

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

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DOCUMENTS Assembled by the Honorable Committee Investigating the Tragedy on Planet Bela, and JUDGMENT Thereupon.

Item (1.) *Extracts from the Notebook of Kohn, Robert Rogers, Colonel, Security Forces.*

I feel like I'm diving, not landing.

Bucking headwinds, the freighter's shuttle fights wind and rain until we drop out of the overcast over a blue-black sea. We're heading for a small rocky headland that juts out of a dim coastline.

The green duroplast shuttleport looks like a large fake emerald set in a broken ring of foam. The retros sear the pad, and clouds of steam boil up. As the sole passenger, I'm allowed to exit the ship before its rusty handling bots begin loading. An army of shiny ingots—gold, titanium, metals I don't have a name for—stands to attention, scoured by rain, awaiting the outward journey.

Two moronic guards (male & female) named Vizbee and Smelt retrieve my luggage under the baleful eye of Julia Mack, Captain, Security. My local counterpart salutes and I say falsely that I'm glad to be here. Smelt comments, "You may be glad now, but you won't be for long."

Vizbee adds, "Oughta give this goddamn swamp back to the Arkies."

"*QUIET!*" trumpets Captain Mack, and without further comment, the guards stow my things in a little flyer waiting in a hangar with airfoils retracted. Climbing in, I feel the four or five extra kilos I weigh here—also taste a fizzy, champagne-like something in the air. Maybe the extra oxygen will help me carry the extra weight. Or maybe just make me drunk.

Welcome to Planet Bela, old man.

We're barreling toward Main Base over fog-shrouded cliffs, through a squall blowing in from the ocean. Mack thinks it's all beautiful.

"Born here," she proclaims, her voice overflowing the cabin. "Only human that ever was. Against company policy, of course; Mama was on the pill, but something went wrong. Folks died in a mining accident and the colony raised me. Now, with these murders, they're talking about closing down the mines. People say we're going home—but for me, *this is home.*"

"If I can help you catch the killer," I tell her, "the mines will stay open."

The smell of disbelief mingles with the odor of mildew from her uniform and lacquer from her regulation black wig. Christ, what a huge woman—must weigh close to ninety kilos. Yet not flabby. Her haunch pressed against me is solid as a buffalo's.

We turn west—or is it north?—above the estuary of a wide river where it swirls into the sea, spreading crescents of foam. A pod of enormous sea creatures rises all together, like dancers, and submerges again. I spot the gleam of tusks. Then we're skating in toward a cliff covered with a cluster of domes, semiplast storehouses, and connecting corridors like chicken-runs.

Whoa ... what the hell?

Beneath the clutter lie huge blocks of stone shaped and fitted together like a puzzle. Did I come four-point-something light years to find the Incas have been here before me?

"Welcome to Zamok, Colonel," says Captain Mack, expertly bringing us in to a landing on the gray circle of a rain-slick pad.

As a boy I loved listening to the adventures of old Navigator Mayakovsky—the Explorer of a Thousand Worlds, as one of my textbooks used to say in the clear neutral voice I still hear in dreams.

He named this one Bela, meaning white. When I saw it from space, I thought the reason was the clouds of water vapor that make it glow almost like Venus. But I was wrong.

"Some information for you," says Mack, handing me a memory cube as we stand at the Entries and Departures desk. I plug it into my notebook and listen idly while an autoclerk enters my essential data into the colony's mainframe.

The cube tells me much I already knew. About Bela's wildly eccentric orbit. About the 241 standard years it takes to make its awesome trek. About its endless seasons, whose radical heat and cold result from the orbital path, not the tilt of its axis, which is only about two degrees. Earthlike features: It rotates west to east and its day is 22.7 hours, which ought to be easy to adapt to, even for somebody like me (I have trouble with circadian rhythms).

Then the cube recites the text of Mayakovsky's original report. The great Russian arrived in late winter, finding the skies ice-blue and clear, the surface a white wilderness—hence the name. His scanners spotted an artificial shape and he investigated and found an abandoned city.

"Who could have built this huge stone platform and the lovely temples that bedeck it?" he demanded. "This world is dead. Beings like ourselves, alien wanderers, must have built this place. But why, in this endless Antarctic?"

He named it *Zamok*, the castle, and the unknown builders *sarkhitektori*. Hence the slang term Arkies.

Exploring the castle led to a nasty encounter with carnivores laired in the temples. At first the species seemed merely interesting, a rough parallel to the Earth's polar bears—and what Russian doesn't like bears? So that was the name he gave them, *medvedi*.

"Their long fur changes from dark to white as they move from shadow to sunlight," murmurs the cube. "Tusks and claws are formidable."

Then a blizzard blew in. With complete white-out at seventy below and all bioscanners inoperative due to cold, the beasts ambushed an exploring party. "Two crewmen dead. Skulls crushed. Another vanished, probably eaten. A dangerous degree of cunning and intelligence in these animals."

That of course was a mere incident. The ores his deep metal-scanners found brought the mining cartel. The miners bulldozed off the lovely temples and built the current trashy hovels instead. Meantime winter had ended, and Bela turned out to be anything but dead. Thousands of species swarmed out of hiding and billions of seeds and spores sprouted, to thrive until summer arrived and turned the surface into a howling desert.

A banal thought: How fragile life is, and how tough. Once it gets started, seemingly it can survive anything.

At this point I have to turn off the cube. The local doc's arrived, a tiny energetic Chinese woman named Anna Li.

She puts me through the usual mediscan. Odd business she's in, meeting so many naked strangers—probably wondering later on, when she sees them clothed: Is this the guy with the birthmark

on his butt?

I tell her I'm not bringing in any dreadful diseases, unless being over-the-hill is a disease. She smiles automatically, pays no attention.

"You're okay," she says, studying the printout, "but stay off sweets." Then dashes away.

When I'm dressed, Captain Mack takes charge again, leading me through bilious green corridors crowded with people in gray coveralls. Name tags echo all the tribes of Earth: Jiang, Grinzshpan, Basho, Mbasa, Jones.

To my surprise, my quarters are in the executive suite. A comfortable bedroom, an opulent private bath. On a broad terrace outside, the Inca-like stonework lies bare and gleaming in the rain. The view over the river valley to the distant mountains would be spectacular, except for a heavy steel screen that obstructs it. What look like maggots are inching their way around in the wet.

"Somebody'll bring your luggage," Mack tells me. "Security Central's right next door if you need anything. Like your suite, it has two doors, corridor and terrace. The Controller will see you in the morning after you've rested."

She turns to go. But I've got a question: "What's the screen out there for?"

Mack frowns. "Mr. Krebs used to sleep in here, until somebody fired a missile at him. Fortunately he was in the Security office chatting with me, and he wasn't hurt."

"A missile?"

"Just a shoulder-fired job," she says defensively, as if a small missile makes you less dead than a big one. "Some disgruntled employee. That's when we put the screens up. There's one in front of the Security office, too."

"Was the missile stolen from your armory?"

Mack glares and says, "Yes."

"And where does the Controller sleep now?"

"Someplace else."

She closes the door firmly, leaving me to rest as well as I can—in the middle of a bull's-eye.

Supper's in the dining hall. Mack guides me to the head table in a private room. I'm hoping to see Mr. Krebs. But the Controller dines alone.

Instead I meet a dozen or so executives and engineers. English is everybody's second language, and I listen to a babel of accents expressing fervent hope that I can find the killer. His current score is nineteen dead—almost two percent of the population of 1,042. Dr. Li again bustles in, wearing a laboratory smock, and tells me she has holograms of the bodies and all the autopsy data. I can see them after dinner.

"Hope you've got a strong stomach," says the senior engineer, a guy named Antonelli. Making a face.

"Actually, there's not much mess," says Li. "Always one blow through the top of the skull with a sharp instrument. Odd way to kill someone, but it's silent and effective."

"Any particular sort of victims?" I ask. "Men or women, old or young, hons or hets?"

"No. If somebody was trying to wipe out a statistical cross-section of the colony, you couldn't get much more variety. True, they're nearly all young people. But that's just demographics."

Right. Mining colonies are like that: a few seniors to run the show, many young vigorous people to do what's often hard and dangerous work.

"There is one pattern. The crimes all happen here," puts in Captain Mack, who up to this point has sat silent, stuffing her face. "Never at the mining camp. For the first time, people are volunteering for extra duty at the mines."

A grim chuckle goes around the table.

When the meal's over, I ask Doctor Li to introduce me to the younger people. I stroll through the main dining room, shaking hands and gazing into a kaleidoscope of faces having nothing in common but under-thirtyish freshness. These youngsters probably all think of themselves as larval executives, here to punch their tickets, then home to climb the promotion ladder. I wonder how many will make it.

A few minutes later, I'm walking with Anna—we've quickly gotten on first-name terms—down a chicken-run leading to her clinic. When we're halfway through, she stops and says, "The first killing took place right here."

"Here?"

We're standing in the middle of a perfectly blank, empty corridor about twenty meters long—windowless, well lit and devoid of the slightest concealment. I ask about the victim.

"A woman named Cabrera. Athlete—good runner; life's so dull here that anybody who doesn't take to drink takes to athletics. She could've escaped, I'm sure of it, if she'd seen him coming."

"What was she hit with?"

"Probably a mountaineer's pickaxe—short handle, easily concealed. The point penetrated the longitudinal fissure of the cranium and sank about seven centimeters into the midbrain. Cabrera lived a few hours in a comatose state, then died."

"Does the killer have to be a man?"

"Not with all the girls who take martial arts classes. We're outnumbered by the men and there'd be a rape a week if we couldn't defend ourselves."

"You're implying that not all miners are gentlemen?"

"They're gentlemen in about the same proportion that cops are."

A woman of spirit, I see.

Item (2.) *From the Written Report of Anna Li, D.Sc., M.D.*

This person met Robert—Colonel Kohn—on the evening of his first day on Bela.

I remembered nothing from doing his mediscan except that he was uncircumcised. At dinner I noted that he was a large man with prematurely white hair.

Our initial talk was useful, I think, in helping him understand the situation here on Bela. He seemed interested in the data I was able to show him. Whether he was intelligent I could not at first decide, though he spoke like a cultured man. I admit that intellectual arrogance is one of my grave flaws. We professionals always look down a bit at policemen, whatever we may claim to the contrary.

When he left, I locked the laboratory door. I had begun investigating a common worm or larva, hoping that unraveling the structure of its genome might provide a model for later work on Bela's more complex and interesting creatures.

Wishing the colonel well in my thoughts, I settled down to quiet, enthralling work that took my mind far away from corpses and those who make them.

Item (3.) *From the Notebook of Colonel Kohn.*

The cool voices of clocks are announcing midnight, but of course it doesn't feel like midnight. I'm ready for bed but not, it would seem, for sleep. The old brain keeps cycling in the dry tedium of fatigue.

I'm glad I had this chip implanted in my larynx so I don't have to speak out loud to record my thoughts. You never know who's listening. The technique is somewhat like ventriloquism, and not hard to learn. All the rubbish from my stream of consciousness winds up in my notebook, buried deep in a coded memory.

Anna's pictures are moderately gruesome and not very helpful. Mack's notes on the murders are much the same. The killer's efficient. The MO's bizarre. The victims are anybody.

The crimes began in the corridors, shifted briefly to the hydroponics nurseries, then everywhere. Joggers were struck down on running trails, late workers in machine shops and offices.

Even after Mack issued orders that people were not to go anywhere without a companion, the killings went on. A woman was using a toilet stall while another stood guard outside. When she tried to open the door, it hit an obstruction that proved to be her friend's body.

Customary methods of investigation have failed. Tests for occult bloodstains, hair, and fibers turned up nothing. The colony lacks the equipment for sophisticated psych tests. Mack's methods have been rough-hewn; after the first crime she grilled everybody, eliminated those with solid alibis, then arrested three people who lacked them.

The results were not happy. After two more murders, the suspects had to be set free.

Now *everybody* has an alibi for at least one, and usually for several, of the crimes. No trace of the weapon has been found. Despite the prevalence of mining engineers, it wasn't standard issue; somebody whose hobby was mountain climbing might have brought it in their personal baggage. Mack's computers have searched personal-baggage invoices as far back as they go, but found no record of such an implement.

The stone platform under our feet is seamed with narrow passages. When stories sprang up about alien killers, the Controller first ridiculed the notion, then ordered Mack to explore. Almost any adult human would be too big to go down there, so she used a bot.

The memory cube contains a few images of wall paintings it found down below—the first ever seen of Zamok's Arkies, little hunchbacked brownish bipeds with three-toed feet and gourd-shaped heads and serious dental problems. But no sign of any recent presence except the scat and bones of small animals.

None of this surprised Anna. From the circumstances of the crime, she'd already concluded that the killer, like the victims, must be human....

Oh, hell. I'm still trying to sleep, but no luck. Just too tired, and the old brain keeps churning.

Seeking air, I put on a robe and open a thick transplast door onto the terrace and edge around the screen. A tremulous roar rises from the river. A few chilly raindrops are falling. Thunder grumbles among distant hills.

The air tastes good up here—phytoplankton in the sea and greenstuff in the jungle are hard at work excreting the poison gas we love to breathe. I can feel my heart beat a bit faster. I suppose when you're down in the jungle among all the rotting stuff, it stinks. Most jungles do.

My bare feet are cold—forgot to pack slippers. The blocks of stone are smooth and slick. Little worms squish nastily underfoot. I cross the terrace to a low parapet and look down. Lightning flickers on a dense black jungle lining the riverbank below. Then I smell something like the lion cage at a zoo—

Ahhh!

Phew. Rude shock.

Let me catch up. Light was emanating from the Security office and I'd turned that way and was padding along toward it when somebody flung open the door, pointed an impact pistol at me and yelled, "*A bas!*"

I hit the wet stones just as a shot whanged by. I twisted around in time to see something big that had been coming over the parapet tumble back and vanish.

Feeling better now. I'm in Security and a young guy in uniform is offering me a towel, which I need.

"Sir," he says politely, "I don't think you ought to be outside at night. Wild ahn-ee-mahls sometimes climb the walls."

A skinny little watchspring of a guy with a blue chin and dancing black eyes. His English is fluent but sometimes original. He's Security Officer Lt. Michel Verray.

All around us monitors are blinking and humming to themselves. A voyeur's dream of heaven. In one bedroom, a tumultuous pile of bedclothes suggests a couple trying for a little privacy as they make love. One of the least interesting scenes—an empty bedroom—is my own.

Michel is Captain Mack's only full-time assistant at Main Base. He calls her, with ironic inflection, Maman.

"Here, Colonel," he says. "Let me give you a key to the security office. I'm sure Maman wants you to have one. And I'll sign you out with a pistol."

We chat while completing this transaction. I heft the pistol, check the load, press the recognition stud until it memorizes the pattern of capillaries in my hand. Hi, pistol. Hi, Colonel.

We chat some more. "I presume she's not really your mother?"

He makes a comical face. "Non. But I think she would like to be."

If he's right about that, it's the first sign of human feeling I've noticed in Mack. Michel shows me around, explaining that the monitors were installed after the early killings.

"We try to persuade people to keep to areas under surveillance. I wish we had more equipment. We don't have enough cameras and anybody could be prowling the dark areas, looking for a chance to attack."

"Do people complain that you're spying on them?"

"They did at first. Not so much now they are scared. Anyway, we spy on ourselves, too. There's my room, with my roommates. And in that one you will be thrilled to observe Maman reading in bed."

Mack has her wig off and her hair is close cropped. She looks like Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. I ask if the dozen or so weapons in the rack are the only ones in the colony. No, of course not. The Security people—Mack and Michel and Vizbee and Smelt—all carry guns. So does Mr. Krebs and Senior Engineer Antonelli and one or two other top dogs. In fact, everybody wants one, but Mack's resisting and so far Krebs has backed her up.

Damn right, too. Armed civilians can be more dangerous than the murderer.

"How about the missiles?" I ask.

Michel grins, knowing what I'm thinking. "All five that remain are here locked up, and only Maman has the key."

"I suppose the attack on the controller made her look bad."

"The whole situation makes her look bad. She gets grimmer every day it goes on. She may look like Mont Blanc but actually she suffers from the stress. And refuses to take the medications Dr. Li offers her."

Michel fetches a bottle of cognac and two plastic cups from a supply room. The drink lights a welcome fire in my gut. We chat and soon get chummy. It turns out that Michel did the exploration of the subsurface passages.

"You built the bot?"

"Non. Miners already had them to explore places too narrow or dangereuse for people. Call them Spiders [he said speed-airs]—little guys, walk on three legs, carry a digicam and an HI-light. I guided it through the passages, made Maman a memory cube and sneaked a copy for myself."

He shrugs, rolling his eyes upward in comic alarm. "Boy, she'd be pissed if she knew that."

"Why?"

"Like many mamans, she's difficult. She thinks knowledge is power. Okay, she's right. She wants to know everything that goes on here. Okay, that's her job. But she also wants to monopolize information, store it up to use against her enemies."

"She has enemies, then."

"Mais oui," says my new friend cheerfully, tossing off the last of his drink. "Everybody but me and Krebs hates her comme la peste."

Like the plague, eh? Well, I never imagined she'd be wildly popular. Michel's becoming franker (and also Frencher) as he absorbs alcohol. While he refills our glasses, I ask, "What do you want the cube for, Michel?"

"When I get home, I want to get a degree in Alien Civ and start teaching. I've started going over the cube frame by frame, and I think I can get my whole tay-seize [thesis?] from it. Le bon Dieu didn't mean me to be a cop," he added, then blushes, thinking I may take this as an insult to my profession.

"I agree with God," I assure him solemnly, and say good night. Now armed, I cross the terrace without incident.

Good kid, I think, turning in. He's saved me a lot—my life, plus a ton of post-mortem embarrassment. Wouldn't that have been a fine terminal note in my personnel file? *On the first day of his last assignment, KOHN, Robert R., COL, SN 52.452.928, contrived to get himself eaten.*

Good night, all. And pleasant dreams.

Morning comes with rain, thunder, lightning, and a nasty shock.

Early on I'm summoned to Krebs's office. Captain Mack pounds on the door and, when I stagger out with eyelids still stuck together, leads me in grim silence through a labyrinth of corridors.

We're somewhere deep inside Main Base when we reach the new executive suite—so deep that the noise of the storm has faded into silence. Clearly, Mr. Krebs does not intend his quarters to be hit by any more missiles if he can help it.

His office is large, blank, and ugly, and so is the occupant thereof. Mack withdraws without a word and a spongy, grim-faced man leans forward in a tall executive chair and gives me two weak-feeling fingers to shake.

The chief feature of his face is a jaw like an excavator. His lower right canine sticks up outside. His gut billows over the edge of the desk, but his arms are thin and look unused. I typecast him as the perfect executive, a fat guy with a stone behind, good for nothing but giving orders to people smarter and stronger than he is.

"You'll be going in half an hour," is his greeting.

"Going where?"

"Why, to check the body," he growls, relapsing against the back of the chair. "Take Li with you. Third-rate doctor, but she's all we've got."

"There's been another killing?"

"Mack didn't tell you? Goddammit, I got to do everything around here. Yeah, it's at Mining Camp Alfa."

"The first at a mining camp."

"Right. Now these cowardly shits I got working for me won't want to go to the field at all. They all think they're here to eat company food and punch their tickets and do as little work as possible."

I begin to see why somebody might fire a missile at Mr. Krebs. He seems to have a similarly unkind view of me. He sits there glaring for a few seconds, then demands suddenly, "Are you piggybacking on my budget?"

Sticking his jaw out even further.

"No. HQ pays me and the mining cartel reimburses them."

"Well, thank God for small favors," says Mr. Krebs. "The dead guy was nobody special. Another small favor."

That ends the interview.

I collect my notebook, put in a new battery and meet Anna outside her clinic. She has an overnight bag full of specimen bottles and a medical chest, which I carry for her.

"I met your boss," I tell her as we hasten to the pad.

"To know him is to hate him," she says. "Hurry up, only one flyer's working and this is it."

Ten minutes later we're taking off into the very teeth of the storm.

What a flight. It lasts one hour or one eternity, however you choose to look at it. The damn black box piloting us has been programmed to take the most direct route—misplaced notion of fuel economy, I suppose—and that involves crossing a wide bay full of churning black water. A squall is barreling toward the shore, and we fly directly into it.

I feel sure the lightning's going to fry the black box and send us careening down into the sea. Haven't had breakfast, so there's nothing to come up except, of course, my stomach itself.

Anna takes all the pounding and shaking stoically, or seems to. Still, I notice she too heaves a sigh of relief when at last we leave the bay behind and bounce down onto another rain-scoured concrete circle near another clutter of domes and sheds.

"Well, here's Alfa," she says.

People come running with umbrellas—yes, real Earth-type umbrellas—but of course we get soaked anyway. Two dozen people are stationed here, but three guys are away fixing a slurry pump, whatever that is. So I get introduced to twenty live people and one corpse.

The latter is a young man named Thoms. He's lying facedown on the poured-stone floor of the machine shop. At first glance the only difference in MO was the fact that he'd been hit on the base of the skull instead of the top.

"Weapon appears to have penetrated the posterior median sulcus of the medulla," Anna tells her notebook.

But then she puts on a headset with a xenon lamp and high-power 3D magnifier, lowers the lenses over her eyes and kneels down, her nose almost touching the dead man's blood-stiff hair.

When I help her up, she's frowning. "The wounds at Zamok were punched through," she mutters. "But this time ... the wound's not nearly so neat. As if the weapon flattened on impact. I'll have to check when I've got the body back at the lab. Help me turn him over."

Somehow, handling a dead body has a calming effect on me. When I first see a corpse I'm always shocked, even after so many years of looking at violent death. But when I handle the body and feel that special weight, especially—as now—with rigor setting in, I know I'm dealing with earth and stone, not a person, and I can treat it like any other forensic exhibit.

Superficial examination shows that except for being dead Thoms's body is not, as Anna puts it, remarkable in any way. After taking a bunch of holograms, we bag it and the miners help us put it in their freezer.

The rest of the day I spend in a small, bare office with a single monitor bleeping on a chipped duroplast desk. I'm sipping coffee, noshing on bad sandwiches covered with some kind of ghastly synthetic mayo, and interviewing survivors.

Nobody saw or heard anything. Thoms was well-liked, with no known enemies, and every single person at Alfa was under observation by others at the most probable hour of death, which Anna puts between 6.30 and 8.00. I reach the last name on my list before Madam Justice lifts her blindfold and peeks at me.

The witness—named Ted Szczech, pronounced Sheck—is a pale, twitchy, skinny kid who looks about sixteen and wears coveralls that could serve him for a tent. He shuffles into the room carrying an envelope.

"I've uh, uh, uh, got something for you, sir," he stutters.

"Oh yeah? What?" Bad food plus no progress has put me in a foul humor.

Ted spends the next five minutes tripping over his own tongue. The story gradually emerges that he worked with Thoms in the machine shop and so was the first to spot the body. Before sounding the alarm he ran for his digicam, rightly anticipating that everybody in Alfa soon would swarm in and obliterate every clue.

"Why didn't you bring me the pictures at once?" I demand in my growliest voice. Actually, I'm impressed by his initiative.

"I w-w-was w-w-w-waiting my turn," Ted explains. "And uh, uh, uh—"

"What?" I say, beginning to pull the printouts from the envelope.

"Well, you can see the f-f-f-footprints pretty clear."

"Footprints?"

"Yeah. They showed up when I used the infrared flash. Standard light don't show n-n-nothing. I never even knew they were there until I p-p-p-printed out."

I stare at dim little three-toed marks around a corpse so fresh that under black light it still glows with the warmth of life. In the early morning the stone floor was cold and the killer's body heat created just enough transient warming for the cam to register.

"It probably ran away when you started to open the door," I comment. That seems to scare Ted.

"You think so?" he asks, eyes bugging out. "You really think so?" Not a single stutter.

When I show the pictures to Anna, she looks ready to tear out her graying hair. "Oh, great Tao. We got it *settled*. The killer has to be *human*," she moans.

"Okay, a human did it. And then Threetoes walks in, trots over to body, trots away again and disappears into the jungle, and—"

My voice dies in midpassage. Anna looks at me. I look at Anna. We're both remembering where we've seen three-toed feet before.

"We'd better get back to Zamok," she says. "Now."

The storm's abated and the trip back is a bit tedious, which certainly was not a problem on the trip out. Lying behind us wrapped in translucent plastic the corpse reminds me unpleasantly of a giant fetus swathed in its placenta.

Back at the Castle we hump our gear across broad puddles and down gray corridors into Anna's lab. I

retrieve my infopack and we check the pictures the Spider took underground. And yes, the Arkies have three-toed feet that resemble Ted's blurry images.

While I make tea on a hotspot under a vacuum hood, Anna calls Mack and asks for the memory cube containing the full exploration of the subsurface passages.

"You're not authorized to see it," that ungracious woman growls.

"What do you mean?" snaps Anna. "I've got top clearance. I need it for the work I do."

"You're a penis machinist, not a security officer. You don't have a security-type clearance."

At this point I step forward. "I'm cleared for everything you are, Captain, and a lot more. Send that goddamn cube and send it now."

That makes me feel pretty good. Pulling rank may not be nice, but it's effective.

We relax until Michel appears with a sealed container, for which Anna and I both have to sign. He gives me a wink, then heads back to his job. A couple of minutes later, she and I are head to head, staring into the image box of her computer.

The solid-looking forms jounce, steady, fuzz out, clarify. We're entering a narrow slot between two of Zamok's cyclopean stone blocks. We descend steep narrow steps. The high-intensity light swivels back and forth, its movement complicated by the robot's walk. Anna's forever freezing a frame here and there so we can get a fairly clear picture.

Along walls of smooth stone marches a painted procession of Arkies wearing fantastic outfits of skins and feathers. Projecting teeth give their heads a spiky appearance. At the foot of the steps a narrow corridor splits left and right and the robot begins to explore. Passages divide and subdivide and it pokes into small rooms covered with garish paintings that make me think of Mayan art at Tikal and Dzibilchaltun.

It's all quite fascinating and, as far as our current problems are concerned, absolutely useless. When the show's over, our tea has gotten cold. "So what's your conclusion, Colonel Sir?" asks Anna with ungentle irony.

"An alien—" I begin.

"The Arkies are natives," she corrects me. "We're the aliens."

"Okay, okay. First of all, you were right. An Arkie couldn't have done the killings at Zamok. You turn around in a corridor and see a strange creature, you run, you scream, you fight back, you do something the victims didn't do. The killings here were done by a human. So we have an anomaly."

We sit staring at each other. Feeling around helplessly in my empty head, I ask, "What do we know about the Arkies?"

She gestures. "What you've seen."

"I mean—" I don't know what I mean. "How'd they survive in this world? It's so bizarre, radical cold, radical heat, seasons that last for decades ... how'd they get along?"

She sighs. "Nobody knows. We're like a pimple on the body of the planet. We came here with typical engineer's tunnel vision, to dig and smelt and ship the ingots home and follow them when the mines play

out."

She spends a while reheating the tea, then goes on: "I'm as bad as the rest of them. Spend my days doing routine physicals and treating orthopedic injuries from the mines. That's where the crack about me being a penis machinist comes from. And there's truth in it. I try to do some real science after hours."

"Anything helpful?"

"For solving the murders? No. On the contrary—it's as far as possible from anything to do with them. I'm trying to get a start on understanding the molecular biology of—"

"Oh," I say. "Okay."

"Anyway, you asked me how the natives fit into their world. Answer: I don't know how anything really functions on Bela. We're all so busy being practical that we don't have time to be intelligent."

So we give up; I send Michel the info we gathered at Alfa, and then we go to dinner.

Replay of last night—Mack feeding her face, the engineers eyeing me, wondering if I know something they don't about the latest atrocity. To avoid questions I don't want to (meaning: can't) answer, I avoid socializing, say good night to Anna and as soon as possible drag my aging butt off to bed.

Through the door to the terrace I see that another storm's moving in. The cube says the "spring rains" are scheduled to last about forty standard years. What would Noah say to that?

Hit the hay but again can't sleep, this time because the lightning keeps waking me up. Cursing, I get up and start searching for a way to darken the window.

Lightning flashes. Inside the screen a monster stares at me.

Lightning flashes. I stare back. Oh come on, it's only an animal.

But it's impressive. Standing upright, bowlegged, body covered with rough fur of indefinite color. It's a boar, by God—a huge two-legged boar. The hairy ears, the little red eyes with startling piggish intelligence in them—and the tusks, two down and two up, dirty orange but rubbed white where they cross each other—and especially the flat snout, quivering, with the hairy nostrils spread....

And then, of course, I see it's not a boar or anything else I've ever known. Long claws instead of trotters. Muscled forelimbs adept for walking or climbing. Imagine a big bear crossed with a swine, crossed with ... what? Something.

In the dark this triumph of natural genetic manipulation claws at the thick transplast with twenty-centimeter talons that make a nerve-jangling skreek. Lightning flashes. It exposes the full length of its twelve-centimeter tusks and turns away, frustrated.

Lightning flashes. The animal's gone.

Somewhat shaken, I continue my search, find a switch on the wall and touch it. Yes, praise whatever gods may be, the window darkens. I go to bed again and try to fall asleep.

Processions of feathered creatures march through my head, tracked by two-legged pigs and by Mayakovsky's *smedvedi*, the bearlike animals that ambushed his people seventy years ago when it was wintertime on Bela....

Why do all these strange critters seem vaguely alike?

Item (4.) *From the Written Report of Li, Anna M., M.D.*

I spent that evening in my laboratory, meaning to work on my project. But my mind kept drifting to the body in my freezer.

At length I gave up, dragged poor Mr. Thoms onto an examining table, and began to explore his wound. Almost at once I found something odd.

Perhaps I should have called the Colonel at once, but I decided he was probably asleep. So I promised myself to speak to him at breakfast, not realizing that tired as I was after our adventures of the day, I might oversleep and miss him in the morning. And that is exactly what happened.

Item (5.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

"So," says Mr. Krebs, champing his jaws, "what've you learned so far?"

His windowless office gives me a feeling of premature burial. The man himself, with his piranha profile and billowing stomach and weak little hands, manages to look dangerous and helpless at the same time.

"Who do you think tried to hit you with a missile?" I respond conversationally. This is a question I (literally) dreamed up last night, when the old subconscious finally did something useful.

"I want answers, not questions."

"Well, I don't have any, yet. But you haven't just had twenty murders here. You've had that plus an attempted assassination of the colony's executive head. I'm curious as to whether there might be a connection."

He growls. Literally—grrrrr. Like a dog.

"Talk to Captain Mack," he says. "That's her department."

"I'm surprised you've kept her in such an important position after all the things that've gone wrong here," I say frankly.

"I trust her absolutely."

I take this as an admission that anybody appointed in her place might use Security's armory to try to kill him—again.

"Now, if you don't mind answering my original question, what've you found out about *the murders*?"

I open my notebook and set it humming. Briefly I outline the events of the day before. At the end I summarize, "The Arkies have joined the fun."

"But they're all *dead!*" he almost yells.

"No more than Mayans or Egyptians or Celts or Cambodians or any of the other builders of abandoned cities on the Earth are dead. They just moved away. Their descendents live on. Spring brought the Arkies out of hiding, and what did they find? Their Acropolis, their temple mount, had been desecrated by aliens—us. That pissed them off, and they've just killed their first human."

I think that's kind of a neat theory—much too neat to be true.

"You're saying none of our people killed anybody?"

Patiently I explain the difficulties in trying to blame the first nineteen killings on the natives.

"So you're telling me we've got two killers, in two different places, killing people in the same bizarre way, and one's a human and other's a whatchacallit. That's the dumb-assedest notion I ever heard."

"Sir, you've summed up the problem," I tell him. "The evidence is unreasonable. *But it's still evidence.* "

The rest of the interview's a total waste of time. We just yell at each other, accomplishing nothing. A supply ship's due pretty soon and I guess he'll send me home, as he's authorized to do. That will make both of us happy.

Needing time to cool off a bit after the shouting match, I set out to find Anna's lab and promptly get lost.

I don't know if I've made this clear, but Main Base is a hopeless maze. The buildings were put up at different times for different purposes out of whatever materials were at hand. Meanwhile the population increased to a high of two thousand or so and then declined as mines were worked out and abandoned. Now a dozen buildings are permanently vacant, and a tangle of corridors lead here and there with no rhyme or reason, often ending in blank walls where an abandoned structure's been sealed off.

Adding to the general confusion, about half the people are absent at any one time. Some at mining camp Alfa—the only site that's presently active—the rest at the smelter, or exploring for new sites. Then they come back to work at administration or housekeeping. The idea is to train the youngsters in all phases of running a colony.

But that also means they rotate in and out, causing ceaseless turbulence. I've got a near-photographic memory for faces, and yet I've never seen many of the people I encounter.

Two I do recognize are Vizbee and Smelt, the guards from the shuttleport, who must have rotated back. Vizbee's as near insolent as he dares to be. "Enjoying Bela, *Sir* ?" he asks with a nasty smile.

At least he's learned the word sir since I saw him last.

"You're looking a bit lost, *Sir* ," Smelt chimes in, with a washed-out smile. Someday I will deal with this pair.

Actually, getting lost turns out to be one of the more useful things I've done. I've been dealing with facts, which are fine as far as they go. Now I'm getting the feel of the situation, too. The killer's been hunting his victims in a kind of indoor jungle. Add the fact that he doesn't seem to care who gets bashed as long as somebody does, and the bloody orgy becomes comprehensible.

I spend a couple of hours wandering, asking directions, finding the directions don't work, and getting lost again. Periodically I come across a sealed window and look out on the river valley. Or a landside enclosure with high fences and shrouded machinery on duroplast skids. Or a big cube sprouting thick cables—the main generator, a primitive fission-type reactor. Bela, I perceive, is run on the economy plan.

But I can't get out, and soon I'm wandering the maze again like a baffled rat.

Finally admitting I'm lost for the nth time, I ask directions from a pretty dark-haired engineer named Eloise. We chat, and she invites me to visit her room, explaining that she and her boyfriend are "on off-rotation"—awkward phrase—from the mines.

The boyfriend's named Jamal, and he's solidly built and dark and bitter as a cup of Turkish coffee. He and Eloise share a very cramped room, which they consider themselves lucky to get. I ask why space is so tight when, with all the empty buildings, it should be just the opposite.

"Mack says it's for security," growls Jamal. "Stay where the cameras can watch your every move, including when you shower and make love. I can just see her and Krebs lying in bed—incredible as it seems, a lot of people think they sleep together—and peeping at us like the swine they are."

My own impression is that Mack and Krebs are both asexual beings, but I don't argue the point. Instead I remark that morale in the colony is close to rock-bottom.

"It's dying," says Jamal, now sounding weary rather than bitter. "Everybody hates the leadership and everybody's scared to death."

I'm sitting with Eloise on the edge of their bed. Jamal is sitting on the floor.

"See, you haven't been here the last two years," he goes on. "You look at the number of victims and think, 'Oh, well, ninety-eight percent of the people are still alive.' But when you live through a campaign of murder, the effect is cumulative. I never leave El without wondering if I'll ever see her again, and she wonders the same thing about me."

She strokes his coarse black hair and nods. She has an inner stillness that he completely lacks, yet she backs him up.

"It's been hard," she says simply. "I'm sure nobody will want to come here again, and everybody who's here already is counting the days until they can leave. Bela will have to be abandoned."

She's less bitter than he is and makes an effort to be fair, even to Mack, whom everybody else blames for their miseries.

"She's in a terrible situation. If she's afraid of anything, it's having to leave Bela. I'm sure she's doing her best to find the killer, and I'm not sure anybody else could do any better. I mean, how do you catch somebody who doesn't care who dies as long as somebody does?"

"Some goddamn maniac," Jamal mutters.

"I don't think so," says Eloise thoughtfully. "The killing's random, yet at the same time it's calculated and deliberate. It's ... cold. Somebody's aiming at something, and it can only be to drive us all away."

"Why would a human want to drive humans away?" asks Jamal, and neither of us has an answer.

There is, of course, the big exception—Thoms's murder. My hosts haven't heard about that yet. But the conversation starts me brooding about it once again.

Feeling a strong urge to revisit Alfa, I thank the young folks and ask them to show me an exit to the pad. They do so, and my luck's in, because on the pad the flyer's revving up. It's a dull trip, and everything seems normal until we arrive.

Then I ask for Ted Szczech, and learn that he won't be taking any more pictures. Ever.

No, he didn't die by the customary head-bashing.

Less than an hour before, something resembling a two-legged boar grabbed him when he was outside working on a stuck valve of a slurry pipe, and dragged him away—presumably to eat.

They're getting up a search party to try and recover his remains. I ask to go along and they say sure.

As I'm suiting up, a call comes in from Anna. She's been hunting me, called Michel in the security office and asked if I was on any of his monitors. He told her he'd seen me with Eloise and Jamal, so she called

them and they told her they'd seen me catch the flyer. Then Michel called her back and said he needed to see me, too.

Funny, all you have to do to get popular is to go away.

Anna's full of her latest discovery. "Last night I found bronze fragments embedded in Thoms's skull. I'm not set up to do metallurgical analysis, so I asked one of our engineers to check the fragments out."

"Why?"

"I think the bronze was smelted by some very crude, primitive process. The alloy's soft and that's why the skull did almost as much damage to the weapon as it did to the skull. Or maybe it was meant for use on a softer, thinner cranium."

"In short, it was made by an Arkie to smack other Arkies and the hardness of the human head took its wielder by surprise."

"Something like that. When are you coming back?"

"They're sending out a party to search for Ted Szczech, and I'm going along. A wild animal got him."

"Great Tao. What kind of animal?"

I describe it.

"Oh, that's *Ursasus terribilis*, " she says.

"Meaning?"

"Terrible bearpig. I started doing taxonomy on the local fauna, giving Latin names and so on. Then stopped, because it seemed so futile. Oh, poor Ted."

"We may find him yet."

Somebody's yelling for me. Michel will have to wait.

We put on transparent rain gear, the kind that breathes so you don't drown in your own sweat, and water-repellent goggles. We're all armed to the teeth. The flyer takes off to circle over the search area. Nobody's expecting it to find anything; the jungle's too full of big organic molecules that confuse the bioscanner.

Down below, it's exciting at first—walking in the deep wet woods of Bela. Up to now its green/blue/purple colors seen through misty rain didn't look especially strange. Close up it's a crawly place. Everything drips; every step squishes. Vines are in motion, like the hands of an antique clock; you can't see them move, but if you look away and look back, yes, they've changed.

The trees form short, twisty lattices of rope-like growths with trunks not much thicker than limbs. No large trees—there's been no time for them to grow yet. Leaves of all shapes stretch up and out toward the little light that's available, ruthlessly shading each other out so that the understory is choked with masses of dead and rotting vegetation.

No flowers. Everything in monotone. Things buzz around that look like flying crayfish. In glimpses of the sky, we see dashing small shadows that somebody on my intercom calls daybats. Hunting the crayfish, I suppose. Now and then I catch sight of an elaborately feathered creature crawling through the branches with its beak and talons, like a parrot. The usual little white worms are crawling around the wet ground,

millions of them. My feet squash them at every step. I begin to feel like I'm walking through the innards of a dead, decaying beast. Even through the filters in my breathing apparatus I catch whiffs of decay, not quite like decay on Earth; a sharp touch of ammonia, stench of methane, a gagging bubble of—what? Chlorine? Plus that smell like a lion cage I sniffed before on the terrace at Zamok.

Lasers hiss in the murky air and slashed limbs fall smoking to the ground where the wet extinguishes them. The ground's like a spongy mattress and I sink knee-deep at every step. Soon my legs ache and my knees are quivering. We circle the whole camp, finding nothing.

Ted's just gone. Period.

Back at Alfa, I'm bushed. Fall on somebody's cot and snooze for about two hours. When I awaken, one of the guys tells me Zamok's been buzzing me.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Easier said than done, old-timer. You were *out*."

First time anybody's called me old-timer to my face.

I stagger to the nearest monitor and press the return-call button. Michel's image says he'd like to see me as soon as possible. I call his code but get only his image again, promising to return my call at the earliest possible moment.

I have ersatz coffee and another plastic-mayo sandwich and think it over. If Michel wants to see me, why hasn't he called again and why doesn't he answer my call?

I call Captain Mack and ask if she knows where he is. She's looking, if possible, grimmer than usual. No, he's off duty until tomorrow. Where's he sleep? Impatiently she gives me the code for the room he shares with two girls and another guy. I call and his roommates are there, but he isn't. I call Anna and ask her to look for him.

"I'm waiting for the analysis of the bronze."

"Look for Michel, please."

I go to Alfa's commandant and ask to borrow the flyer. No, he says, it's on a regular schedule.

When will it be going back to Zamok? Tomorrow noon, he says. Thank you, I say.

I walk out onto the pad and find a tech just finishing his service routine. I tell him Hi, and when he goes back inside, I climb in and tell the black box to take me to Zamok.

"Hearing and obeying," says the gadget.

"Accept no calls from any source until we arrive," I add.

"Hearing and obeying," says the gadget.

I settle back in the seat and wonder how I can explain snatching this machine if, after all, Michel meets me alive and well.

I needn't have worried.

By the time I arrive he's been found, and Main Base is in the state of an overturned anthill.

As startling as the murder itself is the way it was done: Michel Verray has been shot in the back in the same chicken-run where Cabrera's body was found almost two standard years ago.

There was no approach, no hands-on attack. An impact slug was fired from the far end of the corridor. His belpouch has been roughly opened, breaking the catch, suggesting robbery. His pistol's missing. Was he killed with his own weapon?

A scenario flits through my mind: Michel confronts the killer, draws his weapon, has it knocked out of his hand—maybe by somebody who's been taking those martial-arts classes Anna talked about. He turns and runs away, and the killer picks it up and coolly takes aim and shoots him....

But I'm not even sure he was running when he was shot. Mack thinks so, but the holograms she took of the body seem ambiguous to me. A runner hit from the rear in midstride on a smooth surface slams down and slides. I think the abrasions on his face are insufficient for that. I'd say he was hurrying but not running, and Anna's inclined to agree.

In her clinic she starts crying, the first time I've seen her do so. She has Michel's body on her examining table, and it's a horrible mess. As usual with that type of ammo, the entry wound near the spine is the size of my little finger and the exit wound through the chest is the size of my head. The slug, of course, disintegrated as it's supposed to do, leaving no evidence.

"Even Mack's shaken up," she tells me when she's cried on my shoulder. "I saw her when they brought the body in, and she looked paralyzed. She kept saying, 'Oh no. Not him. Oh no.' He was kind of a substitute son, you know. Now she's really alone."

Well, murder gets to the toughest of us, sooner or later.

Anna washes her face at a laboratory sink and says dolefully, "I have to do the autopsy."

"Not now, you don't. Tomorrow's fine. Michel won't run away. Come on, I'll help you put him on ice."

I hate to touch the body, but as soon as I do, it's okay. Michel is gone; the good mind, the lively wit, the Gallic accent, the future he had sketched out for himself—none of that exists anymore. The corpse is merely evidence.

We wrap it up and put it in the freezer next to Thoms. We're getting quite a collection of dead youth.

Anna needs company, so I take her to my suite and, after I check my weapon—in case of bearpigs—we step out on the terrace.

Rain's falling in the distance, but a gap has opened in the clouds and pale sunset colors, lemon and rose, are showing. It's the first sunshine I've seen on the surface of Bela. I begin to see what this world will be like in those magical decades—between spring and summer, again between autumn and winter—when it's neither savagely cold, nor unbearably hot, nor a sodden mess. It'll be gorgeous.

For a while we stand there like a young couple holding hands. Anna needs distraction, so I begin telling her about the wet wild woods around Alfa, about the strange creatures and the restless trees. Her mood lightens a little.

"I want to do some real science here," she says. "I just won't let myself keep getting sucked into the routine. I've been doing a little work on these larvae."

She gestures at the worms crawling on the terrace. "They're all over the place and they're genuinely weird. A human has maybe forty thousand genes, but they've got five times as many."

"What, those little worms? Why?"

"I don't know. They're about as simple creatures as you could imagine—a kind of motile gut. And think about all the chances for genetic errors, for destructive variations—it's too much information."

She added, "Rather like the murders. Where we've also got too much information and can't make any sense out of it, either."

She's back on that subject now, and with a sigh I admit to myself there's no avoiding it. Now she's mourning Michel, who evidently had a gift for making older women want to take care of him.

"Such a nice young man. A little while and he'd have been headed home. It's terrible, all these young people dying."

She starts to cry again. I put my arms around her, and she's so small that for all the gray in her hair it's like holding a child. I'm just about to embark on some serious comforting when intuition—as usual—seizes an inconvenient moment to strike.

"Anna, listen. Tell me this: Why was Michel hurrying down that particular corridor?"

She looks up at me, eyes bleary, mind as usual clear. "Oh. Sure, it leads to my lab. You mean he couldn't find you, so he was coming to see me."

We stare at each other for a few seconds.

"Come on," I say.

"Where?"

"I just saw a ray of light. This time internal. I think I know what the killer was looking for in Michel's belt pouch. Let's go talk to his roommates."

Vengeance is on my mind.

Anna's an unusual woman. Asks no questions, just leads the way through the maze of shoddy construction. I stumble a few times because my mind's elsewhere, thinking of a lot of things that at last, dimly, seem to be making some kind of sense.

Michel's room is in an outlying building: large, clean, well-lighted; semiplast partitions between four bunks; a bouquet of artificial flowers lying on Michel's pillow.

His roommates are all drinking something with the sour smell of home brew and talking together in low voices. I ask to see Michel's belongings.

"Captain Mack took them all," says a young Eurasian woman named Jospin, who seems to be the spokesperson for the group. "She and those two characters Vizbee and Whatever practically turned the place upside down."

"She said," adds the guy, "that she was looking for evidence."

That starts an argument between those who say Mack was just doing her duty and those who say she was harsh and unfeeling. I short-circuit this argument.

"Listen. You all know who I am and what I'm doing on Bela. Now I need something and one of you may have it. I hope you do."

I explain what I think Michel has been killed for, and how much I need to see it if it still exists. Jospin looks steadily at me, then reaches into her belt pouch and takes out a pillbox.

"For PMS," she explains with a faint smile. She shakes out, not a pill, but a memory cube and hands it over.

"He asked me to hide it," she explains. "He said not to give it to anybody. He didn't say why."

"I don't know why either," I tell her. "But I hope to find out. Many thanks, and" (speaking as impressively as I can) "don't ... say...*anything* about this."

In Anna's lab we play the cube and, yes, it's the copy Michel made for himself of the Spider's exploration of the subsurface passages of Zamok.

"We've seen this already," says Anna, disappointed.

"But perhaps not all of it."

As before, we settle down head-to-head to watch. Once again the little robot descends a slot half a meter wide. Once again pictures of garish creatures in bizarre attire wobble past. We enter familiar rooms, leave them, walk three-leggedly down corridors, enter other rooms.

I'm beginning to get worried. The trouble with intuition is that until you test it, an error looks just as convincing as the truth.

"I don't see anything n—" Anna's beginning when I yell something, maybe "Shit!"

We both stare breathlessly at the screen.

The Spider is entering a room we've never seen before. Slowly it pans the walls and ceiling with its HI-light. We're looking at a sacrifice. As with medieval paintings or comic strips, a series of scenes tells a story.

Unlike our Aztecs, the Arkies had metal weapons, the favorite being an implement with a long handle ending in a curved blade on one side and a spike on the other. With one of these gadgets a priest ceremoniously sacrifices one of his own kind to whatever gods he believes in.

The method is familiar; a fatal blow delivered with the spike against the back or top of the head. Only he does a follow-up, splitting the skull with the axe, after which the believers gather to eat the brain.

The victims don't seem to be resisting; light streams from their faces and rainbows encircle them with full-spectrum haloes. Above them god figures hover, radiating light; in the last scene, they welcome the sacrificial victim to Valhalla.

"Looks like a retirement dinner," I remark unfeelingly.

"No," says Anna. "They're not cannibalizing for food. It's magic. They're acquiring wisdom. They aren't murdering anybody, not in their own minds. They've sacrificed somebody they respect, made him a god, and now the tribe is sharing his knowledge and strength—oh!"

For the second time in a few minutes she's been interrupted, this time by herself. As for me, I am, as they say, struck dumb. Whatever I expected to see in the underground, it isn't this.

The Spider has emerged from the room with the images of sacrifice. In the corridor just beyond, a human child is lying against the wall—a tiny, an improbably tiny girl with golden hair.

For a moment I think I'm going mad. Then Anna says, "It's a doll," breaking the spell.

And with that, of course, the whole case opens before my mind.

Anna and I are outside in the rain. We stroll to the power station with its comforting roar of turbines and its EM fields to mess up listening devices.

We lean our heads together and whisper, reviewing the evidence.

A child can get down the steps into the underground, can take her doll and a flashlight, can see the paintings.

Perhaps, surrounded by busy adults who fundamentally don't give a damn about her, she spends a lot of time down there. She meets other small beings her own size. She plays with and loses her toy.

Mack grew up on Bela, the only human who ever did.

Mack is physically powerful. She's nobody's friend, yet she represents security. Somebody, turning and seeing her coming up from behind, would feel only relief—whew, I'm safe—but nobody would stop to chat with her.

They'd turn and walk on. And feel only one stunning blow before the darkness.

Anna talks about Michel, what a terrible thing it must have been even for a mass murderess to realize that for safety's sake she had to kill the nearest approach she knew to human affection.

I'm more concerned with how she caught on to him. "I bet the kid got careless, made a copy of his cube and left the images in a backup memory, where she found them."

"Mack's insane," whispers Anna.

"No," I say. "She's a native. Like the Arkies. She's helping them reclaim their world. When we go, she'll stay here with them. That's what she really wants—to be rid of us, and stay here forever."

The rain patters around us. It's getting dark, or darker. The power station roars and shakes. My imagination's doing acrobatics.

Suddenly I'm seeing in a whole new light that missile attack on Krebs, the one that conspicuously missed, while scaring the shit out of its target.

What if the whole episode was intended to make him feel surrounded by enemies, make him more dependent on her? And whose missile was it, anyway?

She said she was "chatting" with him in Security when it hit. She wouldn't lie about something like that—too easy to check. And I'm sure Michel wouldn't have fired it. Suddenly I'm remembering her other subordinates, Corporal Vizbee and Private Smelt.

Voilà! I think, in honor of Michel.

At last breathing all that oxygen is paying off—I'm in ecstasy, making connections, when Anna interrupts with a practical question. "What are you going to do?"

"Confront her, accuse her, arrest her. And I'm going to grab those two grungy enlisted people of Mack's. There's something I want to ask them."

"You won't get Vizbee and Smelt," she says. "They were just in to pick up supplies. Right after they helped her shake the place down, she sent them back to the shuttleport."

"Then it's Mack alone."

I'm a happy man. I'm about to crack my case and go the hell home and my ego's purring. When I get back to Earth, I'm thinking, I'll take a long vacation—preferably in Death Valley.

"You're really confident, aren't you?" she asks with an odd inflection. I peer at her, curious.

"Spit it out, Anna," I say. "This is no time to be feminine."

"Well, I think you're underestimating her. And this world. You don't seem to realize that she's not just a lone criminal. We've already had Thoms and Szczech attacked at an outstation. And think of *Ursasus terribilis*—what if the Arkies control the local carnivores? What if they've already used them twice to try to kill you?"

Goddamn women anyway. They have a gift for imagining worst-case scenarios. "If you're right, I'll have to move fast."

"When will you arrest her?"

"Now. Right this minute. Want to come along?"

As we hurry back into the maze, she's muttering, "There's something else. I know there's something we haven't thought of."

But I'm not really listening. First I use a public machine to call Jamal and Eloise.

"Do you feel energetic?" I ask.

Jamal looks baffled. "I guess so. Why?"

"I may need a little assistance. In my room. For something important and possibly a mite dangerous."

He looks at me with narrowed eyes, suspicious of anyone in authority. Eloise comes up behind him.

"We'll be there," she says over his shoulder. I break the connection.

"Don't hurry, just in case we're being watched," I tell Anna, and we move with what, I believe, is legally termed deliberate speed through the usual throng, anonymous in spite of their name tags: Ellenbogen, Menshnikoff, Nguyen, Rice-Davies.

In my bedroom we check the terrace outside, then exit and head for Security. I try the electronic key Michel gave me and it doesn't work.

"Shit," I profoundly comment. "She's changed the settings on the lock. Stand back."

The impact slug knocks out the lock and I kick the door open. The gun rack is empty. At the same moment my eyes fall on the monitor that shows Michel's room.

Oh, Christ.

So while I was busy solving my case, so goddamn sure of myself, she was watching us, changing the lock, removing the weapons.

Did she take the missiles, too? I check hastily. One's gone; the other four are still locked in. But she's removed the detonators so I can't arm them. Who's serving this match?

All things considered, Anna's voice is remarkably calm as she says, "Look outside."

My friend the bearpig—or his cousin—is coming over the parapet. He uses his claws like grappling hooks, climbs easily despite his weight of maybe three hundred kilos. As he moves into the light pouring from my quarters I see sticking through his coarse yellowish fur a million black spines, like a hedgehog's. The guy's armored as well as armed.

He rears up, freeing his forepaws for action. Then he moves bowleggedly yet with disturbing speed around the screen and a scream tells me that Eloise and Jamal have arrived there.

I fling open Security's door and run outside, Anna following. But before I can fire, the beast takes what looks like a tremendous punch from an invisible fist, right on the snout. He rears up, flops over and lies twisting on the Incan stonework.

The great skull is ruined. One eye stares at Anna and me with helpless rage before it films over. The body smells like the lion cage at a zoo—an acrid, sulfurous, somehow fiery odor.

I look into my room and Jamal's standing there in the approved shooter's crouch, holding a pistol in both hands, index finger on the firing stud.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask after we've all greeted each other.

"Swiped it from my boss's locker. I didn't see any good reason why the senior guys should have protection and El and I shouldn't."

"Good for you. Look, we have something of a situation here." I explain.

The four of us huddle. We've got two weapons. Each has fired once, leaving fifteen shots each. Mack's got a dozen weapons and all the spare ammo. She knows Main Base backward and forward, and however she calls her friends—those in the jungle, and those in the passages down below—she's undoubtedly doing it now.

Touching my forehead in salute, I tell Anna, "You were right. This *is* the worst-case scenario."

She's standing there as if in a trance, looking like a statue of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy.

"There's more," she murmurs.

So much for mercy.

"I've just realized," she goes on. "The larvae. Two hundred thousand genes."

I don't understand, even though I know what she's referring to. Eloise and Jamal are, of course, looking absolutely blank. But Anna now speaks with calm professional assurance, as if she's telling somebody they need to get their triglycerides down.

"The larvae must be the basic form. They must hatch from some kind of spore with a really tough capsule to survive the extreme heat and cold. Something triggers development into different forms—partly it must be temperature, but I'm sure it's more complicated than that. The Arkies are one form and Mayakovsky's *medvedi* are another and the carnivore Jamal shot is another. And there may be more.

"They're all cousins, so to speak. That's how they dominate their environment and survive the fantastic

changes that happen here on Bela...."

Silence follows. Then the quiet voice insists, "Don't you see?"

"Unfortunately," I say, "yes."

We try to put out a warning.

Eloise has just settled down at the huge console in Security and spoken a first word of command when a sound of distant thunder comes through the shattered terrace door and the machine and the monitors and the lights all go out.

I step to the other door, the one leading into the corridor, and fling it open. It's dark inside Main Base, almost as dark as on the wet and dusky terrace outside. Battery-fed emergency lights are flickering on and beginning to glow redly. People are standing around, looking baffled, their faces purplish as if they had lupus. I turn back with my latest bad news.

"Mack just used her missile on the power station. Zamok's been shut down. All of it."

We head into the corridor and try to spread the alarm by word of mouth. It's not easy. The maze is more confusing than ever. Everywhere people are milling around, bitching about the power failure. Many were headed for the dining hall; complaining they'll have to eat cold rations tonight.

We try shouting, telling them an attack is about to begin, telling them if they've got weapons to join us, if not go to the dining hall and lock the doors. People crowd around us, trying to decide if we're crazy.

Some of them have never seen me before. Anna they know, but so what? She's just the doc. Jamal and Eloise are too young to count.

Where are their leaders? they want to know. Where's Krebs, where are the senior engineers—above all, where's Captain Mack?

"What does Captain Mack say?" a young guy demands. "I mean, she's in charge of security, right?"

"Captain Mack has already killed twenty people and is about to kill a lot more," I inform him, biting off my words.

The fact that I'm getting pissed off doesn't make this unpalatable news any more believable. Yet some people take alarm and start to hasten away. Even if we're nuts, the lights are out; something's clearly wrong.

Others stand around arguing. Some are belligerent—what the hell are we saying? Who the hell do we think we are? Are we trying to start a panic just because there's an equipment failure? Somebody will fix it. That's what engineers do, right?

Then comes a shout. "Doc Li! Come quick! The Controller's been shot!"

And that does it. Suddenly the *toute ensemble* gets to them. The shadows, the dim red lights, the air growing stuffy, the palpable anxiety, Jamal and me waving weapons and talking about an attack, warning them against Captain Mack—and now somebody's yelling that the Controller's shot.

So they hated him, and they hated her, so what, they're the symbols of command and control, right? If they're hostile or wounded or dead, everything's coming apart, right?

Suddenly they panic. And they bolt. They're like cattle scared by lightning. I see shadowy people

caroming into one another, knocking one another down. Running into half-dark corridors, headed for I don't know where. Some for the dining hall, some bolting for cover in their rooms.

The guy who yelled for Anna fights his way to us where we stand together, waiting for the hall to clear. He's Senior Engineer Antonelli, and I met him for the first and only time on the day I arrived here. He's armed, and I'm glad to see him.

Anna asks, "Is it true Krebs has been shot?"

"Yes. I found him in his office and—"

He never gets to finish. Somewhere in the maze, people start screaming. There are roars and howls. People start running out of the corridors they ran into not five minutes ago. A chunky young woman trots up.

"Arkies are coming up through the floors," she gasps. "And there's some kind of big animal loose."

We hurry to the dining hall. About twenty people have gathered there, two with guns. They're using furniture to barricade the doors, of which there are four. The only light comes from the emergency system.

"Stay here," I tell everybody. I tap Antonelli. "You're in charge."

"I know that," he snaps.

"Where are you going?" asks Anna.

"To snatch a flyer if I can. The only reserves we have are at Alfa, and we're going to need them."

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not. These people may need a doctor."

"You couldn't find your way with the lights on. How about with them off?"

Eloise steps up and says quietly, "I'll go with him."

To this Jamal objects so violently that I lose patience and, while he's ordering Eloise not to move a muscle, I give him a short left to the point of his dark stubbly chin. He drops like a stone.

I tell Antonelli, "When he wakes up, tell him we'll be back with reinforcements."

In the dark corridor, Eloise says, "I suppose you had to do that."

After we've walked a few meters, she adds, "He's such a dickhead, I've often wanted to punch him out myself."

Of course Anna was right. If I'd tried to find my way out of the maze I'd have gotten hopelessly lost.

Eloise, on the other hand, turns out to be one of those irritating people who always know exactly where they are and the precise azimuth to follow to get anywhere else. When I compliment her, she says, "I'm part homing pigeon."

There's a body in the way, the back of the head caved in. It's nobody I know, but Eloise gives a little muted cry before we hurry on.

"Know him?"

"Oh, yes. Before I ... met Jamal."

Something roars up ahead. I'm smelling an odor like lions. I pull her into a dark doorway and we wait. Something big lurches past, making the floor creak, thick coarse fur and spines rasping the wall with a sound like a wire brush. Then a patter of footsteps, a chink of metal and a rapid warbling as varied as a mockingbird's song, only deeper.

Everything fades into the distance. A woman screams. There's a little popping sound—an impact weapon. A roar.

Eloise whispers, "You notice something? The Cousins—that's what Anna called them, wasn't it?—all smell kind of alike. The big ones and the little ones. Maybe that's how they recognize their own kind."

Right, they all have the lion smell, as penetrating as burning sulfur, and why not? They all must have the same basic body chemistry. An idiot rhyme runs through my head: If you stink alike, you think alike.

The birdlike voice of the Arkies fascinates Eloise. "Maybe there's only one 'word' in their language," she whispers, "that long sweet whistle, and the rising and falling tones make the differences in meaning."

"It would be nice," I say repressively, "to speculate about that if we had nothing else to do."

We venture into the darkness, turn down this corridor and that one. Under a red light the semiplast flooring's been burst out from below. I have no trouble recognizing the narrow slot in the stonework beneath, the steps leading down. I even catch a brief glimpse of painted walls.

"You know," Eloise tells me as we edge past and hurry on, "if circumstances were just a bit different, my sympathies would be with the Cousins. It's their world ... turn here."

Suddenly we're slamming through a door onto the pad and the shuttle is sitting there, completely empty except for the black box that runs it. Standing in a hangar nearby are two others: one half-dismantled, one that looks service-ready. That fact may be important. Then we're inside the waiting flyer and I'm locking the door and shouting an order to take off. The black box is perfectly calm. "Hearing and obeying," it says.

Abruptly we're soaring into light rain, and as we tilt and turn, Main Base except for a few security lights is plunged in darkness as deep as the jungle below it.

Now we're over the bay, nothing to be seen below but faint crescents of white foam as another in the endless succession of squalls blows in from the ocean. Why do I have these repetitive nightmares, and why do they all turn out to be real?

Emerging from wind-driven rain, we see Alfa's lights still on. A valve is stuck open somewhere and the slurry from the mine—pollution, humanity's signature—is gushing downslope in an oily torrent toward the bay. Eloise makes a faint sound and points.

A guy and a young woman are sitting on top of Alfa's brightly lit power station. He's armed, and they wave at us. There's a dead bearpig lying below. As we bank and turn on our spotlight, something flickers, an arrow maybe, and the two flatten themselves as it flies over.

I doubt that our black box has been programmed for the current circumstances, so I wedge myself into the pilot's seat, hit the manual cutoff and take control of the flyer myself. It's a cranky little machine, and I have some trouble getting it under control. Meanwhile Eloise grabs the pistol and opens the right-side

door. As I start swinging back over the power station she fires twice. There's a commotion in the shadows.

"Get something?"

"I don't know. I think there was a bunch of—of whatever, getting ready to attack."

I finally figure out how to bring us to a low hover. The attitude control's stiff—probably a long time since the machine's been on manual. We tip this way and that, then steady and move closer to the shed.

Over the whine of the engine I yell, "What about the others?"

Can the answer really be, "All dead."?

Item (6.) *From Doctor Li's Report.*

This person regrets intruding herself again.

However, I have a positive contribution to make, for Colonel Kohn's absence left him without knowledge of events at Main Base during many crucial hours.

I may state at the outset that locking the doors of the dining hall proved to be impossible. Regrettably, all the locks were electronic and failed when the power went down. How we longed for an antique mechanical bolt or two!

Fortunately the doors opened inward, and piling furniture against them provided a partial defense. Almost at once the doors began to move, pushing back the chairs, tables, etc. Our enemies had no machines but an abundance of muscle, and we were hard put to it to hold them out.

Then noises were heard from the kitchens. Antonelli led a small group of us to the source. When the tiles composing the floor began to shift and then to be knocked out from below, he was waiting.

An Arkie appeared wielding a bronze axe, and Antonelli's shot went through his body and killed also the warrior behind him, who was armed with a sort of barbed hook. Wild scurrying and scampering followed, leaving the mouth of the tunnel empty save for the bodies.

This gave me an idea. After the corpses had been dragged out, I found that I could just fit into the passage, being quite a small person. I asked to borrow Antonelli's weapon. Instead of waiting for a new attack, I proposed to drive back our enemies. And he agreed.

So for the first time I entered the subterranean world of which we had all heard so much and seen so little. I confess that my motive was far more curiosity than any desire to kill Arkies. I believed that the passages provided them protection from heat and cold, all-weather connections between the buildings that used to stand on the surface of Zamok, as well as storerooms and robing rooms where priests prepared themselves for public ceremonies. All this proved to be true as far as it went—which was not very far!

I carried a battery-powered lamp detached from the wall. It was dim and red, and I kept watching uneasily for side chambers, where anything might be hiding. But for twenty meters the passage ran straight and unbroken. It was profoundly silent, and I guessed that our enemies had abandoned any hope of getting at us by this approach.

Then I heard noises ahead, birdsong voices that sounded strangely in these caverns. I switched off the lamp, and stood for a time in profound darkness. Then I began to see very dimly, the way one does on a

clouded night—peripherally, while the center of the retina registers only a blur.

This seemed strange to me, for of course the eyes do not work where no light at all exists. There was light, then, although very little, and I soon realized that microscopic fungi lived on the walls, emitting a dim greenish bioluminescence. Thus the lamp I carried had never been essential; but when we were looking down from the kitchen, the tunnel had appeared perfectly dark.

I placed the extinguished lamp on the floor, stepped over it with some difficulty, and moved on. The pistol was heavy, and I now held it with both hands, ready for action.

My next discovery was that my shoulders no longer brushed against the walls, though I still had to bow my head. The passage was widening, and I could see an opening ahead with something moving just inside it.

I stopped at once. When the obscure movement ceased, I advanced very, very cautiously, well aware that as the space opened around me I would be subject to attack. The tunnel widened into a broad room, where long slabs of stone stretched away into the dimness in mathematically straight lines.

On each slab lay terra-cotta trays a few centimeters deep, and in each the familiar larvae were swarming.

This was an impressive sight. Clearly, the Arkies no longer depended on the natural development of their kind in the forest. I heard whistling and movement toward the other end of this strange nursery, saw an Arkie emerge from the dimness and post itself beside a tray. Something began to trickle, and I realized that the adult was urinating into the trays, a few drops to each, and I caught the penetrating “smell of lions,” as the Colonel called it.

No doubt, I thought, the urine contains hormones which speed the development of the larvae into the Arkies’ form: a most fascinating achievement for a species that, so far as we know, has nothing that can properly be called science!

Well, and why not? I asked myself. Folk medicine gave us humans quinine for malaria and inoculation for smallpox. I was full of these thoughts when suddenly the Arkie spotted me and broke into a frenzy of birdsong.

Item (7.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

We have them aboard now, the two Alfans, and yes, everybody else in the mining camp is dead.

The technique reminded me a bit of Ted Szczech's abduction. Something broke the slurry pipe, that set off alarms, and when a repair crew went out to fix it the Cousins ambushed them. The Arkies used poisoned arrows as well as bronze hand weapons, and with the bearpigs to aid them soon forced their way inside.

The Alfans say two species fight together like humans with war dogs or war horses or war elephants. Only here there's a family connection much more direct than ours with our symbionts. They recognize each other by smell, and seem to feel a kind of tribal loyalty. There may even be a telepathic bond—the Arkies seem to give orders at a distance. They're the most intellectual members of the clan, but even the ones we think of as beasts are—as Mayakovsky noted so long ago—disturbingly intelligent. In fighting, the bearpigs display initiative and cunning as well as savagery.

Down below, they're dragging the bodies out into the open, into the glaring lights. The bearpigs begin to feed and the scene is garish, horrible, a kind of Grand Guignol theater. The Arkies look on, but don't share the meal. Clearly, humans are not eligible for the company of their gods in Valhalla.

Watching the butchery, I know we've lost the war. Period. We have to assume that the four of us in this flyer and the people holding out at Main Base and *maybe* the guards at the shuttleport are the only survivors. So back we go.

Item (8.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

As I retreated down the tunnel, I could hear and sense rather than see them following me, and I fired the pistol.

The place was so narrow that I did not have to aim. Of course, neither did they. Something came sliding and scraping along the floor and touched my shoe, and it proved to be a short throwing or thrusting spear with a leaf-shaped bronze point.

I fired again. There was no use trying to evade the necessity to kill or be killed. My heel struck an obstacle and I almost fell over backward, saved only by the narrowness of the tunnel. It was the lamp. I stepped over it and continued my fighting retreat.

The sounds at the end of the tunnel indicated that bodies were being pulled out of the way. I fired again, producing much agitated noise. My heel encountered another obstacle: the first step.

It is no easy task to retreat up a staircase that is both narrow and steep, at the same time keeping one's head down and one's guard up. With a metallic ping an arrow struck the riser of a step I had just vacated and the wooden shaft broke. Then friendly hands were pulling me out of the slot, into what seemed at first the blinding light of the kitchen.

I had hardly begun to tell the others of the mysterious world beneath our feet when a deafening impact rocked us all. We stumbled over one another rushing into the dining hall, now adrift in dust and shattered fragments.

The wounded, still shocked, had not yet begun to scream. One of the piles of furniture had been blown to bits and the door to the hall was a gaping hole.

Captain Mack had used another missile, and used it well. Our enemies were upon us.

Item (9.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I think the Cousins are awestruck—it's the only word I can think of. Stunned by Mack's demonstration of godlike power.

I left the Alfans at the pad with orders to rev up the other workable flyer to aid the evacuation. Then Eloise guided me to this scene of ruin.

In the dim red glow of the hallway outside the mess hall our enemies stand, small and great shadows under a forest of glinting spearpoints and axes with curved blades. Clouds of smoke and dust are billowing around them, masking shapes and distorting outlines. I bet their ears are deafened and ringing, just like mine.

For some of the animals it's too much. Frightened, they begin to lumber away, colliding with one another and the Arkies and the walls. The moment of confusion is perfect.

I can see Mack, wigless, with the missile launcher still on her shoulder. I take careful aim at her, fire, and hit a bearpig that lurches between us at the critical moment.

Then Jamal and Anna run out of the mess hall, both armed, firing too, and panic hits our foes. The

coughing of the impact weapons is almost inaudible, and creatures large and small start falling over. Some scream, just like wounded humans.

Then they're running, fading into the darkness of the corridors, maybe some retreating into the underground passages until they can figure out what's going on. Mack's gone too—at any rate, I can't see her distinctive figure anywhere.

We stumble over bodies, shouting. Jamal hugs Eloise, glares at me. That left hook I gave him seems to have made me an enemy. Then Anna mistakes me for something hostile and almost shoots me before I yell at her.

The mess hall's in ruins, some people dead, some wounded, some stunned. We don't have a minute to lose, we grab the living and run. It's a total rout. We're like Spaniards fleeing Mexico City on the *noche triste*. Or like Americans fleeing conquered Saigon.

Eloise and Anna are leading the way through the corridors with their smears of red light, and I'm hearing our enemies roar and sing and reassemble for a new attack.

The walking wounded have to take care of themselves; the helpless ones are hauled and dragged by the shoulders or even by the feet. We've got four weapons but only about a dozen shots left, as near as I can figure.

Then we're out onto the pad. In the rainy dark the lights of the two functional flyers cast frenzied shadows everywhere. Those of us who are armed prepare to resist while the others are jamming people aboard. Two who died on the retreat from the mess hall get thrown aside like rubbish.

Anna has given her weapon back to Antonelli. She's in medical mode, doing a sort of instant triage. She orders the bad cases stacked like cordwood in one flyer so she can ride with them and try to treat them.

Meantime figures are gathering just inside the doors and arrows begin to flicker and ping. A young woman I don't know turns a frightened face toward the door of Main Base and takes an arrow soundlessly in her throat. It's short, about thirty centimeters, and it only pricks her, yet suddenly she's flopping helplessly on the ground, her face cyanosing.

We abandon her, too.

I don't really notice the last moments. All at once I'm hanging half out of the door of a flyer, there's no room inside for all of me because I'm too goddamn big, and arrows with little barbed brazen points are sticking in the skin of the machine.

I hear the black box—so calm, so cool, a voice from another world—as it says, “Hearing and obeying,” and we're lifting away from Main Base.

So slowly, so slowly. And I'm riding like that, arm crooked around a stanchion, and some friendly hand's holding onto my belt as we wobble and yaw out over the estuary and the white-crested black waves of the sea.

Item (10.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

We were packed together like rice in sushi. At first I couldn't do anything for my patients, because I couldn't move.

Two of them died right there, and with great difficulty we extracted the corpses and threw them into the sea, making a little more room so that Colonel Kohn at last found a place to sit inside.

I discovered that eleven of us were on that little flyer, which was built to handle four plus luggage. That it stayed aloft at all was quite wonderful. I feared, however, that the excess fuel consumption might drop us into the sea before we reached the shuttleport.

It was the darkest part of the night, and I shall not soon forget the trip. Sometimes a soft moan, the rank marshy smell of human bodies that have been sweating with fear. The odor of blood. Fortunately, the wounded were in shock from their injuries and burns, and lay quiet.

Exhaustion was our great friend, and I suddenly opened my eyes to find that I had been sleeping, and that a pale gray misty dawn had begun to filter through the clouds.

Soon every eye was trying to pierce the veils of rain for our first sight of the promontory and the egg-shaped green dome. What we would find there no one knew—whether it had been attacked, whether its two guards survived—and I was thinking also of the months that must elapse before the next supply ship came.

It is no light thing to be at war with a whole world.

And then I saw something—I saw something—I saw a smooth geometrical shape rising out of the clouds and mist, and it was still there, the portal by which humans enter and leave Bela. I thought: Oh, that we may yet leave it alive!

Item (11.)*Extract from the Bela Shuttleport Log.*

7.56. Have spotted 2 flyers approtching. Linda and me didnt hardly have time to jump out the sack and put our draws on when they come boncing down on to the pad and a bunch of peple come spiling out. Memo: file complant with Krebs re (1) unskeduled flyte and (2) overloded flyers. (Singed) Cpl Vizbee, Securty.

Item (12.)*From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

Vizbee and Smelt are looking pretty sour and disheveled, and give us minimum help carrying the wounded. They keep saying they take orders only from Mack and I have to get a bit rough to convince them they now take orders from me.

We number twenty-two, of whom nine are too seriously injured to work or fight.

Brief tour of inspection shows a freezer stocked with foodstuffs for the guards and the loading parties who used to bring in the ingots. I ask Antonelli to check it out. He says that if all the wounded recover, we'll starve before the supply ship gets here.

Medicines: the shuttleport has a small dispensary, but Anna looks grim when she inventories the drug locker. I suspect Vizbee and Smelt have been into it for recreational purposes, though of course they deny it.

The port contains about three hundred square meters of floor space. Walls and floor are thick translucent duroplast—solid stuff, nothing will break in. Power source: another antique reactor housed in its own dome and accessible by a protected corridor.

Escape possibilities: We now have three flyers, but the two we brought with us are almost out of fuel—that overloaded last trip, among other things. The flyer V&B came down in is usable, with enough fuel for a return flight to Zamok, where, of course, we don't dare go. One dismantled flyer remains there—I hope beyond repair.

Outside it is, surprise, raining. The pad is wet and shining. There's a bare space, maybe half a hectare in all, where everything except a kind of lichen has been killed off by the retros of incoming and departing shuttles.

Beyond are gray rocks and clumps of stunted trees. A neck of barren land connects us to the shore and the usual gray-green-purple wall of jungle.

Situation summary: We're in good shape, with ample space, bedded down warm and dry, with lights on and medical care and nothing to do but wait for the supply ship. It's due in about sixty-seven days—local days, that is. If it's late (and it often is) we'll be living on air and water. *Lots* of water.

The first need is to increase food supplies somehow.

I call on Jamal and Antonelli to help me search the peninsula. Jamal wears his patented scowl but obeys scrupulously, which is all I ask for. We take our weapons, just in case.

We complete our circuit in under an hour. It's not much of a place. I doubt it's more than a couple of square kilometers of volcanic slag. You can hear the sound of surf everywhere. The beaches are gray shingle or black sand.

We walk out on the rocky neck that connects us to the shore. The water's shallow on one side where the sand has built up, but deep on the other. Could be a fine fishing spot. I'm sure we can fabricate some tackle.

I've surf-fished on coasts like this, and for a moment it all seems halfway familiar—the sea air and the smell of the deep and the sting of salt in the flying drops of spray.

Jamal turns back toward the shuttleport, but I walk a few steps on with Antonelli. He begins to tell me something, shouting to be heard over the crash of the waves.

"Sometimes I dream about retiring to an island. Just me, a good library, a wine cellar, a bot or two to do the dirty work—"

Aagh!

The deep erupts and something huge and black falls with a weight that shakes the rocks.

It's big, big as an orca, and it has broad flippers in front and four huge splayed tusks. It takes Antonelli's whole head in its mouth and thrusts with the flippers and slides back into the water, dragging him under. The wind flings a geyser of foam into my face. I wipe my eyes and the last thing I see are the man's legs thrashing deep down like the arms of a squid.

Antonelli's gone. Just like that. The kelplike odor of the deep mingles for an instant with the fiery smell of lions. Then there's only wind and salt and Jamal is dragging me away.

Behind us something big roils the surface of the sea and there's a great bellowing roar, *Aa! Aa! Aa! Aa!*

Item (13.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

Nothing of this tragedy was audible inside the dome.

I'd done what I could for my patients and was trying to comfort a young woman named Mbasa, concealing my fear that she might be permanently blind.

To treat this one injury properly, we needed a set of replacement eyes, fetal-monkey stem cells to

regrow the damaged optic nerves, and the services of a skilled neurotransplant surgeon. We had none of the above. And there were other cases even more serious than this one.

Then Colonel Kohn appeared in the doorway, white-faced and soaking wet. He gestured for me to follow him. I gave him a blanket, made fresh hot tea and met him in the station's departure lounge. In one corner Eloise and Jamal were hugging each other as if they never intended to let go. The colonel sat hunched over, wrapped in his blanket like a beggar, and sucked greedily at the steaming tea.

"The Cousins have a cousin we knew nothing about," he said, and told me of Antonelli's death. "The trouble with the worst-case scenario is there's usually a worser one. How are your patients?"

I replied that at least four and possibly as many as seven would not survive.

"That's good," he said.

I looked at him and saw a man who was both familiar and strange. Despite his professional toughness, he had always seemed to me a humane man. Now I was seeing another side of him. Though he still trembled with the cold, his face was bleak and hard as the rocks of this nameless island.

"It's a good thing," he muttered, "that we have a big freezer. We're going to run out of food, Anna, and we're under siege and can't get any more. Once our supplies are gone, we'll have no choice but to eat our dead."

We sat quietly together, sipping tea, while the profound depth of our dehumanization sank in. Suddenly I knew that I could not face the coming ordeal alone.

I brought him another cup, plus fifty milligrams of Serenac, which he obviously needed. There was nothing else I could do for him, except go to bed with him and hold him and keep him warm. At that moment I resolved to do so, if he would have me.

Item (14.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I see it's been several weeks since I made an entry, so let me try to catch up. Much has happened, also little. Anna and I have become lovers—a development that was a surprise, at least to me.

By default we've also become the rulers of our tiny besieged colony. As Anna predicted, four people have died of their wounds and two more are moribund. With Antonelli gone, that leaves seventeen of us, soon to be fifteen.

In all we've suffered almost ninety-nine percent casualties. Even if some people at Main Base or the mining camp or the smelter have escaped into the jungle, they won't survive there long. They'll be killed, or they'll simply starve.

All the senior engineers being dead, I appointed Jamal as technical officer. His business is to keep the place working. I know he has long-term plans for revenge. I humiliated him in front of Eloise with that long-ago punch, and he's one of those people who never, never, never forget. Well, I need his brains, courage, and knowhow, and in return he can have his revenge.

Anna has the job of keeping the survivors alive. Eloise works under her and is rapidly turning into a capable physician's assistant. In bright people, on-the-job training produces quick results. I see to defense and discipline, make out and enforce the duty rosters, preside over the distribution of rations (about eighteen hundred calories for the healthy, twenty-one hundred for the sick) and act generally prickish. Like Mr. Krebs in his time, I am not beloved, nor do I expect to be.

The only serious violation of rules has been, inevitably, by Vizbee and Smelt. Ordered to turn over keys to all doors, cabinets and cupboards, they did so, but kept a duplicate set. When Anna told me that six vials of something called M2—a synthetic morphine substitute—had disappeared from the medicine cabinet, I staged a raid and found them in Vizbee's laundry bag.

The matter was serious, because we're low on painkillers and have a lot of pain to kill. In a container of Smelt's vaginal cream I also found the duplicate keys.

My first impulse was to shoot both of them. However, Anna spoke up for mercy and the general feeling in our community seemed to be that they were too stupid to be fully accountable.

So I held a private session with each of them, offering them life in exchange for some answers.

Both babbled freely. Each blamed the other for firing that missile at Krebs's quarters. Both affirmed that Captain Mack gave them the weapon and the order, which as good soldiers they had to obey, whatever their personal feelings.

"I'm sure you understand, Sir," says Smelt with her soapy smile.

"Only too well."

I had them sign confessions, and then I tied both of them up and put them in the freezer beside the corpses. Half an hour later I took them out. They emerged wrapped in spiderwebs of ice, and when revived seemed to have gotten the message. The next time they're going in for good, although the thought of having to eat Vizbee stew or Smelt croquettes eventually is pretty repugnant.

Aside from that, the time has been routine. We haven't been attacked. Those of us who hadn't already paired off are doing so now—most with the other sex, a few with their own. Everybody needs a companion here.

Recreation: Hidden away in cabinets we've found some chess sets, tennis racquets but no balls, a game called *Conquer the Galaxy*—excuse me, I'd rather not—poker and blackjack and Airborne Polo programs, and old sets of greasy playing cards, some of which are marked.

Daytimes we clean the place and tend the injured and service the machinery; at night we mark our calendars, make love and play games and gossip and feel hungry and bitch. And, as much as possible, sleep.

Between Anna and me there's a surprising amount of ardor, considering our mature age and marginal diet. Also a lot of caution. The conjunction of two loners of settled habits is dicey at best. And there are some physical problems, because she's so small and I'm so large. But—in sex as in life—where there's a will, there's usually a way. We've found privacy in what used to be a storeroom. I've locked the door with a confiscated key. At the moment, Anna and I are lying starkers on a pile of discarded shuttlecraft cushions, warmed by proximity and by some clean mechanics' coveralls she found in a bin and turned into bedspreads.

Now she turns to me with a smile and lets her tiny but very capable hand settle on my arm, like a dragonfly. I think this will be all my note-taking for tonight.

Item (15.) *Extract from a Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

Dearest Mama, So many things have happened to us that I hardly know where to begin. First of all, there's been a war....

So that's the story to date. Now I'm working in the hospital in the shuttleport here on Bela. We only have three patients left—the others have died or have recovered as much as they're going to here.

I'm doubly happy when Anna (Dr. Li) declares somebody well. I'm glad that I've been able to help them get better, but I'm also glad that they'll be going on the same 1,800 calories as the rest of us. That way we'll all last a bit longer.

I'm tired all the time. Yet when I lie down I usually can't sleep, and when I do I dream mainly about big dinners. Jamal's the same way. He works hard, much harder than I do. Maybe as a result he's less demanding about sex. I don't know whether I like that or not.

I dread the thought of our first cannibal feast. Yet it can't be far off. Will I be able to eat human stew? Yes, of course. When you're hungry enough, you'll eat anything.

Jamal makes ghastly little jokes about it. "You heard about the cannibal who passed his brother in the forest?" he asks, leering. Or pats my still ample backside and says, "Lunch. Hey, take that back. Lunch and dinner."

How, and above all why, have I put up with him so long?

At least once a day I sneak away and walk outside. I need to be alone for a while, away from the intolerably repetitive faces of my fellow prisoners. Needless to say, I stay off the beaches!

I don't feel so tired outside, I guess because of the enriched air, and I love the smell of the sea. Yesterday a sunbeam worked its way through the clouds and the seawind seemed to glitter with salt.

Yet today even my walk left me feeling down. I climbed, muscles quivering, up a pile of black rock and stood for a while looking out to where the horizon line ought to be. Only it wasn't, because the usual squalls were all around and as I turned, first the ocean and then the drenched jungle faded into the sky without a break.

The dome isn't our prison. This world is our prison, and I ask myself again and again if any of us will ever escape it.

Even if we don't, I'm sure people will come here again looking for us, and I hope they find this. Meantime I hold to the thought of you and the Earth and its sunlight and blue skies as my lifeline.

Item (16.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

The time until the supply ship arrives is getting short. If it's late, ciao, good-bye, sayonara. We're running out of food.

So today we eat human. Two of us do the butchering, I suppose to spread the guilt around. We rotate cooking by roster, and just as I won't name the other butcher, I won't name the cook, other than to state that (s)he doesn't turn a hair over the grisly task.

In fact, once the meat is separated from the frame, it looks just like anything else. We keep the head for decent burial on Earth, assuming we ever get back there. I won't give the name of the entree, other than to say it was someone I knew and liked. But once life has departed, we're all just meat and might as well feed our friends. Think of it as giving the ultimate dinner party.

The smell of cooking permeates the dome. People go about their usual duties, but they keep sniffing. Little groups talk together and I hear some high-pitched laughter. That worries me a bit. No hysterics needed here.

Then we sit down to eat. There are two schools of thought about our protein supplement: It tastes like veal; it tastes like pork. I belong to the pork school. After the meal, everybody's a bit frantic. Next day: We have leftovers. Nobody bats an eye, and two guys ask for seconds, which I have to refuse them. Cannibalism turns out to be like any other rite of passage. The first time's hard, the second time's a lot easier, and after that you don't think much about it anymore.

However, there's one thing we'll all soon have to think about, and I have to admit it's getting me down.

Item (17.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

The problem facing us was this: When we had eaten the dead, what then?

I began to hear jokes about "drawing straws." But was it a joke? Surely, I thought, if the supply ship doesn't appear soon, we'll have to be killed one at a time, so that hopefully a few of us—or two of us—or even one of us can return to Earth to tell our story.

At dinner I saw Robert looking over our people with a curiously bleak face, empty of expression. I realized that he was mentally drawing up a new roster. He was arranging our people in order, from those who could be spared most easily to those without whom the whole colony would perish.

Others understood also. I began to miss Vizbee and Smelt, and realized that they were hiding from Robert's lethal gaze. How stupid! Surely the path of wisdom was for them to look as busy and useful as possible. But the poor wretches were just intelligent enough to realize whose names must head the list of expendables (I almost said "perishables.") And they remembered the freezer, and the shrouded bodies lying beside them.

Item (18.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I'm weighing the remaining rations for the umpteenth time when Eloise puts her head in the storeroom door. She's white as our last kilo of sugar.

Would I step outside with her? Well, sure. I don't ask why, because I know there'll be a good reason.

"Do you come out here alone?" I ask as we crunch through the lichen. "You shouldn't."

"I have to," she says. "I'd go nuts being inside all the time. Now stop being commander-in-chief for a minute, because I've got something to show you."

She leads the way up a black pile of—what do they call it—scoria? Broken lava chunks the sea will turn into black sand, and—

I only need a glance. "Go back and tell Jamal and Anna to join us."

"If Jamal's busy he'll want to know why."

"The reason is I want him now."

"Yes, sir," she says, and goes.

When the others arrive, I don't even have to point. There's only one thing to see.

A pod of the sea creatures is approaching, maybe twenty, maybe more. They're gray, and close enough now that we can see irregular crusty white patches on their backs and tails—I guess the local version of barnacles. They're a ballet of monsters, rhythmically rising and sinking like the waves, all together.

"They can't come ashore, can they?" asks Eloise, hopefully.

Jamal and I look at each other. We're remembering the one that got Antonelli. The way it rose up on its flippers, the way it tossed its head back, the barking noise. Remembering the inevitable smell of lions. Sea lions. These things are pinnipeds that feed in the sea but drag themselves up on beaches to rest and fight and mate.

"Look," says Anna, pointing in another direction. "It took her a while, but she got it running. Clever lady."

Way, way off, a gray dot in the gray clouds darkens, takes shape, and turns into the last flyer, repaired and functional and heading our way.

Item (19.)*From Dr. Li's Report.*

Since we had no option but to resist or die, it was unnecessary to encourage the troops—we could rely on our enemies to do that.

As for myself, I put my hardcopy notes in order, wrapped them in plastic and hid them under loose ice in the freezer. Even if we are all killed, I thought, people sooner or later will come here looking for us, and with luck they may find this record. The last corpse that remained uneaten seemed to be watching me, and I came out shivering for more reasons than the cold.

Yet I continued speaking into my notebook, hoping to transcribe the rest of the story later.

Robert had deployed eight people, which was the number of weapons we had. Adding the shuttleport stock to our own slim armory, we had one hundred and eighty rounds, which was enough to do much damage, though not to drive off all our enemies.

I set up an aid station at the foot of the heap of scoria we had taken to calling the Black Hill, and filled a medical kit with M2, tourniquets, a few antibiotics, etc.

Then I climbed the hill to see exactly what was happening. The sea lions (as Robert called them) had vanished under the waves, meaning that they could reappear anyplace. The flyer had turned and was circling, perhaps a kilometer out. It passed over the shoreline, swung back. Wisely, Robert ordered his people to hold their fire.

I noticed that Eloise was standing beside Jamal. I called her over to help me at the aid station, and she had begun to approach with slow steps when in the corner of my eye I caught a flash from the flyer.

I shouted, "Down!" and she dropped to the ground just as the missile struck the Black Hill and exploded. The sound was loud enough to leave my head ringing. Then the sound *Aa! Aa! Aa!* from behind us warned that the sea lions were coming ashore. At the same moment the flyer veered and from an amplifier came a burst of birdsong so loud that it might have been the giant mythical Roc calling to its mate. At that, the margin of the jungle trembled and something roared in reply.

Item (20.)*From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I can't say I ever liked Julia Mack. But I always respected her, never more so than now. She's got a very weird army, but she's doing first-rate command and control.

She's got an Arkie sitting beside her with an amplifier and she's got her goddamn launcher. Must be awkward—leaning out the pilot's port to fire it, so the backflash doesn't fry her. But she manages. A managing gal.

Okay, here come the lions from the sea.

Okay, here come the bearpigs from the jungle. There's more birdsong, this time from the line of trees, so Arkies are in the jungle as well, leading the troops.

The Cousins are closing in. If we make every single shot count, they'll still win. If panicking was any use, I'd panic.

Since it isn't, I'll have to try something else.

I cross over to Jamal and hand him my notebook. "Take care of this."

He raises black arched eyebrows.

"I have something to do. You're in command till I get back. If we live through today, you can sock me good and hard on the jaw."

That's sort of a good-bye.

Item (21.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook (continued by Jamal al-Sba'a).*

Kohn leaves the field of battle. Much as I dislike him, I don't think he is running away. He is a brave Jew.

May the Ever-Living One preserve him, for I hope to collect on his offer at the end of this day.

It's strange, I've never seen him talk into this notebook, yet he always has it with him. The idiot light goes on when I speak, so I suppose it's picking my voice up. I have no notebook of my own—all my stuff except my weapon was lost in the flight from Main Base.

All right, we have only eight weapons. We will soon be assailed from two sides. Do we fight out here in the open, or withdraw to the dome and try to defend it? This is the kind of decision a commander must make, and if he's wrong, everyone is lost. I've always longed for power, now I feel its crushing weight.

I decide that we'll retreat, for two reasons: first, Captain Mack and her goddamn missiles. She can kill many of us and we can't afford losses. Second, the Cousins can afford losses, so the damage we do to them is beside the point. The only strategy is to resist as long as possible and then accept our fate. I call Doctor Li and instruct her to move the aid station inside the dome. Eloise gathers up the medical kit and heads back, while Li waits to see if we take any casualties on the retreat. The Chinese woman appears perfectly calm.

Mack is coming round again in her flyer. The noise of the engine is lost in the volume of sound rising on all sides—the roaring, the warbling, the barking of the creatures from the sea.

And—*Inshallah!*—another flyer is rising to meet her! So this is why Kohn left us!

Item (22.) *From Doctor Li's Report.*

All my life I had struggled to attain the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment—maybe out of cowardice, because I feared the pain of loss.

Maybe this is why I fled from life into the laboratory—from the knowledge of passion to a passion for knowledge. Why, until Robert came to Bela, I was so much alone.

When I saw our one fully functional flyer take off, I felt as if I'd been stabbed in the heart with an icicle. Then I told myself that if Robert intended to crash into the other flyer, he would have said good-bye to

me first.

So I comforted myself, thinking that, yes, he intended a dangerous game—to distract and alarm Mack, make her fire and waste her remaining missiles. He went, I decided, to court danger, not to seek death. Yet the flyer shot straight at her, moving far too fast for safety, and she must have been startled, for her craft yawed and for a wonderful moment I thought it would spin out of control and crash. But then she mastered the controls and the two aircraft began a twisting, turning ballet that I can only compare to the mating dance of mayflies.

Then our craft turned and fled, with Mack in pursuit.

I found myself again atop the Black Hill without any sense of how I got there. Looking down for a moment, I saw an incredible sight, the creatures of two worlds paralyzed by shared amazement and staring upward.

A sea lion had crashed through a barrier of stunted trees, and it rested propped on immense flippers with its tusked face in the air. Without the support of the sea its own weight oppressed it, and its great scarred sides heaved with the effort of breathing.

On the landward side, bearpigs standing on their hind legs moved their heads from side to side, following the action above like entranced listeners following the music at a concert. Arkies were pointing with their bronze weapons and exchanging wild and strangely sweet snatches of song.

I saw the launcher emerge from the pilot's port of Mack's ship, and an instant later came the blinding backflash. The missile burned a long twisting trail, and my heart stopped because I realized that it was homing in, that it was too swift for its target to escape, and then it struck our flyer, which exploded in a great orb of flame like an opening peony. Dark fragments floated downward like gull's feathers into the sea. From our enemies came a crescendo of sound that I can never describe—one world triumphant over another, howling its victory.

Next I felt a grip on my arm; it was Jamal and he said, "Come on, we're retreating to the dome. Save yourself."

I answered, "Why?" wishing only for my life to be over.

Item (23.) *From a Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

We're all inside the dome together. There was one real shocker when it turned out the door to the hangar had been left open.

Something forced its way in, I didn't see what, but I heard an impact weapon cough and then a couple of guys slammed the door, I think pushing a body out. End of Crisis One.

I was looking for Doctor Li. I'd brought in the medical kit, but to be any good it had to be married to the one person who knew how to use it.

I found her looking awful and I said in alarm, "Are you wounded?" She said, "No, only dead," which I took to be some kind of weird joke—meaning, like, aren't we all?

Jamal was yelling orders, and I said to him, "Colonel Kohn won't like you taking his job away from him."

To my amazement, Jamal said, "Kohn's dead."

"No, he's not."

He ran off, saying he had to check the rest of the doors, especially the loading doors onto the pad, because they were big enough to let in an army if they'd been left open too.

Paying, of course, no attention to me whatever.

I went back to Anna Li, and she was preparing our hospital for new casualties. Her movements were strange, jerky like a marionette, and she hardly seemed to see what she was doing.

I said, "Anna, what's wrong? I mean, aside from the fact that we're all going to be killed, what's the matter?"

She said, "Robert's dead."

Second one in five minutes. Patiently I told her, "No, he's not, he's up on one of the catwalks under the dome, checking the air intakes."

She stopped and looked at me steadily. "I saw him die," she said.

"Well, he must've died very recently, because I saw him climbing a ladder when I was bringing in the medical kit."

"Inside the dome?"

"Of course inside the dome. He'd have to be nuts to be climbing an exterior ladder."

At that her face turned to parchment and she fainted. I caught her going down and laid her on an empty cot. The blind woman, Mbasa, was demanding to know what was going on, so I led her over and sat her down and gave her Anna's hand to hold.

Then I went looking for Colonel Kohn. As I pushed through the people milling around in the main lobby area, most of them were talking about his death. Apparently everybody had seen him die, and only I had seen him alive.

I suppose I should say I doubted my own sanity, but I didn't. What I doubted was everybody else's.

I found a metal ladder with its supports embedded in the duroplast and started climbing. I really don't like heights, but pretty soon I was twenty meters in the air and running along a metal catwalk, wondering where the damp warm air was coming from until I realized it was everybody's breath, rising and collecting up there.

I spotted him standing at the main air intake. He'd pulled off the housing and shoved back the big flexible duct and he was aiming his pistol between the metal louvers. He fired the way real marksmen do, touching the stud so gently that I could hardly see his fingertip move. The pistol coughed and something outside roared.

"One less," he muttered, and I didn't know whether he meant one less round or one less enemy, or both. "What are you doing here, Eloise?"

I told him that everybody had seen him die, including Anna, and he'd better show himself alive before she died of grief and before Jamal had time to make everybody hate him.

"You underestimate them both," he said. "Oh, oh. Step back and open your mouth and cover your ears."

I did and the catwalk jumped and I felt like I'd had an iron bell over my head and somebody had hit it with a sledgehammer.

"Oh my God," I was muttering. "Oh my God." He yelled something at me but I was almost deaf.

He walked me away from the spot. My ears were still ringing, but after a little while I could understand him. He talked like a lecturer.

"If that last missile had hit the grille we'd have a big hole in the dome. And it's accessible to an exterior ladder. But it just occurred to me that we ought to let them come in this way, because they'll be squeezed together on this goddamn catwalk and we can shoot them like rabbits. Or maybe just pry the catwalk loose and let them fall."

He told me to go see Jamal and have him order two people with guns up here. "And tell Anna not to wet her pants. I'm alive as I ever was. As soon as my two shooters get here, I'll be down."

Before going I asked, "Why does everybody think you're dead?"

"It's the flyer. I was going to take it up and harass Mack and see if I could get her to waste her last missiles. But somebody else got there first."

"Who?"

"Vizbee and Smelt, of course. I guess they figured they were on the menu and the battle gave them a good chance to escape. Though where they hoped to escape to, I don't know. Idiots. Now, scram."

Item (24.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook (Kohn speaking).*

Jamal tells me he's deferred the punch on the jaw until either the Cousins break in, or else we get away. That way if he knocks out a few teeth I can either have dental care or else not need it.

I've had some of the guys loosen the retaining bolts on the upper catwalk. A bearpig tore out the grille and louvers but nothing's tried to get through yet. I suppose they've figured out that it's like climbing into a bull's eye.

I wish I knew if Mack's got any missiles left. Let's see, there were six in the armory to start with. One fired into Krebs's quarters. One to blast the power station. One to open up the mess hall. Three fired here. Does that mean she's out?

I bet not. I bet she had a couple stored away in some secret place, maybe underground. This lady is daring but also careful. If she has more, they'll soon be hitting a door. Preferably two doors, one on each side. Then the big beasts will break down what's left, and they'll be inside.

We'll kill a lot of them but it won't make any difference, because, as Anna said, you can't fight a whole world.

WHAM!

Hear that? Just in case anybody gets to listen to this record. I wish I wasn't so goddamn right all the time. I wish I was dumber, so I couldn't see things coming. I wish Anna and I were anyplace but here.

It's the door into the hangar again. It's bent and bulging inward but still standing.

Lots of pressure against the outside. Nerve-shattering squeals of metal grinding on metal. It moves slowly, but it does move. *E pur si muove* —what Galileo told the Inquisition—but it does move. Meaning the Earth, which probably we'll never see again.

That noise like a very loud shot was a hinge breaking. If only these things were nuclear steel, but they're

not; they're strong, but we need something indestructible.

I order four shooters to the threatened door. Order one guy to stand behind each shooter and grab his weapon if he's killed or wounded. Yell for the shooters on the catwalk to come down. Order one to join Jamal, the other to blow off the loosened retaining bolts if something comes through the intake, as of course something will. Order everybody to stay away from the area underneath. Order Jamal to watch the double doors that open onto the shuttlepad. If the Cousins break in there, we're seriously screwed.

Finally stop giving orders. I've done the best I can, now we'll fight it out and they'll win, as possibly they deserve to do. As Eloise said, *itis* their world.

On the way to her hospital, Anna gives me a blissful smile. She's actually happy to be dying with me—compared to living without me. In all my long life, nobody ever looked at me that way before.

Item (25.) *From the Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

I feel like such an idiot, talking, talking to you across the light years at a time like this. But what else can I do?

It'll hurt you to know exactly how I died, but not as much as not knowing. And I want you to know my last thoughts are with you.

The expected blast just hit the double doors to the pad right in the middle and the metal snapped and bent. Then steady, unrelenting pressure.

All the usual sounds from outside. Warbling, roaring, barking. I hardly hear them, I'm listening to the outcry of the metal as it bends. A lot of muscle out there. An arm reaches through, one of the bearpigs, long claws scratching at the metal. Jamal yells *Hold your fire!*

And of course he's right, that would've been a waste of ammo. There's scabbling around outside, more singing, more roaring, and then the pressure suddenly gets much, much worse. You can see the strong metal bulge, something snaps, something else snaps. Whatever's pushing is breathing in huge gasps.

We have to wait until the doors collapse, then shoot whatever's on the other side. Its body will block the opening, but not for long.

Mama, when I close my eyes for an instant I see your face.

Item (26.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

The double doors to the pad burst open. One of the sea lions that's been leaning against them takes two shots and screams, screams like a wounded animal anywhere, only thirty times as loud.

Then with a huge metallic crash the catwalk comes down, carrying half a dozen bearpigs with it. I step up and shoot the one that's still moving.

Turn back and see that the body of the sea lion is blocking the double doors. It's like the hull of a boat, black and slick except for many white scars of past battles for mates and the two small entry holes left by the impact weapons.

Bearpigs are trying to pull him out of the way, and an Arkie scrambles over him, takes one look at what's waiting for him and scrambles back. But the body's moving now, and it's last-stand time in the old Beladome.

Item (27.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

And then came a thunderous roar and such a collective scream as I never thought to hear even in hell.

Item (28.) *From the Letter of Eloise Alcerra (as dictated to Dr. Li).*

Jamal spun on his heel and picked me up and threw me out of the way before jumping himself.

I landed against the curved wall of the dome just as a long plume of fire licked into the doorway and the body of the sea lion burst into flame, all the layers of fat under its hide igniting like wax, melting, spattering here and there, burning gobbets flying. A guy who was caught in the blast was turning black and falling apart like a doll hit by a blowtorch.

If the Cousins hadn't been there to block the opening partly, we'd all have been fried. As it was, Jamal's clothes caught on fire and I threw myself on him and rolled, feeling the flame and not feeling it, until it was out.

And then people were grabbing me by the wrists and pulling me into the hospital, and somebody had Jamal too, and about the same moment the roaring stopped and I realized that the supply ship's shuttle was down and the retros had finally been turned off.

Item (29.) *From the Report of Doctor Li.*

I have never been busier than during the loading of the shuttle.

The surviving Cousins had fled for the moment, but of course they would be back. So time was of the essence, and we had serious burn cases. Robert had suffered compound fractures of the radius and ulna of his left arm. He had either been blown down or had fallen hard trying to escape the blast.

Fortunately, the shuttle was bringing in medical supplies among many other things, and we tore the boxes apart to find what we needed.

Jamal had severe second-degree burns on the torso and some charring on the hands. Eloise had painful but superficial burns on her hands, belly and right breast. A young man serving with Jamal had been burned beyond recognition, and died as we were loading him.

The shuttle pilot, a Lieutenant Mannheim, talked to me as I worked. He was still amazed by what he had found. He said the overcast had been unusually dense, even for Bela, and he was almost on top of the port before he saw that it was under attack.

Since the shuttle is unarmed, he did the only thing he could by landing in the usual way, using the retros as weapons. Robert praised and commended him, as indeed was only just, for this young officer—though suddenly confronted with an unimaginable situation—had saved all our lives.

At the earliest possible moment, we lifted off. I did not feel entirely safe until we rose above the clouds, into eternal sunlight blazing against the blackness of space.

Item (30.) *From Colonel Kohn's Second Notebook.*

Naturally, Anna wants to knock me out and put me in sickbay for the next six months. I tell her to give me a nerve block and splint the broken wing.

I also get a rest, which I need. Anna bathes me. I'm fed and allowed to sleep under sedation for twelve standard hours. When I wake up, I visit Jamal and find him encased in a kind of body suit that protects

his burns from infection and promotes healing. Anna says he'll need a lot of grafting when we get home.

His hands are in no condition for punching me, but I renew my offer for whenever they are. He's wearing a blissfully silly smile, and I think is still too far under the M2 to hear me or care much, one way or the other. He's alive and loved and floating on a morphine cushion, and that's as close to paradise as any of us are likely to get.

Sitting beside him, Eloise is bright and talkative. She's wearing bandages soaked in a topical anesthetic, and when I ask how she's doing, says, "My right tit will look like hell for a while." She holds up her thickly wrapped hands and intones, "And never, never will I play the harp again." Funny lady.

Then I brief the supply ship's Captain Cetewayo (pronounced approximately Chetch-why-oh, with a click to start). He's a big guy with a polished bald head like a bronze ingot, which nods as I brief him. Fortunately he wears a uniform too, and I don't have to spell out the facts of life for him.

The loss of a whole mining colony is going to cause a stupendous stink back home. I expect to spend several years as a professional witness, being grilled by all sorts of people. I want everything done by the book before we leave Bela for good.

He agrees, collects my notebook and a number of other pieces of evidence and seals them in his safe. Issues me this new notebook. Orders Mannheim to start collecting statements from the survivors—all ten of us.

Since bureaucrats believe nothing until it's written down and all the signature blocks properly filled in with names and ranks, these statements will be collated and an after-action report prepared, signed and sealed.

Admittedly, this is a cover-your-ass operation. But there's one more thing. It's essential that we check the mining camp and Main Base from the air, to insure that there are no human survivors. If we had troopers with us, we'd have to physically go inside and inspect, whatever the danger. Since we haven't the people or weapons to do that, we must do what we can—or risk our careers.

That sounds cold, but I am metaphysically certain that everybody except ourselves is dead. We gotta do what we gotta do, but we will not save anybody by doing it. Cetewayo agrees and gives the necessary orders.

Then I join Mannheim in the shuttle. We strap in and drop off the underbelly of the ship, and all at once it's déjà vu all over again, as some ancient philosopher put it.

We're diving into the endless roiling clouds, rain hits us like surf and a huge crooked bolt of lightning flashes from cloud to cloud. I think how silly it would be, after all I've been through, if I get killed by a commonplace thunderbolt while performing a routine and essentially meaningless duty.

Instead we drop through the last and darkest layer of the eternal overcast, and we're flashing over the familiar blue-black sea. With a navigator disk in hand I'm directing Mannheim to Alfa. Soon we're viewing the familiar sheds and domes and chicken runs of the mining camp, and I ask Mannheim to drop down lower.

The jungle's closing in, preparing to erase every track humans ever made here. Only our machines are still alive, the power station chugging away, the brown stream of slurry gushing down the hill like a giant case of dysentery. The lights are long burned out, of course, and—

Something moving—

No! Somebody!

A little figure that's not an Arkie!

Standing in a doorway, waving!

We dip down for an instant, I haul him in with my workable right arm and we're soaring again. I look at him in awe, trying to imagine how he survived in an alien jungle this long—all alone!

He's even skinnier than I remember him, he's wearing rags, his pants are held up with a vine, he's got long angry scars on face and hands, and whatever isn't scarred is covered with some kind of insect bites. He smells like the whole rotten understory of Bela's jungle. He's beautiful.

"Ted," I tell him, "I'm sorry I missed you the last time."

"Well, here I am," he says, and starts to tell his story—without a single stutter.

How he wriggled out of the bearpig's grasp, leaving his oversized coveralls behind; how the beast wasted time trying to eat the coveralls, allowing him time to slide into the thickets; how he ran and hid; how he made himself a cape of leaves to keep warm and shed the rain. How he watched a wingless feathered creature like a parrot, and began cautiously eating what it ate. How in time he worked his way back to Alfa, found it deserted, scavenged some torn clothing and lived off the contents of a couple of sealed supply cartons until he heard the flyer.

"You weren't worried we'd go off and leave you?"

"No," he says serenely. "I know you're not like that," at which I have the grace to blush.

While listening to Ted Szczech, we've crossed the roiling bay and now arrive at the estuary of that river whose name I never learned—not that human names mean anything on Bela anymore. I suppose the Arkies have a musical phrase for it, as they have for everything else.

Zamok is rising before us, and I see that things have changed. It's no longer Main Base; the Arkies have already cleared some of the human hovels off their Incan stonework. Reconstruction of lovely temples to follow, I'm sure.

There's a crowd of them gathered in the cleared area, standing in circles, and they turn their heads when they see us. Some of them shake weapons, but most merely look once and then turn back to what they're doing. We don't count any longer, but a rite is a rite.

In the center of the crowd stands Julia Mack. I tell Mannheim to bring us to a low hover so we can watch. She completely ignores us, looking straight ahead, and she's wearing a gorgeous robe of some sort, and no wig, and she looks more than ever like Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, or how Gertrude would have looked if she'd been wrapped in a Persian carpet.

Suddenly Ted's stutter comes back, and he starts sputtering, "Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-"

"I'll explain later," I murmur.

Now an Arkie steps up behind her and he's carrying—not the usual bronze implement—no, by God, it's white metal, it's the titanium mountaineer's pickaxe that Mack's parents must have brought to Bela so long ago. Only it's been fitted with a longer handle, so the little Arkie can reach her.

He swings it, and Mannheim exclaims something, I don't know what, and Ted gives a strange cry as

Mack falls heavily with the point in her brain. Another priest comes forward, carrying the usual curved axeblade to complete the ritual.

Mannheim says, "We've got to stop this," and I say, "No, we don't."

This is her reward for all she's done for them—to become a god of the Arkies, to join their pantheon and live here forever. At last she's joined her true species, and she's no longer alone.

When it's over—all but the ritual meal—I have to jiggle Mannheim's arm to get his attention.

"It's their church," I tell him, "and it's their communion. We don't belong here. We never did. So let's go."

CONCLUSION AND JUDGMENT

KOHN, Robert Rogers, cannot be held legally culpable for the disaster on Planet Bela. However, as the only surviving senior official he must be held administratively responsible, since there is no one else left to blame. He is therefore involuntarily retired from the Security Forces with official reprimand and reduced pension.

PROTEST of judgment filed by Citizens Alcerra, al-Sba'a, and Szczech is hereby REJECTED.

PETITION of KOHN, Robert Rogers, and spouse to be allowed to live in retirement in an oasis of the Great American Desert is hereby GRANTED.

BY ORDER OF THE HONORABLE COMMITTEE