

# Mikhail Akhmanov

## Farther than the Farthest Stars

The crew of the Ludwig Klein



**CAPTAIN KOVALSKY**

# Chapter 1. The Obsessed

This agricultural planet was named Opensho. It was small, a little bit bigger than Mars but nice: three green continents, its islands reminded flowerbeds, there were picturesque mountains and the warm turquoise-coloured ocean. Neither deserts nor ice, the climate was that of the paradise, the gravity amounted to three fourth of the standard... Actually Kaleb dropped in hoping to have a rest and have a spree spending the money he had made on Cervantes. No matter what you say, the Free Hunter also needed some rest, especially after his rendezvous with saber-toothed rats. He found a comfortable hotel in a seashore town, he rested for ten days, drinking sweet rose wine, he met compliant girls and then he ran across Wesley King. The latter was not on vacation, he intended to work, but it seemed that the work was beyond his capacity. Wesley would have never said that, but there was some anxiety and uneasiness to be read in his eyes — it seemed that it was even apprehension or fear. He did not want to risk without a partner, and that was no surprise if you think about their usual activities... Kaleb had nearly forgotten the rats on Cervantes and decided to help him. No money is ever extra, and the Monasteries paid well.

He stood on the platform by the foot of the hill looking at the stone bridge vaulting above the river and

the ruins of the old city on the opposite bank. The wide cylinder tower of the Monastery sat on the top of the hill, streets with tile-roofed houses stretched down the gentle slope reminding fingers spread wide. The chapel's sharp-pointed spire stuck out below among stone slabs — probably, they had a cemetery there. There were other buildings in the valley overgrown with vineyards and fruit groves — farms with wine-pressing buildings and cattle-sheds, the crystal cube of the power station and the squat tin factory. It was warm, the sky was clear, the sun reminded of a silver eye, fresh breeze was blowing from the river... A peaceful sight! It was time to drop in a tavern under a striped tent, drink some wine and get acquainted with a local beauty... But all pubs and taverns in the village were closed, all residents were here — standing in a crowd. Close to one another, whispering quietly. The sounds they made reminded of a swarm of bees. The taller people were descendents of colonists, the locals looked like elves — lithe, fragile, beardless, with thin bones. Probably, it seemed to them that if they stuck all together, they would not be so frightened.

“What are you waiting for, sion Hunter?” Brother Paul asked, shifting from one foot to the other. “Here is the bridge, here are the ruins, and the obsessed murderer is there! It would be nice to get rid of him till sunset. If he comes again at night...”

The monk fell silent without finishing the

sentence — he was also frightened. Deadly frightened!

Kaleb looked him over quickly. Tall, thin pale face, greenish spots on his cheeks, very little hair in his beard... A half-breed like many people in this world. It was not surprising as the colonists had lived here for nearly a thousand years. Or even more?... In any case there was enough time for mixing...

“For the sake of Life and Light! Why are you silent, sion?” The monk squeezed the platform’s edge with his gnarled fingers. “Go to the city! You have already been paid!”

“Don’t hurry me, Brother Paul. I’m thinking,” Kaleb murmured.

“And how long will you think?”

“Until your piss turns blue. I was paid, you’re right... But surely you don’t want the money to be wasted and me to stay over there, under the grass?” Kaleb waved his hand to the cemetery.

There were enough new graves there. Evidently, the monk also thought about that — he knitted his brows, stepped aside, pulled his red praying crystal out of his long loose sleeve, and his lips started moving though no words were heard. Hardly his prayers saved from the obsessed — Brother Paul was definitely not an adept.

It seemed that there were no adepts in the other Monasteries on Opensho if they hired the Hunter...

No adepts — then pay, sexless drones, Kaleb

thought grinning and listening to the murmurs in the crowd. Acuity of senses was no less important in his profession than a ray gun or protective armour, but in contrast to weapons, this innate talent could not be sold or bought, and no implants could substitute it. Looking at the city on the other river bank, he followed the shadows playing among the ruins lying in shapeless heaps, and inhaled warm air filled with numerous smells. Smoke from fireplaces, fresh water, stones heated by the sun, stench from the corrals with cattle, sweat, skin smells, cheap incense over the crowd... The smell of fear which the Hunter knew and which was the same in every place where death was waiting for people.

“Worm... that’s the worm...” they were murmuring in the crowd.

“The worm crawls into ears at night, and he went to the city... he went there in the daytime...”

“We have no worms... No one saw them for many years... But we do have mites...”

“Mites do not make anyone obsessed...”

“It depends on the mite, sion Gerard... Those from Misty Island, they...”

“Last night he sucked Kenrick, the tailor dry... Kenrick and his whole family... his wife, daughter and his baby son...”

“We live opposite Kenrick, and we heard nothing...”

“The one with a worm in his head is like a worm himself... crawling quietly, you won’t hear anything...”

“I tell you, siona, that’s not a worm, it’s this mite from Misty Island!..”

“Mite! We’re here and where is that island?! How could this mite get here?...”

“I heard that they were flying mites...”

“It may be neither a worm nor a mite but a slug-brain-turner... they like blood as well...”

A heavy sigh, then whispers again.

“Poor Ines... He has already sucked sixteen people dry... They will say that she is at fault... Why did she let Gaub into the city?...”

“There is no fault of hers. Gaub is very obstinate! Everyone knows that!..”

“She should be purified...”

“The monks will hear her confession and purify her. That they can do, but when it comes to dealing with the obsessed, they shy away. We have to be grateful that they at least hired the Hunters...”

“They’re afraid themselves, and that’s why they hired the Hunters...”

The crowd parted, and Wesley King dived out of it, dragging a young woman by her hand. People jumped aside from him — he was a broad-shouldered big man and in his plastic spiked cuirass he looked like a fairytale giant. His blades on the magnet suspension

flashed on his hips, the black eye of his Harrison looked out from under his elbow, freezers stuck out of his pockets which were also filled with gas containers and ray knives, and the fire-thrower's barrel trembled above his helmet. The woman near him reminded of a blade of grass by an oak-tree.

She looks twenty-five, Kaleb thought. And she probably was twenty-five; people were not rich here, they could not pay for reversion.

“Here she is!” Wesley pushed the woman to the platform. “Siona Ines ar’Gaub. Our client’s wife.”

The monk stopped praying, put his crystal away and turned to the woman.

“What do you need from her, Hunters? She is in sorrow and grief, and it’s not a place for her! Let her return to the Monastery!”

“She will return if she wishes it, but now I want to ask her some questions,” Kaleb said. “Shut your mouth, monk!”

He sat on the edge of the platform, with his legs hanging and looked the woman over once again. Her face was pale and tear-stained, her dark hair was disheveled, but she was neatly dressed and looked to be of sound mind... Though she was in sorrow, she did not go insane.

“Tell me, siona Ines, when did your husband fail to return home?”

Kaleb spoke quietly, trying not to frighten the

woman.

“Eight days ago, sion Hunter,” Ines whispered.

Eight days, sixteen dead... That’s a lot! Probably, the monster is multiplying or spawning, or will soon start it, Kaleb thought. A worm, mite, slug, it was not so important what it was, there was time enough for any parasite.

“He went to the city. What for?”

“He was looking for various things... figurines, pieces of broken pottery with inscriptions, stone seals... They pay well for that,” the woman explained, smearing tears over her cheeks. “He looked for old things.”

“And he did find something...” Wesley King murmured.

Kaleb looked at him angrily and moved his eyebrow trying to tell his partner that he should know his place and not interfere. Wesley was not one of the elite, that is Hereditary Hunters and was listed somewhere among the third hundred in the Brotherhood’s Register. Had they been dealing with rats, giant spiders from Bikwara or some other similar scum, one could trust his experience and agility. What were rats and spiders?... Brainless creatures, you just fired and fired at them... Parasites capable to seize the brain were considered much more dangerous.

“Did your husband say anything about this garbage heap?” Kaleb nodded to the ruins. “Where did



he dig, what buildings examined, what he saw? Stop crying and try to remember.”

Ines blew her nose.

“Will you kill him? Will you kill my Gaub?”

“Surely,” Wesley King promised, and the woman burst into tears.

“Wesley, shut up,” Kaleb said. “And you, siona, stop crying and answer me. Gaub died eight days ago. It’s not him in the city but a bloodthirsty monster. Do you want this creature to murder someone else? Your relatives, neighbours, their children?”

That worked. Ines dried her tears and whispered, “The pond...”

“What do you mean?”

“In the square... Gaub said that there was a pond... He sat down by the water to have a rest...”

“Did he drink that water?”

“No. It was muddy... Not clear... I gave him food and uloh... He loved uloh...”

That’s beverage from local berries, Kaled remembered and asked again, “Did he wash in that pond? It’s hot now and digging is not an easy work.”

“May be he did. I don’t know, sion Hunter.”

Kaleb decided that it was not possible to pull anything else out of her, signed and got up.

“Climb to the platform, Wesley. We’re leaving.”

The gravitation platform swayed and sunk a little — even here, where gravitation was lower, King

weighed a lot. The people in the crowd started waving their hands; someone threw a handful of raisins and grains in the air — for luck. Brother Paul took his transparent ball out again and started praying. Ines ar’Gaub lowered her head and closed her face with her hands — probably, she did not want people to see her tears.

“The pond,” Kaleb said thoughtfully. “The pond with muddy water...”

That could well be the place where Gaub had been caught...

“Hydra? What do you think?” Wesley paled and involuntarily put his hand on his Harrison.

Kaleb did not answer and just looked at the ruins across the river sullenly.

The old city looked dark, gloomy, threatening — heaps of broken stone mixed with garbage, fallen roofs, pieces of columns, walls covered with climbing plants, boulders on which fortifications and towers had stood in the past, by now all of them had fallen into pieces. The city had been built not by colonists from the stars but by some Opensho people that had lived here in ancient times. Evidently, the planet had had a period of prime, which like in the other worlds inhabited by people sooner or later had given way to decay and regress. The swings of history either flew to the skies promising power, flourishing and eternal life, or sent the humankind into the precipice of savagery and

oblivion. That had been the case until the Burroughs engine appeared and artificial intelligence systems, gravitation drive, biological reversion, common language and other gifts of the progress with it.

The platform sailed above the bank overgrown with grass and descended to the river. It was automatically controlled, and that system did not turn to the bridge for some reason but decided to force a crossing by air. However, it was all the same for such flying machines what they had under their bottoms: dry land or flowing water. The platform did not need any supporting surface, it moved unhurriedly though it was very reliable.

Kaleb checked his equipment fixed on his belt and armour, took a tiny injector from the pocket above his knee, shook his head and put it back. After that he turned back, looked at the slope of the hill with houses built on it, at the squat Monastery tower and green valley stretching to the horizon. The platform was rolling slightly and sailing to the other bank. The bridge arches to the left looked graceful, the river waters below and to the right were flowing to the sea, and the sky, the roof of this quiet and comfortable world, was of gentle azure colour and shining. A beautiful little planet! Though the name did not sound nice. Why Opensho?... May be that was the name of its discoverer. Why not?... There were hundreds of thousands inhabited worlds in the Universe, and every

one was to have a name! Once Kaleb shot saber-toothed monsters on the planet Six-and-a-Half, as it turned round its axis in six and a half standard hours, and on Drunken Swamp he hardly got out of the swamp full of poisonous leeches. Though if he thought about hydra...

They stopped on the shore by the ruins of the fortress wall, jumped to the ground and lowered their face shields in similar movements, then they had their weapons ready.

“Let’s go, Wesley,” Kaleb said. “Four-step distance. Forward!”

There were gates in the wall. The towers that had been connected with an arch in the past, had fallen down and long time ago, the leftovers reminded a couple of rotten teeth in the broken jaw of some giant. A stone idol looked out of a heap of broken stones and sand not far from the gates. The mouth was open, one paw with talons was threateningly raised. The Hunters got over the heaps of rubbish, overgrown with thorny bushes and entered the city.

A street opened in front of them — it was narrow as a knife blade. They could not see it all as it zigzagged abruptly in about seventy meters from the towers by the entrance. There were ruined buildings on both sides: the walls from darkened stones were higher than an average man, the road was covered with broken tiles and pieces of stones, tilting pipes protruded in

some places above the walls. Judging by the lack of bones and other signs of violence, the city was neither taken by enemies, nor destroyed, nor burned down — the residents had left it themselves, leaving as a sacrifice to the time, and only the sun, wind and rains worked on it.

Kaleb gave a signal, and the platform fired a probe. The small disc flew to the skies, froze slightly rolling above the ruins, and a small screen immediately illuminated by the Hunter's left glove. He looked attentively into the ghostly image. The streets with abrupt turns went to the central square, surrounded by bigger and more massive buildings, probably they were temples or palaces. Their walls, supported by counter-forces, were higher than in the outlying districts of the city, the fallen roofs allowed to see the chaos in the inner rooms. There was a dark irregular spot in the center of the oval square. Probably, there had been a well there in the past, but in time heavy rains and underground waters eroded the soil, destroying any traces of the artificial construction. Now it was a small lake reminding of an ink-spot, and a red dot pulsed by it.

“He is in the square, by the pond,” Wesley said. “It seems that the guy is thirsty.”

“I don't think so,” Kaleb shook his head. “A vampire drinking blood doesn't need any other liquid. He is guarding this pond.”

“What for?”

“His descendants are there, in the water. Abundant food, water, warmth and several days in safety. All that’s needed for procreation...” Kaleb fell silent looking at the screen, then murmured, “God damn me, Wesley! That’s hydra, now I’m sure of it! We’ll have to sweat.”

His companion’s face darkened. But Wesley King was still a Hunter though not from the first hundred. He squeezed his ray gun harder, grinned and growled, ‘Such a careful parent! But we won’t have to look for him in this garbage heap. He will run to us himself when we freeze the water!’

“He will run, don’t you doubt it.”

After saying that Kaleb went along the street. He was on the alert. He inhaled the air deeply with his nostrils, he listened for the crackling stones heated by the sun. Small pieces of broken stones and sand rustled when they fell down.

The street turned left abruptly, then to the right. He saw rooms, halls, corridors through the holes in the walls that had been windows in the past, everything was covered by heaps of garbage mixed with stones and soil. Sometimes he caught evidences of digging in those ancient layers, pits and trenches with earth piled on their sides, filled with dirty water, or they were half-filled again, or nearly blurring with the soil. There had been many hundreds of treasure hunters

rummaging about the city over the last one thousand years, and Gaub surely was not the first one. Those before him had risked to have a wall falling on their heads, or they could have been buried in some hole with debris falling and falling. The land could crack and open, and an unlucky digger found himself in a cave and stayed there forever. But in comparison with them, siona Ines' husband was very unlucky — he ran across the creature one could hardly imagine in a nightmare! It must have been brought by underground waters, but how it had got into the waters and on the planet was another matter and of no interest to Gaub. There was only one way open to Gaub now — under an emitter or a blade.

The street that the Hunters took was becoming narrower — it seemed that if Kaleb stretched his both arms, he could touch walls on opposite sides. Undoubtedly, builders had some purpose in mind — it could be defense: it was no problem to close the passage, and ten skillful fighters could hold a hundred here. It was not bad for ancient warriors, but this narrow street seemed a trap for the Hunters — scattered tiles and stones under their feet, shabby walls threatening to fall down, a limited view and no place for maneuvers. But the probe hanging over the city sent a clear picture, and the red spot was still pulsating by the pond.

“Let's have a look. What is he doing?” Wesley

King said enlarging the image on the screen. “I have never met a guy with this creature in his head. Could it be that he has tentacles now? Can they grow out of him?”

“Hydra is not a metamorph, it cannot change its looks,” Kaleb answered. “And it’s not sitting in the head, but on the back by the neck where big blood vessels are sending blood to the brain. It reminds of a hump.” He paused, then added, “I saw that on the Planet of Towers... Only once...”

The reminiscences were far from pleasant like all other cases of obsession when some foul creature took over human body and mind. People lived on myriads of planets in the Great Galaxies — as a rule under the light of stable stars where the required by humanoids balance of warmth, gravitation, moisture and atmosphere contents was maintained. Sapient species were a part of the ecosystem everywhere, the system that included plants and animals, insects, fish and microorganisms. This boisterous life often generated special endemics that were not dangerous for autochthons but unknown in other worlds. In the spaceflight age there species were accidentally or intentionally taken from planet to planet, mutated in the new environment and sometimes turned into terrible semi-sapient monsters with no respect due to a man. Usually these parasites, bugs, worms, hydras, mites entered human flesh, connected to nerve ends leading



to the brain and subjugated the carrier. The result of the symbiosis depended on the creature's features: comparatively safe bugs feeding on gastric juice made a man eat a lot. Worms and mites affected the mind, and the symptoms were similar of schizophrenia and delusions of persecution. Hydra turned its carrier into a vampire. It was not always possible to get rid of parasites with medical means and the most reliable way was elimination of the creature together with its carrier. And that was not an easy task.

“Look, he is naked!” Wesley said from behind Kaleb. “Lying by that pool with his cock up! Is he sleeping? Or dead?”

Kaleb looked at the screen by his left wrist out of the corner of his eye. The naked man was lying on his back, with one hand in the pond and though he looked like any homo sapiens, there was nothing human in his face. His features were frozen in a grotesque mask: his eyes were closed and sunken, his pale hairless skin stretched on his jaws and deeply lined forehead. Probably, siona Ines would not have recognized her husband now — he aged about forty years.

“A skeleton,” Wesley King murmured. “He looks like a skeleton. His ribs are sticking out... and joints... He looks dead!”

“He only looks that,” Kaleb specified.

They came to a non-wide heap in the end of the street and froze on both sides of that barricade. Several

broken columns and stones that had been a palace or possibly some temple, reliably hid the Hunters, allowing them to watch the square without any obstacles closing the view. There were also a lot of garbage heaps and hills on it, so the obsessed was not seen from their position. Bad luck! Kaleb thought. It would be great to shoot him through an arm or a leg, then the creature would not be so agile...

He changed hands holding his Harrison and ordered, "Fire at a stone on the top of that heap, Wesley. We have to make him rise."

A bright ray hit the stone, pieces of it flew to all sides, a cloud of dust rose up. At the same moment a whitish shadow flashed above the debris and heaps. It was moving very quickly like a lightning flashing in the sky. The obsessed moved at such a speed that human eyes did not manage to fix where he was at the moment. Kaleb fired — once, two, three times; the fiery arrows from his ray gun pierced the air, coloured tiles fell from some palace in the farthest end of the square, then its whole façade fell down making a lot of noise and rising a lot of dust.

"The Seventh Hell! I didn't get him!" he said disappointed.

The target was too quick even for a Hereditary Hunter.

"That's a lively guy!" Wesley King answered him. "Well, and where is he now?"

The red spot on the screen moved to the ruins on the right side of the square and froze there. Just standing and waiting. Surely, he was not a man any more, but the creature did have some brains. It understood that someone had come after it.

“Let’s go to the pond.” Kaleb nodded in the direction of the square. “We keep the same distance. If you hear a rustle or notice something — fire. Fire from your ray gun, its kill zone is bigger.”

“Shall we make him run over the ruins?”

“No. He will come himself to kill us. His descendants are in the pond.”

The Hunters carefully went forward, running and jumping from behind one pile of stones to the other and getting over them. The buildings surrounding the square were preserved better than those by the city gates and looked magnificent: rows of columns separated by arches, carved stones and mosaic on what was left from the frontons, broken statues in niches and paintings over the inner walls — they were not bright, the colours had dimmed, but everything here was surely not badly preserved. True archeologists had never worked here, otherwise the frescoes and mosaics cut out or together with the walls, pieces of statues, stone spires and decorations would have found their way to some museum or private collections long ago. But there were so many planets with old deserted cities and towns in the Great Galaxies that it seemed impossible

and unnecessary to examine and research all of them. Archeologists went to the places where ancient cultures could enrich the galactic civilization by especially valuable works of art. They dug on Ophira and the Planet of Towers, on Shambhala, Earth and Polar planet, on Seventh Aira in the Magellanic Clouds and certainly Avalon.

The area around the little lake heated by the sun was cleaned, a small barrier was made from stones in some distance from the water. It looked dark, cloudy, and thin shining threads trembled and rolled on its surface — pseudopodia from hydra embryos. When Kaleb saw them, he had a feeling as if some cold paw caressed his back. It was the paw of terror. Grown-up hydras threw out threats at unbelievable speed, they pierced skull bones in several places at once and linked to the brain turning a human into an obsessed, obedient carrier. Hydra was the most dangerous and elusive of all parasites; sometimes every form of life had to be destroyed with freezer bombs in the poisoned by hydras areas. Hydras could not stand cold.

“Throw a grenade,” Kaleb ordered. The barrel of his ray gun was directed at the half-fallen building with a row of six-facet columns.

The probe said that the creature was hiding there.

The cylinder of the freezer fell into the water with a plopping sound, and the middle of the pond was immediately covered with an icy crust.

“Another grenade,” Kaleb said without taking his eyes from the ruins.

Wesley raised his arm, but he didn't manage to throw the freezer — there was a quick movement behind the Hunter's back, nearly impossible to catch by an eye, he cried and fell to the ground. Kaleb had time to fire only once and immediately sent a spurt from the fire-thrower into the back of the obsessed. The fire spread over the ground, burnt some stones, but the monster eluded them again. He was like an invisible ghost saddling the hurricane.

“I'll catch you, monster!” Kaleb said through clenched teeth and went to Wesley. The armour on his partner's shoulder cracked from the horrible blow, but it saved his arm and probably his life. Damning all bastard creatures in all Galaxies, both Old and New, Wesley got up, moved the protective shield, loosened the fixtures of the armour and examined his shoulder. His skin under the protective shield was blue, the giant bruise stretched from his neck to his biceps, but it seemed that bones were intact.

“Rat's ass! He nearly tore my arm away!”

“That's hydra,” Kaleb reminded gloomily. “When there is enough food, metabolism boosts, its reaction is fantastic and it's very strong... Can you move your arm?”

“Yes, bless Bosons the Creators!” Wesley bent down and picked up the freezer that had rolled aside.

“Did you get him?”

“No. He is too quick.” Kaleb looked at the pond. “But he won’t go away. He’ll attack us again and again.”

Wesley also looked at the water with threads rolling on its surface and grinned making a face.

“A good bait, isn’t it? I’ll throw a couple of freezers if you don’t mind. You may be lucky next time.”

“We’ll throw together.” Kaleb also pulled out a grenade. “But it’d better to stand by the stones to the right of the pond. It’s a poor shelter but still..”

Looking around and at the screens the Hunters moved to the high stone wall. The local sun passed its zenith, but it was still hot like in hell. It was especially hot in the armour, sweat streaked down their backs from the temples, the Harrison’s barrel was burning the palm even through the glove. Dust devils danced in the hot air above the stones and heaps of broken stones and rubbish, the ice in the middle of the pond was thawing quickly, the water though it was dark and cloudy, beckoned promising coolness.

“I think four freezers will be enough,” Kaleb said.

Two grenades flew into the water, followed by two more. The pond froze immediately till the very bottom, the icy monolith was pushed out of the surrounding banks with a lot of noise, the ice began cracking, screeching, but these sounds were drowned

by a thin piercing shout. It seemed that it was coming from some animal but not a human throat — to be more exact, a creature which had been human not so long ago. This moan expressing despair or anger was still hanging in the air when stones started falling under somebody's quick steps and screeching.

“Careful!” Kaleb shouted raising his ray gun. The next moment some power that could not be resisted turned the barrel to the sky, and the ray hit a stone tooth above the nearest building. A horrible face with bared teeth appeared in front of the Hunter, fingers-hooks grabbed his shoulders trying to pierce and crumple the armour, and Kaleb fell down letting the ray gun out of his hands. He rolled over the broken stones together with his opponent, feeling the armour shields bending and being pushed into his body. The sun and the sky as if jumped above him, he was either on top or below his rival, his hands squeezed the monster's ribs and for a split second he even heard the bones of the obsessed cracking and fracturing. The force Kaleb applied when he squeezed his opponent, was transmitted to the armour, and thorns jumped out of the places where the shield were joined. The bracelet on his wrist let out the blade from nitride steel, and Kaleb found the handle, which he was used to, in his palm. He wanted to stretch to the hump behind the obsessed shoulders, but he did not manage it. Then he struck him in his right side under the ribs trying to get to the liver. The monster

must have felt pain — the creature shrieked, started back, rushed to the ruins, and the Hunter rose on one knee and sent a spurt of fire from the fire-thrower after the running monster. He saw the skin on the back of the obsessed blackening and hanging in shreds, after that the monster disappeared behind the half-broken wall. It seemed that wounds and burns did not affect the speed of his movements.

Grabbing his ray gun, Kaleb got up on his feet quickly. His crumbled shields scratched his shoulders, sweat streams ran down his back and cheeks stinging his eyes, but his heartbeats were steady. He was ready to fight, fire, cut with his blade, tear his opponent with bare hands if he suddenly lost his weapons. Here, on Opensho, he ran across the obsessed vampire, one of the most dangerous creatures in the Galaxies, he could lose and die, but that meant nothing. Danger was inalienable from the Hunters' craft, and it was not rare that their road led to the valley of the deadly shade.

Drops of blood fell from the blade. Wesley King, who had no time to react to the sudden attack, inhaled some air wheezing and slapped his thigh.

“You did it! You wounded him!”

“I wounded him, but I didn't kill him,” Kaleb murmured looking gloomy. “He'll be OK in a couple of minutes. Regeneration is quick.”

They went to the pond. The giant ice block rose above the ground, and dark shapeless spots were seen



in its depth. The ice had already started thawing, drop after drop were making the way over its surface covered with numerous cracks, but hydra embryos were dead.

“We may have been wrong,” Wesley King said. “There is no bait now, and nothing keeps the client here. I have no wish to follow him in these ruins.”

Kaleb shook his head.

“He won’t go away.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Vindictive creature! He’ll try to kill us.”

The red spot on the screen was moving quickly, the bloodsucking devil was circling the pond and the square waiting for his wounds to heal. That was not to take long.

“You have the potion. I saw it,” King said and looked at the pocket above Kaleb’s knee — where the tiny injector was hidden. “Will you inject it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“And what if I won’t have enough time to deal with him and pass out? Then he’ll kill both of us.”

“Well, inject me then.”

Kaleb thought for a minute, then said, “You, my friend, will not overcome him even with the potion, and I’ll have to guard your unconscious body. No offense meant, Wesley. Our job doesn’t forgive mistakes.”

“I agree,” his partner said. “What shall we do?”

Run after him over this old refuse dump?”

“There is no need to run after him, he’ll find us himself. Let’s get back to the river, lure him to the open bank.”

“You really think he’ll follow us to revenge?”

“Not only for that.” Kaleb looked at the sun. “It’s the middle of the afternoon, and he hasn’t eaten since night but ran a lot. He is already hungry, and we’re the nearest source of food.”

Wesley grinned.

“That’s very inspiring! But we’ll have to take that narrow crack again...” He checked the screen. “However, other cracks are even narrower. Damned city! No places for maneuvering!”

“It means you have to look back more often and keep your weapons ready,” Kaleb murmured and went to the blockage that separated the square from the street.

They got over pieces of columns with capitals in the forms of some predators’ paws with big claws, went past the broken in two parts architrave and a broken frieze with a horrible demon looking out of it and surrounded by snakes. If the ruins were a sanctuary, they prayed to not very nice gods here, Kaleb thought. Claws, talons, fangs, open jaws, tails with spikes... A suitable environment for a blood-sucking monster.

They went along the narrowest part of the street, between ruins of houses, in some places crowned with

scallops and towers. Wesley kept the distance and walked in four steps behind his partner, pieces of stone and sand squealed and cracked under his boots, but Kaleb discerned other sounds as well — a hardly noticeable rustle on his right and a kind of slaps like the sounds of bare feet touching stones. The Hunters walked to the gates overlooking the bridge, and the red spot on the screen obstinately followed them. The obsessed was here, hiding behind walls in several meters from them, and now he was driven not only by revenge but also by hunger. Maybe his hunger blurred what was left of his mind, and the Hunters did not seem dangerous to him any more. Maybe he already thought of them as a tasty prey, blood-filled wineskins. In this case...

The rustling behind the half-broken wall became louder, and Kaleb rushed forward, shouting, “Run, Wesley! Quicker!”

But his partner didn't manage in time. Pieces of stone flew in all directions, then the wall fell down with a lot of noise and screeching, one stone struck Kaleb's helmet, another fell on his shoulder exactly where the damaged shield was. A chalky-white ghost appeared in place of the broken wall — he looked horrible, covered with dried blood and dust. For a fraction of a second Kaleb looked into his eyes, they were impenetrable, dark and icy like the black matter separating Galaxies. Was that fraction of a second long?... He did not know,

he could say one thing only: probably less than it was required for his finger to press the trigger. The ray gun spat sending a lighting, but the obsessed had already disappeared as if dissolving in the chaos of walls, leaning chimneys and heaps of garbage.

Wesley was pale, he was staggering and shaking his head, his right arm hanging loose.

“D-d-damn! Well, he is a s-s-strong devil... Who c-c-could have thought it? He b-b-broke the wall...” the partner mumbled, wheezing and stuttering, then he added in a normal voice, “It seems my collar bone is broken. Just a moment...”

He pressed a key on his belt, the first-aid kit peeped under his breast armour, and the usual complexion returned to Wesley’s cheeks.

“Can you walk?” Kaleb asked looking at the screen. The red spot pulsed rather far, in about one hundred and twenty meters judging by the figures the device demonstrated.

“Yes. And I can fire!” King raised his left arm with the ray gun.

“Then let’s go. Keep closer to me.”

They managed to make just several steps when the wall in the place where the street turned, fell down, barricading the way with a new pile of debris. Kaleb reacted immediately — the stones were still falling when he started firing. Wesley’s ray gun added some fire, his weapon was set on the maximum, and a plasma

fountain rose in front of the Hunters. It was unbearably hot, they felt that heat, stone slabs cracked and turned into dust, a column of dark red fire rose to the skies roaring. It seemed that nothing could survive in this imitation of hell, especially a living creature.

“This damned rascal is alive,” Wesley said with annoyance after looking at the screen. “We only burnt his heels a little.”

The fire died, but broken stones were still dimly red and the wind carried a cloud of heated dust above them. The Hunters went round that place going through half-broken walls and piles of rubbish, jumping over pits and trenches full of water, the leftovers of former digging. The narrow part of the street was left behind, it was not far to the gates. The monster followed them obstinately, however, he didn't attack them — perhaps, it was not only his heels that were burnt, and the hydra had to restore the burnt flesh. If regeneration was too quick, it exhausted the carrier's body and could not go on forever, but the creature that settled down inside the man, was not worried about that — there were other humans at its disposal, hundreds, thousands of bodies. It could suck blood from any resident of the village or get into him or her leaving Gaub a bloodless corpse.

Will we manage to make him come out to the bank?... It would be best to arrange an ambush as there is a bait... Kaleb thought looking at the enlarged image on the screen. The probe kept the obsessed in sight all

the time hanging in about forty meters above the city. From the probe's point of view poor Gaub looked like a thin gnarled monkey jumping from stone to stone at unbelievable speed. His hump stuck out like a sharp cone between his shoulder blades and it seemed that some strange cap with pale skin stretched over it was glued to the man's back.

A cloud crawled from the river, covered the sun, it became dark and started drizzling. Rain drops struck helmets and armour, and distorted the vision when streaking down the face shields. Kaleb switched the shield wiper.

Wesley followed in his footsteps and murmured, "We haven't managed to kill the bastard... I swear by the Great Galaxies! It's even unclear who hunts whom!"

Kaleb didn't answer him. They left the gates and stopped on the slightly sloping river bank listening to the rain. The gravitation platform was swinging by the water to the right of them, the old road to the bridge was on the left. There was at least four hours till the evening, but the clouds densely covered the sky, the light went out, the rain was heavier now. The Hunter squinted his eyes and could discern the hill on the other side of the river, the Monastery tower, houses and the crowd by the entrance to the village. People stood under the rain and it seemed that no one had left, no one hid under a roof. They were afraid of the night and

solitude.

Wesley tore off the broken shield, his right shoulder was swollen and reddened. The effect of the drug injected by the first-aid kit had not stopped yet, and there was no pain, but the partner did not look well though he pretended to be brave and firmly held the ray gun in his left hand. Healing a fracture was not a problem for any surgeon, but Kaleb could not count on Wesley now as a fighter. Though he could be used in another capacity.

After examining his naked arm, Kaleb murmured, “You look suitable. Some bleeding to add could work wonders... He will go completely mad from blood...”

“What do you...” Wesley opened his mouth and shut it at once. It seemed he understood.

“Give me the ray gun, helmet, blades and ray knives,” Kaleb ordered. “You can leave the dagger but hide it better.” He took the weapons from Wesley. “Stay by the gates, let him see you at once. Choose the position yourself but be sure to present the idea: the beefsteak is ready and dressed with sauce.”

“Should I play a pheasant on a skewer?” Wesley mumbled but obediently went to the gates saying on the way, “I hope that you won’t miss this time.”

He lay on the damp ground, pulled his knees to his belly and froze as if he was half-dead and absolutely helpless. Rain fell on his head and naked shoulder, the dark entrance with ruined towers on both sides seemed

a dragon's jaw ready to eat the Hunter. Kaleb stood on his knees behind the platform and switched the adjustment of his ray gun. Minimum power and the striking cone not exceeding a fraction of a millimeter. Now the ray could cut flesh and bones but not stones.

He waited without taking his eyes from the gates, listening to the rain, rustling and quiet sounds that reached him from the city. Kaleb's muscles were relaxed, he did not move and if one looked at him from afar, he in his grey armour could be very well taken for a stone idol that had fallen from either a wall or a tower. Waiting was not a problem for him. He had been waiting in ambush in the past many-many times, in just exactly the same way waiting for another target to appear, getting out of some impassable thicket, rushing down from the sky, swimming out of the sea or appearing from the depth of the earth, hole or cave. Ability to wait was no less important in his trade than good eyesight and keen hearing. Impatient people were rare among Hunters and they died quickly.

The chalky-white ghost flashed behind the gates and disappeared the next moment. A stone fell on another stone, the sound was muffled, something rustled, and the monster appeared among the tower ruins for a moment. Kaleb stayed motionless. Wesley King was diligently playing a man who lost his strength, he raised himself on his elbow, moaned and fell back on the damp ground with a shriek. He is no



actor but moaning very naturally, Kaleb thought.

It stopped raining, but the sky was still cloudy. The light was dim, the day was coming to the end and in that light the city looked especially gloomy. It seemed that demons from the ancient times that had lived there, came to life for some time and were watching the Hunters with thousands hungry eyes. Watching and waiting when a new drama would be played between the ruins, and blood would be spilt falling on stones from either the hero or the monster killed by him.

Kaleb did not catch the moment when the quickly moving shadow slipped to Wesley King. A moment ago the area in front of the gates was empty, there was no movement on the wall or towers, but hardly a fraction of a second later angry Wesley's cry broke the silence. The thin naked creature saddled him, pressing the Hunter to the ground with one hand and pulling the shoulder of the cuirass, protecting the neck, with the other. The monster could not wait to get to the carotid artery, but he could not understand why his prey was so hard and instead of the bones breaking and death agony, the prey was still moving and shouting.

"Here you are, my friend," Kaleb whispered very quietly and raised his ray gun. A thin violet needle pierced the temple of the obsessed, he shuddered and fell on Wesley. King swore and threw the light body to the wall — with such strength that his skull cracked

when hitting a stone. Then Wesley rose to his feet, with a dagger in his hand.

“Well, and now I’ll really work on the bastard!”

“Come back!” Kaleb ordered. “You are without a helmet and shield, so do not come near him. Back, I said! Go to the platform, on the double!”

Wesley King grumbled but stepped back. His breast armour seemed gnawed, there were many dents as if someone struck it by a heavy hammer many times and very strongly. The armour made from modified plastic was light and flexible, but it was as firm as steel. It could be crumpled or pierced only by tyrannosaur fangs. Looking at those horrible traces, Kaleb smirked, freed a blade from its magnet holders and went to the corpse.

There were waves rolling over the outgrowth between his shoulder blades, the hump trembled and shivered — the hydra was in a hurry to get out and look for a new carrier. The Hunter struck exactly in the right place and split the skin on the dead man’s back as if he was lancing an old abscess. The dark shapeless clot, which had grown into the human flesh, moved more energetically, rose up a little and suddenly fired up and in all directions with dozens of threads, their ends were sharp and callous. They struck the armour and the face shield of the Hunter, fell down as if there was no strength left in them, were pulled into the hydra’s body and then struck again.

“For the sake of Life and Lights!” Kaleb said the old formula, the slogan of the Monasteries. The sharp end of his blade crisscrossed the dark clot, then he bent down, snatched the creature with his widely spread fingers and tore it out of Gaub’s dead flesh.

The dying hydra writhed at his feet. Kaleb dragged the corpse to the platform, then came back and burnt what was left of the hydra with his fire-thrower. The stench was awful to tell the truth, but he even did not make a face as he knew that smell and was used to it — hunting often ended in sterilization by fire. It was the smell of victory for any Hereditary Hunter.

He returned the blade to his hip, it clicked taking its usual place, Kaleb went to the platform hanging by the water edge. Wesley King had already put the corpse on it and was sitting by the edge playing with his knife.

“Shall we cut his head off?”

“What for?”

“Just in case. His brain is pierced with threads.”

Kaleb shook his head.

“The hydra is dead, and the threads will just rot.” He examined Gaub’s face which was now tranquil and peaceful, and added, “Let’s not make him look a monster, Wesley. He is a man again, though a dead man.”

The platform took them across the river, to the hill and the crowd still standing by the entrance to the village. Ines uttered a frenzied scream when she saw

her husband's body and closed her face with her hands, Brother Paul started praying. The rest spoke in whispers, wiped their damp faces, sighed with relief and made signs protecting from the evil. The wind sent clouds beyond the river, the sky was getting darker and darker every minute, and stars were as if switched on there. Their flashing lights made a giant arch that was a part of the outer spiral of this galaxy. A far, very far galaxy from Kaleb's native world.

He turned to Ines ar'Gaub and said, "Don't cry, siona, don't! You're a widow now and that gives you some advantages. Can I spend this night in your house?"

"Leave that woman alone! Her sorrow demands solitude, tears and prayers!" Brother Paul interfered trying to burn Kaleb through with his eyes. "It'll be much more comfortable for you in the Monastery. I see that your partner is wounded... We have experienced doctors, a diagnostic robot and a tub with the reanimating solution."

"That will suit my friend, but I don't need doctors and tubs," Kaleb said. "Good-buy, monk."

He had nothing against the Monasteries' money, but he felt contempt and dislike to those who lived there. All those brothers, confessors, adepts, hierarchs... Sexless like drones and no more useful... It was impossible to explain to them that the woman needed not prayers but consolation that could be

provided by a man only. Not necessarily in bed — just sitting at the table, talking to her, spending a night in her house... Though going to bed together was not excluded.

“Wait, sion Hunter!” Brother Paul grabbed the armour on his shoulder. “Come up to the tower, wash your face a have something to eat! It’s a sin to refuse from our hospitality and our bread!”

“Such sins don’t bother me.” Kaleb threw the monk’s hand off with one sudden movement. “You wanted to see the corpse of the obsessed — here he is! As for the rest... I’ll take water from the well for washing, drink a glass of wine and eat some bread in this woman’s house.”

He took Ines by the hand and went to the village.

## **Chapter 2. Avalon**

“This is a dangerous expedition. And not only dangerous. You’ll have to go very far,” Seymour Tya, the Curator of the Avalonian Archives, said. “Evidently, their world is located beyond the Savage Galaxies and the Edge of Disintegration, and that proves...” he fell silent.

“... that the Disintegration was not a singular phenomenon,” Dr Arigato Oye continued and smirked. “Great Chaos! What a disappointment for the Holy Fathers! The world order is breaking up, their deity

loses its uniqueness!”

“You should not speak ironically about that, my friend.” The Curator’s face was devoid of any expression. “The Monasteries have their goals, the Archives have different goals, but we, the Monasteries and a dozen of other congregations unite the world. The humankind will be divided without us like small groups of savages in a great ocean. Each nation on its small island, with its deities, its prejudices and languages, which people from other places cannot understand, with their ideas of good and evil, the Universe and the history of our race... A sorrowful picture! Right, Doctor?”

“Yes, you’re right,” Arigato Oye agreed. He was a biochemist and physiologist who had been studying human races for three centuries on many inhabited planets, and could well imagine the picture presented by Seymour. “However, after dispelling the old prejudices, the Monasteries think up and actively introduce new ones. This proposition of theirs about the Holy Clark Bosons and the act of creation... It could only make me smile had there not been dozens and even hundreds of billions believing in this nonsense!”

“Nevertheless, the Holy Fathers are also interested in finding the truth,” Curator Seymour said. “And because of that their representative will go with you.”

A pause followed. The night sun of Avalon, small

and dim, hung over the world, illuminating the loggia with its pinkish light. There were only a table robot with beverages and glasses and two wide armchairs there — and the armchairs purred and rustled quietly, massaging the backs and bottoms of the people in them. The loggia overlooked the west, the ocean, and dark lilac clouds pierced by the lights of the moons and the sun were frozen over its surface. The spectacle was wonderful — however, like all other natural phenomena on Avalon.

“Their representative...” Arigato Oye repeated making a face. “What for? And what about his status?”

“Inspector, just an observer. That will in no way affect your authority as the head of the expedition. Remember that three men from the first expedition were murdered by local savages — and they died in such a way that it was impossible to reanimate them.”

The Curator snapped his fingers, and images started changing with idyllic seascapes as a background: headless bodies covered with blood, broken skulls, chests with the hearts torn out and ribs sticking in all directions. Dr Arigato Oye watched that horrible panopticon with icy patience. His life was long, he had worked in hundreds of worlds in the Old and New Galaxies, and not all of them could be considered safe, quiet and civilized — especially from the point of view of the one born on Avalon.

“I hope that the savages’ minds — how do they

call themselves?... Borgians?... — I hope that the Borgians' minds are closer to ours than their genetics and physiology. After all, they are humans as well..." the Curator said. "Possibly, an experienced adept will be able to influence them somehow, to calm down a raging crowd, make their rulers respect the aliens, even be awed when they see the newcomers... Believe me, an exorcist will be of help to you!"

Dr Arigato Oye rose up and went to the balustrade separating the loggia from the space full of air, spice flavours and shining coming from the sky. The city under him stretched along the sea shore. Sevilyana was one of the biggest metropolises on the planet founded in ancient times by colonists from Earth... The sight from the upper story of the Avalonian Archives was magnificent: crystal towers in residential quarters cast a ghostly glow, rainbow flashes of lightning rose up above the buildings in the central parking area — the lights were reflected and illuminated the alleys, fountains, palaces of entertainments, and piers for yachts and sea-going vessels. The embankment and the moving streets flowed from the center to the outskirts like multi-coloured rivers. The city reminded of a bird that lay down by an oval bay, pressing its body to the ground, stretching its wings and embracing the shore with them. The bird's head, a flat granite cliff on which flourishing bushes and trees were planted, stretched



into the city. Its flight feathers — residential towers in the north and south — were tousled and it seemed that the bird would push from the hard ground in a moment, flap its wings and fly to the clouds — and may be directly to the moons and the night sun.

Arigato Oye watched the city full of life for a minute or two, then ran his hand along his neat beard in a habitual gesture and cried, “Awe! Who could have thought it? Awe!”

“What is your grievance, Arigato?” Seymour Tya knitted his eyebrows and as if repeating the Doctor’s gesture, caressed the medallion on his chest. It was the symbol of power over the Avalonian Archives. It had an open book on it, coined from silver, a book from the pre-computer times, when you had to turn the pages, and the text printed on paper could not be changed and stayed the same forever. Arigato Oye saw such books only when he had been a young man, in the course of his training in secret halls of the Archives.

“I don’t need an expedition member whom I cannot control,” he said gruffly. “Today he makes the savages respect us and be awed and tomorrow he’ll start working on the crew... Tell me, sion Curator, how can I stop him? Firing at his back from around some corner?... This will hardly make our relations with the Monasteries better.”

“That’s reasonable,” Seymour Tya said and started thinking. “That’s reasonable, Doctor,” he

repeated after some time. “But the problem is that the Conclave insists on its participation and even ready to compensate a part of expenses.”

“Don’t we have enough money?” Arigato Oye asked, raising his eyebrows ironically.

“We have money. But the expedition beyond the Edge of Disintegration will take a lot of money... flying so far... farther than the farthest stars... If you take the scales of our organization, the expenses are not so considerable. They are not too big for us and they are not too big for the Monasteries either. You see, my friend, they may send their own expedition, and we’re not interested in that. These Borgians need real help and not prayers.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows rose even higher.

“Their own expedition?... But where?... The planet was found by the Archives’ ship and it seemed to me that the information was kept secret. Am I wrong?”

“You’re right,” the Curator sighed. “But nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest. Our High Collegium knows definitely that they have the coordinates.”

“Did they steal them?”

“That’s an unsuitable term, Arigato. You understand that we collect and store knowledge not for ourselves but for the sake of all people, all worlds in the Galaxies. So they got them and not stole... Another matter is how the Conclave learnt about this planet at

all and our preliminary research as well.”

Relations between the Archives and the Monasteries were neither hostile nor friendly, they could not be characterized by any word. Other powerful entities — those that made the Galaxies a unity, something whole notwithstanding the differences of historical traditions of separate worlds — appreciated their ties with the Archives, were willing to have contacts and paid for their services without arguing over the sums. The Galactic Trade Corporation, Transport Union, Star Patrol and sometimes even the Arbitration Court required information about inhabited planets and the planets on which no one lived, discoveries and technological achievements in this or that region, prices for goods, patents, works of art, arguments and conflicts related to colonization, repartitions of spheres of influence and other issues, all kinds of objects, events and precedents, about everything that had taken place in the Great Galaxies over the millions of years, since the very moment when the life spores flying in the void fell into the oceans of countless worlds in different ends of the Big Universe. Other inter-galactic services such as the Order for Protection of the Environment, Astronauts League, “The Sands of Time” Academy, the Free Travelers League, were engaged in research and shared their data with the Archives as their conservation method for artifacts and storage of information was of

insurmountable perfection. The information network of the Archives stretched till the farthest borders of the Disintegration, they had their centers in each fourth star system that had reached a certain level in technology, the connections between them were maintained by their own fleet, the museums were full of treasures and works of art from thousands of inhabited worlds. The Archives were really the stem of civilization, its firm foundation as the galactic community of the humanoids was united not only by the outward appearance, genotype and reproduction method but also comprehension of belonging to culture no matter that it was different in certain manifestations but it was undoubtedly human. This fact was intuitively understood and accepted by everyone except the Monasteries. Knowledge, progress, culture were not empty sounds for them as the main idea was manifested in all that — the divine spark. But God was locked in the cocoon of His perfection and absolute power, and He had neither enemies, nor rivals, nor allies. He did not need them.

As a rule, He doesn't need them, Arigato Oye told himself. But there was another human race found beyond the Edge of Disintegration, and that made the deity curious. The human race that needed to be saved... An attractive bait for the Monasteries!

“So, we can't refuse from the thrust on us assistance,” he said. “There will be an adept in the

expedition no matter if I agree or not. There will be someone representing the eternal threat.”

“I’m afraid that it’s exactly the case,” the Curator answered. His face was calm, and only a deep line appeared on his high forehead with no wrinkles. Like Dr Arigato, Seymour Tya was born on Avalon and belonged to one of the chosen human races not knowing diseases or old age. Arigato Oye could only guess how many centuries old the Curator was. He also thought about his wife Diane Khan and felt acute regret. But those memories were not for this time and place.

“If there is no alternative, I have to resign myself.” He returned to his armchair, sat down and drank the fruit beverage from his glass. “However, I’ll feel myself better if there is a man in the team capable to oppose the adept. Best of all, a mercenary, skillful with arms. I think that our Collegium will agree to that — me and my people need guards. We don’t want to repeat the fate of the first expedition.”

Seymour Tya nodded.

“I’ll support you as a Collegium member, sion Arigato. You can select anyone from our elite guards or if you want to, from the Arbitration Court Division. They have excellent officers there.”

“They won’t suit, and people from either the Order or the Astronauts League won’t suit. I need a man free from obligations, with whom I can sign a

personal contract. Reliable, skillful, loyal warrior with a certain psychological profile... You understand what I'm speaking about."

The Curator nodded again.

"Not subjected to mental influence... A guy whose protection is not instruments, devices and implants but an innate talent if that is possible... Well, and whom do you suggest?"

Arigato Oye touched the rim of his glass with his nail, and the glass responded with a long silvery jingling.

"A gold digger from asteroids?... A colonist from the Borderline Galaxies?... Well... No, they won't do! Such people have a lot of survival experience and their reaction is excellent, but they are not professional fighters. It seems that a Hunter will do... Their Brotherhood is known in many worlds and well-reputed."

The Curator smirked.

"You want a hero? A half-god, a warrior fighting monsters like in ancient times?"

"This is the image from adventure serials, sion Curator. The superman Hunter saves the Princess, covering the way with dragon and bad guy corpses... Everything is simpler in life. They have a good reputation, they are loyal to their employers and always fulfill the contract, but they ask a high price for their services."

“The latter is not a problem,” Seymour Tya shrugged his shoulders. Then he moved his hand, and the Information Screen again appeared in the air obeying his gesture. Names, faces, planet landscapes and pictures of some horrible monsters started flashing in its turquoise depth. “Here is their Register with the chronicle of the Hunters’ feats,” the Curator said. “Most likely, we need someone from the first hundred and even better from the first ten. Let’s see what they have to offer... Jacob Lui Ini from Fial, Hereditary Hunter... Namchendra from Polar planet, Hereditary Hunter... The rest are also Hereditary... Pike from Eldorado... Archipov, Magellanic Clouds, Maketo World, and Auchuni High Branch from the same planet... Kaleb, this one is from Earth...”

“Earth?” Arigato stood up looking at the screen. “Forty-two, has not been reversed yet, the list of trophies is impressive... This one will do, sion Curator.”

“Why?”

“I have never met a man from Earth, and their settlers are our ancestors like Avall’tagrim and people from Ophira... I’m curious to look at him!”

“And if we speak seriously, my friend?”

“He is young,” Arigato Oye explained. “The rest from that list were reversed and several times, and that as you know makes the mind unstable for some time until the hormone balance normalizes. You and I

remember what it feels like... a quick jump back to youth has its side effects..." Arigato sighed, remembered Diane Khan again and added, "And there is another point: he is young, but he is already one of the first ten. This is a definite acknowledgement of his experience and luck."

"Take him if you wish," Seymour Tya said. "Who else do you need? I mean professionals."

"My two assistants, anthropologist and xenobiologist, both from the Scientific Division of the Archives."

"Will that be enough?"

"Yes. Less people, less risk. As far as I understand, the savages are bloodthirsty... This is the main problem, but we'll do the work." Arigato Oye again touched the rim of his glass with his nail, bent his head and enjoyed the silvery jingling. Then he asked, "How much will I get, sion Curator? First of all I'm interested in ships."

"You'll have the expeditionary ship with an experienced Captain at your disposal. It's now being prepared on the Second Moon. Its range is practically unlimited. With modified robots on board."

"What kind of ship? Yacht? Sloop?"

"Corvette. The ship is armed and controlled by an intellectual-and-electronic module. A fairly clever device."

"What else?"



“Inter-galactic transport-automation for transporting reagents. You can take as much cargo as you want.”

“I’ll need a very powerful synthesizer, preferably of the planetary class,” Dr Arigato Oye said. “The reason of the catastrophe is unknown and we have to be ready for everything. I’ll take a wide range of reagents protecting from irradiation injuries and hazardous additions to the atmosphere — we’ll even be able to sanitize it completely. But if some pathogenic microorganisms are at fault, we’ll have to look for some drug to treat people and then arrange its production in very big amounts. The Borgians are not fully humans... they have different genetics, different metabolism... I am not sure that the reagents we use in such cases will suit them, they may turn out to be a deadly poison. You see, sion, already at the blastula stage, all organisms are very sensitive to...”

Seymour Tya waved his hands.

“Spare me the details I don’t understand. You need a synthesizer? You’ll get it. If you need imperishable relics of our ancestors from Earth, I’ll find them in the storeroom and you’ll get them as well. All your requirements will be satisfied.”

“But the priest will go with me, won’t he?” Arigato Oye smiled.

“Alas...” the Curator sighed.

“Then find this Kaleb for me, the Hunter from

Earth,” Dr Arigato stood up. “My assistants and I will be ready in about twenty days. See you, sion Curator. Let the day sun warm you and the night sun bring you peace and quiet.”

\* \* \*

Some time later he was floating in the half-darkness and silence above the lilac ocean. Strips of light from the moons and the night sun shimmered on the water surface, the one from the sun was brighter and wider, and Arigato Oye could discern foamy waves, sea flowers evenly rolling below and groups of water lizards feeding nearby. The light airplane was flying low, its crescent-shaped wings trembled in the air flows rising from the ocean, infinite clouds stretched above. There was another continent beyond the sea, it was as beautiful as the one in the east and also the land of plenty, the cradle of the old Avall'tagrim civilization. Many years ago millions of colonists from Earth and Ophira had absorbed this nation, it had been diluted in the boiling kettle of the inter-race cross-breeding, but there were still children born on Avalon with enormous amber-coloured eyes. Diane was one of them... the Doctor thought. D'Anat'Khani, “Gift of the Southern Wind” in the half-forgotten Avall'tagrim language. With shining amber-coloured eyes, hair in which dark stands were mixed with fair

strands and lips reminding red tulip petals...

He sighed. The bitterness of loss was oppressive. Certainly, the loss was not final, but he still hadn't managed to restore her, though he made a lot of efforts. It could not be ruled out that the expedition would add some warmth to his family life... New impressions, the new world beyond the Edge of Disintegration, so far that there was not a single telescope able to show even the Galaxy of Borgians... Wonderful creatures living three hundred years with no reversion, whose world it was necessary to save from some unknown threat... However, they had not treated the crew that had found Borg well — probably there had been some mistake made, so only one of the contactors had returned and with the damaged mind. What had been the reason of the tragedy? Records made by the ship did not explain that, and Arigato Oye regretted that he could not speak to the xenologist from the first expedition. He was dead, irreversibly dead, his mind could not be restored.

The world nearing a catastrophe, long life of its inhabitants, strange death of the contactors who landed on Borg... All that is very mysterious, mysterious and romantic, Arigato Oye decided. She should be grateful that I am taking her with me.

Obedying a sudden impulse, he raised the light airplane into the clouds. Now the transparent cabin was surrounded by mist pierced with either pink or golden light, its currents slowly circled and fluttered like

female hair in the wind, and it seemed to the Doctor that he sensed the head-spinning smell, the mixture of wonderful aromas, young girl's flesh, sea and flowers. That was a pleasure, but he did not allow himself to relax. Travelling over Galaxies, he saw a lot of worlds, and not so happy as Avalon, and memories of them served as a good antidote against sweet contentment and empty dreams. He ordered himself to forget Diane Khan, her hair, lips and slim body, which had been so obedient, trembling in his arms. His thoughts turned to the adept thrust on the expedition and sudden activities of the Monasteries.

But why sudden?... If he thought about it, the reaction was fairly expected when the main symbol of the confession was under a threat. That's the difference between religion and positive knowledge, Arigato Oye thought: a crash of postulates was a universal catastrophe for religion, and science was enthusiastic about revolutionary changes. The new picture of the world, new discoveries, new goals, new opportunities... Eternal renewal — that was the guarantee of progress, civilization's driver! Certainly, any revolution was a shock, but after the catharsis you understood that a new step was made in the direction of truth. Religion was not adjusted for such metamorphoses. The truth in any religious doctrine was absolute and unchanging, no one looked for the truth as it was clear: their God was the truth.

There was a time when the collision of two Clark bosons generated the Big Universe. On the one hand, it was a fact established by science, the basis of all astrophysical theories, on the other hand, it was a reason to idolize and worship bosons, the act of creation, formation of galaxies, stars, planets and life that originated in many worlds. After the collision, the primary matter disintegrated, amorphous masses, the future conglomerates, flew in all directions and in billions of years the Universe was structured and became that very Universe comprehended by human minds: numerous galaxies within the borders of the Disintegration. It was thought that this structure was one whole and locked in oneself in some dimension of the continuum; it was not ruled out that there was a mirror image of it somewhere, an anti-world connected with the Universe by the points of singularity, where gravitation collapse took place. Its borders were more likely imaginary than a real border in space — it seemed naïve to think up some surface separating the Great Nothing from billions of Galaxies pierced by irradiation and light, full of mists and stars. Nevertheless, the shape of the Universe and its borders were the subject of research and infinite discussions, though everyone recognized that the Universe was one whole. The common generic code of all human races confirmed this fact, and these races originated independently in various ends of the Great Universe,

sometimes in millions of light years from one another. There was no doubt that life spores, its seeds appeared at the moment of the bosons' collision, later they fell down on planets and if the environment was suitable, they launched the evolution. All that could be considered a blind play of the forces of nature, an accident, a natural spontaneous phenomenon or an act of the Creator, Absolute Power making the bosons collide or, possibly, inalienably connected with them. These two ideas of the world, two philosophies that generated science and religion of the Galaxies contradicted each other but agreed that the universal act of creation was single like the God Creator.

Single! One!.. Arigato Oye laughed looking at the silver ray of the First Moon piercing the clouds illuminated by the night sun. One?... But here was another mankind found in very far-off places that originated differently, not like in the Galaxies, with different genetics and lifespan, even looking differently... What did it mean? It would be wisest to think that Borgians lived beyond the Edge of Disintegration, in another star conglomerate where they had their own act of creation that generated life seeds of a somewhat different nature. That could be a different Universe or the same, and only its borders should be expanded, but it was necessary to acknowledge that the collision of Clark bosons was not a unique act, it had not happened only once and generated only a part of the

Universe. There was no doubt that it was a new concept for astrophysicists, but they would manage! They would grind the new knowledge by the grindstones of mathematics and say: Here is the Truth for you! It would be more difficult for the Monasteries as no symbol of any belief allowed specifying and restorations. Two Holy Bosons created the world... And what if there were four and not two?... Or infinite numbers?... And a deity in each of them?... Or may be just a particle of God?...

What grounds for heresies! Dr Arigato Oye thought making a wry face irritably. He liked the Holy Fathers no more than disgusting sow bugs or ants which savages in the jungle of Drunken Swamp fed on. Ants ate the case of the field synthesizer, they had to throw it away, eat those sow bugs and drink stinking water from the swamp. Happily, the implant did not let down and managed with the organics of another planet.

Dim strips of light slid along the cabin.

“We’re approaching the house, sion,” the light airplane announced in a gentle soprano voice. “Shall I inform siona Diane?”

“No. I think she’s asleep. We should not bother her.”

The small machine dived out of the clouds. The ocean was left behind, in the east, and now there was picturesque area with groves, lakes, rare settlements and mansions on slopes of hills stretching below the

little airplane. The patterns of roads paved with coloured slabs, hunchback bridges over non-wide streams, trees and flowerbeds surrounding houses flashed on the ground. No people, quiet... Neither a sound, nor a rustle, nor any movement... Those who looked for peace and quiet lived here, and entertainments when the night sun shone were not encouraged. Such a big world as Avalon with thousands of cities, various climate zones, various lays of land, oceans and islands, mountains, valleys and numerous secluded places could provide anyone with a suitable dwelling. The Planet's Code prohibited immigration, the number of residents didn't exceed seven hundred million, so there were enough lands on islands and continents for everyone. Besides, the surface of the planet was free from industrial areas, and mines, forges and pottery shops of the ancient times were considered museum pieces.

The light airplane slid over the lake with crystal water and landed by a pavilion on the edge of a wide esplanade. After leaving the flying machine, Arigato Oye went to the house. The two-storied building in the ancient Avall'tagrim style stood by a not high hill and also descended underground. There were night rooms and laboratories in the underground section. The day section was semicircular and as if protruded from the hill. It was surrounded by a gallery with a balcony above it on carved pillars.



The Doctor ascended the steps to the entrance arch and stepped across the threshold. The big hall was quiet. The lancet windows overlooked the gallery, and there was non-bright light coming through them and colouring the walls pinkish gold. Coloured spirals silently circled by the ceiling, they died and then suddenly flashed for a moment, and then it seemed that the day sun had already risen.

“Night joys to you, master,” the house said. “Would you like a drink? Or something to eat? Shall I prepare water for washing? Wake up siona?”

“No, I think not,” Arigato Oye answered, running his hand along his beard. “Let siona sleep, and I’ll go to bed as well. I do not want to eat or drink. I’m tired.”

He went to the top floor to his bedroom, took off his shoes and tunic and ordered the house to switch on the coloured-dream machine. He stretched on his bed and felt gravitation weakening, warm air caressing his body and well-known aromas tickling his nostrils. The mixture of young girl’s flesh, sea and flowers... quiet, hardly discernible breath... strands of hair falling on the pillow... If he closed his eyes, it would seem that Diane was by him... that old Diane of the past times... Lying on her back, throwing back her head a little, her lips half-open, her tender breasts with pink berries of nipples either rising or falling...

He stretched his arm and touched her shoulder. The contact was gentle, momentous, but the woman’s

eyelashes went up like wings of a bothered bird. A smile appeared, her lips moved. He did not hear the words, but he believed that they were the words of love.

Dr Arigato Oye slept and smiled in his sleep.

\* \* \*

The night sun was going down above the other continent. And the eastern horizon was already shining with bright colours of the dawn. That night Seymour Tya, the Curator of the Avalonian Archives, did not sleep. However, he had said his farewell to sleep two centuries ago, preferring recreation in the relaxation chamber. That was much more effective and took less time — about an hour or an hour and a half per day.

He descended to the sixth underground floor of the Archives building, to his office. Seymour Tya liked this place: big and solid furniture made from dark wood, the carpet on the floor was the colour of ripe cherry with some grey pattern, the walls were decorated with panels, old bronze lamps with the bulbs in the form of curved tongues of fire created the feeling of comfort and quiet. Historical rarities of especially big sizes were kept nearby, in spacious halls, surrounding the office and the personal dining room of the Curator: the façade of the Avall'tagrim temple with a double row of columns and gilded gates, the fossilized twelve-meter-high holy tree and the giant horny

mammoth (both from Cervantes), a strange mechanism from Polar planet (possibly another attempt to create a time machine), the transport module of the first Earth liner that descended on Avalon and other rarities. There were boulders among them with pictures of spaceships and figures in spacesuits made by troglodytes, the primitive observatory (monoliths set in a circle one hundred steps wide), icy dwellings of some natives from Winter (they were kept in a big fridge) and a gallery of wonderful mirrors that had been designed to demonstrate the future. Sometimes Seymour Tya looked into them, but he saw the same: an imposing looking man with ageless face.

He made himself comfortable in an armchair covered with python skin from Drunken Swamp, called his night secretary and ordered to collect information about Hereditary Hunter Kaleb from Earth in the sixth Register of the Brotherhood. Then he turned his attention to everyday business: he read messages from the High Collegium, ordered to buy a synthesizer of the planetary class and deliver it to the Second Moon within the three next days, ordered to give information required by the Star Patrol and the Astronauts League, appointed the day for a delegation from Ophira that wished to bow to the ashes and commemorate their ancestors that had moved to Avalon in the far past. He had to think over the message from the agent on Seventh Aira. The agent informed about a lot of cast

iron erotic figurines, they were very curious pieces but dating was doubtful. They cost a lot, the Curator already decided to refuse the offer when tiny Janger Tali, the night secretary, appeared above the console.

“This Hunter from Earth, sion Curator... there is some data. Would you like to have a look?”

Seymour Tya nodded and enlarged the image, Janger turned from a Lilliputian into a dwarf floating with dark wall panels as a background.

“Hereditary Free Hunter Kaleb, son of Ragnar, grandson of Herloof, great-grandson of Olgerd, son of Haakon, and so on... Nearly forty generations and all of them Hunters,” Janger said. “Good heredity.”

“Scandinavian roots?”

“Scandinavian?” The secretary was puzzled. “What does it mean, sion Curator?”

“There is a peninsular in the north of Earth that was inhabited by a special nation in ancient times,” Seymour Tya explained. “Scandinavian men had fair hair, they were strong and very aggressive. Their traditional occupations were fishing and robbery, they fought their southern neighbours. The tribe was forgotten long ago, but there are Scandinavian names among those you mentioned.”

“Do you want me to research their etymology in more detail?” Janger Tali asked.

“No, my friend. I’m more interested in the present whereabouts of this Kaleb and what he’s doing

now. Does he have a contract?”

“He had a contract on Cervantes where he shot rats in some desert...” Janger looked at the screen invisible for the Curator from the corner of his eye. It seemed that he was puzzled again. “Excuse me, sion Curator. Do Hunters eliminate rats? Small nice creatures... Whom do they bother?”

There were rats on Avalon but not brought from either Earth or Ophira, they were of endemic kinds. Fluffy creatures the size of a human palm, they lived in forests, ate mead, nuts, wild corn and did not worry anyone. There had been a time when the Avall'tagrims had kept them in their houses to entertain children.

The Curator sighed. Janger Tali was only twenty-eight, he was excellent in searching for information, he knew all methods and technology in inter-star communications, but if you took all the rest, he was poorly prepared for the responsible secretary's work. However, he was efficient, conscientious, loyal and he wanted to study. They were very valuable qualities in the opinion of Seymour Tya.

“They are different rats, Janger, rats of prey and much bigger than those living on Avalon,” he said. “Cervantes is a virgin world... Did you see the mammoth in the hall close to my office?”

“Certainly, sion. A giant animal! Four tusks, horns and the trunk thicker than my neck... And legs! What legs!”

“The mammoth is from Cervantes as well. Rats hunt such giants as well as people, cattle, everything that moves.” The Curator thought for a moment. “I think we should order about ten stuffed rats and put them around the mammoth... For young know-nothings to learn.”

The secretary blushed and said, “I swear by the Great Galaxies, sion! I’ll study the Cervantes fauna in the near future!”

“And add flora to it as well as the history of the planet’s colonizing. It was inhabited by people from Earth but much later than Avalon.” Seymour Tya leaned back in his armchair and looked at the massive beams on the ceiling. “But let’s turn back to our Hunter. Where is he now? On Cervantes?”

“No, sion, Opensho.”

“Opensho?” Now it was the Curator’s turn to be puzzled — there was no information about this world in his bottomless memory. “Opensho... What is this Opensho?...” he muttered and pressed some keys on the remote control. The beams were closed by the turquoise Information Screen. Seymour Tya read the lines on the screen, then nodded, satisfied, and said, “A small planet in the Five-Spiral Galaxy... far from us... one can hardly remember it... What is he doing there?”

“No information,” the night secretary answered. “He may have dropped there accidentally. A quiet safe little world... There is nothing for a Hunter to do

there.”

Hunters are fidgets, the Curator thought and said aloud, “Contact him, Janger. Tell him that there is an offer for him to take part in the expedition to the far stars on a contract with the Avalonian Archives. We’ll pay generously.”

“How generously, sion?”

“Well, he’ll be able to forget rats from Cervantes and Cervantes itself for ten or fifteen years. Tell him to fly to Avalon. First class ticket on a Transport Union liner. We’ll pay for his passage as well. And...”

“Yes, sion?”

“If he hesitates, promise additional privileges. Something rare, unusual... something that only the Archives can give.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand you, sion Curator,” Janger Tali said after thinking for a moment. “A stuffed mammoth? A female statue without arms and head but with wings brought from Earth not long ago?”

Seymour Tya could not help laughing.

“I think that won’t do. What does he need a mammoth or a statue for? Besides, we do not present pieces from the Archives collections. Remember, my friend: everything that gets into our storerooms stays there forever. But you can promise him Avalon citizenship.”

“But we don’t receive immigrants! Our authorities prohibit...”

“The authorities will do what the Archives recommend,” the Curator said strictly. “Yes, Janger, promise him Avalon citizenship and all respective privileges: land, mansion, the right to take part in voting and bioreversion. I think this will work...” After a pause he muttered, “I need this man and I’ll get him. I’ll get him! The price does not matter.”

Seymour Tya disconnected from his night secretary, waved his arm and information flashed on the Information Screen: “Hereditary Free Hunter Kaleb, son of Ragnar, grandson of Herloof, great-grandson of Olgerd, son of Haakon...” That will be a nice surprise for the Monasteries! a thought flashed. He looked at the lines of symbols for a couple of minutes, thinking if this son of Ragnar and grandson of Herloof would manage to deal with an adept of the highest initiation level. There were horrible rumours that a priest-exorcist was capable to kill a man at twenty steps, cause his heart to stop or tear the arteries feeding the brain... On the other hand, there were a lot of miracles ascribed to the first ten Hunters and they were also surrounded by myths and legends. Seymour Tya thought that it would be captivating to look at their duel. But that idea was pushed out by another: the expedition was to be long, dangerous and it would be better not to have conflicts at all.

Suddenly he felt tired. The Curator left the comfortable armchair, looked at the giant mammoth,



passed the mirror gallery, enjoyed the sight of columns from the Avall'tagrim temple and crossed the hall with the prehistoric observatory. Then he entered the lift and rose to the third overland floor where relaxation chambers were located.

## **Chapter 3. The Priest**

Brother Hakko played with a lightweight small plastic ball. The ball flashed above the net stretched across the table, jumped from the springy table surface and got into the field of force. The automation controlling it was programmed in such a way as to return the ball with different force and make it fly at various speeds in various directions sometimes absolutely unexpected for the human partner. One had to run for the ball not to touch the floor — it meant that the game was lost. Usually the machine was set on the minimum for beginners, but Brother Hakko could compete with the machine in the most difficult variant of the tactics provided by the program.

Forward-back, forward-back, forward-back... The ball flashed in the air, struck the table and jumped. The bat in Brother Hakko's hand worked wonders, either in his left or in his right; he easily threw it from one hand into another, bent forward, lowered his knees, jumped — and successfully hit the lightweight white ball. His automatic opponent did not require a bat; its

video sensors turned on a high stem, followed the man, and the field replacing the hands sent the ball where it was most hard to reach it.

In the old, very old times on Earth the game had been named tennis, table tennis, but it had been forgotten long ago. No one remembered on what planet people had invented this game, to what worlds it had been taken by colonists, what aliens they had taught to take a racket in one's hand and strike a ball, and to what galaxies these people had gone. They had been from Earth, Ophira, Henderson, Planet of Towers, Green Door. The memories had been lost and the game forgotten — and only in the Archives collecting everything they had an old video of the game preserved.

Ping pong, ping pong, ping pong!.. The ball flew here and there, here and there. The man returning the ball moved smoothly but so quickly that an eye could not catch all his movements. He was not tall and lean like all those born on Polar planet; thin lips, hollow cheeks, big mouth, dark crew cut and thin face, which bioplastics or genetic reconstruction could help. He was not ugly and he was not handsome, he just did not have any individual features attracting attention, there was nothing to cause either dislike or sympathy to say nothing of stronger feelings such as hatred or love. Ordinary features, the face impossible to remember... But his eyes frightened: at the moment he hit the ball,

the black iris expanded, the pupil became enormous, darkness filled the whole surface of the eye. They were not eyes, but a pair of obsidian crystals...

Possibly, they had not only videos but also the name of the game in the Archives as well as other forgotten entertainments invented in the old times on hundreds, thousands of inhabited planets. There were riches in the past not required by the World of Galaxies, games with little balls, big balls, hop, bowls, bowling pins, clubs, sticks, bats, games on ice-covered arenas, overgrown with grass fields or in swimming-pools, there were games with figurines moved across the board, cubes, dice and painted pieces of cardboard. Their descriptions were kept in the Archives but to play yourself and watch a video were two different things, like the live arts and memories of them. The Archives remembered, the Monasteries knew, could and used the knowledge to their benefit.

There was a serious reason for that. The Monasteries owned lands, shops and space industries, they gave work to novices and common monks, millions of those who vowed celibacy, sexless people without either a home or a family. But there were other joys in life besides labour, pious thinking and serving deities, and recreations were required. Holy Fathers and adepts of the highest initiation level were engaged in metaphysics, metempsychosis and studying the Mysteries of Being. That captivated them so hard that

many prolonged their lives with the help of reversion, though this practice was not encouraged in the Monasteries. Games were an excellent occupation for the rest, they could use their creative and physical energy in them; some liked to play ball, others liked to move figurines across the board, throw dice or play cards. That saved from regrets of the things lost, and because of that games flourished in the Monasteries.

Here and there, here and there, here and there...  
Ping pong, ping pong, ping pong...

But Brother Hakko did not regret the past and did not engage in games because of boredom. Actually it was not a game yet, but preparation, a kind of warming up. He was alone in the big hall. Though there were no specific orders from the Abbot, brothers tried not to disturb him and catch his eye at all, it was a kind of silent agreement. It was possible — the Monastery was the biggest on Polar planet and occupied a giant area by the inland Kraffi Sea, and there were enough secluded places in the park surrounding the buildings of the Monastery. Many years ago when Hakko had become an adept and was awarded some privileges, he had chosen the tower on the cliff overhanging the sea and settled there with his first two disciples. After the due term the disciples left, some of them even left Polar planet and went to Monasteries in other worlds, but Brother Hakko still resided on the same cliff by the sea shore. However, he also travelled over the Great

Galaxies when his art of exorcism was required. Usually he was ordered pacifying missions as he could exorcise any evil from the human soul — arrogance, vanity, hatred, wish to kill and certainly disrespect to the Monasteries. Sometimes these procedures required extraordinary measures, but Brother Hakko was not afraid of blood.

Here and there, here and there, here and there... Suddenly he threw his bat away, his pupils widened, his mouth half-opened reminding of a crack crossing his face. He froze, but the little ball flew above the table as before, sometimes so quickly that a white strip appeared in the air. The sound changed — now there were only table hits heard: pong, pong, pong! Brother Hakko used his strength of will to return the ball, and that was much simpler than to jump and bend with a bat. He exercised in such a way for several minutes, then stopped the ball on his side of the table and exhaled sending the air at the ball. Plastic pieces fell on the table.

Brother Hakko looked at them twisting his thin lips. Such a power over dead matter would be a big achievement for any adept but not for him. A light, fragile plastic ball... It was impossible to achieve this effect in case of a stone of the same size and weight as well as a bone or wood. He understood that he had a unique talent, but its limits were no secret either: it was impossible to pierce metal, to make powder even from

small pebbles, raise this table into the air, even just move it by thought or will... However, both human flesh and human mind were much more fragile than stone or metal.

The more complex the system, the more vulnerable it is, Brother Hakko thought and stepped from the table. After that he pressed his palms to one another, finger to finger, raised them to his chest and whispered, "Bosons the Creators! For Your orders and Your power!"

He left the building. This not high but long building put up in modern times was intended for sports, various games and other entertainments brothers could take part in. The old towers of the Monastery rose behind it and the pine forest stretched till the sea in front of the transparent façade. The sky was gloomy, lead-coloured as always, strong wind was blowing and swaying the tops of pines. The trees creaked, moaned but held firmly, clinging to the hard soil with their powerful roots. Polar planet was a world not easy to live in. One third of it was covered by ice, its sun was a Cepheid, a variable star, and even when its radiation was at its peak, it could not melt all that ice. This was habitual for meager, unpretentious forms of life and humans born here, but moving from other planets was slow, no one was in a hurry to settle here, and inhabitants of Polar planet had nearly not mixed with other humanoids. The distance to Earth, the nearest

center of galactic expansion, did not exceed three hundred light years, but colonists from Earth had flown here in very small numbers and had quickly dissolved among autochthons. However, their contribution was considerable, they had given the planet its name, and this name was now listed in star catalogues: Polar planet, the fourth world of the Polar Star, the brightest in the Small She-Bear, or Ursa Minor constellation and the closest to the northern galactic pole — certainly, if you look from Earth... Those men from Earth were an egocentric tribe and spreading in the Galaxies, they gave their own names to stars and worlds. Impudent, rude people, greedy and ready to take what belonged to the others... Brother Hakko did not like Earth dwellers.

He went to gnarled short pines with branches crossed and interlaced overhead, they grew into the neighbouring trees, holding and clutching each other so desperately and decisively that winter storms could fall the whole forest only but not a single tree. Wind was blowing through his clothes, but Brother Hakko was used to cold. Actually he was used to heat as well; the range of temperatures that did not immediately kill a man without a spacesuit, in just sandals and light garment, suited him as well as eternal warm summer suited residents of Avalon.

Gusts of wind were practically unnoticed in the forest. Brother Hakko walked to his tower on the sea shore thinking about the new Conclave's order and

about the opportunities of this mission. Will it allow to come closer to the Great Mysteries of Being? They may be known to another humankind, to humans or not humans living beyond the Edge of Disintegration. The Great Mysteries cannot be explained by science, there are no theories to explain them, no devices to contact a deity or measure the weight of the spirit leaving a human body. There is only one device — a man himself! Human brain, conscience! This is the universal instrument to talk to God, here is the way to ask a question and get an answer! But the mind's abilities are limited, and the deity does not hear even the voices of the chosen... It's limited in homo sapiens within the Disintegration borders, however, another human species, with a different brain structure could achieve more! Their long life was an indirect confirmation of that... Possibly, they had managed to knock to the deity until they were heard and were awarded for their insistence... If yes, what does it mean? Is it possible to think them righteous and the rest — us! — sinners? Doesn't it undermine the foundations of beliefs, the very idea of the Monasteries? In this case...

His thoughts were interrupted by melodious ringing. Brother Hakko touched a small disc on the collar of his long mantle, and the face of Imm Forin, the Left Hand of the Abbot, appeared in front of him.

“For the sake of Life and Light, brother! The Holy Fathers are calling you!”



The adept nodded and switched his walkie-talkie off. Then he went back to the sports complex unhurriedly, round it and under the vaults of the main tower of the Monastery. The cold of many millennia whiffed from its walls; there were legends that it had been exactly here, on Polar planet, in this building that the Monasteries had been established. However, there were forty-two more planets in the Galaxies that ascribed themselves this honour.

There were neither gravitation lifts, nor warm screens, nor any other modern conveniences on the lowest stories of the tower. Brother Hakko went up the steep staircase murmuring under his nose, “Holy Fathers! What Holy Fathers? Where did they get here from?”

There was only one person in the Monastery having this title — His Reverence the Abbot himself who was also a Conclave member. Did someone flew to the planet?... With the news of the forthcoming mission?... And not only news?

While Brother Hakko was playing with his bat and ball, his heart was beating steadily, but now his heart started beating faster. It was a sign of excitement. After he more or less took himself in hand, he continued his ascent. There were twelve stories in the tower, and the Abbot resided on the top floor.

The staircase was decorated with holographic pictures presenting episodes of the Big Bang. Certainly,

none of the people could have been present at that sacred event, but the Conclave had long ago approved the canon as to its description: Bosons were painted bright red and not round but slightly prolonged to the center of collision, their particles flying in all directions reminded multi-coloured fireworks, and the First Light born at collision was without fail made golden. These pictures in the temple with its giant stained glass windows and holography made people awed and thrilled with joy at the sight of them.

Brother Hakko came up to the top floor. There were lancet windows covered by warm screens in the room with a half-round wall. Greddah, the biggest city on Polar planet, was seen from this height. It was separated from the Monastery's lands by the pine forest and a bay of the Kraffi Sea. The city was covered with mist — evidently, the climate-control equipment was switched on.

The room was sparsely furnished and served a kind of reception room for the Abbot. The bench was covered by a dark blue shredded carpet, and four servants from novices sat on it. They were strong, well-fed young guys capable to send a disrespectful monk down the staircase if required or teach him with rods. A beverage-making machine stood by the bench, the model was one hundred years old, its matte case had faded over time and was even rusty in some places. Imm Forin, the Left Hand of the Abbot, sat at the table

by the communications device and Information Screen, but the table also looked modest: metal legs and plastic panel. There was nothing in the room except the table, the Left Hand's stool, the bench covered with the carpet and the old machine.

“You were not in a hurry, Brother Hakko,” Imm Forin said. “It's not good! You've made the Abbot wait!”

The adept looked at the Left Hand, the latter looked aside and paled slightly.

“Probably, you were far... In your tower by the sea?...”

Brother Hakko was still silent, piercing Imm Forin with his gaze until the Left Hand's teeth started clattering and his eyelid twitched. The young guys on the bench sat silently, without moving, careful to show respect on their well-fed faces.

After a long pause, the adept asked, “Where to?”

“H-h-here...” Imm Forin answered stuttering and pointed his finger at the door.

There were two doors in the wall opposite the windows. One opened into the austere cell with cold stone floor, beggarly lamp in a niche and a wooden chair that had seen better times. Here the Abbot received monks, listened to their requests and repentances, gave absolutions, punished and forgave and sometimes awarded. No one who had been to this cell, could say that the Abbot lived richly, sat in soft

armchairs, slept in warmth or ate anything else besides thin soup and porridge. The head of the Monastery like other top hierarchs was considered a holy, righteous man, an ascetic and zealot.

The other door led to his personal rooms. Stepping over the threshold, Brother Hakko found himself in a narrow chamber under the all-seeing eye of the robot-guard. The discharger looked at his forehead, two other barrels aimed at his chest and the back of his head, cracks with pulverizers opened by the ceiling — poisonous gas or gas causing stupor and loss of consciousness could come through them. Brother Hakko stood there for four long seconds with a stony face, without moving, blinking an eye and even breathing. After that the entrance in front of him opened, he made a couple of steps, inhaled a lungful of air which was warm and smelled nicely.

“Take a seat, honourable Brother,” the Abbot said. “You must be surprised... I’m afraid, Imm Forin was too zealous when programming the robot-guard. But we have a very important guest, and we have to provide his safety.” The Abbot turned to the man who sat near him and bowed his head respectfully. “Holy Father Ghor Miloc Ruada.”

“I am not surprised,” Brother Hakko shrugged his shoulders indifferently and sat into the armchair covered with desert leopard skin from Cervantes. He did not look around; he had been in the Abbot’s rooms

in the past, and he remembered all the details of the furnishings. The room was cozy and warm, with comfortable furniture but without extra luxury, if you do not take into account upholstering of the armchairs, skin on the floor and horribly looking heads of various beasts that decorated the walls. The Abbot was an expert in alien zoology, especially in fauna of savage worlds where one could find various curious creatures.

“Our guest, Holy Father Ghor Miloc Ruada, negotiated with the Archives on behalf of the Conclave,” the Abbot said. “The matter is settled. You, Brother, are taking part in the expedition.” He paused. “You are taking part as an inspector, an observer, so be careful but firm in your decisions.”

Brother Hakko looked at the guest out of the corner of his eye. Such people were rarely seen in the Galaxies — he was not sun-tanned, he was not swarthy, but he was black as coal, like a parade boot of a lieutenant, a paratrooper from the Star Patrol. The hierarch’s neck above the collar of his robe and his wide face were dark like night sky, and that was a strange contrast with his curly grey hair and red garments. His lips were full, his eyes bright and he did not turn them away, and that was good already... Only few people could look the adept in the face.

“I am the head of the Information Department and I heard about you, Brother Hakko, a lot of impressive things,” Ghor Miloc Ruada said in a clear

ringing voice. “The revolt on Shambhala... and that old story of the authorities on the Planet of Towers... That’s really praise-worthy! Your talent really brings us a lot of benefits! I am sure that this time you’ll be as enthusiastic as before and demonstrate your gift brilliantly. Certainly, if it will be required.”

Information Department... That word combination meant secret service of the Monasteries which Brother Hakko had had to deal with and not once.

He bowed his head silently, then said, “Information?”

“Here.”

The guest let the praying crystal on a chain fall out of his sleeve and stretched his hand to Brother Hakko. Ghor Miloc Ruada’s palm turned out to be lighter coloured than his neck and face, his fingers were long and strong. The oval crystal, the symbol of the Boson the Creator, on the Holy Father’s hand looked like a baby in a crib.

After Brother Hakko had it in his hand, he pulled the chain several times.

“Silver?”

“Silver sown through with monomolecular Kevlar thread. It won’t break,” the hierarch reassured him. “There is a record in the crystal, which only you will be able to open. A small mental effort... You are capable to light a candle, aren’t you? A common wax candle?”

Something like that is required.”

Brother Hakko nodded, put the chain over his head and hid the crystal under his garment.

“It could be useful, Your Reverence, to tell our honourable brother who else is to take part in the expedition,” the Abbot said. “As we say, the one informed has an extra throwing knife under his arm.”

Ghor Miloc Ruada put his dark hands on his knees.

“There won’t be any problems with these people. The nominal head is Dr Arigato Oye from the Scientific Division of the Archives, an outstanding scientist, and his two assistants. This is the research part of the expedition — biochemist, anthropologist, xenobiologist. All of them are from Avalon.”

The Avalonians! There was light contempt in the last hierarch’s phrase. Avalon was the world of eternal light, the most wonderful place in the Universe, the dream and the reason of envy of many-many people. Avalonians accidentally got the star system with a couple of fairly stable suns, five planets suitable for habitation, inexhaustible energy, ore and mineral resources that were the raw materials for hundreds of space manufactories. The high technology level, the army of robots, transport fleet and support of the Off-Planetary Settlements made Avalonian goods one of the best in the Galaxies. The riches of Avalon became proverbial, but as it always happened, there

was the other side on the coin: Avalonians were thought of as pampered and selfish people loving only themselves. And that was not a big deviation from truth.

“Who is the Captain?” Brother Hakko asked.

“Kovalsky, a pilot from the Archives. He is fairly experienced.” After a pause the Holy Father added, “He is from Shambhala.”

Brother Hakko shrugged his shoulders.

“They did not know my name on Shambhala.”

“Besides, those who rebelled against the Monasteries, are long dead, and their ashes were scattered over the oceans of the planet,” the Abbot interfered. “I don’t think that there will be any problems.”

“And I also hope for that. But!” Ghor Miloc Ruada raised his index finger calling to attention. “We haven’t managed to find out the real age of the Captain. If he was bioreversed at least once, it is possible that he witnessed the events we are speaking about.”

“Then it’s better to replace him,” the Abbot said.

“This can hardly be done,” the Holy Father answered. “We can’t insist, this will cause suspicions. The Archives made big concessions as it is.”

“I’ll manage,” Brother Hakko said. “Tell me about the ship and its equipment.”

“It’s an extra-long-distance corvette reconnaissance ship. Armed, with robots on board,



including fighting robots.”

The Abbot was surprised and threw up his hands.

“And one pilot only? How will he manage all that?”

“There is a computer on board — intelligent and electronic device. Besides the expedition ship, they are preparing a transport as well, full of substances that can be of use on the planet.”

“Poisons?” Brother Hakko asked.

“No. Only what is required to protect the people in various situations. It’s impossible to forecast these situations in advance, there is no detailed information about the catastrophe. Everything is in your crystal, Brother Hakko... everything provided by the Archives and everything we managed to get... well... from other sources.”

“I’ll read all that.” The adept closed his eyes and was deep in thought for about a minute. Then he said, “Something unusual may be required... Will they have a synthesizer with them?”

“Yes.” It seemed that Holy Father Ghor Miloc Ruada was surprised. “According to the information I have, the synthesizer has already been brought from the Off-Planetary Settlement of Babylon. And not a field one but of the planetary class. Is this important?”

“I don’t know yet. I may need it.”

The hierarch got up, the Abbot and Brother Hakko followed his example. Ghor Miloc Ruada’s dark

face was solemn and serious. He pressed his palms to one another, finger to finger, bowed his head and started praying. The Abbot and the adept also prayed — silently, humbly, fervently.

Then the guest said, “Now listen to my farewell words.” He stretched his arm, and Brother Hakko stood on his knees. “Be just in your actions, be merciful and kind, don’t be governed by anger or bias, measure and weigh, brother, before acting in this or that way, but after you take your decision, go to your goal without fear or pity. Let the Bosons the Creator be with you! In the name of His orders and power!”

Brother Hakko had heard these words many times, they were said when adepts were sent on their way. It was the usual blessing reminding of what he would have to solve, the problem of finding the border between Good and Evil — or, which is more difficult to find, between lesser Evil and bigger Evil.

He kissed the hierarch’s hand and rose up from his knees.

“Go, honourable brother. Go and do your duty,” the Holy Fathers said in unison.

A second later he found himself in the chamber under the robot-guard’s eye, and dischargers were again pointed at his forehead, chest and the back of his head. Possibly, that was a test thought up by the Abbot or a small dirty trick by Imm Forim, the Left Hand, who did not like Brother Hakko and was afraid of him. Or both,

but definitely not worries about the safety of the visiting hierarch. What could threaten him in the quietest corner of the Galaxies?... There had not been any revolts against either the Monasteries or local authorities on Polar planet for thousands of years, people did not rise against each other, did not divide lands, glory or riches so the history of mankind here was less stormy or bloody than in other worlds. Fighting cold, wind, ice and snow took a lot of time and energy, there was no strength left for cutting each other.

Brother Hakko went down, left the tower, and the wind hit him again. He walked without noticing the cold, angrily blowing wind and the approaching storm. He walked and thought about the three people from Avalon. They could have hardly survived on Polar planet... Delicate people with their soft will like melted wax... Holy Father Ruada was right, there would not be any problems with them.

## **Chapter 4. The Ship**

The corvette was impressive from the outside: the hull was dark and prolonged, with smooth surface, the bottom was nearly flat, the gun towers and engines for planetary maneuvers were in front. The control section reminded of a beak attached to the hull. On the whole it reminded a dolphin hovering in the sunlight above the surface of the astrodrome on the Second Light,

surrounded by the cones of launching towers. The sky was artificial and greenish, it did not know clouds, the giant disc of Avalon was visible, the day sun was in its zenith, the night sun and the First Moon were hidden behind the planet. Various ships, galactic liners, yachts and passenger vessels for local lines inside the system, small shuttles to commute to Avalon cities, robots for repairs in the void were spread along the wide valley of the astrodrome. But there was no place here for giant transports and cruisers; the battle ships of the Star Patrol and the Avalon Space Fleet were stationed on the First Moon, and any planet with the gravity amounting to only one fourth of the standard, was unreachable for cargo ships. There were shipyards beyond the atmosphere and transshipping junctions for them.

The size of the corvette was hardly less than a light cruiser, and that did not make it suitable for a big crew. The super-long-distance reconnaissance ship was full of numerous devices and mechanisms that could be used on the Disintegration borders, in Savage Galaxies, which had not generated life yet. The Burroughs engines — the double set, protection and life-support systems — three of each, gravitation drive, wave extinguisher, hangars with light airplanes and overland transport, arms, robots-guards, extra energy resource, holds full of equipment... there was not so much space left for the crew though it was not numerous. The “A”, Captain’s deck was on the starboard side, there were

laboratories, medical block and duplicating control module. The “B” deck on the port side was the passenger deck. One passage, six cabins, hibernation section and greenhouse with a tiny swimming-pool. They assembled there, in the greenhouse.

“I am Captain Kovalsky, born on Shambhala, a pilot of the Archives, Austronautics Division,” a not tall man in orange overalls with golden stripes said. “Welcome on board of the *Ludwig Klein* . I’ll present all of you to each other and show you the ship, but before that you can take a look around. And guess who is who,” he added with a smirk.

Look around... That was a usual action for Kaleb, the Hereditary Hunter. He knew how to look in such a way that the object of his attention, either a man or a beast, could not guess that he or it were watched.

The surroundings consisted of a fairly spacious section with light panels and arched ceiling, as high as the height of three average men. The cabin for air and water massage and the small oval swimming-pool were in the farthest corner, three people could get into the pool but hardly a fourth one. An ivy with big green leaves crawled over the walls and ceiling, there were lawns under the walls: four jasmine bushes, two palms, a dwarf cedar and another tree reminding of an oak. All vegetation was of the kinds specially modified for greenhouses in spaceships. A bench and a table between the lawns. There was an open ground with six

light armchairs from multi-coloured plastic by the hatch leading to the passage. Nowhere to hide, even the swimming-pool was not suitable: the water there hardly reached the waist.

There were four men and a girl. The Captain was standing, probably to look taller. He was not tall though with broad shoulders and big protruding chest. Probably, he was very strong. Swarthy, bearded, brusque manners, evidently liking to domineer, quick reactions usual for pilots. He was born on Shambhala, Sheckley Galaxy. The planet had not been inhabited before colonization, and he was evidently from the family of migrants from Earth.

Shambhala... the word was whirling in Kaleb's head. Shambhala... He had heard something about this world, something had happened there, but it seemed that before he was born... His father said something about it... Or not his father?... He did not manage to remember and he switched his attention to the man sitting in the blue armchair.

Classical features: straight nose, high forehead, elegant shape of the eyes, small beard... The impeccable looks and the body suited him well: neither too muscled nor too thin, everything was in its place and in right amounts. Very well-groomed... a typical resident of Avalon. Judging by his piercing gaze, he had lived a long life already and had seen a lot.

A girl was sitting close to him in the dark blue

armchair. Also a typical Avalonian. She was young — it seemed that she had not gone through reversion. She looked bored, but she was really beautiful! Her nose was as if cut by a sculptor, amber eyes were big, lips brightly-coloured, her hair fell to her waist and there were both fair and dark strands in it... Her body was also good, she had everything that attracted male eyes... We'll get acquainted closer, Kaleb decided. What if she looks bored now, even sad?... Her favourite dog could die or her cyber-make-up artist could have pulled out an extra eyelash... That's not a too serious problem! I'll make her laugh.

Another man from Avalon sat on the other side of the first Avalonian. Very big, very tall but a kind of faceless. His face did not express more than a log. Kaleb could not determine his age. He was smiling, but the smile was as if glued to his face... A strange type! I'll have to watch him...

The last crew member was sitting opposite the Avalonians but not close to Kaleb. There was some distance between them, and the orange Captain's seat, now empty, stood between them. He was a frail-looking man in a robe reaching the floor, his face was as narrow as a hatchet, his eyes and hair were dark, his mouth reminded a crack cut by a blade... A priest and definitely high-ranking. Kaleb felt a threat coming from him as clearly as he had felt the hypnotizing look of the python from Drunken Swamp. The employer, that

important sion from the Archives whom he had spoken to on Avalon, had said nothing about this man except his name. Brother Hakko from Polar planet. Kaleb was to get more detailed instructions on board.

The Avalonian in the blue chair was looking him over. The girl looked at the floor gloomily, the featureless man smiled widely. The priest looked calm, his gaze was moving along the walls covered with vegetation.

“Let’s continue,” the Captain broke the silence. “The head of the expedition is Dr Arigato Oye from Avalon, biochemist and physiologist, the Scientific Division of the Archives. Present your people, sion.”

The Avalonian got up.

“Dr Desmond, xenobiologist, my assistant,” he said quietly. “The second assistant is Dr Diane Khan, anthropologist and my wife. Both from the Scientific Division.”

Desmond went on smiling, got up and bowed. The girl just nodded. It seemed that her thoughts were somewhere very far.

“The information for the crew.” The Captain crossed his arms on his powerful chest. “When we reach the target, the planet, and that will be in supposedly ninety-seven standard days, we shall all obey sion Doctor. In space, on the way there and back, I’m your commander. I am responsible for your safety and demand all my orders to be obeyed. Is that clear?”



“Yes, honourable sion,” Desmond answered for everyone and smiled very brightly at the Captain. The latter made a face.

“Not sion. Not honourable sion. Not Kovalsky. Not sion Kovalsky. Captain! You have to address me like that. Captain. That’s one of the rules you have to obey.”

“Are there others?” Diane Khan asked suddenly. Her voice was melodious but slightly hoarse. She still did not look at anyone.

“There are, but we’ll speak about them later,” the Captain said and turned to the priest. “Brother Hakko from Polar planet, a representative of the Monasteries. Adept and exorcist.”

Silence followed. Then Arigato Oye said, “Specify your status, Brother Hakko.”

The priest got up looking down. Kaleb had a strange feeling — this monk reminded an exoplanet, unreachable for an observer, the presence of which was noticed by small disturbances of star trajectory. However, the planet existed and, it seemed, was hiding unpleasant surprises.

“I am an inspector, just an observer, Captain and honourable sions,” Brother Hakko mumbled bending his head. “I am an observer and helper in everything you do, your deeds pleasing to the Bosons the Creators. I’ll also pray for the success of the expedition and health of all its participants.”

“That’s commendable,” the Captain answered. “The sixth member of the crew is Hereditary Hunter Kaleb from Earth, son of Hunter Ragnar, grandson of Herloof, great-grandson of Olgerd, son of Haakon... I do not remember any more. Shall we stop at that, Hunter?”

“Yeah,” Kabel said, negligently waving his hand. “If anyone wishes it, I can name forty more generations of my ancestors. All of them were worthy and very courtly people.” He looked meaningfully at Dr Khan, but she didn’t stir an eyelid.

“Family trees of people from Earth horrify me,” said the head of the expedition. “An old planet where everyone has a tail down to mythical and legendary characters such as Heracles, Genghis Khan, Caesar and Buddha.”

“Don’t mention false gods and demons, brother,” the priest said strictly. “Their names are stained by evil deeds as they...”

Blood rushed to Arigato Oye’s face. He narrowed his eyes and stopped the monk with an angry gesture.

“Stained! Possibly, these people, if they were not mythical, were not the images of kindness and piety... But what about the Monasteries? Our Captain is from Shambhala... Shall I remind you what was done there?”

“We had nothing to do with that. As it is usual in the time of a riot, its leaders could not divide something

and the massacre started in which everyone took part,” Brother Hakko said calmly.

“Wrong information,” Desmond interfered, supporting himself with his giant fists pressed to the arms of his green armchair and raising himself a little. “There is data that the bloody massacre was provoked by the Monasteries. The peace was brought to the planet by the Star Patrol, there are testimonies of its officers still preserved, and the records were made with the use of the mentoscope. You’re lying, Brother Hakko.’

It was strange that the smile didn’t leave the face of the xenobiologist for a moment and seemed so sincere as if he had said only compliments to Brother Hakko.

“Priests do not lie, brother. I may be poorly informed... Who is without a sin in this world?” the adept said with a sigh. “But let’s stop speaking about the past and come back to the present. I had no idea that a Hunter would be included in the expedition. May I ask — what for?”

Kaleb could swear that Dr Arigato Oye’s eyes flashed triumphantly.

“You don’t want to speak about the past?... I see, I see...” he said slowly with a sneer. “Well, let’s speak about the Hunter. Kaleb, son of Ragnar and grandson of Herloof, is one of the best in his Brotherhood. His function is protection — certainly, on the planet when

we find ourselves among savages.”

“I’m ready to protect you even from enraged crowds if there is a will of the Creator.”

“And if there is none? Your gift is effective in case of people, and Borgians are not people... So, brother, I rely on you no more than on an empty sack.”

The priest’s cheeks flushed, he pressed his lips tightly. Or did Kaleb just imagine it?

“We have a saying on our Polar planet: do not finger the goods until you bought them,” Brother Hakko murmured. “My talent is effective in case of all hominids, sion. You will soon be convinced of that.”

“Hmm, hominids... Beasts as well? Will you be able to charm a monster whose fangs are one finger thick if we meet such a creature?”

“There are robots to protect from beasts. We don’t need a Hunter.”

“We? This, Brother Hakko, is an indefinite notion. There are three of us, the scientific expedition of the Archives, and the High Collegium worried about our safety, decided that our group needs a Hunter. And you are here as well, an inspector from the Monasteries... Observe as much as you like, get pleasure from it and pray to the Bosons the Creators, the All-Powerful Quantum and Sacred Superstrings! I don’t need you in any other capacity.”

“I humbly take your words and your decision,” the monk said through clenched teeth. “Nevertheless,

honourable sion...”

“Break!” Captain Kovalsky said loudly and authoritatively. He followed the argument, swaying on his feet up and down and turning his head like a gun turret either to one or the other opponent. “Break! I expected something like that as you’re not yet a team, a crew united by common goals, but an assembly of idiots.” Here the Captain turned to Dr Desmond who was smiling as always. “You hardly stepped on board of my ship when you started your squabble, and that’s not allowed! Siona Khan asked if there were other rules... There are. For example, you have to take off your garments and put on overalls for spaceflights... But the main rule is — no squabbles on board! None!” Kovalsky roared. “Ludwig does not understand that!”

Kaleb was not surprised. While travelling over the Great Galaxies, he had flown on ships considered nearly animate. Reconnaissance ships like the *Ludwig Klein* going to the Savage Galaxies, to the Edge of Disintegration were equipped with an intellectual-and-electronic module, the same referred to the ships of the Order for Protection of the Environment and other liquidators of the consequences of natural disasters and emergency situations. It was expensive, but it allowed to transport cargoes and people without a big crew, which had to be provided with air, food and living space. However, on-board computers with intellect equal to human had strange

phobias and caprices. The most wide-spread curiosity was looking at passengers and the Captain as elements of the ship's structure that should stay in maximally precise homeostatic balance. Any conflict on board was assessed as destabilization and could lead to most serious consequences for the quarrelsome crew. That was the reason intellectual-and-electronic ships were provided with hibernation devices.

"I repeat: no squabbles and demonstrations of hostility and dislike!" the Captain said. "Don't even raise your voices! Only polite discussions without mentioning blood, massacres, riots and enraged crowds! Otherwise you'll be sent to the fridge till the end of the trip. Do I make myself clear?"

Five passengers nodded. After that Diane Khan looked around the greenhouse and whispered, "That... Ludwig of yours... Does he hear everything? Now?"

"Now, dear siona, he is asleep, but when he wakes up, he will hear and see everything — everything that takes place on board. But because he is not human he does not understand why one idiot is crying at another. And because of that, sions, peace, only peace when you're watched by Ludwig!" Suddenly the Captain grinned. "We'll have two stops on the way, and then you'll be able to settle accounts with each other when you leave the ship. Only don't cut each other's throats! I have to bring you to Borg alive, and I'll do it, I swear by the Great Galaxies!"

Kaleb looked at the girl. He watched her as Hunters can — out of the corner of his eye, unnoticed as if he was interested in the ivy growing behind her. He left Opensho only four days ago, and his memories of Ines ar'Gaub, her obedient lips and timid caresses were still fresh. Diane Khan reminded the widow of poor Gaub no more than Brother Hakko reminded Brother Paul from an unimportant little planet in the Five-Spiral Galaxy. Like these two monks, Ines and Diane seemed to be representatives of different species, and their difference, contrasting looks, voices, garments charmed Kaleb as he cherished variety in women. He loved women and they answered him in kind. A Hunter is too lonely, and his occupation is too dangerous to neglect warmth and short oblivion promised by their bodies. But that Avalonian looked so cool, so distant and sad... Her eyes and lips did not promise joy.

“We start in six hours. You’ll have time to put on overalls and unpack,” the Captain said. “Now we move to the navigation room. It’s high time for Ludwig to wake up and get acquainted with you.”

They went into the passage, past the hibernation section and residential cabins (their names were written on the doors) and stopped in the passage connecting deck “A” and deck “B” and crossing the one in which they started. The gravitation lifts leading to the lowest deck were here, they could take you from the residential area to holds and hangars, and there was a

massive hatch opposite them. Kovalsky opened it, pressing his communication bracelet to the lock.

The navigation room was absolutely dark, impenetrable. It was narrow and small, and six people hardly managed to get in standing in front of the pilot's lodgment. The Captain went round it, feeling his way, did something in the dark, and lights switched on at once. Outside view screens opened in the air, sensor panels flashed, a red spot of light slid above the arms control, the navigation module switched on with low ringing. The room as if came alive: various lights winked on panels, the diagram showing internal communications appeared to the left of the pilot's chair, the navigator rang again and turned green — it was the sign that the flight plan was read and entered into the course making block.

Kovalsky caressed the control panel with his wide hand as if he was dealing with a child.

“Wake up, lazybones! It's high time to start working.”

“Yes, sir! I'm ready, Captain. Starting calculations for the first jump, it seems there will be a lot of them. We are really going far!”

“How do you think: will we get there?”

“Don't doubt it!”

The voice! Kaleb saw the priest shudder, Dr Arigato Oye dropping his jaw in amazement, his beautiful wife fluttering her eyelashes. Ludwig's voice



was neither male nor female — it was a boy's descant, usual for ten or twelve-year-old boys before the start of mutation. Was it a Captain's whim?... Very, very odd! There were female voices, contralto or soprano on the ships he had been to. An understandable choice for pilots whose life went on in closed space and often in solitude.

The thin boy's voice sounded again, "Who are these people, Captain?"

"Our passengers, Ludwig, our new crew. The expedition beyond the Edge of Disintegration."

Kovalsky said names aloud, Ludwig listened and interrupted the Captain only once when he got to the beautiful female from Avalon.

"I welcome you on board, siona Diane. Women are rare guests here especially such beautiful like you."

"He liked you, siona," the Captain said. "I think he'd like to talk to you. Be gracious and tolerant. He needs communications bringing pleasure."

Diane Khan's eyelashes rose again.

"Sure, Captain. I'll be only happy."

Kovalsky named Brother Hakko and Kaleb and after that accommodated himself in the lodgment.

"Go to your cabins and change," he said. "Ludwig is awake so you can address him if you need help or advice. If you want to have a bite, tell him. I'll be here. We are getting ready for the start-off."

He stretched in the armchair and closed his eyes.

The Avalonians, the priest and Kaleb left the navigation room one after the other. Kaleb was the last, his hearing was very acute as it was usual for a Hunter and he caught some hardly discernible sounds. Ludwig was whispering something to the Captain — may be he was sharing his impressions of the new crew. Or just singing?...

Kaleb stepped into the passage, the hatch closed and the sounds disappeared.

\* \* \*

His residential section was fairly spacious. The cabin was five meters long and three wide, with light plastic furniture and built-in wardrobes, the walls were painted nice yellow, the ceiling was illuminated in golden colours. The automate delivery crack was opposite the door, above the table, and above it a big square screen imitated a window. No images, just milky-white surface in a dark brownish frame. His sofa and armchair were to the left, two big containers with his belongings stood on the sofa and there were also his overalls, yellow-coloured. There were two narrow passages on the right with transparent doors: one led to the sleeping quarters, the second to his bathroom. He saw the shower heads, mirrors, the black mouth of the utilizer and all the rest that was required. After looking around him, Kaleb decided that the quarters were fairly

suitable. Sure, not the first class apartment in the Transport Union liner which he took to fly to Avalon, but on the other hand, it was not the whole crew's quarters in the Order's ship. The Order for Protection of the Environment employed him often. The work was considered honorable but did not pay well.

Kaleb opened the containers. There were knives and long blades from nitrided steel which was no less firm than diamonds, ray guns and other weapons, two sets of armour, helmets with communication devices, garments, his chameleon cloak and some medicines — "Hunter's first-aid kit" as it was called in the Brotherhood. All that could hardly be needed on board and he was already intending to put the containers in the storeroom, but he suddenly remembered Brother Hakko. He took the injector out, threw it on the table and sealed the containers again.

Low ringing sounded in the cabin and it was followed by Ludwig's voice, "You have a lot of arms, Kaleb. What for?"

"I'll take them to Borg. I have to protect our scientists. That's what written in my contract."

"But there is everything on board you may need."

"Not everything." Kaleb slapped the lid of the container. "You cannot imagine what's kept here."

He put the first container in the storeroom, then the second.

"And what's there?" Ludwig asked.

“I cannot answer your question. We, Hunters, have our secrets.”

A strange sound. A sigh? Imitation of a sigh?...

“I’ve never met a Hunter,” Ludwig said. “Probably, it’s a very romantic occupation, isn’t it? Like in case of ancient heroes and knights?”

Kaleb grinned.

“Romantic. Until your first meeting with a dragon.”

“And what’s after that?”

“The dragon eats the knight’s head. And that’s it! Surely, if you just stand gaping.”

“You’re joking, sion...” A kind of sigh again. “If...” A pause. “If I could turn into a human, I’d become a Hunter. It’s so interesting!”

“Yeah,” Kaleb agreed. “Today you crawl in the swamps of Drunken Swamp, tomorrow you hunt rats on Cervantes unless your gall bladder bursts. Though interesting.” He took off his clothes, made a ball out of them and went into the sanitary block. “What should I do with all that, Ludwig?”

“Throw into the utilizer, sion. You won’t need any other garments except overalls on board, sion.”

“Listen to me, Ludwig... Stop calling me sion. Just Kaleb.”

“OK. Just Kaleb.”

He stood under the shower. Strong thin spurts were coming from above, from below, from all sides.

“Your muscles are like thick ropes,” the boy’s voice sounded again. “Like ropes, like snakes... That’s a comparison from one old novel I read. And you have scars... on your chest, on your side... Where from?”

“The one on the side is memories of leeches from that Drunken Swamp. On my chest... It was an unpleasant story, Ludwig, I don’t like thinking about it.”

“Why didn’t you eliminate the scars? It’s a simple cosmetic procedure. I can do it in the medical block.”

“That’s not in our customs. All Hunter’s scars are his scars no matter how many.”

“Is it like a chronicle of feats?”

“No, it’s memories of fails and miscalculations.”

The shower switched off. Warm air dried his body.

“Will you tell me about your adventures?” Ludwig asked.

“If you want to.” It seemed to Kaleb that he was not speaking to the on-board computer but an inquisitive boy. “Shall I start now?”

“Some other time. We’ll have time during the flight.”

He returned to his cabin, took the injector from the table and attached it above his knee. Then he put on the yellow overalls.

“Is the thing on your leg a weapon?”

“No. It’s a capsule with a special preparation. A potion as the Hunters call it.”

“What for?”

“Just in case,” Kaleb lay on the sofa and stretched his legs. His muscles tingled pleasantly after the shower. “Are you speaking to me only now?”

“No. I have a dynamically distributed polymorphic mind. I’m speaking to you, the Captain and siona Khan. She is a very nice girl!”

“I fully agree with you.”

Kaleb closed his eyes and relaxed. He thought about his new contract. He had flown with explorers of virgin worlds in the past as any suitable for habitation but uninhabited planet could present surprises — and as a rule they were unpleasant surprises. Hurricanes, tsunami, earthquakes and other natural calamities were not in his competence, he dealt with flora and fauna, monsters that sat in ambush waiting for people on land, in the air and ocean depths. It was a risky occupation as practically nothing was known about the creatures living on the planet. Saber-toothed rats from Cervantes, leeches and snakes on Drunken Swamp, giant spiders on Bikwara, even worms, hydras and other parasites attacking people, were a well-known calamity, and any Hunter had an idea what they were threatening with and how to fight them. But if a world was unknown, accidents and unexpectedness were running the show. A tree and even the whole forest could turn out to be an

omnivorous creature, a rock could suddenly open its jaw turning into a giant lizard, waves brought medusas on the shore shooting poison, harmless at first sight birds tore spacesuits with their iron beaks. Accidental and unexpected... on the border of life and death... Hunters risked, and risk was paid for. Everyone paid who explored new worlds — the Trade Corporation, Astronauts League, Transport Union and colonists from numerous star systems which were threatened with overpopulation.

But the Avalonian Archives were unusually generous. The work was the same as in other expeditions that went to the borders of the Universe and the price was great... Not cash though the amount in cash was also impressive but privileges and bonuses attached to it. Avalon citizenship! Kaleb had never heard of a Hunter being awarded that and at first he treated the offer skeptically. But sion Big Boss, the Curator of the Avalonian Archives, explained what that meant: house, land, free reversion and life-long allowance. A citizen got a part of profits from trade and loans granted by the authorities to congregations from other planets, and that was no small amounts. A generous pay, very generous! And what did that mean?...

Four variants came to Kaleb's mind. Possibly, the expedition was so dangerous that there was a full guarantee that he would not return... But this case was

provided for in the contract. He had no direct descendants (his grandfather and father were dead and he knew nothing about his biological mother), and so the rights to his property passed over to the Brotherhood. The Archives were sure to pay!

Could it be that those whom he had to protect were especially valuable?... Valuable for the Archives and Avalon authorities?... Sure, that was not the sexless monk from Polar planet but Dr Arigato Oye with his assistants. For example, the Doctor was a genius who had thought up something that rectums fell out when people heard about his discovery... From exaltation certainly... But what was a genius to do in a dangerous expedition? Geniuses were pampered as there was nothing more valuable for the world where they were born. Geniuses were the most precious goods in the Universe, and Arigato Oye could hardly be referred to them. He was just a good scientist and besides easily irritated... How he argued with the monk!

Could sion Big Boss have a personal interest?... The Bosons the Creators could not deal with all those Archives, Monasteries, Orders and all the others... There was struggle everywhere for power and honours, scheming and intrigues... What if the Doctor had crossed someone's path? What if he intended to occupy the Curator's place and the Curator did not need a rival?... There could be other reasons for hostility, but



that was not the case to employ a Hunter. If only it was planned that the whole expedition was to disappear without traces, either with or without a Hunter...

Kaleb carefully thought all those cases over as his life and honour depended on the right decision. There were people behind every contract offered to him and other Hunters, they were dwellers of planets and cities located beyond the atmosphere, or members of galactic congregations. And it was known that people were not perfect. It happened that employers treated the contract terms differently from what the Hunter understood, and that was a reason for disputes, squabbles and sometimes fist-fighting and interference of the Small Arbitration Court. Hunters did not like it when employers were standing behind their backs while they were working or tried to deprive them of something. Disrespect and infringement of honour were a common reason of conflicts.

So, after thinking three variants over, Kaleb decided on the fourth one. Probably, their flight to the edge of the universe was not a usual expedition to explore a new world, it had some other goal, very important for the galactic humanity as the Archives and the Monasteries participated in it. He did not understand what united them in this case, but he could not disregard the fact that there were scientists from the Archives and a high-ranking priest on board, an adept and exorcist. There was no big friendship between

them, but undoubtedly they had some common goal.

What?...

He decided not to rack his brains over that. Someone from the Avalonians — probably Arigato Oye, the head of the expedition — would instruct him, and everything would be clear. There were no reasons for worries. After all, the Archives had already paid what they had promised.

“Would you like to eat?” Ludwig broke the silence.

“No, thank you. But I’d like a drink.”

“Coffee, juice, fruit cocktail, milk?”

“Milk?” Kaleb snorted. “Hunters don’t drink milk. Do you have vodka from Earth? Or juniper gin?”

“They are too strong to be kept on board. We have wine.”

“That’s better. Pour!”

The delivery automation rang and a tray with ruby-coloured liquid in a glass got out of the crack. Kaleb left his sofa, drank the wine in three gulps and made a face.

“Sour! Where is it from?”

“Dry wine from Avalon Amo. Very good.”

“OK. That will do.”

Suddenly holographic pictures started flashing on the walls — calm sea under pink sun, mountains in snow caps, night sky full of stars, city towers full of lights, astrodrome with a silver arrow — a galactic

liner. The images flowed, slid, overlapped; nature and city sights were replaced by ornaments and fractals, then live creatures and people paraded on the walls as if standing in an infinite line: male and female faces, a white tiger with bared jaws, a laughing child's face, an emerald lizard with its spikes, long-legged birds with blue feathers dancing under the moon. Soon faces and figured started changing so quickly that even the Hunter with his excellent eyesight could not discern them.

“What does it mean?” Kaleb asked squinting his eyes.

“If you wish, I can decorate you cabin,” the answer came. “Or do you have holograms of your relatives? Father, mother, your beloved women?”

“There were too many women in order to remember them longer than five days. I know nothing about my mother, I was born in the Stockholm incubator. My father... I have not forgotten my father. But we don't take anything extra with us in our Brotherhood. Memories are a heavy weight.”

“That's true,” Ludwig fell silent. Pictures stopped flashing on the walls.

“I think you can make something suitable here,” Kaleb nodded at the window-screen. “Something to bring joy. The tyrannosaur whose head I broke on Kehna... a herd of cockroaches from Henderson — they nearly ate me alive, I had to use gas to poison

them.” He thought for a moment. “No, my house and lands would be better. I have not seen them yet, so I’ll enjoy them at least here.”

“Where is your estate?” Ludwig asked.

“On Avalon. I’m a citizen of Avalon now.”

“That’s a great honour! Congratulations, Kaleb!”

Ludwig paused. “Where are your lands located exactly?”

“I don’t know exactly. Somewhere in the upper reaches of the Tagrim river.”

“Do you remember your certificate’s code?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He said the code, and an image appeared immediately in the window-screen: rocks on the banks of a not wide river, pines with golden trunks, a meadow with a path winding in grass and a log two-storied house. Tiled roof, big windows, porch with carved wooden pillars and two towers on both sides... A good place, and the house is good, Kaleb decided. When I’m sick and tired of life, I’ll go there to die.

“Do we start soon?”

“Yes. They are loading the last containers with the equipment.”

Kaleb looked at his legs in yellow trousers of the overalls, went into the shower room and looked himself over in the mirror. A chicken, a real chicken! However, of impressive size.

“Can you give me overalls of another colour?”

Ludwig laughed.

“You sat in the yellow armchair in the greenhouse. It is your choice, Kaleb. The cabin in yellow colours, yellow garments, yellow spacesuit... That’s the rule on board.”

“So, beautiful Khan got everything dark blue, right? What a pity! Dark blue is my favourite colour.”

“And you don’t like yellow at all, do you?” Ludwig asked definitely disappointed.

Kaleb looked in the mirror again.

“The tint is unsuitable. It’s the colour of a little chick just hatched out... It will grow a little and will find itself on a skewer. Do you understand what I mean?...”

“This can be changed. Come closer to the mirror... yeah, that’s right... Close your eyes with your hands... Now, wait a moment...” Something flashed like a lightning, and Ludwig announced triumphantly, “Ready! Are you satisfied?”

Now the overalls were shining gold. His chest, sleeves, trouser legs were dark gold, shoulders and sides were lighter, his belt shone like hundreds of golden sparks and his collar reminded a stamped chain...

“That’s a hero’s attire,” Kaleb said. “Had leeches from Drunken Swamp or cockroaches from Henderson seen me looking like that, they would have died from fear. Well, OK, that will do... Our companions are not

easily frightened, and beautiful Khan may even like it.”

He came back to the cabin — and just in time: a giant armchair looking like the pilot’s lodgment came out of the wall, the river bank disappeared from the window-screen, and now the orbits of the planets from the Avalon star system were shining on it. The day sun was a bright burning ball, the two closest to it worlds were too hot to live on, then inhabited planets followed: Avalon Amo, Avalon with its two moons and Avalon Fleur. Gas giants were much farther from the central sun and behind them one could see the night sun of Avalon, a small star with its satellites, the atmosphere of the two of them was suitable for living. It was rare — a stable system of two stars with five inhabited worlds! And besides them, there were twelve moons and satellites of the gas planets with the artificially created environment, water cycle, seas, continents, flora and fauna. Success in terra-forming was much more modest in the Solar system. When the Burroughs engine was invented, it turned out that it was much easier to find a suitable for life world by some other star than transform Mars or Venice.

“Start in three minutes,” the Captain’s voice sounded. “The crew is to take their seats in lodgments.”

Kaleb obediently sat in the armchair, and flexible belts immediately encircled his chest and limbs. The ships with gravitation drivers could accelerate without overloads and sudden thrusts, however, flying in space

near planets required special precaution measures. It was too crowded here — power stations with giant mirrors, navigation and communication satellites, production facilities and laboratories, transports, liners and thousands of small ships flying in and out from and to astrodromes and orbital dockyards. The *Ludwig Klein* was considered a comparatively small ship but at the altitude of several kilometers another vessels joined it, a container-carrier, and that was fairly big. The corvette and the transport maneuvered carefully, rose higher and higher and then turned to the globular cluster above the northern pole of the Galaxy.

Now the screen was covered with velvety darkness in which stars blinked like tiny sparkles. The constellation pattern was unusual for Kaleb, but the Milky Way shone in Avalon skies as bright as seen from the Earth — both planets were in the Three-Arm Galaxy, one of the biggest in the inhabited Universe. The nebulae light hid its center, a mysterious area where no expedition had ever managed to get — get in, come back and tell people what wonders were hidden beyond the eternal glimmer of gas clouds. Astrophysics and cosmologists thought that there was a black hole in the center of any galaxy, a giant singularity in the space-and-time fabric, which possibly connected our world with some anti-Universe. It stayed unclear how and why this phenomenon had originated but only for science — the Monasteries had their explanations.