

Prologue

The Chairman of the High Council of the colony world Minerva faced the UN diplomat. The Chairman sat behind a curved conference table, flanked by the High Councillors and others.

To the UN diplomat's right, the tall, narrow windows let through and diffused a quarter of the afternoon rays from Minerva's bright yellow G1-type star. Despite the dimmed and indirect light, the diplomat's smile showed rows of gleaming teeth stark against his olive complexion. Behind and above him floated holographic lines of bullet-pointed text and a small UN logo in the lower right corner.

The hologram flickered, showed a new slide. The diplomat rested his open hand on his cocked hip. He spoke in a smooth American accent without looking at the words floating behind him.

"To summarize, when Minerva joins the Dubai Convention, multiple benefits will accrue to you. Instead of a four-month journey by warpdrive, you can instantaneously communicate with all of Earth's scientists, intellectuals, and content creators. You can export products free of tariffs—and the immense operating expenses of a warpdrive ship—to UN member states. The quick and easy travel only the wormhole can provide will give you an opportunity to recruit immigrants. Finally, you'll also receive the benefits of increased creativity when your society incorporates the vibrant diversity of the resettled."

The hologram flickered again, showed *Questions?*.

"Thank you. I'm sure you want to know more. I can stay as long as you wish to answer."

The Chairman of the High Council said nothing. He didn't need to.

To the Chairman's right, a blue-eyed man wearing a mustard-yellow blazer and a stubbly beard raised his hand. "What products does the UN forbid colonies to import to Earth?"

"Earth will accept a colossal variety of imports. Metals, fissionables, hydrocarbons, raw and processed foods, heavy machinery, consumer goods..." The diplomat made a juggling motion. "I can't list everything."

The man's blue eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask which imports are permitted. I want to know which ones are forbidden."

"Oh. *Forbidden*." The diplomat folded his arms. "Very few imports are barred by General Assembly resolutions. Weapons of mass destruction. Fission or fusion reactors. Techniques for human genetic modification. Molecular fabricators. That's all." He held his gaze on the man in the mustard-yellow blazer, then turned to the only woman in the room, a statuesque blonde with hair piled high and a Big Dipper pin high on the bodice of her crimson dress. "You had a question?"

Her voice sounded huskier than the smooth lines of her face suggested. "Under the Dubai Convention, what rights would the Minerva government have to select or reject resettled?"

"You may be assured that the resettlement authority takes the cultural background of a colony into consideration, and strives to assign resettled from a similar background when possible. Of course, the crises that create situations where resettlement is appropriate do not always conform to colonial prejudices. Though I am certain the leaders of Minerva are free of such prejudices. I'm certain your heart is large enough to welcome hungry and homeless women and children to your world." The diplomat's brown eyes softened with the final sentences. He drew in a long breath. "Anyone else?"

"No," the Chairman said. "You've given us more than enough information to make our decision."

The diplomat blinked once, but the smoothness of his next words signaled mastery of any confusion. "I'm glad my presentation has

been helpful to you. Of course, should you or any member of the High Council need any additional information, message or call me any time, day or night."

"Noted."

"Very well. I'll return to the UN base camp and await word from you. If you could reach your decision in four days, I and every UN employee, both here and on Earth, would be most grateful."

"We'll make our decision by then," the Chairman said, finality in his tone.

The diplomat bowed from the waist. He turned and strode through the hologram toward double doors on the far side of the room. Against the floor of polished, blue-flecked gray granite, the hard soles of his polished black oxford shoes struck like whip cracks.

The hologram's floating UN logo morphed into a magic lamp shape, sucked up the rest of the slide, then winked out of sight.

After the double doors closed themselves soundlessly behind the departing diplomat, the Chairman and Councillors rose from the curved table. Ceiling-high doors swung open in the twelve-foot wall of ceramic tiles behind them. Strong ventilation pushed robotic miniblimps into the conference room. The miniblimps bumped the ceiling as they dangled filters to scoop up any microscopic airborne sensors the diplomat might have left.

The ventilation chilled the Chairman's face as he led the Councillors down a corridor toward the executive offices of the Minervan government. Twenty feet from the conference room, they stopped at a door to what looked like a utility closet. The bearded man in the mustard-yellow blazer poised his knuckles to knock—

The door swung open. A dozen monitors and status boards glowed in a windowless room. In the doorway stood a lean-figured woman. Her eyebrows arched and her mouth formed a coy, closed-lip smile.

"He told us exactly what you said he would," said the man in the yellow blazer. "So what do you advise?"

Her lips parted in a wider smile. She rocked her head, setting her long blond hair rippling. A gleam filled her hazel eyes.

"Surrender."

1

The producer's office fit with the blue, cloud-dotted sky outside the windows. Potted plants turned waxy, deep green leaves toward yellow LED spotlights in the ceiling. Water dripped from microirrigation systems and fertilized potting soil filled the space with the rich smell of springtime.

Even better as far as Stone Chalmers was concerned, the warming weather meant girls in the streets of Manhattan wore short sheer dresses. He would get back out there soon. Just waiting for—

The producer hurried in. Tanned face and a feathered haircut. "Didn't mean to be late. My flight from Los Angeles got rerouted around thunderstorms in flyover country." He sat on an angular, black leather sofa, stretched his arm along the back, and extended legs crossed at the ankles toward Stone.

"Mr. Chalmers, Rolston—I can call you Rolston?—"

"Why not?" Stone said from a matching armchair facing the sofa.

"Rolston, glad to finally meet you. We've been trying to put together this project for, for—" The producer lifted his hand from the back of the sofa and rolled his wrist. "Tarquinia, how long has it been?"

The producer's assistant, Tarquinia, sat on the sofa six inches beyond her employer's extended hand. Plunging neckline, tight skirt hemmed above the knee, and a high heap of russet hair Stone would

revel in for the five seconds he would need to loosen it. She gave Stone a look hinting she would revel in it too. "Five years ago, we acquired the rights to your great-grandfather's life story from his descendants from his second marriage. We didn't discover he had heirs from his first marriage until your—brother—?"

"Cousin."

"—until he heard about the project and threatened to sue."

The producer nodded. "We don't know what he told you, but, hand to God, from the start of this we wanted to play fair by everyone. We knew your great-grandfather had a son by his first marriage, but we had no idea your grandfather legally took his stepfather's surname after your great-grandmother remarried. Hand to God, when your grandfather's birth name disappeared from the public records, we assumed he'd died as a child during the Time of Troubles."

"Understandable."

The producer's lips clamped together. He looked away from Stone, toward the bright spring sky outside the windows. Probably subvoking to the auditory nerves of—

Tarquinia dabbed her lips with her tongue, then leaned her cleavage toward Stone. "Rolston—"

"Call me Stone."

"Stone. We know you might be unhappy about our mistake. Don't hold it against the project. Hold it against me. I'm the one who failed to dig deeply enough to ensure all your great-grandfather's heirs had the chance to buy in five years ago." She puffed out her chest. "How can I make it up to you?"

Five seconds to loosen her hair, then... an hour later he'd stroll the Upper East Side looking for his next conquest. Back on the treadmill—

Seducing women is a treadmill? What the hell has gotten into you? He forced a lazy smile. "I'll think of something."

"Glad you have no hard feelings," the producer said. "Let me tell you, we're excited as hell to bring Plutarco Blanco's story to the silver screen. It's got everything modern audiences are looking for. Romantic drama for women, action scenes for young men, and older men will love the political intrigue and the principled battle against racism."

Stone sagely nodded. "I was afraid that part might be neglected.

Mestizos—you know, Mexicans who look Mexican?—envied my great-grandfather's blond hair and pale skin." He glanced sidelong at Tarquinia with a faint smirk. Her lips parted in a shocked *o*, but she leaned forward, pulled by his magnetism just the same.

Fish. Barrel.

Treadmill.

"Well, yes, right," the producer said. "We were thinking more about the racism he faced from white Americans."

"Oh." Stone drew out the word and kept his poker face.

"Our working treatment so far doesn't play up the bigotry your great-grandfather suffered from other Mexican-Americans, but script development on a project like this goes on until the last day of shooting." He shifted against the black leather. "Now, Rolston, for licensing your rights to your great-grandfather's story, we're prepared to offer you—" He emphasized the next words. "—0.05% of lifetime net revenue."

Net meaning after a thousand vaguely-worded expenses added up to a few pennies less than the gross. "0.05%?"

"Rolston, Rolston, I know that might sound low, but let me walk you through some example math here. We're expecting a budget of half a trillion dollars—United States dollars—here, but this picture could bring a trillion in domestic box office alone."

At twenty thousand dollars to see a movie in Manhattan.... "Fifty million people will go see yet another costume drama set during the Time of Troubles?"

"Easily. And that's just domestic. Latin America will easily bring in another trillion. Another half trillion for merchandising—and, hand to God, from the novelization, the graphic novel, the action figures, the other collectables, that's a conservative estimate—anyway, your share works out to a cool billion." The producer spread his hands like a car salesman. "So we've got a deal."

If Stone received a royalty check for as much as a million, he'd be astonished. But no harm agreeing. The distant cousins he hadn't seen since his father's funeral would get an ego boost from their glancing contact with Hollywood, then return to their tedious lives, longing for fortune and fame never to come.

He opened his mouth to speak. A message appeared in his vision, green letters laid over the producer's tanned face and Tarquinia's buxom curves by electromagnetic stimulation of his optic nerves by a tracery of wires around his hair follicles.

Code 909. Minerva. Report to my office before close of business tomorrow.

909 meant a special detail. Which reeked of boredom. Bodyguarding some politician, likely. Minerva? A colony world so recently discovered by the UN that it didn't even have a sited wormhole mouth? And a mission so lacking in urgency Gray gave him over twenty-four hours to report?

A mission. After ten months—far longer than the inactivity period Gray had imposed at their last meeting, after his return from Trinity—after ten months, a mission.

Stone's heart beat a little faster.

"Rolston, Rolston, what's going on?"

Stone got to his feet. "An important project at work just came up."

"You mean you're leaving? I thought we had a deal here."

Tarquinia shifted her torso to give Stone a view straight down her cleavage. "I thought so too."

He kept his gaze at the level of their eyes. "Duty calls." He turned for the door.

"Rolston, Rolston, I get it." Humor with a manic edge sounded in the producer's voice. "You're playing the game. You're right, we're eager to close, but we can't give you the keys to the castle. We can go as high as 0.075% of net. Just for you. Provided you don't disclose your terms to the other heirs—"

The glass door made a faint mechanical hum as it swung toward him. "I'll be in touch," he said over his shoulder.

"Rolston!"

After an ear-popping elevator ride, Stone slipped out a revolving door from the building's lobby to the sidewalk. The noise of ten thousand cars and a hundred thousand feet reverberated off the glass and steel faces of skyscrapers. Through the press of pedestrians he glimpsed a low, faceted black shape amid dense traffic. He crossed the sidewalk to the curb. Men wearing neckties loose under unbuttoned collars angled around him. Neck-craning tourists ducked their heads

and muttered "Excuse me" in cornpone Midwestern accents. Leggy young women fanned their short skirts and stared at him from wide, downturned eyes.

Imagine how much more these passersby would react if they knew how many women he'd bedded and how many men he'd killed.

His black coupe, faceted like a stealth fighter aircraft, pulled up to the curb. It popped open its door as he approached, closed it after he climbed in. In silence and cool dry air, he settled on the back seat. *UNICA HQ*, he subvoked to the car. *Priority*.

The black coupe pulled away from the curb, heading east. The message from its transponder compelled cars in front to change lanes and turned the red light at Broadway green.

North and east of Times Square, signs began to bear the logos of UN agencies and global charities. Cameras grew denser, like fungi expanding through a concrete and alloy forest.

In the mid 50s, between Lexington and the FDR, the headquarters of the United Nations Interagency Coordination Authority looked like any other eighty-story highrise. Perhaps the sidewalk in front held more anti-vehicle obstacles, concrete bollards and welded steel spikes, than some other UN buildings. The coupe turned into the garage.

Soon after, the elevator pinged at the 27th floor. The doors parted. Despite his hammering heart and churning emotions, Stone walked with forced casualness to Gray's office, rapped a jaunty pattern with his knuckles on the synthetic wood door.

"Come in."

Stone entered and shut the door.

At his standing desk, Gray looked like the upper-level bureaucrat of his job title, Assistant Director of Operational Planning. His three archaic monitors held scrolling text and a video from high altitude of dusty buildings exploding. Gray typed on a split, angled keyboard that clacked with every keypress. Not for the first time Stone wondered if the archaic input devices and displays were a cover, and Gray used the exact same transcranial magnetic stimulation hardware as everyone else.

The monitors went dark. "You're early, Stone."

And you're four months late calling me in. "I was in a meeting

and needed an excuse to leave. You earned me an extra, let's see, one-fortieth of one percent of—"

"The film based on your great-grandfather Blanco's life and death?"

Stone's eyes blinked wide. How did he—?

Because he was Gray. Rivers of information from ten thousand sources flowed past his eyeballs.

"That's the one," Stone said.

"I'll buy a ticket to the premiere." Gray made a quarter-turn to his sitting-height desk and gestured at the visitor chairs facing it. "Sit, and tell me about Minerva."

Stone sat, faced a broad, glass-topped desk bare except for an inbox, an outbox, and a five-ball pendulum, all of which appeared to have never been touched. "A colony founded during the Time of Troubles. An Interstellar Transport Bureau scout ship reported the colony's discovery around the time I went to Trinity. An ITB diplomatic mission went out to bribe or blackmail the colony's leaders into acceding to the Dubai Convention." Stone subvoked up the diplomatic mission's departure date from Earth and the warpdrive flight time to and from Minerva. A date from the previous week appeared in his vision. "That mission just returned."

"And with success," Gray said, now seated across the desk from Stone. "Minerva acceded to the Dubai Convention. A wormhole is currently under construction at Hawking Station. The terrestrial end will be sited in the Mojave Desert 130 miles from Los Angeles. The ITB warpdrive ship that will tow the other end to Minerva departs Earth orbit for Hawking Station in five days. You will be on that ship."

Stone let out a long breath, and the stress of inactivity bled from his shoulders. "You suspect some ITB employees on the ship are saboteurs?"

"No."

"I get it. You want me to assassinate a Minerva politician or two."

"No."

Stone scowled. "Then what? I've been cooling my heels for almost a year and you're sending me on a mission I'm overqualified for?"

Gray peered down his nose with narrowed eyes. "You will go

where I order you. Unless you wish to move your hiatus from the temporary column to the permanent?"

The pattern in the carpet caught Stone's gaze. "Of course I'll go."

"Good. Your assignment is to gather intelligence on the Minerva government relating to any threats it may pose to the UN."

Blood drained from Stone's face. Reading public websites, maybe hanging out in bars where colonial government clerks drank together and vented about their bosses. His lips clamped together and he breathed heavily through his nose.

"Minerva is unlike other colonies." The way Gray said the words made Stone frown and look up. "Every other colony we've discovered to date was founded by people looking backward from the middle of the 21st century to some imagined golden age, typically comprising ethnocultural purity or monolithic religious belief. Minerva was instead founded by American scientists and engineers who believed their golden age lay in the future. Unlike other colonies, which settled on planets with native biospheres providing breathable air, the Minervans found a waterless and lifeless rocky world and terraformed it. Their economy is heavily roboticized and computerized. They have more molecular fabricators per capita than does Earth. To the best of our knowledge, they lack artificial intelligence, and if I were a praying man I would thank God for that."

"But Minerva acceded to the Dubai Convention—"

"My hunch is Minerva acceded too easily."

Stone felt more like himself. Through a smirking mouth, he asked, "A hunch?"

"If my job didn't require hunches, a computer could do it." A pause, then Gray said, "Your cover will be an employee for a UN import regulation agency. Under this cover, you will meet Minerva government officials and corporate executives. Find whatever you can, however you can, about possible threats to the UN, and return through the wormhole after ground transportation links are established."

A grin creased Stone's face. *However you can....* How many women worked for Minerva's government and large businesses? And how many of those would open their secrets to him as readily as they would

open their legs? "I'll pick up the cover story packet from Jürgen right now."

"No hurry. The shuttle from Cape Canaveral to Hammarskjöld Orbital Port launches in three days. Fly to Florida the day after tomorrow."

A mission *and* two more nights in Manhattan. This day got better by the moment. Still, work to do before he left Gray's office. "You want regular reports?"

"Yes. Copy what you find to encrypted data devices and throw them in the UN's Earthbound diplomatic pouch—you'll learn the address when you hypnogogue your cover."

"What about our field office?"

"Our field office is not yet established. The team to do so will be on your ship, under a cover which I will not share with you. Even after they establish the field office, I don't want you generating sigint that Minerva counterintelligence might pick up."

Stone's nose wrinkled. "You're worried about colonial counterintelligence?"

"No," Gray said. The tone of his next words trickled a frigid feeling down Stone's spine. "I'm worried about *Minerva* counterintelligence."

2

Amid clouds of fruit-flavored nicotine vapor thick in zero-g, almost all of *Yassir Arafat's* hundred-sixty passengers held onto straps and floated in front of the video walls in the ship's lounges.

On the video wall nearest to Stone, two parallel dark rings, their edges nearly touching, hung against a backdrop of thousands of stars. The closer to the rings, the more the background compressed. Crowded starlight haloed the rings' outer edges. Nanotube alloy filaments and electromagnetic grapples connected each dark ring to four space tugs. From experience, Stone read the tugs' interior schematics from their profiles. The dumpy vessels packed a life-support module smaller than a Japanese hotel room between propellant tanks and forward of a single drive nozzle in the stern.

In unison, the eight tugs fired. The dark rings drifted apart. Starlight slipped from the haloes into the growing space between the rings. Cheers and excited gasps came from the other eighteen passengers in Stone's lounge, and echoed down the curving plastic-walled corridors from adjacent lounges.

"Oh my," said a young white woman near Stone. Her pixie cut of purple hair drifted away from her face. The UN identification card clipped to her collar and naming her Merrill Mears rose and fell with rapt breaths. He'd seduced women far more gorgeous, but despite her dye job and unfeminine name, she would be in the top fifty. "It's so

beautiful.”

A puff of vapor smelled of rosewater and cardamom. “It would be even more gorgeous if we watched in virtual reality, alone in our room.” The speaker was a swarthy male, about the same age as the woman. His soft face showed a trace of queasiness. Apparently the ship’s medics underdosed his weightlessness drug. His sweatshirt hung loosely around his belly. Stone couldn’t guess his ethnicity from either his skin tone or his accent—he could be from Mexico City, Marrakech, or Mumbai—but he knew the type. A man-child more at home in the interchangeable residential high-rises and international schools of the global political class than in the teeming streets of his birth city.

“In our room, just the two of us,” the male repeated to purple-haired Merrill.

She turned her shoulder to him. Her rapt eyes soaked in the vista on the video wall.

A smirk touched Stone’s lips. He leaned closer to the young woman. “No, you should stay here.”

Her head swung around. Wide whites of eyes. Purple hair couldn’t disguise black roots. “I should—” She glanced at the ID badge at Stone’s collar. “—Edward?”

The man-child tried to sound tough. “Who are you to tell her what she should do?”

Stone kept his gaze on the young woman’s brown eyes. “We’re not on this ship alone, or even with one partner. We’re on it to serve a higher purpose.” He rested his free hand on her shoulder, then twisted her toward the video wall. “That.”

Only one of the dark rings remained on camera. Though the ring circled the equator of the spherical wormhole, the tear in space remained invisible, except for flashing arcs along its perimeter, where gravitational lensing smeared the light of each background star into a brief, elongated blip.

“It glitters like a diamond,” said the purple-haired young woman.

“I can buy you a diamond when we get back to Earth.” Stone could hear the swarthy male’s desperation. Which meant the young woman could too.

Stone smirked. Any time during the next four months, he could

brush past the swarthy man-child at will. He slid his fingers down over her shoulder blade, then pulled them away. Merrill leaned a few millimeters back toward him.

Fish. Barrel.

Treadmill.

The four tugs pulling the wormhole drifted now, motors silent. The camera, mounted at the rotation axis of Hawking Station, zoomed out until a long, narrow ship came into view. The ship's greatest width came at two dark rings, one fore, one aft, joined by lattices and struts to the chunky modules making up the ship's elongated body. In the middle of the ship hung an empty cylinder with a diameter slightly less than the fore and aft rings.

Someone cheered. Then everyone followed suit, with the relaxing shoulders and relieved sidelong glances of people glad someone else had recognized what they saw: an exterior view of Nobel Peace Prize-class warpdrive wormhole transport *Yassir Arafat*.

Merrill stared wide-eyed at the screen. "We're going to carry the wormhole in the middle of our ship?"

"Well," the swarthy man-child said, "you know, I think so, but I'm not sure."

Her glance invited Stone into their conversation. "A wormhole inside a warpdrive cylinder? Is it safe?" she asked with a childlike tone. Subconscious or chosen, didn't matter.

Stone leaned toward her ear, deepened his voice. "Safety is over-rated, isn't it?"

Over her shoulder, wide brown eyes regarded him. "You're joking. Aren't you?"

"I only joke when I'm serious." He looked past her to the video wall. "Keep watching."

A scale popped up on the video wall. The wormhole was now about two miles from *Yassir Arafat*. White vapor jetted from the tugs' forward attitude nozzles, slowing them. Changes in the glimmering of starlight provided the only sign the nanotube alloy filaments slackened. The wormhole's equilibrators ring drew abreast of the tugs, overtook them. Lateral attitude nozzles puffed. The tugs turned over, locked their orientation relative to the ship with bursts from the at-

titude jets. Very precise, well-practiced by the tug pilots.

How many tedious years did the tug pilots spend in simulators?

Stone shrugged to himself. They chose their career. Every man has his place.

The wormhole drifted closer. The camera zoomed in, tighter, tighter. Red squiggles on the ship resolved into the words *UNITBS Yassir Arafat DTTV-17*. The filaments holding the wormhole equilibrators ring to the tugs grew taut.

"Now," Stone said, softly enough for only the purple-haired young woman and the swarthy male to hear.

The tugs' drive nozzles blazed with light. The wormhole slowed its approach to the transport cylinder. Teasing, agonizing, the wormhole took thirty seconds to travel the last hundred yards. Merrill and the man-child watched the wormhole's progress. Stone kept his gaze on the tugs. Short puffs from their attitude jets, all four moving in unison, imparted to the wormhole course corrections Stone couldn't see.

The wormhole's equilibrators ring slipped into the empty cylinder amidships. Moments later, the tugs' drives cut out. A faint tremor ran through the ceiling, down the strap, into Stone's hand. The purple-haired pixie caught her breath. Her male companion looked even queasier.

The image on the video wall didn't change. Only a faint distortion of the stars visible through *Yassir Arafat's* central gap showed any sign the wormhole had actually been sited.

Passengers drifted out of the lounge by twos and threes. The swarthy male tugged on Merrill's arm four times before she said a good-bye to Stone and followed her boyfriend. Stone was the last one to watch the unchanging image. Inside the module surrounding the wormhole, techs worked, locking the equilibrators ring into its cylindrical cradle. Labor as mind-numbing as the tug pilots', but again, every man has his place.

After an hour, the camera mounted on Hawking Station zoomed out. The entire length of *Yassir Arafat* fit on the video wall. The ship flashed multilingual warning texts across Stone's vision. Recorded voices spoke the words in all the UN's official languages. "Commencing acceleration in 5... 4... 3...."

Stone let go of the ceiling strap when the countdown reached 1. On the video wall, white-hot, wispy reaction mass poured out of the drive nozzles. The wisps thickened as the floor accelerated toward Stone's feet. He flexed his knees and an instant later landed at 0.25 g. He walked out of the lounge, the synthetic gravity of thrust increasing with each step. Fifteen seconds for *Yassir Arafat* to reach its standard acceleration of 1.0 g, equivalent to Earth's gravity. Except for a few minutes of weightlessness when the ship flipped in mid-flight for its deceleration burn, the ship would maintain 1.0 g for the four-month journey to Minerva.

Four months. Purple-haired Merrill crossed Stone's mind. He smiled to himself. He would keep busy.

But not simply with yet another seduction. Each night he practiced with his tool kit, shutting off the lights and pulling out spy equipment—an infrared camera disguised as a black onyx ring, a cloak of computerized fabric that wrapped infrared and UV around his body—from the canvas bag in the dark. Every morning he slipped past the elliptical steppers and recumbent stationary bikes in the gym's cardio section, and worked up a light sweat doing swings and get-ups with a ninety-pound kettlebell. He attended every thrice-weekly cultural sensitivity and diversity training session, and thus appeared to the others to be a typical white male UN employee collecting promotion points. In the sensitivity sessions, Stone struck his usual pose—aloof, sardonic, mildly flirtatious—and amplified it whenever Merrill attended. The women he flirted with responded with coy smiles, hair flips, fingers landing on his lean, solid biceps.

Merrill's interest in him rose with every sign other women desired him too.

When Stone judged she was receptive enough, he easily reeled her in, despite her half-assed resistance. "Eddie, I have a boyfriend."

"I won't tell him if you won't," he said, smirk on his lips.

Or in his cabin, still fully clothed but sitting side-by-side on the edge of the flipped-down single bed, when she said, "I really should go."

"No, stay." He put on a playfully stern look and jutted out a finger. "But you have to keep your hands to yourself."

Ten minutes later....

Fish. Barrel.

Afterward, she slunk away, blushing. Probably heading straight to her cabin to initiate sex with the man-child to soothe her guilt. She did the same after their second tryst, their third, fourth.... Each time after Merrill left his cabin, Stone shrugged. Data held in an encrypted storage device embedded in his armpit held everything Gray knew about Minerva. Might as well learn it.

Minerva. Originally, an arid planet orbiting a star hotter than Sol. After the colonists turned a hundred comets into a hydrosphere and an atmosphere, the planet's ancient impact craters acquired shallow seas, green and stinking with photosynthetic algae. Eight hundred miles south of Minerva's equator, the capital city, Euler City, straddled the banks of a freshwater river, the Strigidae, where it gouged a canyon through a crater wall and poured into the planet's largest body of salt water, the Wisdom Sea. The scout ship and the diplomatic mission both estimated Euler City's population at about eighty thousand, with another twenty thousand colonists living in smaller towns a thousand clicks or fewer from the capital. About three hundred people lived and worked at the base of a space elevator on the equator. The rest of the planet held no human life. No life at all, rather, except for mosses and fungi spread by the wind and algae seeded by the colonists from orbit.

Wait a minute. A hundred thousand colonists? In all Stone's missions, he'd never traveled to so populous a colony—and every other colony had been habitable from the moment settlers arrived from Earth during the Time of Troubles. Family sizes must be immense. A glance at the population distribution confirmed his guess. Half the colonists were under the age of eighteen standard years.

Stone frowned. He subvoked to his implantable. A map projected onto his view of his cabin's far wall zoomed out, showing all of Euler City. *Highlight schools.*

Seven red circles dotted the map.

He focused on one. *Zoom in. Visible light camera view.*

Two bright green lawns crisply lined, one for soccer, the other for ultimate flying disc. Three buildings with a cumulative footprint of about half a soccer field. The buildings' shadows showed each to have

at most three stories.

This school might serve six hundred students. Nowhere near six thousand.

Maybe Minervans gave education a low priority—
—except Gray feared their high technology.

Perhaps the colonists had invented their own speedlearning technology. Squeeze a year's worth of school into a month. Not quite. Grind off the typical Earth school's busywork and ham-fisted propaganda, and you could squeeze that year down to two weeks.

The colonists might want to sell that technology to Earth.

Which is where his cover story came in. Edward Lavallette, newly-promoted to senior assistant manager in the acceded worlds division of the UN's Global Economic Cooperation Agency. Lavallette traveled to newly discovered colonies, helped business leaders navigate the mazes of red tape required to export advanced technologies to Earth, and helped Earth's superrich and superpowerful skim most of the benefit of those advanced techs. The speedlearning he'd done in his hotel on Florida's Space Coast, combined with the espionage skills grooved deep into his muscles and brain, would simplify his role as Lavallette on Minerva.

Too damn bad he couldn't end his in-flight fling with the purple-haired girl as simply. Firmly breaking it off, or simply ghosting her, could make her do something rash. Stalk him; go to ship's security with a false rape accusation; confess the affair to her boyfriend.... No. Better to carefully lower his value to her. Over the final month, he did just that. He acted needy and clingy, coldly gruff when she wanted emotional comfort, submissive to her whims when she craved his dominance.

His scheme worked. During the final week, the purple-haired girl stayed away from his cabin and rearranged her daily habits to avoid him in public spaces. Good. No distractions. Collect as much data on Minerva as he could and ride out on the first bus through the wormhole back to Earth.

Yassir Arafat dropped out of warp sixteen million miles from Minerva, far enough to dissipate the shock wave of ionizing radiation from the warp rings above the planet's atmosphere. Twenty hours of decel-

eration later, the passengers gathered in the lounges. Stone found himself near a gaggle of resettlement bureau site planners and wormhole placement engineers. Menthol vape clouds chafed the lining of Stone's nose. Rumor said the first two ships' ground parties complained of allergies their entire time around Euler City. More rumor said menthol vape juice would reduce symptoms.

The purple-haired girl came into the lounge at the opposite corner. Though the others partially blocked Stone's view of her, her eyes went cold. "Gautam. I want to go somewhere else." She tugged her boyfriend by his flabby upper arm back into the corridor to the adjoining lounge.

Minerva turned a narrow crescent of its dayside to the camera feeding the video wall. On the lighted crescent, crater seas lay like green-blue discs against the lunar gray surface. South of the planet's equator, two green-blue discs overlapped like the view through binoculars in some movie. Yellow-green fringed a quarter of the shore of the largest sea and cast filaments along jagged, hairlike blue lines. Near the edge of Minerva's dark face, a tiny cluster of lights along the coast of the double sea—

Text suddenly appeared on the video wall, labeling various features. A crewman remembered to turn on the labels for the less-savvy passengers, Stone guessed. The tiny cluster of lights marked Euler City, a few minutes before dawn. More words hung over the planet's lighted limb, attached to a computer-generated white line extending from the equator. *Space elevator*. The cable and any climbing cars would be too thin to see from tens of thousands of miles. The white line ended at a dot of the same color. *Stationary orbit station*.

Lines of text in the UN's six official languages popped up in Stone's vision. A voice induced on his auditory nerves read the words. "Prepare for reduced thrust in 30 seconds. Prepare for free fall in 60 seconds. *Préparez-vous à une réduction de la poussée...*" Most of the text vanished, except for one set of the numerals. The 30 shrank and slid into the lower left corner of his vision and counted down. The 60 did likewise to the lower right.

"Where are you going to put the wormhole?" a scrawny man with a short, woolly brown beard asked a leggy woman with a long raven

ponytail. Stone easily read from the man's tone, and the hangdog look of his brown eyes against his pale skin, that he longed to bed her but had no clue how.

Her sharp Scandinavian cheekbones were like a castle wall, her Korean eyes like crenelations, her plucked eyebrows, like arrows in flight. "Twenty kilometers northeast of Euler City. Off the road and rail line to the surface station of the space elevator."

"How long will it take you to prep the site?"

The Eurasian girl waggled her vape pen. "The Minervans already did it."

Eyebrows knitted like crawling caterpillars. "They did?" the scrawny man said.

She puffed deeply on her vape pen. "You think that's odd?"

The scrawny man rolled his lips in between his jaws. "I mean, I've never been out before—"

Stone turned his rolling eyes away. *No kidding.*

"—but I heard it usually takes months after the wormhole transport arrives to place the wormhole." The scrawny man scratched his bearded chin.

Vapor streamed from the Eurasian girl's nostrils. "I was told that too. We'll be ready to place the wormhole in four days."

The lower left timer reached 0. Stone's weight faded, dropping six pounds per second. He crouched and eyed the array of looped straps hanging from the ceiling.

The scrawny man frowned at him. "Hey, man, what are you doing?"

The lower right timer counted down to 1. Stone rocked his weight upward. His feet left the floor and he curled his fingers around a strap. The scrawny man and his companions flailed their arms and ricocheted off each other. Stone smirked.

The Eurasian girl flapped her arms, struggling to swim in air. She grabbed a strap near Stone and caught her breath. Voice still ragged, she asked, "You've been on a wormhole transport before?"

"No," he answered, truthfully enough. His gaze meandered down her torso and long legs, then back up to lock on her eyes. His smirk sounded in his voice. "But there are a lot of places I know my way

around.”

Hours before a shuttle flight to the stationary orbit station. Over a day before a climber car touched down at the bottom of the space elevator.

“Oh?” Her eyes widened for an instant.

He smirked back. Fish. Barrel.

Treadmill.

3

Stone woke. His eyes shot open and his right hand reached toward the miniature plastic 9mm holstered at his ankle.

His hand stopped short as he oriented to his surroundings. He'd fallen asleep with bright sunlight outside the train windows and the tracks whispering underneath at three hundred miles per hour. He reclined in the same padded, auto-conforming seat he'd taken when he'd boarded at the space elevator; but shadow darkened the windows and the train no longer moved.

Outside the windows across the aisle to his right, a beige wall flecked with brown and yellow held a bright red e-ink sign.

Euler City

Main Station

< Ground Transportation

< Parking Garage

Somehow he'd slept through the train's deceleration into the station. Minerva's railroad engineers had great skill at slowing their bullet trains.

Or else four months of travel had dulled Stone's hair-trigger reactions.

The front and rear doors on the right side of the train car silently

slid open. Currents of dry, hot air knifed through the air-conditioned car and rasped his face.

Under him, the seat moved back to upright. Stone rose, stretched his arms to the ceiling, stepped into the aisle along with the twenty other UN employees in the train car. Including—

Behind him, black hair and sharp Scandinavian cheekbones. Her Korean eyes narrowed even further than usual. The scrawny, bearded man stood behind in their row, craning his neck out the window at the sign.

Stone sniffed out a chuckle and turned his back to her.

His implanted computer pinged an incoming message notification into his hearing. Raised a red flag on a mailbox icon in the lower left corner of his vision. *From: Annika Kim.*

Who? The woman behind him. He hadn't remembered her name inside her stateroom their last night on *Yassir Arafat*.

He opened the message. Her voice burst onto his auditory nerve, louder than the shuffling feet and muttered conversations of the other UN employees.

You think you're God's gift to women, don't you, Ed? Trust me, you aren't. Jordan is ten times the man you'll ever be. I wish I'd seen that earlier on the trip here. But I see it now.

Female jealousy. What else was new? Stone kept his gaze on the door to the front of the train car. More and more hot outside air gnawed at his cheeks. *Enjoy your two kids with him in a house out in Queens.* He broke the connection.

The crowd flowed out of the train car. Stone stepped onto a platform under a curving roof made of a single sheet of some alloy. Hot, humidless air dessicated his nasal passages. He knew the term *dry heat*, but the temperature gauge projected next to the mailbox icon showed 105°F. An oven, not a sauna. A mission to Phoenix—the Arizona city, not the Dubai Convention world—would have given him the same miserable weather without an eight-month round trip. At least the surface gravity was a bit less than Earth's.

Three easy steps down the platform, a young Minervan woman in a short-sleeved sundress of pastel-yellow cotton extended her right arm toward the main station. Smooth skin, faint scents of body wash

and floral perfume, blond hair held back by a plain stainless steel band the width of Stone's index finger. A Caucasian and casually dressed version of a Singapore Airlines flight attendant, the closest Earth's technology had ever come to building androids. Maybe the Minervans genetically altered her to not sweat.

Stone curled up the corners of his mouth and stared deep into her blue eyes. She met his gaze, unblinking. "Please keep moving. My colleagues will guide you to the bus to your residence."

"Will you be coming with us?" he asked with a lilt.

"No." Her blue eyes tracked back to the line of passengers exiting his train car and coming up the platform from the cars behind.

His smirk shriveled away.

The crowd carried Stone to a revolving door. He stepped in. Cold air bathed him. He inhaled deeply—the air smelled and tasted fresher than he expected from decades of experience in train stations, airports, office buildings, hotels—and tension bled from his shoulders.

A small concourse served the station's four platforms. Reflections of soft white LED lights glistened on a glossy tile floor and walls the same flecked color palette as outside. A rank of automated kiosks stood with their backs against the far wall and showed soft colors, curved edges, and antiquated icons for lockers, shoe shine, espresso drinks. Everything looked too clean, as if the station had first received passengers yesterday.

One traveller waited at a seating area near the farthest platform, sipping coffee from a mug and staring at the windows on the platform as if a computer projected data on them only he could see. He took no notice of the crowd of UN employees.

Stone made the solitary traveller instantly. He worked for Minerva's intelligence service. An amateur at spycraft: any normal person would turn his head toward over a hundred strangers from Earth.

The only other people in the station were more young women. Each wore a pastel-yellow sundress and a stainless steel hair band. Not a fashion choice, but their uniform. One waited directly in front of the revolving door and gestured the UN employees toward the center of the concourse. There, a guide with hair the same medium brown as the coffee kiosk behind her beckoned them down a corridor

leading away from the platforms. Low conversations and hundreds of footsteps echoed off the corridor's high ceiling and smooth, windowless walls. At the end of the corridor, under a sign showing *Parking Garage*, a third young woman bade them descend an escalator. Another revolving door spun at the bottom, offering glimpses of a caravan of four tall, streamlined buses.

"We have to go back out in this heat?" complained Annika.

Jackson—or Jordan?—said, "I think we're underground now. It should be cooler than the train platform."

Stone went through the revolving door into the parking garage. A ceiling of gravel and larger rocks glistened with a thick coat of sealant. Underground, yes, but cooler? Maybe five degrees.

A strip of green light surrounded the open door of the lead bus. Another guide girl gestured Stone that way. Cool air from the open door wrapped him. Three quick steps up. Standard interior: a food and drink kiosk in front of him and above the nav and control computer. To his left, a center aisle ran between staggered rows of two seats on each side. A new car smell pervaded.

Stone took an aisle seat about two-thirds of the way back. Deep rows gave him enough space to cross his legs, jutting his knee toward the aisle. That should keep unwanted company away.

When his fellow passengers filled about two-thirds of the seats—fortunately, not the window next to him—the bus shifted into drive. Up a gently curving ramp, the bus emerged into dazzling daylight. The windows polarized a second later. From the sun's position in the sky, the bus headed east, toward the shore of the Wisdom Sea.

Stone turned his head. Forget orbital images and the photos snapped by the scout crew and the diplomatic mission. He would see Euler City with his own eyes.

Buildings between two and four stories, various shades of gray and white, all looking wilted by the heat. Stone soon realized why. Though essentially rectangular, the buildings' edges were rounded. The windows, all made from single panes of glass, had rounded corners. Adjoining buildings melded together in smooth curves and blended colors. Inefficient construction to build curved forms for glass and concrete—

He sucked in a breath. Concrete? He subvoked search terms to his implanted computer.

Not concrete. The dossier from the scouts and the diplomats referred to granular masses of quartz, feldspar, and mica formed and continually reformed by a framework of genetically engineered osteoblasts encoded with building blueprints. Specialized osteoblasts formed transparent regions of vitreous quartz.

Translating from tech-speak, the Minervans grew granite walls and glass windows like bones.

His gaze lowered to the street outside, dotted with aerodynamic cars whispering over blue-black fresh asphalt. Never had a street in Manhattan felt so smooth under Stone's wheels.

Stone shivered in the dense flow from the bus' air-conditioning vents.

If the Minervans grew buildings like bone, self-repairing streets should be easy.

Ahead on the left rose the tallest building he'd yet seen. Thick pillars of cream-colored granite jutted six stories upward to a broad dome. The granite pillars framed four broad, tall—murals? video displays? e-ink images?

No. Stained glass windows. Instead of a mosaic of single-color pieces of glass set in a framework, these were single panes holding regions of distinct colors. Each of the four windows showed a heroic image in an Art Deco style. Nine men in royal blue robes and three women in crimson dresses raised hands and rapt gazes toward constellations. A man in an officer's yellow dress uniform held a pistol in his right hand and a shield in his left, with a rank of similarly-equipped soldiers behind him. A man and woman faced each other, the woman handing over a green cornucopia while green 1s and 0s marched from the man's forehead, and impassive faces looked on from the background. Men in gray shirts worked at a long bench, each with a different gray antiquated tool—hammer, soldering iron, test tube, micropipettor, computer keyboard—

The bus drove on before Stone could make out more details in the stained glass. The last things he observed from the building were the words spelled by thick platinum letters jutting from the wall between

the stained glass windows and three pairs of double-height entrance doors. *Center for Alignment with the Universe*.

A temple, one of about ten around the city and twenty across the inhabited part of the planet, Stone knew from reports. But to what god? The scout ship had provided no intel. The diplomatic mission had monitored traffic patterns in and out of this one. Roughly twenty cars per day trickled in and out of the parking garage. Three mornings and two nights per week, a thousand people thronged in for an hour at a time. The diplomats' informal inquiries about what happened inside the Centers met with vague answers and shifts in the conversations. Requests to attend an activity at a Center were politely rebuffed.

Stone shook his head. Months of forced idleness weakened his focus. Why care what rites the Centers practiced? Stone angled his head from side to side, working out crackles left by days of travel, loosening his thoughts in the process. The fanatics on Trinity hadn't threatened Earth with their Christian beliefs, but with their attempt to recover the last rogue warpdrive ship. Before that, the terrorists on New Moravia had acted on something like a religion—the belief that people with Czech ancestry deserved their own planet—but only their missiles aimed at the wormhole mouth on their planet required Stone to act.

Religions only provided motives. Motives didn't matter. Only actions did.

"Mr. Lavallette?"

Another guide girl stood in the aisle, twin to the ones in the train station. No—a brighter yellow colored her dress, and white piping lined her sleeves and neckline. A wider band of stainless steel glowing with pinpoint green LEDs at her temples held back dusty blond hair. High enough in rank to know the UN employees' names. And attractive enough, especially after four months of seeing the same stale faces...

Stone put on a lazy smile. "How can I help you?"

She shook her head. The ends of her hair brushed the back of her neck. "My name is Abigail. I'm one of the liaison officers assigned by the Minervan government to help you and the other UN employees settle in and get what you need to work smoothly. My fellow liaison

officers and I will have rooms in your hotel. One of us will be on call at all times if you require assistance. The only question you need ask is, how can I help you?"

Stone put a smolder into his blue eyes. "For starters, you can tell me when you're off duty."

Her smooth forehead crinkled. "One of my fellow liaison officers would help you then."

He raised one eyebrow and shook his head. "You know I'm not talking about your professional duties, don't you?"

Abigail's voice grew cool. "Of course I do, Mr. Lavallette. It appears I must tell you that fraternizing with you is strictly forbidden."

With a slow lilt he said, "I'm sure that's what your handbook says—"

"I'm an unmarried young lady with a reputation to uphold."

Damn, she played aloof. Ah, the chase was half the fun. Stone's smirk widened. "I have a reputation of my own. Which includes never kissing and telling."

Abigail folded her arms over her chest. "We're nearing the hotel and I have more introductions to make. Good day, Mr. Lavallette." She stepped past him. Thin cotton rustled over her smooth pale legs. She didn't look back.

Losing your skill at the game? floated through his mind. From the Lavallette persona?

No. From himself.

Stone rubbed his eyes. Losing his skill? Couldn't be happening. Anywhere in the settled galaxy, women remained manipulable creatures. He would win the game. At most, playing it on Minerva might require different tactics.

Then into view on his left came something that put skirt-chasing toward the back of his mind. Two- and three-story buildings of stark white and classical styling rose from the middle of broad green lawns. Steel fences stood between the lawns and the sidewalks. Minervan government buildings, aping the style of United States government facilities in Washington. The Minervans were Americans, after all, and doubtlessly shared with most American-settled colonies a nostalgia for some well-governed golden age. Right down to the apparent lack

of security. The cameras presumably hidden in the fencing wouldn't stop a truck bomb, let alone a thousand rioters or a squad of trained commandos.

A closer look beyond the little capitols and supreme courts revealed a pale blue wedge nearly invisible against the cloudless teal sky. Wait. Was that precise shade—?

His implanted computer copied sensory inputs from his optic nerve. His implant effortlessly performed an RGB analysis and mapped the location at the same time.

The results appeared in his vision as a glowing outline of the wedge with accompanying text. Stone read, then laughed.

Not pale blue. *United Nations* blue colored a thousand-foot skyscraper holding enough hotel rooms, recreation facilities, and office space for ten thousand UN employees. A skyscraper built sometime in the last eight months and towering over every other building on the planet. Towering over government facilities and Centers for Alignment with the Universe.

Maybe the Minervans could grow skyscrapers in hours, but they knew to bend the knee and build them for the UN.

Stone smiled and lolled his head back. He closed his eyes, able to relax. Gray worried about nothing.

4

The elevator slowed, lifting Stone's stomach back where it belonged. He swallowed to clear his ears as the doors opened on the one-hundredth floor.

Cocktail party chatter mingled with a muted trumpet soloing over piano and upright bass. Behind the short near side of the long, narrow triangular bar, robotic arms clattered ice inside shakers. Stone spoke three words to a parabolic microphone and ten seconds later a robotic arm lowered a glass of seltzer with a lime wedge in front of him.

He sipped. He'd been productive during his first full day on *Minerva*, despite fitful sleep from a stuffy nose and a mild headache dogging him most of the morning. Productive, and now time to play his favorite game.

Drink in hand, Stone sauntered to the right through a crowded mass of UN employees. Unlike his gray slacks and royal blue oxford shirt, the others dressed wildly, checked patterns, billowing sleeves, upturned starched collars. The trend for twentysomethings the week before *Yassir Arafat* left Hawking Station, now three months out of date on Earth. Many of the young UN employees were already drunk, and most others were well on their way.

A spicy vape, cumin and turmeric, wafted in Stone's face. "My maaaaan." Sweat plastered a pudgy fellow's black hair to his olive skin. Brown eyes looked down at Stone's drink, went wide. "Vodka

toooooonic!”

Stone’s nose wrinkled. “Sure.” He slapped the man hard on the shoulder and pushed him aside.

Keep moving. Stone cut through the crowd. Rounded the corner of the bar. The riot of different checked shirts would bring back his headache before long. Where were the Minervans?

He pushed into an open area. The corners of his mouth lifted. Minervans in clusters of four to six, women in black dresses and diamond necklaces, gray-suited men with hair pomaded down and solid-colored ties knotted up. Only on a colony world could everyone in so stylish a crowd be white. The Minervans stood far from the bar, close to the glass wall lining this long side of the wedge-shaped hotel’s penthouse.

Distance from the bar explained only a little why the UN employees didn’t mingle with the Minervans. A glance down explained the rest. This uppermost level jutted outward from the main structure of the hotel. The glass walls behind the Minervans curved at the bottom to join the floor. While the UN employees kept their footing on the glossy granite near the elevators, the Minervans seemed to levitate in empty space.

Among the Minervans, Stone found a familiar face. Gaze straight ahead, he strode onto the glass floor toward a group of five. He extended his hand toward a man with a narrow, bulbous nose. “Mr. Ranta!” As part of the Lavallette persona’s duties, Stone had visited Ranta’s office four hours before.

They shook hands. Stone stamped the heel of his black wingtips against the transparent floor. “Is this one of yours?”

“I wish. My company can’t grow glass both as thick and transparent as this floor. Not yet.”

“If you can be the first to break in to the Earth market, you’ll make huge profits you can plow into R&D.” His gaze shifted a fraction, toward a dazzle of diamond on the upper slope of a woman’s breast.

Ranta’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “Let me introduce you to everyone.”

The other man in the group, Yeardeley, manufactured equipment for growing organs from a patient’s stem cells. His equipment worked

well for livers. "Looks like your colleagues might need it."

"All I can say in their defense is that they spent four months cooped up on a ship as spacious as two floors of this hotel."

Yeardley's wife angled her head to Stone. "So did you, but you haven't drunk yourself sloppy tonight."

Bleak memories of his dead alcoholic father stirred. Stone stifled the memories. Shrugged. A smirk touched his mouth. "I kept myself busy with—" He gazed into her wide brown eyes. "—Pursuits."

She quickly looked away, then leaned against her husband and wound her necklace chain in her fingers. Yeardley scowled. Ranta shuffled his feet forward, partially eclipsing his wife from Stone's view.

The fifth member of the party spoke in a husky yet alluring voice. "And what pursuits would those be, Mr. Lavallette?"

The woman stood nearly as tall as Stone. Blond hair billowed around her face. Crow's feet wrinkled the skin at the corners of her eyes. A long, crimson dress clung to her trim curves from collarbone to mid-calf. High on the left side of her chest, jewels woven into the velvet glittered in an image of a half-familiar constellation.

Identify, he subvoked to his implant.

Text popped into his vision. Diamonds as the Big Dipper and Polaris, the north star, in line above the Dipper's leading edge. His implant labeled a round yellow tiger's eye low to the left as *Unidentified*.

Stone returned his gaze to her blue eyes. She regarded him and the corners of her mouth curled up ever so slightly.

If he'd met her at a cocktail party in Manhattan, he'd consider attempting to seduce her. She might possess enough mature sultriness to make up for the faded bloom of her beauty. But here on Minerva, where single women fretted about their virtue and married men guarded their wives, he had no better prospects.

Plus there'd be an extra thrill at seducing a woman of her vocation....

"My pursuits on *Yassir Arafat*?" Stone put on a lazy grin while keeping eye contact. "I'm afraid they lacked any spiritual uplift—Reverend?"

"Facilitatrix. Sheila van Bentum." She extended her hand.

He bowed and kissed it. His lips felt the faint pliable ridges of veins on the back of her hand. The crisp floral scent of her perfume lifted his eyebrows. He straightened his back and slowly pulled his hand away. His fingers slid over smooth skin.

"Fa-cil-i-ta-trix," he said. "Not Reverend? The Centers don't provide guidance in spiritual matters?"

"Not in the manner of a church or temple on Earth. You see, Mr. Lavallette, when one lives in alignment with the universe, all one's actions are equally spiritual. And profane."

"An intriguing perspective. And please call me Edward."

"Edward." She tasted the name.

Time to neg her a little. "Just how much can you know about religion on Earth?"

Her eyes blazed like sapphires. "I was born there."

Stone's jaw fell. "Born? You... you tell a good joke." He glanced to either side. Ranta and Yeardley's faces showed no humor.

"I'm ninety-seven," Sheila said.

Stone regained his poise. He gave a lazy smile. "You don't look a day over seventy."

Angled head, arched eyebrow. She looked like a fit fifty-year-old from the era before longevity tech, and she knew he knew that.

Longevity tech. More advanced than Earth's. The Lavallette persona darted around his subconscious, wanting to make calls, schedule meetings, bring that tech home—

Tomorrow. As for tonight... did he still want to seduce a woman nearly three times his age?

Oh yes.

Stone touched her elbow. "I'm curious how a young woman on Earth became a priestess of a colony world's state religion." He applied gentle pressure in the direction of the window wall.

"I would love to tell you my story. But I don't want to bore these well-aligned people." She murmured good-byes to the Rantas and the Yeardleys, then stepped backward on thick black heels.

A few seconds later, Stone squeezed her elbow through the velvet sleeve, stopping her feet six inches from where the floor curled up to the wall. In the window, the lights of Euler City glowed through the

party's blue-white reflections. Three hundred yards below their feet, the waves of the Wisdom Sea spumed up the crater wall.

"The twenty-first century was an era of social upheaval," Sheila said. "In all such eras, the traditional beliefs and rituals that assure us—all levels of *us*, species, society, and individuals—of our place in the universe shrivel. Many perish completely. But our need to know our place in the universe remains, like a seed craving a patch of dirt and a trickle of water."

"Poetic," Stone said.

"During my college years, that need was in me. But the dominant culture only wanted young people to seek meaning by...." Her gaze knifed past Stone. Slashed across the drunken and horny faces he'd pushed through to get here. Her face showed the tracks of dark thoughts behind it.

"The profane only, without the spiritual."

"Exactly." Sheila smiled. "I lacked alignment with the universe and would have been miserable the rest of my life without knowing why. Then I met the First Facilitator."

"How?"

"He lived and worked in a warehouse in a neighborhood of the city still half in ruins from the street battles between Chicanos and Bantu-Americans in the '30s and '40s. He was a theoretician who knew what a future where everyone lived in alignment with the universe would look like, and wise enough to know that many practical and detail-oriented people would have to get their hands dirty to build that future."

A cult leader. Probably surrounded himself with young women with daddy issues. "You were one of those people?"

"I had a few of the needed skills. Enough to take my place on the team. The First Facilitator provided some money and equipment to start us on the work. Doing the work brought me toward alignment with the universe for the first time in my life."

Stone trailed the backs of his fingers down her right arm. "How did you come to Minerva?"

She brushed a blond strand behind her ear. "Zachary Euler had graduated many years earlier from my university. Many of my team

members were my classmates, graduate students, or had recently finished their degrees there too. Euler heard of our work through the alumni network and came to visit. He had profited handsomely during the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century, but still he craved an alignment with the universe that his trillions could not buy.

"After two days talking with the First Facilitator," Sheila added, "Euler took up our cause."

"A trillion here, a trillion there, and soon you're talking real money."

"Euler opened his checkbook, yes, but he did much more. He publicized us. His name alone gave us credibility. And despite his prominence, Euler deferred to the First Facilitator on everything. With one exception."

"Stay on Earth," Stone said, "or colonize a distant planet."

"You have it. Euler commissioned an exploration ship months before he met the First Facilitator. He said in hindsight it was a fumbling attempt to align himself with the universe. Then the ship returned to the solar system and reported finding a world meeting Euler's criteria." She spread her arm to indicate the night-dark portion of Minerva visible from the window.

"The First Facilitator wanted to stay on Earth," she said. "The team could focus on the work, instead of putting most effort into constructing a biosphere. The team could recruit more people and would have access to more infrastructure, and could achieve the final stage faster. The main reason he wanted to stay, though—I grasped it right away—was because he wanted to bring everyone on Earth into alignment with the universe. If he could do that, all Earth's problems would be solved, and there would be no need to flee."

Solve all Earth's problems. Sure, any millennium now.

"How did Euler win the debate?" Stone asked.

Her tone of voice shifted, clashing with cool jazz trumpet. "US government agents raided, arrested the First Facilitator and several team leaders, and confiscated much of our equipment. Almost everyone sided with Euler after that."

Except for the few who realized Euler had pulled strings to get US agents to eliminate his rival for control of the cult. "Then you came

here.”

“I was on the first of three ships. We worked hard those next years, some of us sending comets to graze the planet while others perfected the techniques of alignment with the universe. We survived a second great loss when Euler died on Earth recruiting a fourth shipful of colonists. But we persevered. We built a habitable world and gave purpose in life to all its inhabitants. And I am humbled to have played and continue to play my small role in our adventure.”

Sheila didn't look humble. Quiet pride filled her mature features and her sapphire eyes. She leaned closer.

Time to close. “Your life has been an intricate tapestry,” Stone said. “Let's add a new thread to it. Twenty floors down. My room.”

Her features remained open, yet: “No.”

Stone flicked his gaze down and up her torso. “Your mouth says one thing, but the rest of you—”

“Not your place. Mine.”

UN employees could leave the hotel at any time in a car checked out from the motor pool. A Minervan counterintelligence officer would trail him, would gather evidence of his tryst with her, but that would be Sheila's problem. “Sure. I haven't been inside a Minervan house.”

She moved her mouth close. Her breath smelled of one vodka drink. Her husky whisper filled his ear. “You were so curious about alignment with the universe, I thought you might like to see a Center from the inside.”

His interest immediately rose. “Talk about the sacred and profane.”

Eyes suddenly tight, Sheila glanced about. Her facial expression eased but a hunch in her shoulders revealed unease.

“Send me the address,” he murmured. “You leave first. I'll take a different elevator to the garage and ride in my own car. No one will see us leave together. I know how important her reputation is to a lady of Minerva.”

She smiled wryly. “You have no idea.”