

**THE DUSHAU TRILOGY # 1**  
**DUSHAU**  
**JACQUELINE LICHTENBERG**

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Copyright © 1985 by Jacqueline Lichtenberg  
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PRAISE FOR DUSHAU: "No one writes about cultural symbiosis with a more sensitive voice than Ms. Lichtenberg, who has created a fascinating set of relationships between ephemeral Krinata, eternal Jindigar and computer simulacrum Arlai. The action is continuous and exciting, leaving the reader anxious for more."

—*Romantic Times* on *Dushau*

#### DEDICATION

To Andre Norton, for writing *Star Rangers*, a.k.a. *Last Planet*, but not the sequel I felt it desperately needed, and for not being mad at me for threatening her, as she stood among the lovely flowers in her front yard, that I'd do it myself.

To Jean Airey for hours spent on my back porch enthusing about *Doctor Who* until I lit up, too.

To Judy Bemis and the many fans who've gone out of their way to show me tapes of *Doctor Who*. You may not see the derivation of Jindigar from The Doctor, or you may feel it's spoiled by the admixture with *Star Rangers*, but to

me, it seems Zacathans and Time Lords share the same Tailored Effects with Dushau.

To Don, Elsie and Betsy for the spark that lit the conflagration (and for a lovely breakfast at Chicon IV).

To Marion Zimmer Bradley, for introducing me to Russ Galen.

To Russ Galen, for temerity, perspicacity, and audacity, as well as finesse.

To Nansey Neiman, for sheer nerve.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Here must be mentioned those who contributed actively to the preparation of this book.

Katie Filipowicz Steinhoff, editor of *Zeor Forum*, one of the fanzines devoted to my Sime~Gen universe, and creator of the Sime~Gen chronology published in the Playboy paperback edition of *First Channel*, made Stephen Kimmel's world-building program work on my computer. She also acquired for me several Ravi Shankar records on which I've based my concept of Dushau music. All this in addition to customizing Wordstar so I could learn the darn thing! She's one of those "without whom . . ."

Jean Lorrah, my sometimes collaborator and now independent author in my Sime~Gen universe, suffered through the rough draft of *Dushau* despite her own crushing schedule to produce two books — her first independent Sime~Gen, *Ambrov Keon*, and her first professional STAR TREK, *The Vulcan Academy Murders* — from scratch within 8 months. She showed herself to be a true friend and a magnificent critic.

Anne Pinzow, Executive Editor of *Ambrov Zeor*, the oldest of the Sime~Gen fanzines, and Roberta Mendelson, of many talents, Gail Lichtenberg and Susan DeGuardiola, all read and reacted to the rough draft.

There is no way to thank such people except to pray the finished product justifies their investment of self.

-----2006 update-----

Further information about any or all of the above, or about my forthcoming Dushau, Sime~Gen or Kren or other novels, anthologies edited and non-fiction books is now available online via web pages, free newsletter and discussion lists. All of these can be found at my home page <http://www.simegen.com/jl/> -- where you can also find links to my Monthly SF/F Review column and many other projects, and free chapters from all these novels, including the new and reprint novels I wrote under the Daniel R. Kerns byline.

These are titled *Hero* and its direct sequel *Border Dispute* plus *Alien Master* and set in a totally different universe, *Technoembargo*.

All four of these novels are action stories, but each one chronicles the forming of improbable friendships which

enable the heroes to surmount impossible odds.

The four novels by “Daniel R. Kerns”, just as *Dushau*, *Farfetch*, and *Outreach*, as well as all the Sime~Gen Universe novels plus my Vampire Romance novels, *Those of My Blood* and *Dreamspy*, are examples of what I have termed the Hidden Genre, Intimate Adventure.

For a more complete definition along with numerous examples by a wide variety of authors working in many genres, see <http://www.simegen.com/intadv/>

You will also find a comment on Intimate Adventure there by Ronald D. Moore, the famous *Star Trek* producer who has re-created *Battlestar Galactica* for us and other major network science fiction and fantasy shows.

Jacqueline Lichtenberg

<http://www.simegen.com/jl/>

January 2006

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FOURTH OBSERVATION OF SHOSHUNRI

**"It is incumbent upon The Incarnate to discern the Policy behind the Laws of Nature so They can anticipate results of action/motivation during a Cyclical Hiatus when there is no evidence to reveal even the existence of such Policy."**

FIFTH OBSERVATION OF SHOSHUNRI

**"Disregarding the Fourth Observation is a capital offense."**

**From: *Purpose and Method***

**By: Shoshunri, Observing Priest of Aliom**

## ONE

## Heraldry Rampant

THE KAMMINTH OLIAT HAS RETURNED, AND IS SCHEDULED TO RECEIVE COLONIZABLE PLANET DISCOVERY HONORS. IN THE NAME OF EMPEROR RANTAN, ALL SURVEY BASE PERSONNEL ARE COMMANDED TO ATTEND THE AFTERNOON AUDIENCE.

The words crawled onto Krinata Zavaronne's desk screen and refused to be banished: an imperial command.

She swore. As a programming ecologist she was "Survey Base Personnel." The new Emperor would not allow her to put duty above protocol, even though with the food riots and threats of whole species seceding from the Allegiancy Empire, her work was more critical than ever. The Emperor obviously hoped pomp and ceremony would whip up a sentimental loyalty to carry them over the crises. But Krinata knew this was the worst possible time for her department to delay putting new planets on the open market. *When the throne was vacant, I got things done faster.*

In the privacy of her office, she squirmed into the formal red taffeta tunic. It fit tightly down the arms while blousing above her knees and made her feel silly.

*It's a mistake, that's all.* She was Kamminth's

debriefing officer; *she* should have been asked before this useless ceremony was scheduled.

She'd have said, "No. Absolutely not!" And that would have been the end of it. Exposing the seven members of an Oliat to a public ceremony before they'd been debriefed and dissolved the peculiar psychic bond among them was nothing short of public torture.

She'd failed one of her Oliat teams by assuming everything would return to normal now that they had an Emperor again, so it was up to her to do something about it. As she draped the black sash around her waist, then up over her shoulder and fastened it to show the three linked circles of her family crest, she bent over her screen and punched up Finemar, the infirmary's Sentient computer. The Emperor's command remained overlaid on the screen.

Finemar projected himself onto her screen as a Lehiroh male — the Emperor's species — visually indistinguishable from human. He greeted her pleasantly, adding, "I'd have expected you to be on your way to the Audience, Krinata."

"Has Kamminth's reported in to donate blood yet? Have you done their physicals?"

"Kamminth's Oliat lost a member on location and returned badly disoriented. I'm treating them for Dissolution shock. On order of Emperor Rantan, I have just

released five of them, against my judgment, to attend their Honors — "

"Which five?" demanded Krinata. "Is Jindigar . . ." *Is he dead?* A hollow panic had seized her guts at the news of the loss and now she held her breath.

"The Receptor Jindigar is attempting to become the team's Outreach during the Dissolution." Finemar named the surviving officers of Kamminth's Oliat, adding that the Outreach had been killed, and he had the Inreach under heavy sedation, despite the Emperor's demands. "Do you think I'll get in trouble?" fretted the Sentient.

"No," reassured Krinata, hugging a sense of relief to herself. "But get Doctor Phips to countersign your order."

"Now, that's a good idea!" Finemar signed off.

Krinata grabbed her leptolizer, the jewel-encrusted symbol of her station, from the activation slot on her console, secured it to her sash, and headed for the throne room, arguing with herself. *Rantan has no right to do this to an Oliat, no right!* But he was so new to the throne, he probably didn't realize. *Even so, his advisors should have warned him.* But obviously, they hadn't.

As Krinata crossed the open rotunda between Survey's office building and the refurbished palace, Honor Guards saw her leptolizer and snapped salutes to her.

She couldn't get used to that. There had been no

palace guards since she was a child. In the government hierarchy, she was the most minor and powerless functionary. Her hereditary rank in the third oldest family of Pesht, tenth Terran colony to join the Allegiancy Empire, had never meant anything to her. But she'd gladly use it to spare Jindigar. *Or any Oliat!* she told herself.

Her costume got her past all the guards inside the palace along the route to her proper entry to the audience chamber. But when she turned aside, she was trapped in the midst of the crowd circling the outside of the chamber. Most of them were heading to the front of the chamber, where higher ranking nobles sat. Finally, she edged out of the traffic and turned into a deserted corridor, carpeted in dark red, lit by mock torches, hung with the banners of the Emperors.

Before huge, carved seawood doors — bathed by a falling sheet of water — she was stopped by guards un-awed by her.

They were a pair of Holot: six-limbed, heavily furred, formidable. "Public viewing of the robing chamber," said one, rolling his 'r's and gazing disdainfully over her head, "will recommence in the morning."

She fingered the jeweled wand and her belt. "I'm the Kamminth Oliat debriefing officer."

"Third rank enter the audience chamber from the blue

doors, that way." He'd seen her three-circle badge.

"Thank you," she said, turning away while taking the leptolizer from her belt, "but I have business within." Before the Holot could block her move, she spun and flashed the beam of the leptolizer at the sensor plate on the doors. She wasn't sure it had been keyed to that high a security clearance, and if it hadn't she'd be in real trouble.

But the doors opened. She darted between the hulking guards. Furry arms grabbed her about the waist and shoulders, and she hung suspended, gazing into the opulent backstage robing chamber.

Three male Dushau huddled protectively around a single female seated in an all-form chair before an open fireplace where green flames danced welcomingly. On the spiral pattern of the rug before them, Jindigar sat playing delightedly with a piol pup, wholly absorbed in the baby animal's discovery of the world. Sternly, he commanded it to sit up, and it lay down. The other Dushau laughed, but Jindigar shot them a quick glance, they quieted, and he repeated the command patiently. The pup sat, and Jindigar laughed, plucked it up and cuddled it.

Jindigar, like the other Dushau, was dressed in the shapeless white shirt and pants of the infirmary while against one wall stood a rack of archaic Dushau formal wear.

The guards started to creep backward and close the

doors on the scene. Krinata squirmed. "Put me down!"

As the piol licked his face, Jindigar turned to the doors. He rose smoothly, striding forward. In unmistakable welcome, he called, "Krinata!" His eyes, set wide and high on his head without protecting ridges, lit with hope.

The guards paused. One of them muttered, "That's the first he's spoken to anyone."

The other answered, "Our hides if we abort him!"

They hastily set Krinata down, and she offered her hands to Jindigar, in formal ritual. But he scooped her up with one arm, the other protecting the rooting and snuffling baby piol and buried his face in her hair, holding her as if from desperate physical need.

He was shaking, and the dense indigo nap that formed his skin was cold and damp, not warm and dry as usual. She'd never been on such terms with a Dushau; never expected to be. But after her initial startlement, she felt his bone-deep fear and hugged him in reassurance, trying to imagine what Kamminth's had been through to bring the always self-possessed Dushau to such straits.

And an odd thing happened.

Behind her closed eyelids, she *saw* the chamber as it had once been: newly gilded fretwork, plush new upholstery, too-bright colors. It was as if she were looking into an infinite stack of transparencies of the room, each one only

slightly different from the one adjacent to it. But as she watched, the top one of the stack slid aside, and the others followed, fanning out like a deck of cards. Then images scattered chaotically in every direction. Her head swam, her stomach rebelled, and raw terror blossomed as an infinite chasm opened within her.

She gasped, forced her eyes open, and focused on an odd stain on the wall beside a chipped bent grille. *I'm here; it is now.* She clung to that thought desperately, and her heart slowed.

Within seconds, Jindigar's fit abated and he withdrew, offering his hand formally. "I'm sorry. I'll explain." He glanced at the Holot, and his indigo features changed.

Turning she said to the guards, "That will be all. Thank you." She was amazed her voice didn't tremble.

They hesitated, then retreated and closed the door.

But Jindigar didn't offer his explanations. Instead, with that distant — frightened — look on his face, he pleaded, "Krinata, what has *happened* here?"

She gazed at the instrument in her hand, at her scarlet tunic, bloused black pants, black boots. Oh, yes, things had changed since Kamminth's had departed for the unknown.

"Just after you left, food riots devastated the Vincent and the Shashi Route Interchange Stations which made the Tri-Species Combine threaten to secede from the Allegiancy.

Rantan Lord Zinzik took charge with all the legendary dazzle and charm of his several-times-great-uncle, Emperor Turminor, and put down the riots, provided food supplies from nowhere, and convinced the Tri-Species Combine not to secede."

Krinata met his eyes, trying not to inject her personal bias into the news. "People compared him to Turminor. Since Turminor was the last Emperor before the throne was vacated, they said Rantan was his obvious successor. After all, Rantan was doing as miraculous a job as Turminor had — and Turminor brought eight decades of prosperity.

"After three hundred years of doing without an Emperor, people were saying the Allegiancy needed a new Emperor. Suddenly, Rantan was crowned. He reinstated aristocratic privilege, and even I got promoted without earning it first. Nobody seemed to understand."

As she spoke, Jindigar's expression lightened to comprehension and the underglow of fear dissipated. "Of course! It's so obvious!" He set the piol on top of his head where it perched, happily grooming itself. Then he said something Dushauni to the others of his Oliat who relaxed along with him. To Krinata he added, "I'd have grasped it sooner but for Dissolution and having to . . ."

To spare him, she offered, "Finemar told me why you had to go back to being Outreach." Jindigar had been the

first Oliat Outreach she'd ever debriefed. It was only after her third debriefing of him that he'd shifted to being Receptor of his Oliat, and she'd thought she'd never speak to him again. Only the Outreach of the team could bear the stress of talking to outsiders. Right now, the other three survivors of Kamminth's were withdrawn around Kamminth herself, their Center. And Jindigar had maneuvered Krinata so her back was to them. In essence, she and Jindigar were alone.

"Do you understand Dissolution? You haven't been a programming ecologist very long."

It wasn't an insult. Her ten years seniority was but the blink of an eyelash to a Dushau who could expect to live ten thousand years and had already lived over six. "I suppose I do, as well as any non-Oliat." She named the books she'd read on Oliat function, and courses she'd taken. She didn't confess how, since girlhood, she'd lulled herself to sleep at night fantasizing that she was in an Oliat, exploring a new planet, the ends of her nerves humming with the living vibrations of a thousand life forms, instinctively understanding their interrelationships. Her current job was the closest a human could ever come to that.

"An impressive list of credentials. I'd no idea . . ."

"I told you I was serious about getting an appointment to a new colony. I want to work as an Oliat liaison."

"You have my vote," he said cutting her off, "if you can learn to handle traumatic Dissolution in the field."

Her heart leaped. Vistas of hope for her career opened where there had been only a dead end job. "I know I can."

He watched her intently, one hand straying to her cheek for a moment before he yanked it back. "I'm sorry," he said again, then, "Krinata, I can talk to you. Do you understand what that means? Do you know why?"

"Because you knew me when you were Kamminth's Outreach?"

He nodded. "Partly." He turned away, taking the piol off his head and setting it on the floor, as he perched on the divan on the other side of the hearth and motioned her to join him, their backs to the others. As she sat beside him, he inched away from her and clenched his hands together. "It's because you were familiar when suddenly everything had become strange — strangely familiar. Rantan even looks like Turminor! It's as if we're lost three hundred years in the past." He glanced at her. "Dissolution distorts perceptions. I *couldn't* — none of us could force ourselves to look up recent events."

At last she understood. Loss of sanity, loss of orientation amid the vast, echoing caverns of their millennia-long memories, that was the chief terror and very

real danger of the Dushau, for it meant an inevitable and early death. Remembering what her overly vivid imagination had conjured for her moments ago, knowing it was the palest shadow of what he experienced, she said, "In your place, I couldn't have either."

He studied her. "I may be Kamminth's most experienced officer, but even I've never had to change Offices *during* a Dissolution. Until you walked in, I didn't know . . ." His disobedient hand strayed again to her cheek, seeking contact with a slippery and wavering reality. "May I?"

She suppressed the jab of terror, focused on a worn spot in the carpet, and put both her arms around his chest — they barely met behind him — and hugged him. He wrapped both his arms about her, bending his head until his napped cheek rested against hers, and surrendered to the trembling. It would be ever so much better for him if she were Oliat. But only Dushau, of all the hundreds of species of the Allegiancy, had the talent for joining into a team resonant to the ecology of a new world. The Oliat team was able to evaluate a world's habitability for other known species and determine if a planet already harbored a sentient or pre-sentient species. Only the Dushau could do that, and very few Dushau had the Oliat talent.

Krinata sensed the other four Dushau steady as

Jindigar did. When he finally raised his head, fixing her with his deep midnight eyes, he seemed to have become Outreach in truth. As he spoke again, his voice descended to its normal register, somewhere near the resonance of her bone marrow. "Kamminth's thanks you."

She accepted that gracefully, then touched up a time check on her leptolizer. "How long until your Dissolution is completed?"

"Fedeewarn, our Inreach, is still unconscious. We'll be held in limbo like this until she recovers. But now, thanks to you, I can Outreach for her. In a few days, we'll be able to give the debriefing your department is so anxious for."

She twisted on the seat, offended. "I didn't come for the department!" Appalled at her inappropriate anger, she added, "I came because Zinzik is making a terrible mistake, and I wanted to find some way to stop it."

The piol was clawing its way up Jindigar's white pants: Jindigar grinned at it, showing sharp blue teeth with darker blue grinders behind, and gathered the creature up, lovingly swinging it over his head and nuzzling it, laughing at its delighted squeals. He handed her the piol and got to his feet. "If you didn't come simply to start the debriefing . . ."

"I wouldn't until you all were ready to work."

"Then we must thank you even more." He made an old style courtly bow with an easy grace the modern imitators couldn't mimic. "We're indebted. However, our Emperor has commanded our presence, and we will obey."

The creature squirming in her arms, the very solemn Dushau before her, the onlookers ignored behind her, the decadence of the raw fire beside her, all combined to transport Krinata into the past and render her speechless.

Jindigar paused, as if waiting for some ritual reply, and when it didn't come, he said with difficulty, "May I ask a different service?"

He sounded like an actor in an authentic historical. "Jindigar, I don't know how to do imperial courtliness. I'm a programming ecologist, not a member of the court."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. The faint thrumming of imperial music came to them, and Jindigar tilted his head to listen. "We don't have much time. I suspect, if Rantan is really serious about this game, he'll be offended if we appear in hospital garb." He turned, went to the rack of clothing against the wall, and fingered the material. "Authentic, too. Hideously uncomfortable. But I suppose we must dress." He took down one of the garments, raking it with his eyes. "Somebody researched us — or raided a museum!"

He went toward Kamminth and the others, holding out the crisp gold and white robes. In an archaically flavored

Dushauni dialect which Krinata could follow only because of her intensive study of the modern language, Jindigar said, "I hope you remember your manners. We've got to play this out."

The four of them had relaxed now, too, Jindigar's sense of reality having seeped through their nerves. Kamminth took the robes, examined them, and agreed. The others went to the rack and selected their own garments. Jindigar took a pure yellow surplice over a white undertunic edged with black fringe. They all stripped and dressed without even fumbling at the awkward fastenings.

The fine indigo nap covered every bit of them giving them an oddly dressed look even without clothing. She hardly noticed their lack of mammary glands or external genitalia; general size and shape distinguished male from female. It was their familiarity with the antique dress mode that fascinated Krinata.

She watched, spellbound, as Jindigar wound a long gold sash around his head to make a turban, and got it right the first time, without a mirror. Studying him, Krinata finally identified the costume: Dushaun's first rank sept, and a highly born member of it, too. Three hundred years ago, she'd hardly have been allowed to speak to him. Kamminth likewise claimed aristocratic lineage, but the other three men were undistinguished.

Without a trace of self-consciousness in his outlandish costume, Jindigar came toward her and rendered an elaborate bow, uttering a formal salutation to Zavarrone.

She shrank away in raw embarrassment. "This is silly!"

His manner changed abruptly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disconcert you. Apparently, we must learn a new culture."

"It's just me," she said, suppressing a need to squirm. "This is all such a waste of time."

"I couldn't agree more," he said. "But I must ask a favor, or a boon, depending on the dialect you prefer." The music had ceased. Rantan was on his throne giving a speech.

She laughed and tried to perform the obeisance she'd spent hours in a Court Manners Class trying to perfect, but stumbled into him, off balance. "You see? I can't do it!"

"Would you be willing to try? In public?"

"What?"

"Krinata, we're not sure Kamminth can hold us together out there. Stand with us before the Emperor. If I revert to Receptor and can't speak, or if something happens to Fedewarn, make excuses for us. That's all I'm asking."

"But I . . ." she began to protest. Then, seeing his genuine need graven on his napped face, and his absolute

determination to go through with this, she said, "If you don't mind the risk that I'll blurt out something stupid, or trip on my own feet — sure."

The midnight eyes searched hers. "We'll risk it."

He turned to Kamminth, and she formed them into a marching square with herself at the center, Jindigar at the rear left corner, moving them into position before the carved whitewood doors of the audience chamber. Jindigar drew Krinata to his side. "If you will hold my position here, I will take the Outreach position."

Just like that, she stood in the Receptor's Office, as if she were Dushau. Before she could object, Jindigar advanced to center front. The position behind him, just in front of Kamminth, was vacant — their Inreach, Fedewarn, unconscious in the infirmary.

Jindigar had once moved in these circles. Surely he knew she had no business marching in an Oliat formation for a Royal presentation. No human did. *He doesn't mean anything by it. It's just protocol.* Something inside her squirmed at this real life replay of one of her favorite fantasies — her Oliat returning to the Allegiancy in triumph. She told herself, *Act your age!* and straightened up.

The whitewood doors opened majestically. In the bright rectangle stood eight Honor Guards, of eight bipedal species, carrying Dushaun gold-and-white banners bearing

the Oliat device, crossed wands balanced on the tip of an arrow at the point where they intersected.

The Lehiroh who seemed to be their leader saw her red and black, frowned in offense, and asked Jindigar, "What is the Zavarrone doing among you? It is not permitted to . . ."

Jindigar interrupted. "She's not of us, but is essential to our well-being."

The escort glanced over his shoulder, then hissed, "Let her meet you at your seats, not march in the formation!" She was about to step out of place when Jindigar grabbed a floor length white cloak from the rack. It had a fully enveloping hood. He whisked it about her shoulders, flipping the hood up. Then he returned to his place. "The Oliat is an integrated team, serving the Emperor. We will not be separated, nor will we keep The August Personage waiting."

As one, the Dushau started forward. Krinata, out of step from the first, did her best to keep from tripping on the long Dushau cloak. A part of her wished she could relax and soak up every bit of this, to enrich future dreams. But she felt ridiculous, conspicuous, and wholly out of place. Her Ceremonial instructor had once told her, *Believe what you're doing is significant, and it will be.* As they inserted their formation among the eight Honor Guards, she tried to believe she was a Receptor of this proud Oliat, worthy of

this Imperial Honor.

They emerged into the bright afternoon sunlight, diffused by the force-field dome overhead, and were inspected by the massed thousands of the Court. They slow marched across the chamber, turned in the wide center aisle, made obeisance, and advanced toward the throne, all to the beat of the Dushaun anthem — slow, infinitely patient, fraught with eternity. Indigo music.

She'd never been this close to the throne before. The solid gold throne carved with the insignias of all the Allegiancy species filled her view. Beside it, only slightly less spectacular, was the Imperial Consort's throne, vacant now since Rantan, as a Lehiroh, didn't marry. To either side, other functionaries were seated or posted in ostentatious splendor.

Rantan Lord Zinzik himself was a short, middle aged but trim Lehiroh, dressed in the imperial green, loaded down with badges and honors. For an instant, his careless cruelty to the Oliat was wiped away by the upwelling magic of the vision before her: Emperor of the Allied Species. Rantan, whatever he might be personally, had become the living symbol of the Empire and all that was good in their lives.

She saw him as one fighting bravely and imaginatively for their survival. Tears came to her eyes as she marched amid the ghosts of her famous ancestors and all they'd

sacrificed for the Allegiancy's peace and prosperity.

She blinked away the sudden tears. When the Oliat came to the foot of the stairs, she surprised herself with the smoothness of her deep obeisance, for the first time expressing, in the movement of her body, the emotions she felt for the Allegiancy Empire, the first galactic civilization granting full rights to all species. She treasured the Allegiancy and served it with all her heart.

The Oliat held the kneeling posture while Jindigar rose and answered the Emperor's formal inquiries. Then, at Zinzik's bidding, they all rose and were escorted to chairs set on a lower dais, the banners planted in holders all about them. It was the routine she had seen at dozens of these ceremonies, yet when Jindigar sat beside her, he whispered, without turning his head, "Does Rantan follow all the old protocol exactly?"

"He's fanatic about it," she answered, also facing front and trying to speak without moving her lips.

"Then something is dreadfully wrong." He folded his arms about a bulge in his lap. His surplice stirred and a furry head poked out mewling. He petted the piol as if everyone carried an animal when being presented to the Emperor. But his eyes roved the audience, measuring. "Where is the Dushaun delegation?"

She found their usual place, high on a side balcony,

and saw empty seats. "Rantan's going to be furious. I hope he doesn't blame you that they didn't come."

"They'd be here if summoned. And did you notice the odd stirring among the Lehiroh and the Holot we passed?"

"No, but then I'm not Oliat."

"We're not either. We're shimmering on the brink of Dissolution. Krinata, it could be our perception is entirely warped, but we feel unwelcome, distrusted. Only by some. Others seem unaware. But the Emperor holds us in disfavor."

*He knew that from exchanging a few formal phrases?*

"I didn't see anything like that. Relax, it'll be all right."

The same Honor Guard now escorted a Cassrian into the Audience from the opposite side. She wore only enough clothing to carry the badges and orders she'd earned. Her dark exoskeleton was painted in gilt swirls meaningful to Cassrians, and her wasp waist was adorned with jeweled ropes.

After being presented to the Emperor, she was seated on a higher step of the dais than the Oliat. After that, a Holot and a Lehiroh woman were presented. Then two Binwons were rolled in, their water environment tanks taking up the position just below the Dushau. They stank, but Krinata refrained from remarking on it.

Then the Honors presentations began. The Oliat was

called first. As they stood to be escorted before the throne, Jindigar said, "I told you something was very wrong. If he knows what he's doing, he's insulting Dushaun by this."

In protocol, the orders of things sometimes mattered more than the thing. "I doubt if many people will notice," she whispered. "I wouldn't have." *This is all so new to everyone. Rantan's just made some subtle mistake, that's all. Imagine what it's like to be Emperor and publicly embarrass yourself!*

"We do hope there's nothing to notice," muttered Jindigar.

With a little shock, she noted how he slipped between the personal and the Oliat-combined pronoun, betraying just how much distress the Oliat was in.

Their escort placed them on the level just below the throne, a wide step barely big enough for them, and again Jindigar stood while they knelt. She peeked up between the folds of her hood and caught Zinzik's shocked recognition of her non-Dushauni face. But he was too caught up in his own dedication to ceremony to make any outward sign.

He recited the standard Planet Discovery Citation, and then presented Jindigar with six jewel-encrusted leptolizers with second rank clearance that accessed almost unlimited credit at any terminal, opened almost any door, and gave priority over eighty percent of the citizens of the

Allegiancy. Jindigar made a gracious speech of acceptance and then distributed the leptolizers, keeping Fedeewarn's.

Zinzik, meanwhile, had noticed the piol snuffling out of the neck of Jindigar's surplice, but his only comment was the slight widening of one eye. As the ceremony finished, the amplifiers were turned off and Zinzik said to Jindigar, "We expect you in Our private chambers immediately after We dismiss these proceedings."

Jindigar bowed. "Excellency, one of us is gravely ill."

"We claim a small amount of your time. But the Oliat only, not the human."

Jindigar bowed lower still, then rose tall to look Zinzik directly in the eye as he said, "The mercy of the Allegiancy Emperor has been renowned throughout the centuries. He would not deprive the crippled of their crutch, the sick of their medicine, the fearful of their security. The Zavaronne . . ."

Zinzik interrupted, his manner suddenly modern. "Nicely maneuvered, Prince Jindigar. History warned me of you. Very well, you will *all* present yourselves in my private chambers immediately upon leaving here."

*Prince?* Krinata examined the symbols on Jindigar's robe again. She'd never been very good at heraldry. But if Jindigar was a prince, then no wonder he'd claimed Zinzik was deliberately insulting his people. *But why would the*

*Emperor do that?*

## TWO

### Conspiracy

Rantan's private office was hardly less opulent than the audience chamber, though much smaller. The center of the room was a deeply upholstered pit in the center of which was a holostage activated by the imperial leptolizer, a wand as long as Krinata's arm and sparkling with rare jewels.

The ceiling was paneled with high-relief carvings from dozens of worlds depicting the last Imperial Progress across the Allegiancy worlds.

The carpet had been woven to reflect the panels from above. The walls were colored mirrors arranged to focus light on the images. Dominating all were the imperial green laced with the Lehiroh violet and yellow. Krinata did not understand the rules of succession that rotated the throne among species, but she knew that Rantan's successor had to be human, though not a Zavaronne.

The Emperor reclined before his holostage, drinking from a tall cut-ruby glass and watching the holo-image

audience chamber empty into the public corridors of the palace. Rantan had the good manners to address only Jindigar. "We're delighted you could join Us for this private chat," he said. He waved to a live servant standing to one side and said, "Do please come down and make yourself comfortable."

They descended the padded stairs, and while Jindigar drew Krinata to sit near the Emperor's right, the other Dushau gathered in a knot on the opposite side of the holostage from Zinzik. The servant promptly offered them drinks, though from ordinary crystal glasses. Krinata was dry mouthed, but when Jindigar and the others refused, so did she, to Zinzik's displeasure.

"Then We'll make this mercifully brief. Your memory is more accurate than any Histrecording. We must know details of your years with Raichmat's Oliat."

There was not a trace of tension in Jindigar, yet Krinata sensed by his very relaxation that he understood at last the threat he'd sensed during the Audience. Yet his voice was deep, calm, as he answered, "I was in Raichmat four hundred thirty-two years, Excellency."

"We're aware of how long Raichmat's Oliat existed, and how influential it was on the early expansion of the Allegiancy . . . as if Raichmat knew where to find compatible civilizations willing to join us."

"After an Interregnum of over seven hundred years during which the planets of the old Corporate League had been isolated from galactic trade, one couldn't expect to find the same cultures dominating familiar planets. But Raichmat specialized in exploration, and visited worlds not on any Dushau records. We found over a hundred unoccupied worlds which we opened to Allegiancy colonization."

"We do not dispute this," Zinzik answered, swishing the liquid in his glass. The jewels on his fingers flashed in the changing light from the hologlobe. "The service the Dushau have rendered the Allegiancy is overwhelming. Never has the gratitude of the Throne been withheld. But as we realize what it means for a living memory to span more than three galactic civilizations, the more we comprehend how vital Dushau loyalty is to the Throne."

Absently, Jindigar soothed the piol, which was thrusting its head up under his chin and mewling. "I know you're hungry. In a little while."

The Emperor set his glass aside and rose to stand between Jindigar and the hologlobe. "Prince Jindigar, do you breach etiquette to offer insult to the Throne?"

Jindigar looked down at the wriggling animal, then back up at the Emperor. "Certainly not," he replied without rising. He extracted the piol and set it atop his turban where

it curled comfortably within the ring of twisted material and snuffled itself to sleep. "We are Oliat. We found this piol cub wandering loose in the Groundside Station. Nobody seemed to realize it was orphaned and starving. I've fed it and reassured it, and its bright youth has helped us during this dire time of Dissolution. Surely the legendary compassion of the Throne extends to creatures orphaned within the precincts of the Capitol."

"You presume to instruct Us in Imperial protocol?"

Krinata had never realized this near legendary figure was so insecure in his new position. It explained a lot.

"By no means," Jindigar denied calmly. He rose, the piol balanced like the crown the Emperor no longer wore above his formal robes. Krinata rose with him. Fully erect, he was much taller than the Lehiroh. He added, with an odd, measured inflection. "Obviously, the traditions of Crown and Throne are familiar to their rightful heir."

Not sure what to make of that, the Emperor circled his hologlobe, one hand on its insubstantial surface. He pivoted and fixed Jindigar with a frown. "Your loyalty shall be evident in the thoroughness with which you prepare a complete, detailed, written report of all of your four hundred thirty-two years in Raichmat. You will not slight Kamminth's final debriefing for this, but you'll not leave Onerir until you've completed this task for Us."

"Excellency," objected Jindigar, "I am Oliat, not Historian. What you ask . . ."

"We have spoken."

It was dismissal, but Jindigar remained staring at the Emperor as if expecting an unreasonable order to be amended. One thing Emperors never did was amend orders. Jindigar spoke into the tense silence. "Fedeewarn is Historian-trained, and was with Raichmat from Tempering until I became Outreach. Surely . . ." He broke off, his eyes sweeping toward where the rest of his Oliat gathered. He froze, mouth open, eyes wide, breath suspended.

"Prince Jindigar, you are overstepping."

Suddenly, Jindigar swept the piol from his head, thrust it at Krinata, muttering, "Fedeewarn!" and together with the other four Dushau, ran from the room without even token obeisance. Stunned, Krinata faced the perplexed Emperor alone. He raked her with a glance, and before he could speak, she made the deepest obeisance of her life without faltering, and said, "Prince Jindigar was apprehensive that such a thing might happen to the Oliat while in The Presence, Excellency. He has instructed me to apologize for Kamminth's Oliat, and to explain that in the event of some mischance with Fedeewarn, he would revert to the Office of Receptor."

She stopped when Zinzik flipped a hand at her

sharply, his whole manner speaking of his total familiarity with the sensitive Oliat mechanism. She nestled the piol against her breast and circled away from Zinzik, bowing as low as she could. *He couldn't have done this on purpose.*

Zinzik did not deign to notice her but circled the other way and followed the Oliat. She trailed behind, wondering if she could beat Jindigar to the infirmary by taking a shortcut. But no, if there were any shortcuts in the ancient structure, he'd know them.

In an atrium where a fountain danced merrily, they came upon the five Dushau. The four males knelt around Kamminth who writhed on the tiled floor as if her flesh were seared by the sunlight from the open roof. One of them screamed, an ululating roar of unparalleled anguish.

Kamminth's heels beat against the tiles, a seizure's rhythm. Another of the Dushau vomited on the edge of the fountain, and then fell headfirst into the water. Jindigar remained clutching Kamminth, his hands bracing her head.

Guards swept into the atrium in the Emperor's wake, and formed up around him, awaiting orders. Krinata ran to the Dushau drowning unconscious in the fountain and, setting the piol on the edge, she hauled the large Dushau out of the water. He wasn't breathing.

She pulled him over on his chest and cleared his air passages, noting the unhealthy pallor of his teeth. Just as

she was steeling herself to administer resuscitation, Jindigar's hands replaced hers. He was vibrating again, as he had in the robing room, his whole body in the grip of a palsy of terror. He said, "Kamminth's dead. I could do nothing." And he bent to force air into the unconscious Dushau.

Krinata watched the fight for life, glancing occasionally at the dead form of Kamminth surrounded by two traumatized Dushau men, and feeling their awesome age. What was it like to have invested five or six thousand years in building a life, to feel the beginnings of maturity, and to have it all ripped away in death? Her tears gathered for Kamminth, and her whole body yearned to help the drowned man.

When he finally coughed and choked and drew breath, his teeth taking on the healthy blue cast of the living Dushau, his body convulsed, head thrown back, spine arched. Jindigar gathered him in as he had Kamminth, then reached out to sweep Krinata into their huddle. He grabbed her leptolizer from her belt hook and forced it between the man's jaws. Then he just held on, damping the thrashing with his weight and hers. As Jindigar offered solace to his Oliat mate, he also clutched at her again, as if she were his lifeline to sanity.

She never knew how long it lasted, but the Emperor

and his guards still stood by the archway when the Dushau relaxed and began to breathe normally. Jindigar flashed her a smile, his teeth pale, but still a living blue. He returned her leptolizer, and went to the three other figures.

One of the other two Dushau was slumped bonelessly over Kamminth's corpse. The remaining one huddled upon himself. Jindigar put an arm around him, murmured something, and gently urged him toward Krinata and his half-drowned colleague. As he joined them, the Dushau touched Krinata and said, "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

That he could speak to her meant the Dissolution was complete. "I haven't been harmed," she answered.

Then as the new Dushau turned to his fallen comrade, Jindigar confronted the Emperor. "Fedeewarn is dead. Kamminth and Lelwatha are dead. Kamminth's Oliat is dissolved. The survivors are at the imperial command, but may we beg medical attention first?"

"Your right, without question," answered the Emperor distantly, but Krinata sensed an underlying delight in the man. *Impossible. I must be misreading a Lehiroh trait. The Allegiancy Emperor must think of all of us, not the few who inevitably die each day in his service.* Zinzik sent one of his guards for the medics. Before Jindigar had composed the dead for their final journey, covering Kamminth's terror

twisted features with his own surplice, a team of medics brought five anti-grav stretchers.

With two corpses and the two surviving Dushau laid out on the anti-grav stretchers, the medics came after Jindigar. His teeth were paler, but he refused to move. "The piol?"

The creature was perched on the edge of the fountain, sleek with wetness from its swim, happily nibbling one of the Emperor's most expensive decorative fish.

Seeing this, the Emperor roared, "Get that . . . that *thing* out of here!"

His voice startled the piol. It dropped the half eaten carcass and fled. Jindigar smacked his hand loudly against the fountain edge. The piol halted, measured the distance between the Emperor and Jindigar, then scampered around the fountain and leaped into Jindigar's arms, mewling and licking Jindigar's chin.

Two medics caught the unsuspecting Dushau while he was consoling the piol and sat him down on the stretcher. With firm hands, they pressed him down onto the floating sickbed, connected Finemar's monitoring probes, and set out for the infirmary.

The Emperor and his entourage departed through another arch leaving Krinata alone, stunned. She shook herself and dashed after Jindigar, catching up with them at a

cargo lift. "How bad is it? Is he going to be all right?"

One of the medics, a human man about her own age, smiled charmingly at her and said, "You aren't claiming to be next-of-kin, are you?"

"Hardly," she replied, "but I'm his debriefing officer. The Emperor expects rapid completion of this debriefing."

A Cassrian who was managing Finemar's probes and discussing the readouts to the sentient computer, looked up, "I didn't know humans were that heartless."

Jindigar, barely conscious, roused himself. "Oh, don't think that of her. I've never met a more generous soul."

Krinata, speechless, crowded into the lift with them as it took them down to the sub-basement level where they could get a transport tube to Survey's building. Seeing Jindigar's hands falling weakly away from the piol, she reached for it. He raised his trunk slightly to hand her the creature, pulled her head down and whispered, "Allow a couple of hours, then get us out of that infirmary. Krinata, please!"

His eyes were big, dark indigo pools. She nodded, swallowing against her dry throat, and took the piol. Jindigar crumpled onto the white sheets as the medication they'd given him took effect.

She stood in the bleak, underground tunnel watching them disappear, feeling as if her only friend in all the world

were being taken to jail.

#

Bereft and confused, her nerves in turmoil, Krinata dragged herself back to her own office and locked the door behind her, extinguishing her on-duty indicators so nobody would bother her.

Trying to steady her breathing and calm herself enough to think rationally, she fed the piol from her own lunch. Her appetite had fled.

She'd never seen death — dead bodies — before. Warm, scented flesh turning stiff and cold within arm's reach of her skin had felt very different from seeing it on a news holo. And Dushau — they never died in public.

*Scared to death.* An Oliat could die like that in the field, survivors returning to report it. But on the floor of the palace? She shuddered and huddled over the piol as it alternately groomed itself and her. Kamminth's Oliat had been torn apart, their minds lacerated by that savage ripping of Fedewarn's death. She could imagine what it must have felt like.

Her admiration for Jindigar redoubled. He'd kept his head through all of it. He deserved to rest in the infirmary. But he'd begged her to get him out. *How? He's obviously in*

*critical condition just like Fedeewarn.* She sat up, pushing the piol aside. "Fedeewarn!" *She died in the infirmary!*

Suddenly, Jindigar's desperate fear became real to her. Whatever had been done to Fedeewarn had destroyed the Oliat. But Jindigar himself had warned her of the delusions that could afflict an Oliat in Dissolution.

What were the facts? Was it rational to suspect Finemar, a Sentient computer, an Artificial Intelligence of the highest order, of not understanding the proper way to treat injured Dushau? And if it wasn't ignorance . . . no! No. It couldn't have been murder!

She dismissed all thought of extricating Jindigar from the care that could help him overcome the mental warping of the Dissolution. Returning to her desk, she sat down and powered up to get some work done in the remainder of her day.

But no sooner had she brought up a file than her thoughts centered on Jindigar. What if he died?

Time turned bleak, barren.

And then, of course, there'd be no hope of retrieving the in-depth data on their new planet. They'd have only the holocordings and data arrays; nothing to attract prospective settlers. It took an Outreach to provide that.

*What would I feel like, abandoned helpless in the hands of the murderers of those closest to me?*

She groaned an oath, and punched up the Dushaun ambassador's office. The screen flipped images and settled on the rotating mobius-strip symbol of Dushaun. A cultured voice announced, "The Embassy offices are closed and will reopen at midmorning tomorrow. Thank you."

The deep sinking in the pit of her stomach prompted her to punch up the infirmary directly, telling herself, *It's my duty to find out what's going on*. Finemar came on the screen smiling benignly. Seeing her, he drew his expression into solemnity. "I hope you've not been unduly disturbed by what you witnessed this afternoon, Krinata. The survivors are doing well."

"Thank you," she said. "But I require details on their condition. How soon will they be released?"

"Their prognosis is excellent, considering. We should be able to determine a release date in a few days."

"When can I see Jindigar?"

"He's under heavy sedation. I'm not permitted to authorize visitors for him."

"Jindigar is to be debriefed as soon as possible, by order of the Emperor," she said, hating herself for using such an excuse. But she knew Finemar had been reprogrammed to accept nothing but such authority. "I must object to any delays."

"But I have it on highest authority that Jindigar and

the other two survivors of Kamminth's are not to be allowed visitors, and are to be held as long as possible."

*What?! "Who issued that order?"*

Finemar began to answer, went slack-faced, then puzzled. "I can't locate the source of my orders, but it's Highest Priority. I must have a malfunction, Krinata. I'm sorry. I will attend to it immediately."

His image began to fade, but then the screen split in half and a Dushau simulacrum came on the screen, facing Finemar, profile to Krinata. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing my master's name, Jindigar. I'm Arlai, Onboard Sentient of *Ephemeral Truth* assigned to Kamminth's Oliat. Please provide me a briefing dump."

Finemar turned to Arlai, saying, "My pleasure, but a great deal of the information is under priority seal. Is this sufficient?" In those seconds, Finemar had sent Arlai the open files.

"By no means," answered Arlai in Jindigar's tone. "I require complete information on my master. I have the priorities."

"In Reception," answered Finemar looking down. Then he raised his eyes, saying, "I'm sorry, your key is not sufficient. You haven't been reprogrammed since Emperor Rantan's coronation."

Krinata knew the verbal discussion was for her benefit

alone. The two computers were conversing in their own time frame. She said, "Arlai, I have need to bring your master out of the infirmary within the next few hours. He did request it, and so did the Emperor. Would he be in danger if he were released today?"

Arlai turned to face her, flashing healthy Dushau teeth. "By the data I've been given, no. If he wore my telemband, I could monitor his health as well as Finemar. I have field medic training, as well as Dushau specialization. I would not have placed the Oliat survivors under sedation."

Krinata wondered if Finemar's malfunction could explain Fedewarn's death. She said to Finemar, "You've admitted a malfunction. It makes sense to lighten your caseload under such circumstances, so on my authority, transfer the Dushau to Arlai as a specialist physician." She appealed shamelessly to Finemar's physician's programming. "It's the best way to insure the well-being of the Dushau in your care."

Finemar blinked expressionlessly. Krinata had never seen a Sentient take so long to make a decision. But then he said, "A sensible suggestion. I feel it is wrong to follow it, but I do not know why. Undoubtedly, the malfunction is impairing my judgment. Arlai, send your instrumentality to me at once. I'm beginning to waken the patients who will be remanded to your care."

Again he began to sign off, but this time Krinata stopped him. "I think it would be wise if I were present when Jindigar wakes. Several times he expressed gratitude for my presence. It seems to stabilize him somehow."

Arlai looked surprised, but said, "That can happen on rare occasion, and if so, then it is crucial that you be present."

Finemar looked from one to the other of them, perplexed as no machine ever should be. "I have data that this is true. But I also have specific instructions."

Arlai replied, "It is unwise to follow sourceless instructions, for how will you explain your actions in the event of disaster?"

In evident distress, Finemar agreed to permit Krinata's presence, and the two Sentients vanished from her screen. She snatched up her leptolizer, deactivating the screen, tucked the piol under one arm and headed for the infirmary.

The hospital section was on the top floor, in a far wing of the oldest part of the structure. She set her leptolizer to home on the infirmary, and followed its colored light display until she was thoroughly disoriented. At last, she found herself in a pleasant reception area, wide windows providing a spectacular view of the sunset over the crystal and ebony spires of the Allegiancy capitol.

She paused, breath caught in her throat, once again

ensnared by the upwelling of emotion she'd felt before the throne. The Allegiancy, for nearly two thousand years, had utilized the best within each of those who served it, remaining impervious to their inevitable, mortal pettiness. The greatness of the Allegiancy was in the way it also captured the dedication of people like Jindigar. Such an organization was worthy of her devotion, even her life.

As she approached the monitor screen to announce herself to Security, she felt purified by her perception of the glory outside those windows. A small scurry passed her, three packages on its delivery platform. As Security admitted her to the corridor of inpatient rooms, she set her leptolizer to home on Jindigar, and found herself following the scurry right to the end of the hall and into a large room with three beds and a heart stopping view of the city and the sunset.

There were just a few puffs of cloud scattered about the purple sky, arranged to complement the capitol buildings as if by the Celestial Artist.

Two attendants, a Holot and a Lehiroh, were working over Jindigar and the other two Dushau. As the scurry delivered the packages, the Holot said, "I don't like this. The last time we wakened a traumatized Dushau, she died!"

"But that was before Dissolution, and we told Finemar it was unwise to allow an interview with anyone but an

Outreach."

The Lehiroh spotted Krinata and broke off. "You must be the programming ecologist." When she affirmed that, he asked, "Is your debriefing worth risking this man's life?"

"I'm no medic," she answered, "but Arlai, the Sentient medic who usually treats these Dushau, and I agree the risk is less this way. Hook up Arlai before you wake them, and listen to what he says."

She seated her leptolizer in the com slot near the bed and evoked Arlai. "They're about to connect you."

"Prepared to receive telemetry."

The Holot had one cuff secured around a Dushau arm. He turned to the screen and asked, "Receiving?"

"Perfectly," answered Arlai. "The others?"

The Lehiroh sealed another cuff on Jindigar's arm while the Holot attended the third Dushau. Arlai began running their stats across the screen.

The Lehiroh said, "Finemar, are you with us?"

"Checking. Arlai's stat readback differs from mine. Stand by." In a moment, the screen split and they could see another set of numbers crawl up the screen.

Krinata stood in shock. This was virtually impossible. Computers like Finemar just never, *ever* distorted like this. "Arlai, run your Standardizing Comparison Test. Finemar,

do the same."

The two medics looked at each other in total disbelief. A moment later, Arlai said, "I am clear, up and functioning: Seum's life-stats are too low, the others are low but acceptable."

The numbers on Finemar's side of the screen cleared and Finemar's visage came on, funereal grimness on his countenance. "I am not clear, though up and running. I must shut down the infirmary. I've called Doctor Phips, and he will be here within the hour. I suggest you revive the Dushau by hand, or wait for Phips."

The Holot said, "We'll wait."

Simultaneously, the Lehiroh said, "Arlai can guide."

Krinata said, "I believe it's imperative to revive them as soon as possible. Arlai, can you trust your monitoring? Are you in orbit above this point, or relaying?"

"I am above you and will remain so for sufficient time. I will monitor. Please proceed." He flashed his own face on their screen, gave a reassuring nod, then presented them with the readout and the orders for changing the drugs.

The Lehiroh noted the changes, ordered the Holot to write them down, then opened the side of Jindigar's bed frame and began manually adjusting settings. As the numbers for the others came onscreen, the Holot dictated them while entering them on the portable screenboard

hanging at the foot of each bed. The Lehiroh made the adjustments. By the time he finished, Seum was stirring. Arlai dictated another change, and the whole thing was repeated twice more.

At last Jindigar opened his eyes, peering about him blearily. The windows had turned to reflective black as the lights came on. He raised his head on hunched shoulders, glimpsed the other two of his team, then collapsed back onto the bed with a gusty sigh. Then he saw Krinata. "You came!"

Gratitude flooded from his eyes to hers, and she was warmed. Arlai called, "Jindigar, how do you feel?"

Recognizing the voice, he twisted his head to catch sight of the screen. Krinata tilted the unit so he could see, and Arlai appeared behind the numerals. Computer and Immortal grinned at each other. Then Jindigar said, "I feel terrible. Are you doing this?"

"All my fault. Want something for the headache?"

"Sure. But nothing will blunt the other ache."

Then the other two Dushau were greeting Arlai, getting the whole story of Finemar's embarrassment, which could have been fatal to them, and dragging themselves to their feet to dress. The two attendants helped the others while Krinata fetched Jindigar's tunic and shoes.

Jindigar introduced Arlai to the piol, and petted it as

he struggled into his clothing, and wound his turban. Then he placed the piol on top of his head, signed them all out of the infirmary and led the way back toward Krinata's office, which was several stories underground.

She halted them at the ground floor. "It's well past working hours, and I just don't want to go back there today." She couldn't get the image of death out of her mind. "I need to go home."

Jindigar checked his leptolizer for the time. His was a simple, polished steel model, hardly longer than a finger, the old fashioned, unadorned model that could do everything the cumbersome heraldry-decorated one could do, and weighed less than a third as much. The one the Emperor had given him hung at his belt with Fedeewarn's.

"I didn't realize it was so late. I'm sorry. You go on home, and we'll check in at the embassy." He opened a connection on his old leptolizer, and a silent message appeared: You must upgrade to make connections with this instrument. Thank you.

"Oh," said Krinata, "you'll have to use the new one the Emperor gave you. They've upgraded all systems. But the Dushau embassy is closed for the day. They just show a recorded message to call tomorrow."

"That's peculiar," said one of the Dushau.

Realizing he owed introductions, Jindigar said,

"Krinata, this is Dinai, Protector of Kamminth, and Seum, Formulator of Kamminth. Krinata Zavaronne, our debriefing officer. I've worked with her often, and found her most competent. Perhaps we even owe her our lives. But now," he said pondering his serviceable leptolizer, "I must get to a secured screen and talk privately to Arlai. Apparently this instrument won't allow that."

"I wouldn't use that new one," suggested Dinai.

"Krinata's office . . ."

". . . no doubt only has the newest equipment, installed since the Emperor took over," finished Jindigar grimly.

"That's true," agreed Krinata. She noticed Jindigar's teeth weren't nearly as blue as they ought to be. "You all aren't well enough to be running around hunting a hotel or going over to the Embassy only to find it deserted. Come on home with me. I've a guest room, and one of you can have the sitting room."

Seum was leaning against the wall as if he couldn't stand upright, and Dinai was panting. Jindigar stood straight, but he was too stiff — resisting weakness.

Krinata took charge. "Jindigar, I'll order in some food, and you can reach Arlai privately using your old leptolizer in my old system. Even a Proctor's trace would take all night with my antique."

"Proctor's *trace*," repeated Seum, a kind of creeping horror penetrating his dullness. "Jindigar . . ."

"Hold fast, zunre. Krinata, we accept your kind offer."

They went down to the tube level and Krinata used her leptolizer to call a larger car than she'd used to get to work that morning, but not so large a single person wouldn't use it. The three Dushau filled it. *Must remember to use a Number Five with them!* she thought, and clicked her leptolizer into the receptacle. Relaxing, she pivoted the seat to look at her wilted guests.

Jindigar examined the comunit, then tried his leptolizer in its slot. "No. Only the new design will fit this. Krinata?"

"I told you have the old fashioned machine at home. I'll just take off the adapter for you. Only a few minutes and we'll be there." She used that machine so rarely she had not upgraded it. Most of her work didn't require more communications security than her leptolizer alone provided. *Of course, maybe the new ones don't provide any security from Imperial oversight.* The Dushau were right to be cautious until they found out why their Embassy was closed.

The indigo faces before her set into field-hardened endurance. The trip must have seemed like centuries to them, but was really only minutes. The lift put them a few

steps from her apartment door. When her leptolizer beam touched the door, it evoked her moronic apartment Sentient who began her routine greeting and announcement of supper being served.

"Wait a moment, Fiella," she said. "Company." She apologized to the Dushau. "Fiella isn't in Arlai's class, but she's totally reliable." Then she dropped her leptolizer into its home slot and asked, "Fiella, how would you like a friend to visit you for the evening?"

Fiella put her simulacrum, an overweight grandmotherly human, on the sitting room screen and made flustered sounds. Krinata warned Fiella, then pulled her leptolizer and the adapter out and motioned Jindigar to insert his and evoke Arlai. "They'll get along well enough, I think. Fiella is always polite, and Arlai seems . . . cosmopolitan."

"That he is," averred Jindigar.

Seum and Dinai had stretched out flat on the rose carpet and were doing exercises as if they hurt all over, which she was sure they did after the convulsions. The piol sat on the floor watching them, head cocked to one side.

The screen came alive with a full-length view of Fiella standing on a pink field, just the color of the sitting room carpet, as Arlai walked on screen. The two greeted each other as if they were incarnates, and turned to face

their audience. "How may we . . ." began Arlai, and then seemed to notice Seum and Dinai. "Are you trying to knock yourselves out?" he asked sharply.

They stopped doing leg lifts, and Seum answered, rolling on his side. "From what we've learned, Arlai, we'd better get back into shape again quickly. Is there any faster way?"

"You might eat something and get some sleep first!" Arlai answered with the scolding anger of the overprotective.

When Jindigar said, "Agreed," Fiella glanced at Arlai with genuine respect. "Arlai, send us — and Krinata — a good meal, then we'll confer over these latest developments. Meanwhile, get us an update on Finemar's condition."

"Done!" answered Arlai, earning another marveling look from Fiella. "Survey Base Infirmary has been shut down, all inpatients transferred to Groundschool Hospital. They're talking about deprogramming Finemar. I've been recommending mercy; none of this was his fault."

Dinai sat up, hugging his knees to pull his toes out of the piol's grip. "What do you mean? Whose fault was it?"

"Someone with a very high priority leptolizer amended his programs and inserted blinds so he wouldn't notice his oversights. It was a flesh agency, not a Sentient. My only clue is that when Fedewarn died, a Lehiroh male of very

high birth was trying to question her."

"Question her," repeated Seum, awestruck at the audacity or stupidity. "Arlai, *who was it?*" He raked the room with a glance, as if searching for the threat. "That Lehiroh is three times a murderer."

"I realize that. I've been trying to reach our embassy, but their Sentient doesn't answer."

Jindigar swept the piol up, fondled it, and asked, "Arlai, do you remember the Interregnum — Casey's Planet? That's our situation, I think. My mind is clearing, but I'm still not sure. . . ."

The Interregnum had ended with the birth of the Allegiancy. Krinata had never heard of Casey's Planet.

Arlai said thoughtfully, "They're coming tomorrow to give me the new programming — "

Jindigar lunged forward on his seat. "Countermand!" he said. "Don't let anyone — repeat anyone — tamper with your programming. Tell them I've restricted your servicing to Dushaun Station only. Let them deal with me."

"Acknowledged," answered Arlai crisply.

"These matters," said Fiella in a kindly tone, "are way beyond my comprehension, but I do know your supper has arrived. May I serve you? You all must be famished."

Jindigar nodded. "Please, Fiella; you're marvelous. Arlai, keep trying to get through to the ambassador. Use all

expediency, on my authority, but don't let your requests be traceable to me by any local agency. Wipe all groundside records, and keep yours under seal. Understood?"

"Use graytime procedures. Understood." He executed an obeisance to Jindigar, made a courteous bow to Fiella and took his leave of her as if she were a lady of the high court. She clasped her fluttering hands before her ample bosom and sighed.

As they all rose, Jindigar took Krinata aside. "Now think very hard. Do you really want to harbor us? It could be very dangerous for you; if not to your life, then to your career."

"I don't see why. This is all some ghastly mistake, Jindigar, and as soon as the Emperor—"

"Krinata, *it's the Emperor who's behind it*. Not the hand that wakened Fedeewarn, but the one who ordered it done while he detained us in that ceremony. Think! Where is the Dushau delegation? Why can't Arlai raise the Embassy's Sentient? What is going on here?"

She shook her head, bewildered. "I don't know."

"Only two things are evident. You're going to see the end of a galactic civilization. And the Dushau are going to be blamed for all the ills attendant on that disintegration."

"Now, I really think you're exaggerating — no, you're just plain wrong. The Dushau are known as the staunchest

supporters of the Allegiancy. You've done more for our growth and continuance than any other single species."

"That's not wholly true. We take a passive stance in your affairs, for it's up to Ephemerals to choose how Ephemerals will be governed. But once you've chosen, we will support your choice, and your right to re-choose. Yet we're often blamed when things go wrong. I'm not episodic; my memory is functioning properly now, so believe me. If you befriend us, you're endangering yourself. Say the word, and we'll leave right now. Arlai can eradicate all trace of our presence, and you'll only have to account for why you pulled us out of the infirmary. Finemar's collapse is good enough reason for that. You'll be clear."

She looked at the door, then at the blank screen where Arlai had treated Fiella with such courtesy. How could she turn out three tottering Dushau? What if they collapsed, as Arlai seemed to feel they might? It would be her fault. Then she stopped kidding herself. She wasn't going to turn them out, because they were good people, and such were hard enough to find in any world.

"Look, Jindigar. I don't believe it's like that. There may be some rotten people in high places, but the Allegiancy will come through on your side. You're not going anywhere tonight. Now get in there and eat your supper before I evoke Arlai and get him down on you!"

He stepped back. "Yes, Zavaronne. If that is what you wish. We're grateful — and obligated." He made obeisance to her, just a shade less than if she'd been Empress. There wasn't a hint of mockery in it, either.

Embarrassed, she rushed about, putting the piol out on the balcony with a dish of water and some scraps of food, then hustling Jindigar in to wash up while the aroma of rich, Dushau fare wafted through the apartment.

Once they were all seated about her small table, and Fiella had sent her serving scurry around to present each of them with choices of entree and beverage, Krinata heaved a sigh. There wasn't anything sinister going on. It was just one of those things that were bound to happen when a government got as big and unwieldy as the Allegiancy.

They were hardly finished eating when Arlai came onto the dining room screen and announced, "Jindigar, I've got Ambassador Trinarvil. She wants to speak with you — privately."

### THREE

#### Proctor's Arrest

They adjourned to the sitting room where the screen was larger, taking their drinks with them. Seum lingered to thank Fiella. A scurry set out dishes of fruit as Jindigar brought Ambassador Trinarvil onto the screen, leaving a window in one corner with a headshot of Arlai's simulacrum.

Trinarvil was a small Dushau woman with anxious features and a high voice, which nevertheless carried authority. Her plush indigo skin was darker than Jindigar's, almost as dark as Lelwatha had been, denoting truly advanced age. Yet she made full formal obeisance to Jindigar.

He waved that aside. "It's almost time to forget that silly title forever."

She grinned, showing healthy blue teeth. "Before we discuss sensitive material, we must secure this line."

"Indeed. Arlai, can you subordinate to Kitholpen?"

"Assuredly." Arlai's image was replaced by another Dushau, paler indigo, with a higher bridge to his nose than Krinata had ever seen on a Dushau.

"Your pardon," requested the new Sentient, whom Krinata assumed ran the Dushau embassy. The screen broke up, hissed alarmingly, then settled into a reddish image of Trinarvil.

"Secure," announced Jindigar.

"Secure," agreed Trinarvil, looking at those gathered

around Jindigar. "Now-"

"Where were you this afternoon?" asked Jindigar, not giving her time to consider Krinata's presence at a private conference.

"Consultation with home. For months, there have been rumors. Yesterday, word came of the first anti-Dushau riot. You haven't heard?"

Seum and Dinai were obviously shocked, but Jindigar said calmly, "So soon. How quickly Ephemerals turn."

The conversation continued in the modern Dushauni Krinata had studied, but she often lost the sense. She concentrated, intending to look up later what she missed now.

"It's only in the outlying districts so far, but it seems imperial agitators are behind it, as usual. Blaming the food shortages at space bases on us, accusing us of emptying the throne and then manipulating the government to our own profit. All vague enough to stimulate imagination, evading challenges for proof. The pattern, though, is clear."

"The next step may be already at hand," said Jindigar sadly. "Open indictment by the Imperial Court."

"Rantan laid the groundwork for that yesterday," the ambassador agreed, "addressing Parliament, obliquely hinting that Oliat teams could be withholding information on planets with agricultural or mining potential. He implied

that since most of us expect to live through the next galactic civilization, we might hold back information that would buy us high places in that government. With our lifespan, he said, we've no reason to abhor the starvation of Ephemerals that collapse of the Allegiancy would bring. In fact, the end of the Empire would be to our advantage since it would hasten the New Age which we could engineer any way we chose, since we know where the richest planets are hidden."

"The man's insane," judged Seum.

"Probably," allowed Dinai. "But his logic will appeal."

"Today," said Jindigar, "after the ceremony, he was probing for concrete evidence. He asked about Raichmat. And I believe he sent someone to question Fedewarn while he kept us busy. I saw dismay on his face when Kamminth and Lelwatha collapsed. He didn't intend that. Advisors or no, he didn't believe the nature of the Oliat."

"Arlai told me your story. He lifted recordings of the entire grisly episode, even the questioning in the imperial private chambers. They don't make them like Arlai anymore."

Jindigar agreed while Trinarvil looked down at the table before her, working some invisible controls.

"Someone's trying to crack our screening," she announced.

"Briefly, Jindigar, I've been in conference with home and

our best Historians and Sentients. We discussed hundreds of rumors, half-facts, and planetary trends. The consensus was clear. The Allegiancy is tumbling over the brink of disintegration, and trying to blame us. We're sending out retrieval missions to the Oliat teams in the field, and we're withdrawing all our embassies and consulates, breaking off diplomatic relations, before they openly indict us. Onerir is being evacuated tomorrow morning. Meet us at Overlook Station as the terminator crosses it-

"No," said Jindigar.

Into Trinarvil's puzzled silence, Seum said, "We can't leave Kamminth, Lelwatha and Fedeewarn-

"Bring-" started Trinarvil.

Jindigar cut her off. "Under the circumstances, I'm sure Rantan has already denied permission to remove the bodies from Onerir. Your only chance of pulling out without being stopped is to go swiftly, without announcing intent-

"We're not leaving anyone behind," declared Trinarvil.

Jindigar silently consulted Seum and Dinai, then said, "Kamminth's Oliat contracted to survey three worlds. We found one colonizable, and haven't debriefed on it yet. For Kamminth's sake, we must debrief. You've served Oliat-

"Yes, I understand. But the danger-

"We're still in the field," said Dinai. "Hazard is part

of that life."

"There's one other point," added Jindigar. "I'm under direct imperial edict to submit a complete and detailed report of the Raichmat Surveys. I'm sworn to the Allegiancy Emperor, as he is to me. I'm not so naive as to believe myself safe from him. But for the Oliat, and for Dushaun, I must carry out imperial commands before I leave. The record must show that it has been done with no detail withheld."

Trinarvil frowned gravely out of the screen, meeting Jindigar's eyes in a silent contest that lasted longer than any Krinata had ever witnessed. Finally, Trinarvil said, "You've always been such a stubborn kid."

"And you always told me my attitude would get me into a final trouble one day. Perhaps this is the day, and your prophecy will be vindicated."

"Would that I were wrong." She turned to the other two Dushau. "You're with him?"

The two looked to Jindigar as if he were their Outreach still. He asked, "It could be otherwise? You knew Lelwatha and Kamminth. You knew Kamminth's."

"Arlai," said Trinarvil, "do you agree to this?"

"Without reservation," said Arlai's voice.

After deliberating, Trinarvil said, "Another prophecy then. One day, I'll serve in Jindigar's Oliat."

Jindigar grinned. "It's a deal! I'll see you there!"

The red haze shrank until Trinarvil's figure was sharply outlined. She made another formal obeisance and faded.

The silence was so deep Krinata could hear the ice melting in their forgotten drinks. She understood the ambassador was leaving Onerir and Jindigar was staying, but the reasons had escaped her. Nearly an hour later, still in total silence Dinai and Seum rose and went into the guest room she'd given them.

Jindigar muttered, "I'll explain tomorrow," and followed his zunre. Krinata let Fiella make up the sitting room guest bed. Her own room, with its pink rose petal carpet, violet drapes and mint green bedding seemed to mock her mood. She couldn't believe the Allegiancy would fall apart in her lifetime. To Dushau, "immediately" might be three hundred years from now.

She heard the water running in the guest bathroom, and muffled Dushau voices while she was bathing. Fiella scolded her on the condition of her formal attire — piol dropping stains, Dushau urine from Dinai's convulsions. "I'm sorry, Fiella. It won't happen again."

"Never mind," said Fiella from the bathroom screen. "We haven't had guests since your mother died. We should do things like this more often, even if it costs a few suits."

They are wonderfully courteous." She sighed. "Arlai says you were so heroic, rescuing Dinai and all."

Krinata wasn't about to argue with the Sentients, so she distracted Fiella by asking for the syntax and vocabulary to re-track that interview and understand it while she slept. Then she snuggled into her bed and turned on the sleep field.

She woke four hours later, when the field went off automatically. Since she'd gotten over her mother's death, she'd always slept through that abatement of the sleep field, waking naturally at dawn.

She tossed fretfully for a while, then tried combing her forearms with her fingernails and pressing her thumbs into the palms of her hands to trigger the sleep reflexes. She felt a mild relaxation from it, but then a vision surfaced of the piol left out on the balcony. Before she knew it, she was on her feet, grabbing a robe and opening her door. The sitting room lights were on low, and Jindigar was at the desk terminal, one hand propping his chin, the piol curled on his head and snoring while he scanned old records of the Raichmat expeditions and made new entries with his free hand.

The animal poked its head up to look at her, then scrambled down Jindigar and climbed up her robe, leaving claw marks on the delicate fabric. She plucked it off and cradled it in one arm as Jindigar roused to ask, "Did I wake

you?"

"No, I just remembered leaving the piol outside."

Chagrined, Jindigar said, "I'd forgotten him, too. But I couldn't sleep."

She settled cross-legged on a nearby ottoman and turned the piol over to look for genitals. "Neither could I. How do you tell it's a he?"

"Well, you might say we asked him." He forced a grin onto his ravaged features. "Not very helpful, am I? Here." He reached for the animal and turned its rear to her, raising its tail. "Females usually have a light patch here. And they smell different, even when immature."

"Oh, I never had a piol, though I once had a cat. I thought about getting a dog after my mother died." She hadn't meant to say that. From there, it took only a few gentle questions by Jindigar to elicit the whole story of her mother's death from thransaxx and its complications.

"She must have been a fine woman."

To change the subject, she asked, "Does he have a name?"

"Why, no. There hasn't been time to think." He tried to smile, but she could see strained grief behind the façade. "Do you have any ideas?"

The picture of Rantan's livid face as the piol munched on the prize fish with its festoons of rainbow fins spread

about him made Krinata say, "Why not call him Imperial Fisher, Imp for short?"

"Irreverent, but appropriate."

"You're not smiling. I thought it was funny."

"I'm sorry." He sighed hugely and flicked his fingers over the keypads, forming animated text and diagrams in front of the screens.

Abashed, she remembered that his only memory of Imp's greatest moment was the pain of the deaths of three of his zunre before they had dissolved the Oliat bond. "Are you planning to finish that report so you can leave in the morning with Trinarvil?"

He turned his head to inspect her with astonishment, then answered, "It's going to take longer than that to chronicle over four hundred years as the Emperor has demanded. When this . . . grieving is over, I'll have completely lost touch with those memories, barricaded them behind a kind of emotional scar tissue. So I have to finish this before I . . ." He shuddered.

"Look, if you'd rather be alone- "

He just looked at her, unable to answer.

"After I saw you had the piol, I came out because I thought you might like to talk. It's helpful to humans to talk out a grieving. That's what funerals and wakes are for." She began to uncurl her legs. "But sometimes it doesn't

work across species lines. Perhaps it's too soon."

He put out a hand to halt her. "The grieving will go on hard and long, Krinata. I must ask you to forgive. Let me tell you what Trinarvil said."

"I understood most of it, and got the rest from . . ." Suddenly, the full import of the conversation she had reprised during sleep hit her like a cannon blast. And she knew what had wakened her after the sleeper had turned off.

The Dushau really believed the end was at hand, and that Rantan was going to make them his scapegoat. Despite all of that, Jindigar was going to honor his vows of fealty, taken hundreds of years ago to another Emperor. *What a beautiful man! How could anyone believe those lies against Dushau!*

She didn't know what Zinzik was trying to accomplish, but it must be that he was so intent on his goal of peace and prosperity among the Allied Species that he had allowed his advisors to lead him into a ghastly blunder. And if it went on much longer, it could be very dangerous indeed.

She asked, "Jindigar, are you sure you're not staying here out of a need to court danger, from depression over the incredible losses you've sustained? As a human might do?"

"Dushau might do such things in the emotional turbulence of the onset of Renewal. But I have quite a few more years. This shock alone wouldn't trigger Renewal for

me, or Dinai or Seum. And what I told Trinarvil is true: I owe it to Kamminth and her Oliat to complete this debriefing. Also, I owe it to the Allegiancy to carry out the Emperor's orders."

She was listening with more than her ears. Renewal was the period of about a century every thousand years when Dushau retired to their home planet, took mates, raised families, and became younger day by day. "Kamminth meant a lot to you."

"Yes," he admitted heavily. Again, he put his forehead in his hands as if to soothe a deep ache. "She mated me during Renewal once. We have a son home now — in Renewal. Her last dying concern was for him."

He looked sharply at her, saw her sympathy and shook his head. "No, you don't understand. Such a reaction was most unlike Kamminth — until Lelwatha became her Emulator. Lelwatha was more to the Oliat than a sun to its planets. He was like a deep, still pond, clear to the depths of soul; the radiant stillness acquired through ten Renewals. He exemplified the beauty of ultimate attainment, and his mere presence awakened some of that in us. Kamminth was sharp, young, irascible. Her spiky temper and self-absorption, though simply youthful, made it difficult to be with her. But when Lelwatha came, the Oliat steadied in balance. We doubled in perceptivity. And we became open

to joy. I learned — I hope I learned — so much from him.

"Krinata, I'm so afraid I'm going to lose his touch, that I will be unable to give meaning to his life because we didn't have enough time. And Kamminth — oh, Kamminth. She was learning, too. Now-"

As he broke off, she was aware that he'd revealed more than he'd intended, but she was fascinated to have glimpsed the spiritual value of the Oliat to its officers. To them, it was a maturing, soul enriching experience. And that, not money or adventure — or power — was why Dushau worked Oliat for Planetary Survey.

In his silence, she felt the immensity of his loss, and how it could scar and cripple him for life. She said, "I'll get Fiella to make some tea."

She went into the dining room and summoned Fiella while he continued to stare at his screen. *How does a Dushau cry?* She'd made a professional point of learning all she could about them, and still knew nothing important except that it seemed to her Jindigar needed a good cry right now. So did Krinata, but with less cause. She sat at the table waiting for the tea and wiped at her leaking eyes with a furious embarrassment.

When she took the tea in, along with some cakes Fiella had provided, he was totally absorbed in his work. She curled up in her favorite chair, meaning to stay only

long enough to drink a cup of tea. She watched him sip his tea and munch distractedly while torrents of data swept across all five of the displays now arrayed around the desk.

As he worked, the strain lines smoothed from his face and he seemed younger. She tried to imagine him a thousand years younger. She didn't even know exactly how old he was. But Raichmat's Oliat had Dissolved more than thirteen hundred years ago.

She woke with a start to find Dinai bent over Jindigar at the desk, one arm around Jindigar's shoulders, whispering to him. Jindigar finally roused from his communion with the data displays and moved vaguely, his eyes dazed, his words slurring. Dinai's alarm was written plainly in his posture, his tone, even though she couldn't understand a word he was saying other than zunre, the term for a fellow Oliat member.

She got up, alert as if there were something she could do for Jindigar. But as she moved, Jindigar dragged himself together, and said, "Oh, Krinata, I didn't know you were still there. Did I wake you?"

"No," she lied, checking the time. "I've got to get to the office." She pasted on a smile. "I've got a heavy debriefing later today!" *But he should be in the hospital!*

As she went to dress, he said, "We'll be there."

She left while they were closeted in the guest room, apparently chanting in unison.

The office was buzzing when she arrived. She marched past the reception counter behind which scores of her subordinates sat at desk terminals. Many of them did most of their work at home or elsewhere, coming into the office only occasionally. Today, however, they were in their places, but gossiping, not working.

Clorinda Dover, one of the newest additions to the Survey Base data pool, was fresh from Terra with the air of automatic authority that made everyone hate her while envying her pretty face. She was regaling the young Lehiroh male, Sharfolk, with fictitious details of Kamminth's death, as if she had an inside track to the Emperor's apartments.

Krinata strode past that scene and snapped, "There's work to be done."

"Yes, Lady Zavaronne," intoned Clorinda. The worst of it was, she meant it. To her, rank was everything, and she acknowledged Krinata's status while vying to raise her own.

Krinata stopped, sorry she'd cracked her invisible whip at Sharfolk, who wasn't impressed by titles. "We do have Kamminth's debriefing today, and I'm sure the Outreach will be grateful if we can make it as quick as we can for him."

Clorinda put on a knowing smile that Krinata wanted to wipe off her tastefully made-up face. Three years ago, people like Clorinda wouldn't have been tolerated in

positions of any responsibility. With a bit more rancor than she intended, Krinata said, "And I don't want to hear a single snicker if he walks in here with a piol on his head. The Emperor didn't bat an eyelash, neither will you."

*I shouldn't be so hard on her. She's just young. Besides, she's a member of my team!*

Whispers followed her all the way into her private office. She powered up quickly and began shooting questions at her staff, making sure all the queries from the field had been answered, all new data filed and integrated. Less than five minutes had passed by the time she had all her department's Sentient and all his semi-sentients fully occupied.

Then she checked with Arlai to make sure Jindigar and the others were really as well as they claimed. He answered, "They're not well, but they'll heal faster after they get this over with."

She was staring at the filigreed screen that separated off the debriefing area pondering what to do to make this easier on the Oliat when her door rattled open as if hit by a tornado.

Six Holot guards led by a gilt-carapaced Cassrian trooped into her office in perfect marching step and took up a formation. Feeling smaller than the Cassrian, shock prickling along her skin, she rose to her full height behind

her desk.

The Cassrian was gloating at pulling rank on someone technically his superior. "We have orders from the highest to observe this debriefing."

She roared, "Get out of my office!"

He ignored her, waving toward the full staff outside. "You plan to finish today?"

"The interview part," she answered. "In privacy! I shall file full formal objections—"

"They will be ignored."

Hauteur had always been a Zavaronne tool. She turned it on now, meeting the Cassrian's gaze coldly. "Debriefing must take place in private, or we may lose vital details."

She won the stare-down. Lowering his eyes, he bowed, joints clicking. He said more humbly, "Of course. We will make ourselves inconspicuous. You are ordered to say no word of our presence to the Dushau. But we must monitor. We have our orders." He handed her a slim message tube with the imperial seal on it. "Long live the Emperor."

She broke it and rammed it into the reader. While she folded nervelessly back into her chair, the Cassrian deployed his guards by pairs into Krinata's two side rooms — one a storeroom, the other a bath and dressing room.

The Cassrian and the other two Holot went out into the common office and appropriated desks in the back among the potted plants someone had brought from home.

Krinata stared at the ornately bordered, illuminated, unforgeable Imperial Order. By her oath and her family's oath, she was called to serve her Emperor. She was to complete the debriefing in routine fashion, not indicating to the Dushau that the guards were there, for any emotional disturbance might obscure the data even further than the deaths had already. The Empire needed this planet desperately. The guards were there to prevent interference with her work today. She would be justly rewarded.

She sat with her fists clenched in her lap, her jaw bunching, emotions raging back and forth. She had to breathe evenly to regain calm. But this was her department. This intrusion implied a distrust of her professionalism. A cold thought wriggled up to consciousness. *Or is it me he doesn't trust — because I stood with them yesterday?*

Maybe it was the Dushau, who weren't trusted? Had word of the Dushau withdrawal already reached Rantan? She hadn't turned on the news this morning, and there was no time now. *But of course if this distrust of the Dushau has become public policy, my department will also be suspect. Who else do we work so closely with?*

*Oh, let this be over soon!* But something told her it

wouldn't be. Soon the damage the imperial decrees had done would be unforgivable. The Dushau would have to do something. It could only damage the Allegiancy.

She had to warn Jindigar. Deep intimate details were sometimes revealed during debriefing, personal details that had nothing to do with the planet being surveyed. Yet she'd been specifically ordered not to alert the Dushau to the spies. Jindigar was doing all this from loyalty to his Emperor. How could she do less? Yet, she felt as if she were betraying him, even though there was no way she could get word past the watchers.

While she dithered, feeling helpless and trapped in her own office and hating herself for it, Tully, her department's Sentient, came on the screen — his simulacrum a delightfully muscular young human with a frontier planet accent. "The Kamminth Outreach, Formulator and Protector have arrived."

As the door opened quietly, Jindigar entered. He was flanked by Seum and Dinai, all dressed formally. Sure enough, Imp was atop Jindigar's head. He set the piol down, providing it with a plastic toy fish to play with and asked, waving at the full outer office, "All of that in our honor?"

"We thought we'd be able to finish today. Besides, I think they're all dying of curiosity. Kamminth's tale is all over the division. Right now, I expect they're gossiping

about your arrival." Her cheer sounded strained, and her eyes kept straying to the doors on either side of the room.

Jindigar nodded. "Perhaps we can yet retrieve enough detail to publish a full and attractive prospectus for this planet."

Krinata rose, gesturing to the filigreed screen behind which the debriefing couches waited.

They entered the debriefing area, stripping off turban and outer robe with businesslike precision. As she powered up the equipment arrayed around her control chair, Jindigar installed Dinai and Seum on adjacent lounges and made himself at home on the debriefing couch in the middle. The other lounges remained empty.

He hesitated, frowning at her as if he sensed something amiss. "What's bothering you, Krinata?"

"Uh . . . nothing," she lied, hating herself for being weak. *Nothing's going to happen. It's better he doesn't know.*

She could see through the brittle cheer of his façade to the bottomless ache of loss that was gnawing at his vitals. And he was nursing that ache, not attempting to surmount it, because its ceasing would wall him away from the data the Emperor wanted.

"Let's get on with this," pled Krinata as much for herself as for them.

As if stung, Jindigar turned to his zunre, gathered them with eye contact and then joined hands with them. "Now that we've Dissolved the Oliat, we can't balance for a normal debriefing, but we will access what mutual contact is left to us. Forgive, please, any clumsy lapses."

It wasn't in anything he said, but she got the sudden impression that this was very dangerous for them. Arlai hadn't warned her about that. But she flung herself into her control chair, forcing all worries from her mind. If they could give so much to the Empire surely the least she could do was support them. She snapped on the cone of green light, which signified the detector beams were focused on the debriefing lounge.

Jindigar took his place under that cone as he had hundreds of times before as Outreach for one or another Oliat.

The other two Dushau settled for the long session, hands joined in some sort of formal configuration. Krinata summoned the frame of mind of a prospective colonist as she had hundreds of times before.

She summoned enthusiasm, curiosity, and determination to make a shrewd choice among the new homes available. The machines responded to her brainwaves, the lights flickering in their proper patterns. In the outer office, she knew from years of work there herself,

displays echoed hers, and the staff drew data forth for comparison. Tully stood by with his semi-sentients ready to integrate the data.

"All right, take me to Margo," said Krinata, "and show me what makes it such a great planet to live on."

The scientific data already flowed across her displays, streams of numbers, equations, parameters and analyses, life-typings and ranges. But how many prospective colonists could take those numbers and create the awesome three dimensional image that formed in the green haze before Krinata's chair.

A sheer cliff of red marble rose to a magenta and silver sky. A frothy white waterfall crashed downward, spuming outward on both sides. Enormous winged creatures, blue and turquoise, floated in the updrafts beside the cliff, diving and calling musically to one another, occasionally snapping up some water creature that had been swept over the fall and was tumbling downward through the air.

It was thrilling, breathtaking, beautiful enough to make her cry with yearning to go there. Suddenly, the rare magic happened. Once in ten debriefings, her imagination transported her into a waking dream, fully fleshed out and dimensionally real, as if her brain centers were directly stimulated.

She *became* one of the Oliat officers walking the surface of the new planet, breathing its scents, testing its air on her skin, knowing it intimately with both mind and body. The fine line between intellectual imagination and living dream could not be crossed purposively. When it came, she had to relax and let it happen.

Sleep deprived, emotionally exhausted, she needed to dream. This precious experience had never happened with Jindigar before, and somewhere within was the shrill panic that she'd never have this chance again. She grabbed for it avidly, and found it easy to float away to Margo.

The scene panned around and she saw the foothills rippling away into a plain covered with blue and mint green forest, dotted with lakes. They moved through the air until she could see the edge of the forest, and then an infinite rolling plain with tall waving grasses, grazing herds, streams and lakes. A long-tailed, streamlined silver bird dove into one of the mirror-bright lakes and came up with a big, fat wriggling creature. The bird perched on a boulder and feasted undisturbed. Part of her could become that bird.

Krinata asked aloud, "What eats the fisher-bird?"

Her skeptical curiosity, trained to parallel that of prospective settlers, was her most valuable contribution. Simple holographs could show what the exploring or developing teams wanted customers to see. She had to use

the creativity of the Oliat to present the world as it really was.

While they watched, a sinuous pouncing creature stalked the feasting bird. Figures for its height and weight, its poisonous claws, and the size of its ripping teeth — as well as the fact that it would gladly attack mammals — flowed unseen across Krinata's display. In the outer office, Clorinda would be synthesizing that data with the Oliat's created visions.

The pouncer attacked. The fisher abandoned its kill and flew at the pouncer. The fight raged back and forth across the meadow, Krinata living each side simultaneously. The fisher won, finally gutting and pecking at the pouncer's entrails. She cut off the pain/triumph and focused on the animal species population statistics on her screen.

"What would happen to this land with both these species exterminated?"

The grasses withered, the streams and lakes expanded, eroding the soil. She felt an inward searing desolation.

"Could we build a city here?"

A city sprang up — as the Oliat knew it must look if built here. Shiny buildings repelled the oppressive summer heat, vehicles swarmed through the air and on the ground, surface transports roared in with produce and provisions for the thriving metropolis. A canal was dug to channel the

abundant water of the lowland, and ships nosed up and down that waterway, visiting other outlying towns. It could be one of the more pleasant and prosperous places to live.

"Show me how this city fits onto the world map. Let's see what this world would look like fully developed."

Years flew before her eyes as the Oliat extrapolated how habitation would spread and shift the planetary ecology. She felt the ideal site for the spaceport, and how building it there would turn a swamp into a desert within a century. She saw how they'd have to fight the sand to keep the ships moving, how slender a thread the economy of that planet would hang from as, at that stage of development, agricultural export would be their only means of buying the technology of the galaxy.

But it was no worse than anyplace else.

"Show me the life a typical settler can expect ten years from Opening." An instant before it appeared on her display, an image of a hillside farm etched through her mind and she was there.

A prefab house flanked by standard outbuildings stood in the center, shaded by the remains of a grove of trees. The blue and mint leaves were falling; they had a peculiar but lovely odor. In the distance, she could hear the buzz of a reaper harvesting a field of noddies — grass with heavy seed pods. Fruit trees stood about the house. A small kitchen

garden thrived behind the barn. There were already three silos to hold the coming harvest.

Tamed native animals romped with some human or Lehiroh children while a couple of men and a woman labored over an outdoor grill, to prepare a supper for the field hands. Peace soaked her nerves.

The area seen from above revealed a community of farms which pooled their resources to buy and run harvest and planting equipment. A good life; Krinata reveled in the deep personal satisfaction, the specific kind of peace and joy never found on an urbanized, industrialized planet.

Oliat perceptions extended, she walked toward the farmhouse. A part of her mind complained she was sinking too deeply into the dream state, and searched out a question: “What dangers lurk here in the wilderness?”

Suddenly, the sky was swept with darkness. Purple, black and yellow clouds boiled up from the horizon. A funnel cloud dipped down and ripped a channel across the harvested field gathering dirt and chaff — and several human bodies — as it roared toward her. A huge reaper was lifted from the nearby field and dragged along the ground to slam into the barn, scattering timber and glass everywhere. She ran.

A roof beam landed amid the children, smashing one of them, spattering Lehiroh blood on the others who were

swept away in the wind to be deposited grotesquely on the porch, battered but still alive.

"No!" yelled Krinata.

But dream had turned to nightmare. The roaring, battering monster corkscrewed toward her, sucked her up and tried to tear her limb from limb, and then dashed her indigo body into hard, infinite pain.

She woke to see in the holoimage before her, a stalwart Dushau female she knew immediately as Taaryesh, Kamminth's Outreach, sprawled brokenly against a tree.

"No!" she shouted again, ripping the contacts from her skin, trying to get to Jindigar. "Tully!"

Jindigar groaned, arched backward in a spasm, then curled on his side, moaning in long, shuddering sobs. He was wailing in a keen voice by the time Krinata got to him. The other two Dushau were clutching each other helplessly.

*Damn my imagination! Just let him be all right, and I'll never let it loose again!*

The doors burst open and the Holot guards converged on the Dushau.