

Don't look now, but there's one too many in this room, and I think it's you.

—Groucho Marx

CHAPTER ONE

I've had better Wednesdays.

On Wednesdays, I'm supposed to awaken with the blaring of my alarm clock at seven. I get up, dress quickly, dash to campus, stare at Mrs. Jacklyn in set theory class, lust after her a bit, fall asleep in Mechanics 1, eat lunch, and study in the afternoon, before ending the day at band practice. For me, that was enough excitement on Wednesdays.

On the seventh Wednesday of the fall term my alarm clock didn't go off, probably because I had thrown it across the room the day before in a fit of anger.

I was late to my first class. Ordinarily, being late to set theory would not have posed much of a problem, but when I arrived Mrs. Jacklyn was collecting a pop quiz. I hadn't done very well on her last quiz and I wasn't likely to do much better on this one.

I slunk into the class. With nothing important to do for a few seconds after finishing the quiz, everyone had time to turn and gawk at me. I wanted to whirl and run, but somehow, I found the courage to shrivel into a seat in the back row. What continually cycled through my mind as I tried to disappear was how embarrassing it would be to flunk math, since it was the class in which I wanted to do well. Not because I liked set theory. I hated it, and it wasn't even required for my major. No, I was in the class for one reason: I was mesmerized by Mrs. Jacklyn, and I had no trouble explaining why. Since reaching puberty, I had always adored tall women, and Mrs.

Jacklyn was tall; she'd played volleyball in college, according to rumor, and was an expert in martial arts and weapons. Her slender body, lithe and graceful as a pine tree, was at least an inch taller than my six feet two inches. Her hair was black, as were her eyes, and every time she looked at me with those bottomless eyes I was captured. All she had to do was ask and I would give her anything. Unfortunately, the only thing she ever asked for were my tests, and I was too intimidated to ever speak to her.

Most of the students in the class were afraid of her, but I was both afraid of and in love with her, at least in a theoretical way. After all, I did have a girlfriend, so my dreams of love were tempered by that and Mrs. Jacklyn's attitude toward me. She was remote and unapproachable, as difficult a goal to achieve as the set theory she was trying to teach me. The look she gave me when I slid into my seat late was cold enough to freeze fire. The look she gave me when I darted out of the class at the end of the period was even colder.

I had an hour between classes, so I rode my bike home to retrieve my Mechanics 1 textbook, which I had forgotten in my rush to find a clean pair of socks that morning. In times like these I was glad I didn't have a car, since parking on campus was impossible, and I lived too far away to walk home and back even with an hour off. My bike was an old Schwinn five-speed, but it served me well.

Home was a slightly renovated old house a couple of blocks south of Arapahoe and a few blocks west of Broadway, close to a mile from the University of Colorado campus in Boulder. My landlady, Mrs. Lafferty, who was over ninety, had turned her family home into eight apartments. Only two of the apartments had bathrooms; the rest were just bedrooms that shared a common bath.

Two sizes smaller than the other apartments was my closet of a room. Mrs. Lafferty kept

telling me it had been her children's playroom sixty years before, but I wasn't convinced. It was too small to be anything but a closet. But it was cheap, and with the discount I received for walking Genghis Khan each day, I could almost afford it.

The mail had already come as I panted by; I snatched it off the foyer table, tripped over Khan, regained my footing, and glanced behind me with some anxiety.

Khan had not moved even one drooping lip. I was grateful. The last thing I needed right now was a spoiled brat of a bulldog wanting his walk. Technically, I was supposed to walk him twice a day. Mrs. Lafferty's right knee had been replaced the month before, and she was still too sore to walk him herself. Even though in general we didn't get along too well, Khan and I had quickly come to an understanding—most of the time: I would only walk him in the afternoon and he wouldn't complain about it to his owner. Not that he wanted to; Khan was a fat, ugly registered purebred bulldog who was over seventeen years old. Mrs. Lafferty's family tree had primarily grown in Hungary and she'd named him after one of her heroes: Genghis Khan, the invader of Hungary. Khan's belly bounced along the floor as he waddled (he no longer ran) and his lower lip often dragged the ground as he went. It seemed as though I was always pulling a sandspur out of that lip after one of our walks. Because of cataracts he could barely see where he was going, but there was nothing wrong with his nose: he could smell dead food eight blocks away. The deader the better. Four-day-old-squirrel roadkill (still stuck to the road, of course) was his idea of gourmet dining. It was almost impossible for me to pull him away from it even when a truck was rumbling straight at us. Once I had to scrape the squirrel off the road with my fingers and throw it onto the sidewalk to save our lives.

Still, unless Khan smelled some particularly ripe, tasty feast lying somewhere in the neighborhood, he was no more enthusiastic about his walks than I was. Our unspoken

arrangement suited both of us just fine.

I examined my mail. The only mail not an ad was a notice from the campus credit union that the check I had written to The Food Market had bounced, and loudly, I presumed. That was my second bouncing to The Food Market. From now on it would be cash only for me at that store.

No money in the account! I couldn't believe it! I should have had twenty dollars left over *after* that check. Now, with the bounced-check fee, I apparently was overdrawn thirty dollars and twenty cents. How could I have fouled up my checkbook so badly? It wasn't as though I wrote a lot of checks to keep up with. It didn't make sense.

Food was definitely going to be a problem for the next few days, until my GI Bill check came in. And worst of all, I had a date for lunch with Rosalyn. Sometimes she paid for our lunch; hopefully this would be one of those times. Otherwise, I was going to be in trouble.

As it turned out, my money problem was the least of my worries.

Depressed, staring at the ground, afraid to wonder what else could possibly go wrong on this day that had hardly begun, I ran right into the Ghoul from the End of the Hall. It was like hitting a steel I-beam, and I went careening across the hall into the wall. The Ghoul just glared at me and left.

Dreamy Isle Apartments was a three-story building. Mrs. Lafferty lived on the first floor with Genghis Khan; there were four apartments on the second floor and four more on the third, five if you counted mine. While mine was certainly the smallest, the Ghoul's was the largest, with a sitting room as well as a bedroom and a private bath. I had no proper excuse for knowing this except that I'd been in it chasing Khan. This was one thing Khan and I agreed on. Neither of us liked the Ghoul. If anything, Khan disliked him more than I did. I had no idea why, but

whenever the Ghoul was around, Khan continually emitted a low-pitched growl and stayed as far away from him as possible. But when the Ghoul was out of the building, Khan often spent hours trying to break into his apartment. At least one time he was successful, and I found him staring into the bathroom, his head slightly cocked to the right, lip and stomach rubbing the floor, a puddle of drool in front of him. Pulling him away from that bathroom was harder than dragging him away from one of his favorite dead squirrels, but I finally extracted him from the Ghoul's apartment. My first inclination was to leave Khan in the hallway while I wiped up the trail of drool, but ultimately, I decided it wasn't worth the trouble. Let the Ghoul puzzle over the river of spit.

Of course, he really wasn't a Ghoul, not that I was aware of, anyway. His name was Thaddeus K. Rumpkin. I had some difficulty prying this from Mrs. Lafferty, but kept asking her day after day until it slipped out of her sometimes addled mind. I don't know why it was so important for me to find this out, but it was.

All the tenants called him the Ghoul because in some indescribable way he reminded us of one. It was hard to say why. He was thick and stubby, at least four inches shorter than me. His face was entirely without wrinkles, yet gave the appearance of being old. His expression was always neutral, never laughing, smiling, frowning, or looking puzzled. Yet a feeling of hostility always emanated from him. And his eyes ... they were ancient, deep in knowledge ... frightening ... inhuman. I couldn't look at them without a cold sweat breaking out on my back and my knees wobbling.

Once I had tried to be friendly. I offered to help him carry a load of groceries to his apartment since he was struggling with four obviously heavy bags, two in each arm. He stared at me, almost through me, and shook his head.

“Why?” he muttered. “I’m several times stronger than you.”

With that he bounded up the steps faster than I ever could, leaving me to shrug at Mrs. Lafferty in the foyer.

“Strange bird,” she said, staring up at him. “Pays good money, though. Never late with his rent.” With that, she turned and hobbled into her kitchen. It was the only unsolicited comment about him I ever heard from her.

I often asked her what he did for a living. She shook her head. I asked her why he didn’t come to the weekend breakfasts she fixed for all her tenants. She shook her head. I asked her if she knew why we didn’t see him for days at a time. Was he gone or in his apartment? She shook her head. She didn’t know, of course. No more than the rest of us.

As I now staggered around the hallway watching the Ghoul’s back disappear down the stairs, I thought about the one time I had followed Khan into the Ghoul’s apartment. My mind couldn’t remember all the details, but what still struck me was that it was virtually bare. There was a desk or table in the sitting room, with a computer on it—at least something that was square and metallic—but the rest of the room was empty, and there was only a pad on the floor in the bedroom. I couldn’t remember anything about the bathroom except for Khan drooling in the doorway, but there was a strange presence coming from the room; perhaps that was the reason I needed so much strength to pull him away. It took me several days to admit it, but I was scared in that apartment. Terrified, actually.

Rushing away from the Ghoul, I made it back to campus for my Mechanics I class. The day had been going so badly that I had temporarily buried deep in my mind the fact that I was facing a midterm here. I had studied at least thirty hours for this test, and felt that I knew the material backwards and forwards, but the moment the test was placed in front of me, my mind

went blank. The test questions appeared to be written in Sanskrit. Not one of them made any sense whatsoever.

When I finished the midterm, I was sure I had flunked it.

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At lunch, Rosalyn Jennifer Rosencrantz dumped me. She had been avoiding me for two weeks, studying, she told me, so I should have been expecting something like this, but at times I'm oblivious to the emotions radiating from people around me.

Lunch started out fine. Perfect, in fact, considering my finances.

“Order whatever you want, it’s my treat,” she told me. “Daddy gave me some extra allowance.” Extra allowance for Rosalyn was usually enough to buy a Corvette. Daddy—Robert A. Rosencrantz, Jr.—had moved south thirty years before with his inherited New England fortune and developed acre after acre of beachfront condos in South Florida and square mile after square mile of mobile home parks in Central Florida, thus multiplying his already hefty fortune by several times. Having filled Florida, he then moved to Colorado to develop cheap ski areas. The lift tickets and condo prices weren’t cheap, of course, just the construction.

I was not too proud to take advantage of this opportunity for a free meal and ordered a double cheeseburger and fries, with cheese nachos as an appetizer. My goal for the moment was quantity and food with lasting power, not health.

Rosalyn ordered a small Diet Coke. That also should have tipped me off, but as I said, at times I'm not very observant.

She was quiet until the nachos came, then as I grabbed a chip and dipped my first glob of cheese with my right hand, she reached over and took my left.

“Richard, you know we’ve been dating for a long time.” Warning signal number three. I

ignored it.

I nodded, my mouth full. “Since we were freshmen,” I mumbled.

She continued to hold my hand, but looked down at the table, avoiding my eyes. I was at last beginning to sense a problem and started to take interest in something other than food. But I found it hard to concentrate. Instead of blue eyes and an oval face, tanned to the color of dark sand and framed by short blonde hair, I saw the dark eyes of Mrs. Jacklyn.

“Our relationship isn’t going anywhere,” she went on, and my vision of Mrs. Jacklyn shattered, its pieces fluttering away to the far corners of my mind. “I think it’s time we both moved on and dated other people.”

She must have felt my hand flinch in shock, because she said, “It’s not just your fault—some of it is mine, too.”

I hadn’t even considered that it might be *my* fault. “Is there something I can do?” I asked. “Anything?” More a plea than a question. I looked at her, studied her face. She fiddled with the ends of her blonde hair nervously. Her eyes darted around, avoiding me, furtive blue orbs seeking a hiding place.

Then she withdrew her hand. “No, the thing is ... well, actually ... I’ve already found someone else.”

“Who?”

“John Rogers. You don’t know him. He’s a law student.”

I didn’t like the implications of her sentence. “I’m willing to share you,” I said meekly.

“Well ... actually ... I’ve been living with him for about two weeks.”

That finally did it. The facade of impenetrable concrete around my head crumbled away and awareness rushed in.

She was living with him! That meant ... I didn't really want to picture in my mind exactly what that meant. There was suddenly an ache deep inside and I wasn't sure if it was in my heart or lower down.

“Why?”

She frowned. “Richard, you're sweet, but *so* naive. John is much more a man of the world than you are. And he's finished college and is in law school, even though he's two years younger than you.”

I didn't know what to say. My tongue wouldn't move. I couldn't breathe well. I *was* naive. I *wasn't* a man of the world. Of course, with more cooperation from Rosalyn I could have qualified as more of a man of the world.

She stood up. Her Diet Coke was still full.

“I'm sorry, Richard,” she said. But her blue eyes were suddenly lacking in sympathy, or any kind of feeling whatsoever.

I was still too stunned to say much. She threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table. “Here, this should cover lunch, since I did invite you.” Now my senses were fully alert and I could detect the trace of scorn in her voice.

I was still staring at the door when my lunch arrived. I kept picturing her and this John Rogers—a vague, faceless man in a double-breasted three-piece suit (or maybe without the suit)—and it made me too nauseated to eat a thing. My head reeling, I staggered out of the restaurant, leaving the twenty-dollar bill on the table to pay for lunch. The waitress ended up with a generous tip.

Later, I seriously regretted leaving all that money. And not eating.

#

At twenty-four, I should have completed college; instead, I was just a junior—by my criteria. By the University's, I was officially only a sophomore, since I still had one required English course to take.

I had spent three years in the Marines prior to college. When I graduated from high school, I didn't have the faintest idea about what I wanted to do with my life, so, thinking I was one of the "few good men," I joined up. In boot camp I quickly discovered that I had no real talent for war. I never could quite catch on to hand-to-hand combat; using a gun or knife was usually more dangerous to me than to my opponent, and there was no way in the world I could focus my eyes on anything before nine o'clock in the morning. The Marines had this bad habit of trying to awaken me hours before that. They didn't send me home, but my sergeant, feeling pity for either me or the Marines, managed to get me a tryout for the Marine band. I made it with ease. I could play a trumpet then and I still could play one now.

I stayed in the band during my entire tour of duty.

My late arrival to college life was not the only reason I was still here. There were at least two other reasons. For one thing, I *liked* college life. I liked the parties, the football games, even the classes, most of them anyway. Unfortunately, I didn't like *any* of the classes enough. That was the second reason. I still couldn't decide what I wanted to do when I finished this thing called a formal education. I had taken enough courses to graduate, but not the right ones, and only this semester had I declared a major of aerospace engineering, but that was because I had to, not because it was the unwavering ambition of my life. The truth was, if you could get me to admit it, there were two goals far stronger than my desire to pursue aerospace engineering. My first was to shack up with Mrs. Jacklyn, which tells you two more things: one, I was an unrealistic pie-in-the-sky dreamer (she never even said hello to me outside class, and besides, she

apparently was married), and secondly, maybe I wasn't as crushed at being dumped an hour before, as I first thought. Angry, yes. Embarrassed, sure. Hurt, of course. But not crushed because I'd lost the love of my life. I would have dumped Rosalyn in a second for a chance at Mrs. Jacklyn.

My other goal was to play the trumpet. I did, of course, play in the University of Colorado band, but that was for fun, not for money. Given a choice, playing a trumpet for money would be my choice for a profession, not engineering, but I didn't have the confidence, nor did I have the courage to go against my father's wishes that I graduate from college with some kind of useful degree.

I had to admit that my father had been extremely understanding throughout this school process. He was becoming a bit frustrated, but still sent a little money each month. I was wondering whether to call and ask for it early when I noticed that my feet had taken me to the mathematics building.

What did I have to lose? I was afraid that the answer to that question was "my manhood," but I went in anyhow.

Mrs. Jacklyn was in her office on the third floor. Since she was a graduate student, it was no more of an office than my room was an apartment. A small metal desk, a metal chair, and a bookcase, all crammed into a six-foot-by-six-foot space. She was leaning back in that metal chair, a fancy new electronic pad on her lap, her long legs propped up on the desk, where her laptop was open. Her short skirt was above her knees, and I had trouble remembering why I had come.

She looked up and my heart stopped. In the dim light of her cubicle, her pale face framed by black hair looked like a wraith.

“Can I help you?” she asked. She was probably younger than I was, but the difference in our achievement levels was immense. She was a graduate assistant working on her Ph.D. in theoretical mathematics, with a thesis having something to do with topography. She was also married. I was a junior (at best), and I was ... well, you know.

“I-I’m Richard Johnson.”

“Yes, I know. I hope you have a more worthwhile purpose for your visit than telling me your name.”

“I-I wanted to f-find out if there’s any way for m-me to make up the pop quiz you gave this morning.”

“No.” The answer I feared. And expected.

“My alarm was broken—it didn’t go off.”

“I wake up every morning without an alarm.”

“I don’t need a zero on that quiz.”

“You certainly don’t.”

“Then ...?”

She lowered her feet to the floor, staring at me scornfully with her luminous black eyes that perfectly matched her long hair. I didn’t know how she could manage to convey a look of utter disgust and seduction at the same time—though I suspected that the latter was only in my imagination.

“Mr. Johnson,” she said slowly. “Class starts at 8:30, does it not?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“How long has it started at 8:30?”

“Well ... I guess since the semester began.”

“Then it hardly was a surprise to you that it started at 8:30 this morning?”

“Not exactly.”

“Everyone else was there at 8:30. What was I supposed to do—ask them to sit and read the newspaper until you blessed us with your presence?”

At this point, my only wish was to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. I would rather be trapped in a room with Thaddeus Rumpkin than be here with Mrs. Jacklyn.

“Then, I—”

“I suggest you buy a new alarm clock so that you’re not late for the next test.”

I took that as a dismissal and left. Rapidly. Without looking back.

My bike had been parked right outside the math building, chained to the bike rack with a lock worth three times the bike itself. It evidently wasn’t strong enough, though why anyone would bother with my old heap in a sea of glistening new fifteen-speeds is a question without an obvious answer. But someone did. It was gone, the lock cut in half and lying on the ground.

The way the day had gone, I knew it was time to give up. There wasn’t any point in reporting the loss to the cops. Bicycle thefts were hard to solve. In fact, I had never heard of a stolen bike being recovered in usable condition, though I’m sure it had happened somewhere in the world at some time in history.

I walked home slowly. My mind was busy as I walked, none of the thoughts happy ones. This morning I had missed a math quiz, flunked my Mechanics I midterm, and bounced my grocery check. At lunch I was dumped. A few minutes before, I had been thrown out of Mrs. Jacklyn’s office, and now my bike was gone. And the thirty-dollar lock was worthless. I threw it in a trash can at the corner of University Avenue and Bernard Street. What *had* the thief used to cut my lock? A giant metal cutter from the hardware store? Not an easy thing to hide under your

shirt.

I was tired, sweaty, and irritable when I reached the Dreamy Isle Apartments. My only dream was to start the day over. Instead, what I had to look forward to was walking Genghis Khan. I couldn't avoid it this time. I had to stay on Mrs. Lafferty's good side.

As I walked into the foyer, Khan was bobbing up the stairs toward the second floor. It could only mean one thing. He was heading for the Ghoul's room. I dropped my books on the foyer table and gave chase.

He appeared to be moving slowly, but appearances are often deceiving. I was no match for the old bulldog in stair climbing. He reached the second floor before I was halfway up, then made the turn and headed for the stairs to the third floor. Here, on a level surface, I almost caught him, but he found a burst of energy from somewhere and left me behind. Given how the rest of the day had gone, I shouldn't have been surprised when Khan hit the door of the Ghoul's apartment with his head and it bounced open. Mrs. Lafferty had not spent a great deal of money on door latches and locks when she renovated; they were all from the late eighteen hundreds, when the house was built. Most were rusted and barely latched. The Ghoul's was no exception.

When I finally staggered to the open door, panting heavily, I found Khan staring into the bathroom again.

I caught up with him and grabbed for his collar. He bolted straight ahead ... for the shower. I leaped after him, realizing subconsciously that there was something wrong with it; it was shimmering, out of focus, the back wall just a blur.

Khan jumped into the shower ... and vanished.

A second later, before my mind could cope with that fact, I lost my balance and tumbled after him.

Early and provident fear is the mother of safety.

—Edmund Burke

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sam chose to stay with me that night, though we had no real plan. We discussed a number of possibilities, but there were too many unknowns. I still hadn't shown Sam the gate to the far future, but that would have to wait. Somehow, I had a feeling that it would be dangerous to follow that course now.

As twilight came, the Ghoul returned. My door was closed, but I'd heard that heavy gait often enough to know who it belonged to. Sam had too.

"What now?" Sam whispered.

"We wait. If he leaves, we follow him."

"Not much of a plan, is it?"

"Best one we have."

So we waited.

And waited.

After four hours I went downstairs and retrieved Khan. It wasn't easy getting him to climb the steps, but he finally did when I told him we were going to see the Ghoul. At the mention of the name, Khan's head snapped around and he stared at me, his droopy eyelids almost covering his eyes. But there was a gleam of knowledge in those eyes. I don't know if he

understood my words or could read my mind, but he came willingly after that.

“What’s *he* for?” Sam asked when I dragged Khan through the door.

“We need to get some sleep. He’ll let us know if Dr. Rumpkin leaves.”

Sam nodded. “Good plan. At least about the sleep. I’m whipped.”

#

A deep, heavy darkness still covered Boulder when someone finally tramped along the corridor and down the steps. Through a veil of sticky, sleep-filled eyes I looked up into the drooling face of Khan, whose saliva was dripping onto my chin. Compared to his breath, that was pleasant.

But I did wake up. Sam, hearing me stir, was up before I was.

“The Dr. Rumpkin?” he asked.

“Who else?”

Both of us still wore our clothes, wrinkled and dirty, so we were able to leave the room quickly and follow the thump of footsteps below us on the stairs, with Khan dragging in the rear. We tried to stay far enough behind that he wouldn’t notice us.

It was unusually dark outside because the streetlights were out for a couple of blocks, but when we reached the front porch, we could see a distant figure walking down University Avenue. The air was quiet and cold, and we had forgotten our jackets. I shivered and tried to ignore the icy fingers squeezing my bones. I looked ahead at the Ghoul, then at the stars, clear and bright above, and stared at them in wonder. Their light was steady tonight, with no quivering, no twinkling. Even their colors were visible: blues, whites, reds, shades in between.

We followed the Ghoul to Seventh Street, then north to Central Park, where he followed the curve in the road, then walked into the park and began to follow the sidewalk along Boulder

Creek. The stars disappeared here, replaced by firs and junipers. They shielded the sky and stretched over our heads, twisting and writhing in the brisk night wind. At times they seemed to pause in their motion, glare down at us, then reach toward the ground with malevolent intent, their squirming branches groping for our souls. My nerves began to squirm with the branches and the cold seeped further into my bones.

Ahead of us, the Ghoul was visible only occasionally, when the path straightened. Beside us, the creek splashed and babbled its way down from the mountains. Behind us, nails clicked on the asphalt paving.

I thought it was Khan until I looked down and saw him beside us, plodding silently. *We were being stalked.* As soon as the feeling struck me, the sounds behind us vanished. I looked for the Ghoul ahead. He was gone.

I stopped walking and looked behind us. Nothing. No, not quite nothing. Sinuous shapes crawled in the dark shadows. Four legs? Eight? I couldn't tell; their bodies slunk too close to the ground. How did I even know they had legs?

Now Sam saw them too, and his face shone with fear. Khan was transfixed by whatever was in the woods and growled softly.

"Pick up a stick," I told Sam.

He didn't move, just stared into the darkness, watching the shadows move.

"Sam, we have to get out of here!" I grabbed his arm and shook him. "Pick up a stick!"

He didn't move. I couldn't see his eyes, but his stare was born of fear. He was paralyzed.

I picked up the largest branch I could find, then seized Sam's arm again, this time roughly, and tried to tug him perpendicular to the creek and the walkway. Boulder Creek followed a narrow twist of land that stretched for miles between Arapahoe and Canyon

Boulevard, both of which were well lit. A hundred feet away was the relative safety of Canyon Boulevard. At least it was better lit. Maybe we would be able to see our predators.

A few quick steps broke us free of the trees, but behind us the leaves on the ground shuffled and crackled. Whatever it was didn't follow us into the glare of the streetlight.

"What are you boys going this time of night?"

I looked up. Ten feet up the hill, silhouetted by the streetlight, was the tall cop who had arrested me for stealing Rosalyn's Porsche. Of all cops to run into.

"Just out for a little early morning walk," I told him.

If Sam hadn't been mesmerized, my answer might have worked. But he stood there, propped up by my right arm, staring into the park. The branch in my left hand didn't help much either.

"Somehow, I'm not buying that," the cop said. In the patrol car behind him, his partner sat behind the wheel and looked bored, watching to see what developed.

In the woods, the leaves rustled and crackled some more. Hearing this, the cop took a couple of steps down the embankment.

"That another dog of yours?" he asked as he noticed Khan cowering on the sidewalk.

"No," I replied. Sam just continued to stare. I shivered, and it wasn't from the chill in the air.

The cop took a few more steps toward the woods. "I don't think I believe you two. What're you hiding? Just stay right there. I'm going to check this out."

"I wouldn't go in there," I told him.

"Yeah? Why not?"

"Because you won't come out alive," I replied.

“Smart aleck, huh? Well, I can take care of myself.” He stared at me in the dimness of the streetlight. “Hey, I remember you—you’re the kid who stole the Porsche.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, backing further away from the rustling noises under the trees. Now was definitely not the time to get into an argument.

The cop was about to say something, but he too heard the noise again and moved closer to investigate.

“That’s really not a good idea,” I persisted, pulling Sam back with me as I continued to move away.

“You boys stay right there,” the cop ordered. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He lied. He didn’t come back at all. He walked confidently into the shadow of the trees. Suddenly there was a scream, then the rustling of leaves turned into the sounds of something attacking.

“John! Are you okay?” the other cop yelled, hopping out of the police car.

“You can’t help him,” I said.

The second cop looked at me, his face pale in the glow of the streetlight. He ran into the shadows.

The crash and crackle of branches intensified, other screams bellowed into the night, and then two gunshots rang out.

“Let’s get out of here,” I told Sam. “We can’t help them.”

Sam’s mind finally began to function again and regained control of his body. We ran. Khan somehow found a gallop I was unaware he had, leaving us behind. We were a block down the street before the screams stopped.

Canyon Boulevard paralleled the creek. As we ran, deep within the shadows of the park

other shadows loped along beside us. Whatever it was apparently preferred to stay out of the light.

At Thirteenth Street the park ended, though the creek continued. Out into better light, we stopped running and walked a block past the park before we turned homeward, twisting and turning our way along a series of well-lit streets back to the Dreamy Isle. Khan was waiting for us at the door, staring out over the front yard, tail imprisoned between his legs, ears high on his head. When we entered, he slunk back inside as well, then turned to make sure the door was locked. It soon was, and with that observation he waddled into the kitchen.

There was a small window on each side of the front door, and instinctively I went to one and Sam to the other.

“We should have stayed and tried to help the cops,” he said without any conviction in his voice.

“We couldn’t have helped. You know that.”

“What were they?”

“I don’t know. But it was a trap set by the Ghoul.”

We stood there for a long time, staring out into the darkness. At times I thought I saw something writhe under one of the bushes in the yard across the street, but every time I looked directly at it, I saw nothing. Finally, we trudged up the stairs to my room.

What was left of it.

Apparently not all the attackers had been in the park.

The room was shredded, torn apart in a beastly and furious way. The destruction was almost total, and not that of a searcher, but of an animal trying to claw its way out of a trap. Or a pack of animals.

The pieces of bed and furniture and clothes and books were so small that I had trouble identifying them. I bent down and picked up a fragment of something that I discovered was the upper right-hand corner of page 134 of my set theory text. Next to it was a pile of feathers, from my pillow, I presumed, and then a piece of leather, perhaps from one of my shoes. Even the bed was gone, splinters of wood disseminated around the room.

A flood of total and self-pitying weariness washed over me, and I leaned back in exhaustion against the nearest wall.

“What do we do now?” Sam asked, his voice shaking.

The question barely penetrated the outer surface of my numbed mind. I should have been afraid for my life, because I knew that whatever had caused the destruction might be nearby, but all I could think about was how I was going to replace my destroyed books. Without my books I wouldn’t pass. I felt violated and betrayed.

“Richard! Answer me!”

I turned slowly to Sam and stared at him, but I could barely comprehend what he was saying. I think he must have realized that, because he took me by both shoulders and led me over to a small stool in the far corner of the room that amazingly was still intact, something I had failed to notice. As he sat me down on it, he brought me my Mechanics book. It, too, was intact, and this fragment of good fortune made me feel a little better, but not well enough to get up.

I don’t know how long I sat there—probably less than half an hour. My face was still resting in my hands when Sam said, “Do you hear something?”

For some reason I heard him this time. I listened. From outside the window came the faintest of moans. Not a moan in the sense of physical hurt, but a moan that communicated the deepest mental anguish, a lost soul, a moan straight from the depths of hell itself. Then it was

joined by a dozen other moans.

We went to the window and stared out but saw nothing. I whirled back to the door and opened it, listening. Khan was perched outside my door, quivering, facing the stairs. Somewhere below were rustling noises, like sandpaper being rubbed across the oak treads. I let him into my room, and he crawled over and cowered in the farthest corner from the door.

“You know what they did to the cops,” Sam said.

“I know.”

“There’s no way out of here except the window.” He ran to the window and began to wrestle with the lock. I didn’t tell him the lock was broken and all he had to do was lift the window.

“Don’t you think there are more of them waiting outside?” I asked.

He stopped tugging at the lock abruptly and turned back to me. “Then we’re dead.”

I was as afraid as he was, but somehow my mind was beginning to function. There’s a saying that in the face of danger you feel more alive, more vibrant. I certainly didn’t feel more alive; in fact, I felt closer to death than I ever had in my life, but my mind was thinking clearly. Khan was obviously thinking along the same lines, for he suddenly got up and walked to the door. When I opened it, he waddled down the hall toward the Ghoul’s apartment.

“Maybe there’s a chance,” I told Sam.

I followed Khan to the Ghoul’s door, turned the knob, and leaned against the door, which sprang open with little resistance. Thank the Lord Mrs. Lafferty was a cheapskate.

“We’re not—” Sam began.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“I don’t have any idea. The only thoughts my mind is generating make me want to pee in

my pants.”

We locked the front door, then the bathroom door.

And went through the timegate.

And He said unto me:

Son of Man, can these bones live?

And I answered:

Oh, Lord God, Thou knowest.

—Ezekiel 37:3

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

At first the battle was almost invisible, with small portions of the ships disappearing or breaking off to float away into space. It was like a pantomime, a silent movie, difficult for my mind to accept as real. I asked the Ghoul what kind of weapons the Alliance used, and he replied that the weapons were particle beams. As time passed and the armadas approached closer to each other, different weapons came into play, weapons which, if they did not make noise in the vacuum of space, at least produced the explosions and fire of weapons I was familiar with. Occasionally I thought I caught glimpses of small objects darting from one ship to another, but if so, they moved too fast to see clearly. What was clear was that most of the damage was being inflicted on the Alliance.

During the battle the Ghoul was willing to talk, and Sam, Summer, and I probed for answers. Benrobi was silent but watched the battle closely, his face hidden behind an expressionless mask I could not penetrate.

“We call them simply the Enemy,” the Ghoul explained. “They came in a vast fleet across the intergalactic void from somewhere. They swept down your spiral arm of our galaxy, destroying or enslaving every inhabitable planet. Primarily they destroy, wiping out complete

solar systems, including the primary star. If you were an astronomer on Earth today, you would see a new supernova in your sky every one to two months. An astronomer's paradise, a nightmare for the civilizations of the galaxy. My civilization, called the Shenii, encountered them five thousand Earth years ago because we had a small scientific colony at the very end of your spiral arm of the galaxy. When the Enemy swept in from the void, our colony was immediately destroyed, but not before one fast scout ship was able to escape.

"In spite of whatever feelings you may have about us for wiping out your race, we are a peaceful civilization. Oh yes, we had warships, but only a few, and only for minor policing action. The Alliance is a group of civilizations in our region of the galaxy, a coalition over twenty thousand of your years old. Several different members of the Alliance sent warships to stop the tide of invasion, but were completely unprepared for the magnitude of the force they found. The small armada provided less resistance than an asteroid belt. A few fast scout ships again escaped with a warning."

The Ghoul turned to watch the battle, and frowned. A cluster of Enemy ships was approaching the blue-green giant, protecting a huge ship—huge even by the standards of this battle. The personnel on the bridge noted it as well, and an outbreak of clicking and chattering erupted. The stars swung above us, and we appeared to be heading straight for the planet. It was clear that we were about to engage the enemy.

The Ghoul turned back to us. "Luckily, the Enemy is nothing if not supremely arrogant in its confidence that it can destroy all opposition. Instead of pursuing us, the Enemy chose to continue its organized, relentless, merciless sweep down the spiral arm. This gave us time to regroup and arm ourselves. Three thousand and one thousand Earth years ago we met them in two other major battles, both of which we lost. We are meeting them again here, probably for the

last time. We have thrown every resource we have into this battle. If we lose, I doubt there will be enough left to even consider further resistance. I suspect remnants of our civilizations will flee and hide, but for how long? Perhaps we would have time to build ships to cross the void to another galaxy and leave this one to the Enemy ... or perhaps not.”

The Chief of Security suddenly clicked and clattered at the Ghoul, and he turned to us. “We are being ordered off the bridge.”

We followed him back into one of the worm-like tunnels. Again, as we walked, I had the feeling that I was passing near and even through other beings, not only in other corridors but perhaps in other rooms as well.

We came out in the docking bay, near the great yawning mouth that opened into empty space. Benrobi, unfazed, just stared out through the opening into the battle beyond. As before, I could see nothing separating us from the void. I stood about fifty feet from the opening and wanted to move closer, but I didn't have the courage. Outside, the battle silently raged, and I could only watch in awe.

“Tell us again about mankind,” I said to the Ghoul. “It's difficult to believe that we could not have been of some help to you in this war.”

He stifled a laugh. “How could you have helped? You never even conquered your own solar system.”

“Why not?”

“War, I think. We actually did interact with humans in this time on your moon, where your race had recently built a base, for the third or fourth time over the years. The history of the human race shows great belligerence. Apparently, you blew yourselves back to the Stone Age at least three times over the last fifteen thousand Earth years, forced to slowly rebuild civilization

each time. Perhaps if you had evolved without the wars, you would now be advanced enough to be of some help, but at the level of knowledge in your time, all we needed was your planet.”

“I don’t understand who you are,” Summer suddenly remarked. “You look human.”

“Genetically, I’m as human as you are,” he replied.

“How can that be?”

“Human DNA was used to create me, just as human DNA made you who you are. The only difference is that my creation was entirely in the laboratory instead of in a bed.”

Summer frowned.

The Ghoul continued. “Every being on this ship was genetically created for a specific purpose. The warriors are obvious; the small creatures on the bridge are the command personnel. They are intelligent and quick. There is obviously no need for them to be large, so they are not.”

“Then none of you are Shenii?”

“All of us are, in spirit if not in physical body. There are a few true Shenii—and a few individuals from other worlds of the Alliance—on some of the command ships, but there is little need for many of them. The crew and warriors of this ship are ideally suited for warfare; it is why they were created, and it is their entire purpose for existing. We consider ourselves the military arm of the Shenii and it is our duty to defend our race and the Alliance.”

“Even to the point of trying to kill a defenseless college student?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean that you engineered several monsters in an attempt to kill me!”

“I did nothing of the sort. Your imagination must be overactive. The human race has seen monsters under the bed since the dawn of its civilization.”

“These weren’t under the bed, though some were on it. These were very real—just ask

the cops who walked into the trees in the park and were torn apart by them.”

The Ghoul studied me, as if searching for the truth. “I had nothing to do with that. My mission was simply to genetically engineer the extinction of your race; I wasn’t prepared to use violence in any way to hasten the demise of any individual.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“What you believe hardly matters.”

“But you do admit that you caused the extinction of the human race!” Summer said.

“I have admitted that several times.” The Ghoul stared at us with those ancient eyes.

“Remember our alternative. We are talking about the extinction of sentient life in this *galaxy*.

We felt there was no choice. Your race has spent most of its history slaughtering each other. At least this was much more humane.”

“Then you created the time gate?”

“Some of the Shenii scientists did.”

“How?”

“He won’t know that,” Benrobi said as he continued to watch the battle. “He wasn’t created to know that.”

“He’s right,” said the Ghoul without any embarrassment.

“But you do?” I asked Benrobi.

“I do, a little,” he replied. “As they say, it’s better to be lucky than good. The Alliance was lucky, and mankind was unlucky. The gate is actually a wormhole between several points in space-time. The Shenii don’t really have the ability to create one on their own, but there are natural ones in the universe. They aren’t true wormholes, but rather weak points in the fabric of space-time that can be exploited. They found one when they arrived on Earth and exploited it to

set up a link between your century and now.”

“What about the ones to the twenty-third and twenty-fourth centuries?”

“They are unintentional branches of the wormhole.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

Benrobi didn’t answer; he was watching the battle intently. By now, the Enemy had virtually encircled the gas giant. Alliance ships in the way had been destroyed or incapacitated. I could also see that the large ship I had noticed before was indeed gargantuan, appearing as big as a couple of the smaller moons around the blue-green planet. There was something wrong with the ship, or at least my perception of the ship. It wavered, out of focus, flashing in and out of reality. At times it almost disappeared.

“The problem with particle beams in space is the relative scarcity of particles,” muttered the Ghoul.

“I think your Enemy has found a source,” replied Benrobi. There was a distinct edge to his voice that I found disturbing. I couldn’t tell if it was excitement or anticipation.

“You are right,” replied the Ghoul. “We must prevent their weapon from being activated at all costs.”

As if the pilot of our vessel could hear him, the ship appeared to accelerate. I can’t say how I was able to tell, because the stars were constant and our only sense of motion was in relation to the other ships and the planet itself. But the planet appeared to suddenly rush at us, doubling in size every ten seconds. I wondered when the Enemy would see us. I should have been afraid, but I was not. The excitement pulsing through me overwhelmed the few sparks of fear I felt.

A bud was forming on the equator of the blue-green giant. As I watched, it grew larger

and larger, distorting the planet until it looked more like an egg than a sphere. Then it was a tongue of blue, licking out as if to swallow the Enemy ship. Somehow, through forces not remotely visible, the Enemy ship corralled the tongue from the gas giant, narrowed it, focused it, and turned it into a tongue of fiery death. With the quickness of a rattlesnake, it lashed out at a cluster of Alliance ships and obliterated all but one of them in an instant. The sole survivor lasted merely a moment longer, then it twisted and writhed in agony, falling slowly toward the surface of the planet, ultimately disappearing into the stormy blue clouds.

A second bud burst off the planet toward another cluster of Alliance ships to our right, and again the blast took out at least ten to twelve large ships. By now our ship had penetrated the Enemy lines.

“I’m not hanging around here to be fried alive,” Summer suddenly burst out. I turned to her and noticed that Benrobi was already halfway to the little ship we had stolen on Earth. Summer started after him, pulling Sam with her, and both the Ghoul and I began to chase them. All three were faster than I expected, and they slowly widened the distance. The Ghoul was running stride for stride with me. As we ran, he reached into his front pocket, found a small cube about a centimeter in all dimensions, and raised it to his lips. He quickly snapped out a few clicks, but I slapped the cube out of his hand and when it bounced on the floor in front of me, I stamped it flat. The Ghoul made no attempt to pick it up. I guessed that if it was a communicator, it wasn’t now, and he didn’t waste time picking up the remnants.

I’m not sure that any of the four of us chasing Benrobi had the slightest idea exactly what we were doing; we were simply obeying our instincts, like lemmings jumping into the sea. Blind reflexes in action.

When the ship shuddered and belched, we were within a hundred yards of the shuttle.

The Ghoul and I tumbled onto the floor of the docking bay. The difference was that he landed with grace and I flopped, hands and feet completely out of control, sliding across the floor after I landed, a sudden, agonizing pain in my left shoulder. I tried to rise, couldn't, tried to move my arm, and couldn't. I looked at the shoulder. It was displaced to the front, obviously separated. The Ghoul by now was on his feet, and I staggered after him, making no attempt to quiet the moans coming out of my mouth.

I managed to fling myself through the door of the shuttle just after the Ghoul, perhaps ten seconds behind Summer and Sam. I half-crawled, half-stumbled to the bridge. The three spheres were orbiting around Benrobi's head, and he was staring out towards the entrance to the docking bay.

Where would we go?

The Ghoul had the same thought, because he made a dash for Benrobi. But Benrobi was too quick, twisting out of the way, on the defensive yet instantly prepared to attack. The Ghoul paused, thinking over the situation.

"What happened to your arm?" Summer asked me.

"I dislocated it, I think."

The Ghoul stepped toward Benrobi with a puzzled look in his eyes. I was in too much pain to understand what was going on, but not so much that I didn't know that something was wrong.

Summer grabbed my arm and jerked it before I realized what was happening. I let out a scream, but neither Benrobi nor the Ghoul acknowledged the noise. She continued to pull hard as I continued to scream. The room began to spin as she pulled even harder. I thought my arm was going to pop off, but instead it just popped. Suddenly the pain eased, and I realized that she had

pulled it back into place. A wave of nausea and sweat washed over me as I fell against the nearest wall, unable to stand by myself.

“Thanks, I think,” I told Summer through gritted teeth.

“You’ll be fine. You’re tough,” she replied, turning away from me.

Easy for her to say—it wasn’t her arm and shoulder that two tigers had fought over. I leaned against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

“Where are we going?” the Ghoul finally asked.

“Where *I* want to go,” Benrobi said with a snort.

The Ghoul looked as though he wanted to reply, but then Benrobi ordered our ship to lift off the deck just as the giant craft shuddered again, launching the floor of the docking bay up to bat our ship like a fly swatter hitting a fly. Our aircraft jolted upwards and all of us flew across the room, even Benrobi.

He was the first to his feet, but already some autopilot had intercepted the flutter and corrected it. Benrobi grabbed the cube in front of him with both hands, closed his eyes, and we darted out of the docking bay, glancing against the roof of the bay as we left. The ship was far from level when we bounced upwards, so I didn't have any idea which side of the ship had careened off the ceiling of the bay.

We sped toward the nearest Enemy ship. Everything was beginning to become clearer to me. I looked at the Ghoul—why did I still call him that? I guess I still had a problem with thinking of him as Thaddeus Rumpkin. I asked him what his real name was, but he failed to answer my question or even return my gaze, though he did not look surprised at what was happening. How human was he? Could I expect his reaction to be the same as a human’s? Genetically, he was the same. But he was created by aliens, not by human parents. How could I

know what his reaction would be?

I decided that I couldn't tell, but probably it didn't matter.

The shuttle jerked twice, and I was flung to the floor again. Summer and the Ghoul grabbed a nearby chair and managed to stay erect. Benrobi didn't budge, merely absorbing the bounce with his knees as if expecting the jolt.

"The antimatter ***** is damaged," the Ghoul remarked. "We must have hit it when we bounced off the docking bay ceiling." I couldn't understand the word he used after antimatter, so I asked him about it.

"There's no equivalent word in English," he explained. "I will just call it the antimatter guide, though that is far too simplistic."

Benrobi glared over at him, but said nothing.

"You won't be able to control the ship much longer," the Ghoul continued in a calm voice, as if announcing that dinner was ready.

"It will work long enough, even with your archaic technology," Benrobi snapped.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," the Ghoul replied.

"You can fix it," Benrobi ordered the Ghoul.

"No, I can't. I know very little about engineering."

"What is there to know?" Benrobi sneered. "Your technology is simple, compared to ours."

"My specialty is human genetics. There was no need for me to learn much engineering. Even our so-called 'simple' technology is beyond my knowledge."

"What's going on?" Summer asked softly.

"Tao Benrobi is no more human than our other friend here," I told her.

She stared at me in disbelief.

“I would guess that he is a creation of the Enemy, just as Thaddeus Rumpkin is a creation of the Alliance. Lord knows why Earth deserved such attention from the Enemy.”

“If you don’t fix it, none of us will live,” Benrobi told the Ghoul.

“Do you care?” the Ghoul whispered softly. “We are both warriors for a cause. Are you not willing to die for that cause?”

“I am willing,” Benrobi spat out. “But not before I fulfill my mission.”

“What is left?”

“To convey my information to my superiors.”

“What information?”

Benrobi paused just as the shuttle lurched again. This time I was subconsciously prepared and didn’t fall. Neither did the others.

“Your course of action helped our cause,” Benrobi answered. “I will say no more.”

The shuttle was beginning to vibrate now, the shudder waxing and waning in intensity. Each cycle worsened, and it was obvious to all of us that the ship had only a short time left.

“Well, dammit!” Summer exploded. “I’m not a warrior for some cosmic cause. I don’t want to die, and neither does my brother! Or Richard,” she added.

“You are insignificant,” Benrobi told her, face tight and teeth clenched from the strain of guiding the doomed ship. “No one cares if you live or die.”

Summer blanched and charged. Benrobi wasn’t prepared at all. She intersected him about belt-high with her right fist and he bounced across the room toward the outer wall of the bridge. She was all over him with her hands and feet, screaming and yelling as she struck. I tried to join the battle, but the shuttle suddenly went completely out of control, tumbling and bucking and

bouncing me off the wall. I stayed upright—the floor of the bridge was “down” because of the artificial gravity—but changes in momentum were making it difficult to reach the two combatants. The Ghoul beat me to the skirmish; he wasn’t concerned with the outcome of the battle but rather with pulling the controls from around Benrobi’s head. They appeared to be reluctant to leave, darting around in their orbits and evading the Ghoul’s hand. Obviously, a new approach was needed.

I jumped for the fray when the shuttle autopilot somehow corrected the turbulence for a few seconds. My left fist knew exactly what to do, and suddenly Benrobi was unconscious, and my fist was screaming at me in agony, along with my injured shoulder. I rolled on the floor and rubbed my fist while the Ghoul realized that the control balls were now available for the plucking. He grabbed the balls and slipped them to his head, where they orbited, apparently as content as when they had orbited Benrobi’s.

The Ghoul frowned and the shuttle made a flip. I was still lying on the floor and was thrown against Summer.

“Good punch, kid,” she told me.

I liked the compliment, but not the word kid. When the shuttle straightened up a little and we were finally able to stand, she asked to take a look at my hand, which I was still rubbing.

“You’ll live.”

I’d been hoping for a kiss to make it better.

“We need to repair one of the antimatter guides,” the Ghoul said. “Or we’ll end up in the maw of one of those Enemy ships. We have very little control. There’s a moon ahead with some kind of atmosphere. If we’re lucky, it will be oxygen based.”

We weren’t. We came down hard, bouncing off the outer layers of the moon’s

atmosphere and slowing down with each bounce, like a pebble glancing off water. It was rough on us and no doubt on the shuttle too. We sat as best we could on the strange, too-small-for-human seats. The Ghoul showed us how to activate webbing that helped us cling to the seats as we skipped across the atmosphere. Benrobi we left to bounce across the floor with each skip. The Ghoul was too busy trying to steer the shuttle to bother with him, and I was mad at him for betraying us, though I suppose he was only following orders. He moaned during a couple of particularly hard skips, but I didn't feel sorry for him.

With the fifth skip we entered the atmosphere. "Methane," the Ghoul told us. "Very cold methane. Nothing we can breathe."

The atmosphere was thin but hazy, layered like a cake, with each layer no more than a mile in thickness. The strange, greenish, wispy clouds appeared to be rushing in different directions in each layer, though it was probably just an illusion.

We went down in darkness, on the far side of the moon. I would have chosen differently, but the ship's dying controls chose for us. Somehow the guide stayed together long enough to land, but just barely. I could tell from the Ghoul's pale face that our descent was a miracle given the circumstances.

The four of us still conscious sat on our seats, breathing heavily as the ship settled onto the frozen surface with a sound like huge fingernails scraping across a blackboard. We were all too mentally exhausted to say or do anything for several minutes. The quiet after the Ghoul cut the engines seemed to last for hours, but it wasn't long enough. I thought back over the past few days in awe and wonder. At the same time, I wondered what was happening back on Earth during my time. Or, if we returned, would time not have passed? I laughed to myself. *If* we returned? Who was I kidding? We were in the middle of a war beyond my comprehension, one

in which the side we most identified with was losing badly. How could we possibly return to Earth?

“The atmosphere is almost pure methane,” the Ghoul said softly, looking at a holographic display in front of him. “This moon is smaller than Earth, about six thousand of your miles in diameter, so the gravity is about six-tenths that of Earth. As tired as I’m sure you are, it will feel good to be a little lighter.”

“Then let’s get the antimatter thing fixed and get out of here,” Summer remarked, standing up.

“That’s the bad news,” the Ghoul said. “The repairs have to be partially made outside.”

“In methane?” I asked,

“There should be some atmospheric suits somewhere on board. But there’s more bad news. One of you is going to have to make the repairs, since the only directions are on the ship’s computer, which only I can read, and I’m going to have to stay here at the consoles and talk you through it.”

“I’ll go,” Summer volunteered.

“No, I’ll be glad to,” I said.

“Just show me where the suits are, and I’ll save you the trouble.”

Her sarcasm was accurate. I didn’t want to go outside. Had it been daylight, I would have been more willing, but it was dark and the atmosphere was hazy even on the surface. The bridge lights were turned down low and the exterior lights shone into the haze, where I could see cloudy wisps dance and thrash.

But what worried me was that I also thought I saw movement at the edge of the light: darting glimpses of something.

Maybe it was just my imagination. In my present frame of mind, I could believe anything.

“I think two people should go, if possible,” I told the Ghoul. “In case one of us gets in trouble.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Sam offered. “Richard and I will go.”

“Trying to protect your little sister?” Summer scoffed. “I don’t need any protection.”

“I know you don’t,” Sam said. “In fact, you’ve always been the one who did most of the protecting after Mom and Dad died. Let me do this for you.”

“What could happen?” Summer asked. “It’s cold out there, but other than that, there’s not any danger within a light-year.”

I wasn’t so sure of that, but I didn’t want to intrude into a private conversation, so I didn’t say anything.

“It’s not just cold,” said the Ghoul. “It’s a hundred degrees Kelvin.”

“Over a hundred fifty degrees below zero,” Summer observed, a good half-minute before I was able to calculate it out. But then she was a math teacher.

“Will the suits take that kind of cold?”

“For an hour or so.”

“No more?” Summer asked.

“Not at one time.”

“Maybe we can switch off,” I suggested. “Two of us go first, then the third person can spell one of us in about half an hour. If we’re still out there in an hour, we can switch off again, so that no one is out there more than an hour at a time.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” the Ghoul replied.

“We can flip for the first two positions. Odd coin stays.” Summer found three coins in her pocket, gave one each to Sam and me, and we flipped them. Summer showed hers—heads. Sam had tails. I uncovered mine, found heads. I would go with Summer.

The Ghoul led us back to where the entrance of the ship had been, turned toward the opposite wall, and rubbed his palm against the wall. It slowly melted away, leaving a doorway to a small chamber.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“Just put your hand on the control pad,” the Ghoul said.

“I don’t see a control pad.”

He stared up at me, puzzled, then pointed to the wall. “It’s right there. It is easily visible ...” His voice trailed off, and he chuckled, the first time I had ever heard him laugh. “Visible to me, but not to you! You can’t see in the infrared spectrum, can you?”

“Is that how the pad is marked?” I asked.

“Yes. It emits an infrared glow. If you touched it, it would feel warm.”

Always curious, Sam said, “I’d sure like to know what gene they modified to give you vision in the infrared spectrum.” He reached out and rubbed the wall where the Ghoul had touched, trying to feel how warm it was.

We entered the chamber, a storage hold for about twenty spacesuits of different kinds. The majority of them were small, designed no doubt for the crab-like command personnel, but a few were big enough for the alien warrior models.

“None of these will fit,” Summer said.

“You have little faith in our technology,” the Ghoul remarked. “Try one on.”

“One that’s too big or one that’s too small?” Summer asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Summer picked up one of the small ones, while I grabbed the large economy model. I pulled it off the hook and examined it. It was made of a shiny white substance thinner than the cotton T-shirt I had on. I rubbed it between my fingers and it made a soft, scratchy sound. There was a fixed ring at the neck, which obviously bolted to one of the clear oval helmets that hung on the wall above the suit. Acting strictly on faith, because the suit was twice as tall as I was, I put my right leg in the right leg of the suit. Nothing happened, so I put my other leg into the left leg of the suit and slipped my arms into two arms of the four-armed suit. Material hung three feet beyond my hands and extended the same distance beyond my feet on the floor, a wad of excess material bunched around my waist, and two unoccupied arms dangled.

As I waddled a few feet forward, the suit began to shift. What in the—?

The suit was shrinking to fit me. In about twenty seconds, it clung to me as if made just for me. Even the extra arms were gone. I glanced over at Summer and found that her suit had undergone a similar transformation.

“Intelligent materials,” Sam observed, now putting on his suit as well.

“Yes,” the Ghoul said. “Don’t take such a narrow view of the universe. There are wonders in the cosmos that you cannot even begin to imagine, technologies as far beyond your own as yours is beyond that of a primeval man’s stick. Creating intelligent materials was not a difficult problem.”

I tried to picture his civilization, but it was hopeless. I had no idea where to even begin. He went on.

“I will be able to talk you through the repair, and I will be able to hear you in return. What you have to do is take the cover off and bring the damaged part in here. I’ll fix it, then you

can replace it, and off we'll go."

He rubbed the outer wall and a section of it vanished. Summer and I stepped down the foot or so to the moon's surface.

It was solid, but somehow seemed to grab at my boots, and each step felt as if I was trying to lift a heavy weight.

The atmosphere was murky and distorted, a fact I could distinguish even in the dark. In spite of being in a closed suit, I sensed a pervasive aura around me that I didn't like at all. I could see nothing beyond the edge of my helmet light, which had come on when I locked the helmet into position, yet I could feel something around me, perhaps far away, perhaps not. I wouldn't have admitted it to Summer, but I was scared.

"The guide is mounted near the rear of the ship," the Ghoul's voice suddenly said. "The infrared sensors in the helmet should show you the control pad so you can open the cover."

With infrared sensors built into the helmet, the pads were easy to see. There were about ten control pads implanted in the skin of the ship from the hatch to the tail and finding the last one was not difficult with the Ghoul's instructions.

The pad was about five feet off the ground. Summer rubbed her hand across it twice, and the skin of the ship melted away over a five-foot-by-five-foot area, revealing a number of metallic-appearing components. She reached for the one the Ghoul had told her was broken. It was bent, so it was obvious.

"The skin of the ship is intact and normal," Summer said. "How is this damaged?"

"Because the surface metal self-heals minor wounds," I observed. "Right?"

"You're beginning to understand," the Ghoul replied, knowing that I was talking to him.

"And when we hit the roof of the docking cavern, the skin was pushed in far enough to

damage the antimatter guide. Even though the skin of the ship healed and snapped back into place, the guide doesn't have that capability. It needs to be replaced."

"Very good," said the Ghoul. "Now pull on it gently."

"Where?" Summer asked.

"In the middle. I have programmed the unit to release itself with the pressure you're applying."

Summer reached her hand through the hole in the skin of the ship and grabbed the damaged component. I watched her, then turned and tried to survey our surroundings. I still felt as though something was watching us, lurking just outside our circle of light ... waiting. I shivered. Was this just my imagination working overtime? What could possibly live here, on this frozen, oxygen-forsaken world? Was life that relentless? But yet ... over there ... no, over there ...

"Shit." Summer's helmet light went out. In the eerie glow cast by mine, I could see her slapping her helmet. The first theory of mechanical objects: If it doesn't work, hit it.

Over there? To the left. I turned my head to look.

"Richard!" A shriek more than a word. I whirled back to see a shadow behind Summer, groping at her legs, as if out of the ground itself. She threw me the broken guide. I caught it instinctively and put it in my front pack.

She fell. The shadow writhed around her. She screamed as she started to move, not of her own will, sliding away from me into the darkness. I grabbed for her, seized one arm, and pulled. Now I was being pulled too, losing the deadly tug-of-war.

Other shadows now, surrounding both of us, scattering when I shined my light at them, then shadow arms around me, reaching for my helmet light. I spun, chasing them off.

They hated light!

“They’re all around you,” the Ghoul said calmly over the comm. “Bring her in while you can.”

“Summer! Are you okay?” Sam yelled.

“I’m trying! I’m trying!” I screamed, beginning to panic. “What the hell do you think I’m doing?”

Neither answered me.

I shined my light straight on Summer. Her eyes were wide and glazed with fear. I had to do something fast.

I realized I already had. My light had scattered the things, whatever they were, and I was able to pull Summer to her feet. She staggered with me towards the hatch. Around us shadows danced and grabbed, some reaching for me, some for her, some for my helmet light. I twisted my head from side to side rapidly, shining my light in as many directions as I could.

Now we were within fifteen feet of the hatch. I felt unseen hands—and they would remain unseen because I was afraid to look down—tugging at my feet, trying to trip me. I kicked, but Summer appeared paralyzed with fear and I knew that we would never make that fifteen feet. The terror that possessed Summer began to fill me as I stumbled and tripped and dragged us forward inch by inch. Part of the terror was the situation, but some of it was from the things themselves—they were infusing me with an icy fear that was like a growing, living thing that seemed to seek out every part of my body. It was a hypnotizing terror, which not only made my heart race enough to almost erupt from my chest, but also instructed my muscles not to contract. Lie still and let destiny take its course—that was the message my body was receiving.

I tried to summon a burst of adrenaline based on anger, but anger was gone, replaced by

lethargy and terror.

“Please, Richard,” Summer whispered, her helmet leaning against mine. “Please get us out of here. I don’t want to die.”

I looked at her face through our helmets. I could see the pleading in her eyes, a desperate hope that I could save her. That hope gave me strength to fight. I found that when I shined my helmet light at the ground, the shadows there would temporarily loosen their grip on our feet and I could make progress.

Fifteen feet, then ten, then seven. Each step brought us closer to the door of the ship, but with each step the frenzy of the attacking shadows increased.

Then we fell. The shadows swarmed over us, seemingly erupting out of the surface itself. At first their attack was disorganized, but slowly I felt their efforts concentrating on my helmet and feet, trying to turn off the light and drag me away from the ship. I again thrashed my head from side to side, but the action only lessened the attack; it did not eliminate it.

“Grab on to me,” I told Summer, who also was resisting vigorously and losing the battle.

There was no hope of regaining my feet, and even if I could I wouldn’t be able to help Summer back to hers. I tried to crawl. My hands slid on the frozen surface, though each movement did seem to bring us slightly closer to the hatch. But would we reach it before utter exhaustion made me give up? Even now my muscles were screaming for relief, daggers jabbing into them with every contraction. Every third pull with my left hand was a failure, my arm giving out easily because of the residual pain in my shoulder. Part of the exhaustion no doubt stemmed from the cold, the icy, numbing cold that was sinking into my body even through the smartsuit. Had we been out here that long?

Where was the Ghoul? I called for him, but he didn’t answer. I scabbled harder on the

icy surface, but progress remained slow.

“Come on, Summer, help me a little bit!” I pleaded. “Push on the ice with your feet, pull with your hands.”

“I c-can’t,” she replied, shivering against me. “They won’t let me.”

“You have to!” I snapped at her. “I can’t do it alone. If you don’t help, we’ll die.”

Somehow, even without looking, I knew that some of her usual stubborn persistence had returned. She shuddered, but I could feel her trying to help me.

An angry resolve swept over me. We would survive! We hadn’t journeyed thousands of years of time and unknown light-years of space to die without meaning. To die in battle was one thing, but not at the hands of these ... things. These evil things.

Four or five feet to the doorway. That was all. Couldn’t give up now.

I pulled. I pushed. I kicked with my feet and slashed with my hands, shined my light wherever I felt the most resistance, and slowly, inch by inch, the distance shortened. As we reached the light from the hatch, the wraiths began to melt away.

“We’re almost there,” I told Summer. “Just hang on a few more seconds.”

With the last of my energy, I pulled us to the hatch. I wanted to collapse as I felt the tugging and clawing ease as we moved into more light. But I knew that even here we weren’t safe. I had to get us inside.

I stood up and lifted Summer to her feet. She was able to help a little, but I was glad that she was lighter than I was. Together we virtually fell into the ship.

“Close the door,” I ordered the figure at the periphery of my vision as I removed my helmet.

“Oh, we’re perfectly safe in here,” the figure replied.

I turned. Sam and the Ghoul lay on the floor, unmoving. Standing by the edge of the open doorway, gazing at me, was Tao Benrobi.

