



**Moving Day**

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# Moving Day

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Moving Day is currently my only work in the novella or up class. Back in the days of 160–180 page novels, it might be a slightly short novel. Can be read for itself, or in conjunction with my annotations.

It's scanned from the original typed manuscript and only the most minor editing has been done – spell checking in the main, and a few changes based on linguistic drift over the last 23 years (though I have preserved the usage girl to mean young woman – but given the emortal society, young is a relative term).

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# Moving Day – Prologue

## Clan Wolf, The.

The Clan Wolf is one of the few surviving feudal houses of the [Human Outreach](#). Founded on Lindisfarne (Tau Ceti III) by the Lady Surveyor Trixy Linda of Wolf (see also Human Outreach – Folktales; The Madwoman of Lindisfarne) in 2133 [ADT](#), it has survived basically unchanged to the present.

### History.

During the period of preliminary survey of Lindisfarne, it was considered necessary to construct citadels to which the colonists could withdraw during the [harsh winters](#), before suitable environmental control could be established. Trixy Wolfe, as she was then known, is supposed to have likened them to Mediaeval Castles, and then coerced the other surveyors into setting up a [feudal society](#), where they would be the nobility. Though recent findings place the responsibility with Mark of Connors, it is likely that Ms. Wolfe supported him.

After nearly a century, while most of the noble houses had relinquished all but nominal sovereignty, Clan Wolf persisted in a firm and often cruel government. Attempts were made to depose the clan by force, but all were brutally crushed at Trixy's behest. These repressions caused the situation to deteriorate, until the eventually successful coup led by Matthew Hayward erupted.

The majority of the Clan, and the remainder of Clan Connors fled the world, to the HR 5568 system, where there was known to be a borderline habitable world, surveyed but not yet colonized. They arrived but a fortnight before the colony ships from earth, armed with the equipment that would subdue the world. They moved on again as soon as their task was done, their prior experience of a cold world no longer required, before those who feared tyrannical excesses could expel them.

They had tired of cold and wintry worlds. Warm and summery [Luthien](#) was their goal, seventy [lites](#) further from Sol, the news less than a year before passed to them alone the relays of the [Web of Man](#). But though they fled, their infamy still remained. Those who had feared them claimed victory, that the Clan, guilty, had fled justice.

On Luthien, the Clan, among others, formed the Five Castles Combine, and the article on the Combine gives a more detailed history of this period. Suffice it to say that the eventual colonists challenged the Combine's right under the new Linkers' Guild to govern the world. Matthew Hayward's ghost seemed to rise to rally the forces of unrest against them there, and on Heartward, Toehold and Last Gasp.

Presently, Clan and Combine are resident on Wyvern, their seventh world, their policy, as stated, is to preserve that world in as close to its [idyllic natural state](#) as possible, and this is being opposed by interests outside the Combine that prefer a more aggressive approach. It is believed that these may in part be responsible for funding the renewed Haywardist activity. It is distinctly possible that the Clans may be forced once again into exile in the near future.

## Customs

Following Trixy Linda's ideal of a master-race the vast majority of the clan are female, ectogenic clones [nipped](#) to display silver hair and eyes, grey blood and skin. Within this pattern, only height and build vary ; it is difficult for an outsider easily to distinguish them. Their feudal past shows in the variety of [ritualized titles and observances](#) persisting to this day...

Excerpted from *Tellman's Concise Encyclopedia* Published by the Institute of Worlds, Cateret, October 3261

# Chapter 1 – Raid

The room<sup>□</sup> was dimly lit ; its sole illumination a single candle flame. Shadows gathered in the corners, darting forth as the flame flickered. Scents in the wax filled the air with a smoky tang.

One wall was covered in hangings of a deep red cloth with green–gold designs woven into it. The red glowed somberly in the light. A wall unit stood against the drapes, its shelves and tabletop loaded with a miscellany of objects. On top of it, reflecting the scene in miniature, stood half a dozen bronze goblets. A small plant in a dish straggled its tendrils across them, and down to the shelf below. There, six almost identical volumes, black, embossed in gold, lay gathering dust. A model in glass of the Snowflake, the Linkers' orbital station, stood on top of them, sparkling in the light, like the half empty jar of marmalade beside it. The ebony black of a display screen filled most of the next shelf, but the room that was left accommodated a stack of tatty looking paperbacks.

The desktop itself was cluttered with papers. There were signs of past attempts to stem the tide, and confine them to corners, but they covered now almost the entire area. In the sole island of open wood were the remains of a dinner, a greasy plate, and cutlery, a couple of saucepans, an empty can that had contained fruit. A jar of coffee stood on the open page of a file. It had left a dusty brown ring on the display of intricate curlicues. One of the desk drawers was open, and the sleeve of an unwashed shirt trailed out.

The end wall was wood panelled, in some golden wood, and three doors opened from it. One lead out into the hallway, the other two were a cupboard. They were shut, hiding the confused disarray of clothes and cases within, and barricaded by a table that had been pushed into the corner. It bore a kettle, and a cup of coffee, cold and forgotten, a cassette player, and a rack full of the pale blue crystals. Their color was strange in the golden light of the candle that burned on the bed head a foot sway from the table. It was short and squat, and the wax was orange.

A girl lay on the bed, reading by its light. She had blue eyes and long, light brown hair. She wore a fleecy black jacket, and an ankle length skirt of grey green, her feet were bare. On the wall above her was a poster of a nude blonde<sup>□</sup>, a view of old Earth<sup>□</sup> from space, and a poster of the view towards the center of the galaxy.

The fourth wall served as a window. It had been opaqued against the night, but the low scratching noise of a bush as it was blown against the glass, and the quiet rushing of rain, served as a reminder that the outside was still there. The floor was carpeted in dark brown, speckled with black, and above, the ceiling was a cinemural<sup>□</sup> of a starry sky, slowly changing.

The girl reached down one hand to search the floor, and found a piece of card that she had kicked under the bed a couple of days before. She placed it on the open pages of the text she had been reading, closed the volume, and put it on the bed head by the candle. She swung around to stand on the floor, and hesitated for a few moments to brush her hair back behind her ears. She stretched, snorting ecstatically, trying to reach the ceiling, but falling far short. Even on tiptoes she wasn't five feet tall<sup>□</sup>. She relaxed, a sad sleepy expression on her face. Quantized fields might be interesting, but the mathematics involved didn't make for light reading. She would wait a year, until the actual course, before playing around with its consequences.

She favored the neglected coffee with a distasteful glance, and at arms length, she carried it out into the kitchen to dispose of it. She swilled it out and, rather than dry it, shook the loose drips out onto the floor as she returned. By its heft, the kettle still held more than enough water, so she switched it on, and slotted a cassette, chosen at random, into the player.

She sang along to the music while she measured out the coffee and poured on the water. The tunes were majestic and sad, conjuring familiar imagery in her mind, of endless caverns, deserted cities beneath swollen suns, landscapes of crystal under a distant sun. She clung to the warmth of the cup as if it were a hope of salvation, sitting at the desk and doodling.

She had written the words Nancy Elanor of Wolf / Honey McLain and began to decorate the curves with flowers and stars. She answered to both names. The first was indeed hers by birth as sixth in direct descent from the Lady Jeanne Marygay, first daughter of Trixy Linda, mother to her clan, but it was the second that she used here. During her first term at the University, she had gone around openly as a Clan member, but during the vacation it had been decided that it would be better if they changed their names and faces<sup>□</sup> and rooms, to protect them from attempts at physical violence against them.

The University authorities had agreed to the changes, hoping the confusion would halt the rapid worsening of student violence. Confusion, all the students of the Old Clans agreed, was what had been achieved – they shared a file now, listing a full who's who, stored under high scramble<sup>□</sup> in the Central Access system. They would have to trust to the integrity of that Linker–run operation as the Clan council had trusted the Linkers at the University, but at least it had meant that they were less likely to shoot at their own friends. The violence though? That had just grown worse.

Nancy scribbled out the doodle on the paper before her, then carried it over to the candle. The light of its burning was almost blinding in the sunset dimness of the room. The black and fragile ashes, she crushed to powder in the waste–bin; and to counter the heavy pall of acrid smoke in the room, she switched on the air conditioning, selecting a fresh spring scent. She slouched in her chair, and continued to sip her coffee, her thoughts lost in the music.

A quiet voice broke her reverie.

Alan Harford is at the door, my Lady. It is raining and he requests admittance.

Let him in then. Time?

21: 26: 13. <sup>□</sup>

Thanks. switch the news on at half past.

Nancy wriggled her feet into a pair of slippers and shuffled out into the ball. Alan was there, pushing his never too tidy hair, now slicked with rain, back from his forehead. His face glistened with damp, and his clothes were dark with it.

Sanctuary ? he asked.

Sure. Coffee ? What brings you here ?

Thanks, black, one sugar. Everyone else I know is at some tedious party. I'm not disturbing you, am I – I mean, you' re not working, are you?

This time of term?

I suppose not.

Nancy retrieved the kettle from the bedroom, and with Alan following her, drifted into the kitchen to prepare his coffee. He too was a mathematician, but a year her senior, and from another college, their first meeting though a mutual acquaintance. Nancy wasn't even sure if she liked the guy, but they had kept up a distant friendship. She had never had many friends outside her clan, and many of them had fallen by the wayside when she'd changed name and face.

Sure, she had a repertoire of acquaintances she would acknowledge with a nod or a greeting, or even talk to, though only on whatever limited topic formed the overlap of interests that had brought them together, but very few of them were any more than faces she recognized, without really knowing from where.

Alan seemed the odd man out. He didn't seem the uninhibited socializer that all the other people she knew did, but was quiet and shy. He seemed almost afraid of her, sometimes casual, sometimes stiffly formal, but always there was an underlying seriousness that was neither forced nor obtrusive. In repose, as when he was lost in the music she put on, his face seemed wistful, troubled, but as he spoke he would always seem alert and even happy.

Nancy could understand him, alone in a crowd, for that feeling of emptiness was with her too. They were both dilettante people, playing at life to avoid ennui, and locked behind masks they had built up to protect themselves. They talked casually about work, but Nancy scarcely paid attention to the play of words – in the long seeming gaps, her mind worked on, and she wept metaphorical tears of bitterness at her inadequacy at interacting with people.

Had Alan been a girl, it might have been easier. There would have been less chance of misunderstanding and mutual humiliation, but as it was there was always the chance that he would think she fancied him, that that was what motivated her concern. She wanted to scream, but dared not. The joyful painted facade stayed up, and the small talk continued to hide her desolate anguish.

The news, my Lady. The grey unemotional voice of the automaton gave a brief purpose to her existence, and she obeyed it. The picture on the Tree–V<sup>□</sup> coalesced just in the final second of some program trailer, and then faded to the station identification, and thence into the news.

The newscaster looked up, with no discernible emotion on his reptilian<sup>□</sup> face, but the tone of his voice was clearly tinged with gravity.

Less than one hour ago, Senator Lady Aelia Min–Koë, Chair'an of the board of directors of the Five Castles was shot and killed, apparently by a terrorist. She is dead.<sup>□</sup> We here just received a film of the incident...

The picture was replaced by what was obviously an amateur film<sup>□</sup>, showing the Lady Aelia as she walked across the lawns outside the Council Hall, towards her car. There were a few people about, some of them well known. It was near sunset and the light was red. An explosion made a sudden punctuation mark, a full stop. Half of Aelia's head vanished in a gory spray and the camera zoomed in on the slowly crumpling, corpse, before wheeling around. There was no sign of the assassin in that blurred pan, and the focus turned back to Aelia. Her chauffeur had leapt out of the car with medical equipment, and knelt down by the body, but the effort was obviously useless. Though the body might live again, the person was dead. It was the first time she had seen someone die, was so unreal.

She did not notice for a few moments that the picture had changed again, and the newscaster was beginning a eulogy. Shaken, she reached out and switched it off.

The filthy bastards. Alan had spoken first to shatter the pall. He looked livid. Silence resumed, for Nancy was unwilling to speak, and Alan volunteered nothing.

A change came over his expression.

I think I'm going to be sick... He stood up from the chair, took one step forwards, and collapsed.

Alan? She hurried over to him, and knelt down beside him. He opened one eye.

Terribly sorry. I think I must have fainted. Just let me lie here; I'm feeling better already. I'd never fainted before.

Nancy fetched his coffee and some biscuits from the kitchen and gave them to him, reckoning that low blood sugar had something to do with it.

He had propped himself up against a chair by the time she returned, but was still looking pale. He nursed the warmth of the coffee against himself, and gingerly nibbled at the biscuits.

I think I'll be moving on; try and get an early night in for once. Is it still raining?

No, sir, answered the computer system, Cloud cover is now down to 48%, but the main storm of this system is approaching, and should reach here in one and one half hours. The rings are presently 37% obscured, but this percentage is decreasing rapidly as the storm moves. The air temperature...'

OK., OK., that'll do. he turned to Nancy.

Does she always give you a full report like that?

Sure – don't you, Melanie.

Yes, Lady.

Each to their own, I suppose... Melanie?

That's what I call her, yes. So?

That's my sister's name.

What do you call her then?

Alan paused, uncertain. there was a sudden rush of color to his yet pale features.

Nancy – after, of all people, Lady Nancy Elanor of Clan Wolf.

Time seemed to sag to a halt. Nancy swallowed her immediate correction of Alan's form of address, pointing out that the correct form was *the* Lady of *the* Clan, and concentrated on keeping her mouth from falling open. She couldn't think of what to say or do. She had only met Alan earlier that term – he couldn't know who she was, beside Honey McLain, nonentity – or did he suspect – and how come and the sixty-four dollar question – if he suspected, what would he do? Would he betray her, or keep that confidence, or...

Blackmail? It would be what she would do under the circumstances, and she had an idea what his price would be.

Ambitious ideas you have. She tried to keep a wistful tone to her voice.

Hell – why not aim high. I don't reckon I've got a hope in hell of getting a girlfriend. I can count the number of girls I know to visit on the thumbs of one hand, and you've already got a girlfriend.

I suppose she is good looking, in a way. I tell you – I wouldn't mind getting my hands on some of that fortune<sup>□</sup>, but I suppose I've got as much chance at her as you have. She's probably already shackled up with her sister or someone...

Someone ... The Lady Tricia Katherine of Wolf, her mother's cousin, in a kaleidoscope of images scattered across Nancy's thoughts, regal in her natural silver and grey, lithe and laughing in her new shape, as Carol Mastersen, blonde and freckled.

You said you were going home. I'll come with you – A girlfriend of mine ...

She let the false explanation trail into silence. What really drove her was loneliness. Outside, she could be her own company, lost in the world, but in her room in the evening something had come to haunt her. She tried to put a name to it – Hayward? Death? Fear? Vengeance? Vendetta? What did it care for names? – cold thing, it needed none.

While Alan waited, Nancy returned to her bedroom. She kicked her slippers into a corner, and drew on boots of soft smoke grey leather, that had been hidden under the bed. From the cupboard, she retrieved a coat, large and heavy. It was made as of fur, silvery grey, streaked with black and white.

A smaller cupboard within the main one, opening only to her palm print, yielded up a squat, flat heavy package, encased in plastic scored with sealing lugs. She removed the end cap, revealing a gun butt. She drew the gun forth, and cycled the action, checking that it ran smoothly, and that a new clip had been loaded. The assembly then slid into coat pocket and locked there<sup>□</sup>. There wasn't the time or the place really to hold a test of the system in action, but she was willing to risk the minute chance of malfunction; it had been working fine that afternoon.

Coat half on, she hurried back into the hall : Alan stood there, patiently waiting. When he saw her, he opened the door briskly, and snapped almost to attention as she passed.

The world outside was a gleam of silver in the almost sourceless glow of the rings that arched high overhead. The clouds were like quicksilver ghosts, and the trees seemed beaten from metal, the rain glistening on them. Ignoring the rather circuitous path, they headed towards the center of the college, not speaking a word. Pale glows of color, seen distantly in the silver light, far between the trees, marked out other occupied rooms, in azure, emerald and coral. The aftermath of the rain still dripped through the new leaves and its sound mingled with the rush of their own footsteps through the leaf litter of the past seasons. The air was cool, and damp, bringing smells of the wet earth.

An open gash in the trees ahead of them marked the course of one of the paved path. To one side of the path, out of the direct ashen glare of the rings, two people embraced. Just for an instant, Nancy looked enviously at them, then turned her head. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Alan looking blankly into space, his face marked by lonely sadness. Still without sneaking, she edged closer to him, and then, as the impulse died, returned to her usual distance. The gun butt was warm to her hand now. For a second, their footfalls rang from concrete, as they crossed the path. The decision was mutual, each independently wishing to avoid people; they were sufficient in their loneliness. Each sought something deeper than the shallow gaiety of the people they might meet.

One thing I miss here, said Alan, when they had regained the shelter of the trees,

is the stars. Did I tell you that I'm from Goldenstone? The nights there are almost as bright as this, with stars. We're thirty lites away from a newborn supergiant – it almost hurts to look at it, and the dust and gas paints the sky like some abstract. Here all you can see are a couple of planets and a handful of washed out stars. It looks like the universe has been switched off. It's worse than a full moon and it's every night.

I like the rings – they make me feel tingly – alive, all that cold shivery light. I went to Starforth – that's the next system along the Link towards Earth, and that's only got a moon. The nights didn't feel right there. The stars look alright from space, but they're awful down on a planet.

Conversation proved too much of an effort to sustain, and they lapsed again into silence. There was not enough meeting ground for there to be a topic of trivial conversation that could endure against their introspection.

The trees thinned and failed about them and they walked across a wide open space of natural gravel, and heathland plants, and , as they reached the crest of a small mound, they could see a geometrically perfect line of shining moonsilver, running like a river beneath the sky. It disappeared from sight behind bushes and spindly trees, as they descended into a narrow gully, and they did not see it again until they were within a few feet of it.

In daylight, the slideway<sup>□</sup> would have been arctic blue in color, swirled with white, but now it was an almost uniform grey. The material crunched like fresh snow as they trod on it, and began to move, accelerating until the wind roared about them, numbing, faces and making their eyes water. From across the open area, the trees raced towards them, and engulfed them in a shadow flickering dark.

All too soon, it seemed, that gave way in its turn to the bright lights of Harkvale, Alan's college. She waved him farewell as he skated down the access branch. Now he was gone, she felt freer, but lonelier.

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An hour further elapsed, as she drove furiously around the University, trying to lose herself in the elemental thrill of speed, before she wearied of that pastime, and drove almost grimly for her home.

As she opened the door, an insistent fluting tone assailed her ears.

Just a minute, I've only just gotten in.

OK. I'll put the call through then.

Another voice replaced the imperturbable tones of the automaton.

Honey – it's Jilly. Where are you?

Hanging my coat up. Just a minute, and I'll put the call through to this terminal.

Nancy pushed her coat into the bedroom cupboard, and after a little shoving, actually managed to shut it again. Heartened at that success, she strode over to the terminal and pressed her thumb against an opalescent panel. The screen burst into life, to show a black girl, with cat-like green eyes. She called herself Jilly Dyson in that skin, but the person was Astrid Elektra of Wolf. Four years Nancy's senior, she was a history graduate, and only distantly related, tracing her ancestry through Trixy's fourth daughter.

Her hand moved imperceptibly on the desk, indicating a tile of golden plastic. Nancy nodded, and opened a drawer. Amongst the discarded papers were a number of similar tiles, and a small grey green box. Her gold tile went into a slot in the box. The picture broke up into snow, coalescing again a few seconds later.<sup>□</sup>

We've got a roust on – Jean Silvers – one of the Connors girls – has been ambushed on her way home. she managed to elude them and go to ground in Chan's museum.

How in Hell's name , Nancy asked, did they break her cover? Do we know how much they know?

Jean thinks it's because she was defending the clans at a Union meeting, rather than because they think she's O<sup>n</sup> but I don't think it'll make them temper their actions. What we're going to do is spring her, and get her back to the Castle Abiding. We rendezvous at the Greywater Bridge. You'll identify with one–one–two–four–three, we match one. Be there in ten minutes.

The screen went blank. Nancy removed the scrambler card, and just sat there.

Oh damn! she muttered. For the third night in a row, some excuse had come up for the Clans to assemble and take pot–shots at the matts, and in turn to get shot at.

If only there had been a watertight excuse, some way to avoid the risk, without losing face. Much as she regretted it, Nancy had a sense of honor that acted like some atrophied conscience – she had agreed to rally round, so she could not go back on her word without a convincing let out.

At least, she reflected, no–one had yet been more than temporarily killed, but one day someone might get unlucky, and 'someone' might be her own self.

From depression, she turned to optimism – she would be well protected, part of a strong team, and probably with surprise on their side.

Wearily, she began to assemble her combat kit.

---

Alone, she travelled again along the slideways, unhurried, casual, on an indirect route, fearing ambush at every step. A sigh of relief marked the passing of the last habitation on the way, and she steered herself into the fast central flow. Here, the slideway ran trough a five yard wide clearing through the forest, and it ran almost directly east–west. The shadows, such as the rings cast, of the trees to the right, were ankle deep about her legs, like the foamy fringe of a sea, or curls of dark mist. to her left, in the direct light, the scene was as if arclit, against a backdrop of the deepest velvet black. There was no sound; or if there were, it ,was lost in the turbulent roar of the wind as it streamed through her hair and pummeled her face. She stood still, her feet gripped by the anisotropic material of the slideway, while the whole world of greys rushed at her.

The bridge over the Greywater appeared ahead, a cessation of the trees and of their shadow, a long open run of bare ring silver. Conscious of the exposed position, Nancy jockeyed for the last reserves of speed the slideway afforded.

Two seconds only was she out in the light, but in the elastic perceptions of subjective time, those seconds stretched to their ultimate. She was alone, unguarded. Anyone waiting could kill her, like they had Aelia Min–Koë; kill her, though potentially she was immortal.

The suddenness of her deceleration, skidding and slowing to come to rest a hundred yards beyond the bridge, disoriented her for a while. She stood, readjusting, for a few seconds; the looked about. As far as she could see, she was the only person left alive in the Universe.

She called the watchphrase boldly. It seemed unnervingly loud against the silence, a silence intensified by the recent cessation of the roaring wind.

The response was fainter, and it came from across the road. It was certainly the other Clan girls – the phrases had been taken from a song written – or so Nancy gathered – by one of their ancestors. No one else was likely to be able to guess or find out such an unlikely counterphrase.

The team halted at the edge of the woods. Before them lay nearly a quarter mile of almost completely open ground, where the only cover to be had was from the occasional bench and from ornamental shrubs which were even more sparsely distributed. The light hid nothing. Every movement would be as plain as a signal to any onlooker, and though the clouds massed towards the storm, to wait for it would take too much time. Here, in the deep southern latitudes, the rings arched to the north of zenith, and the clouds moving up behind them had not yet reached the overhead point.

The gardens seemed empty of all life. Even with infravision binoculars, there was nothing to be seen. Jilly, as team leader, decided that they were as safe as they could ever be. The yogis – the origins for that nickname for the security staff were lost in the folklore<sup>□</sup> – were not yet out in force.

The teams moved out in order of seniority, Jilly's team first, then the intermediate one, and last, Nancy and Carol. Their approach was to be most direct, heading along a right line to the museum, or at least, trying to. The air seemed ominously still as they broke from cover.

All now wore combat uniform as of corporals, the lowest rank in the clan militia, their overclothes in a cache in the woods where they had assembled. Each carried a tag with their true names, and they wore the wolf's-mask badge of their clan – but to counter that blatant revelation, they had blacked their faces so it seemed that eyes and mouth opened out of the outer void.<sup>□</sup>

Turn and about, sprinting between what cover there was, and hoping for dozy guards, the two girls edged slowly, towards the buildings, to assault their solid front. As they crossed the gap, the buildings rose up in front of them, and the clouds behind them, like the jaws of a vice, or hammer on anvil. Distantly thunder rumbled, and the still air stirred in a fitful breeze. Like ants they moved towards the shadowed wall ahead.

They paused behind the last cover, a bush some four feet high. Fifty yards now lay before them, ten yards grass, twenty open concrete, and twenty more in shadow. In that dark, some forty feet to their right, an alcove, where decades ago, students had installed a ladder so official looking that it had remained in place. There was no sign of a sniper at the top of it, nor a window where it seemed an ambush might lurk.

Together, without warning, they sprinted for that goal. Not a shot was fired, nor a voice raised in challenge, but the two girls did not hesitate or slacken their pace until almost at the top, where the briefest of checks served to assure them that a booby trap had been placed there. Smiles showed on the girls' shadowy faces. Born and raised in Castle Wolf, some twenty square miles of architectural sprawl<sup>□</sup>, in a continuous mass, they had learned to climb at about the same time as they had learned to walk. This lesser complex, by comparison, hardly constituted a five finger exercise.

Following the natural footholds in the masonry, they climbed up beside the ladder, and silently eased onto the open roof. Directly opposite them, a guy in the uniform of Hayward's original resistance group sat with his back turned, looking out over the site, safe in the thought that the back door, as it were, was safely blocked. His expression, as the cold metal of a gun muzzle was pushed against the back of his neck, was wasted on the open air. Nancy fired a single needle, and he coughed, collapsing inert onto the concrete.

His previous preoccupation was obvious. This point afforded an overview to a wide part of the complex, and the girls spent a few minutes watching for enemy action in the fading light. Already the rings were almost obscured. A couple of gunshots sounded faintly in the distance. Nancy cursed the operational limits they worked under to achieve secrecy. No radio – it was far too easily detected by other ears than were intended<sup>□</sup>;

lasers were out, for there was no way of determining their target, and the powerful range of gravitonic equipment would be instantly detected by the many Linkers around the campus.

Thus blind, they could not tell what was happening in the distance, and so had to ignore it, as they prepared to descend. There was no ladder here, but notched stonework aplenty that was just as good to trained hands and feet. They moved rapidly across the surface, well aware that in the last of the light, they still made good targets, but still no-one took up the opportunity.

In the deepening gloom, they moved along the asphalted roadway, a fifteen foot gash between walls of windows, behind any one of which foes could lurk. Amplified by constraint, the wind blew blasts of grit at them as they walked along, and rustled and moaned. There was no other noise, just the scent of impending storm.

The way bent sharp left, and opened out into a small courtyard, at the center of which rose a monstrosity of abstract statuary, the only cover in their traverse, and forty feet away.

Three shots rang out as they entered into the opening, and the ricochets whined dismally only feet from where they passed. To stop and go back would be to lose the advantage of surprise, and leave them unprotected too long. There was no real decision to make.

They pressed forward, rolling from for cover behind the steel and concrete construct, and sat there, panting softly.

You all alright, Carol? Anxiety tinged Nancy's voice as she asked, and her mouth seemed dry. The pause before the reply opened like an abyss, and any number of doomsday scenarios played in her imagination.

Sure. But what do we do now?

Pray. Those were at least from three different places. I saw the muzzle flashes so they've probably got both sides of this ghastly thing covered, and I'll be waiting for us to stick our necks out. All we can do is shoot it out.

Okay. Ah—one, Ah—two, ah—three, ah—now.

They took up Nancy's suggestion, raking the roof tops with flights of whispering needles. After the first sweep only one position responded, and they concentrated their fire on it. That too ceased fire, and a second complete sweep brought no response.

I hope they're not just playing out. Only one way to find out. To the door – run in panic!

They were out in the open, running, and beyond cover, when, from another location, a sub-machinegun opened fire on them, stitching a line of pocks across the concrete in its attempt to catch them. One slug tore at Nancy's sleeve, but she didn't see how big a hole it left. Her concern was more for the explosion of a ricochet just below the sole of one foot, almost as she placed it on the ground.

The doorway was scant shelter, but it had to do. She whirled around on one heel and began to return fire on full automatic. Carol slammed into the doorway beside her an instant later, and joined in the effort.

Her gun discharged in less than a second's firing, Nancy grabbed the passkey chained to her belt and opened the lock. Maddening instants passed as she fumbled the insertion, but eventually the door opened, and she dived through, dragging Carol with her.

In that last possible moment, as they fell out of sight of the machine–gunner, Nancy felt agony pluck at her left arm, as a ricocheting bullet hit her. Dazedly she shut the door behind her and roared out her pain. In the fluorescent light, she could see blood already staining the cloth of her sleeve. The pain was intense, burning bright as a star, a pain more intense than any she could remember, and she moaned at it. The sleeve was torn raggedly open and beneath, soaked in blood, the wreckage of her arm. The whole arm hung limply. Coldly, she judged that it was broken, but there was nothing actually visible to support that; everything was covered in bright red liquid that seemed to pour without limit from the devastation. Red it was, as she had intellectually expected, but all her instincts, used to her usual frame, expected grey.

It was that color, more than anything else – pain, shock or blood loss, that locked her into a horrified nauseated daze. She stood, benumbed, jaw agape, just staring at the carnage, while her head swam, and her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

Clean, sharp, excruciating agony cut like a white hot blade through the glamour enfolding her. Carol had grabbed her roughly by her intact arm, and the jolt was enough.

Keep moving, the command was low, but almost venomous. My arm... even in her daze, Nancy could feel how lame that sounded. She averted her gaze, not wishing to gather up the strands of that morbid fascination, and followed her girlfriend's lead.

Around a cross–way they paused, but there was no sound of doors opening or being forced, no hail of fire to follow them and as her motive power ceased, Nancy let herself slide to the floor.

Let's have a look at that arm. Nancy thrust the offending limb in Carol's direction, and smiled weakly at the gasp of disgust it evoked. Nancy slipped her right arm from its sleeve, and together, they edged the other arm out.

She didn't look as the operation proceeded, Though the wound had been sprayed with anaesthetic, she could feel that something was going on, something that didn't translate into any sensation she could lay name to; and how it felt dissuaded her from watching. Carol didn't look too healthy when she declared the job done, and held out the gory and misshapen lump of metal responsible for the damage, now thankfully hidden under a mass of rapidly congealing quasiflesh.

I hope you know what you were doing of there.

So, Carol's reply was brusque, do I. You might have to do the same for me someday. Now shut up and let me put that arm in a sling.

Thanks, Tricia. Nancy whispered Carol's true name, and struggled with her jacket, to drape it over her left shoulder. Then, casually, almost as a throwaway asked, You want to come over to my room after?

Sure thing, Nancy. That's if you feel you can manage with that arm.

Just try me. She smiled, and then became serious.

We're going to have to avoid doing any climbing now... If the matts don't hold the Gallery Bridge, going by the tunnel, and then over the bridge would be the best.

And if they do?

Panic. Try some other way out. Or scream to the yogis.

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The darkness was almost complete as they emerged onto the bridge, and the silence was like a great weight. The storm felt close, and all the world waited for it. They seemed the only players on a board long deserted, out of time and place. Only a few lights, like earthbound stars, and the faint distillation of the ringlight illuminated the scene.

The span they crossed seemed a paler grey than the dark below them, as if they crossed an arch of mist over the final abyss. No-one awaited them at the far end of that graceful arc of bone white, to bar their entrance to the asKorran museum of Pre-Partnership Artifacts<sup>□</sup>. The name was diffuse, covering a multitude of sins – but that same could be said of the museum, as it stretched out its pseudopods to engulf the nearby buildings.

What they had reached was one of these tendrils of expansion, a part that Nancy had only heard of before that night. Access from the bridge had brought them into a lone hall, populated by constructs that seemed to be merely fantastic abstract sculpture in wire and gems<sup>□</sup>. In the dim light of the now inert ceiling panels, an aura of menace seemed to hang like a cloak about them. Some were so far beyond reason to make Nancy glad of the poor illumination.

Silence roared at them, buffeting their ears like some malignant force, moderated and motivated through the artifacts on display. Weapons ready, as if to fight off some physical attack, the girls moved quietly forwards, running the gauntlet.

At the far end, a spiral stair rescued them from that level, taking them upwards, to other new and unfamiliar regions. Ever interested in the pretty and spectacular effects that some of the ancient relics could produce, and not at all anxious to return to the firing line, Nancy took the opportunity to do a little sight-seeing. The first level they came to had little in it to interest them, but in the next, where only a small room was accessed, there was enough to make her call a little halt – 'for a rest' she said.

In one corner of the chamber an amorphous blob of darkness swirled, and in it, lights circulated, visible yet seeming to cast no illumination for all their brightness. Coolness and calm seemed to radiate from it, but Nancy fancied that she could discern hints of other forces moving under that surface of innocence, like monsters, deep under a tranquil sea.

On a pillar, crafted out of red wood, and concealed in a little alcove, she found something to make her gasp for surprise, and call Carol over. There, without ceremony or warning, as if it were an every day thing, there only by right of its superior workmanship, a blivit<sup>□</sup>, a real, honest-to-God blivit, with a handle, just like a tuning fork. She tried to locate the point where the three round columns merged into the two square section rods, but it eluded both hand and eye, skittering away like quicksilver from her touch.

A little mallet hung from a hook on the side of the pedestal, both of golden bronze, contrasting with the pure silver of the blivit. She struck a note from the tines, and it sounded out, loud and crisp and clear. Yet in contrast, it sounded weird beyond description– it faded and changed, it seemed contrary to any commonsense idea of what any sound should sound like. Though it was long in the process that alien tone faded and was gone. Or rather the physical sound ceased, but in her mind it endured, echoing and reechoing around her brain like some devilish lament.

She screamed to release the torment, and its sound tore at her throat, and screamed again. Not until Carol slapped her soundly around the face twice, did she calm down. Blessed silence covered the raw wound in her mind, and the dark and the whirling lights in the far corner seemed to drain out the poison, and fill her with perfect peace.

What happened? Carol asked.

Did you hear that ... thing?

No. It's got a quietwall on it. Why?

You are just born lucky. It was hell – if there is any absolute wrong in this whole goddamned universe, that is it factorial. Don't try it.

Carol looked at the blivit sitting innocently on its stand, and shrugged her shoulders.

Come on, she said, we can discuss metaphysics, later at your place, eh? Right now we've not a roust on our hands. She leaned forwards, and kissed Nancy lightly on the lips, but Nancy broke the contact. The change of mood was too much.

Later – we do have work to do. But it was not really that, but the about face from sombre introspection, to purely physical action that she could not face.

Once more they climbed the stair, and into a gallery that, uninterrupted, reached out to span the gulf between that building, and the Museum proper. Only the windows showed that there was any change. The darkness now was even more intense, as if the light was being actively drained. The wind moaned faintly, and it brought a feeling, a scent, of tension in the air. Soon, soon, the storm must break. Everything seemed to be reaching its climax – the weather, the search; on a grander scale, the politics. The feeling of doomsday was in the air.

Which floor? Carol asked, her voice hushed and intent.

Down one. That's if we're not to late, and they're already finished. I circle clockwise, you circle anticlockwise; that suit?

Fine by me. See you around the far side.

They separated at the end of the cantilever, she going left, and Carol right, to circumnavigate the maze of that level. Instantly she felt isolated, cold, defenseless. There was no one just to be there, comforting by their presence.

The silence that closed down was almost palpable, heavy on the mind, like thick velvet, undamaged by the quiet whisper of her feet on the carpeting, by her breathing or by the rushing of her heartbeat. There was no light but these few incandescences in the ebon night beyond the windows, scarcely enough to enable her to distinguish vague shades in the dark. Something of the same menace as in the hall of the statues grew and pulsed in the air. Her imagination began to conjure demonic hordes to lurk in the shaded depths of the halls, and supplied the half-heard sounds of them, and fleeting movements to signify their enduring presence.

Always she could feel someone, something standing behind her, ready to pounce, should she relax, yet able to gather the night to itself, should she try to seek it out.

Had only the sky been clear, and the rings bathing the land in their light, there would have been none of this trouble. She could have gathered the light about herself, enjoying the warm protection it seemed to afford her. But the heavens were veiled, and she was reduced to stealthy progress, with gun ready in hand, sometimes down on hands and knees. She spoke Jean's name, but only in the faintest of whispers, so the demons could not hear.

She was halfway around her patrol when the wind suddenly arose, coming down from the south, like a wall. It howled emptily, gustily, and its force rattled the windows. Nancy started at the sudden assault on her senses, keyed as they had been, to their most sensitive ranges, and in that moment of disorientation, opened her mind to a thread lost in the windcry. It grew in the fertile and prepared ground she offered, and its blossoms were like the flames of Hell. When she had hoped to have lost it for ever, the hellson of the blivit screamed in her head like a song, caught in an endless loop. As it flowered within her, like a chorus of demons in full song, she saw, faintly and from the corner of her eye, a deep blue light, flickering like the flame of alcohol or carbon monoxide.

It drew her to itself, with an attraction that she recognized as frankly sexual. Her heart pounded, her stomach churned, a cold sweat dewed her skin. With all her will she fought to cut that snare, to reject the desire that was not truly hers, but she could not break the spell. The concentration it required was lost, and she was beginning to respond to its allure.

Slowly, her body was answering not to her control but to its compulsion, to approach, and to take. Over it all, distracting, gloating, the non sound of the blivit roared, echoing and reechoing through all the cavernous reaches of her skull.

The silence, the awful pull, the darkness, the memory of sound in her mind : all were shattered, as a mighty bolt of lightning roared down from the clouds. It lit the scene in bright electric blue against the purest of black, like a cardboard cutout, and if there were other sounds, they were lost in its imperious crash. In its aftermath, as if in answer to its call, the rain came. Hesitant at first, it but streaked across the windowpanes, pattering lightly like an army on the move, but it grew as she listened. The faint traces were augmented, and whole tracteries of water built up, clinging like some living jelly, flayed alive on the glass, and its roar grew to challenge all but the mightiest thunderclaps.

Nancy wiped the cold sweat from her face, and pushed away the hair that had stuck to her forehead. Then, with the storm there to exorcise the demons of the dark, she walked on, proudly, calling Jean's name loudly between the explosions of thunder.

Faintly, above the insistent drumming of the rain, she heard what might have been a reply.

Jean! Here! Her cry was almost a shout.

Honey? – it's Carol. Jean's OK. Come on.

She continued forwards, falling back to the stealthy progress just abandoned –NO! Don't remember too well – despite the fresh trails of memory it kicked up. Wary of a trap, she had her gun ready, and waited behind a column of darkness as voices approached her.

Lightning flared, its brief light enough to show Carol, and with her, a young man, in Clan Brady uniform, to whom she could put no name.

Here I am, she announced, stepping from concealment

They started, and for the briefest of instants Nancy feared that they were ready to shoot.

Oh – hi. Come on. Let's go!

Where?

The rendezvous – all the time we took fixing your arm– we're the last ones .here.

---

Down in the basement in one of the conference halls, an unofficial meeting was in progress, The two girls and their escort were greeted by one of the Tegrith Shar<sup>n</sup>. He was tall even for his race, and just one blow from his mighty arm could kill. He grinned as they passed.

Been enjoying yourselves? he asked.

I damn' well wish I had been. Nancy snapped. To her mind, flippancy was uncalled for at any time, least of all under such circumstances. Had her prospective opponent not been nearly nine feet tall and four broad, she would probably have hit him.

She was still boiling with petty anger, and angry at herself for that as she entered the room and took a seat. Jilly requested her report, and she outlined what had happened, what damage they had sustained, answering questions with short snappy answers, and always sarcastically. In her attempt to be rid of something, she poured all her venom into being exceedingly bitchy at the slightest opportunity. She hated herself for it, even while she did it. It didn't live up to her own standards of complete self control, utter placidity, and she was ashamed, yet she had to let out all the emotion festering in her soul.

Sometime later, though she didn't notice when, being too wrapped up in her own feelings, the decision was made as to their route out, and she followed out mechanically with the crowd.

The rain continued yet, cold and heavy, its wrath feeding Nancy's spleen. She couldn't even bear Carol's attempts to cheer her, even though deep within, past the barriers of pride, she longed desperately to hold her, and be held in her arms. On the more practical level, the storm drove them indoors, wherever it was possible to avoid having to dash across open streets. There were, fortunately for all concerned, no ambushes set up on the route they had chosen. Either the would-be ambushers had decided to seek shelter rather than conflict, or, more likely, the sheer size of the task, in the face of the enforced organizational difficulties, had made it impossible to cover the ambushes properly.

That is not to say that they encountered no hostiles. A couple of times, a signal to halt passed down the party, when the point team encountered solitary matts – once even a yogi on patrol – but such hazards as were encountered, were quickly neutralized.

The perimeter posed more of a problem than the trek there. The main exits were by archways through the buildings that faced the complex; each could be made impassable by just a couple of guards. It was inconceivable that anyone should be as foolish as to leave them unmanned, so to avoid capture or unseemly bloodshed they were forced to use one of the ladder routes.

The cold of the outside air, blowing along the corridor from the open doors, woke Nancy from the drowsiness that had begun to unfold her. She shivered and drew her coat closer about herself. The dampness in the air was but a foretaste of what was to come. These were the last doors, the last shelter they would use, before they came again to their own rooms.

She hesitated for a moment under the final shelter, looked out into the night, then at Carol. She smiled, and Nancy managed a weak smile in return, then looked out again.

A sodium vapor lamp, high on a building to her right, cast its wan light onto a square court. five trees, trimmed into cones, and arrayed in quincunx, occupied the otherwise bare area of uneven and patchy asphalt. Deep puddles had collected, and the reflections of the amber light showed the rain shredding their surfaces. The air blew cold and strong with the bite of winter still at its command.

Half-seen figures already climbed a ladder on the opposite wall, and moved across the quad, through the golden mist of rain that filled the intervening space. As soon as the person just ahead of her reached the ladder, Nancy sprinted out in pursuit. She tried, and failed many times, to avoid splashing in the puddles. The rain hammered on her hair and clothes, and stung her face, before, with its force spent, it cascaded down her.

A small waterfall, cascading from the roof top, poured in a ragged tongue beside the ladder, and disintegrated into a spray hardly distinguishable from the rain. The gusts of the wind generally kept it away from the ladder, but for occasional instants, the force died, and a coherent mass of water would descend like a blow on the climbers, and drench them through, chill and half drown them.

The metal was cold, and that hurt the hands, and its satiny surfaces were slick with water on the thin grease film protecting them. Now, though climbing required constant attention, Nancy was able to climb without relaxing the grip of her good hand. She was able to slide her hand up the side of the rail, though the cold benumbed her fingers, and in that way, managed as good a time as anyone else.

Even so, by the time she finally gained the rooftop, eighty feet from the ground, every last thing she was wearing seemed saturated, and cold water trickled down her back and across her face like a swarm of insects. Her sleeve and trousers clung, clammy and chill, and heavy about her limbs. She allowed herself a momentary feeling of relief as she swung over onto the roof, above the cascade at last – and then sank ankle deep into the black and icy pool which rushed out into the abyss, the catch-point of all the evening's rain on that roof. mentally, she damned the pool, allowing it the freedom of choice as to location, provided that it was suitably unsavory, then waded after the chain of figures, nearly lost in the darkness. She warmed her chilled hand against her flank, and hoped that she would trip into nothing.

Their route lay parallel with the axis of the building here, traversing the gap between the ladder they had ascended and the one nearest on the other side.

She stood at the brink of the descent. There was absolutely nothing to be seen out in the night, though she could imagine the trees, the open park, the paths. She would descend, and then fade into the distance. Home – and a promise made to Carol and a more recent one for herself a roaring fire, a dry towel, a hot drink. In a mood of pleasurable, but grim, anticipation, she set her first foot on the ladder.

She had descended two rungs further, before she realized that the noise she had heard, indistinct in the drumming rain, had been a gunshot. She flattened herself against the ladder, with her arm looped about it for enduring support. Below her everyone else had stopped, and she felt that it would be less than prudent to ascend, so there was nothing else to do.

Though the Clan forces at the scene had numerical superiority, they had been caught at a time of maximum vulnerability, with many troops caught on ladders, and unable to fight, and that left the matts with both position and surprise on their side. Only the rain was neutral, antagonizing both forces.

Nancy didn't bother to number the minutes of hell that passed, as she waited in the pouring rain, sheltered only from the gunfire, and completely helpless. She could see nothing of the action, all concealed by solid concrete, and only hear the rattle of shooting from both above and below, faint above the relentless splashing of the rain.

The raindrops on her face itched as they trickled down to her throat, and she could not brush them away. She was cold and wet and thirsty. Her arms ached and her scalp itched; the damp clothes she wore a heavy and clinging torment to her. Nancy reckoned that this was the true hell, and her whole past life, just a cruel illusion, and writhed and moaned to relieve her suffering.

A stray shot hit the sole sodium lamp that lit the scene, and its explosion distracted Nancy from her own afflictions. The vapour flared orange in the dampness, and blobs of the liquid metal rained down in fire. Electrics sizzled, both arc noises and the boiling of water, and blue light flickered for a few moments, before a circuit breaker opened.

Darkness closed in, and with her retinas scarred by afterimage, Nancy felt that it was even darker, more oppressive than it had been before.

The firing also ceased, as the snipers waited for their night vision to return, all those who had noticed the explosion, and while they waited, and hid, they removed all targets from those who could still see.

As the red/green splotches faded, Nancy could make out, though the dark was no less, faint shapes in the sky, and a lightening on the horizon where the rings could be half seen through the squall clouds that were outriders of the storm.

Three flares soared into the sky from somewhere in the darkly massing huddle of buildings. Someone yelled from a roof high above where Nancy hung. One word, and the firing died raggedly away into silence. Yogis' By custom, in the face of a force that could take them in fair fight, and had also the mantle of authority with it, both sides fled the field in haste. Official persecution was worse than the almost stylized vendetta fighting, and neither faction wished to court that dubious distinction.

The ground was thickly muddy, slippery and clinging, but welcome. It was release, and a removing of responsibility and honor. Unashamedly, Nancy departed like a coward from the fray.

The security guards, when at last they arrived at the recently deserted battlefield, found nothing but spent cartridge cases and bullet scars in the stonework. They returned to shelter with all haste, the grounds beyond were not their responsibility, and they had little taste for a policing action in the prevailing weather. They too honored an unwritten convention, that stopping a fight without personal risks was better than catching the culprits red handed and risking injury, and finding no battle in progress, were content not to pursue the matter. Besides, the actual identities of those involved were common knowledge; one merely listed all those students who were Old Clan, or who expressed militant Commoner views, and to act against either – or both – would be politically uncomfortable.

They realized what was going on, and had decided it would be unhealthy to be involved. All that was required was to threaten intervention, a mutually satisfactory arrangement, provided that it remained tacit.

Certainly, as Nancy and Carol went home, it was to their complete satisfaction. And it was one of the things furthest from their minds.

## Chapter 2 – Impasse

The morning dawned bright and clear after the storm; only a few puffy cumulus clouds hung in the sky, gleaming brilliantly white in the new-washed light of the sun. They sailed, in irregular rows, across the deep blue vault of heaven, from the north, under the misty arch of the rings, to vanish in the pastel shading around the southern horizon. A light wind urged them on in their majestic flight, and rustled the leaves in the trees. The lizards sang in the branches, to greet the dawning of the new day.

Nancy, for her own part, received the tidings with a more reserved reaction. She drifted imperceptibly from dreaming to awareness over a period of several minutes reluctantly surrendering the last gossamer webs of comfortable unreality. Her eyes were still closed, though she woke, and she lay for a while, trying to order the sequences of her dreams. One hovered at the edge of recall something that had frightened her, but was now forgotten, save for one blurred still of a ring of standing stones. Regretfully, she abandoned the tantalizing memory.

She forced her eyes open to the brightness of morning. The shadows of the trees fell sharply outlined, silhouettes of total dark, on the quasi-frosted surface of the window. They danced gently as the wind blew, long narrow ribbon shapes of leaves, crossing and opening and every once in a while, casting through transient pinholes foreshortened projections of the sun's disk.

Nancy watched their hypnotic dance, until the motion, and the glaring contrast of the light, made her eyes too heavy to hold open. She did not fight the warmth and drowsiness.

Time passed, in indefinite quantity – seconds, minutes for all she knew or cared, an hour – before again she woke. She had turned over while she had dreamed and this time could see the clock function set up on the display screen<sup>□</sup>. It indicated a time a few seconds before 08:30. Continued oblivion cast its Lorelei lure, but she had a lecture at 10:00, and decided not to risk it. Instead she would allow herself until the half-hour, watch the glowing digits as they rolled on, and then stir herself to get up.

Fifty eight, fifty nine, zero zero. The last numbers counted off like the final moments of the universe, reached, and passed the time appointed. Nancy stirred gently, so as not to disturb Carol, who slept beside her. Having slipped out from under one of Carol's outstretched arms, she sat up, tenderly nursing her injured arm. She stood, and walked out to the kitchen, kicking on her slippers as she went. She poured herself a glass of fruit juice, pale green, and sharp flavored, to cut through the dryness of her mouth, sipping it slowly, lingering to make the relief longer enduring.

With that, and a handful of sultanas, she returned to her room, and began to work at the desk display console. She ate, and drank, seemingly disinterestedly as she checked the progress of one of her little projects – a randomly wandering program that had passed along the interstellar telecoms links, had now reached delta Pavonis,<sup>□</sup> only a score lites from Sol, with relatives in computer complexes in nearly twenty percent of the Partnership systems. She noted down a few items of interest, then cleared the screen.

Another set of codes, and this time she gained access to a routine she had unofficially inserted into the operating system, and then was allowed to reset its countdown to one hundred days. Were that count ever to expire, the routine would set to work on a thorough destruction of the system, at least as far as the actual normal use of it was concerned.

She wondered what she should do with it. In less than a week, the Clan Wolf would depart, acknowledging the public opinion against them – ironically the complete contradiction of the main charge levelled against them, that they cared nothing for the feelings of anyone not of the Old Clans.

In those circumstances, she would be unlikely to be able to do anything after then, and then, in course, the Armageddon would come. She hesitated, began to type in the code that would erase the routine, but halted with a pang of remorse. Could she really destroy out of hand something so beautifully nasty?

She negated the line, and logged off. With a little work, it could be made specific, to act as her instrument of revenge against those who would remain. There would be time enough for that to be done. She cleared all trace of that secret transaction from the screen, downed her drink, and went to prepare her breakfast.

A fat wedge of pinky–red melon lay, bleeding its sticky juices onto the tabletop, the remainder being returned to storage, when a startled yell of Ohmigodwhatsthe time! emanated from the bedroom, announcing plainly that Carol had abruptly woken.

Just gone twenty five to nine, Nancy called back, Want something to drink?

Of course. Hot, cold or alcoholic?

Gageapple juice suitable?

It's wet, isn't it?

Nancy poured two glasses of the juice, and shook the carton. As its weight suggested, and the silence confirmed, it was empty. She threw it into the bin, then retrieved the melon and cut a second wedge.

Collecting the whole lot on a tray, she returned to the bedroom, to find Carol sitting up in bed, wide eyed, and with hair tousled. Nancy set the tray down on the desk, studiously disregarding anything already there, and handed one to Carol.

Two gets you ten it clouds over by the time lectures are over, she commented cynically, Weather?

No – the weather will remain much as it is, with the cloud cover diminishing to 5%. Air temperatures – presently 285<sup>°</sup>, but rising to 298 later this afternoon. Do you wish a more detailed or extensive forecast?

See. Carol smiled. There's no need to be so bitchy. Okay, we've got an algebra lecture, and we both agree it's a pain – so we both suffer. Besides, it's the last one.

Anyway, on a different tack entirely – how's your arm this morning?

A bit stiff, hurts if I strain it, but it'll last until we get home, give it some proper attention.

Good job it wasn't your writing hand, then. <sup>□</sup>

Mmh. Thinking of that – I wonder what the matts'll do after that.

I can't see what they can do. The yogis will be out in force for a couple of days, and by then it'll be the end of term, and we'll all be home.

That's never stopped us though, has it?

I suppose so – Carol paused – but I don't think they'll try anything lethal in public. That's if they can recognize us out of uniform – I'm certain they can't and anyway, if we stay in crowds...

That's all very well – but what do we achieve? What did we achieve last night? Tie up or drug a couple of matts, a couple of yogis, wound a few more, and they do the same to us. We stay thinking one thing, they another.

Why is it that people are so stupid? Us too. If we resort to force, we're just as bad as they are. Only luck no-one's been killed yet.

Achieve? Now it was Carol's turn to sound cynical. How can we achieve anything? We aren't politicians – we can only react to what's going on. We're being shot at, so why not shoot back?

But they can't shoot at us if we don't identify ourselves as Clan. You said they can't recognize us. But then how can they hole up one of us in the museum if they don't know who we are? Or was she just jumpy?

Carol didn't reply to Nancy's rhetorical questions. The subject had been debated so often before, and always failed to reach conclusion. Nancy's gaze roved around the room seeking some anchor point, some idea for conversation. She heard, without bothering to notice it, Carol setting her glass down. A few moments later, Carol's long slender, dextrous fingers began to massage her neck and shoulders.

Don't take it too hard, Honey. I'm scared too, when I go out on one of these things. Only – what five days, then we'll be shot of this planet. I suppose you saw the news last night.

Yes. I feel scared sick when I think about it. Today's the day, then

Uh oh, I see. The twelfth.

Very 'Oh' very correct. The final reading of the outlawry measures. And vis-à-vis that news item we were discussing – and not to be a stickler for tradition – one guess as to our chances of a reprieve.

About zero. They get Aelia, and our only acceptable spokes'an<sup>□</sup> is gone. I doubt Jeanne will be able to work up enough public sympathy to swing it, either.

Do you know where we're going to go next.

Not for sure, but I hear gossip. If we can get Guild sponsorship, it'll be to a place called Cimarron – it's just about to get its gate. I looked it up. It's about four thousand lites swan and a little coreward. One point eight gees. Rather boring place, in fact.

Tedious.

Nancy drained her glass.

Eat, or shower first? she asked.

As she had been assured, the weather remained fine during lectures, and when they emerged, the massed ranks of clouds were gone, only a handful of stragglers remaining. Now revealed, the rings poured like misty waterfalls, gossamer veils marring the azure perfection of the bowl of the sky, a great ring, set with the sun as its begemming.

The white concrete, so abundantly employed in the construction of this complex of buildings flared fiercely in its scarcely moderated light. Only the rows of trees along the middles of walkways, dividing them into lanes, their dark greens, and the greys of the shadows provided haven, directions in which the eye could rest without

bedazzlement.

Nancy waited, sitting on the edge of the steps that led up to the lecture hall, while Carol went to collect some notes. The wind of the early morning had died, or at least was diverted by the buildings, and in the sheltered square, the air was almost perfectly still, its only movement like the brushing of silk against her skin. She closed her eyes, and sat there, basking in the warmth of the spring sunshine, relaxing her, feeding her, it seemed. She shivered deliciously in the warmth, and smiled. Now, for a few brief moments, she could let all the cares of the world pass her by, absorbed in that elemental pleasure.

The hurried footsteps behind her, up and down the steps, might belong, any one of them, to friend or foe. She toyed with the idea, found it amusing, but all the same, there was the ominous expectation of some blow about to land between her shoulder-blades.

And land, such a blow did. A hand, large and unintentionally rough, clapped her on the back, and a gruff voice behind her boomed Evening, Honey.

Nancy started, nearly fell to the path below. She gasped for breath, and clutched at her chest as though her heart had failed, and with her other hand shielding her eyes from the glare. As the tone of the voice had suggested, the speaker was a Hrulgani. But though she recognized the mannerism, she could not remember the name that went with it.

G'morning. You gave me a fright there. So long since I saw you last, I can't remember your name.

The girl, marked as such by the crest of golden hair running back from forehead to nape of neck, sudden against the dark brown of her pelt, wore a long, short-sleeved dress of some lightweight cloth, in white and purple, the colours divided along its vertical symmetry. It could clearly be seen that she wore nothing else beneath it, her ursine frame as neuter as any teddy-bear, the dress only worn for its copious supply of pockets.

Jayso Corvall.

Jayso, of course. Sorry, I'm still not used to all the new faces appearing here this term...

True, but misleading – Nancy admired her own subtlety.

Jayso agreed with Nancy's statement, but though she was of one of the old and clannish families of the first-in-ships, the problems of Clan politics had not affected her personally, and she was content to reciprocate.

Doing anything special this afternoon? Or are you just hanging around to kill time?

Hanging around, Jayso replied, I'm shot of lectures for the term now – for once I have no need of an excuse to do nothing this afternoon.

You lawyers bitch too much. If you can face some of your courses – symbolic logic, axiom theory, and what is it – algebraic legalistics?

Algebra of legal systems.

OK, algebra of legal systems – if you can sit through them, you could have done the foundations course in Math, and gotten as much free time as we do – more if you chose your courses right. I've got no sympathy for you – glutton for... Hey! Carol! Over here! she waved to her girlfriend, and then hesitated. Sorry – where were we? Oh yeah, you didn't have anything set up for this afternoon. We don't either.

Tell you what – we can go to Dean's tower for lunch, then assemble a crowd, and descend on someone. Should keep us busy 'til dinner.

Carol walked back up the steps to them.

You going to be all day there? she asked.

No – hey, Carol, this is Jayso Corvall. She's a lawyer.

No accounting for tastes. Hi!

And what do you do?

Math, like Honey. I'm Carol Mastersen, her tutorial partner.

Another mathematician. Is there no escape?

You could try staying away from our haunts – like back wherever it is you get your lectures. That's out North Pines way, isn't it?

That's right. Say, did I tell you about one of the things that happened the other night...?

Dean's Tower stood in the centre of the site, looking like some relict growth, around which the University had built. It seemed organic, growing from a broad base to a tall and narrow spire, topped with a roughly egg-shaped fruiting body. In contrast to the stalactite like veils that constructed and were woven into the tower's irregular and constantly changing section, the bulb that surmounted it was smooth apart from the seemingly random scatter of large gaping widows like eye sockets. Like a forlorn intelligence, petrified, and abandoned, it stared sightlessly down at them.

The three students took a window table in the restaurant in the upper part of the tower, a window facing south, and away to the green of trees and grass beyond this island of artificiality. They talked excitedly, exchanging snippets of gossip, exaggerated tales told at third hand with glorious embellishments, but when the meal arrived, and mouths were put to alternative use the conversation flagged and died, reduced only to the level of Pass the salt. and What's that you're eating? It was no surprise – Carol and Jayso hardly knew each other and had little in common to provide conversation after the initial rush of talk, while Nancy, their interface, was lost in gloomy contemplation.

The time was but a few minutes after 13:30. In five hours, the most crucial parliamentary debate of the planet's history would be at last over, at the conclusion of a division already certain. In that instant, the old Clans of the Five Castles combine, heirs to a thousand years and more of gloriously checkered history, would be deemed outlaw, and to claim membership, in any way or means, an illegal act, punishable by 're-education' a remedy but one step short of mindwiping, and about as distasteful.

Nancy shivered. There was a faction, likely to be little opposed after the final count, that pressed for the denial of Linker sanctuary to Clan members. They would be welcome to try and take the contingent at present safe in the University. Though their scattered stockpiles of doomsday weapons might not be able to sterilize the whole planet, they could have a damned good try. They could make the attempt rather less than cost effective.

In all probability, self-interest would probably restrain such actions, and the Council would pursue an aggressive hands-off policy, keeping everything looking fair. Wyvern could ill afford the sanctions that the Linkers could impose – their dependence on intersystem trade was still great – if the system industry was

blockaded, there would soon be rationing and shortages of high technology goods.

The Castles however, they would be fair game. Any nut with a grievance, however imaginary, would be there, with any and every weapon they could lay hands on, or simple build. But the resistance would not be merely passive, armed as warships of the void, working relics of the early days of flight, when they must sail through real space between the stars, by ramscoop, twirl or flicker, and there be prey to the things that wandered between the stars, the Castles could fight back. The fight would last as long as would be required. Six days or less and all the Castles would have lifted, they only waited now while the lifter units were reset to the new configurations of mass. Time – it was so obscenely short. The minutes fled like autumn leaves, rushing headlong as if to find some grand finale, and ever eager in their search, mortal man was swept along with them.

Futile anger, formless, and unfocused, welled up like bile, furrowing her brow, taking the taste from the food she ate, mechanically.

Who shall we call on first?

Uh, what was that, Carol?

Who shall we call on first? Your friends, mine, Jayso's or any of the possible combinations?

Whoever's nearest, Jayso suggested, Sssaa Merissaa is in Cedars East, so unless you know anyone in Riverdene or Cedars West...

No – but there's another lawyer I know in Cedars East, Nancy, swallowing her mouthful, managed to catch Jayso's momentary pause, A girl called Tracy Craig – she's from Goldenstone, I think. <sup>□</sup>

Tracy Craig – you know her? Did you know she's Guild sponsored here? And that's not her real name?

No. Is she O?

Old Clan? No – her family have connections in the regional assembly – there's some sort of trouble at home, I gather, and everyone decided it would be safer to get away from things.

I thought it was 'cause she was an esper she was Guild sponsored.

Could be – that and influence together do it for certain.

Anyhow, we can take our time – wait 'til everyone's back from lunch first. We can kill half an hour or so in the Archaeology museum when we finish here, just to be sure of it.

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Nancy surreptitiously steered their path through the museum to the level she had crossed just the previous night. What motivated her to do that, she was uncertain – there was curiosity, and a desire to do something, prove some vague quality that might be courage or equally foolhardiness, to herself. Whichever it might be, she could not say, only that she was doing something that in either case, seemed totally out of character. For a professed and shameless coward, she was acting disturbingly bravely.

Reassuringly, as she approached her goal, her resolution began to fail. She remembered all too well what had happened when she had been ensnared by the blue glowing something, how it had drained her will, or diverted it, enslaving her body, if not her mind, to its bidding. She could only change her mind, though, if she could find some valid reason, for now steeled to the task, she doubted if she could find the courage again, and

always there would be the nag of curiosity unsatisfied.

She let the adrenaline surge expectantly through her system, bothering only to conceal her gasping.

She reached the place, or what she thought was the place – there was so much difference in the daylight – she turned to the windows, and took a deep breath, and another. The desire she had known in the dark burned again within her, like a warm ember. She could resist that remanent effect, but if she were to wake it to full life, she might not be able to.

Moments, like eternities, passed, and Nancy stayed poised on the brink of decision. Then, without reaching any conscious. Deliberated, conclusion, she had made the decision, and began to structure in her mind the nonsound of the blivit that had woken it before.

As she had feared, something came to life behind her; she could feel something that was complete and aware reaching out for her. It drove her, fed its insinuations into her mind, but she raised up walls of denial. They were to little avail. The attack poured through the cracks, like fluid, to lie in the depths of her mind, and release its own thoughts.

It became imperative that she reach it, poor defenceless thing, and take it to herself, guard it and keep it, and in return, it would give warmth, and comfort, shelter and, most precious gift of all, companionship. She loved, yes, truly loved, the thing that called her, above and beyond merely desiring it, like some brutish beast.

And she hated, and feared what it was doing to her mind, her identity in its barrage.

Slowly deliberately, she turned, whether under her own volition or that of the thing attacking she could not tell, and passing between the cases there, came finally to a small display against the far wall.

At last, she could look at the thing that had drawn her. For a few instants, she could not see what it was, but then it drew her gaze, and held it. It was a necklet, or some similar ornament, a chain of one inch links, wrought of fine wire – platinum according to the label – to hold a square, an inch and a half on a side, of the same silvery metal. Set in it exquisitely cut, a stone identified only by a classification of its internal structure, and the name of its finder. Fiery glows chased and flickered in its blue–violet depths.

Beautiful it was, beautiful as she herself measured beauty, on a scale she knew had not fallen to its assault. Her defences trembled; she could not believe that harm could come from something so precious, but deep within her being, where yet she was an animal, she feared and that brutish will maintained the barriers with all the sheer intransigence she could summon.

She watched, as if from outside of herself, from the sidelines of the conflict between her id and the entity in the necklace. Her arm drew back, the fingers clenched into a fist, ready to break the glass that imprisoned the jewel. The whole power of her conscious mind she threw into the battle, to try and stop that blow, but it seemed she had forgotten how to control her body. The arm twitched, the muscles spasmed, and cramping pains chipped away at her strength, and yet that alien will, tireless, immune, continued the struggle to dominance.

The position could be held static, but it took all her efforts to hold it so; and had she not expected that mode of attack, she might have unwittingly given in. The game was yet only in check, and not mate. She would face the greater test, and if luck favoured her, she would prevail. It seemed reasonable to her, in the light of last night's events, that to break the enchantment, she would have to break first the memory of the demonic wailing that continued, half heard, in the background of the world. Some formal prayer, some litany that she knew, believed and could place all her faith in, be it unto death : that focus, she was sure, would be the best

way, the surest agent, but she acknowledged no deity, had learned no ritual, could petition no power in that hour of need. Now, for the first time, she regretted that aid and comfort that she had rejected, however illusory it might be, but she allowed herself only an instant of that, and began to execute the plan she had devised for her own escape.

Mechanically, monotonously, she began to recite to herself the lyrics of the first song she could dredge out of her memory. Then, to the cycle of words, she began to force the music, slowly, again and again, strengthening at each repetition, while the words became just meaningless jumbles of potential sound. No matter, its invocation continued to cycle over the music which was gaining the shape that the words lost. At last, in a sudden quantum jump transition, the hellsound in her mind snapped like a thread of steel. The music rose to take its place, coming perfectly to flower, and it played triumphally, with all the will she had mustered to the struggle against invasion, and with all the joy of victory. It was like a mighty river, and it could wash away all the tainting of her mind.

Her fist, unnoticed during the turn of the mind war, was now bare inches from the glass and the whole arm was distorted, cramped and unusable. Sweat drenched her body, and her breath came in loud, ragged gasps. She was half afraid that she had begun to sing out loud at the crescendo of conflict. Warily, she looked around for Carol and Jayso : they still browsed the displays, and appeared to have noticed nothing untoward happening.

She looked down at the vanquished foe. The metal seemed to have become duller, leaden and the gem had clouded to an opaque, lustreless grey–green; but it was not dead, but merely quiescent – it still cast its allure. Next time, assuming that such a match was brought to pass, next time that she faced the construct she knew that she could, as a matter of sheer dispassion, break the power as she had broken it just. Raw power, however, was not its weapon but the ability to sap the will. It might be that she just didn't want to resist – even at the time of victory, she had tasted that uncertainty. There was nothing, as a point of sober fact, nothing whatsoever to indicate that its purpose was, what use it had for her.

Clumsily, with an arm reluctant to do her bidding, she wiped her forehead, and pushed her hair back into place. Had she been alone, she would have left immediately, and with all haste, but she was not; and the desire that nothing at all that might be considered unusual should be brought to the notice of others was stronger than the urge to flight. She stood a few minutes watching her reflection in the glass and waiting for the suggestion that they leave. She herself was on the verge of that suggestion, when Carol, checking her watch, declared that it was after two o'clock, and a suitable time for them to leave.

Nancy agreed, and followed her lead, keeping her feeling of relief secret to herself

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It was gone 18:00 when finally she managed to disengage herself from what had become a floating group of about twenty people. She had lost count of how much she had eaten, how many cups of tea and coffee she had consumed, as many supplied by total strangers as supplied by friends. She had excused herself by saying that she wanted to get an early dinner, though the only thoughts she had of food were ideas of how to gain a respite from it. Behind her fabrication two ideas drove her : first the wish to find out how the debate on the motion of outlawry went, the second to escape the party. She was there beyond many of her social group, and the whole tone of the gathering was changed. There were a growing number of people she felt uncomfortable to be near, the more physical types, sports fiends, boisterous socializers of what Nancy considered the lowest kind.

She was thankfully alone on the slideway, speeding along, and totally free from the constraints of being with people. The sun shone bright as it descended to the horizon, but already she could look momentarily at its disk, and the air was already chill. especially in the unrelieved shade. She had chosen her route to follow the eastern side of the valley of the Greywater, inasmuch as its meanderings possessed an eastern side but even

there, the hills across the valley cast long shadows that reached over and up to the path.

In brief glimpses through the trees to her right she could see the river, its waters as steely as its name suggested, pouring turbulently over its bed of grey rock.

Around her, waist, on a belt of white leather, she now wore openly the gun that she had carried secretly all that day. In that she had not been alone. Carol had carried one, that she herself had loaned to her, and she had noticed a couple of people whom she suspected of being matts, also displaying slight bulges that were either the mark of sloppy tailoring – unlikely – or concealed guns – almost certainly. If there was an ambush set up and waiting for her, she would be ready.

But ambush there was none, and as she came closer to the more travelled routes about her own college of Greenhollow, she buttoned up her jacket to cover the gun – the whipping of the hem in the slipstream would adequately conceal its shape. She began the manoeuvre into the lane she would want at the interchange.

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She entered her house only after approaching cautiously from out of the woods, and then by one of the windows, where she had placed her own security lock. It might not be strictly necessary, but it was fun, and it provided a sense of the dramatic.

Having gained the sanctuary of her room, she headed straight away to the console in the main room, calling for the Tree–V to be switched on, to catch a summary of the debate.

It was all proceeding to the pattern she had expected, there had been not one surprise, one last minute change of alignment. The speeches, the jibes, had all been old and tiredly familiar, heavy with empty rhetoric that gleamed and conveyed no information – one speech of twenty minutes was auto–summarized succinctly as Someone should do something about this, you know.

Tired, haggard, and pompous, all the speakers were following, for what seemed the thousandth time, the same hypocritical choreography that had been established on the first play of the issue. Disgusted with the endless childishness of politics, she turned on the live coverage.

The summing up was beginning, with the three faction leaders in the Senate opening. The Land–owners' representative had finished the elaborate rituals, and began the speech. He spoke eloquently, and said nothing, a self parody on the party's proverbial lack of policy, and it was a relief to hear some clear statement of intent from the Young Clans albeit an affirmation that they had been bought body and soul by interstellar big business. Standing to gain most in the short term from a peaceful removal of the Old Clans they urged the acceptance of the motion under a stay of execution of one week, to safeguard lives and property all round.

The Lady Jeanne took the floor next, and the whole assembly fell silent. This was the important speech, by it the Clans would stand or fall in the eyes of the jurisdiction. She spoke tersely, and to the point, an event unprecedented in those hallowed halls, and common sense, an equally new, face in the gathering, was its mainstay.

The Clans, she argued, were going to leave, within the week. There was no need for this law, and it would be a point merely of honour in its winning or losing. If people really wanted to slit their own throats, Jeanne had no objections, provided they did not bleed on her carpet, or leave a mess to dispose of.

There was nothing of politics in her speech, she knew the debate already, to be lost, so she spoke her mind, naming names of those with interests in corporations with declared aims on Wyvern. Magnificently wrathful, she ignored the jeers of Royalist! or Dictator! ; catchphrases of their opponents, they had lost their meanings, and so she spoke as if through the hubbub of a farmyard, her face burning with a joyous exhilaration. Blood

they seemed to want, so blood in copious quantities would she supply them – their own here by words, but were battle joined, the, blood would be real.

Honesty! she called, whatever else, we do, we must have honesty – if you've been bought– like the honourable members I named, have the good grace to say so. If you believe in a cause – like you think the Guild oughtn't have a monopoly of long haul trade, say it. If you just hate our guts because your family always have, say so. I've just this one speech here as leader of the Old Clans – let me at least leave you with the custom of honesty. –

I think you are all bloody stupid. If you think you can run a planet better than we do, you ought to go somewhere else, and stake a claim, not try to jump ours. If you think our collaboration with the Guild is bad, argue with the Guild. We were here first, we built this planet up to civilization, we supplied the kernel of the system economy, and then you think you can just edge us out.

We're bending over to accommodate you, and not a word of gratitude do we get. If you really want to lose credibility as a thinking, reasoning being, vote for the Bill. Hell – we're going anyway next week. Are you bloodsuckers not content with that?

Think before you vote, all of you – and think more than two days into the future – you don't know when this could be used against you. Thank you.

Jeanne sat down, she looked old and tired, every one of her more than eleven hundred years etched on her face. Weary and small, she turned to her companions, while the camera turned to show the next speaker.

What applause there was came from those sections of the hall dedicated to the Clans, and it was weak, and drowned out in the jeering, and it continued for the next speaker, the leader of the Traditionalist party who would also throw his support behind the Clans. His speech was less emotive, more strictly parliamentary than Jeanne's, and even his support was lukewarm. He would have to stay behind and try to survive in the new political climate after the departure of the Clans, so was trying to show his supporters that he remained faithful, yet able to respond to the imminent change. His was an unenviable situation, his stable platform torn away in the sudden and dramatic about turn in the vocal consensus on the Clans, and it was all that he could do to survive, but even so, he managed to make a good argument opposing the motion on purely economic grounds.

The Moderate leader, who followed, though nominally not in favour of the clan system and the monopoly of trade negotiations the Combine had held, was at pains to make clear that equally he was not in favour of the extremes urged by the more vocal opposition, and on those grounds called that the motion be voted for amendment only. He sat down to only a ripple of applause. The vote that was answered by the reaction of the council showed what appeared to be a great decline in their fortunes and the roar of applause for the leader of the Populists showed whom the rabble appreciated most.

The speech he made was neither as cogent as those made already from the floor, nor as straight spoken as Jeanne's. Windy, packed with clichéd rhetoric and vituperation, it served no other purpose than to sway the weak willed to his cause, and to exhort the ranks of the 'converted'. As a perfect textbook example of the procedure, it could not be faulted, but the total lack of intellect behind it appalled Nancy. The speaker conjured up visions of a better future when the healthy stimulus of the larger interstellar corporations came into the system, but did not mention that the same combines would be able to just buy them without even thinking about the cost. In the name of freedom he would open Pandora's box, and the unthinking men who listened, cheered with all their might.

The closing speech, was by the leader of the council, and of the majority Republican party. He said little in his speech, trying to sail between the Scylla of the Combine, and the Charybdis of their opponents, and succeeded in being, shouted down by both factions at once, in a rare display of common purpose. Eventually, however, it emerged that he wanted people to accept the measure, but to leave the degree of acceptance to their own conscience. Thus knowing, that a vote to amend would take more than a week to process, he had neatly sat down on the fence, which satisfied the party's division on the matter.

He called for the votes to be cast, and, to a storm of applause, sat down. For some minutes, there was a pause, and then figures came up, both on the score-board in the Council Chamber, and synthesized on the screen:

HOUSE	ACCEPT	AMEND	REJECT	NO VOTE
FLOOR	503	181	287	29
SENATE	18	97	193	4
RESULT	FLOOR	ACCEPT	MAJORITY	
	SENATE	REJECT	MAJORITY	
	COUNCIL	ACCEPT	MARGINAL	

So close the verdict, despite the vocal bias against the Combine. Had four fewer people registered acceptances from the floor, or fifteen more of the Senators rejected the Bill, it would have gone to a Select Committee for amendment, there to be lost. Now, it had been ratified, and she was outlaw on that planet.

She felt sick – how many people, especially in the Young Clans, had supported this, thinking, that they were safe from similar action? Far too many, she felt. One day, the precedent of Outlawry might be used to drive Young Clans, or the Land-owners into exile, so that a grateful People's Corporation could reap their profits. People did not change. They always had been blind to the days after tomorrow, and would presumably continue to be. One day, in the long run, the Partnership would come up against a society in which all its members could think on truly long term time scales, and would promptly go under.

She wondered idly, could that be the secret behind the success of the Linkers' Guild. Perhaps simply that was their long hidden secret. Perhaps – foey!

On impulse, she tapped out her sister's phone number. The screen flickered for a few seconds, hazed over with static, and then stabilized. For a subliminal instant, a message appeared, red characters on black, but before she could read any of it, it had gone, to be replaced by a picture; a girl of the clan, floating against a background of billowing colour, predominantly green, with islands of blue and orange. The girl's hair was grey, but in places was streaked with black. Her face was chillingly beautiful, innocent and eternal.

Hi, Jenny – where's Tracy?

Out in the grounds somewhere. I'm sending out a mobile unit to find her. I suppose you're calling about the vote in the Council, just.

Only indirectly. A part of this is to kill time before I go to dinner. How's the move going your end?

Still on schedule – five days, give or take a few hours. Then up, up and away. Perhaps this time we'll be lucky, and find a place to stay more than a couple of hundred years. It gets a girl down, all this moving about. Ah! – I've got Tracy on the line.

OK, put her through. See you soon, Jenny.

The simulated picture collapsed, to be replaced by a view of Nancy's sister. She was sitting on a rock, and beyond her, the land sloped away to a valley lightly dotted with elegantly cut trees, like dark grey lollipops against the paler grey of the grass. Their shadows were blotchy pools of darkness about their feet. All was colourless in the ring glow.

The audio channel carried the low sighing of the night wind, and the distant sound of the sea.

There in the foreground, however, dominating the scene, was Tracy. After the idealization of the Clan's design, slim, boyish, even neuter; for a female, comparatively hard-bodied, that was the construct image of Genevieve, the Castle's sentient computer, Tracy came as a surprise. She was aggressively pregnant – had been so for several years – and if, and when, she decided to permit the birth, it would be the third such in the history of the clan.

Even without that, she would still seem to be asserting her femininity. She had always seemed plump, compared with her peers, but what seemed buxom to those accustomed to Clan tradition seemed slim, or at least normal, to those outside.

You've heard the results? Nancy asked.

No. I presume we lost. How much by?

That much She held up thumb and forefinger, a quarter inch apart. Two dozen votes would have turned it. So you don't know when we're going to be hauled home?

Not for sure. Tomorrow, probably, tomorrow your time, that is. Though I'd say you were safer at Uni – lots of Linkers around so you can run for help – we've had a couple of snipers already, just trying to take out windows mainly, but a couple of people have been hurt.

I'm just taking a chance to get out and about before the siege closes in for good. If you want to find out what's really happening, I should think Mum would know.

Mm – well, I'll find out in good time. I mainly called to waste time before dinner. We can save all the gossip 'til I get home again. Be seeing you then, Tracy.

And you, Nancy. Bye.

They blew each other kisses as the picture faded, and Nancy leaned back in her chair, suddenly happy. She had been speaking with someone who just clicked with her, despite the fifty year difference in their ages. She also found herself longing wistfully for Carol, but even she was just a little too far away in spirit to match so much.

The time is 19:15, my Lady Melanie's announcement startled her into sitting bolt upright.

Thanks!

She stripped to her underwear, throwing the cast-off garments to be cleaned, and rummaging in the chaos of her wardrobe. At the bottom of one side, she came across the dress she sought, ankle length, sleeveless, and midnight blue in colour, and with it, matching ankle boots. For one last time, she would go out looking smart, and not dressed to hide a weapon. The dining hall was two hundred yards away, and even in her mediocre state of physical fitness it would be only half a minute's run.

She pulled the garment on, and her gown, and pausing only to tidy her hair, departed.

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She sat down in the dining hall, and as soon as she had settled down to wait for the meal to begin, she regretted the decision to leave her gun behind. Too many people seemed to be crowding in, and there was something not quite true about the mood of the gathering, and she reached helplessly for the gun she had left behind. The hairs on her neck bristled, and the stench of wrongness burned in her nostrils.

No—one else seemed to notice it. About her, the trivial chatter of daily life went on as usual, unheeding of the warnings. She felt that she must stand up and call out her warning, but what senses advised her of the tension, and what precisely she could sense, she could not say, and without that firm assurance, she was unwilling to be made to look foolish in public. She sat at the table, fretting, and tearing distractedly at a piece of bread.

A Hrulgani male, black furred and green eyed, his mane vast and silky, sat down beside her. Like Nancy, his gown bore the silver trim of a scholar.

Evening, Honey, I'm Esteen – I'm – he touched thumb and forefinger briefly together –too.

Evening. Nancy looked around, quickly, to check what their neighbours were doing, and saw no—one interested in them.

Keep this to yourself, she whispered, but I think something's going to go up during dinner. You armed?

Uh huh. Two needlers – but a roust – here – you must be joking – how do you know?

A rumour going around. Could you lend me a gun– I didn't bring any of mine.

Okay then – here.

The butt of the weapon nudged against her thigh and she clasped it in her hand, and rested it on her lap. She clung to it as if it were endowed with powerful charms of protection, and thanked Esteen.

Across the hall, a gong sounded, triggering off first a quietening of the talk, and then an explosion of rasping noises as chairs and benches were pushed away, as their occupants stood. The fellows filed in, led by the Mistress of the College, Linker Jean McRae, she in the black and silver formal dress of the Guild, an outfit that seemed almost to drip with diamonds and platinum. Behind her, in their drab academic dress the high ranking philosophers of the College.

An idea took root in Nancy's mind, growing to horrible fruition, an idea as to the event that she seemed to be forewarned of. Surely there could be no—one so bereft of his senses, no—one so philistine, as to try to murder in cold blood, a Linker, and ten or more of the finest minds on the planet. Though the academics would be unable to defend themselves with any vigour, a Linker, hampered though she might be by the twisting, of space–time in such close proximity to matter, would be able to more than adequately defend against any conceivable threat.

She tried to set that idea aside, but it would not budge, until a more outrageous idea supplanted it – the matts might not try for the fellows, but for the Clanfolk. Personal danger, however unlikely, managed to wonderfully concentrate her mind. If they had found out the faces to fit the names of Wolf, Connors, Brady, Tsia, Shan and Min–Koë, by whatever unlikely means, they would use that knowledge to the full...

She ate the soup course left–handed, the gun ready in her right hand to fire at the slightest irregularity. Despite the tension, however, there were no noticeable deviations from the norm of procedure. Glasses clinked, and

silver cups. Conversation was a low formless roar punctuated by occasional expletives, and the robot servants wheeled around in mathematically precise patterns, dispensing food, and drink.

Her bowl emptied, and was taken away, but still the aura, of danger remained and had even grown into a feeling of tautness. She eyed suspiciously the plate handed to her, but the meat and vegetables offered no threat, but the threat existed, and was close by.

Though suspicious, she began to eat, ignoring what the food tasted like, too preoccupied...

Then, the tension snapped, and a feeling of relief surged for an instant in her. The doors had opened, and through each filed half a dozen people. Each wore camouflaged combat uniforms, and carried a variety of home-made and commercial weapons, and on the breast of each the emblem of the Matts, a green globe, bound around with with a broken chain.

Silence, descended with a roar, 'til there was no sound but that of the robot waiters and of breathing. Nancy halted in the action of bringing a piece of food to her mouth, and there were many others stopped, as if frozen, in the actions of eating, The freeze lasted a few seconds and slowly people began to place down their cutlery, and to edge forwards in their seats, to get a better view.

When all was again settled, a further group entered, a girl, with the rank badges of lieutenant, escorted by two Hrugani. She dismissed the guard halfway up the Wall, and continued alone, up to the high table. She looked disdainfully at what she saw, and then vaguely nodded to Mistress McRae.

My Lady. In the name of the Free People's Command of the Planet Wyvern, I demand that all members of the Old Clans, now by due process of law pronounced outlaw, be handed over to us. We will then take them to trial on charges of oppression against the peoples of the planets of Lindisfarne, Starbow, Luthien, Sharrowhan, Kalarim, Heartward, Toehold and Last Gasp.

Jean laughed. You ask me, in the name of an organization that is politically unrecognized, and in pursuance of a law which was passed by a body with no jurisdiction here to hand people over to trial for crimes committed before their births.

Are you insane?

Exit one propaganda scoop, though Nancy. But that was only one facet. In her response, Jean McRae had brought the situation to a region of instability. In that instant of chaos, a chair squeaked loudly as its occupant rose to his feet. He carried a heavy handgun which must have been almost impossible to conceal.

Conversely, he said, I see you support the cause of Matthew Hayward, or at least you wear his badge.

Be quiet , snapped the girl.

You too – Hayward was no saint – Or do you not remember his atrocities?

The situation screamed for release.

Shut up, I'm warning you! the lieutenant shrieked.

The massacres of the spread owners on Danestar<sup>□</sup>, or the friendly hobbies of his secret police...

The speaker paused, aware of what his coldly angry speech had done. There was a pause, while the matts tried to keep everyone in line simultaneously, and while Nancy tried to think of a way to avoid harm in the coming shoot-out. Very soon, people might very well be hurt, and the idea did not appeal to her.

Some item of cutlery dropped to the floor, and momentarily diverted attention. Someone, trigger happy, fired a few shots, and the room exploded into action. Nancy hurled her plate at the nearest matt, and as he ducked, pushed the table forwards, and hauled her gun from under it, and held the trigger down. Her fire caught two before anyone noticed, but the third target fired back, using a lethal projectile weapon. He missed, but began to correct his aim, and Nancy sprayed needles in his direction. In those frantic milliseconds, something happened to the universe, distorting its laws. A sub-machinegun had opened fire, and the sound of it rolled slowly across the room, like the sound of distant ocean swell. The bullets too were slowed, arcing lazily across the room, to bounce, their momentum spent, from anything they hit.

The quality of the light changed, becoming purplish black in essence, and distances and directions were distorted as if in a mirror insanely warped, or as if by the effects of hallucinogens. Even her body had been twisted, and her viewpoint wrenched loose from it.

In that sea of madness, figures moved, veiled in a mother-of-pearl mist, totally unaffected by its effects, and even seeming to reimpose reality about themselves.

Then, as suddenly as it came, the distortion ceased. The matts were missing, the tables moved slightly from alignment, but apart from that, all seemed as before. The tension was stilled, and only a bewildered silence filled the air. Jean McRae hammered on the table with a spoon, and the incipient buzz of conversation was stifled.

I wish to apologize to those of you caught unwillingly in this situation. I hope none of you have suffered discomfort from the effects of the Qbedel field<sup>□</sup>, but this deep in a gravity well, it's not precisely controllable.

Those of you who resisted force with force, did, I feel, follow, what would have been the best course, had there been no Linkers present. However, I would like to remind you that the carrying of weapons in the University is forbidden<sup>□</sup> so I would ask you to leave your guns behind as you go.

There were four deaths, and a dozen people were injured, but they are all in hospital now. Most of them will be out again by morning, though I gather that one girl who was killed may need to be kept in for a couple of days while her heart heals. Now get on with your meals.

Nancy checked her watch. Incredibly, ten minutes had gone by while they had been under the Qbedel field. Even more than before, she felt certain that to attack a Linker was rank folly for any normal person, and many supernormal ones besides. The magnitude of the effect, produced by maybe ten of them at an instant's notice, showed what a powerful weapon it must have been in the wars of the 28th and 29th centuries, when hundreds of minds had combined to saturate planets with its influence so that small teams of Linkers could go down and take over governance without a drop of blood being shed.

Another point that had come out of the incident was the reaction to the pro-Clan resistance. For someone supposedly unbiased by profession, in all matters of politics, Linker McRae seemed rather to side with the clans and those who had demonstrated their active sympathy for them. Nancy had expected to undergo much the same treatment as the matts, and an equal punishment meted out, but she had not even been hindered. The reaction of relief left her feeling weak at the knees, dazed and slightly soggy for the rest of the meal.

As she returned to her room, through the darkening gloom of evening, where only the palest of sunsets remained, she wondered whether that had been a desperate last fling by the matts, or the beginning of an

intensified campaign, both from within and without the University. In either case, she would not care to sleep alone that night, and that not for pleasure, but with the practical aim of allowing a watch to be kept.

## Chapter 3 – Homecoming

It was night–time, and probably well past midnight, and she was all alone. Above her, Dean's Tower thrust like an obscene mushroom into the sky, its windows leering, emptily at her. Pursuit was close behind her, and her vulnerability was something almost physical enough to be felt.

She was running, so the passing buildings blurred into formless masses of grey and black. There was no time, no need to concentrate on that inflow of information – her subconscious could sample what it needed to keep her from stumbling. The next sight she consciously noted was indoors. She now ran along a corridor that seemed to stretch forever both ahead of her and behind her, but she had no conscious memory of ever entering a building.

In the blind panic that had caught her up, she had chosen a route that could quite easily kill her – if she couldn't get out of the far end before her pursuers entered the corridor she might as well stop and blow her own brains out.

Nancy! Ahead of her, a figure beckoned from the doorway at the end of the passage.

Astrid – what are you doing here?

Come on! Hurry! That seemed enough answer to Nancy – elaborate conversation could await a somewhat safer venue. She followed her leader through the doorway.

She halted there awhile, alone. About her, the plain stretched in all directions to the distant horizon, the grass waving and tufted, like a silvery ocean in the light of the rings. Above her, the sky was a complete hemisphere of black, without shading or feature.

From nowhere, a wind came, and rustled the grass until it sounded like breathing, and a muttering of conversation. She strained to catch meaning in the talk, but it eluded her.

Ahead, and slightly to her left, was the sole feature of that barren landscape, a stand of trees, about fifty feet across, and dark in the harsh, merciless grey light. It was, she knew, where she must go.

She walked forwards cautiously, then faster. The grass was like mist about her feet, and the ground firm and level. As she approached the trees, the grass thinned, and a path appeared, worn by the passage of feet over the years, and she followed its lead, and called sword to her hand. The blade burned with a cold and malevolent flame, like a captive moonbeam.

The trees were about her now, lining a path, long and straight, to the heart of the place. They arrayed themselves as a guard of honour along the route, and spread their branches above her head like fan vaulting, a cathedral in ebony and argent. Small splashes of light fell onto the path. It was dust, dead and dry.

A hundred yards away, or thereabouts, a light showed at the end of the tunnel. It grew as Nancy moved towards it, seeming to drift through unreality, until she stepped out into a vast clearing amongst the trees, where short grass grew. In its middle, this expanse sprouted a spiral pattern of standing stones, that reached inwards to some centre of power, hidden by the uncertain light.

Nancy's flesh prickled to the feel of an interplay of unknowable energies. There was a heavy aromatic smell, pleasant but nauseating, drifting on the wind. It passed and all became still. Involuntarily, she shivered.

With reluctance, she stepped forwards, to enter the vortex, knowing that it was the only course of action open to her. In following it, she might gain her unknown goal, or she might encounter and succumb to the powers in there with power enough to destroy her, and more. To stay behind was folly, especially with pursuit so close behind...

From the outside, it had seemed that the ashen skylight fell as brightly within the compass of the stones as outside them, but on passing the first stone, Nancy had stepped into darkness. Yet if the light from beyond did not reach her, that did not mean that the dark was absolute. Rather the path and the stones flickered with potassium purple flame, and between and beyond them, small disks of light, always in pairs, blank and either red or yellow, that first appeared and then vanished again.

Fear attacked her, suffocating her, and clamping her heart in a grip of ice. She could see no shapes, but without doubt, those lights were eyes, and on that cue, the adrenaline had been loosed into her system. Her hands tightened on her gun as if it were a talisman of power against all the evil in the universe. Detachedly she felt amusement. Ask her on an open street in broad daylight about evil, and she would deny that the word had semantic value, yet now she could sense it as plainly as she could see the stones.

With quiet inevitability, she moved to the heart of the manifestation, and with every step, she could feel strength flowing from her. A heaviness, like shackles of black velvet, weighed her down; sight constricted to a narrow cone, as if she looked the wrong way down a telescope, and around it the colours behind her eyelids played like fireworks gone mad. The violet fire grew and caught at her ankles.

She fired her gun wildly, hosing, its blue fire about her as if it were water. The pale tongues of purple drank it quietly, and did not seem to change, though its clutch seemed to weaken slightly. There was no thought of turning; her footsteps slowly led inwards, and as she went, the higher the clinging flames rose, the slower and more infrequent her strides became.

One turn from the centre, the leaping violet tongues were at her throat, she had almost ceased to move. She felt torn apart, as if she was dissolving slowly in that fluid. Even to breathe was now an effort. The culmination was now close; a wave of flame that finally submerged her rolled around the curve and at her.

She had no time to feel fear, only surprise that she remained, and now but a disincorporate viewpoint, seemingly free from all restraint. She turned, and caught a fleeting glimpse of something lost in flame, before its shape went, and the fires collapsed into the formless carpet of their origin. She did not name to herself what was she had seen.

Now loosed, her movement into the vortex was no longer hindered – instead she was drawn almost irresistibly towards the centre. Without any other choice of action, she surrendered herself to the steady drift towards the central nexus.

The force ceased, as suddenly as it began, at the edge of the central arena. In the centre of that void, some thirty feet across, a circular platform of white marble streaked with grey floated. It was lit in white light, as if by spotlight, in contrast with the purple glows beyond. A perfect disk of polished stone, six feet across, it was a contrast with the rough blocky pillars of the way.

Upon it stood something to make her hackles rise. It was her own form, save that the silvery hair was waist length; far more than she herself had ever bothered to grow, and on the brow, proud and imperial, she wore the silver and adamant crown of Wolf. An incongruous wave of lust rippled through her consciousness, turning to revulsion as she saw the alien necklet burning blue at her throat.

The husk stretched forth imploring arms.

Join me, come to me. We are one, we need to be together. Please do not stay apart. Think of your needs...

The tongue spoken was not Tweenspeak<sup>□</sup>, but something alien, and yet she understood it, and instinctively rebelled against it, fighting to be out. She tried to scream when she found that she could not resist the allure, but even voice failed her now. She could only struggle helplessly as she was drawn towards the silver witch who wore her body.

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She woke, and knew that it had only been a dream – or was 'only' really the right word to use? She had dreamed that same dream, event for event, detail for detail, only the night before. She could only remember one possible instance of another dream recurring, and enough time had elapsed between and since for memories to become garbled by lying dormant.

To dream twice the same dream, on consecutive nights, a dream with far more solidity and coherence in its imagery than her normal dreams was unlikely. That in both instances she should notice the alien artifact, yet had only found out its true form between the episodes put it all beyond the reach of unaided probability.

On the first time, she now recalled, when the viewpoint had reached the centre of the stones, she had not been drawn inwards, but instead gone on to some other, more friendly theme of unreality – something about the castle, she recalled, or possibly the University, or possibly some weird fusion of the two. The second time was different – she had allowed the thing entry to her mind for a second time, and even if she had won the battle during the day, she had lost the day's campaigning, and it kicked a gut reaction into life, a quiet nausea, a hollowness.

Last night, she had not woken, but now she was wide awake, and despite a faint kamikaze regret at not having seen the dream through to its conclusion, she was glad of that.

She opened her eyes. The grey light that softly illuminated the room showed the first hints of dawn, and she twisted around until she could see a clock. In pale green figures, distorted by the angle at which she viewed them, it announced that the time was now 04:12, and as she watched, the minutes figure advanced one step.

Carefully, trying not to lose her balance in the gloom, Nancy stood up. Through the window, she could see out to the arch of the rings cutting across an almost clear sky. Few stars were visible in the washed out heavens, that already paled towards the east, but a couple of the other planets of the system showed as brightly unwinking points. She picked up her dress from where she had discarded it, and pulled it on, and gathered up her boots.

The room around her was littered with the dark shapes of people asleep, and the sounds of breathing. and snoring formed a backdrop that she had heard even in her dream, yet which seemed to fade from conscious perception by virtue of its familiarity.

She shuffled forwards, lightly on her bare feet, until she could touch the edge of the work surface that ran along one wall, and then with that as her guide, moved towards the door, delicately stepping over the bodies. On the shelf, at the foot of a mural depicting a hunting scene, a girl lay, limbs asprawl, deeply and quietly slumbering. Her face was non-human – feline in its inspiration. Its half seen form, a hunter's face in repose, imprinted itself sharply in Nancy's mind, recalling, the gem that now snared her mind.

She paused a few moments in the hallway to clear the disturbing image from her mind. Across the way from her, light spilled out from under a door, igniting the carpet to a fiery red glow. There was the sound of voices, and faint music. She entered the room, and all conversations ceased. For a few moments no one moved, with everyone staring at Nancy and Nancy doing her best to return the compliment.

Nancy, one of the girls remarked, You're grey!

Yeah – so what. Pause. Oh my God

She let her voice trail away into silence – she had noticed the bare flesh of her arm. No longer pinkish brown it was a normal, healthy, mid–grey, save where she had been wounded the previous night. There, stretched beyond its repertoire of imitative adaptation, the quasiflesh patching was a cancer of pinkish grey, obscene and sickening. The sudden seeming change left her feeling dizzy.

I didn't know you were Change–immune. Were you told about this?

The speaker was a young man wearing a clan Brady armband.

No – I didn't even realize such a thing was possible.

Its rare – Change is just a tailored gene–cancer virus – some people are just lucky enough to be immune to it or can develop immunity. Would have been useful fifteen hundred years ago. As is, it's a nuisance, but usually masked by stronger patterns.

Oh damn the technicalities. What am I going to do now? We can't stay here all day, can we?

Not really – if you were seen here like this... You can't really hide in a set like this. Any ideas?

Go back to my room – I've still got some of the old Asrovne outfits we wore last term – get me behind a mask and then stay loose, I suppose. I only need to be in my room to pack, and that won't take long. We'll be getting a lift out at 10:00 anyway, but it's those hours when people are up and about... Any better suggestions?

No–one ventured anything.

Okay, Nancy decided, Wait until its light enough to see by outside and then we can go Now who is there here who hardly goes to Greenhollow – The less familiar any faces are, the better.

I'll go. It was the young man of Clan Brady who volunteered first, and he was joined by one of the Min–Koë girls.

While they waited for the light to improve, the team breakfasted, and when they returned from the kitchen, they found that someone had turned the radio on to a news channel.

... And locally, the main item of news is the arrival in High Prospect of the regional director of the StarLine shipping concern, along with Vors k'Shamarra, the president of the Shamarra Funding Cartel to join in talks with representatives of the Free Traders League and senior government ministers.

Although no statement has been issued, it is widely understood that these talks are a forerunner to a renegotiation of the relative position of the Linkers' Guild and the Free Traders and the Treaty of Foundation, following the demise, in yesterday's sitting, of the Five Castles regime.

For a fuller analysis of the situation, we hand you now over to.... A switch clicked, and the voice was stilled.

Ho hum! someone commented, with mock levity The ink's hardly dry on their last little game, and they start selling the planet to the highest bidder – and people actually voted for them..

But think of the money, it was suggested

Crap –who needs money – it's power they're after, and they're too damn naïve to realize that they're selling themselves down the river. I'd like to see the expression on... what's his name – the guy in the Populist party, Edvarton – when he finds out he's only one grade up from teaboy (Junior, Third class) in Shammara Funding or StarLine. If only they would show some decent, civilized apathy...

And one more time... Nancy's comment was edged with enough sarcasm to be bitchy I am sick and bloody tired of that same old moan about politicians who don't have two brain cells to rub together, only an undernourished self interest, it's too much like descending to their level.

Okay, Okay, I know! But, hell, it makes you sick when supposedly responsible people do absolutely loopy things for supposedly altruistic motives. If that's government, I'd rather see anarchy.

Nancy looked out of the window – fortunately, it seemed to be light enough, outside, and glad to get out of a rapidly developing, debate on political theory, suggested that a move be made.

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It was indeed brighter now, the few stars and planets that had been visible were gone as the sky had paled, and on the eastern horizon the first tinges of the dawn provided a faint colouring to the scene. In the open, there was almost enough light for Nancy's colour vision, making the green of foliage truly green, and not a peculiar type of grey.

They had decided to strike across country, firstly deciding that if the roads were being watched, the extra speed could do them no good anyway, compared with the scant likelihood of being spotted in the rough, and secondly that it was as good a way as any to kill time that would be hanging heavily on their hands that morning. Fortunately, the course they would take meant that they would not have to cross the river. Though a generous bend in its course put the river across the direct path, both colleges were on the same side of its valley, and the extra half mile of detour would save them the bother of being out under open skies, or crossing a river, or killing another ten or twenty minutes.

The college was as a city deserted. There was no traffic on the pathways, no loiterers in the empty courts. In all the windows, the glass was opaqued, showing, a pearly silver now that there was no light inside the rooms.

In the woods, however, beyond the arbitrary boundary of taming, night still held sway, and once out of sight of the borders of its shaded domain, the three paused to let their eyes adapt to the gloom, and when they could again see clearly to avoid pitfalls in the broken terrain, they moved on. The forest floor about them was carpeted in flowers predominantly pale lilac, with here and there a patch of pink, or of yellow, or more rarely, blue. In places, the efflorescence was so dense and full that they could not avoid walking on it, and crushing the flowers underfoot.

The trees around them were gnarled and old, and closely packed, and heavily leaved. Even at noon, though thirty feet above them might experience glaring sunlight, here a green cool dusk would hide. Yet, as they walked, and the ground sloped upwards as they gradually moved away from the river, striking south to avoid its curve, the texture of the woods changed. Slowly, while the soil beneath their feet changed in quality, the woods opened out, and the trees became taller, sixty to eighty feet tall. Here the leaf canopy, though about as dense as it had been, was made up of layers, each individually thinner, and occasionally large patches of blue sky could be seen. About them, visibility extended fifty or more yards, showing the local topography. There were puddles still from the previous night's rain, trapped in hollows in the clay soil, and everywhere the autumn's leaves carpeted the ground in oranges and yellows.

High above them, in the trees, lizards sang. Any other wildlife seemed to be content to remain both silent and out of sight, all save one slink. It had draped its tawny body across a branch, and slept there as they passed under it. At their approach, it lifted its feline head, and opened one golden eye. It considered them as they passed, its gaze following them intently, then hesitated. It seemed to pause a few moments in thought, deciding whether it was worth bothering to hiss at them, or whether it might be more stylish just to ignore the intruders into its domain with a regal contempt. Eventually it decided that it would close its eyes, and go back to sleep.

Nancy and her two companions, for their part, pressed on, through yet another mood of afforestation, where all the trees had sprouted clusters of thin trunks, to form a shoddy leaf cover, of leaves the size of thumbprints, at four inch intervals on thin twigs that themselves provided more cover. A few branches obstructed their way, with tangles of lesser twigs and a few vines for good measure, but they all broke brittlely at the slightest touch. They seemed dead and dying, here on this carpet of the leafgold of their own coining, and it depressed Nancy. She hurried, jogging through the rustling carpet of leaves and snapping twigs, with her guards following close behind.

She was glad to begin the descent to a small tributary of the Greywater, where taller live trees grew, and brambles and small succulents, and patches of grass coloured the floor with patches of green. Her running had faltered to a walk, but as the slope, became noticeable, and she began to recognize the countryside around her, she hastened once again, down to the brook.

It was on a tree stump near the stream that she was sitting, when her companions again caught her up. The waters babbled quietly, and above the gravelly bed, small creatures darted back and forth, carried by the flow. A few yards upstream, a log had been thrown across the channel as a bridge.

Nearly there, she called softly as the two approached

Just over the rise, that's where my room is – and I suppose that's where we'll part company. No point in being seen together. Just keep me in cover until I'm inside.

Okay by us. We'll spread out now, cover you from either side.

Right on. Call on me when sanity is resumed.

But there was no incident, no shoot-out, as Nancy reached the crest of the rise, and saw her own chalet. She saluted the two who had accompanied her, and then set off down the last fifty yards. The door opened to the coded infrared signal from her key ring<sup>□</sup>, and she closed it again behind her.

Home again. It was so incredibly mundane that she could hardly believe the events of the previous two days. Here she could believe that life went on as before, and paranoia was a disease rather than an asset. The morning was bright, and soon, the sun would rise. It seemed such a pity to waste those precious moments of peace in just packing her belongings.

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It took her less than an hour. The sun could still be described as newly risen, and yet the last items had been stacked away, ready for her to pick up her suitcase, and go, all save a bundle of clothes lying on the bed, an outfit in the style worn by the Asroven. The Asroven were a desert people, from a small world, with pronounced axial tilt, and they had evolved from a small fox-like creature. Life had always migrated from hemisphere to hemisphere with the seasons, from small sea to small sea across the merciless deserts, and its people had become nomads, for fifty thousand years of recorded culture. Released from the cycle of the seasons by off-world contact, they had built cities that were more than semi-permanent trading posts, and had exploded out into the galaxy, retaining their distinctive style of dress, reminiscent of the Arab burnoose.

Nancy packed her dress, and pulled on baggy pantaloons, tucking them into her boots, and took up the long-sleeved cloak, and the shimmering leather gauntlets, tying the hood under her chin. A silver mask of elaborate workmanship, depicting a sharp, vulpine face remained on the bed. The eyes were wide, and filled with golden sparkling iris, with horizontal slit pupils, though from the other side, they appeared smokily transparent. Nancy took up the mask, and standing in front of the mirror, attached it to the fastenings inside the hood. Now to the casual observer, she would seem to be a totally unremarkable figure, a sight seen every day, and even a careful observer could only distinguish her from the real thing by noticing that she lacked the barrel chest of the Asroven, developed to suck in the thin air of their world.

Alone and unobserved, at least according to the sensors she had deployed around her rooms, she departed, with the intent of killing time until her transport arrived.

She was nearly at the slideway before she realized that she was retracing the path she had walked that evening with Alan. The thought of him troubled her – he was almost kindred spirit, but not quite – they could share a bond of sympathy, but would rather be alone. On a whim, she decided to call on him, and say how she had deceived him.

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The slideway was a band of burning ice under her feet, deep as the unmelting polar snows, its blue with hints of darker and deeper tones below, and covered in turn by smoky trails of white, and it carried her on, while the wild wind of her passage whipped the cloak she wore, and tugged at her trousers. Its touch was chill despite the bright and unchecked sunlight and caressed the bare skin under the garb with icy fingers.

Yet despite that minor discomfort, she was disappointed when finally she coasted to a halt on the big rink at Harkvale centre and took a few unsteady steps onto the stability of the concrete border, and then with confident strides, set out along the path to Alan's chalet.

The small house was made to much the same design as her own, with but minor stylistic, differences to distinguish them, and it was with a feeling of familiarity that she beamed her identifier signal at the door sensor.

Alan is asleep right now, came the automated reply, but he is only sleeping lightly and not dreaming. If you don't wish to disturb him, leave a message.

Could you wake him for me – it's important. She was determined to go through with this thing, now she had decided it. The computer system acknowledged her demand, and then was silent.

There was a long pause, and then, after perhaps two, three minutes, Alan appeared, unshaven, and wearing only his trousers.

Honey? he asked what are you doing at this time of the morning, and dressed like that?

Nancy took off her mask.

Nancy!? Alan's face writhed as he tried to find a suitable expression. But how come? I mean, why? Come in, my Lady, quickly.

Nancy followed his lead and took a seat in the living room, while her host disappeared. He returned a few minutes later, having undergone a complete change of image – he hadn't quite gone to the extremes of putting on a dinner jacket, but then again, he hadn't stopped far short of that. Would you like something to eat, something to drink?

What have you got?

He drew a deep breath, and opened his mouth, obviously about to list the contents of his larder, and then, thinking better of it, said: Come and have a look.

They breakfasted together, on cereal, sitting at the kitchen table. Nancy had thrown her hood back, and let her hair fall back.

Were you really Honey McLain? he asked, after a long pause in the conversation.

Yes.

Then the other night when I called on you... I didn't offend you, did I, My Lady?

No, in fact – well, I was more surprised than anything else. In fact, thank you. No one's ever said anything like that to me before. I suppose with relations, familiarity does breed contempt. She's a first cousin, once removed, by the way.

Who's that?

My latest girlfriend, Tricia Kathrine. Just as a matter of interest, that is. I thought I had to tell you.

Thanks. I... I can't think of what to say – it's such a surprise seeing you – I never even dreamed that I'd ever actually talk to you, let alone this... he swept his arm about, to indicate their surroundings.

Never mind. I'll tell you what – any time you want after all this is over – call on me. And if you decide to change sex in the meantime... I'm sorry – I don't really fancy men and I'm not that curious

I think I know what you mean.

Yeah, I suppose you would, at that. I'd never thought about the view from your position. Nancy paused, considering the ramifications of the idea, and then laughed. Strange, thinking of it like that.

I suppose it would be. I suppose this is one time when telepathy would be useful – just finding out how other people see everyday things, what makes them tick. I suppose you could do with that these days. It might mean an end to all this squabbling your family has suffered these last thousand years. Though I don't suppose there, is any such thing as a 'right' answer to the problem, it might just make negotiations easier.

You said everyday things – and, my god, is it ever an everyday problem for us. I sometimes wish I'd been born someone totally unspecial – but I would miss the Castle. It's a marvellous place to live, and explore. It'll take me century or so to finish it, if I don't get bored meanwhile.

I wish you luck, then. I hope none of it gets damaged before you go.

Not much chance of that – even the original small castle was armed like a battleship – all the planetary defence lasers we could lay our hands on. I can't recall the figures, but I can recommend a few books on the subject.

So if that was what the place was like then – what is it like now?

Uh–uh – careless talk costs lives – and other clichés. Anyway, I don't know – but I wouldn't like to try taking the place without heavy orbital support, which fortunately, is unlikely. We have a lucky star which never sets, if you take my meaning.

You mean a certain place not twenty three thousand miles from here.

Indeed. And I suppose it's really your telepathy idea in practice. Not that you could get a Linker telepath into a Council meeting, without someone screaming for the privacy of their own nasty minds. Not that I blame them too much – there are things I'd rather no–one else knew, about. Nancy stepped, metaphorically, on the stream of examples that rose to conscious awareness.

Alan's expression seemed to indicate that he too had a few private memories that he didn't care for and his face reddened.

I don't need to be a telepath to guess that one, Nancy remarked.

Yes, I suppose not.

It doesn't worry me. I've not got anything against you personally, in fact I like you – but...

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Finally, she departed, leaving Alan at 09:30, and the University but a few minutes later. She was regretful now the moment of departure had finally come. She was leaving friends behind, however few in number, however distant they seemed to her, and she would be leaving them forever. The world was cruel to her, and it filled her with an anguish, that kept her silent during the flight home, and apart from her cousins who shared the minibus

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It was approaching 18:00 local time, or midday by the time–zone they had departed, when they approached to within spotting distance of Castle Wolf. They sped low over the gun–metal coloured ocean, with the sun at their backs, and ahead of them, grey cliffs rose, and white towers, gilded by the sunset light. A darkness hung over the towers, even to the great silvery shaft of the Upside Control, a darkness that formed part of a spherical surface, on which the skeins of smoke writhed and oscillated like the colours on a soap bubble. That feature was new, only established a few weeks previously; for the first time in nearly two centuries the lift fields<sup>□</sup> were up, though yet not at full strength, but still adequate as one layer of their defences.

The minibus circled once about the castle, while security checks were carried out and they drifted slowly through a gap that opened in the veiling. Below them, now, at last, massed the score square miles of castle, spread like a cancer of city upon the green land. They descended further, and then, even that analogy seemed to break down.

From a location near its heart, and at no great altitude, the world became castle, there was nothing else that could be seen, save the mountains miles inland, which seemed to grow from the outskirts of the castle. A world indeed, Nancy thought, *my world*

But a world which had to acknowledge an outside. The rooftop where the bus landed was guarded by a fireteam equipped with full combat support equipment, ready for a kamikaze attack on the part of supremely clever terrorists, and Nancy had no doubts that a further squad were concealed in vantage points overlooking that rather open roof.

Suitcase in hand, Nancy stepped out onto the concrete, and looked around her, seeking her bearings from familiar locations. As well as the shifting veil above, there were vague shimmerings that might well be

soldiers<sup>□</sup> on watch with heavy countermeasure shielding up. For an instant, she also saw one of the laser batteries open up. Her eyes followed their line, mistily traced in ionization up to the lift veil, which sparkled, and then blossomed into an explosion, black smoke, about a roiling heart of dull red fire. The thump of detonation came about two seconds delayed.

Mortar shell, one of the guards explained. Across her helmet, the name Terry had been stencilled. They come in about every ten minutes, and then the automatics get them. I think they're just trying to stop us getting a good night's sleep before we leave.

In rapid succession, two more explosions rang out, followed a second later by a third.

I thought you said every ten minutes.

Yeah – one pattern every ten minutes, there's some random element in their arrival times – Genevieve has the exact statistics to every decimal place that means anything but I do know we've got a good chance of eight minutes before the next bunch. It averages four shells per pattern – there's sometimes five, occasionally three, and I can't recall any larger or smaller runs ever taking place.

Where are they coming from then?

Westfield – which is about the only reason we haven't laid a nuke on the launchers – we can't even run an airborne raid to put them out 'cause they're being launched from a ship on the tarmac there. Damn' nuisance there's a Free Trader port on Wyvern. At least you can trust the Linkers even if they're against you.

Well, at college there, was a rumour going round that the Traders supplied arms to the matts there – they certainly weren't all using home-made stuff. A couple of the guys I know are on Trader scholarships are definitely matts. What more do you need?

About five days. Hell, if the Traders are prepared to act that openly, and at that sort of level even before the Bill was passed. There's going to be something big lined up for half midnight tonight.

Uh?

The twenty four hour hold Jeanne got put on the ratification.

I hadn't heard about that – when did they pass that?

Two hundred years ago – it's in the Treaty of Foundation<sup>□</sup>, cleverly disguised as a popular check on the powers of the Council. When petitioned by any citizen, the Leader of the Council must grant a twenty four hour stay of execution of any measure not given the unanimous assent of the Council, so as the public can register complaints. Jeanne was the only person who seemed to know about it and she was probably responsible for it, which might be taken as an explanation. I'm fairly certain it was designed with today in mind. Now they have to hold with it to maintain any sort of credibility on the interstellar scene. Otherwise we'd be knee deep now in protesters and petty bandits...

Unfortunately we are just that – have you seen a radar view of the local area recently? When we were coming in, it was like flying through a snowstorm. I'd reckon there are about a thousand vehicles of one sort or another out there, and if more than one percent are legit, I'd be very much surprised.

Just like vultures. A pity we can't go out and shoot down a few. I'd like to take this rig out for real, one time. She indicated the combat support suit she wore.

Cousine<sup>□</sup>, Nancy suggested, I'm sure you'll have more than enough of that before this is over. It's your turn to be shot at now. I can tell you that it stops being fun as soon as the other guy starts to shoot back. How old were you when we left Last Gasp?

Negative something.

Count yourself lucky. We've had to fight real primitive, not all mod cons like you'll have to. Have fun. See you around.

See you, Nancy

Terry looked around, and decided that she was no longer needed to watch the aircar. A scintillating, shimmering veiled her as she took off to resume airborne patrol. Nancy watched her fade from view, and then turned, and headed for the door. A smoky veil across the opening told of a low-pass field<sup>□</sup> in operation, making the indoors cooler and darker than otherwise it would have been. After the horizontal evening sunshine in her eyes, she needed to wait, until her vision was adjusted again.

The floor on which she stood was polished stone, pale green, with mid grey swirls lined with white. The stone continued to her left, where it made a stairway, climbing to a landing, then doubling back above her head, and out of sight, and it continued to her right, to make three steps down to a cross corridor, carpeted in a matching pale grey green. A swirl of cool air reached her from the right hand arm of the passageway, bearing the scent of flowers.

On the wall to her right, was a map of that level for the adjacent area, and she checked it for names, to confirm her location. As she had expected, she was close enough to her main set of rooms not to need to descend to the transit levels. She would instead go direct.

The right hand passage was the most suitable route she decided. With a few shortcuts, it would be less than a quarter mile's walk.

Fifty yards on, the corridor ended, and through a door, she came to a stairway, leading down. Two levels she followed it, and there parted company to rejoin the corridor net. Her way led northwards now, along a passage with wood panelled walls, and a floor tiled with wood in a herringbone pattern. To her left, windows opened to an abyss that descended beyond where any noticeable illumination fell. From the depths the sound of rushing waters rose a hundred yards below.

Two hundred yards, the majority, almost, of her journey, she followed that corridor, until it, T-junctioned. The right-hand arm was only five yards long, ending in a leather panelled door, which revealed when Nancy pushed it open. a small room carpeted in red, and furnished with two wooden chairs, their seats upholstered in a like manner to the door.

Across the chamber, another such door, leading her onto the gallery around a great hall. There were three long tables on the floor below, and benches along them, to seat the diners. Old paintings, darkened with age, formal portraits of the once important, lined the walls, which were of a dark oak. The musty odour of long neglect tainted the air, and dust specks drifted in the shafts of golden sunset light that poured in through a window in the far end wall.

Another door opened ahead of Nancy, not quite directly across the hall, and she went to it, her footsteps echoing in the empty chamber as they trod on the oaken beams. The far door took her into a tall, narrow passage, with a diminutive door at the left-hand end. She hurried, not liking the cramped corridor, and wanting to be out.

Out was a lumber room, seemingly neglected for centuries. Junk of generations past filled it, and dust covered it all in a soft white fur, save where her previous transits had worn a path through to the floor, plainly visible, though slightly covered again by the encroaching tide. She skirted the heaps of books and paintings, toys and models, to a wooden stairway, without handrail, and so steep as to be almost a ladder.

On hands and knees, she climbed, into the room above. In direct contrast to the room below, this was brightly lit and empty, and the floor but bare panels of unvarnished pine, covered by a silvery dusting of grit that crunched underfoot. Below the window, open, unglazed, to the elements, was a wooden box. ▯

Nancy leaned out of that window. From its sill a crude bridge spanned the emptiness beyond, a twelve inch flanged girder of bright orange structural plastic that she had found, and epoxyed into position to save a five minute walk. The handrail was of similar origin.

Using the box as a step, she climbed out onto the bridge, and crossed, not looking too long at the asphalt paving of the open ground, two hundred feet below. Above her, the sky opened out, and above the roofs of the immediate buildings, only a few feet above her head, the further ranks of structure, dominated by the mile high Upside Control.

Another empty room welcomed her after that crossing, and she passed through, into a totally featureless corridor surfaced entirely in a slick grey plastic with a spongy texture, and illuminated by long opalescent panels in the ceiling. No one lived here; the only scents she could discern were of machines, the robot cleaners that were ever out of sight, possibly they were stored here. Whenever she took that route, Nancy decided to check whether that was the case, but she had never yet gotten around to it.

The passage turned, and she was almost there, in that little island in the castle where she had sat up her primary residence. At last a borderline was behind her, that indefinite interface where one style of architecture gave way to another. With lightened steps, she skipped down the corridor to a broad spiral stairway, with an open core five yards across that plummeted all the way to ground level. Twice she circled that plunge, and then away along a passage to a locked door that surrendered to the touch of her hand. She put her case down, and flopped onto a couch.

She sat there for a few seconds, just absorbing the familiar surroundings; a table left in disarray under the windows that lined the far wall, and beyond them, past the towers of the castle, and the forests beyond, the mountains of the Shalan Ti, grey and white against the washed out blue of the eastern sky, and clouds that were the final backdrop.

The end wall, to the right of the windows, there was painted a mural, the work of one of her cousins who had been the previous occupant of these rooms. It showed a group of riders, all women, like a valkyrie band riding to war. They were all dressed alike, as if for a uniform, in leather jerkins, part unlaced in the heat, and leather breeches.

Their leader, her arm raised in command, seemed to have reined her horse back only feet away, and now looked imperiously out into the distance. To her left, and behind her, the standard bearer held aloft an orange flag, charged with a hexagonal device in blue. The lush grass through which they rode rose so high that it hid the riders feet.

Around the corner of the room, the scene continued. The grass became shorter, then gave way entirely to red sands, and the blue sky became a lowering greyish red, streaked as if with gradations of clouding, with white and grey and crimson. Mushroom-like trees, and fragile soaring towers rose out of the dunes, and in the distance, hills rose to the horizon, in a landscape from some fabled Mars.

There was a knock at the door, breaking Nancy's trance.

Come in! she called.

Hi there, Nancy.

The newcomer was a younger girl, in T-shirt and jeans, taller than Nancy, and with longer hair.

Hi there yourself, Julie. You sure didn't waste any time getting here. What gives?

Boredom. You're likely to be one of the few people with something new to talk about, anything except politics which unfortunately seems to have dominated the talking here for the last few weeks.

Okay. I'll try and think of something – but I tell you, it won't be easy. We didn't have much else going on this term. I'll just be glad when its all over. I suppose I could show you my war wounds. Let's find a medikit...

There was one in a desk drawer, and Nancy selected the items she would need.

I caught a bullet in this arm the other night she explained and I gummed it up with pink flavoured goo. We can see how its healing and change it for grey if we need.

She stripped off the shirt she had substituted for the Asroven cloak, and displayed the ugly wad of quasiflesh.

Julie wrinkled up her nose.

That it?

What do you want? Scars? Buckets of blood?

Nancy moistened a swab with solvent, and began to remove the dressing, peeling it away in long rubbery strings, to reveal unbroken, healthy flesh beneath.

And when the last scraps of the dressing were gone, there was no visible evidence that she had ever needed it. There was not even any sign that she had even worn the dressing, no puckering or clamminess of the skin; just ordinary, unremarkable arm.

That's a bit of a pity. I'd hoped to have something to show for that. I got a ricochet there a couple of nights back, sure looked nasty enough at the time. I'll show you the jacket – lots of nasty red blood on that.

Red? I was going to ask – I thought you lot out at Uni had Changed – how come you're grey?

I woke up like that this morning. Last night I looked just like any of the cargs. she smiled to herself – being home had one advantage above all the others – no longer the need for secrecy. Here she could use Clan slang of a sort that could have won her a knife between the ribs at college. Deriving from 'cargo' the term 'cargs' had been one of the more demeaning titles applied to the hapless colonists who had been chosen to settle Tau Ceti III. By extension it now applied to anyone who was not a member of the Combine or who used haemoglobin as a blood pigment. Now all I've got to show for it is a few inches of light brown hair that'll need dyeing some time before I see Tricia again.

Tricia – she the one decanted along with you?

Uh–huh. You can tell the model just to look at.... my year, short, slim and flat chested was the style. Certainly changed before they nipped you – what were you? second batch after mine – nearly fourteen.

Yes. I've looked at my specs – it'll be a couple of years before I stop growing – six foot eight, and bulky. Not at all nice. When I can be bothered, I'll get modified more like you.

Thanks. It's nice to know someone else who thinks small is beautiful.

Easier to climb with, provided you don't care for long reach, if you want a practical point. More so if the new place has the silly gravity I hear it has. And you don't squash the person you're sleeping with so much. Talking of which, Nancy...

Which we weren't, but I can take a hint when I hear one. Am I correct?

Essentially.

OK. she decided, Call on me some time after dinner. I should be here, even if it is to do my hair. Now we've got that settled, what's been happening around here? How long till take–off?

Five days, a bit over. As for happenings, like every ten minutes we get bombed, and then there's a crazy sniper who keeps on taking pot–shots at lighted windows. Things like that we couldn't do anything about.

I used to complain at college, like that, even when we were able to go out and shoot back. But we can't do anything, of any meaning. I don't suppose anyone can. As long as the clans endure, there'll be idiots who read their history books and then decide that we are a Bad Thing – in capitals – and try to do their bit to help everyone else. We're on the defensive against the whole range of zanies and nutters, and that's on thing we can't get rid of.

Face it – what we're dealing with is the perversity of human nature – people too stupid or too dedicated to realize the essential worth of enlightened self interest, and apathy. Too goddamn many people feel they've got to do something, so by damn, they go out and do it, even if it hurts, because it's Right – all capitals. Unfortunately, the cargs don't have a monopoly on that sort of thing, like sister Astrid with her bright ideas about going out and shooting back when we could have all been tucked up nicely in bed.

Julie smiled With each other, she suggested

With the bloody matts if need be. 'Make love, not war, is not exactly a brand new idea, and a lot more fun. At least if doesn't have you gallivanting about roofs during the granddaddy of all thunderstorms. There was one of their girls I fancied only she was straight as a die. Always the way I suppose – and that's another advantage of being home.

Never mind. I'll see you tonight, then. Julie walked away, pausing only to blow Nancy a kiss before shutting the door.

Genevieve! Nancy called, as soon as the last sound of footsteps had faded, I'm not in, not to anyone except Tricia. Could you run me a nice warm bath, and get me something to make my hair look normal again.

At once, my Lady.

Nancy resumed her exhausted sprawl on the couch, until she was able to transfer to the bath, and continue that urgent exercise. She lounged in the warm water, letting all the frustrations of term unwind, and fade from her

consideration.

The time had flown, and not only the last couple of months. The years too had caught her unawares, with not one, but two, of the younger batches of girls growing up now. How Kari and Sue, and Astrid and Tessa thought of it, all too soon she would find out, crossing from her comfortably junior position among those of University age. She was worried about growing old at seventeen, while there were those in her family sixty times that and more. Change, rather than age, was the key. After, say, two hundred, things would alter little as centuries passed, but for now she had to wait a long while before she would have half a century to her credit, but she had undergone more change in her first handful of years than ever she would again – she was nearly the finished product now, awaiting the final, and long protracted, polishing.

To hell with that she decided while she was young, she would, act it to the full.

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Her watch indicated 13:28, the wall-clock nearly half past nineteen hours, when she emerged from the bath, her hair now restored to its wonted silver, with a change of clothing waiting for her.

The sun was set, its last colours reflecting from the mountains far away, fading even as she watched, while she dined, or as she reckoned it, lunched, alone in her room, and read a magazine.

But when she had finished the last mouthful she gave up any hope of continuing to read. Quietly something was fermenting at the back of her mind, now that the initial elation at her homecoming was past. She felt disjointed after the sudden change in environment, in culture, in pace, and direction of life. She felt regret now, rather than relief, at being home and away from university, trapped at the intersection between those worlds.

She would have liked to have been able to stay a few more days, with friends, with minds and interests that matched her ideas of fun, and not with family. A few more days, and everything, would have been all right. That thought seemed to tag itself along at the end of her wishful thinking, like a thing alien, welling up from the depths of her mind rather than being deliberately formulated, as if she had caught a whiff of someone else's thought.

A few days, and all would be righted, they would be off-world, and once again, free to do as they pleased, even if that did exclude Wyvern. She shrugged and sighed. She already missed the friends she might never see again. Damn it, she was lonely here, even though there, were more people here she would talk to than at University...

She pushed away the thought that she might be growing out of the Castle, and stood up, and pulled on a jacket. There was something that seemed to push her to action, to achieve some goal, and she could only lighten her soul ache by following it. She left a message for Julie and then was gone, through the corridors and west, taking the secret ways which only she might know, to a suite she had set up and secretly maintained, high in the Red Towers.

A while, she sat there, and watched the castle, and then lay down on the bed, and contemplated the ceiling, and browsed a few books, and then she could not ignore the feeling of emptiness any longer.

She found a bow, and a quiverful of arrows, and in a cupboard, a rather decrepit target which she set up in a nearby corridor and then filled with arrows until it was ragged and her fingers sore, and, then tiring of that game ran. She flew quite aimlessly through gloomy halls and corridors that seemed to have no end, past windows, murals and sombre paintings, wishing, that she could somersault, or even turn cartwheels, running until she had to suck in breath in great gasps.

The activity had filled her, but without it, the melancholy took her once more, and she walked on. She found a small garden, with a swing. The evening was already too chill for her to lie on the grass, and swinging on the swing required too much effort – and besides, she had little enough breath to gasp out on the downswing, and it made her feel slightly sick.

Time was stalled, it crept by, tormenting, her, asserting its right to withhold the resolution of her turmoil within. Slowly, the sky darkened to night grey, and the tingling silver of the rings built up about her, and yet the hour was only little past twenty, and Julie unlikely to be out of dinner for another half-hour. She looked forwards to their night together. It would provide welcome hours of amusement during which she could effectively shut off her mind, and then after that, sleep, which could be extended an indefinite time, and then Julie would still be there... Properly managed, that little escapade could kill a large span of time. She treasured that anticipation as she walked by the river, slowly back to her rooms while the cloak of night gathered itself around her

Every ten minutes or so, the bombs came, ticking off the passage of time, and lights came on around the Castle, and sometimes off again. She had almost finished the detour.

A bell. Twenty and one half hours of the day. Dinner would now be finished. With lighter tread, and faster, she hurried to her room, with first the gravel path beneath her feet, then concrete, and then wood.

Julie was already whiting when she arrived, and she smiled.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Not too long, I trust How about a drink?"

## Chapter 4 – Flight

All was dark; and in that darkness, something stirred, a primeval, bestial force. Nancy felt it bubble up from the lightless depths of her self, like marsh gas, bringing with it taints of all she disliked about herself, dragging her in its wake, from the borders of dream, reluctantly to full wakefulness. Raw, hot animal desire was uppermost in that turmoil of id-thoughts washing up from far below the lighted shallows of consciousness, and drowsily, she began to respond. Already she held another in her arms, so she nuzzled closer, caressing, the cool skin of her back, and kissing her, before she had finished waking.

But the unveiling of her consciousness brought clarity to the drive that had grown within her. She opened her eyes and considered the scene. It was not the young girl with hair of silver brightness in the ring-glow, the fine slender body against her own, that was the focus of her lust, but an inert construct of stone and metal, tens of millions of years old, a chain and a gem in a museum a quarter of a world away.

Her first impulse was to sick fear, but that door was denied her. There was to be no easy flight into hysteria, and that, intellectually, frightened her still more, for she would be perfectly aware of all that would be happening if it erased her. Coldly, then, she turned to fight, to drive away the attack upon her will, but there was no clear avenue by which to direct her counterthrust, no point of especial weakness, apparent to her, and without such guide, her resistance was foredoomed to failure.

Reluctantly bowing to the inevitable, Nancy decided to cease the struggle, to yield to the pressure. Maybe there would come an opportunity to break free, maybe not, but she would wait, and be ready should it come. As for the present, she would do what she had to.

Nancy slipped carefully from Julie's loose embrace, rolling her gently away. She snored slightly in the new position, but otherwise it seemed that her sleep was undisturbed. Even so, Nancy watched all the time for the slightest signs of awakening, as gently she wriggled out of the bed, and crawled onto the floor. Only when carpet was beneath her hands and knees, did she attempt to stand, careful not to misjudge her balance in the uncertain light.

She moved across to her table, disliking the rustling of her footfalls, to check the time by her watch. It showed, now adjusted to the local values, 23:49, a comparatively early hour, as the lights still burning aplenty in the windows she could see agreed. Early enough, maybe, that the Castle as a community would still be awake, yet too late, by an hour and a half, to reach the museum by the 00:34 deadline

She shook her head, attempting to clear her mind, but all she achieved for her pains was vertigo. The compulsion remained, now become part of her she could neither isolate nor subvert. She turned her back on the brightly ring lit black and silver roofscape, and went in the next room to find clothes and equipment for her task.

White was the colour of her choice, a colour that would be camouflaged against the white of concrete, should she be forced onto the rooftops or open boulevards. It was certainly for no other reason, practical or symbolic. Coveralls she chose, with boots of white leather, and a belt of the same material. Contrasting with these, she unpacked two guns, a stunner, and a blaster, home-made both, and of unpainted materials, save, on the latter where radiator fins had a black crackle finish. They were ugly but functional, and had no part in her outfit other than of pure practicality – they could never be aesthetic.

There was nothing else that appeared useful, as far as she noticed, either in rummaging through her case or searching through her room. So she would travel light – it suited her fine.

She sat down at the desk, and switched on the computer console, selecting the non-sentient part of the mechanism.

She paused, sighed, and began to type her message, so that Julie would know where she was going, and why, and Nancy's guesses as to what exactly was happening.

As Nancy slipped out through the door, an instruction for Julie to read from the file glowed blue-grey against the dark screen, like the rings beyond against the vaster and paler screen of the night. The room she left admitted no more light, by her instructions, than was required to see by and not walk into things, but here, in the corridor, the illumination was greater, and she trusted herself to jog-trot, trusting that living in a mainly uninhabited block, no one would be abroad at that hour.

She paused only at junctions, to check that she went unobserved, retracing her route of that afternoon, taking her bridge at a run, and the pausing in the far corner of the room to readapt her eyes. Through the soft darkness of the junk-room she crept, stepping gently over obstacles, until she recognized, in the distance ahead of her, what was the cause of the sound she heard. Voices nearby were raised in revelry, in the midst of a precinct rarely disturbed by human presence.

Stalking the source of the sound, she passed along the corridor, and with every step she took, she became more certain, until at last she beheld with her own eyes that the old hall was full of feasters. She felt reluctant to pass by in view of that gathering, urged to it by the thing that piloted her. She toyed with the idea of calling for help, however reluctant she might normally be, but she could not step from thought to action, and instead resorted to silent curses against the group that made the hall its meeting place.

Resignedly, she tuned back, considering the possible routes she might take to her aircar. It would, she decided after careful deliberation, have to be the roof. – only just over twenty minutes remained until the deadline expired, and local airspace became unfriendly. She regained the bridge, and looked up and sniffed. She muttered faintly to herself and then began to climb along the piton route set there. The climb itself was more annoying than strenuous but had she not travelled that path before, to set pitons and improve footholds, it would have been impossible

Standing on the flat roof, she had two choices – a two mile walk, or a quarter of a mile of climbing sloping roof. The first looped back the way she had come, longer than she dared contemplate; the second began ahead of her, where the grey tiled roof of the hall rose from the dark and glistened damply in the ring-glow. Golden light, and festive noise spilled out from the small window in the end wall, which a few hours before had admitted the last afternoon light.

Nervously, she checked around, and saw behind her spray of pale lines spring into existence, low in the north-east and there to dance nervously around – the time had come for another bomb run, and one of the minor batteries was acquiring targets. The dance halted, and the pencils of light began to spread out from their source, at first slowly, then bursting out. One whipped towards Nancy, scratching sparks from the lifter field as it drank in the energy.

Three puffs of light, and a drumroll of sound marked the perfection of mechanized marksmanship, but failed by orders of magnitude to overwhelm it. That would come soon however, in a continuous rain of saturation bombing, until something got through.

In the remade still of the night, Nancy began her climb, barefoot now, trading comfort for purchase on the cold and clammy roof, aware that she would bruise her heels properly that night. While she climbed, a single, half-hearted explosion, presumably something to do with the previous three, roared in the night above, and its suddenness startled her a little, but not enough to interrupt the climb.

On hands and knees, she crossed the roofcrest, following its narrow purchase, and to her minor annoyance, accumulated grey and green smears on the knees of her coveralls. There would be more of that in time, as she gathered moss and lichen stains from other rooftops.

At the end of that section, a six foot drop brought her onto a stretch of flat roof – ahead, the corridor she had followed that afternoon, and to the right, for a score of yards, another with a crested roof crossing it. She headed for it at a run, her momentum carrying her up the slope, and grabbed for the crest.

For a while, she waited there, looking at what lay ahead. At the bottom of the slope, a four foot gap opened, separating roof from roof, showing her the top floor windows in the opposite block. One window was lit slightly to the left of where she lay, and the occupant was sitting in plain sight. She was blonde, her skin light brown, and that was enough for Nancy to recognize her. Tricia – no doubt in one of her own secret apartments.

Nancy swung herself over the roofcrest, and slid down the far side. There was a small wall, about a foot high, around the roof, and another on the far side, and they were wide enough to make reasonable stepping stones, despite not having, been designed with that purpose in mind.

She stood on the first, not caring to let her gaze descend to the fifty yard chasm at her feet, and estimated the jump. Given grass, or some such, so she could land asprawl if need be the gap would be trivial to cover, even from a standing start. As it was, she could do it without especial effort, it would hurt is she overshot.

Carefully she dropped into a crouch, swinging her arms to gain momentum, and sprang. An interval without duration severed the chain of her existence while she flew through the empty air.

Her heels impacted painfully on the far wall, the gritty surface harsh beneath the blow. She was off balance tending to fall forwards, and with arms windmilling about to compensate managed to regain an upright stance. As soon as she dared, she stepped down, so that the wall now prevented a fall

Coldly she checked the time – 00:15. Nineteen minutes. It would be far more efficient to get inside the castle again, and the force that commanded her movements assented to that decision.

She knelt down, and unclasped her gun belt, lowering it over the edge to knock against Tricia's window

Hey! Out here! she called

From where she watched, she could only see that the window gave onto a lighted room, with four inches or so of green carpet under the window.

Carol Mastersen! Is that you? still no response.

Tricia! It's Nancy. Wake up in there!

A window opened, and a face looked up, and smiled

Nancy, she asked What the hell are you doing on my roof at this time of night?

Long story. Help me down, and I'll give you the whole sordid story. Deal?

Deal. Then Wait a minute, I'll just get something to stand on.

Tricia disappeared, but there were noises of movement from the opened window, and eventually a table appeared in the part of the room she could see.

Nancy. Just swing yourself down, and I'll guide you.

Nancy sat down on the edge of the precipice, and swung her legs over the edge, then turned, and lowered her body by her arms.

Can you reach me?

The only reply was Tricia's grasp behind her knees.

Okay. I'll reach down for the gutter now.

This lowered her another fifteen inches. The guttering creaked, but held. She had checked the design specs – the actual safe loading was about twice her weight. If anything was likely to fail in the near future, it was her grasp where the gutter edge cut into her palms.

That it?

Yes.

Tricia grabbed her around the waist.

You can reach down one arm to the window frame now. I've got your weight, that's it. Now the other arm – hang on to the window frame and I'll lower your feet to the table. OK now. Done.

Nancy slipped the embrace, and jumped down onto the floor, sweeping her gaze around the room, seeking a door out.

Nancy – what is it?

She hardly heard, that question, locked in that alien trance until Tricia shook her by the shoulder, and asked again.

What's the matter? Why the guns?

I can't explain properly, I've put the details under keyword [sapphire](#) in my part of the general archives. It'll say it better than I can, face to face like this. I've told the whole story, or as much as I know. Please don't tell anyone until midnight thirty. Promise me, Tricia, It's important.

What have you been smoking?

Nothing. I wish I had been. I think I might be burning out at last. I mean that – I think I'm going mad. I'm also armed. Please, Trish, help me!

How – I don't know what you're doing, or why?

I'm going back to Uni.

Nancy, don't, please. I love you – if you get killed out there tonight, it could be forever.

Don't you think I realize that? If I had any free will in this matter, I'd be safe in bed with Julie Marie. Hold me, Trish, tell me I'm dreaming this.

Tricia held her, with Nancy's head rested on her shoulder, pressed against her hair. Nancy felt her throat constrict, and her breathing disintegrated into sobs, but the tears did not come. She tried to force herself to cry, but the attempt failed.

Nancy, Nancy, what is it? You can tell me. Please. I won't mind. I'll help you. Tricia forced herself to speak words of reassurance, as much for her own benefit as Nancy's, while she played the situation by ear. She had never had to deal with this sort of thing before.

You remember the other night, Nancy replied between long dry sobs, in the museum, the blivit, something from it got into my head, and while we were looking for that Connors girl, it woke up something else. Then yesterday, when we went there again, it called me, stronger than before. I thought I'd beaten it, stopped it, but I haven't, it wants me to go to it. I'm scared, Trish, scared sick, but it won't let me be. Can you feel that?

She forced her mouth shut, and took a deep breath, and another, and slowly lifted her head, intending to look Tricia straight in the face, perhaps to show herself, perhaps to stare her down, perhaps to kiss her, but she never completed the action. As she lifted her gaze, she saw first the floor, and then the window, and through the window, the clear argent greys and ebon blacks on the far wall leapt out at her, to torment, and tear. The siren-like compulsion clawed at her brain like barbed wire.

Oh God, she swore, The night. Kill it, Genevieve, Fill it. For Hell's name, Genevieve, shut those windows and opaque them.

She threw herself to the floor, moaning.

Shall I, Tricia? Entirely neutral, the servitor mode checked with the registered occupant the orders it had been given.

Yes. Quickly.

' Will that be all?

Yes, thank you.

From where she knelt, Nancy listened to all this in uncomprehending hysteria. She could only see the night, which seemed to identify itself with the compulsion that had planted itself within her mind. So slowly, it seemed, the open panel slid into place, and the material became opaque and when the last sliver of night was hidden, her skin crawled, and colours swam across her sight. There was a funny dark grey green taste in her head, and her skin felt cold and clammy, and everything was becoming strange...

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When they sorted themselves out again, she was lying on a bed, with Tricia sitting by her. The room was apparently without windows, and was lit by a couple of groups of candles, not in the cone of her direct sight. She brushed the hair from her face and found her forehead slick with cold sweat. She checked her watch again 00:18. sixteen minutes to the deadline – sixteen minutes before it would be totally unsafe to leave the Castle, sixteen minutes before any decision would be made for her.

You all right now? Tricia asked her.

Ooh. Nnh. I think so. Can I have a glass of water my mouth tastes all yrrg.

Sure. you stay right there, and after you've had your drink...

Oh, cut that out, and get me some water. This is goddamned serious.

Alright. I will. She stood up, and walked, unspeaking away. Nancy regretted her temper but couldn't find the words for apology.

When Tricia was gone, Nancy levered herself up onto one elbow, and looked around the room. Her attention was caught and held by two paintings, apparently of her, on the opposite wall. She qualified that statement. Certainly, it seemed that the girl who had been the subject for the one, had been subject for the other, though the styles of painting differed.

The first was a formal portrait. The girl was dressed in black, and sat with her left quarter to the viewer. Her right elbow rested on a table in front of her that appeared only in the bottom of the frame. The edge of a chessboard with a game in play, showed there. Her haem-coloured hand entwined itself in a lock of her long blonde hair. Her face which was Nancy's true face, but for its coloration, the same as Nancy's, was woken into a smile of bright and even teeth. She wore a necklace of fine gold chain, with a small ingot pendant from it. The background was a garden of hedges, and flowers and blue skies.

The second was radically changed from the first. It was a full length study, obviously drawn from the imagination. Nancy saw her almost-self from the inside of a building standing in the doorway. She wore green combat dress, like that of the Clan. Behind her, a tracked vehicle moved along the street, and beyond it, wrecked buildings, and a blue sky with faint clouds. The horror of it was the face that was not quite her own. While her hands held an assault rifle and poured a hail of lead into the room, her face showed neither hate, nor glee engendered of sadism, nor even a determination to finish a regretfully necessary task. Rather, it seemed, she believed herself to be spreading some holy blessing of violent fearful death<sup>R</sup>. Could she be capable of that, she wondered disquietingly.

Did you paint those pictures? she asked when Tricia returned with a tall glass full of water.

No – I found them, in a junk heap that hadn't been touched for the last five hundred years or more. I've asked Genevieve, but even she doesn't know or can't remember who she, except that she is strongly of the opinion that this is, or was, a real person.

Mother Trixy painted them herself – the chess playing one is dated November 2105, the, ah, other one, spring, year three of the landing. That's 2134 ADT reckoning. You can see she was right off her rocker when she did it.

Nancy gulped down her water, greedily, letting part of it run down her chin and onto her clothes and the bed. When she had drained it she sat up.

What can I do, Trish?

Tricia's expression changed abruptly, as if that was a key to some distasteful memory. Nancy matched that expression as the great weight of despair settled again on her, dark and formless and empty. Tricia ventured no suggestion, so forced back to her own discretion Nancy made her own decision. She would face the thing now, while there was still a chance of arriving safely at the University.

Give me my guns back, Tricia. I'm going out there.

She was reluctant to comply, but despite that, she took them from the bedside cupboard, but did not hand them over.

I've got to – can't you see that? Nancy implored, reluctant to use force against the only person that she might be considered to love. It's getting stronger all the time. This is the first time it's attacked me so strongly outside of the museum, and it's thousands of miles away. It only gave me dreams before.

If I don't go to it tonight, I'll be called again tomorrow, and again and again, and stronger all the time until we leave – and possibly after that. I can't hide from the night forever. It's night in space, after all, and if it can call from light-years away... If I go now, before it gets even stronger, I might succeed in stopping it – and anyway, if I go now, I've still got a margin of safety, while I'm on my way.

I'll come with you then, whatever happens to be with you, in case...

In case it deletes me.

Yes.

No, Tricia. Stay here – you're safe. It might get you too. If anything happens on the way there, or on the way to the Guild port, there's no need for both of us to die true death. Come with me to my car, if you want, and then give the alarm. A few platoons of the guard will be more use to me, however much I would want your company, I'm afraid.

Oh Nancy, why did this have to happen to us?

Why not? The Universe doesn't care – I was just too nosey for my own good. That's all. There are now only thirteen minutes left before local airspace becomes unsafe. Give me the guns.

Tricia handed them over. Nancy stood and holstered them, and looked at Tricia.

Are you coming, just as far as the car?

Yes, I will. I'll just get a coat.

And Tricia took a cloak from a peg by the door, black, lined with red satin, shimmering green as it moved, and she draped it around herself. Their eyes met, an unspoken reconciliation.

Nancy held out one hand, and Tricia held it and moved closer, and draped the cloak about the two of them.

Twelve minutes. Let's go.

As you say.

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There were no other people about, their absence underlined by the lifeless silence in which they walked. Neither girl spoke, each had matters too urgent, too overriding to occupy their minds.

For her part, Nancy had to plan her moves for the hours ahead, always with the knowledge that whatever reserve of safety she might yet have was fast slipping past, into the dead aeons of history. She was afraid, but had claimed a purpose, and dared not let herself be distracted. No matter what else followed, if she failed now, she would fail her own exacting standards of honour. Not for the first time, she regretted the honour that served her as a conscience.

Beside her, Tricia was still overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. She had never conceived the possibility of something like this – it was something that had before always remained safely fictional, or at worst, had happened to someone else. Whatever the past, the girl who walked beside her now made her feel acutely uneasy, for she doubted her sanity. She felt strongly for Nancy, and the sense of impending loss, that the person she had known for a lifetime would soon be changed beyond recognition, grieved her. There was no training for that sort of thing in the life she had led. Immortality, the slow changes, apace with one's own maturation, the extended family among whom she lived – all had served to insulate her from the loss of those she knew. Hours before, she had parted, presumably irrevocably, with the friends she had won in four months of University life, and that had been a shock to her. Now, the chance that she should lose someone so close served to throw her thinking into confusion.

She walked as if in a dream, the culmination of the nightmare that had grown over the last year. Her body took over for her, walking without needing her direction, holding close against her companion, down, into the windowless depths of the ground levels.

Nancy, feeling the night to be crucial to the gears upon her, and desiring to cling to her integrity until she no longer could, had chosen this easy defiance, but even so, she had at last to climb to the level of the courtyard where she had parked her aircar.

A sense of apocalyptic doom mounted like a thunderhead over her, dark and oppressive, and even her awoken sense of self preservation, goaded into outraged action, could not shift the fatalism it engendered. Adrenaline might be poured into her bloodstream, to make her pulse race, and stomach churn, but even to sigh quietened the impulse to cower. Besides, there were only six minutes left as she climbed the last stair, before the cease-fire was at an end.

Ahead of her, to the right at the top of the stairs was a doorway, and they stopped there, before taking the final step that could not be turned back. Nancy faced her cousine, sadness on her face.

This is it. The end. Once I step out there, it's good-bye. I will still be there, but something else will be at the controls. Remember, Tricia, remember me in case I fail... In fifteen minutes, send a message to the Lady Jeanne, tell her what's happened, tell her to send guards, about two platoons – and remember to tell her the rules we operated under. I don't want to be in the middle of any escalation if she sends in any cybersoldiers. If you want anything more, I wrote all I could think of in the file under keyword *sapphire*.

She held Tricia to her, and kissed her, feeling the warmth of her body, against the cool of the night air. For a minute she held that embrace, though the time was precious, then slowly, and with regret, broke free. There were tears in her eyes, and in Tricia's.

Don't cry, Trish. It's all my fault. Just remember. And remember – I love you.

Tricia pulled her cloak tightly about her, suddenly chilled. Nancy retrieved the car keys from the ledge above the door. She put her hand on the doorknob, and, partly out of reluctance to do what she purposed, partly from a warped sense of the dramatic, turned around one last time.

Now I suppose it should be famous last last words time. 'It is a far far better thing I do than I have ever done before' and so on. Crap. Be seeing you, Tricia, my love.

The door opened, silver light spilled in where the seal had been broken, and now opened wider to admit the flood. Out on the concrete of the court, an aircar stood, waiting for her. Nancy stepped out towards it, cringing as she exposed herself to the sky, as if she awaited physical blow – but none landed. There was only the solitary, metronome beat of her footsteps on the paving, and the faint sighing of the breeze; above the

changeless dark of the sky, cut by the gossamer flame of the rings, about her the castle, painted in the light, and underfoot, the grey concrete.

The door–handle was chill to her grasp, but the door opened crisply when she pulled it, and she climbed in, settling herself in the driver's seat. She began the cursory preflight checks, and with only part of her mind occupied by the task, noticed that the change had already come upon her, subtly changing her motivation. No more was she committed to the escape by pressure of expediency and fatalistic curiosity. Instead she was overcome by an intense and yieldless desire for the artifact – for it as if it was almost a person, not merely for the possessing of it as some cheap and gaudy trinket or work of high and fine art.

That, and that alone was the total change, to the best of her ability to determine it. In any other respect, she was her own mistress, provided that her action didn't directly or potentially interfere with the main mission. Whatever had planted that drive was possessed of consummate subtlety, developed to excruciating precision. It needed nothing as tactless, as brutish, as full control of her body, when her own guiding intelligence had been subverted, and could do whatever controlling was necessary.

She shrugged, and slotted the key card<sup>h</sup> into the dashboard. She would conserve her will for the showdown, the climactic denial of that control, when at last she would be in a position physically to destroy the objects that were the foci of the control. At the present she was more concerned with the array of lights woken on the dash, and the system messages on display screen.

Long term considerations were relegated to the job queue as she fed power to the engines, and let the car lift from rest. Four minutes, she noted coldly as the car reached rooftop level, and she engaged forward thrust. She kept speed down to avoid being noticed by the aerial patrol, but as high as she dared. One minute of freedom was all she asked, in order to gain enough speed and altitude to make interception not worth the hassle.

The light was uncertain, and deceived her eyes, yet she was reluctant to use any of the active sensors, for fear of premature detection, and arrest. Rooftops became planes of grey against irregular shapes of utter black, lighted plaques adrift in an otherwise empty universe too vast and distant for there to be any perspective, cold flames of torments as she strained for focus. Exhaustion fought to claim her for itself, as the reaction to the nervous strain.

She didn't comprehend the ending of her punishment, that the last rooftop was behind her, until she saw the final barrier ahead. She turned her head; and indeed the last high stone wall was past. Below, grass grew, untamed and wiry, and she let the car descend to it. A hundred yards that stretched, before the world ended in cliffs, to a sea of gun–metal below their plunge.

Halfway there, a seam was cut in the land, as far to left and to right as her eyes could discern, a line where the dust boiled to waist height, where the pilot layers of the lift fields intersected the surface. As yet only at about fifty percent capacity, the rest not likely to be fully operative until five days hence, yet stretched to cover the same volume as the full network would handle, the cover that resulted was sloppy. The effect was smudged over a band a meter wide, or thereabouts, as far as she could judge. It made, thankfully, surreptitious passage – whether entry or exit – safer, though less comfortable.

The time was 00:32, and she felt disinclined to waste any more of the last hundred some seconds on caution than were absolutely necessary. She eased power to the forward thrusters, and the car leapt forwards at her bidding, at what she hoped was a judiciously gauged acceleration, a compromise between fast and slow passage.

The groundspeed indicator showed forty miles per hour when she hit the field, enough she judged, to hit the easiest passage. Too fast and the discomfort and potential for damage would be increase, too slow and she would remain needlessly long in the zone of hazard.

She watched it coming up, and at the last moment, let go of the controls. The car passed through the veil, and a shock of ripping pain hit her, followed by the disquieting feeling that her mind had been pulled from its moorings and then allowed to snap back without any ado.

The car rode out into the free night, rocking slightly as the autopilot compensated from the ripple of upthrust imparted to it, and out over the ocean, beginning a long slow dive.

Nancy, recovering from the disorientation of the passage, unprotected, of the field took up the controls again, and looked around. Below her, under the heaving, distorted sheen of the sea, and the clash of foam lining the cliffs, on the platform at hundred foot depth that was the true sea-bottom, on which the Castle had landed, there were lights. Friend or foe, she could not tell – either an aid for underwater patrol by the cybersoldiers of the Clan, or the first preparations of an early arriving group of marine sentients – they would seem the same from her vantage point. She would notify the castle later, in case they were hostile, but that was after she had settled the immediate problem of leaving the neighbourhood.

She pulled the wheel hard back with one hand, and with the other, advanced the thrusters to their fullest extent. Motors whined as power was fed to them, the airspeed and groundspeed monitors began a steady climb. About her the sea and sky rotated, as the horizon fell out of the forwards view, and spun about a vertical axis, in a screaming turning climb for the thinnest of the local air traffic. Almost ahead, was a star, and she altered her course, centring it in the screen. The drives moaned as Nancy kept them on the edge of overload though the acceleration held her down into the seat. Let them think that she rode something with orbital capacity, if that would discourage initial pursuit. Orbital capacity would have been nice – would have cut her journey time from two hours to twenty minutes, but would have required her to register with the Guild and on open access files at that. Such disclosures would not exactly be politic – and nor would her new programming consent to that. Be content then, she thought, with something that gulps air as reaction mass.

As she approached the car's ceiling, Nancy edged the climb into a grand arch, aimed the nose at the western fall of the rings, and locked the controls. Her business now was a little more inspired than moment to moment piloting – she would be a long while on the car's phone link. The proximity alarm would serve her against the approach of craft with hostile intent.

The onboard processor and sensors had already locked into the closest overhead relay comsat<sup>□</sup>, and at the touch of a switch, a beam of near ultraviolet light reached up to it. On the screen a symbolic representation of the keyboard's numeric pad appeared, indicating that she should dial.

Her first call was for the weather charts, both local and continental, all the way she would have to go, seeking a route that would give her maximum cloud cover to hide beneath, away from the prying eyes that orbited the planet masquerading as resource monitor platforms, or similar euphemisms; anything indeed that permitted or required the installation of high resolution cameras trained onto the world below.

The final course she chose wove and tacked, taking every advantage of every last scrap of water vapour condensation existing or projected to exist on her arrival.

That was number one. She committed the weather charts to store, and cleared the call. As soon as the keypad symbol showed, she punched in another number.

The bell flashed on and on, when she had completed the code. Could he have chosen this night of all nights to be out? With the back of her mind she counted the flashes as they mounted into the twenties in number. Come on, Come on, she urged Answer it answer it. Snafu – why now, when so much was riding on it.

And when she had almost despaired of hope, the screen lit up. Nancy drew a deep breath.

Evening, Auntie Shar.

Evening, Nancy. How come you're driving about now – it's after the twenty–four hours, isn't it?

Yeah, just I just didn't tell anyone I was going. Is Uncle Chan in?

No, not at the moment he's at dinner with some of his students.

When'll he be back?

Half an hour or so. Can I take a message for him?

Nancy hesitated a moment – what could she say.

Yes, she eventually decided, Tell him I'll call again at 19:15 your time, and that it's important I won't say more – I don't really trust the line.

I will. Is that all?

I think so, at least that's all I can think of in the way of business...but there's not any interesting gossip. Everything's politics, these days. I'll sign off, I suppose. I want to stay loose. See you.

She broke the connection, and powered down the communications laser.

Now in the privacy of the car, she felt free to swear, and did so, albeit monotonously, for the next few minutes.

Though the delay was not yet crucial, she couldn't go ahead with any other preparations for the evening's business.

She tuned into a news channel of the Tree–V network. Expectedly, she caught a running commentary on the situation she had left behind.

They were presently showing a live picture, obviously taken with high resolution cameras from several miles away, of the Castle Wolf, with commentary from the being on the spot.

Here at Castle Wolf, which must surely be the most famous and controversial of the Clans, the situation is much as at the other locations. Nothing has changed, now the deadline has expired, the internal watch of cybersoldiers is still at its original strength, although we have no idea as to how many more have been mobilized inside its walls. Just a reminder to those of you who have only just tuned in, the deadline for the vacation order expired five minutes ago, and we're showing a replay of the serving of that order on channel 162 if you're interested in seeing history in the making.

One event here that broke the monotony of the last few minutes occurred only a few seconds before the deadline. A vehicle took off from the castle, heading slightly south of west as it climbed. It's below our

horizon at the moment but from the way it was flying, it's my guess that it was an orbital craft, probably heading for the Snowflake.

We'll give you confirmation on that when we hear. Back on the ground, however, as you can see, some cars are landing near the castle. From interviews we carried out on the radio earlier today, it seems that these will be peaceful protesters in the main but a few cars declined to answer us. This is Kerry Qorwen, handing you back to the studio.

In the studio, the commentator sat in a plush armchair, in front of a map of the western half of the continent of Embrys, in featureless green, against a featureless blue of ocean. Five chesspiece castles, in a nearly regular pentagonal array, showed in red. One of the two coastal ones, the northernmost, flashed slowly. That was where Nancy's home was.

The commentator, avian, tall and slender, reacted slowly to the change of scene.

And that was one of our live coverage units, he announced after a few seconds had passed. As you can see, the Clans are taking tonight's events rather casually – as I suppose they well might. However it might be to us, we must remember that for the Clans Wolf and Connors, this will be the seventh time that they have been expelled from a world that they tried to claim as their own.

On the more strategic level we can say that the vehicle seen leaving the Castle has not gone into orbit, but has remained at an altitude consistent with it being a standard aircar. Further there has been no flight plan lodged with the Guild. We have not yet identified the pilot, but we would conjecture that it was one of the Clan fleeing for the Guild port at High Prospect.

Meanwhile the sporadic bombardment to which the Castles have been subjected is intensifying, now that they have been finally declared beyond the law. We have contacted the Linkers' Guild on the question of the legality of the use of high trajectory bombardment of this sort, and it appears that the shells do not exceed the fifty mile altitude that defines the edge of space.

On the political front, the talks began early today between the Council, and the representatives of the Free Trader's League, to renegotiate the status of Westfield Port, and the League itself under the treaty of Foundation. Comment has surrounded the appearance at the preliminary talks between the Ministers concerned and Trader captains who are in port – and that makes about all of the captains who make a regular run here<sup>□</sup>, the appearance of Esseval Kingarra of StarLine and Vors k'Shammarra of Shamarra Funding. Informed opinion inclines towards their appearance being primarily ostentation, for although they are not directly party to the negotiations, they own large interests in the fleet that operates through Wyvern, and it is assumed that they will act as advisors to the Trader captains. At this juncture, it may be interesting to note that the Linkers' Guild seem to have waived their right to have an observer on the committee. No-one that we have spoken to seems to know whether this action was an oversight or intended as a deliberate snub, and the Guild themselves have declined to comment.

Other relevant business in the council, today, went on despite the depleted numbers, and the primary measures under debate were concerned with the status of various activities against, the clans over the last months. There is a growing movement to quash the sentences imposed upon many people under the Public Order Acts, for activities against the Clans during the last few months. This position is interesting, as the precise wording of the acts involved, and the Foundational principles they invoke are comparatively involved. Remembering that these laws were all composed by the late Lady Aelia Min-Koë and the rest of the Board of Directors of the Five Castles, we can see that the legal wrangling may go on for quite a while yet.

As there seems to be little action at any of the castle sites at the moment, let's go over to Krsss Namell for a review of the historical perspective of the problem.

Nancy switched off the program. She had no real wish for another history of the problem, with authentic anti-Clan bias thrown in. She was annoyed enough by being one of the prime stories of the evening. At least her phone conversation hadn't been broadcast to the waiting millions – and they had in her ignorance misjudged her immediate goal. It would seem now that she would in all earnest need the guard platoons she had asked Tricia for.

There were over twenty-five minutes left until the time she had specified for calling Uncle Chan, and still no cloud cover for hundreds of miles. She set the car into a long and very shallow dive, that would bring her down below the cloud deck when, hundreds of miles ahead, she encountered the first cloud.

She watched the time tick slowly by, with mounting anxiety, as she rehearsed the lines she would say, polishing a phrase here, deleting one there, scrapping them, and starting again, and all the while, stage fright threatened to overtake her before the crawling seconds expired. Silently the figures flowed, shape into shape, green on black.

Nancy never looked up, never exposing her face to the orbiting eyes, anxious to remain out of the public gaze, hide what last vestige of privacy remained to her. She was crouched over the clock, entranced by it, as if in prayer or meditation.

The time appointed came, and was past, before Nancy realized. Witch actions clumsy though haste, she switched on the laser and dialled.

The screen belled twice, before lighting up, to show Chan, now returned.

Hello, Nancy. What's up?

Everything, absolutely everything. Uncle Chan, do you swear on your House that you'll help me, even though I sound mad?

Daughter, do you realize what it means for a Han-Chiaki<sup>B</sup> to swear on his house?

I think so, my Uncle. It means that you hold your life, the freedom of your dependents and their descendents and your honour forfeit to me if you break the oath, and that in that case, your name will be erased from the tower of record.

Aye. That is essentially it. Now what do you wish me to swear. I'll accept public records as suitable for the transaction.

I want you to swear that you will help me as I ask or at least offer me no hindrance in what I must do, regardless of what danger I expose myself to.

I have that recorded. I, Chan as'Korran of the third line of the Great House of Tarnweft swear on my honour and my House to follow that command of the Lady Nancy Elanor of Wolf. Now what sort of help do you want?

I want you to get the keys to your museum, the files of records, a small arsenal of non-powered weaponry, and a telepath.

What are you planning to do?

I don't know – it all depends what the telepath can do. I could give you a few guesses, but they're wild, and I don't really trust this line. I promise under my honour to tell you everything when I arrive. Please have everything ready then. Believe me, I wouldn't be doing this if I had any choice in the matter. I'm bound as much as you are, or probably more so.

Don't worry, Nancy, everything will be all right. It'll all be ready for you when you arrive.

Thanks, Uncle Chan, thanks awfully. I'll be there in about an hour and a half. See you then.

See you too, Nancy.

She broke, the connection first, and began to dial again. While the screen rang, she picked up a cloth and covered the camera lens at her end.

Answer came almost at once, this time, and Nancy spoke quickly, before there could be any acknowledgment of the connection.

Alan, this is Honey McLain. This is important– are you alone?

Yes, but...

May I check that with your in–house systems?.

Be my guest.

She saw him key in the appropriate command. Part of the screen blanked to show the readouts. He was indeed alone.

Nancy removed the cloth.

Sorry about that, but I had to make sure. I may have to drop by later this evening. Will you hide me if I do? I promise that I'll only do that if I'm sure I'll lose any pursuit.

OK., Nancy, one thing – are you the car that was on the news earlier?

Yes. Do you want to change your mind?

How do I know? Remember, I want to stay nicely neutral 'cause I happen to like being a-lone. If you don't draw the heat, it's okay.

Thanks, Alan.

Thank you, my Lady.

That was, she reflected, not a nice thing to do to a poor guy like that. She could mould him to her whim And she had done, and he wouldn't bring himself to refuse her. Even if she now told him to forget it, he would not – he seemed to enjoy the role of gentleman too much, and having beguiled her knight, she was likely to wreck him as much as she had in her turn been wrecked.

Even war would be cleaner than the sickness on the world now, and the taint of it was on her. She thought longingly of escape. The Guild port was comparatively close, on the scale of travel she was working with, to the University. She tried to reset the course, to get herself lifted away from this prison world, but her demon and her honour were agreed on the matter. To run would solve nothing, would leave her incomplete, still tied to Wyvern, and unable to return. Even the Partnership of Worlds was finite, and far too small to sustain her for a lifetime's running. There was no course open to her other than to see this thing through or die in the attempt. Only afterwards would she be free to wash her hands of the whole sordid affair, and depart in peace.

She looked out on the deceptive peace that surrounded her, at the rings rising from the ocean, soaring up, and over her head, like a support for the dome of night. Their reflection was a path of cold metal on the water, from archfoot to archfoot across the palely phosphorescent ocean, a cold and delicate blue at the breaking of the waves.

Ten miles below, the scattered coral islands that dotted the waters showed themselves as occasional anomalies in the pattern of light and dark. Any of them could hide a force sufficient to capture her, and the smallest rock house a missile launcher sufficient to destroy her. In a craft not built for combat, she could rely only on what element of surprise was still with her, and enemy inactivity.

Everything she had planned seemed to be working, so now she could only wait. Her home was already twenty five hundred miles behind, and she was not yet half way to her rendezvous. She was alone in the distance and the dark, with only the dark things in her mind for company, and with nothing to occupy the time that she could devote her concentration to. There would be entertainment broadcasts, but she felt unwilling to make the effort to follow a storyline, and any news channel would be pouring out much the same material as she had heard earlier, which was not really entertaining even when viewed with a sick sense of humour.

Her consciousness seethed with a mass of conflicting thoughts, half verbalized, half feelings, painful things that she would rather not think about. Regrets, that she had turned down Tricia's offer of company, that she had not refused to take part in any of the violence of the past months, that she had gone to the museum, by that route and to that floor, that she had gotten into the situations that had led her inexorably to this, and for other things, smaller, more private, friends slighted and crazy boasts. Fears, for her own safety, for the success of this hare-brained venture she had committed herself to, for family and friends, and fears of the things that had ensnared her mind and called her to their bidding. Faint, and half lost, her secret hopes for the future, and her cynical projections of the same.

The wind whistled faintly about the car as it tore through the upper troposphere at four times the speed of sound, quiet in the relative calm behind the bowshock. In the otherwise silent ear, the wind and the motor hum were all that Nancy had to listen to, and she listened intently to the sound.

In that rush of wind music, her mind pieced together from faint cues, and forgotten memories, the banshee wailing that she had heard less than two days before, the sound she had heard when she had dared to strike the blivit, that dark midnight so recently past. The sound hovered, menacingly, at the bounds of perception, like a demon wolf held at bay by the light of a camp fire, working on her fears through its own ghostly presence and its darkly hinted potential for what she could only term evil.

She shivered, uneasy now, feeling a sense of presence outside the car, a malignance that might reach in and take her, a force with more definite aims than the one that had already entered her mind. She wanted to hide herself away from it, but there was little she could do. There were no bedclothes to pull over her head and cower under nor yet any source of spiritual solace for her to draw on, and turn against the threat. All that was left her was the capacity to opaque the, dome, and turn the lights on bright, to banish the night, and loud music to mask the sound of the outside, and so to fool herself that they were gone away. Sleep without dreams tempted her, but always sleep meant dreams as real to her as life, and she didn't care for the dreams that she

might have that night. Drugs would serve to get rid of that, but they would also prevent her from taking the controls at an instant's notice.

The only other relevant drugs in the car's aid kit were combat–hysteria inducing and she was reluctant to do further mischief to her mind. There was really little alternative to sitting, and losing herself in the music until the time came to do something; and meanwhile the minutes and the miles rolled slowly past her.

Thirty minutes past one. An hour out from the castle; an hour from the University, and she was still over the wide, and open ocean, and only slightly over half the way to the further shore. There were no islands now, only the rolling topography of the abyssal plain, three miles and more beneath the silver of the sea. Even the sky was empty, from horizon to horizon no traffic opened itself to the navigational sensors.

Now, if she lacked friends, it was also sure that she lacked enemies, her only companions on the voyage, the fish of the ocean and the birds of the wide seas far below her course. That thought appealed to her and seemed to calm her though it was a drained and hollow calm. She killed the music, and let the wind take up that emotion, work its variations on it, like an escort of lost souls, and its emptiness removed the threat.

She let the windows become transparent. The world, the rings, the sea, were all still there. High in the West, her guide star hung; a finger's width from the rings, the Snowflake served as a beacon for her journey.

A star detached itself from the firmament ahead brightening from obscurity to low negative magnitudes as she watched, swinging away to the left, and down, until it was below her, and lost to sight, a piece of the rings now fallen to earth. Running into massive stones like that was an accepted hazard of high altitude flight in low latitudes but it was the first time that she had seen a bolide from above. A few words from a half remembered song passed through her mind, something about shooting stars, but it was lost in the hollow crescendo of the wind.

Nancy shrugged. The song could be remembered some other time. For the moment, the night, the journey, the loneliness, they were all she needed.

## Chapter 5 – Acceptance

Tricia watched from the doorway as Nancy crossed the small courtyard, and shuddered. Whatever the truth of the story might be, something had definitely happened to change Nancy. The changes might be slight, and indefinable, like the change that had come over her bearing as she had walked away, but to Tricia, who had known her as a sister and as a lover, they stood forth by contrast.

The air held a heaviness, suggestive of ancient and forgotten evils, a half imagined scent of musk or incense that seemed to have clung to Nancy. On the edges of her consciousness, a feeling of recognition fluttered, faint enough to be an unconsciously recorded memory from the recent past, or equally a false memory, fuelled by her present imaginings. She shut the door against the night, and walked away from the place.

The castle had taken on the silence of the midnight hour, and as Tricia hurried through it, her footfalls sounded out, loud and hollow in the empty passages and deserted halls. Everywhere, the night lurked, seeming to drink in all the warmth and the light, pouring in through the windows, and spreading quietly out. The fear of it that Nancy had showed was contagious, making what had otherwise been quite a natural absence of light into something malevolent that had deliberately enveloped the castle, to seep in through unguarded ways, to feast slowly off its helpless prey. It was everywhere, for everywhere, in every hall and passage, there seemed to be windows, and with it, that atmosphere of mindless threat.

She did not actually panic, to physically break and run, but her apprehension speeded her steps, as she hurried to her rooms, where she would find sanctuary, where she could turn and defeat her foolish fears, and once more gain her integrity.

She climbed one last stairway, a stairway spiralling down beyond sight, into the bedrock keel of the castle, and up to a dome where the inky black of the night looked in at her, and leaving that, followed a last deserted corridor to an unmarked door that opened to her touch, then softly snicked shut again behind her. Here was her territory, enough to make her secure from danger, real or imagined, that might currently threaten her.

She retrieved her chair from the bedroom, and drew it to her desk. On the screen, a bridge problem was being displayed, left over from the time before Nancy's sudden arrival. Unsolved as yet, she cleared it to store and typed out the codes for file retrieval, in orange letters against the black.

Her commands brightened once, to show that they had been accepted, and then faded. Gray lettering replaced them, filling the screen, and Tricia began to read it.

And when she had finished the complete text, she blanked out the message. It had frightened her, a cold and intellectual fear. Cold and impersonal, as if some third party were the subject Nancy's confession to the computer was more terrifying than the halting and gasped live version. The haste that had prevented a stylistically perfect sentence structure, leaving what there was in grave danger of breakdown, did not impede the clinical style of delivery, maintained to, and throughout the final list of possible explanations, insanity listed among them.

Nancy had, she realized, been living uncomplaining with something alien wearing away at her mind for – she checked in her memory over the recent rush of events – forty–some hours. Phrased like that, it didn't seem at all long, but with the threat of insanity, or worse, hanging over her, it was a time longer than Tricia would care to bear. Death came close to her on dark cold wings – that was what Nancy faced now. Tricia recoiled in horror from the edge of annihilation, not caring to think long about it, for death was a stranger to her world, a creature of myth, like the gods of old.

She felt her task clear. The time now was 00:51, and Nancy was twenty minutes on the way, and a thousand miles, heading to a rendezvous with what might be her nemesis, to return, if at all, an empty husk, puppeted by something external, alien to her. Mindful of the promise she had made to alert Castle Security a quarter of an hour after Nancy's departure, she switched on the internal phone system and tapped out a number. Singular. The dial code for the Lady Jeanne Marygay of Wolf was the single digit '2'.<sup>Ⓜ</sup>

A feeling as of stage-fright struck her as she committed herself to the call. That code, although generally known, was not lightly used except by those of the first and second generations. She awaited the reply with mounting anxiety.

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While Nancy and Tricia had been leaving Tricia's room, two miles away, the Lady Jeanne was being woken from sleep. She woke quickly, regretting that the time had come now for the final ordeal, that she would not sleep again for a hundred and twenty hours or more. The time was 00:20, and a breakfast rested on the table beside her bed.

She drank deeply of the tea, and took a few mouthfuls of cereal, before discarding it. Gathering a gown about herself, she rose, and strode over to her dresser. Her clothes had been laid out ready for her. Now she must get ready for them.

She stood in front of the mirror, and brushed her long silver hair. Casually observed, she would seem a girl of maybe twenty years, yet her very movements betrayed her age, more than eleven hundred years. Firstborn, she was as old as the castle she defended. She splashed her face with cold water, and dried herself delicately. With her eye on the time, she stood, to sigh and yawn, and stretch, taking this last opportunity for indulgence.

She let her gown fall from her nakedness, and tore a bite of hot buttered toast, now grown cold and greasy, setting the slice down beside her clothes, her full ceremonial regalia as Supreme Military Commander of the Five Castles Combine, one chosen for its firm declaration of intent, from among the other robes of ceremony that were hers by right.

The crisp white shirt was cool against her skin, but she knew from her past experience that it would be grey and sweat-soaked by the time she took it off. Her tie of white silk, she folded one-handed into an impeccable, if ostentatious knot. Trousers and jacket were black, a lightweight cloth designed for throw-away applications as this. She smiled a little at the jacket, encrusted as it was with silver and diamond insignia. At her breast was the wolf's head emblem that signified her clan, and the five-pointed star of the Combine. Two broad bands at cuff and epaulette, and a six-star shoulder-patch marked her rank, without subtlety or guile, as simply above everyone else.

Half past the hour. She gathered up her hair, so that when she put on her cap, it would be held there. The cap matched the emblem on the jacket, its blackness only broken by that, and the silver encrustation of the peak. She examined the result in the mirror. Apart from her bare feet, which would not be relevant, it was a perfect display. She wiped butter and toast crumbs from the corner of her mouth with the hem of her discarded gown, and walked into the next room.

A small studio had been built there, ready for the conversation about to unfold. The serving of the notice of outlawry would be televised around the planet, as it happened, for the vicarious pleasure of the masses.

Two minutes. she was advised as she sat at the desk, ready to take the call. There were papers on the desk, placed there for show, some pens, and a couple of books. She shuffled through the papers, which were mostly blank, to occupy the time.

The phone rang, the fluting tone marking the call as being of external origin.

Well, girls, she said to the monitor crew, this is what we've been waiting for. Casually, Jeanne accepted the call.

The face that appeared on her screen was vulpine, covered in golden fur, and with dark button eyes set deep in its mask. For the television audience, a subtitle had been superimposed on the screen: 'The Hon. Erish Kahsarr, Leader of the Council of Wyvern'. Jeanne looked up briefly at the monitor to see herself billed simply as Managing Directrix of the Combine.

She knew Kahsarr, and both parties held a mutual dislike, born of divergence of their politics, and derived a wry sense of amusement to know that tonight, he would be bound by convention, the party line and the wording of the Bill not to speak what he truly felt, whereas she would be under no such compulsion.

Good evening, Councillor, she greeted him, curtly. He ignored the greeting, and finished tidying a wad of papers on his desk. In anticipation of Jeanne's ostentatious display of rank, he was playing the part of the government official to the hilt, even to wearing an unusually conservative robe. He took his time over tidying the desk, and only when he was finished, did he look at the camera.

My Lady of Wolf, he began, bowing his head the minimum that custom demanded. His voice was soft, but arrogant. As Jeanne traded from the power base of her family, so he would, if it became necessary, trade on the position of his species, for he was a Kintor, and his people had been the first race of the Partnership to achieve space flight, nearly two thousand years before.

You are aware of the business before us now? he asked.

Yes. And I should guess from your expression that this is more pleasure for you than business. Hurry up, let's hear it.

Very well. First I must inform you of the results of your appeal to the populace. There were, from an electorate of 14, 387, 244 currently in-system, a total of 3, 140, 615 affirmations of our position, 1, 932, 452 calls to reverse, and 2, 110, 374 votes of concern. You failed by 152, 526 votes to gain effective sympathy. The vote was quorate, being in excess of one third of the electorate, and each voting position achieved sufficient support for it to be recorded in the proceedings of the debate.

To put it simply, my Lady, not enough people care enough for you.

That is, not enough to put their well being on the line, in case you won. I can sympathize with that. I wouldn't want to tangle with any of the corporations you're dealing with if I didn't have a Castle.

My Lady, that is not germane to the business at hand which is to serve upon you, as a representative of the Combine, a notice of outlawry.

I suppose you're right. After all, the corporations were only responsible for the idea in the first place, and buying sufficient support, and intimidating enough of the unwilling. Get on with it.

Very well. Here comes the formal bit... he paused, and took a deep breath, and began.

My Lady Jeanne Marygay of Wolf, Lady Surveyor of Danestar, Dukin of Kell and Obernal, Baronne of Cormane, and of Tensala, Contine of the Far Isles, Margravin of Angarvale, Marquesa of Haverland, Protector of Enfors and Shayhammer, Mother to the Clan Wolf, Managing Directrix of the Five Councils Combine, Marshal of Combine Security Forces, Mistress of Arts, Mistress of Science, Doctor of Science, Senator-in-Council of Wyvern, I, in my position as Leader of the House of Representatives of the Council of

Wyvern, Erish Kahsarr, by the powers vested in me by assent of the Council advise you of our decision.

We are resolved by fair and open ballot, with votes cast – I shan't bother with detailing them; they are a matter of public record, and you, yourself were there present – with votes cast so as to give a majority assent to these measures, to pronounce outlawry within the jurisdiction of this council for those persons who claim membership or allegiance to the Clan Wolf, the Clan Brady, Clan Connors, the Tegrith Shan, the Tegrith Tsia, and Lyia Min–Koë, and that the possessions and holdings of such persons are made forfeit to the Council.

Is that all, Councillor?

Officially, yes. Do you have any further statement to make concerning this matter?

Only to wonder how you might enforce it. But don't worry, we'll be gone in five days from now

Let me give you a little advice, My Lady – you could, be gone almost within the hour if you apply to the Linkers for asylum. They, I'm sure, will lift you off–world, if you can get to them.

Thank you for that advice, but I shall decline the offer. I've run this Castle a thousand years and more, and I shan't abandon it just for the asking. If you intend to enforce that decree, you will have to take us by storm, and I submit that it will go little good to your public image.

Action on our part, I fear, will not be necessary. It is now quite legal for the people to take these matters into their own hands. I can not stop them exercising their full legal rights, and I shall not try. If you must flout the popular will in these matters, it is you, and not I, that shall be responsible for the outcome

The popular will – or the will of k'Shamarra and Kingarra and whoever else has been buying it. While we're still on air, I would like to take the opportunity to announce that, pursuant to the conditions laid down in the Commercial Military Organization Manoeuvres Regulations of year 4 after Founding, warning notices and beacons have been placed around our territories, as the next week will be devoted to readiness manoeuvres, seeing as it'll be the last chance we have for some while.

And you accuse me of trying to save my image?

This is something different. I am continuing to act within the law, taking on voluntarily the burden of responsibility that you have just lifted from me, as a demonstration of our continuing honour and fidelity. One party to this conversation still has some credibility, and wishes to retain it.

I think I shall leave that undebated. There is no need to discuss self–evident fact. I hope that that proposition rather than what is the fact, is something we can agree on.

As you wish. I feel we have reached a stalemate now, and after all, all the formalities have been concluded.

Agreed. Good night, My Lady

Good night, Councillor.

Jeanne broke the contact first, and wiped her brow. That at least was over, The war had now, begun, and she would be needed on the bridge.

As she stood up to go, the first shots of the war were fired, by a sniper in the nearby hills, who began methodically, to put a bullet into the centre of each lighted window. Armoured glass, they did not break but

they did rattle, enough to wake those who slept. They were nuisance value, but signified enough.

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The situation remained quiet. As yet, no armed or heavily equipped forces had been brought in, and for the first quarter of an hour of her vigil, Jeanne had nothing to do but listen to status reports that were unanimously ones of top efficiency or readiness.

Then, surprisingly, a phone call came for her from inside the castle.

Yes?, she asked of the young girl who had called her. The girl bowed her head, and muttered My Lady.

There's no need for formalities. What do you want that's so important?

Nancy Elanor, sixth generation, has left the Castle. She wants you to send a couple of squads of guards after her.

Does she, now? Why?

The details are on file in her personal space under keyword *sapphire*. She said that something had infiltrated her mind, and was calling her back to the University. If you do send guards, they mustn't use any powered equipment that uses gravitics, otherwise the Linkers would notice, and you must maintain radio silence 'cause of the security patrols. That's how we were fighting this term.

Hell and goddamn. This is all we need. Something to make us really popular with the Linkers. OK, I'll send them out, read the file and call them back if I think it's not worth it. You her bedmate, or something?

Yes. Tricia Kathrine, fifth.

Okay. Come up to the bridge. You'll probably be able to help us in this, second guess what she'd do, right?

Jeanne cut the call off. The girl was hardly likely not to obey, and before she arrived, it would be better to have read the relevant document.

She ordered two squads of guards to follow Nancy's flight, relaying, the conditions of battle that Tricia had put forwards. It would disappoint these who were looking forwards to using their combat support units for real, but that was tough.

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Jeanne waited until finishing Nancy's message before she began swearing, availing herself of the chance to assemble and polish suitable epithets while she was reading. She cursed, in as wide a vocabulary as she had accumulated, in particular, but in no special order teenage girls with a taste for participation melodrama, politicians of each and every flavour, ancient alien artifacts, alliteration, and most especially, her own lack of foresight in not properly debriefing the girls on their return to the Castle. If she had done so, she would at least have found out about the conventions of war that they had used, and possibly detected Nancy's trouble in enough time to get her to the Linkers for a full examination.

She checked the time. 00:59. A few seconds before oh—one hours. It would be a long five days if it kept on going, at this rate.

She thought back. No—one had entered without her noticing, so where, had Tricia gotten to? Even from the edge of the castle, the transit ways took less than five minutes to get to the bridge. She would allow a few minutes more for climbing the stairs, then find out where she was.

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Tricia sat back in her chair as the screen went dark in front of her. Called to the bridge... well if that was what Jeanne wanted her to do, she was no one to dispute her decision. She grabbed a small snack, against what could well be a long night, and changed into a slightly more comfortable outfit, and one that might be seen to be a little more formal.

It was that which delayed her, for as Jeanne was wondering where she had gotten to, she stood at the first security point of the inner sanctum. The great doors opened to her palmprints, without need of any word of command, and she passed into what was, if not the heart and brain of the Castle, something closely akin.

The last doors were before her, and they parted, and she stepped into the main control centre of the castle. Its domed roof was a display system, showing the view, built up from monitors scattered around the castle, which would be that from the bridge, were the castle not there. The rings arched above, notched in the south by the cone of the planet's shadow, and beneath that arch, trees and grass were without colour. Many coloured lights showed in the sky, marking air traffic by range, vector and function. Save for the myriad indicator lights at the control panels, there was no other source of light.

In that night darkness, that quicksilver dusk, there was a feeling of the surreal, at the sight of the women sitting at their posts, waist deep in support machinery, any interface blurred. One of them turned around to face her, and she shrank back from it.

Oh, it's you, the woman said. Find a place and plug yourself in. Genevieve will show you how.

The perspective changed, and a more normal reality imposed itself, as Tricia stumbled across to an empty post, half way across the smoky dark room. Even so, the sense of presence she had felt as soon as she entered remained. Close at hand, and not just through the intermedium of a telephone screen, the great age of these immortal women hung like a mantle, soft as the dust of ages. Jeanne was eleven hundred and thirty one years old, and Tricia guessed that few, if any, of the other present were less than nine hundred. The picture of Jeanne turning to speak to her seemed burned into her mind, that view of a woman, older than had been claimed for the patriarchs of Israel, yet clad in the flesh of a girl barely adult. It may have been a trick of the uncertain light, or something deliberately encouraged by skilful make-up, but that dread visage seemed to shift, and take on many aspects; an aged crone, more ancient than the stars and worlds of this newborn universe, painted in the semblance of youth, a silver wig on the bare bone, and corpse lights in the empty eye sockets; a proud queen beautiful and terrible, and all of moonlight; a young girl, delighting in a world that was still new to her. She cast the memory from her mind, before the last and most terrible face could appear – her own, as worn by her great great great grandmother.

While she went through the less than comfortable procedure of attaching the support equipment, Tricia reflected that one day, barring accident, she too would attain the state of demi-godhood that her ancestors had now achieved – and still find them as far beyond her as she found them now. She looked up from securing the last set of monitor electrodes, to find on a screen before her, a request for an objective evaluation of Nancy's altered personality profile. Sighing, she began to check off the items on the multiple choice questionnaire, and follow through simulation runs to compare the old and the new.

She failed, however, to guess the phone conversations that Nancy was at that moment making, but that went unnoticed. She did, however, manage to mark out a series of likely approach routes to the museum; time would be their test.

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Just over an hour and a half later, at 02:45 castle time, 20:45 local, Nancy saw the first lights of the University ahead and below her. She cut her speed to practically a crawl, only a few tens of miles per hour, and drifted

lower. She glanced uneasily up at the sky, checking that the light, but reasonably opaque, overcast was still continuous.

She had flown subsonic as soon as she had achieved cover, so as not to leave a noticeable trace as she flew beneath it and so to leave almost no trail that would reveal her to orbital spy-eyes. It had added a quarter of an hour to her travel time, and the corresponding anxiety, but she was intellectually sure that she was safer for it.

It was beyond the last of twilight, even here, and the only light beneath the cloud was whatever fraction of the ring-glow that seeped through. There was a feeling of strangeness in the light, a call akin to that which rode her now, which woke something that was almost a memory in her, but a memory beyond the reach of recall, and it left an unsatisfied ache.

Chan's house, her immediate destination, was built after the traditional style of his forefathers, a series of single level courts, interlocking squares all of a standard size, and all the doors and windows facing inwards. Each court was given over to one of his wives, and their children, and was thus differently styled. There were lights in many of the windows where life obviously went on undisturbed, and there were no signs of intruders waiting for Nancy's arrival.

Hoping this to be true, Nancy let the car descend gently into Chan's court, her hand ready on the throttle, to lift the car away at the least sign of trouble, even after it had settled almost noiselessly on the central grassy area. She listened, intent for the hurried noises of an ambush being sprung.

There was, however hard she listened, no sound but the wind, and no movement, save that which it woke in the tendrils of the vines that grew around the courtyard. Nancy relaxed, but only slightly. She opened the door, the sound of it almost explosively loud, and waited a while more. Only then did she dismount, gun in hand.

The gravel border crunched underfoot as she crossed it, waking rustling echoes on the edge of hearing while she covered the empty yards to the veranda. Pale flowers, like bells, hung from the serpentine mass of vines that engulfed the wooden beams, but they had no scent. Even when she put her nose close to one there was only the rank smell of vegetation from the mass of the plant.

She climbed the slight step to the wooden platform which was set perhaps nine inches above the ground and the beams boomed under her feet as she trod on them. The door she sought was in one corner of the square to the left of the steps she had taken.

It opened noiselessly as she slid it open on its track. The darkness within was heavy and scented with smoke. To her left, light flowed under one of the doors that opened onto the vestibule. She knocked, and entered.

Chan was sitting at his desk, in one of the far corners of the room. The vast black work surface was comparatively bare— an ornament of crystal and spun metal, a pen holder, with three pens of varied colours, a few papers neatly piled up, and a hunting rifle that looked large and powerful enough to be a cybersoldier's weapon. He made a brief notation on one of the papers before him, and then set the pen down.

In the right hand corner of the room, another sat in front of the redly glowing log fire that occupied the middle of the room. It provided the exotic smoke, and cast a radiant heat that Nancy could feel from the doorway.

This other was, she guessed, the telepath that she had requested. Human, or so he seemed, he was so dark of skin that his black had almost a bluish sheen to it. An open book rested on his lap, and he looked up at her, with an expression of mild interest on his face.

Nancy holstered her weapon, and clipped the holster shut.

Evening, she said, walking over to Chan's desk. She perched herself on the corner of it, moving aside the rifle and ornament.

The telepath? she asked, motioning towards the stranger.

Yah– Nancy, meet Mike Kimberley<sup>♠</sup> – one of my graduate students. You, I suppose, are too notorious to need any introduction. Now, what's all the mystery.

Nancy outlined the events of the previous forty eight hours, with gaps in the narrative to explain points of procedure and answer questions. Chan was mostly responsible for these, and he concerned himself mainly with the events in the museum.

When she finished, Chan opened one of his desk drawers, and typed a few characters on the keyboard installed there. Across the room, a screen brightened, to show two pictures in split screen.

Are these the ones? he asked her. In the left frame was the blivit, unmistakable, in the second, something that agreed in its location code with Nancy's necklet, but which seemed somehow totally dead, even more than it had been when she had fought it and won. The metal was grey as iron, and the gem no more than a piece of bottle glass, worn by the wind and wave.

They are, she agreed.

That's interesting. As you can see, they're from the same planet, a really third rate burn–off called Lincoln. Asaan 'hvors found them on an expedition about two years ago, in what he thinks was a temple site on a world with basically a pre–industrial – let alone pre–starflight culture possibly with some relics of interference by the Q'l–hrui... Q'l–hrui<sup>♠</sup>; the word was Kintor in origin. Literally translated, it meant something like the those who blazed our trail or those whose footsteps we follow ; but colloquially, it was rendered Ancient Gods . The Kintori had given the name to the civilization or civilizations that has risen all over the known galaxy, and probably further thirty two million years before even the Kintori had achieved starflight, a civilization that had fallen in great and incomprehensible wars that had left their scars to that day. Worlds had been burned into cinders, and suns turned nova in that spasm of destruction, from which nothing had seemed to survive save for scattered troves of artifacts, incomprehensible, mostly seeming purposeless, or if they served some useful purpose to work by physical principles yet unknown.

The star had been novaed, quite spectacularly. The nebula was gone, but from the brightness of the remnant star, and the orbit of the planet, we worked out that it had lost something like fifty percent of its original mass. We found remains of the inhabitants, which made us certain it was a native preflight culture, and they seemed to have been almost human in appearance. He was quite surprised to find the blivit, was Asaan, 'cause he knew that the only other one that had been found was in a derelict from the Q'l–hrui days found in orbit halfway across the Partnership. What he didn't report were any active psychic effects from it, even after examination by Guild psychometrics.

You, my little lady, seem to have woken something up, and I don't think I really like that idea, knowing what has happened when mysterious Q'l–hrui devices have been woken up.

Most of them have proven to be simple hand tools or perhaps small–arms, Mike entered the conversation for the first time, but you're talking about what happened on Chisholm, aren't you, Prof? At Chan's nod of assent, he explained

Chisholm was – with emphasis on the past tense – an H–type world in the Cygnus–Carina axis, seven, eight thousand lites away from here. A team at the Guild University there managed to activate a dark blue

crystalline pyramid – not unlike the material of that gem – that the first wave colonists had unearthed. This was about five hundred years ago, to give it context, and close by the Ggapp Veil – so when the star novaed it nearly started another and more serious war.

So you mean we need to be careful before opening another can of worms? Nancy asked.

Indeed, Mike agreed, and I suppose part of the reason for my presence here is to look inside before we open it.

Yes. Could you have a look to see what it is that's gotten into my mind. If you want permission for anything, well, you've got it. Just do what you think – you can't do any worse to me than I'm afraid is already being done.

Very well then. Just forget what I'm doing, and relax until I tell you. OK?

OK.

Mike seemed to stare intently into the distance, wrapt as he was in Nancy's thoughts. In her turn, Nancy stared into the fire, watching the pale flames of carbon monoxide, their blue coloured into apricot against the yellow glow of the inner depths, Logs crackled occasionally as they dried and settled slightly in the ashes.

Chan resumed his work, and the minutes passed with only the scratch of his pen, and the noises of the fire, to break the stillness. Occasionally, he rustled papers, as he finished one page of script and began on another. Nancy was lost in a trance that ignored time.

Nancy? Mike spoke to break the silence.

Woken from her self-preoccupation, Nancy looked up at him, and asked Well?

I can read fear, because you're being forced against your will by something you don't really understand, and I can read a sense of incredible age, something like what a psychometric gets when he tries to read Q'l-hrui relics. Those are the loudest thoughts, and they pretty much drown out everything but the geas it put on you. I can't get to grips with it – the style's wrong, different race, different culture or something.

Apart from that, and personal memories that I'll not discuss, Nancy blushed, as she reviewed to herself some of what he might mean, not only that, which you're, thinking, about now, but..., oh back to the point, beside the memories of whatever sort, there seem to be tenuous patterns of some sort of secondary personality, pre-dating this latest set of events, and too weak to really probe. Do you write with your wrong hand?

I think I might. I seem to use my left hand a lot for manual work, but I've always used my right hand.

That might be the cause, but I'm not sure. I know people who might be interested in it, though. If you want, I'll put you in touch with them when the, uh, present crisis is over.

OK, but what can you do? Nancy felt it was now time to delve to the heart of the matter.

I'm not sure. I could try to operate on the geas, but I'm really only a telepath on the side. History's my subject and I've not really encountered anything like this before. The trouble is, I can't think of anyone actually on-planet at the moment who's likely to be better placed than I am. I don't suppose you could wait a week until we got someone here.

Couldn't you just put up an interstellar Link?

Not for delicate work like this. Whatever goes on in a Link is too messy for anything but shouting through, not surgery, I'm afraid. There's your option.

I can't wait for help. It's now or never.

I shan't do anything, Nancy. I don't dare.

Then we can only carry this thing through to the end. I'm going to get that necklet : I can't control it much longer. Come with me, and if...if anything happens to me, do what you have to do, both of you. Are you ready?

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The air in the museum seemed hot and still after the chill of the night air. Nancy fancied that there was almost a taste of menace in its silkiness. The glow of the rings fell in hazy puddles along the gallery, lighting one half to stark still life, and intensifying the ebon obscurity holding the other half.

Close to her objective, the resolution close, Nancy felt her fear break through its suppression, a sickening fear of her own termination or possession, stronger than any emotion she had ever known. She walked on, automatically, enwrap in her own self, under the glamour that had been lain on her; a passenger in her own skull.

The gem was already woken to glow in the dark, a single speck of blueness in the black, when she first entered within sight of it, before she woke the conjure-sound in her mind. The metal of the key to its case was warm in her hand, its angular shape insistent in her mind, as she struck off the last yards, driven by a force not of her volition.

At last, the waiting was over. Would she but will it, and the final act of this macabre puppet show would commence. She was alone, without any way to delegate that awful responsibility. Chan's form was silhouetted against the light behind her. His gun was trained unwaveringly on her.

The lock was stiff, and shrieked slightly as it turned, and the click of the bolt sounded as a punctuation mark in the silence. She lifted the lid of the display case fractionally from its resting place and paused momentarily. For the second time this night, the occasion for brave words was upon her but she could think of none. Heart pounding with anticipation, she lifted the lid, and took the necklet. It was warm in her hand, and strangely heavy, and strangely natural as she lifted it high above her head, before putting it on.

Warmth suffused her, radiating from the stone at her breast. Its glow had increased as she held it, and now it was almost blinding, lighting, the gallery to ghastly daylight. And in her mind, it was the same. Something exploded behind her consciousness, seeming to pour nova-coloured light through her, before fading to afterimage blue and deep indigos. In the pain and ecstasy of that assault, she could feel uncomfortable things happening to her. Incoherently, inconsistently, she remembered strands of memory, none that she could claim as her own, memories that burned brightly and then were gone beyond her retrieving of them, leaving not even a memory of themselves. In the background, lines of fire, like firework rockets in flight, burning channels into her mind clearing paths overgrown before and setting patterns new in the fabric of her brain. They exploded, and died, their jobs complete.□

Finally, when only an afterglow persisted, she was once again opened to the outside world beyond her skin.

The attack is dying down now. There are trauma patterns, and a few relict structures without any power to maintain them, but the core of it, the age, is gone, burned out. Whatever had been bound in the gem is dissipated now. She's going to be all right. Her personality may change a little – less than one expects from normal maturation – but it's still her, no discontinuity at all. □

Chan lowered his rifle. Nancy pushed the hair from about her face and mopped the sweat from her brow. She sighed deeply. Weak with reaction, she had no energy for words.

Mike spoke first.

If that's that, I move we go home – or to a bar. Between alien things, and student politics, this doesn't seem to be a totally salubrious place to spend the night.

Seconded. Throw me my guns.

Nancy caught the gun belt left handed and buckled it around her waist. She turned to lead the way out.

From the outside came a loud, flat report, leaving long rolling, echoes like thunder.

The car! Or so Nancy guessed – the explosion had been very near and below them.

Okay, we know you're in there, The voice was amplified and greatly distorted, possibly synthesized. You give up the girl, and we'll let the rest of you go. We just blew up your car, so there's no sense, in trying anything heroic. There's no chance of getting out of there and we can stay here all night. The voice ceased; all was again still.

He's bluffing, decided Chan.

Not the way you think. He can't wait more than twenty minutes. I asked for a platoon of guards to be sent out after me, and they'll be here by then. Possibly before. I saw them setting out by patching into one of our orbital eyes. I can't see them outside leaving us up here – they'll be hoping we stay put while they send up people. Let's try sneaking away, and see what they do to stop us.

They had not gone more than ten feet before a single high velocity round slammed against one of the window panes, shattering it, and breaking off a cone of scab. A few splinters struck Nancy's face.

Tsk. Tsk. , the voice reproved. If you want to get down out of the building, just use the fire escape, and I would thank you to throw your guns out first. You saw what happened to the window. The gun is now on full automatic, in case you were interested. Be sensible about it now.

Mike, can you do anything? Reach their minds, put them out of commission while I escape?

Don't you think I'm trying that. I'm no Tree-V superman. I don't even know what anyone out there looks like to get hold of. Just wait until something happens out there and then run like hell!

I shan't need telling. Adrenaline works wonders, and I've been OD'ing on it all evening.

Nancy edged slowly along the gallery, searching out the way she would take, walking away from the other two, and then back again, so as not to telegraph her intent. She walked past them, and this time did not stop.

Girl! she was warned , the fire escape, if you please, or we take out your friends.

Nancy gestured rudely at her unseen watcher, who declined to comment, and returned, slowly, ready to run. She felt a primeval thrill at the idea of the chase , and her skin crawled with excitement.

A burst of fire tore the night, and an agonized scream announced that someone had died in it. Nancy felt that death as if she herself had lived it, the death that might well be hers, later that night. She sprinted away, her body working independently of her mind, her footfalls crisp on the carpeting.

She did not try for the stairs – they were far too obvious a place for there to be no guard to prevent flight. Instead she would seek one of the covered aerial ways to lead her from the museum, and one of the minor stairways would be enough to lead her to an appropriate level. She would not be caught on the route she had used two nights before, with its open crossing of Gallery Bridge. Instead she would strike north, away from there to the more populous regions around the computer labs, and probably on ground level, just to confuse pursuit. A Clan Wolf girl choosing not to go by the rooftops, that was unthinkable.

She crossed the aerial way on all fours, glad that it was not guarded to force her to another route. Now, she would probably need actively to be sought, now she might have gained some measure of initiative.

With nothing much to lose, Nancy located the stairs, and as silently as she might, crept down the levels to the ground, always expecting to see a guard over the bannisters. Guard there was, a heavily armed Hrugani, sitting with his gun fixed along the bottom–most flight.

Heart pounding, and with trembling hands, she drew back from the penultimate landing, retracing her steps with agonizing slowness, to ensure the most complete silence. Each time one of her joints creaked or popped slightly, she was afraid she would have been heard, but there was never any answering sound of movement, of a gun being grabbed up, or a call to halt.

Three levels up, she dared to sprint, away and up. If the ground was being guarded, then they would force her to the rooftops after all, there to make her escape.

When she had reached halfway up the building, high enough for some transitory measure of safety, she halted, to recover her breath and her composure, and to consider the route her escape would have to take.

Reverse the problem first, she decided. What were the other side doing? Clearly, they didn't have strength to fully and rapidly sweep the building; so how would they have disposed sentinels at choke points? And where were those choke points? Knowing the layout as she did, the question, simply posed, was simple to answer.

In this area, where there were comparatively many small and free–standing buildings, that would be particularly easy. Bottlenecks and walkways, needing at most two to cover would be better than trying to hold a dozen or more corridors.

The main museum was in the middle of three especially isolated buildings, the one she had come to the northern partner, and there was but one walkway across to the rest of the site. The direct way, and all the others such, would certainly be guarded. Anything else would indicate incompetence. But how much would they have done about climbing? And how much time had they had to plan this? Probably no more than she had spent in the museum, as before then they would have had no idea where to set ambush. Someone at a window would be easiest – but on which side of the gap?

To guard both would use an excessive amount of force – with almost a dozen places needing guarding, and probably no more than about thirty matts. There would have to be several awaiting their possible surrender, and more covering them, so that would mean perhaps some places would be guarded both ends. She wished she had asked Mike for some assessment of troop strengths and locations. At least they too would be operating under radio silence to avoid unwelcome attention, so would need to keep runners available for communication; so perhaps the worst she might have to face would be a booby trap – perhaps a mounted gun with a motion sensor laid to cover a corridor, with a live guard disposed, if possible to watch more than one

such.

Her only consolation, in the face of an assessment of what she might have organized was that whatever they did would be calculated not to be immediately and permanently lethal; if they had wanted her dead, they could have just fired some high explosives in without the warning. Now her main fear was of running into an unpredicted, unpredictable, mobile party.

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She busied her mind with setting hypothetical anti-personnel traps, and then breaking them with what gear she had to hand, and her senses with detecting lurkers in the shadows. By the time she had reached the next walkway, she felt that she was as prepared as she could plausibly be.

There was a dog-leg in the corridor, turning right for a short way before launching out over the empty space. Nancy slid her way along the left hand wall, out of the cone of possible fire along the way. Reaching the corner, she sank slowly to her knees, and checked the floor. It was, as she had hoped, but could not distinctly remember, covered by carpet tiles. One of them thrown into the span would determine if it were safe for her to take a look.

She was trying to peel one up quietly, when on a sudden impulse, she turned to look up, out of the window above her head. There was a brief, bright flare of light, just for an instant as she looked, in one of the offices in the building opposite. By turning her glance to one side, away from the patch of after-image, she spotted a tiny red glow in that same window. Now, despite the early hour of the night, there would be very few people on legitimate business hanging around in an unlit office, standing by the window, and smoking to pass the time.

She crawled back, carefully, quietly, staying out of the spill of light on the carpet from the rings above, until she had reached a better vantage point. Now would come the crucial part, as she attempted to shoot the probable sniper – though a civilian manqué with such poor discipline scarcely merited the title – through a closed window. It had never been done, to the best of her memory, on any of the Tree-V shows she had watched, but so far as the theory went, she couldn't see any objection to the effective use of the stunner, even with something dielectric in the way of the beam – especially if it were on full power. The guy across the way had the window slid open wide, but that, she judged, was as likely to be to give a better cone of fire.

Nancy aimed. She fiddled with the divergence of the beam, compromising between power density and accuracy required, and aimed again, checked that she had indeed set the power to full, and fired. This would have to be the shot that worked; her gun was likely to have less charge than the other's.

The pale purple beam leapt out into the night, and though the glass seemed to be absorbing some of it, enough of the radiation passed. Something shifted in the window, the muzzle of a gun she hadn't noticed before, and the cigarette glow fell from sight. Regardless of the splashing of the beam that was beginning to make her dizzy, she held it on for a few more seconds. Safe was far better than sorry, or captured, or dead.

She ceased fire when she could take the back wash no longer, and waited a minute or so for her head to clear. It was like coming out from a smoke-filled room into the cool of the night, and the wind under the sky. There was no return of fire, or any sign that a third party had noticed that none to brief exchange. Cautiously, she slid open her window.

If now anyone, was left, waiting to shoot her, that would mean a level of manning that had been certain to capture; so she would risk being on the losing end of a near certainty.

No one fired as she was climbing out, and when she was firm on the sill, with the window slid shut again, and only her heels resting on solid support, she reckoned she was safe anyway. If she was shot and fell, with the

fire escape turned off with the closing of the window, it would be a tricky job putting her back together. Thirty meters at ten and a smidgen per second squared all the way would make a comparison with Humpty Dumpty apt. Alas, the Queen's women were not yet to hand, albeit they were on their way. If only they would make it soon...

Slowly, without ever completely lifting her feet from the security of the sill, she shuffled to her right. She took her time – she could afford to: she was as yet apparently undetected, and the fall was more than she dared to chance without reason. It took but seconds to move the few feet required, but it was a long awaited relief to feel her right elbow contact the wall of the walkway.

Careful of her balance, she reached up, until she had a firm hold on the roof top. Now secure, she looked down. The fall held a macabre lure, and for an instant she entertained the impulse to dive into the dove grey dark below her, but it could not compel her.

She pivoted on her right heel, and reached for a hold with her other hand.

Around...and...up, ha! she muttered in anticipation, thinking aloud what she would have to do, and gasping out a faint rush of breath when she took up the tension. She lifted herself slowly, for the moment her breath restricted with her belly muscles taut.

Without any chance to leap upwards, and the poor purchase and angle, it was only with that effort that she raised herself to stand on her hands, arms locked straight, head over the roof, but legs dangling unsupported. She gasped, gulping air as she allowed herself a brief rest before continuing, keeping herself from falling backwards only by sheer force of will, and grinding torques from her palms. There was a tautness about her heart, and an uncomfortable feeling of suffocation. The bile rose in her stomach, leaving a faint acidity in her throat, and a bitter taste.

She unclenched one hand from its safe hold, and slid it forwards across the roof, as far as the locking of her muscles permitted. The change was enough to alter her balance, and she collapsed the last few inches to the wet, gritty roof.

For a few moments, she lay there, enjoying her ability to breathe the air freely, before wriggling finally, entirely on to the firm support. Catlike, she gathered herself up into a crouch, and looked once more about her.

She wondered how the borderline between reasonable caution and paranoia could be defined. Each window could conceal a lurking figure, waiting to shoot her when the moment was ripe. In the everyday world, such a thought would be born only of paranoia, but now, it seemed the only reasonable worst-case estimate of the situation.

No window had opened, no figures moved forth into the light, but that did not guarantee that none watched the lone figure on the rooftop. She looked up. It was probable that she was being watched from orbit, that her position was being monitored, and relayed to her pursuers. The rings arched disinterestedly above. She felt an irrational urge to sing out her defiance to the watching eyes but she fought it down. Her scalp crawled, and a shiver ran down her spine, and she gathered up her shuddering, and flung it from her.

Stunner in hand, and standing tall, not crouched, she walked casually along the rooftop. A window, closed, immediately overlooked it, and a couple of kicks served to inflict enough damage for her to open it, and thence to slip into the welcoming dark. It shut again, but unfortunately served as a fine clue to the path she had taken, but it was done now, and was the only path open to her, anyway

As her eyes adjusted, she caught sight of the pale glow of an activated display screen. She sat herself before it, and more by feel than sight, typed out her system password. It took the three allowed attempts, and the delay was beginning to make her jumpy, clumsy, and impatient.

When at last the mechanism condescended to acknowledge her attempts, she cared less about errors. She composed a brief message, mainly in the archaic and formal language of the clan, filling in gaps with words of any other language she knew that fit. Mistakes would only help delay translation by observers. Only the despatching required accuracy, and she set up an indirect routing, back to the castle, whence, if it was noticed in time, it could be relayed securely to the troops, directing them to where she would be found. And if they were in time, that would save a great deal of heart-ache, especially her own.

As an afterthought, merely, did she complete the housekeeping operations that still remained undone. A few codes transferred her files to public records, a few more, and she had deleted all operational programs. With nothing more to do, she logged off. It was 03:05, probably only a few minutes before her rescue would come, but even that short time would serve to place a reasonable amount of distance between herself and the scene of the potential action.

She tried the door. Unlocked. From the window, and the glazed wall panels, she could see that the corridor was empty of life. The door handle turned silently, and stopped at the end of its travel with the quietest of clicks. The door opened without noise, swinging slowly, freely, as Nancy launched herself through the opening, spraying stunner fire first one way, and then the other, just to make sure that she went unseen. Even if bodies would be a sure trail to her, it would at least take down foe as readily as neutral.

The far wall, against which she had flung herself, looked out onto an open space, grassed over, and planted with trees. Lights still burned in windows on the far side, and closer, to her right, along the corridor.

In the distance, there seemed to be a faint noise, above the noises of the building. It grew louder, and resolved into the sound of car engines, and their lights soared suddenly over the rooftops.

Four aircars, and fairly large, and, as they passed overhead, she saw that they bore Clan Wolf markings.

Discarding stealth or guile she hurried back into the office. The cars had slowed, and as she had anticipated, drawn to a hover over the building opposite. Troops debarked, climbing ladders from the cars, and they were already attracting fairly heavy fire.

Above the sounds of warfare, a woman's voice, amplified, spoke to her.

We're here, Nancy, we're here!

If they were fakes, they were doing their job well, speaking in clan formal

If they were real, as she believed, they had spent no time in guile, stealthily skulking below cloud. That arrogance might at other times have annoyed her but at that moment, it could not.

## Chapter 6 – Life–Trip

But initial elation tuned to disappointment as she saw the drop completed, having lasted all of two seconds before its overwhelming by her own cynicism. Help now was no closer than it had been all through this madness of evening, only a hundred yards away – thirty seconds dash, even with stairs to be climb in between. Unfortunately, it was about as accessible as the centre of a planet.

Uncomfortable phenomena known as enemy lines lay between her and rescue and the rather high probability of detection and capture that would be involved in crossing them made any attempt to reach her rescuers close to potentially fruitless, defeating all the object of the exercise.

She did not have the time to waste on idle regrets of what might have been if the rescue had been carried out with just a little more finesse delaying their arrival sufficiently much that her message could be relayed. Then she could have been picked up from a rooftop without fuss or fight. Now that message could prove more of a liability to her as any movement would be copied by the matts, and would be in great force.

Reluctantly she discarded all hope of help from the force at the eye of that hurricane of combat. She sketched out a worst case projection of what might happen, that her message intercepted or deduced by the matts would bring the whole hunt after her, so would try her own independent escape. There was at least Alan, still at the University, whom she had set up against such an eventuality, but there were other of her friends who were still in residence. Some of them, which would be fortunate for her, even had their own aircars with them, aircars which could be borrowed for the half hour flight to sanctuary at the Guild port. Those without transport – well, they might at least provide some help – at the very least, she might be able to acquire enough make-up and a change of clothes to hide her all too distinctive appearance.

Enough of time–wasting. Though she was for the moment safe, it would not remain that way, and she had best capitalise on that asset. Abandoning caution in favour of speed, she trotted out into the corridor, and turned right, accelerating to a sprint. Her footfalls cracked on the hard tiles of the uncarpeted corridor, and in its emptiness, rang out loud, too loud, she felt, to go totally unnoticed with people so close by. The corner approached, turning only left past the occupied offices.

She fought to override the animal panic that held her to the run, forcing herself to walk slowly and calmly down the corridor, as if she had every innocent reason to be there. It was hard to cease her gasping for breath against future need, and to do so felt like self–strangulation, but when she turned the corner, she walked quietly as if nothing at all was amiss.

No more than fifty yards long, the corridor ahead of her seemed to reach out for miles. Eight of the doors showed light through their windows, eight places, at least eight people who might notice her. Had she been of the opinion it might help, Nancy would have been thinking small and insignificant at the top of her mind, and for every inch of that journey. Lacking that faith, however, she must needs walk on without any such aid, and glance cautiously into each room as she passed, so as to know on the instant if her presence had been noticed.

Much to her surprise, work, of all things, seemed to be under way in two of them – or at least one of them. In that one, a lone student was writing confidently in great sweeping pen–strokes – the other held a group engaged in earnest discussion at a board, but she could not make out what the subject was they discussed – it might equally be some diagram of game play.

Apart from these exceptions, things were proceeding much as she had expected – the occupants of the rooms were to be seen staring out of windows, or into blank display screens, with, where this could be determined, expressions signifying the agonies of a failure of inspiration. In one of the rooms, work was clearly not even

under consideration; of five occupants, four were engaged in some card game, while the last sat to one side, eating sandwiches, and reading.

Yet in all this, there was some pervading sense of wrongness, of strangeness never seen before. It was as if she watched this place through someone else's eyes, and felt their reaction. She might have inclined to put it down to shock, but though she might have escaped grave harm at the mercy of the artifact she wore, it seemed to her that she had not entirely gone unscathed, and that something new to her had been planted, and was taking root, a personality whose original was megayears dead, come once again to life.

The thought did not panic her, indeed could not – she had been terrified all evening, and there was no way for her to respond to further stimulus. All that mattered to her was that she get out, and find somewhere to rest for a long time. She was just incredibly weary, washed out, and needing replenishment.

Intellectually, she realized, with cold precision, that her legal status here was a violation of neutrality, in as much as she had called for troops. It had seemed a good idea at the time, but now... Though she had lived in the University, and came of a family that had close ties with the Guild, she knew little of the tenor of the justice they meted out, of how much was law, strict and by the book, and how much was tempered with compassion.

She would not give herself up, even though the off–chance might be a safe bet – her stupid pride would not let her. Instead, she would show everyone and win her way home again.

She had reached a junction. To her left, the corridor went through a more densely occupied region – ahead it reached out as a catwalk across a large hall, and then into another corridor. She chose the way ahead.

The light in the hall came from windows set high in the right hand wall, and in tongues of yellow light pouring from corridors on the level below. The roof was ten feet above her head, so near, and yet so far.

At the sound of voices, she stopped and crouched down, reckoning the elevation of the catwalk sufficient to hide her from casual observers – but she readied her guns, just in case. The voices came from below her, and to her left, and were approaching the hall. She thought she recognized one of the voices. Safe in her concealment, she watched from that vantage point for them to come into sight.

As she had hoped, she did indeed recognize one of them, small, of feline stock, and heavily maned. Apart from his companion, a female of some avian species, there was no other person to be seen, or within earshot.

Hey! Althan! she called down to him.

He looked up.

Nancy? What the hell are you doing here?

Hiding, escaping. Do you have a car somewhere nearby I can borrow? I'll buy a new one, if needs be.

Sorry, I walked here – beyond the obvious, are you in trouble?

Yes – there's a whole gang of matts and a couple of squads of clan grunts having a fire–fight a couple of hundred yards away, and if they don't get me, then the Linkers will. Good–bye – and sorry.

Althan and his companion collapsed under a spray of stunner fire – they would stay that way for ten or fifteen minutes, long enough for her to be well clear. Nancy did not look back as she went, only forwards to note the

doors from under which light showed, where she must tread softly as she passed. In one room, a faint whirring noise indicated some mechanism working at speed, but all the others were silent behind their anonymous doors.

Ahead, the corridor split into a T–junction, with dim light reflecting in uneven patterns from the semi–gloss finish of the wall. There was a door half in view to the right, and next to it, a fire extinguisher, red against the prevailing grey–green colour scheme. Following her earlier choice to turn right, she turned right again, determined to deviate from the course she had previously transmitted that she would follow.

She sought stairs – anything to change levels, up or down. This building seemed to oppress her, close her in. Her mind felt trapped in her skull, helpless to extend itself beyond the barrier of bone.

Suddenly, there was a tension in the air, as if it had become ten degrees warmer and sixty percent more humid, and it clung and cloyed about her. Sweat was on her brow, and her body damp. Her armpits were chill with evaporation. There was a scent of musk, and other heavier, deeper or darker fragrances that she could discern, but put no name to, and she knew it was her own terror that she smelt.

She walked, did not run, and she knew that the air temperature here was maintained at 290K, with a humidity of 35% – and despite that, she was sweating like a pig, and probably the headache she now had was related to that. From her reading, she guessed it to be a fever, though how she had caught such a thing, where, and from whom, was a mystery. The whole concept of illness, beyond digestive upset from over–indulgence, was something she had always before regarded as something out of the unclean pages of history.

She was, however, not totally ignorant of the subject, and knew that in cases of fever, crude and direct lowering of the body temperature had been used in the treatment, and also that were she to keep on like this, she would most likely suffer from thermal overload. She mopped her brow with one hand, and the skin burned at the touch. The sweat left a greasy stain on her flank where she wiped the hand clean on her coveralls. She opened the front zip about halfway from throat to waist, and felt the air touch icily on the open skin. She needed out, now, out where the air was at least five, maybe ten, kelvin cooler, just to escape the tropical atmosphere here.

Help? did she need help now? But whose? Anything that helped, she would accept. She could see stairs, about a thirty yards ahead, but dared not, could not, hurry to them, when the air wrapped her like a heavy blanket. She needed a thermometer, to satisfy her curiosity as to exactly what temperature she was running.

She balanced haste against stealth, and decided to break into a jog, that grew into a dash as she reached the stairs.

Her momentum carried her up the first flight in two strides, and she swung around on the bannister there to get what advantage she could maintain for the next. It was shorter, only four steps, and she took it in two strides as well, and at walking pace, was on the next level. Before the effects of trying to maintain such a pace set in, she continued the climb at a punishing fast walk that made her thighs and calves ache with the strain and the build–up of lactic acid.

The next level was the top, and the stairs up had that familiar, indefinable, but definite air about them that always signified the hardly used ways used only for service access. At the top of the last stairs was a structure just large enough to call a hut or cabin, with a landing at the top of the flight, extending above the previous one. The door was at the end of that, and separated from the open stairwell by a handrail.

Nancy waited by the door, and listened. The door was warped, and split darkly down the middle, and fitted only approximately in its frame. A chill breeze filtered through the cracks, and the ring–light showed through

the same apertures. Its cool was welcome, but not enough to relieve Nancy's feeling that she radiated a conspicuous amount of heat. Getting up above the windbreak of the buildings might make her a glaring target to infrared, but she craved the chill air.

Now near the outside, she could hear the sounds of battle above the whistling notes of the night air as it forced its way in to her. Occasionally – every five or ten seconds – there came the noise of shots. After the initial fling, the fire–fight was going the way of all fire–fights that there had ever been, with the Clan troops now well dug in, and both sides only shooting when someone moved too close to the edges of concealment, and then it might just be one round expended in token.

The smouldering stage the battle had reached brought Nancy most anxiety. She knew how easily a group of three or four people, moving in concealment from vantage point to vantage point could mimic the presence of a whole platoon for quite a while, before the opponents realized that anything was amiss – more than enough for the rest of the platoon to withdraw, and move to encircle or retreat. Tonight, with both sides seeking her amidst the sprawl of buildings, both would be trying as soon as they felt it to be possible to deceive the other. Neither would be deceived, but each had to try to disengage some forces, in case the other also succeeded. And with everything played by standard doctrine, and with the likely intelligence available to either side, it would behoove her to get as far away as she could from where she had intended to be.

She pushed the door open a fraction. It creaked a little in protest, but as soon as it was clear of the frame, it was quiet. No people, or shadows to indicate their presence. She opened the door fully, and stepped out. There was no mocking voice, no gunshot, to greet her. The wind was alone, blowing cold where it could reach. The expanse of roof before her was empty of movement or the shapes of people, and a taller building intruded between her and the museum.

Nancy turned left, continuing on the path she had set for herself, where the roof opened up for her into a road of harsh white running without turn or deviation for at least a hundred yards. She would have to take it in straight sprinting to minimize her time of vulnerability on a roof singularly lacking in cover, and also to build up her lead against the time when even a score of yards could tip the scales between reaching final cover, and capture.

She ran with all the speed she could muster, a small fleet figure, hard to see in the cold grey light, camouflaged so that her shadow was more visible than her reality. Her feet rasped on the rough surface, her breath coming in long gasps, and her arms swinging furiously. There was only the long restrained imperative to move, to reach her immediate goal.

And the keening of the wind, shrill around the buildings, fluting from any opportune projection, in its sounds, she caught once again the thread of the blivit's note, and remembered once more its triumphant elfin song. The sound grew, became fleshed out, louder and deeper, and its timbre far more resonant. It was a song now, and not a note or melody, for all that it lacked words. It was wild, and earthy, born of bursting untamed life in its steady round of seasons, powerful and irresistible.

The song was taken up from other quarters, by the deep tolling of bells that seemed to originate from the depths of the planet below, as if that mass of rock and magma had been struck and set vibrating at some overtone. She had heard such, through some manipulation of the recordings of seismic traces, as masses were dropped onto dead, airless moons, but the sound she heard now was not so crude as that. It was the planet itself joining in the song, adding its own voice to the chorus as it proclaimed the mastery of life over the unliving, of blood, breath and the good earth over dead dry rock.

The great bells echoed and re–echoed about her, as if the heavens, night dark beneath the soaring rings, gave back that sound as it bounced around inside the cold black dome.

Filling the spectrum from the infra–basses of the earth–bells, and the screaming trebles of the night air, it was a whole host, a forest, of sounds, like flames or blades of emerald grass. Terrible and beautiful, the faerie choirs and orchestras, the great bells and bass organ pipes, together the drowned out the rest of the world.

Nancy stumbled as she ran, overcome by this sudden suspension of reality, this rush of beauty from a night of ugliness. It surpassed anything she had dreamed of, and far more, anything she had ever expected to experience. Some quiet part of her, not yet caught up and washed away by the streaming, roaring, flamelike splendour noticed, unsurprisingly, coldly, that tears streamed now freely down her face. The beauty of it broke down barriers she had set herself, barriers that kept all of the deep emotions, the dark and powerful feelings, guarded far inside her, lest through them she became vulnerable to hurt. The surge of release, as she experienced all these things that she had believed that she would never safely be able to experience, lifted her away in the pyre of green and blue fire that rose around her.

That fire was, or became, her, and she flowed in the flames that burned awesomely in the darkness, and she too was the song, a glory in a world too long silent, a song that would – must – rouse the whole world of nature and bring it into harmony. Her body, a husk both limited and physical was, in that timeless splendor, so small a thing, and of so little true worth, that she felt she could ignore it in preference to her communion with the wild and the growing things, its sisterhood of blood and breath.

As if from above, she noticed the battle fought for the possession of her, but only in passing, an insignificant episode in the vast tapestry of life. Though she knew little poetry, and that which she did was usually limited to single lines of phrases, out of her scattered repertoire one sprang to mind, a line, she thought, from Tennyson, that captured the moment – what is it all, but the troubling of ants in the glare of a million million suns? It was a small darkening of the flame, one speck of soot, one dark thread in the tapestry, one half heard discord in the song of life.

Fuelled from the reserves of her self that she had opened to it, the flame burned up, more radiant, it seemed, deeper and hotter. It had started as green as the grass, but the flecks and threads of green drifted away, their sources burned out, and the true flame was revealed. Blue it was, more intense and more pure than she had ever seen, and infinitely deep. It was the real colour, to which the alien gem was but a mere approximation, a half–hearted fake, masking the reality, rather than revealing it. Its song, more than the roaring of mundane fire, grew with its light, rising towards crescendo. It reached to heights of transcendence beyond the imagination, powered by mighty organ notes, and the throbbing of great bells, driven by the voices that freely poured forth the wordless song, ranging from deepest bass to inaudible treble.

As listener, rather than participant, the song would have brought Nancy to tears many times over, for the joys it brought her in her drabness, and for the balancing sorrow that played counterpoint, that together were so bitter–sweet, heart–rending. She was feeling now, in those few instants, more emotions, and more deeply than any before – save perhaps hate, and fear, and anguish of regret. There had been those things, composing her life in crimson. black and umber, but now there was blue, like sky or tropic sea.

Tears there would have been, for other more mundane reasons. To hear the song but once would be to remember only partially, and only the most distorted fragments that could but hint at the reality they would be drawn from – and even that ghost fragment would have been trapped there. Untrained, without specific design, she was unable to communicate non–verbal sound to any other being, and with that awesome word of song forever locked within her, she would surely have lost what last holds on sanity she yet retained.

The climax came, but only after a build–up that seemed to endure for æons. It exploded in terrible splendour of brightness, spreading out from the very heart of her being. It did not come as the total disintegration of ego into that external flow of fire, and breath, that surge of untamed and unbounded ecstasy, that would suffuse the Universe, to and beyond its ultimate heat death, an annihilation that she had expected, had feared, and had

secretly hoped for as an end to this pantomime. Instead, it seemed, the goal of the entire spectacle was a firmer integration of her identity, on a level above its previous structuring. The concept of a harmonic to her original consciousness was how she herself, still dispassionate, chose to regard it. Whatever it might be named, the fire and song were now hers to command and the merest of whims, and she drew their strengths about her like a cloak, a mantle of power sublime, beside which even the powers her civilization could wield were but feeble beginnings.

The night was crisp, its blacks and whites and shades of silver delineated to impossible sharpness, but as if by knife–edges of monolayer thickness. On the air were scents, too many, too subtle and unfamiliar for her even to distinguish, let alone begin to name them.

In this wondrous night, beneath the sky, following the finely etched pattern of debris swarms orbiting above, Nancy walked, a tall, and beautiful and imperial figure, ethereal, but with a terrible and insistent solidarity about her. Her height was not a thing of meters and their fractions, but borne of a sense of presence, to make her tower tens of centimetres above any she might meet. She was singing, her song a song of great rejoicing, with a voice and tongue that were not her own, and all the while, the world was singing to itself and to her, in belling tones of triumph.

Nancy was one, an individual, with her own unique identity. yes, but a One that brimmed over and poured itself unstintingly over everything that lived.

At her breast, focusing the stream of charisma, the stone that had carried this message of divinely human joy down the long and empty ages...she thought that, and immediately there was a picture of an endless black corridor through which dead winds whistled. That was thirty and more million years, a timespan beyond her appreciation. The stone burned starlike, lighting her way in nova light, with coronas of indigo and ultramarine.

Physical azure light surrounded her like a fog, taking on her shape, and extending it to godlike proportions, and wafted away like mist, ever to be renewed from its source. The shape had eyes, and they were hard points of neutral, deep sky blue, flashing starlike streamers of light on the optical imperfections of any there to see.

There was one such, and he was no friend to her. Not knowing what he saw, or even beginning to guess or comprehend its true nature, he was aware that anything he did not know that moved on the roof was not his friend, and in the belief that what faced him was without the powers of a cybersoldier, he aimed, and fired.

Like a lance, or arctic gale of winter, sickly purple light reached for the demigod figure, and its stream began to wash away at the blue aura, and its serpent's hiss seeped into the song of life, sowing its discords in the music. In Nancy's mind, and in the earth below, the great bells clanked and clattered into silence. About her, the choirs faded back into the howling of the wind that had engendered them. The song of joy faltered on her lips, and ended as the words and tune were washed from her mind. The light was extinguished, and she herself diminished.

There was no longer music in the night, only the sickening ugliness of life, with all its stupidities, failures and shabbiness. Anything that might have been joyful had been burned out in those long seconds of stunner fire.

She staggered as if heavily drugged, in a shambling and pathetic attempt at speed struggling with a body that had recaptured her. Nausea filled her, direct and bodily in its origins, and pain, things that she had forgotten even the potential existence of. From fire, she plunged into cold; from joy, she reaped misery; from soaring freedom, she plunged into unwholesome confinement. The sweat that dewed her brow was cold now, and her guts felt curdled and sour. Dully, she realized that saliva trickled from one corner of a mouth gone slack, its sticky stream mingling her tears.

She sobbed deeply, but was too drained to weep again, and her breath bubbled through the aftermath as she fought to clear her nose and sinuses. Tears were too special and precious for this time.

The force that had kept her moving through the song motivated her still, but now with narrowed aims – the animal urge for refuge, for somewhere to crawl away to, to hide, and to die there undisturbed. There was never thought of firing back, without knowing a target, or being able to extract suitable revenge, or enjoyment, from the deed.

Her mouth filled with the taste of bile, and her belly churned with its own life, shot through with deep anguish at each jolting footfall, as if something fermented there. She gasped for breath, needing to yawn or belch to relieve that aggravation, but only able to such at the air for some tenuous sustenance.

Only an insignificant time, a mere handful of seconds, passed before she gained sanctuary, the first approximately suitable location she had found, at the corner of the roof, by an air–conditioning installation, closed off to the other long side, and one short side, by the edge of the roof, and ten feet by two of gravel–set roof where she could lie, and expect not to be seen. She felt infinitely wretched, lying curled up for warmth on the cold, hard and uncomfortable rooftop. How ironic, after mere minutes ago having been overheated to the point of discomfort, to be at the mercy of the cold. It sucked what warmth she had away, greedily, and without sating. She went into a spasm of shivering and chattering of teeth that she had to force away by will. The cold wind pushed roughly through her clothing, despite the resealing of the zip; and the icy touch of sweat–dampened cloth caressed her body uncaringly.

She waited in profound misery for a resolution of events. In these depths of suffering, anything, even the emptiness of death, would have sufficed, if only her torment would cease.

She needed to yawn, she found, and opened her mouth to try, but failed. She longed desperately to be sick, to purge herself, to end the agony inside her now, and be gone. To hasten matters, and force the now inevitable conclusion, she tried to stick fingers down her throat, but even the anticipation of briefest touch seemed only to lock her body in an indefinable heart stopping rictus, separated from her volition.

She tried again, but only blackness and red against her field of vision resulted. Nor could she yawn, despite attempts that seemed to dislocate her jaw. She relaxed, to rest a while and try again. She looked out over the rooftops.

There was only a moment's warning, enough time to almost involuntarily lunge forwards and hold her head out over the abyss, while the contents of her stomach rushed up her gullet.

She moaned as the warm slurry poured from her mouth to splash faintly on the ground below. Its consistency offended her, as if it were somehow gritty, or papery. She watched it fall from somewhere at the back of her skull; distantly through eyes filmed with tears. Without pause to relax, she vomited again, but when she threw herself into the next retch, she brought up only a mouthful of bile that she had actively to spit out. She let herself tauten into the spasms of retching twice more, gurgling in torment each time to retrieve a few cubic centimetres, no more, of goeey fluid that seemed slightly fizzy. She spat as often as she could, to clear out the worst of the taste, with am ought now dried up.

Weak and exhausted, she lay there for a little while before thinking of tidying her self up, blowing her nose to clear whatever measure of regurgitation had been misrouted, and wiping saliva and vomit from her chin and lips. The smell and taste still slung to her, and her stomach's acid burned in her throat, making her teeth feel strange, almost pasty soft.

Sweaty, chilled, and weary, she sat up. She had weathered the storm, and was combat ready again. She looked out from her shelter, ready indeed for combat. She was angry now, coldly so, and her anger was directed at the person who, unknowingly or not, had stolen from her all the beauty and glory of life, tearing her down from truly living to painfully existing.

Wistfully she tried to recapture the feeling, build again the song and the fire, but it was extinguished. The night had become very still, and only a flickering blue flame burned in her mind, a tantalizing reminder of what had been destroyed. For the first time, she had acquired a reason for her existence, and it had been snatched away.

Nancy drew her stunner, and with cold glee, set the drain to maximum and narrowed the beam, until at short range, its touch would be lethal. What had been done to her was worse than mere death, for she still existed, chilled, with the stench of her vomit in her nostrils, its burns in her throat, able dimly to remember the transcendent feelings that had been here. From a heaven, she had been dragged down into hell, and for that she would see justice done, and scrupulously exact her revenge. The only vengeance she could bring about to match the crime was the penalty of death, without mercy, slowly, and in agony, such as could conveniently be caused by a body hit with a full power stunner beam; and even that would be insignificant beside what she suffered. They would last only minutes, but she would have to endure for an indefinite time.

A figure rose from concealment, away across the skyline, at first cautiously, and then, as no fire was directed towards it, with growing confidence. It moved towards her, leaving its safety, and silhouetting itself against the rings. Nancy let it advance – it was clearly male – enemy – and was coming closer, presenting an ever growing target. Coldly, calmly, she aimed, until she was certain of her hit, and squeezed the trigger. With awesome disdain for haste, or so it seemed, a ray of intense purple light reached out to touch its target. Nancy watched it splash from and caress her victim, like a gentle hand of death. In that instant, she understood the expression on the painting she had seen in Tricia's room – and felt her own expression drawn into that maniacal grin.

The figure began to crumple, and Nancy ceased her firing – it was no part of her plan to give, however accidentally, a head shot which would kill instantly and without pain. A gun clattered quickly to the floor from a relaxed grasp, to be followed by the soggy sound of dropped meat. Half gasped moans of agony showed that she had achieved her aim.

Now, while she might still have some of the advantage of surprise with her, Nancy vaulted from her shelter, to run. Her immediate desire for vengeance was stilled, and her unashamed urge to self–preservation now overrode it. Twenty–five meters away, over open rooftop, without possibility of cover, a stairway that she had half noted earlier. Two to three seconds – a fast count of five – only. Halfway, while she was out on the naked arena, a stunner beam swept past her. Without breaking stride, Nancy wheeled around on one foot, bracing against her momentum with the other, and with her gun held steady in both hands, she fired.

Her stronger light reached out, and as it swept by, briefly it kissed the source of the weaker. That lesser fire flickered, and died as the hands that held it relaxed. Only its last guttering spurt touched Nancy, brushed her but only for an instant. On low power – not the killing intensity she had been using – all it could do was cause pins and needles where it touched.

Enemy fire suppressed, and without hardly ceasing to move, she continued her pirouette and accelerated away. So close was the stairway, that she was still accelerating to a full sprint as she crashed through the door. She rolled onto the floor and landed sitting in the far corner, with her stunner pointed down the stairs. Thankfully, there was no need to fire it – as she had hoped, she was the first to reach such an out of the way place.

She picked herself up, and returned to the door, opening it carefully, gun first. To her sight, there were five figures, unidentifiable, moving on the roof. None, however, were human, and that was enough for her. Three of them failed to spot her and try for cover in time, and to each one, Nancy extended the blessing of purple light and agony.

With the fall of the last unlucky one, she checked her stunner. Ten seconds she had used it, at most fifteen, and almost all of that at full drain – and that had used eighty percent of the charge. She lowered the intensity as far as she dared, and then turned it up a little. She needed instant results, and she guessed that at the new setting, and short range, it would provide her with near instant results for fifteen or twenty seconds.

Are my sisters there? she called out in formal.

The only reply was an obscenity. Her worst case estimate had proven optimistic. She must have been spotted by a scouting party of matts, while their companions were likely still harrying the Clan forces who would be following her earlier message in blissful ignorance. They were heading north now, and she, east. Homewards, she thought, with mild interest, but home was six thousand miles away. Six hundred yards would see her safe. She wondered, could she have subconsciously betrayed herself like that? The thought was idle, irrelevant, and she let it go.

The roof remained still. As far as she could tell, there were no other hunters on the roof, beyond those she had driven to cover, not any arriving by visible routes. She could not wait pinned there, while a force reached the stairs from inside, and she could not flee, for there was no way to secure the door against pursuit. Unable to stay, whatever she did, she must depart, and so that required her to destroy pursuit. Reluctantly, she drew her second gun.

This was no toy weapon for ladies of delicate up–bringing as the stunner had been, but a self–contained, if markedly toned down, version of the direct fire weapons of cybersoldier equipment. Its touch would maim, if indeed it did not kill outright from shock; each cartridge would burn a two–inch hole through steel plate a foot thick, and proportionately more through flesh, whoever it belonged to.

She fired on cartridge, pouring out that terrible power at the nearer of her pursuers. The beam was invisible, and lasted but an instant. All there was to see was a transient glow of ionization, and the yellow of concrete that had absorbed some of that energy. Sounds there were, however, enough and more than enough to make up for the deficiency of visible spectacle.

Air cracked, whiplike, where it had been displaced, and the concrete, thermally stressed, exploded in tiny fragments. The spent rod tinkled quietly as it struck the floor, and the person she had hit screamed, and gurgled.

The other hid, but it availed him little. Nancy knew exactly where he cowered, behind a vent for the air conditioning. Another shot left smooth–edged holes in the aluminium about twelve inches above the ground. She had cruelly allowed him that much mercy – if he didn't succumb to systemic shock before help arrived, he would live. Meanwhile, he would not be enjoying his situation. The metal glowed at first, but soon was quenched, head sinking into the whole structure. She reholstered her gun, but only when satisfied when none but the dead and dying remained, and closed the door.

Nancy took the stairs at the fastest speed she could maintain without stumbling and falling, almost skiing or skating down each flight. She toyed with the idea of sending a second message, to correct the first, but decided that the time she had would be better spent in flight.

That last exchange of fire, however one sided it had been on its own, had not been to her advantage. It had slowed her enough for others perhaps to find her, and it had been noisy. The sound could have been heard easily a hundred yards away through closed windows, or rooms that faced away; and there was more than the physical noise. The located, intense gravitic effects employed would have woken any Linkers in the vicinity, at the instant of firing.

She did not trust their reaction to this multiple invasion of their domain. Of necessity aloof, their neutrality made them at best fickle allies, and she dared not hope for a repeat of Linker McRae's kindness.

She was alone on the dark stairs, descending to a ground floor that was just as dark and quiet, and though she waited on the last landing for a cautious check, there was nothing to beware of. In front of her, ring glow spilled through the glass doors of the atrium, and in that same light, the pathway beyond was deserted. Across the way, and slightly to the left, another set of doors, flanked by elaborate ornament, enough to identify for her the location, despite it being a place she had rarely frequented. Knowing where she was, she began to detail her route of escape.

Her own chosen habitat, the wide roofs, had become too predictable, and now, far too crowded as well. They had served their purpose, as a short–cut, but now concealment was as important as speed. She bounded down the last stairs, and tried the doors. They had been locked, but a nearby window hadn't, and she scrambled awkwardly through, to land in the ornamental flower–bed below.

Ignoring the crushed vegetation, washed of its colours in the pallid light, she remained crouched, ready to spring at the slightest sound or sight of threat. In front of her, and above, a few lights still burned on the upper floors, hopefully signifying that the main doors opposite would be unlocked.

A dash, a couple of instants of painful exposure and vulnerability to harm, brought her to the doors, and they parted at her touch against them. At a slower pace, to conserve her strength for the quarter–mile of open ground that surrounded this efflorescence of structure, she turned to her left, to follow a corridor from the entry.

The silence was complete in that empty passageway, and where her footsteps broke it, formless flowing thing that it was, it healed again in the instant, as good as it had been before. Desertion and long neglect seemed to taint the air, a feel of people once there, long ago, and now, only their memory, less than a ghost, remained to show that they had ever been there. Nancy felt deeply, poignantly alone, but quiet with tired resignation. She was crushed by the great conspiracy that had been built up against her. Linkers, matts, even the clans, seemed to have no other purpose than to frustrate her, abandon and persecute her. Her wonted melancholy returned, her yearning for true companionship of the spirit, a sharing of feelings and thoughts between equals, freely given and freely accepted. Anyone – no, not any one; they would have to be psychologically in accord with her. She had said that she loved Tricia – but really they were sisters with too much familiarity; and with seemingly different temperaments; Tricia would be irritatingly light hearted were she here with her now. But then even the incandescent joy of the... experience of minutes ago revolted her.

What had that been? She could not tell, except that it had been centred on the stone she wore, and it had been powerful and splendid, bitter–sweet in memory, just like love. Somehow, she preferred to hold back in sadness, tormenting herself with the idea that such a thing was possible, but not for her, as far as any conceivable future ran. If before she had walked in a blue flame of emotion, the colour of her reverie was now a deep crimson, the colour of dying embers shining on a cloth of regal red. It was too deep, too slow moving to be called a flame, and too sombre. It was an inversion, a perversion – as much in the mathematical sense of a turning inside–out – of what she had known, a thing born of the stillness of the night and not the song of the wild; born of eternal loneliness and not the unity of all things living; a thing essentially of herself, and not imposed from outside. Comforted by that last, she abandoned many regrets, and surrendered herself to it,

taking on that cloak of night.

The corridor ahead branched right. Her eyes noted it, but her conscious mind did not concern itself with such trivia. What was practically an autopilot system, that she had built up over the years, did notice it, and took it, turning mechanically. Her conscious mind began to drift to sleep, now that a continual state of battle–readiness seemed unnecessary, aided by her preoccupation with her emotional plight.

In dark perspectives, the corridor diminished into distant obscurity before her, and from the formless dark, shapes appeared and solidified. Doors, turnings, light fixtures, all emerged from nothing, grew and passed. All fell on unseeing eyes. Instead, Nancy was seeing, by turns, as her concentration wandered from interest to interest, snapshot memory pictures of her route out, as she had seen its sections before, at each point guessing the threats that might be posed, the counterplays she would have to make. She sketched and rehearsed the dialogues she would have with her friends when she found them in their rooms, and asked their help. Increasingly often, the dull work of second–guessing the future took second place to idle musings.

She remembered Tricia, and their farewell, as a girl so nearly the ideal she craved, and so tragically, so minimally flawed. Unbidden, as if she had started already to dream, the picture in her mind changed. She saw the main command chamber of Upside Control, watched the urgent action of those who staffed it. That was one of the places where all the action would be most truly located, for if it were not the actual site of any event, it would be more than likely that the happenings would be guided by the wills of those quiet, intent figures. Those there, and others like them, in the other centres of political and military power on the planet.

Some were openly declared – each one of the five castles – and they were the nexi for most of the military manoeuvring; but there were more. Whatever the mats, in their various schismatic groups, used as high commands, publicly known but secretly located; and the public headquarters of organization clandestinely involved – the Free Traders, Shammorra Funding, StarLine, whichever political factions had been brought in or bought, motivated by either financial or political gains to be made, if only the castles were removed.

And here she was, caught in the middle of it, a pawn with no intrinsic powers, unwillingly mixed up in the web of decisions made by one of those secret wills, those hidden chess–players, and she with only the information of her senses to guide her. She wondered at whose final bidding she had been ambushed here. Shammorra, perhaps, or Kingarra: either of the directors who had recently appeared on Wyvern, just at the time when all their 'side' could use a helping hand? Or just a local cell, motivated by hate for the clans, or more abstracted political ideals, whose commander had tried to gain prestige from her capture, without the order, or possibly without the consent, of higher echelons? There was little practical value in sorting back through the chain of command to the relevant decision maker. The problem was posed, the question of authorship, immaterial. Now, with just what she could see and hear to guide her, she must make her play.

There were doors before her again, these bearing glyphs in white on red that declared them to be intended for emergency use only. She ignored the admonition, and slipped out through them, almost certain she was ahead of the pursuit, if indeed she had not lost it.

Nancy continued south, her path now looped almost into a half–circle, taking the path ahead of her, trusting herself to the open sky again. Here the light faded into a dusky intermediate between the direct glare, and the gloom of unlit outdoors; buildings rising high on either side were responsible, hiding a major part of the arc of the rings. A few pale shreds of scudding cloud moved across the limited view, straggling remnants of the overcast that had shielded her arrival at the University.

A planet, number four in the system, showed yellow near the height of the arch, below it to the north. Three stars of first magnitude, the vaguest hints of others, were all else in sight in the washed out skies of her home.

Wryly, she remembered her last nocturnal visit to this place. In those last swift fifty–odd hours, events, it seemed, had gone full circle, save only now that she, and not Ginny, was the person hunted. Worse, there was no expedition coming to her location, and she was unable to call help without alerting the matts. All that she could count as a positive change was the clear sky. If it had been raining, as it rained the, it would have been the last straw. For all the tactical help it might have offered, she had endured misery enough this cheerless night. Full circle? nice as a phrase, there were enough changes in the balance of initiative and resource to make U–turn more apt.

To her left, all this while, lay the last barrier between herself and the open, a solid length of offices and lecture theatres that formed one wall to the complex. Every so often, every fifty feet or thereabouts, it sprouted buds, so that from the air it would seem like a crude comb for a titan, or a heraldic label of many points, a score or so in number. In one bay, between the teeth, opposite the closest approach of untamed wild, clansman Dr. Peter Brady had his office, and despite his return home, the office should have been left, as always, prepared for the passage through.

The place was marked by a thick growth of rhododendron bushes along the southern wall, and Nancy hid herself behind the cover of their profuse leathery leaves. The smell of the dusty soil was very heavy in the still, sheltered air, and the bark of the main stems was covered in its fine dust. There were cobwebs and rustling sounds of tree lizards disturbed from sleep. Against a wall covered in dried soil and dust splashed there in past rain–storms, where the rings cast a matching dusty grey light, mottled and shifting, she moved slowly.

In the corner, where the darkness seemed almost absolute, her hand touched metal, a spike driven deep into the structure, and by searching with her toe, up and down the angle, she found another, part of a ladder of pitons.

She climbed quickly, aware of her vulnerability as she emerged again into the open. The fickle wind was blowing again, softly cool against her skin, and above its low whispering, Nancy thought she could hear another sound, faint and itself wind–like, but in one instant more, it was past. She did not strain to hear it again, but climbed until she was level with the ledge that, following the building, ran under Brady's office windows. The window was fractionally ajar, opening towards her, and stepping from the pitons, she began to edge towards it. She turned about in the corner, where the angle of the ledge made a better place to stand, and on her heels, shuffled to the window that was her gateway to sanctuary.

Beneath the window, as she stepped backwards through it, a chair had been placed ready to serve as a step for anyone choosing to enter by that route. She pulled the window to, latching it shut – there was no purpose served in letting anyone guess where she had gone, and crossed to the desk. She would leave a message, now that she felt safe enough, and this time, it was in clear, brief and to the point. Sorry, it read I went East. N. If they didn't understand that, the help that might have been wouldn't have been worth it anyway.

Under the desk, in a small recess in the knee–hole, she found a key–ring, with one key, that to the office opposite. That office opened onto the outside world, and the way she would have to take. She went back and forth, opening the door, then replacing the key, but each time, the corridor remained thankfully deserted.

At long last, however, she stood looking out at the grassland, and three hundred some yards away, the forest. One minute to climb, another to run, and she would be almost impossible to locate. There was no movement out there, and even the shadows seemed devoid of menace. With the time of danger so short, it was unlikely that she would be intercepted, and so, before her mind could start generating its own Rorschached threats, she began the descent.

She paused in her movement for the briefest moment as she reached the last piton, and hung, some eight feet up from the ground. Faint and far away it was, scarce heard above the quiet wind, her strained breathing, was another, unidentifiable noise. She steadfastly ignored it, to prevent her fears latching on to it, and let go her hold.

She dropped, and as she hit the tarmac, she turned and was in that instant running as if all the fiends of Hell were at her heels. Stride, legs scissoring, cover ground, that was what she must do, what she forced her body to. The earth was soft beneath her feet, and her track was left visible in the grass that slowly recovered from the crushing.

The wind roared in her ears as she ran, and under the light of the rings, it seemed so natural to her that she should select the proper cues of tone and waveform, with talent normally beyond her, to make the life–song again, and in the song came the fire. Easily, she ascended to and achieved that different awareness, as she had so fleetingly known before. She was with all the world of nature, but uniquely an individual, marked as such by the gem she wore, almost as a medallion. She noticed without surprise, that this time she did not need to sing herself – the artifact had taught, and she was learning.

But what had she learned? What more could and would it enable her to do? She could not tell, but the fancies that sprung to her mind frightened her with visions of godhead. The Q'l–hrui had been termed Ancient Gods simply for their apparent powers, but now she feared that the reality was more a literal interpretation. Nancy, goddess of... Nature, perhaps? The concept fascinated her in a terrible way. The only sort of god–hood she had sought was that of great age, as her ancestors had achieved.

What was the stone and setting she wore, that they had belonged to a pre–flight race, who also possessed blivits, even if not of local origin? Temple site, Chan had said – an apt enough place, if her ideas were correct.

Nancy felt in her heart that even she would perform obeisance to someone wielding that which she had won the custodianship of. She was not going to be able to fit in her old niches, might not even fit this culture, unless perhaps she were to remake the Partnership, or dissolve it.

If she could... it gave her something that she had always craved, completeness in herself, without needing any other, and that could be painfully addictive, as perfections always is.

Roar – yes, the wind roared about her, and conjured up the song, but there was another sound to jolt her from the in–turned rapture. Still under enhancement, she noticed a droning, soft, but apart from the windsong that woke her.

Nancy turned to look for its source, casting quick glances over her shoulder as she ran. To her horror, she saw that what was responsible was an aircar, drifting towards her on muffled jets. An aircar, moreover, that bore the globe and chain insignia of the matts. It was this, she guessed, that she had heard so faintly before, as it patrolled the perimeter in case she should get that far.

She ran even more frantically than before, the adrenaline again surging through her bloodstream. Cover she sought, but all that there was nearby was a single bench, with a litter–bin beside it. It would have to do, and she dived behind it for cover.

Her blaster was in her hand as soon as she stopped, and her first hurried shot cut a glowing hole into one side, unfortunately missing any of the vital systems, and before she could fire again, the gun was hot in her hand. She flung it away, and her belt too, where she carried two extra clips, dropping behind the bench as soon as she had discarded them.

The exploded noisily under the influence of the dissipation field, in a firework display of light. One of the vortices of energy released drifted through the bench beside her, cutting a clean edged hole as it went its own way. The bolts avoided the aircar which only rocked gently as the blast hit it.

Totally disarmed, for her stunner had been still holstered, she had no other strategy open to her other than to run. At least, she reckoned, it would give the matts a run for their money, requiring them to at least make an effort to capture her. And who knew – she might even escape yet. Fifty yards she covered, and now only a hundred remained when a stunner beam hit the ground off to her right. She cringed, looked away, and kept running. The purple crawled towards her, jerkily, as the gunman tried to compensate for the relative motions of the aircar and the target.

Nancy felt a burning soreness across her back as at last the beam struck her, and slight disorientation, but she continued to run. The amulet she wore – what was it that it functioned so – grew almost painfully hot, as if it were absorbing the blast in the aura of azure around her.

As the seconds passed, however, she revised that opinion. Make that *most* of the blast, she muttered aloud as she ran. Soon, she was feeling as if drunk, and her vision went all distant. Thankfully the effects were not as gross as they had been before... she could still run, unnauseated, until something cold and wet enfolded her.

It grasped her in an unyielding rubbery grip, binding her arms and legs. She tripped, stumbled. The ground rose up to meet her. Distantly she felt the impact, the pain in nose and mouth as they hit the ground, mere feet from the first trees. She could feel the earth and the grass, and taste blood in her mouth. Her breath bubbled in her nostrils, and her face was wet.

My first proper nosebleed, she thought to herself as the night closed in on her mind.

## Chapter 7 – Capture

Two blaster shots, separated by a distinct interval, about a second, rang out in the night, clearly audible above the local din of gunfire. Platoon sergeant Jakita Debra of Wolf swore to herself. She had trained exclusively under conditions of perfect communications – anything else was totally inconceivable on the contemporary battlefield – and to be hampered, by the rules of engagement that Jeanne had insisted on, was to be operating under a restriction akin to blindfolding.

Something, heaven knew what, was happening, just out of spitting distance, and she could not get reports from other locations, or any sort of overview. It was enough to irritate one to an extent that might be unwise in active duty.

A perfunctory burst of fire, perhaps three rounds in all, scattered from the stairway–top behind which she sheltered. She ignored it. If she did so strenuously enough, they might think she had gone, and stop it.

But the frustration was more than she could reasonably bear. She looked at the radio at her belt. One brief breach of radio silence – that couldn't bring more hassle than it brought useful information. She unclipped it, and thumbed it on.

Aware that she had irrevocably broken security protocol, she spoke.

Communications. Hey– Nicky– wake up there.

Yes?

Get me orbital survey of the area.

We haven't got any eyes operable yet. The last one's too low now for a picture, and the one rising is behind that cloud bank. Two – three minutes yet for the pictures. Where'd you want to see?

Over east, where those blaster shots came from anything out there – alive dead or halfway, and anywhere in the general area, I want a report on it. Get the cars ready to load. If we have to evacuate in a hurry, I want us to make it. Then call me when you get pictures. OK.

Acknowledge – ready to load, call on view.

And out.

The time crawled slowly past on the open roof. To relieve the boredom, Jakita leaned out from her refuge, and sprayed fire in the general direction of a place where she had seen some matts take cover. When she stopped, and retreated behind the concrete wall, the compliment was returned. That at least relieved her of the responsibility of doing anything more for the next few minutes, and leave her to worry military matters.

Without mobility, her troops afoot, she was bound hand and foot. She would have preferred to have the cars loaded up and ready – or even better, every one of them to have cybersoldier equipment. So what if it would be a trifle overkill at such close ranges. And if she was going to play this weird game by the rules, reinforcements would be just as nice. All the troops she had were tied down, tying the matts down, but to get reinforcements would mean waiting twenty minutes even if they were accepted by the Guild into a suborbital manoeuvre. It was unlikely that such a mission would be accepted – only a purblind moron would pass it, and there was a noted lack of such types in the Guild.

How much longer, Nicky?

Not much. I can see nearby landmarks now. As soon as I get acquisition, I'll scream at you. Hell – hang on, and I'll give you commentary.

Damn the commentary, I just want essentials. Get a car loading. I'll want some troops mobile, so get one of them ready ASAP. Do it so we still keep the bastards pinned. Something's going to break any instant, I can tell.

Okay – I'll relay those orders.

Jakita listened to the relaying, as Nicky spoke into another microphone, before the conversation was rejoined.

Okay –I've got the picture now. I'll start from the museum and work out eastish. She mumbled to herself as she guided the satellite optics across the screen, damning the fraction of a second radio lag.

Ah – bodies – five of them, there was triumph in that announcement. Seeing is turbulent – only resolving to a foot or so– too much damned thermal!

Cut the primadonna act. Whose bodies?

Not human, still warm on IR so they're fresh dead or alive, I'll track out beyond. That place was as much east of here as north.

Was that forced, or do you think she got directions confused?

No – There are perfectly good roofs to the north, and no-one can get confused with the rings giving east-west. I think we screwed up her plans by barging in early, and diving into the thick of things. What night for a bloody snafu.

There was a pause, while Jakita shot at something that moved and didn't wear clan uniform.

Anything yet she asked, that irksome business completed, and how's the loading?

Cars – one is picking up every fourth person along the line, the rest are standing by for a scramble evacuation. You only have to give the word.

Nothing on video yet...see her now! She's down on the ground now, moving south, just inside the complex. Word just came in from HQ – Pete Brady's office is down that way – he keeps a route open for escapees."

Any sign of the enemy?

None under the sky, either inside the complex or out of it. All they can do is ambush her while she's out of our sight. I've alerted the car loading to go if you give the say so.

Hold them, gently now. Tell me when they've gotten a full load of girls, and tell them to hurry it up a bit.

Will do...I can see Nancy out again now. She's out and running like mad for the trees. Three hundred yards or so – and then we can relax. They'll never find her in that terrain...

Oh – that ain't fair – they've got an aircar after her – she's dumped her guns – they exploded– they're firing at her – stunner rays – they're hitting her and she's still going. Come on girl, just another few yards..

Get that sodding car airborne, damn you.

Nancy was being loaded aboard the car, as the Clan vehicle rose from its task, but they would have to wait for the matts to commit themselves to a route. The two cars lifted simultaneously, each waiting for the other to move.

The matts moved first, at the highest acceleration their car could attain, away from its pursuers. The Clan vehicle swung round, its pilot throwing the throttle wide open.

At that instant, the laws of physics packed up and went on holiday. The rings were gone, and the world was enclosed in mist. All light was extinguished, except a vague phosphorescence inherent to all material objects, a glow with little power to penetrate the mist. Jakita lost sight of the aircar, hoped that it had escaped.

Sounds boomed and rolled like thunder, and the radio in her hand squealed as if alive. Existence swirled and went dark.

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Jakita dreamed, feverishly, of deific figures of misty light, without substance of their own, that belonged completely to this world of insanity. There was little plot to the dream, except that she was being transported somewhere, being drawn along by the empty air tugging at her, as they, the nameless beings, willed it.

She's waking up now. The voice was female/human by its timbre. Jakita noticed that she was seated on a chair designed more for utility than comfort – which latter was minimal at best. There was red anger in her mind as she pieced together what had happened during her last moments of consciousness.

She opened her eyes, and looked around. The room was painted off-white, and was starkly functional. There was a door in each wall to left and right, and a pinboard by the right hand one. The furnishings were limited to one desk, three chairs and a tablelamp. The desk was small and bare. Behind it, woman sat, with the air of age upon her. She wore a Linker badge, pinned to the breast of a tunic. The third occupant of the room was another, younger girl, in medic's uniform, leaning over her with hypo-gun in hand. It was she, Jakita guessed, who had spoken.

Having paused long enough to collect her thoughts of outrage into some semblance of coherence, she began her tirade.

Okay – what in Hell's name do you call this. This is a disgrace. Why did you wait to drop the Qbedel field just after the bloody matts had. gotten away, and before we could get after them. Who's on the take? and who's footing the bills? Shammarra? Kingarra?

Or did they get away? If they did, then we'd have surrendered peaceful like. No need for force. Tell me what did happen?

We closed down the field just too late to get the first car – didn't have quite the strength to spread it out enough. How do you think we feel – letting someone go after a blatant violation of neutrality. Hell and goddamn, we've got a reputation to keep, more than some people.

Reputation – there's no call to be so bloody touchy. You've just about lost credibility now. I suppose you know what you did. They got away with one of our number, and just because of your highmindedness, we never got the chance to help her. Nice human interest story it ought to make in the right circles. If anything

happens to our girl after this, we'll fight you in any court, everyone responsible for the decision. So what if your official policy doesn't let you favour anyone, but couldn't you have shown a little common this time and left well enough alone? Or at least made sure of a complete catch? If there's any good press out of this snarl-up it'll only be for the matts, and they're the ones you should be fighting. They'll take you as well as us.

Jakita felt slightly sickened at the situation, emotionally stressed.

What's going to happen to us? she asked.

We'll hold you as prisoners of war for the duration of the conflict. Clan troops will be interned in the Snowflake, and matts in the port embassy, to be released when the castles have all lifted and are ready to spin out.

Great – just great.

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Is she still sleeping? Janice Morgan, black haired, brown eyed, five eight, didn't look up from the gun she was stripping down, while she asked the question.

Her companion, short, broad, leonine, and not at all human, looked over his shoulder at the back seat of the aircar. Nancy lay there, wrapped in a plaid blanket. Her eyes were closed, but the motion under them showed that she dreamed. The tangline that had ensnared her was gone, and she was sprawled inelegantly on the seat

Like a lamb. Don't worry about her – I gave her enough sedative to quieten a dinosaur – and besides, it's during her natural sleep time now, anyway.

It's all very well to say that, Janice commented, more matter-of-factly than cynically. She continued to slot pieces back, and check the action.

But, she continued, your little lamb caught enough stunner fire to stop the selfsame dinosaur, and was still up and running. Without the tangline, I'll bet she'd still be running now. It was only tying her up that made any impression on her.

Whatever else they may be, they certainly build the little minxes well...I wouldn't mind too strenuously if I could stand up to stunner fire that well...

She snapped the final cover plate into its place, and loaded a clip of cartridges. With the first round cycled into the breech, she slid the gun under the dashboard, where spring-clips received it. She checked the controls, and then out of the screen, lights on the horizon showed the location of their destination, the city of High Prospect. Cold wind blew into the car through the hole Nancy had shot into it, despite the blanket taped across it, and Janice would be glad to get into the warm.

Assured that their descent path was clear, Janice okayed the approach, and turned around to examine her passenger.

Cute looking kid, she decided, How old do you reckon she is? Can't be all that much over seventeen, can she?

Her partner mumbled assent, and Janice continued. She'd look quite nice, if only their bitch of a mother hadn't made them that ghastly grey. She's lucky we got her while she was young. It shouldn't be too difficult to get her integrated into normal society.

I wonder if it'll ever be possible to get the old ones into real life – a thousand years like that must warp them terribly. Year after year in the same castle, never leaving it .... I'd go crazy...

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The car landed in the vehicle pool at the base of a residence block. It was still incomplete, and looked skeletal still. Only a handful of lights showed the location of occupied modules. A mile and a half it towered up into the night, and the sky was clear. At the summit of the monstrosity, a warning beacon flashed, cutting a wide double cone of hazy light to each horizon, circling every five seconds.

The air was still chilly, but at least there was only the lightest of breezes. After the car, the silence seemed suffocating. She shivered, without the warmth of her chair to buffer her against heat loss. Nancy struggled in Janice's arms, snuggling up against her for warmth, as she carried her across the open concrete.

She paused at the main doors, and with one forearm free of her burden, waved farewell to the departing aircar. It disappeared rapidly into the dark, and Janice turned, and pushed through into the warm.

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Vors k'Shammarra was not human. Of reptilian descent, his skin was scaly, and snakelike. He was mainly bright green in colour, but between his eyes, and running down his back, a broad stripe of scales was yellow, as bright as the green, and down the centre of that, a narrower strip of red. Each scale of his skin was monochrome, and the irregular bordering of the markings was a line drawn around the edges of the plates.

His throat was heavily guarded by leathery wattles, of a darker green than the rest of him, and his eyes were bright yellow, and horizontally slit, with the irises filling the whole of the visible globe. They were grained in structure, with a predominantly vertical alignment, except at the edge of the slits.

He was humanoid in general outline, and close enough to human in his psychology that he could be annoyed by events that went against his wishes. He had followed on the newscasts the progress of the aircar that had set off from Castle Wolf, and the aircars that had followed it, and was planning an operation to intercept them together on their return journey, or flight to the Guild haven, when to his consternation, he saw that something had happened at the university, where the pursuing cars had been seen to dive below the cloud deck.

Someone had beaten him to that little coup, and he was determined to find out who. He hauled a numeric pad from the equipment on his desk, knocking a paperback book onto the floor as the connecting cable tautened. He ignored it, and tapped out a dialcode, with short sharp impatient jabs. He swung around on his chair, to face the large screen on the far wall. It belled, a discrete warbling tone, with a symbol of a bell in outline, in pale blue appearing. and fading.

He counted the seconds as they passed. At a count of fifteen, a synthesized voice replaced the ringing.

Milord Kingarra is busy and wishes not to be disturbed at the moment. If you wish, you may leave a message with me.

Very well, tell him that Vors k'Shammarra desires to speak with him on matters of mutual concern. He knows my dialcode – tell him to ring me back as soon as is feasible. Remind him of, ah, certain financial matters involving our mutual subsidiary, Confederated Securities. I'll buy him out if he takes longer than five minutes to respond from now. That will be all.

Thank you. I will relay the message immediately.

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Jakita Debra of Wolf, noble of degrees up to and including earldom, was now formally a prisoner of war. She had been led out from the room where she had woken, to join the other members of the family. Together,

under armed escort, they were taken through deserted corridors, and out into the open. There had been nothing to say, nothing at all. The anonymous Linker who had interviewed her had been entirely correct, in so far as she toed her Guild's line exactly. It was inevitable that she would be the type chosen for such work.

Against a fanatical grasp on the principle of total non-involvement, elevated to the level of an article of faith, all Jakita's arguments had availed her naught. She tried arguments based on reason, from the nearly sound, to the totally ludicrous, or based on emotion, or on expediency. But the girl was too intelligent to be conned, and too concerned with various reputations for integrity requiring salvage or maintenance to be swayed by anything less than an order from the higher echelons.

If only it were possible to represent Nancy as a noncombatant. That she had called to her family for aid might well have been considered to be done under mitigating circumstances, but that she had killed and maimed – four dead and one heavily injured, she had been told – could not be forgiven.

Jakita sympathized with Nancy's actions – under those circumstances, only the would-be suicide would refuse to fight. She herself would have done the same and worse, and thought no shame of it, and to hell with politics. There could be no thought of politics in the heat of the moment – it could only be a matter of animal survival. Him or you; the choice was never difficult to make, though worlds might tumble as a consequence. And if, as she had heard, Nancy had been acting under some form of psychic stress, any hope of coldly reasoned, politically motivated actions went out the window. Tricia, whose advice Jeanne had considered worthy of attention, had told of something that had acted across the thousands of miles, to drag Nancy, precipitately, recklessly, to it, despite an innate caution and drive to forethought typical of the family. Something that powerful could have made her do anything, and the Guild had let her be captured. Jakita could only find hope in the thought that, while Nancy alone would not have given any trouble, Nancy-plus-whatever might turn out to be more than they could handle.

Had anyone been with her in the museum? There had been no indications either way in the information she had received, but she had not thought to ask. If she could get access to a suitably ranking officer, something several grades up on the neutral servicemen escorting her, she'd have to ask.

They were now being brought out into the open. Jakita did not recognize the location, but by the sky, she judged that they were still inside the university. They had emerged from an austere cluster of low concrete blockhouses, masking an extensive underground development. Behind, on three sides, trees were a dark grey, almost green, even under the rings, but ahead was the grass. At her feet, it seemed dark, but as it went into the distance, the swaying stalks took on the hues of silver and grey.

Halfway to the horizon, a squat finned shape was a ground-to-orbit tug, marked with the emblem of the Linkers' Guild – a golden circle, at its uppermost point marked by an asterisk of the same colour, as if set as decoration. In the centre of the design, on a field otherwise of black, an annulus of red, like the iris of an eye. It symbolized the opening of a Link in a LinkGate, and was instantly recognized throughout the Partnership of Worlds.

Into the open loading ramp, a vast mouth to the ship, the women of Clan Wolf were marched, to be accommodated in the hold, with enough security locks and bulkheads to keep them away from the crew locations before they arrived at the Snowflake. It was not going to be a comfortable trip.

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Esseval Kingarra, regional director of StarLine, was descended from an ancestor very similar to a starfish. Although his body was in the rough humanoid configuration of head and limbs, his descent was obvious. His skin appeared to be furry, and coloured a pale fawn, but the hairs were modified spines. For hands, he had great bunches of tentacular tube feet, and he had no face, only a crown of very human eyes. His mouth was in the centre of his body, and served him both for eating and breathing.

His main vice was gambling, primarily card games of the sort typified by poker, and his stakes were always high, but he won often enough for this not to worry. He was involved in a very low-stake game with a few Trader captains, and had already won one ship, when k'Shammarra's phone call was relayed to him. He listened very intently to the last sentences, and folded. He had only staked a fraction of his night's winnings, so there was no reason to sit the hand out before calling back.

He made the call from the comparative privacy of his hotel rooms, rather than remain in the saloon.

Well? he asked, as soon as k'Shammarra answered

Was it you who snatched the Clan Wolf girl

What girl? I've been playing cards all evening.

Are you levelling with me?"

Yes. I don't want to get wiped out, a piece at a time. Now tell me what is going on.

A Clan Wolf girl left the castle, with some of their troops in hot pursuit. They headed to the Guild University, and were intercepted by some of our troops.. I didn't order that – I was going to wait to get them on the way back.

Now if you didn't send them, who did?

I can vouch for five of the ship-captains, all of whom have been losing their profit margins to me since dinner-time. That leaves us three ship-captains and any other number of locals who might be responsible. What do we do?

Sit tight a while – wait for developments, I think. Wait for the people who did it to show their hand, then neatly take over their efforts. We could get a lasting propaganda weapon out of this if no-one bungles.

Indubitably, Vors, indubitably. But do we need one?

I don't see we can lose out by having one. As long as the Combine survives, someone will pay for something to smear the Clan with. We can handle all the distribution each time – no sweat.

Right, then. Meantime, I'll make discreet enquiries to see if I can find anyone who might be responsible.

---

Within a mile of either end of that conversation, in the selfsame city of High Prospect, and but a few minutes previously, the centre of their interest had arrived.

At the hundred and fifth level of the apartment block, Janice stepped out of the gravity lift, and as weight resumed, switched her burden into a carry again. Nancy was definitely waking in her arms now, and Janice expected any instant that she would begin to struggle, as the sensory signals she would be receiving would be interpreted and acted upon.

The last forty feet, taken of necessity at a slow walk, so as not to further aggravate the situation, seemed to stretch into eternity. As she took each step, she was certain that Nancy would realize unconsciously, that she was being held and would try to break free, but at each step, she did not. Even as she manoeuvred to set her palm flat against the locking-plate, the fatal awakening failed to occur.

The door slid open. and as it did, she called in a loud unvoiced whisper, Guy! Quickly! She's waking up!

Guy, young, lightly bearded, fair-haired, came running from the main room.

Hey – Janice – what's up? Oh. I see. Didn't you dope her up in flight?

Would you believe two hundred fifty units of sleepy, about half an hour ago? That's what Ghan said he gave her when we got her on board,

Two hundred fifty – that keeps a horse down for an all night session.

It doesn't seem to affect her, but nothing much seems to. She took enough stunner fire to stop an army and was still up and running when we took her. Tangline and then drugged her up. Satisfied?

Well...tough little bitch. OK, I'll get her another shot.

Guy held the door open while Janice dragged Nancy into the main room, then pulled open a sideboard cupboard, and took out a hypo gun, and loaded it with a capsule the size of his thumb. He fired the whole load into Nancy's neck, and it hissed as it sprayed. The girl quietened as the chemicals were taken up into her brain.

Together, taking arms and legs, they carried her through into a bedroom, and dropped her onto the bed. Guy strapped a life-signs monitor onto her torso, and connected it to an alarm system. They would get adequate warning of any crisis or imminent awakening.

We should be ready by the time she wakes up from that little lot. Now we've got to identify her, ready to get all our little games together. Now where did I put my files...?

He returned to the main room, with Janice following him, and began to search through the almost identical manila folders, about a dozen in number, that were strewn about the room in various places. The third one he retrieved, from under a cassette player, was the correct one for his present needs. The title page bore the legend 'Clan Wolf. Post-Toehold era births.'

Together, he and Janice sorted through the wad of hard-copy personal files, for the name to put to the face they had captured. One matched.

Nancy Elanor of Wolf – various titles, born 4th September 3244, terrestrial standard reckoning, daughter to Kathy Jane, who is herself the first daughter of the first daughter and so on back to Jeanne. interests, notes, curriculum vitae – he mumbled the main headings half out loud – ah, here we are, file code –

He quoted a string of digits and characters, and Janice typed it into a small keyboard, repeating it as a check of her accuracy. Here, even the slightest of errors would ruin what they intended to do. With the number verified, she set the program in motion that had already been prepared to accept the file number.

You know who she reminds me of Guy asked rhetorically.

No, I don't. Janice dutifully.

Her great – he paused to count up the list of generations of the family – to the 8<sup>th</sup> grandmother – Trixy Wolfe's mother's father's paternal grandmother. That was the artistic side of the family – Gr8<sup>th</sup> was a singer – more commercial than great art – her grandson was a ballet dancer, and his daughter, Trixy's mother, was a painter of note, like Trixy herself was, before what happened to her.

Just think – if just half a dozen dropouts from inner city Perth hadn't gotten out into Fremantle, and killed her parents, and raped her, none of this would have happened. A young girl, lucky to survive at all – no wonder she went mad in the end. I can almost feel sorry for her.

For the old grey bitch herself?

Sure – at least she had an excuse for what she did – the world hadn't been kind to her, so she was just showing that she could be just as nasty in return, it's Milady Jeanne who's the deliberately evil one – played the arrogant scion-of-nobility bit to T. Let's get to work.

---

The whine of the drives, a sound that lodged itself inside the eardrum and stayed there buzzing, finally faded out, leaving a heavy silence. In the hold of the tug, where only compensator fields acted, and not artificial gravity, it left the Clan troops suddenly weightless. One of the girls went rather pale after the sudden transition, but in general they took the abrupt transition well. The casualties, who had been loaded up-front in the passenger compartments, were carefully insulated from this annoyance.

There were slight noises from the loose stuff in the hold as small reaction jets fired, and produced brief episodes of acceleration, and a perceptible jolt as the tug docked against the Snowflake station.

Platoon, by threes, form column!

Psychological move this, show that we aren't dominated by the Guild, that any action between us is as a partnership. There has to be some political mileage in this; or if not, I'll make some, Jakita thought.

---

Nancy was lost in drugged slumber. Dislocated from her body, her mind was free to move along the pathways that had been opened for it. She was almost conscious as she saw things that had never happened to her, places she had never been – yet remembering them, rather than dreaming them. They were alien, and yet familiar, and if true, they were adequate confirmation of 'hvors' hypotheses about the origin and purpose of the necklet and blivit he had found.

She was – had been? – Linna priestess of the Earth mother, saw through her eyes, heard with her ears.

The body she lived in was slim, agile, possibly taller than the one she had always known. There were six double-jointed digits on each hand, and the skin of her body was copper-coloured, she was a female.

The memory was of some great ceremony, played out in her memory, without any flash-forwards of explanation. Like a loose viewpoint, she was guided towards the focus of the place she was in. The setting was clear, unlike the only vaguely seen people populating it.

Two shadowy handmaids accompanied her, one on either side of her, as she walked a path marked out by two rows of vaguely Grecian columns, towards an altarstone. A fire burned there, and about it a cluster of people were gathered. The sky was dark, and there were stars, like a plague of frosting on a sky more ebon-dark that she was comfortable with. Some of the stars, she knew, bright points of magnitude –6 or brighter, to be novae or possible supernovae – they couldn't merely be close and bright – the astrophysics would all be wrong.

Nancy of Wolf, knowing that Lincoln had been nova-burned, she knew what she was seeing – the war in heaven, where gods fought gods for reasons that might not be comprehensible to her, and in the middle of it, this simple, ignorant folk worshipped their world and their skies. This identity, this Linna, saw them only as blessings, a sign of good favour from the Skyfather. Trapped within the predestined events, Nancy could have screamed with impotent anger at the stupidity. Where they saw favour, there was only death and destruction

beyond their imagining it.

The altar was closer now, and she saw the retinue about it, kneeling priestesses, in raiment less spectacular than the gold-embroidered gown she wore. One male was there, old and patriarchal, with a heavy mane of black fur, and she recognized him to be the High Priest of the Skyfather, the only uncastrated male allowed within the holy places of the Earth. The flame came from a large bronze chalice, standing on the altar, fed with heavy oils and scents and alcohol, its fire red, and smoky.

On the red and gold altar cloth, behind the chalice of fire, a corpse lay. Nancy watched it, fascinated morbidly by the idea of death as a commonplace thing. It was old, maybe not by count of years, but by the ravages of time that marked it. It was naked, and it too was female. The necklet of the blue gem hung around its neck, lay inert on the withered and frail chest. The eyes of the corpse were open, staring blankly at the sky.

She was at the altar, and the patriarch looked at her, his eyes wise and sad.

He spoke, and the words were in the tongue he had always spoken, and only by memory did Nancy understand what he said.

Kneel, my daughter, and understand what it is you are chosen to do.

The polished area around the altar was cold to her knees, and the old man's touch on her forehead, quite repellent.

Linna, will you succeed to the High Priestesshood of the Earth Mother?

I will, my father.

Then take the chalice in your hands, and do not let it fall from you.

The stem, and base of the bowl was cool, buffered by the evaporation of the fuel, but the walls of the cup were searingly hot. In the memory, the pain was thankfully dulled, but even so, it was more than Nancy would have cared to bear.

Receive your rank, High Priestess.

The patriarchal figure drew a blivit from his gown, and struck it against the chalice, which nearly dropped from Nancy's desperate grasp. He placed the stem against the bare stone of the altarblock, which sounded the note loud and clear, it fitted precisely into the context, neither hellish, nor crystal-pure as she had in reality experienced it. But what it caused attacked Nancy's sanity.

The unseeing corpse upon the slab stirred, and sat up. It turned around to fix its blindly staring eyes at Nancy, and dropped onto its feet before her. The gem it wore blazed brightly, on a level with her eyes as she knelt. Its light cast shadows, showing that a structure akin to a sow's udder, two rows of nipples down the whole torso, were what had been female about it.

Dead hands lifted up the necklet, high to the sky, and decaying throat screamed out something wild, something that woke responses in the Nancy persona: not the Linna one, and then the cadaver leaned forwards, and placed the relic around her neck. The flame from the chalice caught in the hair of the zombie, and it burned brightly, as if it had been soaked in petrol, and spread to the whole body.

It burned, ghastly, with sickening stench, and hot as a furnace, for what seemed an age, before collapsing as a calcined skeleton before her. Nancy set the chalice down, and looked at her hands. They were unmarked.

---

Jakita Debra, prisoner of war, gazed moodily through the window of her 'cell'; a large and luxurious hotel room in the Snowflake. Beyond the glass, twenty two thousand miles away, hung a fat turquoise and white crescent, twenty degrees and a bit from pole to pole. It was a world – more than that, it was her world, one that she had nurtured from untouched Eden, to this. And then, without so much as a by your leave, johnny-come-lately politicians, latecomers on the scene, but with powerful friends, had just taken a fancy to it, and would take it, for such was the whim that took them.

The rings, beautiful discs of gossamer, were invisible by contrast, and acute angle of view.

Somewhere beneath those rings, down on the dirt of that globe, Nancy Elanor of her clan was being held and she knew not where and could do nothing about it.

The doorbell sounded, and without waiting to be invited in, a Linker with the uniform of the Guild's security arm entered. She introduced herself as the officer concerned with prisoners' welfare, and asked if there was anything she needed.

I shan't bother you with extravagances – but I would like to phone Professor asKorran at the University. He's the last person we know who might have seen Nancy before she was kidnapped.

I'm afraid that will have to wait. Chan asKorran was picked up along with your troops, and is being held pending a procedural enquiry, along with the Guild telepath who was with him. I can't promise anything, but you might be able to get in contact with him tomorrow afternoon. Besides, I'm no legal expert – can't tell whether that would count as aid to external factions or not. I can bring you an expert if you wish, or allow you access to legal texts.

Oh, hell with it. I'll wait. Damn hassle for a simple phone call that just might save a girl's life. But I don't suppose that could influence you in the slightest. Leave me alone please.

No, I'm sorry, I'll see you tomorrow then.

---

Nancy woke from her dreaming, without full recollection of what had passed through her mind. She wriggled about to snuggle up closer to Julie, but she was alone on the bed. Nancy curled up again for warmth, and tried to get back to sleep, to pass the time until her girlfriend returned. She thought about her dreams, confused things, feverish pictures, events, too solid to really be dreams, memories perhaps?

In one thread, she had hurried out from the perfect sanctuary of the castle that was her home, and fled across the University, pursued by armed matts; but in another, she had been the alien Linna, priestess, ascending to the position of leadership in her faith, back in the age of the Q'l-hrui wars, Leader of the Song of life. She remembered nostalgically that wild and proper rite – it had been so long ago, so long since anyone had danced it

She's awake now – just not bothering to open her eyes for us. How are you feeling now, Nancy?

Nancy summoned up her will, and rolled onto her back, glad of a break in that chain of thought which seemed to lead only to darkness, nightmare and insanity. She had rejected gods, yet they seemed to reach out now to claim her as their own, and she dare not contemplate that long.

Terrible. she announced , my mouth tastes like it was stuffed with cotton wool, my head feels like it was used as a football when I wasn't looking, and my back aches. Do you care for a more detailed... Oh my...

She raised herself up on one elbow, and looked at the room she was in. There were curtains drawn across two windows of the room, and it was these archaic furnishings that caught her eye first, but the rest of it was an unremarkable modern dwelling.

There were two people, total strangers, standing by the bed – one a youngish man, with a beard just the respectable side of looking unshaven, and the other a black haired girl, plain, but, Nancy felt, vivacious enough to be attractive. Both looked concerned.

What happened to me? Nancy asked them.

Don't you remember? What's the last thing you can remember?

My consecration, taking the chalice, watching the corpse give me... what am I talking about – I was going to say that a corpse ordained me a high priestess, then burned up in the fire I was carrying, I think I dreamed that. Last thing I can be sure of is that I went to bed with a cousin of mine, but I have some vague memories of going back to the University, and being chased over the rooftops. I got out of the buildings, but the matts chased me with an aircar. I can't remember all that much else – I just had the impression I'd been captured, but all of that was lost in the dreaming.

Weird dreams from the sound of things, I think your mind needs scrubbing out. But that's beside the point. My name's Janice Morgan, and this here is Guy Naylor.

'This here' smiled, and took up the explanation.

We found you wandering through the vehicle park at Cedars – thought you were drunk at first. We could hardly believe our eyes, seeing a Clan Wolf girl out and about in public after the Bill went through.

Luckily there was no one else around to see, so we bundled you into our car and brought you home, where you'd be safer.

Thanks. If you hadn't happened along I don't know what could have happened. Any chance of phoning home?

I don't think that would be advisable – there'll be official monitoring of calls to the Castle, and that'll bring the cops down on us. You're Nancy Elanor, aren't you?

Yes – why? How did you know?

It was on the news while we were flying back here – following the mystery flight from the Castle earlier, you were top billing. They said there'd been a ruckus somewhere in the University, and some of the people involved had escaped before the Linkers could close the place up.

They named you directly, and offered a reward of fifty thousand plaques for you, on charges of violating neutrality, and incitement to same.

Bloody hell – famous at last. Are you sure you're not going to cash me in?

Of course not! Janice interrupted, aggrievedly

We're traditionalists at heart – we don't feel you as a group affect us personally in any way, and the sense of splendour – sheer nostalgia – of the Clans appeals to us; on the other hand, the Traders and whoever are simply excruciatingly tedious. So when the chance came, we felt we had to do something in support of our principles.

So we're going to try to smuggle you back to your castle tomorrow night – get up close as if we were with the nuts going to protest, and then dive for cover at the last minute.

You could be quite mad. As long as you've got some sort of transport that is very fast – that last approach is going to be a sprint to the wire, with any sort of mayhem following us. Any chance of something to drink – tea, coffee, fruit–juice – I'm a hell of a thirsty.

Sure – come on into the living room and we'll get us something. We were going to have supper as well – You care for something to eat?

Mm–hmm. What's the time here? – I'm all out of synch after this.

Guy picked up Nancy's watch from the bedside table.

04:15 by this watch

22:15 here – we haven't crossed time zones have we?

No – this is High Prospect.

22:15 it is. No wonder I'm hungry.

---

Six thousand miles away, the castle was not so tranquil. The siege was quiet, but the action, however intermittent, served to remind the inhabitants of its existence.

Tricia was still in the control room, she had not been told to go, and the idea hadn't occurred to her. She was still in reaction shock at the sudden climax of events.

Nancy was captured.

She didn't, couldn't believe that. Yet life seemed to go on as before, although, in effect, one of its players had been removed. Would she ever see Nancy again?

She hoped so but feared not – she didn't have enough data on the matts' motivation to sketch a realistic scenario, but what she could guess gave her little cheer. To live her life without one who had been a sister and a lover to her seemed impossible to do now, as it had seemed impossible that such would be required of her.

If only... worlds of probabilities that might have been played out in her head as she sought for some way by which she might have prevented the tragedy.

If she had advised Nancy to turn back when she had been wounded, and gone on alone – possible, but would she have risked it – or would Nancy have wished to be alone? If she had hurried to the rendezvous – but would she have been able to drag Nancy along at that pace, knowing her reluctance to place herself in positions of risk. If only she herself had trodden Nancy's path to self destruction instead – but she was not inquisitive enough to have done so – and if there was something worse than the present situation, changing roles with Nancy could well be that.

She sat, dazed, at her position, face cradled in her arms, staring down in the shadow. As far as it entered her mind, the conflict displayed above and about her was a stupid and totally pointless waste of time and effort.

---

Another of the castle's inhabitants was awake in this early morning, with Nancy's disappearance and capture uppermost in her mind.

Julie had woken abruptly in the night, to find herself alone, and for a long time lay there in the darkness awaiting her return. But there was no sign of her, no sound of movement in the rest of the apartment. There was only the intermittent explosions of mortar shells, more frequent now – every ten seconds, not every ten minutes, and the crackling of energy weapon discharges.

Through the window, despite the limited view her position afforded her, she could see occasional lines, points and bursts of harsh white light, where cybersoldiers and static defences probed at each other, within the restrictions imposed by the defence screens.

She watched the fireworks for an indefinite time, ten minutes she would have guessed, before deciding that she was thirsty enough to get herself a cup of water. To move was strange after so long lying motionless and an effort of will was required to break the stasis. She wriggled back to sit on the pillow before rolling about, landing on her feet beside the bed.

Silently, she strode into the main room, where she saw a string of text burning quietly on the terminal screen. She looked at it curiously.

Retrieve file `sapphire`, and please act upon it.

Help me. Nancy.

Bewildered, Julie accessed the file from store. The first line, obviously added at a later date, surprised her further. 'Acted upon,' it read 'Signed Jeanne.'

That alone was enough to intrigue her to read the enigmatic message beneath. The tale it told was incredible, but written with authenticity – and if it was enough to convince Lady Jeanne to act...

The picture of Nancy it painted was detailed enough to provide explanation to the strange sense of detachment she had noticed, both that afternoon and that evening. The girl who had been an elder sister to her, if always a little remote across the gap of a couple of years age had been even further removed, but had somehow been straining for closeness.

The last item, after a gap, was the real sting in the tail. Added by Genevieve, at Jeanne's behest, the satellite pictures of Nancy's final dash for safety, her fall and her capture, with caption commentary.

The pictures had a morbid fascination for her, and she played them over and over, but each time, the story was the same, and Nancy was taken by the enemy. Julie was sad, with a deep, regretful, resigned sadness. There was no anger, no shock, for she was fortunate not to be that close to Nancy, but she could sympathize enough for some response.

There was no wonder any more that she had waited in vain for Nancy to come back to bed. If she had only woken at Nancy's departure, to plead with her... but that would not have worked. It was going to be hard to write someone that close out of her life completely, but she would have to do it now, like it or not. There had been so many things to say to Nancy, and to hear from her, and now, she would never have the opportunity.

She sat at the terminal, while in the slowly lightening sky, minor dogfights raged. Only when the early morning chill had made her skin icy and clammy did she return to bed.

---

The dinner was over. The dirty dishes had been cleared from the tabletop, and now Nancy and her rescuers sat in the living room drinking coffee, and talking inconsequential nothings, primarily famous, and usually third-hand anecdotes about university life.

Halfway through the second cup, Nancy felt her eyes burn, and the lids become incredibly heavy. To hold her eyes open was becoming almost impossible, she yawned wide and long, almost straining her jaw, and when she had finished, she wiped tears from her eyes.

My god, she said, I think my last term of debauched living has used up my reserves, I'm about to fell asleep here.

She yawned again, interrupting the flow of her speech.

You see. she resumed , Now what am I going to do for a bed tonight

Lie down on the settee – I'm afraid we haven't got a spare bed – never thought we'd need one.

Nancy gulped down the last of her coffee, between yawns, letting a trickle spill down her front in her haste. She set the cup down, and wiped mouth and chin.

That's a damn' good idea, Guy. Thanks.

That's all right. Just pretend we're your relatives. If you wake up during the night, you know where everything is kept, and Janice and I will be in bed if you need us. I'll get you some sheets and a blanket.

Nancy watched him go. Bleary-eyed, she walked over to the settee, and reclined there, staring at Janice. A thoroughly nice-looking girl, all things considered, she decided, She had to stop herself smiling leeringly at the poor girl; from what she had deduced, Janice was unlikely to appreciate the sentiment. She decided to settle down to sleep, using a scatter-cushion for a pillow.

It was luxurious just to lie there with eyes closed, mind loose to wander as the fancy took along chains of distorted logic. Guy returned with the bedclothes to see her lying there as if asleep, and gently laid the over her and tucked them in. He tousled her hair.

Goodnight, Nancy.

Goodnight, Guy, Nancy replied, without bothering to look up. Instead, she pressed her hand against Guy's for an instant, just to show her appreciation.

He departed, and then all that she could sense from the outside world were the sounds of movement as he and Janice tidied up the cups, and readied themselves for bed. As the darkness claimed her mind, Nancy wondered, was this what parents were like : she had never had what might be called a family life, and this was all totally new to her. It might be fun...

Guy returned to stand over her for a few minutes, watching, waiting. At last he was satisfied.

She's out. he stated, flatly.

But will it be all right?

Sure. Hell, there were so many chemicals in her meal she'd've almost been able to taste them. If she'd been looking for them I'd swear she would have. You saw the dregs of her coffee; half that sugar wasn't. Okay – let's get the equipment set up.

Janice rose from the chair where she had been waiting, and went over to the sideboard. From one of the cupboards she fetched a metal framework, which trailed a length of power cable. She plugged the flex into a wall socket, and brought the device itself over to where Nancy lay.

Gently, Guy lifted Nancy's head from the pillow, while Janice fitted the helmet, setting the contact brushes against the skin of the scalp.

Cassette?

Guy picked a pale blue crystal from an elaborate stand bearing about a dozen others, and handed it over. Janice opened a flap in the main body of the helm, fist-sized box against the back of Nancy's skull, and slotted the crystal into the space within. Light glowed bright green when she pressed the test switch.

Okay then. Here's to sanity." Janice threw a switch marked 'play', and replaced the cover.

Patterns of electrons had been frozen into that crystal, distorting the crystal lattice, patterns inscribed by the program that Janice had run before Nancy's awakening. Now those electrons danced on her command, and passed their messages down the interface links into Nancy's brain, where already chemicals were acting to erase habitual patterns of cultural behaviour and assumptions.

And in the morning, she'll be halfway sane. One down now, but there are thirty thousand still left on Wyvern – and how many other such survive elsewhere. But it's a start, anyway.

A start. We can leave her now – there's nothing to do until morning now.

---

A knock came at her door.

Come in! called Jakita. The girl who entered wore the uniform of a corporal in the Clan forces. Bad news, she explained. How bad?

Quite bad. I was hanging around in the lounge, just, having a drink, and watching the Link. There was a liner that came through with it, with some passengers for here.

And...?

I thought it was a bit strange – the situation here isn't exactly being hushed up – but I thought I'd take a look at them. They didn't want to mix with me – that in itself isn't too surprising, but when you have forty people who all seem to know each other well arriving at a place, you wonder what they are. So I peeked at the cargo manifest for the stuff being unloaded.

Loads of crates of gravitic-powered equipment, purpose unspecified. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

Mercenaries – with their own suits.

The same.

Forty of them you say – that's a lot of firepower – together they could do some serious damage to a Castle if it doesn't have its screens tight. We've got to get out of here, tell the castle, it's about time we started what little we can do. Have you told the Linkers?

And just get told that it's none of their business? Not likely.

Okay. Call the girls together, I remember seeing in a film that it's a soldier's duty to try to escape from a POW camp, so I can't not live up to the tradition.

What do you have in mind?

That'd be telling – wait until the last minute, then I'll say – we don't want too many brains knowing the secret open to picking. When do the mercs leave?

About an hour, after a meal.

Thanks.

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There was an anxious gathering in the apartments of Vors k'Shammarra, consisting of Kingarra and a number of persons not officially known to be their associates.

Each of them had a small hand–phone unit that was receiving almost continual use – punch a number, wait a frustrating while for an answer, usually annoyed, but almost at once to become servile, then a few questions, mostly answered in the negative, a few orders, and then the whole cycle began again.

Every so often, one of the intent figures would place the phone down, stand up, and pace around, or fetch another drink.

Shammarra broke the huddle after about an hour of this. If he could have sweated profusely, he would have done so. Instead, his tongue merely darted rapidly in and out of his mouth.

That may not be everyone that we've seen so far, but we're getting down to fairly minor command levels now. If we don't find who it is soon...

Meaning that you're worried about who might be financing this.

Of course, I can't be certain, but I have some ideas, though I can't believe any of them. I can't see anyone with enough spare cash around to try buying in here at this stage in the game. And if they're not trying to buy in here, then that must mean they're playing very clever, using our activities as a smoke–screen, to cover themselves as they build up some advantage. But what? I can't see the clan's moving again for another two hundred years after they next get settled down.

And you're afraid of people who might be planning on that sort of timescale.

Who wouldn't be? But all the corporations who do that sort of thing regularly are back in the Cygnus arm, and all the League businesses that might do that thing at a pinch are operating to heartward of here.

But that's exactly where the Combine is likely to move out to.

But here isn't their territory, I'll phone up a few directors – threaten to buy them out. When's the next Link due?

Three or four hours from now.

Damn. Still, that means the mercenaries must be here. When they get down, I'm almost tempted to set them searching for the Clan girl, rather than deploy them in the field. That way we can claim responsibility for them, and say we're employing them to act where the local police won't, to try and find a non-combatant girl who's been kidnapped by ruthless thugs, that would discourage those responsible for this little caper, and get us the favour of the Guild.

Let's hear points for and against that.

---

Twenty thousand miles overhead, Jakita Debra of Wolf looked down at the world that had eclipsed the sun. There was a pale point of light just south of its centre. This was the city of High Prospect, where corporation bosses conspired, only a mile from where Nancy slept.

Jakita; Nancy; Shamarra; each effectively close to the others, but none of them knowing. One watched and waited, one acted, one slept.

## Chapter 8 – Dreams

Nancy dreamed. Her mind wandered in strange paths through the musty, unused places of her mind. The pictures and the places and the ideas were all strange, with a strangeness bordering on the uncomfortable. Yet they were only dreams, a part of her second life, where excitement and daring were to be had without any price to pay. She was happy with her dreams, and could trust them, as being herself mistress over them.

She did not realize that this was not so, that the dramas playing out before her were born from patternings in crystal, set by the will of others, not fantasies of her own.

---

Nancy stood in the Granite Garden, a maze of fantastic statuary in the south of Castle Wolf. It probably had a formal name, this place, but she was content with the play name she had given it a decade and more before. This was her special place, from as soon as she discovered it : a place designed for games of hiding and chasing, and just eerie enough to add spice. The place had also acquired other memories for her. Here it had been, on a sun-bed at the top of a small tower, a rook in a chaos of chess pieces, that she had first made love with Tricia; the first time for either of them.

Yet something had soured the friendly warmth of the place. The sky had clouded over with winter storm clouds, in the darkest of sky-greys, and the wind was fitful and cold, driving grit lashing across her bare skin. Those statues that had recognizable faces leered malevolently at her, making her more consciously aware of her nakedness than the temperature.

Somewhere close by, someone laughed, powerfully, satanically, in unholy glee. A girl screamed shrilly, from a torment appropriate to that hideous cackle.

Nancy headed towards the source of the sound, fighting her way between statues that seemed to move to block her progress through the mazes. The screams came again, bubbling as they faded. They were not always screams now – they had lost power, were instead groans of unendurable anguish.

At last, she stumbled into an open space, and stopped, horrified at what she saw. The frame of a child's swing had been set up across from where she stood, and instead of a seat, something else had been chained to the crossbar. It was Tricia, hanging by her wrists, shackled to the bolt holes, her body had been savagely mutilated, but through it all, she was still alive and conscious. Their eyes met, in a plea for help, or surcease. The carnage sickened Nancy to her stomach, and to think that that body had been once so beautiful....

Standing between them, turning now to see where Tricia stared, holding in her hand, the gory scalpel that caused the damage, was the Lady Jeanne Marygay of Wolf.

Despite her acceptance of Jeanne's higher social rank, Nancy did not show any respect as the red anger and black hate rose in her mind.

You bitch! Nancy could say nothing further. There were no words she knew that could suitably express her complete outrage. She sought to conjure up hellfires to cast at that laughing monstrosity, but the dream fabric refused to obey her.

Words failed her again as the Lady Jeanne effortlessly took her and hung her in Tricia's place, and began slowly to remove her skin with a scalpel now blunted from previous use. The agony burned incessantly, but she hated equally.

Both sensations seemed to go on forever.

---

Linna, High Priestess, stirred in her sleep, and woke. Sleep was elusive that night, in the heat. Besides, tomorrow the Great Song would be sung, a full month before the date normally appointed to it.

So the priests of the Skyfather urged, and despite her rank, Linna was content to bow to the superior wisdom of their astrological lore. They had pointed out all the new stars that had blossomed in the night sky, an event that had never been recorded since first the heavens had been established three thousand years before, and the great plays of the southern lights, brighter and more persistent than ever in living memory. Those were facts, incontrovertible, and there for everyone to see – even the common-folk.

She threw aside the bedclothes and went to the window to look at them. They were bright indeed in the crystal clear air, which flamed in the south. It was no wonder that the populace had been thrown into near panic. There was talk of the gods coming down to earth, and the end of the world; something especially favoured by the heretical preachers that had sprung up like a cancer in the year since these things had started

On a separate plane, Nancy interpreted the data. There was a war on up there, moving this way at just under light speed – no other way that the light could stack up so neatly. That gave this world of Lincoln very little time to live, before the raging fire of its sun burned it clean.

None of this bothered Linna. She was too involved with the intricate patterning of the dance, and the flow of the song. Unnoticed by her bed burned the deep blue gem, the regalia of the Earth other, woken by the patterns of mind.

---

Nancy was young again, only five or six years old, and her physical viewpoint on the world was disconcertingly different. She was playing catch with her sister Tracy. She was tall and slim, and Nancy found herself slightly envious of her looks.

She missed her catch, the ball sailing past her to land in the bushes that edged the open space of grass where they played. It was dark and green under their huddled leaves, but the ball was made of brightly coloured plastic, in yellows and reds, and was easy to see in the gloom.

She crawled forwards to pick it up, but something moved it away from her clumsy reach. She struggled after it, following its retreat into the depths of the shrubbery and then suddenly she was out in the open again, in a lagoon of open that she had never guessed to exist. She was not alone.

The Lady Jeanne held the ball, and gathered around the clearing were all her sisters, daughters and nieces, each one bearing the aspect of their age.

I hate little girls, said Jeanne, as if as spokes'an, We all hate little girls, don't we?

The rest of them nodded and murmured their assent.

You were playing catch, weren't you? the sneering voice continued, leaving Nancy chilled with fear, and now we're going to play catch.

This was too much for Nancy. She broke and ran as fast as her infant body might allow, but Jeanne was the faster, and grabbed her up – holding her despite her fiercest struggles. When she quieted a little, Jeanne hurled her at another of the girls.

Sky and earth, sun and clouds spun past her, and then she was caught in cruel hands, and thrown on to

another. Sometimes they didn't catch her, and she fell on the hard earth.

It ended, finally.

---

Nancy wandered alone in a space of unreality. All around her was black, save glowing outlines in neon colours that drifted like deep-sea fish. She could move in that isolation as she wished; there was only the problem that one place was much like another in this sea. There was only the faintest of gradients to distinguish one place from another.

She reached for the source of the sign posting, across an indistinct distance of space and time. And as she moved, she called the name of the only person she cared deeply about: Tricia, help me, help me, my love.

And pictures came to her from that source, fragmented at first, but unmistakably real. She looked out at the world through Tricia's eyes, and there was a crystal sharpness about the contact that cut through the fog of illusion that had clouded her dreams.

Her soul partner had departed the control room, and had returned to her room, where now she ate, wearily. She hoped that everything was under control, knowing that although the first operation had been interrupted from outside, that the present search would not fail – although whether it would be in time would be another matter. In the central control of operations, working against the pressures of time and violence, the Clan was bending its will to Nancy's rescue.

For herself, Tricia hoped fervently that they would succeed before it was too late for Nancy and worried that they would not until she could not eat. From her viewpoint, Nancy tried to reach Tricia, to tell her what was happening and as she strained, their waking minds touched, just for an instant. Love and reassurance blossomed where there had only been loneliness and fear.

They exchanged only a brief statement of their names, but that was enough of a message for either.

---

It was a day of High Dinner in the castle, this one to mark the birthday of Trixy Linda. The whole Clan had gathered together in the Great Hall, each in the formal robes of their station, most vying with their contemporaries for outrageousness of design and completeness of ostentation.

Nancy herself had chosen modest attire – her gown in purple, trimmed with silver, and on her brow, the circlet marking her as holding the rank of baronne, but that was as nothing against the metal and jewel encrusted outfits that adorned the high table.



Above that great gathering, on the wall, beneath a representation of the arms of the clan – argent, a bend sinister sable, between two wolves heads erased sable, armed and langued gules, was inscribed the roster of worlds that the Clan had graced. Lindisfarne, Starbow, Luthien, Heartward, Toehold, Last Gasp and Wyvern – even the five year-olds knew that list to recite.

Nancy herself was seated on the middle file of tables, midway down, on the left as one faced the high table, surrounded by her contemporaries, engaging in a frivolous conversation of some lightweight matter, whiling away the time until the food began to arrive.

Nancy Elanor! The Lady Jeanne roared out that name. Nancy felt her heart pound, and cold sickness close in on her belly. She turned to look at the source of the call.

All conversation ceased in the instant.

Stand on the table, Nancy Elanor, came the command.

Do it, damn you!

Nancy had hesitated but for an instant.

Aware of all the watching eye, she obeyed, kicking the cutlery carelessly aside. A knife clattered to the floor, loud in the ominous silence.

Now strip!

The circlet fell dully to the wood of the table, followed by the gown, carelessly discarded. Her hands shook as she unzipped her boots and kicked them off, wreaking further havoc down the table, Her grasp was no better

as she fumbled with the fastenings to her dress, but the elegantly tailored blue cloth tumbled at last to her feet, and she stepped from its ring.

There was a pause, and then her underwear joined the pile of discarded clothing.

Nancy felt the eyes of the gathering upon her, lustful, laughing, cruel. She dreaded to think what might be in store for her at their hands. Only Tricia was not caught up in that fever. There was sadness in her eyes, and fear as she stared with morbid fascination, wanting to tear her eyes away from the sight.

There was a slight disturbance at the high table, and then Jeanne began to walk slowly towards her. Even at this time, she could notice the full regal attire and bearing of the woman she loathed, and the heavy whip she carried in her hand.

Stand away from her, she cried as she approached

They did, nervously moving away to form a circle about both Nancy and Jeanne. Coldly, the mother of the clan cast aside her heavy robes of silver fur, streaked with black, and her crown of argent and adamant, and held the lash ready. Their eyes met, and Nancy saw sickening savagery in their depths, and could only reply with fear and hate.

Jeanne raised the whip, showing the barbs woven into its length, and then brought it crashing down on Nancy's back. The end curled around her and raised a weal across her bare stomach.

---

The sky was clear, and a faded blue. From its vantage point, the sun shone down in scorching summer heat upon the great theatre. There were a few pinpoints of light in the sky that were stars in their death agonies, the aurora were a faint shimmer in the southern sky, like curtains of light.

The theatre was decked with flowers, and thronged with the devout, pilgrims come to this central rite, to be caught up in the oneness of life, in celebration and worship.

In the arena, the priests and priestesses assembled, ready for the commencement, on the hour deemed most auspicious. There was a heavy scent in the air of raw fragrances of flowers and herbs in the oils upon their skins. Set around the stage, incense burners sent up narrow columns of white smoke.

The finger of shadow on the sundials reached the appointed mark. Linna spoke the first words of the chant, and that was enough. On the instant, the dance began, each dancer following the path that they had been trained to, unified by the power that was in the amulet Linna wore. She was as if at a distance as she moved through that joyous crowd, the Great Words of the song pouring from her lips, and her body moving to the rhythms of the dance, embodying the ebb and flow of the seasons, and the intoxicating pulse of life.

Sweat streaked her body, drying quickly in the scorching heat, but still clogging up with the dust. Her feet were sore, bruised on the rough stone, but the joy within buoyed her up, and her steps did not falter. Time passed without anyone being conscious of it, until the clearly remembered closing stanza began. Already the dancers were pairing off to honour the Earth Mother.

And in the end, she was alone on the open stage, save for the one priest who would possess her on the altar. The last words were spoken, the last steps made, and she stood there panting from the exertion.

They faced each other, and Linna let slip her tattered garlands, her dusty gown. She turned to run to the altar. Locked within her Nancy's personality writhed for escape.

The Sun! She did not know who had first made that cry, but it was taken up by all the multitude, in the sky, the aurora flared, even against a sun swollen and grown brighter, its touch was parching, and searing, its light bluish and hotter than any furnace.

This was the nova, the death of world by the hands of uncaring gods, but though the people might fear, none knew truly what was happening, none save Nancy, and she could not act, she could only wait as the heat claimed them all.

---

There was darkness, it was cool and bathed her like stream water from the mountains, fresh melted from the snows of a hundred winters ago. There was a pathway in the dark, leading to a doorway, and she took it, and she and Tricia were together again.

Both slept, and both dreamed, and together they could master the flow of their dreaming. All their dreams were strange and beautiful

---

In Clarke orbit, the Clan Wolf troops were considering their possible avenues of escape. Two were open to them – either to hijack the shuttle taking the mercenaries down to the planet, or to wait a further two hours and try an escape immediately after a Link, when the Linkers would be unable to act.

Every second of their discussion they were painfully aware of their vulnerability to detection by any of the psychically aware Guild personnel, should any be so minded as to eavesdrop. There was only the standard convention on such invasions of personal privacy to protect them now, and even that couldn't prevent an accidental overhearing.

The former alternative was tackled first, with its great advantage of providing immediate transport and the drawbacks of having to face active Linkers and the assumed mercenaries. Conversely, the latter plan would avoid such lack of finesse, but possibly leave them without any transport available.

Eventually, they decided to wait for the link, and chance the transport, having determined that it gave the better chance of success, although neither seemed to be particularly hopeful. But they were content with that slim chance. Two and one half hour hence, during the psychic maelstrom of the link would be the most appropriate time for departure.

---

Time passed. Dreamers moved through the fantasies of the night, and schemers awaited the next Link. And on each of these, the fate of thousands rested.

Come the appointed moment, in the Snowflake, the Linkers reached out with their minds to forge new existence, to touch their sisters at Windfall Station, the next stop heartward.

The span of the great ring blinked like an eye, and at its centre, red fire blossomed, and green and gold rushed to join it, to rush outwards to the circumference bounding them, where they bubbled and frothed harmlessly around the gate to another place.

And as the whirlpool of colour spun and frothed in the ring, two dozen silver haired, grey skinned shapes made their move. Following courses reconstructed from memories and the briefest of scouting expeditions, they made their separate ways to the main docking complex.

Scattered, they avoided suspicion just long enough for them to reach their goal. Then, again *en masse*, they moved in on the few people hanging around, binding and gagging them briskly, and leaving them to be found later. Fireteams detached themselves, going to seek out transport for the escape, and one came up with a

suitable vessel. It was a small in-system craft, presumably parked by someone gone away, with all the creature comforts that their previous trip had lacked.

They packed themselves into the craft, and as soon as the hatch was sealed, Jakita, in the pilot's seat, gunned the engines into action. Docking latches screamed and failed as the small ship tried to tow the whole station along, against the locking action of the Link, and then the ship was free to plummet towards the planet at its highest acceleration, taking them beyond the effective aegis of the Linkers in a scant handful of seconds.

Strained by their recent exertions, the Linkers attempted no fight with a ship that was being steered at ever increasing speed towards the largest concentration of inhabitation on the world below.

And in that place, Nancy dreamed.

---

Minutes passed, and the fleeing ship altered its course eastwards, risking everything on a descent at highest feasible velocity into the safety of the Castle. Towards their home, they cut a thousand-mile long path of ionization through the upper atmosphere, a trail that endured for minutes after that meteoric descent.

Only at the last possible moment did they radio ahead a call that the protective screens be dropped for the instants of their passage, to give the least possible warning to the besieging forces. The nanosecond reflexes of the defence computers opened the outer barrier when the car was but yards away, and closed with such tolerance afterwards, but in the ten milliseconds during which the outer screen was down, the five assaulting cybersoldiers poured all the fire they could into perimeter installations, and the heavy laser batteries that were uncloaked burst into life. Five transient fingers of light ignited five longer lasting, but still brief flashes in the air.

The war had claimed its first irrevocable victims, and no one could say that they would be the only ones. There could be little hope of any sortie from the castle in the days to come; anything that asKorran, or the telepath might have to say to shed light on Nancy's plight would remain unknown.

---

The world turned on its axis, and morning: eventually came to the city of High Prospect, the ascending sun lighting its towers first in pink, then orange and then dazzling white.

On the couch where she lay, Nancy stirred, waking slowly from her sleep. Bacon was frying in the kitchen, its sizzling loud enough to be annoying, should she attempt to sleep again. She was thirsty, and her head ached, and when she tried to remember what she had dreamed, she felt decidedly uncomfortable. Whatever they had been, it seemed wisest to forget them now.

Nancy sat up, and swept her hair into some sort of order, and looked around her, remembering the events of that last night, a night that seemed to have endured forever, in chaotic, feverish activity. By contrast it was nice here, and quiet, nicer by far than at home where... She shuddered without really knowing what there was to shudder about. Trying to think about it felt like struggling in cotton wool and besides, hunger was at that instant more pressing than that sort of worry.

She joined her hosts in the kitchen, where Janice was cooking the meal, and Guy was setting out the plates.

Morning, Janice. Morning, Guy.

Good morning, Nancy, how are you today? How much do you think you can eat?

OK– I feel a bit crook, but should be all right when I wake up properly, I feel hungry enough to finish off

whatever you put in front of me.

Whatever you say. We can take it easy today, at least until this evening. It must have been terrible being chased by those barbarians.

The chase was no fun, but I think you're going a little far calling them barbarians – they have their own ideals – and I'm not so sure I like some of our history so terribly much. They might have a point however badly they put it.

I suppose you're right, Nancy. The idealists are probably a decent bunch. It's the corporation money-grubbers that are to be despised, like Shamarra and Kingarra. They're staying in that tower over there... Janice pointed out of the window at another building.

Just think what you could do with a small cybersoldier hand weapon – no hassle, just point it and no more directors for a couple of large corporations. They'd be too busy then keeping themselves from civil war and takeover. That'd see you safe, these last few days.

If I had a gun. Let's eat.

---

That morning they spent strolling through the parks that made up by far the greatest proportion of area of the works of intelligence on that world. Despite the heavy make-up she wore, and the long black wig, designed to protect her from casual notice, Nancy felt freer than she could ever remember having been. All weight of responsibility had been lifted from her, all the compulsions to act as a good clan member against the dictates of her own self interest, all the hiding from alerted opponents of her presence. Though the storm might rage about her, she was at the eye of the hurricane.

On the hill slopes above the city to the north, they sat and ate a picnic lunch. The city itself was the centrepiece of their view, a rush of gleaming white, spawning tall towers that rose into the pale sky. Small specks of colour drifted around the structures, soaring in the thermals from their great concrete aprons, people hang-gliding around the only city this world possessed.

Nancy sat, and watched them soar about, as they launched themselves down the slope, against the breeze, and moved up and away in widening circuits. They were no source of threat; only to be envied for their freedom of action, and after months of paranoia the chance to throw off her habitual patterns of distrust was intoxicating. The close, almost family-like nature of the group enhanced the feeling of sudden freedom. She had regretted her most recent return to the castle, but she was now almost dreading the next one.

The thought wiped the smile from her face, saddening her deeply. The Castle seemed so restrictive after all this that even the prospect of return cramped her. For a long while she sat staring wistfully down at the bright city, not seeing, and only half hearing what was being said.

Yet looking back on it later, she could say that she enjoyed that afternoon, whatever else she might qualify that statement with, and it was with regret that she agreed with the decision to go back home. But that was not until the shadows were lengthening, and swinging far around to the south-east, and when their stomachs began to suggest that dinner would be a good thing to have. Even from the apartment now, the shadows stretched beyond sight, and the air was cooling, although the direct sunlight was still warm. The fateful evening would soon be upon them.

The local time was already shortly after 17:30. In less than an hour the sun would set on the city. While Guy prepared the meal, Janice and Nancy prepared for the flight to the Castle. All the while, Nancy hesitated, seeking to make a sufficient delay that they would have to postpone the operation until the next day. But that

was not to be. Guy and Janice had obviously done the preparations in advance, leaving only the details for Nancy to fill in. The meal was soon ready, and Nancy ate slowly, the food seeming to lose its taste. The prospect of going home did not appeal to her and yet there was Tricia, waiting, for her, afraid that she might be lost to her forever. With that end in mind, she was determined to go through with it, even if she would leave as soon as the castle lifted.

And when the eating was done, Guy suggested to Nancy that she have a nap now, against what could be a very long night. She agreed, partly from expediency, partly from a weariness that was consuming her. She was thoroughly exhausted, all too ready to go to sleep.

And when she did succumb to its lure, Guy placed the helmet upon her head, and loaded it with a second cassette. She mumbled something indistinct as the first message began to pour through her brain, and then was silent.

Guy and Janice looked at the clock, and at the sleeping girl.

Everything on schedule. Now for the next stage.

Guy took up the phone, and dialled a number.

---

That morning, unwontedly late for her, but before in absolute terms, taking time zones into account, Nancy woke, Tricia made the decision to break out of her half-sleep and get up.

Good morning, Tricia. The usual breakfast?

Sure. Anything happen while I've been asleep?

There were a series of explosions, and the distant sounds of gunfire. When the sounds of combat lulled again, Genevieve replied to her.

We've had no luck on tracing Nancy so far. However, the girls who were sent out after her managed to escape from the Snowflake. We even managed to get five of the matt cybersoldiers while the screens were down to let the girls' ship in. We only lost a few areas of the outer wall during the attack. Nothing much has happened since. The assaulting forces have built up massively – it's going to be almost impossible to get in or out of the Castle from now on. It's mostly air cover, very little ground activity.

They seem to be biding their time for some reason, waiting, and no one is sure why. I don't like it, and neither does Jeanne. I believe that they're waiting until they can get something that can take us out in one go – they must know as well as we do that it's only going to be another hundred hours until we lift.

Other stuffs – the platoon who went out after Nancy want to take a heavy set of weaponry and set off after asKorran and the Guild telepath Nancy mentioned, to try and get some more information, but I don't think it'll fly. Jeanne is a little more calculating than that.

Thanks, Genevieve.

Tricia thought of the dreams she had had, and of Nancy who had been with her during that time. It grieved her to consider that it would only be in dreams that she would ever again meet her, as a skein of animated memories.

She ate her breakfast without appetite. Without Nancy there seemed little point in life. There were other people, but she didn't get along with anyone quite the way she did with Nancy.

And yet...

She checked the situation at each of the other Castles. The inactivity of the matts around Castle Wolf began to worry her more. DawnCastle, holding of the two Hrulgani families, was only under the lightest of sieges, a token effort, in the face of the knowledge that that Castle would lift within twelve hours, the first of them all.

Castle Abiding, Fort Brady and Shallamir Hold were each under intensive assault, and yet only Fort Brady would be leaving after Castle Wolf. And despite that, a large force just waited, inactive, around Castle Wolf. Could they be waiting on a secret weapon that would give them the whole Castle at a stroke? Could that weapon be Nancy?

Tricia was certain to both answers, certain that they would each be 'yes', and she told Genevieve so, only to find that the analysis had already been made, and that plans to deal with that event were being drawn up. That left Tricia with a crazy hope for her girlfriend's life, a hope that sustained her against the silent hours of the day.

During that day, the last but two lifter unit was completed, excuse for some minor celebration. Jakita's mission never flew, despite her protestations. The night came down again, and midnight approached, and still, the fighting remained low-key. And in High Prospect, Nancy was drugged again, and fed dreams.

---

The sun was hot, and the air was choked with dust. Casual eddies moved across the ground, marked by whatever litter there was for them to pick up. Nancy stood at the defence perimeter of the castle her home, gun in hand, an army at her back, ready to throw down the evil queen and scatter her folk. She waited the word that would signal that the all-out intensive assault had begun around the whole perimeter, spearheaded by fresh troops, and while she waited, she sweated inside the light harness she wore, as a toned-down cybersoldier unit. She would be glad when they gained the buildings, just for the cool and the shade.

After what seemed an age, the word came.

Now! Nancy yelled, and leapt out into the open, followed by a small group of soldiers. The sun-baked earth felt hollow under their feet as they bounded forwards, assisted by the power of the suits, ten meters at a stride. Automatic gun-turrets tracked uncertainly recognizing her as a member of the clan, and holding their fire. She had to get behind them and out of their fields of fire before someone noticed what was happening, and overrode that fragile protection.

They lost two stragglers that way, or simply because they were so far away from Nancy that they were beyond her protection, before piling to a halt inside the first perimeter. Their protection fields sparkled under the beaming, flared, and died, leaving two charred corpses sprawled on the dead ground. Those losses were acceptable and had been planned for.

As they regrouped for the next challenge, Nancy sent up a flare, searing whiter than the sun. At that signal, five heavy combat lasers went into action, streaming their power at the five most vital sectors of the castle. That would keep the lifter fields up, and in so doing, keep them safe from internal laser batteries until they were across the minefield and under their maximum depression.

Directly under one of those titanic beams, as it roared through the air, Nancy led her team across the dry earth, under a hail of small arms fire from hastily assembled militia teams. She fired back, sending the defenders scattering.

With the lifter fields in-between, there was no such thing as aiming. Those fields were now tighter than they had been on Nancy's departure, raising the dust twenty feet or more into the air in an almost opaque wall. As the attacking team passed through them, the fields snatched at them, throwing them several feet up into the air.

That was the time they were most defenceless. For an instant, they were disoriented, under the open sky and within the fields. One enemy fireteam could wreak havoc if it caught them – but none did, the reactions were just too slow, and the only walls to hold them out were of stone and of metal. Blaster in hand, she poured through at the head of the avenging horde, cutting down the Clan troops as they tried to stem the tide.

A wooden door puffed into smoke at the touch of her handgun, leaving only the frames that had bound it together, and she hurried into the corridor beyond. She was alone within her home, save for the lone figure waiting for her at the end of the way. With hate in her heart, she advanced, gun at the ready, intending to leave the death shot until the last moment.

But as her finger tightened on the trigger, she recognized who it was that she faced, and in her horror at what she had been about to do, dropped the gun.

Tricia, Nancy moaned in anguish, what have I done? Lift! Lift! Lift the castle now. Save what you can. It's not too late yet.

All her will went into that. The castle had to lift, and before that, all the pre-patterning of the dream shuddered and failed. The earth rumbled beneath the castle, and trembled noticeably underfoot, and then the whole structure, all hundred billion tons of it, drifted majestically from its resting place, up into the starry void. Behind her, although she did not see, the figures of the matts became misty, and drifted away like smoke. She was just not interested in such things. Her eyes streamed with tears, and she rested her head on Tricia's shoulder, and held her tight.

Reality tore under the desperation of her grasp and she held more than a dreamthing in her arms. In her state of almost unquestioning stupor, it did not seem surprising to her that she should hold with her mind the mind of the real girl.

Tricia had been lying in her bed, alone this night, waiting for sleep to come and pass the hours away, thinking wistfully of the dreams she had dreamed the previous night, with Nancy by her side, in cities of gold and coral and open plains of green grass, or by a roaring fire in the middle of winter. And in the middle of that state of daydream came the contact, strongly, not like the fleeting ghost of one that had come while she had slept the night before, a contact that she thought had been no more than a mere dream.

This one she could not so deny. It was Nancy that she held, not a figment of her imagination, and she did not care to look a gift horse in the mouth.

They communicated without words, not needing any such clumsy medium by which to carry their messages, which were too deep for their limitations. But however the messages were encoded, the information did pass along the line, and each knew what the other was doing and where.

Nancy, deep in the darkness of her mind, with falsehoods and stupidity being pumped mechanically into a body obviously incapacitated by drugs, clung tightly to that misty connection, drawing reality about herself as a cloak, taking sustenance from Tricia's mind.

And with the strength she gained, she listened beyond the torrent of drivel entering her mind, trying to reach her captors. But not knowing how, she failed to do more than locate them, without knowing the keys by which

she might contact them in turn, and force them to release her.

She waited, holding minds with Tricia, afraid that if she were to relax the link, it would break without her being able to restore it. It was an hour and a half that she remained like that, her only contact with reality through her link with Tricia, and that her only defence against the indoctrination aimed against her. Then, at the fringes of her awareness, another mind moved, one open to her probings, enough that she could listen to its conscious thoughts, and see through its eyes, and feel with its other senses. It was a girl's mind, and she was walking towards the apartment door, impatient with something or someone.

She knocked, and waited a few seconds for Guy to come and open the door, and beckon her in, and welcoming her by the name of Valerie.

Why, hello, Guy, she answered him, what did you want me for?

You remember I told you we had captured one of the Clan Wolf girls, and put her under indoctrination? Well we're running the final sequence now. She didn't take all that well, so I don't want to make her too suspicious in case something backfires on us. What I'm doing is giving her false memories for the present sequence, something to stop her getting suspicious about the amount of time she's spending asleep these days.

And where do I come into all this?

Well, the most obvious memories to give her, to explain what she was doing in bed, is to put another girl in there with her.

And Janice refused to do the work for you, and you couldn't do it yourself without more time to work in, so you called for me instead. How much are you paying for this essential work?

Guy hesitated. He had not considered that aspect of the problem – and he doubted that he could persuade Valerie by appealing to her political sentiment: she had none to speak of. He was trapped in the situation, having already committed himself by putting one specific girl into the conditioning tapes.

Fifty plaques, no more, he said, grabbing a figure from the air.

One hundred. Let's be reasonable, and have a round number. Have you no sense of aesthetics?

OK, OK, don't rush.

I shan't. Cash please, now. Then we can talk business. knowing that he had no threat to hold over the girl, Guy signed the credit over to her.

Let's have a look at her, then.

She's just as we left her, fully dressed, but under a contact cap. She won't notice anything when you undress her. The only hassle will come when you have to take the helmet off, hide it, and get into position, all before she begins to take notice. She's drugged a bit, but whatever they did when they designed her has given her a fantastic resistance to drugging, so I wouldn't trust that too far.

Thanks a load. I wish you had told me about this a little earlier, though – I prefer at least to know in advance who I'm going to be sleeping with.

But it's all in the cause.

Big deal. One girl. I hope you weren't thinking of calling me in for all n–thousand of them. Where is she?

In the bedroom. This way.

Nancy followed their approach, every step a threat to her, her safety and her integrity. and yet she was intrigued by this girl Valerie who was to lie with her. She had not seen her face or figure, save through the intermediary of Guy's eyes, and her contact there was poor, and in that way had found out only that her hair was brown.

The door to the bedroom opened, and from her viewpoint, Nancy saw herself sprawled clumsily on the bed, a filigreed mesh of bright metal among the silver of her hair. She tried to move, but could not. Until the cap was removed, she would be helpless, totally at the mercy of anything that her captors purposed for her. Through Valerie's senses, she noted Guy's interest, and tried to cringe.

Like screwing a black–and–white photograph , she declared. Well, business is business. Clear out.

And when Guy was gone, Valerie bolted the bedroom door. Nancy noticed that, and modified her plans accordingly. It would give her just that extra margin of time in which to act, though the game would be just as all–or–nothing as before. She watched disinterestedly as she was undressed, only caring really that she saw where the necklet was placed.

Any moment now, Tricia, she called down the link, pouring a great weight of regret and sadness to her mind–partner at that thought. Valerie paused to examine her involuntary partner, before discarding her own attire. Hiding the cap quickly, she realized, was the problem, but simply throwing the thing under the bed should suffice. She lay down beside the still form, and examined the fixing of the cap.

Nancy felt the gentle touch of fingertips across her scalp, the scratching of the wire meshes, and then the cap was torn from her head.

Tricia, Tricia, I love you! she called down the fast fading connection. She would have said more, but there was not time. She was alone in her own head again, totally trapped by a form of flesh ridden by chemicals, with a stranger girl on top of her.

Still, her mind was clear, despite the sluggishness of her body, and she acted. But the flesh was still weaker than the spirit was willing, and instead of throwing the girl from, her, all she did was writhe under Valerie's warm body. There was enough residual drowsiness about her to tempt her to stay and enjoy this stroke of good fortune, rather than immediately to escape from this threat.

That was good, she muttered, to keep up the pretence. Valerie kissed her, and they embraced tightly. And as soon as they were locked in that embrace, Nancy made her move, rolling them both from the bed, with Valerie landing up on the bottom of the heap.

Being forewarned about it, Nancy recovered from the instant's disorientation and winding before her partner, enough time for her to disentangle her hands and get them around the other girls throat, and to lean her weight on them.

Valerie thrashed, and made a few loud, half vocalized noises, the difficulty with which she made them indicative of the effectiveness of the attack. But she was taller, and stronger than Nancy, and her struggles, even from a position of disadvantage, were almost enough to free her from the desperate hold. As her air ran out, and she felt she must surely choke, Valerie reached up and tried in turn to strangle Nancy, but by then, she had pinned one arm, and the grip on her throat was a mere discomfort.

It took a long time for Valerie's struggles to quieten, a time during which Nancy was many times nearly thrown free, and during which she was ever fearful of intrusion, despite the locking of the door. Yet even when her victim lay still, she continued the hold, just in case the girl was faking unconsciousness.

She breathed deeply and raucously when Nancy released the grip, but did not stir. Not wishing to take any chances, Nancy moved hurriedly, taking up her necklet and her coveralls in one bundle, and tiptoed over to the panel in the far wall marked *Fire Escape*, moving with a stooped stance like some half-ape ancestor.

The panel fell away from the supports that had held it tight, with a brittle snapping of restraining bars, and end-over-end it tumbled down, aured in red by the active field of the fire escape. Ringlight glinted from the splintered ends of the glass rods that had held the panel, and tingled as it fell on her bare skin. The thousand foot drop, the framework of the tower were a flat pencil sketch, with perspectives distorted.

A sudden vertigo made her head spin, and the air was chill about her. For milliseconds that seemed to be minutes, she contemplated the fall before her, the assurances of her intellect now overcoming the animal fears of her mind, before the din of the warning hooter, muffled though it might be by the field, but loud enough yet to waken the dead, hammered its way through her distraction.

She scrambled out of the door, hanging at arms length from the sill, and swinging herself under the apartment. She had to get out of sight before the cause of the alarm was discovered, and the bedroom door broken down. But what swing she had gained was soon dissipated in the viscous medium, and she was forced to try to swim, but it was no different to trying to swim in normal air. Under the influence of the safety field, only vertical motion, under gravity, was affected, impeded, and the air was made only to impede motion, not allow it. And with those constraints upon her, her transverse progress was painfully slow.

So slow indeed, that she was: almost too late. Guy arrived first at the open panel, carrying a stunner in his hand, and Nancy was yet a yard from getting out of his sight as he leaned down. The beam reached for her, but only clipped her legs, and was without effect.

Janice's voice, echoing strangely in the field, its tonal qualities grossly distorted by its acoustic side-effects, announced her arrival, and she joined Guy in the hatchway. She fired calmly at Nancy, weighing the increased accuracy of the aim against the rapid disappearance of the target, and almost won the gamble. A tangline coil splattered against a girder, wrapping it up in a pallid white cocoon, its point of impact mere inches from her legs.

For the moment, she was safe, and the time came for decisions, time to guess whether they would try to recapture her, or opt simply to kill her, before they succeeded.

They had the choices of either following her down outside the tower, or racing down in the central gravshaft and catching her as she drifted down like an autumn leaf. Against this, Nancy could play either to remain outside and dodge the attacks, hiding behind the supporting engineering, or heading for the gravshaft and taking that way herself

She set up the game matrix in her head, making up the payoff values much off the top of her head, and decided that the matts profited by taking the shaft, and her play relied on her choosing the safer of her two choices under those circumstances. She opted for the centre. That would end the game faster, and would give her opponents less time in which to prepare for her.

She passed close to one of the beams, and grabbed hold of it, changing the direction of her fall in the few instants for which she held, drifting now more in the direction of the central core. She hoped that her analysis of the situation was sufficiently detailed, that enough conditions were satisfied for the reasoning to be valid.

There were no obvious omissions, only the oppressive need to be right, first time, or not at all.

The only flaw she could identify in the reasoning was that those opposing her take only one strategy. They could play as many as they had personnel and weapons – two at least, three if Valerie was sufficiently recovered. She looped the necklet over her head, and threw away the coveralls, to collect them at the bottom. It was time to to panic now, and she would prefer not to be cluttered.

She looked up. Alone, Guy drifted into sight in pursuit of her. She guessed that that would mean that Janice would be taking the gravshaft, arriving at the bottom long before she would. The fire–escape was only a simple comparatively fail–safe device, the shaft–fields were more sophisticated, the simplest difference being that the shaft could make one go up against gravity.

That idea, was crazy enough to be worth the try. The nearly mile–high tower would be amply sufficient to lose two or three searchers in; and if she could find someone in the tower who owned a hang–glider – or if she could tempt all three to head up at her, for her to dive past at the highest velocity she could attain. That decision would be kept until she reached the tower core. The problem was now how to reach that place.

There was now almost a race on, an incredible slow progress through the loose forest of girders, as Guy struggled to locate Nancy in the shadows through the red markerhaze that clung about him, and obscured his sight, preventing necessary dark adaptation, and Nancy wriggled and writhed towards the structural beams, so that she could halt her fall and drag herself arm over arm to the central shaft.

Guy won the race, and while Nancy was still a few feet short of her goal, he saw her clearly in a shaft of light that passed through the meshwork, and with a clear line of sight on her he could hardly miss. He did, but for the merest instant, and with a slight twist of the arm the beam, almost at its full drain, caught her square in the body. Yet as far as he could tell, it was totally without effect, its power just being absorbed in the blue haze that had supplanted the red about the girl. That it was markerhaze, he doubted, for it tattered slightly under the blast, but did not falter.

Nancy scarcely noticed the attack, until the blueness engulfed her, enhancing the ringlight non–colours, and not competing, as had the rosy glow of the field haze; if it had any effect, it was negligible besides the wooziness still left over from her last drugging. The matts however would not prove so resistant. Now if only she could capture the gun, all would be well. The idea intrigued her enough to try it, despite her trepidation at the thought of closing, with Guy, while totally unarmed.

The cold metal of the beam she had been struggling for slapped against her outreached arm, brushing it aside without changing her course. The next one she grasped more tenaciously, swinging around until she was falling almost directly to the next one in sequence below. She almost landed there, killing most of the twenty feet per second of velocity she had acquired. Now, at a more leisured pace, she could actually grab hold of the next crossbar, and hang there, still.

She scrambled up to stand there, and looked up at her pursuer. A hundred feet above her he was, and committed to a pursuit path, without any structures available for him to steer from. That gap gave her five seconds to manoeuvre on the beam, still some five hundred feet up from the ground, time to prepare herself for what she would, do. She might just as well carry through the lunatic plan, now, as there would be time enough to stop again later. She checked around for other apartments, and saw no other ones in the stack she currently occupied for about three hundred feet below her.

As Guy drew level, Nancy sprang from the beam, diving for him as he thrashed about to turn and face her. She reached him before he had completed the manoeuvre, approaching him from one side. Recognizing that under the circumstances it would be more a liability than an asset, he threw the stunner away, as Nancy struck

him feet first. With the object of the fight one out of reach, Nancy began to regret her decision, for despite the first kick to the head, her opponent was still willing to fight her – or more, from the look of him.

His hand caught her left ankle, and drew her towards him, her struggles availing her nothing. All she could do was continue to land weak kicks to head and shoulders with her free leg, sacrificing strength for agility, to avoid the capture of the other leg. Guy waited for her to tire, riding the blows, content to let her remain at extreme range for a little while.

But Nancy succeeded more than she had realized she would. Their combined course drifted them horizontally, across the space to the next line of beams, and Guy, being beneath Nancy, and facing upwards, was not aware of this until he landed on one, taking the force of their combined deceleration. His grip slackened, enough for one sweeping kick to the face to free her entirely, and set her drifting back.

She might have gone after the stunner at this point in the action, but she had heard it clatter from some piece of structural work, off to one side, without any notion of where it had scattered to, that idea lost its charm. Besides, it was more entertaining to watch Guy tumble limply from the beam, obviously not conscious.

Her artistic appreciation of the events did not preclude her from hearing a sickening slurp as a tangline charge took something – her coveralls, she guessed. From the path of his fall, Guy would be next – he didn't have an apartment below him any more, or so she judged. That would amuse the ground crew – or something. Then either she could slip out at a distance while confusion reigned, or instead just stay on a crossbar, taking all comers. No, scratch that idea. That last victory had been mostly luck and she didn't feel like chancing her arm again. She would sneak out like a coward, a *modus operandi* that suited her temperament so much more closely than the heroics that she had been involving herself in.

She began the landing approach to the apartment, killing her velocity in fleeting contacts with crossbars as she had before, for it was as much important to her not to make an excessive noise as it was not to endanger her personal comfort by making a poor landing at high velocity.

With more room to play with, she let herself roll as she hit. The rooftop was finely gravelled, like coarse sandpaper, and scoured at her skin, but did no more than leave white scrape-marks. It was no discomfort to stand on it in bare feet, but not to sit down on in similar attire.

She dusted herself off, and walked towards the central column. There was a small railing, designed to prevent those getting off at wrong floor from falling, but she climbed it easily, and opened the shaft door. Brightly lit, it extended in severe perspective above and below her, distorting her perception of direction for a few instants.

Recovered of her sense of up and down, she punched keys to the code for the ground floor, and stepped out into the shaft. Warmly, protectively, the fields grasped her, pulling her down at several gravities of acceleration, then suddenly reversing at the half-way mark, drawing her to a halt at her assigned destination.

The entry concourse was deserted. Nancy peered out from the shaft, looking out into the night, in as much as she could see anything through the doors. Against the contrast of illumination, she could see that they were not directly guarded. Towards the city, a few lamps showed a vehicle park which she would have to cross. It was almost empty, and the mercury lights made it a fast way to suicide were she to attempt it. Away, there were trees and parkland. As the least desperate of the options, she chose that, and sprinted out.

This was the side opposite to the apartment and where she had remained during her fall, and Janice was, as she expected, not there. Valerie was, and standing right where Nancy would run into her. She did. Both went sprawling on the concrete, with Valerie's gun falling from her hand, and skating across the rough surface.

Nancy picked herself up and crawled across to it, but fumbled her attempt to pick it up and run. Something inside her snapped as she panicked, and her mind spiralled away.

Janice came running at Valerie's involuntary shout, and found her picking herself up off the floor.

No it wasn't her. It was a dog of some sort. She must still be up there hiding, Reinforcements?

I suppose we'll have to. Stay here. I'll phone from the car – and don't let her jump you like that animal did.

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Almost within sight of those events, Vors k'Shammarra was far less happy that he would have been, had he been observing them. He had diverted his prime force to searching for Nancy, but without much in the way of trail to follow, and without any information from those responsible – not even a claim of responsibility, let alone negotiations with the Clans; and none from the prisoners from last night's fiasco, it was no surprise that so little progress had been made.

And there was that worrying business about the attack on Castle Wolf. Serious though the loss of five cybersoldiers might be, he did not care for the local commander's decision to cease all but the slightest of attacks, and call repeatedly for reinforcements to make up for that loss. He had made his decision, and would abide by it, just to spite the man. Not being an employee, however tenuously, of his, and not being native to this world, there was little he could hold over him in the way of threat. Not that at that late juncture, it really mattered. DawnCastle would soon be lifting, and the troops from there could go in as the reinforcements so many times demanded. But it would be too late now for there to be much chance of actually cracking one of these strongholds. It served only as an outlet of feeling.

He would let the people play at toy soldiers. As for himself, he had more profitable projects underway to occupy his time.

## Chapter 9 – Resolution

Distantly, like wrong-way through a telescope, like a dream at a distance, while Nancy used Valerie's senses, Tricia used them too. In the depths of her being, cameo-like, it even so obliterated the widescreen productions of dream, pushing her into a state of awareness of mind while yet her body slept.

In that miniature of reported reality, she saw the cargo girl reach down, grasp the helmet, and tear it free. The caress of minds from Nancy reached her, and then the bridge between them was gone, snapping from tautness, recoiling into her mind in flaring light. She opened her eyes, and saw her own room, dark in the midnight. She rolled across to the bedside table and looked at her watch. The hour was 00:54, a time she was more accustomed to treat as a time to go to bed, rather than for getting up.

Genevieve. Status report.

DawnCastle is delayed, while emergency work is done on part of the keel, which fractured during stress-up. Military activity continues as before. Latest estimates make time to lift-off for Castle Wolf as eighty three hours. Do you want anything more than that?

Yes. Get this to Jeanne – Nancy is in High Prospect, being held by matts who are trying to indoctrinate her enough to convince her to lead an attack on the Castle. We've got to try and rescue her.

How, Tricia? You're letting your emotions run away with you. All the castles are bottled up, so no one can get in or out, and that'll be so even when we lift, as long as we stay within planetary jurisdiction, and apart from us, there's no one who will do the job. The police won't and the guild can't.

But surely in a place like High Prospect there'd be some traditionalist paramilitaries we could contact.

But not without having the call tapped and traced as soon as it entered the city net. There's nothing that will fly, nothing at all. I know, I've checked them all. I'm sorry, Trish, but my analysis nets are designed to handle facts, not wishful thinking. If anything comes up that might work you and Jeanne will hear of it.

Thanks.

Tricia spoke that last word with a voice tinged with gloom, and resignation to the inevitable. She sat in her bed, staring into the darkness, watching the sporadic play of false colour in her eyes, and seething at her total helplessness in the face of the events that were overwhelming her.

A thought occurred to her, one that at first turned a little of her futile anger upon herself for thinking of it and then grew more and more attractive – if it could be fulfilled. She climbed out of bed, and clothing herself in her cape, went to seek out a friend, any friend. Surely even at this hour they could not all be asleep or otherwise engaged. In any case, she would find out.

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Around High Prospect, a dozen furtive figures spread out from the tower where Nancy had been held, wary of the official police, of the corporation directed matts, and of possible pro-clan activists, as eager to avoid any of these as to find Nancy Elanor of Wolf.

They had covered the tower, and knew that she was not there. Even when they had tapped the environmental control sensor system, there had been no sign of her. Therefore, by some means, though its details be unimportant, she had escaped the tower unnoticed.

So they must search elsewhere, and so they did, efficiently, swiftly, eager to conclude the search before the area they must cover grew too wide. But wide as they spread their net, they had little or no success; and what success they had was in the negative sense of going unnoticed by their rival groups. None of the searchers ever bothered to notice the red eyes that glowed betimes in the corona of their lights. There were, after all, not interested in the local wildlife.

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Nancy was woken by the cold. Though the actual numeric value of it would probably have been 280, well within the range of her tolerance of hypothermia, it sufficed to send her into violent fits of shivering as she lay unclothed in the dew-wet grass. The sun was not yet risen, but it would do so within the hour, though closer she could not guess. Dawn was always so different to a reversed-time sunset, and though she saw the sun go down many times, she rarely saw it rise, and had not learned the signs to tell its timescale.

The sky, however, was content to go its own way, to lighten more slowly than the eye could follow. As yet, it was blue, but deep blue, more nearly purple than was the midday sky. In the east, fingerlings of cloud were touched with the first colours of a sun reaching itself over the edge of a world. She was captivated by the beauty of the scene.

Above her, a tree reached up into that heaven, and spread its leaves wide over her, and she nestled among the bushes that crowded around its base. Eastwards, ten yards away, the grass ended, and the grassland proper took over. Between the arch of two trees, the dawn yellowed a tiny patch of sky and blushed far more into peach-pink.

The world was not silent either. A faint morning breeze stirred the leaves, and the lizards warbled. Across the open ground, at the base of one of the border trees, a tree-rat sat, and chattered angrily at something.

In among that harmless chorus, something new, something alien, something dangerous. The voices of people, at first distant, but approaching from behind her, out of the wood. She turned, carefully, quietly, to peek from behind the tree, hoping that the dawn behind her would blind any watchers to her presence, poorly advanced, though that wakening of the day might be.

As they came closer, out of the gloom, Nancy could put locations to the speakers, two of them, and dressed in paramilitary uniforms. She could not see any badges, but she could see the colour, a mottled green and brown, with black and yellow splashes. None of the Clans used other than monochrome battle-dress, and there were so few pro-Clan forces that it would be safer to discard that possibility as an operating hypothesis.

The pair were Ayassa, a female and a male, much smaller, by her side

Let's give up now, he suggested, we've been searching for the little minx for six hours now. Hell- she could have practically walked to the Guild port in all that time. I'd not reckon on her staying anywhere near the heat, at least I wouldn't, and by all accounts, she's not stupid.

OK. We'll get back to the car, and say so. The tall girl stretched herself further as she yawned, catlike as ever her people were. I could do with a few hours sleep now.

So slowly, they moved past, unhurried in their walking, out into the grassland, striking to the right, and passing beyond sight. Their voices faded.

A trap? She thought not. The mechanism was far too complicated for that. It would just be enough to point a gun in her direction now, and tell her to stand to get her out of the bushes, given she had been noticed. On the other hand, however, it would do no harm to wait a while longer before moving. Slowly, one number to the second, Nancy began to count, and continued until she had reached the count of two thousand. And all that

half hour, she was cold, and her hunger was like barbed wire. The sun, slowly, approached the horizon, and the sky above it began to blaze brightly.

In all that time, she remained alone, neither hearing nor seeing any other matts. It was enough for her. She stood, with joints creaking and muscles aching, protesting at the sudden change of posture, abrupt after hours of huddling.

A mile away, below her, and across a wide lake, its colour still the deepest of blues, lay High Prospect. Twenty five miles away on the far side lay the Guild port, and the sanctuary of the Embassy there. Her home was besieged, and besides, two hundred fifty times as far, so it would have to be the port. Without shoes, walking was out. Therefore as a direct consequence, some poor unsuspecting person would, have to be relieved of his car – there would be less difficulty in that than acquiring footwear.

For once the decision that she, and the others of the Clans be educated among the folk of their world had a beneficial side effect, in as much as she had acquired one reasonably trustworthy friend resident in the city, one to whom she had intended to flee under cover of night.

The question that she had put aside a dozen time before rose again to plague her. Why was she here, and how? and how come she had no memory of the preceding nine hours? She could make no definite conclusions, only fearfully speculate that the Linna personality that had been embedded in the necklace had taken control. It was something she could think about, or try to avoid thinking about, while she walked.

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The city lay in the middle of a piece of sign writing on the planet's surface, where a bulls-eye design had been carved out of the forest for the guidance of incoming spacecraft, its centre astride one of the radial arms. Nancy was on the one side, and her goal on the other, across open land, devoid of cover, and with potentially hostile eyes to watch her. There was no recourse than to use the only cover open to her, the city itself, trusting to the early hour to keep her from the notice of casual passers-by.

She followed under the eaves of the trees, the course of the pattern, until she struck an out-stretched arm of slideway to take her as she wanted. Its surface was as chill after the night as its arctic appearance might suggest, yet as it moulded itself to her feet, and was warmed, it was more comfortable than the vegetation strewn earth that she had covered to reach it.

As she had planned, she took the direct route, under a sky lightening to dawn, observed only by the unconscious maintenance robots. The buildings – houses or shops – all turned their blind windows on her. Yet there was an aura as if someone watched her. The open sky above worried her, more so when the sun began to edge over the horizon, casting long and unmistakable shadows, with its M-coloured light. The direct rays were hot, making her skin bead uncomfortably with sweat, despite the rushing, chill of the air. She did not like this part of dawn, where its quiet mystery was transformed into the humdrum rush of daytime. The night was more the time for her, she decided.

The sun was its own width above the horizon, and she five miles along the line, deep into the forest, when she reached her destination, a clearing where a house had been built, one of a score or so strung sparsely along that particular slideway spur. Nancy stepped off onto the grassy verge, kicking up the dew, and walked closer to the house. Each and every window was opaqued, which was not particularly surprising, given the time of day. But in a couple of hours – given that the family had not gone off somewhere in the meantime – it would be a temporary refuge.

There was only really one place to go, however, to wait out the time, the only place that would conceal her even from infrared eyes in orbit – the stable behind the place, which being built in the archaic style of such constructions, would be easier to enter. And so she did, finding in the hayloft a warmer, and no less

comfortable place to bed down than the place she had woken. There would be no difficulty in getting to sleep; the fatigue weighed heavy on her, as if she had been active all of the night, bedding down to sleep only shortly before the dawn. Her eyes closed of their own accord, and the horsey noises beneath her resting place did not impede her drift into a light but dream-fevered sleep.

The sound of a cheerful voice cut through her repose, and she forced her bleary eyes open, and crawled to a place where she could look down into the stable proper. Beneath her, feeding handfuls of hay to a chestnut mare in one of the stalls, was just the person she had been looking for.

Alan! her voice sounded unusual, for her mouth was gummy with thirst. He looked up from feeding the horse.

My god. Nancy What the hell are you doing here?

Looking for somewhere to cadge a breakfast and some transport. How come I'm here, and stark naked, when I should be at home and enjoying my lunch, well, it's rather long and involved.

Hiding after that brouhaha on the news the other night?

Thereabouts.

Hell, that's okay. Come on in. Let's shock my parents with what I've found.

OK, but not too much.

My Lady, would I do anything like that?

Nancy did not bother to answer.

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Nancy flew the car as fast as she dared along the approach radius, letting her course wind about the hills shielding the town from the port, keeping her altitude as low as she dared, and certainly no higher than the minimum that regulations demanded. Again in compliance with regulations, she kept her speed down to four hundred miles per hour, which was slower than she could have managed on manual, but a limit that she adhered to to minimize her noticability.

Half way, two minutes more to safety, a cheering thought, despite her almost paranoid fear of ambush; she counted off the miles and seconds eagerly in her haste to be done with it all.

Ninety seconds she counted off, and the great plain that formed the starport opened out before her, over the crest of the last low ridge of hills. It was then, with her goal in sight, that she noticed the car following hers. Disregarding everything else, Nancy poured power to her car, skipping it over the last ridge, and bringing it down screaming, at just short of Mach one – however she might need to hurry, to stun or kill innocent bystanders would prejudice her case. Besides, it would be difficult enough to land the car under those conditions.

The pursuing car matched her every move, even as she brought her own vehicle down in the quickest landing she could devise, heading it straight for the embassy buildings, then cutting in reverse thrust. Safety webbing caught her in a suffocating grip for a few hundreds of milliseconds, as the car, protesting, lurched to a stop. It was still drifting slowly forwards as Nancy vaulted out and began to run the last yards.

She was not yet in official sanctuary territory. The manoeuvre had been clumsy enough to require her to stop in the relatively uncluttered field a hundred yards or so short. The crowds milling about, transferring to ships

or cars, scattered about her, and more vigorously yet when bullets began to fly, stitching across the concrete almost beneath her feet. She ignored them. Tangline was the only thing that could be used to capture her in a state where she would be immediately useful to the matts, and a bullet would have to be a killing shot if they wished to stop her this close to her goal. Then, all they would likely benefit by would be her memory, which could at best be only a long term weapon against the Clan.

A burst of fire rang, out, and impossible pain sprouted in her right leg, just below the knee. She stumbled a few more steps, then fell awkwardly. She began to drag herself across the rough concrete, scraping her hands, and snagging her clothes. She waited for them to come for her, as she inched painfully forwards, shattering fingernails for every inch she gained.

The waiting seemed to go on forever, and at last, she turned her head to look behind her. The two matts who had left their car to follow her afoot had stopped., and were slinging their weapons. Between them and her, a yellow line was painted on the concrete, the borderline. The embassy steps were only ten yards beyond where she lay and there were too many Port security guards around to make a violation of neutrality worthwhile.

Well done, Nancy, one of them called, You fight well. But that was only one battle. We're not finished; one day the Clans will be dispersed, Tell the Lady Jeanne that.

Then he spoke again, in a louder voice, and not addressing her specifically.

Hey! There's a girl here been shot. She's bleeding badly. Someone call a medic.

And he saluted Nancy, and Nancy returned that salute, and then he and his companion turned and walked away.

Crazy honour. Better than we showed, though, My god – they may be right after all. Oh, let that be wrong. What a garbage heap my mind is.

In response to the call, and the flurry of events, two nurses came out of the Embassy, and gently laid Nancy on a stretcher, and took her through the great golden doors. Now that everything was resolved, and the Linkers in control, Nancy let herself faint from shock.

## Chapter 10 – Exile

And now, what, Nancy?

She looked up from her book at the woman in Linker uniform who had come into the otherwise empty lounge, then out at the stars.

Join us, and we can help you. You can be a telepath, and we can guide you, help clear all the partial compulsions from your mind when it's safe. Or you can join your family *en route* to Cimarron.

Nancy looked the other woman in the eye. She was young, not unattractive, and the uniform was impressive. But then so was her Clan regalia. Both were also confining, and too many years lay ahead of her for her to chain herself now.

There is a third way. I can travel – go to Earth perhaps. That's far enough away, so I shan't be able to hurt my Clan. I might stay there to take a degree, or maybe just keep on going. There are enough worlds And then one day, when everything is settled, I might come home again.

And the Guild?

Nor that either. I have my freedom now, and I don't have much else in the way of intangibles. I want to keep that. Many thanks for your offer, but not yet.

It'll always be there, for as long as you're possessed of some psychic talent.

The woman stood, bowed in farewell, and was gone. Now you've done it, Nancy thought to herself, you have cut yourself off from your old life. Or maybe just made it formal. She touched the gem she wore at her throat. That had cut her off already, and would be her life for some time to come.

Tears came easily to her then. Too late, far too late, she had discovered what Tricia had meant to her. After, in a sense, it was over.

Her eyes were still red as she boarded the liner to Earth via Greybeacon, Harnwell, and Oscar Station, but her mourning was done. From now, all would have to be new.

# Moving Day – Epilog

## Clan Wolf, The.

The Clan Wolf is one of the few surviving feudal houses of the [Human Outreach](#). Founded on Lindisfarne (Tau Ceti III) by the Lady Surveyor Trixy Linda of Wolf (see also Human Outreach – Folktales; The Madwoman of Lindisfarne) in 2133 [ADT](#), it has survived basically unchanged to the present.

### History.

During the period of preliminary survey of Lindisfarne, it was considered necessary to construct citadels to which the colonists could withdraw during the [harsh winters](#), before suitable environmental control could be established. Trixy Wolfe, as she was then known, is supposed to have likened them to Mediaeval Castles, and then coerced the other surveyors into setting up a [feudal society](#), where they would be the nobility. Though recent findings place the responsibility with Mark of Connors, it is likely that Ms. Wolfe supported him.

After nearly a century, while most of the noble houses had relinquished all but nominal sovereignty, Clan Wolf persisted in a firm and often cruel government. Attempts were made to depose the clan by force, but all were brutally crushed at Trixy's behest. These repressions caused the situation to deteriorate, until the eventually successful coup led by Matthew Hayward erupted.

The majority of the Clan, and the remainder of Clan Connors fled the world, to the HR 5568 system, where there was known to be a borderline habitable world, surveyed but not yet colonized. They arrived but a fortnight before the colony ships from earth, armed with the equipment that would subdue the world. They moved on again as soon as their task was done, their prior experience of a cold world no longer required, before those who feared tyrannical excesses could expel them.

They had tired of cold and wintry worlds. Warm and summery [Luthien](#) was their goal, seventy lites further from Sol, the news less than a year before passed to them alone the relays of the [Web of Man](#). But though they fled, their infamy still remained. Those who had feared them claimed victory, that the Clan, guilty, had fled justice.

On Luthien, the Clan, among others, formed the Five Castles Combine, and the article on the Combine gives a more detailed history of this period. Suffice it to say that the eventual colonists challenged the Combine's right under the new Linkers' Guild to govern the world. Matthew Hayward's ghost seemed to rise to rally the forces of unrest against them there, and on Heartward, Toehold and Last Gasp.

*Most recently Clan and Combine were resident on Wyvern, their seventh world. Their policy of intensive preservation of the planet was opposed by interests outside the Combine that preferred a more aggressive approach, and certain corporations are known to have supplied aid to certain paramilitary Haywardist groups, and have then gone on to buy heavily in Wyvern stocks.*

*As a result of the political pressure applied, the Clan has left Wyvern, and despite some minor*

*frictions with the Linkers' Guild, have received sponsorship to settle Cimmaron, a world newly autonomous under the Guild. It is hoped that this change of policy, in migrating to a post–frontier planet will ease tensions and prevent further forced migrations.*

## Customs

Following Trixy Linda's ideal of a master–race the vast majority of the clan are female, ectogenic clones [nipped](#) to display silver hair and eyes, grey blood and skin. Within this pattern, only height and build vary ; it is difficult for an outsider easily to distinguish them. Their feudal past shows in the variety of [ritualized titles and observances](#) persisting to this day...

Excerpted from *Tellman's Concise Encyclopedia* Published by the Institute of Worlds, Cateret, June 3262

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An Ending; and a beginning.

# Nadia

The city was spectacular, a masterpiece in the art of cities. To one who had never seen a real city in her life, it was overwhelming. Nancy Elanor of Wolf sat at the terrace cafe, and just watched it.

To her left, the building fell sheer for a thousand feet or more to a square where the tiny shapes of people passed by, over lawns, and by rows of trees. That may have been the ground level here, but she doubted it. Opposite the drop, across the broad terrace, the soaring tower rose at least as far into the deep blue sky. Near its peak, so high that to look made Nancy's head swim with vertigo, the golden sunlight of the early morning gleamed on the white tower.

The terrace lined a square, about two hundred yards on a side, forming a tiny ledge less than half way up the soaring shaft. Through deep gashes in the walls, the way led on, to the other squares of the city, and along them people swarmed, a catalogue of the sentient races of the Partnership of Worlds, a nightmare bestiary. There were thousands in sight, more together in one place than she had ever seen before, so many that she could smell a composite musky scent of people. The sounds of footfalls, the rustle of clothes, the patter of conversation were louder than she had really conceived possible, like the ocean smashing against the cliffs, or wind in the trees.

And in her mind, their thoughts swarmed formless, flashes of light, slippery and alive, a sentient rain in her head. She listened to everything wonderingly: all here was new; fresh and exciting, and she revelled in the exercise of her new-realized senses, catching at the thought-flecks, inconsequential disconnected snippets, half vocalized.

She muffled the rush of other people's minds, and in the silence, resumed thinking herself. She sipped elegantly at her coffee and wrinkled her nose. Cateret was indeed crowded, crowded so she could feel and hear, smell see taste and think it, twenty five billion sentients on a planet fractionally larger than Earth. To her, it was unbelievable that people could bear to live on a planet fifteen hundred times as crowded as her native world; and yet they seemed to manage, here and on worlds yet more populous.

A girl emerged from the crowd. She looked around the cafe tables, occupied mainly by breakfasters, pausing to stare at Nancy before continuing the sweep. Nancy took the opportunity to return the compliment. To her mind, the girl wasn't bad looking; slim, small breasted, and not too tall. She wore her black hair in a ponytail, and her sharp alert face hinted at feline qualities. The easy way she walked towards Nancy's table shared that suggestion of cat.

Do you mind if I sit down? , the newcomer asked.

No – be my guest. I'll buy. Though Nancy had gone voluntarily into exile, she could still draw on the Clan's immense credit reserves, built up over the last thousand years, and hardly used. She could afford that much generosity.

The girl ordered a breakfast, making a few exotic choices that surprised Nancy –many of the animals and plants providing the dishes, she had never heard of before, and those that she had, had never been used in that context – things used as savoury that she would have considered sweet, and vice versa.

I see you haven't been to Seafirth – everyone I eat with thinks the things I eat are funny. I suppose Skerry steaks in coffee is a little unusual. By the way – if I'm going to spend your money, I might as well introduce myself. I'm Nadia Bentley, I'm an academic student in psychophysics.

My name's Nancy – Nancy Wolf, from Cimarron. I'm a maths undergrad.

Clan Wolf? Or is the hair just for fun?

Yeah – I just couldn't figure what colour to have my hair and eyes, so I just left them silver – I can always think of something if I have to.

You're not afraid of reprisals? I'd be scared stiff some nut with a grudge would shoot me.

I've got no real choice. Anybody determined enough is going to find me if he really wants, and I daren't go home. You read about the troubles – well, the other side got hold of me on Wyvern, and twisted my mind, to make me work to destroy the Clan.

Couldn't the Linkers do anything?

They daredn't – seems I'm a telepath, and all the rough handling I'd gotten had brought it to the surface. While I'm still working it out, they wanted to keep right out of my mind.

Hey – that's great. I can read minds a bit – it's what made me choose psychophysics as my field. I could help if you want.

Nancy reached for her bag, and the gun she carried. She didn't like the sudden turn of events.

Prove it – or I'll blow you in two.

As she spoke, she tried to listen to Nadia's mind, but there was only a blank

Nadia threw a card over to Nancy, an Institute of Worlds ID, bearing out the story to the last detail.

Sorry, she said. I may be out and about, but I still get touchy, when people press me; and the last unsolicited help I received turned out to be the bad guys. I'm still trying to get rid of the do-it-yourself paranoia I had to cultivate during the troubles. A pause, and then : How did you shut your mind off like that?

It's all right Nancy... Shut my mind off? no, I'm probe immune. I don't know what I do it just happens that way. There are only a few people who are. You're not one – that's why I came here – I could feel you open, unguarded

Didn't the Guild warn you? There are things that can eat your mind, and puppet your husk. They always go for telepaths, beginners with their minds open, and no defences. I could teach you, and keep you safe.

That's going to be difficult. I'm only here for today. I'm waiting for a connection to Earth.

Nadia paused for a few seconds. To Hell with it she said, I can take what equipment I need with me, and I can write up results just as well shipboard. What ship, what time? I'll go and book.

Nancy told her, and then watched her disappear into the swirl of people. The breakfast she had ordered lay on the table scarcely touched. Twenty minutes later, at the conclusion of a very leisurely breakfast, Nancy was about to give up hope and go when Nadia reappeared.

People, she said, making it half a curse, half an explanation. You'd never believe the queues for the public terminals. Not only that – some guy went berserk, shot a few people and dived off the ledge while I was there.

It cleared the way to the terminals though. Then the fuzz turn up and want details. If I didn't have my Institute card, I'd still be there.

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A wall of rock, worn by wind and water, vertical structure thrown sharply into relief by the oblique sunlighting, passed by the observation deck of the airship. Its rectangular shadow slipped across the rock far below, receding or reaching up close as the surface contorted.

You say you're a telepath, Nancy, but how much does that really mean?

Nancy was leaning on the rail, looking down the wind sculptured surface of rock, strata of buff and red and purple, trying to identify them from the guidebook. Nadia had her back to the edge, looking across the open deck, to the broad expanse of the canyon, where towers of rock cast their shadows into night—dark gorges, or like sundials across open areas. Beyond them, half seen in the shimmer of the horizon, rose snow capped mountains.

I can catch fragments – if people are close, and verbalise their thoughts, I can read them quite well, if there aren't too many other people about, and then I can stop listening, and that's about all I've tried. There's something else I've noticed too – since about the same time I seem to heal almost instantly – does that always happen to telepaths?

Always ? I'd never even heard of that happening. Are you sure?

Yeah, but I'm not giving demonstrations – it still hurts, and that's more than enough for me.

We'll have to see if we can do anything about that. My talent is a bit anomalous, too. I can feel what people are doing when they're using any paranormal ability – if they don't block me – and I've examined quite a range of abilities. One of them could selectively dampen his sensory responses – pain among them. I'll have to try you at that.

Mmh. Nancy turned to her search to identify the Lower Beckman sandstone, amongst three or four practically identical beds.

By lunch time, they had reached the mountains. The sky was overcast, and the mountains were thickly covered with untouched snow. Rocks and sheer ridges of rock showed as black by contrast. The colourlessness of the scene seemed to drain all warmth from the air, and Nancy shivered, despite the steady cabin temperature of 295.

She cut a mouthful of steak. Its warmth was as welcome as the taste, and the sating of her hunger.

What are you working on in your research?

Nadia started.

Sorry, you startled me. Research, now.. she wiped her mouth on her napkin, and swallowed. Linker talent – I'm trying to determine whether the current theory is wrong, or if it's some fault in the practical application.

You mean the Coherence Failure?

Yeah. It's all very well having a theory predicting an effectively infinite shift radius, but when in practise, we can't keep the tolerances acceptable beyond twenty lites. Things match up fine up to then, but then everything goes haywire. There's not even a noticeably different threshold for different races – at 20.68 lites, when theory

suggests uncertainty errors should be less than a hundred meters with five nines probability, things we send through can end up literally anywhere. When the Institute tried it last, they went through a few thousand beacons, moving the receiving station a couple of AU each time.

There was a five AU band where the beacons surfaced within a couple of lites of the receiver, but after that we had to retrieve them from all the way over the Partnership. There are still sixteen missing, with not a word. They've got an indefinite lifespan, so we might find them when we start exploring other galaxies.

The coherence bit comes in like this – the average Linker can reach about 3 lites, when you put more together, they can reach further – that's alright, it's expected that units aren't perfect, so when you run them together they can draw on each other's strengths. It's just when you put a fifth Linker in, she isn't able to push the distance up like she should. Instead of going from about sixteen to twenty two lites, the range doesn't budge beyond 20.68. Everything. else; the size of object they can shift, the cycle rate, fatigue, tallies with theory.

Some people are trying to rebuild the theory from scratch so it incorporates a catastrophe point where practise shows one, and I'm trying to improve the mechanism, to remove it. I'm convinced it's a basically biological failure in the integration process; so that if you could manufacture a series of entities with a, say, twenty five lite range they could form a team with a range of nearly two hundred lites, assuming the same coherence threshold.

Have you had any results?

Some, but not what I was looking for. I managed to build one which apparently could shift without need of a receiver – it just disappeared one day, so I gave that approach up. I'm just casting about for new ideas now. I may try building the maths to a theory incorporating teleportation – seeing if that forces a coherency limit... Hell. Let's forget this for a while. I'm grabbing a chance for a short break from work to help you, and to do something different. From my work that is.

Any suggestions what we should talk about then?

We could just be tourists, admire the scenery. Save our conversation for on the ship, when there's nothing much else to do.

Nancy smiled. I can think of at least one thing – that's not counting telepathy.

Nadia sat for a moment with a blank expression, before everything clicked. Yeah. I'd forgotten that all your Clan were gay, too.

Not all. I have an uncle who would resent that accusation.

---

The StarLink station hung in space like a piece of fantastic jewellery; a nine kilometre ring, with at one point, a profusion of globes, spars and planes. Around this efflorescence a swarm of ships hung, some mote-like, others nearly as large as its kilometre span; freighters, liners, even a renovated slowboat a thousand years old, the lifeblood of interstellar commerce.

As Nancy watched from the shuttle window, the ring blinked like an eye. Green, gold and red fire blossomed at its centre, and rushed outwards, framing a view of another world. Ships passed through this tear in space, and then it shimmered. Fire poured into the centre, until the whole ring swam with colour like a soap bubble. Reds vanished towards the edge, blues appeared in the centre, then black, and like a soap bubble, it burst.

The ring grew as they approached, vast, distorted by its own size, and passed out of sight as they entered the faerie growth of the station proper, white in the sunlight, and black almost indistinguishable from space where shadow fell. A gentle bump signified the contact, and an explosive report, the final sealing to hard dock.

Nancy felt Nadia tense as the docking completed, and as soon as they were told that they could debark, she stood up, and hurried against the flow of people to the freight hold. Nancy called her name, but the only response was a muttered See you Something in Nadia's single-minded concern for the safety of the equipment she had brought along, the furtive way that she had both at the ground station and now here, hurried off to supervise its movement, worried Nancy, but she couldn't trace it. It might be some esper sense warning her of something, or the simple tension of blocking the trivial thoughts of thousand thousand thousand minds, paranoia, or the shattered feeling of a crowded bustling day. One thing that was certain, and overrode the concern for Nadia's mental state; and that was the use she could make of her claimed talents – that much of her story she believed.

Nancy followed the last of the rush of people out into the entry concourse. She found an unused terminal there, and checked the status of her luggage, and gave instructions for its loading onto the liner. Even after a few minutes wait, there was no sign of Nadia, so she gave up, and headed down the driftway. There was a strange feeling in passing along the long glowing tunnels of the station, away from the bustle of people in the waiting lounges; a feeling of the strains and fluxes of space-time, like a mighty ocean that could wash away the whole Link station like a seashell if it ever broke through. If that was what she could feel from the conscious minds of Linkers to be one would be awesome. She could understand the high and lonely attitude they maintained, for when one can ride the tides of the Universe, everything else is tired and mundane.

In the soaring weightlessness of the driftways, the borrowed splendour was euphoric, intoxicating; the return to gravity in the liner, an unwelcome, inevitable return to normality. Nadia was there already, waiting in the docking lounge. She seemed completely carefree now, excited like a young girl

You know, she said, this is the first time I've been in space... for almost ten years.

I hadn't even been offworld before I left home a couple of months ago. All your gear packed away safely now? You seemed quite concerned about it.

I suppose I was; but then it did take me long enough to build – couldn't even use standard parts for most of it had to ship them in from Symbaree and Lisston, some of them. There's a few measurements of Link parameters I want to make test a few ideas of mine. Shall we go to your cabin now?

We can – but when we get there, I'm having a hot drink and I'm going straight to bed. Alone. I'm absolutely dead beat now. Might not be a bad idea for you to get some sleep too – you seem a bit edgy.

Sure, Nancy. See you tomorrow.

Nancy walked over to the ship plan to locate her cabin. Edgy had not really been the word to describe Nadia's condition; in heat would be closer, judging by the dilation of her pupils. Pressure of work and a lack of companionship for a long time, and then a sudden, justifiable excuse to get away from it all – almost anyone would overreact in those circumstances, and Nadia had told her as much. No wonder the girl was acting touchy.

---

No, no and no Nancy's denial broke a long silence I'm not doing anything more today. My mind is blown – all over the walls – it aches. We've been working for – what, ten hours now – and what have we proved ? Nothing we didn't know already – except for– what did you call it?

Astral projection – I don't know if there's a technical term for it...

Well – whatever it was – that's all we've achieved. All the other fancy talents you've tried have ranged from slight promise to not in my line at all.

All right, Nancy. We'll call it a halt then; try again tomorrow.

Sure. Sorry about that, Nadia – my turn to be edgy tonight. Care for a cup of coffee?

They were in Nancy's cabin – had been all day. The only light was from the turquoise and white globe in the centre of the transparent wall; the world called Halfhaven, a hundred and eighteen lites from Cateret on the run to Earth. Nadia was sprawled in an armchair in one window corner, Nancy lounged on a sofa facing the window, where, one after another, a series of planets had passed. She stood up, and brushed her hair from her face. A small red light marked the dispenser. She dialled, narrowly missing making a double order for cognac – one black, one with milk and sugar.

She carried the two cups over to Nadia, and handed her one. She perched on one arm of the chair.

Why aren't you with the Linker's Guild?

Planetary politics. The Free Traders opened up Seafirth, and the influence lingers on. The Guild is fine as a monopoly cartel on rapid starflight; but I just don't feel that gives them the right to monopolise every paranormal talent– besides, I have my own life to lead – there are even Linkers who don't work for the Guild – academics, adventurers, and artists mainly. They keep tabs on some of them; others they ignore, others they don't know about. I'm pretty certain I'm in the last class. I don't think they're tracing you, either

Take my word for it – that's the way to stay. It's a pity they already know about you – but there are ways of escaping, even from them...

Nadia's voice trailed into silence. she lay in the chair, completely relaxed, only her eyes alert. The cup of coffee steamed on the table beside her, completely forgotten. Then suddenly as it came, the trance broke.

Memories. she said.

There's no need to get morbid about it. Come on – I know how to stop you worrying – make up for yesterday....

---

The room was dark. There were the sounds of movement, ragged gasps, gentle moans.

Unnoticed, the gauzy structure of the Link station, and the gleaming arc of the LinkGate drifted into sight, eclipsing the world there. The liner drifted into the whirlpool that had been ripped into space. Around it, along the entire length of the wormhole, colours played. They could be seen close at hand through the stateroom window–wall, bright and almost metallic, with a streaky structure, fading into absolute black between colours. Though they glowed brightly, there seemed no increase in illumination due to them, only a faint play of colour in the gloom.

An animal noise rent the air; all the more ghastly for having been framed by a human throat. It seemed to have been intended to be. a scream, but it was gurgled, and abruptly cut short. There was a violent movement on the bed, and Nancy collapsed to the floor. She crawled away, the light playing on the skin of her back, and screamed, a terrible long sob of a scream. Her breath gurgled, as she staggered to her feet and recoiled into a corner, and half sat, half collapsed there, leaning against a view of the madness outside.

Thing! The word was half screamed, half sobbed. Any more was lost in hysterical tears.

Nadia hurried over to her, and slapped her on the face

Nancy – listen to me' she snapped.

Nancy's eyes focused. A thing , she gasped between the racking sobs, A thing , it was in my mind. It hated me –it hadn't been born – It was trying to tear me apart...

She clung to Nadia for support, and cried until she could cry no more.

---

Nancy paced through the deserted corridors of her part of the ship, heading from her wedge, now, at 04:30, towards the earlier zones. She was scared, but it was an intellectual sort of fear that assailed her. All gut feelings had been burned out of her earlier, when her mind had been invaded by ...something, unknown, but malignant.

Her mind had been quite open while lying with Nadia, her only shielding requiring far too much effort to maintain. Then, without any warning, or build-up, something black had exploded in her consciousness. It struck as an arctic storm would have in that room, and then. there had been a flood of physical sensations, cold, and pain , but they were secondary, side effects of the main burst of malignant hate. Her self had been almost drowned in that outpouring of the dark things of the mind. It was Hell, uncorked and boiling over.

She didn't remember, except by being told about it, what had happened next, but that didn't concern her as much as the actual fact of the event. Nadia hadn't noticed any paranormal activity, though she confessed to being otherwise occupied at the time. She was of the opinion that what had affected Nancy was somehow related to that particular link they had been going through at the time, or possibly had something to do with the attendant circumstances at the time of Link. Nancy's own opinion was that she had been exposed to the depths of her own mind, possibly triggered by any of the prevailing conditions.

Even yet, doped up with anti-hysteria preparations, and in memory there was a shard of recollection that could trigger fright reactions – a vision of unseeing eyes, full of malice, beneath a swelling brow.

She had left Nadia asleep, when, in the early morning she had woken, had dressed, kissed her gently on the lips, and gone out to try and sort her mind out in the winding miles of the ship. She avoided people when she could feel their minds near her, to stay alone with her thoughts.

Then, faint but unmistakable, on the edges of her mind, she felt a whiff, a mere trace of the demonic mentality that had erupted in her mind; and with it a feel of direction. She followed that elusive wisp of being, keeping it on the threshold of perception, in towards the axis of the ship, and aft.

Here it became impossible to avoid people, where the time-zones mingled and life went on twenty four hours a day: here where all the entertainment functions went on; gambling, dancing, gymnastics, and others. Nancy pushed impatiently through the crowds, trying to ignore the roar of their thoughts, shallow stupid and banal, as she clung to a thought that was a smell of sulphur in her head. She relinquished it only when she had chased it as far as she could, and made certain of its source : somewhere in the hold.

---

Twenty minutes later she was back at the sealed bulkhead door marked *Ship's Hold – Authorised Personnel Only* that had ended her previous search. Much of the time had been taken up by convincing Nadia that she had actually contacted something real, and then in going through the paperwork authorising them to inspect Nadia's cargo, ostensibly to check its performance to date.

This time the door opened, and they climbed down a metal ladder into the hold. Nancy cast around for the mind she had followed, and touched it. She felt nauseated by its unclean aura, but moved towards it, down level by level, and past the hulking masses of crates and bales.

That which she sought stood alone in a square space formed by leaving a long gap in one of the rows; and she recognised it at once – or at least its essentials. Beneath the various items added, it was a standard ectogene tank, such as she herself had been born from; and in it, something lived, something utterly malevolent – something unborn.

Nancy closed her mind as tightly as she knew how, and looked about for something to smash the unit, and its diabolical occupant. A bundle of metal rods caught her eye, some special alloy according to the label. She pulled one of the rods from the bundle, and held it; it was heavy, about six feet long, and half an inch diameter, and according to the specs, hard, tough and most refractory.

She walked towards the tank, to check the owner's name.

Nancy – what is it?

I've found it. Now get back... Oh my god – you. Why, Nadia?

This was my Linker-type entity – the one I said had vanished.. The tone of the voice changed, But I didn't vanish. I dispossessed her of her body, for cheating me of mine. And now, I'm going to take your body.

At that last declaration, Nancy felt something click shut at the back of her head, and her legs just seemed to vanish. She swung the bar down with all her might, tearing loose wires and life-support tubes from the central tank. A trickle of blood and amniotic fluid ran down the sides of the tank, before the fail-safes cut the flow. The next swing was aimed at Nadia who had launched herself at Nancy, and she felt ribs give under the blow. She staggered back on wooden legs as the mangled body hit the floor. It landed silently, and writhed across the floor towards her. With a shock, she realized that she had lost her hearing – and was losing more and more control of her body. She brought the bar down with all her strength on the cluster of apparatus, to smash the tank and its occupant – she couldn't wait for anoxia to lay it low.

The plastic of the tank went from an opaque grey to cloudy under the blow. With the berserker rage on her, and scared to the core of her being, she struck again, and again. A great mass of plastic fell away, and the end of the rod came away bloody.

Without warning, she was falling, and she saw that Nadia's body had grabbed her around the ankles. Nancy flung her weapon away as she felt her last ties on her body being torn away, and reached for the dying husk at her feet.

I'm free – and I am Nancy Elanor of Wolf now.

Nancy heard her own body mouth those words, as she listened with Nadia's ears. The body felt strange – it was damaged, unfamiliar, her control of it poor, but she dragged it along, and fastened both hands about her own throat, and just hung on. Her adversary poured all its spleen on her, but her mind was too benumbed by its previous attack. It eroded her mind but could not dislodge it.

Then, the universe detonated; and she was carried out on the shockwave of Nadia's exploding consciousness; and when it was none, she found herself floating in some limbo, with only one thing there to be sensed. She reached for it, and was embodied again. Eyes opened, focused – it was her own body, dead on the floor, that she occupied. Dead arms reached up and pushed the hands from her throat. And she breathed.

She lay there, as her body mended, drawing thankfully at the air. She shied from thinking of how close the outcome had been.

Nancy? Are you all right?

Who's that?

Me – Nadia. I'm back from Hell. Now for God's sake get me a doctor. The last words were wheezed through gritted teeth, a trickle of blood running from between them.

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Nancy was alone again, as she had been before. She could work up no enthusiasm for any of the entertainments that the ship could offer, and instead was content to remain in her room, passing her time by reading books or watching films. In the empty moments between, she often picked up and read the hard copy she had taken of the last message she had received from Nadia.

'Sorry,' it began, 'but I couldn't stay; I've got far too much work lined up, a whole new line of approach to find. That thing I had grown had been sentient for just three months when we destroyed it; it was only days old when it possessed me, and pushed me into some hell inside me.

'Thanks for letting, me out.

'Love and kisses, Nadia.

'P.S. The institute is paying for this; that's why you don't have to decipher it from compact.

For all that they had been lovers, for all that Nancy had released Nadia from months of imprisonment within herself, they had been like ships in the night, without the real contact required for friendship. Had there been more time, more common ground...

With quiet regret, Nancy dropped the folded sheet of paper onto the table by her chair, and sat staring into the depths of space.

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## Afterword 1976

The whole idea came from a dream I had in August '76, hearing which caused [one of the Cambridge University SF society writers' workshop group] to accuse me of having a diseased mind. This is how the original inspiration mapped into fixed form.

I saw the picture of the scene on the opening page, including Nancy leaning her elbows on the rail at the edge and looking over. Then my viewpoint seemed to coincide with Nancy's location, and I saw Nadia approach. The surname I made up later, but I knew from that instant that she was called Nadia. Although this was shortly after the Montreal Olympics, and the name probably came from Nadia Comaneci, her appearance was that of her fellow eastern-bloc gymnast Theodora Ungureanu.

The other part I visualised in dream was the denouement. Partly I dreamed I read it in *Analog*; it was part of a short (about six pages) Telzey Amberdon story. The open double page I saw was the third and fourth of text, and were tinted grey. There was an illustration in the style of Schoenherr occupying just over the upper half of the right hand page. It depicted Nancy, her back turned, feet planted wide, (but out of frame, which came down to about knee height), with the metal rod in hand, drawing it back high over her right shoulder to deliver an oblique chopping blow to the ecto-tank. Nancy was wearing a waistcoat like little jacket and a knee length

skirt, her hair was straight, and, not quite shoulder length.

All I can remember of the text is the phrase the shockwave of Nadia's exploding consciousness . There is then a memory of the direct sight of Nancy thrown back into the corner of a room, bathed in a terrible light. this room was about a hundred yards in front of and a hundred yards above where Nancy was sitting in the cafe, coordinates oriented from her initial location.

I waited about a month to commit the story to text, as I wanted to finish [the first draft of] *Moving Day* first. When I did finally get down to writing it, I inserted the tour of the planet, to use up a couple of picturesque sets, and of logical necessity relocated the showdown in a plot summary that included Nadia's motivation.

## Afterword 2000

This was the sort of tale I'd intended to have set Nancy up for, as a novice telepath, and unwitting werewolf. But in order to set that up, I brought in the alien artifact I used in *Moving Day* to set up a radiation accident and trigger her powers. Alas, it had its own ideas of where things were going; and I ended up with the next – and fragmentary tale

The whole Coherence Failure bit was tacky at the time; I dislike it more at this distance, but need something to give reason for Nadia to be growing psis-in-a-tank. The comments are contradictory of the original source for the interstellar psionic teleport, the *StarForce* game, and it contradicts other unfinished story fragments from the same setting in which the Linkers retained the source material's ability to transport ships without sender or receiver station. There are some story based reasons in *Moving Day* for keeping the Linker ability to a fixed-station to fixed-station setting, keeping the rest of interstellar travel to mechanical means; but when I started a Linker-centred story at the time of the Ggappi conflict, about 500 years before the time of the story above, I needed to have the *StarForce* style properties.

None of the above is compatible with the Linker-as-Transcendi Y2K-epoch reinterpretation. Nor is the story entirely consistent with the secret origin, as she seems now to have changed her skin colour.

# Driftmind

Morning. At last. Those words were not spoken, nor even framed as thoughts. They were just a feeling that ought to have been relief, but didn't quite achieve the goal.

Nancy awake instantly from a feverish sleep, stared dully at the ceiling. She felt dull-headed, unclean with dried sweat, and her stomach felt raw. Sleep had not refreshed her, and she was too leaden limbed to get up and attend to her discomforts.

She reflected on the course of events that had brought her to this sorry state. Six weeks earlier – such short time – she had been ripped from the quiet routine of her life, and had had her mind worked over by a relic of ancient intelligence, and a subversive group dedicated to the dispersal of her clan. Unable to fit back in her old life, she had tried to make a clean break, start a new life, resume the education that had been interrupted elsewhere.

Now she could see how forlorn that hope had been. She was a different person now. The combined assault on her mind had done more than awaken the empathic traits that a first examination had revealed. They had, incidentally, uncaringly, ruptured brittle structures in her personality. Darkneses, once hidden beyond her own knowledge now seeped through to the surface.

What periods of happiness she had enjoyed seemed to be briefer, shallower than before. Even the excitement of exploring her new senses had been marred by the intervention of a malignant mentality wishing to possess her, to itself become Nancy Wolf. She had died, albeit briefly, under its attack, and yet had brought herself back to life. That had been ten days before, and in that time she had more than once found herself regretting that 'happy' ending.

Last night had been one such time, and she had used a party to which she had been invited as an excuse to drown her sorrows in drink. The attempt had failed miserably, with the drink and the happiness of the other revellers turning her thoughts inwards, and though the memories had been blurred in the recording she recalled long and detailed expositions of her personal woes that she had recounted to perfect strangers, until finally, puking and raving, she had been escorted to bed by the girl with whom she had been partnered.

And now, she must face the morning after. She cast away the one sheet that remained on her bed, and staggered to her feet, pausing for a few vertiginous instants as her circulation adapted itself to her new posture, before discarding the underwear in which she had slept, and heading for the bathroom. A hot bath would take care of most of her discomforts, and there would doubtless be something in the medical supplies that would be appropriate for her stomach.

Between the tasteless slurry that had been dispensed for her stomach, and the relaxing warmth of the bath, Nancy drowsed, catching up on the sleep she had lost, only to be jolted from the tranquillity of non-thought by the door-buzzer. She fought petty anger at the person responsible, but failed to stem its evil tide, and with a hate in her heart that the mask of her expression only concealed, she went to answer the call.

The tall avian steward waiting at the door did not react visibly to the towel-wrapped, dripping figure that answered

"Lady Wolf?"

"Yes." Coldly, Nancy noticed how she filled that word with hate and spat it out.

"A package for you. Sign here."

Anger gave way to curiosity, and it was excitement that spread her signature untidily across the form.

"Thanks." she called, distractedly, as she shut the door again.

Asprawl on her bed, she examined the package, a small box, four inches by five, and three quarters of an inch deep. The address label was printed, and postmarked from the next system Earthwards of the current position of this liner. Nancy could think of no one she knew or had ever known who could have sent something to her from there.

She cut the seal open with her thumbnail, and scattered the contents out onto the sheets. Freed from its wad of packaging, a small pendant glittered there, a square of bright metal set with a pale-blue transparent gem. Disbelieving, Nancy looked to her bedside table where the original lay, its gem indigo, not cornflower blue. She sought explanation from the small envelope which had remained in the box. It contained a note handwritten on a sheet of cream toned paper.

"If you know this, then your time is come. I may have been delayed a few million years, but now, I have you."

In place of signature there were three whorls of glowing gold light, like fingerprints woven into the page.

Before reading, Nancy had been sliding into mild hysterical shock, while she wove in this seemingly impossible gift. Now she was only afraid. Memories that were not truly hers, that had been planted by the indigo gem, stirred to life, memories of the previous owner. She had been Linna, High Priestess of the Earth, worshipper of light and life, the gem her badge of office, and she had known that sign of three.

The powers of Sky and Earth had not been alone in bestowing aid to their faithful: and the spirits of death and destruction had matched the powers of life in their generosity, and in the teachings of both cults there was the prophecy that at the end of time, the two factions would rise in open combat, and bring down the curtain. Was this to be that battle, her own self against the person or persons who now controlled the opposing holy relics?

Armageddon, an universal ruin across the cosmos full of galaxies unaffected by the original struggle, Nancy could not accept, but her own death seemed all too likely. Would she run? She might be able to, depending on the sequencing of the Links, but if she had been located, it would not be easy – if indeed it were possible – to shake off pursuit, and to be condemned to eternal flight. She would rather die than suffer that tyranny.

The only alternative was to stand and fight, and she would be able to choose where. Ship-board, obviously, was far too fragile an environment for any display of force, such as she could recall from Linna's memory. The only suitable place would be dirtside, on the green Earth, where her own power would be the stronger.

"Ship," she called, "This is Nancy Wolf, Cabin 06-458. I'm pausing my journey here. Have my luggage stowed on board the Link station."

"Decision registered. Your luggage will be collected in ten minutes. Thank you for your custom."

Packing was trivial. One suitcase was filled from her wardrobe, the other from the incidental luggage scattered around the cabin. All the remaining trash and trinkets were dumped in the bin, and that was all. The bath, the half destroyed bed, were all the trace she would leave of her passing.

One last check, one final decision on what to wear, and she departed. She travelled light, with only a shoulder-bag to carry her minimum of supplies. Anything else, she had money enough to buy.

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By the time the shuttle undocked from the link, half an hour later, Nancy had a clearer idea of what she would do. Time was her most precious resource, her two hour lead over any opponent fighting the timetables down the line from the next system, two hours that would remain hers until she stopped. Meanwhile, she would ignore the oh-so-familiar sight of the link station drifting away into the distance, and concentrate on the guidebook she had purchased, in case there might be some useful peculiarity of the world, something that would work to her advantage.

The world was called Angharad, and it was green and summery through its year of barely perceptible seasons. It was a world slightly smaller than Earth, roughly half of its surface dry land. There was only one spaceport – the population being too small to warrant more. That was the first bonus, that her pursuit would be constricted a longer time.

She continued to read, gleaning other interesting snippets of information about the world. The population, it seemed clustered in a few dozen small cities, in regions free from an almost universal jinx that seemed to haunt the world. It had been tamed long before the first Partnership vessel had approached it, and had remained so. Even the cities had been there then, and had been eagerly filled by the incoming colonists. Yet each time an effort was made to extend the settlement, every possible disaster had befallen it.

Now, few people left the cities, except to travel by monorail to another city and the only other mode of travel used was to go afoot. Inevitably the environment would be little different from that aboard ship, unsuited to a showdown, unless she were to choose the unlucky outside. Final judgement could await access to a decent library.

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The landing field was a seemingly endless expanse of concrete, uncomfortably bright in the bright sunlight. The sky was too dark by Nancy's prejudices, the clouds too wispy, and the gravity perceptibly lighter than the shipboard value. Planets seemed a little primitive after a long time away, despite her atavistic desire for a blue sky and bright sun overhead.

She shrugged, more with her face than her shoulders, and followed the other passengers into the reception hall, a bright white construction of corrugated metal where a few officials waited to supervise the newcomers. Nancy chose a queue randomly – there was none perceptibly shorter than any other – and resigned herself to the wait.

The formalities were thankfully brief, and soon she was at the head of the queue. The rodent-like creature at the desk sounded bored as he asked to see her passport, and asked for a few other bits and pieces of information for the files.

"The purpose of your visit?" he asked.

"I'm expecting to meet someone here." She had none of her usual lies ready against that question, and so answered with almost the truth. She was greeted by an expression that clearly thought this world an unlikely place for rendezvous.

"How long will you be staying?"

"A day, maybe two. If I survive". She symbolized a gun with her right hand, held it to her temple – suicide; that was surely what it would be, should she meet her death. The official's expression conveyed the opinion that he didn't care to deal with the mentally unbalanced.

"Too bad. Peace be with you."

"Thanks."

As soon as she left the hall, she headed directly for a public terminal, and requested the statistical analysis of the jinx that the guidebook had mentioned. It was there, and it was large, and probably psi-related as it only crippled complex non-organic structures.

So she would just have to choose a city. She requested a map, and jabbed her finger randomly at it to decide her final destination. The resultant choice had only its name to distinguish it from any other possible choice, so there could be no underlying drive to choose any other – only some ramifications of the planet's luck manipulating effects.

Nancy withdrew her credit card, and looked around the reception area for signposts. She strolled away from her corner, watching for any to appear from behind stairways or ornamental greenery, though the hall, easily a hundred yards long, encouraged her to patience: if she could not see a sign now, there was plenty of opportunity for one later.

She paused at one of the shops that lined the hall, and bought a few books and magazines to read during the journey, bundling them into her shoulder-bag, and moving on to a snack bar, where she bought a hot meat pasty and a chocolate milk shake. She breakfasted as she walked, following the sign that she now could see in the distance, directing her to the monorail terminal, up a flight of stairs to the catwalk level. She discarded the cup as she climbed, letting it drift into a trash-can below.

There was another receptacle by the ticket machine, where she deposited the napkin which had wrapped the pasty, and wiped her hands, before tapping the key labelled Halcyon. The plastic tab that would permit her the random journey clattered into the receiving dish. She picked it up, hesitantly, as if that could delay the inevitable. A travel plan appeared on the dispenser screen, giving her a choice between the first departing train, and the more direct one that would reach the final destination first. She decided upon the second, despite the half hour it would hold her at the spaceport. She went through to the waiting area, a scattering of chairs and tables, with continuous windows on two sides allowing a view out onto the field.

Nancy had no eyes for the comparatively uninspiring aspect, nor did she notice the bar, just the clock above it. She sat herself down where she could just look up to see the time, and began to read one of the books she had bought.

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Once aboard the train, however, she had no taste for reading, or for the magazines in her shoulder-bag. She had never travelled so fast so close to the ground, and the increased perception of speed drew her attention. Out of the city, the line passed through forest, and the continuously changing aspect of sun, and trees presented a hypnotic display of light.

The outside air had been cool, but inside the carriage, the sunlight was warm. Imperceptibly, Nancy felt her eyes grow heavy, beyond her capacity to hold them open.

Dreams came to her, interwoven with her intermittent glimpses of objective reality. And amidst the dreams, there were threads of her false memories.

So when she walked again the woodland path down to river that she had known only, yet repeatedly, in her dreams, she was at times not herself, but Linna, so that when she turned a bend in the river's course, she came across the temple where she had trained. There was a sense of the sky darkening as she approached, a threat above her. In the distance, behind her, something glowed red, and she knew it for the witchfires of the devil

cult. Nancy forced herself into control of the dream, forced herself to levitate, to speed her travel, fighting the unaccustomed resistance she met.

It was all she could to lift herself a handsbreadth from the ground, and half walk, half drift along, but it brought her to the temple itself ahead of the threat. She screamed with her mind as she raced along the central path, calling for people long departed, the fires of devotion cold, their ashes scattered onto the floor

That shocked the Linna–structure, and Nancy, freed from its moulding of her dream ducked out. She stood on the riverbank under the sunlight, where it was crossed by a broad belt of grassland, between two halves of an old–fashioned city. Two young black women stood nearby, at the door of a small rickety shanty.

"Where is the spaceport?" she asked them.

"But this is Halcyon." The reply was unnecessary; she knew where to go. She struck away from the river, along the highway of grass.

Something startled her awake, and she forced her eyes open. A few moments of disorientation went by while she adapted herself to the time of day, and realized that the monorail had reached the first stop of three *en route* to Halcyon.

She ordered a jug of sparkling water to help remove the stale taste in her mouth, and a somewhat unimaginative lunch to occupy her mind for at least part of the next leg of the journey, and while she waited she looked around to see her fellow passengers. They were a mixed bunch, none of them human – an Ayassa female in traditional kilt, a troupe of shaggy blue spider–monkeys, a number of huddled beings in all concealing robes, and some strange being in a heavily armoured environment suit. None seemed likely to strike up a conversation; and at that moment, she would have welcomed anything to take her mind off the reason for making this trip at all, and to prevent her dreaming about it. She had been unable to think of anything that she could do for herself, and so she wished now only to forget what was going on, pretend that nothing was wrong, at least until it happened

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It was evening, now. As she looked out of the window Nancy could see at last the city of Halcyon, its white spires gleaming in the golden light. The monorail itself formed a jewelled thread, reaching out from the city, curving wide around the low hill that still hid the mass of the city, and out to her

She gathered together her belongings and turned, impatiently to the window, as if she could hurry her arrival by the force of her will, although she knew that it would nearly three hours before her pursuer could arrive. The same emotional disregard of her cold reason left her meagre luggage in a storage locker at the station, so being ready for combat. Now all she carried was the key, her credit card, and holstered in her right boot the small gun that she carried out of habit.

She wandered restlessly, waiting out the time with growing impatience. Occasionally, she opened the defences about her mind. to ease the chafing, for all that it forced her into overly intimate contact with the swarms of other minds around, and left her unclean as she retreated behind the barriers, but there was never a trace of hostility directed at her.

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Two hours brought her roughly back to her starting place, having traced a path through most of the city. She had decided to have one last meal, before... She realized that even the prospect of imminent death did not fill her with the fear that, even a month ago, it would have done. But then, she remembered wryly, she had died once in that intervening time. She choked back hysterical laughter, hanging grimly on to her own version of sanity, and forcing her conscious thoughts to the location of a place to eat.

She chose the first restaurant she came to, its one small dining room already crowded, and sat down at a corner table for two, slightly apart from the general huddle of diners. Their conversation came to her, in isolated snippets, intruding into her consciousness while she studied the menu. She felt herself despising the people to whom she could attribute the dialogue, for only so acting out stereotypes. There was one group who were obviously tourists, a couple, obviously a mated pair, having a soap–opera argument and a number of persons of a very non–human race gossiping most intensely, within arm's reach. No one else seemed to be dining alone. The bitterness that now seemed to be her constant companion welled up inside her, tearing her apart, when she resisted the temptation to tears or anger.

"Hi! What'll you be having?" The arrival of a waiter, a casually dressed feline woman, turned her attention outwards again. Nancy ordered, her choice made off the top of her head.

"Fine. Thanks." the girl smiled at her before going off with the order. Nancy sighed. That girl had been happy in her hobby, and friendly: why could people be so open precisely when she could not follow that openness up? Was it because of the intimacy associated with the provision of food, or a cynical professional openness, possible only because any interaction would be transient? Nancy could not choose one answer over the other. Hope chose the former, so she denied its choice. She felt a tear form at the corner of her right eye, and affected an itch to hide the reason that she tended to the eye.

Was this screen of lies that she hid behind something that everyone did? Even cynicism could not answer that. It could only remind her of her feeling of her own essential hollowness behind her facade.

She didn't even interrupt the train of thought while she faked a sorrowful smile for, and accepted her first course from another waiter, a human male, who smiled back at her as well. She bore the pangs of despair within herself until she was unobserved, and could relax her expression. This time her face contorted itself in preparation for tears, and, she forced her feelings away, trying to return to the good old days before emotional issues arose to complicate things, before she had had to feel for herself.

She sighed, half in regret, half in appreciation of the cold tangy taste of her drink, and began to eat greedily, which at least beat thinking for entertainment.

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Too soon for Nancy's liking, she could eat no more and would once again have to face outside reality. She felt mentally tired as she went to pay her bill, too tired even to raise a wan smile as she did, and she fled as soon as the transaction was complete.

The darkness on the street, the jazzy lighting, rolled unnoticed off her back, Night, as far as her mood would allow her to be concerned, was merely an inevitable fact and the city lights were an immediate corollary. She knew that her time of reckoning came soon, and some primal impulse decided her to seek out a hidden place beyond the city. Later in her wandering, she rationalized her choice as being motivated by a desired to protect lives and property but at the time, it was pure whimsy upon her part.

The construct city of small squares, organic–seeming towers, elevated boulevards, ended abruptly; beyond the perimeter, only the empty land. Her route had taken her south, across the line of the monorail, and the final ramp that led her out of the city faced south–east. Across to her left, she could see, by the lights in it, the last sweep of the monorail into the city. Turning slowly, she saw in the east a faint shimmering of light behind thin clouds, and a paling of the sky that foretold the rising of a moon. Directly in front of her lay a bare grassy hill, and then past it, a swirl of pale mist, and the dark shapes of trees. A river; the only interesting terrain in the vicinity. Unhurriedly, she walked in that direction. She knew she still had enough lead over her pursuit to reach it.

As she passed, she felt, rather than saw, in the starlight, the terrain change underfoot, the grass become longer, heaped into irregular mounds: that formed an almost impossible surface to walk, before merging into a uniform calf-high blanket on the ground. In the growing light before moonrise, and her growing adaptation to the dark, she could now see to guide her way past obstacles, fallen, blasted trees, now only bleached shells, stripped of leaf and branch. and between the main avenue of their yet-living brothers along the mist-curdled river. There was a chill dankness to the scent of the air, and the utmost calm, yet without the sense of impending storm – ironical in the face of what must surely come to pass.

Between the trees, the earth was bare again, save for the debris of the last autumn, and the darkness folded her in its cloak, hiding her rather than engulfing. Her arcane senses, loosed as she passed beyond the city, detected a thread of a call from ahead, as from a welcoming beacon, her Linna memories endorsing the faint message. In her flight, she could not have been as random as she had thought, had instead been following an unconscious hunch to a place of possible sanctuary.

She stared forward into the gloom, to the pale curtain of light ahead that was the river. There was no sign of the beckoning place; merely the swirls of mist. She hurried forwards to the river, as much as the poor seeing allowed, and did not find the crumbling earth of a normal riverbank, but a path leading both ways. She followed it to her left, and soon ahead a bridge loomed out of the mist, a spar of the same not-quite-rock of the path, and she crossed it.

There was a similar path on the far bank, but she spurned it and stumbled her way through the trees there, and out into the open, spurred on by a feeling of the closeness of her unknown goal. The open land came suddenly upon her, and she stopped at the edge of its extent. Above her, paralleling the trees, and ultimately the river, a line of pylons extended in both directions, as far as she could see. Beyond that line, a low hill with a handful of trees on its slopes, one standing stark, blasted and dead on the skyline at the left, at the contour of some darkness, be it a wall or hedge she could not tell. At the summit a number of slender stones were arranged in what she guessed was a circle. Pale blue fires played around their tips. She now knew what she had been seeking, a safe place of the powers allied to Linna's cause. She felt their call, and knew that it offered safety for her; and in that same instant she felt the hellfire breath of the aura of her pursuer.

She walked calmly up the hill, knowing. that pursuit could not catch her before she had gained the summit, and at the darkness, a low wall of dry stone, she turned and looked back to the city. A mile away, it did not seem diminished by distance, rather it seemed merely to have been given context. It, and the intervening terrain, gave no sign of any life, and it did not surprise her that she did not see anything. That could wait until she had gained the summit.

"Hold!" Nancy wheeled to find the source of that cry, and saw, halfway between herself and the summit, a figure indistinct in the darkness, and seemingly wreathed in dull red fire, and felt the gem at her breast surge into life. She recalled the first time she had worn it, how it had caught her up in triumphal song, never since to waken. This was like that time, yet weaker, and she too bound to her immediate conception of reality to let herself go.

"Who are you?" she called in counter challenge, her voice weak in her ears.

"My names are many, as well you know, priestess of earth, as indeed are yours. They are all irrelevant. Now is our hour."

"I don't suppose you're open to reasonable persuasion?" Nancy felt the weakness of her voice change to tiredness as she made her final play. The reply was only laughter, floating on the slightest of winds.

Fire gathered in her challenger's darkness, and roared at her, passing unnoticed the blue fire that guarded her, and her clothing and her flesh, to strike at her spirit. It broke like a storm against her mind's defences, and sent pain lancing through her whole existence. She screamed in a scream that tore at her throat, in pain, misery and fear.

When she had come to this place expecting death, it had merely been the concept of annihilation that she had accepted; she had given no thought to the many roads that might lead to that end, and how many lead through pain. That was what she could not accept. She had to struggle, to fight her way clear; and yet she had no resources available. The gem she wore had power but it was not hers to command, and the time spent in surrender to it was not left to her.

But her body, working far below the level of her conscious mind, without the confusion of the two different sets of memory to impede it, had already made its own decision.

From the holster in boot, her gun flew to her hand, sending its nerve-deadening effect along a purple tracer beam that reached directly, to the flame figure. Such an attack had stripped the influence of the gem from her on the night she had acquired it. Yet even against the full power of her handgun, the flame burned undiminished, and its voice mocked her.

"Your toy is irrelevant here! it explained, Watch!"

It held forth one hand, and the flame gathered about it, brightening, and in the instant, leaping forth to touch the weapon she held. It exploded as the flame touched, the blast sending its fragments deep into her flesh. She watched the shredded remains of her sleeve, the destruction that had been a hand, waiting for the pain to come, a pain she knew would last for the rest of her brief life, and looked to her opponent.

She wanted to call out asking that her death be brief, yet remained silent as another attack was prepared. She yearned for it, the brief explosion that would tear her from this agonized shell of flesh, and yet, while the bolt was on its way, her body betrayed her once again, and she threw up her good hand into the devil horns gesture that she knew had been supposed to turn the evil eye, and watched the attack break against that defence.

"That cannot succeed. Eventually your arm will tire, and you will be too sluggish to block my attack. You will soon..."

The voice halted; suddenly, in the midst of its boast, and a deep stillness came across the hill. The figure in flame seemed to be distracted by some event behind where Nancy lay sprawled and off to her left. She turned to see what it was and saw the moon all silver, without a hint of maria, rise from the clouds. Without rhyme or reason, that sight brought reassurance to her and... No pain. She looked at her hand and saw that it was healed without scar. As, in retrospect, had she healed once before, under the light of the rings of her home world, Wyvern.

"The moon may be with you, Priestess, but will not save you."

"Time will tell, Fire-holder."

The demon did not speak in reply. It had grown silently, and now released the gathered fire at Nancy, who spread her arms wide as if to greet the attack. Golden flame lapped about her as it struck, instantly to be engulfed in blue; and while it jolted her, the jolt was more than merely physical, carrying her in a flare of ecstasy into the altered state of awareness that she had known once before.

She was now fully herself, though engulfed in the blue flame of the gem, and yet more than herself. She felt with the plants and animals of the region, could taste the night wind, and touch the patterns of its motion. She moulded the fire now, sending a streamer out to meet the onrushing lance of red-gold that had been launched at her, and dissipated it. She prepared a counter-blow and held it ready to launch when the idea struck her that there might be more than this one use to the flame she possessed.

Gently, she released the stored power, letting it strengthen the veil about her, and then drew that veil into herself. There was another transition, a moment's eddying of darkness, before she stood again on the hill, her fire gone out. Equally, she knew that she had lost nothing of the flame state, and had possibly gained. Not so her enemy, for she heard a contemptuous laugh as another vortex of fire rushed towards her. With equal if silent contempt, she caught it in her hand, a hand, she noticed with quiet interest, that was gloved in silver, and crushed the golden glow. The demon form hesitated, and then ran. Nancy would have run after the creature, reversing the pursuit that had led them here, had it not been that her newly refined senses hinted of a better way.

She had, even in the flame phase, been able to feel the stresses of the air. Now, she reached out, altering their patterns to her own will, guiding them about herself until she could fly. A hop, a step, and she was carried aloft upon the winds, clumsily at first, and then with mounting confidence, as she soared to what she judged as fifty feet of altitude, stooping before beginning a long slow plunge towards her demon quarry. In her hands of silver, she gathered the lighting, like a fluorescent jelly that dripped slowly away from an over-full grasp, and released its power at the fleeing figure. It howled, but did not drop and staggered into the safety of the trees.

Harshly, Nancy pulled out of the dive, climbing nearly vertically to lift herself above trees and pylons for another attack run, the next time a target would present itself. Her mind reached out to track that hellfire mentality, touched it, and felt it go out. There was no barrier, just emptiness. Wary lest this be some elaborate trap, she let herself descend gently, and almost to the ground and went into the trees afoot, albeit with six inches separating her silver shod feet from the soil. She lit her way with lightning-bright flashes that seared the retina, and lit the wood like day, yet found no-one, and despite her straining for it, there was no sign of the demon mind that had pursued her, fought her, and vanished from her grasp.

She gave up the search, after what she guessed had been half an hour, and soared out of the oppressive woods, descending to earth just outside the city. Though it irked her, she decided to walk henceforth, for flight, unlike the new attire she had acquired, would attract remark. Yet in the end, her indecent haste in wishing to walk about half as fast again as the main flow of people attracted its own share of attention from those offended by her ungracious passage. Yet what reason was there to hurry, without a destination? That sudden quiet thought stopped her as she stood, dissipating the frustration that had driven her, and in her pause for thought, she realized that at some time past she had lost the fleeting calm that the gem induced, was again reduced. She accepted the fact resignedly, and dismissed it. All she could do now was find a bed for the night.

Her hand went to her pocket, and touched only bare flesh, diverting her attention from the location of her credit card to the clothes she now wore. Silver were her boots, with blocky soles, form-fitting: to mid calf, and silver too her gloves, which were fine enough to show her fingerprints, and fitted like a second skin halfway up her forearms. In contrast, the skin-tight suit covering her torso was deepest blue, silver-marred only at the throat, where the gem was set in the tight collar, and at the waist, where a silver sash broke the uniform field of colour. And were her arms and legs not bare, Nancy realized, she would have called this outfit a spacesuit. There was also a second and more serious deficiency. No pockets, and as consequently, no credit card, no locker key. She swore under her breath This was going to cause hassle.

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It did. In fact it took half an hour for the public service network to research her finances and associated data, delete the old card and issue the new one, and now, ten minutes later, sleep seemed very attractive indeed. She

closed the hotel room door behind her, and headed for the bed. The gloves and boots she discarded easily, leaving them shrunken on the floor, and then, after a few minutes struggle to locate its fastening, her leotard joined them, while Nancy settled down to the warm invitation of slumber.

And yet, as she lay there, gazing at the puddle of moonlight on the floor, her mind remained awake and active. Things had happened to her this as day like had not happened to her, to anyone, things that seemed only to have come into existence for the day, without proper context in the enduring scheme of things, without even a self-consistent logic of their own. And all were focused about the entity that had fought her, and then gone away, without the merest trace, when the tables had turned. Teleport? All the physics she knew denied the possibility so deep in a gravity well. Illusion ? if so, one more subtle than her mental defences could block

Incoherence, and then sleep, claimed her thoughts before she could rationalize everything away. Her dreams were full of flight, soaring in the interstellar emptiness, or down the corridors of non-existent wings of the Castle that had been her home.

---

Morning came, bright and clear, with sunlight streaming through the open window onto Nancy's bed. She fought to remain asleep despite the hurtful glare in her eyes, tossing and turning as she transposed fitfully between wakefulness and dream until sleep finally abandoned her. She lay a long while as the sluggishness left her limbs and she felt ready to stir.

She pulled on her minimal attire, the wrinkled shrivelled material of it seeming to acquire new life as it stretched to fit. Clothes would be a definite priority for the day's activity. After breakfast.

Whatever had happened to her body on the previous evening and during the night had taken lot more out of her than she had realized at the time, goading her to a sickening hunger that hastened her steps to the restaurant.

At this time of the mid-morning, the restaurant was remodelled as bar, open to the patio, a swimming pool, and a large lawn. Everything was a bright white, and the air was pleasingly cool. More important, now there were few other people eating and thus less delay likely for her own meal. She would begin, she decided, with a large mug of chocolate, and a stack of pancakes in syrup, and work on from there when the time came to make further decisions, but not before.

In due course, the meal arrived, and she drank deeply of the chocolate, before greedily attacking the stack. Even as she ate, the appeasing of her hunger, was noticeable, and as its all-pervasive influence declined, another element of disquiet became distinguishable. There was a presence about the area that compelled her attention.

Nancy looked up from her plate, eyes, as well as more subtle devices, attuned to the task, seeking its cause – and finding it. The psychic unrest that had attracted her attention seemed to centre about a young woman, with dusky skin and blonde hair, towelling herself down at the poolside. Their eyes met, and held as some discharge of psychic effect passed between them, and was gone.

Impulsively, without a clear idea of her intent, Nancy beckoned the woman to her table. She in her turn hesitated, as if to make sure that it was not some other who was being summoned, and, wrapping her towel around herself for warmth, followed the invitation.

"Hi," she said as she sat down on the chair next to Nancy's, "I'm Suzi, Suzi Bergmann. Which one of us did whatever happened?"

"Nancy Wolf – Clan Wolf. I don't think it was me, at least not consciously. Are you psychic? I can telepath a little."

"I'm a weak sensitive, not enough for the Guild to be interested. Are you Guild?"

"No, I'm still a free agent, making my way slowly Earthwards. You local?"

"No, I'm just wandering too. But," A troubled frown passed across her face, as if she were uncertain whether to continue the sentence she had begun.

"Well?" Nancy asked in encouragement.

"No, I was just wondering what it might be that brought both of us here, thousands of miles from the spaceport, from halfway across the Partnership. It was as if somehow we were *meant* to meet."

"Meant?"

"Well, not predestination on any rubbish like that, but some kind of affinity between us, though what, or how...?"

"You wouldn't happen to be a depressive self exile?"

"No, I go in for memory lapses myself."

"You realize," Nancy said, in an effort to change the direction of the conversation, "that we're both being amazingly frank about ourselves."

"It must be that affinity, whatever happened when I saw you. Are you alone here?"

"Until now. It's that in a way that which brought me here. I was thinking of dying here, only self preservation won."

"Wow. How were you going to do it?"

"Fire," she half-lied, caught off-guard, without a cover story ready.

Suzi's expression as uncertain, as if she wanted to continue the conversation but could not find the lines she wanted. Silence continued long enough for Nancy to take advantage of the break and cut herself another mouthful of pancake.

"Where are you staying?" Suzi asked after a minute or so.

"Room 609. You?"

"420. I'll go and change now. See you around. Bye, Nancy."

"Bye, Suzi."

Nancy watched her as she went, uncertain of the decisions she had made, each time she had chosen to be open and truthful, laying herself open to emotional harm from this woman she did 'not know. And when Suzi was gone from her sight, Nancy stood up, abandoning the cold remains of her meal, and walked out into the city,

out among the crowds.

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She window–shopped for half an hour, intent more on putting distance between herself and the hotel than on actually buying. Eventually, she did stop to buy a few outfits, most of which she had delivered to her room, except for a long green dress and white blouse and a wide–brimmed hat, all of which she wore directly over the outfit she already wore, and in her shoulder–bag she carried a respectable handgun for the sense of security it gave to her.

She lunched in a street café, on a none too imaginative choice of ethnic cuisine, and a tall glass of lager, and watched the sunlight sparkling from the waters of a fountain in its pool in the little rock–garden in the middle of the small square. Consciously she tried to act the part of a tourist, to keep her mind from stagnating in negative thinking about everything that had happened since she had arrived in the system. She half minded to leave, unable to think of reason why not, until she decided that events had not been resolved, so all her original reasoning still held.

Yet she had done all that there was to do and, still did not want to return to the hotel, to face her chance acquaintance. She walked restlessly after leaving the restaurant, trying to lose herself in the mess of people, and failing. That left her, she reluctantly concluded, only one place to go. Out to visit the site of last night's conflict, maybe to find something that could help... well, just to satisfy my curiosity, she thought in correction.

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In daylight the scene was changed. For one thing, she was not alone. The open land down to the river was crowded as any park, and their stares seemed hostile and intrusive to Nancy as she walked past them, trying to ignore their presence.

Beneath the trees, however, she felt safe, the moist green shadows enclosing her protectively. She slacked her pace for a while, until impatience hurried her on. Sunlight dappled the grey–brown mould that scattered in dry clods underfoot, making it warm, a comforting warmth that she could feel through the soles of her boots. The seclusion made it almost seductive, tempting her to roll naked on the good earth.

The river when she came to it, flowing leisurely, peacefully along, its waters clear, and bright in the sunlight, offered her much the same temptation, to be herself, free from any of the restraints that convention placed upon her spirit. With the same regrets, she withstood its allure, sad, even annoyed at herself for letting her overactive fear of attack and dislike of getting cold in the river dissuade her. What right had such mundane matters to intrude in situation owing more to poetry?

The bridge was close now, and as she set foot upon it, she finally fought down the call of the wild, and strode along purposefully, without turning her head. Beside, she was now almost at her intended destination, too close to be distracted.

At the edge of the trees, she paused, and listened, with ears and mind alike. People, random sounds of talk, which, half–noticed, had prompted her to actively listen. She moved out of the cover, and saw them, a small group in a huddle among the standing stones at the hill–top. They were tourists, being given a guided tour of the local oddities, and one of the minds had a familiar feel. Instantly, on that touch, Nancy clamped her mind shut. Suzi had been among that group, and she did not know how to react to the girl. She faded back into the trees, and followed the edge of them around the hill, and waited, and watched.

After a time that she could place no value in minutes or seconds to, the party finally moved on, down the flank of the hill furthest from the city, and almost directly towards her. For her part, Nancy retreated into the trees, retracing her steps, and every so often, checking the progress of the tourists. It seemed that they intended to

follow the line of pylons a way. Maybe there was some other site of relics along that way. She would see later, when the sightseers had moved on.

When at last she deemed the group to be suitably far away, about two hundred meters along the line, halfway to where a spur of trees cut the line, Nancy left the cover of the trees for the open land, heading directly up the hill. A stagefright feeling gripped her as she walked, as if eyes were trained upon her from every concealment, watching her, just watching.

She crossed the dry stone wall at the base of the blasted tree she had seen the previous night, clutching at its white, dry wood for support as she passed. No figure of flame rose this time to bar her way, and she crossed the last twenty meters to the stones.

Gently she reached out one hand to touch the nearest, a rough near-cylinder, ten centimetres through, and about two hundred fifty tall, its tip looking like it had once been twice as tall and had snapped in the middle and its texture was a dull dusty white, yet...

As her hand drew close blue fire awoke about the silver glove she wore and an answering fire woke in the pillar, its dusty white woken to clear crystal. Her skin crawled, under the glove first, then up the arm, up the side of her head and across her body.

This intrigued her, so carefully she withdrew her hand the thrilling subsided, as did the flame, leaving the sleeve of her blouse eaten away up to her elbow. The pillar glowed for a little longer before the fire faded.

She took off her new-bought clothes, packing them into her shoulder-bag, and stood once more before the pillar, her feet planted solidly on the slight incline, and took the stone between her two hands. Blue flame engulfed her poured up the pillar and struck across the gap to the adjacent pillars, until the whole complex was alight. Her mind readjusted itself into the more tightly integrated mode that the gem had before induced, and her thoughts were filled with something that wasn't a map but served as one. It sparkled with yellow points that she knew were people, civilians and one point that burned red. Enemy, her instinct insisted.

The flame burned out with a thunderclap and she stood alone with a cold. hate in her mind

No! she yelled, trying to deny its alien insistence. But she was outvoted, two to one. Both the installation, and the memories that had come with the jewel at her throat insisted the necessity and the right of the hate she felt for the devil enemy.

No! quieter this time, barely voiced, a blunt denial of something that revealed itself as external to her, that seemed to need her acceptance, her volition, to move. And using her override, she channelled the aggression she felt into raw power, and raising her arms to the heavens, poured it out in a gout of blue fire that dissipated harmlessly.

She felt weaker after that, but the other thoughts were still. However, the map was still clear in her memory, and something that was an enemy to the faction of Elder Gods among whom she had thrown her lot, might bear investigation, in regard to last night. The hate she did not need, it did not suit her temperament, but enemies and attempts to murder by pseudo-magical means did tend to have some connection.

A fragment of stone was cruel under her left foot, and she bent down to look at it, and saw that she was naked save for the amulet on a chain about her neck. Well, thrice could be the charm. She embraced the warm stone again, and fire struck from it, engulfing her in a gauzy layer of azure and indigo. Left foot. She concentrated her attention on the flame, and it gathered to her will, and knitted into a silver boot. Right foot this time. A gathering, a coalescence, a boot upon the foot. Glove now, and at the thought it appeared, and then... the

thought could not be framed before the transition was complete.

Now she had been shown the way, she knew how to handle the transition, as a minute's practise showed, taking the change from gem to uniform, and back at will. She would have to put that together with the lessons she had learned under fire the night before, and the device she had encountered as some kind of votive talisman gathering dust under museum glass would be fully revealed as a combat weapon of undetermined, but probably extremely great, capabilities, something distributed to primitives by gun-runners among the Elder Gods

And she had nigh worshipped the selfsame thing, albeit at the behest of the memories burned deeply into it by the generations of ignorant owners. In her mind she saluted the broken-down installation, and then with the cold fire about her, she turned away, her thoughts overrun by her adjusting to her new realization of her situation.

So enwrapt was she in her thoughts, that she took little heed of the direction in which her feet were taking her, more concerned with what to do about the murder machine she had become part of, restraining the reckless temptation to take apart everything to the horizon for practise. For all its vast power, she would, have to regard the device as no different to the gun she carried in her shoulder-bag.

And when she surfaced a while later, to look consciously at the world again, it took more than, a few seconds to figure out where she was, that she was following the line of pylons in the direction that the guided party had taken, and the same direction in which she had been advised that one of the enemy still remained. Two opposed installations, so close?

She walked on, curiosity winning over her frantic self-analysis. She crossed through the row of trees that at a distance had looked much denser than they now seemed, and saw that they marked the end of the pylons, and through the trees she saw why. The darkness she had taken at distance to be the shadow of a deeper mass of woods was revealed as a square of totally black substance that felt glassy when she reached down to test its inscrutable surface. There was something disturbing about it, though what caused the feeling, and which of her triune selves had triggered the alarm were not clear. What was clear was that indeed it was the enemy, and possibly their equivalent of the stone circle.

Respectfully, she backed away, senses extended, waiting lest her presence had been revealed to that which hunted her. Assured that there was no-one in sight, no sign of the unmistakable though pattern of her pursuer, Nancy gathered the flame closely about her body, and, risking the overt use of the combat-suit's power, took to the air, skimming close to the ground, barely a meter above the dry earth, at all the speed she dared, until she had regained the shelter of her own base. There, she deliberately collapsed the flame into the gem, and retired into the cover of the trees.

From there, she went on foot, but as fast she she could, and, now, though naked – she had no wish to burn away the only clothes she had with her should she come under attack – she found it trivially easy to ignore the lure of nature. Only at the far eaves of the wood did she pause to put on the long green dress, and hat, leaving the seared blouse in the shoulder-bag, along with the redundant gun she carried. From now on would be almost safe; she would be among people and to some degree hidden.

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Suzi was in the front lounge as Nancy returned to the hotel, and greeted her like a long-lost friend, hugging her tight, and kissing her on the cheek. Nancy tried to shrink away fearing what might develop into a compromising situation, glad when at last she was freed from temptation as she was released. She was about to explain the situation to Suzi when the girl suddenly went blank faced, and started to collapse. Nancy caught her as she fell, and drove a probe into her mind. And found nothing – not an absence of abnormality, but a total absence of all function on any of the few surface levels she could reach in such manner. Then, still

mind-blank, she gained animation, wriggling her way from Nancy's hold, and walking towards the elevator. Nancy followed her, and in the privacy of the elevator cell blasted her with the stunner she carried, and when it stopped at Suzi's floor, sent it on to her own, where she dragged the inert body into her room, and lay her on the bed.

She took a beer from the fridge, and drank it slowly, while she waited for Suzi to recover from what had come over her, and from the stunner.

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It was an hour later when Suzi finally struggled back to awareness, after another stun shot to keep her under after first awakening in the same robotic state. To pass the time, Nancy had in the meanwhile bathed, and changed into another outfit, a heavy blue shirt and blue-jeans, and a pair of white leather boots. From there she had gone on to grooming her hair, and with nothing else to attend to about her person, had returned to the watch.

Well, actually that was what she called it; in point of fact she spent as much time staring out of the window as watching Suzi, and so missed her actual awakening

"What happened?" Suzi managed to ask that question first.

"You switched off all your mind, and then started walking away. I followed you into the elevator and gave you a quick burst of this." She held up the gun.

"One of my attacks. I get them every so often – usually end up a hundred lites away from where I went under. I had one earlier this afternoon, I'm told, only that time I just went berserk and it took a couple of Hrulgani to restrain me and I'd only just snapped out of it before the group got back to the hotel. "

"Group?"

"Guided tour of some Q'l-hrui remnants. We'd gotten to a place where there was; a big black slab just set in the ground, and then something went off in my head. You seen the local relics?"

"Yeah, I walked round there earlier. What happened this time round?"

"You'd just backed away from me, and then for no reason I can discern, everything went red. Yeah... you certainly looked worried for some reason. I just didn't notice anything else – I was just looking for a shoulder to cry on after what had just happened."

"It felt like you were coming on seriously at me. I wouldn't mind that, but I'm not sure that that was what you were meaning."

"Oh. I'm sorry – I'm glad that came up right now before I could do anything else stupid. That wasn't what I was meaning, I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right. I've had too many other things to think about than lust for you." However, it had been a long enough time since she had held another person. If only Trish were here with her, if only they could be once again as close in spirit as once they had been, before all this. She thought of writing to her cousin, asking her to join her, but dismissed the idea at once. Their unity had been broken the night she had acquired the killer thing that hung cold against her breast, and could never be reforged. That wound was still raw, worsened, if anything, by her brief involvement just a few days earlier. She did not dare admit to herself the secret hope that he had held that Suzi and her 'affinity' would fill that gap, and now.

She looked wearily at Suzi, who for her part was staring disinterestedly out of the window. Conversation had died, and she could think of no gambit to resurrect it, and time yawned emptily for the next three hours until dinner.

She felt suffocated again, as she had done in her time aboard ship, and until Suzi seemed ready to depart, convention tied her here, denied the solace of restless wandering. It was a time that was designed for sleep, but she was wide awake.

At last, after maybe ten minutes, spent mainly in keeping her eyes off Suzi, and trying not to brood on her own boredom, she finally asked "Have you any ideas of what better things we could be doing?"

A pause, presumably for readjustment to the here and now.

"Not really. I can only think of getting something to read, or watching the Tree-V or..."

*You*, Nancy thought to herself, supplying the word she wanted to complete the sentence

"...listening to some music, perhaps?" Suzi concluded after her brief hesitation.

So much for idle curiosity, Nancy thought. Well, she'd just have to live with that. Suzi wouldn't be tempted. At least she had supplied some excuse to get out and away from each other.

The fragment ends here

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# Whatever happened to Nancy Wolf?

At this point I stopped writing, because the damned gem was taking over, and she was becoming more a Jean Grey as Phoenix than the original Telzey Matuchek character I had intended.

## How the story would have finished

Suzi is, of course, being piloted by the opposing gem. Cue some more Andre Norton style Forerunner bits, an obligatory fight scene, and Nancy triumphant, a full time super-heroine. Does this develop the character? No.

If I were to try and finish this today, the story would have to end with some form of renunciation of the gem, now revealed as some Transcendent-tech enabler (rather than being a Power itself, it helps bootstrap a human-level being, as well as having some nifty abilities). That would move the character on in some degree.

Suzi – well she ruled herself out as Nancy's life-mate; but I think she survives, albeit traumatized, and not entirely certain of what happened. She can recover her life and vanishes from the tale.

## What Nancy did next

I stopped writing about this time, as I got into cosy domesticity, and RPGs took up more of my hobby time. After exhausting the immediate charms of *DD*, and the high fantasy genre in general, we thought about trying super-heroes as a genre. Given that the state of the art then was *Superhero:2044*, and *Villains and Vigilantes*, we opted to free-form, meaning I could bring in a version of the Nancy-as-Phoenix called Silverwolf. Imagine the original Jean Grey Phoenix, but with the appropriate shift of colour-scheme, and a wolf-mask instead of the bird outline.

Nancy also made an appearance as a PC in an all-weekend gaming session for high powered favourite characters run by [Phil Masters](#) back in about '83. As a mostly-GM, rarely player, I had no really suitable characters of my own, so handed Phil a copy of *Moving Day*, and he produced a set of *Champions* stats

## Nancy Wolf, human form

<u>Value</u>	<u>Char.</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Pts</u>	<u>Skill/Power</u>	<u>END</u>
23	STR	13	6	2 levels, single shot stun	
20	DEX	30	5	1 level all guns	
20+5*	CON	25	5	Gadgeteering 13-	
11	BODY	2	5	Programming 13-	
20	INT	10	15	4 Climbing 17-	(2)
23	EGO	26	4	<u>2PD, 5ED Force-field at 0</u> <u>END*</u>	
10+10*	PRE	5	Stun Gun	OAF 100 pt battery + spare:	
12	COM	1	46	127pt Multipower reserve	
7	PD	2	4	122pt fixed slot, 7D6 NND 1/8END	(1)

Moving Day

Whatever happened to Nancy Wolf?

10 <sub>+1*</sub>	ED	6	5	125pt fixed slot, 4D6 NND Autofire 1/64END	(1)
4	SPD	10	4	120pt fixed slot, 6D6 NND Burst fire 1/16END	(3)
9+1*	REC	–	5	<u>127pt fixed slot, 5½D6 AP RKA</u>	(25)
40+10*	END	–	Blaster	OAF 6 uses + 2 spare magazines	
38+3*	STUN	<u>5</u>	40	<u>4D6 AP RKA</u>	
		<u>135</u>			
	+Powers	<u>277</u>	33	Alternate form, 332 pt wolf	
		<u>412</u>	6	STR 1/2 END	(2)
			2	+1 running (to 7)	(11)
OCV: 7	DCV: 7	ECV: 7	13	2D6 EGO attack, IAF necklet	(4)
PD: 7+2	ED: 10+1+5		7	–15 EGO Defence (11pt) 14–	
PHA	3,6,9,12		EC	Telepathic power, 1/3 innate 2/3 IAF	
Move: 7 Run			44	1. Telepathy 9D6 1/2END	4
			22	<u>2. Mind scanning 9D6 1/2 END</u>	
			3	1 BODY regeneration 8–	
			<u>3</u>	<u>1 BODY regeneration under moonlight</u>	
			<u>277</u>	<u>Total</u>	

\* Enhanced state only (+1 disadvantage) – only in appropriate circumstances, destroyed by energy attacks

<u>Disadvantages</u>	<u>100+</u>
Unusual looks 8–	5
Fear of injury/death	20
Disdain for cargs	15
Hunted: Matts 11–	25
Hunted: Free Traders 8–	20

<u>Disadvantages continued</u>	
No control over shape–shift	20
Stress+moonlight triggers, leaving clothes and weapons	
Bonus	<u>207</u>
Total	<u>412</u>

**Nancy Wolf, wolf form**

<u>Value</u>	<u>Char.</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Pts</u>	<u>Skill/Power</u>	<u>END</u>
23	STR	13	41	Human form	
23	DEX	39	6	STR 1/2 END	(2)

30	CON	40	10	Damage Resistance vs. Physical ranged and all HTH KAs	
11	BODY	2	20	2 BODY regeneration	
8	INT	-2	18	+6 running to 12 all 1/2 END	(1)
23	EGO	26	2	+1 swimming to 3	
15	PRE	5	19	1D6 HKA 1/2END	(1)
8	COM	-1		= 2D6 w/STR	2
20	PD	15	15	Tracking Scent	
12	ED	6	10	Ultrasonic hearing	
6	SPD	27	4	+4 Hearing (-1/7 )	
11	REC	-	7	-13 EGO defense (11 pt) 14-	
60	END	-	5	Stealth 14-	
38	STUN	-	<u>5</u>	<u>+1 to all Perception rolls</u>	
		<u>170</u>	<u>162</u>	<u>Total</u>	
	+Powers	<u>162</u>			
		<u>332</u>			

OCV: 8      DCV: 8      ECV: 8  
 PD: 20 [10]    ED: 12 [[6]]  
 PHA          2,4,6,8,10,12  
 Move: 12 Run

<u>Disadvantages</u>	<u>100+</u>	<u>Disadvantages continued</u>	
Unusual looks 14-	5	No control over shape-shift	20
Animal mentality	25	Shifts in daylight	
Berserk if cornered 11- recover 14-	10	Hunted: Matts 8-	20
Berserk in HTH 8- recover 14-	15	1.5* stun from fire c.	10
Functionally mute	15	Bonus	<u>77</u>
No hands	25	Total	<u>332</u>

Another guest appearance followed some years later in what started as Phil's UK based Champions campaign (which provided the basis for some of *Kingdom of Champions*), but became a community project where everyone tried GMing at some point. When martial arts super-heroine Pushover needed a make-over, she received a healthy pension from a mysterious Wolf Foundation, and changed her name from Carolyn Wilson to Christine Wolf (and her *nom d'heroique* to Masque). And yes, there's also a reference to Christine Spar, a.k.a. Grendel's grand-daughter in there, too.

At this point Nancy's motivations have been that, having managed to get back to a critical point in the past, make sure that things turn out better. In '98 I wrote the following tiny fragment to start another episode, set c.2003, nearly 15 years after Pushover's retirement from the superhero business:

*Cold wind and rain lashed the streets as Carolyn left the conference centre to return to her hotel, tired after a day of frustrating meetings. What point, she wondered, was there in trying to make any sense of a development policy for the third world at a time like this, when the whole world had suddenly become an underdeveloped country, at least according to the enigmatic Woman from the Future?*

*It was hard to think that it was only a few days since the announcement that had cut across all broadcast channels and spammed every newsgroup and mailbox, that the future was flawed, and that things would have to turn out differently this time, followed by a torrent of sightings, enigmas and hysteria. There were large structures in orbit, confused reports of halts or interruptions of fighting in the Balkans and in Africa, and all sorts of religious outbreaks, and continued random broadcasts of various technical data.*

in which her motivation is to make sure that the Singularity happens before significant migrations into space, so there aren't folk such as herself left behind. She has become a one-woman Peace Authority (as per Vinge's *The Peace War*) ; before I encountered Jenny Sparks and her Authority beginning to tread a similar path to a finer world.

I'm developing this into a newstory called [Castles in the Sky](#), available as a work in progress locally.

## Meanwhile, back at the future

While preparing this page, it became obvious that Nancy had become one of the ways I externalized growing up and leaving home. Almost twenty five years on, I know I'm different; so what would happen to Nancy?

I have this image of her, maybe fifty years later. She is sitting at a table, alone, after a meal, a nearly empty glass of red wine to hand. She looks slightly older, a little softening of fat over the sinews and muscle, and is lazily content. The night sky arches above outside a great dome. She is content, and looks back at her youthful folly and exuberance with faint amusement. She has never gone home.

## Distinctive Appearance

Besides looking like a black and white photo, with some grey pigments instead of haemoglobin and melanin, of course her fingers show the distinctive mark of the werewolf (long ring finger, IIRC).

Her hair is silvery, as are her irises. Her eyebrows are gun-metal and of course meet in the middle, and fan out at the sides almost merging into the hair at her temples. Her eyelashes are also gun-metal, and are long and thick. She has a noticeable and uniform fine silvery down over her entire body from neck down, thinning, but present, on the palms of the hands and absent only due to wear on the soles of her feet. Not enough to be furry, it would, if darker or coarser in texture be noticeably hairy; a common add-on to the Clan phenotype, to improve the retention of warm air close to the skin – a useful feature on icy worlds.

But see [Castles in the Sky](#) for more detail.

# Annotations

## Overview

There are several sorts of comments here. Explanations as I framed them in 1976–7 when this was written (first draft in '76, redrafted and expanded in '77); how I might have written it starting in 2000, how the science and speculation has held up and suchlike. I shan't attempt to self lit-crit or comment about the adolescent angst – or horniness.

The tale is a "secret origin" story, setting up a character who would be my take on the Telzey Amberdon meme; but I never quite got settled what her "super power" would be, and ended up with three.

The name comes from a nod to Ruth Blackett, from *Swallows and Amazons*, another to *the Lord of the Rings*, and Wolf 'cos it's kewl.

## Prologue

### ***Human Outreach***

*A grand name for the wave of interstellar colonization. The time–line runs roughly thus – c2040, space industry and colonization becomes economically feasible, and by the end of the century, large ramscoops had started out the usual suspects within 6–7 parsecs of the Sun. FTL travel (modelled on the spindizzies from Blish's *Cities in Flight*) were acquired by trading with other civilizations some centuries down the line. The setting as given uses this (and some other slow–FTL drives) to establish footholds. Developed systems can then be tied into the mainstream by the Linker based instantaneous gate–to–gate travel. This one is stolen from the SPI game *Starforce*. Indeed that whole trilogy of games (*OutReach* and *StarSoldier* being the other two) furnished input to this future history.*

### ***ADT***

*AD Terrestrial – i.e. conventional dating, not mangled by different lengths of planetary years.*

### ***Lindisfarne***

*It's a planet in the white–earth state; the perspective of the year 2000 suggests that the environmental control involves pumping plenty of water–vapour, methane and other short–lived greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This state is akin to current thinking on the state of Neoproterozoic (late Precambrian) Earth, 700Myr ago.*

### ***Feudal system***

*This one is the concept from Niven's *A Gift from Earth* taken to a further degree*

### ***Luthien***

*This one I had pencilled in for the first contact encounter, and the acquisition of the twirl (spindizzy) drive.*

### ***Lites***

*A lite is a light–year.*

### ***Web of Man***

*In function, an interstellar Internet, rather like Vinge's *Qeng Ho* net, only more planetary civilization than trader–ship based. Still radio or communications laser in this epoch; inward traffic would be the relaying of results from cheap large aperture telescopes carried by surveying or first–wave colony ships, looking out to systems beyond their destinations, and colonial discoveries. Outbound traffic would be technological advances (though by this stage things would be well onto the top of a sigma curve).*

### ***Wyvern***

*This is one of the genre tropes – planets have almost–earthlike biochemistry, biology and ecology. Part of the secret history of the setting has a "war in heaven" about 30Myr ago that explains why there are only emerging civilizations now. Year 2000 speculations are that perhaps in the real deep past, this convergence of*

*biology was engineered, perhaps 600Myr back*

### **nipped**

*Genetically manipulated – slang taken from Benford and Eckland's *If the Stars are Gods*. The conceit is that the appearance of the people of Clan Wolf is such that they don't look different in a black & white photograph.*

### **ritual**

*It was about three years before writing this that I'd read *Gormenghast*. It shows.*

## Chapter 1

### **Nancy's room**

*This is a composite of a number of rooms observed during student days in the late 70s, with a few high-tech frills. It's not simply my own squalor that's on display here.*

*Some of the high-tech is still 'magic'; but I lost big-time on guessing about computing. There is home automation which has strong AI, but Nancy's display screen is a sophisticated dumb terminal link to a logical central mainframe (which may be a number of distributed processors). Personal computing power – or portable telecommunications – are missing.*

*View the cassette/crystals as MP3 in some fancy optical storage medium.*

### **Sexuality**

*You have an extended family of what would be clones were there not a little bit of deliberately engineered differences, and they have been part of a system of apartheid which viewed everything not family as less than human. The line between both incest or homosexuality and masturbation blurs when outgroup sexuality gains connotations of bestiality (or at least rishathra). No explicit sex here – I didn't feel qualified to write any at the time, and these days, I don't feel inclined to add to the pool of mediocre smut. [alt.sex.stories](#) is there if that's what you're after. Or, as the Strangers put it, use your twentieth century imagination, if you've got any, that is.*

### **Earth**

*When I wrote this, my image of Earth twelve centuries hence was of a somewhat backwards, bucolic sort of place – images of post-Imperial England here. An idea for a later Nancy Wolf story had her eventually arriving on Earth, and I have a scene in mind of her sitting by the light of a late spring full moon, looking up at the masses of Lagrange colonies and those further afield in solar orbit near the Earth, from Castle Hill in Cambridge, a Cambridge that was more 17th century with unobtrusive high tech. If I were to revise this universe today, Earth would have undergone some Singularity, as per Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* or the *Nanoclysm* in Adam Warren's *Dirty Pair* and the real magitech would be the results of limited commerce between Earth and human-level entities. Linkers would be the most comprehensible form of Transhuman, beneath orders which I will refer to as Seraphim, who start out incomprehensible and work in mysterious ways up from there.*

### **cinemural**

*A flat screen display (as are they all in this tale), with a glorified – but much more like a detailed simulation – screen-saver, used for decoration.*

### **Units**

*I wrote as someone who thought in Imperial measure. Units used by the author in description reflect this. The characters use a more systematic set of units – temperatures are referred to in Kelvin, for example*

### **Changing faces**

*There is serious but understated biotech here; the change is a major phenotype re-engineering – deep biochemical changes as well as shifting bone and muscle. Alas, such a substitution would be easy to spot with techniques akin to traffic analysis (even if one just didn't compare lists of students before and after). How mannerisms and other identification techniques based on gait and similar features would be preserved through the change is open.*

### **Crypto**

*There is a fair amount of crypto in this tale, all done in hardware with props gathered from 60s spy films; looking back at the story, the file referred to here would be simply encrypted under some hefty conventional algorithm (perhaps One Time Pad) and decrypted by some hardware token. The scrambler used later would also be an OTP, perhaps with some SSL-like negotiation in order to establish the starting offset into the pad.*

#### **Time**

*Conventional 24 hour clock imposed on local planetary rotation as 24 hours; I don't recall making notes that Wyvern's day is much adrift from Earth's.*

#### **Tree-V**

*Sounding like Tee-V; rather than the old standby, Tri-V, or anything else clumsier, like 3D-TV.*

#### **Aliens**

*The newscaster is a lizardman of some sort. Aelia Min-Koë is an Ayassa; close to human, about 7ft tall, with a feline cast to the features (but definitely not cat-headed furies). Hrulgani (like Jayso, who we meet later) are great big bear-furies.*

#### **Death**

*Anything previously regarded as death, but to some point just short of [information-theoretic death](#), can be cured with prompt enough treatment. Getting into such a moribund state counts as being killed; but you can get better – if you haven't succumbed to information-theoretic death as in this case. Then you are dead. And in a society of emortals, this is not good news.*

#### **Video**

*I definitely missed out on this one – personal use motion compensating and self-focusing portable video recorders are not far fetched now, but they seemed impossibly so then.*

#### **Money**

*The economic system implicit in the story is like the one from many of Mack Reynolds' stories. It's an economy of abundance. Everyone gets some basic income, enough for a spartan life; but you can gain extra credit for economically useful activity. The Clans have acquired credit from the Linkers' Guild for terraforming, they in turn gain it from their transport function. And compound interest still works.*

#### **Holster**

*Inspired by the automated fast-draw kit in Harry Harrison's Deathworld*

#### **Slideways**

*Based on the material technology from The City and the Stars, but the current viewpoint would explain it as some form of nanotech smart matter, and within the setting it would be a black box gift from the Seraphim and other Transcended beings via the Linkers. I assume that there are mechanisms preventing unrestricted Nanoclysms. The Linkers must run a covert BTR.*

#### **O**

*Slang for "Old Clan"*

#### **Yogis**

*Via the slang use of Bear for cop in 1970s trucker CB slang (presumably in turn from Smokey Bear) via Yogi Bear. Plus the Linker-trained guards can do weird mystic shit and get the yoga practitioner angle too.*

#### **blackface**

*I picked up this idea of some extremely light absorbing night camouflage from John Campbell (writing as Don A. Stuart)'s Cloak of Aesir.*

#### **Night Climbers**

*There used to be an honourable tradition of night climbing of college buildings at Cambridge – I recall seeing a book called A Night Climber's Guide to Trinity College in the University Library, written as an undergraduate by some-one who went on to academic respectability (perhaps even becoming Master of the College); here that tradition gets obliquely linked to Steerpike's traverse of Gormenghast. There are [contemporary night climbers](#) too.*

#### **Radio Silence**

*This for once would apply just as well to mobile phones; though a race-to-the-bottom with extreme spread spectrum techniques might be won by the transmitter rather than the eavesdropper.*

#### **asKorran Museum**

*For those who remember their Andre Norton, this is one of the places where all the stuff (transcendent artifacts in the y2k interpretation) that came out of the various archaeological digs in Forerunner ruins end up.*

### **Wire and Gems**

*There's a Robert Silverberg short story which involved a robot guardian of ancient treasures that asked questions of those who came to plunder, and killed those who didn't respond correctly. The treasures here come from that source.*

### **Blivit**

*As seen on the Kelly Freas cover to the issue of Analog containing Stan Schmidt's Lost Newton*

### **Lightning**

*No fat chef, or Hall of Spiders here, but that's the influence*

### **Tegrith Shan**

*A Hrulgani clan, with family name Shan*

### **Cartridge cases**

*I'd not heard of caseless ammo at the time; perhaps in the end it doesn't make more than a passing fad.*

## **Chapter 2**

A lot of student life here; or at least a composite of the way things were in the late 70s with the F&SF/CompSci crowd that I used to hang around with.

### **DigitalWatch**

*Digital timepieces were still a curiosity back when I was writing this. LCD watches were just coming in. So this was sexy high-tech.*

### **Interstellar Internet Worm**

*I can't remember when the famous worm happened compared with when I was writing this (it was in the '76 draft). I do remember as an undergraduate having heard of people communicating by computer network from the US to the Computer Lab at Cambridge, usually from people who pulled all-nighters suddenly getting message on their terminal asking "Where have I managed to connect to?". These were the same folk also mentioned in the context of late night hacking exploits into the local home-grown operating system, the so called Key Zero club.*

*Nancy is clearly in the local Key Zero club, and has been getting out onto the network.*

### **Writing**

*A few years ago, I would have asked forgiveness, and said that this would have to be replaced by keyboard input in a rewrite. But palmtops are getting pretty good at decoding handwriting. OTOH, my handwriting has deteriorated from disuse from the level that got me marked down bad handwriting at school, to where it would need serious AI to decode from context.*

*Voice input wouldn't be feasible for taking notes in lectures except for capturing the lecturer verbatim.*

### **Gender Neutral terms**

*I guessed that the outcome would be to swallow the "man" or "person", getting to a state close to that which transformed "boatswain" to "bosun".*

### **Dean's Tower**

*Dean as in Roger Dean. It was the late '70s after all. I believe the image was called Lighthouse*

### **Tracy Craig**

*This is a tangential guest appearance by this parallel's version of Telzey Amberdon. It can't be the prototype as the settings just aren't compatible.*

### **Yah-boo politics**

*I can't remember if the proceedings of Parliament had been opened to broadcast when I wrote this. However, the level of debate here and what passes for debate in the Commons these days aren't that far apart. If some of Jeanne's directness might be considered unparliamentary, then assume that there is some concurrent*

*transmission by aides of supporting evidence of the assertions to the Speaker—equivalent.*

#### **Voting System**

*I did work out how this functioned, involving various levels of plurality required, and any implicit ordering of preferences, and weighting of the Houses. I can't remember what they were, but trust me, there was one.*

#### **Digital Images**

*The digital images we can do now; and we can do something better, like not display analog static. But then William Gibson got caught by this one a few years later – I don't think by the opening lines of *Neuromancer* that he meant that the sky was bright blue.*

#### **Mobile phone**

*There aren't mobile phones, but the AI can send out a robot with an outside broadcast unit. This is where the real world has most significantly leapt ahead since the time of writing.*

#### **Spread owner massacre**

*Akin to what happened in Zimbabwe in the first half of 2000.*

#### **Qbedel Field**

*The Heissen field from the StarForce background. I'd given it another name, but I decided I liked the look of the printers pie that the scanning made of the fairly faint typewritten pages better. More alien.*

#### **Gun Control**

*This is implicitly a "sensible Libertarian" type of future, at least in terms of most personal conduct; at the University, part of the contract is that they handle security matters. As for how come there aren't various security scanners – partly, there is a culture of trust that has only recently been subverted, and partly due to interesting materials. I can't remember if in '77 I had given much thought to the latter idea – plastic and ceramics, though it was definitely possible. The home-made weapons referred are definitely not just zip-guns, but manufactured to proper specs with readily available home workshop tools, so I probably had some idea along those lines. The original draft had some comment about Nancy wondering about how some of the guns had been snuck into the dining hall.*

*As an aside, it is interesting to note that the AK-47 is simple enough to build that it is an output of a cottage industry in southern Asia these days.*

## **Chapter 3**

Just action, description, more studenty bits, and a little bit of AWAK-ing here. The opening dream sequence is a bit "me doing Andre Norton".

#### **Tweenspeak**

*Rather than "Interlingua" or similar latinate named for a common tongue, this one is explicitly Northern European.*

#### **Infrared signal**

*Much like one's car-keys these days; but containing some personal ID as well. This was meant to be the standard issue, as we see shortly, not part of special hardening of security.*

#### **Lifter Fields**

*As noted, a variant on Blish's spindizzy, with many of the same behaviours. At low levels (compared with those needed for moving the whole castle) such as this, we have the visual "special effect", the imparting of a significant upward impulse to anything material trying to pass, and the tendency to disperse high concentrations of energy attempting to pass. We see this when the defence laser is stopped at the field.*

#### **Cybersoldiers**

*These one-man battle platforms are the troops from StarSoldier rebadged, only now we see them from a civilian's viewpoint – i.e. hardly at all when powered up.*

#### **Treaty of Foundation**

*Essentially, a document with a role matching the Constitution for the United States. A stab at the question of how the planetary polity might be bootstrapped.*

**Cousine**

*Relative at some more distant degree than immediate cousin.*

**Low-Pass field**

*Fancy air-conditioning, using a Maxwell's Demon effect, stopping the fast molecules in the air from entering. Of course it takes power, and magically doesn't affect people walking through.*

**Fuschia's Attic**

*These two rooms are a nod to Lady Fuschia's secret attics in Gormenghast*

**Chapter 4****Sapphire**

*One of the few bits of the text I have amended; the hands-on interaction with the computer was extremely simple in the original – well simpler when compared with having to craft JCL to run a program so as to be able to invoke a delete-on-terminate handler in order to delete a file. The various coloured permutations on green-screen terminal mode used by people accessing this file later in the text I've left for period flavour.*

**Lara**

*The nearest I've seen to a realization of this is that broad grin so often shown on Lara Croft's features, usually accompanied by the gunfire.*

**Car keys**

*A smart-card of some sort.*

**Relay Comsat based car-phone**

*They're using geosynchronous relays, not low orbit systems like Iridium, so a mobile unit would be far bulkier, and not pocket-sized. UV beams would be high bandwidth and low side-lobes, so eavesdropping would be difficult. But you'd only want to use it at high altitude when you're above the most strongly absorbing parts of the atmosphere.*

*I saw the screen about 10–15cm on a side, the keyboard icon as a simple 3x3 array of squares, and the bell icon as a maybe 8x8 pixel thing across that size of screen*

**Free Traders**

*This is not to be taken as being against free trade as [the Economist](#) would define it; the Free Traders are those who ply trade off the beaten tracks defined by the Linker network. Often this means goods carried clandestinely between systems served by the Linkers. Freebooters is probably the more accurate, but less tactful, name.*

**Han-Chiaki**

*It would require too much AWAK-ing in line to explain that this is a Hrugani ethnicity – extees are poly-cultural too! There is a pseudo-Chinese implication in this culture, but the Han part is accidental (I didn't know at the time of writing that this was the name of the Chinese ethnic group).*

**Chapter 5**

I have amended the text (or to be precise, dialogue) in a couple of places this chapter, more than simply making sentences broken by writing to a fixed medium from flow-of-consciousness, into more grammatical structures. The significant places are in the bickering between Jeanne and the Councillor (which has been made somewhat more mature); and in the description of what happens when one messes with Transcendent artifacts.

One notes that man-portable sensory enhancements – particularly IR and millimetre wave technology – don't appear to be in regular use. Nancy does use something like an anonymous remailer net towards the end of the chapter.

*The code 'I' is – or was – of course that of Lady Trixy herself. And there has to be an end-of-code symbol to follow for this non-hierarchic system.*

**Mike Kimberley**

*It was my intention that Mike is what is nowadays termed a Mabo.*

**Q'l-Hrui**

*Another improvement from the scanner. Though it does like the letter Q when not simply degrading into punctuation.*

**Radiation accident**

*In comics-book parlance, this is the radiation accident, the radioactive spider, the cosmic rays, whatever catalyst required to unleash our hero's super powers. I wanted Nancy to be, like Telzey, a psi outside the organized society of such folk, and so needed an unorthodox method to jolt her powers from latency. What I didn't intend was this to become the staff that became an Uru Hammer – but it had ideas all of its own on that score.*

**Continuity of Consciousness**

*This was, of course, long before I encountered Daniel Dennett, and his work – and how consciousness is of necessity fractured and discontinuous.*

## Chapter 6

This is where the guiding precept "No plan survives contact with the enemy" comes into play. The radiation accident continues, as I try to figure out what the artifact might actually be or do. The blaster works with cartridges of "slow glass" bound under some gravitic standing field, which are pushed through a phase transition to release the stored energy

The chapter is also noted for its graphic vomiting scene.

## Chapter 7

This is where we get to see a little more of the casual use of space technology; and the appearance of some different faction amongst the matts. The Patti Hearst case was, IIRC, an influence in this plot device of memetic engineering.

We also get to see civilian life in this society; the minimal impact including housing in ultra-high tower blocks; but when you can buy a floor large enough to build a house and garden in if you want, and without being crowded by neighbours, the evils of the 1970s could be mitigated.

We note that the "yuppies" do have something close to cell-phones. Very time-of-writing.

Kingarra, the starfish, is of a race drawn from Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*

The flashback scenes are a bit Andre Norton meets RQ.

## Chapter 8

The memetic programming is me trying to write evil or horror. Compared with e.g. Bret Easton Ellis, it's of course tame. But I plead that I intended to use understatement (and that good old 20<sup>th</sup> century imagination.

The escape from the Snowflake uses an implied threat – "Incapacitate the pilot of this ship, and say good-bye to most of the population below". A desperation tactic.

At the start Nancy was a latent werewolf, living on a world where it's always full moon. Hence all the foreshadowing, about the effects of the ring-light upon her and her state of mind. Here, she makes the transition for the first time. And I was being misleading above, when I said baldly Wolf 'cos it's kewl.

## Chapter 9

Being a wolf would have misled infrared traces – she would have been detected and then passed over as not being human. Clearly the two matts walking past aren't using any such devices actively as they pass.

With most infrastructure service operations automated, there is little impetus to get up early for work in this culture; but there might be joggers and such.

## Chapter 10

So now we have Nancy set up for a whole string to tales. Cut loose from home, free to wander, loaded, a novice telepath and unwitting werewolf (just see the sequel). Just that damned necklet to foul things up.

## Epilogue

As prologue.