

Chaldinor

Kerry Truelove

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Acknowledgements and apologies

I suspect very few of us, if any, can claim that what they think, write, draw, play or otherwise create or do is totally original. We are each of us the result of our experiences, our family backgrounds, our tastes in friends, fields of study, music, literature, art, entertainment, sport and so forth. Certainly this book is a mixture of all of these, and to acknowledge all influences would be beyond my capacity. However, there is one whose impact lurks within these pages.

With that in mind, I happily acknowledge the influence of Andre Norton. When I was in late primary school, she introduced me to the concept of a universe populated by co-operating sentient species, beings to whom space-faring was a way of life. This took me beyond the confines of this remarkably beautiful planet of ours, opening extraordinary possibilities limited only by a blinkered imagination. In her writing I found worlds of wonder, and I gather I am by no means the first person to do so. It is a crying shame that the evolution of our societies seems to drift further and further away from the ideals introduced in her writing; but we still can dream.

I can see other influences at work in this book - books by other authors, such as John Wyndham and Theodore Sturgeon; a number of films; the excellent television series “Babylon 5”, which reminded me that politics is everywhere. But to name them all would be impossible, if nothing else because they have gone into the mix that is my memory without necessarily being properly attributed to first sources.

I derived the name of the inter-planetary civilisation within this book, pompously and in retrospect rather foolishly, from my brief (unsuccessful!) foray into the Latin language. I apologise profusely to all Latin scholars, who must squirm at such

frivolous use of their subject; but the name has stuck in my mind, so the Civitas it remains.

So, too, do the six main species who comprise the Civitas - Humans we all know, but there are the Lixiors, Voods, Skuvians, Ludorians and Inemons to consider. This book contains no detailed description of them; they are, just as the Civitas is.

Chaldinor

Table of Contents

I. Beginning.....	1
II. Boreaster	20
III. Boreaster is closed	59
IV. Trial.....	91
V. Volcec	118
VI. Research	139
VII. Earth Station	158
VIII. Reappearance	169
IX. Discovery	186
X. Julia	213
XI. Mind	232
XII. New information	258
XIII. Storm.....	275
XIV. Catharsis	290
XV. Chaldinor Station	300
XVI. Infiltration	312
XVII. Balance	326

XVIII. Ends and beginnings334
XIX. Adjudication..... 346

Chaldinor

I. Beginning

The girl's head was throbbing and her body shuddered from time to time, as if in the grip of deep chill. Outside the tent it was cold, bitter autumn moving inescapably into long, savage winter. The relentless winter wind was blowing, hurling snow and ice nearly horizontally over the battered land; it would not let up significantly until spring, although it would get stronger. The tent took off its edge and the small survival heater that filled the tent with a coral glow made that shelter quite bearable, but still the girl shuddered as if to rattle her very bones. The primitive thumping in her head made her huddle the harder, teeth gritting. She desperately wanted to huddle into oblivion, but of course she could not. That would have been giving in. Worse, that would be to abandon her sister.

Her sister spoke to her, shyly touching her thigh as if terrified she would attack. She fought down a shift of nausea in her stomach and smiled reassuringly, trying not to let her exhaustion and desolation show although she knew the other would pick up her feelings, not her falsity. Sure enough, the younger girl looked blasted again. She wished they were not so close. If they weren't she would have been able to reassure; but they were close, and she could not reassure where she could not feel all right. Her stomach heaved again. She had given the last of the emergency rations to her sister that morning, unable to face the other without offering food although she knew she herself was hand-in-hand with starvation as if was. But she was a lost cause and her sister was not; besides, emergency rations usually made her sick, now.

"Are you all right?" repeated the youngster, this time referring to the Other Thing. She shrugged, not bothering to lie. Her sister touched her again, cool hands to a throbbing brow, and she felt a little of the terribleness drain from her. It was a relief, but she couldn't let her sister keep doing that and shook her head. Rebuffed, the other settled back, "I want to help."

"It'll come good."

"You don't believe that."

"I do," she objected, glaring at her sister. The other looked disbelieving and for a frightening moment the red film washed over her mind,

the red film of unreasoning anger. Her sister knew it, but did not retreat. She never knew why the youngster didn't retreat from her madness - it could hardly be certainty that she wouldn't hurt her. But the redness faded and her head throbbed all the harder, "look, it must come good eventually. Either that, or I go completely crazy. There'll be a solution."

"I want to help you with the pain."

Her sister was a *healer*, of course. She had the indefinable *healer's* touch that could soothe all manner of physical or mental injury. If they ever got out of this, if she could she would see the youngster trained in medicine; it would be an intolerable waste not to enhance that gift as far as it would go. No amount of training could instill the *healer's* touch, but it would make the burden of *healing* a great deal less.

"You do."

She took her sister in her arms, holding closely for simple animal companionship, drawing into her lungs the scent of her sibling - a sweet cleanness all her own, only just beginning to develop a sometimes rank, sometimes heady odour of womanhood. She drew in that scent hungrily and tried to forget the nightmare when nothing existed and the mind slithered uncontrolled, a gorgon's head without gravity. Her nerve endings were still raw with it. She buried her nose in her sister's hair and the coral heater light caught in dark eyes, making them feral, like a cat's eyes caught in a beam of light.

She could not recall much of the time before the nightmare, it had been ripped from the broken fabric of her mind during the terrible times. She had a vague recollection of security and an extended warmth akin to that which she felt when she held her sister. Conceptually, she knew she had loved her family, at least; had gone to school and eaten happy family meals like everyone else - although somewhere there was a niggling of doubt, as if it was not as cut-and-dried as all that. True recollection of such moments had gone, lost in the nightmare. The nightmare itself was a stark reality of which she recalled very little; there was practically nothing to recall, only an endless nothingness. Beyond that was the awful time when everything had been too loud, too bright, too strongly scented for her to know what was going on, her bludgeoned mind in constant derangement. It was then that she had done the Thing, although she could not recall doing it, much less planning it. She tried to remember it, but all that did was make her head throb more and more. She was only vaguely aware of her sister's cooling touch, chasing away the hot demons of insanity and finally easing her to rest, if not sleep.

The girl stared. Before her was a body, crumpled over on its side. There was a knife rammed up under the ribs, buried to the hilt by someone insanely strong. It looked like an ordinary dining knife, hardly the tool of an assassin, but how could the man have done it to himself? Besides, he would not have done it just before eating, as the spilled drink and dinner suggested.

Her head hurt and she didn't want to stay in the same room with a corpse, especially one of which reminded her of the Thing. They had locked her up because of the Thing, that was why she was in this dark place, that was why there was a key in the corpse's hand. She bent down to pick it up, wondering how the assassin had escaped. There was blood on her hand, but apart from her thundering head she was in no pain; the regular shuddering of her body never had anything to do with pain. She turned the key slowly, letting it gleam against the bloodiness of her hand, and knew without recalling it that she was the assassin, this corpse another of her victims. Strange how she could recall neither this murder nor the Thing. How she wished her head would stop pounding.

She was a murderer, of course. That was why they had locked her up. She went around killing people and could not be left on the loose, and that was absolutely right. At the same time she could not wait here for her punishment. She had done the Thing and that was wrong, but by the same token They were wrong, too. They wanted... If only she could recall what it was They wanted. It was to hurt her family, but why? Still, if they wanted to hurt her family she needed to get to her sister and get them both away. Something was very wrong, and it was not just her; she was wrong, to be sure, but she was not the only one. With that in mind she opened the door and stepped out. It was dreadfully bright in the corridor and her tired eyes squinted, struggling against the glare, but she made herself move as quickly and as silently as possible. The crackle of her clothing was as loud as a thunderclap, but no-one came to investigate. They might be cunning in a coup, but they were very poor guards.

Her sister would be held in the Apartments. They had no legal means of disposing of her and probably were holding her incommunicado on the pretext of illness. Perhaps, in the long run, They wanted her to murder her sister as well. She was reasonably sure that They had caused the nightmare.

The girl thought for a while, pressing her scrawny body into the wall, before darting up a further flight of stairs. There was a guard at the main door, standing stolid and immovable, his gun held across his chest. She did not recognise him but knew she wouldn't have, even if her memory had not been destroyed. He was one of Them. He also was a fool, because the

crossbow and bolts hanging on the staircase wall were not mere imitations. She was swift to possess both, shocked by the weight of the crossbow - when had it got so heavy? She did not recall it being so heavy, nor so stubborn to cock, in the grey area of impressions that might have been what was left of her memory. She nearly dropped the bolt and clutched at it, hearing the ruffle of feathers against her skin violently loud in the midnight silence. The guard did not. The guard just stood there, stolid and unimaginative, cocksure that They had won. They had, of course. All she wanted to do was look after her sister, that the family not die out altogether, that the youngster have a chance to fulfil her magical skill. It wasn't a very good reason - well, she didn't think anyone else would think it a good reason.

The guard was so sure of himself he didn't hear the crossbow whipping, the twang of an arrow released. Then he didn't hear anything at all, because he was dead. His gun made a horrendous din clattering onto the carpet, as did the heavy thud of his body falling; surely someone must have heard it? She tensed for the outcry, but none came and she darted over the hall to unlock the front door. For a moment she contemplated leaving the gun there, but it seemed wiser to arm herself and she plucked it up. Like the crossbow it was unnaturally heavy. It was just a hunter's gun, like the one she was used to, or rather the one she thought she was used to, in the grey tangle of what had once been memory; but it weighed a ton. She was beginning to wonder whether it was more a case of her being unable to move the weights she used to move freely. Had the nightmare done more than affect her mind, had it sapped her body as well? Was the glaring quality of light and the violence of sound a function of her physical condition, not the jumbled heat of her mind? She had not always operated herself as if through remote control, of that she was reasonably certain. Perhaps if the heat and confusion ever left her she might come to understand this incomprehensible thing, but for the moment she hefted the gun, head pounding, and hesitated beside the door so that she might look out and yet not be seen.

It was a cold night, sharp and still. She could see another of Them walking back and forth, breath condensing in icy puffs before him. Yet another leaned against the wall, signified by their breath and the faint line that probably was the barrel of a gun. The first, the one walking, had a hard, blocky outline and his clothes crackled as if made of dried straw. He, too, carried a gun. The light from the house seemed to trace over the gravel pathway to catch, gleaming, on the silvered metal of his weapon; but he was restless and she could hear the stones crunching underfoot as he turned again. The crunching was inhumanly loud.

"Why don't we just kill 'em both?" he stopped suddenly, pillar-hard, in front of the other, "we could - once they're dead-"

“Martyrs,” said the other incisively, in a female voice so close to familiar the girl’s neck prickled like fire, “are the most inconvenient of things in any coup. We don’t want martyrs. They can do a hell of a lot more damage dead than alive. You kill either of them, let alone both, and you create a martyr.”

“Why do we have to stand guard?” the man changed tack, still restless and bored with his duty, “they’re both locked up.”

“Hassn was right about you,” reflected the woman shortly, “you’re a precipitous fool. It’s not inconceivable that there are people out there who are loyal to the Dorimur’s family, who might want to get them out. If they get out, they form a focus for counter-coup. We are here to keep them isolated; then when Mace is finished with them, we’ll have a nice little sororicide and every reason for putting her down as a mad dog. For the protection of the people.”

“You used to know her,” said the man. His voice was loud, erupting out of the dark cold, and the girl flinched. Were They talking too loud, or was it her hearing again? “doesn’t it bother you?”

“No,” said the woman, surprised, “why should it? We have to break the stranglehold of the Dorimurs by any means possible. Mace’s way is actually very clever, because there’s no way we can be linked to her psychosis and everything we’ve done since she killed the Dorimur has been in accordance with our function. It works out to be quite legal.”

Volcec. The girl felt weak, leaning heavily against the wall while her gun drooped. Now she recognized the woman: Volcec. She had been a trustworthy friend, an ally, someone to whom a frustrated soul could talk; the sort of companion who was above suspicion of duplicity.

“How crazy is she?” wondered the booming man. Volcec snorted, a soft sound that was like an explosion to the despairing girl.

“She’s completely scrambled, you needn’t worry on that score. Mace knows his stuff. Just shut her in a room with someone and she’ll kill them. You stay here, I’m going to see if Berens has anything to report,” that was Volcec all right. She swung the gun to her front, grasping it firmly, and stepped from the girl’s sight.

The man resumed his pacing, beginning to whistle tunefully something that sounded almost familiar; but the watching girl was not paying much attention to it. She was beginning to feel physically sick, as much from hunger as from the cacophony in her head. She had not eaten for a while and that was inevitably catching up with her, adding to the headache, the constant shuddering, the deepening animal despair with which she sank to the floor.

She had no idea how long she remained there, shaking so hard the gun barrel made a low rumble on the door frame. She was not even aware of the desolate sense of all things lost that swept over her, immobilizing her; that happened from time to time. She would seem to come back into herself and find her body stiff, as if it had been in the one position for too long.

After a while she straightened stiffly to close the door, letting the catch snick back so gently she could hardly hear it. She thought for a while longer before stepping over the dead guard and resuming her crossbow, smiling slightly although it still weighed the earth. With the gun on one shoulder and the crossbow in her hands, she felt calm, as if she knew exactly what to do. She was not aware of thinking it out, but she knew she had set upon a clear course of action. The first part of that would be to get her sister.

There was another of Them outside the Apartments. He stared at her as if he had seen a ghost, and then he died, impaled on the crossbow bolt. The bow had been an old friend and she had shot so many vermin with it; to use it on one of Them was absolutely proper, if not plain poetic. His gun, a pathetically small hand gun, was possessed and jammed into her waistband. She hoped it would help hold up the trousers, as they had persistently slipped off her hips all the way up the stairs, but if anything it aggravated the situation. She could hardly spare a hand to hold up her trouser, so she ransacked the body for his belt as well as his keys. The former was securely strapped around her waist, and the latter applied to the door.

Her sister was in the front lounge, positioned so she could watch the door. There was a small bag beside her and a welcoming, quiet smile on her lips.

“I wondered when you’d get here,” observed the youngster calmly, standing. The girl didn’t understand why, but she seemed to recall this anticipation happening before the nightmare, that her sister knew when she was coming. She wasn’t sure that the reverse hadn’t held, too, but that seemed lost, “I saved what I could of my dinner, and there’s a change of clothes in there, yours as well as mine. There’s also a canister of water. Where are we going?”

“Don’t know,” her sister approached and she panicked, backing up so violently she nearly fell over the corpse. Fortunately, the youngster stopped, “look, we can’t be in the same room. I’m crazy. They’ve set me up to kill anyone I’m in the same room with.”

“I trust you,” said her sister simply.

“I killed father!” if only her head would stop thundering.

“You’ve calmed down a lot since then. Where are we going?” at the words, a sense of calm seemed to shoot through the girl like a laser and she settled back on her heels. Everything seemed very clear again, the heat and noise pushed back to bearable levels.

“We are going to get the hell out of here. Did They leave the camping gear? - then we’ll take that and go.”

When they reached the front door there was only the man outside, stamping up and down, no longer whistling. Her sister hissed, recognizing him. That meant she probably should, but of course she didn’t.

“He can’t be our enemy,” whispered the youngster. A cool sense of surety, almost alien in its completeness, washed over the older girl. She knew without a shadow of doubt that all Humans were their enemy, and that in order to survive they had to become primeval hunters, unfettered by conscience or doubt. Accordingly she cleared the gate by the most direct means possible, although it left her with only one crossbow bolt in hand. She bundled her sister over the corpse and out the gate, telling her to keep moving. The youngster obeyed instantly, trusting her and probably a little unnerved by the callous ease in killing she had found. She decided to protect her sister from this primitive regression for as long as possible. It would not be good to destroy the *healer’s* touch. She might need it some time.

The bolt had fouled on bone. She jerked at it, frustrated, but the corpse jerked flaccidly and the bolt hardly moved at all. Her head began to thump again and she forced herself to calm, worrying the bolt absently; as a result she nearly missed the sound of footsteps and was almost panicking when she darted into the shadow beyond the gate.

Voltec stopped, still in shadow. The gate was open and the guard down, practically a moral to be dead. She raised her gun carefully, trying to catch a glimpse of white breath or tiny movement, feeling appallingly vulnerable. Half of her hoped the escapees had gone; the other half tensed to hunting pitch, pumping blood to every particle of her body. If she could find them-

Something hurtled out of the darkness and a vice closed around her impaled body, making it nearly impossible to breathe. She wasn’t aware of falling, but there were cold stars overhead and cold gravel under her injured body. A short while later there was the girl standing over her, crossbow in hand. She wondered idiotically why she hadn’t thought of the crossbow; of course the girl would go to the crossbow. She had all the right instincts. That was why she was such a danger.

“We were friends,” said the girl quietly. Her eyes seemed to burn out of her skull and Volcec wondered for a horrible minute what more could be done. At the same time the girl’s words made her neck prickle. She croaked and the girl smiled drily, “we used to be friends. But friends don’t condemn one another to madness.”

“Friends?” she shouldn’t be able to remember that. On top of everything else Volcec began to feel sick. Mace had bungled. The girl was meant to be safely insane and utterly without memory.

“Friends,” repeated the girl, her unholy eyes gleaming as she leaned over, “look after friends.”

She was gone, and Volcec left to die alone.

They had stowed away aboard a ship they had thought was Human, but found out otherwise when two of the crew had opened the door and found them guiltily looking for escape. It had been the stuff of nightmare, these strange beings so tall and swiftly moving, even at her best the youngster could not have evaded them, much less her debilitated sister. The beings lunged around to cut off the stowaway’s escape, then seized them in grips so strong they hurt. The youngster squirmed, wishing their captors would let off some of the pressure, but if she struggled, a claw came out to rest against her in unmistakable warning. She rolled an eye to her sister and the other shook her head, going passive. She followed suit, putting her faith in her sister’s sense and ability.

Still held tight, they were taken through the corridors of the ship to what she guessed was the bridge. There another of the strange beings spoke to them. This one had the air of one in command, regarding them closely through rather beautiful, slanted eyes.

“I’m sorry,” said the elder girl politely, “I don’t understand-” and the other suddenly shot out a hand, catching her jaw, turning it left and right. She tensed a moment then made herself relax. Whatever happened now, fighting would not improve it. But the being’s head went back, its elegant ears flicking backwards for a moment, its wonderful eyes widening. It spoke again, but this time not to her, and there was a swift movement to the side. Another of the beings came up, something in its hands which it pressed against her throat. For a moment she fought down panic and started to squirm, which only meant the arms holding her tightened; at least the claw wasn’t reapplied. A faint hiss and a sting against her neck, and the other being stepped away.

“You understand me now?” asked the commander. The girl stared, bewildered, and then touched her neck in wonder. Oddly, there was a smile from the other, though it showed a great many teeth and could have been as alarming as it was reassuring, “yes, you now have a UT implant. You have to have one if you’re going to be in the spaceways.”

“UT?- Oh!” realization hit her and despite their situation she brightened. She had heard of such things, the invaluable universal translator, though she had never seen one and hadn’t known they were implanted into the neck. But the being before her smiled again, before tilting its head slightly to one side. Beside her, her sister was rubbing her own neck, eyes wide with wonder.

“Good, you know of such things. You also know, I’m sure, that stowing away on a ship is not legal. So, what can you do for the Clan Hairikkin to pay passage?” there was nothing they could do, and the being before her - a Lixior, she realized later - knew it. She searched for some way of expressing it and the other’s head tilted over further until it seemed one expressive ear would touch its shoulder, “then you will have to owe my Clan, and we will leave you at the first port we reach.”

The girl went along quietly, knowing that in the confines of a ship they had no choice once they had been discovered. But once they had made planetfall she was swift to get her sister and herself out of sight in the maze that constituted the port, constantly moving into narrow alleys and slipping from time to time into the myriad of ducts, anything to ensure they were not followed. If the Lixior crew reported them, she didn’t know of it; but there was no sense in taking chances. Especially when her sister seemed determined to betray them with her amazement at the sight of other species going about their ordinary business, although in time that faded and they both became immune to the excitement. She wished, though, she could become immune to the terrible brightness of light, the aural assault of sound, the sense of her nose being clogged up with scents, her sense of taste over-stimulated with a plethora of remarkable and ordinary flavours. It was a relief when she managed to get them aboard another ship, one crewed by Humans, and they could leave the port behind.

That left her with the debt, but at least they had not been caught by Them, and their sojourn in the Lixior vessel appeared to have escaped Their detection. It would be good to find a way of paying passage and getting aboard legitimately, and avoid the risk of discovery as a stowaway, but until the hunters stopped coming she couldn’t risk that. The youngster, understanding that, made no complaint though at times their ersatz accommodation bordered on a torment.

It took a few years, but eventually she found herself slipping through the corridors of a station to drop a parcel onto the table that was surrounded by Lixior crewmen with a particular Clan insignia on their uniforms. Her hand was seized, of course, but when she held out the Clan token the crewman took it and released her. It was not the way of the Lixior to question an action which was accompanied by the Clan token.

The woman stood by the window, watching the vermilion sunset through streaks of stasis. She felt calm, no longer caring very much what was said in the room behind her. These were the people who had governed her life for the past six years. They would govern her life until she died, and her involvement or otherwise was of no consequence. The sunset, though, was beautiful. She was always happy to have a conference in this room at this time of day, when sunlight was filtered through maximised atmospheric haze. On days like this, when the purplish green of normal sunset gave way to vermilion, it was a special thing. She hoped they would keep talking until the sun went down.

“Personally,” that was the overweight, balding man who had come in with the military woman, “I think this is the best solution for all of us. It takes the strain off the prison system and makes use of a socially unacceptable individual.”

“My client,” said the lawyer, the same thin, sad-looking Legal Aid member who had represented her all the other times. He seemed inexhaustible, why did he keep trying on her behalf? “is not just a socially unacceptable individual. She has rights and opinions - isn’t that so?”

The lanky woman by the window shrugged. Had she rights? It seemed to her she had not, and hadn’t had any for six years. Had she opinions? They only made the situation more difficult. These people would decide what to do with her as if she was just another chess piece in some weird cosmic game. It seemed quite likely that they, all of them, would never know the meaning of the game, if it was a game. There could be no meaning to it.

“According to reports, aggression is way down,” said the military woman. The rustle of clothing was an explosion to the prisoner, but it had been that way for years, now, “your client may not suit our purposes, in any event.”

“Killing,” said the prisoner, not bothering to take her eyes from the last violent traces in the sky, “is clean and good. No lies. No postures. One is alive, one is dead.”

“I’m not talking of killing, I’m talking of aggression,” the military woman’s voice was raised. She need not have bothered, they all were talking more than loudly enough for the prisoner. The prisoner laughed mockingly, eyes on where the sunset had left a hint of life in a high cloud.

“Just what you need, a military so aggressive it hasn’t the wit to recognise when it’s time to negotiate,” in a soft voice laced through with mockery. Behind her, someone stirred.

“You also would have to obey orders.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing for the past six years?” sunset concluded, she turned to look at the military woman. A little heavy, but not unfit; clear, obstinate gaze; not someone willing to be dismissed. Even as she watched she could see the eyes harden.

“Look,” said the balding man, as if she wasn’t there. In a way she suspected she was not, at least to him, “she fits all the criteria. If the aggression is down, how bad is that? She gets out of prison and into a place where if anyone gets hurt, it’s her. I would have thought that was all we needed.”

“You have to obey orders when given, not after due consideration,” continued the military woman as if he hadn’t spoken, “these,” she tapped the chip before her, “show you don’t snap to when told to.”

“I’m also hardly in a life where snapping to or otherwise isn’t going to matter a hoot,” the woman’s sharp grey eyes bored into her, challenging. She cheerfully grinned back, secure in the knowledge that she had no control over the situation. Let them all go to hell.

“She has become more manageable,” said the prison officer, speaking for the first time. He sounded tired, depressed, seeing an opportunity for one of his charges drifting away.

“Psychological anomalies ironing out, I can see that,” the military woman gestured shortly at the chip, “but she questions authority.”

“I don’t believe in blind obedience.”

“Nor do I,” said the military woman unexpectedly. The balding man hissed, eyes like saucers, and the prison officer’s eyebrows soared, but she paid neither of them any attention. The clear grey eyes were fixed on the prisoner’s face *young, so young to be in a situation like this, I wonder what the story is? She can’t be much more than twenty-five, twenty-six,* “but you must have discipline. That’s what a lot of the obedience is about, discipline. Instilling in soldiers the instinct, if you like, to work as a unit rather than an agglomeration of individuals.”

“What happens if there’s nobody left to give orders?” the prisoner spoke lightly, almost as if she was part of a debating team, not as if their discussions might well change her life. The military woman wondered again at the circumstances that had led this young woman, someone who seemed not that much older than a juvenile, to be in this situation.

“You never reach that situation,” the young woman laughed incredulously, mockingly, and the military woman shook her head - one sharp shake, somehow an absolute negation, “if the officers and non-coms are gone, there is always someone else capable of taking command. It’s a byproduct of the discipline, the work towards a larger purpose.”

“I don’t believe you,” surprisingly, the other smiled, settling back in her chair. Her confidence annoyed the prisoner, making her fall mistrustfully silent.

“Your platoon has inadvertently walked into a trap; the lieutenant is dead, the sergeant has had to be sedated. Neither corporal is alive and there are six of you stuck there with a man on a stretcher. You’re in a blind alley, nowhere to run. Your enemy has only to wait for you to run out, and he’ll pick you off one by one. Communications are u/s. You can’t outrun the guns, certainly not with the stretcher. One of the men is getting excited, another’s hysterical, and you need two to handle the stretcher. What do you do?”

“Slap the hysterical one for a start, it’s catching-”

“You have just effectively given an order: stop having hysterics. What would you do then?”

“See what firepower I had left.”

“What of the firepower of the others?”

“That’s included. I’d have a look at the trap, see if walls could be climbed-”

“You’ve given another order: what ammo have you left.”

“What would you have me do?” baffled by the bright amusement, she planted her feet and folded her arms. She had been scrawny ever since the nightmare, but she would be able to give this woman a run for her money if it came to a fight. At least until they Zonked her. But the grey-eyed woman merely told her to continue with the scenario and she shrugged. If they wanted to be idiots, she could play along, “if possible, get someone up the wall to clear it, might be possible to outflank the enemy. Or evacuate upwards, though that would be risky with the stretcher. Failing that, lay down a smokescreen and try to get out the front way, take my chances. But you’re

wrong about the sergeant, he'd probably be better in a fireman's lift than in a stretcher. Stretcher'd tie up two instead of one and be a bigger target."

"Effectively, you have taken control. Someone giving the orders. That's my point. Someone giving orders, and someone taking them. You need the co-operation of obedience, or it won't work."

"Very pretty," mocked the lanky woman, "if an officer drew his gun and told me to do something suicidal, I'd probably kill him."

"If an officer did that, he or she probably would deserve to be killed. But you'd be court-martialed."

"Another trial," jeered the prisoner, "for another murder. Do you really think it matters any more? Killing is easy, it's the easiest thing in all the worlds. One way or another everyone threatens; one way or another, unless their life is useful to you, you might as well kill them," and let the assemblage deal with that one. Her lawyer sighed, retreating into his shell, and the prison officer pulled a wry face. The balding man looked as if he wanted to be sick - either that, or have a stiff drink in a congenial bar some distance from this room.

"Your profile indicates no friendships at all," the military woman, unphased, touched the record chip again.

"No-one wants to be the friend of a lunatic."

"Highly emotional, deliberately inaccurate and intended to turn me away," the military woman tapped the chip lightly on the table. It sounded like a blast of thunder overhead, "this tells me that you repel friendship, quite deliberately and usually in as ruthless a way as possible. Why?"

"Why not? What use are friends? Besides, there are no friends. Just liars trying to blackmail you into doing things for them," she grinned broadly at the woman, beginning to enjoy this. The prison official and the lawyer looked dismayed, the balding man shocked.

"Altruism?" at least the military was still in the game.

"Mendacity, ulterior motive, manipulation, self-gratification - take your pick. Not altruism. More likely to help someone because it makes you feel, and look, good; not for the sake of the other."

"What," the military woman spoke after a while, the voice of one intrigued by theory, "about family?"

"I have no family," but there was an ice of fear inside her, hidden too deep for anyone to know of it. Was the military woman one of the hunters, after all these years still trying to annihilate her family? She didn't look like

it, more like someone with an intriguing concept to digest. But Volcec had been a friend, and it was imperative never to trust, “anyway, I’m dead.”

“Not yet,” the military woman leaned forwards, collecting her possessions into a neat bundle. When she had them squared away in a plain case, she hesitated on the point of rising, “how would you feel about joining SGF as a pointman?”

“I’m dead. It doesn’t matter what I do or where I go, I’m dead.”

The hunters would probably start again, if she left the prison and joined SGF; but they could do nothing more to her. Her sister was, hopefully, safe; they had no hold on her any more.

Outside a sub-zero wind screamed like a thing demented, snatching at the taut tent guys with maniacal fingers. Their survival heater was running down. It might last the night, but it would not last the next night. They hadn’t eaten for two days and the girl was beginning to fear they would die in the hostile winter, granting victory to Them. The thought was intolerable; above all, she must get her sister away and safe from Them.

Within the tent, her little sister’s eyes were huge and trustful. The sight made her head throb all the harder.

“I don’t think we have enough money to pay passage,” said the youngster, trying to be helpful. She nearly laughed, but of course her sister might not grasp that taking normal actions was the path to getting them both killed.

“We won’t be buying passage, we’ll be stealing it,” she could hear, through the roar of the wind and the thunder of her own insanity, the basso rumble of ships’ engines. The port was so close she sometimes feared a mistaken landing would finish them both. Now her sister looked alarmed, “yes, we’ll have to be very selective.”

If she made a mistake someone else would have to clean up the mess left by two depressurised bodies, but she hoped that could be avoided. Maybe a dockworker would help them?- No. Trust no-one. She cuddled her sister closer, inhaling the smell of her with slow hunger. There had to be a way around this. If only she could trust her own thoughts! But the warmth of her sister, cuddling back, while gratifying in the extreme frightened her again. What if she went beserk? They had been fine, these past ten- No, twelve days on the run, but what if she went beserk? She tried to push her sister back, but was firmly clutched.

“I trust you,” repeated the youngster, calming her. She wished her head would burst and have done, but struggled again with the heat and confusion within it.

“Logically, we’d head for a passenger shuttle so we can’t do that. They’ll expect us to. That means we have to get on a freighter shuttle and find some pressurised area where we won’t be detected. And we’ll have to unload something of equivalent weight, or she won’t lift off safely.”

“A load of perishables would be it, then,” said the younger girl, calming. Her voice was like a coolness through her sister’s fevered mind, “there’s a regular trade in that, isn’t there?”

“Yes, I think so,” the heater gave a hiccupping whine and began to die, damn it, “all we have to do is find a container of them and replace them with ourselves. Easy.”

“Yes,” the youngster sounded cheered by her false confidence, but she wasn’t fooled. Neither of them was confident.

“We’ll have to steal another heater, too. And food,” her stomach growled on cue and her sister laughed, prodding it gently, “and water.”

The more she thought of it, the more it resembled a logistics nightmare. If it came to that, how were they going to deal with the problem of waste elimination? Was she being mad to even think of this? - well, madder than she obviously was? But her sister believed in her, her sister understood that to remain on planet was to die, and her sister had to be protected at all costs.

First trick of the morning was to get into the port. It was a security establishment, in that the entire port was walled and there were high security scanners on every gate; but the wall was not electronically protected, although it was tall and set deep into the ground. Too many vlandings, scrambling up the sheer face as was their way, had tripped surveillance equipment too often and now only the scanners which were directed at the gates remained operational. Vlandings got into any enclosure without a roof, no matter how assiduously Humans tried to keep them out; but they generally were harmless and now mostly tolerated. It was the first stroke of real luck the girl could remember. All they had to do, in theory, was climb a three metre wall; all they had to do. The girl was under no illusions about their fitness for such a task. They had not eaten properly for some days, and her own resources had been used up in the nightmare. Before that she presumably could have done it. Now she was not so sure. The tent could be ransacked for rope, and the light poles might be jury-rigged into a grapple, but from where would come the strength to climb? No, the first order of the day had to be food, after all.

That part, as it happened, proved to be quite easy. They stole a driver's breakfast. He had been foolish enough to leave it on a table within reach from the open window, and probably cursed the vlandings forever afterward, although generally the little creatures didn't take things. It was a hearty breakfast for a cold and hungry man, and did a great deal towards sustaining two extremely hungry girls who were beginning to feel life was altogether too precious to lose at the whim of a power-hungry cabal.

"If we could get on top of one of the big transports," said the youngster as they crouched in the snow-covered scrub, watching the traffic flow in and out the gate, "we might get carried through. Do the scanners go that far up?"

"Don't know; probably," and her sister's face fell. Despite the pain in her skull she grinned, lightly touching the other's cheek, "well, it's a pretty obvious route, isn't it? Come on, we'll see how good a grapple we can make."

It wasn't very good. They had to tie the tent poles together, being unable to bend them, and that absorbed a great deal of rope without giving a very good hook. Even with the tent torn into strips, not an easy task in itself, and tied onto the remaining rope, the girl feared there would not be enough to get them up the wall. Nonetheless, she would not sacrifice the gun straps and her own belt was essential. She could hardly climb with her trousers around her ankles.

After a few abortive attempts she was too tired to throw again and had to let her sister take over. She watched the youngster's sturdy, capable form tossing the grapple and her head began to thunder like a full cannonade. To calm herself she pressed the cold barrel of the gun against her blazing brow, curled a finger over the trigger, consciously relaxed as she took aim on the youngster. It was a very clean, sensible thing. All she had to do was gently depress the trigger, calm and coolth would follow.

Her sister stopped, stared at her with a mixture of compassion and alarm, put her head to one side and held her hands away from her body.

"I trust you," said the younger girl quietly.

The girl felt sick, suddenly hurling the seductive gun from her and doubling over to return her stolen breakfast in a partially digested mess. Shivers of cold mingled with the regular shuddering, her head was pounding hot and now her mouth was scalded and vile, her stomach aching. She wanted to crawl away from her sister, but the soothing *healer's* touch seemed to reach in to quiet the raw nerves and she rocked slowly. She wanted to cry, if only tears would come and cure everything.

“It’s all right,” whispered her sister, gently rocking, enclosing her in *healer’s* arms as if to defend her from the entire universe. It would have been quite different before the nightmare. Then she had been the strong one, protecting her sister, doing all things. Now she relied on the youngster, and that wasn’t right, she was the eldest, she should be the one handling everything. But she wasn’t in control. They would only get through this thing together, relying on one another; no other way. She sniffed, holding her sister close, and the youngster squeezed gently, “it’ll be all right.”

Shortly thereafter her mind seemed to step out of the madness and become clear, direct, capable of seeing ways around things. The grapple wasn’t taking because there simply was nothing for it to catch, what had she expected? They would have to hijack a transport- No, that wouldn’t do, it would flag where they were and what they were doing. Perhaps they could steal a ladder - there was a maintenance shed over there, it was bound to have ladders- No, that was in plain sight, any attempt to get there would be seen instantly.

“How about a leg-up?” suggested the younger, half joking, “if one of us got up there, they could pull the other up.”

That struck the girl as an idea worth exploring. She braced herself against the wall, cupping her hands to form a stirrup, and told her sister to give it a try. The youngster hesitated, regarding her half-starved sibling with doubtful, compassionate eyes. Before the nightmare there would have been no question, but now?

“All I can do is drop you,” said the elder, tiredly.

She thought she would collapse as her sister clambered onto the hands and thence onto her shoulders; her legs trembled uncontrollably, as if in the grip of a violent fit. When she pressed her palms against the wall to steady herself it seemed to come better, although any let up in that pressure caused her to rattle like a reed in a high wind. She wished her sister would hurry, although she knew the youngster would be hard pressed to get enough leverage to get to the top. They were both roughly the same height, and that wasn’t much above average.

Her sister seemed to press down harder and for a ghastly minute she feared she would lose consciousness. There were bright motes behind her eyes, clouding her vision, and her breath seemed to become constricted. She could feel her knees give and buckled, head cracking against the wall as her neck whipped. For a wonder her sister didn’t fall on her and she struggled back to her feet. The youngster was hanging on for dear life, trying to twist one foot up to her inadequate handhold. The girl swiftly caught the steadier

foot and pushed upward with all her might, while her sister grunted a hurried thanks. Finally the pressure eased and she nearly fell again.

“All right,” the youngster sensibly straddled the wall, “now it’s your turn. I might be able to pull you up from here-”

“I’ll pull you off,” she handed up the rope, keeping one end in her hand, “get down and hold it steady. I’ll climb.”

Her sister wanted to argue that she wasn’t strong enough, but eventually nodded and dropped out of sight. When the rope snapped taut she began to climb, laboriously working off the wall and praying her fitful strength would hold. The guns didn’t help, but she was not going to let them go, not while They might still find and kill them.

Finally she tumbled off the wall to join her sister, one gun barrel jamming hurtfully into her ribs and bringing blood. The rope lashed over her as it fell, adding to her discomfort, and they lay in a tangle for a while, each trying to catch their breath. Then, once she had buried the rope in the snow, they slipped off silently into the cold winter day, in search of the port’s storage area. When they located the warehouse of perishables they settled down to see which shuttle was loading them. It proved surprisingly easy to sneak on board.

No matter how she strained, she couldn’t see anything. It was as if she had suddenly become blind, but that didn’t seem right, she was sure she had been able to see before. Her hearing, too, had switched off; she couldn’t even hear her own breath, that soft, endless, slightly comforting sussuration somehow gone. If there was a scent in the air she couldn’t find it, and strain though she might there was nothing to touch, no sensation at her fingertips, no slight touch of cloth. She tried to bite the inside of her cheek, to provoke some form of sensation, but nothing seemed to happen. She tried to call out, but there wasn’t a sound and she wasn’t even sure she had made a sound. But that didn’t stop her from trying to sense, sense anything. If time passed, she had no idea of it.

The images came into her mind, unheralded, sometime rapidly, sometimes quietly and gently. They didn’t seem to make much sense, she didn’t recognise them, but they were there in her mind so they must have been hers. It bothered her that nothing seemed familiar. Why was it all so strange, so unfamiliar? Why couldn’t she sense anything? Where was everyone?

After a while the images almost seemed to make some form of sense. She thought she must be tired, but that was a sensation and she didn’t have those any more. She just was, in a place without sound or sight or scent or

touch or taste. Perhaps even her memory of those senses was a lie. She didn't want to believe it, but perhaps it was true.

But there was still the deep, unconscious, ever-present imperative, sitting there quiescent in the far corners of her mind, holding her together. She neither saw nor acknowledged it; it just was.