

Hanako's Heart
Book One of the Kilesa Trilogy
By Tomek Piorkowski

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A note from the Author

This novel represents work done from late 2001 to late 2006, and I consider it, truth be told, an unfinished work. This is the eighth draft/revision of the text. Yet after working it over so many times over so many years, I have grown weary of it, and now I release it onto the internet as is, after a year of ignoring it. I hope that any avid reader of science fiction will enjoy it, if one is not put off by my frequent divings into surrealism (I have perhaps been too much influenced by Philip K. Dick in this sense). Also, I hope the reader will be forgiving of my many experiments in style, which perhaps make the novel uneven in its reading, and the ludicrous amount of references, some of which may come across as bizarre.

This work is released under a Creative Commons licence, and as such this work may be freely distributed provided no payment is asked. In the unlikely event that someone may want to make a derivative work (ie fan fiction), that someone is free to do so, again provided that no payment is asked for in its distribution. The Corporate Universe may still be fertile ground for many more stories.

Although this is the first part in a trilogy, it is unlikely that I shall ever write its sequels, as other projects have long since overcome my desire to work on this 'Kilesa' trilogy; however, the two sequels were meant to be sequels in the sense that they continued the underlying philosophical and moral discussion, rather than being actual continuations of the story. Thus in terms of story this novel is a complete whole.

I hope then, that five years of work has not been totally wasted, and that a few readers will find merit in this little science fiction novel.

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Part One - The Beating Core

"There are these three roots of unskillfulness. Greed as a root of unskillfulness, aversion as a root of unskillfulness, delusion as a root of unskillfulness."

- The Lord Buddha (The Pali Canon, Itivuttaka III.1)

The student must learn

It was only then that Smuggler Knight realised he was covered in blood.

His breathing was deep but controlled, his heart beat fast but not heavily palpitating. Nevertheless, he felt that his mind was about to slide into panic. To stop this, Smuggler Knight deliberately decided to regroup himself, to carefully reanalyse his situation starting from the most very basic assumptions :

1) What happened?

1-a) Smuggler Knight had walked into a trap.

1-b) Smuggler Knight had managed to fight his way out of it.

2) Where is this place?

2-a) Smuggler Knight was aboard a spacestation. He could feel the gentle, omnipresent throbbing, so typical of spacestations, that tapped the underside of his boots through the deck floor.

2-b) More specifically, Smuggler Knight was in a large and vacant storage room aboard this specific spacestation.

2-c) More importantly, Smuggler Knight was aboard a spacestation which fell under the jurisdiction of a Corporate vassal, the Shareholder Tang Yu-lin¹. Said Shareholder will soon want Smuggler Knight dead.

3) Who is this person, standing here?

3-a) Smuggler Knight was someone who was to be very dead very soon if he did not get out of Shareholder Tang Yu-lin's territory extremely quickly.

3-b) Smuggler Knight had just killed four people, this being the reason for supposition 2-c and also 3-a

4) What now?

4-a) Smuggler Knight would first pray to his Ancestors for guidance.

4-b) Smuggler Knight would analyse his context, decide an action, and follow the action through.

Analysis of the context. Why is context so important? Without context, a moment of time has neither a past nor a future, it has neither an inheritance nor anything to bequeath. Without past or future, the present may as well not exist, the presence of the present moment is obliterated.

Analyse the context carefully. Where is this present moment coming from? Where shall this present moment go to?

It must be studied. It is important. With a careful study, the causality of reality is looked over, and the consequences of actions are hidden behind smoke. It is said that those who study according to a system are those most successful at those studies. One of the most common systems of study is to study the work in chronological order. We shall need to go to the beginning.

In the beginning (a context)

Is there any true beginning to a story? Or a true ending? In truth, there are no beginnings and endings but merely one continuous narrative, cut at certain points for the sake of finiteness, yet still dependent on what came before and what shall come after.

And thus *this* narrative begins long after an ending, but throughout this tale it shall be apparent that the history that ended so long ago permeates this one. And the events of *this* history shall, no doubt, influence another beginning, long after this history has ended. The history of one happening cannot happen in isolation of what preceded it or what shall follow it as a consequence. There is always a context.

So when does this history start? What number of calendar shall we assign to this beginning? What good are calendars? - every time some new prophet comes up, with his own fantastic version of an Almighty Divine, his followers promptly reset the calendar to zero, ensuring that time shall never ever grow too old in years. And as for years, shall we use Earth years? Earth has become an insignificant planet, good only for ones interested in buying slaves to work on factory planets and in finding Abrahamic prophets. There are now various years of more significant orbits.

But in this beginning there are in fact several calendars in use, by the various space faring groups, each with their own version of a year. Attempts at introducing a universal calendar have failed, since they invariably failed in adjusting to local needs. Yet one achievement was made, in that the various types of years now approximated one another in length.

Still, there was this vexing problem of when to pin the year zero. On Earth, this was solved by firmly placing the pin on the death or birth or life of religious figures; but in colonised space, in which religion multiplied and mutated into an uncountable number of forms, there are far too many holy men to choose from.

So, as in the days of the ancient, prophet-despising Hellenes, time was measured from the last significant political event, and in this narrative, that event occurred ten years ago: an ending, a zero-causing event. It was the siege and final fall of the nation of Old Italy to the Corporation.

Old Italy, so named because those people were proud of upholding ancient Italian traditions, had been the hegemon of the colonised galaxy. With defeat, the hegemony of a vast interstellar empire went to the leader of the Corporation, the Chief Executive Officer Czerwon². It was not only a changing of masters, but the spiritual forces governing the galaxy had changed. It was the victory of quantity over quality, of factory over workmanship, of capitalism over dignity.

Yet the Corporation, exhausted from the war against the Old Italians, was not strong enough to assert its control over the galaxy. Even though ten years have passed after the fall of Old Italy, Free Traders still hold out in their Zone, unfearing pirates sail the starscapes and various territories are controlled, not by the CEO Czerwon, but by nominal allies, warlords but referred to as the shareholders. There are many who prefer the new order, as well as many who preferred the old ways and are the Corporation's enemies - of course, the greatest numbers belong to the apathetic, as has always been the case throughout history.

We now have our zero, our context – the fall of Old Italy - the ending before our beginning; and out of this beginning shall arise a new ending. Ever as history goes on, calendars reset due to some occurrence or other, to new zeros. Such a resetting will occur in this narrative.

Now let's narrow the context, to a place aboard a spacestation in a territory under the control of Shareholder Tang Yu-lin, where an out of work smuggler is about to walk into a trap.

The swordfighting stance of the House of Knight

Smuggler Knight had been in many dangerous situations. He had made a name and reputation during the siege of Old Italy, where he had become a part of the Royal Italian navy, running through Corporate blockades. In those great old days, he had made quite a lot of money on various dangerous missions. But he never got himself into stupid situations.

With a quick indrawing breath, Smuggler Knight silently called upon his Ancestors. Smuggler Knight found himself caught in a situation as stupid, as it was dangerous.

He had been looking for work on a spacestation³ on the outskirts of the Corporate empire. The station was within territory under the administration of a Corporate ally by the name of Shareholder Tang Yu-lin. It was an open secret that the Shareholder profited from lucrative trade in various illegal narcotic drugs, and Knight had thought that perhaps he could get a smuggling job or two amidst all the drug running. But smuggler work had momentarily dried up, and Knight had passed his name around so that if anyone was interested they would know who to call.

Unfortunately it just so happened that the son of the shareholder, known as Prince Tang, was fascinated by swordfighting. Swordfighting had experienced a revival back in the days of gun-shy space travellers - bullets used to be dangerous aboard gentle-hulled spaceships - but now was mostly carried on by its few remaining adherents for the sake of tradition. Prince Tang was even an avid student of the history of swordfighting and of the great swordfighters. Now one of the greatest of these men was Knight's great-grandfather, also by name Smuggler Knight. This great-grandfather was perhaps the most famous swordsman of his time, and created his own style, the style of the House of Knight. Knight's great-grandfather's influence was so great that he also to some extent influenced the Smuggler's Code, of which every member of the Knight family swore to uphold as a code of honour and conduct, and which used to be upheld by all smugglers in general.

Raised in luxury and grown arrogant under the sheltering wing of his father's power, the impetuous Prince Tang longed to test his swordfighting abilities against a warrior of skill - as opposed to his servants, who generally lost to him because they were too frightened of the consequences of beating him. When word reached him that a smuggler called Knight had been going around looking for work, he immediately recognised the name. After sending his servants to investigate, they confirmed to the prince that the smuggler in question was a member of the House of Knight.

Soon after, Smuggler Knight, lured by the promise of a lucrative job, walked into a large, empty storage deck of the spacestation. Walked straight into a trap.

The deck was mostly empty except for a few large crates scattered about. The smuggler was walking towards the prince and was about to give a formal salute and polite greeting, when Knight realised something was not right.

"Honourable greetings," said the smuggler, trying to put warmth into his face and words.

"Hmph," replied the prince. He nudged his manservant, an elderly white-haired man who spoke for his master in a crackled voice, "The Most Wondrous Prince Tang, son of the Warlord and Shareholder Tang Yu-lin, wishes to challenge you to a formal duel."

Knight's heart shot a jolt of alarm. He needed work, not bravado games.

"Prince Tang, forgive me, I must respectfully decline," said Knight, carefully toning his words to be somewhere in between 'respectful' and 'forceful'.

Knight heard chuckle sounds from behind. The prince had placed three thugs at the only exit. Prince Tang gave a snigger, something which made it clear that Knight had a good chance of not making it out alive without a fight.

This prince, Knight realised, was willing to duel to death for no better reason than a reckless whim. Formal dueling was a bloody and dangerous sport and either of them could get killed, something that the prince did not care about. So arrogant was the prince that he fancied that he could beat Smuggler Knight without much effort, although the prince had never fought a proper swordfight with someone of blade-skill and furthermore, the prince was not taught by any of the great swordmasters, or even a swordmaster of slight distinction.

In Knight's mind, a mixture of anger and also contempt arose in him, as he looked over Tang. Prince Tang was short and did not seem to have the body of a well conditioned fighter. Tang also looked only about fifteen years old, and the smuggler began to feel utmost contempt for this arrogant boy, the son of a corrupt drug dealing vassal man.

Knight straightened his back, let his shoulders loosen a little. Caught in the trap, he saw no way of escape. "Very well, Prince Tang," acquiesced Knight, "You shall have your duel."

Prince Tang made all three⁴ of his armed guards leave the room and ordered them to wait outside the exit, behind a closed door. The prince was worried that one of them, out of overzealous concerned loyalty, would interfere in the fight - the last thing the prince wanted was for the satisfaction of conquest-victory to be snatched away by his slaves. Only the manservant, an elderly gentleman, stayed behind to act as referee. "For your benefit," the prince sneered, "in case you want to surrender, rather than die by my hand!"

Knight was astonished. This prince, this boy, obviously did not respect the killing power of a bladed weapon. And although Knight himself knew that he would never be the amazing swordsman his great-grandfather was, nevertheless Knight was well drilled in the stances and techniques of the House of Knight and he was a swordsman of merit. Did this child know what he was getting himself into?

"Have you ever fought before?" Knight asked.

"I have fought hundreds of times and I won every battle!" the prince exclaimed.

Knight was not convinced. The boy's body and face did not have any visible scars on it, although to be fair, Prince Tang was fully clothed, in the most expensive attire Knight had ever seen anyone wear to a fight. Knight's own face did not have any scars on it, but that was luck, and for every wound he missed on his face he received one somewhere else on his body.

Knight gave the old man his gun, then took off his coat, folded it and gave it to the 'referee' to put it, and his weapon, in an unobtrusive place. Knight unbuttoned and did the same with his shirt as the coat. As he did so, the many ugly scars that he had accumulated on his chest and arms could be seen.

The prince, his eyes wide, suddenly looked a bit taken aback. Knight gathered that, for the first time, Prince Tang had seen the marks of a warrior. Knight concluded that the prince himself never received a vicious wound, or even had his precious skin broken.

Nevertheless the prince regained his composure and at least the veneer of his former arrogance. Acting impatient, he ordered Knight to take up his blade to fight.

"You want to fight fully dressed?" inquired Knight. The prince was not taking his shirt off.

"I will fight any which way I want to!" the prince retorted.

The elder servant was slow with age, gathering up two swords from the floor, and the Prince kicked him downwards, shouting at his servant, "Hurry up!". The man sprawled onto the floor, then crawled up into a standing position, meekly gave the prince his sword and then held the sword Knight was to use, waiting for the smuggler to take it.

Knight took the blade and raised it up in salute towards the prince. Prince Tang, however, broke protocol by not saluting back and instead rushed into attack.

The surprise attack was clumsily executed and besides, Knight had twinged with the faint intuition that Tang would do something stupid like that. He parried the blow, grabbed Tang's arm and pulled, while stepping out of the way and watching prince being carried forward by inertia. Prince Tang went by so fast that he had no control over his body.

Reflexively, Knight brought his sword downwards to the ground then flicked it upwards into Tang. The blade ate off a chunk of the prince's neck.

The prince stumbled a step further before falling down in a gargling heap. Knight regretted his action - if he had taken a split-second more to think, he could have given a non-killing wound, or perhaps even disarmed the prince without harming him. Now he had killed the son of the feudal lord of the territory he was currently resident in. The prince's own free-willed foolishness that had sealed Tang's fate; but now Knight himself was in trouble.

Tang was gargling about, trying to scream but his torn larynx would not obey. Blood gushed about like vileness. The prince's face was distorted in pain and fear.

Knight did not stop moving after he had dealt the blow. He already knew what he had to do even while considering the consequences of what he did. In a series of fluid movements, Knight stepped towards the prince and brought his sword down, mercifully put an end to Tang's life.

The referee was stunned at seeing his master felled so quickly and with so little respect for the prince's inherent superiority. Before the old man could recover enough sense to call for help, Knight's sword had already withdrawn from the prince's body, a slight stream of blood followed the blade as it swung through the air; then the blade was at the man's throat, cold against his skin. "Do...not...utter...a...sound," said Knight, pausing between his carefully sounded words.

Knight was in survival mode and he had to escape. The elderly man at his sword's end was quiet and whimpering and scared. The armed guards were still waiting at the entrance. If he got past them, he would still have to make his way to his ship the Poet's Whim, get off the spacestation, and then escape this region of space before the shareholder realised that a smuggler had killed his son. Shareholder Tang Yu-lin was notorious for his cruelty and Knight did not wish to know what would happen to him if he fell into the warlord's hands.

The old man had strapped Knight's gun to his own hip, instead of placing it somewhere - it was a way of making sure neither of the competitors could get to it during the fight

(not that it was much of a fight). Knight undid the clasp, took the gun belt of the man. He pulled out the gun, and pointing it at the man, he clipped the gun belt upon himself.

The men outside still did not know what had happened. Knight remembered that there were three of them; he would have to act quickly and precisely.

Knight had an idea. As the old man recovered his wits, and stopped whimpering a bit, Knight commanded him, firstly, to keep his mouth shut. The man agreed, a bit dazed but with enough wits about him to recognise the significance of the gun pointed at his face. Luckily, the old man did not realise Knight was bluffing⁵, and he agreed to do what the smuggler said.

After telling the man what to do, Smuggler Knight walked away and leaned himself against the wall next to the entrance. There was a recess right next to the door into which Knight snugly fitted himself in. After a cue, the old man began to shout for help.

Evidently the guards were not of the exquisitely alert type, for it was only after a few loud shouts that they reacted. The door opened and a single head poked its way through. His eyes looked upon the old man, then moved on to see Prince Tang's body lying on the floor.

A moment of thought had to pass through the thug's head before he came to his startling conclusion. He cried out to the others.

The first thing they did was to hurry over to the prince's prone body - exactly what Knight wanted, as he aimed and fired his gun.

It was a bit dirty to shoot them in the back, although it was a dirty trick to have trapped the smuggler in the first place. The Smuggler's Code, too, had nothing to condemn this action - as long as your opponents were armed, they were fair targets.

Despite the quick and shaky aim, Knight's first shot manage to plunge itself into the back of the nearest foe. One fell down on the floor, two turned and pulled out their weapons from inside their jackets. Knight fired off two shots, one missed one hit, second man down. Third man fired at Knight. Knight dropped down, firing one two three, back and forth back and forth third man missed Knight. Knight hits third man. Third man down.

It was a short gun-battle. Knight suddenly remembered how loud the gun shots had been, ringing acoustic in the warehouse. His alarmed mind considered the possibility that others had heard. The old man, frightened, had immediately ran to take cover as the first shots rang out and disappeared among the empty crates.

The three guards were downed, and Knight was for the moment safe. As for the old man, Knight could do nothing - even if he found out where he was hiding, the Smuggler's Code forbid him to harm an unarmed man, and Knight was not going to break the Code lightly for fear of offending the spirits of his Ancestors⁶.

He cautiously checked if there were no more men waiting outside the storage bay, or if anyone had been around to hear what happened. No one.

Shareholder Tang Tzu would probably want the smuggler's impaled head brought before him for causing Prince Tang's death. Knight had to get out of the station, and out of this sector of space as quickly as possible. The smuggler would have to work his way through the more crowded areas of the station (hopefully the alarm would not be sounded before he was through) and get to the parking bay where his ship, the Poet's Whim, was stored. Then he'd push out at full speed for the border. But he would need to pay off the

Whim's parking fees. Spaceship parking, like all convenient things, was not free. That needed money. Money Knight did not have.

The smuggler looked over to the prone bodies of the men he had just slain. Men carry wallets. Wallets have money. Smuggler needs money. Smuggler get wallets.

Knight cautiously walked over to the bodies. He knew that the thugs were shot to hell, but that didn't necessarily mean they were dead yet.

He crouched down near the nearest, the one he had first shot, in the back. The man had twisted around and was lying on that shot back in a pool of blood draining out of that shot back. One hand pointing gun at head, Knight's other hand searched pockets.

Problem : Man was not dead yet.

The thug suddenly returned to consciousness and with a shriek pulled his gun out. Knight shrieked too, startled delay before he pulled the trigger. Knight's gun made a hole in the thug's head. The newly hole-headed man fired off his own gun but never had time to aim, and the bullet flew past a arm's length away from its target. It hit the walls and clanged off the wall's metal then zipped up and down some more, *kling klang klong* it sang. Knight put his arms over his head and huddle and hoped that the crazy thing would avoid him. Finally he heard a cry of muffled *ugh!*

Frenzied, Knight kicked at the bodies of the three thugs, then kicked at the body of Prince Tang, making sure they didn't grunt or otherwise indicate that they were still living. Satisfied that everyone was dead, he ran to where he thought the muffled cry had come from, his arms outstretched and his gun ready. He spun round an empty crate.

There was the old man, who had been hiding behind the crate. The bullet that had been fired earlier had bounced off the walls and right into his hiding place. A red hole in his shirt indicated where the bullet had gone in. The old man gurgled a red gurgle a bit, eyes blankly staring at the crate. A younger man would have lasted for a while still from that wound but this old man's physiological reserves were all deteriorated with age. Knight saw him tense his legs up a bit, then slacked into death's grace.

Life, and the miserable joke of human circumstances. A unintended bullet randomly flying killed this man's life. Ever the weak shall hide, and yet the context shall chase them. Though the weak run and run past innumerable stars, yet they are still the product of their environment, and that environment shall have power over them, its final vengeance and retribution. And as all human animals must adapt to their circumstances, they must change and alter, till the thing they are is no longer recognisable as human, but has either gone back to beast, or gone on to something better.

Do not think you can lock yourself into your house and keep the world a world's length away, for the world shall find you.

Knight's sympathetic nervous system was winding down, the smuggler's body sensing that the worst was past.

Then Knight suddenly realised he was covered in blood.

Flashback : The thug suddenly awaking and with a shriek, pulling his gun out. Knight's gun then made a hole in the thug's head. The man's head exploded like a pumpkin and blood and brain had been thrown all about, especially over Knight. At that time Knight's brain was so awashed with adrenaline⁷ that the smuggler had not even consciously registered sensory information about it.

For a moment, he felt his heart rate speed back up and his mind about to slip back into panic. Fear : How was Knight going to get off the spacestation while covered in red-red blood?

Stop.

Knight regrouped himself, forced his psyche away from its fantastic imaginings and back to basic questions that plague humanity : What? Where? Who? Pulling his mind back to these basic issues, Knight could figure out what to do from there.

Luckily Knight had taken off his shirt and coat before the fight with Tang and had still not put it back on. His coat would be enough to cover the blood stains on his clothes and skin. The problem would be the smell of his frightened sweat and the brain and the blood and the gunpowder and whatever else; also there was blood that over his face. Either could give away what had happened.

Having finished analysing his context, Knight came up with a course of action.

First, money. Money makes the galaxy go round.

Knight quickly searched all the corpses, found some money chips, and one of the bodyguards had a money comm. A money comm was an access terminal to the Corporate banking system, which allowed a person to remotely manage his finances and also download money into his money chips. Unfortunately the comm was designed to activate only according to a complex recognition system of voice, body odour, skin texture, fingerprints, and numerous other systems that Knight, not being a hacker, knew little or nothing about. The comm, in Knight's present situation, was useless, except to check how much money was on the chips.

Relief, as Knight found that the chips had enough money to pay off his parking fees, with a little bit extra for any incidental bribes or expenses on his way off the station. Unfortunately he got a bit of sticky blood on his hands and on the chips while searching the bodies.

The smuggler looked around the warehouse, found his shirt and coat. Since there was no clean cloth anywhere, he used the shirt to wipe off the blood on his face, his hands and the chips. This stained the shirt, but after he put on the shirt he put his coat over that, effectively hiding the evidence. Knight hoped his face was clean.

He walked over to the exit to the warehouse, stood facing its closed door. He straightened out his clothes, hoping he looked presentable. He took in a deep breath, said a short prayer to his Ancestors, opened the door and stepped through.

It was quiet outside, no one around. Evidently the Prince had planned to kill Knight and then leave the smuggler's body, where it would be only found after some time. Things had worked out differently, but at least the smuggler knew he had a small margin of time.

Czerwon's valuation

Chief Executive Officer Czerwon was a man who, when he put his mind to it, could be far-sighted with regard to the future. It had been a skill of instrumental value in the rise of his Corporation, and in the fall of Old Italy. The CEO's life was dedicated to the pursuit of his own happiness and the expansion of his power through the Corporation, a great personal quest for what was 'more'. But Czerwon, mortal man foreseeing, could see that it was all for nothing if he was going to die and leave everything behind. And so, not

long into his rise to power, Czerwon had put an incredible amount of money and the considerable talent of Corporate Research Division into making him: immortal.

That had been many years ago, even before the fall of Old Italy, even before the place and position of the Corporation could be guaranteed. But it had, at least for the CEO, been worthwhile for now he could reap the various fruits of what he had sowed. For instance, his eyes had been replaced.

His previous eyes, dark in colour, had become too old to see well anymore. He could have had corrective surgery, but that was not good enough. To Czerwon, surgery was a tacit acknowledgement of his mortality, of the imperfection of himself. Instead, he resorted to the solution that had been devised many years ago by his Corporate Research Division. He had a pair of fresh, green eyes teleport-ripped out of a boy who had been genetically engineered for Czerwon's parts. Now he had a pair of young, teenage eyes, from brown iris to green iris.

Czerwon's body was a patchwork of replaced organs, organs taken from genetically engineered test tube children. The children would be grown, their organs harvested, then they were discarded. They were called genelings, and they were considered the property of Czerwon, Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation, since they had been specifically commissioned by and for him, built by his express orders. They were not human beings, but property.

In this way the CEO was kept in a state of perpetual youthfulness, but not only that, his body was at the same time enhanced by the genetic engineering of his body and his replacement organs. The genetic engineers not only designed the organs, but improved on nature's originals. Czerwon was stronger, his reflexes were faster and the metabolic reactions of his cells were more efficient and faster in recovery than that of an ordinary man. His craving for immortality, for that great 'more', had changed his body, its normal human constraints superseded.

Most of his organs had been replaced. His brain, of course, could not be replaced, but it was kept young by the pharmacological wonders dreamt up by his personal physician, the Doctor Fallsoul. Only one old organ still remained, and that was his heart. It had aged before its time, a victim of abuse. Czerwon's heart was an ash-covered dusty shell, nearing its destruction.

"I need a new heart," said CEO Czerwon to his sister, staring out across the expanse of space before him. He was aboard his magnificent flagship, a leviathan known as the Corporate Ship 'Red Claw'. This ship had the largest outer-space viewing room ever built for a spaceship. The transparent dome rounded up over Czerwon's head like a mock night sky.

To Thalia⁸, to whom the remark was addressed, the vista felt like a heavy, near-crushing presence on her; she wondered if her brother felt the same. Of course not; Czerwon's presence had a conquering air, a force capable of holding up that entire sky like an Atlas, embracing it as his own, heedless of the burden.

"The doctor was gracious enough to inform me," said Thalia.

Czerwon turned to look at her, his new eyes raking into Thalia's mind, disturbing her memories of her brown-eyed brother and putting green colours on the orbs. Thalia wanted to shiver under the unnatural gaze, but suppressed this urge within herself. She maintained a grave expression on her face, which was accentuated by her black dress.

Czerwon's sight did not linger for long on his somber-clad sister, and turned back to the star-sky. "It is a year or two early, but the heart should be ready. We will be taking quite a scenic route there. The planet itself is apparently quite beautiful. I think you shall enjoy it."

Thalia thought to herself, that her brother's words seemed mildly like a threat, a warning to enjoy what beauty there was before he devoured it all. Everything must die for Czerwon. She sometimes felt that she was attending an unending funeral. She didn't let her thoughts shine through when she said, "It will be good to see some nature. This ship and the spacestation feel so metal-bound..."

"Where is your servant?" said the Chief Executive Officer, suddenly changing the subject.

"I gave Ansar⁹ some time off. There is not much to do on a ship like this. Everything is automatic." Some strands of black hair fell onto her face of sun-lacking ivory skin, unnaturally pale and dead. She took her hand and brushed it back underneath the black hood of her clothes.

"You are dangerously lenient, as usual..." There was a pause; Thalia knew her brother well enough to know that he was trying to find words to say something deep within him. It was not often that the lord Czerwon needed to express something from within his soul. "Perhaps, one day, you too will need some organ replacement..."

Thalia smiled. She was much younger than her brother, and still very much in youth. She also took care of her body, and her emotions, a bit better than her brother did. Czerwon's statement was more of an indication that he was scared of losing her, a real companion amidst the insects that normally surrounded and droned about him, scuttling around inside the corridors of the Red Claw. "That will not, I hope, be too soon," said Thalia.

Czerwon wondered if he had really detected a slight acid edge to his sister's words. He knew that she had a distaste for his methods. A bell-sound rang out suddenly – the doorbell.

"Open!" called Czerwon. The voice-recognition unclicked the heavy locked doors. The intruder on the other side still had to pull the massive doors apart, a vulnerable target to Czerwon's gun, which he held lightly where it was clasped to his hip.

The man who grunted the doors apart was Captain Rumsfeld, commander of the Red Claw. A vassal king of this huge ship-territory, thought Thalia, serving his emperor-liege.

Rumsfeld straightened his blue uniform after the door-shifting effort, and bowed to Thalia, then saluted Czerwon, puffing himself up and trying to sound suppliant yet dignified. Thalia remembered how once the captain had seemed more confident, before he had been defeated at the hands of Czerwon not long ago.

"Chief Executive Officer Czerwon, I am here as ordered." Rumsfeld's outstretched right-arm salute stayed in the air as he spoke. When he finished, the hand fell to his side. Thalia wondered how long the captain would be able to hold that arm up if ordered to a perpetual salute.

"Captain, the weapon systems have been fully loaded?"

"Yes, Chief Executive Officer, I am here to report that fact as you ordered me."

"I know what orders I gave you, captain. Release the ship from docking, and set course for the world of Forestglen." There was actually no need for Captain Rumsfeld to have come up all the way. Rumsfeld could have reported through the ship's

communications systems. Czerwon simply wanted to flex his power over his vassal. Czerwon turned to Thalia. "I assume that you do not need anything from the spacestation?"

"No, brother; this station is absolutely dreary. I abhor it. I will be glad to get away." from the industrial stink of the air aboard and the unsun-like illumination and the lifeless sterile white corridors and rooms.

"Good. Captain, depart the Red Claw as quickly as possible. I have a new heart to acquire."

Navigation

Thalia returned to her room. Adjoining to it was a botaniarium, her own greenhouse with hydroponic lights. Always feeling slightly oppressed when in her brother's presence, she immediately came here, her sanctuary.

The garden had been installed by her brother, despite the technical difficulties. Thalia needed nature, green leaves, flowers and the song-throated birds she kept in the botaniarium, else she suffered a malady. Early on, her brother had noticed this, and Thalia had been too frightened of asking to leave her violent brother's side for 'greener' pastures; her brother had been gracious enough to give her this relief, a sort of silent compromise between his loneliness and her love of nature.

She took some nuts and fed them to her perched parrot, who gratefully acknowledged with a cry of "*Principessa*¹⁰!"

The doorbell rang in her adjoining quarters. As long as the button was pressed, the little bell rang. The rings came out in a certain order, a code : long, short, long, short. Opposites, almost changing into each other, becoming indistinguishable.

She took a little remote control from her pockets, and pressed the button responsible for unlocking the door. She did not bother using the intercom system to find out who it was (she would have had to leave the botaniarium to use the intercom) because the code within the bell rings told her it was her servant, Ansar.

"*Principessa!*" cried the parrot again.

"My Lady..."

Thalia did not turn to greet her servant, but said, "The silly parrot. Her name is Principessa, and all she does is cry it out loud for everyone to hear."

"Perhaps she is a vain egotist, My Lady."

Thalia turned to smile at the mature, balding gentleman standing in the doorway. She let her smile speak, then continued, "So, we are off to kill some innocent so that the guilty may live." Then she frowned. "Ansar! How many times have I told you, you don't need my permission to come in and sit down."

"Yes My Lady." Ansar stiffly strode over the gravel-covered floor and took a seat at the little garden set that centred the botaniarium. Thalia remained standing, thoughtful, in a straight-backed pose that made her look like an exquisitely beautiful ivory statue draped in black, like a work of art misplaced, displaced.

"Did you have any trouble finding out?" she asked.

"A little, My Lady, but please do not trouble yourself over my account." In order to prevent his Lady's inquiries over this little 'trouble', he immediately continued, taking out his note book, leafing through the pages, and saying, "The child was engineered by the

genetic division eighteen years ago, specifically to fulfil a future need for the Chief Executive's heart..."

"My brother has always managed to be foresighted from time to time."

Ansar lifted his eyes to glance at her, then went on, "She was given to be raised by the folk of a planet called Forestglen. Population of about two hundred. An exceedingly healthy and fertile forest world..."

"So that the geneling will have a healthy environment for a healthy body."

This time Ansar's eyes didn't glance but stayed on the paper. "The people of Forestglen were given eighty four million Corporate dollars, and were promised a further eighty four million dollars once she was collected."

"Does the geneling have a name?" Thalia interrupted.

"Hanako, I believe..."

"What else did you find out about her?"

"...It seems there was some defect in her genetic code. A mistake. Apparently it only affected the personality."

"How?"

"The scientists were unsure, they guessed that it only made the personality more 'positive', in the sense of 'extrovert' or perhaps 'likeability'. Maybe they were just saying that to placate the Executive Officer's wrath at the possibility of having damaged goods."

"After all, what can be more precious than the production of a custom geneling, especially if it is for Czerwon himself? Anything more?"

"That was all I could find, My Lady."

"Ah well..."

"*Principessa!*" squawked the parrot. Having learnt only that one word, never having grasped something else, the bird was doomed to repeat-squawk it, over and over, unable to change the course of its direction. "*Principessa!*"

"Yes, you do fancy yourself a princess..." said Thalia, rubbing the parrot under its beak with her finger.

The bell rang suddenly. Ansar immediately stood up, and with Thalia's leave he went to open the door.

The white-bearded gentleman who entered was Doctor Fallsoul. Doctor Fallsoul visited Thalia every few days, regularly, in his desperate attempt to find intelligent conversation away from the economists and blank-minded personnel of the Red Claw. Thalia did not mind for the moment; he did not come so often as to irritate, and his conversation was a distraction from the humdrum of the ship. She did, however, detect an ulterior motive.

"Ah, Doctor Fallsoul, please come in and take a seat." She remained standing. She absentmindedly began to inspect her garden, touching leaves and flowers with the tips of her hands. "Ansar, won't you get the good doctor something to drink?"

"Certainly, My Lady. What would the good doctor like?"

"Just a glass of iced water, Ansar," the 'good doctor' said. He sat down. His eyes haunted around, hungry-looking about.

"Nothing alcoholic?" asked Thalia.

"No, I quit."

"My word, why?"

"I'm trying to cultivate a virtue, Lady Thalia."

"But you live in a den of sin, Doctor Fallsoul. There are only two places the goddess Virtue shuns : Hell, and the Red Claw."

"Yet, My Lady, I will try and tempt that goddess to my side."

"Using Lust to attain Virtue? Isn't that sinful?"

Doctor Fallsoul smiled a weak smile at Thalia's weak joke.

"The centre of power in the colonised galaxy is right here, the Red Claw. Where there is power there is corruption. The problem is," Doctor Fallsoul continued, "I think your definition of the places that Virtue shuns is limited..."

"Hush, doctor. I was merely playing word games. Unsatisfying philosophical babble-babble definitions were not what I was aiming at." Thalia wanted to shift the topic of conversation. Having just come back from visiting her brother, she didn't want to depress herself further. Philosophy, the opening of the eyes, to see the world for what it really was : not here in the botanarium, not here in her sanctuary. Escape a while.

Clink-clink went the ice in the glass, as Ansar re-entered the botanarium with iced-water in hand. He put it on the table. "Here you are, doctor."

"Thank you, Ansar."

The doctor drank a cool draught from the glass. His eyes on Thalia, black on a background of lush green, both the woman and the garden misplaced, under the protection of the bloody claws hungry. Profit(exploitation) and protection : mutual antagonists.

Thalia, her hand on her cheek, in turn regarded the doctor. She had first met him when he had entered Czerwon's service; talented, idealistic, dreamer, with spirit. His surname was an apt description for what happened to him.

"What other virtues do you wish to cultivate, good doctor?" Thalia asked, the image of the younger, charming, highsouled doctor in her mind. His hair had not been white then, his skin not so wrinkled. He had aged prematurely; now he looked more like a walking ghost.

The doctor shrugged, drank some water, stared into his glass. Pause.

"I... Let me speak, to you, Lady Thalia, from my heart. There is no one else I can speak to on this ship. Will you let me tell you my secret?"

"Of course Doctor Fallsoul. In all things you may have the highest confidence with me." Her smile nearly turned to a smirk. She wondered if her eyes really had glinted like frost like they had in her own imagination. Did she hide her lie well enough?

"My Lady, once I thought I was a good person, then our CEO asked me to do things that... Well, were against the voice of my conscience. But I did them, not because I was forced, but out of choice. I have done so many horrors, that I am unable to tell you of them; they refuse to release themselves through my mouth." Doctor Fallsoul took an uncomfortable swallow of water. "Eventually I started enjoying the things. I admit it. I don't want to say this, but it is truth. It's like they became habitual, a part of me. But I want to be a good person..." Doctor Fallsoul looked at Thalia, "Am I good person, Lady Thalia? I'm trying, really hard..." Yearning, he looked like some spirit-being, unsubstantial, unable to grasp what it wanted, ephemeral hands touching matter, like a sieve holding water.

'This is a pathetic sight,' thought Thalia. Here was a man on the verge of baby tears. A man who had been destroyed on the inside, and it was partially, actually mostly, his own

fault. Like a ship that sails into a storm, and sees its sails tear apart, losing control of its direction, so all it can do is to plunge forwards.

"I don't know, doctor," replied Thalia, "I think everyone must be their own judge. Or else defer that judgement to their gods. Ultimately, whatever we do, we must accept the consequences of our actions."

Doctor Fallsoul said nothing, staring and lost in thought. "The consequences of our actions. The reactions to your actions. A traveller sets out in a direction, with the compass of his heart. If you get lost, on the wrong path, do you have the strength to break from that path?"

"Forgive me, Doctor Fallsoul, I seem to have disturbed you..."

The doctor suddenly remembered where he was, like a man waking from nightmare. "Ah, no, Lady Thalia, please do not apologise. I lost myself in a daydream, I should apologise to you, in fact."

"Tell me doctor," said Thalia, following the line of her thought, "What do you think of this heart business?"

"What do you mean, Lady Thalia?"

"I mean, how do you feel about ripping the heart from a young human being to put it in our Chief Executive Officer Czerwon."

The doctor opened his mouth to answer, but horror spun out its tail and wrapped it around his tongue. Images of all the previous genelings, screaming and in their death throes, suddenly washed over his mind's eye. The doctor found himself unable to say anything, although there was a shadow of a mute-scream, 'I want out! I want out!' It was he who had teleport-operated those genelings, and at times it seemed to him that he was the one who suffered from the procedures.

Thalia, attempting a guess at what the doctor was thinking, asked, "Why don't you resign?"

The doctor shook his head. "Money, where will I get money?" he said. But it was not the real reason. The truth was that he couldn't stop, it was as if he was being carried by the momentum of his actions. It had become his lifestyle, journeystyle.

"So you'd rather sell your soul and live than remain true to yourself?"

Thalia had shoved a barb into the doctor. The doctor mumbled something about being late, and excused himself, rising quickly and near-running for the door, he left. As he stood up the glass on the table tilted and spilt the water. The water, too, was near-running; it reached the edge of the table and, it seemed willingly, fell to the ground to mix with the dirt.

"My Lady?" inquired Ansar.

"Never mind, Ansar. I seem to have upset him."

Ansar gave a short grunt, the meaning of which was too ambiguous for Thalia to interpret, and cleaned up the table.

Forestglen

Giggling, the girl ran through the meadow trying to catch the butterfly in her hands. She finally managed to cup the insect, only to immediately let it go again. The butterfly, disorientated, slowed down enough for the girl to gaze at the colourful wings.

She took in a deep breath, closed her sky-blue eyes, stretched out her arms, and let herself fall backwards. The soft, thick grass caught her in its green arms, her golden hair scattering¹¹. The sun overhead began its drowsy afternoon beat. The girl turned onto her side and fell asleep.

This girl's name was Hanako¹², beloved of the few inhabitants of Forestglen. She was like the kiss of a breeze; she had the ability of bringing happiness that made her the joy of Forestglen.

Eighteen years earlier Czerwon had swept over the planet like a dark angel. The inhabitants of Forestglen feared that he would annex their planet, convert it into one of his numerous industrial factory worlds. They were surprised when Czerwon's messengers came down to them, not with weapons and angry intentions, but with a little baby girl.

Czerwon told them, that if they accepted this child and raised her, they would receive eighty-four million Corporate dollars. One day, Czerwon continued, he would return for her, and they would receive a further eighty-four million¹³.

This injection of wealth was what the dying community needed. They accepted the offer, Czerwon departed, and they were left with the child. They gave the child to an old and childless couple, Demetria¹⁴ and her husband Abimelech¹⁵, who was chief of the Forestglen community. They named the baby girl Hanako.

At first, rumours abounded about the child. She was a bastard child of Czerwon's; she was a hostage or prisoner taken from one of his enemies; some tales got very bizarre. But Hanako grew up knowing nothing of the transaction. And as she turned from baby to girl, from girl to young woman, the Forestglen folk found in her a personality full of joy and kindness, gentle and caring. She loved everyone and everyone loved her.

Abimelech, however, was suspicious of Czerwon's motives. He used all possible means that he had on Forestglen to find out the nature of Hanako's origin. Although the planet was isolated, he eventually found out many stories about Czerwon. That was how he learnt of the genelings, and of Czerwon's surgical fountain of youth.

And now there was word : Czerwon was coming along with the Red Claw to collect what he had left to them so many years earlier. While Hanako was sleeping and dreaming of dancing butterflies, Abimelech called the men of Forestglen into a council. The men were cramped together in Abimelech's house. These men with their cracked hands and weatherbeaten faces, most of them farmers, by now all of them knew that the Claw was coming.

Abimelech told them what he thought and they, suspicious of Czerwon's motives, agreed with Abimelech that the Executive Officer was coming not to collect the girl, but to collect some organ. Taking turns, they spoke in many voices:

"Of all things on Forestglen, Hanako is one of the most precious."

"We all love her. She never forgets about anyone. She makes everyone feel good about themselves."

"How can we call ourselves men, if we let them take her? A girl who loves nothing more than to run barefoot through meadows..."

"We will not let them take her." Abimelech said, flatly, his bearded jaw set, his grey eyes steeled.

"No-one will argue with you on that, Abimelech."

"But what can we do?"

"She must leave this planet. As long as she stays here she will be in danger."

"It's easy to say she must leave, but where to? Abimelech?"

"She must go to the nearest spacestation, Crosspoint. Hopefully there will be a smuggler there who will take her to safety," said Abimelech.

"We can't send her alone though..."

"My wife Demetria will go with her," Abimelech stated. "I will give her money to hire the smuggler."

"Let me contribute as well.

"Me too, I'll give money."

"All of us will."

"It's a risk," Abimelech interrupted, "But I want to take some of the money we still have left from the eighty-four million. It will put us further in debt to Czerwon, but Hanako will need the money..."

"You don't even have to ask, Abimelech. We all support you.

Take as much as she will need."

"Five million¹⁶. That way, Hanako will have enough but it will still be a small enough margin to maybe make a deal with Czerwon."

"How far in debt are we with the Corporation, Abimelech?"

"Of the eighty-four million dollars, we spent only twenty-three¹⁷ million, mostly on the cutter¹⁸. We give Hanako five, we owe twenty-eight million."

"We might be able to scrape an extra million from our own funds and from pawning to the traders."

"And we can finally rely on our exports. If we're lucky, they'll start bringing in dollars from next year onward."

"I'm sure we can strike a bargain with Czerwon."

"We'll tell him that Hanako died in an accident. We'll tell him we'll pay him back for his loss."

"Are we agreed?"

Unanimous yes.

"Thank you," Abimelech tried to say, but it came out as a hoarse whisper. He felt relieved that they had come out in support of Hanako, but he was full of worry as to what would be the result of their actions. Abimelech asked Demetria to go find Hanako, for she would have to leave as quickly as possible, for the Red Claw was due to arrive soon.

Demetria went looking for Hanako, with a basket on her arm. The sun was nearing its set. Demetria found Hanako, still asleep in the flowery meadow. The poor child had never known the meaning of danger, and it was now coming. Czerwon was bearing down on them, like in the ancient empires of exploitation when the colonialist hunters would go hunting with their guns.

She sat down next to Hanako, gently stirred her. Hanako didn't want to wake up, but finally sat up, rubbing her eyes, smiling at Demetria, "Hello mama."

Hanako's adoptive mother took out a sandwich from the basket. "Here Hanako, I brought you some food."

"Oh mama, thank you!" Hanako hugged her mother, took the sandwich and hungrily munched it.

"Hanako..."

"Mmfm?" Gulp.

"There is something I have to tell you..."

"Mhm?" Bite. Swallow. Gulp.

"You have to leave Forestglen, Hanako."

Swallow. Stop. "What?"

"Hanako, you have to leave."

"I don't understand, mama. This is my home. I can't leave!"

"Hanako, you know you're adopted, and for some reason some very bad people who know you're alive are coming to Forestglen to get you. We must flee." She had forever neglected to tell the child what the girl didn't know – the transaction. Hanako had been raised on a fantasy, that one day a mysterious stranger had come, fleeing from bandits, a child wrapped in his arms. The stranger had begged the people of Forestglen to take the child, while the stranger himself flew on, ever pursued. It was this half-lie that Hanako took seriously as her own history.

The lie did manage to serve a purpose, though. It made it easier to convince Hanako that she was in danger. Demetria was able to get Hanako to accept the fact that she had to leave Forestglen.

Czerwon was a week away, so by the dim dawn of the next day Hanako was packed and had said good-bye to her friends, trying not to cry too much. She was unable to sleep her last night on her home planet, instead, she thought how sad it was to leave her home behind, but at the same time she felt excited. She had only been off-planet once in Forestglen's only cutter, been to orbit and back. She was too naive to fully appreciate the danger she was in; for her, it was almost like going on some grand adventure.

Demetria and Hanako were ready at dawn. Abimelech took his wife and adopted daughter to the large, concrete square that served as the launchpad for Forestglen's cutter. The pilot of the cutter was already there to take them into orbit. Abimelech had arranged for a tradership to pick the pair up once they got into orbit, to take them to Crosspoint.

The pilot was tinkering with something, his back turned to them. Hanako soft-stepped up to him, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hello Sparky!"

Sparks was one year younger than Hanako, and also was perpetually infatuated with her. He was useless as a farm boy, couldn't master the concept of growing vegetables and milking cows, and preferred to spend his days whittling things out of wood and serving as a technician for what electronic machines were about. When the community had acquired the cutter, it was discovered that Sparks had a talent for piloting and ship mechanics. The lad had finally found a niche for himself.

Sparks turned to Hanako. He wanted to say something, but was unable to. So he smiled instead.

"Is everything ready, lad?" Abimelech asked.

"Yes sir. Just triple checking through the safety precautions. I suppose we should get the bags in first." Sparks and Abimelech took the ladies' bags and stored them in the back of the cutter.

Hanako watched them packing the things. She always liked the aesthetic lines of the ship; to her it looked almost like a big, friendly, yellow butterfly.

"Hanako?"

"Papa."

Abimelech took his daughter, held her for a few long moments. He kissed her on the head. "Take care of yourself, and your mother."

"Yes papa."

They let go and Sparks helped Hanako up into the cutter.

Now Abimelech was with his wife. "I hope to see you again soon, Demetria. I love you."

"I love you too, Abimelech. Don't you worry about me while I'm gone. Take care of Forestglen."

"Do you still remember how to operate the money-com?" asked Abimelech, referring to the small computer device that allowed access to bank and credit information.

"I'm sure I won't have problems with it, Abimelech. Don't worry so much."

One last hug, and Sparks was pulling up Demetria.

They strapped themselves in the cutter's three seats. Sparks closed and sealed the entrance hatch. Abimelech had walked off the concrete and gave Sparks a thumbs-up all-clear from the edge of the launching pad.

"Everyone alright?" asked Sparks, checking to see that everyone was strapped in. "I suppose we're off then."

The ship whined and harumphed, and lifted into the air. Sparks hovered the cutter up about a hundred metres, then tilted the nose and throttled the cutter up through the atmosphere.

As the ship gained terrific speed, terrified Demetria clutched her heart and thought she might be getting a heart attack (she wasn't), while Hanako shrieked in delight. Sparks, concentrated, led the cutter skilfully through the atmosphere, a final *whoosh!* as they broke through.

Weightlessness took hold for a moment as they drifted in orbit. Some form of false-gravity return as the cutter accelerated to the big trader ship, which was sitting like a big ugly bug nearby, hovering in orbit. The little cutter flew in close to the ship, slowly and carefully entering the docking bay. The trader's tractor and guidance devices activated, and the cutter finally cut to a stop as electro-magnetic fields stabilised it. The docking doors closed behind them and the air vents belched out stale air to pressurise the bay.

Power

'Power. That is all that matters,' Rumsfeld thought, as he walked the corridors of the Red Claw, inspecting the workings of the huge vessel as he made his way back to the boardroom, the Red Claw's bridge.

Evolution is the survival of the fittest, and the surest way of showing you are fit is to assert your dominance and strength over others. Captain Rumsfeld had dedicated himself to this principle, and thinking that the best way of proving dominance is through killing, he had done away many people.

It had worked. His rivals he killed. Those superior to him he also killed, preferably. Though Rumsfeld did not know it, it was this relentless need to destroy which endeared him to Czerwon, for the CEO shared the same thinking in some ways. But whereas the CEO practised this in the spheres of economics and politics, for Rumsfeld this need was expressed in his daily life. Rumsfeld wanted power, and this savage desire permeated his every dealing, every thought, every breath.

The most powerful man in the galaxy, Rumsfeld knew, was the CEO Czerwon himself. And Rumsfeld's goal in life was to destroy this man, and in doing so to prove that he was stronger than Czerwon. The captain's life was dedicated to dominance.

But Czerwon had not become who he was without cunning and paranoia. He suspected what Rumsfeld, his protégé, wanted, and he gave it to him. Both of them were students of swordfighting, and aboard the Red Claw was an arena where occasional swordfights were held, as well the occasional feeding of a prisoner to the Mammon tiger¹⁹ that was kept aboard the Claw.

Czerwon offered Rumsfeld the chance the captain had always wanted - a one on one swordfight in the arena, with no restrictions; in essence, a chance to kill him. "Since you are so desperate to prove yourself against me, here is your chance," said the CEO.

Rumsfeld took up the blade and saluted, his heart trembling from anticipation of final victory-overcoming. But the blade fight that ensued did not last long. By then the CEO's body had already been changed and mutated by genetic engineering and organ replacements; Rumsfeld, mere mortal, was not fighting a body human. Czerwon easily bested Rumsfeld, disarmed him, and forced the captain to his knees.

Captain Rumsfeld, in what was the most painful moment of his life, had to beg for mercy. Chief Executive Officer Czerwon, inexplicably, gave it.

Rumsfeld returned to his duties as commander of the Red Claw. He was so humiliated that for a time the desires within him were stilled, and he was loyal and servile. But the hunger slowly came back, its empty belly growling through Rumsfeld's skull. The craving for power was too strong within him, and now this craving was combined with the desire for revenge. He wanted to destroy Czerwon.

He was not the only one aboard the Red Claw who had such animosity against the Chief Executive Officer. The emotional climate aboard the ship was such that soon after joining it, any new worker would find himself lost in the tide of general loathing, both for himself and for Czerwon. As flagship for the Corporate fleet the Red Claw was not a place that valued the human being, it was a place where your humanity would be slowly leached out of you, till there was nothing left in your heart but a beastly growl.

Various officers had been half-seriously planning an overthrow of Czerwon for a long time, although their need to draw up plans, redraw the plans, then to throw away the old plans and draw up new ones, had come in the way of any real action. It came as a shock to them, in fact, when the captain of the Red Claw, who had for so long been considered Czerwon's most loyal henchman, approached them with the aim of finalising the plans and of personally leading the conspiracy.

But by then Czerwon had hired a band of mercenaries to function as a 'security' force aboard the Claw. Apparently the CEO suspected what was going on.

Captain Rumsfeld was surprised, not so much as by the creation of the security force, as by the choice of mercenary. For the mercenaries chosen had once been part of the Royal Guard of Old Italy, and were under the command of a Lieutenant Brasidas²⁰. Although the captain had never met Brasidas until he came aboard the Red Claw, he had heard of him during the siege of Old Italy, when Rumsfeld had been planning to utterly annihilate the Royal Guard.

Rumsfeld had distinguished himself during that siege, especially by his excessive cruelty. None of the other siege commanders, who prided themselves on having some sort of military honour, could compare to then Commander Rumsfeld as he mercilessly

slaughtered all who dared run the part of the blockade under his control. He involved himself personally, often flying his own dart²¹ against the various ships that attempted to break through. He killed many smugglers - he was dubbed 'the Smuggler's Bane' by the various people who either for profit or out of loyalty to the monarchy, ran the Corp blockades to deliver essential supplies to the Italian besieged.

There had been one smuggler, though, who had infuriated him by constantly escaping his grasp. The commander had made it his personal mission to destroy him and, apart from Czerwon, this smuggler had been the only man who had ever successfully contested Rumsfeld's dominance. This man had been called Smuggler Knight, and Rumsfeld had fought in a one-on-one dogfight against the smuggler in the last few days of the siege. The fight had ended in a stale-mate, and both of them, their weapons used up, had to limp away, vowing to end the fight in the future.

Rumsfeld had become so angry at his defeat that when the siege had changed into an all-out assault on the Italian homeworld, the Commander, learning of the smuggler's position, diverted himself from his main objectives, which included the Royal Palace, and attempted to chase the smuggler down. He lost the smuggler somewhere in the burning and still-shelled ruins of Troy, and by the time he returned to the assaulting the Palace the Royal Guard had been evacuated. If he had not diverted himself for the fruitless hunt, then Lieutenant Brasidas along with the Royal Guard he was part of, would have been pinned down by Rumsfeld's forces and trapped, and killed, in the Palace.

Now Rumsfeld was forced to co-operate with a man he once had the power to destroy - he now had to pay for not having done so. Rumsfeld realised the presence of Brasidas and his mercenaries meant that any attempt to overthrow Czerwon (and to make himself CEO in the process) would meet armed resistance. It was no longer merely a conspiracy to assassinate Czerwon - now it had to be a full armed revolt.

But there were enough malcontents aboard the Red Claw, especially in its more neglected quarters, where the people performed less-important tasks and were otherwise forgotten. For the Red Claw was a vast ship and entire sub-societies formed in its more isolated decks. These were pallored people cramped in dark dingy little corridors who habitually cursed their overlord. Many of them did not join the Claw by choice, but were forced by whatever methods of compulsion the Corporate recruiters had used.

It was these people, united more by their hatred of Czerwon than out of love for Rumsfeld, who the captain had to rely on for his plans. Some of them, though, hated the captain of the Red Claw almost as much as they hated the Chief Executive Officer. Nevertheless, Rumsfeld continued to work in the shadows, to work for the one thing that mattered to him : power. He had been striving for it for too long, and had too much blood on his hands, to give up now.

Nameless friends/nameless enemies and other automatic mechanical animals

"Smuggler Knight!"

Those were the first kind words to meet Knight since the smuggler had boarded Spacestation Crosspoint. It was his old friend, the same that had recommended Crosspoint. It seemed that his friend had taken his own advice, and they had run into each other.

A smoke bar aboard the Spacestation Crosspoint. Knight and his friend were sharing a smoke (it was cheaper that way).

The friend had the mask put against his face, tightly covering over his nose and mouth, while the smoke flowed up through the tubes out the table. Inhaling the warm smoke, mildly irritating the inner linings of his lung bronchioli. Hold breath. He handed the mask over to Knight. Knight inhaled, while his friend ended his breath holding and let out a smoky exhalation into an exit tube. A big ugly bouncer roamed the smoke tables, making sure the various patrons exhaled properly, either into mask or tube. Fresh air was expensive aboard a spacestation and careless pollution was not appreciated.

His friend took up one of the drinks on the table and swallowed it into his dry throat. They had ordered stimulants to smoke, and Knight watched his friend's pupils dilating as the sympathetic neurons in his body were activated, pupils black and wide. Knight held his breath, closed his own eyes for a moment, feeling his heart beating a little bit faster, his body a little lighter. It made the smuggler giddy, but Knight could see his friend firing up, as if his increased intellectual activities were flexing themselves right into the muscles of the body.

"What is then, this force behind the wheel of history, the momentum - one side! - of this pendulum – other side!"

Knight suddenly realised how vivid the coloured tiles looked, clinging to the walls. Red against blue, green against yellow, not complementary but antagonistic. The colours clawed at each other, Knight's eyes darted from one tile to its neighbour tile, the tiles swinging like pendulums. Then the bar was a pendulum weight moving from side to side, from one extreme to the next.

"Evidently," Knight thought aloud, "Our smoke has been contaminated with a hallucinogen."

Knight's friend suddenly burst into giggles. Then Knight laughed along. After some time, Knight asked, "What were we laughing about?"

"Something you said..."

"What did I say?"

Frown. "Don't know. Can't remember. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"Then we are condemned to remain in ignorance."

Knight, for some reason, found his friend's statement to be funny. He laughed.

"We are swept away, Knight," his friend continued, oblivious. "Swept away in a tide of ignorance, a social commonwealth of unthinking. We are sheep. Baaaaah. We do what other people do, lemmings. If someone is greedy, our herd-mind goes 'Look, he is one of our herd, we must copy.' Then we are greed. If someone is angry, we are anger. If someone is delusioned and illusioned, then we willingly go into delusion and illusion."

"Not me," interjected Knight. "I'm an individualist."

"No way man, you're just another type of sheep. A smuggler sheep, admittedly, but still a sheep. With mechanical instincts, dictated to you by some evolutionary herd-advantage. We unconsciously and subconsciously and consciously imitate one another, so that we become like each other, melding our individual existences into one great homogeneity. Our souls tend to be like other souls. So this thing called society, it is shaping us. Think of it! This huge morass of nameless friends and nameless enemies is right now attempting to alter who you really are."

The dimensional matrix of the bar began to oscillate and oscillate, until suddenly the fabric of space and time tore to reveal the interdimensional links between all worlds. A wolf strolled over to their table, and spoke to Knight, "That's some serious smoke, man, but I hope you know you're hallucinating."

"Didn't know animals can talk," exclaimed Knight, stupefied.

"Arrogant human flesh. What right have you to elevate yourself above me? You sweat, and breath and feel your heart palpitating just like I do. In what sense, then, do you separate yourself? When we were both six week embryos, did we look different, you and I? No, we looked the same, our own mothers would have had trouble discriminating us.²² Your physiology is so much like the rat's and the monkey's physiology, you even use them to test your medications and drugs and poisons on, yet that slight difference between their bodies and your body is enough for you to proclaim a separateness? You are not-animal, but they are? Yet you take the medication that has been tested on them? Hypocrite! I have a beating heart, you have a beating heart; dissect us and what differences do you find?"

Then both the wolf and Knight's friend rose into the air, facing the smuggler. Their limbs were tied to the sky as if strapped to a vivisection table. Twin scalpels materialised out of astral material. The scalpels then began to cut up the wolf and his friend by making an incision on the skin, starting just above the jugular notch and continuing down the midline, past the umbilicus and ending in the pubic area. Once this incision was complete the rib cages suddenly pulled apart, blossoming like the petals of a lotus flower, and they opened up completely to show all the contents of thorax and abdomen.

Their inner organs glistened with real-life sheen. The intestines were covered by a raggedy yellow membrane, globs of yellow hanging of it like scrambled eggs, the omentum. Bits of the intestine peeked through from under the omentum, like worms writhing under something. Stomachs pale pink, tucked in under the dark-coloured livers. And the lungs, inflating and deflating in a frightening organic way, like balloons.

Then, just as the rib cages had separated, so too the lungs moved away, unfolding like flower petals, as if a lotus flower within the lotus flower. As the purplepink lungs separated, from beneath them revealed itself a heart.

Beating and bright red. Both hearts, wolf's and man's, beat in unison, a harmonious rhythm. Like drums, loud ones, going *lub dup lub dup*.

And then Knight heard a voice call out, "Homo homini lupus!"²³

The vision then dissipated, and Knight felt groggy. "What happened?" he asked.

"That was some trip," his friend retorted. Evidently he too had returned from some sore prophetic vision. The friend took up the mask, looking it over. "What was in that smoke?"

"Something we didn't pay for," said Knight.

His friend, still a bit intoxicated, burst into giggles. Then he managed to at least appear soberly, and said, "In the end we pay for everything. All has to be accounted for. Everything that comes for free has a price."

"And what is this everything?" Knight inquired.

"What we see, taste, smell, feel, hear and think²⁴. That is everything. And we pay for it eventually, with our lives if need be. That's the coin we use to pay for this privilege of existing – our mortality."

"Do you think they'll ask us to pay for this smoke?" Knight asked.

"No," his friend said. "I think that the tube was just filled with left-over smoke from some previous customer. It just happened to hit us pretty hard. See any tail-biting snakes?"

"No, but I did see you being dissected next to a talking wolf." Knight only realised how ridiculous his sentence sounded after he had actually said it.

"Wild." His friend paused speaking, looked at the mask with a suspicious eye. Then he shrugged, cast off the suspicion in his eye, put the mask to his face, opened the valve, took a deep inhale.

A few moments later he exhaled into the mask, closed the valve, handed the mask over to Knight.

"I think I'll wait a while, I want to see if it'll hit you again like last time," grinned Knight, rubbing his fingers over thick dirty plastic of the mask.

"Doubt it. I think the two of us managed to breath in whatever was left of that stuff." Smoke exhaled between his teeth. The friend was silent for a moment, his eyes in thought. "I didn't see any talking wolves but I did see a vision. I saw the whole thing that happened to you back at Spacestation Beijing, or Peking or whatever its called. Call it Tang Yu land. So I saw you in Station Tang Yu land, I saw you chop that bastard prince's neck open, saw you scavenging for money, saw you walking about the station soaked in blood and stinking, running like some scared animal. Must have been extremely undignifying."

"It was," confirmed Knight. "Are you seeing any tail-biting snakes?"

"The whole universe is a tail-biting snake, going around and round repeating itself forever. But if you're asking whether I'm on a trip, then no, I don't see any."

"Great," said Knight, and he took an inhalation of smoke while his friend went on.

"So I'm watching in full four dimensions, like I was some spirit, watching this indignity that a fellow member of the smuggling profession has to go through. And I was thinking, 'Oh man, what depths we have sunk to. This profession as it is has no glory left in it.'

"Knight, I have something to admit to you. I promised my father that as long as I was a smuggler I'd follow the Smuggler's Code. Except, I'm not much of a smuggler anymore. I got a job and it isn't smuggler work. I'm hauling mined ore for a small colony not far from here. I'm a shipper, Knight. There's no real honour in it, and it pays poorly, but it's good, steady work."

Knight was shocked. "You've become a *shipper*? You? The same man who ran the Corp blockade with me ten years ago?"

"I know, I know. It's awful. But I just can't compete. When you stick to a Code when no one else does, the odds are against you."

"But what about your Ancestors?"

"My venerable Ancestors will understand. I'm sure that the family history goes back to a time when there were no smugglers, and now it will have to go into a time with no smugglers as well. Things may change but the Ancestors are still there."

"Maybe you're right," conceded Knight, taking a smoke. "But I saw my venerable father die with my own eyes for what he believed. He was killed by some thugs who didn't care about the code, though this was even before Old Italy. The rot was setting in even then. Thing is, my venerable father gave his life for the Smuggler's Code. It would be disrespecting him to just give up on it when he made even greater sacrifices."

They sat then in silence, taking turns passing the mask to and fro, to finish up the smoke. They even took in the last part of the smoke, which contained the heaviest gases and was most irritating to the lung's lining. They both had a small coughing session after that.

Then they left the smoke bar and Knight accompanied his friend, who was going to leave to collect a new shipment of ore.

As they were about to part, they saluted each other in the traditional manner.

"Smuggler Knight," his friend said as parting words, "I admire you, in a way. I don't have the courage to keep at the Smuggler's Code like you. Your kind are a dying breed, and there are fewer and fewer of the old types of smugglers around. I wish you luck."

After his friend departed, Knight spent some time looking for work, but did not find any. Station Crosspoint was new and underpopulated but was gradually becoming more frequented by space travellers. Knight worried, though, that he wouldn't be able to get a job before he went flat out broke. After passing his name around, he decided to head back to his ship for some rest, once more acutely aware that the longer his ship was parked aboard the station the higher the parking fee would go. To complicate matters, his ship was very low on (expensive) fuel, so low as to be equivalent to empty. Knight was stranded on Station Crosspoint, without fuel to leave even if he had wanted to.

Smuggler Knight hoped he would get a job, soon.

The journey to Crosspoint (the present comes from a past going to a future)

A tradership's docking bay was usually rather small and the tiny cutter was cramped in the space, like a creature caught in a slow-enclosing net. Coming out of the exit hatches, there was not much room to maneuver as Hanako and Sparks helped Demetria get herself out of the cutter.

The owner and sole crewman of the tradership, Trader Statek²⁵, had come to greet them as soon as they stepped out of the ship. Trader Statek was well known to the people of Forestglen, for he was the most regular of the traders who came to deal in goods with the small colony.

"Hello, Trader Statek," said Demetria.

"Greetings, traderman. Father Abimelech sends his regards," Sparks said.

"You can send mine in turn, when you return planetside," said the traderman, with smiles. "Let me help with your luggage."

"Oh thank you, traderman," exclaimed Demetria.

He took one of the bags that Sparks handed down to him, and Sparks himself came down with the other.

"I'll take you to your quarters, ladies. Unfortunately, this is only a humble tradership, and the quarters are rather minimal..."

"I'm sure they'll be fine, traderman."

"Your optimism is most gracious, Madam."

Trader Statek took them to their quarters. The quarters had six bunks, three on each wall²⁶. All except for the bottom two were folded up against the wall, the same style of bunk that had been designed and in use for centuries, designs inherited from the past.

"Hey, I thought spaceships had these bunkers that *zipped!* out the wall when you pressed a button!" exclaimed Hanako.

"Alas, I am unable to afford the *zwip* factor," Statek said. "Us poorer traders must run our ships on economy, even if that means using traditional bunks instead of more modern *zipping* bunks." The traderman opened up a locker set into the far wall and set the bag down, and then took the other bag from Sparks and set it down as well.

"The bathroom is the room immediately across the hallway," Statek continued. "No trouble there. I can take you to see the rest of the ship, but I suppose lad Sparks here needs to get back planetside before his mamma starts worrying."

Sparks grinned. "My mother doesn't need to worry about me."

"Ah, a-virgin-to-the-death lad?" Statek retorted. Sparks blushed.

The walk back to the docking bay suddenly thrust melancholy upon Hanako. She realised that once Sparky left in the cutter she would have crossed the mark of no turning-back; she may very well have cut herself loose from her home permanently, never to see Forestglen again.

In the bay, Sparks noticed Hanako's clouded mood. "What's wrong, Hanako?"

"Sparky, I'm never coming home again!"

"Don't say that Hanako. I'm sure that once this is all over you'll be back in Forestglen like you had never left. Here..." Sparks took out something from a bag he had slung around his shoulder, "this is for you."

Hanako took it in her graceful hands. It was a small, wooden statue of a house, whittled away from some block of wood Sparks had found in his lonesome walks in the forest.

"It's a typical home of Forestglen," Sparky explained. "So that you'll always have a home away from home."

"Thank you, Sparky. This is the best present anyone has ever given me." Hanako lightly kissed him on the cheek. Again Sparks blushed.

"Uh, well, I'd best get going," word-stumbled the boy. "Hanako, Demetria, good luck. I know this whole business will turn out all right in the end. Traderman Statek, it was good to see you again. I'll send Father Abimelech your regards."

"You do that lad."

"Then I'm off."

Sparks got into the cutter and sealed the hatchway. The traderman ushered the women out of the docking bay. A rumble vadoomed through the hallways as the docking bay locked and then depressurised itself.

"The viewing room is just down there..." the traderman began, but suddenly Hanako ran down to where the trader had indicated.

"Hey!" called Statek, but Hanako didn't listen. "Well," said the traderman to Demetria, "she's certainly spirited!"

"Oh yes she is," said Demetria, smiling.

Hanako ran down the corridor, hoping the traderman's vague direction and her own sixth-sense feelings would lead her to the right place. Sure enough, one hatchway was labeled, big and bright, VIEWING ROOM. Through the open doors she rushed, like one who has ceased the chance to attempt an escape from a prison.

The room inside had transparent walls, with a magnificent viewpoint over the docking bay exit. The cutter was leaving the bay and like some star-butterfly glided off, gently tilting itself to enter the atmosphere of the planet. Although she knew that Sparky could probably not see her, she waved good-bye to the butterfly, a tear on her cheek.

When the cutter had disappeared into the skies of Forestglen, she ran out of the viewing room, and down the hall, straight into Trader Statek and Demetria, who were coming up to meet her. Hanako ran into mama's arms, buried herself in her Demetria's bosom and cried.

"There, there, child, why are you crying? We'll be back soon enough," Demetria soothed her adopted daughter.

"Come, Hanako, let me take you on a tour of the ship," Statek said, big grin on his face, trying to cheer her up. "You've never been on a trader ship before?"

"No," Hanako sniffed.

"Well, you have missed a fantastic thing indeed! Let me take you on a journey of discovery!"

Hanako laughed through her tears at the traderman's melodrama.

"There! Feel better already! A tradership will do that to you. 'Nothing better than a tradership on a blue day,' I always say. Come, let me take you to the pilot deck. I'll show you the cockpit."

Demetria, after her traumatic journey in the cutter, said she'd lie down a bit; in the meanwhile Trader Statek took Hanako to the cockpit. The pilot's deck was small and cramped, much like the rest of the trader ship, built for economy rather than luxury. The traderman sat in one of the seats, told Hanako to sit next to him. He explained to her what the mind-boggling assortment of dials and switches and displays all meant. He activated the navigation programs, and as they entered the launch window, pulsed power into the engines

The tradership struggle-heaved to one side. A sigh bounded through the vessel, then the tradership dipped forward in the direction of Crosspoint.

It was going to take three days to reach Crosspoint. Time drifted a while. Uneventful time passed with chatter and stargazing in the viewing room. Hanako spent much of her days exploring the tradership, and got to know its every wall and corner. Occasionally Trader Statek would explain the principles of navigation to her, how one had to plot previous positions in order to find out the direction the ship was going in, to predict the short and long term outcomes of one's trajectory. He also explained the concept of spacestreams, where the fabric of space was tighter, which allowed spaceships to travel fast down the streams, as if carried by momentum, like a stone rolling downhill. The end of the journey crept towards them slowly, inevitable-predictable, the resultant of their efforts.

As they neared Crosspoint, Hanako was in the viewing room waiting for her first sight of the station. Crosspoint was originally a derelict piece of space scrap. Its owner spent the last of his life savings buying it and renovating it to a dubious standard. He towed it to its present location, an empty place, that had as its one virtue close proximity to three spacestreams and several small colonies.

Establishing the station in a such an area was a gamble, but it turned out to be a winner for the aspiring entrepreneur. Although the spacestreams were not clog-ridden, the traffic on them converged on the crossway between the three streams, the spaceships either seeking supplies from the station or else, passing by on to another stream, they would often stop for their rest and relaxation.

The station owner became rich, and earned enough to tow in a proper quality station. But he was unable to part with the original station, it was too great in sentimental value.

It is difficult to let go of what you cherish, especially if it is a material thing; it is strange, how many choose to love most the things which cannot love back. So instead of buying a new station the owner attempted to upgrade and build on to it. This resulted in one of the most bizarre creations in the colonised galaxy, a strange mishmash of new facilities tied to the ancient spine of the original station. Like some sort of an evolution, a birth of a new species that still carried characteristics of the previous incarnation.

With Crosspoint upgraded with the facilities required of its patrons, and the owner set for a comfortable retirement, he and his crew became rather bored. One day an asteroid was floating past, and someone got the crazy idea of hitching Crosspoint and the asteroid together, burning some metal corridors into the asteroid to link it to Crosspoint, then digging rooms in the asteroid as an expansion of the spacestation. The concept hinted that it would be cheaper than expanding Crosspoint by towing in new parts, and would require so much time and energy that they would be able to whip Boredom back to its corner, and they would have something to tell their grandchildren about.

The result made the most bizarre station in the galaxy into the most bizarre planetoid in the galaxy. The effect was not unlike that of a giant metallic spider grasping a piece of dirt of equal-like size. An evolving station which could not escape its past, embracing a strange future.

The presence of the ever-enlarging station served in and of itself to attract more traffic to the region. Crosspoint was unique, and since it was the only station in the area, both pirates and traders docked there for supplies and repairs, and the hunters and hunted could very well share a drink or two at one of Crosspoint's bars. The eccentric owner, realising this, built up a station security force to prevent the thieves from stealing from merchants in-station. This security force eventually expanded into a tiny star fleet, sufficient enough to chase down errant pirates and parking-fee dodging traders, as well as blowing up the rival station of any would-be competitor, a rather liberal interpretation of competition laws. The triumph of the entrepreneurial spirit. The owner had gone from nothing to everything, but still had too little to share.

So this was the metal spider that Hanako first saw, clutching tenaciously to its bit of earth, greedy and unable to let go.

One of Crosspoint's fighter ships flew by them, the little dart leaving a trail of sparkling gas. The dart made a fantastic view from where Hanako was. She waved to the pilot of the dart, fancying that the pilot had waved back.

Production and destruction (King of the ant-hill)

As the trader ship docked at Crosspoint, the Red Claw was steady in its orbit around Forestglen.

"Chief Executive Officer! We have searched the area and found no trace of the geneling." Captain Rumsfeld's voice crackled over the speakers of the boardroom. It was in the boardroom that the Red Claw was controlled, and that commands could be sent forth to any ship in the Corporate navy. Below, on the command floor, were lines of panels and screens where the CEO's employees kept watch on Corporate goings-on, while in the centre of this active hive was a circle of such panels where the crew of the Red Claw piloted and navigated the ship, as well as monitoring its systems. Over this work floor, loomed a rounded metal balcony, vaguely reminiscent of the oval shape of a

shark's jaw. A huge coat-of-arms, Czerwon's company emblem, leered from this balcony; two blood-coloured claw-like hands grasping for a shimmering gold coin.

Thalia saw Czerwon, gripping his hands into knuckle-white on the rail of the hovering balcony. She could not see his face as she entered the boardroom, but she imagined twisting rage. Thalia had meant to stay in her room, feigning sickness, but when Ansar informed her of the disappearance of the girl she decided to come see for her own pleasure if perhaps the mighty Czerwon had, for once, been thwarted in his designs.

She stood on the wall-end of the balcony, waiting for her brother to turn from his position at the rail-end. She did not dare approach him herself, not with the volatile mood the CEO was experiencing.

"Captain Rumsfeld!" Czerwon boomed.

"Yes, Chief Executive Officer?" crackled the captain.

"I want an explanation, captain, and I want it from those rats themselves. Who is their leader?"

"A man by the name of Father Abimelech, Chief Executive Officer."

"Does the settlement have a means of transport to the Red Claw?"

"There is a cutter, yes, Chief Executive Officer."

"Is that the only means of stellar transportation they have?"

"Yes Chief Executive Officer."

"Then tell this 'father Abimelech' that he must come take this cutter and present himself before me aboard the Red Claw."

Thalia was puzzled at first at the insistence at taking the cutter. Then she surmised that her brother wanted to cut off the last form of escape from the settlement, under the ruse of a 'discussion'.

These poor folk, thought Thalia. They had earlier claimed that Hanako had died only a few days before in an unfortunate accident, and would attempt to repay Czerwon. If they had not been so naive, they would have realised the futility of such a plan. One could not make such deals with Czerwon, not after taking away something so precious from him.

"Lieutenant Brasidas, where are you?" called Czerwon to those below him.

"Chief Executive Officer!" A man in a black uniform on the lower deck saluted upwards to Czerwon.

"Lieutenant Brasidas, put the delegates under your personal protection when they dock, and bring them before me here."

"Yes Chief Executive Officer." Lieutenant Brasidas barked out some orders, then marched out of the boardroom, disappearing under the balcony, away from Czerwon's sight and malice.

Czerwon slowly turned away from his overlord's-view of the boardroom, and saw Thalia, still standing wall-end. "Sister, I thought you were ill."

"Brother, I am feeling better, and wanted to come see what this planet looked like. But I have heard that something wrong has happened?"

Czerwon nodded, a single efficient movement of his head. "The inhabitants claim that my geneling has died recently in an accident, and have cremated the body. I do not believe them."

"Why? Surely some sort of calamity had to befall one of your genelings eventually?"

"I do not believe them, Thalia," his voice becoming harsh, "because my spies informed me that the Forestglenners bury their dead. This is the first time I'm hearing of any

cremation. Either my spies are in the wrong, or the Forestglenners are lying; and either way, there are people going to regret their subterfuge against me within the very near future."

'More bloodshed,' thought Thalia, 'Will this ever end?'

"A ship is leaving the atmosphere," intoned a disembodied voice from the boardroom intercom systems. "It's a cutter."

Czerwon turned back to brood over his minions of the lower deck. Below him, his worker ants worked hard and 'enthusiastically', aware of their master's gaze boring into the back of their necks. Even if one of them had nothing to do, they would pretend to be doing something, not slacking, anything to avoid the wrath of their master. The slaves of productivity. I once was human but now I am an ant.

"The cutter is turning to dock," said the intercom, "Docking bay is preparing to receive visitor."

Thalia had walked forward to stand nearby her brother's side, close enough to see the action of the lower deck, far enough to not feel her brother's overwhelming presence.

"Thalia," Czerwon asked, "How is your parrot?"

Always the same questions. "She is fine, brother, strong and healthy. I think she's finished growing."

Background : "The visitor has successfully docked. Docking bays are closing. Preparing to pressurise the bay."

"And your servant, Ansar? He never seems to be around. Or is he 'sick' too?"

"Ansar is busy running errands for me."

"Are you satisfied with his work?"

Again this damned question. "Of course, brother. You know that when I am dissatisfied with anything I always tell you." She only realised the irony of her statement after she had finished it.

"Good," said Czerwon. Thalia knew that if she ever wanted Ansar to be mutilated by the beasts in the arena then all she had to do was say that he had been slacking in cleaning her dishes. Czerwon seemed to expect even more from Thalia's servants than his own.

"Good," said Czerwon again, unable to think up of any extra small-talk. The conversation had ended.

'Once brother,' Thalia thought to herself, 'you must have had a soul, and that is the only reason I pity you.' They watched the people below, 'productive' and 'thriving', like neuronics sparks, a central nervous system, the centre of power of the colonised galaxy. Ants.

"Communications!" Czerwon called out, "Have Doctor Fallsoul come join me in the boardroom. Tell him to bring his 'methods of truth'."

A faint "Yes, Chief Executive Officer!" came from below. 'Methods of truth'. Perhaps torture was to be involved. Thalia wondered whether she should go or stay. She stayed. Perhaps she could learn a few lessons from Cruelty.

A few minutes further, Lieutenant Brasidas led four security officers into the boardroom, the officers flanking the two delegates.

Thalia moved further along the rail, away from her brother, making space. Brasidas raised his hand in salute, reporting and introducing the two 'delegates'. "Chief Executive Officer, this is Father Abimelech and his cutter-pilot."

Abimelech stood tall and straight, and met Czerwon's gaze. Sparks was not as sure of himself. He looked away from Czerwon and found in his vision Thalia. His first surprise-thought was the she was an ivory-white statue draped in black. Thalia gave the young boy a sympathetic smile, and Sparks gave a grateful beam back, and he felt Thalia's eyes comforting him, enough so that he too could look at Czerwon.

Brasidas lowered his hand, stood at attention. Brasidas and his men were once the mercenary guards for the royal family of Old Italy. Brasidas had led a part of that planet's resistance when Czerwon's Corporation swept down to destroy. Driven from the planet, he and his mercenaries roamed, searching for work. When the Red Claw needed an on-board security service, they were willing to act as officers aboard the massive ship, serving, out of circumstance, a master that they had once fought against.

Brasidas turned to Lady Thalia, smiled and gave a respectful of bow. Thalia had a few conversations with Brasidas and was always charmed by his manners, honed in the now-ruined courts of Old Italy. It was he who came up with her pet parrot's name, a subtle insult at Czerwon, naming the CEO's gift for his sister after a title that lay among the palace rubble of Old Italy. She regretted that Brasidas had recently entered service aboard the ship : it could not be too long before Brasidas' soul would be caught up in corrupting rot that pervaded the corridors of the Red Claw.

Doctor Fallsoul entered the boardroom, carrying his black bag, and quietly stood by the wall, awaiting orders. He did not notice Thalia, he seemed to absorbed in something, some other world, obscure.

"Father Abimelech, welcome aboard the Red Claw." Czerwon's voice disturbed Thalia's train of thoughts.

"Chief Executive Officer Czerwon," began Abimelech, "the people of Forestglen deeply regret the loss of the child, Hanako, that you gave into our care. We are willing to pay back all of the money that we still have left, and to work off the rest or pay in instalments."

Czerwon's jaw shifted from side to side, his eyes never leaving Abimelech's.

"The child is dead?"

"Yes sir. Hanako was in..."

"I don't want to hear the sobbing-story of her death."

"...Oh, yes sir, Chief Executive Officer, sir." Abimelech immediately regretted his words as he spoke them, they showed too much hesitation, nervousness.

"You," said Czerwon to Abimelech, his green eyes locking into his grey, "are strong." Czerwon suddenly changed his line of sight towards Sparks. Sparks wanted to tremble at the cold, powerful gaze. "But you," Czerwon's lip curled at one side, "I think you are not as strong. Doctor Fallsoul!"

Doctor Fallsoul's eyes clicked back to the scene in front of him, from whatever realm they had been to. He walked forward, holding his bag so that it did not touch him. It was almost as if he was afraid of it. "Chief Executive Officer?" asked the doctor.

"Doctor, administer your truth serum to the boy."

"I must protest..." said Abimelech.

"Protest and die, Father Abimelech," commented Czerwon, pulling out his gun, loading it with an aggressive click.

Abimelech, himself unarmed, looked around seeking help. Brasidas' face seemed regretful but otherwise showed no sympathy. The other security officers were not about

to step forward against their master, and their machine guns were lowered but ready to fire if necessary - no escape for the Forestglenners. Thalia still looked at them, her head tilted, her expression resigned to witnessing their fate.

Czerwon smiled. "Don't worry, Father Abimelech. If you are telling the truth you have nothing to worry about."

Thalia looked at her brother, knowing that even if Father Abimelech was telling the truth, Forestglen would be wiped out anyway.

Doctor Fallsoul put down his bag, bent down and opened, reached in and took out a metal dental syringe and a small vial. He opened the syringe up, and exposing the vial's small needle, inserted it into the dental syringe. He closed the syringe, then inserted a long needle into its end. He squirted a few drops out, then bent the needle slightly at the bevel, to aid the insertion.

Two of the officers had taken Sparks' arms and were holding him steady. Sparks wondered if he should struggle and try to run for it. Doctor Fallsoul took scissors and cut the sleeve of Sparks' shirt off, not bothering to ask Sparks to take it off. He pulled Sparks' arm, and clamped it down under his own left arm. He looked for the vein, and was about to put the needle in when Sparks resisted. The officers firmed their grip and a third grabbed Sparks from behind. Sparks was entering a wild panic and he would not desist, so the fourth officer stepped past the doctor and punched Sparks several times in the stomach, then smashed a fist into his face. Dazed and in pain, Sparks pacified down long enough for Doctor Fallsoul to administer the injection.

Abimelech had lunged towards Sparks when they began to beat him, but was caught from behind by Brasidas, who twisted Abimelech's arm into pain.

"Sorry Father Abimelech," Brasidas said, "But this is how things are aboard the Red Claw." He pulled Abimelech back from Sparks.

Doctor Fallsoul turned to Czerwon. "A minute or two, and he will start to be susceptible."

Czerwon smiled at the doctor. "Thank you, Doctor Fallsoul." He turned to Abimelech. "Forgive us, 'father', but I must make sure of the entrusted child's fate. But don't worry, what I am doing is merely a formality. Once the boy tells us the truth, the same 'truth' that you have given me, then you will be set free."

Czerwon's appearance of good humour as he said this terrified Abimelech even more than the words spoken.

"Doctor Fallsoul, would you care to measure out the space of a minute, or the space from now to 'susceptibility'."

"Of course, Chief Executive Officer." Doctor Fallsoul turned his head to stare at the watch on his wrist. Thalia sensed that the doctor cocooned himself into a little world with that a watch; for a minute, the doctor would be oblivious to anything else. In the world but unable to be of it.

Czerwon turned back to the overlord's view he had of the lower deck of the boardroom. "Navigations," he called out, "I want to know the likeliest destinations that someone were to take, from Forestglen, and fleeing from the Red Claw."

"As ordered, Chief Executive Officer!" A young man, leader of the navigational team, sent up a outstretched salute to the man commanding over them.

Sparks was beginning to feel dizzy and nauseous. A dull, pounding pain was starting in his head. The eyelid above his left eye was flickering uncontrollably. His vision was blurring.

Doctor Fallsoul looked up from his watch, and then at his patient. He visually assessed Sparky's clinical signs. "He's ready," he said, flatly and objectively. Then he stepped back and took his position near the room-exit.

"Good," said Czerwon. "Let him go."

Sparks heard the doctor and Czerwon speak, but was unsure whether the voices were real or not. The officers let Sparks go, and his legs collapsed beneath him. Sparks felt surprise somewhere in the back of his head, surprise that his legs had failed. He was disorientated, and couldn't quite remember where he was. He couldn't see anything, why was everything so hazy?

Czerwon walked over to Sparks. The boy was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, eyes wide open, vision virtually shut. Czerwon stepped over Sparks, leaning himself into Sparks' field of sight.

A blurry object is over me, thought Sparks, it looks like it could be someone I know...

"Lad, this is Father Abimelech. Are you alright?"

The blur resolved itself into Abimelech.

"Father Abimelech," Sparks said, "what happened?"

"I'll tell you later lad, but first I must know – where is Hanako?"

"Father Abimelech, she's gone now."

"Yes, but where to? Answer me, boy, it's important!"

"But Father Abimelech, why are you asking me? You yourself recruited the tradership, you said good-bye to her when she left for Crosspoint. What has happened, Father Abimelech, have you lost your memory?"

Czerwon stood up straight. Abimelech looked with shock at him. How had he convinced Sparks that he was him? The realisation dawned on Abimelech : he was as good as lost. His only wish now was that Hanako get to safety, away from this madman.

"Navigation!" Czerwon cried, his voice so booming that it was thrown clearly to the level beneath the platform, "What is Crosspoint?" Sparks wondered why Father Abimelech was suddenly acting strangely again.

A short pause. "Chief Executive Officer, there is a spacestation called Crosspoint a few days journey from here. It is the only station in this region."

Czerwon bent back down over Sparks. "Lad, this is Father Abimelech, I have lost my memory. You must tell me, when did Hanako leave for Crosspoint?"

"Three days ago, Father Abimelech. I hope you get well soon. Hanako will be happy to see you again. She's so pretty..." Sparks mind was having difficulty using logic, and he was finding it hard to suppress the urge to vomit.

Czerwon straightened. He was taking deep breaths, anxious not to over-excite himself and tax his dying heart by making the pulse rate rise. So, as calmly as he could, careful not to let Rage take him over, he pointed his gun, pulled the trigger and shot Sparks in the head.

"No!" cried Abimelech, his voice drowned out by the booming howl of the gun. He tried to run forward, but Brasidas was still holding his arm. Abimelech struggled and the lieutenant hit the back of Abimelech's head with his fist, pacifying him.

"Abimelech," said the CEO, turning towards him, "I dislike it when people lie to me."

"You animal! You won't get her! You won't kill her just to keep yourself alive!"

"I assume that means you won't reveal anymore information to me." He walked up to Abimelech, still struggling under the hold of Brasidas. Czerwon holstered his gun. "Abimelech, I want my heart. I paid for it, I have waited eighteen years for it, it is my property. You took my property away from me. It is only fair that I take from you what you took from me."

Czerwon pulled a long knife from the scabbard attached on his own left forearm. He then thrust the knife into Abimelech's chest, twisting the blade into Abimelech's beating-core. The long blade slit out through the Forestglenner's back, and some blood came out and spurting onto Brasidas. Brasidas pulled back involuntarily, slightly repelled by the wet blood spots that sprinkled over his black uniform. Czerwon himself was near total overed in blood from the spray of the gaping wound as he pulled out the knife. Abimelech collapsed onto the ground, gasping a last dying.

Czerwon walked out to the edge of the platform once more. Those below looked up to see the blood-soaked god, his right hand stained with life-fluid of those who sinned against him, standing above his holy emblem of two red claws craving for gold. Thalia stood with her face impassive, trying to keep her emotions numb. It wouldn't do to start crying over the deaths of two strangers.

"Communications!" he hissed, preventing his voice from roaring by sheer force of will and by fear of heartbeat. "Link me up with planetside!"

"Chief Executive Officer?" said Captain Rumsfeld's disembodied voice.

"Captain Rumsfeld, set up a bombardment beacon there, then return with your men."

"I shall do that immediately, Chief Executive Officer!"

"You are going to bombard them?" asked Thalia, innocently.

"I will do more than bombard them, dear sister, I am going to utterly annihilate them."

The intercom spat, "Our military transports are leaving the atmosphere. We are preparing the docking bay."

"Weapons, do you track the beacon?"

"Yes, Chief Executive Officer!" exclaimed the man in charge of the Claw's weapons systems.

"I am in a hurry, send down ten of our heaviest warheads."

"Ten, Chief Executive Officer?" Anxious and puzzled look. 'Did I mishear?' thought the weapons officer.

"Is that too little, Weapons? Make it twenty!"

Brasidas cocked his eyebrow. He had never seen anyone order such a gross overkill, where one warhead would have been enough, and much cheaper.

Thalia noticed that Czerwon's arm, still holding the knife, was trembling.

"The bombardment beacon has been locked," talked the intercom, "Warheads will go down in ten seconds."

The weapons officer looked up at Czerwon, wondering if some last second reprieve will come out. The predatory look in the Chief Executive Officer's eyes convinced the man that it would not come.

The missiles flew down, twenty roaring Azraels, a pack of dogs of war scenting the beacon below. Screeching and whining, the doggy Azraels fell in metal rain, and killed the people of Forestglen, wiped their settlement into a crater.

Before it was over, Czerwon had already ordered the Red Claw to turn at all-speed to Crosspoint. He dismissed Brasidas, said good-bye to his sister, and asked the doctor to accompany him as he left the boardroom. Several brows furrowed at Czerwon's sudden turn of behaviour.

Czerwon walked down the corridor, the doctor behind him. Czerwon was finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the pain, and the more he tried the more his arm trembled in rage and agony.

He turned into the first room, pulled the doctor in, and locked the door.

The pain in his chest was roaring and crushing. "Doctor, do something," he said, clutching his chest with his bloodied hand. The knife clattered to the floor as he dropped it.

The doctor took out some medicine which he placed under the CEO's tongue.

"Why did you suffer it for so long?" Doctor Fallsoul asked.

"Are you a mad fool? Idiot! I cannot reveal weakness before my employed." The Chief Executive Officer spat out his words at the doctor, slight spray droplets of medicine and saliva, a threat if the man decided to reveal anything of his ailing beating-core.

As the pain subsided, Czerwon felt the change in the ship's engines hum under his feet, as the Red Claw set out for Crosspoint. The quarry had escaped, but the hunt was beginning.

Smuggler Knight

With the trader ship docked at Crosspoint, Trader Statek prepared to disembark along with Hanako and Demetria. "I'll have to hurry," the traderman said, "Things haven't been as good lately and I can't afford the parking fees."

Demetria fumbled in her bag for the credit panel, so that she could offer the traderman some money, but he insisted, "You don't owe me anything. I don't know why you're running from the Corp, but any such fugitive is my friend. I've had too many run-ins with the Corp to have any love for those pigs. I will still help you find a smuggler to hire; save the money for that, Madam Demetria."

They had docked into one of many little compartments within the greater docking bay that was built into the side of the asteroid. The compartment had sealed and pressurised. An airlock opened out from the belly of the ship and a ladder descended down.

"I apologise, it isn't a very dignified method of getting out my ship," said the trader, referring to the ladder, "But the only other way is through the cargo bay doors, which will take too long to open up and close. Every minute counts, you know, with the parking fees."

Hanako climbed down with nimbleness, while Demetria had a bit of difficulty. Then down came the traderman, struggling with the bags. Hanako glanced about, noticed the parking fees scrawled in huge white letters on the walls, with hourly, daily and other various measures of time, prices next to them in Corporate dollars.

Hanako shouldered her bag and her mama's, insisting that she should carry the load.

Trader Statek led them to the airlock that led out of the docking compartment, and into the station proper. Cameras dotted the area, and no could leave or enter the docking bay without being filmed. If anyone committed a crime aboard Station Crosspoint, they would have a hard time sneaking out.

Hanako's first impression was rather sour. They were in a network of long, dank corridors built into the asteroid and connecting all the compartments of the docking bay. The smell of dust was still in the silent air – the tunnels had only recently been dug. But as they came out of the tunnels, Hanako could hear music, at first soft. They came nearer, and the music became more jubilant and riotous.

At the tunnel exit they burst into a circus world. Bars, restaurants, brothels and entertainment centres, casinos, a little bit of everything that the lonely spaceman might need, were sprawled around haphazardly on multiple levels above and below. This part of the station was organised to a multi-level circular plan and one could stand by the railing and look up and down at the other levels.

Traders, smugglers, rogues, and the occasional adventurer were about. At one gambling venue, a crew-group gathered around a dice game, their red shirts and frolicsome coloured clothes made them look like tropical parrots. "Pirates," whispered the trader, "You can recognise them because they always wear something in the colour red. Stay away from them."

The trader took them to one of several bars, the 'Prohibition.' "This is where the smugglers are supposed to hide," Trader Statek explained, standing under the big neon letters. To enter one went through some thick curtains. The light inside was dim and safe for shady dealings.

As they entered the bar, Hanako started retching. The air was tinged with smoke and it irritated her throat. "This is also a smoking establishment, that's why it stinks. Looks like their exhalation tubes aren't very airtight either," the trader explained, indicating towards inhalation and exhalation masks that lay on the tables, with connecting tubes disappearing somewhere into floor. Through the tubes came various gases, and customers would hold a mask to their faces and open up the valve to breath in.

Some of the patrons stared at the threesome from behind the hubble-bubble masks, gently inhaling-exhaling. Some of them had their eyes glazed blood-shot red from the side effects of the narcotic they had chosen to breath in, while the others went for the less daring, more soothing or stimulating mixtures.

The single barman, a large, thick-jawed male, stood cleaning a glass with a dirty rag under some harsh neon light. The trader motioned for the two women to wait in a corner while he spoke with the barman. The drink-maker motioned with the glass to the back of the room.

The trader came back to the women and asked them to wait for a moment, while he himself disappeared into the dimness in the general direction the barman had indicated.

About a minute later he came back. "Madame Demetria," he whispered, "You'll have to clinch the deal yourself. I'll stay here with Hanako." The trader told Demetria to which table she had to go to.

She moved through the smoky haze and walked towards the table she thought had been indicated. The man sitting at the table beckoned her to sit. He was holding a mask to his face, breathing in thick airs of huddling smoke. He closed the valve at the mask and replaced on its stand on the table. His piercing green eyes looked at Demetria sceptically, his handsome face otherwise frozen into a neutral expression. The man licked the edges of his lips, where a little black tar had accumulated.

Smuggler Knight was tired after a long day of several botched deals, his head was in a zing from the smoke and he wasn't in the mood for much politeness so he impolitely began : "So, you need some smuggling done? Human traffic, if I heard correctly?"

"Please," coughed Demetria (the air was very dirty by Forestglen standards), "We are fleeing Czerwon. We need to be taken to a place of safety."

"Well, there are several places I could take you where the Corporate presence is not as significant..."

"I don't think you understand. I think Czerwon himself is after us."

"Right," said the smuggler, his tone disbelieving. "It always feels that way when the Corporation is after you. As I was saying, there are several places I could take you to, but it depends on the price you are willing to pay?" He stopped, waiting for a response from Demetria. He took up a glass and sipped the liquid inside.

Demetria wished that Abimelech had told her more about these things. She had five million dollars loaded into her money-com credit panel. Half of it, she decided. Surely the man would take them to the best of places for that price?

"Two and a half million corporate dollars."

The smuggler choked on his drink. He steadied himself and lowered the glass, while disbelief took over from surprise. He spoke, "Firstly, don't say amounts like that so loudly. The walls have ears here. Secondly, I'd like to see some confirmation of that amount."

He took out his own credit panel, and Demetria fumbled with her own, finally remembering how to transfer information between the panels.

As the information crossed his own panel, the smuggler's eyes widened.

"Lady, I follow the Smuggler's Code," said the smuggler, putting away his own panel. "And perhaps that is my downfall." He looked around in distaste at his surroundings. "I used to run the blockades around Old Italy. Back then smugglers were still expected to obey the Smuggler's Code. After the annihilation of the Italian monarchy, a new, lawless breed of smugglers arrived and drove me out of business, and a certain shareholder has a price on my head. Now I'm in this," he waved his hand about, "A once proud smuggler reduced to servicing backwaters.

"A lesser smuggler, the new-breed, would take you off to some half secret dump and leave you there. But for the money you're offering me, lady, there is only one destination." He leaned forward towards Demetria, his voice dropping nearer to a whisper. "There is only one place worth the price you wish to pay me, the only place that still holds out against the Corporation. The Free Trade Zone."

"I've heard of it, but I don't really know what it is..."

"A place where freedom is more precious than anything. A place where people are not the slaves of the Corporate system, where their way of life is not determined by someone else's profit margins. The Free Trade Zone may not have the military hardware of the Corporation, but they make up for it with spirited defenders. They are always taking refugees and that is the only place free of the Corporation." The smuggler paused for a moment. "If you wish to be taken some place else, I will do it, but I feel deeply that there is the only refuge worth the amount you wish to pay me, even though the journey there is most perilous. That is my opinion, grounded on the Smuggler's Code."

"I have no choice but to trust you, smuggler."

"You will not find that trust betrayed. Your man did a service by picking me out. Who will be coming?"

"Just me and my daughter."

Emotional relief at having found a job would have gone through Knight, except that the smuggler was so pumped on the stimulant he had just smoked that he was quite simply ready-to-go. Almost as an afterthought, he asked, "Do you wish to leave immediately?"

"Yes."

"Good." The smuggler finished his drink. He suddenly felt aware that he forgotten something important. Oh yes, "By the way, my name is Smuggler Knight."

"I am Demetria. My daughter is Hanako."

They got up from the table. Trader Statek and Hanako were waiting outside the 'Prohibition', leaning against a railing and watching some slightly drunk pirates singing on one of the lower levels. Hanako was still giving out little coughs here and there, but she was recovering from the smoke.

Ten minutes later they were in the tunnels leading to the docking ports. The trader took Demetria aside. "I've heard many good things about Smuggler Knight. He is known for his daring exploits during the siege of Old Italy, as well as being part of a long and respected family tradition of smuggling. It's a lucky thing he just happened to be here and that you've managed to hire him. I believe that he is for the most part trustworthy, but I worry that his principles may be a bit shaken due to hard times. Always be a little bit wary, then, and good luck, Madame Demetria."

"Are you sure you don't want compensation, Trader Statek?"

"No Madame Demetria. Just get yourself and Hanako to safety. Goodbye." He turned to Hanako "Goodbye Hanako."

Hanako jumped towards him and hugged him. "Goodbye Trader Statek! It was so nice meeting you!"

The traderman saluted Smuggler Knight, and the latter put his feet together and saluted back, fist on chest, happy to find someone who still obeyed to old protocols. All the while the cameras followed their movements. The trader sealed the airlock behind him and ran into his ship, desperate not to incur further parking fees. The smuggler took them to his own ship, parked in one of the extended visit docks, which worked out cheaper in the long run compared to the short stay docks.

It was built much like the square bug trader ship, but bigger. It's front was reinforced and it had much larger engines. Smuggler Knight helped them and their bags get aboard the ship, then said, "The journey will take several days. I'll show you to your rooms. I also need a fifty thousand dollar deposit."

"Pardon?" asked Demetria.

"I need to buy fuel for the journey. This expense is, of course, deductible from your final fee."

"Very well." Demetria took out the credit panel, and transferred fifty thousand over to Knight's money-com panel.

"Thank you, Lady Demetria." He took them to their room and went off to the cockpit, disguising some relief - his ship had been completely out of fuel and he had been completely out of credit, an extremely unprofessional state of affairs that he worried would embarrass him in front of his new clients.

The rooms were almost exactly the same as those aboard Statek's trader ship. Hanako wondered if the corridor-plan was the same, and rushed out to explore before Demetria could stop her. The floor-plan was similar, yet from the outside it didn't look like the same model of trader ship. Hanako made her way to the cockpit.

Smuggler Knight was ordering fuel and was opening the tank hatch for the station's automatic systems to charge his engines. Hanako startled him.

"Sorry," said Hanako.

"It's alright. We were in such a rush, I'm afraid we didn't get a proper chance to introduce ourselves. Lady Hanako, is it?"

"I-hm. And you're Knight?"

"Yes. Charmed to meet you. We'll be taking off soon."

"Trader Statek showed me how to fly his ship. These controls look similar. Why is this ship built like a trader ship when it doesn't look like it from outside?"

"Well, Lady Hanako, this ship was originally a trader ship. The front was built up so that it can ram orbital barricades, and the engines are much larger, built for speed and for landing and take-off from planets. There are also some weapon systems and evasion systems..."

"Weapons systems?"

"This is a smuggler ship, Lady Hanako. It isn't always the safest vocation."

"Does this ship have a name?"

Knight smiled. "Yes, my ship is called the 'Poet's Whim.'" The fuel indicator beeped. "Well, we are ready to go. Would you like to stay here for the take-off?"

"Here, of course!" replied Hanako.

Knight turned on the ship's intercom. "Lady Demetria, we are ready for take-off."

"Very good, Smuggler Knight," come Demetria's voice through the speaker. "Have you seen Hanako?"

"Mama! I'm here in the cockpit. Mr Knight is going to show me how to fly this ship."

"Alright dear, just don't get any ideas about taking over the controls."

"I won't mama."

"Strap yourselves in," said Knight. He turned off the intercom and activated the navigation systems. The docking compartment depressurised and the giant doors of the compartment opened up into the docking bay proper, through which ship entered and left the station. Hanako watched Knight pilot the ship, and felt the spaceport sliding away behind them, another milestone on her fugitive's journey. Hanako suddenly let out a sigh.

Knight glanced at her. He did not know the reason his passengers were fleeing the Corporation but for the money he was being paid he was willing not to ask, for the moment at least. He set the ship towards their destination, at an optimal speed.

The Red Claw at station Crosspoint

One of Crosspoint's dart ships was chasing down a trader who had run up a tab at the station facilities and had 'forgotten' to pay it, after hacking the computers in charge of the docking bays and thus fooling the computers into releasing him from the station without paying his debts. The dart suddenly turned off its course, abandoning its chase and headed back at speed for Crosspoint. The pilot jabbered with shock into his mouthpiece,

trying to be coherent, trying to describe that the very Red Claw itself was bearing down on Crosspoint.

The commander-owner of Crosspoint tried unsuccessfully to contain the news within the control room of the station, but was unsuccessful and the information ran louder than gossip down the corridors of the spacestation. Pirates abandoned their rolling dice in mid-air. Entrances to bars like the 'Prohibition' were suddenly left with unfinished and unpaid-for drinks. Crew charged into the brothels, interrupting their ship-mate's hot passions for the higher prerogative of fleeing.

A huge proportion of the clientele of Crosspoint had, at some time, committed a crime against the Corporation, whether it was gunning down a Corporate transport, blockade running or tax evasion. These people now ran for their ships. Each individual thought that Czerwon was coming after them, especially and personally.

At first the commander-owner of the station tried to halt the exodus, and ordered the docking bay doors locked. He gave up when a pirate ship blew the doors away. Then he realised that Czerwon might be coming after him personally. Then he thought that Czerwon was definitely coming after him personally. In panic-rush he left station control to his second-in-command, and ran his bulky body to his own transport-ship.

The second-in-command calmed down what was left of the station's personnel. She cranked open the docking doors and let the exodus out unhindered. She ordered someone to fetch champagne and caviar from storage, to present to Czerwon's envoys as a gift. Then she ordered a dart to go forward with messages of greeting and welcome to Crosspoint, offering full co-operation, without charge, for anything the Red Claw might need. In this the new commander hoped to prevent the Red Claw from destroying Crosspoint simply because it was in the Claw's way (such an event had occurred before).

They did not know that Station Crosspoint was, at the moment, too valuable to destroy. Captain Rumsfeld boarded the station with some troops and accepted the champagne and caviar in Czerwon's name when he entered the command room, dismissing them with a nod. He demanded to see all records of incoming and outgoing ships. The commander nervously smiled at him and then she curtly ordered that access be granted, although this would damage the reputation of Crosspoint as a place where such details were up to then treated in strict confidentiality. Rumsfeld sat down at a computer panel which controlled access to camera footage files. Two bodyguards hovered near him. Some more troops, with heavy guns, were in the room, while the rest were searching Crosspoint.

Rumsfeld activated the computer searching system, and inputted descriptive information. Although he had never seen Hanako in his life, the Corp's genetic engineering division had given a complete description according to her gene-code, which they still had stored in their own data banks. From that data they conjectured a computer image picture of what Hanako would look like. Rumsfeld took out the picture from his uniform's pocket. He unfolded it, and place it down beside the footage viewscreen.

The computer whirled through the footage, looking for matches to the description it had received. A camera still came up. Rumsfeld hit the 'next' button. Another potential still on the screen. Rumsfeld hit the 'next' button.

The third time an image came up of a girl, an older woman, and a mature man. The girl was Hanako. "Got you," whispered Captain Rumsfeld, a smile crooked on his face. On another viewscreen information of time of arrival, on what ship, time leaving. He made the computer search for the footage of them leaving on the ship. However only the

mature man [name: Statek, Trader] left. Either Hanako and the old woman had stayed on the station, or they had left on another ship.

Captain Rumsfeld made the computer search for a possible cross-index. It found Hanako, an old woman and a man leaving aboard a totally different ship.

The captain's eyes hovered over the man. He drew in a hissing breath. The computer showed [name : Knight, ?]. As he breathed out, he whispered, "Smuggler Knight, we meet again."

Rumsfeld grabbed a disk that had been lying about on a nearby desk, and saved the information on it. "I assume you don't mind me borrowing this?" Captain Rumsfeld asked the station-commander non-chalantly, taking out the disk and holding it for a moment in the air.

"Of course not, Captain Rumsfeld. Take whatever you need."

Captain Rumsfeld marched out, his soldiers falling in behind him. Soon afterwards the Corp military transports returned to the Red Claw, carrying all the Corp personnel. The Crosspoint staff breathed again, relief, as the Red Claw turned and moved away from Crosspoint, leaving the spacestation behind.

Not long after returning to the Claw, Captain Rumsfeld gave Chief Executive Officer Czerwon his report. "She arrived in a ship that had come from Forestglen, no name only a number registry. She then boarded a different ship with a smuggler known as Knight, wanted for smuggling and related crimes by several powers, including the Corporation. Recently, a large bounty was offered by a shareholder of the name Tang, although for exactly what crime hasn't been made clear."

"The name of the smuggler ship?"

"The 'Poet's Whim,' Chief Executive Officer."

"I never thought I'd be chasing a poet's whim," dryly commented Czerwon. "Order a search and capture for that other ship as well. Order *the entire* Corporate fleet put on alert for these two ships, and other possible carriers."

"Pardon, Chief Exec..."

"The entire fleet, captain."

Short pause. "Yes, Chief Executive Officer," acceding to this unprecedented order. The fleet was so vast that it generally was only necessary to put a part of it on alert.

"Good. Captain Rumsfeld, let us chase after whims."

The Adoration of Nature

It was time for dinner aboard the Poet's Whim. The dining hall of the ship was just large enough not to feel cramped. Knight brought out several trays of ship rations, well-heated. The food was heated with air that was vented past the ship's engines. The engines released a large amount of heat. Much of the heat dissipated uselessly into space, but space-farers being what they are, the rest was put to use - like heating food. Economical. Expense is the mother of Thrift.

Hanako was not impressed with the food. Sticking her spoon into the brownish goo, she screwed up her face, saying, "Eieew."

"This is good food," said Smuggler Knight, "It may not look or taste well but it stores for long periods and is nourishing for the body."

"This isn't Forestglen food at all," said Hanako.

"Now, Hanako," intervened Demetria, "You shouldn't criticise. In space things are done differently than planetside."

"I guess so," sighed Hanako. She took a healthy shovel of the food, closed her eyes, and gulped down. "Actually," she began, taking another shovel, "It doesn't taste that bad."

As they ate the rest of their dinner, Hanako suddenly exclaimed, "Mama, sing a song!" "Hanako!" retorted Demetria.

"Please mama, please! I'll go get my guitar!" Hanako got up and ran off to her room, quickly coming back carrying a small four string²⁷ guitar. She sat down, plucked a few strings in order to tune the instrument, then asked, "Mama, what are you going to sing?" Hanako's look indicated that she wasn't going to let Demetria get away without a song.

Demetria laughed. She was used to this sort of thing, since Hanako would often do this back on Forestglen. And as much as she would play modest and say she was too old, she really did enjoy singing. "Choose for me, Hanako," she said.

Hanako took in a breath, closed her eyes, and looked like she was mustering her concentration. With her delicate fingers she gently pressed down a chord, and started to strum and pluck the strings. What came out of the instrument was a calm tune with an undercurrent of joy.

At the appropriate time into the music, Demetria began to sing, in a voice stronger and more melodious than her age suggested she had :

"This is a song about Forestglen
 The most beautiful place in anyone's ken
 From the meadows the fragrant air will beckon
 While the elders sit with their pipes and reckon
 While shepherds nap to guard their fleece
 We pick fresh eggs from the chickens and the geese
 In the fields everyone works their very best
 Through the day, earning the night's rest
 Though in fields we toil the day
 In evening we go home and say :
 'I'm back from doing my part,
 Here is Home which warms my heart!"

This is a song about Forestglen
 Home for a fox in his den
 Little birds do their swinging and acrobatics high
 At night little beasts wink at stars in the sky
 All sorts of creatures, little and small
 Up to those great and very tall
 All the beautiful ones, go on and roam
 All over green Forestglen, our home
 Though in fields we toil the day
 In evening we go home and say :
 'I'm back from doing my part,
 Here is Home which warms my heart!"

This is a Forestglen melody

Of a place that values harmony
 Where Nature dances with a carefree style
 Where the tree's shade beckons to nap a while
 And where the blossoming flowers
 Perfume many slow passing hours
 But of all places that place is best
 Wherever we can stop a while and rest
 Though in fields we toil the day
 In evening we go home and say :
 'I'm back from doing my part,
 Here is Home which warms my heart!' "

All the time that Demetria sang, Smuggler Knight watched Hanako playing the guitar. Her dexterous fingers danced on the strings, and her beautiful face was in serene concentration. For the first time Knight noticed the delicate scent that Hanako's body gave off, it was sweet and ticklish, like the scent of a flower. The way she moved, elegant and refined, reminded him of the royal courts of Old Italy, so long ago.

The song finished, and Knight clapped, "Well done, Lady Hanako, and Lady Demetria." Hanako stood up and took a bow.

"That song reminds me so much of home," said Hanako, "I miss it so much already. The land is green and fragrant. This ship, not to be rude, but it is so drab compared with the countryside. It is only in the countryside that you can really feel free and human. I should know, because I learnt a poem in school that says so." Plucking the strings for a musical accompaniment, she recited :

"It is only under the shade of a tree
 That anyone can truly dance free
 And only in the happy sunshine
 That anyone can really feel fine
 It is only by the bubbling stream
 That you lose yourself in daydream
 And only with birdsong above
 Can anyone truly fall in love
 It is only out there in the plains
 That we can forget our pains
 And only on top of the highest green hill
 That a human's heart can have its fill
 For it is only in harmony with Nature
 That the human soul can enter its Rapture."

Hanako recited the poem with grace. Long forgotten emotions began to stir within Smuggler Knight, about a woman he had been with during the siege of Old Italy; but he forced himself out of the daydream brought on by the poetry and reluctantly pushed those pleasant emotions away. It was not a time for pleasant feelings, he was a Smuggler, he had a job to do, and that was what he had to concentrate on.

He finished his meal, then excused himself. He was going to the pilot's room to check the ship's course. But as he got up to go, Hanako quickly gulped down the last mouthfuls of food and then insisted that Knight teach her more about running a ship. Knight laughed, and though something inside him warned him that he was beginning to get emotionally involved, he agreed.

Part Two - Action

Dr Elizabeth Kübler-Ross studied and classified the human response to death. She described five stages : Shock, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance²⁸. While not everyone goes through all stages or in the specific order, yet there is a sort of universalness to these stages which indicates that human coping abilities are somehow in-built, that we are born with them, and hold them in common. Regardless of our beliefs or culture, yet these same stages manifest like some internal programming that is activated when needed. Though they are modulated by our consciousness yet the basic themes remain the same, as if evolution has granted all human beings the basic mechanism whereby we adapt to the concept of death.

Snapping of jaws

"How did you become a smuggler?" Hanako asked.

Hanako and Knight were in the cockpit. On the viewscreen was the nearest planet, a green and blue fertile sphere with lifeless red rings banding around it in a hostile predatory way, like a snare around its prey.

"My father was a smuggler, and his father, and so on. It is very much an ancestral tradition."

"So were you always a lone smuggler?"

"Not all the time. I had a few partners."

"Tell me about them."

"No, most of them aren't worth talking about. But one..."

"Yes? Go on!" said Hanako, insistently.

"She was a noblewoman from Old Italy, the Contessa Rhea Silvia²⁹. She couldn't sit by while her people starved, so she ended getting involved smuggling, during the siege of Old Italy. We ended up working together, smuggling supplies and weapons, criss-crossing the barrier lines and nearly getting killed several times."

"What happened to her?"

"After Old Italy was overrun, we stayed together for a while. She got a group of refugees together, bought a ship with what was left of her inheritance, and started pirating. She mainly focused her pirating activities on Corporate ships, of course – revenge for Old Italy. I stayed with her a while, but then I decided to go. I'm a smuggler, not a pirate."

"You say that with regret."

"You are astute, Lady Hanako."

"So, tell me what I'm being so astute about?"

"Me and the Contessa were attached, Lady Hanako. But it doesn't matter now, all things must end to give way to new things. We realised that the road we shared had ended, and that our paths diverged. The circumstances had become different."

"Did you ever see her again?"

"Yes, a few times. It's amazing what a small place the colonised galaxy is. The last I saw her was at the Closed Fist, a space junkyard, we both were scavenging for parts."

"What did you say to her?"

"Lady Hanako, stop with your questions. You have made me feel melancholy."

"Sorry."

Quiet in the pilot's room. Knight brooded into the empty space past the viewport. Hanako looked at him wondering about his past, wanting to ask questions but too considerate to cross the line the smuggler had drawn.

Smuggler Knight sighed. "You should get some sleep, Lady Hanako."

"I'm bored of sleeping. That's all there is to do on this ship. Besides, mama is sleeping and she snores loudly, but don't tell her I said that."

"If you're not feeling tired, how about we play a game?"

"All right, what would you like to play?"

"I was thinking of chess."

"Ok, but which rules? I know three."

"You know the classic chess, I hope?"

"Course!"

Knight pressed a button on one of the computer displays. The display changed from a non-essential system status screen to a game menu. Soon a chess board displayed on the screen.

"You can be white," Knight said.

But as they made their first moves, a Corporate ship received orders to go into full alert status. Several patrols of darts were sent out to scout out the surrounding area. Knight knew that there was a Corporate battleship nearby but his flight plan had assumed that the ship would not be on full alert status, with tentacles of patrols. He hadn't reckoned on how desperate the Corp was to find his cargo.

The passive radar on Knight's ship flickered into life, catching Knight's attention.

"Something's up," Knight said, turning off the chess, "We can finish the game later."

"What's wrong?"

"Probably nothing, usually even a passing trader ship activates the passive radar. Could be pirates though."

But the passive radar picked up more and more active search signals. Someone was making a radar sweep through the area with several ships, methodically and carefully scanning the area. "Scavenger fleet?" thought Knight, trying to puzzle it out. Scavengers were traders who collected space junk to use or sell.

Whoever was sweeping the area was going to find them. Knight had no choice but to turn the passive radar for a moment to active, to find out who he was dealing with.

At least eight Corporate darts.

Knight quickly switched the radar off. His heart leapt. The nearby Corporate ship was on full alert and he could not fathom why; this was a quiet area, little political or economic instability. What reason could there be for it to be on full alert?

The darts sensed the Poet's Whim momentary radar signature. Their wing commander sent a message, "Unidentified trader ship, you are to stop immediately. Your ship will be boarded and searched. If everything is found in order you will be allowed to go. If you attempt to resist or evade we will be forced to destroy you."

"Oh no," whispered Hanako, terrified.

"Strap yourself into the chair," said Knight, flicking the red alert button, clicking the strap belts closed over himself.

'The darts think I'm a trader ship, good,' Knight thought, 'I could stop but that is far too risky. My radar's off and they haven't got my identity signature so I've got a few moment of invisibility. I have to run.'

Knight pushed his engines to full power, streaming towards the blue planet. He hoped to lose them either in the outer atmosphere or, preferably, in the gas of the ring. Hopefully the darts were only on a training exercise and didn't feel like chasing.

The last hope was dashed when the wing commander angrily ordered him to stop immediately and display his position. These Corp pilots were not going to give up as easily had Knight hoped.

Knight kept the ship running silent, hoping to slip out unseen through the ring of darts.

"Ship Poet's Whim. This is your final warning. We have you on our radar."

Knight was shocked. Although it was illegal not to do so, the Poet's Whim had not been registered with the Corporation (it would have been counter-productive for a smuggler). They could have only have identified his registry number, they could only have put the number and the name together if they were specifically looking for his ship, out of the millions of unregistered trader ships that roamed the Corporate empire. Knight looked at Hanako, her face a shade paler. Knight had underestimated how far the Corporation would go for his human freight.

Discovered, Knight gave up the pretence of silent running; he activated radar and weapons system, power surging through the empty electric veins of his ship. At the same time Knight activated a pre-recorded message to try and befuddle the darts – "This is the trader ship Distant Hope, we are unarmed. We are at the moment experiencing technical difficulties. Could you please re-transmit your previous message?"

On his radar, Knight saw the darts hesitate, then they surged toward him.

His fingers hovered around the defensive mechanisms. He was going to activate it at the last minute, a bluff to the darts. If the darts didn't know he had defence, then their offensive systems wouldn't be primed to compensate for such things.

His warning systems glared out 'LOCK' in red letters, the display flashing while it sensed several missiles locking onto the ship.

His hands slammed on the controls, defensive systems surged in power (emitting audible signals through space that could be picked up by suitable weapon sensors - the darts would be able to compensate for the next attack). The shipboard computers let out a blast of static to confuse the guidance systems aboard the missiles; Knight released several canisters of chaff through the ship's weapons vents, and fired off flares into several directions. Knight pulled the ship into such a deep turning-dive that the computer in charged of gravitational systems was befuddled, and for a moment of overcompensation it felt like they were being pull-crushed into their seats.

The missiles missed, losing their lock on the Whim and shooting for the chaff and flares, detonating harmlessly away from the Poet's Whim in bright orange blossoms. But

that kind of easy evasion worked only once. The darts would now configure their onboard systems to compensate, to decipher the signals roaring through space out of the Whim's computers and nullify the Whim's defenses.

The Poet's Whim was full-throttled towards the red ring of the nearby planet. Knight for a moment pondered about the possibility of dogfighting, dismissed it after calculating the odds against him.

"Poet's Whim, this is your final chance to surre..." The rest of the message was lost as Knight ordered his ship to pump noise into communications channels, to prevent missile computers from perhaps hijacking the channels to home in on the ship.

The defensive panels seemed to leap up as more missile locks were displayed. This time Knight knew that the attacking locks were counteracting his protective measures.

Nevertheless, the noise over his systems continued blaring, and Knight released more chaff and flares, pulling his ship up for a moment, then diving in a circular roll. The first few missiles were fooled and missed, but several were luckier.

The ship shook and a powerful blast-noise bellowed through the ship, the ringing from the walls and floor lasting long after impact. Three hits in succession shook the ship so hard that it was flung from its course. Knight struggled with the ship's controls, forcing it on a steady course to the red ring. The ship had been damaged badly and several systems were no longer displayed on the status panels before him. To Knight's dismay these included several defense mechanisms. His heavily armoured engines had sustained minimal damage but damage to several of the vents may have caused hot air to spit out of the Whim, making the ship bright-lit to heat seeking missiles.

In the hope of delaying the next attack, Knight had his computers lock on to his pursuers, and released his own barrage of missiles. He doubted the missiles would hit the darts. They did however, have the effect he had intended : the darts scattered and blasted out chaff and flares, momentarily taking the Poet's Whim out of the hunt-thought of the pilots.

Some of the darts released missiles just before Knight's counter attack, and some of these struck a nasty blast across some exposed heat vents, though the missiles had not managed to direct hit. The thundering transmitted down the vents echoed into a roar through the ship. For a moment of alarm, Knight thought that the Poet's Whim was going to crack in two. This disintegration did not happen but Knight did not think his ship could take many more blasts. His instincts told him to wheel the ship around so that the armoured front faced the darts, but they were too close to the red ring. The gases of the red ring could mask a large object, and the only way to navigate was by moving forward, exposing the frontal ship sensors.

Then Knight realised it didn't matter, because he was practically on top of the ring. Plunging into the gas, Knight corrected the course to now fly along the curve of the ring. The darts behind fired a last volley of missiles but these were confused by the cosmic garbage in the ring, reflecting signals and flinging sensor information into a thousand directions. The Poet's Whim was also pulling away from the darts with its superior speed, and would soon be out of reach even of missile range.

Space junk or asteroid chunks could be lurking in the ring, hiding from radar and sensors behind the ions and metals in the ring's atmosphere, and could at any moment emerge from the red mist. Knight carefully supervised the course of the Poet's Whim through the gas belt. Even so, planetary rings were notorious for often being death-traps.

But the ring was obliging in its ease to ride. When Knight thought that the Whim had managed enough distance from its pursuers, he steered out of the ring and at full speed headed back for its original course. He switched off the defensive measures and other systems, pushing the ship to be as radio silent as possible.

He leaned back, bathed in the red glow of priority system-status reports and took a deep steadying breath. He turned to look at Hanako, who had been sitting in the co-pilots seat during the whole battle. Her face was a sickly white, her blue eyes wide. She was trembling.

Knight undid his seat straps, went over to Hanako and unclicked hers. "It's alright," Knight said, trying to comfort the still-trembling girl. She leaned forward to be hugged by Knight. He kept one arm around her shoulders, while the other reached to turn on the intercom. His fingers found the switch and flicked it on.

"Lady Demetria?" he asked, but the intercom spat static. "The intra-communications system must have been damaged," thought Knight out loud.

At Knight's words a flicker of something other than sheer terror flitted across Hanako's eyes. She suddenly buried herself into Knight's shoulder and began to cry, her body shivering.

"It's alright Lady Hanako, you're safe now. Come, let's find Lady Demetria." Knight put his free arm under Hanako's legs and lifted her up. Taking a last glance to make sure the ship's autopilot course was properly set, he left the cockpit and headed for the passenger quarters.

Knight hoped that Demetria had heeded his instructions, that in a red alert the best thing to do was to stay in your room and strap yourself into a bunk. He was relieved to find Demetria lying in her bed, calmly strapped in.

"Mama!" Hanako cried. She leapt out of Knight's arms and embraced her mother.

Knight let them hold each other for a few moments, then he said, sternly, "Lady Demetria, the Corporation is hunting us down. They already know my ship's name, and the next time we are ambushed as we have just been, they will know a lot more about me than they did this time." Knight waved his hands about. "This was a relatively new ship, completely anonymous to the Corporation. Now it's data signatures are in every little Corporate dart fighter. I did not expect this amount of danger." His eyebrows furrowed. "Lady Demetria, I absolutely must know the reason you two are fleeing the Corporation. The more I know the greater the chance that we will survive."

Demetria wanted to, but the secret of Hanako's past was too terrible for her to reveal. "I can't tell you, Smuggler Knight..."

"Lady Demetria! We were almost killed a few minutes ago. Another missile and this ship could very well shatter into pieces – you heard how the plates shuddered when we were hit. I don't want to die and you don't want to die so it is best that I know."

Demetria simply shook her head. Hanako looked from one to the other, unsure.

Smuggler Knight closed his eyes for a moment, opened them with a cold glance at Demetria. "Lady Demetria, I can't force you. But I urge you to reconsider. Every decision I make is flawed and risky until I know what you did against the Corporation to warrant them trying to hunt you down so hard. In the meantime, we are heading for the nearest spacestation. This crate is heavily damaged and is leaking fuel. I'll need some more money to repair the ship there. Then we'll go back on course for the Free Trade Zone. And thank you, Lady Demetria."

"Smuggler Knight?"

"Thank you that you followed my instructions and strapped yourself into the bunk when the red alert hit. It would have been dangerous to have wandered about the ship." With that Knight turned and left.

"Mama, why won't you tell him?"

"I can't, dear child, I can't," Demetria said, her eyes filling with water. She couldn't bear to speak the truth in front of her adopted daughter, for Hanako's sake, and that is why she had kept silent.

Events aboard the Red Claw

Czerwon was furious at how grossly his commands had been misinterpreted.

Captain Rumsfeld himself had delivered the news of the combat engagement with the Poet's Whim, entering a conference room and interrupting a meeting between the CEO and his accountants. The wing commander had expressed regret that he was unable to destroy the ship. Czerwon flew into a rage – the last thing he wanted was for the ship to be destroyed, and the wing commander was lucky that he had not succeeded in this. As the CEO roared his heart suddenly moaned in anguish, and Czerwon forced himself to calm down. He had to focus on his goal - Hanako's heart. If he did not the beating core in his own chest could fail him.

At Rumsfeld's entrance Czerwon had ended the meeting within which he was engaged, curtly dismissing his accountants, who resided in several dark corners of the Claw. Czerwon was unwilling to have his delegates work anywhere where they could not be under his constant scrutiny, so he forced them to live with him aboard the Claw.

An adjoining room to the meeting hall was a small command centre, a direct link to the boardroom and its facilities. It was built so that he could send immediate orders when he was away from the boardroom; the nerve center itself was twenty minutes away through the maze of corridors crisscrossing the ship.

A communication was waiting for him – a Corporate ship in another sector had captured the original trader-ship that had ferried Hanako and Demetria to Crosspoint. The ship commander stated that there was nothing aboard the ship, and the solitary trader refused to offer any information on the fugitives.

"I doubt that he knows anything useful," Czerwon said. "Kill him." The commander was hesitant. "Is there a problem?" Czerwon asked.

"No, Chief Executive Officer," said the commander, "None at all."

"Good." Czerwon impatiently terminated the communication and started a new one, which would send his 'clarification' of his orders throughout the Corporate fleet. The Red Claw was put on a new course, now it was on its way to where the battle had been, in hot pursuit for the damaged, perhaps disabled, smuggler ship.

It did not take long for Ansar to learn of these new events. Acting as a spy for Thalia, he rushed to her with the news.

Thalia was in her heart glad. Her feelings were for the fugitives, although she doubted that they would escape Czerwon in the end. She had remembered the last one, the boy who replaced the Chief Executive Officer's eyes. The screams so disconcerted the staff that Czerwon ordered that for the next operation the victim would be sealed in a soundproof cage. Doctor Fallsoul had handled all the machinery : to activate it, a great

lever had to be pulled. Thalia remembered the expression, the satisfaction in Fallsoul's face as the boy cried, gaping holes in his eye sockets. The doctor had for so long inflicted suffering that now he couldn't stand to be revolted by it anymore. It was as if to be stable his mind had to operate according to new parameters.

"What will they do now?" Thalia asked.

"They were hit several times," Ansar said, "They will probably have to stop for repairs. If the damage is serious enough they will have to dock in a station..."

"...Where they will be quickly found, assuming the Corporate intelligence service is up to the task."

"With the state of alert, My Lady, I would imagine they are."

"Thank you, Ansar. How you always manage to stay so informed, I haven't the faintest idea."

"It would be best that it remain that way, My Lady."

"Yes, I know... What was the dear Captain Rumsfeld's reaction to all this?"

"Rumsfeld was the first to hear of it and delivered the news personally to Czerwon. That is all I know of the event, my Lady, but I stumbled upon some information, or rather an ambiguous remark."

"Go on."

"I do not wish to state this as a concrete fact, but it may be that Captain Rumsfeld is planning a coup."

Thalia thought the she should have been surprised, but for some reason she wasn't. Aboard the Red Claw there was an arena, where gladiatorial games were held. Czerwon was a lover of blade fighting and was an expert swordsman. In the time when his heart had been healthy, Czerwon had a duel with Rumsfeld, ostensibly to put the latter in his place. Thalia remembered the agony of the man, on his knees and clutching a wound, his body glistening with sweat, while Czerwon stood triumphantly above him his sword glinting in the boiling light shining into the arena.

Rumsfeld had from then seemed to be ever more subservient to the Chief Executive Officer, but Thalia had seen this possible plot of overthrow in the glint of the defeated man's eyes while he knelt humbled on the cold metal floors of the arena.

Did Czerwon not sense the ambition of his officers? Perhaps he did, mused Thalia, and he let Rumsfeld stay because he himself wanted a confrontation, he wanted to defeat Rumsfeld in a coup attempt and to personally cut a blade through his life-force, or perhaps throw Rumsfeld to the mercy of the Mammon tiger kept in the bowels of the Red Claw.

Years ago, before finally deciding on his coat-of-arms of the two red claws, Czerwon had toyed with the idea of having a stylised Mammon tiger as his emblem. In Thalia's mind, the Mammon tiger still remained the symbol and embodiment of the Corporation's ideals.

Thalia had seen the Mammon tiger twice, and each time the powerful crush-jaw creature terrified her. She had turned away when Czerwon had thrown in some criminal to the arena at the mercy of the beast. The second time was when she saw the animal being fed in its dank and dark holding cell. The creature bore in resemblance to its earthly ancestors only in its ferociousness - its tiny red eyes, its bloodshine-black coat, its big, gaping bright-white teeth were the things that most stuck out in her mind when she

pictured it. It was a dangerous creature. Even when full and well-fed, the creature would try for the kill simply for the sake of the shedding of blood.

It had an ever-present hungry look in its eyes, the same glint that she occasionally saw in Doctor Fallsoul pupils when the man looked at her. It was uncomfortable, the doctor's eyes on her, which was why Thalia had become increasingly unpleasant in her attitude to the doctor. The doctor seemed to hunger for her, in the bestial sense but also, it seemed, for more. The doctor wanted Thalia's soul, because his own had suffocated to death, just as it had with most of the denizens of the Red Claw. She now avoided him, treated him coldly, but although she now kept him at a distance, it seemed that the doctor's desire for her increased in direct proportion. Whenever Fallsoul did not walk about with his distracted, inner-viewing thoughts, Thalia would dread having to look him in the eyes. They seemed like an empty vacuum, into which her own soul, if the man had his way, would disperse into.

He had been a decent man, before entering Czerwon's service. But now he was a follower of a godhead with two red claws, who in turn was accompanied by that dog ever by his side, the possibly rebellious Captain Rumsfeld. This was the kind of company one had aboard the confines of the Claw.

"Ansar, keep abreast of these rumours. If a coup is being planned, I do not want to become caught in the middle of it."

"Of course, my Lady."

"And get me something to drink. I'll be in the garden." Thalia went into the garden, the only place where she felt any respite from the intrigues and the events that occurred aboard the Red Claw

Revelations

The wounded Poet's Whim, leaking fuel into a long hazy white tail behind it, reached a run-down spacestation. Knight didn't want to dock there but he had no choice in the matter - repairs and fuel were now issues that absolutely had to be sorted out.

This station was far seedier and sinister than the its more noble cousins like Crosspoint. It was like many countless stations, sisters-in-spirit, spawned like mushrooms, thriving maggots in space. As much as Crosspoint was near to the ideal of the capitalist system, so this station was on the opposite extremity; nevertheless both of them were children of the same philosophy.

Parking was cheap but areas of the station were horrendously rundown and in bad need of maintenance. Music blared half-statted out of worn speakers from the casinos and brothels. Shops were full of cheap goods of low quality, the merchants were slit-smiled with eyes sparkling for an opportunity to scam their clientele. Restaurants served over-priced under-nutritious food, saturated in oil and with chemical taste. Factory-shops belched out smoke pollution into some corridors, and in various places the sewage systems were broken and urine and faeces slopped around in stagnant smellpools. People lived aboard this station, it was their world, but no one cared that this environment had been made horrendous. What mattered was to make money, dishonestly or semi-honestly, did not matter. There is no peace in such a place.

There were no individual parking bays, and each ship had to share space in one of the large docking bays. Unlike Crosspoint, where guns were forbidden aboard ship, there

was much less of law and regulation aboard this station. Pirates walked with heavy rifles slung on their shoulders. As a ship docked, various armed guards would approach, each looking for business as a bodyguard or as a parking attendant for the duration of the incomer's stay. Supposedly these services were voluntary, but parked ships were easy targets for vandals (often the disgruntled guards) and for many tradersmen forced to dock here, walking without an escort was tantamount to suicide.

Knight had to leave the ship, and visit some of the station shops for parts. He would take Hanako and Demetria with him, safe under his eye – this would also allow sensitive alarm and anti-theft systems to be activated, which would otherwise have only been possible if the two women had laid absolutely still in the passenger rooms. He also hired a guard to protect his ship, but even so, guards could be bribed and theft was not uncommon aboard these types of station; it was at best a supplementary measure.

He warned the two women to stay as near to him as possible, for there were dangers in straying. Any one of many black fates could befall an unarmed woman who wandered alone through those virtue-blind corridors. For their personal protection, Knight did not hire a bodyguard but strapped a gun to his chest, covering it with the loose folds of his coat.

But events were developing that Knight did not expect. Having calculated the most likely places where a damaged ship would take refuge, Captain Rumsfeld dispatched several high-speed Corporate ships with troop contingents. He himself commanded the one that was sent to the most likeliest of these spots – the very station aboard which where Hanako, Knight and Demetria.

Knight took the trio from shop to shop, looking for used or preferably new ship parts, often holding the women's hands to make sure they were close. The jargon that he spoke with the shopkeepers was incomprehensible to the two women, although Hanako was excited at feeling part of a dank underworld she had only previously experienced in works of fiction; Demetria herself felt rather worried and paranoid amid so many bristling guns.

An hour and more had gone past, and Knight was becoming frustrated in his search. He still needed several parts. They walked through the decks, holding hands, under the suspicious tense scrutinies of rogues and would-be thieves, accosted here and there by prostitutes, who were always in pairs or threes holding each others' hands – the custom wherever lone work was too dangerous.

But their reception was positively warm compared to the cold, distrusting and sometimes even belligerent looks that the Corporate men received, led by Rumsfeld. The blue uniformed men fanned out through the station, looking to confirm by sight whether or not the fugitives were aboard the station (for unlike Crosspoint, which kept meticulous easy-to-refer-to records, the recording of such information aboard a station like this was very unwelcome, and sometimes fatal).

Nearby the sprawling and packed station casino Knight sensed the change in the atmosphere around him, and looking down the corridor he saw the blue-clad men, instantly recognising their threat.

He took hold of the women's hands.

"What's wrong?" asked Hanako, noticing Knight's change of mood.

"I think we've been found," he said, leading them down the corridor away from the Corp men. He turned to look over his shoulder.

Knight saw, to his dismay, that the Corp men had spotted them, were pointing at them, following them, discussing them - it seemed that they were not close enough for positive identification, and were a bit unsure.

Desperate to separate themselves from their hunters, Knight turned into the entrance of the beat thumping casino, with loud music and louder patrons. They forced their way through; Knight was in the middle, gripping tightly the hands of his charges to make sure they were not going to become lost.

Although the trio made an unlikely grouping among the pirates and brigands within the casino, they Corp men who tried to follow them were even more unlikely. The jovial crowd suddenly became agitated, loudly telling the Corp men to get lost and blocking the way in. The fact that the Corporates were outnumbered prevented them from shooting through; the fact the Corporation could annihilate the station within an hour for an 'incident' prevented the pirates from shooting the Corp men where they stood. Frustrated at the standoff, the Corp men notified Captain Rumsfeld through their communication sets that they suspected the fugitives were aboard the station.

The casino was built in a bizarre way, winding around almost the whole of the station like veins and arteries, with easy access from the docking stations to suck in many would-be customers. Knight led them out of one of many exits from the casino, planning his route in his head to, hopefully, reach an area empty of Corp men.

They came out to an alley, opposite an entrance to a bad restaurant. A drunk man, passed-out and forgotten, was lying on the floor in a puddle of his urine. There were only a few mercenary guards, a motley crew who had been pushed out of their territories by the better armed and better organised guards who now worked their former patches. These armed men stood in the doorway of the restaurant, stuck lingering near a minor casino entrance, hoping that the occasional persons who came out and in may ask for their services.

They looked at Knight hopefully. Knight toyed with the idea of hiring some of them, but decided against it. It would be too obvious, when what they needed was to sneak off the station. Besides, the mercenaries looked like a bunch of amateurs, and would probably end up being liabilities or even turncoats.

Not knowing what to expect, Knight quickly let go of Hanako to undo the clasp that held his gun to his chest. He quickly returned his hand to Hanako's, feeling the weight of his gun shift slightly, ready for drawing in an emergency. It was a good precaution, because as he led them up the alley, a lone Corp man turned in.

Before the soldier could react, Knight had already drawn his gun. The mercenaries immediately jumped within the doors of the restaurant and casino, loading their guns, some of them pointed at Knight, the others at the Corp man. The soldier, a half-striped novice, green with lack of training and on his first mission, did not properly weigh the risks when entering an alley aboard a pirate station, and certainly was not prepared to react fast enough to Knight.

The bullets hissed softly as they singed through the silencer barrel of Knight's gun, thumping through the body of the flailing soldier. The man dropped with soft clunking sound.

For a wild moment Knight worried that one of the women would scream in panic, giving themselves away; Luck had it that both were too stunned by the event. The mercenaries, although they still pointed some barrels towards Knight, looked more

relaxed. They saw no need to interfere with the death of a Corp man, and no need to shoot civilians unnecessarily (their reputation was poor enough - if they did such a thing and the news broke out, they would probably never find clientele again).

Knight peered around the corner at the end of the alley. There were plenty of ruffians but no Corporates. He needed somewhere they could hide for a few minutes, so he could talk to Demetria. They ran out the alley. His eyes quick-scanned every person they passed, his paranoia lit high. He saw a promising entrance and ducked in, taking the women into a bar which had private, closed kiosks. It was actually an establishment where one could bring a prostitute one had hired. Knight ordered a kiosk and they sat down in a closed, dark and cramped space; there was a slight smell of semen from those who had used the kiosk before them.

"Lady Demetria, we are going to die," Knight said, "because I do not know why the Corporation is after us. I don't know who I can bribe, who I can run to for help, how determined they are to find us."

They sat there for a moment in the dim light, in silence. Demetria said nothing.

"Lady Demetria, you must tell what you have done to make the Corporation so determined to find you."

"We haven't done anything, smuggler Knight."

"Then why did I just have to kill a man?" Knight exclaimed, anger tingeing his words.

"Smuggler Knight!" Demetria suddenly cried, then calmed. "We didn't do anything," she continued, "they're after Hanako. I don't quite understand it, but they're after some organ of hers."

"Organ?"

"Mama," Hanako said, "I don't understand."

"My daughter, I'm sorry, you're a geneling."

The word took several moments to register in Knight's mind. He looked at Hanako, his thoughts murmuring and processing. "A geneling?" he said, softly to himself. This changed everything. Knight had heard the stories, of how the CEO harvested his youth. He had thought that Demetria was exaggerating when she had said Czerwon himself was after them, but it was true, the CEO himself was hunting them down.

"That means the Red Claw isn't far away," the smuggler continued, his eyes widening in terror.

"Mama, I'm not a geneling, am I?"

Knight didn't give the conversation time to go its course. "We have to run," said Knight standing up and grabbing their hands. His mind kept on whirring, like a machine operating according to a program, instincts rising. They had to get away from the station. The best way would be to run for their ship. The Poet's Whim was still too damaged to go any sort of long distance but for their immediate survival they had to go now and worry about repairs later.

The conversation in the corridors was angrier. The patrons of the station resented the presence of the Corporation, and expressed this in edgy near-violent manners. Several people tried to pick a fight with Knight; Knight simply ignored them, leading on Hanako and Demetria by their hands.

The Corp men aboard the station felt the change in mood and had also become tense. They uneasily patrolled the corridors, looking for the fugitives while trying to avoid looking the underworlders in the eyes.

Knight wound the trio inbetween groups of people, trying to lose themselves in the crowd. He saw several blue uniforms. He thought he recognised one.

Captain Rumsfeld.

Knight had encountered the man before, many times, in his days as a blockade-runner during the siege of Old Italy. Then-Commander Rumsfeld had been in charge of a part of the siege, and was known for the harsh pounding of his iron fist. The bloodshed he raised opened doors to promotion, to the very side of Czerwon himself.

Rumsfeld spotted Knight as well. He had sought the smuggler and many others like him around the barricades of Old Italy, and immediately recognised his old foe.

"Smuggler Knight! Halt!" Rumsfeld cried.

"Go to hell," Knight muttered under his breath, leading the women away. It was too dangerous for the Corp men to fire at them, surrounded as they were with pirate guns, and for the moment Knight had to keep it that way.

Rumsfeld tried to give chase, and somehow the crowds of the corridor melted from the front of him, long enough for him to start running. Knight picked up his speed as well. "Run!" he cried to the women.

Suddenly he felt a hand slip from his grip. He looked over his shoulder to see Demetria fallen, hands and knees on the ground. She had tripped.

Rumsfeld was already upon her. He drew his gun and pointed it at Demetria. There was a very short moment of hesitation, as Rumsfeld decided : this target is expendable. Pull trigger.

Demetria stared down the barrel, an expression of horror on her face.

The sound of the gun clapped over the mouths of everyone present. Silence chased after the echo of the gun retort. Guns were loaded. For now the pirates didn't see the point of starting a fight because of the death of an old woman.

The only sound to disturb this blood-tranquility was the sound of Hanako's scream.

"Mama!"

Rumsfeld set his gun from kill-bullet to paralysis-dart, took aim and fired at Hanako.

Knight saw this and at the last moment pulled Hanako away.

The dart, filled with a paralysing drug, hit a pirate who had been standing a short distance behind Hanako.

The shot didn't kill him but his comrades thought he had been hit with a normal bullet. They pulled their weapons and fired.

Within a few seconds there was absolute mayhem as everyone shot at anything. The firefight spread like flame on oil, and soon the entire station was in chaos.

Knight pulled Hanako into a corner and covered her, while his back was exposed to the spit of the guns. Blasts pierced the roar-cries of the combatants, knife-cuts and fierce challenges hung in the air.

The moment there seemed to be a momentary lull in the fighting, Knight stood up, took Hanako's hand and led her away.

Several times he had to push her against the wall and cocoon-held her there tightly while a gun-battle erupted near them. Hanako had switched off, and mind-numbed followed Knight and allowed herself to be pushed and shoved by him as was needed for her safety. It was almost as if she was unaware of what was happening around her.

Knight finally managed to lead them to the docking bay, but the violent brawling had reached here too. Several of the parking-guards were on the ground clutching their

wounds. A medical ship, the first one to respond, had just arrived in and landed in the bay. The medical personnel ran from the hospital ship towards the wounded, and bending down, first asked for money before they gave medical care. Those who could not afford the nurses had to tend for themselves (or simply die), while those who could were taken aboard the hospital ship for treatment. The gun-battlers were careful not to hit the nurses as they ported the casualties – attacks on medical personnel caused the nurses to inflict price hikes.

At the far end of the docking bay there was fierce firefighting. The Corp troops had fled to the docking bay and were trying to get to their troop carrier.

Knight did not want the risk of being shot at by some pot-shot pirates. He grabbed Hanako by the hand and they ran for some medics, who were putting a wounded ship-guard on a stretcher. Knight's plan was to use the sacred medical personnel as a shield from the bullets. The nurses were unhappy with Knight and Hanako but were in too much of a hurry to argue – the faster the nurses went, the more money they earned. Knight and Hanako went alongside them as they carried a wounded man on a stretcher.

It was luck that had it that Knight's ship was nearby the hospital craft. A short run, a quick deactivation of the security systems, and they were inside.

Knight started up the take-off systems. The ship heaved itself into the air, and hovered through the docking bay, right over the heads of Rumsfeld and his men. The Whim left the docking bay through the exit tunnel, and the air lock behind them automatically sealed. The exit side opened up for their escape.

But although the Corp men had been left behind, a pirate gang had taken the initiative and was sitting outside the exits to the docking bays, waiting to take out ships fleeing the anarchy within.

Unable to turn back, his radar warning systems screaming at him not to go forward, Knight had a moment of unsureness. His weapons systems had been depleted in the previous skirmish with the darts, so he couldn't fight his way out. Perhaps, though, there was a way to mix-up the weapons sensors of the would-be trappers.

Knight fired one of his last missiles out of his ship's tail. The rearward-missile hit at the sealing hatch for the air lock, bursting it into the inner side. A huge gulp of air rushed out, and Knight kicked in his ignition forward. The huge amount of scrap following the air-tide behind the Poet's Whim managed to muddle up the pirate's weapons systems for those precious seconds that he needed. The Poet's Whim streaked forward past the firing pirate ships, whose weapons aimed for pieces of scrap and were far off their intended victim; the Whim quickly put space between them and itself. The pirates decided not to take chase with the battered and damaged Poet's Whim; there were probably more lucrative ships coming out anyway.

Inside the station, there was a powerful roar as air escaped from the docking bay through the now-blown air-hatch. The emergency systems that would have sealed the breach failed due to lack of maintenance. The medical personnel managed to lock themselves into their hospital ship in time. Some unlucky ones were pulled by the force of outrushing air and flew helplessly into space. Rumsfeld and his men took the opportunity to struggle into their carrier and seal themselves in, while many of the marauding gangs were trapped in the new vacuum.

Rumsfeld's navigation crew told him that a ship, probably the Poet's Whim, had flown past them. Rumsfeld ordered that they immediately pursue. They flew out of the docking bay and were caught by surprise by the pirate ships outside.

Laments

In the viewing room of the Poet's Whim.

Before her was a little wooden house, the one Sparky had given her. She was crying, crying. Something in her pendulomed between helpless anger and despair.

Knight came to sit by her. His mind searched within for a way to console her.

"I'm sorry," said Knight. "I blame myself for what happened."

"Don't." mumbled Hanako. "Everyone tried to tell me what an evil place the universe is. I listened but I never understood. Now I know. My mama didn't die because of you, but because of those other people."

A momentary pause. Knight tried to think of what to say.

"I lost my father," he said, finally. "I remember that day, like it was an hour ago. I was fifteen. We were running a supply of weapons along with another smuggler. But the smuggler turned on us and led us straight into an ambush." Knight took in a deep breath. "My father's last words, over the communications link, 'Obey the code, son, obey the code!' The code's pretty much dead now, among smugglers, but I still follow it. It's like my father is still alive as long as I follow the code, and if I stop then I'll lose him forever."

"What was he like?" she asked, gently turning around the little house, balancing it in her hands.

"Stern, honourable, kind..."

"I want to go home," said Hanako, suddenly changing the subject.

"They'll be waiting for you there."

"Who?"

"The Corp."

"I don't care."

"Then your mother's death will have been in vain."

Hanako buried her face in Knight's shoulder and started sobbing.

"Your mother would have wanted you to go on, to get to safety. And I am bound by the code to help you. You have to go on, get away from Czerwon."

"I'm not even human!" she suddenly cried out. "I'm a... I'm a... geneling? What is that, geneling?" Hanako rolled the word in her mouth, probing it with her tongue.

"An artificially created human."

"I thought as much... What do they want with me?"

"Only the Corporation makes them. I've only heard rumours, but apparently Czerwon breeds them to replace his organs. He just keeps replacing his organs and in that way he keeps himself young."

"Geneling. And all my life I thought I was human..."

"Hanako, I don't think that whether the fact that you're a geneling or not makes you human. It's what is in your heart that makes you human, and from what I've seen of it, you're more human than most of us."

"Tell me about him... Your father. Tell me how he died... Please."

Knight sighed. "If it will make you feel better about your loss, I will share the story of my loss. I will tell you the story of the death of my father, whose name - like mine - was also Smuggler Knight." And Knight began to tell his story, and it was almost as if he was taken back in time, to vividly relive his past.

When Knight was still very young, his father came to him, and said, "Son Knight, you know how important it is to honour our Ancestors. One way of doing this is to learn what they themselves used to learn. Son Knight, it is now time for you to learn the great sword techniques invented by our Ancestors. I will teach you how to fight with the sword, just as my father taught me. But as you learn, remember, you are not merely training to fight; rather, you are fulfilling a religious obligation. Before you can embark on this training, you must be willing to dedicate your training to my father's father, your great-grandfather, who created the style of fighting which I shall transmit to you."

And so Son Knight bowed his head in prayer, and said, "Oh venerable Ancestor, great-grandfather Knight, I wish to learn your way of sword fighting. I wish to do this firstly, to honour you, great-grandfather, and secondly, to honour the House of Knight, and thirdly, I wish to do this as a sign of self-respect, as a member of the House of Knight. Please let your spirit be with me as I train, so that I may faithfully reproduce your skills and styles. I dedicate my training to you, venerable Ancestor; may you likewise encourage and guide me."

And so Smuggler Knight taught his son how to fight according to the ways of the House of Knight. Every training session began with a prayer ceremony dedicated to the Ancestors, asking for guidance and wisdom. After every session, there was another prayer ceremony, thanking the Ancestors for their guidance during the training.

Along with the rules of sword combat, Son Knight also had to learn the rules of the accompanying systems of honour and behaviour, the Smuggler's Code.

"Remember, my son," said Smuggler Knight, "that the Smuggler's Code, which was in part formulated by our venerable Ancestors, is also considered as sacred, for in obeying the code you are obeying your Ancestors, and by breaking the code you offend the Ancestors."

Son Knight bowed his head in acknowledgement of his father's words. The Ancestors expected the same of you what they expected of themselves. There was no obligation for the Ancestors to help you, except for the blood-bond of family Honour; in the same way, the bond had to be reciprocated. Honour was to be upheld. It was a religious duty. Son Knight swore to obey the Smuggler's Code. The past is the present.

Smuggler Knight then showed his son a computer disk, and said, "Son Knight, if anything should ever happen to me, and I become lost to you in this physical plane, then you must access this disk."

Time went past, and while Son Knight was growing up so too was the Corporation gaining power. The Chief Executive Officer of the Corp, Czerwon, was ruthlessly pursuing dominance and profit-gain. As Czerwon's power grew, so did the influence of his philosophy, pervading and corrupting the old ways of doing things.

Smuggler Knight had joined with another smuggler to carry contraband cargo. It was this other smuggler who had suggested the route and what cargo to carry. Son Knight was flying a dart escorting his father's ship. The Smuggler's Code forbade treachery when two smugglers had to work together.

But this other smuggler was one of the new type, those who did not follow any codes. Suddenly various pirate ships appeared around them. The smuggler turned on Smuggler Knight and all the ships suddenly attacked him - the ship had no chance against them. Son Knight tried to defend his father in the dart but he was overwhelmed.

"Get out, Son Knight!" cried his father, "Get out!"

"Father, I cannot leave you!"

"Obey me, Son Knight! Obey me, Obey the Code!"

The pirates decided the situation for them. Son Knight knew that if he stayed he would die. The dart was on the verge of disintegrating from the intense enemy fire. If they had wanted to the pirates could have killed him. His father would probably be alright - after all, the pirates wanted to capture the ship and its cargo, and the reason Son Knight's dart had not been destroyed was probably so that he could live to ransom his father back from the greedy ones.

But as Son Knight fled, he heard his father say, "I'll be damned by my Ancestors if I let this cargo fall to those who break the Smuggler's Code!"

So it was that Smuggler Knight, rather than surrender to a dishonest rogue, destroyed himself, his ship, and his cargo, taking most of the pirates with him. For Smuggler Knight was part of the old ways where men were death-bound tied to Honour; but the moral laws that were the undercurrent of the galaxy had changed, and Smuggler Knight refused to be part of it.

Son Knight had lost his father. For a long time he sat still and quite. Then he started crymoaning, "Father! I'm only fifteen, how could you leave me?" Then Son Knight remembered that his father had given him a disk, which he was to access if anything happened.

On the disk was a video recording, the last will and testament of his father. Through his eyes, filled as they were with tear-water, Son Knight could barely see the image displayed. In heart-pain he fell on his knees, and put his one hand on the monitor to touch his dear father. Son Knight tried to restrain his sobs, to be quiet, to force himself to listen to audio of the recording.

The recorded image of Son Knight's father spoke, "My son, if you are watching this, then that means I am no longer in a physical form. Unfortunately, you will not be able to see me, because you are still mostly part of the material planes. You cannot see me the same way a man born blind cannot see the sun, or a man born deaf cannot hear distant thunder³⁰. But I want you to know, my son, that although you may be experiencing great sorrow, that wherever you are, I am with you, and that wherever you go, and whenever you are in danger, I will be there. Although I will not be able to be seen by you, and I will not be able to talk to you, me and all your other Ancestors will be at your side, ready to guide you and give you strength.

"My son, it pains me to know that I will not be able to talk to you, but at least if you ever need to talk to me, you can just pray and I will hear you, and I promise you that I will do everything that I can for you. If you are ever in doubt of this, just look in your heart and you will know that I am guiding you.

"Although you may feel alone right now, there is no need to feel so, for I am there, and will always be there.

"Son Knight, now that I am gone my title must pass on to you, my son. From now on call yourself Smuggler Knight. Remember to keep our traditions and to obey the code.

I've taught you everything you need to know, don't doubt yourself. Remember that you have access to all our bank accounts, there's enough money in there to start from scratch if need be. But if you are ever in need remember that your Ancestors are always be by your side. Keep well, my son."

That was the end of the message. No longer Son, Smuggler Knight got up from his knees. Materially and physically he seemed alone.

Yet suddenly Knight could feel that his father's spirit was near him, and he knew his Ancestors were there. He called on his father and the rest of his Ancestors, asking for guidance : for now he had to start off a new life, as a Smuggler Knight of the House of Knight.

Knight recounted his memories as best he could to Hanako, until he finished. There was a quite moment, then Knight said, "I have to go pilot the ship. Would you like to come with me?"

"No, I'd like to be alone for a while."

"All right. Call me if you need anything."

Hanako alone. With one hand she clutched Sparky's little house to her breast, the other she pressed on the observation window, trying to push through the transparent material to touch the stars, to touch home. Tears.

While she cried, Captain Rumsfeld, battleshaken and pridelost, had to tell Czerwon that the pursued had escaped. Czerwon roared with anger. He was angry, because within himself he could feel his heart failing him. He was panicking, because within himself he could feel his heart rejecting him, the pain in his chest crushing in its intensity. The CEO knew there he did not have much time left to capture Hanako.

Thalia, too, was not as overjoyed at the news as might be supposed. She was worried of the things Czerwon might do if driven to desperation. It could lead to even more destruction than was necessary.

But perhaps the only one who had a true understanding of what was happening, was Doctor Fallsoul. He was in the holding cages of the Red Claw, watching the Mammon tiger being fed. The tiger buried its teeth into rich, juicy flesh, staining its claws red. To the doctor, it seemed that the Mammon tiger was eating them all.

Angel's Hope

Angel's Hope was a rich life-world, green and oxygen-full. It had been terraformed by a no-longer existing political entity which had needed extra space (an extra planet) for its citizens. That entity was destroyed soon after the fall of Old Italy, when the Corp asserted its dominance. There were still hopes of the planet being colonised until this was forbidden by the Corporation, who forbade settling Angel's Hope and many, many other planets. The reason for this was their proximity to the Free Trade Zone; colonies would have made the Corp defenses pregnable, vulnerable. It was better for the Corp to have a wasteland completely under its control than settlements tempted by the rebels so nearby.

The Poet's Whim, battered and weary, entered the orbit of Angel's Hope, although neither Knight nor Hanako knew what the planet's name was. Although the Poet's Whim was originally a trader ship (trader ships were generally unable to land planetside), the modifications that had turned it into a smuggler ship allowed it to safely enter and exit an

atmosphere. Knight wanted to land the Poet's Whim, to repump the oxygen supply and to try and repair the ship. Also, one little smuggler ship on an entire lifeworld would be hard to spot, perhaps taking the heat of their trail for at least a while.

They landed in a lushy green valley. The moment the exit hatch opened a fresh breeze of life-world air blew in, scented with flowers.

Knight climbed down to the ground first, and turned to help Hanako down. "What's wrong, Hanako?" he asked, noticing the strange look on her face.

"This place, it reminds me so much of home," she said.

For several days, Knight made what repairs he could to the starship. In the middle of some work, Knight was surprised by his communications systems picking up the trader frequency. The traders used a special frequency to communicate news to each other in packets. These packets were thrown from ship to ship, and as each ship received the packet it would rebroadcast it out again for other ships to pick up, passing the messages along – sometimes a ship would receive the same news packet several times. This non-structured network was the premier source of information among the tradespeople, free of Corporate censorship and sometimes accurate.

At first Knight was glad to have received the news packet. Usually he would have rebroadcast it so that any tradership in range could catch it, but that would have been detectable if any Corp ship was nearby. Knight's mood changed to consternation, though as the information decoded on an output screen as text.

He went out of the ship, his hands still oily from repairwork. "Hanako!" he cried, but there was no answer. She had probably gone exploring. He stepped off the ship and onto the grass. Hanako's explorations into the vicinity had trampled down several pathways into the grass, and Knight traced the path of one of them, following his intuition. Choosing the pathway; some would have followed their instincts, some their logic, some would have simply bludgeoned forth on any-or-so path; but any of these 'choices' are just following a habitual way of thinking. Human consciousness is subservient to the creature of habit within us.

He found Hanako sitting by a river under the shade of a yellow-leafed tree. The tree didn't look very healthy; all the vegetation around was green and beautiful, but this specific tree looked like it was slowly dying. Closer inspection showed that the tree was being strangled by a clinging vine. One person's happiness is another person's pain; there is always something that has to be sacrificed, both in our environment, and in ourselves. There is no gain without cost.

Knight crouched down by the water and cleaned his hands of the oil-gunk that clung to the spaces inbetween his fingers. For the first time the purity of the water had been soiled by someone else's civilisation. The hunger of others prevents our own satiation; how can one be surprised at the imbalance in the world?

"Hanako, there has been some news of your homeworld."

"Yes?" Hanako asked, her face with a blank expression. She could not muster up much curiosity. For much of the past few days she spent her time in an emotional torpor, trying to slowly work her way out of the emotional limbo she found herself in.

"It has been destroyed. Corporate work apparently. A passing trader ship tried to make contact with Forestglen only to find it in ruins. There weren't any survivors."

"I thought as much." In Hanako's hands was the little house Sparky had given her. The gift seemed to have been received a century ago. "I think I know what that man, Czerwon, is like. We had a story about him, on Forestglen.

"There once was a beast, whose stomach was never full. He was always hungry, and just ate and ate. He ate the trees and the deer that ran through them. He ate the fishes and the birds. He ate the flowers and the bees.

"In the end the beast had consumed everything, and there was no more life except him in the world, but for once it felt satiated. It sat down on his haunches, and put a satisfied paw on its swollen belly.

"But now that its hunger was satisfied, he had nothing to do. He had annihilated the entire planet's life. And the beast died of loneliness.

"That is Czerwon, the hungry beast, the incarnation of greed, who is unhappy until he has consumed all; and when he has consumed all, he will find that he will have destroyed himself.

"I feel exhausted, Knight. I don't feel like running. Czerwon is too hungry to ever stop looking for me, no matter where I hide."

Knight then said, "Whenever you stumble, Hanako, I will pick you up and we will keep on running. We will run to the Free Trade Zone, and if we can't hide there we will run further, past the outer rims, into deeper space.

"I cannot leave you, Hanako, not now. I don't think you understand how important you are to Czerwon. If he is this desperate to find that means he is dying. Czerwon is a brutal and greedy man who has destroyed so many, now simply by keeping yourself alive you may destroy him."

"I don't want revenge."

"This isn't just about revenge, Hanako. Forestglen is dead, but it is not the first colony to have been wiped out, and, unless Czerwon is stopped, it will not be the last."

"How can you be so sure he won't be replaced by someone as bloodthirsty?"

"I can't be sure. Perhaps someone just as hideous as Czerwon will rise up and claw the CEO's place for himself. But there are all sorts of people resisting the Corp; perhaps someone from among them, someone with honour and restraint, will come up and make this galaxy sane once more."

Hanako thought about this for a moment, in silence. Then she said, "You want to avenge yourself on Czerwon for the death of your father."

Knight, after a pause, answered, "Yes." He wanted to add, but that's not my only reason for wanting to help you.

Hanako stood up. "I cannot allow the deaths of my family to be in vain. They all died for me, so that I may live."

"So you will go on?" asked Knight.

"If you will take me, Knight. You are my last friend. I don't know how to repay you. My mama had all the money and it was all left behind on that dreadful station."

"This isn't about payment anymore, Hanako. This is too big for something so petty."

Hanako plucked a bright flower, warm like hope, from the ground and gave it to Knight. "Perhaps, then, this might suffice for now."

The Poet's Whim had been repaired all that she could be, which wasn't enough for long-haul. Despite this, Knight knew they had to leave Angel's Hope. There was nothing more he could do for his ship and he knew that despite being alone on this planet it would

only be a matter of time before the Corp would detect their presence. Out in space, even if they could only short-haul, perhaps they may reach a friendly station or ship, and they could repair the Whim enough to be able to complete the last leg of the journey.

And so, having rested, the Poet's Whim reentered the sky she had come from.

Rhea Silvia

The ship's engines were working only at minimal thrust to save fuel. A thin streamlet of the fuel streamed out as a tail behind the Poet's Whim from the damaged tank, though not as much as before as Knight had managed to plug the hole somewhat. They had been drifting in the vague direction of the Free Trade Zone, with occasional bursts of the engine to maintain the Poet's Whim on course. The Whim drifted down a spacestream, like boats on a river carried away by the water, the stream of their actions.

"Where are we?" Hanako asked, staring out of the cockpit window at the unfamiliar starscape. The old constellations of Forestglen were by now unrecognisable.

"The frontier. Behind us is Corporate space. Ahead of us, the Free Trade Zone. The area we are in is disputed territory. Here, Free Trader ships, Corporate battlecruisers, pirates, traders and refugee carriers roam."

"Refugees?"

"You are not the only one trying to escape the Corporation. Apparently refugee shipping is becoming quite a business among some of the pirates in this area."

"What are they running away from?"

"Financial exploitation, mostly. After the fall of Old Italy, the Corp's last real challenger, the Corporation started to slowly squeeze people dry, increasing the price of living while reducing the quality of life, maximising its own profit at other people's cost. Those who try to fight the system are marginalised or destroyed, so many of them prefer to flee."

"Do many of them make it?"

Hanako's question was interrupted by buzzing from the communications systems. The ship was receiving a message.

"What is it?" Hanako asked.

Knight frowned. "It's a recognition code. If you know the answer to the code, you unscramble it and throw it back." Knight hissed in a deep breath. "I know this one - it's an Old Italy code!" His eyes widened. "There's only one person I know of that would use this particular code."

Knight punched several keys on the panel, his mind dusting off the counter-code from long-unused memories. A strong surge of sentimental emotion swept through him, his hand shivered slightly as he broadcast his return message.

They waited for several minutes, but nothing happened. "What is supposed to happen?" Hanako wondered.

"There's supposed to be another communication. This is beginning to worry me."

"A trap?" Hanako intuited.

"Possibly, but we must not panic just yet."

The screens blipped.

"Another code," Knight explained, "This would be standard procedure. Two codes in case one was captured. I recognise this one as well." He hesitated for a moment. "I know two replies to this one. The standard Old Italian counter-code, and another one..."

"Which one will you use?"

Knight's heart started to beat harder. His thoughts raced: 'Could it be her?'

Knight entered the second code, which had once been his own personal counter-key during the blockade of Old Italy.

Whoever had sent the codes did not reply to Knight's counter-code, almost as if giving a stunned silence. Then a woman's voice crackled over.

"Smuggler Knight?" the voice asked. Knight recognised the commanding, educated tones.

"Contessa Rhea Silvia?" Knight replied.

"Knight! What are you doing here?" the Contessa asked.

"Doing what I do best."

"Which would be smuggling. Where are you?"

"Dead in space. The Whim has been badly damaged."

"You're still flying that piece of scrap? *Mia Déa*³¹, I still remember how you almost got me killed in that thing. How bad is it?"

"Firstly, it's not the Smuggler's Whim I flew during the siege, I'm now flying the Poet's Whim, and secondly, we are fine in most respects except propulsion."

"We will come fetch you *ad alta velocitá*³² anyway. Keep broadcasting your message beacon at five minute intervals. *E per amor del cielo*³³, use the coded frequency, the Corp ships are all over the place. There is a price on your head, Knight."

"I've always had a price on my head, Contessa."

"Not one this high, Smuggler. Be glad I found you and not some other scum. It will be good to meet you again."

"I look forward to seeing you as well."

"Which shall be soon enough. Send word if something unplanned happens. Venezia di Notte out."

The little light that indicated incoming frequencies blinked out, and there was quiet again.

"Who was that?" Hanako asked.

"That, Lady Hanako, was the Contessa Rhea Silvia, self-styled pirate queen of the 'Venezia di Notte,' a vicious little battleship."

"Was she the one you once told me about? The woman you ran the Old Italian blockades with?"

"The same. It's a miracle how we always manage to run into each other. I should have known she'd end up pirating these waters. She owed me quite a few favours and now she has the chance to repay them."

"Venezia di Notte. That is Italian?"

"Yes. 'Venice by Night,' I think. "

The lights of the control panels flickered on and off in the darkened cabin, illuminating the features of Hanako's face. "Knight, are we safe now?" she asked.

"No Hanako, we still have a bit to go till we get over the border. But the Contessa will repair our ship, and with that we'll be able to move on. For now, though, we can experience a momentary peace."

It did not take long for the Venezia di Notte to reach them. The battleship, several times larger than the Poet's Whim, loomed beside the smuggler ship, and opened up docking bay doors. Knight guided the Whim into the docking bay.

This was one of the smaller docking bays on the battleship, though large enough to take in a trader ship. It was a capture bay for the pirates; usually, the battleship would fly alongside a trader and maneuver itself so that the capture bay slid over the trader. The trader ship would find itself trapped within the very belly of the ship.

The bay doors closed behind them and the air locks opened up to repressurise the bay. As soon as the pressure allowed, Knight swung open the hatch and lowered the ladder. He offered for Hanako to go first. "No, I'm scared, you go first," she said.

So Knight climbed down the ladder, with Hanako following. The feet clanged on the hard metal floor, echoing in the dimensions of the capture bay.

As they were climbing down the ladder, out of a side air-lock came four figures. Two of them, wearing red uniforms, took up guard position on either side of the entrance. The other two walked forward to the ship.

The leader was a tall, elegant and beautiful woman, dark-haired, the slender fingers of her one hand gently draped over the gun strapped to her side. Even without the gun, one might think, she would have the aura of a commander. She wore a black uniform with two crossed swords emblazoned over the upper left pocket. Black was the colour worn by the Old Italian militaries, soldiers, sombre clad students of the arts of death and of hopeful victories.

Beside her, and shorter than her, was a man. His eyes sparked with suppressed emotion and much intelligence. His uniform was also black. The insignia over his left pocket was that of a cup and a book, the cup above the book, triumphant antecedent.

The pair halted their walk just as Knight and Hanako had reached the bottom of the ladder. Knight clicked his heels together, placed his fist on his chest, bowed.

"It is an honour to see you once again, Contessa."

"*Vecchio amico*³⁴, you insult me by using the formalities." The Contessa stepped forward and embraced Knight, holding him by the shoulders and kissing his cheeks. "It has been a long time."

"Not so long, Rhea. Remember the Closed Fist?"

"For you, perhaps, time flows by more quickly. I remember Closed Fist junkyard quite clearly, Knight." Rhea Silvia turned to Hanako. "And who is this?"

"May I present Lady Hanako."

"Lady Hanako, welcome aboard the Venezia di Notte. I will extend every comfort I have available for you."

"Thank you, Contessa," said Hanako, unsure if some sort of formal social-ritual was supposed to accompany the words.

Evidently, the lack of any ritual mattered not. The Contessa immediately continued, introducing the man beside her, "This is Fabricius³⁵, my second-in-command, and I trust him with my life. If you need anything, you have only to ask him. Fabricius will also see to the repair of your ship. Finally," Rhea smiled at Knight, "I have a way of repaying you for Troy."

"I never asked for repayment..."

"Quiet, Smuggler Knight, I don't need your false modesty. You saved my life at Troy, and now, by conjunction of fate and chance, I have saved yours. For you see, Smuggler

Knight, you were drifting towards a Corporate ship. Their numbers have suddenly increased recently and they all seem to be looking for a poet's whim. Their sudden interest in poetry didn't make sense until we found you." She turned towards her companion, "Fabricius, see to the repair of their ship."

Fabricius put his fist on his chest, and bowed, "Neither Alcinous nor Dido³⁶ shall provide the weary traveller with a ship so well repaired as this one shall be, *mia Contessa*³⁷."

"Carry on, Fabricius. As for you two," she said, speaking specifically to Knight while glancing at Hanako, "You are coming with me to explain yourselves."

Later, they were seated within the captain's cabin. A small garden filled the one side of the room, the one wall, slanted, had large viewing portals opening out into the vista of the frontier.

A red-uniformed woman had brought in a large jug filled with rose-coloured liquid, and placed it on the little square table in the room, along with three glasses. The Contessa dismissed the woman, and poured the wine into the glasses herself, then placed them by Hanako and then Knight. Her movements, as she did this, were elegant and refined.

"You'll find that this isn't the most exquisite of wines, but hunting hasn't been particular bountiful lately and this is the best we have." She leaned closer to the smuggler. "Now, Knight, it is time to explain yourself. The bounty on your head is enough to buy a planet. Czerwon himself, it seems, has an interest in you. What have you done to earn such animosity?"

"I will tell you everything, Contessa..."

"Don't call me by my title, Knight. Could it really have been that long?"

Knight smiled. "Rhea."

"That's better."

"I will tell you everything, Rhea, because I trust you with my very life."

Knight began to relate of events, from Crosspoint and the events following. But Hanako was unable to bear listening to the story of her mother and she ran out of the room, through a small, adjoining corridor. The corridor opened up to another viewing room, this one with a much smaller viewing port but with a large, green-bursting garden. The air and humidity were higher and the air was scented with fresh-blooming flowers. A reading couch sat in the garden in such a way as to receive a comforting light. Hanako lay down on this couch, and unable to bear herself, she wept.

Knight got up and went after her, but upon seeing her, Hanako motioned that she wanted to be alone. So he left her to mourn, closed the door and returned to the table where the Contessa tapped her glass with controlled impatience.

Knight continued his story, talking about their near escapes. The Contessa's eyes widened when the truth of Hanako's origin was disclosed.

"Now, only now, does it make sense," Rhea Silvia spoke. "Within the geneling is the very thing that will keep Czerwon alive. The organs are made to match for his genetic make-up; they are the key. Perhaps it is her liver, or her lungs, does it matter? The point is, that without them Czerwon is lost. Knight, kill the girl, then lay low with us aboard the Venezia di Notte."

"I cannot do that!" cried Knight.

"Listen to me! If she dies so does Czerwon; it will only be a matter of time. Then we are free of the Corporation."

"I want Czerwon dead as much as you do, but I will not do that by taking an innocent one along with the guilty one."

"Then I will do it!" The Contessa stood up, her hand to her gun.

"No!" Knight leapt up, stood next to the Contessa.

"You..." Knight whispered, "How could you think of such a thing? On Old Italy, you always upheld a strict code of honour..."

She turned away. "Old Italy is gone, Knight."

"Does that mean honour is dead too, Rhea?"

"Perhaps."

"Maybe you are willing to forsake your code, Rhea Silvia, but I am unwilling to forsake mine. The Smuggler's Code, on which I swore by my father's death, binds me to accomplish the task I was hired for. Yes, if Hanako is gone so will be Czerwon, but your way is not the way..."

"There is more to this than what you say Knight," Rhea interrupted, looking him in the eyes. "I knew you too well, and I know you still; our life together, and our love together, has given me that. There is another reason why you are willing to risk your life, to risk even the future of humankind, for no reward.

"You love her, Knight. I see it. The way you look at her, is the way you once looked at me. In a way that hurts, because we were together. It was not so long ago, when we loved each other.

"I remember that day, in Troy, when Old Italy fell to the Corporation. I remember the guns, screams and the blood, freely flowing. I remember pain, fear and the smell of the burning bodies. I stood among corpses beneath a sky exploding with fire.

"It was the hopeless hour, and there seemed to be nothing but the killing and the killing. We were isolated and defeated and like animals we looked on in fear, for we were in a hell world where everything we knew and thought before became irrelevant. It seemed that was nothing left for us but to cradle ourselves and wail.

"And into that world you came, Knight. Into the world of blood and *rata-tat-tat*. And inbetween the blood and the fire, you found me and those few who had survived alongside. And then I knew that the one thing that can redeem us and save us when we are plunged into such inhuman worlds is Love. It can elevate us when we are afraid like animals or in pain like demons. And our love, Knight, in the midst of a famine it could make us content, and in the midst of conflict we would find our peace. Which is why we could not be together, Knight.

"Because, my dear Knight, although you took me away in the Smuggler's Whim, flying inbetween the columns of smoke that stood over Troy, yet some part of me still remains there. I can still smell the fire-dust that hung in the air. I still feel that fight-instinct that pulsed through my body." Pause.

Then she continued, "The Corporation destroyed my home and my people. And as long as they remain unavenged I must keep fighting back. It is as if I can't live without being part of the ongoing battle. Until that battle is over I cannot embrace peace.

"That is why I had to leave you, Knight. You made me feel at peace. You made me feel there was no need to fight. It was Love, and it was making me human, when what I wanted was to be angry and wild and hunting my enemies.

"If it was not for Czerwon and his bloody hand, I would have given into the emotion. But I was under the shadow of that bloody hand and I saw that bloody hand shake the

earth and the bloody hand made the sky howl with thunder. And I felt something in me shriek, to strike back at that thing, to destroy the beast as it destroyed. I could not rest until this inner purpose was fulfilled."

"Contessa..." Knight tried to speak.

"The codes are dead," she interjected. "No one follows them anymore, except you, my dear Knight. And I admire you for that, as foolish as your stubbornness is. For you, my dear, I shall follow the old code. It is the human thing to do.

"No harm will come to Hanako. I will fix your ship, and you will attempt to reach the Free Trade Zone. But remember, the fate of the galaxy rests upon her, and you. If you fail, and the Czerwon captures his prey, then we will remain under the Corporate oppressor, our vengeance denied, the battle on-going. There are so few men of honour left, Knight. Get her there safely, my dear, and let nothing happen to you. But enough.

"You are my guests and I am throwing a feast in your honour. You will be shown your quarters and then you may wander the ship as you wish. If you will excuse me now." She called for the guard who stood at the door, and told her to take Knight and Hanako to their quarters.

Hanako had fallen asleep, and would not be roused, so Knight carried her to her room, following the red-uniformed woman. The woman opened the door to Hanako's quarters so that Knight could enter. He laid her down gently on the bunk-bed, trying to make her as comfortable as possible.

Hanako shuffled from her sleep. She opened her eyes and looked at the smuggler.

"Knight, I had a dream."

"And what did you dream about, Hanako?"

"I dreamt about my mother, and our home, back on Forestglen. Papa was just coming back from a hard day at the fields. I ran to him and leapt into his arms, and he carried me all the way back. And everyone was happy. I feel such a tiring heaviness upon me, Knight, I cannot explain. It is sorrowful, yet not sorrow; painful, yet not pain. It is like there is an emptiness inside me."

"Sleep, Hanako, and dream some more. And when the soul's healer, Time, has passed, you won't feel so tired, so empty."

"I believe you, Knight..." She turned round and closed her eyes.

He went out of the quarters. "Your room is the one next to this one," he was informed by the red-uniformed. "You have access to most of the ship. You will be called once the dinner-feast is ready. I shall have to go now."

"Thank you, then," said the smuggler.

The guard walked away, leaving him alone in the passage. He sat down in front of Hanako's door, and checked his gun. His hand rested on the gun while he leaned his head back on the cold passageway wall. But Knight had overestimated his strength. Having pushed himself so hard the past few days, he nodded off to sleep, despite having resolved himself to guard duty.

It was not the Contessa he mistrusted, but rather her crew, of which he knew little. He thought that perhaps one of them might attempt something on Hanako, especially if they learnt the truth about her. Besides this, he was answering an inner need to devote himself to this task.

"Knight!"

Knight awoke with a start. It was Hanako. She was on her haunches and gently shaking the smuggler awake. His worry in the Contessa's crew was misplaced. He felt a bit silly, especially at having fallen asleep. His neck hurt from the uncomfortable position he had been in.

"Come on, sleepy head," said Hanako, "They've invited us for dinner."

The red-uniformed woman, the same who had escorted them to their rooms, had arrived to lead them to the dining hall. A few minutes later, they were sitting at the small captain's table on a raised platform overlooking the several long tables below where the rest of the crew sat, in their red uniforms. Along the walls of the large hall were tapestries with emblems of the old noble houses of Old Italy, and various musical instruments hung on the walls.

The Contessa arrived at the far end of the room, flanked by Fabricius. The crew, who were just settling down at the tables, loudly cheered for their captain as she walked past them towards her own table.

"Ah, there you are," she said as she arrived at the table. "I hope you have had a chance to rest. Please sit as my guests of honour." She sat down at the head of the table, and motioned for Hanako and Knight to sit at either side of her. Fabricius sat at the opposite end of the table.

A hush filled the room. The Contessa closed her eyes and made the sign of the cup - her right hand, starting at the right shoulder, moved down then up in a curve to the left shoulder, and then starting from the middle of the curve, the hand went down to about the level of the umbilicus. Then with a clear, loud voice that echoed through the silent hall, Rhea prayed, "*Ave Maria, gratia plena, benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui. Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.*"³⁸ Amen."

"Amen!" cried the crew, and shortly after the food and wine was served.

"It is merely the standard ration. Unspectacular but filling and satisfying," said the Contessa, referring to the food. "Normally wine is not served, but with you two here I have made it a special occasion."

"So they put forth their hands to the good cheer that lay before them,' as the poet said"³⁹, remarked Fabricius.

"Which poet?" Hanako asked.

"Homer, Lady Hanako. He lived on ancient Mother-earth."

"You seem very knowledgeable, Sir Fabricius," said Hanako.

"My Lady, 'I know very little, and I comprehend much less'," Fabricius replied.

"Come now, dear Hanako," interrupted the Contessa, "Let the man eat."

"Rhea, do you know when my ship will be repaired?" Knight asked.

"Fabricius?" said Rhea, bouncing the question to her second.

"It will take all of tomorrow and by the morning after it should be done, *mia Contessa*. We have all the necessary parts."

"*Buono*"⁴⁰. You see," Rhea turned to Knight, "Occasionally we are short of parts, especially if we had a rough battle somewhere."

"I am willing to pay for the repairs..."

"Do not insult me, Smuggler. I am still in a good mood. You do not wish to tip the balance, *é chiaro*"⁴¹?"

"Do not be angry, Rhea. It's just I know these waters haven't been very giving lately."

The Contessa sighed. "You know, Knight, I miss my family's farmlands. I remember the harvest season, when I was a little girl, and running through the fields, everywhere was the smell of the harvest. And the grapes, what grapes!, that we use to grow. They made some of the finest wines of Old Italy.

"But that's all gone now. My hearth and home now belong in this ship, my living is not from fresh produce but from the produce stolen from other people. To rephrase, we steal from the thieves, the damned Corporation. And the wine is atrocious."

"May Czerwon and his dogs rot in hell," commented Fabricius, raising his glass.

"I will drink to that," exclaimed Rhea.

"So will I," said Knight.

"And I," said Hanako, wearily.

They clinked their glasses together, drank, and ate, and talked. But Hanako did not have much appetite, nor was she much in the mood for conversation.

After a few minutes, Rhea, whose memories of Old Italy melancholically weighed down on her, said to her second-in-command, "Fabricius, will you sing? You sing so well."

"For you, *mia Contessa*, I shall sing."

Fabricius took a quick drink of wine, put down his cup, and stood up, getting up on the table and facing the pirate throng. When the pirates saw Fabricius, they started cheering him. Fabricius cleared his throat, and with a clear voice sang,

*"Libiamo, libiamo ne' lieti calici,
che la bellezza infiora;
e la fuggevo, fuggevo ora
s'inebriù a voluttà.
Libiamo ne' dolci fremiti
che suscita l'amore,
poichè quell'occhio al cuore
onnipotente va..."⁴²*

It was not long after Fabricius started, that many of the crew members, those who understood Italian and knew the opera, joined in. Many of those who did not know opera, some who did not even know how to speak Italian, being already a bit tipsy, joined in the song anyway. The whole hall was filled with the sound of singing voices, and the chorus of the song caused a tremendous crescendo as more people joined in. The Contessa laughed and clapped her hands, evidently much cheered and away from her black mood. "A perfect choice in song," she cried.

At the end of the song, Fabricius yelled, "Viva l'Italia! Viva l'amore! Who will drink with me, for love and for Italy!"

"For love! For Italy!" yelled back the hall.

Several crew members reached for the instrument which hung on the wall, and delicately lifted them down. As the music began to strum, there was music and laughter and general joy.

"All of my people," the Contessa said, "they are here because they have been wronged by the Corporation. Most of them are refugees from my homeworld. They are not mere

thieves, or common pirates, they are all good people, here for vengeance. We always prey on the Corp, or others who steal from those weaker than themselves."

"You have stout, disciplined and well-hearted warriors, Rhea Silvia, and they have a good and courageous leader," said Knight.

Some of those who had finished their meals had started to dance. Hanako looked on the merriment, but had an expression of sadness.

Intuiting the younger girl's feelings, Rhea put her hand on Hanako's shoulder. "Dear Hanako, you managed to get this far against the greatest of odds. Your mother would be happy to know you have got here, and are so close to the safe refuge of the Free Trade Zone."

Hanako smiled at the Contessa, and said, "Thank you."

The merriment continued long into night-shift, and the conversation and song flowed freely, a respite of peace for these exiles and fugitives from Corporate law. But despite the joy around her, Hanako's heart was not in it. Her thoughts were on those loved ones, now gone.

The only person who seemed to share her mood was Fabricius, who had sung so merrily earlier. At one point, he excused himself from the table and left the riotous dining hall. Hanako, following some instinct, also got up from the table and followed him.

The Ashes of Troy

Some of the corridors leading towards the dining hall were lined with window portals, through which one could see the outside starscapes. Fabricius stopped by a portal, and looked into it. He was unhappy with the constellations he saw and pressed a button to change it. These portals were not actually true windows, but actually screens that displayed various camera views, to make the intestines of the ship feel less claustrophobic. Fabricius cycled through various cameras. He settled on a particular star scene that appealed to him - although, to tell the truth, each one looked very much like any other.

Fabricius leaned his body on the sill of the portal, his body sagged as he let out a deep sigh. He didn't realise that Hanako had followed him. He suddenly recited a poem, mouthing the words loudly :

"What is this feeling in my heart?
It feels like it has been torn apart.
Why do I feel so alone?
Is it that my heart has turned to stone?
Why do I still shed tears,
And still shake with these fears?
Your death has in my heart sown
The greatest pain I have ever known."

Fabricius stopped. Hanako had heard everything and guessing that it was the end of the poem, said, "Mr Fabricius?"

He turned to look at her, a blank expression on his face. He seemed neither pleased nor displeased at seeing her. He spoke, "Hanako, you have recently experienced loss. Do you also feel as if there is a hole within you?"

"Yes."

"I would like to share my story with you. May I?"

"Of course you may."

And so Fabricius told his story, of events ten years ago.

By then the Old Italians realised the battle had been lost. Those that had the means were preparing to get off the planet, to fight their way through the Corporate blockade and to get out of the solar system. Those who did not have the means, or were otherwise unable or unwilling to retreat : either death, or to become prisoner-slaves coughing in the dusts of the factory worlds.

What men had been left under the command of Captain Fabricius were loaded onto a smuggler ship which was now hurtling into the skies with several others. Fabricius himself, despite the pleas of those under his command, did not go - he was not going to leave without his family, not without his son, little Pallas⁴³.

Fabricius had to find a way to get to Troy, where his home was. The last he heard, the city was under heavy attack from the forces of Commander Rumsfeld. The various Old Italian forces, including the one under the command of the Contessa Rhea Silvia, were struggling to hold on. Fabricius hoped that it was not too late. He found himself a cutter ship, which he could use to fly to Troy, directly to his estate.

While still far away from the city Fabricius saw the glow of the burning. As he drew closer to Troy he could see the bright-flaring bombardment weapons of the Corporation, streaking across the sky and to the city. Troy had defenses against such weapons but Fabricius saw, to his heart's sagging, that the white flares characteristic of defensive fire were very few - the majority had either been abandoned, or destroyed.

The closer he got to Troy the heavier the Corp presence - there no longer seemed to be any real Old Italian presence. He flew lower and lower to the ground, hoping that his cutter would not be detected. By now his heart was full of fear, for Troy was burning and now he could see that the devastation was far greater than he had thought. Fabricius prayed to the Goddess Mary for his family to still be safe.

Suddenly, nearby, a Corporate fighter speeded in. His heart leaping, Fabricius realised there was no time to hide, and since the cutter had no weapons, he was as good as gone.

But the fighter ignored the cutter and streaked past, towards the city. It came so close that the cutter picked up its Corp signature and pilot designation. The pilot had been Commander Rumsfeld, who for some unknown reason was in such a hurry that he did not even stop for a few minutes to take out a lonely cutter. A small hope came to Fabricius, that perhaps the commander was in a rush to get to his forces because the Old Italians had managed some sort of counter-attack.

He had to fly through the outskirts of the city. Artillery, both orbital and land based, was still shelling the city despite the fact that virtually all of Troy was now in flames. Fabricius used the radio to search the frequencies, hoping for some indication that the Old Italians were still battling in this area. But most of the frequencies only pick garbled Corp chatter, so distorted Fabricius could not make out whether the Corporation was still on the offensive. Only once, did Fabricius pick what sounded like the Italians; it was

something about the Contessa Rhea Silvia, something about a retreat. Fabricius wondered if the city had been properly evacuated, or if there were still frightened civilians hiding in the bomb shelters under the city - the fierce pounding force of the Corp weapons above them must have been bellowed loudly into those shelters. Perhaps even destroying the bunkers.

The city was under a rain of bombardment. There were explosions all around the cutter, some came dangerously close. Structures would shatter from the shells and fling shrapnel pieces in random directions. But the cutter managed to get through unscathed, and Fabricius gave thanks to the Goddess.

He saw, to his relief, that parts of the outlying districts, were spared the devastation. His own estate was a small farm lying right on the outskirts of Troy. He flew next to a piece of desolate, scorched earth, seared into charcoal by a massive blast. He was going to fly over and past it, until he suddenly realised that the land, so devastated, was his own estate.

Fear. Fabricius soared past the burnt terrain and towards the soul of any farm, the homestead. Fear became truth. His house was fire-scorched to the ground. Fabricius landed the cutter near-by, jumped out of it. His hopes went against the evidence of his eyes. Fire was blazing within his home. Heat was still waving up from the blasted ground, and he could feel the warmth of the ground crawling up his legs.

His first thought was for his son. "Pallas!" he called, "Pallas!" then he said, "Oh Goddess Mary, let them be alive." As he ran towards his house, he could feel the various thermal currents around him, dancing out of the explosion places all around his devastated land, scalding.

His house was radiating heat; the temperature tingled with increasing intensity on the skin of his cheeks. "Pallas! Pallas!" he cried. The door of his home seemed like a gate into fiery hell - Fabricius almost touched it, then realised how hot it had become, warm enough to burn his hands. He looked around for something to break the door down with. There was nothing immediately available, and his fatherly instincts for his family were becoming too desperate. He kicked the door down. A cloud of heat escaped through, and, despite the burn pain in his foot, Fabricius shielded his face and leapt through it.

In the ovenlike anteroom, a peculiar sweet smell drifted about, it took a moment or two for Fabricius, already disoriented in his surroundings, to realise it was the smell of burnt flesh.

Illuminated by the flames, there were two figures. One was lying on the floor, a shape loosely resembling a woman, oozing blood through burnt muscle. Pieces of white cloth were stuck onto her, the parts of clothing that didn't burn had melted into her. She was dead.

Kneeling by her was a little boy. He was only half destroyed by fire. He turned his look away from his dead mother to look at Fabricius. On his half-burnt face was an expression of total calmness.

"Papa?" said the little boy. He stood up and stepped towards Fabricius. The little boy's arms stretched open to embrace his father.

"Pallas," said Fabricius, in a rather numb-like way. He picked up the child. The calmness that the child had suddenly dismissed itself. Cries of pain and suffering. The child wailed, "Papa!"

"I'm here my son." Fabricius made to escape the burning household, holding the child in his arms. The child was sobbing and crying uncontrollably, clinging his tiny hands to the man carrying him. Through his burnt skin blood was oozing through, sticky and warm on Fabricius' arms. It stank.

Fabricius took the child out of the house. He felt exhausted, both by the terrible heat, and by the terrible sights. A small patch of grass beneath a shattered fruit tree had not been destroyed, an island of green in black, and Fabricius let his knees sink onto the ground there. The tree, although hit hard, still had a few green branches and perhaps would survive the attack. The fruits of the tree, however, had all been destroyed, and the branches were now barren of them.

"Papa, it hurts," said the little boy, "please make the hurting stop..."

The father looked around, and realised there was no way to fulfil his son's dying wish. His son needed urgent medical attention. Fabricius looked towards the skyline of Troy - he could see the far-off smoulderings of the destroyed hospital buildings.

"Papa." moaned the little boy.

"I'm here, my son."

"Papa..."

"Here I am," Fabricius said. There was nothing he could do. He was going to lose his son.

"Papa..." ... "..." Child died.

"Pallas," said Fabricius, "Pallas..." His arms trembled.

Afterwards, he could never recall how long he had been there, kneeling, with his dead child in his arms. It could have been for a few minutes, or even seconds, or perhaps he had been there for hours while Troy turned into ash on the horizon. His sense of time only normalised when he realised that the little boy he was holding in his arms was gone forever, a realisation not as obvious as might be supposed.

"Come back!" cried Fabricius.

"Oauw!" escaped from Fabricius' mouth, a moan of inarticulate pain. "Come back," he tried to say, but the words came distorted out of his mouth. Tears stung out of his eyes. He tried to say what he was feeling, but it came out inarticulate as "Oauw." He gently lay his son's corpse on the grass, then a violence overcame his body, and Fabricius rolled beside his dead son, convulsing, "Oauw! Oauw!"

From the depths of his memories, he suddenly remembered the lines of a poem he had read a long time ago, into which his despair coagulated. "Come back to me, you who mattered to me the most," he whispered, "return, even if only as a shadow, as a dream, or as a ghost..."

Just two lines of the poem kept drumming themselves in Fabricius' head, over and over, until he was desperate-voicing the words over his boy, as if they would bring his son back to life.

"Come back to me, you who mattered to me most,

Return, even if only as a shadow, as a dream, or as a ghost.' "

In this moment of pain the rhyme couplet was his only solace. He spoke it over and over until exhaustion of several kinds came back to him. Unable to do or say anything, he sat numb, for a while, until despair washed over him again.

Questions formed : why was he allowed to see this?

"Goddess Mary," Fabricius whispered, his thoughts and his words crashing into each other. "Why did you save my life so many times? I could have died today. You could have spared me this suffering - I would rather have died than lived to experience such pain. My son is dead - if I had fallen today, perhaps I would be with him now, in the afterlife. But you specifically kept me alive, to see the corpses of my wife and child, so that my heart may suffocate and my body may enter living-death. Goddess Mary, you bitch, what have you done to me? Do you enjoy this? This is worse than any death. You Bitch! You Bitch! You have put me in hell! I-Oauw!"

Two Italian soldiers, part of the fleeing remnants of the Trojan battle group, were crossing Fabricius' estate, in the hope that they could evade capture by the Corporation. They heard Fabricius' cries and decided to investigate. One of the soldiers recognised Captain Fabricius.

"How is it that the brave Captain Fabricius, who has slain so many of the enemy, who had so many comrades-in-arms die beside him, lies weeping like some little child?" asked the one soldier.

"Captain Fabricius! What are you doing? Your country needs you to fight, not to despair!" exclaimed the other soldier.

Fabricius looked at the two men; he was unable, and unwilling, to stop the tears that spat his eyes. "Soldiers of Old Italy," he spoke, "I have witnessed the death of many brother warriors today, and I myself was nearly killed many times since this battle started. If only I had been slain by the Corporate pigs! I was alive not long ago - now I am not dead, but I am certainly not living. This ruined land was my land; the corpse in my burnt house was my wife; and this body, here, was my son, Pallas."

"It may be good to mourn your family, but it would be far better to avenge them!"

"The battle may be lost but the war is not over! Captain Fabricius, come with us, and you will have your chance for vengeance."

"What good will vengeance do me? My life was dedicated to my son, my life was dedicated to Pallas; his life was my life. With the passing of his life my life goes. Vengeance will not bring my son back to life; vengeance will not bring my body and soul out of its limbo state."

"The Goddess Mary did not keep you alive for nothing..."

"Didn't you hear what I said? I am not alive. The Goddess did not keep me alive. I am not alive anymore."

"So you say now, but we are all part of the divine plan. Draw comfort from Her love, Captain Fabricius. She will carry you through this travail just as She carried you before, because She loves you."

"How can this be part of some plan? If She loves me so much, then why was I not slain? She should have plucked me up and taken me to heaven, but instead She, in Her divine love, has utterly crushed my spirit, and delivered me into a hell-world."

"How can you speak like that? You know that millions of people have faith in the Goddess; surely, what so many people believe must be true. And if it is true, then surely it is great wisdom, and you cannot brush wisdom aside just so!"

"Oh, Italian, your speech rings hollow, like an empty room that echoes the speaker's words, reflected and not heard. I once read a poem, which said :

'You think you have wisdom, as into oblivion you stare?

What is wisdom, but a type of falling, from a castle in the air?'

"The Truth is not some cloud-fantasy."

"It is all very well and good to say such a thing. But the religion is not Truth, for in misery Misery is its own truth, and in pain the only truth is Pain."

"Your suffering shall not be unaccounted for."

"In heaven each receives his due, and for every pain you feel on earth there will be joy for you in heaven."

"What kind of consolation is that? I don't want a heavenly reward for my suffering; I would rather never have experienced the suffering in the first place."

"It was not She who inflicted this suffering..."

"It was not you who wanted this suffering..."

"Because each of us has free will, She is powerless to restrain those who wish to harm us."

"Because each of us has free will, She grants us the power to fight those who would wish to harm us."

"That is why the Corp has inflicted suffering on you."

"That is why you must stand up and avenge what the Corp has done to you."

" 'Come back from those lands of the forever-lost

Come to me, be a shadow, a dream, ghost.' "

"Our words do not comfort him."

"He is beyond comforting."

"We must go. We have to evacuate before it is too late to leave."

"Shall we take him with?"

"Yes."

"But why should we? He is half-mad. And he blasphemed against the Holy Goddess."

"Whether or not he blasphemed is not for us to decide : the Goddess Herself will judge. It is more important for us to see to it that we obey Her teachings. Captain Fabricius is too mind-ill to escape the Corp, we must help him in his time of need. Help me carry him."

"What you said was right. I will help you carry him."

The two soldiers lifted up Captain Fabricius, and then they hurried off, aware of the little time available to them. Fabricius did not resist, and allowed himself to be carried.

After a while, Fabricius cried, "Goddess Mary, why have you forsaken me?"

"Goddess Mary, we have not forsaken him."

"He has not been forsaken."

"Goddess Mary, why do you ignore my suffering?"

"Goddess Mary, we do not ignore his suffering."

"His suffering is not being ignored."

"Goddess Mary, why do you not help me?"

"Goddess Mary, we are helping him."

"He is being helped."

"Goddess Mary, I cannot walk, why do you not carry me?"

"Goddess Mary, we carry him."

"He is being carried."

"Goddess Mary, where are you, where are you?"

"Goddess Mary, we are here."

"He is with us."

"Pallas!" Fabricius wailed.

At this point Fabricius gave into his grief and his war-weary limbs - unwilling to stay awake, he fell into unconsciousness. The two soldiers continued to carry him. They all eventually made it off the planet.

Hanako was saddened by Fabricius' story, and felt sympathy for his loss, especially with her own loss so near ago. There was a silence that came about after Fabricius finished - he was unsure what to say, and began to feel a bit weak for having revealed so much to someone he do not know so well.

Hanako didn't say anything, but from her pocket took out the little house that Sparky had given her. She put it into Fabricius' hand, saying, "I suppose if one can't share one's humanity, then one doesn't really have anything to share in the first place. And as long as Czerwon doesn't take away your humanity, then what has he really taken?" She then turned and walked away, back to the dining hall. Fabricius stared after her, holding the gift, not knowing what to make of it.

They must not escape my grasp

Meanwhile, aboard the Red Claw, CEO Czerwon was slowly, with a deliberateness, pacing up and down in the viewing room. He was silhouetted by the star-scene behind the view-portals. He listened to Rumsfeld giving a status report on the fleet, but his mind was elsewhere, recalling when he had told Thalia that they were going to Forestglen. It seemed like centuries ago, and the task had seemed so simple then. By now it was obvious that the fugitives were heading for the Free Trade Zone. Czerwon's very life depended on Hanako being caught before crossing the border.

Brasidas, too, had been summoned, and stood uneasily in the one corner of the room.

Czerwon gave a hard glance at Brasidas. The conferences between himself and Rumsfeld did not usually have an audience, but the captain's attitude of late was suspect. Although Czerwon could very well do away with Rumsfeld himself if the need arose, Brasidas was also armed, and the captain was not - Czerwon wondered if Rumsfeld would understand the hinting.

"The men are worried, Chief Executive Officer. They think that we are preparing to invade. I am even in doubt as to your intentions here, Chief Executive Officer."

"I am not about to sacrifice half my fleet in order to subjugate these rebels, captain. The Corporate empire is hard enough to hold as it is. These rebels, these 'Free Traders' as they call themselves, their turn will come in time. But not for the nearest future, no. So do not, captain, trouble your little head on such a matter," Czerwon turned and paced in the opposite direction, "But the keep the main prize in your sight. My geneling, she will not escape me again. You are dismissed, Captain Rumsfeld."

"Chief Executive Officer!" Rumsfeld gave the right-hand-out salute, then retreated out.

"If they slip through his hands again," Czerwon commented to no one in particular, "I will personally cut those hands off."

Czerwon turned to look at Brasidas with a steely-eyed stare. "Thank you, lieutenant."

"Will that be all, Chief Executive Officer?"

"Not quite. I want you to prepare security arrangements to protect the Lady Thalia, in case of... something. In a dangerous eventuality, I want her safe."

"I will do that, Chief Executive Officer." Brasidas didn't mention that in his opinion, Thalia would be the only person aboard the whole of the Red Claw who was actually worth saving in a 'dangerous eventuality', besides his own men. He was surprised, thought, that the CEO would feel concern for someone other than himself.

"Dismissed, lieutenant."

"Chief Executive Officer." Brasidas gave the salute, turned, and marched resolutely out.

The lieutenant went to the barrack quarters, a thin corridor fitted with bunks, similar to submarine quarters. This was where the lieutenant and his men were billeted aboard the Claw. Brasidas had the choice of better quarters, but he chose rather to stay among his men.

Brasidas greeted his subordinates, entered a small and cramped side room, sat down on his customary chair. One of his men brought him a notepad and a pencil. Brasidas began to sketch diagrams and flow charts, the rough beginnings of the procedures that his men would follow if the need arose to protect Lady Thalia. When he had filled the space of the paper, he tore it off the pad, crumpled and dropped it on the floor.

Time later, the floor became strewn with the crumpled papers and littered thoughts. Brasidas was no fool - he knew that the threat was coming from the ship's captain, Rumsfeld. But the lieutenant could not understand why Czerwon did not simply do away with Rumsfeld - he had seen enough of the CEO's bloodthirst to know that there was certainly no moral force holding the CEO back.

But the more he pondered it, the more Brasidas was sure that the reason why Czerwon did not kill Rumsfeld outright, despite the threat from him, was because Captain Rumsfeld was the closest thing to a friend that the CEO ever had.

Leaving

The next day, the Contessa summoned Knight for a discussion on the route he would have to take to the Free Trade Zone. Shaking off his heavy sleep, Knight joined Rhea and Fabricius in a room adjoining the battleship command center.

They stood around a large table in the middle of the room. In the table top was embedded a computer screen, and Rhea cycled through various starcharts by tapping keys on a keyboard that lay on the one side.

"The Corporate presence here has built up enormously, and there is news that further ships are streaming in. Until you came along, we had no idea why this was happening. In fact, I suspect that the huge shift in Corporate ship presence towards the Free Trade Zone may destabilise the political situation in areas where there will now be minimal Corp presence, if any. This is a substantial risk for the Corp to take; if you had any doubts how desperate Czerwon is to capture you, that fact alone should settle it." Rhea pressed a key, and the display revealed a three dimensional schematic of the frontier, thick lines representing the x, y and z axes, with coloured triangles here and there. "The blue triangles are Free Trade Zone ships. The red triangles, Corp ships. Notice how they

seem to be forming a sheet of ships near the border. You'll recognise it; the formation was last used during the siege of Old Italy."

Knight agreed, noticing how few those blue triangles were in comparison to the red ones.

"As you can see, the Corp is dwarfing the Free Zone formations. It seems that those within the Zone are panicking – they are sure the Corp is preparing an all-out invasion. Normally, the Free Trader ships will gladly pick up and aid refugees, but they're so jittery at the moment I wouldn't be surprised if they're firing at anything that moves, so be wary around them, Smuggler.

"The 'sheet' that is building up is concentrating at the most used spacestreams into the Zone, but other areas are building up as fast as Corp ships can stream in. You'll have to try and slip past them by avoiding the main streams.

"Of course, this will be slower, and every smuggler knows, that the slower you go, the greater the time they have to detect you. But, in this case, the faster ways are impenetrable."

Here the Contessa paused to press a button, which changed the screen format. The triangles disappeared and were replaced by a matrix of white dots, splattered in irregular concentrations over the frontier, representing space-time densities. The higher the concentration of the dots in an area, the faster a ship would go through that area – where the dots were so many they would coalesce into a line, the so-called spacestream. "Here is the most recent space contour formation we have available for you to plan your route. Fabricius has already downloaded this information into your own ship's systems.

"The Venezia di Notte is a big ship and even this close to the border we are in danger of being spotted. We'll try to get as close as possible to the border before you leave, but only a smuggler ship is small enough to slip through the Corporate net to get past the border."

They continued talking for a while, Knight asking questions that were like probes, feeling the frontier border-areas for trouble. Rhea and Fabricius answered as well as they could. Once Knight was satisfied, the mini-council dissolved and Knight planned the route that he and Hanako were to take, while Fabricius oversaw the final repairs on the Poet's Whim.

The ship was finally repaired at about one in the morning, or at least what passed for morning aboard a spaceship. Knight decided to leave immediately. The Contessa ordered the Venezia di Notte to get as close to the border as possible without being detected by the Corp, but even so Knight knew it would take a few more days to reach the Free Trade Zone.

There was no ceremonious exit, for two reasons. The Venezia di Notte was on high alert due to the large Corp presence. The other reason, was that smugglers preferred to leave quietly anyway. Only the Contessa Rhea Silvia was present, as well as Fabricius, while the rest of the crew were scurrying about in their duties, ready in case of an emergency. Rhea stepped forward, and put her hand on Smuggler Knight's shoulder.

"Well, dear smuggler, once more I have to say goodbye, and it is no less easier than it was last time," she said.

"I'm sure that Fate will run our roads across each other again," Knight replied. He turned to Fabricius. "And I thank you, good companion, for having repaired my ship so well."

Fabricius gave a slight bow. "May your journey be safe, Smuggler Knight." He gave a slight bow to Hanako too, and said, "Farewell, Lady Hanako. Your presence upon this ship was like the breath of Spring's air."

"Thank you," Hanako said.

"Every second that passes counts against you, smuggler," Rhea remarked. "You must leave now, *buon amico*⁴⁴, for your own sake."

Knight stepped forward to embrace the Contessa, and as he did so, he said, "*Arrivederci*⁴⁵, Rhea."

"*Arrivederci*, Knight." Rhea turned to Hanako. "Farewell, Lady Hanako, may your journey be safe."

"Farewell, Contessa, may Fortune smile on you," Hanako replied.

The Contessa turned around and walked to the airlock, with a smart military stride, not looking back once as she left.

"Once more, Lady Hanako, farewell," Fabricius said, then he faced Knight, and said, "I shall leave you, Smuggler Knight, with a line from an ancient poet, which has suddenly come to mind: 'Go, mount the western winds, and cleave the sky!'⁴⁶" Fabricius clicked his heels and placed his fist on his chest. Knight saluted back. Fabricius then marched after the Contessa, but unlike her, he turned around to acknowledge Hanako as the girl cried out one last goodbye.

Knight helped Hanako up into the ship, and just before he closed the Whim's hatch, he heard the great airlock doors of the battleship sealing also.

The Whim gave the Di Notte confirmation. The bay depressurised, the exitway opened, and so, they departed from the Contessa's ship, quickly leaving it behind as they raced at all speed for the Free Trade Zone.

Border

The journey continued for several more days, and as they neared the end of the frontier Knight became more edgy. The Corporate presence was the highest he had experienced since the blockade of Old Italy, but then the smugglers had the advantage of flying under the cover of continual military engagements. This time, Knight would have to get through the Corporate net before he could even think of calling for military help from the Free Trade Zone.

They were nearing the border. A message packet, bouncing off some pirate ship or other, reached the Poet's Whim. It gave the alarm-information that a Corporate ship, steaming at full speed, was going to cross Whim's path. The Corporate ship would be close enough to detect the Poet's Whim even if Knight turned his ship back and bolted full-thrust up the spacestream he was travelling in. The only thing to do was hide.

The Poet's Whim gently dipped out of its spacestream, and turned its head towards a nearby asteroid belt, where the giant rocks glistened in the distant light of its sun.

Some of the rocks were so massive that a single one could smash the Whim, so Knight eased his ship into a more stable area of the belt, where the rocks were large but slow moving and easier to dodge. He parked the Whim inbetween two large asteroids, so that sensor signals would bounce off them and prevent his ship being detected. The twinkles shining off his ship's hull mingled with that of the mineral glints of the asteroids, and in the belt, it would have been hard to visually spot the Whim.

Knight turned the ship's gravity to its minimum, so that the Whim's artificial gravity field would not draw the rocks outside towards it. He felt his body floating upwards as the generators whined down, and he turned the shipboard power to a minimum too, to keep the ship radio-silent. Carefully the smuggler scanned the nearby rocks, aware of how close the ship was to their menace.

Curious as to whether he could pick up any communications frequencies, he tuned his receiver. Although inside the belt was a lot of static, Knight managed to pick up something.

"...rt devilship designation delta⁴⁷-adam-smith repeat delta-adam-smith spotted and position confirmed..."

"...angelship Worker's Star, repeat Worker's Star in final position; report devilship designation delta-adam-smith, repeat delta-adam-smith, devilship position confirmed..."

Hanako had floated through the ship towards the pilot's room, and positioned herself near Knight.

"Angelship? Devilship? What are you listening to?" she asked.

"I think it's communications between Free Trade Zone ships. I suppose 'angelship' would indicate one of their ships and 'devilship' is used to refer to a Corp ship. It's good that we can catch their signals because in this way we can be informed about the Corp ship positions without exposing ourselves by using my radar. That way we'll know when we can leave this asteroid belt we're currently hiding in..."

"Listening post delta-one⁴⁸, repeat delta-one, report devilship, no designation, repeat no designation, entering delta."

"Angelship Worker's Star, repeat Worker's Star, where the hell are these bastards coming from?"

"Listening post delta-one, repeat delta-one, they're all over the place. Alpha and beta sectors have run out of designations for the devils. Several refugee ships have been gunned down."

"Bastards. Is it an invasion?"

"We don't know. We haven't had any confirmation from Central, although things seem to be pretty frantic over there. Can't tell you much else on an insecure channel. Actually, can't tell you much more even over a secure channel."

"Right on that, delta-one. We've picked up devilship, no designation, repeat no designation, cannot pinpoint, repeat, cannot pinpoint. They're jamming our scanners."

"Listening post delta-one, repeat delta-one, central has just come back to us with a designation for devilship, no designation, repeat no designation, new designation is devilship delta-keynes, repeat delta-keynes. We are attempting to counter their jamming frequencies."

"Angelship Worker's Star, repeat Worker's Star, we confirm the new designation of devilship delta-keynes, repeat delta-keynes."

The rest of the radio chatter was practically unintelligible, a long string of numbers and coded messages. Interrupting its steady stream, Hanako asked, "Are they really going to be invaded? Why are we going there?"

Hanako put her arms around Knight, and lay her head on his chest. Her hair wafted upwards in the zero-gravity and their scent drifted up to caress Knight's face. With his one hand he grabbed a handhold nearby one of the Whim's consoles, while he put his other arm around Hanako.

"Perhaps Czerwon will chase us into the Zone," whispered Knight. "But then we'll keep running, and we'll keep going. And we will go on until Czerwon gives up. But wherever we have to go to, wherever we will end up, I'll be there by you. Czerwon can come with his entire fleet, all one thousand ships, I will stand between you and them, and protect you to my last."

Hanako looked up, and kissed Knight on his cheek.

"Thank you, Knight." She stayed in Knight's arms, feeling comforted. They floated in the dim light to the sound of the coded chatter picked up by the Whim, Knight feeling his cheek rub against Hanako's hair.

After some time passed, the Corp ship that had been close to spotting the Poet's Whim, which Knight surmised was the one called 'delta-keynes', had moved in towards the border and now the way was open. Reluctantly, Knight said, "It's time to move. I'm going to put the gravity back on."

Their feet drifted back slowly to the floor as the gravity whined back on. The Whim maneuvered itself out of its position, then skimmed over the belt for a little while in case it had to dive back in again. Sensing that all was clear, the Whim raised its nose and flew away from the glittering belt.

As secret as he thought he was, though, at that moment a Corp ship detected the Whim as faint reflection on the radar system. It was too far away to make a proper identification, and too slow to catch up with the fast little spaceship, nevertheless the information was quickly transmitted to the rest of the fleet, forewarning them.

Soon afterwards, the Poet's Whim was less than an hour away from the border. Knight felt relieved. "I think we've made it, Hanako. We're almost there."

"I don't know," said Hanako. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Maybe," Knight said. Despite his attempt to sound confident, he knew that this could still prove to be the most dangerous part of the journey. "It's best that you go back to your bunk, you can strap yourself in safely, if anything happens."

With a slight look of apprehension at Knight, Hanako accepted his advice and left the pilot room. Knight was alone now and he could focus. But it was not much later when a communication came in. Knight recognised it as Free Trader.

"To unidentified trader, this is the Free Trade Zone advising you to leave immediately."

Knight couldn't dare risk replying, for fear of giving away his position to the Corp.

"Unidentified trader, a Corporation ship is bearing down at you. Your position is extremely dangerous."

'Is this some trick?' Knight thought.

Another communication suddenly forced its way in. "Tradership Poet's Whim, this is the Corporate ship Undying Hunger, you are to stop immediately and wait for us to arrive at your position. We have you on our radar."

Knight grabbed his communications microphone. "This the smugglership Poet's Whim to the Free Trade Zone, can you hear me?"

"This is the Free Trade Zone, we hear you, smuggler. You are advised to retreat."

"We are refugees, we have nowhere else to go. We can't retreat. Is that delta-one?"

"This is delta-one, Poet's Whim."

"We request military assistance, delta-one."

"We can't do that, Poet's Whim, I'm sorry to say this but you're on your own."

"Isn't there anything you can do?" Knight asked, an extreme desperation creeping into his voice. His passive radar had just picked up the Corp ship actively scanning the Whim.

"We can give you the cords of the Corp ships."

"Give them, give them..." Knight heard his voice tremble, saw his hand shake. His hands had only ever shook like that once, at Troy. There too he had been so close and yet in such danger of losing everything, when it was up to him to rescue the Contessa.

The systems beeped. They had just received an information packet with all the coordinates, cords, of the Corporate ships in the area.

"Poet's Whim, confirm that you received."

"Poet's Whim confirms that she received. Thank you."

"Our hands are tied, Poet's Whim, we can't offer more help. We are all rooting for you. Good luck in reaching the border."

"Thank you, delta-one."

Knight mentally forced his hand to steady. He scanned the Corp positions now displayed on one of his screens, and mentally calculated a route through them, a process that would normally take twelve⁴⁹ minutes of careful calculating, but time was lacking for carefulness - Knight had to put his trust into his intuition. His hands became automatic as they activated the various combat and defense mechanisms of the Whim, as they had done countless times before in his smuggler's life.

The Corp ship came in, "Ship Poet's Whim, you are to stop immediately and wait for Undying Hunger to come for you. If you do not, we will open fire without warning. We know you have defensive systems aboard."

The last statement forced Knight to scrap part of his plan and to quickly come up with a new defensive thought-pattern. He would not be able to dupe the Corp fighters like he did last time.

He was out of the range of the enemy, but not for long. Two enemy darts entered attack range, and the various systems aboard lighted up as they neared, their screens giving out ugly red and green warnings. The Corporation blasted out one last warning through communications, which Knight rebroadcast right back, in a bid to confuse them.

Knight turned on the last array of defensive systems and then flicked on his active radar. On the sensors a host of darts suddenly came up, pouring out of the Undying Hunger. Thankfully, that was the only battleship around but it would be a race against the other Corporate battleships in the area, to find out who could reach the border first. There were two other battleships in the immediate surrounding space, according to the information given by delta-one. Then there was one 'angelship', the 'Worker's Star' (if that was its real name); the terrifying thought flashed across Knight's mind, that even if he reached the border the Corp ships would plunge in after him and overwhelm the all-alone Worker's Star.

The darts behind him launched a single missile. Knight easily dodged it, leaving behind a tail of chaff and flare - Knight couldn't understand why they were not being more aggressive. The missile exploded harmlessly, far away. Then the systems aboard the Whim blanked out for a moment, before forcing themselves back online. The Corp was using ionised warheads, missiles loaded with little plus and minus charges, meant to take out the electrical systems aboard the Whim. The Corp was aiming to disable the Whim, not destroy it.

Two more dart patrols were entering within the Whim's range, this time from the front and side, an encircling formation. The Whim was going to have maneuver itself out then use its superior speed to outrun the darts.

"Delta-one to Poet's Whim, a new Corp ship has entered this sector. It is bearing down on you at extraordinary speed, we are transmitting cords..."

The Corp battleship knew what Knight was attempting to do and was trying to reach the border before he did.

The Whim's engines screamed as Knight pushed his ship into a curve meant to get them out of the dart ring. The darts fired a volley of missiles to try and stop the smuggler. Again, the missiles detonated away from the ship, but the ion radiation disrupted the electrical systems.

The systems in the cockpit suddenly went dark. Crying out in frustration, Knight began banging his fist at the cold lifeless plates, his heart trembling for a moment in the fear that now, finally, all was lost. The ship drifted dead in space, waiting to be captured by the Undying Hunger.

The generator then rumbled itself back to life, and electricity and hope both surged back into the ship's systems. Knight forced the clenched fingers of his fist to open up and take back the controls. His mind was racing faster than his body responded, and for a moment through Knight's eyes events grinded down into slow-motion.

Knight regained control of the Whim and steered it away from the darts. The darts following coalesced behind the smuggler ship like a swarm. More dart swarms were converging from several directions.

The delta-one piped in. "Free Trade Zone to the Poet's Whim, hang in there, you're near the border. We are on military standby. Just get across the border!"

The Whim threw out the last of its flares as it managed to successfully dodge several missiles at once. The next volley of missiles would be much harder to dodge, Knight knew. To his dismay Knight saw that many of his missile detection systems were not functioning, still under the disrupting influence of the ionisation.

Somewhere in the back of Knight's mind he heard the argument that was being transmitted over the communications systems. The Worker's Star wanted to send fighters across the border to intervene, while delta-one was re-iterating orders not to do so. It seemed that the Worker's Star was about to disobey those orders. There was also some commotion as to the identity of the second battleship that was coming up to meet the Undying Hunger.

Some darts crossed the border. They did not have the Corp radar signature; they were Free Traders. Their aim was to try and intimidate the Corp darts, while avoiding a direct confrontation.

The other battleship was coming into the scanner range. It was huge and coming in fast. The Undying Hunger was also closing in.

The Free Traders loosed some missiles on the Corp, in an attempt to scatter them and so to prevent them locking their weapons on the Whim. This bought the Whim just a little bit more time; the Free Trader darts and their mothership were in visible range. Hope starburst through Knight's heart. The Poet's Whim was almost at the border.

Suddenly a missile, out of nowhere, slammed into the side of the Whim. It was not a true warhead, but an ionizing one like all the others, but the impact shudder-hammered

the smuggler ship. Knight was thrown against the side and was knocked unconscious. The Poet's Whim was disabled.

Just before the missile had struck, a message from the Free Traders had come through :
"My God! It's the Red Claw!"

Part Three - Reaction

The 'fight or flight' reflex is governed by the sympathetic nervous system of the body. It is activated when the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) receives some sort of stress input, such as : anxiety, fear, anger, pain, a sharp decrease in environmental temperature, and physical exercise. This triggers signals in the hypothalamus of the brain which causes the conduction of a stimulus down the spinal cord. Out of the spinal cord come the preganglionic nerve fibres, specifically at the vertebrae levels of T1 to L2, as well as S2 to S4. These fibres synapse at ganglia, which then give off postganglionic fibres to innervate the rest of the body, the exception being the adrenal medulla gland, which receives only preganglionic fibres. The postganglionic fibres directly stimulate the organs they innervate, while the preganglionic fibres of the adrenal medulla gland stimulate that gland to release two hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which augment the functioning of the sympathetic nervous system. The overall effect of the sympathetic nervous system is to prepare the body to react to danger : the pupils dilate to improve vision, the bronchioles dilate to improve oxygen supply, non-essential processes like digestion are slowed down, unnecessary loads like urine and faeces are expelled, blood supply increases to essential organs, and the heart beats faster and stronger. This response, a reaction to outer stimuli, is remarkable for its universalness among humans, mammals and other animals.

In the clutch of the Red Claw

The Poet's Whim had been disabled but as a result it was careening through space. The Red Claw had to do a bit of maneuvering in order to catch the Whim in one of the Claw's holding bays, just as the pirates do. The Claw, despite its size, was able to do this because of the high speed and maneuverability that it gained from the size of its gargantuan engines.

Hanako, kicking and screaming, was placed in a holding cell designed specifically for Czerwon's genelings. As for Knight, Rumsfeld had tried to persuade Czerwon to let him finish off the smuggler himself, as a personal payback from the frustration he had chasing him around Old Italy and across space to the edge of the frontier, but Czerwon decided otherwise. It was a deliberate slight, perhaps to put the captain in his place, perhaps to provoke him into doing something rash.

There was an old bounty on Knight's head, and Czerwon decided that it would be collected. "This Shareholder Tang's reward will recompense us for the trouble the smuggler scum has caused," the CEO remarked. "And I would imagine that the shareholder will do away the smuggler with more creativeness than we would."

Czerwon also decided that for the time being the Red Claw would remain in the frontier, to cover the break up of the Corporate battleship formations. With the geneling captured, the Corp no longer had any purpose in maintain a siege formation against the

Free Trade Zone, at least for now. The Corporate ships were leaving and the Red Claw was needed to intimidate the Free Traders away from doing any surprise attack. But the CEO found the presence of the smuggler so distasteful that he decided to have him sent off immediately by prison ship to Shareholder Tang Yu-lin.

Knight was roughly transferred to the Red Claw's prison transport. He was not the only one aboard; before the pursuit of Hanako had begun, there were quite a few flotsam that the Claw had picked up, and had been rotting all this time in the battleship's dungeon. It had been decided to get them all off the Claw in one go.

The prisoners were put into separate cells; for Knight there was special treatment, as he was chained by his wrists high up onto the wall, so that he had to hang suspended by his arms. The cell he occupied had been occupied by some poor soul who had been forgotten by his keepers; the corpse had only recently been taken out and the cell had not been cleaned. The smell of rot and excrement nearly pushed Knight back to the unconsciousness he had experienced when the Whim was finally disabled; he forced himself to remain awake.

His being, his inner-self, was like a foaming, raging dog; the imprint of his angered soul burned into his body. His thoughts, although slurred and slow-moving, glistened behind his eyes, searching for some way to escape, to find Hanako and ensure her safety. He didn't care what happened to himself, as long as Hanako was safe.

But after several minutes of straining his weakened, hungry muscles against his bonds, he was at a loss of how to set himself free.

He heard footsteps. The door of his cell opened.

Captain Rumsfeld. At first Knight didn't recognise him, but as the man moved closer the captive's groggy mind clicked in memory. Loathing, hatred, then fear, chilled the smuggler's heart. He had no idea of what Rumsfeld wanted to do, but the smuggler was well aware of what the captain was capable of.

Captain Rumsfeld leaned closer to the helpless Knight. His breath blew over Knight's face in an uncomfortable way. The Corp man's eyes seemed to venom with spite. "Well, Smuggler Knight, I finally get the chance to meet you in person, up close," Rumsfeld whispered, breathing into Knight's ear. "I remember, when I first saw you in your little ship streaking across my barriers. You were one of the best of the blockade runners anyone had ever seen, and I swore I'd hunt you down. I chased you through the blockade and through the asteroids, from the rim of the Old Italy system right down to plains of Troy and the ruined court of the Italian king. You were always just within my grasp, and you kept slipping from under my fingers.

"Then, to my great surprise, I had to chase you again, all across space and through the frontier and right to the edge of the blasted Free Trade Zone. Only a smuggler of your skill and confidence could ever have gotten so far with Czerwon's precious little geneling. I'm not surprised that you were hired for the job.

"So, here you are, in my grasp at last. Soon, you will be taken to a man who wishes to do far worse things to you than I ever would. Still, I could not let you leave without a parting gift from me, a token of the high affection I have for you..."

Rumsfeld ended his monologue by forcing his fist into Knight's abdomen. Knight was sure, from previous experience, from the pain now coursing through him, that the Corp man was using knuckle-irons, though he had not seen the Captain wearing them. Several

blows followed in quick succession, with a final swipe at the face that set blood dribbling down the side of Knight's mouth.

Knight groaned, his head hanging and body dizzy with pulse-pounding pain. Knight heard Rumsfeld say something, but the words would not make audible sense in Knight's ear. He managed to raise his head to see Rumsfeld go and the cage doors shut closed.

The walls began to speak with a gentle rumble. Knight pulled at his chains with a renewed, desperate vigour. The rumble became louder. As the prison ship's engines and gravity generators started, Knight could feel the center of gravity of his body shift slightly. His last frantic thrashes did not set him free. Knight let out a shout of frustration, then screamed, ignoring the pain from his dry, parched throat. By now the rumblings could be felt and heard through the walls and floor, and the balance of his body told Knight that the ship was leaving the Claw.

Knight stopped screaming, his anger giving way to despair. A tear came from his eye, a hoarse whisper from his mouth : "Hanako..."

As for Hanako, she found herself in conditions that were luxurious compared to the ones Knight had found himself in. She was locked in a spacious room. There was a soft bed, with white sheets. There was a white carpet. There was a little white en suite. Everything was white, sterile. There was a mirror and a vase, both were made of an unbreakable material. They would not break, no matter how hard Hanako thrashed at them. The walls were padded, so was the impregnable door. There was no way out, either by escape or by suicide.

Hanako grabbed her face, a look of desperation on it. She felt like something wanted to explode inside her. Her legs felt weak and bent a little, as she started shrieking, her entire body shuddering. She kept screaming, her angry nails digging into her body.

She expected that there would have been some sort of reaction, some response from those that locked her in the room, but there wasn't. She started beating the walls with her fists.

Those who were observing through the hidden cameras in the room wanted to intervene, they were stopped by Doctor Fallsoul, who did not yet see a reason to intervene despite the girl's desperate behaviour. To him, it felt that since he would have to violate this girl's body, he should at least not violate the girl's emotional expression. He turned away from the view monitors which showed Hanako from three different angles, said some reassuring words to the worried staff manning them, and went back to supervising the preparations for the transplant, to be done by teleportation device.

Hanako was crying so hard she could not see through her tearful eyes. "Knight!" she wailed.

Knight's body hung limply from his chains, his body heavy from the weight of his soul. He could feel the soft rumblings of the prison ship engines humming through his bones, like a gentle but ironic caress.

Knight's attention was caught when there was a slight change in the rhythm, and the centre of his body weight shifted too, indicating the ship was turning. Through the grating of his cell door he heard panicky voices echoing through the prison corridors.

The centre of gravity had shifted several times, as if the ship was taking evasive action. Then a clang resounded and a thunder-shudder spread along the prison walls. Soon afterward the sound of gunfire rattled from outside.

The sounds and cries of battle. More guns. Shouts. Time. The sounds gradually fade away as one of the sides gains victory.

The door to Knight's cell opened, and into the cell stepped the Contessa Rhea Silvia.

From the depths of his beating core

"When the Corporate barricade around the Zone began to break up, we thought it was because you had managed to cross the border with the girl, but we monitored the Corporate and Free Trade Zone communications and we realised otherwise : that the Poet's Whim had been captured.

"We weren't sure if you were aboard that prison ship, but I decided that if even the slightest chance to save you was there, we'd attempt. All my crew hate the Corporation and Czerwon, *accidenti a lui*⁵⁰, and they were willing. The prison guards had no idea what happened; we did not have any fatal casualties. In any event, we have some new recruits from that moving dungeon."

The Contessa stopped speaking for a moment, then asked, in a tender way, "How are you feeling, *mio caro*⁵¹?"

Once more, Smuggler Knight was sitting in the captain's cabin of the Venezia di Notte. Rhea Silvia had been pacing the room up and down, explaining to Knight his rescue. He was absorbed in thought, and did not notice the Contessa's question.

"Smuggler Knight?" the Contessa prompted.

"I have to go back," matter of factly.

"You did not say that."

"I have to go back."

The Contessa turned her back to the smuggler, her hands were behind her back and she was tensing them open and closed, trying not to let her frustration overflow into anger.

"And how do you intend to do this?" she asked, "Your ship is in the hands of the enemy."

"I was hoping I could use one of your darts."

"You were hoping wrong." She made an angry turn to once more face Knight. "I will not waste an expensive and indispensable ship, essential to what we do, so that you can go off on a suicide mission against the Corporation."

Silent pause.

"She's dead," Rhea said.

She shifted her jaw from side to side, then continued, "She's dead by now, and you know that. Czerwon's raped whatever he wanted from her. There's no point in trying to go back. Go to your quarters and get some rest, Smuggler."

"You can't..."

"That's an order, Smuggler! Either you go to your quarters or I'll throw you in the brig!"

Knight knew he couldn't argue with the Contessa. He knew her well enough to know that she could very well carry out her threat in her current state of mind. He rose from his seat.

"Thank you, Contessa. You risked your life and those of your men to save my life."

Rhea didn't say anything, and Knight walked out of the cabin.

Alone, she let out a deep, controlled breath, and sank into a chair. She muttered something to herself.

But Knight did not do as he was ordered, as indeed he had not done during that day during the fall of Old Italy. For although he had been ordered to help some Italian politicians escape, he instead entered Old Italy's atmosphere and flew towards Troy. For then one thing had mattered more to him, and that was the safety of the Contessa Rhea Silvia. Now that same mad, irrational impulse took hold of him

He snuck through the Venezia di Notte and found his way to carrier bay, where the ship's darts were kept.

The bay seemed abandoned. Nevertheless, the smuggler kept in the shadows that were formed by the lights, dimly shining above the darts.

Knight put his hand on the hull of a dart. It felt cold under his palm. He was looking for the cockpit hatch when the sound of a flicking switch echoed through the bay. Power surged through the bay lights and the dimness suddenly blared into light.

Knight put his hand to his eyes. He was momentarily blinded by the glare and could only see the silhouette of whoever had turned on the lights.

"Put your hands up, smuggler," said a male voice.

Knight didn't see any other choice, and raised his hands. "Who are you?" he asked.

The man stepped nearer, out of the glare. He was holding a gun, pointed at Knight. Knight's eyes adjusted and he could see who it was. If ever he heard that voice again, he would know it would be Fabricius. In his other hand he was holding something.

"Well, smuggler, are you unhappy with your quarters? Where they so poor that you have decided to go elsewhere to sleep?" Fabricius asked, cynically.

Silence.

"Eh, smuggler, has your tongue been cut out? Speak, explain yourself."

What could Knight say, except for the truth? "I have to save her."

"Who?" Fabricius already knew the answer to the question but to his mind it was unbelievable.

"Hanako."

"And where is she?"

"In the Red Claw."

"So you wish to take one dart and with that dart take on the most powerful battleship in the known universe?"

"Yes."

"Fool. 'Go to now, cease from strife, and let not your hand draw the sword.'⁵² Go back to your quarters and I will forget this happened."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I must."

"How romantic."

Silence.

"You know," said Fabricius, "My son was killed by the Corp." He remembered how he himself had risked his life, flying through burning Troy to try and save his family. Even if someone had told him beforehand that they were dead, he knew that he would have probably have gone anyway. Sometimes, it is as if some power was awakened within one, and you had to obey it and do as it said. Wisdom, technique, reason had nothing to

do with it; although the impulse could lead to an irrational death, yet ignoring it would be like plunging into sleep and into a dream. It was the impulse to protect something deep within every person's heart; something precious, raw, and powerful.

This was the impulse that Fabricius had once felt, which had pulled him through battlefields, had made him curse his Goddess and then embrace her again. Fabricius could now see it in Smuggler Knight, and for the first time he understood. Sometimes, when the human being no longer had the power to act, all that was left was to react.

Fabricius turned the gun away and holstered it. " 'Go and take all my troubles with you.'⁵³ That one was from Euripides, I think. You might need this..." Fabricius unclipped his gun belt and tossed it over to Knight, then began to walk away.

"You're letting me go?" Knight asked, catching the gun and holding it to his bosom.

" 'The brave prevent misfortune; then be brave, and bury future danger in it's grave.'⁵⁴ " Homer. I'd also appreciate it if you wait for me to leave and for the airlocks to seal."

"But why?"

As Fabricius stepped through the airlock, he said, with a sad smile, "Because you must." As the airlock sealed, Fabricius clicked his heels and placed his fist on his chest in salute. And in that fist was the little gift that Hanako had given him.

The lights were bright and Knight easily found the hatch into the dart. He climbed in and activated its systems. As he did so the exit hatch for the bay began to open by itself; perhaps Fabricius was opening it for Knight. A few minutes later, Knight was streaking away from the Venezia di Notte, on course for the Red Claw.

It was not so long afterwards that the Contessa had Fabricius arrested and brought before her. "You not only allowed him past yourself into the carrier bay, but you aided him in his escape!" Rhea accused. She was outraged.

"Escape? Was he being held captive?" Fabricius replied, his eyebrow raised.

"Shut up, Fabricius. I used to trust with my life. Now I don't know. Why did you let him go, Fabricius?"

" 'In case he somehow tricks death and fate and wins his way back.' "

"I could forgive you for the material loss of the dart, but you sent the only man I have ever loved on a suicide mission."

"I didn't send him, *mia Contessa*, I merely helped him."

"So you say. You allowed him to leave. If he returns, you will live. If he dies on the Red Claw, so will you."

Fabricius shrugged. "You are speaking from your heart, not your head. Even so, it doesn't matter if the smuggler does not return – I died a long time ago, when Czerwon killed my family and destroyed everything that I held dear."

"I am already thinking of him as dead," Rhea said. She suppressed the tear that wanted to well up in her eye.

Rhea and Fabricius stared at each other for a few moments.

"Don't you have anything to say, Fabricius?"

" 'Since then in vain I tell my numerous woes, in silence let them dwell.' Homer.⁵⁵ "

"Ah, and what other pearls of quote have you, my jester?"

" 'I am no prophet, and know very little about omens, but I speak as it is borne in upon me from heaven, and assure you that he will not be away much longer; for he is a man of such resource that even though he were in chains of iron he would find some means of getting home again.'⁵⁶ "

"Ave Maria." She turned to the pirates who had brought Fabricius to herself. "Put him in a cell, under surveillance."

As the red-uniformed pirates took Fabricius away, he turned and cried, "I want him to succeed. I know you do too."

"Shut up, you bastard," Rhea whispered. Turning away so that no one could see her, she finally let the tear fall down her cheek.

The battle for Hanako's heart

Fortune was smiling for Knight. The last time a dart had, all alone, attacked the Red Claw was a long time ago during the siege of Old Italy. It was a long time since any ship had dared attack the Red Claw. The radar operators were complacent and inattentive. They did not notice the little pirate dart that was coming in, like a speck of dust attacking a whale.

The over-dwarfing Red Claw loomed in front of the dart. Knight flew in close, looking for some way inside. He didn't allow himself to feel the fear that was coming up from the back of his heart : how was he in his tiny dart going to confront the most massive ship in the galaxy?

Guided more by instinct than by rational thought, the dart pointed its nose towards a hatch in the Red Claw's side, and fired a missile. The hatch blew out, and the dart flew at full burn into the froth of air that leapt out of the hole. The dart managed to force its way in as the inner airlock hatch automatically sealed to contain the breach.

The dart was in a tiny parking bay, with three Corporate darts parked in it. Knight fired the remaining missile aboard his pirate ship, and it screamed into one of the Corp darts. There was a very pretty explosion. Knight needed the distraction, so that he could slip out of his ship and scuttle away into the corridors of the Red Claw.

What few stunned Corp men that were around were busy trying to put out the flames. Knight exited his ship with a jump, and ran for a corridor.

Alert sirens were blaring and the traditional colour of alarm, red, was pulsating from the lights. Knight heard the sound of boots and ducked into a side corridor. Three Corp men were having a hurried conversation not far off, and the words echoed down into Knight's hiding place :

"Lieutenant Brasidas!"

"What was that?"

"Sir, someone has breached the hull with a dart-ship and caused an explosion in the docking bay."

"We give thanks to the infallible radar men up in the boardroom. How is the situation?"

"The maintenance team is attempting to control the fire, but we haven't captured the perpetrator."

"Set up a search-and-capture. I'd do it myself but Czerwon has ordered me up to take part in some ceremony or other, that dog, involving an organ transplant, of all things. Go to it, and try to keep Rumsfeld's men out of this. For all we know they are the ones responsible."

"Yes sir!"

"Yes sir!"

Sound of running feet. The two men that Brasidas had been talking to rushed past the entrance of the hiding-place, Knight crouching in the shadows. Their steps went farther and Knight took out the gun Fabricius had given him. He went out back into the main tunnel. At the one end, the two Corp men were already in the docking bay, where the loud roar of the fire was blanking out the hearing. At the other end, a man was hurrying up the tunnel, his back towards Knight.

"Lieutenant Brasidas," he said, remembering the name from the conversation he had just heard, remembering too the reference to the 'ceremony'.

Brasidas turned, expecting to see one of his own men behind him with fresh news. His eyebrows raised in a startle when he saw the smuggler and the gun pointed at him.

"Don't make any sudden moves," Knight growled.

"If you shoot me," Brasidas replied, "The sound of the shot will echo through these corridors and alert my men. You'd be trapped."

"Don't underestimate a desperate man. I will shoot you, if you don't do as I say."

"And what must I do?"

"Take me to Czerwon."

The machine in Brasidas' mind quickly skimmed through the various possibilities. It seemed to him that the smuggler was out to assassinate Czerwon. The chances that he would succeed were very slim : Czerwon's body was so neuro-enhanced by Fallsoul's medical technology that the CEO would be able to react before the fatal strike. However, Czerwon was about to be operated on, perhaps he was drugged pre-operatively, perhaps he would be dazed afterwards. Brasidas was, technically, under compulsion; he could therefore lead the assassin to Czerwon without culpability. He would have to be very careful not to lead the man into a situation in which he would be able to overpower the smuggler, because then he would be forced to act and this chance to kill Czerwon would be wasted. If the smuggler succeeded, Brasidas would quickly capture Rumsfeld and secure Thalia as the new CEO; if the smuggler did not, Brasidas' hands would be clean of blame anyway. Such a chance to kill Czerwon should not be squandered.

"Very well," said Brasidas, suppressing a smile, "I will lead you to him."

"Drop your gun, then start walking. If you lead me into some trap, I will make sure to kill you."

Brasidas slowly unclipped his gunbelt, dropped it on the floor, then turned. "This way," he said, then began moving with measured, deliberate steps. Knight followed him, picking up the gun belt as he passed it, treading lightly like a feline predator. He clipped it around his own waist.

Brasidas led Knight through the corridors of the Red Claw, on a route that would avoid premature capture of Knight but hopefully would not be so safe as to cast suspicion on the lieutenant.

While Brasidas was leading Knight to Czerwon, Hanako herself was brought to the ceremonial hall to prepare for the transfer operation. She was struggling and hissing against those who were dragging her into the room; these draggers were quite irritated, especially since they had been ordered not to hurt her in anyway, and were thus unable to use fists to keep her quiet.

The hall was quite large. A platform, a balcony, jutted over one half of the room, much like in the boardroom. In the other half was a hollow column, built of some tough

transparent material, with a strange chair-like contraption in it. A wide gangway led from the transparent column and up to the balcony, where a similar chair-like object was situated. Various medical personnel made last minute checks on the various equipment scattered about the room. The strange shapes of the contraptions gave no clues as to their function.

Hanako was force-handled up the gangway to the balcony. Thalia, with her attendant Ansar, stood to one side, at the corner where the balcony railing ran into the wall. She was watching the medical workers move about, like little ants. Czerwon, Captain Rumsfeld and Doctor Fallsoul were standing on the opposite end of the balcony.

The Chief Executive Officer Czerwon stood silently and watched Hanako being brought to him - kicking and screaming - with the half-interested eye of someone looking upon an expendable possession. His arms were crossed lightly across his chest, his hands near his coat sleeves, where he kept several weapons ready to draw out. He kept Captain Rumsfeld in front of him, the captain's back in quick and easy range for a killing thrust.

The two men eventually stopped before Czerwon, with Hanako hanging between them. Their arms seemed tired from having to drag Hanako's weight and stubbornness around the Red Claw.

Hanako, who had never seen Czerwon before in her life, looked up to see the CEO, and immediately knew who was before her. Desperation flashed through her mind; a final resort pushed itself out of a fearful corner of her mind and went into her mouth.

"Please, let me go," she said, "I'll do anything..."

"Little girl, you will be free to go," Czerwon said, "As soon as I have taken what I need from you."

A little spark of hope glimmered across Hanako's face.. "What?" She knew he wanted an organ. A lung? A kidney? She could live if he wanted one of those.

"Your heart."

Just as it had come, so Hanako's hope now faded. She knew now that there was no Escape. There was nothing else to do but accept what would surely be. Accept.

She put her feet solidly on the ground and no longer dragged her heels in resistance. She stood up straight, and her weight no longer pulled at the arms of her escort. A calm seemed to have come over her. Hanako had accepted death.

"Doctor Fallsoul..."

"Yes, Chief Executive Officer, we will start the transplantation right away. Put her in the chair," said the doctor, pointing below to the chair within the column. The men escorted Hanako down the gangway, surprised at her compliance as she walked with them. She, without compulsion, sat in the chair. The medical staff tied various straps around her arms and legs and body and head to keep her as immobile as possible. The staff then stepped out of the column and sealed the door, locking her inside the column. The column was a recent addition to the transplantation procedure; the previous operation, involving the operation to renew Czerwon's eyes, did not have one. But the screams of the boy, who had his eyes ripped out, unsettled the medical workers. Many of them complained of nightmares, where they saw the boy's face, with two gaping bloody holes instead of his eyes, his mouth wide open and shrieking in pain. Doctor Fallsoul begged Czerwon to install the sound-proof column, so that the staff could turn away their eyes and then they wouldn't hear anything either. Doctor Fallsoul would have liked to

seal the victims completely and out of sight, but for reasons of the procedure it was necessary to see the victim.

Hanako thought of Knight, and how badly she wished she could see him. She wanted to tell him that she loved him, and she felt her eyes well up at the sorrow of never having told him. No one had told her what had happened with him, but she was sure that he was dead.

Czerwon was put into his transplant chair, was strapped in and injected with various drugs. Hanako was not given any drugs. The transplant instrumentation was aligned, one part of it pointed at Czerwon's chest, the other at Hanako's.

Doctor Fallsoul took his position by a lever which would activate the device.

But just then Brasidas finally brought Knight to that very room. The passageway with which they entered opened up below the balcony; all one could see, was the open room with the column in the middle and a gangway leading off to nowhere. Above was the floor of the balcony, which looked like the ceiling.

Knight looked past Brasidas' shoulder. He saw Hanako, seated in her glass prison. Because of the way the room was built, Knight did not see anything else, the other dangers. But even if he did see, it wouldn't have mattered, because all Knight cared about in that moment was Hanako.

He ran past Brasidas towards the column.

"The fool!" thought Brasidas as he saw Knight rush-pass him. The lieutenant would now be forced to act.

Knight rushed past one or two bewildered medical staff – his mind barely registered them – and was running so fast that his body slammed against the transparent wall of the column. Despite the collision, Knight's body did not feel the pain.

Fallsoul pulled the lever.

White fire and blue sparks surged in the column and struck between Hanako's breasts. At the same time a separate transferral beam struck Czerwon just as violently. Czerwon, however, had been given anaesthetic. He managed to tolerate the torment of the pain quite well.

Hanako screamed. Knight was overcome with horror. Although he did not know the technicalities of what was happening, the look of Hanako's face explained everything. She was locked in a sound-proof column. Knight's eyes told him that she was screaming but his ears questioned this.

Hanako screamed. She was bathed in the pallor of the beam pummeling itself into her. The violent sounds of the sparks as they clawed through the air was locked inside the column. Hanako's mouth was wide open, her eyes closed shut, yet no sound escaped the sound-proof barrier.

Hanako screamed.

"Hanako!" Knight beat his fists against the wall. His knuckles were not up to the challenge, and the skin over them snapped and began to bleed.

Doctor Fallsoul was oblivious to what was happening below the balcony. His concentration was on Czerwon and the various instruments that allowing him to monitor the CEO, to make sure all was well with his master. The monitors indicated to him that the procedure was almost finished.

Fallsoul pushed the lever back.

The beam stopped and the light faded. Hanako still felt pain but compared to utter torment she had just experienced it was bearable. Her insides felt very funny and there was fluid in her throat.

Knight leaned against the transparent wall, too agitated for his thoughts to coalesce into any useful action. It was too late to do anything anyway.

Hanako saw Knight through the column wall. She did not believe that Knight was actually standing there; her thought was that he was some vision that she was experiencing on the threshold of death. She saw the vision mouthing her name. She tried to smile, and said, "I love you." As she did so, blood drained itself out her lips.

And Knight, for lack of any action to take, said nothing. Tears came out and he felt an urge to howl from the pain he was feeling.

Blood gurgled from Hanako's mouth. Her eyes widened and became empty; her head fell to the side.

Knight's body was slam-forced, from behind, against the column. Brasidas twisted Knight's arms into a lock behind the smuggler's back.

Rumsfeld would have shot Knight already but he was afraid of somehow disrupting the transfer process if his bullets hit the column (He knew that he himself was to be eliminated if anything happened to Czerwon). His gun was out and aimed for Knight's head when Brasidas slammed the smuggler. Rumsfeld ran down the gangway his gun aim shifting to Knight's exposed chest as Brasidas arm-locked Knight.

"Let me kill him!" his mouth frothed, "Let me kill him once and for all!"

Czerwon was standing, gently ripping out the various needles and devices attached to him. His face was calm, his expression reflective. He could feel his new core beating strongly within his chest. The entire room suddenly became silent as the followers awaited the verdict of their god.

"Bring him to me," the CEO said. "Alive," he quickly added, when he saw the disappointment and blood-lust on Rumsfeld's face. Brasidas forcefully man-handled Knight up the gangway; Rumsfeld walked beside them, his gun no longer pointed at Knight but hovering in the air, ready to come down and shoot if necessary.

When Knight was forced on his knees in front of Czerwon, the smuggler raised his eyes, and staring into his enemy's face, asked, "What did you take?"

"The heart. It is mine now," said the CEO.

"May it reject you," the smuggler uttered.

"Unlikely, the heart was designed for my immune system. My body will not reject it. You have been quite a pest. I was rather annoyed when the prison ship was attacked; unfortunately, due to maneuvers arising from the break up of the blockade of the Free Trade Zone, no Corporate ships were able to respond to its distress calls. Strangely, though, like a stubborn fly you came back to irritate me; a rather amusing course of action. You shall amuse me more, smuggler. I should kill you now but I am in a good mood, with my new heart, so instead of spilling your blood on this floor you shall instead do battle against the Mammon tiger, for my entertainment. Lock him up in the dungeon till further notice." Czerwon's last sentence was spoken dismissively, contemptuously.

As they dragged Knight away, his hands clenched like claws, the smuggler cried out, howling, "Babylon, you vampire!⁵⁷ I will defeat you yet!"

"Shut up!" said Rumsfeld who smacked Knight across his face with the handle of his gun.

Thalia, standing in her corner, was unnoticed, and even Ansar did not observe the shocked, tearful expression on her face until Czerwon ordered that Knight be removed.

"What is wrong, My Lady?" Ansar asked.

"Ansar, I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

In the meantime, Doctor Fallsoul had turned from his instruments to a chimney-like column that was nearby. Fallsoul opened the hatch of the column and heat escaped from it. The doctor reached in, and scalding his fingers, took out a blackened lump. Between the doctor's fingers the lump leaked a sticky black gunk.

The heat had arisen from the teleport process. The lump itself was Czerwon's old heart, taken out a split second before Hanako's heart was inserted. The doctor looked over at Czerwon and the commotion that had sprung about because of Knight, and realised that the CEO couldn't care less about his former beating core.

Doctor Fallsoul knew that the wasted organ in his hands was barely recognisable as a heart, and he could think of no reason to keep it. He shuffled over to a waste disposal unit and dropped the blackened beating core into it, some of the black muck clinging to his fingers and refusing to let go.

Preparations

Once more Knight was in the belly of the beast, locked in a stinking cell of the Red Claw's dungeon. In him was burning a cold fire, the burning ice of a man who had decided to die, but not without some form of revenge. Hanako was dead now, although her heart still lived on, trapped in the cage of Czerwon's ribs, locked behind his sternum. For Knight, who had given his heart-love to Hanako, it was as if his own heart was now gone, and in its place was a death-pact, his last spur to life, to liberate the heart of his love.

In dark meditations Knight sat in the dimness of his cell, which seemed to transform around him into a lair. Knight's mind seemed fade away, replaced by an animal-like psychology, his thoughts transformed into the hunt-lust of a caged beast, a predator pacing his confined space to and fro. Time melted into some intangible thing, that went faster and slower, lived and died, to its own will.

Seated in his cell, Knight was drawn out of the depths of his murky world when he felt sounds coming through the floor. He put his ear down; the sounds became footsteps of people outside his cell. They were coming to take him away.

He raised himself to a half-crouch. The muscles of his body tensed and his face took on a fierce expression in preparation to take on his captors in wild barehanded frenzy.

But the cage doors opened, and it was not a Corporate guard that came through, but the graceful step of the Lady Thalia. Ansar, her attendant, stood at the door, edgy and nervous for Thalia's safety at the hands of the smuggler, for the Lady had insisted that she enter the cell alone.

A corona of light illuminated Thalia, and the light streaking past her from the bright corridor into the dim cell made her look like an angelic being.

"Are you from heaven?" Knight asked.

"No, I am not from heaven. I come to you from a hell."

"Who are you?"

"I am the Lady Thalia, sister of Czerwon. I am here to help you."

"Why would you help me?"

"Be quite, man, and listen to what I say. Tomorrow you shall be brought to do battle against the Mammon tiger. Even if you are armed, you will have little chance against the fiend. Nevertheless, to supposedly increase the sport, you will be given a choice of several bladed weapons. You will be allowed to take two; it is absolutely imperative that you take the dagger in the hilt decorated with a white jewel. Which other weapon you take is up to you.

"This dagger will be oozing from a liquid inside special microscopic pores embedded in the blade. This drug is meant for Czerwon. It is not, ordinarily, a poison, and will slip past any molecular scan for such. The drug will merely cause a mild body-wide constriction of blood vessels. In the ordinary man, the blood pressure will rise and the nervous supply to the heart will order the heart to slow down and to diminish the force the blood is pumped with.

"But in Czerwon, the nervous supply to his heart has been interrupted due to the transplantation, and the tedious task of replacing the nervous supply has been delayed. The heart will continue pumping with force despite the rise in blood pressure. This will cause a build-up of fluid in the cranium, which will, perhaps, kill him."

"But how..." Knight tried to interrupt.

"I told you to be quite, man! The more time I spend here the more danger there is for both of us. The Mammon tiger we will attempt to weaken, in some way or other; you will still have to kill it, but we will insure that there is a chance for victory. For you, it is the difference between perhaps surviving or definitely dying. Unfortunately, that is the best we can do.

"Once Czerwon's precious little pet is killed, he will try to kill you himself - I know his vengeful spite well enough - most likely with one of his beloved swords. He is the greatest swordmaster known, but all you have to do is nick him with the dagger-blade; the drug will do the rest, while you must simply fight to survive."

Thalia stopped for a moment, and the commanding tone of her voice changed to a gentle sound, "Do you understand, Sir Knight?"

"Yes, but why are you doing this?"

"I must go. It is dangerous for me here." Thalia turned to leave.

"But why? He's your brother!"

"Because, Knight, there are many persons aboard this hell-like ship, some female, some *male*. But you are the first true and honourable *man* I have ever seen or met, the only one aboard this ship that would have done so much for the sake of love. It is your warm humanity I admire, and I want it given a chance to triumph over the cold."

The doors sealed behind her.

Ansar quickly led Thalia through corridors that had been bribed empty and past cameras temporarily off-line. "It cost a fortune to get to him," Ansar muttered.

A few minutes later they were in Thalia's garden. "My Lady," Ansar said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Ansar."

"I fear I may be blunt..."

"Then be blunt, Ansar."

"I don't understand why we have to get him involved. Surely, perhaps I could simply take the dagger and stab the CEO myself..."

Thalia laughed. "Oh Ansar, your offer is presumptuous. We both know Czerwon well enough that he will kill you before the blade even unsheathes. It is impossible to surprise him. Besides, what does it mean for us to destroy him? We are merely mirrors of him, rats that live in and live off the Red Corpse. To kill him ourselves is show how much like him we are – there is no meaning in it. But Knight, he is not of this rotting world, he is an outsider, pure, he is Honour - if he were the hand to deliver the fatal blow, it would be the triumph of good over evil. Knight and his Honour is all that can vindicate our pasts, and only he can justify my future."

"But my Lady, what makes you think he can succeed where so many have failed?"

"Because Czerwon would ordinarily kill off his assassins immediately, but when Czerwon feels injured, as he shall after his precious tiger dies, he will instead play with his prey."

"You think the CEO will make a mistake in his play?"

"Playing is itself the mistake, Ansar."

"My Lady, what if Knight fails?"

A flicker of sadness went over Thalia's face. "We will be safe, at least physically. My brother will suspect Captain Rumsfeld, not us and Doctor Fallsoul, if he suspects treachery. But our existences will not be vindicated, will not be justified. The death of Knight will affirm to me the doubts that lurk at the back of my mind - that all this existence is empty and meaningless, that there is no joy and happiness, and above all, there is no justice, there is only power and sorrow. And hunger." A tear slipped down her cheek. "Yes, Hunger, above all the other things." She felt, that despite everything, the smuggler was sure to fail, and that she would see him die, either gored by the tiger or by Czerwon's bloodied hands.

In his cell, Knight was huddled, tense and focused. Outwardly he was silent, but inwardly he was praying :

"Ancestors, I know I have not prayed to you in a while. But in the hour of my greatest need, hear me.

"Father, I remember your strength, both physical and in heart. Father, give me your strength, that your death, which came because of the coming of Czerwon, may be avenged.

"Great-grandfather, you are the genius who created the stance and styles of swordfighting for the House of Knight, to use against those who would steal your cargo. Great-grandfather, guide my hand tomorrow that I may slay my enemy and avenge the death of Hanako, who was my love, and reclaim the beating core!"

Cause and effect

Thalia's garden.

Thalia did not think that Knight had a serious chance of winning. She therefore decided to make plans for the evacuation of Hanako's body, even if Knight failed.

"But why?" asked Ansar.

"Because Ansar, I would assume that to be the smuggler's dying wish, to at least get what is left of her body to a place where she can rest in peace."

"My Lady, what difference will that make?"

"It will make me feel better inside, Ansar."

Ansar was entrusted with getting Hanako's body into the Poet's Whim, the ship still sitting bruised and battered where it was placed after its capture. The body had been stored in case any other organ could possibly be harvested for Czerwon's needs. Now it had been snuck onto the smuggler ship, and Ansar also organised that the ship would be partially repaired, even rearmed. If Knight died, Ansar would sneak off the Claw with the Whim.

Ansar did not like the plan. He was even more pessimistic about Knight's chances in the coming battle, and felt that he would certainly have to fulfil Thalia's wishes. He did not know if he wanted to; the last thing he wanted was to abandon his Lady within the clutch of intrigues that was always the undercurrent of events aboard the Red Claw.

"Has Doctor Fallsoul been able to drug the Mammon tiger?"

"I do not know, my Lady. He has not returned yet."

The bell rang. Someone was at the door. Thalia motioned for Ansar to see who it was.

It was Lieutenant Brasidas. "Lady Thalia," Brasidas said, "The CEO Czerwon has asked me to escort you to his presence, immediately."

Thalia felt shock. Did her brother know of her plans? She knew that Czerwon could be brutal if he discovered betrayal. She had no idea of what Czerwon did know or did not know. She had to maintain her composure and pretend nothing was amiss. Her survival could depend on it. Ansar tried to follow Thalia, but Brasidas stopped him. "The CEO has requested that the Lady Thalia come alone." Ansar protested, but Thalia gave him a look that made him shut up. Ansar understood, and gave in, knowing that confrontation would only make the suspicion fall on Thalia.

Czerwon was in the viewing room, the same one where he had spoken to Thalia first of going to Forestglen. Thalia was led by Brasidas, and two men walked behind her. Not a word was spoken. Brasidas looked visibly nervous. When they reached the entrance, Brasidas opened the doors for her.

"The CEO has asked to see you. Alone." Brasidas said. "We will wait for you outside."

"Thank you, lieutenant," said Thalia, maintaining, outwardly at least, a calm and ignorant composure.

The doors sealed behind her. Czerwon's back was turned towards her. He was staring out into the stars.

"Brother..." she spoke. To her surprise, she almost choked the word in fear, and it only came out slightly louder than a whisper.

Czerwon spoke. "Do you know why I come here so often, sister?"

"No, tell me why, brother." She didn't know if she was in danger or not, because she didn't know Czerwon's motives in summoning her. 'Brother', 'sister', it was as if the words were affirming the family bond, that ancient code that programs one to be part of a greater unit. It was mildly comforting, even though she believed Czerwon probably would not hesitate to kill her.

Czerwon raised his arms, spreading them out wide to embrace the galaxy he was looking at through the view portal. "Because every single star, orb and cloud of gas that I can see from here, it is all mine. They are my possessions, including every planet that orbits each and every one of those billion lights. I can have everything I want from those planets, be it material wealth, resources, or even human beings. If there are those who will not give those things to me, then I simply take it, such is my power. There are some

things, though, which cannot so easily be acquired..." Czerwon turned to look at Thalia. There was something grim in his face. "...Like loyalty."

Thalia's expression remained neutral.

Czerwon continued : "I have managed to use my wealth and power to keep myself young and strong. I have conquered aging, but I will not conquer death. For as much as I have taken from my vassals, so much have I earned their envy, their jealousy and their hatred. It was said, that a man will more quickly forget the death of his father than the loss of his property⁵⁸. And I have, over the course of my reign, caused both, in variations.

"There is no greater poison than hatred of your enemies. I have created every single one of my enemies. Where there were peaceful farmers I came and took their livelihoods from them, and they in turn dropped their hoes and spades and took up the gun. Where there was prosperity I came and turned it into poverty, and the content became ravenous.

"My greatest mistake was thinking that I could rule with impunity, that where there was a cause there was no effect. Not so, for where there is bloodshed there will arise bloodsheddors, where there is violence there will arise the violent, where there is greedy taking there shall arise those who take back. I have put my hand into every corner of this galaxy of mine, and in every corner I destroyed livelihoods and humanity and made the people into unhappy ghosts. I destroyed their souls and in its places are now mirrors of me. I have created hordes of hungry spirits, but they have the added gnaw of the desire of vengeance.

"I acted like an animal, and now I have animals baying for my blood. I acted like a wolf, but now I have wolves nipping at my heels. I do not know from where my killer will come. Perhaps one of my subordinates will want my power and overthrow me. Perhaps some stranger or free trader, fighting to avenge his loss, will come and defeat me. Perhaps some religious fanatic will kill me in the name of his righteousness. All I know is that I will die, through battle, through assassin, or perhaps, even through *treachery*." There was stress on the last word. Thalia thought that her brother could hear the loud beating of her heart. She hoped that her expression was the calm face she was trying to show. "Yes, treachery from those who are most near to me."

Czerwon stepped closer to Thalia. He drew out his dagger, and with the blunt edge of the cold blade he stroked Thalia's cheek. "What are you doing, brother?" asked Thalia, a small glint of alarm in her eyes. Did he know of her plans? Was she the traitor he referred to?

"Do you sometimes wonder, how you would feel if those closest to you were also the ones who planned to destroy you?" asked Czerwon.

"I don't know what you are talking about brother." Suppressed fear - could he hear it in her voice?

"Hmm." Czerwon took away the blade and sheathed it, turning his body away from his sister. Thalia forced herself not to faint. Inwardly she was terrified.

Czerwon continued : "Soon the Smuggler Knight will be thrown into the arena. But even if he dies, there will be someone to take his place. Someone, who hates me with as much passion, and who desires my death as much as I desire my life.

"For this is the great flaw in Capitalism. For the sake of profit the capitalist exploits the meek for his own gain. But as a system Capitalism is flawed, for there are far greater and ancient systems within the heart of each person. Systems that date back such ancient

spans, that they originate with the evolutionary ancestors who hunted, killed, fought and died in prehistoric forests. I can almost hear the cries of those wild animals in my mind's ear, a brutal world that turns our Hobbesian society pale with fright in comparison.

"Capitalism's greatest arrogance is that it thinks it can overcome the other systems ingrained within our very nature. One working to a capitalist system may think he acts with impunity when he takes from the human and destroys the human's dignity, but he forgets that within the human heart are those ancient systems waiting for some stimulus to awaken them. They are Vengeance, Anger, Violence, Religion, Thirst and Hunger, Sacrifice, Honour, Pride, and the most dangerous of all, Love. The capitalist should not be surprised when those he consumed suddenly become fierce and hungry themselves, suddenly more dangerous than he can handle.

"So it is, Thalia. If you treat human beings like animals, don't be surprised if they start biting back as animals. The same conditions which caused my rise to becoming ruler of the galaxy are the same conditions which will lead to my downfall.⁵⁹

"I have destroyed the basis of trust, respect for others, and as such I cannot trust anyone, not even you, Thalia. I suppose what I should do is to kill off those closest to myself, before they begin to conspire against me. But I cannot. For as much as you think of me as being a monster, yet I cannot and will not sacrifice the last piece of humanity I have left in me. That last vestige is an intimately intertwined with myself but it is not of myself. Rather, it is the baying of those same ancient systems I see coming through in my enemies. They are too ancient and powerful for me to deny them. I have sinned against them and now they demand that I carry out my flawed design to its conclusion."

"What are you saying, brother?" Thalia was confused. Did he or did he not know of her plans? She felt like screaming.

"I am saying that I have gone too far, and I cannot do anything about it. Soon I, the destroyer, will be destroyed. I am trying, Thalia, to tell you my feelings on this matter. I am trying to say good-bye."

"I thought that perhaps you were accusing me..." said Thalia, wondering if it was right of her to say it. Her brother could be bluffing and she could still, perhaps, give herself away.

"No Thalia," said Czerwon. His tone of voice was sincere. "It is just that I have been so self-greedy that there is nothing to offer in return for loyalty. Rumsfeld, for example. He was my right hand man, but he betrayed me, and he continues to betray me, plotting behind my back. Even Lieutenant Brasidas was so conveniently subdued. Yet for me strike at them would be for me to strike out something within myself." Czerwon looked into his sister's eyes, his words hard. "I just wanted you to know that my end will be soon. And I intend to meet it, with full fury and wrath. I do not intend my death to be an easy gift."

"My brother, if you realise that what you have done is wrong, why don't you remedy it? Perhaps you can still change things for the better..." Thalia was almost as surprised at herself as at her brother. Neither she nor her brother had ever spoken with such emotion in each other's private company. She almost felt her hatred of her brother melt, and a faint hope came up within her that perhaps he could still be redeemed.

But Czerwon's eyes suddenly became cold and predator-like. "I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation. I rule this galaxy. It is mine! The only way it will be taken away from me is by prying it out of my cold, dead hands."

There was no redemption. Even now, realising the consequences of his actions, he was not going to relinquish the material desires that gnawed within him, the flawed processes of his psyche leading him to his doom. He was so obsessed with what was his he could not relinquish his possessions, even for the sake of his life.

"Yes," said Thalia, "you are the Chief Executive Officer."

It was the end of the conversation. The CEO dismissed Thalia. She left.

As she was being escorted back to her room by Lieutenant Brasidas, Brasidas told her, "My Lady Thalia, for the moment it may not be safe for you to wander around the ship freely. There are," slight pause, "events taking place."

"I understand, Lieutenant," Thalia said. What Brasidas wouldn't tell her she already had a good idea from the information that had been gathered by Ansar. The 'events' alluded to were most likely those in connection with Captain Rumsfeld.

"It was my spies who found out that you had been to visit the imprisoned smuggler," Brasidas suddenly said.

Thalia stopped. "What did you do?" she asked.

"Nothing. I did not inform the CEO, although it was clearly my duty."

"I owe you my life, lieutenant. I thank you deeply."

They reached Thalia's room. As she was about to go in, Brasidas addressed her, "I don't know what you are planning, Lady Thalia, but I would like to warn to be very careful."

"Thank you, lieutenant. I will bear that in mind. Although," said Thalia, remembering in Czerwon's voice that faint accusation against Brasidas, "I could tell you the same."

Lair

Doctor Fallsoul had often gone to watch the Mammon tiger being fed. The tiger was even, on occasion, fed sweet delicacies and dainties, which apparently it was quite fond of.

The doctor had taken it upon himself to try and drug the tiger. He was still able to move about the Red Claw without attracting as much suspicion as for example Thalia and her servant. Czerwon was seemingly healthy, so the doctor did not have to worry about being suddenly called to help the CEO out of some heart-crisis. Able to move about freely aboard the Claw, he had the best access to the tiger.

He had managed to convince someone in one of the Claw's kitchens to make him a hollow ball of chocolate, the inside of which was smeared with drugs. After scanning through veterinary books, Doctor Fallsoul had come up with a formula of analgesics and hypnotics that would, hopefully, make the tiger drowsy and defeatable.

He had been warned not to kill the tiger, or otherwise make obvious the attempts at tampering. Thalia's fragile plan would not work if the tiger was completely unable to fight, for it was only through the tiger that Czerwon could be emotionally manipulated into confrontation. Fallsoul therefore had to strike a balance between overdosing and underdosing the tiger, and unfortunately the veterinary books only gave partial light on the matter.

The corridors near the animal's keep would occasionally echo with tiger sounds. As he approached, Fallsoul could hear the creature make some rumbling sound from within its cage. There was an opening in the tiger's enclosure, a pit-like thing through which

food could be thrown down onto the cage floor for the tiger to eat. It was there that Fallsoul had in previous times gone to watch the animal being fed, and now he hoped to add a little morsel of his own.

It was outside of feeding time and he had expected the place to be empty. But as he came out of the corridor and into the room he heard a voice saying, "Doctor Fallsoul."

The doctor turned towards the voice and saw that it was Captain Rumsfeld. It seemed that he had been waiting for the doctor. He had several of his men with him.

"Captain Rumsfeld. What are you doing here?"

"Visiting the tiger. It is going to destroy my old enemy from the days of Old Italy. It is good to know that, although I would rather take Smuggler Knight's life myself."

Rumsfeld's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I do not know what plans Thalia has involved you in, but be assured that I will not allow you to interfere with the tiger. Knight is going to die, and you will not stop it."

Fallsoul had been confounded. Rumsfeld's spies had warned the captain that Thalia would perhaps attempt to tamper with the arena fight between the tiger and the smuggler.

"While we are on the subject, doctor, how much value would you put on life?" asked Rumsfeld, a question not so tangential.

"What do you mean?"

"You are a doctor. Didn't they teach you something about the value of life in medical school?"

"No. You learn about many diseases, much sufferings, and a few cures. A little bit of ethics. A bit of law to keep you on the safe side. But I don't recall anything on the 'value of life'."

"And yet you, you hierophant, you are the instrument of Czerwon's human sacrifices. You are science enslaved, obedient to Corporate interests. Tell me, Priest Fallsoul, how does that make you feel?"

"It is deadening, when one murders lives."

Rumsfeld laughed. "I agree. Let me tell what I think of this. The only value that a human being has is in how much control you have over him. To rephrase in a more scientific way, doctor : a human being's value is directly proportional to your control over him. Those that you cannot control you should destroy."

"That doesn't sound right. Those you control will resent it, becoming uncontrollable. Besides, you yourself are not the controller, you are Czerwon's puppet."

"Admittedly, right now I am a puppet and there is peace. But the true warrior sees peace only as the means to new wars⁶⁰. I have been preparing myself for this challenge."

"What challenge? What preparation? Where is the originality in what are you doing? You are merely reacting to your circumstances, adapting to the system instead of attempting to change the system. You wish to replace the system with your own but except for a few superficial aspects they are the same. You would consume the consumer only to become the new consumer."

"I accept," said Rumsfeld, "that in capitalism, in practice, the actual consumer is not he who buys the product, but the one who sells. For the one buying the product gains less than the one who sells it. This is known as profit, and as such it is not the buyers who consume the producers, but the producers who consume the buyers. But how can you say that my theory of power is comparable to capitalism?"

"It is in this : the intention behind their actions are different, but the actions are the same, and if the actions are the same, then the reactions will be the same. The purpose of your control is just as exploitative as Czerwon's."

"And what exactly is wrong with exploitation? Why shouldn't we seek to make ourselves stronger and everyone else weaker?"

"Understand," Fallsoul began, "that within us there are various instincts which evolution has granted, essential to the survival of the human individual and the human race. There are two conflicting instinctual programs within the psyche-matrix formed by the substrate of our genetic code, namely, the program for fulfilling our individual needs and the program for living in equilibrium with fellow individuals of our society, a program necessary for the existence of society in the first place.

"It may be said that these are not evolutionary programs but programs formed by our consciousness, and as such are not absolute since they may change along with the shifting views of the conscious mind. That this is not so may be seen in nature - it is unlikely that wolves, or even ants, have conscious processes complex enough to form such programs, and yet they are able to exist in stable societies. It can be inferred that the human need to exist in a society, although it can be modulated by conscious process, is first and foremost an instinctual and thus an evolutionary drive.

"Such programs, and this conflict between 'I' and 'we', are integral part of our human nature, and there should be an attempt to keep these nature-given instincts in harmony, with neither one dominating the other. If we tip the balance towards either side, we would be denying an essential part of ourselves. With your system and Czerwon's system the scales are tipped towards the 'I', towards self-gratification. The other side, the 'we', becomes lost and deranged. Unbalanced, we lose our humanity and return to the primordial state from which we as a conscious race had to strive and fight so long to get out of.

"We become animal-like, our Thirst and Hunger amplified. But the 'we', those whom are exploited for the sake of the 'I', they too become unbalanced. Their concept of 'I' is insulted and violated. As individuals they are exploited and they escape into sub-society formed of similar individuals. Their concept of 'we' becomes too strong, they act with a unreasonable group mentality, and within them the ancient primordialities are stirred and brought forth. Like wolves howling their worship of the moon, they become irrational, faith-led and fanatical. A system does not exist in isolation of the reaction to that system. Capitalism cannot exist separate from socialism, slavery cannot exist separate from emancipation, immorality cannot exist without fundamentalism.

"When there is a generalised discontent with a system, thus allowing reactionary forces to come into play, there are two possible fates once enough momentum has gained : either the system will fall and be replaced with something more harmonious and sustainable or the system will fall and be replaced with something as unharmonious, and as unsustainable. Which fate it enters into depends on the actions of those who are riding the reactionary wave. Hence Tsarism fell to Stalinism, but Apartheid gave way to Mandelan reconciliation."

Rumsfeld interjected, "I do not understand what differentiates the sustainable with the unsustainable system."

"A system must be able to endure the reaction to that system. Allow me to illustrate this concept with a story. There was once a man with a great and beautiful garden, at the

edge of a forest. One day he noticed a certain species of deer, called wind-deer, foraging at the edge of his garden.

"Determined to capture it, the gardener smeared honey on the grass where he had seen the wind-deer foraging. When the deer came back to that spot, it ate the honey grass and liked it. He developed a craving for that taste.

"The gardener continued smearing the grass with honey, and the deer came around regularly to eat the honey grass. The gardener eventually smeared honey on the grass to form a trail, which led straight into a cage.

"Sure enough, the deer followed the honey trail and, overwhelmed by its craving, even entered the cage. The gardener closed the cage and thus captured the rare and elusive wind-deer.⁶¹

"The moral of the story is such : that a system that is based on craving, whether it be for money or power or whatever else, will ultimately set up the conditions for its own destruction. Led by craving, those who live according to the system will be unable to adapt to the changing circumstances that they themselves have created. They will lead themselves to their own demise. The struggle to appease that craving will prevent the system from stepping back, considering the situation and adapting to that situation."

"Yet, doctor, how does one deny one's craving once it has been indulged even once? How can one slow down the momentum that builds up and up, till from the sheer speed and force of the craving one relinquishes oneself to the unbalanced life? How do you refuse the satisfaction of indulgence once you are used to it? How do you let go of the thrill of power once it has corrupted your very bones? It is like we are pulled down, faster and faster, into the heart of a black hole."

"Only a sudden revolution, a sudden unexpected turning about, a break from your own character, can save you."

"And yet, doctor, the unbalanced mind is also the least likely to change. Despite its disharmonious state, it exists in homeostasis with itself and cannot wrench itself into higher forms of harmonious consciousness. It is not for nothing that it was said that as a human being descends, and is reborn as a titan, a hungry ghost, an animal, or a hell-dweller⁶², it becomes increasingly difficult to return to the human state. Once we focus and indulge a specific side of psychic program, our consciousness attempts to maintain homeostasis. Since rare is the individual who has control over his own mind, the mind is surrendered to the homeostasis, leading it steadily downwards into maladaptation, till the mind finds balance in some lower state. And in that lower, animal-like state, there is not enough conscious objectivity left to escape that state."

"I'm sure there is some way, some action, whereby can redeem oneself."

"You hypocrite!" Rumsfeld growled. "Liar and fool! How can you stand there and talk of redemption when you yourself are past it! You are nothing but a hungry ghost, unable to find anything to fill your heart. You exist as a purposeless slave of the system, contemplating the forces of destruction even as they begin to act on you. If the heart is the container of our essence, then you have cracked yours into a leaky vessel, and whatever was human in you dripped out bit by bit. Why do you bother, Fallsoul? You will never return from your state back into that of a man. There is no redemption. All you can do now is to choose your side."

"What sides? They all seem the same. They all expect me to do what demeans me."

"Wrong, for it was never the system that demeaned you. It was you who demeaned yourself. You yourself were overwhelmed by craving, which was what attracted you to Czerwon's side in the first place, just as I was. Behold, though, how that system which would have labeled you a 'consumer' has in and of itself consumed you! We have allowed our flaws to be taken advantage of by this system, and thus magnified and strengthened the flaws in our nature have become so intertwined with our psyche that we cannot escape. We gave ourselves up to those forces long ago and now all we can do is roll with the momentum. For we are ever the product of our actions, and as such we are trapped by our past actions. It is like we are chained to boulder, rolling ever down hill, faster and faster. We are beyond the point of redemption, there is no escape."

"Captain, although our past actions hung upon us like heavy chains on our shoulders, surely there is some chance to redeem ourselves. For although our present is the result of our past, yet in this present we may choose new ways and new actions, so that perhaps in the future we may free ourselves, slowing down the rolling rock just enough just enough so that we may escape it."

"Again, this belief of redemption. Doctor, your faith in the human heart is touching, but it is certainly misplaced. What is the human heart, after all? We came from the primordiality, and do you know we are heading, Fallsoul? Back into it!" Rumsfeld pointed downwards to the tiger pit. The tiger's growling rumbled up from beneath.

"You asked me the value of life, Rumsfeld. Now I have an answer. The value of life lies in mending one's ways and trying to live as something better. Mankind is something to be surpassed⁶³, not something to be neglected so that it may decay into beasthood."

Rumsfeld laughed. The Mammon tiger felt impatient and struck the sides of its cage in frustration. The sound its claws made screeched upwards. "Don't you understand? For any ordinary human that may be true," Rumsfeld said. "But we are not the ordinary. We have gone beyond our boundaries, we have broken the sides of the definition that once bound us. That which made us human is gone forever." Down in its cage, the tiger attacked the sides of its cage, scraping claw marks on cage walls. The shrills and bangs drummed and screeched upwards out of the lair. "We were ignorant of the results and blind to the consequences. In our short-sightedness we could not see past the wild calls of our self-natures and we freely leapt into the descent." The tiger began calling out, loud yelps and screams, and it beat *dum-dum* against its cage with greater intensity. Rumsfeld had to raise his voice to a wild roar to make himself heard. "We took our humanity and upon the altar of our desires we sacrificed our beating cores for the sake of the beast within! We return to the primordial womb, and all the old ways and all the old hungers fire up through our bones and command us! We had consciousness, we had the ability to choose our destiny, but instead like fools we returned to the old programs and those programs will not let us go!"

"Surely if the human race managed to drag itself out of the primordialness, then surely we as individuals can drag ourselves out of the inner primordiality?"

The tiger roared, its cry so loud it reverberated the floors. Rumsfeld, his face contorted into a howl, shouted, "Doctor, it took millions of years for life on earth to wrench itself out of programming and into program-transcending consciousness. And even then, those who had achieved it best, the humans, were still unable to completely free themselves from it. If it took so much effort for life to achieve this transcendence, what hope do we as individuals have? We are battling against ancient forces more powerful than we can

fight against, and these forces are imprinted even in codes of the very cells we are made up of. We are the products of evolution, and having dared to step out of sync with nature we now rush to our devolution!"

"The core is sick but it is not dead."

"The core is dead and there is no cure or remedy, doctor!"

Fallsoul would not give in : "Those programs were within us even when they were unaccessed. They are a part of our human nature, not its antithesis. Just because they are active does not mean that the human part of our being has to have been destroyed, merely that it has in turn become dormant."

"While we are living, doctor, the momentum of our instincts, the ones we once consciously favoured and strengthened, will prevent us from breaking the habitual behaviour which characterises our action. We allowed the wheel to start turning and now it spins too fast for us to stop ourselves. The only redemption for us is in death, the destruction of the wheel."

They stood there for a moment. The tiger calmed down and the loud commotion no longer bellowed upwards from the pit.

"Perhaps you are right," said the doctor, calmly. "Perhaps for us, all that is left is to choose how we shall die. How we live is no longer under conscious control. But I do not accept that we should give in to those inner hungers and allow them to completely dictate what we are to do."

"Then you will not join me as an ally?" Rumsfeld asked.

"I think each one of us must do what he thinks is best, and accept the consequences. If we had been more mindful, perhaps we would never have devolved to this situation in the first place."

"If you are not my ally, then you are my enemy. And as my enemy, I will not allow you anywhere near the tiger pit. I am still the captain of the Red Claw and I still have the authority to seal off areas of the ship."

Rumsfeld's men moved closer, making as if they were going to physically force Fallsoul out of the room.

"Then," said the doctor, "Since you are my enemy, I shall go." The doctor turned and walked back the way he came.

The doctor's love for Thalia made the emptiness inside his heart more bearable. Indeed, it seemed that love was the last thing that made him still human. When the deer is eating the honey-grass, and realises that its craving is leading it towards a trap, then it has two choices. Either it can overcome its craving and force itself to refrain from the honey grass, or it can continue with its self-destructive path. But in real life, outside of stories, the decisions are often more difficult than that. Fallsoul realised that in order to achieve the human refraining, he would have to let go of his animal instincts for self-preservation.

He still had that chocolate ball, lined with drugs. "Sleep now, beast," Fallsoul said, biting into the chocolate, "If my life was ghostly and empty of virtue, then at least let me face my death as a man!"

The Redemption of Doctor Fallsoul

Those closest to Czerwon were summoned to join him, to take their seats around a commanding view of the arena. To one side of the arena, was the portcullis which would

lift to allow in both sacrifice and devourer. On the other side, opposite the portcullis, was Czerwon's seat, where he chose to sit alone, sealed off from the other seats by walls that he had recently put up. In his little box no one could see the CEO except from the metal floor of the arena, and so he was by himself in his broodings. Past Czerwon's left, on that side of the arena sat Thalia, her servant Ansar, and Doctor Fallsoul. On the side of Czerwon's right, was Lieutenant Brasidas and Captain Rumsfeld.

Czerwon had a panel on the arm rest of his chair, which controlled the entrance into the arena. He pressed it, and the portcullis was raised; Smuggler Knight stepped through. He had not washed himself in a long time and his unshaven, smelly countenance radiated a type of wildness. On his belt was a dagger; its hilt was decorated with a single, white jewel. His right arm carried a sword, the second of the two weapons he was allowed to choose.

At first the lights overhead the arena blinded the smuggler, who had become too used to the clawing dimness of his cell. He reacted with a growl, and with his free hand quickly covered his face, until his eyes could get used to the glare.

Thalia looked away from the smuggler, turned to speak to Doctor Fallsoul. "Doctor, were you able to do something about the tiger?"

"The tiger was not accessible, my Lady Thalia, but I have a plan..."

"How are you going to docilise the tiger if it's already in the arena? The smuggler is done for, and our plans were in vain."

"The battle is not yet over, my Lady..." Fallsoul said, trying not to slur his words. The drugs were still throbbing in his body.

Knight gave Czerwon a mock salute. "Hail, Babylon!" he cried.

"Hail, Sir Knight," Czerwon saluted back, jovially. "You will be happy to know that we have fed the Mammon tiger. It will immediately not leap in and tear you to shred and eat you. Instead it will toy with you. May your death be slow and painful."

There was a growling from behind the portcullis. It sounded almost like a meow but for the fact that it was loud like a thunderous roar.

"There comes the bane of our plans, doctor."

"My Lady, there is something you do not know. Allow me to speak, please, and do not interrupt me, for if I stop now I may hesitate in what I wish to do. I have asked why you wish to help this man, and you replied, 'Because he is the only man on this ship.' Then I asked if he was truly the only man, and when you said 'yes,' I finally understood what you were getting at.

"I know that you do not think much of me. You see me as one whose soul is shriveled and dead in a shriveled up and dying body. You knew I loved you and you manipulated me to accomplish your own ends. I knew you were using me but because I loved you I let you, in the poor hope that perhaps you would one day love me back.

"But you will never love me because I am not a man. I'm a foolish cowardly doctor who's helping slaughter innocents to keep a megalomaniac alive. I have allowed my inner core to be poisoned and with all my knowledge I do not know how to heal it. I am an unsubstantial ghost, a hungry and unsatisfied spirit in the midst of matter. How can I live with myself with all that I have done aboard this ship in Czerwon's service? Sometimes, a time comes when one must choose between redeeming yourself and damning yourself; now is such a time.

"I do not expect you to ever love me. But I hope that you will forgive me." Just then, the heavy paw-steps of the Mammon tiger pounded on the arena floor; Knight turned to face the dreadful beast; Czerwon's face glimmered with a smile - he pressed the panel on his chair to bring down the portcullis and seal the arena. The doctor turned to look at the tiger as it lazily stepped in. "It has eaten my soul, now I shall give it my body. Thalia, I may not have lived as a man, but at least do me the honour of remembering me as having died as one."

Doctor Fallsoul stood up, and jumped over the railing and landed on his feet, thudding the arena floor. He quickly sprung up, and faced the beast, whose body stood as high as a man is tall. Doctor Fallsoul gave a shrill yell, and threw himself on the creature, armed only with his soft fists.

At first the tiger was puzzled and did not react to the screaming, soft-pounding little figure, except for fixing its red-eyed stare at the doctor. Then it gently leaned in, and clutched the body of the doctor in its gaping mouth. The animal turned the doctor this way and that, eventually turning its head to hold the doctor upside down. Despite this, the doctor, gently trapped in the tiger's teeth, kept screaming and pounding. The tiger grew irritated and pressed its jaws closed. There was a snap as Doctor Fallsoul's spine broke.

'In my life, all I did was obey the beast within, till I became a ghost,' thought Fallsoul. 'Now at last I managed to command, and brought *it* to obedience. It is my victory, my redemption, my unbinding of the wheel. May my past actions give way to a redemptive future, if there is any life after this.' And then the doctor died, and his body went limp. The tiger shook the body like a dead rag doll, and then spinning its head it flung the body out of its mouth. It landed next drainage sluice, where it lay puddled in its blood.

At first, Knight was stunned and stood surprised-unmoving in the arena. But fierce and violent courage suddenly overtook the man, as he realised the tiger's back was turned towards him. Before the tiger had broken the doctor's back, Knight was already coming in for a deadly thrust of his sword.

"No," said Czerwon. He had been stunned at the doctor's intervention, but his face became ashen when he realised that the smuggler had an opening to attack his beloved Mammon tiger.

An ordinary Mammon tiger, one that lived in the wild and ruled uncontested over its home world, would have sensed the smuggler, and spun around and broken him with a powerful swipe of a claw. But this tiger had been in captivity for a very long time, and had grown soft and its natural instincts had, to a certain extent, been tamed.

"No!" cried Czerwon, suddenly standing.

The familiar voice of its master only served to confuse the creature; it looked up in bafflement. It was by now too late for it to react.

Knight's wild rage aimed the sword for the animal's abdomen, in a thrust that would go down deep, perhaps to the tiger's very heart; at the very least, Knight wanted to tear the diaphragm and puncture the lung with his blade.

The penetration stunned the creature, and the tiger's unused instincts gave the wrong signals – the creature's startled jump only served to aid the insertion of the blade.

The tiger went berserk. It began to run, its paws thudding a terrific reverberating sound on the metal of the arena floor. Knight held on to the sword handle and to a fistful of tiger fur – he knew he was safest clinging to the tiger's back, rather than anywhere where

the thing's claws could get at him. His feet were being dragged along the floor. His body was flailing violently and Knight struggled to keep his lower body out of the path of the hind paws as they stamped up and down.

Only after a while did the tiger realise that its biter was still clinging on to it. It tried to shake him down and Knight almost fell off, to a certain death under the shredding claws of a Mammon tiger. But the smuggler clung on with all his strength.

The tiger, unable to shake Knight off, suddenly began to run sideways. The realisation flashed through Knight of what was about to happen; but unwilling to let go, and unable to do anything else, the smuggler braced for the impact.

The force of the tiger's body slamming against the arena wall was tremendous, although certainly not as powerful as it should have been – for not only was the tiger wounded, its muscles had grown soft with captivity as well. Nevertheless, Knight was stunned, his breath knocked out. The pain from his arm, which had taken the brunt of it, caused his grip to slip and he fell down to the floor.

His first thought was to get up immediately, but his shocked body took some moments to stagger up. He faced the tiger, preparing himself to face whatever it would do next.

But the tiger did not attack. The effort of flinging Knight off had only aggravated the injury. The tiger gave a moan, then stumbled about in the middle of the arena. It looked towards where Czerwon was standing; the tiger gave another moan, a pitiful helpless cry towards its master. Its eyes were pleading, and the fire in them was dying out.

The tiger's legs gave and its body fell to the floor, side first. The weight of the creature was so heavy that the entire room resounded with an echoing thud. Then silence. The Mammon tiger was dead.

Czerwon, with calm expression on his face, his eyes not moving their gaze away from the tiger, took hold of his shirt with his hands and slowly ripped it off. The glow of the arena light shone onto his powerful, drug- and genetically- enhanced muscles. He turned around to take two, beautiful swords from beneath his chair. The swords were in gold and jewel encrusted hilts. With one sword in each hand, and his usual dagger at the belt, he stepped onto the railing separating his seat from the arena, and jumped. He landed with agility, the sound of his feet landing the only sound that had penetrated the quietness that filled the room.

That handful of spectators sat and stared, dumbstruck, amazed, at the events they saw unfolding before them. It was only now that Lieutenant Brasidas, commander of security, realised that Captain Rumsfeld, commander of the Red Claw, was gone. Czerwon had explicitly warned Brasidas not to let Rumsfeld out of his sight. Indeed, in normal circumstances, Czerwon himself would have noticed Rumsfeld - who had been ordered to go about the ship unarmed - attempting to leave and immediately would have killed him. Rumsfeld must have felt that his time was running out; and an opportunity had suddenly leapt forth, an unexpected event, to escape from Czerwon's attention and that of Brasidas', for the lieutenant had been absorbed in the events that had taken place in front of him. Rumsfeld took the opportunity to sneak away behind Brasidas' back. The lieutenant knew that the captain's sudden disappearance could mean only one thing - Captain Rumsfeld had set off to begin his mutiny and revolt against Chief Executive Officer Czerwon. The lieutenant, despite a strong longing to stay and see the outcome of the conflict about to start in the arena, quickly left in order to take part in another conflict that would surely begin within a few minutes.

Knight had been about to move towards the tiger in order to retrieve his sword, but Czerwon moved towards the tiger first, the same calm expression on his face, a fixed gaze in his eyes. The smuggler stayed back, his hand ready to draw the dagger hanging at his belt.

Czerwon, very slowly, turned his head to look at Knight. Czerwon's gaze then went back to the tiger.

The CEO's face suddenly filled with anguish. He took in a deep breath, then arching his body back, let out a terrible cry, that seemed to bounce up and down from the metal ceiling and roof. The CEO then went on to his knees and placed his hands gently around the animal's head. He carefully lifted it, to look at the darkened, dulled eyes, that would never burn with red fire ever again.

"You!" said Czerwon, his voice enraged and spiteful, his face contorted with violence. "You!" he said again, his anger directed against Knight. The CEO's eyes seemed to glow. Czerwon stood up, and he did not seem like a man, but something of fiercer origin.

And as Czerwon seemed to become more intimidating, so Knight's spirit became wilder. The smuggler felt like his body was enflaming with some kind of primordial energy; the tension in his body felt like the storage of an explosive force.

For Knight, too, did not seem like a man. Both of them, Czerwon and Knight alike were not facing each other as two people; each of them, rather, became the representation of all that they stood for. They were no longer men, those two, but two archetypes, readying themselves to a battle that would decide the supremacy of an ideal.

Czerwon spoke, forcing himself to mouth his words instead of letting them come out as unintelligible snarls, "My knowledge of history is a bit scant, but I seem to remember that the Knight family of smugglers were known for their swordplay."

"My blessed great-grandfather was the greatest swordsman of his generation. His techniques have been passed down to me."

"Then stand, little man, and take your stance! My anger has been aroused and it demands satisfaction! I must assert my dominance over you!"

Czerwon threw one of jewel hilted swords at Knight. The smuggler caught it, quickly drew it out of its hilt. He dropped the useless hilt to the floor. His left drew his dagger and the right brought the sword up to salute Czerwon.

Czerwon did not salute back, but roared, "I am the stronger! I will crush you!"

"Babylon!" Knight howled back.

The Righteous Prayer

The Venezia di Notte had been shadowing the Red Claw. Contessa Rhea Silvia had ordered this. It was dangerous for the Venezia if it was somehow detected, but Rhea wanted to be near in case, somehow, Smuggler Knight managed to return. For Rhea, despite herself, had faith that somehow she would see Knight again.

The arrest of Fabricius had been unpopular with the crew, although the man had been responsible for the loss of one of the few, precious darts that the pirates had in their possession. Nevertheless, once Rhea's fury had died down he was released.

The pirates were very much surprised at the signals that suddenly came in from the Claw. It was impossible to tell quite exactly what was going on. The systems picked up a large number of Corporate darts flying around the Claw like flies on a carcass. The

bewildered pirates did not know that Brasidas had ordered some of his fliers into their ships in order to attack Rumsfeld's men from *outside* the hull. Because docking bays were the easiest to attack, Brasidas' darts concentrated on these targets, with the result that the soldiers of both sides quickly learnt to be wary around anything with an airlock.

Trusting her gut feeling, the Contessa decided to dispatch several darts. The situation would be monitored, and the darts would be close enough to respond to any opportunities that may arise. She decided that Fabricius would lead the darts.

And so Fabricius and his fellow pirates stepped into the parking bay, the same one where Fabricius had allowed Smuggler Knight to leave the Venezia di Notte. He felt as if the events were all meant to happen, part of some great destiny. It was as if some momentous change was about to take place, a great turning of the wheel of time, and he would have his part to play.

He made the sign of the cup, then knelt down, clasped his hands together, and prayed, "Sancta Maria, Blessed Virgin, Mother of Creation, hear my prayer.

"When a ship enters a storm, can you blame it if it overturns? When a man enters a desert, can you blame him if he collapses from thirst? Can you blame the wind, for dispersing when up against a mountain?

"Sancta Maria, in the same way, when the time of my greatest woe came upon me, I floundered too. And from these lips came blasphemy, and I cursed you for woes that were not your fault, though I did not realise that you were watching over me even then.

"Sancta Maria, I have since asked for your forgiveness, and like someone missing from the flock you found me, Shepherdess of mortals, and I felt your presence once more.

"Now I plead, Goddess Mary, for you to grant me my prayer. The forces of evil attacked your followers ten years ago. They destroyed the land and dispersed your followers. They sowed torment in the hearts of your people. They murdered those I who loved most, and in so doing they almost destroyed my soul.

"Sancta Maria, Blessed Virgin, Mother of Creation, you are a benevolent Goddess, a compassionate Goddess and a forgiving Goddess. But I believe that you are also a just Goddess. Grant me the ability to defend and avenge myself against those who wronged your followers. Grant me justice, oh Goddess, grant that my right hand may be stained with the blood of my enemies and that they breath their last gasp at my feet! Grant justice, that the wrongs inflicted on your followers are not unpunished!"

"Grant me this, that I will have the chance to slay those responsible for the destruction of Troy. In the name of my dead son, Blessed Virgin, grant me this!

"*Ave Maria!* Amen!"

The others, who were waiting for Fabricius to finish his prayer, also cried "Amen!", and they all made the sign of the cup.

Something rose up with Fabricius, fervent and zealous. "Pirates! Pray with me!"

Fierce and wild he cried, "*Ave Maria!*", the pirates also crying out, "*Gratia plena!*" frenetically making the sign of the cup, "*benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui,*" shaking and sweating with the primalness of it all, "*Sancta Maria!*" kneeling on the floor, at once humble and righteous, "*Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,*" hands clasped tightly, closed like the jaws of a wolf, "*Nunc!*" faithful hearts beating like holy drums, "*Et in hora mortis nostrae!*" instinctual mad and insane : "AMEN!"

"Pirates! Companions! Brothers!" proclaimed Fabricius, standing up to address his fellows, zealous sweat on his forehead, his core thumping inside his chest. "Our scans

indicate that the walls of Babylon are shaking to their foundations. The king of Babylon has devoured us, he has crushed us, he has made the universe an empty vessel which he swallowed up like a dragon, he has filled his belly and cast out what he did not want.⁶⁴

"But evil does not go unnoticed by our Goddess. The Corporation has sowed its seeds, and now we shall witness the fruit. There is no escape from the temporal relation of cause and effect, the wheel of time pushes forward to the conclusion. Let us go, and witness the power of the Blessed Goddess, for Babylon shall now be held responsible for the violence done unto us⁶⁵!" Fabricius' rousing speech was answered with eager cries.

"*Ave Maria! Viva Italia! Death to the Corp!*" they shouted.

They scrambled for their darts, climbing in, sealing themselves inside. The engineers made sure the darts were fueled and fully armed then quickly scurried away with their equipment. The pack of darts launched and leapt from the Venezia di Notte, bearing towards the Red Claw.

Dialogue : The Glory of Capitalism vs The Rage of a Dishonoured Man

Babylon! You wish to see who is dominant lord?
 Babylon! May I impale you with your own sword!
 And in your very own arena may I send
 You to your deathly end!

Sir Knight, do you expect me to quake with fears?
 Can you hear the laughter ringing in your ears?
 Do I think I am a mortal
 That you shall send through Hell's portal?
 I am no mere man, I am a God! In vain
 Does a human like you attempt to end my reign :
 I am older than the ancient times,
 I was the spur for the first of crimes,
 I was desire personified as snake
 I was that which reached to take
 I was there when the first whore sold
 Her body for the piece of gold
 And when the first murderer slew
 Because the things that were his were too few
 But do you think that I am evil?
 A mere serpent of the Mammon devil?
 I am not evil, I am good!
 Of all Gods I the most benevolent stood
 Without me progress would not exist
 Superstitions would still persist,
 For the wise man does not think for free
 And the inventor first imagines his fee.
 And every single virtue has its price!
 It is a greedy lust for place in paradise!
 All things are done on earth for profit motive

Each one of the opponents attempted for the kill, thrusting the sword straight at a mortal target. But both of them managed to parry swiftly and rush into fresh counterattack. Whenever the opponents had their own blade deflected they immediately had to deflect their opponent's - the attacks and defences carried on in fierce continuity several occurrences per second. It was not enough to stand in the same place for sometimes the parries had to be supplemented by dodging and the two foes locked themselves in an exquisite dance around the corpse of the tiger.

The first rule of swordfighting is to keep your distance but the combatants were so aggressive that neither could keep further than a swordlength away hardly any breathing space. When one retreated the other forced himself forward but the tides of this battle were such that the advancer himself was quickly pushed back, and so the fight ebbed, from side to side. Neither foe could find an opening in the blur of knife-edge that flew from one to the other. Each one kept his right side forward as little body exposed to his opponent as possible. Thrusting at each other, lightning reflexes on both sides prevented even first blood.

Czerwon suddenly exposed himself to force his dagger through; Knight caught it with his own dagger and counter-attacked, but Czerwon blocked the counter with great speed and dexterity. Knight was inwardly alarmed that his opponent had managed to so easily achieve such a difficult defense. They were suddenly locked in, each breathing hot and angry into the face of the other.

They pushed each other away with much force and for the first time there was a little space between the two men.

Knight was breathing hard and fast. Czerwon, however, modified as his body was, seemed to be recovering quickly. Knight realised that the genetically-enhanced body gave Czerwon a great advantage over Knight. But seeing Czerwon thus only brought further fire to the cold fury that pulsed through Knight's mind; the energy felt like it was engulfing him and he let out a load yell as his body sprung to the attack once more.

The tiger that lay prone in the middle of the arena floor had been dead for several minutes. The huge amount of blood that was stored within its body was only gaining momentum now, as it leaked out of its wounds. The arena floor had been designed with a slight slope, so that the bodily fluids of the victims within would seep to the sides and into drainage sluices. The blood followed the gradient in a radiating puddle of red over the metal floor, the tiger in its center.

Each combatant's reactions were perfect, textbook. But as the arena floor became covered with the tiger's blood, the two were no longer able to attain perfect footing; their feet kept slipping. Swords swung wildly and bodies wobbled as the blood flowed beneath them. But this made the fighting more desperate. The two men would slide away from one another, only to leap at each other once more. Standing still was not an option - both of them were such experts that they could easily slip through the defenses of a stationary target - neither of them dared stay still for long.

Czerwon was fighting as enthusiastically as when he started; Knight's body, however, was beginning to feel the strain. As Knight went in for the attack, he miscalculated, and slipped on the blood and fell on his back.

Czerwon immediately tried to go on in for the kill, his sword point down. But in his haste he too miscalculated; he slipped on the blood; Knight wriggled his body; the blade

missed. Knight immediately thrust up his left arm, the poisoned dagger heading straight for Czerwon's chest.

Czerwon managed to twist out the way. The dagger thrust at empty air.

Czerwon, knees on the floor, with a swift swing of his own dagger tried to cut off Knight's hand still in the air after the futile thrust. Knight was quick enough to dodge his hand away, but Czerwon successfully managed to hit Knight's dagger with such force, that it flew across the arena.

Above the arena, Thalia's face blanched.

Knight rolled to gain a distance between himself and Czerwon, and got to his feet; his entire body was covered in tiger's blood from the floor. He wanted to rush over to the dagger and pick it up, but no sooner was he up than Czerwon, also half covered in blood, launched a fierce attack. Without his dagger, Knight was unable to launch effective counter-attacks; it was all he could do to defend himself. Unable to attack, he kept moving backwards, dodging Czerwon's blades; Knight knew, that if he lost his footing on the slippery floor, his body would be open and that would be the end.

Czerwon was wanting to finish the fight. His attacks came in a frenetic speed. Knight managed to keep up but his body was screaming at him, that he would not be able to take the pace much longer. His burning arms were taking a serious strain from the blows raining on his sword's blade. Knight kept up his defenses, knowing that any mistake would mean his death, telling himself not to give up even though it seemed that Czerwon was sure to win.

But respite came. For Czerwon became overwhelmed with angry fury, it was no longer the calculating mind but the fiery beast within that took over the fight. As the fierceness of Czerwon's attack intensified, Knight could barely keep up in the face of this offence. But the second rule of swordfighting is not to lose your temper - one makes mistakes when not under the cooling hand of thought. Czerwon's feet lost their grip and slid apart; for a moment Czerwon was unable to gain stability in his legs.

Knight knew better than to attack Czerwon in such a moment of weakness. By now he knew enough of his opponent's combat skills to know that Czerwon would be able to defend himself against Knight's tired arms, despite the mishap. Instead Knight took the chance to gain some distance, to find the dagger, his only chance of winning this fight. Czerwon, with a body designed for battle, had a great advantage over Knight. Knight had to find the dagger.

Half-running, half-slipping along the side of the arena, keeping his right shoulder towards Czerwon (for the third rule is never to expose your back), he looked in desperation for his weapon. For a moment he feared that the dagger had fallen into a drainage sluice.

But in the area where the dagger had fallen, Doctor Fallsoul's corpse lay against the sluices. For a second time, the doctor had rendered Knight a service - the dagger lay against his chest, otherwise it would have disappeared down the sluice for sure if Fortune had not smiled.

Heavily panting, tired, Knight managed to get enough distance between himself and Czerwon, but this was partly because the CEO was in no hurry. Instead of rushing to the attack like before, he moved slowly towards Knight. Evidently, he thought the battle was already won, and indeed, Knight was worn down and was no longer a serious threat. Czerwon now wanted to play.

Knight was at the doctor's body. Knight leaned down and grasped the dagger's handle. The handle was soaked in blood so he held it tightly. Knight rose, his eyes on the approaching Czerwon.

Knight's body was giving signals. It could not keep up for much longer. There was only enough strength for one more stand. For the final time, the power within coursed out of Knight's spirit; the last flame flickered behind Knight's eyes, burning, and growing stronger. Now, either victory or extinguishment.

'Ancestors,' Knight prayed in his thoughts, 'Here I stand, against an enemy more powerful than an ordinary mortal. My lungs are burning, and his are filled with air. My legs are falling, and his are strong. My arms are weak, and his are fierce and ready to kill me. But despite my pain and despite these odds, I will rush this monster. Guide my hand, Ancestors, that my poisoned blade may bring the beast to heel!'

With a cry, Knight rushed forward, launching an attack.

"My goodness," said Czerwon, laughing, "I didn't think you still had enough energy in you. You've earned my respect."

"Shut up and fight!" screamed Knight, as sword clashed with sword, blade clashed with blade. Despite everything, Knight's attack suddenly became even fiercer. Czerwon thinking battle was won did not concentrate as well as he should have Knight saw opening Knight took it.

Knight's left arm went underneath Czerwon's left arm.

Knight's left forearm pushed Czerwon's dagger hand out of the way.

Thrusting upwards, Knight's dagger was striking at Czerwon's chest.

Czerwon was not expecting such a quick, sudden move. Overconfident. He had not been paying enough attention to the circumstances.

Czerwon move backwards, to get out of range of the dagger.

The tip of the dagger cut across Czerwon's chest.

The dagger had been oozing drug all this time, and Thalia had been worried that the special pores in the blade would run out, but now the tension in her body released itself. It was only the tip of the dagger, it was only a scratch; it was enough.

Knight had drawn first blood.

There was a lull in the fighting. The CEO looked down at the gash on his chest. He became enraged at the injury that Knight dared inflict. With his anger bursting through, Czerwon launched an attack so fierce and fast that Knight could not strike back and once again was in a situation where he could barely defend himself. He was unable to dodge fast enough away from Czerwon's blades, his alarmed self-awareness noted the holes in his own defense. Czerwon cut into Knight gashes, into his cheek, his thigh, his arms. A piece of Knight's left ear flew off. And still Czerwon kept coming; Knight only managed to defend himself well enough so that he wasn't killed outright.

But after Czerwon wounded the opponent's other leg, Knight couldn't stand anymore, and fell to his knees. He still tried to parry Czerwon's blows, but his arms had slowed down. Czerwon, a smile upon his face, easily managed to cut off the rest of Knight's wounded ear. Then, with ease, Czerwon attacked Knight's sword arm, till the flesh of his arm was so battered into it couldn't hold the sword anymore, and it fell into the ground. Knight then tried to use his dagger for one last desperate attack, but Czerwon swung with his sword, and the heavier weapon flung the dagger out of Knight's hand. Now unarmed,

holding his wounded arm, Knight lifted his bleeding face to look eye-to-eye with his enemy.

Except for the wound across his chest, Czerwon was unharmed. He looked quite pleased with himself. He raised his right arm to point the sword downwards at Knight's neck for the killing blow. "You earned my respect, Sir Knight," the CEO grinned, "No one has ever wounded me in a sword fight for a very, very long time. It was an exhilarating fight. I shall remember your death with fondness."

"You shall not remember it for long, Czerwon," Knight said, "Soon we shall be together in whatever hell awaits us..."

"And why would we be in hell, Sir Knight?"

"You for having killed me, and me for having struck you with a poisoned dagger."

Czerwon's eyes flickered for a divided second, but then he frowned. "You are lying. The weapons were scanned for poisons before you took them, and you carried nothing to taint them with afterwards. Are you so desperate for a few more seconds of life to utter such rubbish?"

Knight laughed, an action which disconcerted Czerwon a bit. "You are right," Knight said, "I had nothing. But the blade had been drugged; a drug which is only poison when your own heart is destroyed."

"Enough," said Czerwon, not understanding. His face seemed perturbed, a state not natural for the CEO. Unnatural state. Something in his chest going *heart, beat, heart, beat, heart, beat*. "Die you now shall."

Czerwon was going to press the blade in but something funny happened in his legs and he stumbled back. The grip of his right hand weakened and the sword dropped onto the floor. Czerwon looked at his hand with surprise. The right part of his face became droopy, out of sync with the left side. The right side of his body became increasingly paralysed; his right leg once more buckled and this time he fell onto his knees.

The situation had now turned, as Knight struggled himself up onto his weary legs. He picked up the dropped swords, and carried them, one in each hand. His hands were covered in so much blood, both his and the tiger's, that at first it was difficult to grip the sword handles.

As he approached Czerwon, the CEO stared at the smuggler. Czerwon's left eye was constricted by the bright arena lights, while his right eye was widely dilated and bewildered. He was unable to defend himself, indeed, it was a testament to his own strength and resilience that Czerwon was not in coma.

Knight stepped behind him. In a dispassionate way he lifted his left hand and placed the point of the sword just next to Czerwon's clavicle, then pushed it downwards and sideways, so that it came out on the opposite side, just below the rib cage. He did the same with the other side, although this time with both hands because his right arm was too tired to apply enough force to get the blade through.

Despite the swords thus crossed, Czerwon still attempted to stand, and almost did. He made three staggering attempts in all, each time falling to his knees. Blood drained out of his mouth. Only the sheer momentum of his will was keeping him alive.

Then the mighty Czerwon, Chief Executive Officer of the dreaded Corporation, ruler of the greater part of the colonised galaxy, fell down to the ground, and died.

Three corpses. Fallsoul. Mammon. Czerwon. One victor. The arena floor was wet with the intermingled blood from all those who had fought. The blood shone, the light was hot and heavy like jungle air. Two stunned spectators.

Knight laid himself on the ground. Having won, it felt as if all the adrenaline that had been storming through him had suddenly disappeared, leaving his body tired, hungry, and desperate for sleep.

Ansar was too shocked, while Thalia was in tears, a smile on her face. She stood up, not taking her eyes off her exhausted, bleeding, splendid champion, conqueror of Czerwon. She was about to speak when several armed men rushed in through the doors of the spectator boxes.

Thalia closed her eyes, clenched her hands and inwardly she prepared to die, certain that these were Rumsfeld's men, here to kill her.

"My Lady Thalia..." It was Brasidas' voice.

She opened her eyes, half-surprised. "Lieutenant Brasidas."

Brasidas looked over the railing into the arena, and saw with eyes of momentary disbelief: Czerwon, impaled with two swords. "Is he finally dead?" Brasidas asked.

"The Chief Executive Officer is dead," Thalia replied.

"Then long live the new Chief Executive Officer, Lady Thalia!" Brasidas cried.

The rest of Brasidas' men cried the same. Thalia was a bit startled. She would have thought that the Chief Executiveship would simply pass on the next strongest aboard the Red Claw, either Brasidas or Rumsfeld - the law of the stronger. But Brasidas was a monarchist - the idea that one ruled simply by right of strength was alien to him. To Brasidas, the right to rule passed on through the family line. Brasidas, who could have easily claimed the position of CEO for himself, had given it to Thalia. She suddenly had the power to change all about the Corporation that she abhorred - as she realised the power and responsibility she had, it momentarily frightened her.

"Chief Executive Officer Thalia, Captain Rumsfeld is leading a mutiny. I must insist that you allow yourself to be escorted to a place of safety. Me and my men will do everything in our power to protect you."

"But lieutenant, how will we stop Rumsfeld?"

Brasidas laughed, "My Lady Chief Executive, I am not about to let that swine win! The security forces have already engaged the mutineers and have foiled the first stages of their plans." Brasidas then returned to seriousness. "My Lady, we must go!"

"Very well, Brasidas, I trust you. Ansar?"

Ansar had been sitting, lost in his own world, his eyes did not once leave the corpse of Czerwon. "Hm?" he muttered, for the first time noticing what was happening around him.

"Ansar, I must go. Will you help Knight?" Despite Brasidas' assurances, Thalia knew that the chance was there of losing the battle for the ship, and if that was the case she wanted Knight far away and safe.

"My Lady, after seeing his courage I would gladly give my life for him. I will do my best to get him off the Red Claw, as was our plan."

"Beware," Brasidas said, "The Claw has become a battlefield. If you run into Rumsfeld's men, you may be done for. Do you want one of my men as well?"

"No," Ansar said, "It will be easier to sneak about with only two men. Besides, My Lady, you need every man you can get to fight that despicable dog Rumsfeld. Myself, I am an old man, not much good for fighting. But at least I can still serve in something." He was suddenly looking underneath the chairs. Then he found what he was looking for - Doctor Fallsoul's little black bag, which the doctor had always carried with him. A quick check inside it showed that Fallsoul had packed it wisely and with forethought - it was filled with bandages and various first aid items.

"My Lady CEO..."

"Yes, Brasidas, I am now going. Good luck, Ansar. Take care of Knight for me!"

"I will, My Lady. May our side gain final victory!"

With hurried movements Thalia left, under escort of Brasidas and his men. Ansar went over to Czerwon's chair, and pressed the panel to open the portcullis, then, having seen both Fallsoul and Czerwon doing it, decided that the quickest way to Knight would be to jump over the railing and into the arena.

He quickly regretted it. Fallsoul had been in a death-wish frenzy and Czerwon had a body designed to withstand physical punishment - Ansar had neither, and the floor had been dry for them as well. He twisted his ankle and nearly yelped from the pain. He even dropped the black bag; but he forced himself to ignore the throbbing pain in his legs and scooped up the bag, trying to wipe away some of the blood from the floor that clung to it.

With unsure footing, aware of the danger of falling over on the slippery floor, he came over to the smuggler and knelt down next to him. He opened the bag and began to dress the wound in the side of Knight's head, where the smuggler's ear had once been.

"Smuggler Knight!" Ansar said as he wound the bandage, "Are you feeling well?" He immediately chided himself in his thoughts. Obviously the smuggler was not feeling well - he looked awful.

Knight forced himself to open his eyes. Every movement felt laden with lead. He was breathing heavily. His limbs were quivering. It felt difficult even to think. For some reason, he suddenly remembered that it had been quite a while since he last ate. "Who are you?" he half-moaned.

"My name is Ansar, Smuggler Knight," Ansar replied, "I am Lady Thalia's servant." Knight grunted, his face in puzzlement - in his state he couldn't quite recall who she was. Seeing Knight's perplexment, Ansar continued, "You remember, she came to your cell, she told you about the dagger."

"Oh," Knight uttered. He remembered. It seemed like an eon ago.

"Smuggler Knight, Lady Thalia asked me to help you escape the Red Claw." Ansar had finished bandaging the head and now was hurriedly applying dressing to Knight's other wounds.

"I'm exhausted," Knight replied. "I need to rest."

"That won't do, smuggler. You need to get off this station. You must live, smuggler. You must live!"

Ansar's words of encouragement brought fresh wind into Knight's blood, and the smuggler told Ansar he would try his best. Ansar kept on bandaging Knight, and after about a minute or so, Knight felt much better - his muscles stopped quivering and his mind was relieved of its heavy dullness. His body still felt punished by the recent physical straining but now Knight felt he enough strength for the escape.

Ansar had finished binding Knight's wounds, and helped Knight stand up. The sound of faroff gunfire could be heard. Pricking his ears, Ansar said, "We should get going."

The two hobbled out of the arena, through the same portcullis through which Knight had entered, unable to walk properly because one was exhausted and the other had twisted his ankle. As they were about to step out of the arena, Knight turned back. He looked at the man who attacked one of the most feared predators of the galaxy with his bare fists; his gaze turned to the dead Mammon tiger, hulking even in death. And last of all he gazed on the corpse of Czerwon.

"Farewell Babylon," Knight said, "In the end, your own heart betrayed you."

The corridor led into the weapons room, where Knight had chosen his weapons from a large rack in the room, and then into the Red Claw's dungeon. The security forces who had been there to escort him into the arena, Lieutenant Brasidas' men, were now gone. Passing by the cell he had been kept in, Knight asked "How are we going to get off this ship?"

"Well, smuggler, your own ship is still parked aboard the Claw."

"The Poet's Whim?"

"The same one, I believe. We manage to bribe some engineers to refuel it, so it should get you anywhere you choose to go. My job is to get you to the bay it's being kept in."

"Incidentally," Ansar continued, "Lady Thalia had the body of the girl, Hanako, put on board your ship."

"Incidentally? Is that some sort of joke? I did not get her to the Free Trade Zone alive, now you are giving me the chance to bring her there dead?"

"My Lady Thalia did not mean any amusement, Smuggler Knight. Rather, she thought you would be the only one who could find her a decent resting place. She was going to be kept here, for more spare parts. This place is too impure, even with Czerwon gone, for her to find resting place aboard the Red Claw."

"Your Lady was right," Knight conceded.

They carried on in silence, attempting to sneak through the Claw to the parking bay containing the Poet's Whim. The Red Claw had become a battlefield, and no matter where they went, there was always at least a distant echo of gunfire, and the sound of voices and shouting.

Ansar tried to lead Knight by taking some of the smaller, less used tunnels, thinking that the chances of detection would be slighter. It was a mistake, for the fighters of the opposing sides were also using those tunnels, for exactly the same reasons. Often, the sound of running footsteps thudding on some nearby corridor floor made Knight and Ansar duck into hiding until the footsteps faded away.

They slowly made their way through the ship. As they neared their destination, Knight put his hand on Ansar's shoulder to stop him, saying, "Wait."

Ansar turned to look at Knight, a puzzled look on his face.

"Didn't you notice?" Knight asked. "The noises, they're gone."

It was true. The sounds of conflict had been omnipresent during their journey except for now. It was silent, an eery state when you know you are on a battlefield. It was uncomfortable.

Ansar shrugged. "All the better, smuggler, we won't have to risk running into a fire-fight."

"Wait, how big is this parking bay?" Knight asked.

"It is one of the main ones."

"Then isn't it important enough to fight over?"

"I don't know, smuggler. Maybe Fortune is smiling over us."

After Ansar spoke, they kept quite. They were now at the tunnel entrance into the parking bay. The tunnel led to a platform, and from the platform stairs descended down to the bay, where the ships were parked in neat rows. They couldn't see anything other than this platform, but the place seemed abandoned.

So they stepped through, but only a moment later their hands were up in the air.

A soldier, one of Rumsfeld's, had been keeping watch at the entrance, his body pressed to the wall, with a good view from the platform over the parking bay. He had heard their whispering echoing down the tunnel and had been ready with his machine gun.

"Hey!" he cried, to some companions who were down below, "We've got two prisoners here!" Turning to Ansar, the soldier spoke, "I know you. You're the servant of Lady Thalia." Then he turned to Knight. "You are a sight! Your clothes are dark with blood, and *ech* you stink of sweat too. You were fighting or something. I do not know you. Who are you?"

"I am Smuggler Knight," was the reply. He looked the soldier straight in the eye. Having defeated Czerwon, Knight no longer really cared whether he lived or died, and he considered tackling this soldier with his machine gun.

"You're the dog we were chasing the whole bloody universe for," the soldier said, his eyes staring back. "Hey, lads! Intercom command that we've got Thalia's servant and that infamous smuggler man."

"Right!" The reply came from down below. "Give me a few seconds, though, I'll do it in the corridor. I don't want to be caught chatting in the dockbay if that airlock's attacked."

"Right. So," he said, turning back to his prisoners, "What are you here for?"

Ansar stayed silent, while Knight spoke. "We are here because I want to take my ship and get out of this infernal hole. I have no reason to be here now that Czerwon is dead."

"Czerwon? Dead? You're lying, although it would be a nice truth. No, he's still alive, that's why we're all fighting - we're sick to death of him. None of us is in this for Cap Rumsfeld, that man is a dog as well, but we'd prefer him to CEO Czerwon anyway."

"You don't have to prefer him," said Ansar, "Czerwon is already dead. There is no need to follow Rumsfeld anymore."

As if to confirm what Ansar just said, the ship-board communications suddenly crackled to life. Brasidas' voice boomed through the bay, as it did all over the ship, in every corridor, bay and room.

"This is Lieutenant Brasidas, commander of security. The former CEO, Czerwon, is dead. His sister, the Lady Thalia, has been appointed to be the new Chief Executive Officer. You will now hear a broadcast from your new CEO."

The next voice was Thalia's. "Captain Rumsfeld! Mutineers! With the death of Czerwon I have taken control over all Corporate affairs. However, you shall not find me cold-hearted. Whoever of the mutineers surrenders their weapons and allows themselves taken into custody, will be given amnesty, except for the leader, Captain Rumsfeld. I hereby pledge rewards to anyone who will bring this traitor to me, alive if possible."

Brasidas returned. "You have heard the new CEO speak! Mutineers, your cause is hopeless. The Claw's security forces are quickly regaining control of the ship. You face

defeat or even death if you stay with Rumsfeld. If you have any doubts, I hereby personally guarantee that you will receive amnesty should you surrender peacefully. I suggest you make the decision quickly, as the security forces are about to launch an all-out counterassault."

The broadcast ended. Brasidas' last sentence hung in the air like a dropped feather. The soldier looked visibly confused; if Czerwon was dead, what purpose was there in fighting?

Knight heard the sound of footfalls from below - someone new had arrived. Orders were barked up, and the soldier, although hesitantly, made them walk down to the lower level.

The lower level, the actual parking bay itself, was filled mostly with Corp darts, but Knight saw his own ship, the Poet's Whim, not far off, looking in good shape for all its recent misadventures. As he looked at it, he couldn't help but give it an unhappy, sentimental smile. He never thought he'd see it again. Towards the one end of the bay was the main airlock entrance, through which was a tunnel that was all that separated him and freedom.

But when he looked away from his ship, the next sight he saw sent a bolt of angry electricity down his spine.

Other than the soldier escorting them, there were three others. Two of them were normal soldiers, one with a radio unit. The third person was Rumsfeld himself.

His skin and uniform was soaked with some dark liquid - covered in blood, fresh from the thick of fighting, and Knight could smell the sweat of recent exertion. Rumsfeld's expression was hot and crazed.

"If only I had killed you, Smuggler Knight!" he cried. "If only I had caught you while you were running my blockade at Old Italy, or perhaps stabbed you when you were loaded on the prison ship, or gunned you down when you dared come back!

"Imagine," Rumsfeld continued, his voice trembling, "Me and my best men, how we rushed through, fighting as we went, to capture the arena area. And there, to the shame of my eyes, I saw my hated enemy, Czerwon, with two swords impaled through his body.

"I could not believe it, how could it have happened? I even went down to check closely, to feel with my own hands his dead flesh - I've never felt such pain, such loss, in my life.

"And all because of you, vile smuggler! How could you do this to me? You took away my revenge, my chance for Dominance! How could you!" he screamed demonically, "All my life has been wasted, all my life was dedicated to defeating the strongest, to prove that I was stronger - I was supposed to kill Czerwon, not you! You've taken away my purpose for life!" His hands flew about as he spoke. He could barely contain his anger.

"When I received word of your capture, it was the middle of a battle. I left the slaughter to come here, just for you. All I wanted was to kill Czerwon, then by law of the stronger I would have been CEO! But you killed him instead - you are now the strongest. I will be satisfied, since you are the strongest, I will kill you, then I will be the strongest."

Have finished off his hell-spirited and crazy soliloquy, Rumsfeld put his hand to his gun and was about to draw it.

"Hold it!" said the soldier.

Rumsfeld turned to look at him. The soldier was pointing his gun at Rumsfeld. "Put that gun away," ordered Rumsfeld.

"You're in no position to give orders, captain. Hands in the air."

Rumsfeld looked at the other two soldiers who were present, but after a moments hesitation, they indicated that Rumsfeld would receive no help from them.

"Traitors," Rumsfeld muttered, torment flickering in his eyes. "A perversion of natural law - the weak dominating the strong."

"What about us?" Ansar asked. "We are on a mission for the CEO Thalia."

"Well, I guess you had better do your mission then - we're on the same side now."

That was it then. While the soldier asked his comrades to radio that they had captured Captain Rumsfeld, Ansar and Knight walked over to the Poet's Whim. Rumsfeld's eyes, full of hatred and despair, disbelieving and impotent, followed his old adversary.

"We made sure it was in good shape," Ansar said, as he and Knight approached the ship.

"It seems like a lot of trouble to go for someone who might have died in that arena..." Knight commented.

"I admit I had my doubts about the whole plan, Smuggler Knight, but the Lady Thalia had a some strange faith in you."

"It may have gone either way," said Knight, remembering how desperate it became towards the end.

"But it didn't. This is how we repay you, although now I think it is too little. The ship is refueled and is even partially rearmed. Hanako is inside, for you to properly bury her," Ansar said, as they stood by the ship. The main airlock, directly into the cargo storage area of the Poet's Whim, was yawn-wide open. It was bit strange for Knight to see it open like that - he himself had hardly used it for a long time, and had used the smaller, less power-hungry and less accident-prone hatches instead. Knight (with Ansar's help, for he still felt weak) pulled himself aboard, then turned to Ansar, his standing body framed by the big circular opening.

"Well, Smuggler Knight, this is where we part. I will go to the control room and open up that exit for you. I'll signal your ship when I'm ready, so keep the communication channels open."

"I'll do that."

As Ansar walked away, Knight sealed the opening closed. It chunked into a lock, airtight and sealed. He turned around, and saw that something had been stored in this area of his ship. He approached it, and when near it, his fingertips gently touched its surface.

It was a translucent coffin, and in it was the body of Hanako. The clear surface reminded Knight of her death, when he had pounded that see-through column. Now, the translucent barrier was even more impassable.

With tears in his eyes, Knight spoke, "Hanako, I wanted to save you, because in this world that has been corrupted and destroyed by capitalism, you were everything it wasn't. You were beautiful, you were hope, dreams and natural beauty. In this hungry world it was in you that I found my satiation. I am sorry, that I could not protect you from the ravenous belly of the Corp. I have only two consolations, the first, that in destroying you, Czerwon ultimately destroyed himself; and the second, that I at least can bury you where I promised to take you."

Rumsfeld watched as the Poet's Whim lifted itself up, and hovered into the airlock, where it waited impatiently for the doors behind it to seal and the doors in front of it to open into space.

Rumsfeld was being escorted away by the three soldiers. His mind and heart were fuming. His revenge and desire for power over Czerwon had been taken away from him - he realised he had nothing to lose. His life's meaning was over, it didn't matter, he realised, whether he lived or died. Never underestimate a desperate man.

They were about to enter the tunnel when Rumsfeld spun around and smacked the soldier, the only one pointing his gun at him, across the face. The soldiers had made the serious mistake of leaving Rumsfeld his gun - they did not expect the captain to try take on machine gunners. Before the other soldiers could react, Rumsfeld's gun was out and firing.

Rumsfeld was so quick that the other soldier didn't aim his machine gun properly, although he did hit Rumsfeld in the left shoulder before he himself received a shot to his head. The radio operator had a gun, but it was holstered fast on his hip and he had too much adrenaline suddenly rushing through his shaking hands to get the gun out - Rumsfeld instead fired at the dazed man he had first punched, finishing the job. By the time the nervous radio operator had got his own gun out he had to stare down the barrel of Rumsfeld's and was shot immediately after.

Growling from the pain in his shoulder, which made his left arm practically useless, Rumsfeld turned around to check on the Poet's Whim - it was still waiting for Ansar to open up the airlock. Rumsfeld gritted his teeth, then ran in order to catch up with Ansar and prevent him from allowing Knight to escape. His every jarring footstep caused stabbing pains in his shoulder.

The walls of the control room had been built thick, so that if worse came to worse, and the parking bay depressurised, someone could still safely monitor the situation and perhaps prevent further disaster. Since they were tough enough to withstand vacuum, they were practically sound-proof and Ansar did not hear the shots as Rumsfeld managed to free himself from his captors. Knight, by the same causes, was unaware.

Ansar had seated himself in the control center, and was trying to jog his memory as to how to operate the switches and computers around him. He had, out of his characteristic curiosity, once attempted to learn how to use the thing. It had been rather easy to learn although now unfamiliarity made it unnecessarily complicated. He finally figured out how to operate the microphone.

"Smuggler Knight?" he tentatively asked.

"I hear you," came the reply through the speakers.

"Bear with me, won't you? I'm trying to remember how to use this thing."

"Very well," Knight lied through his cockpit microphones - actually the waiting made him feel uneasy. He was not going to consider himself safe until he was off the Claw.

Bang! Bang!

The shots roared through the communication systems. "What's that?" Knight cried.

Ansar was lying on the ground, his face grimaced from the pain of two gunshot wounds in his back. "Rumsfeld..." he moaned, weakly. The pain paralysed him, he found himself unable to move. He realised he couldn't fight Rumsfeld, so Ansar resolved himself to simply survive, a tough enough task by itself.

"What's happening?" Knight crackled through.

Rumsfeld took hold of the microphone. In slow, poisoned words he hissed, "Chief Executive Officer Knight..."

"Rumsfeld? What are you talking about?!"

"The Executiveship is transferred by right of power. You killed Czerwon so you inherited the title by virtue of having been stronger than Czerwon. You took it away from me, Knight. I was meant to be CEO!" Rumsfeld yelled in anguish.

"Well, go ahead, I'm not stopping you!" Knight cried. "You can be CEO. I abdicate the title."

"Fool! I must assert my dominance over you! I will kill you, CEO Knight, then I will be CEO. You will pay for your betrayal..."

"I'd damn you Rumsfeld, but you are already in your own Hell! You did not capture me at the blockades of Old Italy and you will not catch me now." Knight turn on the Whim's weapons systems. 'Partially rearmed,' Ansar had said, and so it was. - the Whim had two missiles aboard her, awaiting command to fire. He had done this before and now he was, hopefully for the last crazy time, going to blow his way out through the airlock.

Scraps of airlock flew out into space, ignited burning hot by the explosion of the missile. The Whim herself was close enough to be shaken by the blast.

Stabilising the ship, Knight then had to contend with a new factor - the huge volume of air trying to scream out into the vacuum. It pulled his ship along with it and Knight forced the Whim to stay on course, in the middle of the airlock. Nevertheless, the unpredictable torrent of air forced the ship sideways into the wall. The side of the ship scraped a trail across the wall.

However, the Whim managed to pull through, as it had so often before. She forced herself back into the center of the tunnel and sailed the outflowing air into the space beyond, free at last.

One last battle

The great weariness that was over Knight finally had a chance to settle. He leaned back on his chair, letting out a deep breath. His one hand gently caressed the painful bandage covering the area where his ear had once been.

Sadness came over Knight. He was free and he had completed the vengeance he vowed to undertake, but at a price he would rather have not paid. He had lost his love and had failed in his duties as a smuggler.

He wondered what had happened to Ansar, and of Thalia, and her battle for the Red Claw. His thoughts turned to Ansar, and the gunshot he had heard - how had Rumsfeld managed to interfere? Did he escape from his captors? Was Ansar all right? A twinge of guilt went through him - did he not abandon them? He looked over his bandaged body, and laughed. What good was his tired body? Even now his muscles ached from exhaustion, every movement was painful and laboured. He would have been a hindrance. An unarmed, wounded smuggler would not have been much help.

His thoughts were beginning to swim around his head. His eyelids were heavy and his breathing drowsy. His body sensed that danger was past and now prepared itself for recuperation. Knight wanted to sleep. He set his course for anywhere away from the Claw and, too tired to even get up, lay his head back on the pilot's chair and began to fall asleep.

He was ripped and pulled back into the world of the waking by an emergency beeping sound. Something in his mind told him to let go, to just abandon himself to darkness and sleep. Knight felt strong temptation to ignore the sound, but he forced himself to wake up, like a man arising from some depth. The incessant *bip-bip* was coming out of the radar system. A Corporate dart was flying towards him.

As the air had emptied from the parking bay, Rumsfeld, safe in the control room, forced the secondary airlock doors to close. Not waiting for the bay to fully repressurise, Rumsfeld hopped over Ansar's moaning body and ran down into the bay, the air still tussling and hushing through the vents. He scrambled inside the hatch of the nearest dart.

By this time the Claws' security forces, Brasidas' men, had arrived. They forced open the emergency doors that had sealed off the depressurised parking bay and rushed in. Some of them went up to the control room, while the rest checked for any of Rumsfeld's men, though they only found the corpses of those Rumsfeld had killed, thrown about into various positions in the bay where the force of suction had thrown them. Indeed, some the darts had scraped across the floor, leaving scratch marks across the floor before Rumsfeld had sealed the breach.

It took several moments for the leader of the men to realise where Rumsfeld was, sitting in the pilot's seat of a dart. He motioned for Rumsfeld to get out of the ship and surrender himself. Rumsfeld glared back at him, shouting something through the sound-proof view-portal.

Instead of surrendering, the dart heaved itself into the air and screamed for the same exit which Knight had done such damage to.

"He's going to blast himself out!" someone cried. "Run!"

The security forces hastily evacuated while Rumsfeld, flying towards the hatch, at the same time readied one of his missiles. Rumsfeld was a quick student, and he blasted his way out the same way he saw Knight do. The dart went through the blast with much more grace than Knight's ship had, and speeding away from the Red Claw, his dart was fast nearing the Poet's Whim.

Rumsfeld's voice blasted through the Whim's speakers, "You can't run away from this, Chief Executive Officer! It is my destiny to defeat you! You can't outrun fate!"

"Rumsfeld!" Knight cried, suddenly awake once more, "My old nemesis, will I ever be rid of you!"

The Whims' engines had not been repaired sufficiently to go faster than the dart. The fabric of space all around was more or less uniform and there were no spacestreams in which to gain some sort of advantage in speed. Knight could not outdistance the dart, escape was not a possibility. He had to turn the Whim round and force it, and himself, to fight one last battle.

"Die, Knight, die!" Rumsfeld cried. Knight had heard that cry before. Once before they had sparred, near the blockades of Old Italy, in similar circumstances. That time, it had been a draw, and both limped away from the fight in their damaged vessels.

"This ends here!" Knight cried back, referring to an old vow they had made to finish that fight fought ten years ago. He turned the Whim to face Rumsfeld. While Knight was doing this, Rumsfeld had already let loose a missile.

Knight quickly switched on the radio jamming and took evasive action - the missile just missed him, zipping by. As it did so, the missile lost its lock on the Whim and flew on harmlessly into deeper space. Knight suppressed the urge to fire back. He had only one

missile left aboard the Whim and he could only fire it when he was absolutely sure it would hit.

Knight tried to swing around Rumsfeld to get a good lock on the dart's tail, but Rumsfeld was far too good a pilot to allow that to happen easily. Looping around, Rumsfeld tried to do the same thing and get behind Knight's tail.

The two expert pilots flew in intricate patterns, aiming to avoid being locked on by the other's missiles while at the same time trying to lock his own missiles on his target. Knight realised, to his own alarm, that he did not have any chaff or flares to divert enemy missiles. Ansar had organised that the Whim would be reloaded with missiles but had neglected the missile evasion devices. All Knight had was the static his defensive systems were blasting out, which by themselves only gave marginal protection once his enemy's computers compensated.

Rumsfeld was patient at first, flying his dart in such a way as to prevent a good opening for Knight to take advantage of, while he himself waited for his opponent to make a mistake. Although Knight was exhausted and beaten-up, his concentration managed to hold strong and the opening Rumsfeld hoped for did not materialise. Losing patience, the pain in his left shoulder gnawing at him, Rumsfeld pointed his dart in the general direction of the Poet's Whim and fired a missile without a specific lock.

The missile rocketed off and quickly managed to get a loose lock on the smuggler ship. To his surprise, Rumsfeld noticed that Knight was not releasing chaff and flare to confuse the missile's radar and heat-seeking capabilities. Knight had been bluffing, Rumsfeld realised, and had been flying as if fully loaded with counter-measures.

"Liar! Dishonest one!" Rumsfeld called out, the pain in his left shoulder throbbing voraciously. Deliriously, Rumsfeld crazed, "I expected better of you, Knight, than to pretend you have defenses when you do not!" Although Rumsfeld transmitted his words over to the Whim, Knight could not hear them since all incoming signals were scrambled by the Whim's jamming.

"Say something. Answer me!" Rumsfeld screamed. After a few moments without reply, Rumsfeld spoke through his gritted teeth, "So you stay silent. Are you dumb with fear? Are you playing some game? No game is going to save you, Chief Executive Officer!" Rumsfeld then fired off a further two missiles.

Knight felt a momentary surge of realisation-panic as he noticed the two extra missiles he had to dodge. Nevertheless, with automatic reactions he managed to evade them for a few minutes longer. The first missile had by now run out of fuel and unable to turn, the missile flung itself out into deserted space.

However, the Whim still had two missiles to dodge. The gravitational generator aboard the Whim was beginning to hiss and whine - this machine, which was the only way a spaceship could achieve quick turns in space, was being overworked by the smuggler ship's evasive maneuvers. Warning lights flashed their threats - if the generator blew, the Whim would drift according to the last forces acting on the ship and would be unable to dodge the missiles hunting just behind it.

Despite the increasing desperateness of the situation, Knight was resilient and stubborn in his refusal to give up. Hoping that the generator would hold, his maneuvers were those that would least punish the ship's systems - but, this meant that extra bit of risk that Rumsfeld's missiles would hit their target.

Rumsfeld was thoroughly enjoying himself. Although he could have thrown in a few extra missiles and finished Knight off outright, he instead followed the Whim at a distance and was laughing out loud despite his wound-pain, pleased at the sight of Knight desperately trying to stay alive.

The sheer strain of concentration and the punishment that the Poet's Whim engines were taking proved to be too much. A split-second lapse of judgement and the Whim's deteriorating maneuverability. A missile hit.

The gravity generator momentarily gave out and, without the generator to compensate, the force of the explosion sent the Whim hurtling uncontrollably through space. The second missile was now closing in. Knight, for all his desperate insistence on the unresponding controls, could not drive the Whim into an evasion pattern.

The missile was blazing in closer and closer. The Whim's gravity generators finally kicked in. Knight clenched his teeth and rolled the Whim out of the way of the missile's trajectory.

But the maneuver began too late. Rumsfeld's missile hit its target.

The conflagration took out the ship's engines and almost ripped the Whim in two. The air seals around Knight's pilot cabin audibly locked themselves, as the corridors of the rest of the ship depressurised. There was barely enough power coming through to keep the cockpit lights on, and though the various monitors were still working their screens were burning only dimly. The gravity was still working, probably on backup power, but without the engines gravity was useless to him now.

Knight knew that his ship was paralysed and even motionless because gravity was still generating. In a few moments, he thought, Rumsfeld would launch another missile, which would destroy what was left of the Poet's Whim. There was nothing Knight could do. It was over.

"*Ha ha*, Chief Executive Officer!" Rumsfeld cried. "You have run out of clever tricks to play on me!" But instead of firing his weapons and destroying his hated adversary, Rumsfeld flew his dart over to the Whim and position himself at a distance in such a way that the pilot of the Whim could get a good view of him.

"See me, Chief Executive Officer!" Rumsfeld elated. "Do you see me, Executive?"

The static jamming was still operating and Knight did not receive Rumsfeld's transmission. He saw Rumsfeld hovering at a distance in front of the Whim and was amazed that the dart had not fired yet. For some reason that Knight could not fathom, Rumsfeld was delaying the final blow.

Hope.

Knight leaned forward. He felt as if he was in fever. His hands were trembling and sweat dripped down his forehead. This was his last chance.

Rumsfeld had been waiting for a reply from Knight. Every moment that passed the rhythmic stabbing of his left shoulder thundered into his consciousness. The blood from the wound had gradually soaked downwards and Rumsfeld's legs and the cockpit seat were washed in fresh red. When Knight did not answer, Rumsfeld screamed, "Damn you! Damn you! Chief Executive Officer, your silence is your downfall! I might have been merciful, Czerwon, but you were too proud to grovel. Damn you, Czerwon, damn you!"

Knight called up the Whim's weapon systems. Mercifully, the single missile that the Whim had carried was still intact, and there was enough power for it to be fired.

Rumsfeld still wasn't doing anything, except sitting directly in the Whim's line of fire like an easy practice target. Knight switched off the radio jamming (for jamming affected any missile in the vicinity, even if it was one's own), quickly set the target, and launched his only missile. With jamming off, Rumsfeld's messages could finally get through, although all Knight heard was his opponent crying, "...Damn you!"

The missile made a visible flash as it launched out the Whim. Rumsfeld found himself looking at a missile heading straight at him. There was only a second to react before the missile would slam into his dart. Knight held his breath - he knew that his could be his last chance for survival.

Rumsfeld cried out in surprise. His reflexes, honed from years of combat experience, rolled the dart out of the way. The missile streaked past the dart with only a few centimeters outside of the dart's hull, a mere breath's distance.

Knight's hope sagged, but it wasn't over yet. Although Rumsfeld had managed to survive the surprise attack, the missile still had Rumsfeld's dart in its target memory and was now wheeling around to give chase.

Rumsfeld turned his engines to full blast and made a tight loop to avoid the missile that was now on his tail. Knight was still able to watch the scene, hoping that the missile would catch its prey. But unlike Knight, Rumsfeld had a full load of flares and chaff.

Little white lights of heat-sensor distracting flares and also puffs of radar-disrupting chaff would scatter behind the dart each time Rumsfeld made a tight turn. The missile would be sometimes be misled and would shoot straight through the chaffs and flares without turning to chase the dart until it was too late. Still, the missile had enough fuel to constantly turn around and try again.

In view of the Poet's Whim, Rumsfeld's Corporate dart was locked in a deadly dance with its hunter. Knight's only chance would be if Rumsfeld's concentration would slip and make a deadly miscalculation.

Rumsfeld very nearly did make that mistake. He had lost so much blood that with every turn the dart made he felt dizzy. The pain throbbed at him, more tangible than the reality, almost taking his mind off the hunting weapon so close by.

Knight watched helplessly from his disabled ship, unable to control the events unfolding even though everything depended on it. His heart beat faster and faster as the fuel in the missile ran out.

The dart, with its flares and chaff, was able to escape the missile, despite having a wounded pilot. The missile, just as it was approaching the end of its fuel reserve, put out one last outburst to try and get near the dart. Rumsfeld wasn't quick enough to get completely out of the blast range of the warhead, which exploded.

But although the dart was mildly tossed about by the force, it had not been near enough to be significantly damaged by the explosion. Rumsfeld had successfully evaded the missile.

Rumsfeld then returned to the exact spot he was before, when Knight had launched his missile upon him. "Chief Executive Officer, I did not like that!" said Rumsfeld. With the jamming off, Knight was able to hear Rumsfeld.

"Go on, fire another one!" Rumsfeld cried. Knight wished he could. Again the dart was a sitting target and Knight doubted that Rumsfeld would have the combination of luck and reflex to be able to dodge a missile so cleanly again. If he only had one more missile. Knight gripped the pilot's seat with white-knuckled hands. He couldn't believe

how close he had been to survival, only to be foiled both by his opponent's skill, and the lack of weapons with which to attack him.

"Go on!" Rumsfeld continued, "Don't you have anything to throw at me?"

"I can't attack you, Rumsfeld, but there is no reason for you to attack me either," Knight said, transmitting his voice to the dart. His words were the only weapon left for him; perhaps he could talk his way out of his situation.

"There is reason enough, Chief Executive Officer, only the fittest may survive! You have proven yourself to be unfit, Chief Executive Officer."

"What is wrong with you? I am not the CEO, Rumsfeld! Killing me will make no difference!"

"I remember," said Rumsfeld, "how in the arena you overpowered me and made me grovel for my life at your feet." There was a slight pause - Rumsfeld's thoughts were swimming inside his head and he was having trouble making them stay on the track of coherency. It felt as if his mind was slowly plunging into the darkness, and he did not know how to make it rise up again. He felt cold and his skin was wet with sweat. "And now, CEO, it is my turn. You should not have let me live then. I learnt from my defeat, I became stronger. Now you are begging for your life, but I won't let you live to come and kill me another day. You are going to die, Czerwon!"

"What do you mean, Rumsfeld? My name is not Czerwon! I am Smuggler Knight of the House of Knight!"

Rumsfeld was momentarily confused, his brain felt blood-starved. "No, Czerwon," he said, "you are not going to escape me. I have waited far too long for this moment. You are not about to take away my revenge now. I am the stronger, Czerwon. Now," Rumsfeld's voice raised itself to a shout, "Die you now shall!"

Knight, his options exhausted, suddenly leapt out of his chair and, without thinking, cried out to the last source of possible help available to him : "Ancestors!"

A missile was fired. It flew through space, hurtling towards its unmoving target. The missile was on a direct collision course with the ship. It slammed into the side of Rumsfeld's dart.

Thrown like a rag doll, the dart spiralled in space, leaving a trail of sparks emanating from the damaged and exposed systems. Two more missiles were already on hand, and before the dart could regain control of itself, the missiles found their target. The dart exploded. The hint of Rumsfeld's screams still hovered over the communication links, while small, heat-glowing chunks of the dart scattered into various directions. The dart, with Rumsfeld, was no more.

Knight, who had seen the dart suddenly vanish before his eyes, was momentarily too stunned to realise what happened. But a voice came through the speakers, " 'It is Pallas, Pallas gives this deadly blow!⁶⁶ "

Knight recognised the voice. It was Fabricius.

Ending

"Smuggler Knight!" Fabricius exclaimed. "You are still alive - my faith in you was not misplaced. I see that your ship is paralysed. Hold tight, the Venezia di Notte is coming." Indeed, soon afterwards the Venezia di Notte arrived and gently swallowed the crippled Whim into a capture bay.

With the flight of their leader, Rumsfeld's men did not stomach the fighting for very much longer. Brasidas was soon able to report to CEO Thalia that the Claw, the most powerful machine of war ever built, was now firmly in her control.

It did not take very long for the news of the sudden overthrow of Czerwon to spread through the stars. The events that occurred aboard the Red Claw had a greater significance than the mere changing of who was the Chief Executive Officer. The Corporate ships that were used for the recent blockade of the Free Trade Zone had been drawn from the thinly-stretched forces throughout the Corporate empire, and the ships had left power vacuums in their wake when they were ordered to join the blockade. The result was an instability, for various forces had taken advantage of Corporate absence for their own gain.

Czerwon would have gone on an all-out campaign to reclaim these pools of revolt within his empire; but Thalia did not see the merit of such aggression. She wanted to consolidate the empire – Czerwon, by forcing it to become so vast, had stretched out his forces and this was a great source of weakness; the Corporation barely controlled the vast stretches of its territory. Thalia wanted to reduce the territory to a size that could be adequately held and for law and order to prevail where there was lawlessness.

Thalia was determined to create something human and humane out of the Corporation. She was determined to break up the ruthless, insane hunger that had characterised the way the Corp had worked under Czerwon, and to replace it with an ethical way of life and a sustainable system that would bring growth to all, and not to only the powerful few. As such the new CEO endeavoured to make peace with Czerwon's enemies. The greatest opponent to the Corporation had been the Free Trade Zone, but this war-weary nation embraced the chance for ending the conflict.

The guns at the various disputed territories died down and peace came, most noticeably at the frontier of the Free Trade Zone. But a feeling of unease settled over the colonised galaxy. While few were sad at seeing Czerwon go, no one knew what to make of the new Chief Executive Officer. Would the new CEO be hard-hearted enough to hold the Corporate empire together, or would she, as it seemed from her initial peace-mongering, succumb to softness and allow the Corp to be torn apart by others more opportunistic than her?

With the Red Claw firmly under the commands of Captain Brasidas and the Chief Executive Officer Thalia, the CEO decided to take the Claw on a tour of the Corporate territories, hoping that the intimidating ship would stamp her authority. Along the way, however, they stopped by a lush world, flourishing with life, in order to bury the late Doctor Fallsoul. Just before the coffin was to be lowered, Thalia said the following :

"Doctor Fallsoul came aboard with the ideals of a scientist, only to allow them to be perverted and bought, to crumble into near-nothingness aboard this Red Claw.

"I thought I knew him, and I believed him to have become devoid of anything resembling humanity. I saw how he desired me, but I thought it was the mere hollowness of his heart.

"In the end, though, he himself realised the inherent falseness of the path he was on, and he broke away from it, even though it cost him his life.

"Doctor Fallsoul had become something less than a man in his service to Czerwon, but in his final act he became something more than a man.

"He said he did it to redeem himself, but he succeeded in so much more. I have never seen and I doubt I will ever see such courage again in my life - of a man, with his bare fists, take on the beast of Mammon. The greatest sorrow, is that this man died the way he should have lived - and he could have achieved so much more alive! Nevertheless, we honour him." She threw a flower on the coffin and Brasidas and his men saluted as the coffin was laid to rest.

For the burial of Czerwon, the Red Claw stopped by a dark and lifeless world. While still aboard the Claw, Chief Executive Officer Thalia ordered surgeons to open up Czerwon's thoracic cavity. Inside, the surgeons found that the heart had been separated from the body when Knight had impaled Czerwon with two swords. Hanako's heart could now be simply lifted out of the chest; it was removed from Czerwon's body and placed in a crystal box filled with formaldehyde, to preserve it.

Brasidas handed to Thalia a heavy piece of lead, which she took, and lifted it up and dropped it into cavity where the heart was. The ball of lead landed with a heavy squishy sound.

"That is the heart he had chosen, and it is the only heart he ever deserved," said Thalia, and she ordered her surgeons to close and stitch up Czerwon's chest. The body was then put in a metal crate, which was loaded on a cutter to be unceremoniously dumped on the dead planet's surface. On the metal surface of the crate, was written :

'We miss loved ones, we mourn them when they are dead
But no one mourned Czerwon, whose heart was of lead.'

Thalia wished Hanako's heart to be delivered to its late owner, so that it may be buried with her. She thought about sending Brasidas, but she needed him by her side, for the transition was still uncomfortable and a CEO, whether Czerwon or Thalia, has many enemies. She decided to send Ansar – her faithful, indomitable servant had survived the bullet wounds Rumsfeld had inflicted and was now recovering. Despite doctor's orders that he should rest, Ansar accepted the task, and followed Knight's trail into the Free Trade Zone.

Taking advantage of the new state of calm at the frontier, the Venezia di Notte had crossed the border into the Free Trade Zone, soon arriving at the planet Sanctuary, the homeworld of the Free Traders.

When the struggle aboard the Red Claw had ceased and the new CEO was firmly in command, Thalia had become worried about the fate of her hero-smuggler, especially after hearing about Rumsfeld's escape. Knight had vanished into space, but the black box recorder from Rumsfeld's dart was recovered. The device had still been recording after the destruction of Rumsfeld's dart, and it revealed that it was the Venezia di Notte which had picked up the smuggler. Ansar followed the Venezia di Notte, to the homeworld of the Free Trade Zone.

Ansar's journey into the Free Trade Zone was uneventful, passing by the stilled guns of the armies of the Zone, past listening posts which were now calm and silent except for inane chatter between bored personnel.

The Venezia di Notte had arrived amid a jubilant celebration of the coming of peace. The people of Sanctuary were finally assured of the freedom to live in other ways than those dictated by the Corporation's version of capitalism. At first they had been sceptical of the peace treaty but after a time had finally decided that it had not been some Corporate trick. There were many feasts and spontaneous festivals, as a holiday-feeling

spread over the planet. Despite being strangers, even pirates at that, the crew of the Venezia di Notte were invited to take part in the festivities.

But although many of them did accept the invitation, nothing could bring Smuggler Knight out of his sombre mood. Accompanied by the Contessa Rhea Silvia, the smuggler took the coffin within which was Hanako, and prepared her burial place.

Knight bought a small plot at a graveyard known as the Wheel. It was a large and beautiful graveyard in a green valley. Some monks, seeking solitude, had settled there amidst the gravestones and the crypts – their followers had even bought some of the land and built a monastery for the monks to live in. The monastery walls were decorated circular designs.

Knight, accompanied by Fabricius and Rhea Silvia, stood by Hanako's coffin.

The gravedigger on duty had led them to the spot that had been allocated to Hanako. "You didn't give us enough time to dig up the grave," he said, pointing to the green grass, untouched by the shovels. "You'll have to wait while I dig it."

"No, it's alright," said Knight. "I will dig it."

"I will help you," said Fabricius. The two of them took the shovels and began to dig. The gravedigger, ironic smile on his face, stood watching them, idling – he had only brought two shovels. His eyes were wisened by the histories of those who came and went and stayed in this graveyard he worked in; with his eyes he looked on Knight and Fabricius.

"What is your name, friend?" asked the Contessa.

"Manussa⁶⁷," the gravedigger replied.

"I am Rhea," she introduced herself, not bothering to use her title. Manussa was obviously a simple man who was uninterested in titles.

Knight and Fabricius began their work, their shovels digging in *kchunk kchunk*.

The monastery was not far off, and the monks had begun their morning chanting. In the easeful spring air the sounds of their voices drifted through the graveyard valley :

Kammassakomhi
kamma-daayaado
kamma-yoni
kamma-bandhu
*kamma-patisarano.*⁶⁸

"I am the son who lost his father," said Knight.

"I am the father who lost his son," said Fabricius.

"What I lost now drifts in the past."

"I lost my dreams of the future."

"It was as if the sun had set, and day turned to night."

"It was as if the summer surrendered to the winter."

Kchunk!

Kchunk!

"My heart has been broken and now I am filled with anger!"

"My heart has been torn and I am furious!"

"The eyes of my heart seek my enemy, and it is hatred at first sight!"

"A picture is worth many words..."

"And the easiest picture to draw is with my own fist!"

"Yea, curl your fingers into a fist!"

"A fist!"

"A fist!"

Kchunck!

Kchunk!

"My heart is hungry! Where shall it find satiation?"

"My heart is hungry! Hunger is torment."

"The belly of my heart has swollen."

"My heart cries out from the pangs."

"My hunger makes me thin and pale like a ghost."

"Like a wandering ghost I seek what I cannot find."

"Hungry!"

"Hungry!"

Kchunk!

Kchunk!

"My heart is growling; it is time to hunt."

"My heart clutches at scents in the air."

"It's as if I've forgotten something, long ago..."

"I once thought, but now I instinct."

"I forgotten why I do it, I just do."

"I run and howl, as my body tells me to."

Awoo!

Awoo!

Kchunk!

Kchunk!

"I bleed and I scream from the knife in my heart!"

"I screech and I shriek in the blood of my heart!"

"I bite to the front from the knife in my back!"

"I've lost my defence and I lurch to attack!"

"My hate is my blood and my blood is my pain!"

"The slain are slayers and the slayer is slain!"

Scream : *Aieee!*

Scream : *Aieee!*

Kchunk!

Kchunk!

"Hey!" cried Manussa. "Why are you digging your own graves?"

Knight and Fabricius suddenly stopped their digging, and looked at each other with startled eyes. The dirt and sweat that clung to their skins made them look strange and wild, like forlorn demons. They stood, still and silent, while the monks of the monastery began a new chant. The sounds hovered over them :

Mano-pubbangamaa dhammaa

Mano-setthaa

*Mano-mayaa*⁶⁹

"But what does it mean?" asked Rhea.

Manussa explained, "It means that inattentiveness to your own mental processes will lead you on the path of death. We are beings of habit, and we act and react according to our habitual thought patterns.

"Only by forcing our attention to examine these mental processes, can we understand why we act and react the way we do.

"Only by forcing our attention to examine these mental processes, can we stop ourselves from following destructive paths.

"Only by forcing our attention to examine these mental processes, can we change our ways and follow redeeming paths.

"Only by forcing our attention to examine these mental processes, can man be something to be surpassed.

"I am the gravedigger, but I have seen many graves that dug themselves. Listen, if you have ears!" And the monks chanted :

*Appammattaa ne miyyanti
Ye pamattaa yathaa mataa.⁷⁰*

"Four beast destinies are there for the heedless man : titan, ghost, animal, hell-dweller. Man is something to be surpassed!" Thus spoke Manussa.

Knight looked at Fabricius.

Fabricius looked at Knight.

"Where are we?"

"Who are we?"

"We are at a certain point of something called evolution."

"Through many species we wandered, accumulating habits and thought-patterns."

"Our angers, hungers, habits, and pains were all handed down to us by our animal ancestors."

"Then animal surpassed itself – it became a man."

"Man comes from animal but should not behave as one. Man is something to be surpassed."

"We were treated as less than men – our hearts reverted to the lesser state."

"Those who treated us as animals were themselves animals. They paid their price. They are gone."

"Then we should forsake the lesser state. Let us surpass ourselves and return to the happiness that once was."

"Yea, for night surely will turn to day."

"And winter always turns to spring."

"My past has been redeemed."

"My future has been justified."

"I am not a beast; I am a man."

"Then let us rise as men."

They pulled themselves out of the grave, like rising from the dead, and staggered up to stand, fatigued from their efforts.

"I think the most important thing to remember," commented Rhea, "is that just as one can tell where a wheel shall go by looking at its motion, so we can also know where we are going by looking at the forces that set us to motion. Let us remember that as much as we value our spontaneity, we as humans beings are for the most part predictable."

Smuggler Knight was unable to keep Hanako safe from Czerwon, but at least now she would be able to rest in peace. The Smuggler's Code was fulfilled - his mission had been accomplished, although only symbolically, as he prepared to lower the coffin to burial on Sanctuary's ground. It was at that moment that Ansar caught up with the smuggler in the green valley where Knight was preparing to bury Hanako.

He handed over to Knight a heavy, silver box.

"From my Lady, the CEO Thalia. You may think its rather gruesome," Ansar explained.

Knight opened it. Inside, kept in the same crystal that formed Hanako's coffin, was a human heart. Ansar explained further, "The CEO Thalia did not think that Czerwon deserved it, so Hanako's heart was taken out of him. The CEO thought it right that the heart should be returned to its owner."

"It is right," said Knight.

So the Hanako's heart and body were buried in the same grave. To mark the place, was a gravestone, on which read :

'Here lies Hanako, whose heart, beautiful and gentle
Overcame even Babylon in battle.'

Ansar still had one last mission. Speaking to Knight, he said, "The Lady Thalia would very much like you to join her, as a councilman and advisor."

"Does she ask me as the Chief Executive Officer?" Knight asked.

"No," Ansar replied, "She asks as a woman."

The Contessa, overhearing this, clenched her teeth and fists. But what could she do? What she renounced she could not claim as her own. Yet the reasons she had used for separateness were no longer relevant. Czerwon and Rumsfeld, the destroyers of Old Italy, were dead.

"Tell the CEO Thalia," Knight replied, "That I am in mourning."

Ansar nodded his head in understanding. Who could embrace a new future when still shedding tears for the past?

Ansar left soon after, mentioning that Thalia would again, sometime, summon Knight.

Left alone, Knight asked Rhea, "So, what are you going to do now?"

Rhea Silvia, Contessa, thought for a moment. The last ten years of her life had been spent in hatred of the man who had destroyed her home. Now that Czerwon was dead, there was no one left to hate. The purpose of her life had been taken away from her.

What replaced it was an uncertainty, but an uncertainty pregnant with so many possibilities.

Rhea answered Knight's question, "I heard that there are quite a few frontier worlds now open for colonisation."

"You are thinking of starting a colony?"

"Yes." After so many years, Rhea wanted a home of her own again. "And you?" she asked.

"I want to stay here for now, on Sanctuary. There is so much hope here. I want to soak it into me like a sponge. When there is enough hope in me I will return," Knight said, finishing off his sentence with a wave of his hand to the sky, indicating the starscapes beyond.

Rhea Silvia looked at him. She had sworn a life of hatred and revenge, exclusive of love. But all that had ended. Now was the time for new beginnings, and perhaps redemption.

New beginnings

A legend arose around the figure of Smuggler Knight, which was only fired up brighter by the absence of the smuggler, who had chosen to disappear, either into the countrysides of Sanctuary or to some little trafficked spot, somewhere like station Crosspoint.

It was unthinkable that a mere smuggler, even if it was a smuggler from what had once long-ago been the illustrious House of Knight, to have defeated the mighty Chief Executive Officer Czerwon. There was a need to make Knight the same larger than life figure that Czerwon was. So the tale of Czerwon's death carried only the barest of facts, so that the hero of the story, Smuggler Knight, became something else entirely : the gossip that leapt from bar to bar and station to station, created a hardly recognisable personage.

No longer a smuggler, Knight had become a fierce Pirate King, who commanded a flotilla of pirate vessels in the borderlands of the frontier. This Pirate King had a daughter, a sister or a wife (depending on which version of the story one heard) whom Czerwon had abducted in order to revenge some Corporate losses, in order to have her for herself, or to conduct some sort of medical experiment (again, what Czerwon wanted was dependent on the version of the story). Enraged, the Pirate King turned on the Red Claw, and with his personal battleship, rammed through the Claw's hull. The Pirate King then single-handedly fought through hundreds (or thousands) of Czerwon's men before reaching the dreaded Chief Executive Officer himself. After a titanic struggle between the two warlords, Czerwon was finally destroyed.

This story, with whatever embellishments the ever-creative gossip-mongers felt like throwing in, furnished the foundation myth of a new era, or rather, a resetting of the clock back to zero. For much of the history of mankind it took messianic figures to tear down the old calendars, and the years were fit only to be counted from the births or deaths of the various prophets of god. But the galaxy had long become a cynical place, and prophets were all too many in the colonised galaxy for enough people to take them seriously. Still, it would have been inappropriate for Knight to have been the cause of a new zero, until he was elevated to the great stature of a Messiah, in the proud tradition of the calendar resetters.

No longer did the dwellers of the galaxy use the fall of Old Italy as a reference point, a zero. It was no longer, 'so many years after the fall of Old Italy.' Now, it was 'so many years after the death of Czerwon, at the hands of the Pirate King.' The old ways were gone - now something different, something new, was alive. The spiritual and philosophical foundation of the way the galaxy was run had changed.

And so this story ends, not at an ending - for there is no such thing as a true ending - but at a beginning, a new zero.



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Endnotes

¹ Compare to Warlord Tang Yu-lin, Governor of the Chinese province of Jehol in the early 1930's.

² From the Polish word, 'czerwoni', meaning red. Pronounce it like 'Chair-von', with the stress on the first syllable.

³ Both the spacestation and the territory were known as Peking. Or was it Spacestation Beijing? The people in this corner of the galaxy had their reasons to support whichever name. Peking hating Beijing, Beijing hating Peking, both raging and reacting against each other, accomplishing much for history and contributing nothing to posterity but tomes of historic cycles. Suffice to say, those who loved Tang Yu-lin called it Peking, and those who hated him called it Beijing.

⁴ The characteristics of a tyrant's rule are three: injustice, fear and non-benevolence. The flaws of a tyrant are three: self-indulgence, aversive fear, and deluded world-view.

⁵ The Smuggler's Code, which Knight obeyed, forbade attacking an unarmed person. With the momentary exception of Knight's gun, the elderly man did not carry any weapons.

⁶ "He used himself coarse food and drink, but displayed the utmost filial piety towards the spirits." Analects of Confucius, Book 8, chapter 21.

⁷ For some obscure reason, American medical scientists and practitioners prefer to refer to adrenaline as epinephrine.

⁸ According to Greek mythology, Thalia was the muse of pastoral poetry. The name comes from the Greek word 'thallein', meaning 'to blossom.'

⁹ The word 'ansar' means 'helper' in Arabic.

¹⁰ The word 'principessa' means 'princess' in Italian.

¹¹ Her eyes are blue, and her hair is yellow. When you mix yellow and blue colours together you get a new colour, green.

¹² The word 'hanako' means 'flower child' in Japanese.

¹³ "Finally, Ánanda, the Buddhas accomplish the Buddha-work by means of the four Mara's and all the eighty-four thousand types of passion that afflict living beings." The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra, chapter 11.

¹⁴ From the name 'Demeter', which means 'earth mother' in Greek.

¹⁵ The name 'Abimelech' means 'my father is the king' in Hebrew.

¹⁶ "What is five? The five aggregates." The Pali Canon, Khuddaka Nikaya, Khuddakapatha 4. The five aggregates represent the five things that make up a 'being', namely form (body), feeling, perception, beliefs, and consciousness. The sum of money Abimelech proposes is meant to maintain Hanako's 'aggregates', hence to save her life or 'being'.

¹⁷ Western astrology divides a horoscope in twelve houses (besides the twelve zodiac signs). The second house ('two') represents possessions and resources, while the third house ('three') represents communication, mundane activities and short journeys. The cutter was specifically acquired as a possession in order to enable the Forestglenners for short journeys into space to contact traders.

¹⁸ 'Cutter' is a word used to specifically describe certain boats, apparently only those capable of carrying a light cargo. According to Collins English dictionary, it can refer to sailing boat, a boat that is powered by oars or sail and is attached to a ship, or a lightly armed customs boat.

¹⁹ According to Christian mythology, Mammon is the lord of greed.

"MAMMON, the least erected Spirit that fell
From heav'n, for ev'n in heav'n his looks & thoughts
Were always downward bent, admiring more
The riches of Heav'ns pavement, trod'n Gold,
Then aught divine or holy else enjoy'd
In vision beatific..." From Paradise Lost, by John Milton.

²⁰ Brasidas was the name of a famous soldier in the Peloponnesian War. He was famous for being upright and honourable. See 'The History of the Peloponnesian War' by Thucydides.

²¹ A spacefighter which was shaped much like a dart, hence its name. Designed purely for space combat, the dart is popular, massproduced and cheap.

²² Up to the age of 6 weeks, the human embryo looks the same as any other embryo from any other mammal. It even looks similar to fish embryos, though the resemblance is not as strong. This is one argument that has been used to argue our common kinship with the

animal kingdom, and thus to support the idea that we have common ancestors with creatures of the so-called animal kingdom.

²³ Attributed to Thomas Hobbes. Translated from the Latin, "Human beings act like wolves to one another."

²⁴ See the Pali Canon, Samyutta Nikaya XXXV.23

²⁵ The word 'statek' means 'ship' in Polish.

²⁶ If the three beds on the one side of the room are greed, aversion and delusion, and the beds on the opposite side represent selflessness, peace and wisdom, then which side can truly give one a sense of rest?

²⁷ In western astrology, the fourth house represents roots, origins and home. Thus the number four reflects Hanako's state of mind at this point in the story.

²⁸ See 'On death and dying,' by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, or alternatively look up her name or 'death' in any good psychiatry textbook, such as Kaplan and Sadock's 'Synopsis of Psychiatry.'

²⁹ According to Roman mythology, Rhea Silvia was a priestess and also the mother of Romulus and Remus.

³⁰ See the teachings of Nichiren Daishonen, specifically the letter entitled 'Winter turns to Spring.'

³¹ 'My Goddess' in Italian.

³² 'At highest speed.'

³³ 'And for the love of heaven.'

³⁴ 'Old friend.'

³⁵ Fabricius was the name of a Roman general who gained a reputation for being incorruptible despite his poverty.

³⁶ King Alcinous helped Odysseus in 'the Odyssey,' while Queen Dido helped Aeneas in 'the Aeneid.'

³⁷ 'My Contessa' in Italian.

³⁸ This is an altered version of a Latin prayer. The translation is thus: 'Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed thou art amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Holy Mary, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.'

³⁹ See Homer's 'Iliad', Book IX. (All quotes of the Iliad are taken from the Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers translation).

⁴⁰ 'Good' in Italian.

⁴¹ 'Is that understood?'

⁴² From the Opera 'La Traviata'. Roughly translated : "Let us drink happy glasses adorned with beauty, and the fleeting hour will be drunk with pleasure. Let us drink from the sweet tremblings that come from love, because this omnipotent eye pierces the depths of the heart." Note that the Italian word for 'heart' is 'cuore'. 'Cuore' is also used in referring to the 'core' of something. Thus the Italian 'al cuore' can mean either 'the heart' or 'the core'. In the same way in German, 'das Herz' can mean either 'the core' or 'the heart'. This is in keeping with the tradition belief that the heart is the seat of the soul, and thus the 'core' of one's being.

⁴³ In Virgil's 'Aeneid', Pallas was a friend of Aeneas, and was killed in Battle by Turnus. See Book Ten of the Aeneid.

⁴⁴ 'Good friend' in Italian.

⁴⁵ 'Goodbye.'

⁴⁶ See Virgil's 'The Aeneid,' Book Four, the John Dryden translation.

⁴⁷ The equivalent of delta in the Latin alphabet is the letter 'D'. According to western numerology, the letter 'D' is associated with business. Delta, as a capital, is spelt Δ, and this triangle (with its three sides) represents the three unskilful attitudes that are the fuel for the war and strife between the Corporation and the Free Trade Zone.

⁴⁸ The concept of the number 'one' is the basis for counting and hence the development of all mathematics. The listening post is delta-'one' because it 'counts' the enemy ships.

⁴⁹ According to western numerology, twelve represents understanding and wisdom, especially that gained from experience.

⁵⁰ 'May a misfortune befall him' in Italian.

⁵¹ 'My dear.'

⁵² See Homer's 'The Iliad,' Book I.

⁵³ See the play 'Medea' by Euripides.

⁵⁴ From Homer's 'The Odyssey,' Book XVI, the Alexander Pope translation.

⁵⁵ From Homer's 'The Odyssey,' Book II, the Alexander Pope translation.

⁵⁶ From Homer's 'The Odyssey', Book I, the Samuel Butler translation.

⁵⁸ See chapter XVII of Nicollo Machiavelli's 'The Prince.'

⁵⁹ "The heavier this Napoleon trampled on the world, holding it tyrannously down, the fiercer would the world's recoil against him be, one day. Injustice pays itself with frightful compound-interest." From Lecture VI, 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History,' by Thomas Carlyle.

⁶⁰ See chapter 10, 'War and warriors,' of Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Thus Spake Zarathustra.'

⁶¹ See the Pali Canon, Jataka tale 14.

⁶² These are the four states of deprivation as taught in Buddhism. They are understood in two ways; first, as actual planes of existence in which one is reborn, secondly, they are seen as reflecting actual depraved psychological states in human beings. Hence, a person can 'act like an animal,' and so on. The titan represents anger and wrath, the ghost who cannot touch or eat anything represents hunger and greed, the animal is under delusion and ignorance. Hell represents severe psychosis and compulsively anti-social behaviour, and ostracism from society.

⁶³ See part 3 of 'Zarathustra's prologue' in Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Thus spake Zarathustra.'

⁶⁴ See the Bible, Jeremiah 51 verse 34

⁶⁵ See the Bible, Jeremiah 51 verse 35

⁶⁶ See Virgil's 'The Aeneid,' Book Twelve.

⁶⁷ Manussa means 'human' in Pali.

⁶⁸ 'I own my actions, I inherit my actions, I am born of my actions, I am associated through my actions, and I live reliant on my actions' in Pali. See the Pali Canon, Anguttara Nikaya V.57.

⁶⁹ 'Phenomena are preceded by the heart, ruled by the heart, made of the heart' in Pali. See the Pali Canon, the Dhammapada, chapter 1, verse 1-2.

⁷⁰ 'The heedful do not die. The heedless may as well already be dead' in Pali. See the Pali Canon, the Dhammapada, chapter 2, verse 21.