely lacking in vision. Only those in power possessed the stuff to dream big.

The Elder possessed that stuff in spades.

His dreams were fueled by exotic images, and kept at a high burn by an addictive personality: he had to have his daily fantasy fix, in a dark and private place. The Elder was approaching that private place now.

Just outside Applications leans a mounted touch pad containing a universal translator, a grid-map of the Center, and basic emergency instructions accessible to over two dozen species. The Elder tapped out a sequence on the exclamatory icon marked Security, correctly

entering the combination that unlocked the massive double doors. Graven on those doors was a gorgeous rendition of the planet Earth, looking down on the North American continent, with designs meant to represent bridges linking her borders with the globe's perimeter. In the whole area outside the globe were uncountable hammered asterisks, symbolizing the millions of Terran-managed stations and outposts.

The Elder stepped inside and reverently closed the doors. Once he'd breathed in the locked and lonesome rooms, the faded murals and webbed corners, and the tattered Terran blue and green, he padded under a lobby arch into an antechamber. Here the doors of one room featured padlocks as well as the original combinations.

This was the Elder's hidden haven, his secret chamber. He worked the locks with the practiced care of a boy thumbing through his pornography stash, crept inside, and gently latched the doors, triggering a reverse-dimmer. A soft white haze gradually filled the room, seeming to emanate from its very center.

The North Wall was taken up by a giant full-color poster, one of Welcome Station's original retro Earth memorabilia. It was an advertisement for a gorgeous, solar-powered luxury vehicle known as the *Panthyrr*. The sleek, jet-black car was parked outside an Earth nightclub shining like a jewel-studded tiara. A coiffed and tailed playboy stood beside the open driver's door; a wolfish grin on his face, a half-naked starlet on either arm. The Elder clenched his fists and ground his teeth, staring fixedly—he was born on the wrong world, at the wrong time. *Earth*, glorious Earth . . . ruthless, lavish, haughty master of the galaxies. Every attempt to mimic its glory only mocked his frustration. No EarthAd female could begin to approach the true honey of Earthwoman as depicted by that revered poster. No outfit conceived on this wretched asteroid, no matter how spectacularly tailored, had a prayer of competing with that shiny clipped tuxedo. And the *Panthyrr*! No coach, no carriage, no wheeled litter . . . he took a deep breath and dropped his white old head.

The East and West Walls were collages, photomontages, testaments to the wonders of Planet Earth. There were images of fat politicians in high-windowed palaces . . . herds of brainlessly grinning civilians . . . great cities standing proud and fair. Martial images stirred his imagination: invincible armies, staggering space flotillas, concubines nude and kneeling. The Empire of the Cosmos—no one else on Elis Royd even dreamed of living like these pictured lucky humans. And no one else imagined the Royd Hoard as the Elder

## The Commander

conceived it—limitless wealth, hypnotic wealth, wealth on top of wealth. With such a trove he might realistically emulate those politicians, and belatedly approximate that smirking dandified playboy.

The South Wall featured a huge profile of the Terran Bald Eagle. Fierce eyes, vicious beak: a merciless raptor. The Elder straightened and rocked on his heels; maybe he was growing soft with the years, maybe it was time to horsewhip a toady or two. He swept back his robes and crisply stepped from the room, locked the doors, exited the building, and marched the Administration corridors into the Grand Hall. Outside the Head Administrator's rooms he twirled a hand over his head. A guard rapped smartly and announced him. The Elder stepped back to pace.

There came a muffled thumping, and what sounded like a curse.

“Again,” the Elder growled. “Harder.”

The guard butted the door with his rifle. This time the response was a threatening shout.

“Give me that.” The Elder snatched the rifle and hammered meaningfully and repeatedly.

In a moment the door flew open and a half-dressed Head Administrator peered out. He looked from the guard to the Elder. “Make it good.”

“A matter of State. Put some clothes on. We'll get you a fresh batch of boys tomorrow.”

When the Administrator was dressed they dispensed with the Guard and marched back.

“What is this all about?”

“I need you as a witness.” They turned into a rear building and were promptly admitted by a trio of guards.

Inside was a small, ramshackle radio room, probably the asteroid's most efficient aboveground operation. All the wonders of consumer technology—communication, entertainment, computing—had been lost in the shuffle of building and stocking Elis Royd. On the asteroid's surface only the electrical basics survived: fans and lights, simple home appliances, crude radios for receiving this single station's broadcast news and ancient Terran music files—piped precariously into homes and shops, and through outdoor loudspeakers during public announcements.

The Administrator cuffed the operator. “Emergency broadcast.”

The operator cut the music file and initiated a series of descending triple beeps. He studied a pair of gauges before nodding.

The Elder leaned into a standing console microphone.

“All proud men of Earth.

“This day a declaration of war was delivered against Administration by a body termed ‘The Great Royd Coalition’. Despite all our attempts at mollification, the Royd Queen will not be swayed. She has used subterfuge to purchase a substantial armory from within these very walls—the men and women who sold those weapons have been duly punished, and their homes and valuables confiscated. They were traitors.

“Now, supplying these animals with arms was an unspeakable wrong. They are savage, soulless, bloodthirsty predators committed to the destruction of all that is good and giving. They hate you, they hate me, they hate the very system designed for their betterment. They will stop at nothing to destroy us completely. So, as of this announcement, consorting with the enemy carries an automatic penalty of death. We are at war.

“I do not need to remind you of all those stories about royds—about their stealing and eating children, about their hypnotizing our pets for bizarre nocturnal rituals, about their systematic violation of females—the recent spree of rapes and murders should be more than enough to galvanize we good men of Earth.

“Administration will guarantee a solid gold Elis Eagle for the hide of each slaughtered adult royd male, five Eagles for each captured healthy pregnant royd female, and ten for each sturdy royd youth deemed capable of work into adulthood.” He paused for emphasis. “And, oh yes . . . half a million Premium Gold Eagles for the delivery of one Emra, Queen of Royds—alive, in one piece—and . . . *voluble*.”



They rode all that day; over treacherous swamps and through labyrinthine canyons, the Guard growing increasingly disgruntled at the poor food, bad water, and recurrent malaise. A persistent swarm of leapers threw many into itching delirium, even as some unknown bacterium brought on coughs and chills. These were conditions royds had adapted to over many generations; to the softer humans it was living hell. When at last twilight forced a halt, the Guard were one step from mutiny. A fetid wind blew in from the northeast; a wind so foul the men were forced to seek refuge in a depression lost among the gentle hills and ancient gale-strewn boulders. They curled up in a tight, common circle, moaning and rolling about. Very soon they be-

## The Commander

came still, as though drugged. The Commander, suspicious of their conspiratorial rumblings, stationed himself well to the rim. The Cept boy lay beside him like a faithful dog, and every now and then the Commander couldn't help but reach out and stroke his scaly cheek. Once, only once, that long tongue rolled out and gave a rasping lick in return. Sometimes once is all you need.

"We are all alone up here, son," he whispered. "I don't trust this lot for a minute. How much farther to the treasure?"

The boy patted the ground with both palms.

The Commander just stared and stared. He brought his face in close. "*Here?*"

Something landed on his cheek. He swatted it off and seized the boy's arm, preparing to shake a little data out of him. Another landed on his temple. The Commander angrily smacked himself upside the head. There came a determined tugging at his ankle. That did it—he sat up straight, vividly alert . . . pallid tendrils were slapping at his arms and knees, squeezing up between the rocks, ejecting pearly-white slugs of protoplasm in all directions. The whole depression was full of them.

"Guard!" he hollered. "On your feet! That's an order! Everybody up!" But the sick men were slow on the uptake, and slower to react. They rose to find themselves surrounded by long drifting clumps; slow-motion projectiles that accelerated upon approach and smacked into anything moving. The poison was fast-acting; some were succumbing with barely a struggle.

The Commander looked all around: the Cept youth was nowhere to be seen. He walked back on his palms and heels, using every rock and root for leverage, until he'd reached a dozen feet below the depression's rim. All beneath him were his calling men, some fighting vainly, some surrendering outright. There came a scraping noise above and to his left. The Commander spun around. "*You!*"

The boy gave a little cry and scrambled over the depression's lip.

"Traitor!" howled the Commander. "You set us up! You'll pay for this, goddamn you! I'll see your old man cut to pieces! I'll kill—" he clawed his way up like a spelunker "—when I get my hands—I'll kill you, I'll—" The Commander pulled himself onto flat ground in time to see the boy flitting between outcroppings. He looked back.

The depression was now half-obscured by mucilaginous streamers. Once the men were immobilized by poison, the pale goo immediately foamed over their exposed flesh, drying within seconds to cut

off the breath and initiate the digestive process. To the astonished Commander, it was like looking down on a frothing pond, the surface broken here and there by the flailing limbs of drowning men and horses. His command was being eliminated, right before his eyes. He cursed and pushed himself to his feet.

He pursued the Cept boy in a crouch, pausing every dozen yards to catch his breath and get his bearings. Too dark to be certain of anything. It was just a matter of flushing him out, but the boy wasn't about to be caught in the open. After way too much of this hide-and-seek, the Commander hunched behind a large spiny boulder and called:

"Son! Don't be alarmed! I won't hurt you. We had a bargain, remember? Now, if you want to see your father again, you'll hold up your end." He caught a deep breath. "Think of it! When we find the treasure, it'll be just you and me, the wealthiest guys on the asteroid! We'll buy your dad's freedom, and we'll set him up in the fanciest house money can buy. You can have anything you want, and you can bring all your friends." He advanced a few dozen feet, carefully modifying the amplitude of his calling voice. "Don't worry about those two old Councilmen. They won't get a single stone. With our kind of wealth, we'll be able to hire assassins. It'll look like somebody else did it! Eh? Why, we can even buy our own army! You and me, masters of Elis Royd! And your dad of course. What do you say? Son?" He crept on hands and knees until he was among the outcroppings; actually a kind of natural rock garden, some stones fifteen feet high. The Commander wormed around on his belly, making very little noise, pausing to pick up a scent and, finding none, worming along. After a while he began to mutter to himself; a labored, halting whisper. He was shot, and he knew it. The chase was out of him. At last he found himself splayed full-out; his right cheek buried in the dirt, his eyelids fluttering, his crimped fingers gradually relaxing. He could have slept there forever. But then he picked up a movement from the corner of his eye.

On a low, dune-like hill some two hundred yards off, the Cept boy was creeping along, silhouetted by a billion stars.

"*You . . .*" the Commander whispered, and hauled himself upright. He slid between stones, moving to his right and away from the boy, tailing him. When he emerged he was directly to his rear and so low as to be practically on his hands and knees. He followed quietly, testing each rock before trusting his weight. The boy and man moved up the hill like crabs.

## The Commander

The Cept passed from view down the other side, and when the Commander reached the summit he was alone. But there was some kind of cave opening at the bottom. He tiptoed down until he was right alongside and listened carefully. After a few seconds he picked up a scuttling. The Commander slipped inside and began feeling his way along the cave wall.

Beyond the initial bend the darkness was utter. He stopped, listened, and whispered, “*Boy!*” No answer. The Commander froze. In a while he heard a scraping maybe thirty yards ahead. He quietly slipped out his flashdisk and held it directly above his head. The light showed a broadening tunnel moving inexorably downward. Guided by that one glimpse, the Commander picked his way, moving side to side, pausing every ten feet to perk his ears. The blackness played upon his other senses, so that his own voice seemed to shout back at him when at last he’d summoned the focus to call out: “*Boy!*” He waited in the echoes. “I know you’re in here, and I know you can hear me. This standing gets us nowhere. I only ask that you make your whereabouts known. I won’t harm you; I swear. Talk to me, boy—you must realize I am the sole link to your father.” Complete silence. “*Boy. We must remain a unit. Do you understand? For both our sakes. We’ve come too far together, son, to grow too far apart.*” There was a slight rustle a dozen yards off. The Commander soundlessly rose to his full height, his face dead-set on the spot. He raised his flashdisk, took a deep breath, and thumbed the wheel.

A small figure hopped out of the brief pool of light.

The Commander immediately began a pursuit, and almost at once caught his foot. He flicked his disk again. The tunnel floor was grooved, the walls ragged and showing occasional roots. It appeared to be some kind of crudely-worked shaft, bearing downward at maybe forty degrees. Not too steep to navigate with little leaps aided by guiding flashes. But he quickly lost his footing on a broken stone, and turned an ankle upon recovery. The next thing he knew he was kicking and thrashing downhill. A collision with the wall knocked the flashdisk out of his hand, but it wouldn’t have served him—he was sliding, ricocheting, tumbling—he was plunging headfirst into abyss.

The Commander did a belly flop on a rock pile, knocking out his wind. When he could breathe again he flailed his arms in all directions, searching for the flashdisk. Nothing but rocks and cold metal. That stopped him. It took a minute to put the pieces together, then he was wildly running his hands back and forth on the rocks. He

chanced upon the disk, and when he thumbed the wheel reality almost knocked him over.

He worked the disk frantically.

Emeralds. Sapphires. Diamonds. The blood-tinge of rubies. Some rough cuts, some fine stones. And here, a gold urn. Here a silver ladle. And there . . . there the most beautiful weapon the Commander of the Guard had ever seen.

A tempered silver sword, an astonishing five feet from point to pommel, its solid gold hilt stellar with spectrum-running gems. It seemed to warm in his hand; seemed to caress his fingers rather than the other way around. Each thumbing of his disk revealed greater intricacies of craftsmanship. It was almost as if—there was a muffled rumbling deep to his right, accompanied by a slight but growing glow. The Commander, up to his knees in treasure, quietly stuffed miscellaneous pieces down his cassock. As the light increased he dropped the flashdisk in with the precious stones and metals, now supported at the waist by his left forearm.

The approaching light played upon the ceiling and walls, revealing a wide pit overflowing with gems and gold. He was in a halfway post; a natural storage room. Narrow rails ran past this post through a low tunnel; the rumbling was coming from an empty cart banging uphill along those rails. The light was a little lantern swinging from the cart's front end.

The Commander gently walked on his knees to the right-hand cave wall, out of the rocking yellow haze now filling the tunnel. The rumbling became a clatter, and the little wood cart appeared, pushed by two tiny old royds, a husband and wife team by their banter. They were yrts, gaunt and down-frosted quadrupeds using the cart like a walker. The moment light struck the pit the Commander came out of his crouch. The yrts, turning at the sudden movement, threw up their arms in dismay. The Commander ran them through with a couple of bolo thrusts and immediately bent to the pile.

It took him a good half hour to fill the cart, spilling treasure by the armful, passionately picking out and replacing gold, silver, and uncut stones with a kind of hysterical whimsy. He couldn't bear to leave a single piece, so he carefully peaked the cart's load one gem at a time. When it wouldn't hold a stone more he slowly rolled the cart back down its track, his cassock again stuffed to the breast, the sword balanced on his forearms. As he progressed, the overladen cart gradually picked up momentum, controllable only by braking hard left and right with his heavy riding boots' heels. The tunnel began to curve



## The Commander

and broaden, simultaneously brightening from a source not far along, and, as the light grew, the load sparkled with the bucking cart until the Commander became half-dazzled. The heap inside his cassock shifted and tumbled—he nearly lost a sapphire! Abruptly the Commander was fighting two losing battles: the cumbersome pile of gems and metal at his midsection, and a top-heavy cart threatening to careen out of control.

A stumble, and those off-setting forces combined in a heartbeat. The Commander's boots hammered against opposing walls like pistons as he struggled to brake. He hauled back on the hurtling cart, causing his legs to slide further down. The wheels clipped his boots, his whole body jackknifed back, and then he was tearing along on his toes. The Commander shot into a huge, brightly-lit chamber in a spray of precious stones.

Dozens of frozen royd workers stared in astonishment. By the ominous drum roll of his approach, they'd been expecting a rockslide, or worse. But their amazement was nothing compared to the range of emotions assaulting the Commander as he flew in headfirst like some misguided superhero, his robes billowing out behind him, his sword gripped instinctively by the hilt—

*The immense chamber was filled wall-to-wall with a vast pool of raw gemstones, with gold and silver urns, with goblets, with pendants, with gold chains and jewel-encrusted frames. Tables and shelves were heaped high with crude ingots and piled jewels for cutting and finishing. Half-filled carts and cases were lined against the far wall, large smoky lanterns dangled from the chamber's ceiling.*

The Commander hit the pool in fine form, then went skimming like a stone, the plowing blade saving his face a major drubbing. He wobbled to his hands and knees, rocked back on his haunches, lifted his arms so that gems dribbled down his sleeves.

Shouts rang from the royd workers, and the anxious Commander immediately began scooping treasure into his emptied cassock. The voices were approaching; workers were tentatively making their way out onto the solid pool. He bundled up his pickings in his left arm and reached for his sword. The Commander decapitated the first while still on his knees, then pivoted on his left knee, half-rising with a slice to an approaching belly, pushing off with a jab in a retreating back. Now hunched on his feet, he stumbled across the pool to the chamber's main entrance, constantly pausing to retrieve dropped stones.

The workers' shouts were answered by a great hubbub. The Commander halted—cut off, front and behind. Somewhere in there he

must have snapped. Heedless of his bundled cargo, he took the sword's hilt in both hands and, with an ongoing bellow, met all comers full bore; hacking and stabbing, swinging, thrusting, and bludgeoning. He went through them blindly, his madness agitated by their screams, until daylight struck his eyes. He puffed up to the mine's entrance and burst out into the world.

The Cept boy, having followed quietly, snuck around the entrance and scrambled up the hillside. He watched from behind rocks while the gasping Commander stood propped up by his gleaming sword.

Sounds of pursuit blew out of the mine. The Commander swung about and assayed his circumstances: the entrance was shored up by crossbeams secured with taut ropes wound thick as cables. These ropes were tethered to massive spikes set deep in the rocky earth. He stalked over and hacked at a rope until it split, then leaped back.

The beam shifted and slipped. Half a second later the entire roof came down, effectively sealing the shaft with a rock pile lost in a huffing plume of dust.

The Commander swayed there; staring, exhausted. Finally he picked up his few remaining stones, rested the blade on his shoulder, and staggered for home.

## *Chapter Seven*

### The Curios



Three Raun: two males and a female.

The males shot execution-style; a single round to the backs of their necks. The female strangled and bludgeoned . . . and apparently violated. The Elder grimaced He used a poker to turn them on their tethers: all the displayed royds were hung upside-down; stinking, oozing, crawling with grymps.

An elderly mahgl'n, all but quartered . . . a pre-pubescent female, butchered in her sleep . . . sloppy, sloppy work . . . a pair of hrmpTs: difficult to determine the gender; badly lashed and partly skinned—all swarming with grymps, heads to hooves.

Farther down, the earlier displays were now smothered in grymps—they'd become shapeless, pallid, wriggling mounds suspended some three feet off the ground.

"Glove," said the Elder. His aide held up a black leather hand-and-forearm cover. The Elder slid in his arm and rolled the poker's tip inside a hrmpT's split belly. Instantly the tip was squirming with pus-colored grymps; winding around the shaft, working their way toward his protected fist. Taking his time, he pulled the poker away and held it upside-down. He kicked his aide. The aide immediately pushed up a

little wheeled keg half-filled with scalding oil. The Elder dipped in the poker and stepped back.

The oil frothed wildly, emitting a protracted shriek that petered erratically before blowing away in the pale Sirian sunlight. The Elder pulled out the poker and wiped it on his aide's cloak. They moved along, pausing beside an obviously pregnant marsh sprenk, now decapitated and dangling low between a pair of horribly maimed, terrified royd youths.

The Elder turned with a frown. "Whose kill is this?"

A man kicking back on a wagon got to his feet. "That would be me," he said. "Sir."

The Elder pointed the poker right between the man's blood-guilty eyes. "You can't spot a pregnant royd? The deal was five Eagles for a healthy—meaning *living*—preg. You just screwed yourself out of four Eagles, pal, and you're lucky to get the one." He looked around. "Drawer!" A thin man in his wake raised an eyebrow. "Give this fellow a single Eagle. And don't make it too shiny." He and his aide continued down to the end of the line, where the grymps were so heavy they completely obscured the hanging dead. The Elder repeatedly slammed his poker on the ground. "*I can't see a thing!* Why weren't these kills properly dressed?"

A small group of men rose in concert, pushing forward a spokesman. "We've been waiting," this man mumbled. "I mean, very patiently. Like all day."

"But you *could* have kept them clean!" the Elder barked. "*Couldn't* you?" He shook his head. "Drawer, I'm not paying good Eagles for these casualties. Give each of these men a dozen Alexanders for waiting. But that's all." He looked at the milling Earthmen half-filling the courtyard. "That goes for all of you! Clean kills only!" He hammered the poker on his aide's shoulder.

The aide immediately splashed oil on the cadavers. The Elder backpedaled as the aide dipped his brand in the remaining oil, lit the brand, and torched the corpses.

The dead royds erupted in smoky clouds of immature grymps, desperately beating their gossamer wings. Before they'd managed a foot they were thrashing, spiraling sparks. The hanging bodies shimied and swayed with dying adult grymps.

The Elder felt a hand on his shoulder. He raised the poker and paused, recognizing the Head Administrator's sepulchral bass baritone:

"I have something you surely want to see."

## The Curios

They walked back to the complex and into the Grand Hall. “Don’t tell me . . .” the Elder moaned; “is it green and scaly and smelly all over?”

“Pretty much. It is in very bad shape, to be sure, but I am certain you will recognize it.”

They strolled into Chambers, where a filthy tramp lay on his face, apparently dead. So dirty and mangled were the robes and cassock that they came off as completely unfamiliar to the Elder. He hooked the poker’s tip in the man’s collar and yanked the head around.

The Elder dropped the poker in amazement. “No! He’s back!”

“What little remains,” said the Administrator.

Every visible inch of the Commander’s flesh was inflamed, puffed, pocked, and scarred. His eyes and cheeks were sunken and bruised, his purplish lips bloated and split. He’d been stung and bitten, made sick by radioactive water and poisonous roots, and served as a shambling mobile home for too many intestinal parasites to enumerate. Tympanic rot showed above his lobes, walking eczema made a matted disaster of his scalp. Truly he seemed dead; an appearance belied only by the slight flaring of his scab-filled nostrils.

The Elder went down on one knee. “Get him some clean water. Make him speak.”

“He is beyond that.” The Administrator used his boot’s toe to pry open the Commander’s mouth. The black tongue was so swollen it completely blocked the airway.

The Elder looked up. “What did he tell you? Did he find it?”

“As to your first question: he is beyond even delirium. He could not speak, and was indeed unconscious when the sentries dragged him in. You may check my word against theirs. As to the second—” and he reached under his cloak to draw out the long magnificent sword. The jewels in the hilt gleamed like party lights.

The Elder’s jaw fell. He reached down, snatched the Commander by the lapels, and vigorously and repeatedly slammed his head on the floor. “Where did you get this, damn you? *Where!* Friend! Good Counselor! *Commander of the Guard, to the fore!* Remember your vow!”

The Administrator grabbed a bicep. “Cease. You are too late.”

The Elder stared at that dead face, grimaced, and wiped his hands of the man. He stood and caressed the sword top to bottom, his fingers resting longest on the gem-studded hilt. His eyes were distant

and glazed, and when at last they dreamily rose it was as if the flecks in his irises had been replaced by stars.

“You were wise and good to bring this to me—you are a true friend and compatriot.” He placed the sword’s tip on the Commander’s rigid chest and gradually applied his weight. “The Triad is dissolved. We are now two.” He plucked out the sword and offered his arm. The Administrator clasped it. “We will groom a puppet commander for the Guard, we will renew our vow in blood, we will be richer than—” the Elder passionately shook the Administrator’s arm. “He has brought us the proof we need! The Royd Hoard is real!” They stood like that for a long awkward minute, locked in a private salute, nodding and studying each other’s expressions. At last the Elder segued: “What of the boy? That loud little monster who accompanied him?”

It was aloofness by tacit agreement; the men let go and relaxed.

“The good Commander,” the Administrator intoned, “returned alone. The royd youth must have succumbed en route.”

The Elder polished a gem with his sleeve. “Our one lead . . . gone . . . yet his father can’t know.”

“Worth a try,” said the Administrator. He turned to lead the way and stopped. “And the sword? It cannot be split in half.”

The Elder brushed off the insinuation. “Sure it can. Figuratively, anyway. We’ll melt it down and split the jewels fair and proper.” They sauntered to the interrogation crypt’s hidden stairwell. “I’ll take it to the smithy straightaway.”

“Uncanny that I happen to be going that way.”

“Y’know,” the Elder parried, “‘uncanny’ is just the word that’s been eluding me. How royds can withstand every form of physical torment developed by man, and still maintain their common vow of secrecy, is a staggering puzzlement.”

“Oh?” countered the Administrator as they wound down the stairs. “You are privy to such an encyclopedic knowledge of torture? And where might you have come by this information?”

“Oh, you know,” the Elder said, “here and there.” He unlocked the crypt door and they walked in among the cells. The Elder was indeed well-schooled in pain. “I and the carpenters have been busy,” he boasted, “while you were juggling facts and figures.”

A pair of racks held a pair of royds, both too far gone to acknowledge their visitors. A number of others were slumped chained to the walls, starved by the looks of them. There were prisoners bound

## The Curios

upright and supine; flogged, burned, stabbed, gouged, tormented to the very limits of their endurance.

“Amazing,” the Administrator breathed. “I will admit to being impressed.”

“Not yet, you aren’t. Allow me to present the ultimate marvel.” The Elder indicated the main cell, where the Cept boy’s father hung impaled through the back by a huge, freshly-chiseled iron meat hook. The implement was in fact an instrument: a single piece attached to a chain and incorporated into a wheel and pulley system. Over the days the hook had torn through so much muscle that the Cept was now only a few inches from coming apart at the shoulders.

The Administrator leaned in. “Does it yet breathe?”

“Oh, he’ll puff soon enough.” The Elder splashed a bucket’s worth of foul water on the Cept’s hanging head. The prisoner shook languidly. After a moment the bloodshot eyes rolled up.

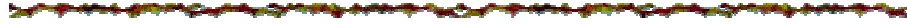
“G’morning!” the Elder called pleasantly. “I’ve brought company. You remember the Administrator, don’t you? Well, he’s been off leading a search party for our dear departed Commander, who brought us this fine weapon as proof of the elusive Hoard Of Maldea. Along with this sword and that very dead Commander, the Administrator here also retrieved one healthy young royd, who bears a remarkable resemblance to you. That was not a compliment. Anyway, he’s upstairs, right now, and boy, is he ever dying to see you.”

The Cept found the strength to raise his head for an aborted appeal. The Elder slipped the sword between the cell bars until its point was supporting the chin. “Tell me the treasure’s location, you ugly royd bastard, and I’ll let him live.” He pushed the tip upward, breaking the hide. “Hold out on us now and we’ll torture him in ways that make this room look like a pleasure dome.” The Cept gagged. A long shudder ran up his frame, causing his broken arms to flap about and his head to kick back. A dry heave doubled him up, and a moment later he was hanging limply. In a weird anticlimax, the hook slowly tore out his back with a wrenching spray of blood and gristle. The Cept dropped in a heap.

“What!” The Administrator stepped back. “Muted! We are in the dark!”

The Elder appeared stunned. He looked around: nothing but shadows and stains, nothing but wrack and ruin. And silence. “So close . . .” he whispered, raising the blade directly before his eyes. “We’re wasting our time rooting around at the bottom. There’s only one party who can give us the hoard’s location. And the day I pull out

my first cartful will be the day I see her squat crowned head mounted on the tip of this bright eager blade.”



The Curio brothers never missed a beat. They were indefatigable trackers; relentless in their study of patterns, merciless in their persecution of prey. Add to this the restlessness of youth, the natural bully-dummy give-and-take, and the fact that their father would whip them raw at the first scent of disappointment, and you had a team that wasn't about to come home empty-handed.

Right now they were sitting in a field, sharing the membranous shade of an imported cross-evolved ghritchn-willow. They'd been scouring the horizon for anything moving, but the singing quiet of the dull outdoors produced a swollen, soporific effect. It was a sleepy scene. A twigfrigger poked up its rump, gawked at the brothers, and popped back in its burrow. The tedium grew.

Finally the younger Curio boy rolled his head.

“What would you do with a solid gold Elis Eagle?”

Wiles didn't bat a lash. His eyes remained twin periscopes over an alien sea. “Shut up, Dickie. You asked me that a thousand times, and I told you the same answer a thousand times: Pops says he wants the big money, not the pickings. We're Curios; we're coming back with the Queen or we ain't coming back at all. Now shut up, Dickie.”

The younger boy let his head roll back. While digesting this thousandth answer for the thousandth time, he noticed a tiny figure run skipping along a ridge and vanish. “Wiley!”

“Shut up, Dickey.”

“But Wiley, you said I was to sing out if I seen something. Well, I seen something, Wiley.”

Wiles rolled onto his stomach. “Talk to me, Dickie.”

Dickie imitated his brother's posture and pointed. After a minute the little figure again showed against the skyline and disappeared.

“On the other side of that ridge,” Wiles whispered. “We can't see what's going on from here.” He rose to his fingers and toes like a sprinter and spat, “Go!” The boys scurried across the field in the manner of commandos, swinging northeast as they ran. They sprawled on their bellies and looked down.

It was a bowl-shaped depression peppered with little structures created of criss-crossed branches and marshpillows. Maybe two dozen



## The Curios

royd children were occupied therein, tumbling and climbing and rolling and wrestling.

“Gosh . . .” Dickie drooled.

“Don’t zone out on me now,” Wiles said. “You know the game plan. Let’s go!” They leaped to their feet and charged.

The royd children, picking up on the sound of running, threw up their arms and scattered.

“*Earthboys!*” they screamed, “*Earthboys!*”

The Curios raced along just behind, puffing and cursing; Wiles in the lead, Dickie pulling up the rear. One of the smaller males, a kryml, had been defecating in his sandpile, and was literally caught with his pants down. Wiles hit him running—the two went rolling like a tumbleweed in a gale. By the time Dickie came loping up, Wiles already had the child in a headlock and was vigorously punching his snout. Dickie took the hindlimbs.

“Quit crying!” Wiles snarled. “You’re just gonna make it worse for you. Now stop wailing and tell us what we want to know.”

“Where’s the Queen?” Dickie panted. “Where is she, you little punk?”

“Shut up, Dickie . . . where’s the Queen, you little punk? Where is she?” The royd child was screaming out of his mind. “*Shut up!*” Wiles grabbed the child by his tail and hammered him against the ground like a man beating out a rug. At the same moment there came the sound of an adult calling nearby. “Cripes!” Wiles said. “Let’s get the heck out of here!” Dickie scooped up the child and took off full-tilt, but Wiles caught up and punched him twice on the ear. “No, you moron! Leave him here!” Childless, the boys dashed back the way they came. They scrambled to the other side of the ridge, dropped on their bellies, and watched as a female royd rushed onto the scene and began soothing the wailing kryml.

“Strike one!” Wiles whispered bitterly. He slapped Dickie across the face. “When I say ‘run’, that means *run!* It means the caper’s up, okay? Don’t try to stretch it out.”

An hour later they were watching a different group of royd children, unsupervised like the last, in a very similar setup.

“I’m gonna circle around to the other side,” Wiles explained. “I’ll throw a rock as a signal. That’s your cue to come out like before. But this time I’ll be waiting, and I’ll snag the first little devil what comes running by.” He crept around a boulder and vanished. In a minute Dickie could see him wriggling through the underbrush like a snake. Soon a stone came zipping by his head. Dickie jumped up and

stomped toward the closest children. He chased a whole bunch straight into his brother's ambush, and when Wiles came out of his crouch he was bowled over by the sheer brunt of their panic. Dickie, grabbing a child in each hand, was unable to control two hysterical forces at once. He ended up on his butt in his brother's lap, watching the little crowd stampeding to safety.

"*Earthboys!*" they screamed. "*Earthboys!*"

Wiles bit Dickie's ear until the younger Curio wept like a baby. "Serves you right!" Wiles declared. "That's strike two, thanks to you. I should of brought along a dog instead. At least then there'd be two brains working on this." He smacked him on the back of the head. "Now think about it: what's the good of all my cogiplating if you're just gonna mess things up!"

"Ow," said Dickie. "You don't gotta hit me all the time, Wiley."

"If Pops was here he'd whup you all the way home."

They were quiet for a time. Finally Dickie said, "That was a playground those kids was in, wasn't it, Wiley? How come they was doing that? I thought royd was'n't supposed to play."

"Something," Wiles said absently. "Maybe picked it up from watching people." He stabbed a warning forefinger. "Now this time I want you to get it straight!"

An hour later they were standing in a clearing, not far from a just-observed group of royd children.

"You messed us up for the last time!" Wiles shouted. He kicked Dickie in the shin, bringing down a fist on his crown when the boy bent over. Dickie yelped and curled up in the dirt. "I've had it!" Wiles hollered, kicking any soft spots he could reach. "I mean it! I hate your guts!" The louder Dickie cried, the more savagely Wiles responded. At last Wiles just snapped, kicking and punching with a ferocity curtailed only by exhaustion. Dickie retched and wept as Wiley caught his breath. In a minute the older boy yelled, "I'm *serious!* I *disown* you! You're *no* brother of *mine!*" and stormed across the clearing and down an embankment.

"Wi—" Dickey sobbed. "Wiles. I'm sorry; really I am. Please, Wiley. Don't leave me. Wi—" He broke down entirely; a pathetic, heartbreaking pile of pummeled and forsaken humanity. So wrenching were his cries that the hiding royd children poked their heads up one by one in the underbrush.

"I can't take it," whispered a wide-eyed knurt. "He's dying."

## The Curios

A little Cept shushed him. “Are you crazy? You wanna get beat up too?”

“But the bad boy left,” the knurt insisted.

Dickie howled to the heavens.

“Don’t be a total zobb. He could come back any minute.”

A tiny sprenk leaned her muzzle in between them. “I wanna go.”

Dickie wailed from the bowel.

“I have to go!”

“Maybe we should call someone.”

Dickie flopped up and down and back and forth, shrieking like a banshee in labor.

“I *have* to go! I mean it!”

“No more,” the knurt boy whined. “I’m gonna try and help him.”

Dickie screamed bloody murder.

“Don’t look, don’t look! I’m going!”

The knurt boy stood up. With his friends whispering urgently behind him, he crept over to blubbering Dickie and leaned down. “Is there—is there anything I can do?”

One eye opened. “My tummy,” Dickie gasped. “I think he broke it.”

The knurt’s face fell. “What should I do?”

Dickie’s expression twisted into one of unfathomable suffering. “I . . .” he tried. “I . . . oh, please . . . I . . .”

“What?” The knurt boy knelt nearer.

“Blubduh,” Dickie coughed. “I . . . mumsa hebe diwa . . .”

“*What?*” The boy turned his head so that his ear was almost on dying Dickie’s mouth.

In one move Dickie threw an arm around the boy’s neck and legs-clutched the midsection in an unbreakable scissors hold. “*Wiley!*” he howled. “I *got* him, Wiley, I *got* him!”

The hiding royd children threw up their arms and ran.

“*Earthboys!*” they screamed. “*Earthboys!*”

His brother came stomping across the clearing. With Dickie maintaining his hold, Wiley beat the holy tar out of the child until he was plumb tuckered out. He rocked back on his haunches and wiped his forehead with an arm. “You done good for once, Dickie. Now just conk him on the head and we’ll get on with this. Conk him proper, but don’t break him, you got that?”

The little knurt stared up out of pleading eyes. Dickie grinned into his face, picked up a fist-sized stone, and smashed it on his scaly head. “What should I do now, Wiles?”

“Shut up, Dickie.”



Although Council Chambers was closed for the weekend, its two highest members were more than happy to be working overtime.

The Elder and Administrator sat at opposing sides of a small, cloth-draped table, like men playing cards. In the center of the table were two tiny piles of cut gems, two tiny piles of cubed metals, and, in the very center, a small weighing scale. They might have been buddies divvying up a dope deal.

Each man’s actions were being covertly overseen by a group known as the *Inner Guard*—a newly recruited body designed to take over the late Commander’s hush Triad functions. This Inner Guard consisted of four of EarthAd’s biggest, dumbest, and most venal soldiers, sworn to serve up their lives at a moment’s notice to protect the Elder and Administrator. Additionally, they were given vital duties in the interrogation crypt; duties too gruesome for even the seasoned stomachs of their bosses. They took to their tasks with a will, sometimes working deep into the wee hours, savagely competing for the dangled rewards of extra meat, an occasional strumpet, and pretty badges of no value to anyone other than the wearer. They were utterly without sympathy, conscience, or higher aspiration: excellent men to have around. They even spooked their puppet commander.

Now the Elder neatly placed his equal share on a silken black handkerchief. He lifted and pinched the corners, knotted it up with a bit of string, and drew the bundle into the harbor of his arms. He turned to face an Inner Guardsman. “What the hell are you looking at?”

“Half,” the Administrator commented, “has a far nobler ring than third.”

The Elder turned back. “Half . . . of what? How many lost nights—calculating the size of a fable . . . and now that I know the Hoard is real I dare not dream too large.”

“Rumor, hearsay, talk . . .” the Administrator placed his property in a wooden jewel box. “Fables, my friend, are not without foundation. The Lore of the Hoard concerns not a minor trove—it speaks of an underground mountain of wealth, deposited generation

## The Curios

upon generation by countless royds of every species. It speaks of riches inconceivable to those born behind walls.”

“Inconceivable . . .”

“Save by she who rules over it.”

The Elder drummed his fingernails. “Any time now. Her headquarters are certainly stormed, the witch captured, and the command on its way back. I’ve been preparing a room for her.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve had the executive suite cleaned out. Just go on with your paperwork and rabble-rousing.”

The Administrator chuckled. “You, sir, are the most persistent man I have ever known. And you *shall* find the knowledge we require. Why, I will wager that—” He was cut off by footfalls in the Hall.

“Speak of the devil.” The Elder waved aside the Inner Guard.

The acting Guard Commander, still too intimidated to enter directly, knocked meekly and waited.

The Elder’s voice was the crack of a whip. “*In!*” The end Guardsmen swung open the doors and the new Commander stomped up with due click and wiggle.

The Elder sighed. “At ease. Where’s your prisoner?”

The Commander remained at attention. “Her headquarters at the Maert’n Inn: quickly surrounded and taken, without a single casualty to my command. All royds inside: promptly sequestered in the inn’s kitchen. Those escaping: soon rounded up and brought in with the rest.”

The Elder smacked down his palm. “Excellent! And you thoroughly torched the inn and cremated the bodies.”

Sweat was creeping round the Commander’s hairline. “Actually, sir, we did burn down the building, but the prisoners were not burned with it. The men felt, you know, that with the bounty for royd prisoners still current and all . . .”

The Elder wagged his head dismally. The Administrator nodded gently, reached out a hand, and patted his forearm. The Elder double-clenched his forefinger. “Bring in their queen.”

Now the Commander was really sweating. “I’d like to, sir, but she was nowhere to be found. I can only assume she was tipped off.”

“Get out of here,” said the Elder.

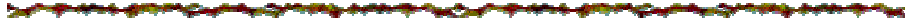
“There were three pregnant royds taken with the children and adults.”

“Go!”

“Sir!” The Commander did an about-face and marched out.

“Console yourself,” the Administrator said, “with the knowledge that our map is yet alive. She has certainly relocated, and it will only be a matter of maintaining a vigil on her followers.”

The Elder shifted the precious bundle directly over his heart. “Only one thing will console me.”



The knurt boy carefully peeped through the one-way shields of his eyelids. He'd spent the last fifteen minutes exploring his circumstances, using only his inverted periscopic ears and sensitive down-like scales, and knew before looking that he was alone with the resting Curio boys. The eavesdropping was disheartening; he now understood that the brothers were some kind of bounty hunters, that the object of that hunt was an older female royd, and that his potential for attaining adulthood was the equivalent of something called Ten Gold Eagles.

He was in a small aboveground cave, peering at a jagged window of daylight. It was chilly. The Curios were stretched out on either side, staring at nothing in particular. Finally Dickie said, “We can buy us a playground when we get back, huh, Wiles? Do you think Pops'll go for that?”

Wiles considered him disdainfully. “Aw, you'll get your danged playground, Dickie. Now just shut up, willya? I'm trying to exercise my thinker here. We've got to get going before it's too dark, and we've got to make sure this kid's on our side.”

“Maybe I should twist his tail? That oughta wake him up.”

“Aw, for the love of—oh, go ahead then.”

The knurt peered out at Dickie's dully grinning face as long as he could. The instant he felt those clammy hands on his tail his eyes popped open and he cried out.

Immediately Wiles scooted over, his expression intense. “Hey, kid! How ya feeling? Sorry about my dumb brother here—remember; he hit you on the head, not me.” Wiles snarled at Dickie and socked him flush in the eye. “There! That's for hurting this poor kid, you big stupid! How you expect to make friends like that?” Dickie rolled away, yowling and nursing his swelling eye. Wiles turned back. “Don't trust him for a minute. If there's anything you need, or anything you want to tell us about, just talk to me, okay? What's your name, kid?”

## The Curios

The boy sobbed quietly.

“Well?”

“Fyrtyl—” the boy sniffled, “Fyrtylym.”

“Cool. Well, we’ll just call you ‘Farty’ for short. That’s what friends did way back on Earth—they gave each other neat nicknames, and, doggone it, what was good enough for them is good enough for you. I’m Wiles, and this idiot’s my little brother Dickie. You can call me Wiley, and you can call him anything you want. If he busts you on the head again, you just tell me right away. I know exactly the best place to do him. So-o-o, Farty, how’s they hangin’, anyway?”

“I’m . . . I don’t—”

“That’s an old Earthman expression. It’s how friends talk, and we’re all friends here, right? *Aren’t* we buddies? Okay. Now, because you’re our friend, we want to cut you in on a straight-up deal that no one else is even close to. The good folks over at EarthAd have set up a special reward for bringing in the queen of royds. They just want to treat her to dinner and a chat. Everybody knows you royds don’t keep secrets from each other—c’mon, Farty, you know where she is. The reward’s all the candy you can eat, right out of our warehouses. How’s about *that*, Fartster? All you can eat—when’s the last time you ate something you didn’t have to gnaw? Well, let me tell you: melts in your mouth, man, melts in your mouth. So. What do you say?”

“I . . . um . . .”

“Take your time.”

“Well, I . . . um. No.”

Wiley’s fist came at him like a rocket. “You punk! You led me on!” Then both brothers were all over him, beating him into a squealing pile. At last Wiley sat back. “If you don’t wanna listen to reason we’ll have to do this the hard way. But don’t never say we didn’t never give you no chances. Dickie, hold him down good.” Once poor Farty was restrained, Wiley whaled on him until his arms went dead. “Now,” he panted, “are you gonna take us to your queen, or do I have to start all over?”

But the boy was hyperventilating so rapidly he couldn’t get a word out. Dickie sank his teeth into his neck. “Yes!” he screamed. “Yes! I’ll show you, I’ll show you!”

“It’s about time. Now, Dickie’s gonna hang onto you, and I’m gonna walk in front just to make sure there’s no ambushers waiting. When we get there, you can have some candy: that’s a promise, and a Earthman’s word is all they talk about in this here galaxy. But if we don’t find no queen, we’re taking you to meet Pops, and he’ll whoop

your sorry royd butt from here to Alpha Centauri. And that's a promise too. Dickie, stay behind me, and don't give Fartface too much stretch-room."

"What about me? Do I get some candy too?"

"Shut up, Dickie. Which way, Farty?"

The boy pointed southeast. He wept as Dickie prodded him along, making enough noise to compel an occasional tail-stomping. They hiked into a deepening twilight; over a bog and fields, and so came to a low line of craggy hills.

"You're sure this is it?" Wiles said.

"Yes," Farty whined. "It's the royd gatherplace. Everybody knows. It's famous."

"I don't see nothing."

"Caves," Farty mumbled.

Dickie's face lit up. "The treasure!"

"Shut up, Dickie. Is this the treasure?"

Farty shook his head.

"Do you know where the treasure is?"

He shook his head again.

"That's okay," said Wiles. "Half a million Eagles is good enough for now. Show us how to get inside."

Farty led them to a hidden crevice in the hillside. The opening was well concealed, but it didn't matter; there were more than enough foot/hoof/paw prints to make its location obvious. Once they'd wormed through, they found the hill's innards highly illuminated by torches and lanterns set into wall niches. The whole hill, like much of the asteroid, was honeycombed. This particular cavern had been further worked to form a vast convention hall, with several corridors leading off into living quarters. The place was packed, and the Curios' timing impeccable—Emra was poised for one of her mustering speeches.

"Wow!" Wiles whispered "That's her; I just know it! Oh, man-oh-man-oh-man, if Pops was only here!" They inched through the shadows. There must have been two thousand royds jammed inside, all eyes fixed reverently on their regal leader. Emra's station was a squared rock platform, lit all around by torches.

The knurt gasped as Dickie stepped on his tail.

"Dang you!" Wiles whispered, and popped little Farty a good one. "Dickie, you keep him quiet!"



## The Curios

Dickie embraced the boy from behind and clamped a hand on his mouth. The more Farty struggled, the tighter Dickie made his hold.

“She’s gonna give a speech,” Wiles hissed, motioning for the two to keep low. Dickie sank to his rear, pulling Farty’s head down between his knees. He squeezed and squeezed until the boy went into convulsions. Finally Wiles turned around and kicked Farty savagely. When he saw that his brother had suffocated the boy, he kicked Dickie too. “*Dang* you, Dickie! Having you along is worse than getting grave roach fever! Now let’s go. Just leave him there. Like I told you before; don’t try to stretch it out.” They crept from hollow to hollow, approaching their quarry in as roundabout a manner as possible. When they were in the crowd’s line of view they got down on their bellies and slithered, a few inches at a time, until they’d reached an eaten-out rock wall almost directly behind the platform. Here it was possible to view Emra in half-profile, through a ragged aperture now serving the brothers as a peephole.

“Half a million Eagles!” Wiles marveled.

“That’s a lot of candy.”

“Shut up, Dickie.”

“‘The Great Royd Coalition’,” Emra said. “A noble title for a great people—a great people who were once scattered tribes with allegiances to nothing higher than their base appetites. I actually see this war, this outrage, as a boon. It has wakened us, and determined us to make the sum greater than its parts.

“We are becoming organized: we have built us a chain of command. In the matter of personnel, we outnumber the Earthmen a thousand to one. But we are no army; we don’t possess their training, their arsenal, their technology, or their fortifications. What we *do* have is diversification. We have many abilities, imported from many worlds, that must seem altogether strange to the army of EarthAd, and this will be to our advantage. Tonight I want you to pay close attention to our field commander, Mhendu, who will describe plans for an assault on the walls and fences of Earth Administration, and for an internal takeover once those walls and fences have been breached. Every one of our unique abilities will be of paramount importance, so please listen attentively. Mhendu?”

A strapping royd stepped up on the platform, bowed to his queen, and turned to address the crowd. Emra had chosen well; every aspect of his appearance and manner radiated trust and command. The

Queen stepped to the wings, so to speak, and watched from the partial cover of a perforated half-column.

“Jeez!” Wiles hissed. “Would you look at that? She’s close enough to put in my pocket.”

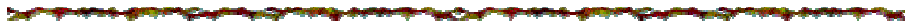
“What you want me to do, Wiley? You want I should conk her?”

“Shut up, Dickie. What I want you to do is conk her. But this time I *don’t* want you to just hit and run. Can you handle all that information? *Do* stretch it out this time. Conk her, grab her, and sprint like Pops is after you. I’ll be way up ahead, making sure the coast is clear.” He took off, running almost soundlessly on his hands and knees.

Dickie selected a rock and snuck up on the Queen with one arm outstretched and his back scraping the wall. When he was inches from exposing himself to the light, he drew back his arm, pulled himself up to striking distance, and almost knocked her head off.

There were gasps and shouts from the audience. Dickie scooped up the little queen and lurched along the wall, burst through a fence of startled royds, and scrambled back up the way they’d come, bashing her up and down as he went. After a minute he saw Wiles waving frantically. Snarling and gnashing, Dickie dragged the queen from one foothold to the next while mobs of mortified royds formed in his wake. When he reached his brother he handed over an arm and a leg, and together they swung her through the opening.

With their precious cargo manhandled into a workable bundle, the Curios leaped out and raced through the dark like rats.



“Begging your pardon.”

The dirty unshaven man stank of cheap bourbon, old sweat, and homemade deodorant.

The First Hall Guardsman ignored him completely, but the guard’s dead-steady eyes burned into those of Number Two, facing him directly across the Grand Hall.

“Name’s Archibald Curio,” the dirty man said. “I believe I have a ’pointment with anyone in the Council, the higher the better.” He leaned in and whispered, “It’s about the reward. You know, the Big One.”

The guard’s professional stare remained unbroken. Curio followed his gaze across the Hall to Number Two. His own eyes nar-

## The Curios

rowed. He looked one to the other, then quietly turned and tiptoed over to Number Two.

“Begging your pardon. Name’s Archie Curio. I come to collect my reward money, and I might be peculiarly generous to anyone wants to, let’s say, help pave my way.”

The Hall was silent as a tomb.

Curio’s eyes shot back and forth down the twin lines of rigid guards. He silently crept back to the great open arch, went into a crouch, and signaled furiously to his waiting sons. The boys picked up what looked like a knotted body bag. Fighting for lead position, they dragged it up the final flight of steps, banging the sagging center all the way. When they reached Pops they dropped the whole bundle outright. All three went into a huddle.

Wiles popped his head up and down. “What’s with them?” he whispered.

“I dunno,” said Pops. “Seem to be under some kind of spell.”

“Spooky.”

“Shut up, Dickie.”

“Don’t rile ’em!” Pops warned. “Keep cool and nonchylant. Act like you does this ever day, and we just might pull it off. Now pick her back up and don’t drop her back down!”

The boys heaved the bundle to their shoulders and walked two paces behind their father, who smiled and nodded personably to each passed Guardsman.

Their greeting at the Chambers archway was not so static—here the four burly members of the Inner Guard swung to block their entrance with crossed rifles.

“Good mornings, sirs,” Pops said affably, “and begging your pardons. Me and my boys here would like a word with your boss or bosses, as it were, concerning a matter of the highest importance.”

“Council Chambers,” boomed one guard, “is closed to all but official business.”

Curio bowed to the waist. “Well, I’ll be begging your pardons again, sirs, but this *is* busyness of the most official nature. It respects a present we’ll be bringing to the High Council Hissself, and it respects half a million Eagles what’ll be coming right to my person straight and proper.”

“The Council is in Session,” rumbled the guard. “Now leave.”

“I’m bringing ’em the Queen!”

“Get out of here!”

“The Queen!” Pops called. “I gots the Queen!”

“Shut up, you!” The two end guards made to close the huge double doors.

“Queen!” Pops screamed. “*Queen! Queen! I gots the Queen!*”

There was a bustle behind the guards. “What’s that?” called an elderly voice. “Out of the way, you lummoxes. Who said something about a queen?”

The Inner Guard parted and the Council Elder peered out; scarier than Pops and the boys had ever imagined.

“The reward,” Pops fumbled. “The bounty money.”

“Yes, yes,” the Elder fumed. “*Yes?*”

“Here!”

Pops smacked Wiles, who smacked Dickie, who immediately untied the lead knot and lifted the rear so that Emra slid out headfirst.

The Elder grabbed the doors and hollered, “Guards forward!” Those Hall Guards caught peeking instantly faced their counterparts. He gestured irritably. “*In*, damn you! Drag her in!”

The brothers did so. Pops waltzed around the big room alone, wringing his hands. The Administrator watched closely.

“Lock the doors, you idiots!” The Inner Guard obeyed with robotic precision. The Administrator joined the Elder beside the unconscious Royd Queen. Pops and the boys squeezed into the huddle.

“Looks good, don’t she?” Pops tried. “Hard to keep her fresh as you might like, being as we had to tote her halfway across the grounds and all, but I’d say, all being done and fair and all, that we upkept our part of the bargain.”

“Bargain?” The Elder cocked his head, as though noticing him for the first time. “Oh yes. You’re making your claim.”

“That I am, sir,” Pops beamed, “and that we are!” He draped an arm around either son and looked up humbly.

“Oh, you’ll get your reward, all right,” the Elder said. “Guard! Take these three gentlemen downstairs for their reward.” He handed the head guard the crypt’s keys. “Make sure they feel right at home.”

Still embracing his sons by their shoulders, Pops was escorted across the room to the secret stairwell. As the guard worked the key in the lock, Pops looked back and smiled uncertainly. The Elder returned the smile and nodded. The Inner Guard ushered them through and locked the door behind them.

The Elder and Administrator bent to their task. “She must have air,” said the Administrator, fanning Emra’s puckered face. “Those buffoons nearly suffocated her.”

## The Curios

“She’ll live.” The Elder stepped to his desk and brought back a glass half-filled with water.

“Do not splash it!” the Administrator warned. “A little on the lips, and by degrees on the tongue.”

“In we go.”

Emra’s mouth contorted at the water’s kiss. Her expression twisted and her head slowly lifted from the floor. The men brought her round with staggered applications of irrigation and ventilation, eased her to a sitting position, helped her to her feet. They walked her twice round the room before making her comfortable on a bench seat.

The Elder pouted. “Let’s get some ice on that lump.” He cracked the doors, spoke a few words, and a minute later came back with a full ice bag in a little wooden bowl. The Administrator applied the bag to Dickie’s handiwork, clucking all the while.

The Elder leaned back on a bench, his hands folded against his lap. “Well, then. Our little war’s first casualty. In you come. Out you go. In you come . . . really, Madame Queen, maybe for once you’d like to just hang a while.”

Emra fought her spinning head. “I find your accommodations . . . wanting.”

“You haven’t seen the whole floor plan. I’m hoping you’ll find the basement particularly enchanting.” He sat squarely on the bench. “Now let’s get down to business. No one is interested in your silly war, though, I must say, I do admire your pluck. Perhaps your world’s ancestors and mine existed in a state of concordance, in philosophical *equipoise*, ah, so very long ago. Tell you what, Emra, if your cause is so central to your being, we’ll sign any accord you wish. I’m ready to turn over the keys to the whole damned city, right now, for directions to that one place central to *my* being.”

“The entire Hoard,” Emra retorted, “would be entirely valueless without that ‘whole damned city’.”

“Where is the treasure, Queen? You must understand that you will tell us, one way or another, sooner or later. Visualize these words ‘sooner’ and ‘later’ as opposite ends of a pain endurance scale. The sooner you divulge the treasure’s whereabouts, the less agony you will be obliged to withstand. Speak it now, and you are free to go, with our blessings. There is absolutely no point in needless suffering. How do you serve your people as a martyr?”

“How do you serve yours, as a tyrant?”

“Bah! ‘My people’ wouldn’t live for a minute like these maggots! ‘My people’ dance on stars and neon.”

“Interesting,” said the Administrator.

The Elder shot him a glance. “Help me with her. Take an arm.”

Emra put up no resistance as they escorted her to the stairwell; she was a bitty thing gripped by two determined men, and her head injury was playing tug o’ war with her equilibrium. The small party of three passed the ascending Guard on the steps. The Elder flicked a cursory salute. All four guards, sweaty and disheveled, flattened against the wall to make way. Just inside the crypt proper were the waiting Curios. The Guard, using shelved carpenters’ tools, had nailed Pops and the boys to a set of standing wood I-beams; by the fingers, by the toes, by the ankles and wrists. They shuddered like icicles in the sun.

“We’ve taken the liberty,” the Elder explained off-handedly, “of admonishing your kidnappers for you.”

Emra almost heaved at the horror sprawling throughout that room: dozens of dead and dying, torn and strung on every cruel device imaginable.

The Elder swung open the main cell containing the enormous iron meat hook. “Only recently vacated,” he apologized. The stench of death and suffering was overpowering. “He was one tough lizard, I’ll give him that much; didn’t leave us a clue.” He waved an arm around the room. “As well as the rest of your kind. Now, Royd Queen, you can spare your subjects endless suffering by just being up front with us. Believe me, I possess the tenacity to squeeze every living royd on this asteroid until the last is wrung dry.”

“I believe you.”

“Get in there.” He and the Administrator each took an arm and walked her back. The Administrator tied her hands and pulled the hook down to just above her wrists. The Elder grabbed her dress at the throat, said, “Pardon me,” and ripped it to her knees. “Now—*where* is the treasure, Queen?”

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No getting around it: war fever had definitely left the cavern. The crowd, made numb by their loss, seemed to be taking the bad and the ignominious as their due.

Mhendu’s abashed investigative party laid it down plain—the Queen had indeed been abducted from right under their noses, and a knurt child murdered in that very cavern. What was considered a secret fortress had in fact been breached by a pair of dysfunctional

## The Curios

human children. Their trail was followed two miles through the fields and bogs, and no one was less surprised than Mhendu to find it led straight to West Gate.

Once the royds were out in the open air—milling without direction, seeing each other as useless victims—the hard truth of their passivity sank in, and from that shameful realization erupted an outrage held in check for years. The vanguard aspect of the Queen’s battle plan—all they had to go by—became the blueprint for her rescue. Suddenly they were in no mood for tomorrow. Mhendu, now *de facto* Coalition Commander, realized he had to lead immediately or risk everything in a general rush—archers and marksmen were already mounted by the time he’d ridden a wave of passion to his own steed. A dizzying rally, a mustering of locals and vagrants, and then they were off as an unruly force, carrying torches and spears, clubs and slings; any old weapons they could improvise. The mob hurried down the beaten way to Administration, their ingrained rivalries now far outweighed by their common hatred for humans.

And it was in this spirit that they broke as a unit upon the white haze of Earth Administration, prepared to do in one clean sweep what should have been accomplished time out of mind before.



The Elder’s personal enthusiasm for the technical could at times be a real threat to his professionalism. But guys do love their gadgets. “The beauty of this device,” he told Emra, “is that it works on a notched pulley system. By that I mean it can be regulated so as to raise the hook itself, one inch per application, by pressing down on this lever.” He demonstrated with a single gentle depression, observing her controlled grimace. There came a clean *click* as the first gear found a notch. “As your body becomes suspended, more strength must be applied to the lever to meet the additional strain. Eventually the tip will split your cervical vertebrae—assuming royds are thus equipped—causing exquisite torment to radiate throughout your central nervous system. The tip will then enter your midbrain and work its way, very slowly, through the gray matter itself. I’ve no idea what outrageous effect that will have, but I can guarantee you the Administrator here will be taking notes. Where is the treasure, Queen?”

“Why are Earthmen,” she grated, “so infatuated with the possessions of others?”

“Y’know,” the Elder said ruminatively, and he gave the lever another press, “I’ve given that considerable thought. There’s a vast compendium of digitized literature describing the history of Earth, including the biographies of her many movers and shakers. And all my research indicates a persuasion of single-minded covetousness in those born to lead.”

The Administrator raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“Absolutely. There were men—Atilla, Croessus, Nero—great men; men who risked everything and stopped at nothing. Additionally, there were specimens capable of tremendous undertakings. Alexander the Great, for example, the namesake of one of our coins, razed cities and massacred whole populations. A fellow named Hitler nearly extinguished an entire race. Calhoun, Emperor of the Outer Giants, sold half the Martian Third Wave into slavery—and blamed their disappearance on a rival! McMillan, using only sixty-two regiments of kidnapped mothers and their explosives-wired children, was able to—are we getting light-footed yet, Emra? How do we reach the Royd Hoard?” His fingertips danced on the lever, sending augers of torment up her spine.

In her quivering squeals’ echoes, the Administrator said, very quietly:

“I believe it was actually the Fourth Martian Wave.”

The Elder froze. He didn’t budge for an excruciating half-minute. Then his head turned slowly, an inch at a time, until he was looking the Administrator dead in the eyes. A peculiar breed of animal electricity arced between the two, powered by the sudden shared realization of each man’s sneaking rendezvous with knowledge—knowledge they both understood to be the ultimate key to mastery over their backwater world. Little by little, the Elder’s grim frown worked its way into a savvy smile. The Administrator offered his arm. The Elder clasped it in their private salute. No more need be said. The Elder returned to his pupil.

“This notch should be the one that gets your attention. Ah! I see your pointy little toes have begun to twinkle. Not long now, and you’ll be all but airborne. *Where* is the treasure?”

Emra’s scrunched expression fought to relax. Her pinched eyelids opened and she shook her head.

“Where!” The Elder pounded down on the lever. “Where? Where! *Where, where, where!*”

Now the little royd queen was hanging six inches off the stone floor, flapping like a fish out of water. The Administrator placed a



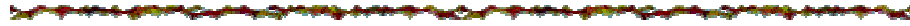
## The Curios

hand on the Elder's shoulder. "You will go too far!" He stepped out the open gate and returned with a coiled horsewhip. The Administrator tested it against the cell's bars and stepped back. "Now."

The Elder hurled a bucket of water on the prisoner and moved aside. The Administrator gave a tentative snap to the forehead before really laying into her. When her hide was raw and bleeding, he crouched to catch his breath. The Elder stepped over curiously.

"Emra? Queen?" He moved his ear close to her mouth and listened a bit before turning to the Administrator and nodding. The Administrator composed himself while the Elder went for another bucket of water. When he'd returned and the water was poised for hurling, the Administrator nodded back and grunted,

"Now."



By the time the Coalition reached the stony ring surrounding Earth Administration they'd come to resemble a genuine fighting force. The approach was essentially a broad phalanx, with Mhendu and selected representatives of each species at the center fore. Archers rode the green-spotted plains ponies in identical groupings left and right, while sharpshooters on larger mounts wove in and out of the Coalition's midst. There were, additionally, makeshift battering rams for the Gate and an assortment of ladders and grappling hooks. But the Coalition was more than a simple medieval assault operation—its real genius lay in its broad extraterrestrial prowess:

The *whoopseem* are a clambering species; it was their job to scramble up the walls once the actual battle for West Gate was in progress. *Tumtams* are known to withstand a dozen rounds off a medium-bore rifle and still retain the energy to take down an opponent. They were to be the first wave once the fortress was breached. The *Rauna*, mentioned earlier, are precognitive; as sensitives, they'd never been tested in an electric situation such as battle, but Mhendu figured they just might prove an ace up the sleeve. And zobbs are always good for shields and general-purpose projectiles.

It was now a black, black night. West Gate's main searchlight played back and forth over the advancing army, bright floods burned round the base of the fortress wall. Along the bulwarks scurried crouching soldiers. Marksmen knelt every fifteen feet. The Coalition vanguard was restrained by Mhendu at its head; he was still going for an opening gambit of diplomacy-over-gauntlet. Torch in one hand and

spear in the other, he paced his horse ahead and called out for the immediate release of the Royd Queen.

In a minute the soldiers atop the bulwark shouldered their rifles and stepped back. There was a confused exchange beyond the searchlight's pool, and then the Council Elder parted the standing Gate Guard, moved up to the parapet, and threw wide his black-cloaked arms. He appeared very energetic and commanding for such a scrawny old man, and his voice, while it may have piped during Chambers outbursts, carried well in the night. He used his scary, Reaper-like mien to his immediate advantage—seizing a light and turning it upwards under his chin, lending his face a quick Halloween countenance.

“Don’t you freaks know how to petition? Can’t you voice your demands by emissary? Can’t you produce some legitimate evidence before you stampede all over the place with your specious claims? Watch how we work once in a while. You might learn something.”

“We come seeking the release of our Queen,” Mhendu called. “We don’t need an emissary, and we have all the necessary proof as to her abduction and whereabouts. You are in no position to be critical. Open this gate or we’ll open it for you.”

“Freaks,” the Elder repeated. “Freaks and one-eyed fools. Ah—but what is a circus without an act that’ll wow ’em in the aisles? Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Amazing Emra, High-wire Queen.” And with that he stepped aside and motioned furiously to a glare-obscured team. A long pole, festooned with multi-colored streamers, peppered with burning brands, and guided by four strong men, peeked over the bulwark. The Elder himself commandeered the searchlight to illuminate the spectacle.

Gleaming in the light was Emra’s flayed and naked body, hung dangling by the feet, torn practically in half from the small of the back to the rear of the skull.

The whole Coalition gasped as one. Mhendu fought for voice. “You are ev— you are , , ,”

The Elder nodded. “That I am.” With a savage kick, he booted the pole out of the guards’ hands. The entire apparatus, dead queen and all, plummeted spiraling to the ground and crashed in a mini-explosion of twisted streamers and billowing sparks.

## *Chapter Eight*

### The Elder



The Coalition was stunned.

Their dignified queen's crash-and-burn, before a single shot had been fired, along with that surreal black scarecrow standing with one foot on the parapet and one fist raised high, was so emblematic of utter defeat . . .

Nothing in the annals of royd conflict—no brilliant strategy, no relentless mob, no screaming revolution—*nothing* could match the all-trumping audacity of good old Terran testosterone. So finalizing was that characteristically brutal act, in fact, that the two sides might have simply returned to their well-defined realms—the Earthmen to their feast and security and the royds to their wasteland and want—had not an unseen archer let fly a single shaft that appeared to soar in slow motion through the fluttering patches of dark and light.

The arrow pierced the Elder's left upper chest. One hand shot to the spot, the other went out as though to ward off a second impact. The illusion of slow motion immediately leaped into fast-forward—the old man fell back like a struck arcade target, the searchlight jerked up to search the heavens, the bulwark's nearest guards raced to his aid.

A great cheer went up from the Coalition, followed closely by a series of war cries and a protracted battle chant. Mhendu signaled the charge.

First to hit the wall were the whoopseem.

They scrambled up in jerky, stop-and-go fashion, mindful of both the positioning riflemen above and the anxious royd archers below. The lead climber had his head blown off even as he popped into view, and a royd sharpshooter immediately took out the offending guard in response. This quick exchange triggered a call for a general volley and rally: the whoopseem made the top in a rush and engaged the Gate Guard tooth and nail, while royd archers picked off the nervier bulwark guards, and royd sharpshooters kept the wisest behind cover.

Beneath the great arch the thickset tumtams maniacally worked their ram against Administration's heavy wood Gate, then, growing frustrated, doused the whole thing with oil and set it ablaze. Amid the smoke and flames it was difficult to see if any whoopseem had survived to man the Gate Wheel from within, and then it was purely academic—the burning Gate split laterally, a huge chunk blew in, and seconds later the overhanging masonry came crumbling to the ground.

Mhendu urged his steed left and right, leaned in tight, and cleared the Gate's flaming remains in one mighty leap. The Coalition poured in behind him.

EarthAd's grounds were unfamiliar to all but a few royds: a vast cobbled courtyard surrounded by looming contoured buildings, partitioned here and there by broad brick paths leading to streets fringed with fine shops and official residences. And steps, steps—steps everywhere. Those streets, now active with sprinting soldiers and civilians, seemed to extend forever, and that courtyard, far too grand for the soles of a common royd, was alive with guards and awkward new recruits. The Coalition went in as a single-minded wave, heedless of their own safety. In half a minute it was all a blind reeling brawl.

Mhendu understood that the Coalition's sole goal was to humble the master. There wasn't a reasonable hope of working things out; humans had demonstrated their arrogance was incurable. And the queen's murder had sealed the issue beyond all redemption—no longer would royds allow rule by intimidation. Suddenly Mhendu found himself prey to a lifetime of vengeful fantasies. He temporarily overcame his species' ethos, shooting a pair of crouching guards in the back and setting a large shop ablaze while his Closest rode in a

## The Elder

shifting swirl. The human soldiers about them were completely unprepared for the royds' unflinching will to engage, even when outnumbered and unarmed; these Earthmen intuitively took to sniping, ambushing, and playing dead. It was subterfuge for naught: their shops were gutted by fire, their official buildings made into dark badlands of guerrilla warfare. Soon it seemed there were more fallen than standing, and no participant willing to come to another's aid. But humanity is indomitable—barely visible in the lancing shadows, two men were busy with a limp fading form: Leroy and Rat had propped up a winged Rhydsylmn, determined to keep him alive.

"Where'd you hide your gold?" Leroy panted. "*Where?* Don't you die on us! Rat, check him again."

"He don't wear proper clothes!" Rat snapped. "What you want me to do, go up his crap hole?"

"If that's where he keeps it, then, damn it, that's where we'll go!"

"Aww . . ." Rat dug his fist into the belly wound, hollering, "Where? Where? Where?" while the dying royd choked out abbreviated screams.

"Outta my way!" said Leroy. He whipped out a blade and stuck it in the Rhydsylmn's single nasal aperture. "You wanna die, monster? Clean and quick? Or you wanna go just as slow as we can make it? Either way, you're nothing more'n a bitty bounty to me and Rat. But if you make it sweet for us, we'll do you like a human, instead of like a damned wiggly royd. Where's your gold? Where?" He dug deeper, until blood foamed out the opening in panting syncopation with the Rhydsylmn's gurgling screams. "*Where?*"

"Earthman."

Leroy froze. A snarl took his face and he whirled. "What the—"

The first arrow caught him between the teeth. The tip plowed off the roof of his tongue and pierced the glottis, ripping a hole into his midbrain. So powerful was the archer's thrust that the shaft tore out Leroy's nape and pinned him to the backing wall.

The second arrow went into his left eye even as his head was rocking back. The third and fourth took out his Adam's apple and right cheek bone, respectively.

"Enough!" Mhendu raised an arm, and with the other quivered his bow. The royds, seven strong, clopped up and bent over Rat.

"Please, sirs," Rat whined. "Don't hurt me! I was trying to save your friend, that's all, I swear! But this dirty swine human—" and he kicked at Leroy's body, "I couldn't overpower him, sirs! No way. He

was just too strong. Let me go, oh please. I'll tell everybody how wise and merciful you are, sirs. I'll tell the Council!"

The mounted royds leaned closer.

"They'll give you more gold!" Rat gasped. "Honest! They wanted to give it to us, but I'll tell them it should go to you. You can have all our gold; lovely, lovely gold! We don't want it—we don't even like it. Please. Just take it all, okay?" He choked on his own backwash. "Sirs?"

The riders slowly sat upright. After a minute Mhendu turned his steed and the royds clopped off. Rat scrambled to his feet and vanished in the shadows.



"I got here as fast as I could."

The Elder opened an eye. His physician was watching closely, sterile pad in gloved hand. Outside the high room's open window came shouts, followed by a brief cannonade and the stately arc of a flaming arrow.

"You were rushed to your quarters by litter. The shaft has been excised and the tip examined. It's deeper than a flesh wound, but nothing to lose sleep over. You'll live."

The Elder grimaced. "It feels . . . much worse than you describe. But thank you." He steadied his breathing. "I must have lost consciousness rather quickly. How goes that awful little disturbance at the Gate?"

"Most of the wall stood the test, but the Gate was completely destroyed and the courtyard infiltrated. Our entire military is now invested in the complex, and to the best of my knowledge the invaders are at an impasse. The fence has been assaulted in several places. Royds don't have the good sense to back off, even when they've been cut to pieces on razor wire. The Council's Head Administrator, your colleague, ordered the fence electrified wherever there's suspicious royd activity, and a number were fried before they got the message. But they're clever devils, and don't give up easily. While you were drifting the Administrator took executive command of the military and police, and relegated your new Guard Commander to Chief of Recruits. If the whole population is mustered, the fence proper can be held using a regularly spaced civilian guard."

The Elder, attempting to sit up, fell back with a sigh. "My 'colleague' . . ." he grated. "I—I am emasculated in bed."

## The Elder

The doctor reached into his medicine bag. He leaned close, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "This is morphine, from the original stock locked away in Warehouse 17." He injected the Elder and leaned back. "You are fortunate on two accounts. First, you're lucky the arrow's tip was not poisoned. At your age even a less than generous dose could prove fatal. Second, be glad the archer was at a considerable distance, and that the projectile struck well away from important vessels. There was only minor bleeding, and I anticipate little or no infection. You'll be sore. I strongly advise bed rest, and that you keep the affected area as stationary as possible. Your aide has received brief but thorough instructions on the methodology of cleaning and dressing wounds."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"The opiate should be taking effect any minute now. How do you feel?"

"Lovely."

"Good sign." He checked the pupils and pulse, waited, leaned back down, checked again. When satisfied he said, "As these are off-hours in a crisis situation, my usual fee will be increased accordingly."

"Of course."

"Your health is my one worry. Now, it breaks my heart to have to discuss money, but there will be an additional charge for going out during a siege."

"Certainly."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. He continued studying the pupils while speaking in a dreamy monotone: "This emergency visit forced me to cancel three appointments. That's lost revenue, and these are lean times, but we men of medicine are an honorable breed—my profession vigorously embraces the concept that a patient's health is his physician's principal concern. Therefore my obsession with your well-being completely overshadows all monetary considerations." He leaned back.

"I understand, and deeply appreciate your faith and dedication. Administration will cheerfully cover your financial needs."

The doctor licked his lips. "You are prepared to place that in writing?"

"Just show me where to sign."

"There is, of course, the added expense for tutoring your aide."

"Naturally."

“I might append the considerable wear and tear on both mine and my horse’s shoes.”

“It’s only money.”

“There were extra costs related to new medical equipment, re-upholstering the carriage seats, and a proposed deck.”

“It’s always something.”

“The kids really should have their own rooms.”

“A big house is a happy house.”

The doctor pulled a sheet from a folding file. “Your signature on this line. Don’t worry about all this fine print.”

“Never been one to worry. Ouch. There you go.”

“Keep that arm steady. Indulge in a sedative only should the need arise.”

Once he was alone, the Elder took his physician’s advice by ordering a tall bourbon and water. The aide brought him both and a glass. The Elder giggled feebly and, even minus a wing, managed to pour a stiff one. He was soon complimenting the remedy.

Amazing: there were anomalies popping in and out of the mundane—he’d have sworn his black shirt had just waved a sleeve. The light’s reflection on his window performed a kaleidoscopic pirouette—but he was seeing things! Featherflies wove intersecting patterns in the air—all in his imagination. And there, seated at the foot of his bed, was an ugly little green monster, staring right back. He looked very solid. Moreover, the Elder recognized him! He sat up straight and pushed the cobwebs from his brain.

“You!”

The Cept boy lowered his head and peered up shyly. “Where Father?”

“How did you get in here?”

“Through door.”

The Elder fell back. “Makes sense.” One minute his mind was wool-gathering, the next it was a cauldron of inspiration. He sat up again. “Your father, sweetheart, was freed to go back to Maldea. He asked me to look after you when you returned, and begged me to escort you to him. He’s waiting there for you now, and wants to make sure I get plenty of treasure as a reward for being your mentor, and for being his wonderful, wonderful friend.” He expression melted. “We’re all just *so* glad you made it home safely, son.”

The boy considered. “Here not home. Maldea not home. Where Father?”



## The Elder

The Elder, pain-free, swung his legs off the bed. “Like I said, darling, he just wants to give me all the treasure I can handle, and he wants *you* to bring me to *him* so *he* can give it to *me*! You don’t expect him to carry it all the way back here by himself, now, do you? Of course, you don’t—oh, you’re *such* a cutie. So let me just write a nice little bye-bye letter to that mean old Mr. Administrator, and I’ll be right with you.”

He tore a scrap from his nightstand drawer, dipped his quill, and wrote:

*Dearest friend and colleague.*

*It pains me profoundly to have to say farewell in this way, but I fear my time is at hand. As you are well aware, I was gravely wounded in battle—I do not regret my reckless courage under fire; war fever has taken far braver men. My physician has offered me an encouraging prognosis, but he cannot sense that which my soul far better knows. So this is my end. Yet I refuse to waste away like some lovelorn spinster while the battle rages without! Rather than self-commiserate, I intend to walk out into that savage wasteland I have so long endeavored to tame, and take out as many of the enemy as my waning vitality permits. Do not bother looking for me; I shall face the world of men no more. The you-know-what is hereby dissolved, and there is certainly no sense in your seeking the you-know-what-else. I leave you now, good soldier, to maintain this fair enclosure as you will.*

*Yours even in passing,  
You-Know-Who.*

“Now,” he said. “Out that window you go. Take this note two windows down and slide it under the frame. Skedaddle back here and away we’ll fly.”

The boy scooted out and the Elder dressed: black shirt and cassock, black robes, black cloak. Black boots and a wide-brimmed black hat, the better to disguise himself. He sheathed his saber and tried the shoulder; it was only sore when rubbed, and even then the pain was mild, transient, and somehow unreal. The boy scampered back in and they snuck out into the Grand Hall; the Elder had him walk under his robes as they passed the standing Administration Guard. Signs of battle were everywhere; the Cept boy led him deep

into the city, past shops still open under siege, down dark streets and bright, and so into a long-abandoned warehouse. They clambered through the gloom, over mounds of shattered cinder blocks and around fallen shelves.

“This is laborious,” the Elder said, and sat to gather his breath. He tenderly massaged the wound area. “You’re sure this way will lead us to safety?”

“Under here,” the boy piped. He squeezed behind a sprawling heap of broken timbers, cracked pipes, and torn chain link. The Elder had to follow on hands and knees, and then barely escaped a plunge into what he first imagined was a hidden sinkhole.

The space beneath him was the asteroid’s natural honey-combed interior: countless pitted taffy-like columns joined in seemingly impossible formations: twisted, curved, and coiled by the world’s earliest expanding gases. It was rather like looking into the body of a highly perforated meteorite. Deep, deep below reverberated a muffled roaring, as of tremendous volumes of water spilling into a basin. The realm was fuzzily illuminated by a soft amber light filtering in from miles away. From that unseen place came, too, a thudding of heavy machinery and the long gasp-and-sigh of pumps. The Elder stared down at the boy beaming up five feet below.

“The power plant,” he whispered.

The boy nodded, grinning.

The Elder felt his way down feet-first, using his knees and elbows as points of balance. He hunched on a ledge and nursed his shoulder. “How did you come upon this place?”

The boy shrugged. “Follow light.”

For a moment the Elder was certain the morphine had kicked back in: those twisting pocked columns were melting before his eyes. Then he understood: mottled gray footlong cockroaches, millions of them, were on the move, having frozen at his and the boy’s entrance. With a start he realized they were everywhere—on the ledge, on the rock walls around them, on his shoes and hem. The boy giggled and squashed a fat one with his stubby tail. The Elder shook himself up and down, then stamped and kicked while the boy danced along with delight. When the area was clear they cautiously followed the ledge, keeping low. Subterranean roaches are not aggressive; they picked up on the footfalls and scattered correspondingly, allowing the Elder and boy a narrow ongoing carpet of lifeless rock. After a while the ceaseless flow of roaches became just another harmless feature.

## The Elder

A nasty breeze wafted in and out as they scrambled along: the distant pumps' residue. The sound of falling water and a massive spillover continued to grow below, and a humping oppressiveness took the Eustachian—it was possible to imagine great falls, hammering on some monstrous heaving contrivance. Administration was certainly powered hydroelectrically; the steam must be fanned and chamber-vented. The fuzzy light remained constant, the air acrid and suspicious on the palate. In places the ledge broke away from the wall, becoming a scary narrow bridge before reconnecting. On one of these perches the Elder, fighting to retain his balance, found himself nevertheless peering down at what looked to be miles and miles of interwoven columns and bridges. It was a gothic, dwarfing view, built of deepest black and hazy shadow. For one crazy moment he had a horrifying notion something enormous had squeezed out of the dark to stare back at him, and then he was scurrying like mad for the adjoining wall, hundreds of equally busy roaches moving before and behind him, thousands more streaming up the walls just below.

The Cept boy looked down at that huge black shape, appearing to pass column-to-bridge-to-column by way of long grasping tentacles. He carefully pitched a rock, and two gray dully glowing eyes vanished. "Grandmater," he explained.

The Elder collapsed, clutching his chest. "How much more of this? How much more?"

"Look!" the boy whispered.

Not thirty yards ahead the ledge began to climb, and a hundred yards farther shone the unmistakable beauty of night.

"Thank" the Elder coughed, "God." He walked his back up the wall and immediately commenced a ribs-hugging hike. They managed the last few yards on a segment only a foot wide, pushed aside some gnarly roots, and forced their way out.

The night air was sweet as nectar. The old man rolled on his back, then, mindful of his cloak and robes, forced himself to sit.

"Never again," he wheezed, and glared at the boy. "How long have you known of this hidden highway?"

The boy shrugged: the Elder was to get used to that non-responsive response. But he was too exhausted to whip him proper. Instead, he merely smiled and gently wagged his head. "Y'know, son, what's important is we made it out okay." He gazed back at the series of mounds hiding West Gate, now outlined by the glow of battle fires. "Though it's beginning to look like your funny route may be the only

way back in.” He flicked his hand disdainfully. “Good riddance, then. It’s time we got busy.”

Yet his injury, exacerbated by his struggle and with the morphine worn off, quickly grew unbearable; after only a hundred yards he was all-in. The boy eventually walked away, returning with his steed. It was a thymrn pony: tiny purple creature with ash-white mane and short puffy tail. Thymra are a sturdy breed—low wide bodies, tunnel vision, phlegmatic dispositions—and this one was certainly tough enough to accept a scrawny, fagged-out old man. The Elder rode on his stomach while the boy walked alongside, cheerfully guiding the pony over fields, up and down gullies, and so to the brink of that cracked, unmapped desert east of EarthAd. Occasionally the Elder shifted his position to favor the wound, but as the hours passed he became increasingly ill and irritable. At last they stopped and the boy helped him down.

It was a warm night, even this far from the sultry pall of Administration. There was no blanket; the Elder curled up on the ground and clasped his filthy cloak about him. The boy sat close by, his chin on his knees, and watched that old mouth jabber of rubies and gold until the night sealed his eyes.



“We all know why we’re here.”

The room was partitioned into two distinct halves; not by any material contrivance, but by deep human sentiment.

“We’re here because it’s time we got off our asses and did something about protecting our border.” The speaker, Ernie Ralfwissel, had rehearsed this moment throughout the long ride to People’s Hall. “There’s an army of those things all set to do the unmentionable to anything human. Who knows what diseases they carry? Who knows what foul practices they’ll introduce to our children?”

“That’s just the point,” countered Bill Hemley. “Who knows? And who the heck are you, Ernest Ralfwissel, to drag out all these tired old prejudices right when we need to stick together? You’re a rabble-rouser.”

“And you, sir, are a moron. Will you believe *anything* you hear—why can’t you have the good sense to listen to reason? Man, oh man alive; didn’t you just catch the Administrator’s address? They’ve poisoned our water, violated our livestock, and danced and defecated

## The Elder

all over our flag—why, they’ve even kidnapped, tortured, and mesmerized our Council Elder! They’re holding him for ransom, even as we speak, in some place dark and obscene.”

“But why can’t we just *talk* to them first?” Ms. Humphardy tried. “They speak English; what’s the problem with just *trying* to communicate?”

“Everybody on the asteroid speaks English. Everybody in the stupid galaxy speaks English. That’s not the point. The point is they’re *liars*, ma’am. Don’t you get it? Am I the only one here with two Alexanders’ worth of wit and wile? English is our gift to them, and English is their weapon against us. They’re going to tell you *exactly* what you want to hear. And *you*, ma’am, no offense, are buying right into the whole program. It’s people like you who befriend the enemy, take one in the back, and then run around crying, ‘oh why didn’t anybody protect me’. Let me ask you a simple question, ma’am; do you have any children?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Hemley objected.

“I’m just asking—does she have any children?”

“That’s a sexist question and you know it. Why don’t you stick to the matter at hand?”

“I *am* sticking to it! Now, does she or doesn’t she?”

“Oh, this is ridiculous.”

“Ma’am?”

“I fail to see what my fertility index has to do with this meeting.”

“I’m just asking. It’s got everything to do with everything. So, let me put it to you a—”

“We need a monitor,” Hemley cried, “or we’ll never get anywhere.”

“It’s a simple question.”

“I nominate Mr. Hemley here. He’s got his head screwed on right.”

“Why can’t she just answer? It’s how you say integral to the business at hand.”

“I second the motion.”

“Ma’am? Let me try one more—”

“Okay, then,” Hemley called. “All in favor of marching out to North Fence and negotiating—give a shout!”

“*Yay!*”

“It’s a fair question, isn’t it? *Isn’t* it a fair question?”

The crowd swept out the main entrance, thrilled to be moving instead of talking. Once exertion had caught up, they proceeded as an orderly mob, growing more pacifistic in sentiment with each step. Upon reaching North Fence they discovered that a small gang of royds had built a shaky gangway of tree limbs and were attempting to vault the electrified fence, which snapped and sparked with the jouncing wood. When they saw Hemley's group coming up they dropped to the ground, leveled their rifles, and used the makeshift ramp for cover. Hemley waved his arms over his head. "Sirs!" he called. "We come as friends."

The royds set down their weapons. "Speak," said one.

"We're all the same," Hemley panted. "I mean, pretty much. We have lives, we have dreams, we have families. You, madam. Is that your child? She's lovely."

"*He*," said the female. She lifted the boy to eye level. They were a squat family of glyphs; a race from a nondescript planet around Sirius B, or Little Dog as it's known. Your typical glyph has a face that appears to have been stepped on at birth, with flat aural and olfactory folds covered in brown scaly moles, capped by a wide bonnet of slimy tentacles peeking out of thorny humps. "He has never seen an Earthman before," the female said.

The child took one look and turned away. "Ugly," he whispered.

His mother's flap lifted slightly in a half-smile. "Now, I wonder where they get these ideas."

"Kids," Hemley laughed. "The same all over." He spread his hands. "Look, we've been going over and over this, and the upshot is we feel our grievances can be settled diplomatically."

"We have seen enough of your diplomacy," gargled a phaxc in the crowd. "Maybe you'd like a taste of ours."

"There we go!" Hemley beamed. "We're negotiating already!"

There was a shout down the way, and a party of mounted guards came storming up, their rifles ready.

Hemley threw up his arms. "Wait! We're negotiating!"

The first shot took out the glyph boy, the second and third his mother. The royds returned fire, but were no match for the well-armed and highly trained guards. Hemley and Co. hit the dirt while the battle raged, and when they looked back up there were half a dozen bloody royd corpses, the survivors were running for the hills, and the dismounted guards were placing the prone men and women under arrest.

## The Elder

“This is outrageous!” Hemley cried. “We were conferencing, we were making headway!”

“You were dealing with the enemy,” a guard replied. “Don’t tell me you didn’t hear the dictate about selling arms to royds. Well, I sure hope you got your money’s worth. And you’d better keep your gold out where he can see it—everybody knows the hangman’s got bills to pay.”



Dismounting had never been so difficult. The Elder slid down the thymrn’s flank inch by inch; clinging to that sturdy neck with his good arm, catching the mane in his fist, at last making the pony droop its head to support his weight. His grip relaxed and he dropped to his side. He’d ridden halfway through the morning, on a beast too brainless for caution, too one-dimensional for dexterity. There’d been good miles and bad miles, but now the continuous thudding had hammered his shoulder into a wretched hunch. He carefully rolled onto his back. In a minute the boy crept over and stuck in his face: the Elder was breathing hard. The boy fanned him until those withered old eyelids cracked.

“Worse than I expected,” the Elder panted. He motioned with his head. “Can’t move it at all. Damned arm’s locked up on me.” The boy drew the pony over so that the Elder was catching some shade. The old man nodded, had a minor flirtation with delirium, and passed out. When he came to, he was staring at a broadly smiling young Cept. The boy used his tongue to push forward his mouth’s contents—he’d been chewing some kind of root; a faintly acrid smell rolled with his breath. He now removed the root and made sure the Elder saw him gently rubbing it into the wound. There came a stinging, followed quickly by a penetrating warmth. His shoulder went numb, and in less than a minute the pain had passed. The boy wrapped up the wound in fresh bandages.

“My compliments,” the Elder breathed. “And my gratitude. You’ll have to show me where you dug up that stuff; I could make a killing back home.”

The boy simultaneously smiled and shook his head. “Use royd spit only,” he said.

“Ah! Evolution is a beautiful thing, especially on this fast-forward little world. But I’ll bet you guys don’t have any morphine.”

The boy cocked his head.

“Kind of an Earthman root,” said the Elder. He creaked to his feet. “Better, I am. Much better.”

And not only that. The wound healed even as he rode; he could feel the stiffness melt out of his arm and chest, could sense a new vigor to his side. Within an hour the swelling was all but gone, and a pinkness had replaced the brown. They plugged through the desert forever. At a broad stretch of canyons the boy stopped and said, “Royd come on horse.”

The Elder leaned closer, instinctively lowering his voice. “But how do you know?”

The boy shrugged. “Cept know.”

“Then how many are there?”

The boy shrugged again. “Many?”

“We must hide! We are at war, and they are the enemy. There’s no telling what wickedness they will stoop to. They aren’t like Earthmen, boy! They have no compassion, no honor, no interest in anything other than their own selfish wants. They cannot be believed, much less trusted. Should we go that way?”

The boy shook his head.

“Then how about that way?”

He shook his head again. As though to underscore his responses, a number of riders showed to the southeast, and, a minute later, perhaps a dozen to the northeast. The Elder sagged. Catching himself at this, he sat erect as the parties neared.

The riders bore long flag-tipped poles. These flags showed the new Coalition logo: a single level line meant to represent a horizon, capped by a fatly hemispherical crescent signifying a rising Sirius. They also carried rifles slung behind the right shoulder, and short spears sheathed on their saddles. The Elder thrust out his chin as the leader clopped up beside him.

“You are lost?” the rider inquired. “There is nothing for you in this direction.” He looked down at the boy. “You are well?”

The Elder arched his torso in the universal male posture of confrontation. “He rides under my protection! You’ll keep your filthy paws off of him!” He drew out his saber.

The rider backed his horse a step, then smiled at laughter from his troops. He reached down and pulled out a blade easily four times the length, and twice the breadth, of the Elder’s. He allowed its shaft a long kiss of Sirian rays.

The Elder shrank back. “You would not harm a crippled old man?”



## The Elder

The rider grinned. “Never before lunch.” He touched the tip to his crown, sheathed the sword, and casually rode back to his fellows.

“You see?” the Elder whispered. “He didn’t want us to go this way. He knows we’re onto something.” He watched the parties pass out of view, his eyes burning under the wide black brim. “Vile freaks. Notice how they need an entire squad to intimidate a helpless old man and his faithful young companion? Where are they now?”

The boy shrugged.

“Press on then, son. And know that I will protect you if it takes my final breath.”

They traveled into the afternoon, through areas absolutely strange to the Elder, but perfectly fair to the pony and boy. On the edge of a broad gulch they stopped for lunch; the boy, like most royds, carried a little pouch of dried roots and suckflowers. Awful as it was, it was desperately needed nourishment for a recuperating old man. He sat the pony and used it for a recliner while the Cept boy built pebble castles. Time seemed to die. Finally the boy said, “Why you hurt Father, if he your friend?”

“Hurt him?” The Elder looked over, one brow arched. “Oh! You mean downstairs at Administration.” He laid a comforting hand on a scaly forelimb. “That was all an act, son, a game. Me and your dad were out to fool that evil Commander and Administrator. We both knew what they were up to. They wanted to steal Maldea’s gold and jewels and keep it all for themselves. I couldn’t stop them—not one man against two. So me and your dad decided to even the odds. He’s a pretty good actor, eh? You should be proud.” He stirred the dirt with a forefinger. “Are you proud of your father, son?”

The boy looked away. “Why they want to take royd treasure?”

The Elder sighed. “Children and their endless questions.” He too looked away, in the general direction of a small blue world he’d studied extensively. “Where my ancestors lived, son, things aren’t as straightforward as on this big old asteroid. Leaders on Earth work things out in the dark, and put on the Big Smile for the light.” He fingered his dirty robes. “And they wear fine clothes, and eat only delicacies. They marry the most beautiful women, are escorted in awesome things called Panthyrs, and receive fear and respect from all they encounter. And do you know why they are able to live the way they do? Do you know why? It’s because they command great stores of wealth, and wealth on Earth means power on Earth. Just as it does here. No one can withstand the dazzle of treasure. Do you hear me, boy? No one!”

“Royd,” the little Cept explained, “make jewel into pretty charm, sell metal to EarthAd for big treats.”

“Ha! Your stupid traders are fleeced to the quick. Precious metals for food scraps and cheap manufactured baubles. Our hand-me-downs for your gemstones. Rigged scales, empty promises, and lollies for the kiddies. Royds are the laughingstocks of this asteroid.”

The Cept boy was quiet for a minute. He looked over at the old man, still intent on the heavens. The boy matched his gaze. “No natchu, natchura . . .”

“No. Royds will never be naturalized. Humans will never see their glorious imperial planet. Royds will never be Earthmen, and Earthmen will never go home. Never, never, never. We’re all stuck here.”

The boy mulled this over. His face broke into a smile. “Go see Father!”

“Yes.” The Elder creaked and groaned to his feet. “Time to go and see your father.”

The boy hiked an hour longer, leading the riding Elder through a vast desert land peppered with enormous pocked boulders. Beyond this realm rose a place of gently rolling hillocks; dry and brown, dusty and forlorn. They moved weaving between these hillocks, some mere rises, until they came to one nondescript hill, slightly isolated from the rest. The boy stopped and pointed, his face breaking into a smile. “Father!”

The old man dismounted, instantly galvanized. “This is it? You’re sure?”

“Yes.” The boy wagged his stub of a tail. “Maldea!” He made to rush off. “Go see Father!”

“No, no!” The Elder grabbed a limb. “Your father and I have an arrangement. He wants to see you alone, quietly, and with dignity. He loves you very, very much, son. As do I. He asked me, as his personal friend, to make certain you reach him without being seen. He said he’ll be waiting in the treasure room, and he wants you to bring me to him. Do you know where the treasure room is?”

The boy shrugged. “All Maldea treasure room.”

“*Really!*” The Elder’s whole face morphed. “Well! Let’s not waste any more time then! He’ll be easy to find, and just think how excited he’ll be to give me all that treasure. Man, is his face ever going to light up! I’m sure he wants to see you, too, son, so let’s get a move on! Go, go, go!”

## The Elder

They walked the pony around the hill and crouched near the mine entrance, using the animal for cover.

“We can’t let them see me, son—oh, no-no-no, not a mighty Earthman! Like I told you, this is all a wonderful surprise set up by me and your father. We have to work out a way to get past the guards.”

“No guard,” the boy said. He scampered inside and reappeared leading a pair of roys pulling an old wood cart. The adults and boy shared a joke; the boy returned to his place and the adults to their work. There was a leather bridle in the bed, and a rough hide tether rope. The Elder attached the bridle to the pony’s neck and hitched the cart. He climbed inside and whispered instructions while keeping low. The boy nonchalantly led the pony down the main track. The place grew brighter as they progressed, the sounds of tapping and talking more pronounced. The Elder peeked off and on, but couldn’t bear to focus too long on all that splendor. He had the boy steer him into an alcove, and there fell out onto a broad ledge overflowing with jewels.

The Elder absolutely lost it, feverishly running his hands back and forth over the pile. At last he looked up, only to find himself staring straight into the Cept boy’s wide liquid eyes.

“Where Father?”

“I’ll give you ‘Father’, you little—” He tore the hide rope from the cart’s bed and tightly wound it round the boy’s throat. “Start filling this cart, you freak.” He gripped the loop at the sobbing boy’s neck with one hand and used the other to lash him with the slack. “Faster, damn you! Faster! We don’t have all day.” So great was his need that he began scooping and tossing wildly: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires; a broad rainbow shower. When the little cart was brimming he stepped atop the pile and dragged the boy in with him. “You’re coming with me, so I don’t get lost on the way back. You got that? If you think I’m leaving all this here then you’re dumber than the average royd. But, man, with this load I’ll be able to finance equipment, laborers—damn it, I’ll bring me back an army!” And with that he kicked furiously at the pony’s rump. The thymrn, hereditarily programmed to obey, strained at the load until the cart began to roll. Even against the grade it tugged resolutely. It lurched side to side rhythmically, then managed a zigzag trot, and finally, prodded by the Elder’s repeated vicious stabs, broke into a crouched shambling uphill run.

The astonished workers moved to cut off the cart, but were quickly dispatched by the saber. The Elder, hugging the Cept boy as a

shield, kicked and slashed wildly as the flustered pony barreled up the track and out the main entrance. The cart fishtailed in the dirt, its sturdy wheels shaking. As workers spilled outside, the Elder dragged the boy up his chest until their heads were level and his blade was dug deep into that trembling scaly throat.

“I’ll kill him!” the old man shouted. “Don’t think I won’t! All of you back off and return to whatever you were doing. If you try to follow us I’ll cut off one of his toes for every tracker I see!” Still holding the boy, he hopped out and whipped the pony, then poked and swatted until it had worked its way back around. Panting, he dragged the boy aboard and lashed the pony on. The workers watched dumbfounded as the leaning cart shook against the horizon.

The boy struggled up and down in the old man’s hold, at last managing to slip from his noose. He backed away over the pile while the exhausted Elder, fighting to control the digging pony, took great lunging swipes with the blade. The boy, easily timing the thrusts, worked his way to the rear of the cart and leaped free.

“Get back in here!” the Elder bawled. He stood erect, waving his saber with one hand and fighting the reins with the other. “I killed your father, boy! Do you hear me? I cut him open wide! I made sure he died in agony! Follow me if you want to see him! We’ll dig him up together! Aww—” and he hurled the blade. It whirled like a toy before falling harmlessly. The boy stared as the spectacle receded, then, crying his heart out, scurried back to the mine.

The cart lurched between the hillocks while the Elder jealously monitored jewels rocking at the cart’s rim. He quickly lost his way, rediscovered a landmark, lost his way again, and finally just relied on Sirius as his guide. Every now and then he was compelled to rest the pony, and during these breaks laid full-out under the cart, in the grip of his years. Only his sapphire dreams kept him going. But by twilight he’d become truly worn, and prone to panic attacks—based on a variety of extraneously-induced hallucinations, a narrow run-in with a frantic swarm of crag leapers, and a very real fear of being stranded without provisions. Plus, while pushing through the boulder-strewn desert, the cart’s rear wheels became mired in a sticky, thin red mud. He whipped the pony mercilessly until the poor thing, too stalwart to surrender but too stupid to resist, simply dropped on its belly and let the lashings fly.

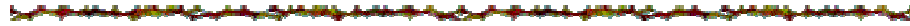
“You thick bastard.” The Elder threw down his whip and shoved, hoping to dislodge the cart and spur the pony on. Little by

## The Elder

little he sank to his knees. He all but died there, his elbows buried in diamonds, his kneecaps buried in muck.

Almost as in a dream he heard it: a distant, rapid clattering, as of many running feet. He very quietly pulled himself upright. In a minute the first antennae came waving around the largest rock, and two heartbeats later the Elder was completely surrounded by predatory Great Roaches.

They raced over the mud and each other, pouncing on the little old man and his tiny purple pony. The Elder was able to buy a minute by squeezing under the cart, but those grasping feelers were everywhere. The pony fell with a heartbreaking scream, the writhing mass went mad, and the overladen cart split down the middle, half-covering the Elder in precious stones. A pair of Roaches took his arms, two more his legs. So ferocious was their assault that he was quartered in seconds, and his trunk and head left to settle under a sprawling heap of jewels in the sucking and popping mud.



“Civilian Guard, front and center!”

The sergeant fumed.

After a few seconds he stormed back to the slouching, bewildered file. “That *means*,” he hissed, “that you are to move your sorry butts up here where I can see them!” When he’d marshaled the men he addressed them as in boot camp, though they were assembled right in the street. “Before you compulsory recruits go out and shoot yourselves in the feet, you will respond to this field order: you are hereby commanded to go into these houses and shops and deputize all adult males for immediate placement. That *means* you are to direct them to me, and I will make sure they are furnished with arms and posts. You are not to sit and chat over coffee and scones, *okay*? They are not being given an option, and neither are you. This is a martial situation; Administration has declared all service-worthy males military property. Get them out here where I can handle them. No excuses, no delays. Now go!”

Ed Sales and Whitey Pinn were more than glad to break rank. “Jeez,” Whitey said, “who’s gonna be watching my store with me out here playing soldier?”

“Theoretically,” Ed replied, “the Guard. Meaning me, them, and everybody but you. Watch that rifle, Whitey! It’s not a baton.”

They knocked politely at a haberdasher's. After a long minute the door opened and a curmudgeonly middle-aged man peered out. "You're deputized, Earl," Whitey said. "Sorry, but the sergeant says everybody has to go out in the street, right now. You'll get a gun and a post to guard, and any royd's fair game."

Earl was about to slam the door when his expression shifted. "What's the inside bounty rate?"

"Administrator's upped it," said Ed, "to two Eagles for any adult royd soldier." He licked his lips. "They're coming in by the hundreds."

"How many skins are in already?"

Whitey shook his head. "They won't tally or pay till after the dust settles."

Earl blinked, then slowly eased himself out, quietly closing the door behind him. "That's two Eagles per hide?"

"Skinned or whole, dead or alive."

"Who's to say if dead bodies was scooped off the battlefield and turned in as kills? Who's to say?"

Ed and Whitey exchanged stares. "Not me," Whitey said.

Earl cracked the door. "Woman! Fetch me my coat and flask. I'm off to join the Army."

## *Chapter Nine*

### Mhendu

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Without much of a backbone, Administration's front-line command went fairly quickly.

The moment shots were heard in the courtyard the Councilmen hiked up their skirts and scurried down to the vast Warehouses complex, where they were safe to nurse their apertifs and processed cheese, monitor breaking news, and roundly damn those bungling cowards shot to pieces defending the Gate. The Head Administrator, now de facto Prime Custodian and Commander In Chief, immediately ordered all priceless objets d'art moved to his personal quarters for safekeeping, and relocated Grand Hall's Administration Guard to the Warehouses Gateway, thereby making certain no savage royd hordes could raid the official pantry. Organization is always key.

The Coalition was wholly ignorant of EarthAd's means of electronic surveillance and communication; without a blueprint or vanguard royds were forced to learn as they went. Yet the ill-equipped and all but unregulated Civilian Guard proved far more formidable than the regular troops—these guys knew every nook and cranny, and freely employed tactics that were surreptitious, untoward, and downright dirty. The campaign to take, as well as to defend Earth

Administration, quickly devolved to the very ballsiest kind of street fighting.

All that night the sides battled throughout Administration. Earthmen had access to limitless supplies—to food, to ammunition, to medical aid—but they were an inherently soft opponent. Royds, by contrast, were pretty much on their own, yet they had heart and grit, and an enemy on the ropes. The first truce came at noon the following day, though not by pact or visual agreement: the humans had simply disappeared, regrouping in underground halls and storehouses constructed at Elis Royd's physical inception.

Mhendu and his Closest used homes, outbuildings, and a series of abandoned shops as walled bivouacs. By now his Next were basically non-combatants—cripples and the unassigned used as couriers. The news was always the same: puppet commanders were running Administration's military; the real ruler of EarthAd was some intellectual shadow going by a variety of titles, but most commonly tagged as 'The Administrator.' Mhendu realized that, whoever and wherever this mystery figure was, it was his, Mhendu's, personal and patriotic duty to make sure he received the same treatment as Emra, Queen of Royds. Mhendu meant to take this idea literally: he intended to drag the human leader up York Peak, hoist him on a battery of spears from Terra Tower, and slowly run him through in view of every Earthman prisoner of war. And after that—?

There would be one hell of a party; he'd make sure of it. The Warehouses would be appropriated, and if they contained anything resembling the brochures' claims, well, royds would be feasting for years to come. EarthAd would become Coalition property, plain and simple. Humans would be locked out, and only let back in when they'd learned some manners. Maybe. Mhendu saw no reason they couldn't, with a little discipline and a whole lot of time, learn to fall in love with a diet of gnawed roots and recycled radioactive condensation. Sparkling water, indeed. And naturalization? The propagan-dized dream drummed into every starving royd, cradle to grave? This was it: this was as far as anyone could go.

All that next day the Coalition fought in the streets and fields, on foot and on horseback, with little sleep—forever chasing opponents that appeared to vanish exhausted and depleted, only to reappear fresh and replenished. At nightfall their dark 'Administrator' was still an elusive figure, but logic dictated human leadership must be holed up somewhere in the administrative complex, back near the West



## Mhendu

Gate entrance. They'd tried everywhere else. Mhendu patiently led his Closest down the quiet roads.

The whole vicinity was sacked, shot, and burned out, though a number of smallish fires occasionally cropped up here and there almost as afterthoughts. Most of the dead royd combatants had been dragged off, presumably to be stored underground for post-combat bounties. Human corpses—guards, soldiers, and civilians—were everywhere.

Mhendu's party galloped up to the Grand Hall's entrance, his Closest fanning out, forming a phalanx, fanning out . . . the group dismounted atop the final flight, left their steeds with an auxiliary, and carefully worked their way around the front. Mhendu peeked inside—the Guard were long gone. The Hall itself had been looted by Earthmen, and the forced doors to Council Chambers thrown wide. The party inched along the high walls, pausing every few feet to listen: the place was quiet as a morgue. They moved into the high-windowed Council Chambers, now lit eerily by a building just catching fire. All the adjoining rooms had been violated; broken into, ransacked. Yet one door, secreted behind an iron staircase, was only half-open; something inside had spooked the looters. Mhendu and his Closest placed their backs against the wall, and one by one squeezed through.

Behind was a dark stairwell, cool and drafty. Despite the ventilation, a strong charnel smell clung to the walls and steps. They tiptoed down, and so came into the bleak interrogation crypt. Just inside the crypt door were a raggedy man and his two raggedy sons, nailed to standing beams. The weight of their bodies had caused their fingers and wrists to tear through the nails, and they were now crumpled in a touching family embrace. A crushed wall accounted for the draft. There was no point in checking the dozens of royds racked, impaled, flayed, scalded, and hanged. The stench of rotting bodies was so nauseating, even in that drafty place, that the Closest found themselves incapable of basic sympathy. They were just turning to leave when one noticed the little Cept sitting alone in the largest cell.

The boy looked up as Mhendu walked in. "How'd you get in here? Through the door, or through that wall?"

The boy nodded.

Mhendu went down on one knee. "What're you doing here, son? Where're your parents?" The boy shrugged. "Don't you have a mother?" The boy shrugged again. "Then where's your father?" The boy looked up at the huge gristle-tipped hook.

Mhendu winced as he rose. He'd lost his own father as a child, and was himself childless; the depressing atmosphere, the corpses about them, the many lost in battle—he'd never felt so cut off. On impulse he reached down, lifted the Cept, and rocked him on his shoulder. "You're not alone any more, boy." He gestured with his free hand. "A pretty shabby family, to be sure, but . . . you're coming with us." He carried him up the steps and set him down in Chambers. "How'd you find your way into EarthAd? Were you here before all the fighting started?"

The boy shook his head.

"Well, you sure didn't fly in."

The boy grinned and thumped his little tail on the floor. He gestured downward repeatedly. "Under."

"So. You're not a mute, anyway. What do you mean by 'under'?"

"Bridge."

"What bridge?"

"Tunnel."

"There's a tunnel under us? A bridge in a tunnel? Do you think you can show me?"

The stubby tail thumped harder. And so the Cept boy led the group across the city, sometimes riding on Mhendu's broad shoulders, sometimes running ahead. The party moved on foot, as circuitously as possible, keeping low in the shadows. They snuck into the warehouse, crept through the jumble, and one by one dropped onto the ledge. Mhendu listened with all his senses.

"That sound . . . very far away—machinery. Those are the pumps." He gripped the Cept's shoulders. "Are those the city's pumps?" The boy shrugged. "It's their power plant, isn't it? The one that runs the whole place, re-circulates the air and water, makes all the lights and appliances work?" The boy shrugged along with each clause, an idiotic grin on his bobbing face. Mhendu turned to his Closest. "They're dead without light and power. We've got to follow that sound."

Now, royds aren't particularly squeamish about cockroaches, having shared their hit-and-run existence so long. The little party quickly forsook the main ledge for a series of descending wall outgrowths, crossed a spiraling bridge, and began shinnying down columns. The maters came out to meet them. It grew more active the deeper they climbed: the royds had never imagined maters anywhere near as large as these acrobatic purple monsters—the things were

responding to the party's clambering vibrations by looping their tentacles around bridges in anticipation, hoping to exploit any wayward footfalls. And suddenly they were everywhere, emboldened by the pheromonal fear-scent, only beaten back by bullets and well-placed shafts. The group all voiced the creeps, unusual for royds—they couldn't have known that wilderness maters, recognized as mere corpse-sucking vermin in the broader scheme of things, had *evolved*, in this spacious, mildly radioactive environment, into bloodsucking predators accustomed to raiding Administration for infirm humans, unsupervised children, and injured animals. It just got worse and worse: larger specimens came out of the dark like hammerheads, while the occasional grandmater watched brooding, her many sucker-lips smacking with impatience. There were also long-established, yet entirely unknown species inhabiting EarthAd's underworld: there was some kind of living ooze that preyed upon sick and crippled roaches while showing an unnerving curiosity about these new, much larger visitors; there were blind leapers that immediately swarmed any unfortunate party caught hosting one of their own—the royds had to quickly beat them off each others' backs or risk infection; there were very, very dark things that at first seemed shadows, yet relentlessly stalked the climbers, parting and reforming as they moved. The fuzzy sallow light was stronger in some places, paralleled by an increased clarity in the thudding of machinery, so that the royds' meandering course was set more by circumstances than foresight. Sometimes the way became almost horizontal, branching eastward for what seemed miles, only to drop by degrees, circle back, drop some more, and branch again. Eventually the roar of water grew universal; and a slimy condensation was felt on the porous rock. Something in its composition brought on a common complaint of nausea and malaise, compelling the explorers to monitor their breathing and to occasionally wipe down.

The party set foot on a narrow, perfectly level rocky bank. What appeared to be an underground sea stretched before them—actually a regulated body of water contained in an artificial basin some hundred feet deep, perhaps five hundred yards wide, and with a breadth lost in a backlit, oddly sparkling haze. The thumping and wheezing came from beyond that haze. And from places far away came the sound of massive volumes of cascading water, landing in basins at progressively deeper levels.

The walls of this particular basin were fabricated, making it actually more a room than a cavern. A sickly violet-green algae ran

around the rim, partway up the facing walls, and deep into the still water. There was nowhere to stand other than the ledge they presently occupied; it was wall-to-wall water. Those cavernous side-walls were actually great components housings, holding technological mysteries of no interest whatever to the royds—what did interest them was a nearby 12 x 12 aluminum cover, hanging at an angle by a single huge bolt. Its surface was unbroken, and once they'd torn it free it proved a good three feet deep, and more than capable of supporting them all. There was no current; without oars, they were forced to use their hands and rifle butts. They pushed off hard, and the raft moved freely into the mist.

It was very slow, very disquieting going: that heavy thudding vibrated the water's pea-soup surface, and made the depressing mist seem to heave and roll. Soon they were fogbound. The royds, in no hurry to paddle into complete obscurity, sat back on their haunches and spoke with their eyes. The raft slid to a stop.

In a bit the water just to port showed bubbles along the surface. That little event was quickly mirrored by another to starboard, and another directly ahead. The Closest leaned down, studying these disturbances like cats. Other than the gentle sounds of percolation, it was dead quiet.

Something thumped the bottom.

The raft turned gently and bobbed. The royds fingered their weapons.

And the raft kicked up three feet. A thorny brown tentacle slapped over the side. Another rolled up from behind, pinning a royd by the legs. Two more tentacles then locked the raft in place, and seconds later a long conical trunk split the surface, dripping dirty pearls in the murk. The thing swayed hypnotically, all sucker-ringed mouth and heaving gills. It came in like a snake, intuitively going for the pinned royd.

Mhendu's first shot caught it dead-on. The head shook madly, dipped and rose, jerked back and forth. His second and third, made errant by the raft's motion, caught the neck just above the waterline, then everybody was up and firing. The head splattered like a ripe melon, the tentacles flew off the raft, and the whole ghastly thing shot flapping below the surface. Excited by the bucking of the raft, those maters following overhead blindly thrust and swept their graspers, only to be snagged, yanked free of their holds, and shot thrashing in the water.

## Mhendu

“Enough!” Mhendu whispered. He used his rifle’s barrel as a stirrer. The ripples spread and passed; the surface remained unbroken. Those maters still attached to the rock ceiling receded into the mist, and the royd’s carefully resumed paddling. The fog, dissipating, was gradually replaced by a soft amber light. A kind of brooding backdrop became apparent, and at last the raft kissed the basin’s far side.

Elis Royd’s vaunted atomic plant squatted on twenty thousand square feet of reinforced concrete, two hundred feet deep and locked into the asteroid’s natural substructure. The whole area was overshadowed by massive conical tanks, heaving pumps, and strangely wrought machines, all winking with the system’s perpetually rock-steady pulse. The command station itself was igloo-shaped, battleship gray; surprisingly unimposing. There was no door, just a broad portal revealing a sparsely lit interior. While they were staring, something pallid and long lurched across the dock and slid into the water without leaving a ripple. The royd’s crept up in single file, not sure what to expect. Inside they found countless racks and gauges, feeders and faders, cables and bays—an unbelievably sophisticated system to these simple wilderness folks.

Mhendu set down the Cept boy. “Now what?” He ran his fingers over the glass-fronted meters with secret admiration. “This tells me nothing.” He tapped a bank of pulsing touch pads. The pads glowed softly in response. “This tells me less.”

“Mathematics,” muttered a Closest. “Gibberish.”

The boy scampered beneath the equipment. In a minute he jumped up on a table and began gleefully hammering a rack of meters with a fire extinguisher. Mhendu threw out a restraining arm, then looked closer. “Maybe he’s onto something.” He wrestled the extinguisher from the boy, said, “Only one way to tame a monster,” and smashed it against a row of meters. Nothing happened. He tried elsewhere, again and again. The place was solid.

“Allow me,” said a Closest, and shot three rounds into the wall-to-wall motherboard. Everybody jumped outside. Ten seconds later they were all blasting away, weaving side to side while bullets ricocheted like popping corn. The station lights flickered and quit, followed immediately by the dock lamps. The pumps labored and wheezed, the big machinery kicked and stalled. The housings’ seams burned brilliant white, some kind of alarm bleated twice, and just like that the cavern went absolutely dark. After an uncertain pause the royd’s whooped and threw themselves into a blind victory embrace. But their spontaneous little celebration was short-lived: high over-

head, punctuated by the groans of some large straining device, there came the oddest rumbling.

Black streams began pouring off the ceiling and cascading down the walls—the pumped surface water was smashing level to level, overflowing basins, spilling into progressively deeper wells. The royds had to duck back inside and wait it out—there was no telling how high the water would rise, and no hope of finding an escape route in the utter darkness.

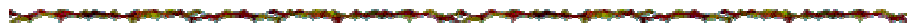
Gradually the thunder diminished and the cascades thinned. Somewhere a buzzer kicked in, emitting an endless series of harsh triple blasts.

A ruby glow appeared in the basin, accompanied by a slowly growing whine. The water began to steam, a hairline crack raced across the dock. The glow, pulsing as it grew, played upon the walls and turned the algae purple-brown.

Mhendu and his Closest crept to the basin's edge; tiny bunched silhouettes on a platform in Hell—the whole cavern was throbbing in a dull red haze. A number of rocks dropped into the basin, throwing up broad pink fountains. The glow intensified and the water began to boil.

They ran looking for an exit, only to find the lift's car locked in place at the top. There were no doors or hatches. The walls were polished concrete, without handholds.

And that low background whine surged and rose until it became a non-stop, ululating howl. The cavern shook. With a resounding crack, a huge piece of ceiling plummeted onto the dock, broke off the lip, and crashed into the water. The royds huddled and embraced, calling back and forth while chunk after chunk rained on the basin. And the dock broke up, and the walls cracked like glass. The pylons gave, the struts collapsed, and a heartbeat later the entire ceiling came screaming down.



The Administrator watched another piece of real estate vanish: kicked round the rim, caved at the center, sucked into the asteroid's bowels. The world was coming apart.

Without power, the only source of illumination was firelight, but there was plenty of that: lots of homes and shops were still on fire, and a number of burning farmsteads showed as pinpoints of light.

## Mhendu

Even as he stared, a huge chunk not far from the complex broke up, appearing to revolve slightly before pouring into a new abyss.

To an observant man, the pattern was evident: subsurface columns and bridges making up the asteroid's skeleton were holding fast, but the highly-compacted crust was collapsing in sections—this could only be due to some profound subterranean disturbance. Land farthest from the bridges, lacking any deeper support, was going quickly, while the gigantic cliffs of packed earth at the perimeters only gradually slid from view. The result was a growing latticework of column-supported bridges overlooking the world's seething interior. As each burning sector passed into oblivion, so passed the dwindling illumination.

The Administrator, watching from Terra Tower's circular observation deck, was moved in a way he hadn't experienced since puberty. He was no geologist, and no physicist, but as the only living man with access to Application's thorough records banks, he was the only one with a pretty good idea of the catastrophe's true nature; he knew the atomic plant's location, realized the power was dead, and had no problem putting two and two together.

Earthmen and royds were done fighting; they could be seen running about willy-nilly, many desperately scrambling up banks of caving earth. The thickest succumbed in the centers, while the more intelligent stuck to the rims, and so eventually worked their way to the safety of bridges. The Administrator's vantage was 360: he could clearly make out innumerable panic-stricken citizens, unable to escape through the blocked turnstiles, fighting to weigh down the fences. The fences were too tough to fall, but the initial eviscerated scalers provided excellent flesh cushions for their followers. Those managing to squeeze out the turnstiles never looked back.

York Peak gave a warning tremble. The Administrator quietly descended the Tower's outer spiral staircase, pausing meaningfully on each step. He'd outwitted every foe he'd ever met, mastered a career and family, honed his strengths and tamed his weaknesses, dreamed and schemed his way to the very top. But like any man secure in his prowess, he hadn't given a thought to the business of dying.



The Great Roach has always been an opportunist.

When death is in the air, it's able to determine the breadth of that tragedy, locate the source from miles away, and use a number of

adaptive tricks to gauge its victims' ability to retaliate against swarms, teams, and individual raiders.

Its many feelers—*cross-evolved* appendages contributed by hundreds of imported species—are able to function as remote sensory equipment. Thus the Great Roach utilizes a kind of radar to zero in on *tremors of profound agony* (the GR is all but useless in cadaver scrounging, a feat largely monopolized by the mater, its grudging symbiotic partner). The Great Roach can also mark and relocate its kills with personalized pheromone trails for return snacks, and emit a mild electric charge to rouse any unconscious prey saved for a chaser (there's nothing like horrified thrashing and screaming to get the digestive juices flowing).

First inside West Gate were the smaller, hit-and-run grave-robbers that have always competed with the perimeter roach. Small and inefficient though these robbers are (generally under five feet, and unable to manage anything larger than a child without first dissolving it in salivary extracts), they are true Great Roaches, with compound guts adapted for humans as well as roysds. This distinction is important, as it explains just how those ravening leviathans of the canyons were able to exploit the bloody trauma of Earth Administration. To wit: the unusual liveliness of graverobbers at the Gate was manifested in intense vibrations of their foremost dorsal antennae, creating an atmospheric disturbance readable by the highly sensitive feelers of the canyon Great Roaches. The latter made for the compound post-haste, and within hours arrived in swarms numbering in the several thousands.

By that time their excitement was an unstoppable thing.

West Gate was well guarded, though it had never been repaired due to the near-constant influx of roysds late to battle (a mixed blessing for EarthAd, as plenty of those marching soldiers-to-be ended up as appetizers for the first wave of rapacious Great Roaches). In their horror, the shocked Gate Guard fired hardly a shot, but the minor noise and resulting confusion sent the bulk of the Roaches up and over the wall, and once in the courtyard they found plenty to keep them busy. Even so: though the perimeter fences were designed solely to prevent royd access, they proved impenetrable to the Great Roach. Many of these monsters were sliced to ribbons on razor wire, only to be dragged back down and devoured piecemeal by their fellows.

At any rate, there wasn't a whole lot left to protect, and most of the Gate Guard had already bailed, going for brute survival in the

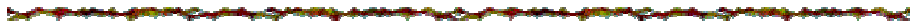


## Mhendu

wilderness over being sucked into the rapidly evolving black hole of Administration. These earliest fleeing guards soon met their ends in the Great Roach juggernaut, as did the reluctant defenders, the straggling royds and deserting Civilian Guard, the mortified mothers and their terrified children, the shopkeepers and civil servants, the homeowners and the homeless, the farmers and the tradesmen, the wounded and the infirm, the sane and the insane, the newborn and the elderly, and pretty much anything else out of doors, out of options, out of ammunition, and edible.

## *Chapter Ten*

### The Administrator



To a thinking man, no vision of Gehenna could be more specacular or surreal: on a field lit only by stars were hundreds of marauding Great Roaches; fighting over cadavers, running down hysterical Earthmen and royds, laying into anything they could tackle.

The Administrator stood motionless in the rubble of a fine old two-story, watching without emotion as a man hurled his family into a widening pit to spare them a slower horror. Ordinarily he'd have been transfixed—now he felt . . . nothing.

There was a predictable, nauseating pattern:

The opening of each new chasm would be followed by a momentary lull. The perimeters would appear to quiver and rock.

And the rims would come alive: thousands of those footlong gray roaches would pour out like overflowing water, radiating in swarms that just as abruptly vanished into adjacent pits. Maters, clinging out of view, would flop their long purplish bleeder necks along the crumbling rims in search of scrabbling humans; they'd pull themselves root to root, then drag themselves topside by latching onto the limbs of corpses and ravening Great Roaches.

Even as he watched, a great column of superheated steam blew out of the crust half a mile away—a basin geyser, one of many to

## The Administrator

come. This, too, struck him as just another detail in an endless 3D nightmare.

He clasped his hands at the small of his back and wandered, lost in thought—there were razors in his quarters, along with various household poisons that, when mixed in the correct proportions and taken on an empty stomach . . . self-inflicted wounds by gun or blade are just *so* pedestrian . . . to leap poetically from the heights: ah, but into what . . . the Administrator brooded as he walked, his tranquil behavior making him that much less noticeable in the general feast and flurry.

He stopped.

A soul-deep sickness had just radiated from his chest to his shoulders. He had to rest, had to sit. All the excitement—this was no place for a sedentary man. And the air was certainly more rarefied. The pumps . . . he fell back against a burned-out building on a chasm rim, dully watching the world die.

In a few minutes he felt stronger. He rose and looked longingly at the blacked-out Administration complex, accessible only by crossing half a dozen of these spiny tapering bridges. Elis Royd's engineers had constructed the complex above the asteroid's most thickly-columned latticework; it would surely be the last to go. He stepped to the first bridge and looked down, feeling all the dread of a novice parachutist.

The chasm walls were absolutely alive with millions of gray roaches, with thirsting grandmaters swinging gymnastically column-to-bridge-to-ledge, with climbing humans, royds, and Great Roaches tangled up in the necks of furiously sucking young and adult maters.

He tiptoed out and paused, forcing himself to not look down.

This was a zen challenge.

The Administrator, walking upright and with forced calm, reached the middle, paused again, and steadily proceeded to the end. He crossed the first five bridges pretending the crawling horror below was all a dream, keeping his respiration absolutely steady, and controlling his balance by holding his arms at a relaxed, admirably maintained forty-five degrees.

But by the time he was halfway across the final bridge he was a nervous wreck. His rigid arms, now out at right angles, dipped and windmilled with each step; his teeth were grinding right into his skull, spots flashed and swam before his eyes. His trembling only made the bridge seem more precarious, and then—*smack*—a mater had him by the ankle.

He went straight down, instinctively embracing the bridge.

A second and third neck wrapped around his left arm and thigh. He automatically shifted his grip and rolled, and if it hadn't been for the clinging mater he'd have spun right off the bridge. The Administrator lunged forward, tearing the mater free and hauling it airborne. He had to weave and bob to avoid its many whipping necks, but the thing was desperate for a grip; in seconds he'd taken one across the eyes, and another right in the mouth. He immediately peeled off the high one and bit down hard—the high neck shot out of his hands, the injured neck flailed wildly, snapped back, and wrapped around his throat. He staggered along on his hands and knees dragging the thrashing mater, finally collapsing full-out on a relatively wide length of bridge.

The Administrator rolled onto his back, tore off the neck and gripped it, jerking and snapping, six inches from his nose. A pursing ring of suckers pushed out of the bleeder's mouth.

The instant that mouth clamped on his cheek the Administrator freaked—he ripped it off and swung the mater round and round by its wounded neck, hurled it kicking and screaming into the chasm, and recovered just in time to catch the bridge with an arm and a leg. With the last of his strength he pulled himself back up.

A sharp pain squeezed his chest and rolled down his dangling left arm. His brain told him he was a fool not to rest, but something deeper—a horror of losing consciousness, of being eaten alive—drove him wheezing to his hands and knees.

The bridge broadened at the rim. The scary crossings, the recent struggle: by now the Administrator was really shaken—so shaken he was completely unaware of another presence until the Great Roach's drooping antennae were almost in his face. He froze on all fours, looking into a horseshoe-shaped bank of compound eyes glinting palely with starlight. One antenna dropped. The other hovered for a few seconds, then slowly made its way forward, moving in an up-and-down serpentine motion. When it was right in his face the Administrator's entire frame locked up. The whole fight-or-flight thing was out of him; he couldn't move.

Pointless questions knocked about in his brain: Do doomed animals become immobilized out of self-preservation, on the off chance they'll be overlooked? Or is it just shock, numbing one for the inevitable? Does apprehension give way to acceptance . . . out of some *healthy* give-and-take aspect of the food chain? That certainly seemed the case now. Are life and death naturally in equipoise? At

## The Administrator

that moment the Administrator simply ceased to exist; as a fighter, as a dreamer, as a viable life form. The antenna shivered and fell. The Roach rolled onto its side, then, with a final jerk and heave, onto its back. Its hundred legs kicked wildly for perhaps two seconds and ceased. Now the Administrator could see the huge aluminum signpost protruding from its abdomen.

Triggered by the Great Roach's death throes, a dozen maters immediately flung their necks on the bank, and at least eight more popped out of the dirt. The Administrator was forced to navigate a snapping, wriggling gauntlet. Fighting for breath, he stole around the carcass, stomped on a pair of lunging necks, and hurriedly moved to safer ground.

Now each structure in the complex showed clearly against the stars. The area was deserted. He moved listlessly down the streets, only half-aware of the familiar old homes, shops, and official buildings. Guttled, burned-out, looted, razed.

A rumbling underfoot backed him up to a leaning storefront. The exhausted Administrator just zoned there, paralyzed by the vibrations racing up and down his frame.

Not a hundred yards away, a huge mass of earth kicked up. A sinkhole appeared, pulling in enormous chunks of land from all sides, tearing up the ground radially, widening rapidly—he could only stare as the perimeter came on, expecting at any moment to be swallowed up. A crushing sensation clamped his breastbone, followed by the profoundest sense of morbidity. Molten electricity flowed down his arm. The Administrator paled head to toe.

This was it. He slid down the wall incrementally, a foot at a time, coming to rest with his legs sprawled out and his upturned hands dug halfway into the dirt.

There was no air to breathe; none. His head fell to his shoulder, and he caught a great gasp. Hot sweat soaked his cassock. His fingers and toes crimped. The Administrator closed his eyes, found his center, and passed.

Five minutes later his eyelids cracked apart and he looked out on the same old disaster. Cheated. He'd have to go through it all again, sooner or later. Life still wasn't done with him.

The Administrator laughed as he stumbled down the streets; at everything and at nothing. A playground was abruptly sucked underground; that struck him as funny. A senior center went next. Hilarious. He instinctively made his way to Applications, slowly climbed the steps, and tenderly ran his fingers over the mounted touch

pad's soot-dusted screen. Nostalgically, almost wistfully, he tapped out the old security sequence, and was nearly knocked off his feet when the double doors quietly swung open.

The darkness inside was broken only by a haunting red glow; the source was a nondescript bank of metal cabinets against the east wall. He locked the doors and stepped over.

The light came from a series of liquid crystal display touch pads. The largest, in the center, bore the embossed words:

*EMERGENCY GENERATOR.*

Intrigued, the Administrator tentatively pressed a finger on the pad.

Something kicked under the building and the place lit up like a Christmas tree. The Administrator stepped back. After a few seconds he pressed again. The lights shut down and the centermost pad began blinking. He triggered the generator again, then set about turning off all but the essentials.

Certain recessed lights—he'd never noticed them before—didn't respond to any of the switches. These lights bordered specific doorways, and formed a blinking path on the floor. The Administrator followed, knowing exactly where he was going: the trail led through familiar territory into Records, terminating at the blinking screen he'd haunted a thousand times and more; it was RAT, the Records Access Terminal, hub and wellspring of all worth knowing. He sat in the padded contour recliner and tapped the screen.

The blinking stopped. The screen glowed coolly, separating hues and eliminating angles, until a soothing tidepool-blue swam in mother of pearl. A canned gender-neutral voice came from micro-speakers buried in the console:

*"Thank you. The emergency system has been activated. Sensors indicate a meltdown of QX-Tandem-Oh-Five, with irremediable structural damage. Subsurface stresses are radiating logarithmically. World annihilation is imminent."*

"I do not . . ." the Administrator fumbled, "I do not understand."

*"Thank you. The security system to this building has been deactivated via password. This screen was triggered by the emergency generator. The program itself will be initialized once the security pass that accessed the building is re-entered."*

A backlit exclamatory security logo appeared on the screen, identical to the one embossed on the mounted touchpad outside. The

## The Administrator

Administrator placed his fingertips on the logo and repeated his password.

*“Thank you. The asteroid is determined to destruct in—00-29-17—whereas time is represented in particulars of hours, minutes, and seconds. Please enter your log and obit for Earth Administration now, and seal and launch the box. You have—00-28-53.”*

The Administrator spread his hands. “I have nothing to seal.” He looked around. “I do not know what is meant by ‘launch the box’.”

*“Thank you. Please relay your distress call to the Orbiter monitor. Begin speaking in three, two, one—now.”*

The Administrator’s jaw worked uselessly. “Hello?” he mumbled. He cleared his throat. “Hello! I am unfamiliar with these proceedings! I am to coordinate with a monitor somewhere. If you are hearing me now, I can only tell you that this process is a complete mystery to me. However, I am nominally in command of the vestiges of Earth Administration. There has been some kind of catastrophe—as I understand it, the atomic power plant that supplies the basics to this world has suffered a form of technological calamity. There is much death and suffering. We require urgent assistance, and beg that—”

*“Thank you. Records reveal that the Orbiter was retired at—minus 164-09-17-23-59-07—whereas time is represented in particulars of years, months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds. You may leave a brief bio, as well as a message for your immediate family; include kin related directly by marriage, but exclude kin related by marriage of progeny. You have—00-24-51.”*

The Administrator studied his hands. “Of progeny, I have none,” he admitted. “My wife, you see, was unable to perform her natural duties due to some misbegotten notion concerning a work ethic of which I will frankly—”

*“Thank you. You may request an Intercession. You have—00-23-19.”*

The Administrator balled his hands into fists. He wanted to smash the contraption, so great was his frustration. “I do not know what you mean! I am unfamiliar with these things!”

*“Thank you. You are required to respond in the negative or the affirmative. You have—00-22-46.”*

The Administrator’s shoulders sagged. He unclenched his fists. “Whatever,” he said, and slowly wagged his head. After a minute he sighed, “Yes.”

“Thank you.” An interactive icon appeared, taking up the bulk of the screen:



*“The four pads correspond to cardinal points. They are as follows—Uppermost: forehead. Right: left shoulder. Bottommost: sternum. Left: right shoulder. Please touch each pad as it engages, followed immediately by the corresponding cardinal point. The pads will light in proper sequence. You have—00-19-34.”*

The top pad glowed a soft scarlet. The Administrator curiously tapped it with a forefinger, then touched the finger to his brow. The pad went dark and the lowest lit. The Administrator followed patiently, touching pad to point until he’d crossed himself and completed the sequence.

*“Thank you.”*

Except for the screen, the room went entirely dark: the emergency lights, inside and out, clicked off; the warning indicators and room guidelights vanished. The screen itself became a dull white contoured plate—wholly blank and absolutely neutral. It began blinking off and on, rhythmically, so that the immediate environment smoothly alternated black and white, lost and recovered, unlit and lit. It took a moment for the Administrator to realize the equipment was reading and matching his heartbeat. This very restful experience



## The Administrator

quickly became cloying: the program had locked on his pulse, and was electronically determining its subject's subliminal responsiveness.

The screen filled up with a stupefying hail of spots and flashes. The Administrator's eyes ached with the unnaturalness of it; his skull became congested, his mind a passive sponge. He sat perfectly relaxed, upright hands resting on the console, staring fixedly at that flickering white field until the barrage ceased.

The backbeat released his pulse, the screen dimmed, the room went black.

He sat in deepest darkness, only gradually becoming aware of a smattering of white points cropping up all around the walls. These pinpricks were electronic glyphs meant to represent stars, thousands of them, glowing everywhere. The room was simulating night. He rose woodenly.

The Administrator was standing in a desert hollow, watching those stars shine with a curious beauty unknown on Elis Royd. He was experiencing something cell-deep, something his remote ancestors had breathed in, night after night, long before his own wretched arrival in life. And as he stared, one of those stars appeared to increase in brightness, and to gently drift toward the horizon. It swept down majestically, in slow motion, growing brighter and brighter until it fully lit the sky over a shabby little tent. The Administrator, mesmerized, bent down to check it out, and ended up landing on his knees in that tent, where a poor woman sat swaddling her newborn son. A strange pain ripped through him, and for some reason his eyes welled. The Administrator struggled to his feet, only to find himself following a peculiar receding figure down a dusty desert path. He was one of many in this man's train, and was being jostled left and right. The Administrator elbowed his way forward, turned, and looked into a face that was a steady stream of black bytes on white. He turned back and tripped over the other followers—suddenly so many he had to fight to regain his feet. They were all part of a great crowd, straining to hear the words of that same faceless figure, standing in a rowboat on a little sea. The Administrator climbed through the rapt listeners until he came to a long flight of rock steps. That mystery man was now dragging up a giant wooden cross. He was in heartbreaking shape, and the Administrator had to assist him—had to. He threw out his arms and lunged, landing prostrate at the foot of the cross, now propped upright on a skull-shaped hill. An unbelievable grief ground him down, a desperate pain

that was shared in spades by a handful of others, all crying out to this broken hanging man as though he were the closest of family. The Administrator wept openly as he rose, reached up, and stretched himself to his limits in an unworthy embrace: one hand to each of the crucified man's own—two points—torso to torso—another point—his wracked face falling forward for a final begging kiss.

*"Thank you."*

The lights came up, the apparition vanished, the Administrator's arms dropped to his sides. He stood slumped in the room's center, vaguely hearing, as his senses returned, a pounding and crying without.

The survivors of Elis Royd wanted in.

They'd seen Applications' little light show: couldn't miss it, actually; it was the only electric thing going. The roof's cap was now emitting a steady light-pulse, a computer-generated SOS to nowhere. The Administrator shuffled out of the room, unlocked and hauled open the great double doors.

The entire crowd fell in, one on top of the other. It was a fairly even mix of Earthmen and royds; perhaps two hundred in all.

"Let us stay!" wailed a woman. She hugged a badly wounded Uryndm to her heaving chest. "We don't want to fight any more! We're sorry, we're sorry!"

"Yes!" cried a half-buried man. "We're all sorry—we're sorry, sorry, sorry! Whatever we did, we apologize, and we promise not to do it again! Please let us in."

The Administrator languidly spread his arms. "There is nothing for you here." He numbly stepped through and out into the night.

A different woman embraced his legs. "Oh, please don't leave us. *Please*. Anything you want. We'll do anything. Only just don't leave us."

The Administrator cocked his head. "I am not the one you seek." He continued his slow brooding walk, his hands clasped behind his back, his upturned face fixed on the brilliant night.

The crowd followed him to the top step's lip. "Look up," he said, "to the eastern sky. A star will announce his coming; a falling star that will light the world for all time. In him will you find salvation; not in me, not in yourselves, not in any selfish philosophy of humans or royds. Upon his arrival there will be great celebrations, and all will be well." He turned back, addressing those silhouetting the

## The Administrator

Applications lobby: “Fall on your faces when you see him. Know that your sins are to be borne by one too great to deny.”

A royd grabbed his arm. The Administrator looked on him curiously. The royd’s expression was torn by wonder, his eyes about to bust out of his face. The Administrator studied the crowd and saw that every member was staring at a point just above his left shoulder. He turned.

Among a million stars in that black velvet night, one was falling gracefully, growing larger and brighter as it neared. The impression was uncanny: the Administrator was witnessing the exact sequence, in real time, that he’d viewed in Records.

A great gasp filled his body. His hand shot to his chest.

The royd at his arm embraced him as he fell, eased him to his back, cushioned his head with his lap. The Administrator’s blue lips twitched and writhed. The royd pressed closer.

“I could not see his face,” the Administrator wheezed. “I must see him. In the flesh. I must see him.” The royd fanned him urgently, despite his broken forelimb and lacerated claw.

The light of this star was now so great as to cast shadows. The Administrator’s face, fully illuminated in that expanding pool, grew whiter and whiter, even as his dull eyes correspondingly dimmed. He gripped the royd passionately, although the bleached and blue mask of his face was unable to reflect his joy. “He is come!” he whispered. “He is come, he is come!”

And the beautiful star grew and grew, cutting out the night, laying bare the crowd, and filling up the whole visible sky with its promise of sweet, white, and all-glorious light.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### Storyteller



Captain Warren first noticed Applications' blinking dome from three miles up.

He immediately ordered the expanding field of view narrowed to a single square mile: there was no point in wasting time looking elsewhere; every gauge indicated an asteroid only minutes from coming apart at the seams. The atmosphere was all but gone, the magnetic field veering wildly due to a disrupted rotation—the disintegrating crust was rapidly exposing the true nature of this mechanically packed and paved wiffle ball-world.

Sensors picked up humanoid activity outside Applications, as well as a closing army of Great Roaches. Warren ordered the ship's entire keel lighted as an entry beacon during descent: now Applications and the immediate milieu were brilliantly illuminated.

One benefit of the huge white beam was that the nearest Roaches tended to scatter, or at least back off somewhat. In a minute the captain noticed a band of humans and royds huddled on the top step; seconds later he could make out every detail of their expressions. They appeared in shock; dumbfounded, immobilized, disoriented.

Warren dropped his chin to his chest.

## Storyteller

“All medical and security personnel to Bay. Navigation, put us down a quarter-kilometer from that illuminated structure, but give the keel at least a meter of surface clearance. Be prepared to lift off immediately upon my signal, regardless of head counts. There’ll still be time to seal Bay once we’re off-surface.” He cocked his head, ear to shoulder. “Indications are the air’s going fast. All personnel are to carry half-hour masks.” He backed off a notch. “I know, I know. Meet me in Bay.” Warren handed his reader to an aide and stepped into the pneumatic pit marked ‘Bay’, bracing his shoulders against the cylinder’s smooth plastex wall as he dropped.

Security was already waiting. Medical and a trio of field recorders landed even as the captain was stepping out. There wasn’t an instant to waste on details or the mundane: this was a balls-out emergency, and every member had been on his mark from the moment the ship hit the asteroid’s deteriorating atmosphere.

Warren lowered his chin. “Air?” He cocked his head and looked back up. “Okay . . . go.” Bay’s broad dish of a floor descended with a spiraling hiss.

Applications was now lit strategically, by both static columns and sweeping beams. The great keel light had been switched off so as to not blind the field party. They could see the black hulks of Great Roaches emboldened by an accumulation of shadows. “Security,” Warren said. “Take out any of those things that get within thirty meters. We’re bringing in casualties; fire only when necessary. Medical, two stretchers per team of four. Absolutely no field work. Time frame is four minutes. Go.”

Warren trotted out halfway while his field party ran flanks. The humans and roysds cringed on the top step, terrified of these strange new figures. “Subdue and drag them if necessary,” the captain called. The air was going fast. “If they’re not ambulatory, throw them on the stretchers and get them down here pronto. Three minutes.” The ground shook all around. One half of Applications spiderwebbed and collapsed.

And now the sector including Exxona and Dooport was abruptly ringed by geysers; great pallid exclamation points in the distance. Much farther off, the gorge at Maert’n threw off a mushroom cloud of steam; a second later the whole valley blew into a million pieces.

The medics raced down the steps dragging shell-shocked humans by the dozen; roysds were more inclined to make their own way. Captain Warren waved from his command crouch. “Let’s go,

let's go, let's go!" He grabbed a royd in one hand and a human in the other. The crowd spilled around him. "Security!" he shouted. "Give us a hand! *One minute!*"

Then it seemed everybody was caught up in a mad rush for Bay's waiting lowered floor. Security dropped their weapons and wrestled survivors inside, threw them to the floor, dragged them to the brightly lit hub.

The ground kicked five feet in the air, a humongous roar tore out of the world's bowels, and the atmosphere began to pop and sizzle. "*Go!*" Warren hollered. The screaming crowd piled in. "Lift off!" The keel whined, and the pneumatic hiss of Bay's floor began to spiral in reverse. They all stared out the narrowing space as Applications was swallowed whole.

Bay sealed tight while the ship was still in initial thrust. The cabin pressure quickly recovered, and after thirty seconds of ascending they'd stabilized. The entire floor became a vast active screen showing the ground coming apart below.

No one said a word. They just sat sprawled in each others' arms, staring down between their knees at the rapidly receding debris of their pasts.

It all went very fast. There was a scary half-minute of turbulence, then Elis Royd was just another whirling rock, and the ship might have been gliding on smoothed silk.

Captain Warren lowered his chin. "Real-time reports on all screens. Hospital, man your tubes." He waved to Medical and Security. "Get them all sitting up. I want to know how many are critical." He cocked his head. "No. None that I can see so far." There was a disturbance to his right. A Security member and a wounded royd were carefully dragging a man in a filthy black cassock.

The royd stared up at the captain. "He said he wanted to see you."

Warren went down on one knee, gravely puzzled. "Me?"

"Yes," the royd panted. "He asked . . . he requested—he said that . . . he said he couldn't see your face."

Warren bent closer. The Administrator was ice-blue, throat to forehead. In a moment his lids fluttered and he looked up out of eyes like cloudy gray marbles.

Warren brought his mug in tight. "Sir?"

The Administrator's cheeks and jowls shook. He looked from the captain to the room and back. The strangest expression crossed his face. A second later his eyes rolled up and locked in his skull.

## Storyteller

Warren used two fingers to close the lids, then quietly rocked back on his haunches. “Who was he?”

He and the royd traded stares. Finally the royd said, “Just a man,” and limped over to join the others.

Warren got to his feet and lowered his chin. “Scratch that last. Make it one cold.” He walked up to the crowd of survivors. Minus those being pneumatically shunted to Hospital, they numbered a little over a hundred. A dozen masked and gloved nurses surged down and began picking through the crowd. The humans and roysd looked up uncertainly.

“First things first,” Warren said. “We’ll be segregating the healthy humans from the extraterrestrials to make sure there are no cross-species contaminations. Extraterrestrials, don’t be alarmed. You’re our first priority, and as soon as we get things organized you’ll get your own special area in the back of the ship. Nurses, remove these Earthmen to the galley and make sure they get some good hot chow.” He beamed at the huddling roysd. “Tonight’s stroganoff!” Once the humans had been moved out of Bay, the captain stood as though at a lectern.

“Well then, I guess it’s time we introduced ourselves. I’m Captain Darryl Warren, and you’re aboard the Terran recovery vessel *Nymph*. I saw lots of Earthmen like myself, but I’ve got to admit, some of you guys are radically unfamiliar.”

The crowd was respectfully silent. Warren smiled warmly.

“Now, I feel it’s incumbent on me to provide a basic explanation as to what this is all about, seeing as you’ve been through so much hardship and all. You’ll fill up on the details later. Speeches aren’t really my strong suit; I’m more of the take-charge type, so please bear with me.” He blew out a sigh.

“Okay. The Elis Royd project was designed as a stepping stone for refugees out of the Local Group Wars. It didn’t start out being called Elis Royd, of course; that’s a sort of colloquial shorthand—what folks do to make a place or person familiar. Add to this the fact that your ancestors were still struggling with English, and you see how even straightforward titles can get garbled.

“This place was originally named Ellis Asteroid, after a Terran point of entry called Ellis Island. Earth had a similar problem way back when, due to an international conflict, rather than an intergalactic one. Ellis Island worked out very well; in fact some of the finest people on the planet were naturalized there, and became citizens of a great big wonderful country called the United States of

America. Right now we're waiting to lock into the outposts grid, but you'll be able to read all about it once we get under way, in our ship's huge social studies library. Anyway, with all the superior minds America absorbed, she came to be the predominant nation on Earth, and her government and social policies were triumphant throughout the Solar System, and eventually the Galaxy itself. But then she became embroiled in LGWI and II, and next thing you know she was, well, the wet nurse to countless refugees from hundreds of worlds.

"In time the United Galaxy of America stabilized. Now war is a thing of the past. All the differences were ironed out, everybody forgave everybody, and the idealized inhabitants of Ellis Asteroid became the poster children of extraterrestrials everywhere. You guys are practically heroes. The *Nymph* was sent out to bring you to the ceremony you deserve—and talk about good timing—you're going to Planet Earth Herself, to be naturalized as Earthmen! Think of it! And you'll be just as good as any real Earthman. Why, you've got the lingo down, and you know all the tricks.

"Plus, you won't be hampered by any extraterrestrial physical handicaps. You see, this was a very, very big asteroid; almost as big as the planet Earth. They wanted to make it as much like home as they could, so you folks would be all good to go when the time came. They wanted you to become what they call *acclimated*—ready to take up proper residence in the Solar System. So they brought in all kinds of Earth animals and plants; horses and trees, dogs and pretty birds. At first they thought there'd be problems with an artificially-induced rotation, with a lighter gravitational field, with recycled water and air . . . but you know what? Turns out the body adapts, and beautifully. Muscles get stronger, the respiratory and digestive tracts alter ever so slightly; doesn't matter where you're from, so long as your cells use oxygen. Time heals all things.

"Then they brought in electronic tutors and simulated librarians—I'm told the entire Books Of Solar Wisdom resided, in a virtual sense, in that building where we picked you up. Pretty neat, huh? Well, are there any questions so far?"

A little old royd half-covered in gauze raised a broken claw. "How come you abandoned us?"

Warren took a step back. "Hey, I didn't abandon anybody, okay?"

"Not you personally. I mean your super-great great granddaddies. These 'Solar Wisdom' Earthmen you mention. How come they just left us here to rot?"



## Storyteller

The captain spread his arms. “You see? This is *exactly* what I was talking about. I’m here to give you folks a cursory explanation; all the details are in the ship’s Library.”

“Then let’s *hear* your ‘cursory explanation’!”

There was an affirmative grumbling.

“Fair enough.” Warren folded his arms across his chest. “Those political men who red-lighted the Elis Royd project were under a lot of pressure. We were at war. Funds had dried up. There simply wasn’t the wherewithal, in any sense, to maintain this thing. In retrospect, it was a very selfish thing to do. And that very selfish thing can’t be undone. But it can be remedied. And that’s why the *Nymph*’s here.

“A war of this breadth taught us a thing or two about social evolution. We learned humility. Throughout history, mankind’s tenure was marked by egocentricity, by hypocrisy, by lust and by greed. But we’ve grown up. We used to justify everything, as though values were temporary, and as though faith existed solely for the sake of expunging one’s conscience. We would fight: man to man, family to family, nation to nation; always pointing the finger everywhere but at ourselves. There was no accountability.

“Then something happened. Our scientists tell us that we have evolved socially, rather than just physically, and that it took a great war to make it so. And those scientists tell us we are virtually a new species; grounded in compassion and charity, in foresight and fair play. Anything we can do for you, *anything*, just won’t be good enough. We want to help. We *need* to help. Just ask. Anyone?”

“My mate,” called a royd female, barely able to hold back her tears. “He is missing. I know he was with us on the steps. Please see if he was taken to your hospital.”

Warren dropped his arms. “Well you see, it’s like this. During a medical emergency we need all our people on their toes. They can’t just drop what they’re doing to look for relatives.”

“But can’t you have one of your people do a quick check?”

“Sorry,” said the captain, strolling with interest before the crowd. “Out of the question.” He paused to pat a little shmrag’s knotty skull. “Hey there! What’s your name, son?”

“Gubyrhmtlynnkxr.”

Warren smiled winningly. “Hmmm. Now there’s a mouthful for you. Well, y’know, back on Earth we have a kind of game where we give our friends nicknames. So we’ll just call you ‘Goober’ for short. What do you say? You like that?”

“Do you have a nickname on Earth?”

“Oh, heck. They just call me Dashing Darryl, but what’s in a name, eh, Goobs? It’s respect that’s important.” He gave the boy a pat on the tail. “Now you just waddle along, son.”

Warren pointed at a pregnant glenk urgently waving her raised forepaw.

“Ma’am?”

The glenk brought the paw back down to her lap. “We have been through so much . . . please do not be angry, sir. I have been, well . . . expecting, for some time now. My condition requires that I . . . you know, when the need arises . . .”


“I understand.”

“I will need privacy and many . . . implements for clean-up—*very* soon now.”

“Of course, of course.” Warren wagged his head sadly. “But unfortunately, you see, our lavatories are not outfitted for, well, misshapen occupants. So regretfully—” the captain snapped his fingers, positioned his chin, and said, “Facilities for the extraterrestrials?” He cocked his head and his face lit up. “Bingo!” Warren re-addressed the royds: “Never underestimate the resourcefulness of *Homo sapiens*. We’re setting up another special area for you guys in Garbage. There’s plenty of room between the bins and—guaranteed no waiting.” He snapped his fingers again. “Nurse, show this fine lady to Garbage. Make sure she gets plenty of extra candy wrappers. Anybody else?”

“I have a question,” said a young male *Emphesnu*. “I am impressed with the ability of this one species to attain what it so adamantly seeks, with a drive that is both blind and visionary. How is it that no other race of beings has come even close to matching your accomplishments?”

“Ah! A philosopher. Well, sir, there’s this amazing foundation to the cosmos. Everybody gets what he has coming to him. You don’t just need our wits and fortitude, you need something called *karma* on your side, which, roughly expressed, means your results will be the sum total of your actions. We humans have reached the status of cosmic demigods not because we begged for it, but because we earned it. We’re unique. So you see, my questing young friend, every species will meet its match, and every world will get what it deserves. Excuse me.” Warren cocked his head and listened intently. “Roger that.” He turned back to smile at the royds. “Saddle up there, ‘Earthmen’. You’re going home!”



Tucked into Bay's darkest corner, the seven foot Great Roach tentatively placed her upper dorsal antennae on the deck and slowly swept left and right.

To one side was bright artificial light. Voices could be felt, ricocheting off the white steel walls.

The other side was all shadows and silence. The broad vents of several open flues could be seen; wide tin tunnels leading from the heaters to all decks.

Riveted to a steel half-column was a brass plate with the boldly emblazoned legend *NYMPH*, followed by some smaller raised characters. She tested it with a long shiny mandible feeler, tracing the big letters. Her swollen egg-case seemed to ache in response.

The Roach raised her carapace off the floor by jacking up her anterior feelers. Although she was stimulated by the scents of oil and garbage, her basic maternal instincts compelled her to first find a place of dank safety. She hissed and deposited a pheromone-laced stain, then, with a quick sniff around, darted through the shadows like a thief in the night.