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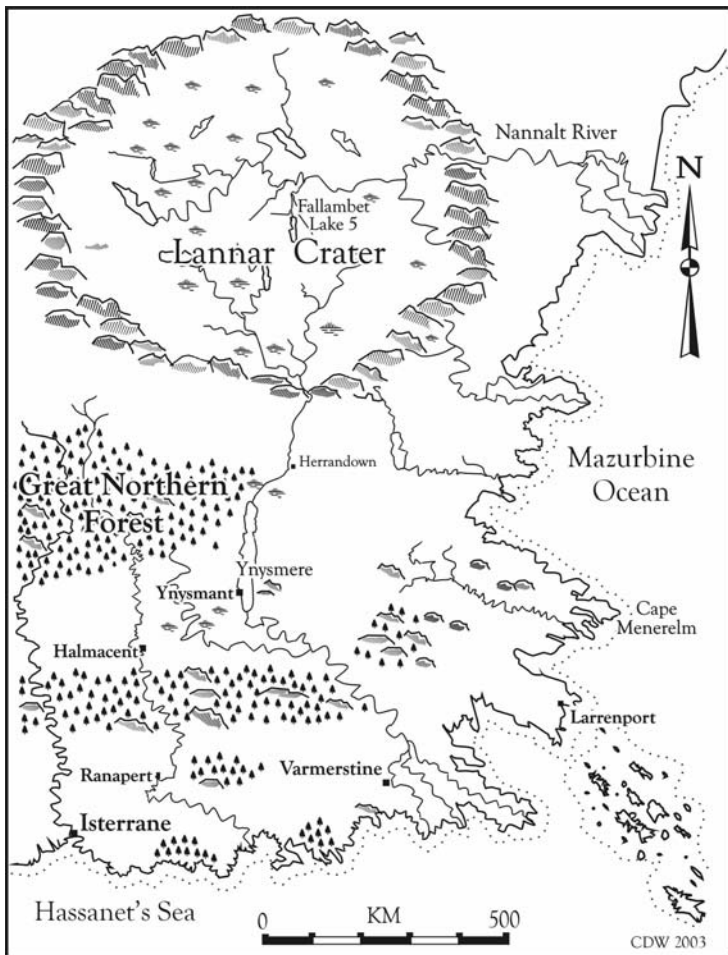
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**I**t is like being at the prow of a ship, thought Merral Stefan D'Avanos, as he gazed southward out of the rain-drenched windows of the Planetary Affairs building at the sodden houses, roads, and parks of Isterrane below.

Beyond the high gray wall that protected the city from storm and earthquake waves, he could faintly make out the angry white breakers of the ocean's edge. *A storm. How appropriate. A storm has been unleashed on this planet—the Gate has been destroyed and Farholme is isolated from the rest of the Assembly. And we must face what it brings. Do the others feel this?* Merral turned around slowly to stare at the three figures who sat round the dark wood table, awaiting the arrival of Representative Corradon. Vero, dressed in a green jacket and trousers with a definite non-Farholme cut, sat at the far end of the table, staring abstractedly at the large mural of the woodlands of the High Varrend that filled the end wall. Merral sensed that the bland expression on his face barely concealed a profound dejection. Vero reminded him of a lost child. But then, wasn't that exactly what he was? It would take forty years for any message to reach them from the Assembly, fifty years for a ship to come. In what sense did a family continue to exist after half a century of total separation? To the right of Vero sat the slight but erect figure of Perena Lewitz with her cropped auburn hair. Dressed in a deep blue space pilot's uniform, she was staring out of the windows, her expression unreadable. Merral knew the uniform was unnecessary for this meeting and suspected that it was an act of defiance against events. The Gate might be gone and, consequently, her flying curtailed, but Perena would wear the uniform nonetheless.

There was always something insubstantial and reserved about Perena, and here, amid the gathering storm, both qualities seemed emphasized.

Perena's sister, Anya, sat next to her, and Merral noted the contrasts between them. Anya, with a heavier build and longer, redder hair, wore a beige pullover and trousers that teetered on the edge of informality. She was staring at a pile of papers with a deep frown, and as she shuffled them in evident consternation, he felt a longing to put his hand on her shoulder to reassure her. Vero rose and joined Merral at the window.

"My friend," he said lightly, the accent of Ancient Earth plain in his voice, "I have made a decision to keep some of my suspicions quiet."

"Which?" Merral was aware of the others listening.

"Up there," Vero said, gesturing skyward to where the hexagon of the Gate had hung, "I made guesses. I guessed that, despite everything that our history has told us, elements of Jannafy's rebellion somehow escaped destruction at Centauri in 2110. I guessed that they survived, fled, developed in ways we cannot imagine, and now, over eleven thousand years later, they have come back."

"Where, on the very edge of the Assembly, we have encountered them."

"Perhaps."

Perena had joined them now, her lean, tanned face showing curiosity. "But why do you wish to keep these guesses silent?"

"I simply have no proof. It is all speculation." Vero shook his head. "Our tale is extraordinary enough without my adding to it. I think we had best stick to facts. Theories can wait."

Anya leaned back in her chair. "Makes sense, Vero. I barely believe it myself. But, Merral, reassure me—you will take the lead in any discussion? Please?"

Merral hesitated. "I think it is Vero who should speak. He has had suspicions longer than any of us that something was wrong. He is a sentinel."

“No,” Anya replied, the ghost of a grin on her face. “Be realistic. The story of your meeting with the intruders is so incredible that they will only believe it if it’s told by someone with as little imagination as a forester. This is *your* job, Tree Man.”

Vero turned to Merral, a faint smile trying—and failing—to break through his dejected expression. “Yes, you, Merral, should lead. I am both a stranger to Farholme and a sentinel.”

Merral noted a slight gesture of accord from Perena. “Very well,” he said.

There was the sound of echoing footsteps outside the room. The door slid open, and a tall man wearing a dark gray suit entered, paused, and looked around with alert blue eyes. Merral instantly recognized Anwar Corradon, representative for northeastern Menaya and the current Chairman of the Farholme Committee of Representatives. He had heard the representative speak at ceremonies and conferences, and along with all of Farholme, he had watched his short but momentous broadcast the previous night.

This close, Merral was suddenly struck by how much Corradon looked the part. In his midsixties, he had the sort of face that sculptors and painters liked: long and rather angular, dominated by a well-defined, almost aquiline nose, and thick, wavy black hair with silver streaks. With his looks and bearing, Corradon would have stood out in a room full of people. There was something about his calm, positive manner that seemed to reassure that, however bad things were, they could be sorted out.

“Good afternoon,” he announced in a precise and resonant voice as he looked around. He gave a rather sad smile, and for the first time Merral felt there was a hint of the strain he must be feeling. “In the last few hours, I have wished, for the first time in my life, that I was neither a representative nor chairman of the Farholme Committee. Yet this—” here he raised a hand skyward with a slightly theatrical gesture—“happened on my shift. And we must all do the tasks we are called to.”

Corradon smiled at Anya. “Now, Miss—sorry—*Doctor* Lewitz, I

know. And I can guess this is your sister, Captain Perena Lewitz, but the others here . . .” He shook his head.

“Let me,” Anya said. “This is Sentinel Verofaza Laertes Enand of Ancient Earth.”

“Ah, our visiting sentinel,” Corradon said as they shook hands. “I’m sorry, Verofaza. It’s hard to know what to say, I’m afraid.”

“I get abbreviated to Vero, sir.” Vero hesitated. “Yes, I’m afraid I will be a guest of Farholme for a long time.” He seemed to struggle with his emotions.

“Fifty years.” Corradon shook his head. “My deepest commiserations,” he said in a voice barely more than a murmur. “Another lamentable story. But if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The representative turned to Merral.

“And this,” said Anya, “is Forester Merral Stefan D’Avanos of Ynysmant.”

“A forester?” Bushy eyebrows rose in surprise. “I think I have heard your name.” He offered Merral a firm handshake. “It’s a small planet.” A rueful smile slipped across his face. “I was in agriculture once, before they decided that I was more gifted at management. Until this happened, I had not regretted the change.”

The door opened.

“Ah, here is Dr. Clemant.”

A younger man, also wearing a gray suit, entered the room, closing the door carefully behind him. He stood in front of the door, looking around with deep-set dark gray eyes as if he was trying to fully evaluate the situation before taking another step into the room. The newcomer was shorter than Corradon and had a pale, round face accentuated by neat, pitch black hair parted precisely down the middle.

Merral, who judged the newcomer to be in his forties, felt struck by his watchful and reserved expression.

“And may I introduce,” said the representative, “Dr. Lucian

Clemant. Until yesterday, Dr. Clemant advised me on planetary social trends. He has now been given the role of crisis advisor.”

Doctor Clemant bowed formally and gave a stiff smile. “An unprecedented title for an unprecedented situation,” he said in a deep but rather unemotional voice. *He is a private man*, Merral decided. *You couldn’t fail to notice Corradon, but you could easily overlook his advisor.*

“I have no idea of the purpose of this meeting,” Corradon said. “Anya insisted it was vital. So I took the liberty of inviting Lucian. Please, everybody, introduce yourselves to him and then—without further ado—let’s take our seats. As you can imagine, we are busy people at the moment.”

Clemant nodded and moved around rapidly, giving brief handshakes, repeating each name carefully as he heard it.

When all were seated, Corradon nodded to Anya.

“Representative, Advisor,” Anya began awkwardly, “thank you both for seeing us—”

“Oh, Anya, we can be on first-name terms.”

“Thank you, sir. But this is a serious matter. We seek you as Representative. Formality is appropriate.”

Corradon and Clemant exchanged glances, and Merral felt that the advisor’s watchful gaze suddenly seemed to become sharper.

“Formal it is then, Dr. Lewitz,” Corradon said. “But before you begin, let me give you a status report, so you know where we stand. We have, by the grace of God, weathered the immediate crisis. Communications across Farholme, for example, will shortly be fully restored. The shock of the blast weakened the diary network, and the inevitable usage surge in the wake of the accident overloaded what was left. But it should be back up in an hour.”

He glanced at Clemant and got a nod of confirmation. “And, thankfully, the Admin-Net has stayed up.” Merral sensed relief in his voice. It was understandable; almost everything to do with running the planet, from the registration of births to the requisitioning of road

repairs, went through the Admin-Net. If that had been wrecked, Farholme would have been incapacitated.

“May I ask, sir,” Vero said, “about the state of the Library?”

Merral remembered that Vero hoped to use the Assembly’s vast store of information to try to obtain clues to the mystery of the intruders.

“Lucian?”

Clemant, who was sitting with his hands placed neatly before him on the table, gazed at his fingers for a moment before looking up at Vero. “The Library? Well, we hold copies of about 63 percent of the Assembly data stock here. Those files are, of course, intact. I have ordered an inventory of what is missing. I suspect the losses will mostly be specialist files to do with other worlds. It will not be back on line today, and tomorrow is, of course, the day of prayer and fasting. But it will—I am told—be back on line the day afterward. Does that help?” The advisor turned toward Corradon to indicate he had finished and then returned to staring at his fingers.

“Thank you,” Vero said.

Corradon looked around. “So, that is encouraging. Long term—well that’s another matter. A whole new global set of priorities will have to be sorted out. There are endless meetings being arranged, and I can only hope that tomorrow will help clear all our minds. But there are grounds for optimism.”

Corradon paused and stared at the end wall. “I have to say that I sympathize with those who have found this event personally traumatic. Our youngest son . . .” He paused, struggling against some deep emotion. “His fiancée was on agricultural training on Pananaret. . . .” The public persona seemed to crumble slightly. “The wedding was to have been this autumn. It is almost unimaginable. Already you can see the problem that is emerging.” His voice was slow and strained. “Does he stay engaged to her for the next fifty years? Or does he treat it like a death?”

Corradon continued to stare out at the rain a moment longer and then turned back to them, his face once more the picture of assurance.

“But such decisions *will* be made.” Then he looked sharply at Anya. “So, Dr. Lewitz, if, as you say, you and your friends can cast light on this calamitous accident, we will hear you out. But otherwise—if you will excuse me for saying so—other needs are pressing.”

“Sir, it was not an accident.”

Corradon’s eyebrow shot upward. The advisor stiffened.

“*Not* an accident?” The representative frowned. “I hope you can both clarify *and* justify that statement.”

Anya nodded. “Yes. But, please, let me hand you over to Forester D’Avanos, who has been involved from the start. I will let him tell the story.”

Merral, aware of the intense and unfaltering gaze of both the representative and his advisor, began his account. He started four months earlier, just before the Nativity celebrations, when he had visited the Forward Colony of Herrandown and seen what he had taken to be a large meteor going northward, toward the area of the Lannar Crater.

Here Clemant silently raised a finger to pause him, drew a control pad out from the table, and pressed buttons. The woodland scene on the far wall disappeared, to be replaced by an image of the whole of Menaya. Merral, recognizing it as a customized digital composite, was struck by how the green areas of woods and cultivation seemed no more than some artist’s daubs over the blacks, grays, and dirty browns of the lava fields, ash flows, and sand deserts.

Feeling conscious of the shortage of time, Merral quickly continued. “While I was at Herrandown I felt there was something wrong—something I couldn’t identify. Anyway, I returned on the eve of Nativity to Ynysmant to find that Vero had arrived at my parents’ house.”

At Vero’s name, the advisor again raised a finger in interruption. “Sentinel Enand, if I may ask . . . why are you on Farholme? Isn’t Brenito Camsar our sentinel?” His tone was cool.

Vero’s gaze seemed as steady as the advisor’s. “Yes, Brenito Camsar has been your official sentinel for—I think—twenty-two

years. He requested help. He had had a vision that Farholme was under threat. I was sent in response.”

Clemant, still staring at Vero, tapped his chin thoughtfully. “A threat? As long ago as Nativity? Remarkable. . . . Anyway, please continue.”

Choosing his words, Merral explained how, two weeks ago, his cousin Elana had reported seeing a creature that she described as half insect and half human above the Herrandown colony and how his own brief investigation had suggested that there had indeed been something there. As he spoke, Merral saw how the expressions on the faces of the representative and his advisor began to shift from puzzled interest to marked unease. Merral then mentioned results Anya had obtained from the DNA analysis of the strange fur sample he had found and how the results implied that, in total contravention of all Assembly practice, the creature had an apparent mixture of animal and human DNA. As he spoke, Merral found himself comparing the faces of Corradon and Clemant; while Corradon’s expression displayed alarm, horror, and shock, his advisor’s face simply showed a cool astonishment. *Corradon is outraged*, Merral noted. *His advisor seems to see this as nothing more than some extreme intellectual challenge.*

Then, as Merral went on to mention Vero’s discovery that his uncle had apparently willfully altered a re-created voice, the advisor leaned over and whispered something into the representative’s ear. Merral caught the word *miriam* or something like it, but it made no sense.

Corradon paused as if in thought, turned to the map, nodded, and then motioned Merral on with his account.

As Merral recounted the story of his trip north up the Lannar River with Vero, Clemant smoothly enlarged the wall image to show the river’s path. When, with halting words, Merral described the discovery of the two types of intruders, the representative suddenly strained forward over the table toward Merral.

“You are *serious*?” he asked, his blue eyes strangely wide. “This is

not some vision or illusion? There really *are* strange creatures loose on our world?”

“I am afraid so,” Merral answered, suddenly aware of the tension in the room. “I wish it were a vision. But we saw them clearly. And I have a wound from one, and we have provisional genetic results from blood samples of both and images.”

Corradon shook his head in bewilderment, looked at Clemant as if for reassurance, found none, and leaned back in his chair. “Continue,” he said in a tone that indicated he had been badly shaken. “I did not mean to interrupt. Nor, of course, to suggest that you had not got your facts right. However, I had no idea that you were going to tell us anything of such appalling importance.”

Mindful of the passing time, Merral rapidly told the account of how they had spent the day on the hilltop at Carson’s Sill. Here, although he was inclined to skim over the violent and bloody encounter with the intruders, Vero kept interrupting him and prompting him to expand on various details. Then, alarmed by the intensity of his memories, Merral recounted how they were attacked at nightfall and, at the last minute, rescued by Perena with her ship. He then explained—as economically as he could—how, once back at Isterane, Perena had arranged for them to join the inter-system liner *Heinrich Schütz* in order to leave the system and get to Earth rapidly. Perena took over and showed her satellite image of the intruder ferry craft near Carson’s Sill before outlining the appearance of the mysterious envoy and his warning to her. Finally, Merral concluded with how the inter-system liner had narrowly escaped being destroyed.

“And that is our tale,” he said. “We felt you ought to hear it.”

The representative took a deep breath, placed his head in his hands, and stared silently at the table in front of him. Merral found himself impressed by the man’s control. In the silence, he was aware of the gusts of rain being flung at the window. Then Corradon looked up at Perena, his face pale. “This envoy, this strangest of figures, can you repeat what he said to you? His words were . . . ?”

Perena gave the tiniest of nods. “‘Captain Lewitz, *night is falling. The war begins.*’ The words will not easily be forgotten.”

“Excuse me, Captain Lewitz,” Clemant said, his dark eyes scrutinizing her, “can we be sure that this was an *objective* occurrence?”

Perena returned his gaze, her face revealing no emotion. “As opposed to a subjective vision? *No*. It *could* have been a hallucination. But as it preceded—and predicted—one of the most dramatic events in Assembly history, I think we ought to treat it seriously.”

The representative nodded.

“You have never had anything like this before?” continued the advisor.

“No,” said Perena. “Space Affairs gives me a yearly psycho—”

“Lucian, what’s your point?” Corradon’s tone was sharp.

“Sir, I just want to distinguish qualitatively between the biological data and the ship damage, which can be considered as hard data, and this report. Which is of . . . of an *appearance*. It could be a vision.”

Perena looked across at Clemant with what Merral felt was a gentle curiosity. “I considered the vision hypothesis myself, sir, but after examining the evidence I felt it was an objective appearance. And I do not feel that the creature I met with was human.” Her voice remained even toned.

Corradon looked up at the wall clock. “Please,” he said, “discussion of exactly what, or *who*, Captain Lewitz saw can wait. The fact that this envoy predicted the Gate loss and allowed us to save almost everyone on an inter-system liner validates it for me. Whatever, or whoever, it was. And it makes the announcement of a war and ‘night’ worrying in the extreme.”

“There was another warning.” Vero’s voice was quiet but firm. “From a man who dreams and who has visions. He told Merral and me—independently—that he had foreseen the testing of the Assembly and a storm unleashed on Farholme. He gave us a command ‘to watch, stand firm, and to hope.’”

“To watch, stand firm, and to hope,” Clemant echoed slowly, his round face a mask. Then he looked at Merral with something that

hinted at a frown. “Forester, I wish we had known these things. Had these anomalies been reported . . .”

“In hindsight, sir, I erred. But—”

Corradon waved a hand in dismissal. “Never mind now. I’m afraid we have another meeting in five minutes with the Epidemiology Council. Anya—Dr. Lewitz—please tell me more about the biology of these creatures.”

“Sir,” Anya said, slipping her diary off her belt and putting it on the table, “there are two sorts of organisms that we have evidence for. Both seem, I’m afraid, to be heavily modified humans.”

She clicked on her diary, and after a terse command, the map on the wall was replaced by the images Merral and Vero had obtained through the fieldscope. Merral stared again at the strange creatures with their brown, polished-woodlike carapaces, their weirdly jointed limbs, and the platelike covering of their heads and chests. As he watched, the horror of them came back to him, and he was barely able to suppress a shudder. He heard a sharp, appalled intake of breath from Corradon and saw his advisor shaking his head in incomprehension.

“These,” said Anya, her voice dark-edged with a note of disgust, “are the ones that we call cockroach-beasts. About 1.5 meters high, with a chitin-rich, rigid outer skin casing. I thought it might be like fingernail cuticle but it’s different, apparently generated from insect DNA segments. It’s not actually a true exoskeleton, as apparently they do have a vaguely hominid bone structure underneath. It’s more an organic armor.”

The advisor opened his mouth and closed it again sharply.

Anya showed a few more images. “You can see they are bipedal; they have stereoscopic, forward-facing vision. The insect appearance is purely superficial; they are mammals. Not arthropod eyes either, which is consistent with Elana Antalfer’s report that one was watching Herrandown. Distance vision, you see. The hands are strange; the finger and thumb give a scissorlike cutting blade. It’s apparently efficient, as Merral found out.”

Merral, trying to suppress his memories of the attack, observed a look of stunned incomprehension on the face of the representative and his advisor.

“These we just call ape-creatures,” she said, flicking a new image on the screen. Merral felt his stomach squirm again at the sight of the tall, dark-furred beasts with their strange, backward, displaced heads and their peculiar stooping stance. “Bigger, around 2.2 meters tall. These seem to have a mixture of ape and human DNA, but with some innovations. The data is preliminary.”

The representative, his jaw moving up and down, gestured at the image. “Ape and human DNA *intermixed*. I find the concept appalling and the reality, well . . . are there *no* limits?”

“A profound question,” Vero said in a low but insistent voice.

“This data has not gone to Ancient Earth?” Merral turned to see the advisor staring at him.

“No,” Merral answered. “We were taking it with us when the Gate exploded.”

Clemant shook his head. “Putting aside—for the moment—the extraordinary irregularity of your journey, why didn’t you just transmit all this data as soon as you had it?”

Vero spoke before Merral could answer. “S-sir, I take responsibility. It was because we found out that the signals through the Gate were being intercepted.”

“*Intercepted?*”

“I’m afraid so,” Merral said, feeling he needed to protect Vero. “We can show you the evidence, but the intruders were able to intercept and modify Gate signals and diary calls.”

Vero raised dark, mobile fingers. “A-and if I may interrupt. Please, we must all assume from now on that all our calls can be overheard. Nothing of what we have said here today must be transmitted.”

Corradon and Clemant exchanged wide-eyed glances.

The silence was broken by the advisor’s deep voice. “Let me summarize. *One*: you believe that non-human—or modified human—creatures have landed in northeastern Menaya. *Two*: they have at their

disposal technologies beyond us: in communications, genetics, and weapons. *Three*: they are hostile. And *four*: they are behind the destruction of the Gate. Is that a fair summary?"

Merral was conscious of nods of agreement around him.

"But *f-five*—" there was determination in Vero's voice—"we must not neglect the spiritual dimension. The disturbances in Herrandown, the modified re-created voice. The feeling of evil we have felt. Above all, the warnings of this envoy. Indeed, the very fact of his presence."

Clemant, his face inscrutable, said nothing.

The representative rose. "We must go," Corradon said. "Although after this, I do not feel like another meeting. I need a chance to think and pray."

He stared at Vero for a moment before shifting his gaze to Merral. "But I have, of course, one more question: What do you suggest I do? You have had more time to think about things."

Merral, suddenly finding himself unclear about what he was to say, looked at Vero.

"To be honest, sir," Vero replied, "I think that, at this precise moment, you should do nothing. Until we can meet again the day after tomorrow."

"Nothing?"

"Yes; we too need time to think and pray. I do not think a day's delay will make any difference. I also fear there is a real danger that we may make a wrong decision."

"But surely," Corradon asked, "it could be dangerous to delay?"

"Possibly, sir, but we do not know where the intruders are. And your north looks very big to me."

"I agree with Vero," Merral said. "We need to keep quiet. For the moment."

Corradon looked at Clemant, who gave an unhappy shrug. "Sir, I agree," he said in a low voice. "We need to be very careful. There are issues here that we need to discuss before we act."

“But shouldn’t people be warned?” Corradon asked, smoothing his streaked hair. “I have a responsibility.”

“Ah, but warned against what, sir?” Vero was frowning. “We do not know how many intruders there are. Or even whether they are a threat beyond the Lannar Crater area. Besides, everyone is so shaken at the loss of the Gate that another shock may cause panic.”

An intense expression of alarm briefly appeared on Clemant’s face before vanishing.

“Hmm. What about the other representatives?” Corradon asked. “I must talk with them. Can I call them?”

Vero shook his head. “Sir, I do not think you should use diary transmission to talk of such things. None of us should; it may be intercepted. Are you meeting them soon?”

“They are all gathering here in two days for what are scheduled as several days of crisis meetings.”

“Sir,” Merral said, catching a nod from Vero, “I suggest we meet with you earlier that day. Would that be possible?”

Corradon looked carefully at him and then glanced at Clemant for support. “Yes.”

“And, sir,” Vero interjected, “if I might make a request, can we meet somewhere more isolated? We have no idea what the power of the intruders is, but we cannot rule out being overheard or noticed here. It was an old rule for meetings to do with strategy to be carried out in secret places.”

Corradon shook his head with wearied astonishment. “I had not thought that it was possible to get worse news than the loss of our Gate. But *this* clearly is. This event . . . no, these *events*, are almost too terrible for words. Indeed, the combination of this and our isolation . . .” He paused as if reluctant to finish the sentence. Finally, a degree of composure returned to his face. “I’m sure we can find somewhere suitable to meet. Can’t we, Lucian?”

Clemant gave a slight nod of agreement.

The representative walked to the door with a determined step. “Come, Dr. Clemant, we must leave or we may have to make an expla-

nation. And that would not do. Everybody, nine o'clock the day after tomorrow. And then we must take some action." Then he gave a small bow of his head and swept his gaze around the table. "Forester, Sentinel, Doctor, and Captain—my greatest thanks."

Then, with his advisor following him, Representative Corradon left the room.



Perena, anxious to get back to her ship to oversee the repairs, drove them back in her borrowed Space Affairs four-seater. She dropped Anya at the Planetary Ecology Center and Merral and Vero at Narreza Tower, where she and Anya had their apartments. Perena had found Merral and Vero an empty fourth-floor two-bedroom apartment there; an out-of-system visitor was going to occupy it in a fortnight's time, but that wasn't going to happen now.

As they drove, there was almost total silence in the vehicle. *Somehow*, thought Merral, gazing at the somber, wet streets that seemed to echo his mood, *we have crossed another boundary. Until just now, only four of us really knew what was happening. Now we are six, and the two new people have the power to act.*

*Now we need to decide what to do.*