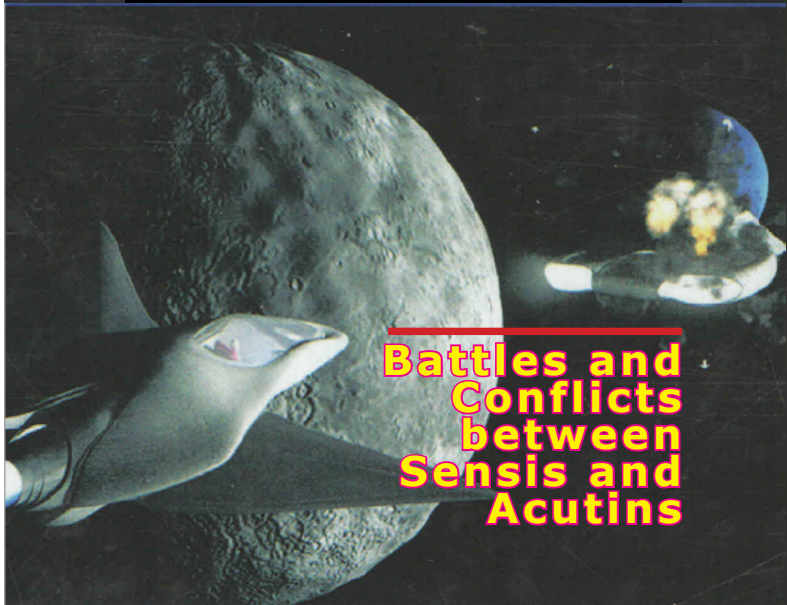


Boris Cherin Levy



**Battles and
Conflicts
between
Sensis and
Acutins**

**THEY
CAME
TO GET ME**

Boris Cherin Levy

**THEY CAME TO
GET ME**

Translated by **Hugh Brown**

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Chapter I

I stretched out on the grass of the alpine meadow and breathed deeply. Peace, silence and the pure mountain air filled me with a comfortable feeling of lazy contentment, a drowsiness in which images of the nearby mountain peaks drifted into the foreground and then disappeared again. I think I even dozed off, and then half woke up again. I was just sinking back into a deeper doze when a slight shudder shook my body. I opened my eyes but the heat of the sun soon pushed me back into my sleepy torpor. "Probably just a muscle relaxing or something," I said to myself before yielding to drowsiness. But even as my breathing slowed and I slid back into a doze, I felt another shudder. A sense of movement, of some vivid event, intruded so rapidly into my slow-moving thoughts, forcing its way into the foreground of my consciousness, that I lifted myself up on my elbow and looked around. Everything seemed normal. My friends were still stretched out lazily on the grass. All except Rick and Jane, a couple of school-leavers with their final exams coming up, who were chatting quietly. It was pleasant lying here in this grassy meadow, and none of us had felt like continu-

ing to the little mountain lodge slightly higher up, although the trail was far from arduous. The scorching heat and the fresh air made it even more inviting.

I stretched out again on the grass. That strange sensation had come and gone in a flash. I grinned to myself and shook my head: it had been a hard week. I lay back. My breathing slowed and once again I slipped into a doze. Suddenly, and with increasing insistence, flashing outlines started appearing before my eyes. Shapes, now dark, now light, darting from one side to the other. I held my breath and waited. It wasn't anything I could put a name to, and it surely couldn't have been anything important. I shook my head to get rid of the uneasiness I was beginning to feel. Yes: a feeling of anxiety was creeping over me. "It's coming towards me," I thought. It was all coming towards me. What was? There was nothing there. Nothing that could come towards me through my thoughts alone. Then the flashing outlines became a more vivid image, sped up, darted to the left, crystallised once again, traced a zigzag course and disappeared.

"What on earth?" It was all much too vivid for a dream. I propped myself up on my elbows, still unsure whether I had simply been dreaming, and scanned the peaks of the surrounding mountains.

"Whaa...!" I gasped. The scene from my dream, or whatever it was, appeared before me. The gleaming surface of a disc-like object with delta wings at its sides flashed past and disappeared. Then it appeared again and turned suddenly in our direction. Judging from its speed, it would be over us in a matter of seconds. That's all I had time to think, before something else flashed into view behind the craft. A triangular object. A moment later, the two objects shot off, one behind the other, jockeying for position in what appeared to be a kind of dogfight. The whole thing barely lasted a few seconds. Then the second craft was alongside the first, as though it had caught it. There were some more flashes, the two craft glowed

red-hot, collided and bounced back. The second exploded and the first, evidently damaged, spiralled downwards, appeared to rally, lost height again, rallied once more and flew to the forest, where it landed noisily among the trees on the other side of the clearing. Silence fell. Everyone was staring at the place where the ship had landed. We saw a flashing light, and then all was silence.

During the last few moments the noise had attracted the attention of most of the climbers scattered across the hillside, who were now looking in the direction of the dust cloud and wondering what had happened.

“Look!” shouted a gaunt, fair-haired man a few metres away from me, pointing towards the edge of the clearing. “Is that the pilot?”

“Were they hit by lightning?” asked John, one of the kids from our group, before shaking his head. “He looks hurt.”

This triggered an avalanche of comments, mixed with excited shouts that grew louder and louder. Suddenly everyone fell silent again.

“He’s coming towards us!”

It certainly looked as though the pilot was wounded. And yet he was approaching surprisingly quickly. And he seemed to be heading straight towards our group.

“He’s gone past those climbers over there!” I said out loud.

“Yes!” confirmed my neighbour. “He’s not interested in the next group either! He’s coming in this direction!”

“It certainly seems to be us he’s interested in!” said the gaunt man. Everyone fell silent again. The figure was coming closer and we could make out his unusual outfit with increasing clarity. It appeared to be some sort of flying suit: close-fitting and of an unusual cut, of a kind that none of us had ever seen. He seemed to be a man of about forty. Suddenly he staggered. He had no visible wounds but he must have been injured. A few paces still separated him from the neighbouring group when he raised his hand in greeting and, without stopping, continued

past the group of teenagers and older climbers, and marched on with increasingly frequent glances in my direction. This was becoming so evident that even the other climbers began looking at me. My only response was growing astonishment and more frequent glances at the approaching figure. I shook my head in confusion, because the whole thing was really quite strange, and forced a smile. Then I looked more closely at the stranger's face and into his eyes.

"Huh?" I gasped. A single moment was enough for us to exchange a series of rapid but apparently meaningful glances. I started in surprise. Or was it fear? The realisation that this stranger was rapidly reading my thoughts made me shiver. I looked appraisingly at the stranger once again, with a succession of rapid glances at his eyes, while at the same time trying not to meet his gaze, in an increasingly desperate attempt to understand the situation. The stranger was about my age and his appearance was friendly. He showed no sign of hostility as he walked up to me and said in a serious but soothing voice:

"There is no time left. I know it is hard for you to trust a stranger. But you are linked to us in an important way. We need you, and without our help you will not survive. Cooperation is our only choice. Besides, we are not so alien as one might too hastily assume. Your senses are already telling you that."

Something in the stranger's voice inspired trust, but the circumstances were just too difficult for me to understand.

"We have to move back quickly," the stranger went on. "Just to the edge of the clearing there. After that, things will be clear enough. Yes, you must act quickly!"

"Act? Act how? Why?"

"Quickly! Because of the link between us." His voice was determined, even commanding. "You know that you can trust me. You already know that. You can feel it clearly."

I looked at him doubtfully. It was true: I did feel something like trust. I stood up slowly, still not really believing what was hap-

pening, but the pained, impatient expression on the stranger's face was eloquent enough.

"Right! To the edge of the clearing, then."

I raised my hand in salutation - or farewell - to my thoroughly surprised companions, and with a smile that was more of a grimace I set off down the hill, walking faster and faster until I was practically running.

The forest was only a few dozen metres away. Ten, twenty seconds at a run. Yes, just a short run. As my body started moving faster I felt the strange pressure of an instinctive impulse or a vague feeling of compulsion: a feeling that I had to do this even though I had consciously made my own decision that it was the right thing to do, despite all my doubts about whether it was sensible. This was what the rational part of my mind told me, but the internal impulse continued to grow in force until the first pine branches brushed my face and two figures dressed like the other stranger were standing in front of me and gesturing at me to hurry up. I looked round. The wounded pilot was following me at a run. Actually he probably wasn't a pilot at all.

I half stopped, but two pairs of hands dragged me violently under the trees and pushed me forward. I thought of resisting but the two strangers weren't even looking at me. They were staring past me. What at? I turned and looked back too. I couldn't see anything. Or? There was a flash, and for a brief moment I caught a glimpse of a craft of some kind flying past. I looked questioningly at the two strangers. Their gestures, their expressions and a brief, urgent appeal all said the same thing: we had to get away from here, and quickly. They were afraid too. That was what convinced me. We ran through the forest, down a short slope and behind a rock in which there was a barely visible fissure. The stranger ahead of me ran towards the fissure and disappeared inside. I was just in time to catch a glimpse of his vanishing silhouette.

"There, there!" The other stranger pointed towards the crack

in the rock. I stepped into it and crawled past a rounded wall and on into a damp cave. We reached a kind of open doorway and quickly stepped in. I found myself in a slightly larger cavity with coloured hieroglyphics on the walls.

There were five more strangers here, and an atmosphere that was hard to define. A beautiful woman in the corner started crying. She was really beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. I caught her glance: it was gentle, with pain in it, but it was also questioning. What could she want from me? I gave her a friendly smile, because I didn't know what else to do. I would have done something of course: she could read that in my face. The woman came over to me, took my hand and gave it a slight squeeze, and then walked towards the exit.

"Perhaps we should talk a little?" I suggested. I wanted to try and understand the situation. She smiled at me again. She was friendly but clearly upset.

"Of course. My name is Honaja. We are Sensins, of the civilisation of the Sensins. It is true that our level of technology is slightly higher than yours, but do not let that worry you. We are neighbours. Friendly neighbours."

I thought I caught a hint of happiness when our eyes met again.

"We certainly owe you an explanation," she went on. "We realise this, and we also want to avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary disagreements. We have to help each other. You saw how the Acutins pursued our ship. With such persistence that we had to shoot them down. They do not know about you, but sooner or later they will find out that you are the one who is important to us at this moment. If they were to find out why, they would kill you immediately. Or rather: they already know why one particular Earthman is so important to us, at least approximately, but they cannot guess who that Earthman is, although they will have spotted you escaping with us. Naturally we have made it harder for them to track us down by coming down to Earth more frequently and by constantly

transporting individual Earthmen to our space station and back. We can do this in such a way that the Earthman sleeps the whole journey regardless of whether it is day or night. But a combination of circumstances have further increased your importance. And a mere suspicion could be enough to make the Acutins kill you.”

I tried to speak but no words would come out. I had received so much important information in such a short time, all of it difficult to digest. What was worse, there also seemed to be a far from insignificant threat. I looked questioningly at the beautiful stranger.

“My importance has increased, you say? In what sense? Actually, I still don’t understand what this is all about.”

Her smile grew even friendlier: “As I said, we owe you an explanation, naturally. We will explain everything to you. But since we cannot afford misunderstandings, we are compelled to establish trust on the basis of reciprocal knowledge. That should not be too difficult. My feelings tell me that it will not be hard for you to accustom yourself to our environment. But now is not the time for a long discussion. We have to set off for Station ZEN1736 as soon as possible.”

“Yes, the transport is ready,” said a stranger next to her, pointing towards the corridor.

“This will be a pleasant and safe flight. At our level of technology, serious technical failures no longer exist. You will simply have a little rest, a little sleep, and we will be there.”

Chapter II

The journey to the space station was over very quickly. In fact I had hardly settled into my reclining seat when I was woken by a light touch on my shoulder.

“Oh, was I asleep?” I asked in surprise.

“We all slept for most of the flight,” came the reassuring answer.

I looked at the seats around me. The other Sensins were waking up or were already on their feet. So they really had slept throughout the journey.

“Yes, we slept too!”

“And how long did we sleep?” I asked with an incredulous smile. I seemed to be having difficulty grasping even apparently simple facts. “You certainly have all this organised in a very practical way.”

“Our transports are comfortable, aren’t they?” another Sensin replied. “At our level of technology, transport is a remarkably efficient operation. We also know how to take care of our passengers’ comfort, wouldn’t you agree? The asteroid station we are heading for isn’t actually very far away. We use it as a base

during our trips to Earth. For your friends the time now is 16 minutes past 11 in the morning.”

I thought about this for a moment and nodded non-committally. “Interesting.”

“This will only be a transit station for you, since as far as I know you will soon be continuing your journey. At least according to my information. The crew for your flight is already assembled at the farewell briefing. Shall we join them? They are probably waiting for us.”

* * *

The large high-ceilinged hall reminded me more than anything else of a tastefully decorated café. That was the impression I got as I walked in. So this is where we were supposed to be “already assembled” or something like that. The relaxed atmosphere offered no hint of any impending risky mission. It looked as though the official part of the briefing – speeches and that sort of thing – was already over.

“Welcome!” said a female Sensin dressed in figure-hugging overalls with accessories of the kind usually found on women’s clothes. I couldn’t decide whether this was a designer outfit based on uniform overalls or a pair of overalls with some of the characteristics of a designer outfit. It certainly suited her. I looked around at the other Sensins. Most of them were dressed in similar fashion. This was probably their uniform.

“The crew of your expedition are all present and correct. Let’s go over to them: I’m sure you’re anxious to meet them.”

“Of course,” I replied, as though this were obvious, and then

stopped, slightly surprised at the spontaneity of my response. Hmm, was it because of the friendly reception or – my doubt made me smile – could it be a sense of belonging? When we reached the group this feeling grew even stronger. They all greeted me in a very friendly manner. They were pleased to see me. Some of them even called out to try and attract my attention, and I returned their greetings with a smile. One of them tapped me on the shoulder:

“Now we’re all here, right?”

I nodded and laughed, more out of politeness, since any other reply would have been out of place at that moment, and anyway, what else was I supposed to do? I looked around again. Most of them were already engrossed in their own conversations. My arrival had only been a temporary interruption. The Sensin next to me went on:

“We came for you just in time, didn’t we?”

“Why?”

“If we hadn’t pulled out in time it would have been all over for you.”

“Why?”

“Ha. Why!” The Sensin frowned, as though considering what words to choose, and then stared at me: “We’ve got quite a lot in common, haven’t we?” And then, with a new gleam in his eyes, he added: “We don’t seem particularly alien to you, do we?”

“No, no,” I replied hurriedly. “No, not at all, although...”

“Well, yes, of course, the different level of technology is something that separates us, but don’t worry: it won’t be difficult for you to adapt.”

“Ah yes, the different level of technology. I’d already noticed that. And what level are our opponents at?”

“Actually we’re at a similar level. We probably have a slight advantage. More important than that is the current state of our mutual relations. That is a slightly more difficult situation.”

I nodded slightly. “What I saw certainly looked like a more dif-

difficult situation. At least as far as I could tell. And where do I come in?"

The Sensin looked at me keenly. There was something else he wanted to tell me, but he couldn't find the words. At least that was my impression. I got the feeling that he wanted to explain something else to me. But what could it be, to make an individual from such a highly developed civilisation hesitate like this? "Yes, a highly developed civilisation," I muttered to myself. These words and their meaning conjured up a rapid succession of images as I thought about all I had seen and experienced since the arrival of that stranger. I still didn't know anything about them. They were certainly a superior civilisation, with an extremely highly developed intelligence. I could sense that. And yet their behaviour towards me... I tried to marshal my thoughts. Then it struck me: they showed me the same respect that they would show to an equal. I sensed an atmosphere of common purpose, of being together in the formation of a common plan. I paused. That thought. Where had it come from? Why? What had prompted it? It had appeared spontaneously, as if from nowhere. Or... Were my senses playing tricks on me? All the gestures of these strangers, comments, hints, the way they addressed me, the way they behaved towards me. They acted in a friendly way, as though I belonged to them, as though I was theirs.

No, I told myself. I couldn't trust my power of perception to that extent. I knew too little about them to think any more clearly, or to arrive at any sort of conclusion.

"I hope you are not uncomfortable among us," said the Sensin in a polite and reserved voice.

"No, absolutely not," I replied, with a grateful expression. They had received me in a friendly manner, that was true. And the hospitality these strangers showed me was pleasant. And that was important.

The Sensin smiled. "Good. I am pleased that you are settling in well."

I returned his smile.

“I don’t know much about you,” I said, unable to conceal my curiosity, as my brain made an effort to penetrate this unknown world, with all my conjectures and questions.

“Naturally it will take you a little time to get accustomed to us. Even on Earth you have problems when you move to a new town, or to another country.”

I nodded. That was true, of course. But in any case I had to make a start, and my curiosity was already beginning to get the better of me. What I didn’t know, though, was where to start, although perhaps that wasn’t the most important thing. The Sensin continued to gaze in front of him for a few moments, in a sort of meditative absence, and then turned back to me.

“The problem is the lack of time. We have to act immediately. We have no other choice.”

I nodded intelligently. Of course. From what I had seen it wasn’t difficult to understand the need for rapid action. But I was unable to arrive at any more tangible conclusion from all of this. I still hadn’t been offered an explanation – even an approximate one – of this whole business, and I was struggling to form even a basic picture of their civilisation.

“Actually, we are on the brink of war!” the Sensin continued. I nodded. It had to be something like that. “To put it another way,” he went on, “hostilities have commenced, and skirmishes, and everything except a full-scale engagement. But the marshalling of forces in order to secure an advantage has already begun.” The Sensin gave me a penetrating look. “We had the advantage. A considerable advantage. But the death of our friend means that we have almost lost it. I say ‘almost’ because we can still get it back. There is only one detail left to resolve.”

I suddenly realised that this problem of theirs probably contained the reason why they had come looking for me. But what could I do that they were unable to do themselves?

“We are going to need your cooperation,” said the Sensin calmly after a slight pause, and smiled respectfully.

“Ah,” I said, with a slight nod, “of course.” Then, after a brief reflection, I added: “It is probably also in my interest to join you, isn’t it?”

Something in the stranger’s voice had awakened doubts in me. Indistinct doubts and vague notions. I sensed a kind of conflict and incongruity in the vague contours of my perception. But nothing more definite, not yet.

The stranger was still looking at me expectantly. He was probably waiting for an answer. For me to agree to cooperate. And yet it was obvious that I would cooperate. Why wouldn’t I? There was no reason not to. I thought about it. Nothing pointed to any other course of action.

“I don’t know what I can do. If I can help, I will do everything in my power,” I said with a smile. “But I can’t imagine what I could possibly do better than you can do yourselves.” The idea that I could do anything important for them was more than I could understand.

“Naturally. I understand your doubts,” continued the Sensin calmly. “But it is not important. You will receive explanations in your group.”

“All right,” I agreed. “So this expedition will probably be a war, is that correct?”

“Well, you could say so. Perhaps you are familiar with the concept of special forces? It is not quite the same. It involves weapons that are very different from yours on Earth. The purpose is of course the same, and the individuals are also trained in this sense. They are specialists, yes.” For the first time the Sensin smiled with something like animation. “You too will be a specialist. One of the more important ones. Do not be afraid. Everything has been carefully planned for this mission. You will not fail.”

These last words were pronounced with something like enthusiasm. And yet his comment about a carefully planned action by special forces nevertheless contained some uncertainty. I couldn’t help thinking about the possible risks, because of

course I still knew far too little about the whole business. Too little to arrive at any more definite conclusions.

“According to our estimates the risk is quite acceptable. But it does depend on us arriving in time. Any delay, and it could become dangerous. Too dangerous, in fact. But in view of the circumstances, this risk is nevertheless vital. The unit must get under way at once. During the journey we will tell you everything about our civilisation, or at least as much as you wish to know.”

“Okay,” I agreed. Evidently there was no time to spare. I was eager to hear more about this civilisation of theirs, but in view of the situation, if matters stood as they said they did, we would need to hurry. Our enemies would not be idle either. That was the way of these things, I told myself. Enemies, yes, enemies... But who were these enemies?

The Sensin shook my hand in a friendly manner and bade me farewell.

Chapter III

The pain in my chest and shoulders was accompanied by a tremendous downwards pressure. And then an upwards pressure. Waking up suddenly, at first I couldn't understand this buffeting. I gripped the armrests tightly and noticed with confusion how the straps were digging into my body. The next moment I realised that without these straps I would have been thrown out of my seat. Memories of recent events flashed through my mind, and with them a dawning comprehension of the position. From these fragmented thoughts, I slowly formed a clearer picture of the current situation.

There was a Sensin next to me. In the next seat. Benesens - that was his name - was watching me. I was on their ship, on our mission, with the members of the special forces. The flight had started off so calmly, and now all of a sudden we were gyrating wildly.

"Don't judge from what is happening to us at this moment," said my neighbour encouragingly. "This is not as important as it might seem. There is no danger."

The window in front of me was twenty metres wide. I stared through it, my eyes following the curving trajectories of the

approaching ships. They were heading straight for us: straight at the enormous window of the command bridge. I gripped my armrests even tighter. A moment later a tremendous jolt hurled us off to one side in a rapid spiralling turn. Another narrow escape, apparently. The craft flew so close to us as to practically skim the surface of our ship, but evidently there was no contact. Then for a hundredth of a second one of them filled almost the entire window of the flight deck and disappeared.

“How can they fly so close?” I asked.

“As far as technology is concerned, we are fairly evenly matched. This is nothing special.”

“Surely you’re not still saying that this is unimportant?”

“Well, we would need to know the whole picture. All I can say is that in all probability it is unimportant.”

I looked at him incredulously. “In all probability you say? So there is a certain amount of doubt, then.”

“Doubt, yes, but not about the technical side.”

“What do you mean, not about the technical side?”

“Just that. Technically speaking, everything is so accurately calculated and calibrated that a collision cannot occur unless it is planned.”

That was good to hear. I forced a smile.

“Let’s assume that I understand. We may not have your technology on Earth, but there is a rule that you don’t fire at the enemy’s aircraft until you are ordered to shoot them down or unless they violate the rules of engagement. At least in the period before the start of a war. But are you sure that you are not violating peacetime rules if, as you say, you are not yet at war? You did say that we were in no-man’s-land.”

“I’m not sure. According to my estimate that is the case. But it is true that the rules have changed a lot recently, and that introduces uncertainty.”

Their military experience was something else I knew nothing about.

“When were you actually last at war?” I asked.

“Us?”

I nodded and watched him without saying anything. This Sensin seemed to need a lot of time to answer simple questions.

“The answer is not so simple. What war is, that is something we know well. The problem is that we have never related this concept to our existence.”

“But then you cannot know what a war is!”

“Oh yes we can.” Benesens’s eyes lit up. “There are ways to know war even if you have never fully taken part in one yourself. We know this concept a lot better than you can imagine. But all of our understanding, all of our life has proceeded in the total conviction that at our level of development war is something utterly absurd, that it is something that will certainly never happen to us. Most of us are still convinced of this. On the other hand logistical analysis suggest quite the opposite. That war is in fact inevitable. Some variants point to an explosive escalation of hostilities and immediate conflict. However, even I cannot fully accept this.”

“Who actually are your enemies? Did they appear suddenly?”

“No, no. We have known each other a long time. We are different, but not so different that we need to go to war over it. This escalation of tension really is introducing uncertainty to this no-man’s-land. It is already quite disagreeable, isn’t it? One is filled with uncomfortable sensations.”

“I see.” A thought struck me. “What in your opinion is more likely: that you will attack first or that they will?”

“There is no sure answer to that question. They have a greater propensity for war. It is possible that it will be them, although in all probability we are still at a slightly higher level of technology.”

“Can you predict where they will attack?”

“That is clear.” Benesens smiled at me. “In the vicinity of the Earth.”

“The Earth?”

“Yes. So you see, you do have a good reason to cooperate with us.”

“What are you saying? Why should they attack in the vicinity of the Earth?”

“They have a reason, yes. The destruction of the Earthmen would weaken us.”

“Is that the reason? That is hard for me to understand. What advantage would that give them?”

“I don’t know. But judging from how they are acting, they are convinced of it. Your problem is above all your insignificance. At least with regard to the significance they attribute to their actions.”

At that moment we heard a brief message giving the all clear. Lively conversations immediately started up all around us and there was a palpable easing of tension. Even I reconciled myself to the fact that there was no real danger. I soon caught the cheerful mood and began engaging my companions in conversation in an effort to find out something more about the situation. I was, however, only partially successful. As regards the technical aspects, I received a number of interesting answers and explanations, but for the moment they didn’t seem interested in talking about themselves or about their civilisation. I was unable to involve any of them in a conversation on this topic. They weren’t in any hurry to reveal themselves to me. Nevertheless my mind kept returning to the comment that the destruction of the Earthmen would weaken them too. This was really important! If that’s how things really were, of course.

In order to try and learn something more about them, I began studying the faces of the Sensins around me. They were still chatting away animatedly. The group I joined was talking about the chances of war breaking out. Someone was saying that they had been warned of the possibility of the first real clashes, and that we would be right in the thick of it. It was even possible that we would be the trigger for hostilities to begin. A few metres away a Sensin was talking in a loud voice

about some logistical analysis that suggested that the Acutins were first going to try and thwart our expedition with a series of manoeuvres, after which they would destroy us.

“If they knew about the Earthman, or if they knew why we need him, they would certainly have done so already.”

These words reached me over the conversations going on all around me and once again made me feel uneasy. I still couldn't imagine why my presence should be so important. I even had the sensation that they were deliberately leaving me to wander blindly through a labyrinth of conjecture. I looked around me. The command bridge was big enough for the entire crew. It must have been around 40 metres long and 40 metres wide, with a window of corresponding dimensions at the front.

I let my eyes wander over faces and groups, and then suddenly I saw her a few metres away. It was her. In one of the groups, in the middle of an animated discussion, although she didn't seem to be particularly interested in it. At least that was the impression I got. She stood there quietly with her arms folded in front of her and her head slightly to one side. She was beautiful. Too attractive for me to look casually away. My breathing slowed and I felt the beginnings of desire. She had turned away and was gazing in front of her. The melancholy, anxious look in her eyes reminded me of the expression she had worn at our first meeting. I ran my eyes over her long, wheat-coloured hair and imagined a caressing hand sinking through the curls to touch her neck. A slight movement would reveal it to the touch of my lips and a tender kiss. I looked at her face again. The mood emanating from her had changed completely. A slight backwards tilt of her raised head revealed her neck and filled me with an urge to touch her, to slide my lips down to her full breasts and then up her slender neck to her ears and her sensual mouth. She looked at me. Although we were seven or eight metres apart, our eyes met. She gave me a slight smile. Melancholy at first, but then her eyes seemed to light up and her smile widened. I smiled too, although I was slightly confused. Once

again those looks of hers seemed to speak volumes. But that was the reason I didn't understand anything any more. Or perhaps I understood too much and nothing. So many sensations were racing through me that I was unable to concentrate my thoughts. Had she seen the desire in my eyes, was that why her body language suddenly seemed so disdainful? Surely not! She couldn't have seen that. She looked away, squeezed her arms together so that her breasts rose slightly, and then moved her head back, in a kind of sensual abandon, and breathed deeply. Her bare neck was revealed, as though offering itself up to adoring kisses all the way down to her shoulders. This excited me. Was this for my benefit? A demonstration of her perception? Was it an invitation or was she merely teasing me? I didn't know anything about these Sensins. I would have to be careful. There was something somehow cunning about them. It might all be a trap. If only I had at least a rough idea of who they actually were. I looked around me. I could feel someone else watching me. A woman, two or three metres away, staring at me with a look of melancholy yearning. She immediately looked away, with a barely perceptible glance at Honaja. I continued to stare at her as she walked past me with a sensual smile.

"You have wakened memories in me", she said quietly. "Beautiful memories." And she walked off.

I stood there feeling embarrassed. That's all I needed! Where had she come from? How could she have stood there watching me without me seeing her? How dare she? Damn! And what a piercing, sensual look she had given me.

Chapter IV

The next jolt pulled the floor out from under our feet and we staggered, instinctively putting our arms out to try and keep our balance. Quite a few Sensins sprawled to the floor, but then the alarm signal sent us rushing to our seats. I jumped into my own seat, pushed the safety harness button and looked around me. The Sensins were evidently no better prepared than I was, although they should have been. I found myself wondering just how in control of the situation they really were, and thought doubtfully about what the Sensin had told me a little earlier.

“Well,” I muttered to myself, “at least some of that self-assurance was probably exaggerated.”

The reactions of the Sensins seemed to confirm my doubts. Their calm complacency had been replaced by an air of panic and they stared in confusion, now at the main hologram display, now at the giant window of the command bridge. How this war of theirs was supposed to begin cannot have been very clear to them. “Hmm, a superior civilisation,” I murmured, looking at Benesens, who finally turned towards me. There

must be a lot going on in his head, I thought cynically as I tried to interpret the expression on his face. But Benesens's serious response brought me back down to earth. If, as it appeared, we were in a dangerous situation, I was in the same boat as them. At least at the moment. Even a slight deviation from his confident version of events, and we would all be in the soup together.

"What was that?" I asked.

"They are attacking us," Benesens replied.

There was silence, but tension had filled the room and gripped the whole crew.

"Has the war begun, then?"

"No, no." Benesens shook his head thoughtfully. "We would have been informed by headquarters. The Acutins have several times called for the withdrawal of both sides from this sector, but we were here before them, this is ours, and they have no right to claim it nor to try and persuade us to leave by promising that they will then leave too. They want to remove us at any cost, and I am afraid that they have begun the local war they have been threatening, although this has not yet been confirmed. We have received no notification of this, and yet it is difficult to find any other explanation for what is happening now."

Benesens frowned as he considered the possibilities. But only for a few moments. Another jolt shook the whole ship and suddenly a tremendous acceleration forced us back in our seats.

"Captain to crew," came the calm voice of the commanding officer. "We are entering the network of protective asteroid fields. Prepare yourselves for powerful lateral g-force as we take evasive action."

A new series of explosions shook us, and then there was an enormous crash as an enemy ship slammed into the command bridge window and the whole front section of the ship caved in. Even the window buckled inwards as far as the front row of seats. A cry escaped from my throat. The others were shouting

too. But in the very fraction of a second that the whole front section and the window should have shattered to smithereens, everything stopped. The walls and the window hung there, as though held by opposing forces of enormous power. Everything went quiet. The crumpled walls and the distorted window seemed to waver before our eyes. Everything was twisted, and so badly deformed that I found myself searching for cracks in the wall. It suddenly occurred to me that there was a danger of a vacuum. Some of the Sensins had already reached for the emergency buttons to close the security cells on their seats: airtight transparent cylinders that surrounded the whole seat and its occupant. I took all this in with lightning swiftness. My hand was already reaching for the button, but before I could press it I noticed the walls silently moving back into their original position. The window straightened itself with a loud pop. In a matter of moments it was back in its old place. No crumples, no wrinkles and above all no visible cracks. I looked incredulously at the window and the walls, and then finally turned to my neighbour. "Wow, this ship of yours really is made of good materials!"

A complacent smile spread across Benesens's face.

I looked around me. The whole room filled with life and excited chatter. I looked at the window again. "That's not made of glass, is it?"

"You can see through it, but that is all that this window has in common with your glass windows on Earth."

"I had my doubts," I admitted with a smile. "I still don't have a very clear idea about the solidity of your materials."

"Don't worry. I know what they are capable of, but I don't know if that makes me much better off. I can't predict the power of the explosion, can I?" Benesens laughed lightly at his own witicism. "Both are important, you see?"

"Message from the commander." The amplified voice of the main computer interrupted the lively chatter. "Stand by to receive instructions!"

The crew waited expectantly. Everyone had been busy speculating about the best thing to do, although most had already admitted that the lack of data made it impossible to arrive at any firm conclusion.

“The Acutin fleet is astern of us. It is their advance party that has attacked us. According to a communication from their commanders, they will not permit us to pass and they are maintaining this prohibition despite my drawing their attention to the rules currently in force. In short, they have refused to negotiate further with me. They are threatening to stop us in the outer belt of the asteroid cloud. If we go beyond this belt, they are ordered to act immediately to destroy us. Then they broke off talks. But it will not be so simple for them to destroy us. As you have seen, they have already tried and failed. They will not be able to stop us, either. Our fleet, at least as big as theirs, in quadrant XL273, can send us the protection of its roborockets. We can fall back into their protective fields at any time. I have also received additional instructions from headquarters. The whole fleet and all the squadrons in our vicinity have orders to support us during our breakthrough to the energy dumps and the automated production planets. Even at the cost of their own destruction. I have given the word to begin our penetration through the asteroid clouds. These asteroids are rocks several kilometres in diameter, containing hydrogen, iron and other elements. We transported trillions of them here when the Acutins were still far away on their own planet. Then we allowed them to transport their own asteroids. Now, in their arrogance, and after a somewhat superficial analysis, they see in front of them only randomly dumped material. But we can move these apparently randomly scattered asteroids into the navigable routes through the cloud. We have this capability. It is true that they also know something about this. But thanks to our speed, they will not be able to stop us breaking through the asteroid cloud.

“The Acutins are now dispatching units to try and outflank us with an encircling manoeuvre and prevent our retreat or escape. But the vicinity of the asteroid haze is to our advantage. We will be faster but we must be ready for a pursuit. Flying through the densely packed asteroids is extremely difficult and dangerous. Our bodies will be pushed to the limit of endurance. Prepare yourselves for rapid evasive manoeuvres. Laser cannon and rocket shield crews: be ready for immediate action. Some of their fighters will probably catch us before we reach the first asteroids.”

The hologram display showed a countdown: the little lights went off at intervals of one second. I relaxed in my seat, rested my head on the cushioned headrest and gripped the handles positioned either side of me.

“Now!” A harsh voice gave the order, and we instantly accelerated with such force that our faces were twisted out of shape. A few seconds later, with the ship still in its steep turn, the main computer announced the attack of the Acutin fighters. Almost at once their energy bolts began striking the ship. Our laser cannon opened fire at our attackers. By the time we were halfway through the turn, all the weapons on both sides of the ship were already hammering away. Now it was a question of how long our ship’s protective shields and armour could hold out. The side of the hull began to glow red-hot as energy bolts continued to strike it, but then in quick succession our cannon destroyed first one, then another, then all the remaining fighters from the first small group of attackers. The armour of the robot-controlled fighters was not enough to protect them from our powerful laser cannon. But this in itself meant nothing. These robot fighters, though of limited power, were dangerous above all because of their great numbers. They were more like robot-controlled guided missiles. A ship like the GNAT could not be destroyed by a single fighter, or even by several fighters together. But a large number of them meant a constant depletion of fuel and ammunition, an exhausting chase until our

energy stocks and ammunition were completely used up. We were still more than ten minutes away from the asteroids: the first large chasing squadron of fighters would need the same amount of time to catch us. The hologram display showed their position. The fighter squadron would catch us, that was clear. But by then we would be right on the edge of the asteroid cloud. Then we would fire our laser canons.

“The enemy forces are too strong!” The main computer had completed its calculation. Silence fell once again.

“Hold your course!” came the voice of the commander. “We’ve done it!”

The crew exchanged astonished glances and looked at the commander and at the holo-display. Nothing indicated that we were in the clear. Nothing on the display appeared to point to such a conclusion.

“Yes: sixteen seconds before entry they will catch up with us,” continued the commander. “But at this distance the remote-controlled asteroids can come to our assistance. They will start to move at any moment. We will be safe in their shelter, and in any case will we be in a good position because the fighters will still have to encircle us, and that will mean losing vital time.”

Everyone looked back at the main hologram display, where there was still no sign of movement from the asteroids. If they were triggered too late, that could be fatal for us. I could hear the murmuring of voices growing louder and louder. “What are they waiting for?” came a shout from the background.

The countdown lights appeared on the holo-display: sixteen red lights for the seconds, and ten blue ones for the minutes. The murmuring stopped. The entire scene was spread out across the holo-display. Everything motionless and everything moving. The approaching fighters and our ship’s flight towards the asteroid cloud. There was still time. Ten minutes’ flight to the critical point, and then sixteen seconds to reach the first asteroids.

We held our breath. The minutes ticked by but those blue lights went out very slowly. The last blue light was extinguished and the red ones lit up. We felt the violent discharge of our laser cannon as they fired at the approaching fighters. The battle had begun. Were we going to make it, or was this merely hopeless resistance in the face of their superior strength? Then, from somewhere inside the asteroid cloud, an object appeared, something long and rope-like. It flew towards us at great speed from the heart of the asteroids, curving in our direction like a long, thin snake's tongue. It must have built up speed inside the asteroid cloud where no-one could see it. Perhaps there is still time, said the expressions in the eyes of the crew. The noise stopped. Breathing slowed. The holo-display showed the scene clearly: us, the fighters and the giant tongue. The red lights began to go out... seven, six, five... Now the fighters opened fire on us, several hundred at the same time, with such ferocity that our protective shields disintegrated one after the other and the armour of our GNAT grew red-hot. The intense heat was vaporising the outer layers. "The armour is giving way!" somebody shouted. Another three seconds, two, one... A giant shadow flashed past and suddenly we were caught in the silence of absolute peace. We were flying along the surface of the tongue. We were safe! Yes! We were now out of range of the fighters' lasers at least until we entered the asteroid cloud. Before they could fly around the tongue, we would be safe. The chase would of course continue. But we would be on our own ground. There were thousands of fighters but we could count on a enormous number of robot-guided missiles of our own. Yes, an enormous number. Once again everyone was looking at the hologram display. "There are so many of them," I heard over the growing buzz of conversation. The answer came immediately: "There will be plenty of ours too!"

"There will be plenty of us on both sides!" said a red-headed Sensin next to the holo-display in an anything but triumphant

voice, immediately adding with a somewhat forced cheerfulness: "But now we have a chance. It won't be easy. We're probably going to make it."

Then came another few moments of reflection and doubt. The danger was still pursuing us, and there was also danger in front of us, but we were flying in the safe shelter of a long shield leading into the interior of the asteroid cloud.

We flew past the first asteroids and on, along the giant tongue to its root. And then we were flying freely, past the massive bulks of asteroids measuring several kilometres across, and mist-like clouds of tiny particles that would damage the hull of our ship if we flew too close to them. These clouds were interesting to see. Very interesting. The gleam of neighbouring stars fragmented into various colours on their surface so that blue, green, yellow layers blended one into the other and intermingled to form a surprisingly beautiful work of art that I had to look at despite all the tension, or perhaps even because of it.

"Yes, this mist is in our catalogues," Benesens explained. "It is one of the finest works of art of the builders of this asteroid cloud. I like it too."

"Interesting." My admiration turned into reflection. "Art in space." I looked at my neighbour. So now we were safe. I looked back at the mist.

"Hmm, one day you Earthmen will create something like this too." Benesens spoke with a smile, in a slightly patronising tone, but then the features of his face hardened and his eyes grew cold. "Provided, of course, that we succeed with our breakthrough and re-establish a connection with our energy production fields. Failure to do so would make it difficult to predict the course of your development or, rather, your very existence."

Once again I was filled with doubts. What actually were these energy production fields? And why couldn't we get into them? Everything seemed to suggest that they were central to what

was going on. And apparently I had something to do with it too. But what was this thing in which my presence was so important? Extremely important, by the look of things. And then this quarrel between these two superior civilisations. Even about that, the answers I had received were too sketchy to allow me to formulate any clear conception. Except, of course, with regard to the threat to the Earth, which was apparently facing destruction. Or was it? This was something else I was unable to puzzle out. And what if the origin of the quarrel was something else, something deeper? If the whole thing had begun for a completely different reason? Some important reason, more important than energy production fields, about which they still hadn't told me anything.

The warning that we were about to leave the shelter of the giant tongue silenced the cheerful enthusiasm at our successful escape. It was hard, very hard. It had been a close shave. No more than a fraction of a second had tipped the balance in our favour, a few decisive moments, some slight inclination of fortune against the logistical precision of the enemy's moves. But enough for a breakthrough and an outburst of happiness. And at least it would be easier from now on, since we could already count on support. The Sensins returned to their seats. We would still have to fight, very hard perhaps. But they could no longer trap us in a tight blockade. We were all convinced of this. We all concentrated on the hologram display to follow the new development. A visual representation of all the available data showed our flight past the densely packed asteroids and revealed our rear. This is what attracted our attention. A second cloud was sinking into the asteroid cloud. Thousands upon thousands of fighters from the Acutin fleet hastening in pursuit of us, in such enormous numbers that the swarms of fighters looked like an accompanying cloud. There was no end to them. I looked questioningly at the Sensins. So many! Would we really get help, reinforcements to block this incredible force?

The Sensins continued to observe the disposition of our pursuers, but they were no longer shouting enthusiastically. The concentration of power must have surprised them. That was certainly my impression – an impression that was growing ever stronger. They looked worried at the number of fighters, which clearly exceeded their notions with regard to the enemy's forces.

“What does this tell us?” I asked Benesens in an unnaturally calm voice.

“Hmm.” Benesens continued to stare at the hologram without moving.

“Do you have similar forces at your disposal?” I blurted out impatiently.

“Hmm.” He seemed to be having difficulty appraising the new situation. This was considerably more than a merely local matter that we were caught up in here. Nothing that they had predicted about the presence of merely local forces in this part of space applied any more. “We knew the density, strength and distribution of their armed forces. We knew about every part of the entire galaxy. But what we can see in the hologram display simply does not agree with what I know. Such a concentration of forces. Where has it come from? Movements of such large armed forces could not have passed unobserved. Unless...” Benesens paused. “The Acutins were not supposed to have the capability for something like this. But perhaps...” He fell silent again.

“Perhaps what?” I looked at him closely as he shook his head.

“I don't know. Perhaps headquarters is no longer giving us all the information.”

“What does that mean?”

“Several things.”

“For instance?”

“That movements and new concentrations of armed forces have already been carried out throughout the galaxy. Both ours and theirs.”

“And how does that change things?”

“At the galactic level?” The Sensin frowned. “I doubt that it is any more than a different arrangement of forces. It is probably nothing important. But that only applies to the arrangement at the galactic level.”

“Why only at the galactic level? I asked. “What about us?”

“Hmm.” “Yes, that’s a good question. It is harder to assess. I don’t like the look of it.” Benesens looked at me. “I don’t like it at all. Especially because you are aboard our ship.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Clearly the Acutins have guessed. That would explain it. They know of your presence here.”

“Am I really so powerful that my presence could be important in all of this?”

“I don’t know. We need you. I have received clear instructions about your importance to us. What I don’t know is exactly why you are important. I am still unable to comprehend the full dimensions of your importance. Apart from that, it is also true that you are important to us as an Earthman. All Earthmen are important to us. These events, however, indicate that you are irreplaceable. Or at least difficult to replace. And this is what I don’t understand.”

Benesens seemed to consider for a moment. He looked at me and then at the hologram, and then stared fixedly ahead of him. But his gaze kept flitting somewhat absently over the display; I could see that he was deep in thought. He was pondering something.

Then he turned slowly towards me, took in the expectant expression of my face and shook his head.

“I do not know. But that is of no importance. It is clear, however, that the Acutins do know. And that is important.”

* * *

Our flight through the densely packed masses of the asteroids was a breakneck series of zigzags, and our speed was limited by the lateral inertia in the turns.

Benesens was explaining the position to me.

“They will soon be up with us,” he said, before going on with a confident smile: “But they are going to have other problems. This asteroid cloud contains a labyrinth of traps, security barriers and guided missile stations, which in normal circumstances would certainly be enough. The problem is this incredible concentration of forces.”

“So what are our chances?” I asked, beginning to feel anxious again.

Benesens looked me up and down with an expression of calm self-possession.

“That is something I really cannot predict now,” he replied.

Everyone fell quiet. The main hologram display showed the whole of the asteroid cloud and the chasing fighters. In this display, which ran the entire width of the command bridge window, we could see everything as though through a giant telescope. We were able to see all the asteroids in our path before we got near them.

The GNAT shuddered. I caught the eye of a Sensin.

“Fighters?”

“Yes, they have caught up with us.”

The energy bolts from the robo-fighters shook the ship in rapid succession. Then our powerful laser cannon opened fire. Some of the leading fighters were instantly blasted into nothingness. But their places were immediately taken by others and the firing grew even more intense. It was no longer possible to

save ammunition. Despite all the power of our laser cannon, the fighters were already starting to outflank us in a pincer movement, and even the simulated prediction on the main hologram display suggested the worse. Meanwhile a large swarm of fighters had appeared beneath us and was climbing to cut us off. We went into a steep climb and evaded them with a rapid change of course. We were still free but a second swarm of fighters was already right up with us on our starboard side. We spiralled away from them and flashed past a giant asteroid, and then a second and a third.

Despite our successful evasive manoeuvre, the central hologram display showed the circle closing around us, leaving no escape route except perhaps in the top right quadrant where the cloud of fighters was slightly less dense. We immediately headed in that direction, but the pursuing fighters altered course as well. All our laser cannon were now pointing forwards.

We held our breath.

“There are even more fighters heading to cut us off on the outside!” a Sensin by the holo-display shouted in surprise. “They must have had their own routes through the asteroid cloud!”

His neighbour spread his arms helplessly: “They are so far ahead of us! But – they are almost in range of our roborockets!”

“Yes, the hologram display confirms it. Look, you can see it already. Help is coming. Our roborockets!”

“It’s going to be a free-for-all. Thousands of dogfights.”

“We’ll all be in it together. That is clear. Our breakthrough is going to be a question of millimetres.”

“We can’t fly through that chaos! We’ll smash into the wreckage – theirs and ours!”

“Stand by to receive orders!” Captain Harstan’s voice interrupted the speculations about our chances. “We are about to begin our breakthrough through the weakened part of the encircling forces.”

The holo-display showed the distribution of the fighters in the area selected for the breakthrough. Everything was illustrated very precisely, with all distances and sizes properly to scale: our ship and every fighter at an exact distance from it.

“Computer, highlight the selected fighters!” ordered the captain. “Each laser canon has a precise target. By blasting away the fighters we will cut a way through the barricade.”

The laser cannons locked onto the highlighted fighters, tracing a cut through the blockade on the holo-display.

The visual simulations generated on the basis of the computer’s predictions showed a hologram image of the GNAT at the point of intersection of all the converging flight paths: those of our ship, our roborockets, the fighters approaching from our flank and the pursuing fighters on our tail. This is where the impact would occur: thousands and thousands of individual engagements of uncertain outcome, a blizzard of ships in single combat, a swarm of enemies joined together in a giant conflict, and our planned breakthrough. The hologram image disappeared. “Impossible to predict outcome,” was the curt message from the main computer.

“Silence please!” said the computer, and we heard the captain’s voice again:

“Put on your spacesuits. We are going to release the air from all compartments because of the high likelihood of penetration of our protective fields and the ship’s armour. In all probability this will not be fatal for us. The important thing is the breakthrough. Even if the whole front section of the ship is destroyed, we still have a chance, because our warships or robot-controlled rescue rockets will pick us up on other side.”

“Spacesuits give us mobility and enable us to fall back from a danger zone. If part of the ship is destroyed, this becomes very important,” explained Benesens.

I nodded. We were going to need them, by the look of things. I walked over to the wall. In two, perhaps three seconds ten robotic hands had dressed me from head to foot.

“Wow, that was quick!”

“Fighters within laser cannon range! Fire!” The commander gave the order. The same moment we were hit by a charge of energy. We fired at one fighter, avoided another group of attackers with a rapid diving turn round an asteroid, and suddenly an incredible scene appeared before our eyes: thousands of roborockets engaging the enemy fighters.

“Our roborockets!”

Help had arrived. The roborockets were attacking the Acutin fighters. Thousands of crisscrossing laser beams, striking their targets and heating the ships' armour until they exploded. All around us the blinding light of exploding fighters and roborockets. There were ships everywhere we looked and countless explosions, and we were flying straight into the middle of this chaos. We had to break through it, but we could see no way past. We would never get through without colliding. That was the only certainty. The bolts from the laser cannon of the chasing fighters had heated our hull to an incandescent whiteness, and an even greater danger now threatened from ahead: the front section of the hull would not be able to withstand all the collisions.

“Fall back, to the escape pods! Fire control and navigation to automatic!”

We all rushed back immediately. It was our last chance. The fragments of shattered fighters and roborockets ahead of us were getting denser all the time. A powerful explosion shook the floor beneath our feet, so violently that a number of Sensins fell to the floor, while others stumbled over their sprawling comrades in their rush to escape. Just as I reached the exit I tripped over a Sensin on the floor and as I fell I caught a fleeting glimpse of a fighter crashing into the front section of the ship. An explosion ripped the walls apart. I managed to pick myself up and set off after the fleeing Sensins. There was another jolt, once again the floor was jerked out from under us and once again we stumbled, fell and picked ourselves up.

Clinging desperately to the walls, I crawled along and finally reached the escape pod along with a crowd of Sensins. One after the other, we jumped aboard.

“Ready to launch!” shouted a visibly shaken Sensin with his finger on the trigger of the rocket drive, but a shout stopped him:

“Wait! Not so fast! Damaged or not, the ship’s armoured hull is still protecting us from all the flying wreckage. We’re in the middle of a battle!”

Our escape pod, one of four, remained in readiness as we waited for the right moment.

“The laser cannon and the main drive are out of action!” This was the voice of the main computer. “We have broken through the sector where the fighting is thickest. If you choose the optimum moment to launch, the escape pods will stand a chance of getting away. Good luck! Farewell!”

I gripped the armrests of my seat. The launch would be quick. Nice of the main computer to sacrifice itself for us, I thought.

We felt a violent jolt. The whole front section of the launch bay flew off, opening such a large gap that we had a view of a group of asteroids in front of us. Then the powerful acceleration pushed me back in my seat as the escape pod launched. Within moments we were flying past broken-off sections of our ship and streaking towards a dense cluster of asteroids. The right place for our little pods. Like a little sparrow darting into a thicket to escape birds of prey. Miniature holograms by our seats soon showed the explosions of the pursuing craft as they smashed into the asteroids. There now came a few nerve-racking minutes of dizzying turns that sent the blood rushing to my temples, then to my feet, and back to my head again, but then the motion calmed down and we flew along more easily. We were safe. The hologram no longer showed any pursuers. We had shaken them off. At last! We cheered enthusiastically at the sight of the clear route through the remainder of the asteroid belt. This part of the asteroid cloud must be in the domain

of the Sensins, I thought. The murmuring and exclamations subsided and we held our breath expectantly until at last we entered the wide open space on the far side of the asteroid belt.

“Wow!” The scene that opened up before us was magnificent and unexpected. We were surprised, at any rate. Happiness and fear disappeared from our faces. Both at the same time. Our brains raced to adapt to this new situation.

“Well that really is something!” said the Sensin who had provided the commentary by the holo-display on the ship. “So that’s how things stand now.”

His neighbour nodded.

“Yes!” His voice sounded somehow absent, but suddenly he spoke with more animation. “How, actually? What does that mean?”

I was struggling to find an explanation myself. The scene that spread before our eyes was the exact opposite of what had gone before and contradicted all our expectations. No-one had mentioned this possibility. And yet they could have imagined it. The Sensins, with all their intelligence, could surely have predicted this. Or perhaps not?

Thousands and thousands of warships floated in a variety of geometric figures around a giant space station bathed in an iridescent glow. It must have measured several tens of kilometres across: a veritable city. I caught my breath and exhaled slowly. Those were Sensin and Acutin warships, in equal numbers. At least that’s what it looked like. They lay there in perfect peace. And yet they must have been watching each other. Be that as it may, both sides had their warships moored there. In peace? There must be some kind of dialogue or conference going on between them, I thought.

The pod’s hologram display came to life and showed a group of Sensin commanders – so I gathered from the comments of the Sensins around me – with a dignified looking man in the foreground, who proceeded to address us:

“Welcome! You have accomplished a successful breakthrough. Congratulations!” A bright smile flashed spontaneously across his face. “A job well done!”

There was something foxy about this man, it occurred to me. Nevertheless I was happy to share the satisfaction of the Sensins in the pod.

“We shall hold a dinner in your honour with lots of guests!”

This met with a lively and approving response. The events we had just experienced, with all the risks and the emotions that went with them, were to be followed by a social gathering and a dinner. Wonderful!

“Naturally we will also have to invite the Acutins.”

The pod fell silent. The Acutins, of course. That seemed understandable. At least given the current position.

“What is actually going on?” said a voice behind me.

The dignified Sensin did not appear surprised at the question, and smiled with eloquent self-assurance:

“As you know, we are always trying to reach agreements on cooperation with the Acutins. Even now. But some things, as you yourselves have seen, go their own way, no?”

The Sensin gave a slight bow. “We shall meet at dinner!” he said by way of farewell and drew back from the holo-display.

“Well, you heard,” said the talkative Sensin from the back of the pod in a loud, complacent voice. “We are back from our journey.” And everything was all right.

Chapter V

The speech by the representative of the Sensins was respectfully official, just like the Acutin's thanks for the invitation to the dinner. Once the introductory words were over, the conversation between the Acutins and Sensins moved to the tables. I watched them with interest. Both groups. A certain restraint was evident. There was no laughter, but nevertheless they were chatting easily. It was the same at my table, where the Acutins even made some slightly cynical comments about the comfort of our journey. Conversation flowed among the Sensins themselves and with the Acutins.

Once the dinner was over, my attention was attracted by a group of Sensins who seemed to be looking more and more frequently in my direction. The way they bent their heads together as they talked seemed to reveal some secret purpose. And it must have been something to do with me, or they would not have kept looking at me. I began watching them more carefully. They noticed this immediately, and with slight movements of their heads seemed to be trying to indicate to me that

something important was about to happen. Then one of them left the group, walked to the other side of the hall and continued walking until I lost him from view. I searched the hall but it was no good. I could no longer find him. I looked back at the original group. This friendly gathering over dinner was in all likelihood at an end. At least as far as I could tell. I looked at the Acutins again. Their conversations with the Sensins were proceeding peacefully and quietly. If anything they seemed even more relaxed. That was my impression. Nothing about this evening event suggested that there was a serious quarrel between them. Oh yes: that old question of this quarrel of theirs. What was it about? Whatever it was, after everything I had just experienced on my journey here, this social gathering could only mean a short pause before further hostilities.

Once again I looked around the hall and studied the faces of the guests. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the Sensin I had lost sight of a little earlier. He was coming towards me, although he was still looking away. I looked away too, and stared in front of me as I waited for him to approach. He stepped up to me and whispered: "We've done it. Everything is ready. A fast ship is already waiting for us. Slip out unobserved and make your way towards the structure marked with a double 'W'. One of our people will be waiting for you there."

I nodded. It looked as though things were about to start moving again. A little too soon, perhaps, because I was keen to get into conversation with the Acutins. I needed to get to know them a little better too. The atmosphere here was just right for a spontaneous conversation. Things were getting increasingly sociable, and some Acutins were already looking curiously in my direction, although their looks were slightly different: more appraising.

I stood up. I had no time left for a conversation with them, which was actually a pity. At least some of the replies of the Acutins had attracted my attention. I was already walking

towards the exit when a smiling Acutin – about my height but of a slighter build – came up to me, looked at me with curiosity and said: “You’re not a Sensin are you?”

I stopped. Outwardly the Sensins were no different from me. At least I had not noticed any notable differences. But this Acutin had guessed anyway, even though he shouldn’t have done. A remembered phrase flashed through my mind like a warning: “If the Acutins knew of your importance to us, they would have attacked us even more fiercely!”

I smiled at the Acutin. “Is there something bothering you about me?”

“No, no. Don’t take it the wrong way. It is merely my capacity to recognise the truth that interests me.”

“And what have you learned?” I asked, to avoid giving a direct answer about my connection with the Sensins.

“No, no. There’s nothing wrong. It’s just that I know the Sensins pretty well. I have spent quite a lot of time with them, in their company. You’re an Earthman, aren’t you?”

“Hmm!” I looked at him doubtfully. Was his question really well intentioned, and was this conversation really so innocent?

“But something must have led you to your conclusion,” I continued with slightly heightened curiosity, while pretending to enjoy an entertaining conversation.

“Of course.” The Acutin was becoming increasingly confident. “We Acutins respond to events more directly, more appropriately to the current mood.” He laughed knowingly: “Sensins are a good deal more absent in their conversations.”

“Oh yes?” “Your tradition derives from a military upbringing, but the Sensins are more sensuous, with something of the absentmindedness of the artist. So do I seem more combative?”

“No, no, you seem perfectly normal.”

Two Sensins standing nearby, who must have overheard our conversation, moved closer. With visible briskness, or even boisterousness, one of them mentioned recent events with a

hint at the “shooting match” during our encounter with their fighters, while the other chimed in cheerfully with his own acknowledgement of the Acutins’ successful introduction of martial thinking at the level of highly developed civilisations. The Acutin shook his head: “With that old story about our tradition you are merely evading the issue. You can’t deceive me. There is something amiss with you, or you would not have brought this Earthman here. We will find out why you need him. You have miscalculated somewhere.”

The Acutin moved away. In fact he had been looking somewhat uncomfortable for a while, as though there was still something he wanted to say. As he looked appraisingly first at me and then at the Sensins I could clearly see that he was less and less keen to continue the conversation, before he finally took his leave.

“Let’s go! They’re waiting for us,” said the Sensin next to me, looking cautiously round to see if anyone was watching, and indicating to me that we should move unobtrusively towards the exit.

Chapter VI

The Sensin in front of me leaned forwards and launched himself at the hologram of the door. He flew through it in a long, easy flight, despite the gravity pulling him down. Once on the other side of the transparent barrier he stopped and floated there, making slow movements. He levelled himself slightly and then, free of gravity, descended in a circling turn towards the spiral.

“This is the entrance spiral with seventy-seven doors,” explained Benesens. “All of them are opened by passwords and the solving of problems for which certain skills and special knowledge are required.”

Meanwhile the Sensin in the foreground had already come to a halt outside the first closed door and was waving at us to follow him. Then, standing in a semicircle three or four paces from the door, we reported our arrival.

“Welcome!” The translucent hologram of a dignified-looking female Sensin greeted us. “I must draw your attention to the necessity of knowing the passwords,” she said in an official tone of voice.

The Sensins nodded, and I imitated them.

“Please, proceed!” The hologram doorkeeper gave a slightly condescending bow and withdrew.

“Right, let’s go!” said the Sensin next to me without wasting any time, and he stepped on through the slowly opening door. I followed him, with a mixture of caution and curiosity, all the way to the next door. This had even more unusual arches of stonelike appearance, with figures carved into them, although they were of some transparent material that kept changing colour.

“Do these tests relate to the group as a whole or are they also individual, for each of us separately?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. We have anticipated everything. Naturally the tests are quite thorough and demanding, since this is the entrance to our largest energy fields, protected by millions of colossal robot-controlled missiles, which we cannot allow the Acutins to reach no matter how hard they try.” The Sensin smiled slyly: “And that is of course very hard indeed.”

Have they already attempted it?”

“Yes, of course. They don’t have an energy dump as big as this. Almost half of all our energy reserves are here. They have even got as far as the entrance. But they couldn’t get any further, because they were stopped by the security system. Impassable and impenetrable shells are arranged in layers all around the energy dump. Laser cannon capable of unleashing enormous energy are positioned at various points of the shells. Anyone wanting to break through these shells would have to have at least the same energy capacities, and that is a tall order because of the colossal masses involved. Even we were restricted by them when building these energy silos. It took us a considerable time to transport all the material here.”

“So how were they able to get to the entrance?” I asked.

“Well, they too are at an advanced level of development. They managed to conceal the arrival of a powerful fleet using a simple technique, one that is familiar to us, that on this occa-

sion, as a result of a combination of circumstances, actually succeeded. They disintegrated their ships into tiny particles and, moving them in at a carefully calculated speed in order to deceive us, they guided them to the entrance in apparently random clusters. Everything was arranged so that they could be reintegrated at a specific moment in the vicinity of the entrance. Some particles flew more slowly, others more quickly, over quite large distances. They managed to create a misleading exterior which confused our computerised analysers into seeing different, peaceful vessels. And so their warships gathered outside the entrance in such great numbers that our local forces were unable to hold out against them, although they did inflict heavy losses. Then a raiding party broke through the security system at the entrance and made their way to where we are standing now, and quite a lot further too. They got through seventy-three tests and were only four away from the control panels. We were taken by surprise. Even now we do not know how they managed to get hold of all the codes and the knowledge necessary to open the doors. They almost made it.”

“But surely you had security protection inside?” I asked.

“We did, and that is in fact why their plan failed. They stopped outside the seventy-fourth door because they couldn’t get through it. There are seventy-seven protective doors here, but only seventy-three of them are designed to protect against a break-in from outside. The other four are to prevent abuses from our side, for a system as important as this cannot be entrusted to any one individual, no matter how distinguished and above suspicion. We also had an entire garrison stationed outside the seventy-fourth door along with their commanders.”

“And what happened to them?”

“The raiding party got as far as the seventy-fourth door.”

“Did they take them prisoner? Kill them?”

“Yes! They exterminated all of them.” The Sensin shook his

head. It was hard for him to accept. After a brief pause for thought, I took a deep breath:

“Ah. They killed them? Hmm. So then the way was open to them?”

“It’s not so simple. The last four security checkpoints may have been installed to prevent possible abuse by individuals on our side, but nevertheless they were there. Anyone wanting to get through them would have to undergo authentication. Otherwise they would be able to get their hands on the whole computer system controlling the energy fields and production processes that also controls the energy dumps and the production of all types of weapons and robots with powerful logistical capabilities for autonomous warfare. For military interventions these robots are on a par with us, if not even better than us. But it is only possible to take control of the whole system via the central control panel. Otherwise it’s no good. The Acutins must have reconciled themselves to this fact when they tried unsuccessfully to decipher the codes. Later they blamed the short amount of time available, which is only partly true. Our district units naturally responded quickly to the call for help, but nevertheless it was quite some time before they arrived. Subsequent analysis revealed that before the incursion the Acutins had carried out a series of simulations of their break-in to the energy fields. On the basis of these simulations they would have anticipated both the time needed for decoding and the timing of the break-in. And they actually had this time at their disposal, several times over. But they were unable to break the codes. It is impossible to know whether they would have succeeded if they had had more time, but the fact is this was a serious blow to their pride. They were convinced that they would simply waltz through our protected entrances. But it didn’t work out”.

“Well they did manage to get through the first seventy-three doors. And from what you have said, it seems that they did so very quickly,” I said, alluding to the by no means negligible

capabilities of the Acutins. But with undiminished enthusiasm at the failure of the Acutins, the Sensin continued calmly:

“They miscalculated. The failure of their raid also meant the failure of their attempt to get the upper hand over us. Or to be more accurate: despite all their careful preparations, it all went wrong for them. That is the most important thing.”

I looked at the Sensin with a smile. Success would have given the Acutins an enormous advantage, I concluded from the Sensin’s reply. That was the feeling I got.

“Have the Acutins got problems because of a lack of energy? On Earth we have seen quite significant differences over gradual or rapid transitions to war,” I said, trying to show my understanding of this quarrel between these two civilisations, about which I still didn’t know very much.

The Sensin looked at me in silence and then, with a slight shake of the head, looked away: “That’s not the reason. They have a billion times more than they need, almost like us. Both sides have more than enough.”

“So the energy fields are not the cause of the hostility between your civilisations?”

“The differences between us arose from the incomprehensible desire of the Acutins for predominance, despite the fact that all needs, both theirs and ours, are covered a billion times over, since here there is enough of everything. They consider themselves a superior civilisation and believe that they are entitled to precedence and to control us and, consequently, the Earth too. Their predominance would not be very propitious for you Earthmen either, since for them you are merely beings at a lower intellectual level. They believe that they can allow you to evolve, but you do not represent any greater value to them. They would not miss you if you were to disappear or be destroyed.”

“And you have a different attitude towards us Earthmen?” I looked at the Sensin.

“Fundamentally different. However things are not that simple. Without living with us, an individual would not understand us, or would very probably get the wrong impression of us. On the other hand not much time is necessary to grow a little better acquainted with us. Even for you a week or two should be enough. Three weeks would certainly do it. But in these circumstances, with such turbulent events occurring, any explanation would involve lengthy interruptions. On the other hand, you Earthmen act according to your feelings, just as we do. But for such a decision, you have been provided with a minimum amount of knowledge even now.”

I frowned, to show that I didn't really understand, and shook my head slowly: “I would need two to three weeks to get a basic understanding of your civilisation?”

“Yes!” agreed the Sensin immediately, as he gestured towards the next door. “They are waiting for us.”

I looked at the opening door with the three Sensins in the background. On the right stood what appeared to be a juggler, playing with balls, cubes and other objects of uncertain shape. Next to him stood a man with a top hat on his head, a long white scarf and white gloves. He looked like a circus conjurer or a magician. Over to the left, a slim girl dressed in overalls was bending forwards like a gymnast. She clearly had a very elastic physique. With a smile, she span round on her fingers, bent over backwards all the way to the floor, stood on her hands and then dropped down into the splits.

“This way please!” said the man with the top hat and white scarf.

We walked on.

“I'm not really cut out for acrobatics,” I said to the Sensin next to me.

“It won't be necessary. It is merely a question of verifying the coordination of our movements, since the Acutins are clumsier than us in some things and have difficulty copying acrobatic dance routines. They also have problems juggling with a large

number of objects, although they are capable of learning. It's the same with conjuring tricks: they don't come very easily to them. They are clumsier than us by nature."

"So how did they manage to get through these doors," I asked, less than convinced by the Sensin's self-confident smile, "all the way to the seventy-fourth and your garrison?"

"Yes, well, they also have more skilful individuals with special abilities. And they also foresaw tests of this kind."

"That might explain their successful penetration of all the barriers," I agreed, "but are these tests merely simple verifications?"

"Yes and no. In the case of a large number of requirements that are sufficiently varied, the crucial ones become easier. As a rule one of these tests will cause difficulties for an individual. And the passage through each successive door is more difficult. At least by our standards."

"That will be a problem for me too. I won't be up to this," I said after a pause.

"Don't worry. In our team you have the position of energy systems manager," said the Sensin reassuringly.

"Energy systems manager?" I had to smile.

"We, and this includes you, are a special forces unit sent to re-establish the route to the control panels. And you are in our group with precisely defined tasks of your own. None of us has nor will have any more powers than those defined for him in advance." The Sensin studied my reaction to his explanation.

"Right," I agreed, "because I have no special desire for your energy fields. Even if I found myself alone at the control panel, I would stick to the agreement."

The Sensin looked at me thoughtfully once again. "You won't be alone at the control panel." Something in his voice seemed to betray a slight uncertainty. At least that was the impression I got.

In the meantime the first Sensins had already walked up to the

“doorkeepers” and were proving their identity by imitating all those skills one after the other. It was very interesting to watch. They were amazingly good at it. Perfectly at ease, with the tranquillity of a specialist who trusts in his own ability, they executed all those difficult tricks and then joined the juggler in a collective juggling of all those balls, cubes and other objects, before vaulting over obstacles at a run and somersaulting to the floor, landing perfectly.

A very different type of test awaited us at the next door. This time it consisted of apparently random requirements from the most diverse spheres, which somehow added up to an agglomeration of individual abilities. The Sensins satisfied all the requirements without difficulty. And so it went on, all the way to the seventy-fourth door, where they stopped, as though they had done their part. And since they had stopped, that must mean it was my turn. Some of them even patted me on the back encouragingly. A good team sticks together, their expressions told me, and it was true that I had shared their happiness at each one of the completed tasks as though it were an obstacle successfully overcome. On the other hand I was still bothered by the Sensins’ conviction that if I wanted a more in-depth conversation about their civilisation I would have to live with them for a little longer. What was it that I wasn’t supposed to be able to understand that meant that they had still not fully revealed themselves to me? Merely something about their benevolence towards us Earthmen, they had told me. That should have been at least partially clear from the whole situation. I suppose. And that the Acutins don’t need Earthmen? Perfectly possible.

After passing through the seventy-third door, we found ourselves in a large room, a hexagonal chamber measuring something over 50 metres across, with six archways.

“Over there! Let’s go!” called a Sensin at the front of the group as he stepped towards an archway on the other side. It was actually the largest one, so the others must have been secondary entrances. This must be the most important route, the one

to the control panels, I imagined. Then the leading Sensin stopped and turned towards me. He waited for me to come up to him and then began explaining the situation in a firm but calm voice.

“The answers shouldn’t cause you any difficulty. All you need to do is relax and everything will be all right.”

“Relax? What do you mean? In the sense of composure?” I asked, wondering if there were any other important details I needed to know.

“Of course. That too.” The Sensin went on with his explanation: “But unlike all the tests so far, in your case your emotional response will be more important. And if you are relaxed, you will undoubtedly be more convincing.”

“Well, all right. That sounds good. But why have I been selected as the most suitable? In all the tests up till now I haven’t been better than you even in the slightest detail. I wouldn’t have passed any of the previous tests.”

The Sensin smiled encouragingly: “As I have already said, it will be very simple for you.”

“Okay. I’m sure you know what you’re doing.” I pushed aside my doubts and accepted the Sensin’s encouragement or task or whatever it was. I walked up to the archway and on to the now familiar door, identical to the seventy-three we had already come through. I stopped outside the door and looked up, and then to both sides. There was nothing to see. Judging from the tranquillity of the Sensins around me, I concluded that they were convinced about this enterprise of ours, or this system or, in other words, the success of our mission. Then the door opened, but there was no doorkeeper. There was no-one at the door. Just a room with furniture along the walls. Actually it was more like a theatre stage on which someone had placed a low table, like in a living room – a table for drinking coffee or tea while chatting to visitors, two armchairs and three more chairs that looked as though they belonged in a kitchen, because they didn’t match the style of the other furniture. It was all some-

how familiar to me. Years ago, when I was a student, we had had furniture like this at home. I started to look more carefully at the room and its contents. No! This was our living room at home from when I was at secondary school. Unbelievable!

I had started to inspect the cupboard when I heard the doorbell ring.

“Yes!” I shouted automatically, and by way of a reply I heard some noisy chatter and someone commenting that parents should go away from home more often and “leave us in peace a bit more”. I hesitated. The whole thing had taken me by surprise. Then, one after the other, my friends from my school days came into the room.

“Your parents have picked exactly the right time to go off on holiday. Once the girls get here it’ll be a full house. They’re coming this evening. We’ve already fixed it up,” shouted Jim above the din the others were making. They whooped enthusiastically at the news. I observed them calmly. Some went into the kitchen, others sat down in the living room. There were cards on the table. Jim took a chess set from a drawer and Matt stood in the doorway and raised a bottle of wine. Everything was happening exactly as it had back in my school days. Then John and Mal had a mock fight, there was a crash, and a smashed vase lay on the floor. We all looked at them and at the shattered fragments on the floor. I remembered that vase, and the fight between John and Mal. It had happened exactly as it had before. I looked back through the door. The Sensins were still there.

“He pushed me!” protested Mal. John immediately denied it and swore it wasn’t true. Mal continued to blame John and, exactly as before, each stuck to his story.

I went to fetch a dustpan and brush, swept the broken fragments into a heap and wrapped them in newspaper. “I’ll take this out to the bins. You just carry on!” This was exactly what I had done that other time. But this time, as soon as I was out of the “front door”, I stepped over to the Sensins.

“All of this is from when I was at school,” I told them.

“Yes, this whole recording is from that time, everything as it originally happened, except that your character has been completely deleted. It is missing and you are here to take its place.”

“So I haven’t gone back in time?”

“No, no. This is simply the past recorded on hologram film, and everything is computer-generated except the furniture, which is an exact copy of the originals, so that you too can sit comfortably on the couch. Your friends are merely hologram images. All we expect of you is to behave and respond exactly as you did back then.”

“Is that it?” I looked at the smiling Sensin and then smiled myself. “I think I can manage that.”

“Good. It will be hard for us to help you in this, because we are missing the recording of your original responses.” The Sensin continued to look encouragingly at me. I continued to smile at him. For the first time I had found out something more specific about my tasks.

“Yes, I probably will be able to this better than you could.”

The Sensin nodded. “Good luck!”

I went back into “my” flat and was very soon immersed in events of which I still had a vivid memory. Even moments I had nearly forgotten came back to me, or at least enough for me not to cause any delays or introduce any confusion to the “scene”, and this after all was probably the first requirement of this test. But the sensation of being thrown back to my school days, even if it was only through a hologram recording, was so overpowering that I soon found myself experiencing the whole thing almost as vividly as I had experienced it back then, and this realisation actually made me even more enthusiastic. I joined in so eagerly with arguments and discussions that I remembered as though it were yesterday, and laughed so heartily along with the others that I risked overdoing it and ruining everything. A momentary doubt about this possibility flashed through my brain. An involuntary “hey!” even slipped out. No,

I thought, I must play my part according to the rules. I can do this, I felt, despite the fact that much was still unclear to me. And so it went on, right up to the moment when I turned round and suddenly there was no-one in “my” room.

“Let’s go! The way is clear!” Benesens was gesturing me in the direction of the next door. I had done it. The smiling faces of the other Sensins confirmed it. Another test was behind us and now there were only three doors left to go.

Benesens gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder: “Excellent. Everything is going according to plan. Some of us had certain doubts, but I was fairly sure about you, although emotional responses are very slippery terrain with you Earthmen. Isn’t that right?”

I nodded automatically. In this slightly triumphant atmosphere Benesens’s words were a perfectly appropriate and amusing pleasantry. Even I smiled. And then he added that emotional responses were slippery terrain for them too, and that it would have been hard for them to assemble my past responses without my help.

“Yes, that’s true. But this was just a party, without any particularly strong emotions,” I said, before asking in a slightly more serious tone: “How come one part is missing?”

“We lost it,” he muttered, shrugging his shoulders. This however rather contradicted my impression of the Sensins. They radiated such a sense of infallibility that it was, to put it mildly, difficult for me to understand them losing something so important.

“Are you forgetful too?” I asked in obvious surprise.

Benesens shook his head: “It’s not that, it’s just that the combination of circumstances was unfavourable. It’s not a question of forgetting. Technically, of course, we could have provided enough copies so that something like this couldn’t occur. But there are also principles at stake here. Important principles that we never violate, even in the case of recordings as important as the ones that are missing here.”

“Principles?” He could tell from the way I looked at him that once again I was having difficulty understanding his answers.

“Well,” he went on, in view of my evident lack of comprehension, “I have already told you about the incursion of the Acutins to the seventy-fourth door and the slaughter of the control panel garrison. That was when the recordings were destroyed, although we could have stored a copy somewhere else.”

“Oh yes?” This sounded a little more likely, although I couldn’t dismiss a number of nagging doubts. I nodded and was about to ask him why they hadn’t done so, but he went on:

“Look! Here is the next door. In all probability this test is going to be more demanding.”

“Will it be me again?” I asked.

“Most likely.” Benesens considered for a moment before going on: “But with a little composure you will cope with every task, as long as you don’t get confused. After what you have demonstrated so far, I can conclude this with a considerable degree of certainty.”

As he was talking we had come up to the next entrance and, following the usual presentation and the invitation to enter the testing room, we stopped expectantly outside a perfectly normal, terrestrial wooden door. It looked quite familiar, and all the Sensins were looking at me too. Clearly it was my turn again. We exchanged glances and then I stepped forward alone, as the others around me nodded affirmatively. I hesitated briefly outside the door and then went in.

“Hey!” came a voice from inside the room. “I’ll be right with you. Come into the kitchen a moment!”

It was a woman’s voice. I didn’t recognise it but something seemed to spark in my memory. The hall I was in didn’t seem very familiar. Neither did the kitchen.

“Did you get it?” The same voice again.

I mumbled something indistinct by way of reply. There was no way I could remember what I was supposed to be bringing.

“Did I tell you I nearly got a distinction in the exam? In the end he gave me a ‘good’. Not bad, huh?”

“Yes, well done.” Hang on a minute, isn’t that... what was her name? I remembered the face but I couldn’t think of her surname. If I had ever known it. She had probably told me. Probably. It was the mad girl! That time in the mountains, that party in the log cabin a friend of mine had rented for a week, that was when I had met her. We were both in the first year at university, but she was from some other town. We weren’t made for each other. At least as far as my feelings for her were concerned. Or in any other way. Actually she was a bit crackbrained. I had met her for the first time that evening. While we were preparing dinner, which was supposed to be our job, we suddenly seemed to click. Then we had dinner, and then there was music, a party atmosphere. After two or three hours people were already pairing off on couches or in corners. Each couple separately, of course. Us too. But by the next day we had already started to split up. We didn’t get on. And then she suddenly started acting all offended. She was overcome by a sudden urge to put on a performance for us, a stupid one, and ended up in the arms of one of my acquaintances and while dancing with him began egging him on as though trying to get us to compete for her attentions. He probably wasn’t any keener on her than I was. But anyway she managed to create this whole circus – which actually ended up as an argument with Ben. We nearly came to blows over her. What an idiot. And now after all this time I was going to have to play the same role again, with the right timing and the same emotional responses, just like at the previous door with the hologram recording. But this was going to be harder, because as far as I could remember my feelings on that occasion were very muddled, and then there was that fight with Ben too. And of course the excessive quantity of wine I had drunk had probably contributed a little too, or perhaps not such a little. The whole thing was really quite confused.

“Here I am!” she called as she came through the door. Damn. It was really her! I don’t think I’ve ever met such an idiot. Zaza – that’s what they called her. I couldn’t remember her real name. She looked around and went over to the window. “They’re not here yet.”

“They’ll be here. Jim shouted from the cable car that we should go on. He said he’d follow later,” I replied, just like I had back then. That was something I could still remember.

“Okay. Who needs them anyway?” Zaza giggled.

I laughed too, just as I had that day when we first met. It was actually mere chance that we were alone together. I tried to collect my thoughts. To begin with we had got along fine. Not especially intimate, but I could still remember that conversation. “What year are you in?” I asked her.

“First year. You too, right?”

“Yes. Law. You’re studying drama aren’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“Earlier when we were having tea you were saying something about it.” Actually she had put on a whole performance about the course at the drama faculty.

“Were you listening to me?”

I nodded. If I’d known then what I knew now I would probably have told her that actually no-one in our group had had much choice. It was a real performance, like in the theatre, when the spectators aren’t supposed to talk among themselves. But back then her fondness for extemporaneous acting at the slightest provocation still seemed quite amusing. Less so later, of course.

“I get the impression that appearing on stage or in front of a camera isn’t a problem for you. Or shouldn’t be, if my impression is right.”

“Are you saying I’m a born actress?”

“There might be something in that,” I said, flatteringly. Although in fact she was so obviously expecting me to agree with her that there wasn’t much else I could have said. At least that’s how it had been then, and it was my job to repeat the

whole thing as faithfully as possible. After that things seemed to proceed fairly smoothly. Just like that evening, although I had already forgotten quite a lot about it. Actually the only thing I could remember with any clarity was her throwing herself at my friend later on. That must have been over an hour later. That was supposed to really bother me. And then there was that guy with the glasses. That's right, I'd almost forgotten about him, because I never met him again after that. But he was the one she had come with - just for the skiing. Nothing else, as she later explained as she pressed herself against me. Actually she had treated him in exactly the same way she treated me later. The more he looked at her, the more she pressed herself against me, wrapping herself round my neck.

"Have you noticed how he's watching us?" she whispered.

I threw a glance at him and caught a glimpse of his face and was about to carry on when I couldn't help remembering what my situation would be an hour later, when I would find myself in a very similar position. Except that then that acquaintance of mine would beam with happiness, because in his imbecilic opinion she had made a fool of me, which in fact wasn't true at all. But he was convinced of it. That was her fault and it was all I could do to stop myself giving her a kick up the backside. The silly cow! My blood boiled. After so many years I felt such indignation as she embraced me that without meaning to I pushed her away.

"Funny, isn't it?" she went on, smiling. And automatically I replied: "What's funny?"

At that moment the room suddenly went completely dark and then the lights came back on. Everything had disappeared. "Oh no!" I gasped. "Back then I responded with a laugh."

The Sensins ran up to me. "What happened? Why didn't it work?"

I spread my arms helplessly: "I made a mess of it."

"How?" The Sensins were looking at me with evident disap-

pointment. Clearly because of my mistaken response, and so I started apologising.

“I remembered how that scene developed, “ I said, “and a detail that happened a good hour later came back to me with such force that I suddenly got upset. For a moment my composure abandoned me.”

The Sensins shook their heads in silence. The moment seemed to last an eternity. But then they started focusing on the question of how to proceed. What could we do? The seventy-fourth door remained closed.

I was filled with a feeling of guilt. How could I have forgotten myself like that? I had to say something by way of apology.

“Without getting into the spirit of the situation you can’t respond emotionally. That’s why I tried to relive it as faithfully as possible. I tried really hard. But that whole business was just a muddle, with silly play-acting and stupid situations. That woman was capable of being extremely cunning, despite all her silliness. I think she had a kind of fixed idea that she was appearing on a stage, or even in a film...”

I stopped in mid-sentence. When it came down to it, she was right: it was all being recorded. On a hologram film complete with emotions. Wow. But that was something different. She couldn’t have known that.

“All this confusion, after it all came true, she actually really enjoyed it. She really enjoyed the circus she had triggered with her intrigues.”

Benesens patted me reassuringly on the shoulder: “It’s all right. No-one is accusing you of anything. We would just like to find a solution. We will have another chance in thirty-three days’ time. Till then the best thing will be to think over the whole thing again and try and envisage possible slips during the next attempt.”

“Even that won’t be so easy. That constant feigning innocence of hers.” I considered for a little while, weighing up my doubts, and went on: “Actually she was more pretend-

ing than acting, and that complicated things even further. Forgotten details were coming back to me. If I could just spend a little time with her again it would be easier for me to remember details of what happened back then. And of course all of her other bright ideas. But the next attempt would still be quite risky.”

Benesens listened in silence and after a brief pause said: “That could be arranged, although it won’t be so simple. But there is enough time. A journey to the Earth and back is possible. With a certain amount of risk, of course.”

“A certain amount of risk?” I said, emphasising the last word. “We set off for here, as you say, with a negligible amount of risk. But in the end we were lucky to survive – in fact we almost didn’t.”

“Well, yes. But we are on the brink of war with the Acutins and in such conditions surprises are more frequent. But your knowledge of the current conditions should tell you that we will not expose you to risk unnecessarily. If you manage to meet this... what do you call her?”

“Idiot.”

“Right. As I say, if meeting her again would make it easier for you to remember what happened back then and all the details of your experience, we will take you to her and bring you back.”

I considered this. My suggestion that meeting her again would help jog my memory had actually been more of an excuse, but the more I thought about the more it made sense. Especially since she was quite unpredictable. Then there was the fact that I myself had changed a lot since that time, so that it would be impossible for me to react spontaneously, without preparation, in exactly the same way as back then. Especially when faced with one of her sudden outbursts.

“Then use her to jog your memory, if that is the best solution. A few meetings with her, a little conversation, perhaps while taking a stroll or over dinner. We can arrange that. That

wouldn't be difficult, since talking to her can't be too much of a problem for you."

"No, no. After all, she's not stupid, or ugly. I could even call her pretty. But you'd be hard put to find anyone as crazy as her."

"So if I have understood correctly, you did not find her disagreeable at first? It is merely that your emotional responses when you met differed quite considerably from your later emotional responses when you parted. But during the test you must not mix up these different emotional states. It has already happened once, and by the look of things this lapse could happen again."

"That's for sure. Because in this game of hers it's not easy to know when she's being serious and when she's faking." I was beginning to feel more and more confused. My failure, though not forgotten, had at least been put to one side. And the only possibility we had left was to make sure that we had the best possible starting-point for the next attempt.

"Okay. So be it," I said resignedly. "Perhaps this time your assessment that there is little risk involved in the journey to Earth and back will be more accurate than the 'guaranteed safe journey' we had on the way here."

Chapter VII

The first part of the journey, as far as the space station that we had secretly left that evening during the get-together with the Acutins, was as peaceful as predicted, with no attacks by Acutin rockets or pursuits by their ships. The landing itself attracted no attention. I would later learn that meetings between the Sensins and the Acutins were very common - one of the Sensins told me they were organised by pacifists on either side - and it turned out that we were to attend a reception hosted by the Acutins that very evening. The theory was that more frequent meetings would diffuse tension and strengthen efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions. But in Benesens's opinion there was far too little of this to have any serious effect, let alone to prevent the outbreak of war. The two sides apparently allowed these meetings as an excuse for their intransigence with regard to their own demands, while at the same time appealing to the need to defend themselves and placing the blame for the situation on the other side.

Together with my Sensin friends – or perhaps after everything that had happened it would be more appropriate to call them comrades in arms – I sat down at a large round table with a mixed company of Sensins and Acutins. I soon observed that a lively discussion was in progress. There was quite a lot of laughter to be heard, and I found myself glancing increasingly frequently round the table. There was something slightly unspon- taneous if not even forced about that laughter. But since both sides were making a conscious effort to contribute to the cheerful atmosphere, it seemed to work. Cross-table conversa- tions kept starting up and those around me had to raise their voices to be heard. Those from my side of the table joined in with cries of agreement or jocular denial, depending on the point that was being made or the cleverness of the comment. Dialogues like this must have been quite common throughout the hall. I looked around appraisingly, my eyes wandering over the tables and beyond them. I couldn't actually see the far walls, partly because of the decorative fountains and the stairs by the columns containing the lifts. Crowds of figures were strolling among the tables. At that moment I was distracted by a slightly louder shout, which I ignored, assuming it was nothing to do with me. At the next shout I looked round and spotted a smiling Acutin, two tables away. His arm was raised in greeting and he was trying to attract my attention. It was the Acutin I had been talking to that time before our journey to the energy dump – when I was forced to interrupt what prom- ised to be an interesting conversation. I returned his greeting by slightly raising my hand. He beckoned me to come and sit by him, but I wasn't sure if that was a good idea. After all, the Acutins were the Sensins' enemies: deadly serious enemies. The Sensins wouldn't exactly be happy about me going over to him. I looked round. Benesens was shaking his head, as though to confirm my doubts.

“It is difficult to know what the Acutins are up to,” he said. “They are past masters at feigning ignorance and at leading

innocent conversations in the direction they want, for a clearly defined purpose and with an objective that they are able to achieve through skilful manipulation. We must not talk to them about our mission, or they will attack us with redoubled zeal. The balance of power that has been established is still the best guarantee of peace and if we do not soon re-establish the connection with the communications centre in our largest energy reservoir, some Acutins might start to think that they have the upper hand. As you can see, even now quite a number of them are convinced of their superiority. Too many of them, perhaps.”

“That’s very possible,” I began, intending to mention my theory about sudden outbreaks of war, when I was interrupted by a light touch on my shoulders.

“Hey, I heard you were back.” The smiling face of the beautiful Honaja was bent towards me. She was even more beautiful than at our first meeting. She was also dressed slightly more provocatively, in a manner more suitable for an evening function, although the military overalls she was wearing that first time had also suited her very well. This time she was in a happier mood. Without that hint of pain in eyes that were slightly red from crying. All I could sense in her was a kind of exuberance. She made no effort to hide her happiness at seeing me again.

“I heard that things got off to a good start,” she said. “And then there some problems, right?”

“Yes. It worked for a while, until...”

“It’s all right. You proved yourself enough. Our efforts have now been confirmed, that’s the most important thing. It is enough to know that it works. You’ll be able to do the rest, too. I know you will.”

That was nice to hear. “Thanks for the encouragement.” I nodded at the Sensins round the table. “My friends think so too.”

“I know it better than your friends do,” she answered with a

self-assured smile. "Believe me." Now it was her turn to nod towards the table: "A lot better than they do."

I smiled back her, feeling slightly embarrassed as I wasn't really sure what she meant - although I had nothing against her having such confidence in me or indeed in her ability to judge the situation. But the more I looked at her beautiful face, turned towards me, the more I felt an unusually strong connection to her. For her part - and this was strange and pleasant at the same time - she was gazing at me, now with tenderness and now with a sly teasing look, apparently convinced of the obviousness of our belonging together. The strange thing was that I felt the same, which was funny in a very strange way.

"That crazy woman has got you all confused again!" she said with a teasing giggle. But I sensed so much understanding in her and at the same time an unconcealed revulsion at the mention of "that crazy woman" that I was confused for a moment.

"You know a lot about it," I commented after a brief pause in which I looked at her with curiosity. "Did they tell you everything?"

"They have to tell me." She carried on smiling that mysterious smile that I didn't quite understand - because I didn't know the background or something like that; that was the only explanation that occurred to me.

"Are you married?"

She shook her head slowly. "I was. Unfortunately I lost him." We exchanged glances and for a moment I caught a glimpse of her inner pain. "My husband, I mean."

'Yes, of course.' I was already regretting my over-hasty curiosity.

"Actually, they killed him. He was one of the supervisors of the energy fields. When the Acutins broke in, he was with the garrison behind the seventy-third door. He was killed in the fight with the Acutins."

"Oh!" I said in surprise, but Honaja went on: "He was the one

who set up the coded protection that is causing us problems now.”

“That was him? Oh!” That was an even bigger surprise. At least for me. “So he...” I stopped. Several things occurred to me all at once. “So he was the one who got me involved in this business?” I asked finally, and after a pause, in which she remained silent too, I looked at Honaja, who nodded.

“And he chose me?”

“Yes. He knew you very well!”

“How do you mean ‘knew me’? Where from?”

“He monitored you.”

“Monitored me? Wow!” I took a deep breath.

“It wasn’t intrusive. Of course he didn’t interfere with you in any way, at least not deliberately. It’s not allowed. And he certainly wouldn’t have done anything bad to you.” Honaja looked at me affectionately. “He actually grew very attached to you. Very strongly. You meant a lot to him. Actually you were a very dear friend to him.” Honaja was getting excited. “He wasn’t your biological clone, and you weren’t his either, if that’s what you are thinking. And we do not have the ability to travel through time either. There is nothing from the future or the past here.” Honaja gripped my hand with a kind of urgent intimacy. “All of us Sensins have friendly ties to Earthmen, so for us your collaboration with us in this business is something quite natural. You don’t mean anything to the Acutins. They would happily sacrifice you, since for them you are merely beings at some primitive level of development, too low down on the evolutionary spiral for them to give you any serious consideration. We, however, see things quite differently, and this is also the origin of the conflict between the Acutins and us. We nurture very benevolent feelings towards you.”

“I’m happy to hear it,” I replied, under the influence of her humorous playfulness. I could sense considerable emotional benevolence in the way she looked at me, and at a deeper level than just respect. It was the same thing that I felt when

I looked at her. Yes, I couldn't be mistaken. On the other hand she wasn't doing anything to hide her feelings towards me, which were surely more than just a vague benevolence. Quite a lot more, if I wasn't mistaken. Meanwhile, my feelings were growing stronger too.

"Come on, let's go and dance," she said, offering me her hand. My neighbour, Benesens, was in the middle of a lively conversation with an Acutin from the next table. I looked at the others. They were talking among themselves. No-one was paying any attention to Honaja or me. Right then, I thought to myself, and slowly stood up and walked with Honaja to the dancefloor. I still didn't know very much about these Sensins, I thought with a grin, and shook my head. They were in fact revealing themselves to me gradually, but all things considered they now seemed stranger or perhaps more mysterious than at our first encounter. Nevertheless some things didn't quite add up, or at least that was my sensation. Even the explanation of how her husband had apparently been monitoring my life was quite strange in itself. I was unable to form a more definite view of it, and meanwhile Honaja was acting towards me as though I were...as though I...a comparison had just formed in my mind but I was somehow reluctant to put it into words. Then I had to smile. At times she really did react as though she saw her husband in me. Where did that impression come from? After all, she had explained that it was nothing to do with time travel, which was something they were apparently not capable of, and that I was not a clone of her husband either. So what was behind it? What was the basis on which all of this was happening?

Honaja stopped at the edge of the dancefloor. "Let's go over there," she said, pointing to where there were slightly fewer dancers. I led her across the middle of the dancefloor, past the dancing couples.

As we moved to the rhythm of the music, her arms around my neck and mine around her waist, I whispered into her

ear: "There's a nice atmosphere here." She was all mine. With her entire being and her sensual abandon, she was becoming more and more part of me. But then she gave a kind of sigh and I found myself imagining her dancing with that husband of hers. She must have loved him. But she was also fond of me, here and now: I could sense it. Every movement of her hands, draped gently around my neck, told me this. Then she gave me a slight shake. "Look. They are calling us. It must already be time for you to go."

I glanced over to where she was looking. The Sensins were surreptitiously signalling to me that it was time to leave and that I should get away without attracting attention.

I pressed Honaja closer to me and we exchanged eloquent glances. I squeezed her hand and our fingers brushed together. Then I left the dancefloor and walked towards our group. When I reached them I stopped and we exchanged a few words so as to maintain the impression of a relaxed gathering. Then I set off after the others, who were already making their way towards the exit in twos and threes, at brief intervals, and then following a path lined with ornamental shrubbery to the next building, whose ground-floor rooms appeared to contain several groups of Sensins and Acutins. Our group quickly re-assembled and we were given a short briefing. Then we set off in the direction of the test range, from where we were apparently going to continue our journey. Once again in small groups and at carefully-timed intervals. The rest of us spread out so that we were still within sight of each other and waited for the signal to move towards the ship. But before it was my turn to embark (I was already looking out for the signal to move), a Sensin from our group hurried up. He passed along the line, pausing momentarily to give a short message to individual Sensins from our unit:

"Six tables of Acutins got up from their places as soon as we left. I have just received the message that they are heading

for their pursuit ships. They suspect something, although they do not know the true importance of our flight to Earth. Therefore we should not discuss this, not even amongst ourselves.” The Sensin looked at me very earnestly and after my muttered “okay” he moved on to the next trio from our unit.

With a sense of foreboding at this new turn of events I turned towards my neighbour: “What does this actually mean?”

“That they are going to follow us,” came the answer. “And probably you too, or rather you in particular. That’s my impression. In any case they will want to monitor us closely to ensure that their forecasts are as exact as possible. Yes, it looks as though that’s the main thing. They want to get to the bottom of the whole business and then take decisive action. It appears that your presence is starting to disquiet them more and more.”

I smiled: “They won’t succeed in assembling the missing details on their own. I am sure of it. You weren’t able to either, not on your own and not with me. My crazy friend simply let herself go that evening. There was no logic in her behaviour. Or to put it another way, whenever she lost the thread, she improvised by putting on an act. I don’t believe that even she knew where her emotional outpourings actually came from. And as far as I have been able to remember so far, my emotions that evening were almost as confused as everything else.”

It occurred to me that there might be a comparison here between Acutins and Sensins, but I was unable to reach any more definite conclusions about their abilities.

“Those Acutins seem quite self-confident in their dealings with you,” I said.

“Ha! Self-confident? Arrogant, you mean! The most suitable word for their character is arrogance.” But then the Sensin drew himself up slightly and, with a slightly absent look in his eyes, continued: “Well, perhaps for us, here, this arrogance of theirs is actually desirable. We welcome it. At least I do. Because if their arrogance didn’t make them believe that they

had an advantage over us in forecasting events, they would have already attacked us.”

“With weapons?” I asked.

“Yes, with weapons too.” The Sensin continued to stare in front of him with an absent look in his eyes, but even so he flinched slightly under my steady gaze.

“So the safety of this flight is actually slightly more conditional?” I said slowly, with an emphasis on the questionability of the notion of conditionality.

“Well, that’s not exactly it. We are also able to predict their intentions, and, as you have already had the chance to see, in these minor skirmishes we are more than a match for them, don’t you agree? Even in a conflict involving all our forces, we believe that we would have more chances than them.”

Naturally the fact that my life appeared to depend on how each side predicted the actions of the other was not the most encouraging news, but I didn’t tell the Sensin that. It probably wasn’t appropriate.

Then the Sensin who had just arrived summoned us, waving his arms, all attempt at concealment abandoned. “Let’s go! To the asteroid belt as quickly as possible!” he shouted. After waving his arm in the direction of our ship he broke into a run, and we followed him in a straggling column. But before we had gone more than a few hundred metres, to my surprise, our ship took off and flew towards us. It paused in mid-air above our heads and started sucking us up into itself, one by one. Or at least that’s what it looked like.

“Wha...!” I said in surprise, and suddenly found myself being pulled vertically up into the air. I ran to my seat and gazed out through the big window.

“That was quick,” I said to Benesens, with a glance at the other Sensins who all appeared completely unruffled.

“We’re in a hurry. We must get to the asteroid belt before them, and then we will probably have to talk a little more seriously about this pursuit.”

Our ship rose up into the air and accelerated rapidly, banking steeply towards the exit corridor and then heading at full speed in the direction of the asteroid belt I already knew so well.

Through the window I could see two more of our ships in the foreground, and the hologram display showed our immediate vicinity. There was no sign of any pursuing ships. Or was there? Yes, I could make out six Acutin ships within visible range, caught in the holo-display.

I tried to estimate their speed and whether they would catch us up, but our speeds were too evenly matched for me to tell. I beckoned Benesens over to the holo-display: "Will they be able to catch us?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "They are probably planning something else. There are many possibilities." Benesens considered for a moment. "At the galactic level, by which I mean all planets, both natural and artificial, a kind of trial of strength is taking place. At every step a new balance is established, with an increasing amount of brute force. Wherever there is any gathering of forces of whatever kind – military, energy production or intellectual – and for whatever reason, that is a sufficiently strong reason for the other side to do exactly the same. And this is what is causing this confusion now. Seen from this point of view, this Acutin pursuit is perfectly normal behaviour, or, to put it another way, it could be perfectly normal. The same thing happens everywhere where no-man's-land has, up until now, been used for free passage by both sides. This pursuit could actually have the same origin as all actions of this type, couldn't it?" Benesens looked at me with a smile. I didn't know what to say.

"Or perhaps they have already worked out what's going on. That is also a possibility."

Benesens smiled as though admitting that despite all his cleverness this question was too much for him, and went on: "But as you have seen, the asteroid belt is dotted with a great many asteroids, both ours and theirs. Quite a number of them are

space stations, despite their convincingly asteroid-like exterior. That is where we shall see what importance these Acutins actually attribute to our group and to your presence among us.”

“And how will you know that?” I asked.

“For now I can only guess. It will probably all depend on the extent and intensity of the intervention of their forces in the asteroid belt in order to halt our flight, or indeed to destroy us. And as you can probably imagine, the forces gathered here are considerable.”

“Could our clashes with their forces along our route to the Earth merely be part of the ongoing mutual demonstrations of strength?”

“Yes, of course. Because of the major redistributions of forces and the powerful military concentration in this part of the galaxy, even in the case of minor skirmishes all the armed forces from the surrounding area are immediately involved.”

“I see. After everything we managed to survive on the way here, I really don’t want to have go through anything like that on the way back, despite my confidence in your technical abilities and the accuracy of the computerised guidance systems. But from what you say...” I paused.

Benesens raised his eyebrows. Then with a gesture of his head, a slow movement of his arm and finally two spread palms, he indicated his belief in the need to accept the facts as they were. He ran an appraising eye over me: “Perhaps after this new redistribution of forces things will have calmed down again. That is very possible.”

Yes, of course. But I was far from reassured by his reflections on the probable risk of our flight past Acutin gun emplacements disguised as asteroids.

Chapter VIII

When we reached the asteroid belt the pursuing ships moved in closer and flew along in formation like an escort. Then they banked steeply to circle around the first asteroids - or what looked like asteroids from the outside. We did the same, so that after flying past the first enormous mass the ship turned on its longitudinal axis and the straight line of our course to the asteroid belt became an ever tighter spiral. Suddenly the asteroid in front of the Acutins opened like an umbrella - an umbrella several kilometres across - and forced us into a sharp turn. Somehow we managed to avoid it but then the next asteroids began opening too. We were going to be trapped inside a kind of giant shell. At that moment we picked up a signal from an asteroid that had suddenly appeared in front of us. A split second was enough for us to exchange coded light impulses: yes, it was one of ours, come to rescue us. The asteroid would carry us through the shell. We immediately changed course and turned in a short arc towards the entrance that had

been indicated to us. The barriers were still lifting as we flew through them towards a runway several hundred metres long, with the arches of an enormous vault curving over it. I looked at Benesens:

“How are we going to get out of this?”

“The shell is probably too thin to resist an asteroid as big as this,” explained the Sensin as he watched the hologram display of our asteroid’s progress towards the shell-like covering of this cage that had suddenly formed to trap us.

Automatically I gripped the handle on my seat. What would such a collision mean? The asteroid might even explode. Did these Sensins really know what they were doing?

“So we are going to crash into it?” I said.

Benesens turned excitedly from the big frontal window to the hologram display of the computer’s simulation of our current position: “They’re not going to let us through!”

I continued to observe our approach to the shell in the holo-display. There was a bright gleam as the giant masses came into contact and the whole of the asteroid started shaking. Through the window we could see the quivering of the walls and the bending of the giant arches above the hangar into which we had retreated. After this violent buckling, however, the ceiling arches immediately straightened themselves again. All eyes turned to the three-dimensional display of the computer simulation. The asteroid was sinking deeper and deeper into the collapsing shell, crushing it and pushing the shattered fragments ahead of it. It looked as though we were going to make it, and the crew responded with mounting enthusiasm. We were through!

“The asteroid will carry us part of the way. Remain in readiness!” The commander’s voice cut through the noisy shouts.

Once again we all looked at the holo-display, which showed our asteroid’s path through the smaller barriers put up by the Acutins. These were probably capable of stopping smaller vessels, but they were too small for asteroids as big as ours. It

looked as though this was merely a routine operation by the Acutins, more to do with their constant measuring themselves against the Sensins than with the importance of our mission. But when we found ourselves trapped for a second time by the automatic opening of those giant umbrellas, our fresh attempt to break through the shell revealed a very different situation. The shell simply would not break and we were unable to split it open. Like a parachute covering the head of a parachutist who has just landed, it hung over our asteroid and prevented it from moving. An alarm sounded. The danger was visible on the holo-display in the form of a multitude of tiny moving dots that we immediately identified as landing craft. Other, larger ships, with more powerful weaponry also appeared. The whole area around our asteroid was filled with teeming movement. It was an invasion.

“Battle stations, everyone!” ordered the commander. “We are caught in a flexible shell which for the time being is obstructing the view of our rapid intervention forces on the outside. We will have to rely on our own strength for a little while at least. The holo-display already shows the enemy landing on the surface of our asteroid and the first clashes between the attackers and the robots of our asteroid’s garrison.”

“Zoom in on the fighting!” the commander ordered the computer display. It showed us the surface of the asteroid and such a violent turmoil of fighting between the robots of both sides that I was seized with anxiety as I watched these implacable humanoid machines engage each other in single combat. Projectiles of every kind, from metal bullets to flashing energy bolts lit up the whole area like fireworks, and metal hands, feet, heads and body parts flew through the air. Yet although these explosions revealed the metal structure of the robots, much of their bodies looked remarkably similar to living, human flesh. They were probably made of some kind of plastic, or perhaps even from living muscle and skin grown in laboratories. Everything was in

movement, including my thoughts and emotions. My heart in my throat, I watched the attackers penetrate our first line of defence. It was not only the human exterior of these robots and their relentless mutual destruction; the presence of a powerful intellect and a decisive mind was evident in the rapid transitions from chaos to order, on both sides. When the attacking groups of robots pierced the asteroid garrison's defensive line, our robots immediately formed a new line. Once again the attackers broke through, something I perceived as the inexorable advance of the entire civilisation of the Acutins. At the sight of the asteroid's garrison falling back ever more rapidly, even my Benesens, who until now had been calmly observing the battles of the robots and the individual advances of the enemy forces in individual sectors, began shifting in his seat with growing nervousness, staring now at the holo-display and now at me. Then something lifted our ship and twisted it round with such force that I was thrown into the air and then back into my seat. The Sensins standing by the holo-display were all knocked off their feet. An explosion had pierced the wall. Everything happened very quickly, and as I turned to look at the sprawling Sensins I noticed out of the corner of my eye a powerful flash of light from the frontal window and, immediately afterwards, a number of small craft firing at us. A moment later they were scattered by bolts from our cannon. Even before the last of the attacking trio had been shot down, a fresh group of vessels had begun its attack. These vessels were much larger, more numerous and of various kinds, as though designed for different purposes. Some fired their cannon at our ship and pierced its hull with their energy bolts. The others flew rapidly past and immediately reappeared behind us. Slowing down, they lowered groups of robots to the ground, and then returned to the attack with rockets powerful enough to pierce our hull. At last the Sensins managed to shoot them down, one by one.

Meanwhile the robots had already taken shelter behind the hangar's giant pillars. They divided themselves into several groups and set off in various directions.

I watched the erection of a barrier on the site of the shattered doors of our landing bay. It was too late for that, though. Before it was finished, the Acutins attacked once again with astonishing speed, breaking through as far as the barrier builders and attacking them. Our exit was blocked. I looked at the commander, who had also been observing the group of robot engineers. He stood up. The same thought must have occurred to him. He raised his hand and we all fell silent.

"We can't hold out here," he said briefly. "We must retreat into the interior of the asteroid and we must do so without delay. One group of robots has already broken through to our exit door. Arm yourselves with high-powered weapons to hold the robots in the corridors!"

He then walked over to a wall decorated with engravings of historical motifs that were probably terrestrial in origin: medieval knights in armour, Roman legions, heroes from Ancient Greek and Hebrew mythology, such as a youth holding a shepherd's sling and, in the background, the figure of a giant. At least this was the association suggested to me by the relief, although in themselves the lines and incisions were only enough to create a faint impression. They were not distinct enough to form a clear picture. On slightly closer observation, however, the motif became sufficiently recognisable.

"Our escorting forces on the outside are on constant alert and ready to intervene, with weapons if need be. And now this situation has arisen. They will soon discover that we have been captured, but of course the Acutins are aware of this too. That is why they are in such a hurry. They made preparations for a lightning attack after closing all the sections of the shell to form a giant egg-shaped cage with flexible walls. First our asteroid, then the ship, and now us, every one of us. Or at least him..."

The commander looked at me and I felt the eyes of the whole crew on me. He went on: "And so when we leave the ship we are going to take particular care of him. The groups of robots around him will be reinforced. In view of the Acutins' recent behaviour, it is impossible to predict whether they intend to take him alive, because they suspect that his presence is necessary at the entrance to the energy fields, or whether they have also been ordered to destroy him if they fail to seize him."

There was a moment's silence. They were all still looking at me as I shook my head and swallowed nervously. This was a far cry from the safe journey I had been promised, although I had had my reservations about that from the beginning. As far as I could make out, the best thing to do from the Acutins' point of view would be to eliminate me. This thought paralysed me even more than the commander's words had done.

"Some of their robots have probably managed to break through in our rear, perhaps even as far as the corridors along which we are planning to retreat. But there is no doubt that we have superior numbers of combat robots. Are there any questions?"

The commander looked at the crew in front of him, and then back at me. I continued to listen in silence. Then he ordered us to arm ourselves and to prepare for our sortie. A crowd immediately formed by the wall where the weapons were stored, and then again at the exit. At the back of the ship a column was forming, consisting of ranks of three robots and two more along each side for protection. The two ends of the column were reinforced by additional robots. A red light started flashing and the upper section of the wall opened outwards and lowered itself to the ground to form a ramp. We ran down it, first the robots and then the rest of us, and hurried in the direction of the corridor leading to the interior, scanning the surrounding walls as we ran.

The Acutins' robots had to be somewhere nearby. Every movement of the Sensins showed that they were expecting an attack. I could sense it too, as I gripped my laser rifle, ready to

open fire immediately. We were all on the lookout. After such a comprehensively planned attack, they were not going to let us simply escape into the interior of the asteroid. No way. My brain struggled to make sense of the situation, but the only thing that was certain was that the next stage was going to be hellishly difficult.

Our corridor was a little over ten metres wide and about the same in height, with numerous exits on two upper levels as well as on the ground level. After less than a hundred metres it suddenly widened out and we found ourselves in an enormous hall with several exits, some of them with round arches twenty metres across and twenty metres high in the centre. The largest of them, of almost double the diameter, was at the opposite end of the hall to where we stood.

“There!” shouted our commander. He ordered the robots to set up a protective cordon to the exit tunnel and they immediately dashed forwards. But before the cordon had reached the exit towards which we were now moving, at least a hundred robots poured from the neighbouring doorways, firing at our robots and rushing at them in a concerted effort to shatter their ranks.

“Run!” shouted the commander. The attempt to break through had begun. The only question now was the actual balance of forces. Robots from the rear ran to help the unit that was under attack, hitting the enemy in the flank at the last moment. A slightly stronger counterattack would suffice to repel the attack, and we still had a reserve group of robots in readiness. But before they could engage the enemy the Acutins’ forces also received reinforcements. The waves of reinforcements, first from one side, then from the other, merged into each other. Then the Acutins’ robots struck out across the centre of the giant hall, straight for our column and the protective escort on our flanks. Our robots immediately engaged them, in four close ranks, side by side, their laser rifles aimed at the attackers. The first rank was shattered immediately. It was almost

the same with the second: the attackers passed through it with barely a pause. The third rank at least slowed down the attackers, and managed to stop some of them, while the fourth offered stronger resistance. I had to strain every muscle to keep up with the fleeing column of Sensins. Just a few metres away I saw one of the Acutins' robots break through our defences and pounce on the nearest Sensin. One of our robots immediately rushed at it with such force that the next moment they were both rolling on the ground, each beating its metal hands against the metal armour of its opponent. Another Sensin ran up and fired an energy bolt that blew off the attacking robot's head, thus freeing our robot, which immediately dived back into the fray. I looked once again in the direction of our exit, at the protective cordon and the clashing robots. Their metal bodies crashed together. The robots raised themselves up in the air and threw themselves at their opponents. A little further away two robots were wrestling on the ground. Just beyond them I saw a small group of robots break through the ranks of our defenders as far as the Sensins, who immediately opened fire with their laser rifles. One robot was destroyed instantly, a second was damaged, but a third managed to grab one of the Sensins around the waist and lift him up high, onto his shoulders. With a great leap, he jumped over the duelling robots and disappeared with his victim into the rear of his own side.

"They are taking prisoners!" cried Benesens.

"Why?" I asked.

Benesens merely shook his head uncertainly. "Why indeed? Perhaps they want to find out more about our mission."

"Ah. So that means that we might survive?"

"It is going to take them some time to destroy our robots."

Once again I was nagged by unpleasant doubts. The Sensins could not simply surrender me to the Acutins. And they would not. Even they would rather see me dead than alive in the hands of the Acutins. An awkward situation. But what other

option did they have? This could get dangerous. In the end I wouldn't know who to be afraid of.

My attention was attracted by a confused jostling in the foreground. Just in front of the archway of our exit, the situation had degenerated into confusion and chaos. Our whole column had come to a halt. Then we heard shouts warning us that the Acutins' robots had broken the column right next to the corridor that was our intended line of retreat.

"Robot guard detachments from the rear to the front, now!" ordered our commander.

Benesens and I looked at each other. Did that mean that the rear of our column would remain unprotected? The situation must have been desperate if this was the only possibility left to us.

"The rear of the column will defend itself!" came the next order.

I looked at Benesens. "Are we going to fight the robots ourselves?" I asked.

"Yes. I had not counted on such an escalation," he replied gravely. "Or such ferocity." He leaned towards me: "Although it is my opinion that they do not intend to kill you, it would nevertheless be better for you to move towards the middle. Leave the fighting to us. In this unit we have been well trained for it."

"Our battleships have penetrated the walls of the cage." The message spread like a wave from the rear. "Help is coming. Landing craft are already heading for our asteroid. Hold on!"

This boost to our morale had not yet subsided when we were struck by an even more powerful wave of hostile robots, both from the front and on both flanks at the same time. The ranks of our robots, including the last ones from the defensive cordon, disappeared under the advancing Acutin robots. Now the first Sensins threw themselves into the counterattack, joining battle with the hostile robots without the protective barrier of our own robots. They were incredibly brave, and surprisingly

successful. Their laser rifles were fitted with special barrels for firing energy bolts, and these bolts were powerful enough to blow off the robots' heads, arms and legs and shatter their bodies. More and more of the Acutins' robots were rapidly converted into scrap metal. But this didn't seem to make any difference to their numbers. If anything, the opposite was true: they kept on coming and they were pushing us into a circle that was growing tighter by the minute. I looked at the robots and then back at the Sensin defenders. They were incredibly courageous and also extremely skilful. Suddenly I realised something – something that the various explosions and flying fragments of shattered robots had prevented me from noticing before: it was true that the robots were pushing us into an ever tighter circle, but they were not killing the Sensins. They were simply moving forwards, dodging the Sensins' energy bolts and – this was the surprising thing – capturing individual Sensins in their steel embrace. They could have crushed them but they didn't. Our powerlessness was becoming clearer and clearer: at any moment they could shatter our resistance. Some individual Sensins realised this and began to fall back, while their comrades kept up their frenzied firing. But the robots were seizing more and more of them.

Suddenly we heard a piercing whistle. The robots stopped. A transparent craft came to a halt some metres away. It was a kind of saucer with a transparent dome, and there appeared to be Acutins in it. We all looked at them.

An amplified voice began speaking: "Sensins, fighting with such fury against robots is irrational at our level of civilisation. We do not wish to kill you, or we would have already done so. That is not our intention. We only wish to talk to you."

"The war between us has not yet begun, nor has it been declared. What you are doing goes against all the agreements between us," said our commander, stepping to the front. "You have no right to attack us and you have no chance of concealing this attack. Our forces are already on their way to this aster-

oid. Outside, our battleships are in complete readiness. There is no way for you to get out of this situation, whatever you do. The best thing would be to let us go while there is still time.”

“That is not a problem. It is true that these clashes between robots have produced quite a quantity of scrap metal, but you are as used to this as we are,” the Acutin on the flying saucer continued calmly. “And you are also used to discussions with us, are you not?”

This was said in a slightly cynical tone, and our commander bristled visibly. “What do you want?” he asked, with the measured voice of an equal even though, as far as I could judge, he was already a prisoner, just like all the other Sensins and me.

“We shall interview each one of you separately.”

“I will not permit any questioning of individuals.”

“As far as permission is concerned, our robots have already reached agreement. That is sufficiently clear, is it not?”

“With force, then. I will not allow it! That will be war!”

“Arrogance is of little use to you here. It is true that we prevented the robots from firing at you, but not because of fear. It simply was not necessary. How they would act in the face of stronger resistance, however, we can only guess.” The Acutin gave a cynical laugh: “Or rather, you can only guess.”

“You may be able to kill us,” replied the commander sternly, “but you will not get away with it. You may have surrounded our crew, but our ships have surrounded this asteroid, and that includes you. You cannot evade them. You cannot escape. If you kill us, you too will soon become victims.”

“So be it. We shall take your warning into consideration.”

The Acutin’s tone was still cynical, but now there was also a mixture of insolence and satisfaction in his voice as he gave orders to the robots.

“Be as gentle as possible as you take away these Sensins...or whatever I should call them.” The Acutin gave a low chuckle that seemed to contain a great deal of malevolence. “As gently

as possible,” he went on, “and no more, isn’t that right, Sensins? As much in fact as we can afford. Naturally you will not be able to refuse to talk to us. That is probably already clear. At least I hope so.”

The Sensins glanced quickly at each other.

“They want him,” said the commander, indicating me. “They are going to question him.” Then he moved over to Benesens. “Explain to him,” he said, “that he must delay them for as long as possible. It is true that the Acutins’ speed has taken us by surprise, but we are capable of something similar ourselves.”

Benesens continued to stare at the floating transparent disc with a glassy look in his eyes, and then turned to me: “You must not let them take you in. Do not believe them. They will try and get as much information out of you as they can. Tell them everything except about the seventy-fourth door and our abortive attempt to get through it. Putting off telling you about our civilisation was a great error. But bear in mind one thing...”

Before he could finish, the steel hand of an Acutin robot seized his forearm, pushed him easily forwards as though he weighed nothing, and then led or rather dragged him away. Other robots did the same with the other Sensins, and then it was my turn. Except that after a few steps the robot pushed me out of the column and towards the floating disc, which in the meantime had descended to the ground, just over twenty metres away. I tried in vain to wrest myself from its steel grip. Twisting round, I could see three Acutins stepping out of the transparent dome. They walked forward a few paces and stopped. The robot placed me on the floor in front of them and, at an order from the Acutin in the middle, released me from its grip.

“Welcome!” said the Acutin, smiling. “Do not be afraid of us. We are not your enemies. Certainly not in the way that these Sensins have told you.”

I returned his greeting with a slight nod of the head and then raised my eyes. I looked at the middle Acutin, then at his two neighbours, then back at him.

“You are an Earthman?”

“Yes.”

The Acutin smiled. “Are you fighting on the side of the Sensins?”

I remained silent. I couldn't think of a suitable answer. The Acutin seemed quite friendly. There was nothing harsh in his voice and there was none of the arrogance I had expected. No aggressiveness. Even the condescension I had noticed during those receptions seemed to be absent. Actually I was slightly surprised by their friendliness. Or whatever it was that this unexpectedly friendly reception demonstrated.

I smiled back at him.

“But are you sure that you are not mistaken in this?” The Acutin smiled patronisingly. Despite the ambiguity of the situation, or perhaps because of it, I continued to smile and shrugged my shoulders as if to ask what else I could do in my situation. Just as I was on the point of asking him if there was anything strange or unexpected about this, we were distracted by sudden cries and a commotion in the column opposite us. One of the Sensins had managed to extricate himself from the arms of his captor. Dodging the outstretched arm of the next robot he ran straight towards us, coming to a stop between the three Acutins and me.

“Let him go!” he said loudly and, it seemed to me, with a somewhat exaggerated self-assurance that would achieve him nothing under the circumstances. Everything was in the hands of the Acutins.

The Acutins looked at each other and smiled condescendingly. “But we mean him no harm. Not only that,” – the middle Acutin stepped towards him – “but this should already have become clear, even to you.”

“You have no right to interfere in our connections with the

Earthmen, nor in our discussions with them. This has always been the way. You are about to violate one of the fundamental tenets of the mutual respect that until now, despite your impudence, you have always maintained. We shall not allow this. You are provoking war.”

“We shall not argue about this. Robots, take him away! Now is really not the time for discussions of this sort.”

The Acutin took a step back, gestured to the robots to remove the Sensin and waited for his order to be carried out. The Sensin tried to resist but a robot quickly seized him with its steel fingers and dragged him away by the forearm. Suddenly our ears were assailed by a terrible crackling, crashing sound from the opposite side of the giant hall. Something was tearing the wall open from top to bottom. Through the yawning gap we saw a mass of Sensin vessels of various types, some similar to those used by the Acutins in their attack, judging from their external appearance. The flashes we could see along the hulls of the vessels in the rear probably meant that there were more Acutin battleships out there, but the main part of this conflict, at least judging from the flashes of the explosions, was taking place in the background, out of sight.

Meanwhile, the Sensin craft that had already managed to penetrate our hall were beginning to disembark new detachments of their – our – robots. Immediately, however, a number of Acutin ships arrived with their own robotic reinforcements. As soon as the robots were landed they threw themselves into battle, supported by their heavily armed ships and a variety of flying self-guided laser cannon.

“You could lose your head in such chaos, no matter which side you’re on,” I commented, with a look at the Acutin in front of me. The fighting was spreading very quickly in our direction. At any moment it would reach us. The Acutin did not reply. It was though he were stunned by the violence of the fighting. The expression on his face reminded me of our commander’s

reaction to the Acutins' attack. So the Sensins had managed to strike back... Each side was capable of surprising the other with these sudden and rapid incursions, and with such a concentrated attack that it was difficult to understand how they had managed to conceal the mustering of their forces that must have preceded it. Now, however, it was the Sensins who had once again taken the initiative, or so it seemed. I wondered whether the Acutins had any more forces in reserve. I looked at the three Acutins in front of me. They were still watching the Sensins' advance. Their units were unable to stop them. The Acutins looked at each other. The one on the right, slightly taller than the others and with sharper features on his elongated face, looked at me and then at his two companions.

"Where are our forces? How can they have secured such superiority? But this is nothing. Our outside forces will not abandon us to these foolish Sensins."

"The matter is becoming clear," replied the Acutin on his right. "Our plan has affected them considerably. We appear to have hit a soft spot, since otherwise they would not have reacted so furiously. They are hiding something."

The Acutin turned towards me, still calm and composed, although the Sensins' robots had already broken through the hastily placed barriers made of material from the shattered walls and the supporting arches of the ceiling, and were almost through the fortified line that the Acutins' robots were still constructing. They launched themselves at the robots guarding the Sensin prisoners who, on being released, rushed to rejoin the action. Some joined the robots, while a second, larger group ran towards the transparent disc and the Acutins standing next to me.

"Is everything all right?" one of the Sensins asked me, looking first at me and then at the three Acutins.

I nodded.

"It seems that we too are capable of acting with surprising speed, wouldn't you say?" The Sensin's manner was already

calmer and more self-assured. But there was still a hint of ebullience in him when he turned to the Acutins: "Your impudence, not to say perfidiousness, has not had the effect you expected, has it?"

But the Acutin looked at him with such a convincing appearance of bored resignation that I was forced to ask myself whether this was normal given the situation: the Acutin could simply be pretending. It was perfectly possible that they had this ability highly developed. He was so convincing that he put a stop to the Sensin's ebullience.

"And what have they been telling you?" the Sensin asked me.

"Well..." In embarrassment I looked first at the Acutins and then at the Sensins. I had no complaints about how I had been treated. The Acutins were still looking at me with that friendly yet superior smile, while the Sensins were still unpleasantly suspicious. I couldn't hold it against them, despite some misgivings over the Acutin's comments about my joining the Sensins. Putting it simply, the situation was a tricky one. For everyone.

"Not much," I said. "There wasn't time for a serious conversation. Everything has happened so quickly." I smiled: "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes." A smile formed on the Sensin's lips. "Yes, that's probably true. Rather too quickly, even for us."

Suddenly an amplified voice echoed throughout the hall: "Attention, all robots. The commanders of both sides have agreed to cease hostilities. Contact your headquarters in the asteroid cloud immediately. The discussions will continue in the pavilions that have just been erected in the asteroid's main landing area."

"So, Sensins," began the middle Acutin after a short silence, "as you have heard, a pleasant evening's entertainment awaits us. Personally this outcome suits me very well, since making your acquaintance has been a great honour for me."

All three Acutins smiled with evident satisfaction and increasing enthusiasm. The Sensins' faces, however, still wore a grim

expression. They did not seem particularly inclined for a friendly conversation.

“If our forces had not surrounded you, you would have killed us, wouldn’t you?” The Sensin stared coldly at the leading Acutin, who at these words nodded understandingly: “Well, you cannot hold that against us.”

“What impudence! First you want to kill us, then you say that we cannot hold that against you. Is there anything that in your opinion we could hold against you?” The Sensin’s contained rage was undiminished. But the other Sensins had already reconciled themselves to the new situation and began telling their colleague to calm down, that he could not change the Acutins because this was simply what they were like. The smiles of the Acutins turned to frowns and it looked as though a new quarrel was about to flare up, but after a few harsh exchanges the Acutins and Sensins returned to their own groups, and with some noisy venting of the anger that had just reached boiling point, they set off in their own groups to the “friendly discussion”.

Chapter IX

The grey rain clouds, from which a light drizzle was falling, were darker over to the northwest and promised heavier rain, if not a downpour, but those few drops were not enough for me to open my umbrella. Passers-by were already beginning to close theirs. After parking in the square opposite the convent church I walked towards the university building. I had arranged to meet Martha, Zaza's friend. Over the phone she had explained to me that she had tried to call Zaza several times the previous evening but had got no reply. Maybe her phone battery's dead, she had suggested. Whatever the reason, she hadn't been able to get hold of her. Now Martha was approaching from the other side of the road. It was nice of her to respond so quickly.

"Hey!" I greeted her cheerfully. She was an old acquaintance. And after all I had been through recently, it was good to see a familiar face.

"Hi! I can't get hold of her." Martha's face was serious, without the smile people normally wear when they meet.

"But you say that she's in town?"

“Yes, probably. She hasn’t gone on holiday, I know that much.”

“Then we’ll find her. I absolutely have to meet with her.”

“Yes, you said. It’s just that recently she’s been more crazy than usual. To start with she broke up with Matt, her third boyfriend this year, or whatever he actually was. She went out with him from time to time. Personally I don’t know if all these acquaintances have got her in this state or whether there is actually something wrong with her.”

She shrugged. Of course what was “actually wrong” with Zaza was that she had a screw loose. There was no doubt in my mind on that point.

“And what is she planning to do now?” I asked with a smile.

“Planning?” repeated Martha absently. “You know, that’s the problem. I’m worried that this situation is about something more than just her plans. She seemed pretty upset. To start with, she didn’t get a part in a play that she’d been trying for, even though she would have apparently been perfect for it. Then she got sick or something, as far as I could make out from what she was telling me: the last time I saw her she’d been drinking and was already pretty out of it. A little too much, given what I know of her habits. And she kept going on about the meaninglessness of life and saying that she was going to kill herself.”

“What?” I was immediately serious. “Kill herself? Has she completely flipped?”

“From the way she was talking, that would seem to be the only explanation. Anyway, that’s the situation. We’ll see. You’ve certainly picked a good time to show up. You’re going to get yourself into trouble.”

“Trouble?” That was ridiculous, given that I had recently been dealing with matters that were much more serious than the insignificant problems of Earthmen – or rather of one crazy girl.

“If she commits suicide after meeting up with you, you are going to have problems.”

“Are you serious about this suicide of hers?”

“In the state she’s in now, anything is possible.”

“But she can’t commit suicide! Are you crazy?”

“Not me. Her.” Martha laughed.

Hmm. Of course, she knew both Zaza and me, and she knew perfectly well what that girl meant to me. Nothing. But now it was different.

“You know...” I began.

“What?” The smile on Martha’s face was simply proof that everything she was saying was true.

“She mustn’t commit suicide. She...” I tried to find the right word. “She doesn’t have the right.”

“The right?” repeated Martha, looking at me. The expression on my face must have surprised her. She shrugged, as if to say that she didn’t consider the problem worth expending any mental energy on.

Her mocking tone really annoyed me: “So the fact that your friend might commit suicide doesn’t actually bother you?”

“What? Probably not.” Martha looked at me more keenly. “Interesting.”

“What?”

“Your interest in her. All of a sudden.”

“Okay, Martha.” I collected my thoughts and decided to try a calmer approach. I had clearly shown a little too much agitation at Martha’s mention of Zaza’s suicide. “We need her. Seriously. We urgently need her.”

Martha became more serious. “Who’s ‘we’? I thought this was about you. So it’s nothing personal?”

I continued to look at her earnestly, and after a moment she raised her eyebrows: “I think you might actually be telling the truth.”

“I am!” I said, and went on in a serious voice: “We have to find her. As quickly as possible. Her suicide could have very serious consequences. We have to stop her.”

“Hmm. Unbelievable! At our last meeting – in most of our

recent conversations, actually – she was complaining that no-one would miss her. Naturally I told her that it wasn't true, although it seemed perfectly probable to me. To be honest, I thought it was the only sensible thing she said the whole evening. But if you say otherwise, you must have your reasons. I don't hate her, you know, I'm just fed up of her depressions. I wouldn't begrudge her a little happiness. Why not? The girl needs cheering up. But who's going to do it? You?"

I didn't say anything and maintained my composure.

"Okay," agreed Martha. "You could tell me a little more about who 'us' are, or about your renewed interest in her. If it isn't a secret, of course."

I opened my mouth to reply, and then closed it again. I couldn't tell her everything. If I did, she would start wondering about my sanity too. First Zaza and now me. Damn! And I had piqued her interest. My answers to her questions would have to be the opposite of what she expected. But what should I say? I couldn't tell her anything about what was really going on.

"Let's leave the explanations for later. We need to find her while there's still time. Then we can talk about it as much as we like."

Although outwardly I maintained my serious manner, I couldn't help smiling to myself: I sounded just like those Sensins. As though I had absorbed their tactic of evading questions... Martha looked at me doubtfully for a moment and then nodded towards the city centre:

"We'll probably find Daria in one of those bars over there. I've seen her with Zaza quite a few times recently."

"Okay," I agreed and followed her across the street. Daria was sitting at a table with two friends in the third bar we tried.

"Hey, Daria!" called Martha. "Have you seen Zaza around? We urgently need to talk to her."

"I'm looking for her too. Yesterday evening she was really out of it. She started off by getting drunk, and then that friend of hers in the leather jacket arrived. The tall, thin one, you know.

You've seen him. I don't know what his name is. He's always got that pullover sticking out of the bottom of his jacket. A dealer or something. He sells drugs. I don't know what her connection is with him. She has taken drugs a few times but I don't think she's a junkie. At least she wasn't before. They had some kind of argument. I think he was asking for money or offering her grass or maybe something stronger. They caused a bit of a scene, actually. Later, at about one in the morning, I saw her in the pub by the hotel, looking really stoned. She came and sat with us but she wasn't exactly talkative. She told us that life has no point; but then that's not unusual for her. She would drift off for a while, staring absently in front of her, and then suddenly wake up and start going on about that part in the play she was supposed to get but didn't. Eventually we started getting fed up with her but when we tried to stop her from repeating the same explanations over and over again she said that she knew how little she meant to us but that she didn't care about us either any more. She carried on in that vein for a bit until finally as she was standing up - actually she kept sitting down again - she declared vehemently that it didn't matter, that she was no longer going to be a burden to anyone, and that it would be sooner than we think. She seemed deadly serious about this. There was something almost fanatical about her. Then she mumbled something else, I don't know what, and then said, loud and clear 'Tonight.' We just stared at her stupidly - what else could we do? - as she repeated 'tonight', over and over again, but more quietly, almost to herself, but with furious obstinacy."

I moved closer to Martha.

"She didn't get the part she wanted, she's probably out of work, things are going badly with those boyfriends of hers. Add alcohol or drugs or whatever, and anything is possible, don't you think?"

"At a time like this she shouldn't be on her own," agreed Martha. "When several things go wrong all at once, badly wrong, you

need a little support, perhaps from family; or if you haven't got family, at least from friends."

"We have to find her. I'll talk to her," I said.

"Hmm." Martha's gaze lingered on my face for a few moments. Even if Zaza's behaviour was already more than she could understand, my concern for Zaza evidently didn't seem any less strange to her. I realised that immediately. I had only ever exchanged brief hellos with Zaza, at least in Martha's presence.

"But where on earth can she have gone?" I said out loud. Whatever might come of this, the thing that was clearest to me was the terrible risk we were facing, and the incredibly important consequences.

It was far more important than just the life of one mixed-up girl. How idiotic! War was about to break out, everything was hanging from a thread, and now there was a risk that the change in the balance of power was going to be exposed. The Acutins still didn't know that the Sensins were unable to reach their energy fields. But sooner or later they would find out, and it seemed very likely that the Sensins didn't have much time left, even though they claimed that their forces would be sufficiently powerful even if access to the biggest energy fields remained closed. Yes, the Sensins would give it everything they had. There was no doubt of that. But both sides possessed energy missiles, probably made of antimatter, which could destroy entire planets. Both sides had these weapons. It would only take one missile to destroy the Earth, and they had thousands of them. Thousands? Billions. Only evenly matched forces could guarantee peace. And peace was the only thing that would ensure the survival of the Earth. The balance of power had to be preserved. I had to open that doorway. I had to undergo that test and above all I had to talk to this wretched girl as soon as possible. She had really picked the wrong moment to start having problems. I had no doubts about my own ability to persuade her. I simply had to find Zaza.

“Let’s think about where she could be,” I said, in an effort to encourage some serious reflection. “Then we will act. And quickly.”

No-one contradicted me. Actually they were all looking at me – the girls at Daria’s table and the three boys at the next table, who had also been listening to the conversation. Partly because of my decisive manner, and partly because we were talking about someone they knew, someone who belonged in their extended circle of acquaintances. With some reservations and on certain occasions they would have even called her their friend.

“Hey!” said a skinny lad in the corner. He was wearing a faded tee-shirt and washed-out jeans. The jeans were ripped, I noticed. Deliberately, probably. His friends were all dressed in the same grungy fashion. The addition of leather jackets – and this was the height of summer – merely served to emphasise their “rebel” look. “You looking for Zaza?”

“Yes,” I said, staring at the skinny lad with the unshaven face and his companions. If these were the sort of people Zaza hung out with, I thought, then it was perfectly possible that she had got into drugs.

“I was talking to her flatmate a little earlier. She was asking after her.”

“Who? Her flatmate?”

“Yes, the girl who lives with her. She says she hasn’t been home for two days. Apparently it’s not unusual for her to stay out the whole night, if there’s a party or whatever, but she’s always told her in advance whenever she’s gone away for any longer than that. This time, though, she just disappeared.”

“Had she shown any suicidal tendencies?” I had to clear this up as quickly as possible. “Could she have committed suicide?”

“Well, she’s certainly crazy enough.” The skinny kid sniggered idiotically. I gave him a piercing look, but this didn’t seem to bother him. If anything he laughed even more heartily,

although this frank, open laughter was the last thing I would have expected from this grungy type – actually he may have been just a slightly older student. “By my standards I would say that she has gone a little too far.”

“By your standards?”

His bony, unshaven face with its centimetre-long stubble, and the fact that he was clearly under the influence of alcohol, meant that it was hard to take him seriously. It was difficult to imagine him having standards of any kind. My doubts must have been sufficiently visible on my face for him to see what I was thinking, despite the state he was clearly in.

“Yes. Even by my standards she has gone a little too far. And that’s not good.”

“It certainly isn’t,” I interrupted. I couldn’t waste any more time. “Where can I find her?”

His thin face grew serious as he pondered his answer.

“If it was a question of suicide, which Zaza is certainly capable of, there is a place that she has sometimes dropped hints about. She mentioned it a few times. I never really paid much attention but because she repeated it so often it stuck in my head.”

“Can you take me there? I’ll pay you. I’d like to give you something for your trouble.”

I placed two hundred euros on the table. I was prepared to pay more if need be. But if I hadn’t misjudged this kid and his friends, this was already quite a lot of money for the favour I was asking.

“Is it enough?”

The skinny kid looked at the banknotes, then at me, and then back at the money, and indicated that I should add a little more. I put down another two hundred euros, and that seemed to satisfy him. He jumped nimbly to his feet, all his lethargy gone.

“Okay. But you mustn’t be disappointed if by any chance she hasn’t killed herself yet. Anything is possible with her.”

“I won’t be disappointed. Actually that’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

* * *

Stubble Chin stepped onto a path running off to the side towards some bushes below the branches of trees that extended over the beaten track.

“Over there, to that tree. A little further on is the precipice. If she’s here, that’s where she’ll be. And now – I’ll go, or you can, whatever you prefer. Or we could all go together.”

That wouldn’t do.

“No, I prefer to go alone.”

In her tense and highly emotional state, she didn’t know herself what she was doing. If she hadn’t done it already. She was the sort of person whose emotions could very quickly get the better of her, and there was no telling what direction her mood would take. But then she could also calm down again for a while, almost to the point of apathy. At least as far as I could remember.

“First I’ll ask her the way and then say something about how people meet in the strangest places,” I went on, “and before she has a chance to think about the actual probability of a chance encounter I’ll already have got her talking.”

“Hmm!” Stubble Chin shot a glance at me. “Interesting.”

That was all he said. The simplicity of my plan even enticed a smile of acknowledgement from him.

I walked forwards and stopped by the tree. The outline of a female figure should appear at any moment, but I couldn’t see it. I moved forwards carefully. Still nothing. No-one. I reached the edge of the precipice and looked around. It was dark. Very

dark. And this undergrowth, which made everything darker still. I looked down. It would not do to slip over the edge. I'd probably kill myself. I leant a little further forwards. I really would kill myself, in all likelihood. Involuntarily I drew back, although the ground beneath my feet was perfectly solid. "There really is something a bit creepy about this place," I muttered to myself and shook my head to get rid of irrational thoughts of suicide.

As I was moved my head I saw out of the corner of my eye the dark outline of something that was not part of a bush. Instinctively I turned in that direction. It had to be her. Someone was sitting under the bush. And this someone was watching me in silence.

"Hey!" I waved my hand in greeting. "It would be pretty easy to take a wrong turning here, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," replied a woman's voice.

"In daylight these paths were clear enough, but now in the dark it's all different. It's easy to get lost here, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Actually I've already gone a little too far from the path."

I moved over to the figure huddled in the shade of the bushes. She was sitting on the ground, her arms round her knees, which were pulled up to her chin, and she was staring in front of her. As though she didn't want to be disturbed or, more likely, she was simply waiting for me to move on, or go back. In any case she showed no signs of wanting to talk. But I showed no signs of wanting to leave. She might not have realised this at first, but when I sat down my decision to stay put must have become painfully obvious to her. The outlines of the woman in the dark changed from perfect stillness to a slight movement, as though she was intending to stand up. Then, suddenly indecisive, she sat back down under her bush.

"How does one actually get down from here?" I asked her in the calm voice of someone out for an evening stroll, pointing in the direction of the precipice.

“You have to go that way,” she explained, with a movement of her hand in the direction from which I had come.”

“Oh, really?”

“As far as that tree, and then down.”

This explanation was given in a slightly more communicative tone of voice. At least that was my impression.

“And what’s down here, a precipice or what?” I continued in my conversational way.

“Yes,” came the brief reply. It was too dark to recognise her face. Zaza’s face was coming back to me, in all its details, and I was already trying to make out the familiar features in the dark. When she eventually moved slightly forwards, only a little but at least out of the extra darkness of those bushes, her face appeared for a few moments that were all I needed. It really was her. I had sensed it all along. She would surely have recognised me too, if she hadn’t been staring in front of her.

“You’d break every bone in your body if you fell down here, right? I mean, if you slipped.”

As I threw out this comment I looked at her. It must have been obvious to her that I was expecting her to reply, but instead she moved forwards slightly, and then, as I continued to look at her, she moved forward again – but without leaving the shade of the bush.

“You would kill yourself,” she said in a calm voice, although there was no doubting her sincerity.

“Hmm,” I thought to myself. If I could find a way to contradict her on some pretext, she might actually start talking. Would it work?

“I reckon you’d get away with a few nasty bruises.” I stretched my neck for a better view over the precipice and shook my head. What I had just said was ridiculous. You really would kill yourself.

“A good thing you’re not planning to commit suicide,” I went on, in a transparent attempt to be witty.

“No.” Her reply was immediate. And, once again, brief. Too brief, at least for my taste. There seemed to be some anger in her voice at my invasion of her privacy. Then she made some rapid movements, calmed down again, and then stood up with a jerk, so suddenly that I jumped to my feet and took a quick step towards the precipice.

“No,” she repeated, more decisively and more angrily. “But what’s that to you?”

“Wait a minute! We know each other! What a small world!” I was waving my arms as though in surprise at the coincidence.

“What are you doing here?”

“Me?” Well, I was going along that path there” – I pointed in the direction I had come from – “and then I turned this way.”

“How can you be such an idiot as to walk along a path like this in the middle of the night?”

“Yes, well. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You know what, we were talking about you just yesterday, in connection with the female role in that play, what’s it called? Well anyway, they were looking for an interesting female character and I mentioned you to them.”

“Me? You?”

“Yes, sure. Why, does that seem strange? There’s an interesting provocativeness in you. I’m being perfectly serious. You are exactly the type of woman we were talking about. I don’t mean that you would have to play yourself, far from it, but the provocation that the actress would need to communicate to the audience is something that you could do very convincingly.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“You mean to say that you’re involved in the theatre, too?” Zaza shifted nervously from one foot to the other. “What are you actually talking about?”

“How do you mean what am I talking about? In your place I would be interested in this part.” I looked at her, completely convinced by my own words.

Zaza looked at me doubtfully, as though wondering whether what I was saying wasn't simply a load of rubbish. She still didn't believe me. No way. But as she was considering, the expression on her face changed, as though her certainty of the futility of everything – and that must have been one of the fundamental and most consistent constants of her thoughts in the last few days, and above all in the last few hours – had suddenly lost its sting. And then she didn't want to reveal her indecisiveness to an old acquaintance. Especially not to me. And the fact that last time we met she had managed to annoy me must have come back to her in a flash, because for a moment I thought I saw a spark in her eyes.

“So what's your connection with these theatre types?” she asked after an initial silence during which she looked away from me.

“Well, you know, I've been a regular theatre-goer for quite a few years.”

I smiled at her. That had actually been true, at one time. That was another reason why I was able to answer her question so readily. I had made a good start but now I needed to talk a bit more about that female character. The character of a slightly crazy woman, in other words. Yes. I carried on smiling as I racked my brains to think of a suitable character from the various plays I had seen. It was a shame I had stopped going to the theatre after I broke up with Mia. That was back when I was a student. But now I couldn't lay it on too thick. I had to be especially careful about giving my own opinions – telling her that the part was made for her. Although there must be a play somewhere with a character like that, and it wouldn't be hard for the Sensins to stage it if necessary. I thought about this for a bit. They could do her this little favour in exchange for her cooperation. Yes, and something else too...

“It’s nice here, isn’t it? It’s so peaceful.” I decided to change the subject.

“And what excited you most about this female character?” asked Zaza, who apparently hadn’t heard my last words.

“Ah, that female character, yes.” I racked my brains but I simply couldn’t think of a crazy enough female character. Something similar would have to do. But I couldn’t think of any similar roles either. And I wasn’t going to. It was too much for me, suddenly having to try and think of crazy female characters. Zaza was already a big enough problem. Not just difficult: too difficult. And suddenly I needed to find a suitably crazy female role for her. No, I would stick to her. Let the Sensins write a part for her. That would be the best thing. With all their abilities, let them write it! When I came to think about it, the testing at the seventy-seven doors was also theatrical in a way. They mimicked everything. Live. But now they had that hologram film in which I had to play my own role. And this crazy girl here had to play her role. And now she wanted to know what kind of crazy character there was in this play that I had had to go and mention to her. All right: I would describe it to her. The more comments she makes, the better for her.

“I can give you a basic outline of the character.”

I looked around me to find somewhere more comfortable to sit and then turned back to Zaza: “Some details are quite funny. In one scene she’s dancing with one guy and flirting with another, and in another scene she’s dancing with the second guy and flirting with a third, or something like that.”

I laughed, and Zaza smiled for the first time.

“Do you remember?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“That evening, at the party.”

“Oh, sure.”

“I thought so. That’s why you immediately thought of me, when you saw this scene?”

“Do you think so?”

Zaza laughed. "Absolutely. It came from your subconscious."

"From my subconscious? Hmm. Maybe you're right."

"Yes. Let's go over here." Zaza stepped back to a place more suitable for a relaxed conversation. There was some grass and a slight mound, and even a piece of rock to lean against.

"I remember how you smiled," I went on. "How did you do that?"

"You mean flirting with you when I was dancing with Matt?"

"Yes."

"Like this."

In an instant, Zaza changed utterly. Her whole face became animated and roguish. Playful too. Yes, that's exactly how it was. I remembered.

"And you know what I did after he dragged me away from you?"

"What?"

"I was surprised. I didn't like him. And then I looked at you. Like this, look."

"Wow, you really do remember everything. That's exactly how it was."

"And then I went into the kitchen."

Zaza was becoming animated. She was beginning to relive the whole experience. She remembered every detail and matched it so faithfully to the corresponding facial expression that I found myself nodding in agreement. This was more than I had expected. I had got what I wanted, and so quickly that I was bubbling with enthusiasm. This was exactly what I needed. I tried to commit to memory every nuance of her expressions. And after each scene that she re-enacted, I looked her with such unfeigned enthusiasm that this undoubtedly made her even keener to relive every last detail of the events at the party. I was the audience that Zaza had always dreamed of. Every detail that she acted out interested me, and I followed even the slightest grimace and contortion of her face with such genuine enthusiasm that she was soon thoroughly absorbed in her per-

formance. We went through all the details. For the time being at least, I was unable to think of anything else that we might have forgotten.

I needed to go over it all again in case I had overlooked something: accuracy was essential, since even a trifling error could be disastrous. The sort of detail that hadn't even occurred to me could be enough to ruin everything. Irrevocably. I pondered everything once again and then shrugged and gave a cheerful laugh. Wow! I really hadn't expected it to go smoothly. That was it: we had reached the end. We lay back, on our elbows, staring at the sky. We had earned a little break.

Then Zaza, suddenly serious again, pulled her knees up to her chin, wrapped her arms round her legs and sat there in silence. My thoughts kept going back to that party and to the details that I still had to consider while Zaza was still available to me. After that I would be left to my own devices. But I already knew what to do and how, although I still needed to ponder the whole thing a little longer. I looked at Zaza. She was staring in front of her with an absent expression. A closer look showed that tears were sliding slowly down her face.

"You're not crying, are you?" I asked her. "Why on earth?"

Then I remembered her rapid changes of mood, and also her reason for coming to this place - in all likelihood - and I forced myself to try and find the most suitable words to cheer her up again.

"What's the matter?" I began in a more comforting tone. I sincerely wanted to help her. I had to do something for her.

"Nothing."

"I mean, it's nice here, isn't it?"

But Zaza carried on staring in front of her, although the vicinity of my face bent towards her was stopping her from sinking into absent isolation.

"What you're saying is all rubbish. It's just words. You haven't got a clue about theatre."

“Why are you saying this now? How have you suddenly come to that conclusion? Just like that...”

“It’s all just a waste of time.”

“What do you mean, a waste of time? Why should everything be a waste of time?”

“The truth is something completely different.”

“And what is this truth?”

“Nothing.” Zaza wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I am so insignificant.”

“What? Insignificant? What are you saying?”

“If I were to die now, no-one would even notice.”

“Are you crazy? Of course they’d notice. And not just one person.”

“You’re just saying that! I know it.”

“You can’t even imagine how many of them there are.” I spread my arms expansively. “And you are incredibly important!”

Zaza sniffed, wiped her tears again while glancing over at me, and then once again buried her chin in her knees.

I remained motionless. Despite my recent outbreak of happiness at my successful progress, I felt as though I had hit a wall. This was too much! After everything that had happened...

Zaza slowly turned towards me and raised her head until we were looking directly at each other. She shook her head doubtfully. Then she lowered her eyes again. I watched her anxiously.

“You know, Peter, I have a feeling for people.” Her voice was calm again.

“Oh yes?” That didn’t sound very understanding so I immediately rectified: “I mean: of course you have.”

“You’re a strange person, Peter.”

“Ha!” I laughed cheerfully. I wasn’t even sure myself whether my cheerfulness was real or pretend.

“With you it’s hard to tell when you’re bluffing and when you’re being serious. It’s strange.” Zaza shook her head at what she seemed to think was a puzzling contradiction. “How can you

get so enthusiastic all of a sudden? I've never seen someone get so excited about stirring up a few old memories as you did just now."

"What about you? Didn't you get excited?" I replied defensively. When did she have the chance to observe me? She'd been busy acting all the time.

But Zaza shook her head: "That's not it."

Zaza's reasoning, though perhaps mistaken, was nevertheless perfectly rational in its own way. Her expression had changed considerably too. As though she were studying me. Me? I smiled.

"But shouting out that you're insignificant, that's just ridiculous." I grinned at her as we exchanged glances. "Perhaps I'm a little crazy too. I don't see why I wouldn't be."

Zaza laughed.

"Do you want me to tell you how important you are?" I asked her. I was starting to feel more confident again.

"Yes." Zaza was looking at me wide-eyed, like a child.

"Ha." The funny side of the situation was beginning to strike me: if I were really to tell her how important she was, she certainly wouldn't believe me. She wouldn't believe the real story, which meant that I had to invent something simpler. Perhaps something about the strong impression her acting had made on me and a prediction of a successful career for her.

I propped myself up on my elbow as comfortably as I could and looked up at sky, where my new friends were waiting for me. I turned to Zaza again. She was looking at me curiously with a mixture of playfulness and expectancy.

"Yes," I began, and stopped.

"Yes?" repeated Zaza.

The words wouldn't come. In the face of such eager anticipation, I had to say something more... I shook my head, then nodded and gestured with my free hand. I still couldn't find the words. I shrugged my shoulders and frowned, forcing myself to think of something. I just couldn't come up with a reason

why she should be important, or at least important according to her criteria. I looked into Zaza's big childlike eyes.

"Well, the two greatest civilisations in this part of the universe are on the brink of war. And now everything depends on you."

"Oh. This is even more than I imagined. Are they going to fight over me?"

"No, but a great deal depends on you."

"Great. Although I'd still rather see them fighting over them."

"Everything depends on how convincingly you act," I continued calmly.

"Oh, that really is an important part! I've always wanted to play a really important part." Zaza giggled. "I would have been happy even with a slightly smaller part."

"And then all eyes rested on you..."

"And I stepped onto the stage..."

"No, no, before that..."

"Before? Before, I... hmm, what did I do before that? Peter, you began so well! I've always been a good judge of character. But I didn't think you were so romantic. And on a day like today, when there aren't even any stars in the sky."

I acknowledged the compliment with a slightly ambiguous smile: "Should I carry on?"

"Yes."

"Even before that, you carried in yourself an emotional charge. Actually a great number of emotional charges."

"That's it: go on, go on! You talk wonderfully, Peter. It's been a long time since anyone laid it on so thick with me."

Hmm. Well it was a compliment of sorts. Perhaps not the words themselves, but Zaza had said them with such cheerfulness that my confidence continued to grow. "And when you stepped onto the stage, all these emotional charges of yours came out of you through your performance and revealed the incredibly variegated world of human experience."

"Human experience? Where do you get these words?"

“Yes, you are very important for them.”

“And then I saved the day?”

“Not exactly. You won’t be saving anything. It won’t be necessary. You are important because without you we simply can’t go on.”

“You can’t go on?”

“That’s right. You’re terribly important!”

“Oh yes? You certainly know how to talk. You’re really convincing. You should be an actor. There’s so much suggestion in your voice that I almost want to believe you.”

I waved my hand nonchalantly: “I have no ambitions in that direction.”

“But that mixture of the earnest and the romantic – you did it so well.”

I had to repeat her “oh yes?”, but then I looked at her: “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You are important Zaza. Too important for a stupid suicide.”

I looked at her seriously. Her weakness infuriated me, and I snapped at her almost angrily: “You are important. Remember that!”

Zaza back slightly. My confident persuasiveness and, even more than that, the firmness of my manner, which left no room for doubt or contradiction, was probably causing her to doubt my sanity.

“I’m not planning to commit suicide!”

“Good.” I flashed her an appraising glance. “What about before?”

“Before?” Zaza looked at me apprehensively. “How serious you’ve become all of a sudden!”

But when our eyes met again she turned away and hung her head slightly before raising it again and replying: “I don’t know.” She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly: “I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it.”

“Are you okay?”

Zaza looked at me from under lowered lashes: “It may be that

I'm a little strange, but you aren't exactly the most normal guy yourself. These things you've been saying - you start off by teasing me and then your voice suddenly changes and you become so severe..."

I could feel the conversation taking an unnecessarily serious turn. That would only ruin things. "I feel like a beer. Earlier I was in that bar, where some of your friends were. Shall we go there?"

Zaza nodded: "Okay." Evidently she no longer had the will to resist. If nothing else, my behaviour had confused her a little. And angered her too. She was probably already wondering whether she hadn't given in too quickly. But then she shrugged her shoulders as if to show that she accepted the situation. She suddenly became animated again and, shaking her head, repeated my words, more to herself than to me, and barely audibly: "But without you we can't go on..."

Hmm, perhaps I shouldn't have told her that.

* * *

Once we were in the pub, Zaza started smiling more and more frequently, regardless of whether anyone said anything funny. The cheerful atmosphere was enough for her, and perhaps also my happy mood, which came from my feeling that our mission was making progress. I no longer had any doubts about Zaza's states of mind, even though she was able to move so easily from one extreme to the other, or about distinguishing her acting from her genuine mood. I was confident that I would be able to relate them to that party, enough for me not to be thrown by something unexpected. At least not like during the last test. I watched her surreptitiously as I chatted with the others. Now

and then I turned to Zaza and joined in her conversations. Yes, she was starting to get under my skin, or rather I was getting under her skin, with the result that it was getting easier and easier for me to compare her current feelings with those at the party. They were different, certainly. But with her beside me it was not hard to remember her earlier moods. Following my failure in the test, I was glad I had suggested the need for better preparation before making a fresh attempt. It was probably here that the balance between spontaneity and accuracy in achieving identical results in the test inclined towards the latter. This was the part that was most difficult for an outside observer to put together. The key was therefore hidden in her emotions and in mine, in the emotional charge that rebounded from her to me and back again, changing all the while, in all extremes, in one direction and the other, with a logic that was based on Zaza's mixed up nature. They had certainly found a good partner for me.

I looked at Benesens and the unfamiliar Sensin next to him. He was probably a member of our mission. Using the holo-equipped mobile phone they had given me - outwardly identical to a normal phone but with many more features - I told him about the successful start and probable imminent conclusion of my mission. Only a few details remained to clear up, I told him. But Benesens advised me to think about potentially important details that might conceal the most dangerous pitfalls. This was where the key would lie, as I had already predicted. Despite my new self-confidence, I was still happy to have some more help in checking whether I had overlooked anything important. And so they came and joined me.

"Sit down. We're a friendly crowd here." I indicated the empty spaces next to me.

"Hey, Peter!"

"Yes!" I looked at Mike, who must have come in while I was talking to Benesens. "Where have you come from?"

“John told me you were here. He said he’d seen you down here with some friends, so I thought I’d drop by for a beer.”

“A friend of yours?” asked Benesens, who had rapidly adopted the happy mood of our company. The whole thing was getting quite funny. Now he nodded at Mike and smiled.

“Yes, we come here for a coffee or a beer, and to chat, of course,” I explained with a smile as Mike came over to our table. “About sport and the universe.”

At the last word Benesens’s lips curved into a knowing smile. Mike was listening too.

“About what? The universe?” he asked, laughing. In view of the atmosphere, even a chat about the universe would be acceptable, especially over the glass of beer that he immediately ordered. “I have to admit we’ve rather neglected that topic recently. And what aspect of it are you working on?”

“Oh, nothing,” I replied with a stifled laugh. I pointed at Benesens: “He has some very interesting views on certain aspects of the universe, although we haven’t had time to discuss them thoroughly. But there is one topic that we are taking quite seriously.”

I looked at Benesens: “Isn’t that right?”

“Absolutely. And I think we can say that we are doing quite well.” Benesens’s enthusiastic reply showed his unconcealed happiness about this theme, both as a whole and because such conversations were entertaining.

We moved round to make room for another chair, and Mike sat down, clearly in the mood for cheerful company.

“Yesterday,” he explained, “I went to a funeral, and at the wake afterwards we ended up talking about ‘up there’, about purgatory, and about where heaven is, although for an old sinner like me hell is probably more to the point... anyway, after a conversation like that my brain is certainly up to a conversation about the universe, however you get there, ha ha.”

“And whose funeral was it?” asked the Sensin next to Benesens, as if to suggest that he may have known the deceased.

The expression on his face gave that impression. In a calm and perfectly serious tone of voice, he went on: "You say the wake was only yesterday?"

"Yes." Mike looked at him curiously, as though there were something not quite right about this, or something in that last comment that didn't quite make sense. Then, after a sudden, lucky inspiration - even he didn't know where it came from or how he managed to guess that the Sensin had made a mental leap, because he was certainly thinking about knowing someone in the ordinary sense - he said that perhaps he had met him in purgatory. It was really funny.

Between chuckles he said: "He won't be in purgatory for long enough for you to meet him there." And he burst out laughing at what was - judging from the reactions - an extraordinarily witty comment. Everyone thought it was funny. I laughed too and turned to Benesens. But when our eyes met he merely smirked slightly, as though concealing something yet to be revealed, and I gave an involuntary start. After all I still didn't know much about their civilisation. But surely it wasn't possible that concepts such as purgatory could have anything to do with them. I looked at Benesens again, and then at his friend and at Mike, who was still laughing. Quite a variety of reactions to a silly comment. So different that it made me stop and think.

"Don't bother yourself with trying to search for all the possible connections between our two civilisations," said Benesens. "They are not a cause for any bad feelings. It is just that in several spheres we are more closely connected than you probably imagine, but in terms of the importance of our mission this is of negligible importance. We are all in the same boat."

I could sense the benevolence in his voice. That wasn't something that could be easily faked. I could hear it in the way he pronounced the word "Earthman". There must be something more to it than the simple benevolence of a highly developed

civilisation towards beings at a much lower point on the evolutionary spiral.

I moved closer to Benesens: "I can remember almost everything about the events at that party. That evening we also danced. Perhaps it would be a good idea to invite Zaza to dance. Then I will probably be ready for the test, which would mean that we can start back tomorrow morning."

"Good. You have managed it quite quickly. Even by our standards. When matters charged with emotions are involved, we too are slow."

"You too?" I laughed. "Really?"

"Yes. All emotions have their own birth, their own life. Using logic to try and rush them would destroy them, it would kill them." Benesens gave me a mischievous look: "All pleasant things are over too soon, aren't they? Then when we reflect on our life we realise how little there has been of that which made it worth living. And if we were to replace even this with logical understanding? What would be left? Even less."

"Yes, yes," I smiled, showing that I agreed. It seemed that these Sensins were capable of abandoning their cold calculating nature very quickly and become surprisingly human.

The rest of the evening went according to plan. I danced with Zaza for almost two hours. Then Zaza danced with someone else while I watched her. She kept looking over at me. Not like that other time, because the atmosphere was very different, but for a few brief instants she became animated like at that party - only fleetingly but enough to spark a memory of those moments that I wanted to recall. This was exactly what I needed. Just like the close contact a little earlier, when she snuggled up to me and I felt like I had done back then. The close pressure of her warm body brought back to me those last forgotten moments, in every detail, including the thoughts that had gone through my head at the time. Yes, quite a number of contradictory

thoughts had raced through my brain. And then, obviously, I had forgotten them. Discarded them. After we quarrelled of course. Whatever. I had got everything I needed for a fresh attempt at that test. There was nothing left. The whole of that evening was once again vividly and fully present in my memory. Fully? There was still a tiny doubt as I walked back from the dance floor.

I sat down next to Mike. "I've danced enough for today."

Mike merely nodded absently and continued to stare in front of him, shaking his head slightly. He seemed different somehow. Not dramatically different, but different. I looked at him more closely. Was he meditating or what? He hadn't had much to drink yet.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked him kindly.

"Nothing. Those new friends of yours, or acquaintances, or whatever they are supposed to be, are a bit odd."

"Oh yes?" Naturally this statement wasn't particularly surprising, but how had Mike come to this conclusion? The Sensins hadn't drawn attention to themselves in any way. Especially as they didn't want to. "What's bothering you?"

"I don't really know how to put it. We kept talking about purgatory."

"You were discussing purgatory?" I laughed. "So you moved onto religious issues?"

"No, actually. We were talking about the universe. More in the sense of different views of the universe, from the Ancient Egyptians onwards. They did make some interesting comments about various religious explanations of the universe, but for the most part they stuck to their scientific basis. At least as far as I was able to judge. But even so they seemed to steer the conversation to the subject of purgatory rather too frequently."

I frowned as I tried to make sense of this. "How do you mean, 'too frequently'?"

"Actually I wouldn't have even noticed."

“What?”

“That they did it too frequently. If it hadn’t been for the strange behaviour of that guy.” Mike gestured towards Benesens’s friend.

“Strange behaviour?” Completely serious now, I looked at Mike. I hadn’t noticed any unusual behaviour.

“You know my father died a year ago?” Mike went on. “That acquaintance of yours, with his gestures, his responses, his whole behaviour, is sometimes so like him that it is hard to believe.”

“Like who? Your father?”

“Yes. My father was a bit of a one-off – as the saying goes.”

“I know, I remember him.”

“Of course you remember him. Now look at that guy! The way he talks, the way he laughs – look at him!”

I looked over at Benesens’s companion. It was true that there was some similarity in some of his gestures. Then he laughed. Yes, his laugh. It was strangely similar to Mike’s father’s laugh. But then the Sensins could easily arrange something like that without there being any connection with purgatory. Judging from what I had been able to learn out about them so far, that wouldn’t cause them many problems. But what did purgatory have to do with anything? I pondered this. Could the Sensins really have some connection with purgatory? purgatory? In what sense? The religious sense? Or in some figurative sense? It could be something they have constructed themselves, and they are now trying to establish whether anything like that – something similar at least – already exists in human consciousness... Hmm. They would certainly be capable of that. No doubt about it.

I sat there in silence considering the various possibilities. There were certainly plenty of them! As I wrestled with the problem I noticed that someone was trying to attract my attention:

“Hey, Peter!”

A familiar face was smiling at me. It was a friend of mine, a director – or at least that was what had studied to be, as far as I could remember. What he did nowadays I didn't know. He might even be director.

“Hey, Sebastian!” I returned his greeting and he gestured towards the bar, although he was still looking at me and at our motley company.

“Hey, Sebastian!” Benesens repeated my greeting with a hearty exuberance that surprised even me, and waved his hand at the full bottles on the table in front of him: “Help yourself, Peter's buying!”

“Oh yes?” I said. What was he doing now? Did Benesens want to meet this friend of mine? In view of the atmosphere that might not be so unusual, but it disturbed me slightly: he was usually so calculating. What could be behind this open-handed invitation? Well, all right then. “Grab yourself a chair!” I called to Sebastian, indicating a free chair at the next table.

“Hey, Sebastian, hi there!” called a suddenly cheerful Zaza. “Come and sit down, and you can tell them something about the actors we've got for the comic parts. These friends of ours are crazy about them.”

Sebastian sat down. He nodded in greeting at everyone round the table and allowed Benesens to pour him a glass.

“Yes, we were actually talking about actors who are able to make people laugh merely through their appearance,” said Benesens, picking up where Zaza had left off. “They want to overcome some constant conflict in themselves, but everything turns into impotent rage and resignation to their fate, which are then the origin of their rebellious rage with contrasting, more combative anger.”

Sebastian shook his head and laughed: “Whoa, slow down. What are you saying?” He considered the sense of Benesens's words he sipped slowly from his glass.

“Yeeees, bravo! You put it beautifully!” Zaza started clapping her hands. “That's what happens to me too: this incredibly

aggressive anger that bubbles up out of a total resignation to my fate.”

Zaza laughed enthusiastically at this discovery and looked at me so eagerly that I immediately nodded, although I couldn't help remembering the expression on her face at our first meeting above that precipice. But if she had a new opinion of herself, than that was all right. I looked searchingly at her. She no longer showed any signs of depression. She had really come to life.

“Yes, I've noticed that too,” said Benesens, encouraging Zaza in her new conviction. “It's really surprising how easily you can release from yourself such a powerful life impulse.”

Yes, Zaza, whatever she had been before, had disappeared, and now she was now whatever what she was in this moment, because the past, when once you cast it off, disappears and no longer exists. At least that was the conclusion I came to when I looked at Zaza. And the more I looked at her, the more I could see how in her this was something she experienced at a particularly fundamental level. Or something like that: but it struck me that I shouldn't get too involved in her problems, or else I might quickly find myself in a situation where nothing was clear any more.

“I would also like to say this,” said Benesens. “A number of acquaintances have already mentioned your acting to me. They have told me about your extraordinary ability, and how you can draw in an audience more than anyone else.”

“They noticed? Really?”

Zaza forgot to act for a moment. Actually Benesens's words surprised her slightly, but thanks to the persuasive expression on his face she accepted them anyway. Initially slightly hesitantly, but immediately afterwards with genuine enthusiasm.

“Yes, she's really famous for that,” agreed Sebastian after a brief reflection. “That humorous element in an actor is an attribute that is usually very popular with audiences. Yes. In fact I was

already thinking of her for that part. I was even planning to call her.”

“Yes, we should sign her up for the part.” Benesens was once again using his extraordinary powers of suggestion, which made Sebastian consider his reasons for abandoning his own original intention, although at first he was not even sure whether he had even had that intention.

But then, more in order to bring the matter to a speedy close, he threw out: “Money is the problem. It ran out, and that is why everything is still up in the air.”

Benesens shook his head: “You artists have no sense for money matters. For a comedy, a good comedy, it really isn’t that hard to get some financial support from backers.”

At these words Sebastian was suddenly himself again: “What do you mean it’s not hard? It’s a real problem! For example I still haven’t managed to obtain funding.”

“Really? Is that difficult for you? Such a trifle... How much do you actually need for this project of yours?”

Sebastian considered. “Are you saying you’d like to provide financial backing?”

“Sure, why not? I’d be happy to.”

Sebastian looked at Benesens doubtfully. It was true that he did seem to be enthusiastic about the project, which in itself was a little strange, or at least hard to understand, but anyway... Then he thought about the suitability of the expression “project” and how all of a sudden it was there in front of him. But if things were really as they seemed, then... He glanced in my direction and caught my encouraging nod. That meant that I also believed that he was in a position to make an interesting move.

“Wow!” Sebastian began doing calculations.

Benesens winked at me, leaned over and whispered: “Will it be all right? Seeing how well things have gone, we might reward her a little.”

“By all means. If you can. How much support can you give to

this thing?" I asked, although the amount of support shouldn't be important, in my view at least.

"Hmm!" Benesens smiled and went on, in my ear: "We have quite a number of these gold spheres like your planet Earth. Bigger ones too."

"I see, erm..." That was possible, and even though I had no way of knowing what the real situation was, or even how big these "gold spheres" really were, his words told me that he was serious about helping Zaza, who had in any case earned our help.

"Well then, I actually made a withdrawal from the bank today, which means that we can move on to more concrete discussions, don't you think?" Benesens reached into the leather bag by his side. Sebastian and Zaza stared at it too. Its leather strap had been hanging across his shoulder the whole time, but in fact they only noticed it now.

Benesens opened the bag slowly, pulled out a neatly wrapped bundle of banknotes, still fresh from the bank, and placed it on the table.

Sebastian and Zaza stared at the numbers on the top banknote and muttered, almost in unison: "A hundred dollars!" How many hundreds must there be in the bundle? Sebastian and Zaza looked at each other. They were clearly thinking the same thing, despite their uncertainty. Sebastian slowly reached for the bundle of paper, flexed it expertly and then let it go with a slow "pfffrrr" sound, revealing the interior of the bundle. Then he turned the bundle over and repeated the "pfffrrr" and slowly placed the money back on the table.

"Cash."

"Yes, cash," nodded Benesens, reaching into his bag again and placing three similar bundles on the table. Sebastian and Zaza nodded, and Benesens kept the bag in his hands.

Sebastian picked up the bundles, one after the other, and rapidly checked them with his shuffle technique. "It's all cash."

Meanwhile Zaza was following Benesens's hand, which was once again reaching into the opened bag, and she caught a glimpse of even more paper.

"Wow! You've got loads of the stuff! He probably wouldn't even notice a bundle more or less!" she said in surprise, almost as though to encourage him.

Benesens nodded: "Certainly. A few of these bundles wouldn't mean much to us."

"Oh my goodness!" Zaza almost shouted. "Did you hear him, Sebastian? How funny! You said it in such an amusing tone of voice that..." Zaza searched nervously for the right word, but apparently she couldn't find it: "Well, Sebastian, what do you say?"

"This is..." In contrast to Zaza, Sebastian remained cool and the expression on his face had not changed: "...this is a concrete business proposition," he finished, with the calm reflection of the experienced man of business.

"Wow," gasped Zaza, and then perked up again, even louder than before: "Yes, that's it, a concrete business proposition!"

"In cash," commented Sebastian solemnly, as though underlining the importance of the transaction, or his acceptance of this business proposition.

I had to intervene: "Zaza, put that stuff in your bag. We don't want to attract unnecessary attention." I nodded at the unusual pile of paper on the table.

"Oh yes, sure." Zaza quickly looked round to see if anyone was watching and giggled when she realised that the bottles on the table were still blocking the view of the banknotes. She stuffed the notes into her bag, looking round a couple of times as she did so.

"Well, here's some more..." continued Benesens, pulling another three bundles from his bag. This time, however, it was clear that these were different banknotes. Sebastian and Zaza reached the same conclusion almost simultaneously:

"Thousands!" Then Zaza added: "In dollars."

“Yes, in cash!” agreed Sebastian. “One bundle – a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Well, I only have two lots of ten bundles of these notes,” said Benesens modestly.

“Only two lots of ten bundles...” was all Zaza managed to say.

“That’s right. Here they are.” Benesens placed two piles of ten bundles in front of Zaza.

Now it was Zaza’s turn to shuffle her way through the first bundle, then the second, and then all the others. Actually there were too many for an accurate examination. “They’re all thousand dollar bills,” she said at last.

“That’s right. A thousand dollars each,” confirmed Sebastian, who was growing increasingly serious.

“This is an advance,” said Benesens.

“This is an advance,” repeated Sebastian.

“For this wonderful film starring Zaza,” continued Benesens.

“For this wonderful film starring Zaza,” repeated Sebastian.

“For a film?” asked Zaza, surprised. “I thought we were talking about a play.”

“That was a slip of the tongue,” replied Sebastian, with a nonchalant wave of the hand as though to suggest that this was a trifling detail. “We’re talking about a film. Understand?”

“Yes, of course.” Zaza was practically bouncing up and down on her chair. “I knew all along that we were talking about a film...”

“Yes. We are talking about a film,” confirmed Sebastian in businesslike tone.

“And I shall write you a cheque for your ongoing costs.” Benesens continued to develop the project.

“Right. For ongoing costs,” repeated Zaza and looked at Sebastian, who was gazing mutely in front of him. Then he and Zaza watched calmly as Benesens wrote a cheque.

“Four, five, six zeroes,” counted Benesens, leaning towards me and whispering: “How many zeroes should I write?”

I give a slight frown and after a brief pause replied: "That will be plenty. Any more and she might go crazy again."

"Seven zeroes." Benesens looked at Zaza, who was staring now at him and now at the zeroes. He couldn't refuse her: "Eight zeroes."

"In US dollars?" asked Zaza.

"Certainly. Or perhaps you would prefer some other currency? If it's a problem..."

"No, no, it's no problem at all," said Zaza, drawing back slightly apologetically. "In dollars. That's fine isn't it, Sebastian?"

"Perfectly fine," came the confirmation, once again in a serious businesslike voice.

"Right, and now we have to go," said Benesens, concluding this mutually satisfactory business agreement and beckoning to me: "Let's go."

I got up from the table and waved goodbye to the group. They returned my farewell in different ways: respectfully, cordially and even formally, as befitted a business meeting.

Zaza stood up too and rushed over to me, bending towards my ear. "Peter!" She squeezed herself close to me. "I don't know who everyone is in this team that you referred to at the beginning as 'us', but I have to say that you are amazing."

"Oh yes?" I smiled. "Unfortunately not everything is that rosy. The question is: will we succeed?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"I don't know."

"I am with you a hundred percent. You can count on me. We're all one team, there's no doubt about it."

I gave her a friendly nod.

"Peter!"

"Yes?"

Zaza suddenly looked almost worried. "Look after yourself, Peter. For a moment, all of this seems terribly serious. At least that is the sensation I have."

“Well, it is serious. That’s why we’ve taken care of you at least, no?”

“You certainly have. Extremely well – all of you. I would also like to take care of you, if only I knew how.”

“Oh, you already have, better than you think.”

Zaza looked at me questioningly: “You know Peter, I’m sorry about that time, that evening. I shouldn’t have been like that. But I liked you. And then I found out that you didn’t feel the same way about me. I would only have been a way to pass the time. And so I started overdoing it.”

“Overdoing it?” I repeated slowly. “Well that’s an interesting word for your behaviour at that party.” I looked back over everything she had done. “And you overdid things a little today too, didn’t you?”

Zaza laughed. Softly at first, but then more freely, even happily, but it was clear that she still felt a little guilty. “I won’t do it again. I promise.”

Chapter X

On our return to the station we gathered round the holo-display for the latest reports on the negotiations between the two sides. There had been no progress. If anything, the opposite was true, although the Sensins, at least as far as I could understand, had been quite conciliatory, or at any rate that was how they presented themselves in their reports. But judging from the faces around me - I scrutinised them quite frequently as we listened to the reports - everything we heard was probably expected, and the news was received with something approaching indifference. I realised that these reports were simply a matter of form, nothing more, and I was therefore easier in my mind as I followed the subsequent reports.

“This is nothing.” The commander’s voice cut the sleepy atmosphere. “The Acutins are not standing still. I don’t trust them. Computer: establish a connection with headquarters! We will no longer be able to break through the asteroid belts without an escort.”

After a brief pause a woman’s face appeared in the holo-display. I assumed she was an officer from headquarters. “Stand

by, please. I am putting you through to headquarters,” she said in a official tone of voice. Then a man appeared in the display. He was dressed in the same overalls as the Sensins from our mission, but with slightly different markings in the form of coloured geometrical figures linked by lines across his chest and shoulders. He greeted us and explained his presence. He had been detailed to look after us, he explained, before conducting a brief conversation with our commander. He gave us information about the current situation – information that was quite different from that contained in the reports. The situation had apparently worsened considerably. After we had broken through the asteroid belt, both sides began joining their asteroids together to form impassable groups based on their previous configuration. This meant that neither side had gained a significant advantage in controlling the area within the asteroid belts, but it had become considerably more difficult to pass through them.

“The barrier will soon be complete,” concluded the Sensin from headquarters.

At that moment it appeared that our chances of breaking through the asteroid belt were getting smaller.

Captain Harstan walked to the opposite side of the holo-display, which was now showing the asteroid belt. Bending towards it, he studied the entire asteroid field once again and then turned back to us with his arm raised. “Your attention, please,” he said in a calm but decisive, commanding voice, and indicated the sector that he had just been observing. “Things are a lot quieter in this sector.”

We all looked at the area he was indicating. It was quiet and lay outside the area where asteroids were visibly uniting to form impassable layers, at least judging from the display. One after the other the Sensins around me nodded without comment. I nodded too: my views were increasingly frequently taken into consideration, and this fact, and the common search for solutions of which I was part, had

awakened a feeling of belonging that made me more relaxed about expressing my opinion.

“Everyone to their stations! There is still a likelihood that we will have to evade pursuing ships. Collisions with them can also be expected, as we learnt during our previous flight, although we shall try to avoid them.”

The commander turned to the navigation computer and ordered it to engage full thrust and steer towards the calm section of the asteroid belt. The order was immediately obeyed. But barely had our ship settled on its course and reached full speed when we noticed an increase in movement in the previously calm area. We maintained our course: we were going to attempt a breakthrough. That was clear. Whatever route we choose, it would be the same story. We had no chance of finding a more reliably quiet route through the belt. We already knew that the Acutins attached considerable importance to us, but it was unlikely that they would attack us with all their forces. They would certainly send powerful units, however, and the question once again was whether these forces would be more powerful than the support of our own forces. Yes, that constant uncertainty as to the importance that the Acutins would place on our intention to fly through the asteroid belt. If it was still merely a question of the Acutins’ assumptions about our importance, without knowing its true cause, the main thrust of their strategy would surely not envisage the total support of all their available forces in this part of the asteroid belt. In that case their local responses would not cover the whole of it and a passage through the belt would be possible, since the Acutin blockade would not be sufficiently broad.

We all stared at the asteroids in our flight path. A kind of flickering movement, an indistinct image, and then several consecutive mergings of the Acutins’ asteroids came into focus. Fortunately the Sensins were able to prevent the construction of barriers by assembling asteroid layers of their own.

Before entering the asteroid belt, like the rest of the crew I

tried to estimate our chances from a close observation of the holo-display.

“Navigation computer!” called the commander.

“Sir?” responded the computer with military briskness.

“Take us towards the boundary between the calm section and the area where the asteroids are being formed into impenetrable barriers. Then turn slightly towards the calm zone. Everything should be as though we still trusted in the normal passability of the asteroid belt. Avoid the first barriers without making any sudden manoeuvres and continue tracking all possible routes!” Captain Harstan turned to us: “It is quite likely that the majority of the currently free routes will close rapidly. Be ready for a bumpy ride!”

He returned to his seat and pressed a button to inflate protective cushions around his body and automatically tighten his safety harness. This offered the maximum protection possible in the case of a collision. As we proceeded to do the same, the commander concentrated even more closely on the holo-display and continued issuing orders:

“Navcom!”

“Sir?”

“Use code POT7911/X313 to establish a connection for data transfer!”

“Yes sir! A connection via code POT7911/X313 will be established at the prescribed intervals.”

“Good.” The commander cast an eye over the expectant faces around him. “We shall receive constantly updated images of possible routes on the basis of the predicted orientations of our asteroids into anti-grouping barriers to oppose the Acutins’ attempts to build asteroid barriers. In this way we will know about the clustering of our own asteroids before it even happens. This will help us avoid quite a number of blind alleys and cul-de-sacs. We will also be able to predict the alignment of our asteroids to ensure our passage through the asteroid belt.”

“And what happens if despite everything they prevent us from getting us through?” interrupted a Sensin from somewhere behind us.

Captain Harstan did not reply immediately: he was mentally estimating the probability of our mission failing and all the complications that would ensue. He then looked back at the three-dimensional hologram display of the asteroid belt.

“We will succeed. We have to!”

Strapped into my fully reclined seat, I absorbed myself in the display of our approach to the asteroid belt, until at last we drew near to the entry point. Yes, it was here that activity was greatest. The asteroids approached each other and then slowly merged to form longitudinal layers. It was difficult to imagine the Acutins triggering such large-scale accumulations for the sake of blocking our flight unless they knew the importance of our mission.

“We are entering the asteroid belt,” announced the navigation computer.

The holo-display showed our entry point. The flat concentrations of asteroids, all in constant movement, some slow and some fast, and simultaneously rotating around axes oriented in all directions, began to come to a halt. Now, like detached sections of asteroid layers a thousand times larger, they merged together to form barriers of giant proportions. The first asteroid barrier formed right across our flight path. And not only that. I looked at the holo-display in surprise. The relief image of some kind of castle or walled town, with giant gates, was appearing with increasing clarity on the plane of this barrier. Yes, and there was also a kind of path leading to the gates, in the very direction that we were flying. The path ended at the colossal gates, which were closed, set in correspondingly colossal walls. I looked at Benesens. He was also watching the formation of this relief image.

“This message is intended for us,” he said with a slight grimace.

“Message?” The idea of messages communicated through relief images was a new concept for me. “Are they communicating to us that there is a barrier obstructing our flight, is that it?” I asked.

“A barrier, yes, a barrier. But what kind? There are several levels of barriers present in the asteroid belt. This image is telling us that our flight is prohibited. This message bears the stamp of the Acutins’ asteroid belt command. There is a likelihood that all their forces across the entire asteroid belt will be engaged.”

“And what can we do?”

“Whatever happens, we will attempt to break through: we have no other choice. Then our fleets from the other side of the asteroid belt will be able to come to our assistance. They are capable of making a deep incursion. But we will have to break through at least three quarters of the asteroid belt by ourselves.”

“What about their fleets? Can they attack us?”

“Yes, they can. But then our fleets will attack theirs.” Benesens once again absorbed himself in the holo-display. “That would mean the start of combat operations on an enormous scale.”

“So we can forget about trusting in the ability of our ship’s hull to withstand various impacts?” I tried to be light-hearted, although I didn’t feel much like laughing.

“In theory they aren’t allowed to attack us until we are halfway through the asteroid belt. But this relief display tells us quite clearly that different rules apply in our case. At the local level we are already in a state of war. Or we will be at any moment.” Catching sight of my serious expression, he laughed reassuringly: “They’re not going to destroy us!”

“Check your safety harnesses!” The commander’s voice interrupted our conversation, as a violent change of direction pushed us into our seats with terrifying force.

The holo-display showed our course: apparently we were headed for the edge of the blockade. The turn lasted all the way to the visible surface of the grouped asteroids. We flew over

them, towards the edge, and then immediately changed direction again. We all stared at the holo-display. We appeared to be heading towards the area in which we expected our asteroids to collect. That was what was supposed to happen, assuming that our flight was coordinated with the strategically managed accumulation of our asteroids, which we were expecting to see in the holo-display at any moment. But for the time being we could see nothing of the sort. We had almost reached the edge, but still nothing. The concentration of Acutin asteroids was getting nearer. We held our course. Despite our tense expectancy, nothing happened. All that we could see on the display was an image of our ship flying about the relentless accumulation of Acutin asteroids. We had already covered a distance that was twice the original breadth of the accumulation of Acutin asteroids beneath us, yet we still continued on. The accumulation of asteroids was proceeding at the same speed as our flight. Flying round it was therefore not going to work. I began glancing increasingly frequently at Benesens, who was following events in the holo-display.

“They’ll soon be coming to our aid,” he said calmly by way of response. “In any case we cannot break through on our own. The forces the Acutins have thrown into this blockade of our flight are too great.” He suddenly raised his head: “Yes, there they are!”

The sound of cries spread throughout the command bridge. The agglomeration of our asteroids had taken on the outlines of an American football player – a quarterback – complete with helmet and shoulder pads, charging at the point where the Acutins’ asteroids were assembling.

“He will make space for us! Hurrah!” A cheerful shout drowned out the other sounds.

“Yes, we will dive into the interior of the asteroid belt right next to the quarterback,” explained Captain Harstan.

Meanwhile the quarterback was already approaching the point where the blockade was spreading fastest – represented on the

display as a stampeding herd of giant buffalo which the Acutins had formed in response to the Sensins' quarterback. The first collisions were already taking place between the asteroids of the two sides, which were rapidly multiplying into an ever more awe-inspiring spectacle: as the million-strong herd of buffalo continued to advance, the powerful quarterback used his armoured shoulders to drive the whole attacking wave before him, the force of the impact sending the buffalo flying in all directions. And just like the slow eddy that forms behind a great rock in a rushing stream, a calm area free of colliding asteroids formed behind the quarterback. That was where we could break through! The ship's rapid banking manoeuvre threw me against the straps of my harness with such force that the breath was forced out of my lungs. We were flying along the armoured shoulders of the charging quarterback through the zone where the asteroids were colliding with the greatest violence, in the very thick of the action. For as far as we could see through the great window of the command bridge, the sky glowed red with the powerful explosions that followed the collisions. There were thousands of them. Millions. Viewed from a distance, all that could be seen was the quarterback's progress through the stampeding herd of buffalo, and the buffalo colliding with his helmet and somersaulting over his padded shoulders. From close up, through the command bridge window, it was possible to see the violent collisions of the asteroids. Some asteroids simply grazed the asteroids opposite them, sending up great showers of sparks; others crashed together causing great sections of the rocky surface to break off. The biggest explosions came when asteroids collided head-on. These would explode in their entirety. Some of the biggest explosions were probably due to the energy stores in the interior of the asteroids or accumulations of energy bolts and explosive bombs. At any rate the explosions that followed these collisions were more powerful than one would expect from the mere collision of two giant rocks.

We were now flying directly into the interior of the asteroid belt. Deep into the interior, and towards the middle our way appeared to be clear. Even the pressure produced by our rapid manoeuvring soon subsided, allowing us to breathe normally and then finally even to talk, although some effort was still required to get the words out, because the course we were following still contained several twists and turns.

“These relief images...” I began, but it was hard to find the right word for these strange goings-on.

“Yes, our side responded correctly,” said Benesens, who clearly understood my astonishment at the explosive collisions of the giant bands of asteroids from which the relief images appeared, in places taking on sculpture-like forms and coming together to produce complete images like our “quarterback”.

“We usually operate at many levels, with the constant presence of the intellect or at least through associations. The quarterback with his protective armour represents pleasure in a game that is hard but fair. In our case this enables the inclusion of a considerable part of our forces while at the same time clearly showing our attitude towards events in this sphere as a whole. Despite the hard fighting, all of this is merely a game for us. That is our message.”

“But that can’t be true!” I gasped.

“Of course not. But in view of the extent of engagement of our forces, we shall merely talk about our readiness to play hard.”

“And if they respond the same way?”

“They will. They will respond very sharply. But as a last resort we will still have the possibility of striking first, so that at least it is we who begin the war. This could also lead to a re-establishing of the balance of power, although at a cost. In my opinion this will not be necessary, since we can already count with considerable certainty on passing through the seventy-fifth door. It will not go wrong either for you or for us.”

“And if after evaluating the intensity of this game, or whatever

you want to call it, the Acutins give the order to destroy us using all their forces?”

Benesens made a wry face and moved his head from side to side as he considered his answer: “Our forces must not allow them to do this.” But I got the impression that he was telling me what he hoped was going to happen rather than expressing an opinion born out of solid conviction. It was going to be dangerous – that’s what my feelings were telling me.

“Initiating spiral flight” announced the navigation computer. The safety harnesses tightened once again. I gripped the armrests, rested my head against the headrest and took some deep breaths. I already knew how quickly one could find oneself gasping for breath during these spiral flights, although perhaps it wasn’t always just the tremendous pressure of the violent turns that took my breath away... Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the holo-display. Our projected flight path was full of twists and sharp spiralling turns...I stared in incomprehension. Our route appeared to turn completely to one side, below the compressed layers of the enemy asteroids, through the sculpture-like clusters of our asteroids and then once again beneath the Acutin layers to the left in a long turn. Yes, the whole asteroid belt would soon be in play, I concluded. “A well-conceived plan,” I thought to myself. “At least let’s hope so.”

Then our ship rotated around its longitudinal axis in the direction of our flight and we were already flying in steep banking turns through the clusters of our asteroids, shaped into sculptures suggesting human figures. It was wild and tiring, but as safe as if we were in a sheltered zone. Our asteroids gave way to us or allowed us to pass through secret entrances that opened at our approach, and on through their empty interior. It was becoming increasingly evident that all this had already been calculated and prepared in advance. The only problem

was that the violence of the turns continued to throw us from one side to the other. I maintained my firm grip on my chair's armrests. We were really being tossed about, and just when I had got used to it enough to breathe more or less normally, another line appeared across our trajectory in the holo-display. A moving sphere was clearly visible on this line. I looked at Benesens, who answered curtly without taking his eyes off the holo-display: "They mean to cut us off."

"How?"

"Look more closely at that moving sphere!"

I could make out outlines. Another bison or buffalo. All the Sensins around me were staring at the display too. Then the image began to grow larger and we began to see it closer up with increasing clarity, until at last we could clearly see a snorting buffalo with its horns lowered for the charge. The holo-display zoomed in even closer to show the layers of asteroids that formed the buffalo's exterior and hide, and then a presentation of the individual strata. The buffalo's giant head was composed of tightly packed asteroids. There must have been thousands of them - millions of them, of different sizes and shapes.

"They have accumulated quite a considerable mass here," I commented, half to myself. "It won't be easy to stop it, will it?" Benesens did not reply. He continued to monitor the holo-display's images of the individual sectors around our ship. We all waited expectantly. Our side had surely already prepared its response: we were convinced of it. The thin hull of our ship would not survive a collision with such an enormous mass, and yet there was less and less space for our ship to fly in. We would soon have no room left to manoeuvre. A collision with such masses would pulverise us. Even so, around the holo-display all was calm and silence. And expectancy. This was as it should be. The real question was whether our response would be powerful enough. This was not so easy to believe, although there was a strong sense of hope among the crew. At least that is what the expressions on their faces led me to believe. I too

was waiting for a response from our side – a response that would be triggered from the Sensins' central command for the asteroid belt.

Suddenly I heard a murmur of voices. The Sensins stirred excitedly. Everyone was gazing at the holo-display. A kind of glimmer appeared but I couldn't make out anything else. Nothing more definite.

"Where? What?" I asked Benesens.

"The individual clusters of our asteroids are combining; a new quarterback is on its way," he replied.

I still couldn't make it out. All I could see were the movements of our asteroids. Then I spotted the outline of a helmet, part of an arm, and then the contours of padded shoulders. At last I could see it. Our trajectory appeared on the display. We were moving directly towards the approaching herd of buffalo. The holo-display now showed all three lines of movement: the quarterback, the herd of buffalo and us, all at the predicted intervals. The noisy cries died down. We would all come together at the same time. If our ship found itself between the quarterback and the buffalo at the moment of impact, nothing would be left of us. Thousands if not millions of asteroids would be utterly crushed. And some of them had a diameter of several kilometres. The layers of these asteroids, at least on the heads of the buffalo, were so dense that nothing could survive a collision. Or, even worse, the collision of two of these massive clusters.

"Navcom, what will the passability of this sector be after a collision?" Something about the tone of the commander's voice attracted our attention.

"The analysis from headquarters gives a negligible possibility of a breakthrough following a collision of the two sides. We have to overtake them. Headquarters recommends overtaking them by firing the emergency booster rockets. In all the simulations they have carried out, the interior of the

asteroids remains an unknown factor, especially as regards the quantity of explosive substances in the individual asteroids. And since we don't know how the energy stores and energy bombs are distributed among them, we cannot predict the density or trajectory of the exploded fragments of asteroid."

"So our chances cannot be seen from the holo-display," continued Captain Harstan.

The navigation computer then showed the probable chronological sequence of our positions with regard to the collision between the opposing sides. It now became apparent that the success or failure of our flight depended more on the possibility of unforeseen delays caused by unexpected obstacles. Otherwise a breakthrough should be possible, or even fairly certain.

Captain Harstan spread his arms helplessly. "Without eventual obstacles... What kind of reasoning is that?"

"I have just received an updated recommendation," continued the navigation computer calmly. "Even in the case of a minor obstacle slowing us down, a breakthrough is possible. Our units will help us by firing rockets at smaller groups of asteroids."

"Very well," agreed the commander. "Did they give at least an approximate estimate of the quantity of explosives in the Acutins' asteroids?"

"No."

"Hmm." The commander considered for a moment. Powerful explosions of asteroids could be fatal, although we would still have some possibility of manoeuvre. "All right, Navcom. Full speed ahead! Find me the optimum evasive manoeuvres!"

The lines of possible flight paths appeared on the display. They appeared to be sufficiently passable, with enough open space for manoeuvring and the chance to take evasive action in the case of collision with a single asteroid.

“Navcom, are those moving dots an asteroid shower?” asked the commander without taking his eyes off the display.

“The Acutins are directing these asteroids into our path,” explained the navigation computer, showing the objectives of these hostile asteroids and the probable movements of the Sensins’ asteroids to protect us. “The majority of them are only intended to clear the way for their individual asteroids, which should come within range of us. Most probably at the passages between the individual sculpture-like formations of our asteroids. That is where the layers of our asteroids are weakest.”

Our flight through the permeable Sensin asteroids, within individual clusters resembling geometric figures, proceeded smoothly and without hold-up despite the sharp twists and turns, although tension mounted as we awaited the arrival of the asteroid shower or the breakthrough asteroid predicted by the simulation – the one for which the others were merely clearing a path and piercing our protective layers. It was probable that the Acutins had already selected it or – even more likely – that they had selected a number of asteroids, at least one of which was then expected to strike our ship or at least fire an energy rocket at us. In the holo-display the explosions of the enemy asteroids as they crashed into our protective layers were becoming ever denser. Suddenly the showers of sparks in the impact area closer to us spread rapidly and intensified over the entire section of the route into which we had just turned.

“Prepare for evasive action!” came the commander’s order, although the threat was already clearly visible from the holo-display. After a few tense moments a concentrated series of enemy asteroids approached the same section of our asteroid layers in parallel and struck the defensive barrier across our path, creating an opening.

“Three asteroids!” announced the navigation computer. “At our present speed, impact in 28 seconds. Am reducing speed. Our asteroid will come from our left, from behind, just above us.”

And after a few moments of deceleration which would have thrown us from our seats were it not for our safety harnesses, the view through the great window of the command bridge revealed an asteroid flying past us and disappearing into the distance. The collision would come at any moment now. It would be a violent impact. The only question was: would the fragments of the two asteroids disperse before we reached the point of impact or would we collide with some large piece of debris. We didn't have long to wait. The flash of a powerful explosion was clearly visible from where we were. I instantly closed my eyes. When I next looked through the window I saw a section of asteroid measuring several tens of metres hurtle by on our right. The ship wheeled round violently, went into a climb, banked to the left and then spiralled past several other asteroid fragments before levelling out and continuing quietly in a straight line along the planned route.

"The second attacking asteroid has also been destroyed," reported the navigation computer after a brief pause. "Six of our rocket-powered asteroids are flying to block the third one. It cannot evade them. Our way is clear."

The navigation computer's report was also visible on the holo-display. It showed all the trajectories: ours, those of our asteroids, those of the Acutins' asteroids, and that of the last of the three attacking asteroids. The crew gave an enthusiastic cheer despite the approach of the last remaining asteroid.

"It's going to hit one of ours!" I heard as I held my breath and waited for the explosion. An enormous boom resounded through the ship. It was at least ten times more powerful than all the previous explosions put together. The two asteroids must have been full of explosives. The crew gave vent to their enthusiasm in a series of noisy shouts, despite the ship turning steeply to avoid the remains of the asteroids - which the navigation computer had spotted in good time. We had come through this blockade without losing time. But now the most dangerous part was before us. The frontal collision between

the quarterback and the buffalo. The holo-display was already showing a simulation of our ship's flight path, along the line of the colliding masses of the gigantic layers of asteroids of the two sides. But here there were almost no more asteroids to be seen. The images of the quarterback and the buffalo had become so vivid that I couldn't help thinking of a clash between living beings. They radiated the impression of a guiding intelligence. This intelligence may have been external, since both groups of asteroids were directed by the respective asteroid belt commands, but nevertheless I had the sensation that a part of all this intelligence had been transferred to these two colossal combatants. Then the quarterback stretched out its arm.

"Does it want to take the buffalo by the horns?" I wondered aloud, "or will they really clash as though these were their bodies?"

Benesens shrugged: "This will be of little importance to us. We must avoid a frontal collision, because if we don't there will be no breakthrough on our part." After a brief reflection he shook his head and continued: "The probability shown on the holo-display of our flight between the quarterback and the buffalo does not agree with the recommendation from asteroid belt command. We will not outrun this collision, even though headquarters say that our chances are good. The situation shown by the holo-display is not promising. The question is: who to believe? Unless headquarters have something else up their sleeves, which is also possible."

On the display the quarterback and the buffalo had begun their charge. Each of their movements spoke of a tensing of muscles, powerful momentum, increasing speed and a violent attack. The collision of millions of asteroids crashing into each other. And a tiny bright disc, a barely visible point of light somewhere between the head and shoulders of the quarterback and the forehead of the buffalo with its lowered horns, represented our ship. Through the window of the command bridge we

could observe the approach of these two powerful space warriors with the naked eye – and of course our own progress. As though we wanted these powerful masses to flatten us when they collided. Silence fell once again on the command bridge. Here without assistance even evasive action was impossible. The masses grew closer and closer to each other. We divided our attention between the holo-display and the great front window of our ship, where the “live” image was truly magnificent in its enormous dimensions. Then flashes appeared in the holo-display. Far below us, the extended arm of the quarterback had struck the buffalo on the muzzle with such force that an entire section of the asteroid belt gave a blinding flash. Through the window we could see the approach of the buffalo’s eye and the outlines of its mighty horns, stretching from the far behind us where they were only visible in the holo-display, and on beyond the limits of our vision. Immediately below us the armoured shoulder of our quarterback was already striking the buffalo on the head, just above the nostrils, with a force that bent the buffalo’s head down. The ship turned violently. Now we were between the armoured shoulders and the helmet with its elongated faceguard and the buffalo’s forehead. Behind us there was still some room. The question was: would it remain like that long enough for us to fly through it? Below us we could still see the glow left by the explosions of the energy-filled asteroids. Above us the first collisions and the first explosions could only be moments away. The ship flew through the empty space beneath the quarterback’s chin, manoeuvred round the other side of its face and was already preparing to swerve away when our path was suddenly closed by the buffalo’s right horn. The buffalo had suddenly turned its head and the tip of the horn had only just missed us. Banking steeply, we flew all the way back to the quarterback’s free shoulder and were once again beginning an evasive manoeuvre when another gigantic horn missed us by a whisker. Then flashes began to appear on the other side. I looked at the holo-

display. Some new movement was coming from the lower side of the asteroid belt and had already involved the whole of the opposite side. I looked at the display and then at the Sensins around me. It was clear that they were even more disturbed than I was by these events on the other side of the asteroid belt.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Benesens started at the display in silence: “I don’t know. Perhaps all-out war has begun with all forces, ours and theirs.”

“War?” Benesens’s restraint and his serious face were very eloquent.

“Only the largest spaceships are powerful enough to release such quantities of energy,” he explained.

“Message from headquarters,” interrupted the navigation computer. “Prepare for landing! We are about to go aboard the Conqueror 949.”

I looked at Benesens again: “What now?”

“The Conqueror 949 is one of our largest and best armed ship carriers. Ships of this class are capable of breaking through to us. It can even clear the other asteroids out of its way. It could break through all the asteroid layers on its own. And it can only be destroyed in battle with Acutin ship carriers of the same strength.”

I looked at the holo-display. The demolishing of the asteroid blockade – of entire layers of asteroids – was followed by the appearance of the front section of the Conqueror 949. So these were the Sensins’ “aircraft carriers”, or rather “ship carriers”. They must have been several thousand times bigger than the largest aircraft carriers on earth: we could only see the front section, while the rear section and even the middle section were too big to fit in the image shown by the holo-display. The ship would reach us at any moment; all eyes were already gazing at it through the big front window. All around, as far as we could see, across the whole of our horizon, light gleamed through the dark clouds consisting of countless asteroids,

large and small, moving in all directions as though driven by a colossal storm.

“It is a sort of storm, after all,” I murmured to myself. Some of the nearest asteroids were already being swept past us. Flying fragments of the exploded asteroids were beginning to strike our hull. Then the accumulation of asteroids became even denser, while somehow remaining at a slight distance in front of us, since none of the larger pieces came in our direction, only rubble carried by the enormous blast. There was an incredible number of these dust particles. Entire layers of asteroids must have been utterly pulverised to cause a dust storm like the one through which we were moving. Then, all of a sudden, there was calm. The clouds disappeared and the shower of asteroid fragments ceased to glisten. And our view, up until now limited to the empty spaces between the dust clouds, now widened to reveal the mighty hull of the Conqueror 949, with hundreds of openings from which various vessels were flying. This spaceship of the Sensins was truly majestic. Mighty columns extending from the hull arched over the ship’s giant sides and bent to form the supports of the landing platforms. The ship must have had several hundred decks, and its hull was so long that it disappeared into the distance. It occurred to me that we were probably safe now, although according to Benesens enemy ships of the same size could destroy it. Be that as it may, its enormous dimensions exceeded my wildest fantasies about spaceships and their possible dimensions.

“We are directed to enter through entrance number 37,” announced the navigation computer. Then came the voice of Captain Harstan:

“In all likelihood this is the end of our ship’s journey, since travel has become too dangerous for small vessels. Meanwhile the results of our negotiations with the Acutins do not indicate any reduction in tension. If anything the opposite is true.”

Chapter XI

The reception aboard the Conqueror 949 proceeded according to protocol. A considerable part of the crew was present and the introductory words of welcome were spoken by the ship-carrier's commander Admiral Stratus.

"It is an honour," he began, "for me to have this opportunity to congratulate my friend Captain Harstan, the commander of the special mission, on this successful breakthrough."

The admiral indicated our commander, who accepted the congratulations with a slight bow and expressed his thanks for the admiral's timely assistance.

"Your customs appear to be quite similar to ours on Earth," I said to Benesens, who merely nodded and said: "Naturally," as though this were perfectly obvious. I looked at him again, since although his answer was perfectly acceptable, and in its own way even pleasing, its obviousness seemed a little harder to understand. Then Admiral Stratus began talking about the intervention of his forces which had liberated the passage for

us, and about the blocked routes that had previously been open to everyone but now, owing to the irresponsible actions of the Acutins, were closed or at least less easily passable, as had been the case for our STORMBIRD.

“Although as you have proved,” continued Admiral Stratus, “it is still possible to get through.”

He then spoke about the course of events, about which I had a slightly different opinion, since it appeared to me that the commander of the ship-carrier underestimated the Acutins. In fact our mission, taken as a whole, was considerably more risky than might be concluded from his words, even admitting the Sensins’ abilities and the personal qualities of the commander. He could have acknowledged that the abilities of the Acutins, if not identical, were at least on approximately the same level. These Sensins were probably like us Earthmen in overestimating the importance of their own decisions too, I thought. In the past I had known quite a few people with a similar tendency. Interesting. My reflections on the kinship between Sensins and Earthmen began to move away from these amusing details and towards more serious comparisons. When they reacted to various events, the expressions of their faces were very frequently similar to the expressions of Earthmen in similar circumstances. I looked appraisingly at the Sensins around me. Some of them were listening with real attention, while others were only pretending to listen and even chatting among themselves. I was able to spot several conversations taking place, especially when I turned to survey the entire hall. And there she was. Honaja! Our eyes met. There was still something melancholy about her, although she immediately smiled at me. When had she got here? It didn’t matter... I raised my hand in greeting and she immediately waved back, with no hint of restraint. I pointed at myself and then at her. I wanted to tell her to wait for me after the ceremony, that we should meet, but we were too far away from each other. She immediately nodded, and once

again smiled happily. She had understood everything. We were going to meet. I smiled back at her, raised my arm again to say “see you later” and despite everything, at least for the next few words, listened to the speaker, one of the commanders of the spaceship.

* * *

I smiled at Honaja as she came towards me. After we had squeezed wrists in greeting she positioned herself right next to me.

“They let us through the asteroid belt in small groups,” she explained. “It was easier that way, apparently. Otherwise I would have been here even sooner.”

“It’s nice to see you here,” I replied, showing the same measure of enthusiasm at our meeting. I really wanted to embrace her, squeeze her, kiss her. Even her eyes told me that this was what I should do. But I had too much respect for her. It would be too hasty, too quick. Yes: she was actually in mourning for her husband. I flinched slightly. It was true. That husband of hers. In these first few moments I had almost forgotten about him. Even when our eyes met, between Honaja and me there was only agreement, along with a deep inner feeling of belonging to each other, as though after a long acquaintance when there is no longer any doubt. Nevertheless, there was doubt in me. Above all doubt about how this could be real. But her gaze continued to divert me from various doubts of this type. She understood everything immediately, each gesture of mine, along with my thoughts, in the same moment. Then she took a brisk step backwards and began dragging me in the direction of the park.

“We can go to the restaurant in the garden beneath those trees,” she said, indicating some tall trees just under a hundred metres away. “Would you like to eat something?”

This was an invitation expressed with an agreeable softness...I wondered slightly at the solicitude I had only just noticed in her voice, while at the same time I sensed a sort of continuation of those moments when her eyes were filled with tears at our first meeting.

“Your husband,” I began. It was difficult to talk about him but I had no choice. “That was a painful loss for you. I’m sure he meant a lot to you.”

Her silent inner pain was now only evident in occasional carefully restrained glances.

“Loss.” Honaja repeated my word with a bright gleam in her eyes. “Yes, of course, although I don’t know whether I should see it like that.”

I looked at her questioningly. It was clear that I didn’t understand. Her answer was a smile that seemed to say that now the two of us were here.

“I shouldn’t leave you with these uncertainties. I wouldn’t either, if important interests of our civilisation were not constantly present.”

“Yes, your civilisation.” I squeezed her wrist lightly. “I still don’t know very much about you. And I have already spent quite a lot of time among you.”

“Oh yes?” The melancholy look had utterly disappeared from Honaja’s face. “There are no more obstacles. In view of the current situation, conditions are completely different from those at our first meeting. Now you’re ours, aren’t you?”

“What? To be honest...”

“I know what you want to say. But now we can talk more openly. Besides,” Honaja smiled teasingly, “...now they’ve left us alone, and for a good long time too, until conditions calm down enough for your mission to continue, which won’t be any time soon. At least I don’t think it will.”

“I see... So a kind of enforced break in your company? Actually that doesn't seem such a bad idea. A little holiday would suit me. Especially if it is with you.”

“We get on well, don't we?” Honaja's voice allowed no contradiction and the gleam in her eyes renewed the flirtatious atmosphere. “Come on, I will prepare lunch for you. With us that means that I will choose the dishes for you. I'm really curious to see how you like it.”

“Great, but hadn't you already started talking about your civilisation? Despite everything I can't help being somewhat curious.”

Eager to maintain the atmosphere that had been created, I tried to direct the conversation back to the topic we had started earlier. She agreed with me, but only in principle.

“We have to take some time for ourselves. That is important too. There is still much that is unclear between us. Or perhaps not. It would be good to find out,” she said.

“Hmm, of course. Although I can't think how we could do that.”

I laughed, as though to show how funny this conversation seemed to me, but her desire for a more intimate conversation once again pushed the topic of their civilisation into the background. After all that Mike had told me about purgatory and Benesens's friend with the incredible resemblance to his father, and all those repeated explanations about how they had to be careful about how they presented their civilisation to me in case I misunderstood them, and after what Honaja had just said, when at last their previous hesitations had vanished, I now had to deal with female vanity. I could sense her conviction that everything around us was insignificant. I had already had to deal with similar examples of female vanity of course, so I couldn't really hold it against Honaja. But even so. On the other hand it would be too rude to insist on the question of their civilisation. There was too much sensuality emanating from her to pass to a more serious reflection of the kind that I would probably be

unable to avoid during a conversation about their civilisation. Honaja smiled at me with alluring tenderness. It was always pleasant when I was with her. She wants me to devote all my attention to her, I thought, and as I observed her smiling face I realised that I wanted the same thing. How beautiful she was! Close to her like this, squeezing her wrist, I desired her. I gazed at her face, the delicate sweetness of her complexion, and ran my eyes down her neck to her breasts. What a beautiful body lay concealed beneath those figure-hugging overalls! Everything about her was perfectly proportioned. At least as far as I was concerned. Men must have found Honaja attractive. Most of them, probably, there was no doubt about it.

In the restaurant garden Honaja looked at the beautiful arranged tables closest to us and then at those to the side, half hidden in the greenery, in a kind of shrubbery but with artfully arranged branches. One of the tables was almost entirely concealed by the branch of a large, luxuriant tree that spread above it. "Let's go there," she suggested, walking past a table at which a group of five Sensins lounged on comfortable wicker chairs. I followed her, looking around me as I walked. The garden was very pleasant, with tall trees and even a little wood behind it. And the ceiling - I looked up, since it was barely visible - arched more than a hundred, perhaps two hundred metres above us. It was made of partially transparent materials that absorbed the gaze, creating a vague sensation of distance. The whole thing could easily be mistaken for a restaurant garden on Earth.

"You certainly don't worry about saving space here," I commented when we had sat down at our table.

"Yes, we have enough of it," Honaja replied. "Do you like this place?"

"Very much." Once again I looked around curiously.

"With us there is no need to be sparing with space," she explained.

“I see.”

We looked at each other once again. I could see a silent yearning in her eyes, an expectancy. Then her expression changed, and it was as though her eyes were searching for some kind of confirmation in mine. But a confirmation of what? Expectations? What kind? Then she was seized by a gentle melancholy, or even sorrow. She took a deep breath.

“Death is an ugly thing,” she said.

“Yes, it certainly is,” I agreed, in the same serious tone. “How many years do you Sensins actually live?”

Honaja gave a barely perceptible start, nothing more: it was probably simply a memory.

“That isn’t the problem For us death is not necessarily an evil thing. We have merely opted for a life from which we have not excluded death, although we could have done.”

“We Earthmen would exclude it immediately,” I replied with renewed animation and when she smiled I laughed softly myself in confirmation of my words. Honaja continued to smile. My different views on the question of death were evidently sufficiently well known to her.

“At our level of development such a choice is something utterly different,” she said. “The uniqueness of life carries in itself a great value. For us even a risk with a fatal outcome is not difficult to avoid. Accidents are actually so rare with us that it is a long time since the last one. At least no-one takes them as something that could mean his death.”

“But your husband died...”

“That is true. In the case of war or a commando attack the position changes completely. But the uniqueness of life is not an advantage. At least not in my experience. After what I have been through my opinion on everything has changed completely.”

“Yours is an unusual civilisation, Honaja,” I said. “It doesn’t make sense to me that you have not retained the possibility of returning life in the case of an accident if, as you say, this is

something you are capable of. To renounce such a possibility, and to do so completely, is in my opinion foolish.”

“Well, a complete renunciation... it isn’t exactly like that...”

”Honaja stopped, as though searching for the right words.

“What do you mean it isn’t like that?”

“It isn’t so simple. At least not entirely.”

This time Honaja gave a slightly mysterious smile, and although I couldn’t tell whether what she was saying applied to me or to her herself, she had given me a premonition of something important. Something that had to be in close connection with all our decisions and probably also our emotions and with her feelings for me. Something that was the reason we two were sitting here. How complicated it all was!

“Peter, look what I have prepared for you!”

The food that had just been placed on the table had made Honaja almost as excited as a child. Nothing else any longer had any importance for her. I looked at her for a few moments as I searched for the right words to continue our unfinished conversation, but her eager expression and the fact that she was obviously waiting for my reaction led me to abandon the idea.

“Try it! You’ll like it – you’ll see!” she said.

I gave up. There was no doubt that it was all very beautifully prepared. And judging by its appearance, it would be tasty too. But I had something other than good food on my mind. I had never been a particularly choosy eater and although I enjoyed eating well, I had never wasted much time over food. Be that as it may, I now had at least ten different types of food on a plate in front of me.

“Try it!” said Honaja encouragingly.

I took some kind of sauce on my fork and tasted it. It was very good. Then I took what appeared to be a piece of roast meat, but Honaja explained that it was actually made of several different kinds of plant and was considerably more appetising than meat, at least for her tastes. And in fact I found that I liked it

very much too. Then I tasted the next dish, and because Honaja was looking at me as though she wanted to hear my opinion of the other dishes as well, and above all because of her happy concentration on choosing individual morsels for me, I took a bite or two of each. A little of everything. I really did my best with this tasting.

“Very good. You prepared this for me amazingly well,” I said with satisfaction and indicated her plate with its barely touched food. “You should eat too. It’s really good. Why aren’t you eating?”

“I am eating. It’s just I’m a little slower than you.” And she ate a few quick mouthfuls.

As I chewed a mouthful of plant kebab, I lay back in my comfortable wicker chair. It occurred to me that there was something unusual about the way Honaja was observing me. How many details attracted her attention as she cleared away the dinner! And then suddenly, happily and self-confidently, or at least that was the impression she gave, although I could not understand the reason for this sudden change, she began eating too.

“Next time I will invite you to dinner,” I said, “although I will have to leave the choosing to you. I probably wouldn’t know how to choose things that are to your taste.”

“It isn’t necessary,” replied Honaja with a certain smugness. “I know why you said that. But it isn’t about that.”

“And what is it about?”

“Forget it. It was nice for me to see how much you liked the food.”

I smiled back at her.

“You’re keeping something from me, aren’t you?”

“Does that annoy you?”

“Not at all.”

“Good. Come back to my place. After that terrible journey you must be tired. I would like to lie down a little too.”

I repeated her “good”, which she had said out of concern for how I felt, while simultaneously inviting me to her room.

Perhaps with these Sensins this was a perfectly obvious invitation or something and actually didn't mean anything special. Or did it? As I looked again at her alluring figure, I once again had the desire to touch her, to caress her, her whole body. As our eyes meet it occurred to me that I was staring at her a bit too much. That melancholy and pain in her eyes at our first meeting was still imposing a kind of deference on me despite Honaja's smiles. She was happy. But those melancholy glances of hers had made too powerful an impression. I couldn't push them away, let alone forget them. She, on the other hand, merely had to laugh, and immediately everything was different, and her eyes filled with playfulness. Well, whatever happens, she had certainly given me plenty to think about, and doubts too. It wasn't easy for me to connect her previous reactions with her present ones. In fact it was impossible. Although as she continued to smile at me this was becoming less important, and for a moment all my reservations even seemed superfluous. And yet I couldn't put them completely aside. That was all.

"We get along well, don't we?" said her lingering gaze. She could sense me with all her being. Even when she looked away she was watching me. From time to time I could feel her respond to my sensations even though I kept them to myself.

"We can go across the park, to the wood over there," she suggested.

"Over the grass?" I looked around. I couldn't see any path.

"They take good care of this grass," she explained, smiling, as I looked for the path. "Walking freely across meadows and through woods is more pleasant for us than walking on paths. Come on!"

Honaja took a few steps across the grass, waited for me and offered me her hand, squeezing my fingers playfully as I took it.

I looked at her from the side, running my eyes over her beautiful face and down her graceful neck towards her breasts. I stared hungrily at her alluring form before tearing my eyes away and

raising them to meet her gaze. She laughed. Her response was full of sensuality. If I had caressed her with my hands rather than merely with a look, she could not have responded more sensually. I put my arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her towards me. I moved my lips over her cheek and neck to her ears, kissing her lightly.

“On our first date my husband and I went across a park like this to my apartment. Back then my apartment was right behind a wood.”

“Just like now?” I smiled at this interesting coincidence.

“And as he later admitted, I surprised him by catching him looking at me. Some men think that they can observe women secretly, even from close up, without us noticing.”

“Can you do that?”

“Most women can,” she said, with a lightly concealed air of mischievousness.

“What about Earthwomen?”

“They probably can too. But there aren’t any of them here, are there?” Honaja laughed again.

“Yes, of course,” I said. What a lot of things she was telling me. She could already tell that I liked her, since I was making no effort to hide it. I was even showing her. But in that moment I still wasn’t capable of strong feelings, although she was so incredibly beautiful. But what did all this have to do with her husband? There seemed to be certain similarities between him and me. Between us? Was it coincidence? Or was there something else involved? From time to time she was seized by memories, then she suddenly shakes them off, and then the process is repeated. She even awakened the memory of the first time she met her husband. The result was that the figure of her husband was a powerful presence all around us.

“Oh, I shouldn’t be bothering you with my memories. Just forget about everything! I feel good with you. Really good.” Honaja pulled me towards her, brushed my mouth with a quick

kiss and wrapped her arms round my shoulders. “Even better than I had hoped.”

“Than you had hoped?” I repeated. This sounded a little odd given what she had been saying before and all her replies so far.

“Well, yes...” Honaja sounded confused. She almost grew serious, but then her face spread into a smile once again. “Didn’t you want to get on well with me?”

She only wanted acknowledgement, nothing more. She was demanding it, though with a smile.

“Yes, of course,” I nodded. It felt so good being with her. I bent towards her neck and touched it with my lips. I moved to her mouth, which this time opened hungrily to receive my passionate kiss.

* * *

Stretched out comfortably on the couch in Honaja’s room, I was following the latest reports. “No sign of a diminishing of tension, is there?” said Honaja, sitting down next to me.

“Neither side wants to give way, or something like that, if I have understood correctly. But even now I don’t know what the quarrel is really about. I can’t even judge why one side is more right than the other, although I have to admit that this is beginning to interest me more and more.”

I looked questioningly at Honaja. Earlier she had said something about conditions having changed enough for a more relaxed discussion on this topic. She smiled and snuggled up to me, placed her hand on my shoulder and started caressing my neck, my chin and my cheeks.

“When you visit Earthwomen in their rooms do you first discuss politics?” she asked.

“No.” I couldn’t ignore her desire for sensuality. In such intimate moments no-one talks about politics. And yet the whole situation was just a little too complicated, and too intense, for me to simply put everything aside, although this was apparently the natural thing to do as far as she was concerned.

Honaja pressed a button on the armrest and the couch extended to form a double bed. She stretched out on it, gave me a playful look, turned on her side, and then turned again and lay on her back with her arms stretched over her head. “Caress me!”

There was nothing for it but to obey. On any other occasion this is all I would have wanted. Everything about her was beautiful. Her mouth, her face, her neck, her alluring breasts and her perfectly formed body with the provocative curves of her hips. I moved my hand beneath her shoulder and slid my fingers round to the nape of her neck. I drew her closer to me with sensual pleasure and squeezed her tightly until it almost hurt. Then she laughed because she was ticklish. Her laughter was full of sensuality and an infectious playfulness. She liked it. The caresses of my hands drew from her a slow and then increasingly violent writhing that reached its height when our eyes met. There was so much sensuality in her eyes that I caught my breath. As our eyes met I took her whole being into myself, my eyes pushing on through her dilated pupils, and her body responded with a spasm. Again and again, my gaze sank in hers. Such a game.

“Honaja!”

“Yes?”

“You’re really hot, Honaja...”

“What am I?”

I abruptly lifted myself above her, lowered my head to her half uncovered breasts and with passionate kisses worked my way up her body to her neck and ears.

“Honaja, my beautiful Honaja...” I whispered. And as my mouth

moved back towards her breasts her dress slipped from her shoulder. Under the pressure of my hands it slid further, to her waist, revealing her slender abdomen. My adoring kisses moved further down her body. I pulled the dress from her. I then removed my own clothes and our eyes met in mutual accord. Our mouths sought each other with hungry, hot kisses as we embraced ever more ardently until we reached a final passionate union.

* * *

With my arm laid across Honaja's breasts I played with her long hair.

"You know, Peter..." Honaja broke the silence.

"Yes?"

She had an air of satisfaction and relaxation. "We go together pretty well, don't we?" she said.

"Sure," I replied, despite my doubts about the future of our relationship. "At least from my point of view perhaps a little too much."

"You know, you and my husband..." She paused mid-sentence.

"Yes?"

"You have a lot in common. A lot more than you can imagine. I sensed this the first time I met you. But after today I can talk about this with considerable certainty. It seems quite surprising too me."

"What? It's surprising for you too? What is behind this? What is actually going on? I thought that here things were only surprising for Earthmen. Not for you as well."

Honaja turned towards me, ran her hand through my hair and cuddled up to me: "But despite everything things are clear.

Taken as a whole, of course. With the details it's a little harder. In terms of variety of characters we Sensins are considerably more heterogeneous. We place greater importance on building the personality than you Earthmen do."

"That's certainly possible. At least in view of your higher level of civilisation," I replied.

Then the bed vibrated slightly and a decorative model of our spaceship fell from the shelf above us. I looked at Honaja. But she was raising herself up onto her elbows too. It had surprised her as much as it had me, if not more. All the hanging objects in the room were swinging, even the water in the small spherical aquarium with transparent sides was lapping from side to side. The stand containing a basket of fruit tipped this way and that a few times before coming to rest. Then came a quiet, muffled drumming sound.

"An earthquake?" I wondered aloud, although in the same moment I rejected that idea: we were on a spaceship after all.

Honaja jumped from the bed to the holo-display which had just lit up. A pleasant-looking female Sensin with a serious expression on her face was talking: "We have just been hit by energy missiles from an Acutin ship-carrier."

Flashing signals had lit up on our wrist-receivers: the agreed call sign of our mission. A moment later the image of the mission's leader, Captain Harstan, appeared in the display.

"All personnel report to the muster station immediately! We are under attack. We must abandon this ship-carrier," he said.

In a moment I had slipped into my overalls. Honaja was even quicker and was already running for the door. She stopped and waited for me - I was only two or three paces behind her. She threw herself into my arms and kissed me briefly and violently, and then ran through the door and into the corridor to the rapidly moving wall fitted with stands that the Sensins used to travel along the corridors. It carried us to a large vaulted space the size of a football stadium, one of the larger junctions in our ship-carrier. Here there was

pandemonium, with everyone running in different directions. Some were jumping aboard the flying craft used for shipboard transport, while others were standing in front of the giant holo-displays that offered a clear view of what was happening. Honaja stopped by one of the larger groups. Here I saw for the first time a large number of thoroughly agitated Sensins, following the constantly updated reports with great concentration. It was true that the Sensins from our mission had displayed agitation during our attempts to break through the asteroid barriers, but they had been specially selected for a risky undertaking and everything that had happened was more or less as expected – or rather as they expected, seeing as for me everything was unexpected, to put it mildly. I found myself drawn towards the holo-display. A spaceship of incredible dimensions – I realised that it was ours – appeared in the display. Its front section was shattered, with gashes from the explosions that appeared to be several kilometres deep. Not even the biggest nuclear bombs would be capable of causing damage like that, not in materials that were harder than diamonds and with a melting-point higher than that of tungsten. But then there were more explosions, one after the other, shattering other enormous sections of our ship. The Sensins watched with bated breath, Honaja too. Then a wave of cries and shouts echoed through the hall. I looked at the section of the holo-display that an increasing number of Sensins were pointing to. Thousands and thousands of spacecraft, among them small ships, were leaving our ship-carrier. All of them, large and small, were in attack formation, while a second wave was heading for the front of our ship.

“Our squadrons,” whispered Honaja. “They are going to attack the enemy, and those in front of us are going to build a shield. Our anti-missile fighters will shoot down the energy missiles before they hit us.”

“Can this ship-carrier withstand an attack like this?” Judging from the expressions on the faces around me, and the enthu-

siastic cries that greeted each new squadron that left the ship, one would certainly think so.

Honaja's face again showed a sombre shadow of doubt. "It is more a question of how long we can hold out. Three of their ship-carriers are attacking us. Help is probably already on its way, although we can't see them yet. But, Peter..."

I looked at her anxious face: "Yes?"

"An attack by ships from the ship-carrier class... that means war. They are our biggest ships. This is no longer a local war. It isn't like before with the GNAT or the STORMBIRD. Look there, in the top left corner of the display!"

"What does it mean?" I could see a glint of light above the distant fleet.

"The fleets from the upper part of the asteroid belt have entered the fray."

Then there was a flash of light across the whole belt. "The entire asteroid belt is ablaze," came the announcement.

"It's war," whispered Honaja.

"We have detected laser cannon support from our ship-carriers."

All the Sensins round the holo-display jumped up and down with enthusiasm. Even Honaja rejoiced:

"With this support we will hold out. Their three ship-carriers aren't enough to destroy us because we have the support of the laser cannon of five of our own ship-carriers. But where have they come from...? Look, Peter!"

An entire section of the asteroid belt was merging to reveal the increasingly clear outlines of a ship of the ship-carrier class.

"So these weren't asteroids but the scattered component parts of ship-carriers!" I shouted. It was a magnificent sight: each part was building itself into a united whole.

Honaja nodded: "There are asteroids of every type here, these too."

"What does this mean?" I asked, as I tried to guess what effect the presence of this technology would have on the situation.

“I don’t know. There has been too much redistribution of forces recently for any more definite assessment of the situation. Shifts are taking place constantly on both sides. It is difficult to say who has the advantage where. Here it now looks as though a balance of power is being re-established. But in other sectors one side could gain an advantage, or perhaps not. Be that as it may, the support of the laser cannon of these ship-carriers closest to us is a cause for happiness. A satisfied smile appeared on Honaja’s lips.

Suddenly everyone fell silent.

“Whaat?” I cried. Immediately above us, above the flank of our ship and the section containing we were standing in at that moment, a mass of Acutin craft seemed to be growing out of nothing.

“Dive-bombers!” shouted the Sensins.

I looked at the holo-display and then back at Honaja. “How? Where from?”

“All these craft are made up of modules, including very tiny ones no bigger than dust particles. The distances between them vary. At first they appear in a more or less dense asteroid cloud with all the individual particles separated and mixed with a large number of “blind” asteroids to mislead our analysts.

“And what does this mean for us?” I turned from the holo-display to observe the Sensins’ reaction to the appearance of these attacking dive-bombers.

“It depends on the number of these ships. If the worst came to the worst, our ship would have to expand too. All of its components would have to separate and produce a hundredfold if not a thousandfold increase in its current size. Any energy blast would then only be able to destroy an incomparably smaller part of the ship. A millionfold increase in the power of the energy charges would be necessary to destroy such an ‘inflated’ ship.”

Meanwhile the first dive-bombers were already attacking

with such force that an entire section of the ship above us had begun to glow red-hot. The glow increased to dazzling glare which for a time hid our view of events beyond the outer walls of our ship, but once the blinding light had diminished we could see that a kilometre-long section of the outer shell had collapsed into the interior of the ship.

“Peter, we can’t just stand here counting their dive-bombers! We must get to the STORMBIRD. Everyone will flee to their own stations.”

We began to run, past the giant holo-display and the rapidly dispersing crowd of Sensins. Most of them were getting into small vehicles in the form of discs with glass semicircles above them. Those by the walls were opening cupboards and removing spacesuits complete with square backpacks and transparent egg-shaped helmets.

“For the vacuum,” explained Honaja. “In the case of a rapid dispersal of the component parts of our ship, a vacuum will form here. Those flashing lights above the cupboards containing the spacesuits are an alarm signal. They indicate that everyone should put on spacesuits. That is what we ought to do too. The hangars are too vast for us to cross them quickly enough, even though they are designed to hold smaller vessels like our STORMBIRD.

Honaja ran to the nearest wall. A light was flashing above the stylised image of a spacesuit. She removed two backpacks from a cupboard and pressed a button on top of them to release the airtight spacesuits they contained. We both immediately put on our suits and began looking around for the nearest free vehicle. But there was an enormous crowd in the parking bay. Because of the large holo-display, so many Sensins had gathered in this section before the alarm that delays were inevitable despite the increased capacities of their internal transport system. Even so, everything seemed to be happening very quickly. It only took a few minutes for all the Sensins to disperse. There had probably been tens of thousands of them, or perhaps even

more: I hadn't been able to tell how many of them there were behind all the different entrances to this great crossroads-like space. But there was no time to think about that now. An arch on the opposite side collapsed to half of its previous height with a great bang. The explosions were already reaching the area we were in.

"Quickly!" shouted Honaja. "There must be enough free vehicles in the lower part of the parking bay. We have to find one because we can no longer rely on the moving walls and lifts." She ran past the vehicles that were taking off around us and towards the central part of the parking bay. We then made our way past vehicles that were already occupied by individual Sensins waiting for their friends, and then across a long footbridge that curved in an arc towards a raised parking area in the distance. But this was the same direction as the collapsed section of the arch. Honaja stopped:

"If they have already managed to penetrate the outer walls, this section will now be the target of their energy missiles. The interior of the ship is far less resistant to explosions than the outer part of the hull. We had better go back."

Naturally I agreed with her. In these conditions among the Sensins I was already able to make up my own mind about some things, but not in the current situation. Honaja's suggestion seemed to make sense. And she was right too. There was another crash and the arch split, fissures opening along its length. Then came a powerful blast of air which would have sent me and Honaja rolling along the floor if not up into the air, like the several thousand Sensins it had swept off their feet and towards the gaping fissures through which the air was flowing out, right up to the ceiling. Falling back down from that height would be terrible. I was already thinking about broken necks, arms, legs, heads, when the gravity suddenly disappeared or, more likely, some artificially created gravity that enabled us to move as though under the effect of Earth's gravity. Honaja and I clung to the rail in order to resist the powerful blast of air,

but suddenly that disappeared too. Now we had to cope with airlessness and weightlessness.

“Artificial gravity stops functioning when the component elements move apart,” explained Honaja. “On your wrist you have a controller for the miniature photon motor in your backpack. Lift your arms in the direction you want to fly in and waggle your fingers to start the motor. Look, like this!” Honaja rapidly demonstrated the very simple controls. “But we still have to find a vehicle. We can move quickly enough round the ship with our backpack motors but they are not suitable for longer distances.”

She set off under the arch and I followed her. We were heading towards the hangars, first along tubular corridors and then through empty space with a clear view of the starry sky outside. In those conditions there was nothing pleasant about that black emptiness dotted with numerous clearly visible stars.

Honaja stopped.

“All the routes have been cut. We have to call the rescue service.”

All we could see around us were large moving walls and individual sections of our ship-carrier, from which smaller ships would apparently be assembled. We actually saw this transformation taking place on an enormous piece of ship below us. The large plates began to curve and bend. A number of smaller pieces approached from further away. Some of them opened suddenly to reveal engines, and already we could see a new ship taking shape. It was much smaller than the CONQUEROR 949 but it was still very big. Honaja pressed a button on her wrist unit to call for help. We only needed navigation assistance and since the information system was still fully functional we immediately received all the explanations we needed – although it was not what we wanted to hear. We were still in the area of the main attack by the dive-bombers.

Once they had finished assembling themselves in the way we had just witnessed, the six ships closest to us immediately

launched a counter-attack by activating their laser cannon. However after a brief exchange of fire they were destroyed by the dive-bombers' energy bolts.

"We could head for the ship below us but the main information centre has advised us not to because that ship is believed to be the target of dive-bombers that are already on their way. They could attack it at any moment," said Honaja.

"Move back in the direction you came from! Rescue ships have already been dispatched. We have transmitted your position and the STORMBIRD has signalled that they are on their way to you." This message arrived via Honaja's miniature hologram receiver.

I pointed towards the six large laser cannon that were rising up out of the hull in the forward section of the ship immediately below us.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Honaja. "They are already here."

I looked around for the attackers, and then again to the right, to the left and in all directions, but I couldn't see them. There were too many vague shapes moving all around us. Then we felt the shock of a powerful discharge of energy as the ship below us opened fire. I still couldn't see the attackers but the ship was already hammering away without interruption as though taking part in a direct attack. We rapidly descended along the hull towards the rear section and then ducked below the four laser cannon located at the top of what looked like a tail section, although ships did not need a tail in this vacuum. Suddenly the tail exploded. It had been hit by an enemy laser impulse. It must have had terrible power. The enormous cannon – tens of metres long – evaporated: a fraction of a second had been enough to blow them away.

As we flew, I looked towards the violent flashes of light where the entire forward section of the ship had disappeared beneath the explosions of energy bolts beneath that were tearing its armoured hull to pieces. The ship would not last long I mut-

tered to myself. And the crew would be destroyed despite their courageous resistance. This was something that was outside my understanding of these Sensins, with their safe and secure lives.

“Why don’t they flee?” I shouted to Honaja as I flew along next to her.

“They will,” she replied. “The crew is probably already in the rear section and preparing to withdraw aboard escape rockets. But they still have some laser cannon and energy bolts. They can still resist the attackers.”

“Hmm. They are certainly courageous.”

I caught sight of a large piece of hull being torn away, and then a new explosion ripped through large sections of the partition walls of the accommodation quarters in the interior of the hull. But two laser cannon on the sides of the ship were still firing away at full power. Energy bolts flashed from them in rapid succession, while energy missiles continued to fire from a part of the hull that was still undamaged.

“Away! Quickly, away!” shouted Honaja, visibly alarmed. “When the rear section is shattered the individual pieces will fly in our direction. Even a small fragment could be fatal for us because there is no air here to slow them down. We have to get under cover, behind the first large piece we can find.”

Honaja looked at the ship. Its hull was already half torn apart and shattered by internal explosions. Then she launched herself in the direction of a ship that was assembling itself behind us at that very moment. Its hull was taking on a shape similar to the one we were fleeing. We were still a few minutes away from reaching its shelter when we were suddenly blinded by a violent gleam of light. A moment later a large piece of hull flew past us and, behind it, a dozen smaller fragments torn from the walls. A rescue craft appeared immediately below us and a Sensin from the destroyed ship signalled to us to come on board. This craft had protected us from the smaller fragments. That was why we were still in one piece. They had only

just managed to abandon their ship before it exploded, and yet they had protected us! Honaja and I flew to the rescue craft. I felt safer in it than out in the open, although even this was questionable.

“What’s happening? Are we at war?”

These were Honaja’s first words on entering the crowded central command bridge of this disc-shaped craft, which though smaller than our usual ships still measured several tens of metres across.

The Sensin who had rescued us answered: “Battles are taking place in the whole of this sector around the asteroid belt. A large part of the fleets, both ours and theirs, had been sent here in advance. A good part of the forces of both sides are now in this part of the galaxy and it appears that the majority are already engaged in the fighting. But war has not yet been declared either on their side or on ours. The reports talk about local conflicts, but given the scale of these battles that is rather difficult to understand. We have orders from headquarters to take you to the flagship and to communicate to you the suspension of your mission until further notice.”

Chapter XII

After terrible clashes, which included robotic units inside the asteroid belt, and after several thousand ship-carriers had been destroyed on both sides, the two sides agreed to resume negotiations. Among the conditions imposed by the Acutins was a request for my presence, without any additional explanation. They insisted on it. I was able to hear this for myself in the company of a group of Sensins around the large holo-display. Captain Harstan stood up with a thoughtful expression on his face. He pondered for a moment and then signalled to Honaja that she should go with him. He took her to one side and they spoke confidentially. They talked together for quite some time. Then they returned. Harstan still looked slightly preoccupied. He looked at me. Then he beckoned me to join them. I walked forwards and as I did so I cast a fleeting look at Honaja, who smiled at me with her characteristic sensual expression. “Don’t believe these Acutins!” said Harstan. “Now, in these strained conditions, they will feign ignorance and make up various lies on the spot. They still do not know the true impor-

tance of your presence, nor the real reason for it, although they may already have some vague notions. They will want to find out more. Therefore we can expect certain complications and provocations, something at which they are past masters. They have even managed to catch us out in the past, so it will probably be considerably easier for them to catch out an Earthman. I therefore ask you to show a little restraint, and suggest that when you are talking to them you take time to consider your answers to the more difficult questions or discuss them with Honaja.”

I gave a slight nod to indicate my acceptance of Harstan’s warnings.

* * *

In the large hall the chairs at the negotiating table, three on either side of it, were still unoccupied. The escorts were supposed to remain in the background, but with advisers and experts on various issues within immediate reach of the negotiators. It was going to be difficult. Honaja and I stood slightly to one side, by the carpet that ran from the entrance through over half of the fifty-metre hall. My gaze was attracted by the floor beneath my feet. Some kind of parquet cut from wood of various colours to form a mosaic-like depiction of a flower garden, with decorative shrubs and a stream flowing towards the walls, or rather columns, with small arched exits between them and one larger arch beneath which a small lake extended into the hall, with a little bridge across it.

“The delegation of the Acutins!” announced a clear voice from the direction of the entrance. The Sensins and the Acutins standing along the carpet moved apart, each group to its own

side, and stood there in a respectful attitude. Honaja and I did the same, although we remained slightly more to the front, where I observed with interest the etiquette of these highly developed civilisations. Their protocol was quite similar to ours on Earth, except that the overall effect was one of preserving a tradition, despite all their new technology. “What tradition they are trying to preserve?” I wondered. It appeared that emphasising the solemn nature of the occasion with the presence of a large escort was perfectly acceptable and indeed expected.

Three negotiators appeared at the entrance, accompanied by nine advisers in black jackets rather like tailcoats beneath which they wore silver close-fitting one-piece overalls with the shoes, or rather boots, already attached. The negotiators were dressed in the same way but with the colour scheme reversed: their tailcoats gleamed silver. I had already had a chance to see this “fabric” of theirs from close up. It was made of thousands of tiny diamonds measuring barely a tenth of a millimetre set in a matrix finer than a human hair and invisible to the naked eye. The first impression was that this was merely a rather unusual material with a flat surface. It was the reflections that gave this attire its splendid appearance.

The negotiators came to a halt. One of the Acutins from the hall approached them and handed something to them. Evidently they had been waiting for this. Then the main negotiator walked decisively forward along the carpet towards the negotiating table. I watched with interest but as he passed me he suddenly stopped and looked me in the eyes with a severe expression on his face.

“Are you sure that you are on the right side?” he asked me with a seriousness that seemed to contain a kind of anger, as though he were accusing me of having made the wrong decision.

“What are you saying?” interrupted Honaja. “You have no right to rebuke our guests. At least not here.”

But the expression of the Acutin's face grew even more severe. He looked furious. This was the kind of anger, contained and genuine, that could not be appeased by mere words. He raised his hand, paused for a moment and with a circular movement indicated the Sensins around us. "These are robots. All of them."

I looked at him in silence. I didn't say anything. I had no idea what I was supposed to say. Actually it was all rather embarrassing. He was insulting the Sensins, my friends.

"It's not true," whispered Honaja.

But the Acutin continued to stare at me, and although I averted my eyes he waited for so long that I had to pull myself together again. We looked at each other. He was still standing in front of me with the same furious expression on his face.

"They cannot be your friends. It's not natural."

"That isn't true!" snapped Honaja. Her face flushed and she could no longer hide her growing anger. "You Acutins are a civilisation that began genetic manipulation even before you had understood the basics of life and living beings. You understood nothing and yet you embarked on fatal changes. And the result is what it is. Cripples. That's what you are. Mental cripples!"

The angry expression on the Acutin's face gave way to a cynical smile as he turned to me. "Haven't they told you the fairy tale about their origin yet? No?" he said, gesturing at the Sensins.

"I could tell him some facts about your origin," interrupted the Sensin next to Honaja. "They are very brief and easy to understand."

The Acutins standing nearby all started talking at once. The volume of noisy exclamations continued to grow until an Acutin from the other side of the carpet intervened:

"You want to talk about us, you mad robot? How? You don't even have the first idea about life and you want to talk about us!"

Now I sensed a wave of indignation from all the Sensins around me. A tall individual with a trim beard and longish hair spoke up:

“What expressions and lofty words! You drag them out of nothing and throw them on the table as though they were facts. You have forgotten everything else. Our warnings, our recommendations. How wretched you seemed when we revealed your deformity! With proofs, of course. We told you clearly what was wrong with you. We explained it all down to the last detail. And then you began trying to rectify it. Once again too hastily, and once again mistakenly. It is a real shame that at this level of civilisation you have understood so little.”

At these words the Acutins flew into a rage. The one the Sensin had addressed replied:

“There has been no rectification on the basis of your findings, still less on the basis of your recommendations. We merely introduced some changes in our constantly evolving process of self-construction, which has been going on ever since the primitive level at which the Earthmen are today.”

At that moment the negotiating delegation of the Sensins arrived. Their leader only caught the last few words, but evidently he had immediately grasped the situation. “Keep to the agreement, please,” he said in a serious tone, interrupting the Acutin’s explanation. “This Earthman is free, as you can see. We shall give you the opportunity to satisfy yourselves of this. There has been no compulsion from our side. Although this in fact means nothing to you, as I can see and as was already clear to me. You merely wished to confuse him for a while, since you are not capable of any more than that. You are well aware of this. But you have arrived at some conclusions regarding the sense of this intention of yours, which you have now had the opportunity to put into practice despite the breach of protocol. Good. Now you have done what you intended, but you have achieved little. Please!” – the Sensin pointed towards the table – “let us continue the negotiations!”

He made a gesture to indicate that he was giving precedence to the Acutin, or that he was the one who would follow and not the other way round. When the Acutin hesitated, the Sensin offered him precedence again with an even more decisive gesture of his arm.

I observed all this calmly. At least this was the impression I wanted to give, despite all the doubts and confused sensations that were now assailing me. The leader of the Sensins had certainly made some very strange remarks, although of course I didn't believe everything. Of course not. I tried to find some encouraging words for Honaja. We looked at each other.

"It was my mistake, yes," she began. Her face was thoughtful. "I wanted to give you a clearer picture of our civilisation so that you could have a deeper understanding of the differences between us and the Acutins. But their insults are vapid and without basis. Yes, they are merely insults."

My gaze slid along the soft skin of her innocently bare neck. She radiated so much alluring tenderness that the words of that Acutin really couldn't have been anything other than, as Honaja said, a vapid insult without a serious basis. But he had spoken with such conviction... I couldn't find the right expression even in my own thoughts... Yes, it was incredible... And then it all came out in a rush:

"The leader of your negotiators gave as good as he got in that exchange of insults. You were no slouch either. What was it you accused them of? Oh yes, of being mental cripples..."

"Yes, well... That was putting it a bit strongly, but there really is something questionable if not unhinged about the mentality of these Acutins. At first I agreed that their genetic deformation was insignificant, but now that it is the very source of these actions of theirs that are causing conflicts, hostilities and probably, as you yourself have been able to see, even war between us, my opinion has changed."

Naturally everything that triggers a war is important, terribly

important, I thought. "How are they actually different from you? I can hardly see a difference," I asked.

At my words Honaja flinched and indicated with a gesture of her hand that these differences were far from being small. She smiled: "We are very different."

"Who actually are the Acutins?" I asked.

"They are a civilisation with an origin similar to your human civilisation on earth, but then they interrupted their evolutionary path. Violently and irresponsibly. Although in part this was due to an unfortunate chance that led to a nuclear war among them."

Silence fell as those around us started listening to the negotiations, so Honaja and I interrupted our discussion.

They began with mutual accusations about the breaching of the agreed rules both with regard to the triggering of military conflicts and in general, but after a brief exchange of words they finally agreed on the topics to which priority would be given and decided the agenda of the negotiations.

Leaning towards Honaja I whispered: "Aren't they going to discuss those energy fields of yours?"

Honaja smiled and nodded: "They will, yes. After all, that is why we are here."

What she meant, of course, was that this was merely a prelude, an introductory warming-up. The most important issue would be on the agenda later. Now they would try and saddle us with the responsibility for the first conflicts, even though they started them, there was no question of it. I didn't know how they could deny it. Probably by feigning ignorance and by introducing uncertainty in other areas, whose connection with the initial clashes they would then attempt to demonstrate. Something along those lines. This was similar to the behaviour of the different parties in a dispute on Earth, especially before military conflicts but also after them, when major or minor disputes were involved. But the main dispute between the Acutins and the Sensins

nevertheless probably derived from the partly destroyed balance of power, I assumed. I stopped to consider the likelihood of this explanation. Another perfectly possible reason for the dispute lay in the more efficient management of energy resources by one of the sides. Probably the Sensins. Yes, the balance had begun to be destroyed. But the other differences between these two civilisations appeared to be considerable, and seemed to be increasing. Even if those words had been said merely with the intention of insulting, and without a serious foundation, something had to be behind them, I thought, although the words themselves may not have had much cogency. The responses of the two sides, particularly the emotional responses, had been a little too strong. They had really gone for each other. I cast my eyes over the nearby faces. Yes, that was it. They were all waiting tensely for the outcome of the negotiations.

“Hey!” An Acutin about two metres away greeted me with a smile. A familiar face. Like the Acutin next to him. These were the two Acutins from the last encounter, the ones Honaja had had her altercation with, and given their attitude then it was unlikely that she would welcome their company now. Yes, it would be better to avoid associating with them. For Honaja’s sake. Her embarrassment had been unpleasant to watch, although she had stood up for herself with great self-assurance, and had appeared pretty convincing, at least to me. What they had said then corresponded quite closely to these last words of the Acutins’ negotiating group, to whose lies and impudence Honaja had reacted so emotionally.

The two Acutins moved a step nearer, close enough for the conversation that I had intended to avoid. Honaja had noticed them too, and I could see the displeasure on her face, although she greeted them politely. The tension grew immediately. Why did we have to meet here all of a sudden? Was it a coincidence? If it was really merely a coincidence...

“My friend Orhan and I were admiring your friend. She is

very beautiful,” said the nearer Acutin. There was something slightly provocative about his manner.

“Of course,” replied his neighbour, although this rather cynical compliment had been addressed to me. “The Sensins follow events on Earth very closely, especially the design achievements of the Earthmen, which they copy very successfully.”

Honaja remained silent. I glanced at her. I felt obliged to intervene in her defence, and that was also what I wanted to do, but I couldn’t find the right words. I knew nothing about the background to their insinuations but I had a vague sensation that there was something important here. Honaja’s reserve, and mine, seemed to amuse the two Acutins. At least that is how they responded. I had the impression that this sort of conversation came naturally to them.

“It is interesting how the Sensins have mixed industrial design with the exterior of living bodies.” Orhan addressed his comrade as though they were now talking among themselves, but his voice was loud enough to be heard by everyone around us. After listening to him with an exaggerated seriousness, the other Acutin took his cue:

“Yes, that is the interesting thing,” he replied. “Things have their own form, which in the end is what it is. And this is the most important thing. If the form of Earthwomen is written in the genetic code, and the Sensins achieve the same appearance through design, then in the end there is no longer any difference, is there?”

The Acutin laughed cynically. Or even maliciously. As I looked at Honaja to see her reaction, the word “malicious” seemed by far the most appropriate. This was a deliberate repetition of the insult.

“Their cynicism is really irritating,” I whispered to Honaja. “They seem to be rather malicious by nature.”

“Yes, that’s right. They are Acutins,” she replied, containing her anger. “And this is nothing special for them. This is simply what they are like.”

My understanding look – in her anger she seemed particularly beautiful to me – had extinguished her anger. Her eyes told me this. The Acutins clearly wanted to provoke her with their insults. They were simply being malicious.

“You surprise me, did you know that?” said Honaja, half turning towards the Acutins.

The Acutin closer to us immediately responded cheerfully: “We’ve noticed.” His comrade smirked.

“I had long been convinced that that nuclear war of yours had only damaged your genes in the sphere of the emotions. But now it is becoming evident that the damage extends to other areas too. Including form. It is hard for you to recognise this. But it doesn’t matter.” Honaja turned towards me: “They destroyed their planet with nuclear bombs. Everything was destroyed. Every living creature perished and all life on their planet was exterminated. And despite everything, the few Acutins who survived, these few mental cripples, remained convinced of their own superiority. This a special type of deformation. Mental of course. On the one hand it limits an individual, while on the other it gives him a sense of superiority. It’s very interesting. In this sense you are certainly an evolutionary achievement. There’s no doubt of that, is there?”

Now it was the turn of the Acutins to get angry. Their eyes flashed.

“Such obvious lies cannot pass unchallenged,” said an Acutin of more pacific appearance from the circle of listeners around us.

“That simply isn’t true!”

“Yes it is!” retorted Honaja. “During your quarrels you triggered a nuclear war. Is that true?”

“Yes, that is true. And the consequences were terrible. But what you have hinted at is not correct.”

“Only a small number of your entire population survived. All the others died,” continued Honaja.

“There were no genetic changes as a result of radioactive

radiation, which is what you are trying to imply,” answered the Acutin coldly.

“In the final consequences there were. We have proved this to you. And these genetic changes are now proving to be fatal.”

“Madam, that is a lie! I do not approve of what these two gentlemen are saying” – the Acutin indicated his comrades – “since it is not correct. But that does not give you the right to feign ignorance. First and foremost, the genetic changes were very small. And they did not occur as the result of radioactive radiation during the nuclear war. And then on top of that, we remedied all deficiencies long ago.”

“But that is precisely the point: you didn’t. Or you didn’t do it properly, and that is why we are where we are now – on the brink of war,” continued Honaja with increasing firmness, to the approving nods of the other Sensins.

“What is this beautifully designed puppet talking about?” interrupted one of the pair of Acutins. “I cannot believe it! We are being accused of genetic deficiencies by someone who doesn’t even have any genes!”

“Silence please!” said a loud voice amplified through the wall. I looked around the hall. Quite a number of lively discussions had started up. Judging from the animation of the participants, they were probably similar to our quarrel. Tensions were clearly increasing on both sides. I brushed aside my doubts on the matter. The imbalance of power resulting from the blocked access to the energy fields still seemed to be the main cause. If the Acutins were to discover their current advantage, they could take the opportunity to defeat the Sensins and launch an attack. But they hadn’t done so yet, at least not with all their forces. Their tactic was more about feeling their way, provoking the Sensins with local attacks and then – negotiations. They were still not fully convinced of the situation regarding the Sensins’ energy fields. That was probably a good thing. While I hoped that the Acutins really didn’t know the whole background, I at least was afraid that they would discover the Sensins’ difficul-

ties in re-establishing control over the largest energy field complex. And behind it there had to be some difference between them. Hmm. A difference, yes. Perhaps it wasn't such a small difference after all. Certain signs suggested other dissensions that were not exactly insignificant. With a civilisation at this level I would have expected tolerance of differences, unless... I paused. Nothing I could think of seemed to fit the case. Was there a difference that would be unacceptable even to beings at this level of civilisation? This was exactly what it seemed like at certain moments. But if that were true, how is it that they have tolerated each other until now? Was it only because of the balance of power? That was possible. Hmm... They certainly have no reservations about insulting each other. That reference to the damage that is supposed to have been caused by a nuclear war, that was very cruel. Brain damage, character defects, and these beings are then supposed to gain the ascendancy at such a high level of civilisation, in the immediate vicinity of the Earth, which they can visit whenever they feel like it. That cannot be good for the people of the Earth. The supremacy of the Acutins would not be good for Honaja either.

I smiled. It was nice that we were on the same side. How angry those arrogant Acutins had made her! Cynicism was evidently an innate characteristic of the Acutins. Even I had been a little irritated by their manner, which was arrogant however you looked at it. There was too much malice in it, particularly in contrast to the almost excessive tolerance and conciliatoriness of the Sensins. How could they behave with such impudence at their level of civilisation? Well perhaps they were not all like that. The Acutin who had intervened in the last discussion was quite different, although he still stuck to the Acutins' positions. Or starting-points, perhaps I should say. Even he didn't show much friendship towards the Sensins. But at least he was prepared to discuss things in a more approachable manner, although it was clear from his words, and even more so from his way of talking, that he considered the difference between

Sensins and Acutins to be a serious matter, something which at this moment pointed to a certain ambiguity where the Sensins were concerned. Yes, there was something mysterious about them too. That reference to robots may have been just an insult, but perhaps it was partly acceptable, at least in so far as it referred to a specific characteristic of the Sensins. Perhaps in their characters. But to accuse Honaja of coldness or emotionlessness was nonsense. That could not be true in this sense. But those two Acutins had certainly been trying to suggest something like that. And not even that conciliatory Acutin had said anything more specific on that topic, probably because he had had to rebut Honaja's accusations. It was a pity that he, at least, had not said anything more about the Sensins. His explanation would have made it easier to form a clearer picture. Yes, I really needed a clearer picture, I thought. About both sides. I needed to investigate the whole business.

Whatever had already been said, and although it was too little to form a clear picture, I had at least been given a starting-point for better understanding. The ordinary abilities of Earthmen were good enough (or probably were) to evaluate whatever it was that the Acutins and Sensins were accusing each other of at their higher level of civilisation. Madness or (why not?) robotic behaviour, even if it was only a matter of a lack of sensibility or confusion in their emotional responses, whatever it was caused by - this was something I could detect. At least that. It was important for me to finally find out what I needed to be attentive to. I decided to intervene myself from time to time. Yes: all I really needed was a little conversation. With both sides. Ideally in their company, in everyday life. That would be good. Unfortunately that possibility was unlikely here, in the middle of negotiations and surrounded by military formations, with emotions pushed to one side. And if I remembered the reactions of the Sensins and all those moments when their life was hanging by a thread...

Yes... What was the truth for them? I found myself wondering whether their life really had been hanging by a thread. As it had for me? For a moment or two they had seemed quite unaffected, even in some extremely dangerous situations, and that in itself was quite strange. It was true that according to their subsequent explanations the situation had not been as dangerous as it appeared, because their materials were capable of withstanding far greater impacts than an Earthman might expect. Then they were in the middle of battles for a while, and now they are in the middle of negotiations.

I looked at the faces around me, my eyes lingering on one, then another, then a third. Most of them were facing the negotiating table: the negotiators had just agreed the agenda, although even this had required a considerable amount of noisy discussion. The Acutins insisted on giving priority to a discussion of the violation of the laws prohibiting interference on the part of highly developed civilisations in the evolution of sentient beings at a lower stage of development. The leader of the Sensins suggested that this was rather cynical given that they were on the brink of war. The fighting had already involved a wide area from sector ER22 to sector ER742.

“In any case,” added the Sensin, “we do not interfere in the evolutionary development of any civilisation, including the human civilisation on Earth.”

“That simply isn’t true,” cried an Acutin with heavy eyebrows and a gaunt face, with a slightly jutting chin. “Your visits to Earth have already become habitual. You go down to Earth and carry off their people. We cannot even verify all your doings down there, and now you assure us that you are not interfering in the evolutionary development of the Earthmen...”

“Our visits to Earth are few and far between and there is nothing ill-intentioned about them. There is nothing controversial about this from our point of view. We certainly do not do anything that could cause confusion or fear among the Earthmen. On the other hand your descents to Earth are more frequent

than ours: we know this because we too have our own surveillance teams.”

The Acutin merely smiled and shook his head: “What nonsense! What about purgatory? You have built your own purgatory and you plan to convince the Earthmen that your civilisation is part of it, but this is only one step from occupying the Earth on the pretext of your coexistence with the biblical purgatory.”

“Such talk is inadmissible!” objected a Sensin to the left of the main negotiator with slightly lighter wheat-coloured hair and slightly darker moustache and beard.

“Purgatory is part of our civilisation. You know this perfectly well. You also know the position it occupies in our development to date. Your denials, and your accusations of pretence, deceit and other dishonest conduct are insulting. I would therefore ask you to be respectful of the differences that separate us, since although they are considerable there is no need for us to go to war over them.”

“Very well. You have built what you have built. We too could build something of the kind without difficulty. But why do you call it purgatory? At least give it some other name!”

“But it is purgatory!”

A loud murmuring sprang up around the hall. Everyone was speaking at once. Most of the Acutins were shaking their heads as if to say that this wasn't true. The Sensins talked about their tradition, their development and the fact that purgatory was part of their culture. Above all – and they were especially vociferous on this point – they pointed out that the Acutins could also assume this element of their culture, that this would be the best thing for them, rather than rejecting an achievement of highly developed civilisations without verifying it first.

Everything that was being said was causing me such strong misgivings about the situation that I couldn't help murmuring out loud: “But this really is too much!” I started as I noticed the reactions on faces around me. Quite a number of them were staring at me.

“They are bluffing!” suggested someone to the side of me. I turned to see the smiling face of the nearer of those two cynical Acutins. It was Orhan’s friend. He was responding to the reflection that I had involuntarily expressed out loud. “These Sensins are bluffing. Surely you had guessed that?” he said mischievously.

I turned away: it would be hard to accept any explanation from these two cynical Acutins as well-intentioned. I was also disturbed by the slightly patronising tone that had taken the place of their usual cynicism. Too much so for me to seize the opportunity that had been offered to me and ask them straight out for an explanation of this unusual concept of “purgatory”. Although of course I needed quite a lot of explanations. My original plan had been to get an explanation of the nuclear war from one side and an explanation of the insults from the other side, and then try and establish the truth by means of surreptitious observation, but now I had to modify this plan by going into this question of purgatory being one of their peculiarities, as the Sensins put it, although this did not correspond at all to the Acutin’s replies on the subject, which seemed to be trying to expose the Sensins as deceivers or something. Another question was how they had managed to place their attitude towards Earthmen right at the start of negotiations. At least as far as I could tell, this was a minor problem in view of the size of these two enormous civilisations – enormous in terrestrial terms – with their colossal military and energy potentials a billion times greater than those of the Earth. And now their attitude towards Earthmen was in first place. The Acutins had insisted on it. The Sensins, meanwhile, had cited the peculiarities of their own civilisation when purgatory was mentioned. What I was supposed to think about all of this was another question again. I shook my head at my inability to understand.

I was unable to create any real picture of what was going on from all that I knew. I hadn’t noticed anything that could genuinely have caused differences that were so serious as to lead

to a threat of war. And this purgatory. What did they actually mean by that? Was it the same thing that Mike had mentioned that time after the dance – something about that Sensin's resemblance to his father? The same gestures, the same smile, the same reactions. I had noticed a similarity too, or rather when he smiled I too had got the impression that his father was nearby. Externally he looked different – or perhaps not. That Sensin was quite a lot younger than Mike's father. On the other hand I couldn't say what his father looked like without a bald patch, white hair, and a full beard. Hmm. Purgatory? In what sense? As an expiation of sins before entering heaven? Probably not, at least not in this simple sense, because that would imply some sort of judgement process, and the Sensins did not appear to have any tendency in that direction. Meanwhile the Acutins apparently found the whole subject unacceptable. Why? Or rather: what was it that they found unacceptable? Perhaps purgatory merely meant some place, the name for something... But what could this mean for Earthmen? Or rather: what could it mean in general? A connection would therefore seem to have been already established. Damn it! Could someone exploit Earthmen in this sense? Were they already exploiting us? But how? Their entrances to the energy fields suggest a complication, and also these codings and security barriers based on verbal and emotional responses at some insignificant kids' party on Earth. In other words there is some connection in the background. That's clear. If there wasn't, I wouldn't be here either. The mere fact of my presence in all of this business indicates a connection or link or whatever I should call this relationship between Sensins and Earthmen. On the other hand some sort of relations have apparently already been established between Acutins and Earthmen too, since the Acutins also visit the Earth, although, as that Acutin said, without interfering in terrestrial evolution. It was probably more in the role of observers then, which apparently meant a more correct attitude, although they seem considerably more cynical than

the Sensins, who – and at least as far as Honaja was concerned I couldn't be mistaken – were incomparably more sensitive.

Honaja? Purgatory? The Acutins had tried to provoke her with their “beautifully designed,” presumably an allusion to “designing” robots. Yes, hmm, these Acutins insult them by calling them robots... Why robots? Because of a lack of sensitiveness? There was nothing metallic, nothing robotic about Honaja. She was far from being emotionless. Quite the opposite. There was so much life and human warmth in her, and so much joy and happiness, and also sorrow, mixed with a kind of fear, a kind of expectation... I couldn't take these insults of the Acutins seriously. At the negotiating table, during the discussion of the attitude towards less developed civilisations, the Acutins, unlike the Sensins, had constantly mentioned Earthmen and human civilisation. The Sensins on the other hand had merely talked about less developed civilisations in general, and had only mentioned terrestrial civilisation when explaining how a deeply respectful relationship had been established between them and us Earthmen; this accorded with my experience or rather with my feelings regarding the Sensins' attitude towards me, and thus probably towards Earthmen in general. And when this constant working of the Earthmen issue into the negotiations had become more and more like an academic discussion – and it was already difficult to understand why they were devoting so much time to insignificant little Earth, insignificant at least in comparison to the civilisations of the Sensins and the Acutins – the Acutin in the centre of the negotiating group interrupted the discussion with a request for an immediate suspension of all contacts with less developed civilisations. This suspension was to last until a joint agreement was reached on ending the state of emergency, after which they would re-establish a balance under increased supervision on the basis of mutual respect and a recognition of the right to evolutionary development.

This was followed by a short break which the Sensins requested

in order to discuss the acceptability of the proposal, as they put it. After they had returned to the negotiating table, the leader of the negotiating group accepted the proposal and said:

“I hope that we can now focus on the issue of free passages, which, as we all know, thanks to the barriers that have been erected in the asteroid belt and also in other parts of the galaxy, have been closed or rendered more difficult.”

Now it was the turn of the Acutins to request a break for consultation. I had the impression that they were surprised that the Sensins had agreed so rapidly to their proposal. I could sense something like alarm in their ranks. All the Acutins around me were visibly agitated. “They’ve got what they needed,” I overheard one Acutin comment to another, and immediately afterwards, the reply “They won’t get away with it just like that... . . We mustn’t let them.” All the Acutins were talking loudly. Evidently those on the commission had already known something, but probably not the details, since otherwise they would have concentrated even more on me and not on the Earthmen as a whole.

“Peter,” whispered Honaja, gesturing at me to move closer to her. Her face showed me that she wanted to talk confidentially to me, as she stole a glance at the two Acutins who were talking among themselves and looking at her increasingly keenly. I bent close to Honaja’s mouth so that I felt her warm breath as she said: “Peter, the Acutins have linked our more frequent flights to Earth in the recent period with their conjectures about our possible difficulties in managing the energy fields. In view of their sudden excitement when we agreed to interrupt connections with Earth, we can already form a good idea of what they have managed to find out about our problems. Their findings apparently told them that a constant flow of information from Earth was vital to us, although they do not know why. That is also why they have closed all routes through the asteroid belts. Now they have realised that this flow of information is no longer so

vital to us and – something that could be dangerous for us – they believe that the purpose of our mission was to transfer the last of this information, which they now believe, in view of our agreement to halt traffic to Earth, should be sufficient for our needs, for some time at least. They are still believe that their assumptions about our urgent need for information from Earth are correct. But now they are looking at this as something that has already been done, despite all their forecasts and blockades. They have established that the information that our present mission is supposed to be bringing is effectively the only information we still need. They don't know what kind of information this is supposed to be, but their teams of analysts have already begun studying everything connected with our mission and our flight. It is possible that they will even discover the actual reason for it. Until then, however, they will do everything in their power to halt the transfer of this last part of the information. They will attack our mission and probably you in particular. You mustn't give in to them. We will be with you. I will be there too. We have to get out of this place, although they will probably not want to let you go. Do not oppose them. Whatever they say, listen to them, agree with them and accept what they tell you, but point out the impossibility of making an immediate judgement, which means that you are not able to reach a final conclusion – which will probably be true. In the meantime, we have made all the preparations to fully acquaint you with our civilisation. This time, when we have told you everything, you will finally understand the essence of our civilisation, which is the complete opposite of what the Acutins are accusing us of when they talk about robots. It is actually the other way round. Owing to their genetic deformations they have become incomparably more robotic than us. They are metal cynics without feelings.”

I wanted to look over at the Acutins, but then I noticed them right next to me. They must have approached us during

Honaja's last words, so silently that I started when I suddenly noticed them by my side. Their countenances were serious, with no cynical smiles. They looked at me without a trace of any superiority.

"Everything suggests that your journeys are of considerable importance," began Orhan. "Not only for the Sensins, but also for us, and for the Earthmen in particular. We are fighting for evolution. For the normal progress of evolution, do you understand?" Orhan paused for a few moments to allow this to sink in. "We are a highly developed civilisation, as you already know. The Sensins are also at the same technological level. But I must warn you, they are only at the same technological level. Not at the same level of civilisation, because they are not living beings..."

"And you are?" shouted Honaja. "You, emotionless cynics!"

"I only ask your attention for a few moments," interrupted Orhan, with the evident intention of diverting my attention from Honaja, whom he was already pushing aside as he moved closer to me. But our conversation had already attracted the attention of both Acutins and Sensins. They were all following it, I saw, in the same moment that I saw Orhan pushing Honaja away, for which there appeared to be no good reason at that moment, since there was no need to be so close to me: there was more than enough space for a normal conversation. Furthermore recent events had brought me so close to Honaja that she awakened my protective instincts, at least in situations that were unpleasant for her. I raised my hands and slowly lowered them to indicate my desire to calm things down. Orhan accepted this with a nod of his head, but he immediately went on:

"Evolution continues forward even with us. And we Acutins, with a civilisation that has grown through the same evolution that you Earthmen are undergoing now, are fighting of for the existence of our own evolutionary path. Of the kind that will one day await you Earthmen too. But the Sensins wish to inter-

rupt this evolutionary path of yours and impose their own on you, based merely on the partial information packets of a civilisation that, if it has not already been completely destroyed, is at least partially destroyed. Their genes have been destroyed, although what they have are not actually genes but merely computer programs that were used by that destroyed civilisation.”

“That isn’t true!” snapped Honaja. “We do not derive from any decayed civilisation! What shamelessness! Do you even know what you are saying? You are only now arriving at the level of partial understanding of highly developed civilisations, the level that we are now at, and your problem is above all your weak ability to comprehend these facts. Weak because of your cynicism and arrogance. If the Earthmen were to see how you look down on them, they would lose even the smallest desire to cooperate with you. Not only that, your arrogance would make them realise how unimportant and superfluous they are for you, and that you see in them merely the unnecessary repetition of a path you have already trodden. If it wasn’t for us, you would have destroyed them long ago.”

“That is not true!” seethed Orhan. “We do not destroy less developed civilisations! The reason that we do not approach them more closely lies in our conscious decision not to interfere in the evolution of new civilisations. Including human civilisation.”

“Yes, you have labelled them as a slightly more developed animal species, that is something we have been able to establish countless times already,” replied Honaja angrily.

“That is not true! Our attitude to them is far from being either disdainful or belittling. We respect their evolutionary path. Much about them reminds us of the childhood of our own civilisation. It is true that some of their habits and reactions seem amusing to some of our individuals, but to conclude from this that we have an arrogant and contemptuous attitude towards Earthmen is going too far. It simply isn’t fair.”

But the Sensin's only reactions to Orhan's words were jeers and a general shaking of heads.

"Always and everywhere you have acted the same way," said a Sensin standing two or three paces to my right. "You attack and destroy everything that clashes with your interests. And several factors indicate a change in your interests with regard to the planet Earth. You have become fond of this planet. A planet without an unnecessary human civilisation would be even more to your taste."

"That is a wicked thing to say," shouted an Acutin on his left. He was about to go on when a loud shouting suddenly broke out in the middle of the hall, over by the negotiating table. There seemed to be some sort of disturbance, with people running in every direction. One of the running Acutins stopped next to Orhan. The other Acutins in the vicinity moved towards him too and there was a hurried whispered conversation. It had to be something very exciting. The Acutins first dispersed into separate groups, and then individuals began jumping up and down and waving clenched fists. Their discussions and various interpretations were becoming increasingly noisy, and then we heard a shout:

"The Sensins cannot reach their energy fields!"

"What?" shouted some of the Acutins who had hitherto remained calm. "What has happened?"

"The latest analyses of the situation have confirmed our assumption that the entrance to the Sensins' largest energy fields is blocked. This is now a fact. All of their increased traffic to and from Earth was a consequence of this blockage."

Orhan was all smiles. He was positively glowing with happiness. Then he started waving his arms. Yes, this was a success for them. This was the news they had been waiting for. This in particular.

"Their key has stuck in the lock!" he shouted facetiously.

"Participants in the negotiations: your attention please!" came the voice of the neutral computerised host of the negotiations.

“We are interrupting the negotiations until further notice owing to the altered conditions.”

“Quickly!” I heard Honaja’s voice. “This means war. The Acutins will attack. Everything is ready. They were only waiting for confirmation from their analysis centre. According to their calculations their current advantage will enable them victory. They are going to start the war. If they haven’t already started it.”

“And us?” I looked at her anxiously.

“We will continue our mission to the end. We Sensins are ready too.” Honaja smiled at me despite the pallor of her face. “Trust us! Believe me! Let’s go!”

Outside the hall, on a great platform beneath a hundred-metre-high arch, which together with the surrounding structures created the impression of a great city square, a traffic jam had formed, and there was a dense throng of flying craft. They were landing and taking off, singly or in swarms of varying size. They stopped by the running Sensins and Acutins and took off again as soon as they had climbed aboard. Everything was happening very quickly. I was walking rapidly in a small group of Sensins, most of them from our crew, with Honaja by my side. “There!” She was pointing towards a free section of the platform. We immediately turned in that direction, walking faster and eventually breaking into a run, like everyone around us. Then I caught sight of several hundred craft taking off in formation. I watched them rise up into the air and saw how they turned sharply and headed towards the exit.

“Look!” I called to Honaja, who was already pointing at the craft arriving behind them. “Those are ours!”

We immediately stopped running. The craft reached us in a moment and screeched to a halt like sports cars on Earth. The sides nearest to us opened to enable us to jump in. The whole operation was over in a matter of moments, and like the previous wave we were now flying in a swarm consisting of some

hundreds of craft. We turned steeply towards the exit and set off towards our mothership from the ship-carrier class.

Brief messages in our holo-display gave us the most urgent information during the flight. Everything was in turmoil. Not only us. At least judging from the bulletins on the holo-display, which showed the return of our negotiating team to the CONQUEROR 949 and then the empty "Peace Square", which only moments ago had been full of bustling activity, in front of the great hall with the negotiating table, at which no-one was any longer sitting. Then the holo-display showed a blinding explosion in that sector with a brief message saying that this peace station had been blown up. I looked at Honaja: "Did the Acutins blow it up?"

"Yes... And that means war. The war has started..."

"War... It's war.." repeated the other Sensins, one after the other.

"All forces from both sides will now engage." Honaja gripped my arm more tightly, and I squeezed her wrist in reply. Nobody spoke, but then at last the silence was broken by a sudden cry: "Look! Our fleets are coming!"

A magnificent scene revealed itself to us through the great window of the command deck. Enormous spaceships were slowly emerging from the grey clouds piled up on our left. Along the whole belt, as far as the eye could see, their front sections were already out of the clouds, clearly visible, and behind them we could see more and more of their hulls. There was a moment of silence filled with mute enthusiasm. We knew that the other side would also have such fleets in readiness. But the scene was magnificent.

"Look at the holo-display!" someone shouted. We all turned. From the opposite side, right over by the asteroid belt, the Acutins' ships were heading in our direction. Once again the air was filled with shouts and conjectures about our position.

"They can still cut us off!" said a Sensin not far away on my

right. "We are in range of their cannon. They are going to attack us!"

"No they're not," came a more resolute voice from somewhere behind me. Silence fell once again. Now we were all watching a simulation of the probable outcome of events. Everything indicated that we would be able to get away in time.

"We will evade them," said a Sensin by the holo-display.

"But then what? They will attack our ship-carrier and even before we manage to land we will find ourselves in the middle of a battle."

"We have to embark on the opposite side to the attack," said the Sensin by the holo-display, "or they will shoot us down. The best thing will be to head for the rear doors."

This is in fact what we did. Events soon confirmed our predictions. Energy bolts began to strike the front sections of our great ship-carrier as soon as we had landed in our little STORMBIRD, with such force that the floor beneath our feet shook several times in succession. The question that was now raised was whether it made sense to flee into the interior of the ship-carrier, away from our STORMBIRD, given that in the case of the ship-carrier breaking down into its component parts we would have to return to the STORMBIRD which, though smaller, was fast and agile. But the landing area and hangars were immediately below the outer part of the ship-carrier, and therefore vulnerable in the case of a succession of hits by energy bombs in that section. The interior was in any case better protected because of the enormous dimensions of the ship-carrier.

Some members of the crew expressed their misgivings, while others insisted that despite everything we should stay aboard the STORMBIRD, ready to take off immediately and abandon the ship-carrier. In the end the recommendation of headquarters prevailed. Apparently this was the better option for us. But even the choice of words in the communication from headquarters was different from usual. Our protection was

apparently one of their most important concerns. As though they were well aware of the importance of our mission, they assured us that they would do everything necessary for us. And yet the ship-carrier did not immediately retreat into the background and hide in the clouds behind the other fleet that was on its way. It continued to brave the attack without retreating. There had to be some other factor involved. But what?

As soon as we had reached the quarters assigned to us, we immediately gathered round the large holo-display, which showed a wide area of space around us with all the asteroid belts and the distribution of our fleets and those of the Acutins. Bombardments were already taking place throughout the border areas far into space, and within the whole of the asteroid belt. But one area nevertheless stood out in terms of both the density of the bombardment and the violence of the explosions. This was the area around that section of the asteroid belt where there was the greatest concentration of Sensins. A kind of pincer attack appeared to be taking place against the security shields fortified by bunkers that completely surrounded the whole of that sector, giving the impression of a fortress protected on all sides. Yes, this was where the Acutins were directing their most powerful ship-carriers, or even the majority of them.

“Why do they want this part of the asteroid belt?” I asked after a long, close observation. The two Sensins next to me looked at each other but they didn’t reply. Not immediately, at least. But then, when the sense of my question became increasingly apparent, the Sensin closer to me started talking while staring thoughtfully at the holo-display: “Incidents like this have been taking place in rapid succession recently. It is difficult to predict the outcome of engagements in individual areas.”

I nodded. That was true. But... I had actually asked something else, and this wasn’t an answer to my question.

The increasingly powerful bombardment directed at our ship-carrier, despite the defensive fire from all our armament,

had already weakened or even pierced the armoured shields of our hull. Then all of a sudden the bombardment stopped. This seemed very strange. At least to me. Then, through the window, I caught sight of the movement of enormous spaceships immediately above us and further ahead. The ships from the clouds had overtaken us and were drawing the enemy's fire. The enemy's entire firepower was now directed at them. But this did not stop them. There were too many of them. Almost the whole fleet, or at least the large part of it from the dense dark clouds, must have been taking part in the attack. They were heading straight for the worst of the firing. Yes, they were breaking through towards the encircled section of the asteroid belt. They were coming to help. They broke through the surrounding ring, with the result that the Acutins were forced to retreat along the whole line of the attacking Sensin fleet. This was a rapid and unexpected transformation of the balance of forces on the battlefield; now the Sensins had taken the initiative along the whole line.

"It's going to work!" shouted a Sensin by the holo-display, which everyone was now staring at. But the view in the display was by no means encouraging. I observed the reactions of the Sensins: they were merely smiling and nodding in satisfaction.

"Why such satisfaction?" I wondered, since as well as the breakthrough by our fleet, the display showed the approach of an equally large Acutin fleet. Although it was slightly further away, an engagement seemed inevitable. At least that's how it seemed to me. I pointed at the enemy ships.

"Before we break their encircling rings, they will be here," I said to Benesens. "Isn't this rejoicing a little premature?" I asked, referring to the reactions of the other Sensins.

Benesens looked at me with a gleam in his eyes, and then said in a serious voice: "Look, we know how you Earthmen think. And it isn't difficult for us to explain the peculiarities of our life. We also have sufficient experience of Earthmen. Experiences of all kinds. But experience teaches us that Earthmen must first

understand everything. When, in the past, we allowed some of your fellow Earthmen to live among us and adapt to our way of life, they very quickly accepted our values too. Our values became very agreeable to them. They were enthusiastic. It was not necessary to oblige them to do anything. They accepted everything themselves. And after that none of them ever complained about anything. But when we merely described our civilisation to some individual Earthmen, in words, in conversation, they reacted very cautiously. Here..." Benesens pointed towards the calm section of the asteroid belt around which the fiercest battles were raging: "Here is where we keep what we call purgatory."

"Purgatory?" I repeated the Sensin's last word.

"Yes, this peculiarity of our civilisation. And as far as I know, we have never discussed it with Earthmen. And so the reaction of Earthmen to such activity on the part of our civilisation is still something of an unknown."

I didn't know what I was supposed to think about all of this. I merely repeated part of his words: "Such activity..." Then, falteringly, I added: "You haven't talked about this with any Earthman..." I frowned and looked closely at Benesens. "What did you talk about with them? I mean...?"

The Sensin had guessed my doubts. "Oh, we showed them many things. We accepted them among us. They lived among us, we made their acquaintance. Many Earthmen found good friends among us. We discussed both our common inclinations and our possible differences."

"What do you mean 'possible differences'? I have been among you for quite some time but I still have the feeling that I don't know you very well. Well, I sometimes have that feeling."

We were interrupted by an announcement instructing the crew to prepare to receive cargo from the asteroid belt: "Warning for rescue teams. Some asteroids from the purgatory sector have been damaged."

I turned to Benesens: "What does this mean?"

“I don’t know.” Benesens looked at me. “You already have a job to do. A very important job to do. So stay here! The rescue teams will deal with this. Part of our high technology has probably been damaged during the Acutins’ bombardment. I can hardly imagine the sort of complications can arise during the reception and reassembly of such a complex system as purgatory.”

In the holo-display we could see the first clashes of our ship-carriers with the Acutin ships from the outer part of their encircling ring. The explosions of energy bombs with their blinding flashes at first covered merely the thinner outer part of the ring, but as the Sensin forces advanced the bombardment moved ever deeper and soon covered the whole hemisphere. Their ship-carriers were continuing their advance. That was clear. But just as the total destruction of the Acutins’ attacking ring seemed imminent, they managed to regroup their ships on the interior. This did not cause the slightest hesitation on the part of the Sensins’ ship-carriers. They immediately attacked them along the whole length of their line and with equally destructive force, shattering and destroying them bit by bit, so that the Acutins were forced to retreat from this inexorable attack. And yet the Sensins were still not able to achieve a panicked rout with the collapse of the orderly functioning of the Acutins’ forces. The Acutins defended themselves with all available firepower from all their groups of ships and quickly established another inner protective shell of fire, although it was not strong enough to halt the Sensins’ ship-carriers.

The enthusiasm around the holo-display began to wane as the new distribution of forces became apparent. As I looked away from the display in order to observe the reactions of the Sensins, I realised that their suddenly subdued expressions were a confirmation of my fears about the rapid arrival of the Acutin ship-carriers in this vast battlefield. As we could see, the Acutins had managed to gain enough time for their ship-carriers to reach us. And now an engagement would commence between

the two fleets before the Sensins had managed to transfer all that... I searched for a word to describe that thing that the Sensins called “purgatory”, something that was probably some kind of high technology... These two concepts – purgatory and high technology – simply didn’t go together. I had too little information about all of this, of course. But I could comprehend its importance for the Sensins: judging from the size of the forces sent to rescue us, it must have been something vital to them. But the Acutins were sending equally powerful forces, which probably indicated their commitment to capturing or destroying this thing. That was it. This thing. The word “thing” was perhaps the most suitable because of its indefiniteness. Since in any case it wasn’t nothing. Something definite had already been said. Something important, yes, although I was unable to formulate any clear picture on this basis. They were fighting over this thing, and in deadly earnest. But the ship-carrier that was carrying me and the whole crew of our mission had been kept in the rear. They had not sent it into the fray. They must be holding it for transport purposes. Was that it?

The holo-display had meanwhile begun to show the first long-range bombardments of the ship-carriers from both sides. I slowly scanned the whole of the display: the Sensins really had thrown the majority of their ship-carriers into battle. Some of them were heading towards the interior of this part of the asteroid belt. Yes, if they could make it... The ship-carriers were supposed to remove the whole of that “thing” from the thick of the fighting and transport it away. That is what they were going to do. At least that was the intention, but the Acutins had already guessed or predicted this and were now trying to prevent it. With all their forces. Whatever happened, nothing indicated a rapid end to this conflict.

Chapter XIII

Still half asleep, I turned over and slightly opened my eyes. Vivid hologram images of the battle of the ship-carriers flashed through my brain. I had followed the battle for a long time together with the Sensins. Terrible energies were released during the engagement. But the battle dragged on into long hours of indecisive positional warfare, until at last my eyelids began to droop. 'This is going to last a good while yet,' Benesens had said. 'And whatever happens, we're going to need our wits about us. We're going to have to act, Peter.' So I went off to get some sleep, as did many of the Sensins... Now I looked at my watch and realised with surprise that I had slept for eight whole hours. Why hadn't anyone woken me up? No need, I suppose. But a lot must have happened in that time. I got up and went over to the holo-display. I had to see what was happening.

Once again, most of our crew was gathered there.

‘How’s it looking?’ I asked after staring at the holo-display for a few moments.

‘Not too good,’ replied Benesens.

‘What’s up?’

‘Our ships are falling back.’

‘Oh no!’ I looked at the display again: the advance of the Acutin ship-carriers was clearly visible. Then I looked over towards the ships carrying our special cargo. The Acutins were already right up with them. At any moment they would be alongside. I pointed towards the section of the holo-display where these ship-carriers were. ‘Are they retreating?’

‘Yes, but they still managed to get all the cargo on board,’ he said, smiling slyly and flashing a glance at me.

So they had done it – or rather we had done it. Looking round, I could see the same mixture of anxiousness and satisfaction on the faces of the other Sensins.

I concentrated on the holo-display, to try and understand what was going to happen next. Our forces were drawing back. I could already see that. What this actually meant, though, was another matter. Surely not the outcome of the war?

‘They will soon be here.’ Benesens woke me from my musings. ‘Then we will fall back towards our energy fields, shielded by our ship-carriers.’ Benesens flashed another glance at me as he followed the images on the holo-display.

‘We still have that crossing to come, eh Peter?’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’ With all that was going on I had almost forgotten about the crossing, or rather about the closed doors into the energy fields. Then it dawned on me. Of course: the energy potentials stored there are incomparably greater than those here. Those of the Sensins, at least. We have to get there, yes, and then get in. That will do it. That will be our salvation. Hmm. I stared at the Sensin fleet. I couldn’t tell whether it was moving away because of the superior strength of the Acutins or if this was a planned withdrawal to the shell-like surfaces of the energy fields.

Then, following a rapid series of explosions along the entire length of its hull, the ship-carrier next to us began to disintegrate. We watched the whole thing through the viewing window. As we gazed at this scene, hardly breathing, explosions tore apart the remaining sections of the ship. Then the same thing happened to the Sensin ship-carrier right in front of us, and then to three more: one on our left and two from the spearhead of our fleet. This created a gap large enough for the Acutins to break through. Even before the Sensins had time to reposition their forces, the Acutins were hurtling towards the gap, and with a concentrated attack on the fleet's second line they destroyed the next six ship-carriers. This meant that our freighters now found themselves under attack: clearly they were the target of this breakthrough by the Acutins. The situation was becoming critical.

'They're going to catch them!' shouted a Sensin by the holo-display.

Despite desperate manoeuvring by the Sensin fleet to plug the gap, three Acutin ship-carriers had already caught up with the freighter convoy and were hitting it so hard with energy bolts that two of our freighters had split in two.

'We're closest to them'. This was the thought voiced by the Sensins around me, now staring through the window, now at the holo-display in order to get the fullest possible picture of the situation and the distribution of our forces in the engagement with the Acutin fleet. The damaged ships were within range. We could take on board their cargo and all their crew. They were Sensins: surely we couldn't abandon them to their fate? Indignant voices around me suggested that I wasn't the only one wondering what we were waiting for. A moment later, however, the holo-display showed that the disposition of the forces had changed. Now the Sensin fleet was attacking the flank of the Acutin breakthrough. Once again the sector was full of a large number of our ship-carriers escorted by smaller, nimbler ships armed with laser cannon and rocket-propelled

energy bombs. The Sensin counter-attack was even more violent than the recent breakthrough by the Acutins. The holo-display even showed the truncated spearhead of the Acutins' breakthrough forces. The Sensin ships scythed into the gap, right behind their leading ship-carriers.

'We'll soon finish them off,' said Benesens. 'We've surrounded them and they won't be able to get out.'

Then I felt our ship go into a steep turn, which immediately triggered an enthusiastic response from the Sensins. 'We're going after the cargo,' Benesens explained. And in fact we were heading at full speed for the damaged ships, from which large pieces of hull were already breaking off, together with sections of the storage bays and the recently loaded cargo. Important cargo that had already fallen out and was now floating in its asteroid-shaped containers.

Judging from the images of the battle on the holo-display, rescuing the cargo would be possible without much risk, since all the Acutin ship-carriers from the spearhead of the breakthrough were busy fighting for their own survival.

Now that we were heading for the damaged ships, individual groups of Sensins from our ship-carrier received precise orders to get to work. The entire rescue operation went ahead very quickly and smoothly. No-one offered us any resistance either during the flight or when we came alongside the damaged ships. We immediately began the transfer. Our little tugs attached themselves to the asteroid-shaped containers – a thousand times their size – and dragged them, with their mysterious cargo, towards our storage bays in closely grouped, rapidly moving columns. A distant observer of the hologram images of this rescue operation would get the impression that everything was being 'sucked up', as though by a giant vacuum cleaner. As though everything were flying of its own accord into our storage bays. It was already clear that the opera-

tion was going to succeed, and at last the signal came for the departure of our entire fleet from the area of the asteroid belt. Meanwhile, however, the Acutins had managed to reposition their forces, unite them with the forces from the spearhead of their original attack, which were still holding out despite serious losses, and establish a corridor to allow the ships that were waiting in the rear to fly unmolested through the resulting conical space of their breakthrough and head straight for our ship-carrier. Our initial retreat had now become a headlong flight, but it was clear that the weight of the cargo was slowing us down, despite our powerful thrusters. And there was no doubt that it was us they were heading for. Clearly the Sensins had understood this too, and with a rapid manoeuvre they positioned eleven ship-carriers on our flank as a protective escort that nothing could get past. So tight was the shield they created with their smaller ships that not even energy bolts could get through. But the forces of the Acutin ship-carriers, brought up from the rear and through the conical space they had occupied, suddenly attacked this protective escort with such force that after a powerful bombardment they broke through to our position, almost colliding with us. At least four Acutin ship-carriers had managed to break through and catch up with us. We immediately engaged them. The ship closest to us dived to help us, and others were on the way, but it was too late. Unable to take avoiding action, we collided with a ship-carrier the same size as us. A terrible breaking and grinding sound followed the collision. We all immediately put on our spacesuits - or rather jumped into them as quickly as we could - and moved away from the point of impact. But the enormous momentum of the two ship-carriers had a terrible effect. Hundreds of decks, thousands of compartments were crushed, all the way to the giant hangars and the storage bays with the just-loaded cargo. Bulkheads were ripped open. The Sensins fled, jumping into speeder-shuttles or engaging their photon-drive backpacks and disappearing along the long corridors used for internal

shipboard traffic. Along with the remaining Sensins from our group, I was heading for one of these corridors, now blocked by slow-moving traffic, when our ship-carrier suddenly split in two and, immediately afterwards, disintegrated into its various constituent sections. And before I realised what was happening, I was floating in space, like the other Sensins, surrounded by whirling sections of the two ship-carriers, both ours and the Acutins', which at that moment were incredibly dangerous because they kept colliding with each other and suddenly changing direction. But I didn't lose my head. I dodged them like the Sensins were doing and landed on a large section of ship so as to protect myself from the smaller pieces. I spotted a large section of hull hurtling towards me, but fortunately I was able to get out of the way in time. I sprang to the side, and back, and managed to dodge it. Looking round, I saw a torn-off section of bulkheads and compartments floating not far away. I headed towards it, grabbed its edge and tried to collect my strength. I also had to collect my thoughts. Everything was happening too quickly. 'My spacesuit!' The thought flashed through my mind like a warning. I checked my suit with my hands. Nothing seemed to be damaged. Then I remembered that if my spacesuit had ripped I would already be dead. I was slowly getting myself together, so once again I looked around, trying to get my bearings. The appearance of this broken-off section suggested some kind of compartments from the interior of the Acutins' ship, although of course the bulkheads were warped and buckled. In the lower part I could see a door. Closed. And undamaged. Could there be Acutins in there? This is going to be awkward, I realised, unable to arrive at any more precise conclusion. If they catch me, then... Once again I had reached an impasse. I mustn't go towards the door. After everything that had happened, that seemed obvious. I turned my attention back to the undamaged door. Judging from the size of this asteroid-like chunk of ship, it was probable that there were quite a few undamaged compartments behind the door.

I was sitting on a partially detached and twisted panel that had been the deck above the compartments with that door below them. I was opposite the door, on top of a compartment whose ceiling had been wrenched off and whose walls were buckled. I moved back slightly along the panel, out of view of the door. It was perfectly possible that they were watching me, since the collision had trapped both Sensins and a large number of Acutins in the compartments of their respective ships.

I still had the possibility of flying away using my photon-drive backpack, but where would I go? Ahead of me, further away, was a large section of ship-carrier complete with hangars and what looked like cargo strewn all around. I could make out some asteroid-shaped lumps. Then my attention was attracted by the opening of the door below me. Moving back, I hid myself behind a broken pillar and watched. The door swung open. A slight pause, and an Acutin appeared in the doorway. After a cautious look round, he stepped out, followed by other Acutins. They stood there taking in their surroundings. Then they pointed towards some distant pieces of the ship-carrier and began moving around in various directions, apparently looking for a rescue craft or a large section of their ship, just as I had done a little earlier. I counted six, seven, eight of them. Flying off to some other section of ship or to one of the asteroids that made up our just-loaded cargo now really did seem to be the most sensible course of action.

I retreated to the opposite side of the broken-off section of the Acutin ship-carrier, switched on my photon drive and set off in a curving flight towards the scattered cargo. To begin with I stayed on the side that was hidden from the Acutins, but once I judged myself to be far enough away I veered towards the asteroids floating by the storage bays, reaching them with no difficulty. From close up, the asteroids seemed a lot bigger. Their exterior looked like solid rock, like ordinary asteroids,

except that presumably that strange cargo of theirs was concealed inside them. Yes, the mysterious cargo. I discovered an entrance. For some reason this made me feel slightly uneasy, although I couldn't say that I was exactly afraid. It wasn't fear, no, but there was something creepy about it. Moderately creepy. It wasn't enough to prevent me from going on, at least not in the sense of danger, and yet whatever there was behind that door was causing me a certain amount of uneasiness. However the unchanged exterior of the asteroid revealed nothing but the barely visible outline of an entrance. I moved closer to what seemed to be a door handle. This, too, was merely an outline, but when I touched it the panel gave way to my gentle pressure and let me through the entrance into the interior. I looked around. There wasn't much to see. I was in a kind of entrance hall with several doors leading out of it. One of them, directly in front of me, was transparent and revealed a slightly larger illuminated space behind it. At least as far as I could make out by peering through it. I inspected the other doors carefully. There was no sign of movement anywhere. There's probably only inanimate cargo stored in here, I thought to myself. This could easily be a storeroom for material packed in containers. Or could it? Hmm... Had they kept all this space free for the transfer? It was impossible to tell. All I could see were doors and walls: no objects of any kind, nor anything to suggest that something had been removed.

I moved towards the transparent door, through which I could see a large illuminated chamber. In it were chairs and tables, while along the walls sculptures reached right up to the ceiling, which was transparent, with a bluish-black background. I was about to push open the door when a friendly voice invited me take off my spacesuit once atmospheric conditions had been re-established. The entrance door, a solid plate, closed behind me and I felt the external pressure increase. I looked around for something that could tell me what the pres-

sure was, but I couldn't see any gauges. Then I thought of my wrist display. It was sure to have a pressure gauge. The only problem was I didn't know how to work it. The controls consisted of various buttons set in a circle, together with some symbols that meant nothing at all to me. This thing wasn't going to be much help then. 'Pressure gauge,' I murmured to myself, and the device immediately lit up with a display of an elongated cylinder with a red column rapidly moving up towards a horizontal line. Then a message flashed up showing that the pressure had equalised, and the friendly voice from the transparent door announced that I could enter, welcomed me and wished me a pleasant stay, and warned me of possible difficulties as a result of the damage caused during the collision of the ship-carriers and the impact of large sections of ship with this asteroid, which seemed to have damaged communications and made it impossible to control the operation of certain systems. 'Our surveillance system is no longer able to monitor the situation in the individual compartments,' the message ended.

I entered the chamber and looked around. Once again there were several doors and several corridors, without any indications of where they led to. The sides were lined with sculptures and unintelligible Sensin hieroglyphics - although perhaps these were simply works of art too. After a brief examination I decided to go straight ahead. The corridor seemed to be quite long, and also curved, since I couldn't see its end. There were probably doors along the sides too, only it wasn't possible to distinguish them from the walls. I walked on, looking right and left, and I noticed some warped panels on my right. Yes, that was collision damage all right. I went on a little further. Now the damage was even more evident. I could even make out cracks. The further I went, the more damage was evident both to the walls and to the ceiling above me and the floor below me. Then I caught sight of a large crack on the left and, slightly

further on, a series of damaged walls: one, two, three and more. 'Wow,' I muttered. 'That was certainly a big collision...'

I looked into another crack. Nothing but darkness. The next ones didn't reveal much either: just rooms a little larger than living rooms on Earth, but everything was empty. I walked on, and then stopped mid-step. My attention had been caught by a strange glow, actually a faint light in a room that was in partial darkness. I looked once again. This was something quite different from the usually uniformly and brightly lit rooms of the Sensins. A face went past. A woman with long hair. Then she was gone. I stopped. The figure appeared again. Now I could see better. She was a Sensin, unusually dressed in a long white robe, with her hands folded on her breast; it was the first time I had seen a Sensin dressed like that, and in such a pose.

I held my breath. Just seven or eight metres away from me, with the ecstasy of a priestess carrying out a ritual, she was gazing in front of her and moving her lips as she murmured what could have been vows. Suddenly she stiffened. Standing still, she gazed at a transparent sphere lying on the floor a little over three metres away, covered with a cloth. The whole effect was one of solemnity. She stood motionless for quite a long time, and I was about to shift my weight from one leg to the other when the expression of her face kept me rooted to the spot. This ceremony must have been very important for this mysterious priestess, who stood up even straighter and lowered her arms to her sides. Then, with slow movements, she spread her arms as though in solemn expectation of an offering. A light began to shine in the transparent sphere, and the image of a bed on which an old Earthwoman was lying became increasingly visible. She was lying on her back with her eyes closed. Slowly she opened them, but only a little and just for a few moments. Then her eyelids drooped and her eyes

remained closed for a while. Then they opened again. She lay there motionless.

A transparent figure, outwardly identical to the woman lying on the bed, slowly rose up from her body and began to grow smaller, disappearing into the distance. It turned in a semi-circle and circled once again above the prone body, and again receded into the distance before finally turning upwards and flying towards the standing Sensin. The apparition approached her, growing as it did so. Now full-sized, it landed right next to her, as she awaited it with arms outstretched, smiling in unconcealed happiness at its arrival. The transparent figure of the Earthwoman stood there, hesitantly. There was no doubt that this was the elderly Earthwoman from the bed, or rather a transparent image of her, since her body was still lying immobile in the sphere. And this transparent image now looked at the Sensin, and now at the image of the woman lying motionlessly in that transparent sphere. Then the figure gave a half smile and without moving forwards or backwards took a deep breath, opened its mouth, slowly closed it again, placed its hand on its lips in apparent surprise at what it had just experienced, and in response to the Sensin's friendly smile began smiling more and more. Yes, the friendly smile of the Sensin also brought a smile to the apparition of the Earthwoman. The glances exchanged between the transparent figure and the Sensin grew longer and longer, and their smiles became increasingly relaxed. Then the Sensin opened her arms as though to offer a friendly embrace. It was clear that the transparent figure was not afraid. They stepped towards each other, and the transparent figure opened its arms too, in expectation of the embrace.

I held my breath. The Sensins had never talked about anything like this. What could this ceremony mean? I took a few deep breaths and exhaled slowly, my mouth half closed. Instead of

an embrace, all I could see now was the transparent figure sinking into the Sensin. Disappearing into her. Entirely, completely. Slowly and unhurriedly, the Earthwoman entered the Sensin. Both continued to smile, even during this strange fusion, until only the Sensin was visible. The transparent figure, after slowly sinking into her, had completely disappeared. She could no longer be seen. Yes: she had disappeared into the Sensin, who then straightened, folded her hands across her breast and, breathing calmly and deeply, stood with her face turned upwards. Then she repeated all the movements in the same sequence and stood there unseeing, as before, with her face upturned. Suddenly a shudder shook her whole body, and then another and another in successive waves, until finally a cry burst from her lips, and then another, now almost a moan, but with a kind of blissfulness in it. Calm returned to the Sensin. She hung her head, her body relaxed into a normal attitude, her arms dropped to her sides and, visibly weary, she walked towards a floating panel. The strange ritual seemed to have exhausted her. At least that's what it looked like. Or perhaps invisible forces were struggling inside her. The expression of her face certainly suggested a turmoil inside her that was so powerful that she had to hold tight to that panel to avoid falling. Her strength was failing her. As a result of that fusion, some process was taking place inside her that was making her knees give way. 'Yes, it could be a process of some kind,' I thought. The Sensin drew herself up again. She seemed to come to herself and appeared to be a little more collected. She looked at the transparent sphere. The image of the motionless Earthwoman was still there, just as before, except that now there were other people beside her: men, women and even children. Probably her relatives. Some were crying. Others were standing slightly further away.

The Sensin approached the transparent sphere, going right up to it. Then she stopped. Deeply moved, she passed her hand lightly over the sphere in a trancelike manner. Tears

began to course down her cheeks and with a sorrowful expression on her face she murmured some indistinct words. Could they be the names of those round the bed? That at least that was the impression I got. The whole scene was surprisingly moving, with the result that even I had to turn away and wipe my eyes, filled with tears for a few moments. But as I looked once again round the dark space that surrounded me, I spotted a male figure, leaning against the wall. But how... Where had he come from? Had I failed to see him because of the dark? He could have been there before me... Had the scene with the Sensin moved me so much that I had stopped checking my surroundings? I looked at him more carefully. He was an Acutin. Oh no! Had the Acutins got here before me? But not the ones from the section of the ship-carrier where I had hidden, not those Acutins who came through that door. Probably not. But what difference did that make? Was he alone? I looked around a bit more. I couldn't see any other Acutins. Only that one. I moved a step backwards, but the Acutin put his finger to his lips indicating that I should keep quiet. Then he pointed towards the Sensin and once again put his finger to his lips. I nodded, although I didn't know if that was the right thing to do or whether I should cry out. The Acutin didn't seem aggressive. He didn't look dangerous at all. He stood there, now looking towards me and now through one of the cracks in the direction of the Sensin. Actually he was looking more at the Sensin. That was so obvious that I turned back to the scene by the transparent sphere, switching my gaze from the Acutin to the Sensin. Still visibly affected, she continued to stare at the scene around the Earthwoman's bed. She was moving with slightly opened arms above that image in the transparent sphere. And the tears began to roll down her cheeks. Faster and faster.

Meanwhile the Acutin had slowly moved closer to me. Now standing next to me, he looked at the Sensin again. 'So you have seen what these fools do?' he asked.

I didn't answer. The Acutin's comment surprised me in itself, but there was also something about the way he said it: a kind of reluctance.

'You're one of those Earthmen, aren't you?' the Acutin asked me, before continuing calmly: 'I have been observing you watching the Sensin's performance. I hope you haven't been taken in by it...'

I shook my head noncommittally: 'Well, yes, I don't know whether I really understand all this. What is actually going on?' And after a brief reflection, under the influence of the Acutin's penetrating gaze, I blurted out: 'They're not ghosts are they? It seemed as though the ghost of that dead Earthwoman passed into the Sensin. I don't know anything about the origins of the Sensins' civilisation, at least not enough to be able to form an opinion on all this. Your kind even insulted them by calling them robots. Quite a lot of words, and even more of what has happened, are hard for me to understand.'

'That wasn't an insult,' replied the Acutin firmly. 'And your guess isn't far from the truth. They could be anything. As far as I'm concerned. I will grant them anything,' he smiled contemptuously, 'except that they are living beings.' He underlined his words with a fixed look that was surprisingly persuasive.

'Wow,' I gasped. I still wasn't sure how much credence to give the Acutin's words, because I also had to look at the whole thing from the other point of view, and yet some details of the Sensins' behaviour even appeared to confirm them. But Honaja was a woman of great sensuality. I had felt all of her feminine essence as we embraced, together with a sensuous warmth that could not have been an act, just as her distress at the loss of a man at our first meeting could not have been an act. No, it couldn't be true. Honaja was not a ghost.

'Their bodies are of flesh and blood,' I said to the Acutin, who listened to me calmly and then slowly shook his head and said:

‘In living beings the thought of the individual is connected to both brain and body. In the Sensins there is no such connection. With them the body is one thing and the brain another. Thinking, together with character and passions, is something completely different again.’

‘So their bodies are made from some kind of material?’ I said, indicating that I accepted his explanation, although I still had my reservations.

The Acutin observed my response to his words. ‘It is difficult for you to accept these facts, isn’t it?’ he asked.

I shook my head. I needed more time to make up my mind about all this. Why should the Acutin be telling the truth, especially since the Acutins were in dispute with – actually at war with – the Sensins? Yes, in dispute... The Sensins aren’t exactly very complimentary about the Acutins either. Not at all. They say there’s something wrong with them, that they are suffering the after-effects of that nuclear war of theirs. I looked at the Acutin. I couldn’t see any signs of nuclear after-effects. Nothing strange, nothing that indicated specific physical injuries. There was nothing of the invalid about him. Quite the opposite: this Acutin was very well-built, like the others of his kind I had seen up to now. Their speech also appeared to be perfectly normal. They are arrogant, it’s true. A little haughty – very haughty, in fact. They think they’re something special, which in a way is understandable given that they are an extremely highly developed civilisation. Even on Earth it is ‘normal’ for more highly developed nations to consider themselves somewhat superior to those that are less developed.

Now the Acutin, who didn’t like my appraising glances, quickly realised what was behind them. Smiling, he shook his head: ‘What have the Sensins been telling you about us? That we are cripples, yes? Mental cripples? That we had a nuclear war? He observed me fixedly.

I made a noncommittal grimace: I didn’t want to repeat the

Sensins' accusations, still less their abuse. And yet I couldn't pretend that the Acutin's guesses were wrong either.

'You see,' continued the Acutin, 'as far as our nuclear war is concerned, things are perfectly clear, but that doesn't suit the Sensins. And so they keep on making things up and bringing in matters that have nothing to do with the whole business. Look: even what they have told you about our nuclear war is a clear example of how they deliberately mislead Earthpeople. They are familiar with your own experiences and they only tell you the part that will serve as a basis for you to reach your own conclusions - your own mistaken conclusions. They have sown doubts about our intellectual normality, although they know more than enough about our nuclear war.'

I nodded: 'Of course it's hard for me to judge these things. They probably exaggerated.'

'They weren't exaggerating, they were trying to make you think the wrong thing!' The Acutin looked quite angry. 'They have sent you off in an utterly false direction. They don't exaggerate, they mislead, do you understand? Mislead is the right word. You'll see. But I'm not only saying this because of our nuclear war, where the facts speak for themselves, but because they do the same thing in all other cases too.' He pronounced these last words with real indignation.

I didn't say anything. I would have to argue with this Acutin if I contradicted him now, and I didn't want that. I had no desire for an unnecessary dispute.

'As for our nuclear war, it was like this,' continued the Acutin, his tone of voice now somewhat calmer. 'Two dominant nations - at that time we too had several different countries, just like you Earthpeople - were in conflict. It was very similar to what happened on Earth at the time of the Cold War, except that we threw ourselves even more enthusiastically into the production of nuclear bombs, thanks to the greater accessibility of minerals, especially uranium. Then

the conflicts grew increasingly severe. And since a nuclear war began to seem quite likely, both sides started building powerful nuclear shelters designed to ensure long-term survival. Both sides took this project very seriously and devoted their best efforts to it. Meanwhile there was the question of who should have priority for a place in the first shelters. Since the wars had been going on for decades even before the discovery of the nuclear bomb, and there been hostilities of varying severity for centuries before that, a warrior culture had developed. To be the best soldier was the highest virtue of all. We inspected the young recruits on enlistment and during training. We ranked them according to how they carried themselves on the battlefield, as well as through written tests. Boys and girls. And over the years we developed this system of selection to an enviable level. We obtained elite divisions of warriors, the sort that every commander dreams of. And both sides, theirs and ours, decided that in the case of war, these elite units of young men and women should be protected first. That was the position on both sides. Part of it was also the desire to strengthen the reputation of the military profession and encourage young people to join military units. And as it later turned out, this was decisive in determining precedence for a place in the atomic shelters. This can also be seen from the changes made to the priority list. Evidently, though, the leaders on the two sides were still not convinced that a nuclear war was a serious possibility. In the end they were taken by surprise. The possibility of an error cannot be excluded. Another contribution to total war came from the command positions in the shelters, although later checks shows that they only launched their systems after the enemy's first bombs had exploded. In the end, all life throughout our planet was destroyed. The only survivors were in the shelters. Since then our development has been peaceful. The survivors from both sides later united, because of their small number, and then built our civilisation in peace. In the war itself there

were no wounded. The Sensins know that perfectly well. There were only the dead and the perfectly healthy survivors. The genetic changes that the Sensins accuse us of are supposed to have been, so they say, the consequence of the selection of recruits through testing, and to a certain extent that may even be true, since later we carried out corrections on the corresponding genes, but nothing like as much as they say. The main reason this went on was the uncertainty in our relations with our neighbours, since there was reason to believe that we would again need to strengthen our defence forces and military spirit. Courage and the readiness to obey orders and sacrifice ourselves for the good of our civilisation are innate qualities for the Acutins, and it would never occur to us to change these two principal virtues that evidently disturb the Sensins so much.'

'This is all a bit different from what I had imagined,' I said. I needed to think about what the Acutin was telling me. This explanation of their abnormality, if I could call it that, hadn't occurred to me. Was it possible? That they could have been so foolish as to start that sort of testing? It was hard to believe. Unless when looking for one set of abilities they had completely forgotten about the others, then it would be possible. Hmm. It's true that it wouldn't be very nice having a militaristic, highly-developed civilisation like this for a neighbour, so in that sense I could understand the Sensins. It wouldn't be exactly fortunate for Earthpeople either, to put it mildly. From this point of view the Sensins are probably better partners for the Earthpeople, but I'd better not mention that to this Acutin. But the Sensins are strange too. If they really are ghosts, as the Acutin says and as it now appears, a partnership with them wouldn't be particularly pleasant either. Actually, it is quite hard to imagine what kind of partnership this could actually be. 'I will grant them anything except that they are living beings.' I couldn't get the Acutin's words out of my head, although because of the beauty of Honaja's face I kept pushing

them aside. Ghosts, hmm... But what does that actually mean? It wasn't easy thinking about them. At least not for me, because I simply didn't believe in ghosts. I still don't believe in them. It's true that there was something strange about these Sensins here, but even so it wasn't easy to decide what was actually going on. Ghosts? That's a good one. But on the other hand quite a number of their characteristics suggested that many things were possible. Yes, many things...

I looked at the Acutin, who was facing the Sensin by the transparent sphere and staring straight ahead with an absent expression. His thoughts must have been elsewhere. I looked at the Sensin and saw her tear-stained face, and how she followed events in that sphere with rapt attention. A man and a woman sitting on chairs at the foot of the Earthwoman's bed were wiping away their tears. They were probably relatives of the dead woman. At least that's what it looked like. After everything I had been through recently, and taking into account the little that I had been able to understand, I was no longer sure about anything.

'The evolution of your civilisation is very interesting,' I began. 'It is difficult for me to imagine what is possible at such a high level of civilisation, which means that not even your dispute with the Sensins is exactly clear to me. But judging from all these conflicts,' I went on, alluding to their incredible scale, 'it seems to be a terribly serious business.'

The Acutin carried on watching the Sensin standing in front of the sphere, or at least gazing in her direction, and then gave a slight nod. 'It is serious, yes,' he said, and looked at me appraisingly. 'Their victory would mean the predominance of ghosts and robots over living beings, a predominance over the civilisations that have developed along a normal evolutionary path in this part of the universe. Including yours. Or rather, especially yours, since for them predominance over you is particularly important. Do you know why?'

I thought about it, but I couldn't think of anything that might

be suitable as an answer. Apart from a few disjointed details, nothing of any significance came to mind.

‘For them you are a kind of farm.’ The Acutin contemplated me for a few moments with his penetrating gaze, and then continued in a calmer voice: ‘Well, not exactly that, because up until now we’ve been here too. It’s us you have to thank for the fact that your evolution has proceeded without interference. At least for the most part. At our very first meeting with the Sensins we made them agree not to interfere in the development of younger civilisations. They had to agree. They knew they had to. Despite their indignation, they eventually assented. Then we set the rules.’ As he said these last words the Acutin began to grow excited, which made him even more convincing.

‘The Sensins have talked to me about their friendly inclinations towards less developed civilisations,’ I hazarded. ‘I haven’t noticed anything hostile in their attitude towards us Earth-people.’

‘Nothing hostile!’ repeated the Acutin, with an ironic laugh. ‘Ha! You aren’t hostile to pigs either, but you eat them, don’t you?’

This comment was, I thought, either tasteless or... . . . hmm, cruel. ‘You mentioned an agreement on allowing less developed civilisations the right to their own development, so the comparison with pigs...’

‘Well of course this agreement has remained in force until now. At least as far as we can see. Your evolution has been undisturbed until now thanks to our insistence on non-interference in the evolutionary development of less developed civilisations. But if we hadn’t been there and the Sensins had been able to do what they wanted, without any kind of supervision, the comparison with pigs would be worth considering.’

I made a face and repeated under my breath: ‘Worth considering... hmm. Why? What would make them do such a thing? I didn’t understand and I couldn’t accept it, and I wondered whether it might not be better to believe the Acutins rather

than the Sensins. Just then a light flashed on and a piercing whistle sounded. The Sensin looked round wildly. She didn't see the Acutin or me. In distress or fear, judging from her expression, she turned back to the image in the transparent sphere and then at the lights coming on above her head. She moved back a step, as though she was going to run away, but then stepped closer again and once again gazed at the image inside the sphere. She brushed the tears from her cheeks and then turned away and fled rapidly through the door. I looked at the Acutin. He was looking slightly confused too. He looked at the lights and at the holo-display on his wrist: 'They destroyed my security control panel outside the entrance to this asteroid container. They did it earlier, before I could spot them.' He looked around, and then at the display on his wrist, where a map of the surrounding compartments appeared.

'What are we going to do?' I asked.

'Here, through this door, and then we must go along the corridor to the upper rooms.' Moving his finger across the holo-display, the Acutin traced out the route. There was a way out through the upper rooms. I nodded. The Acutin walked to the open door and I followed him. We went through. There was no-one in the corridor. Thanks to the accurate map generated by the Acutin's holo-display, I had no difficulty getting my bearings. Suddenly there was an explosion in the room we were about to enter. The door opened with a crash and we were struck by a blast of air, which forced us to stop. Simultaneously, Sensin robots rushed towards us from doors on either side of the corridor. In a moment we were on the ground. They immediately disarmed the Acutin and left me to pick myself up. By the time I was on my feet, they were already leading the Acutin away and quickly disappeared with him through the door. I was left alone with the robots.

'I hope we did not hurt you,' said an apologetic voice. Though the speaker was a robot, its appearance was entirely human. It

invited me to follow it into the central chamber, where there was some kind of muster station. 'The other members of your crew survived the collision,' the robot continued, 'and fleet command has ordered you to continue with your mission.'

'I see,' I said, as doubts began to form, and with them the realisation that it was still too early to reach a conclusion. Yet that Acutin had been quite convincing. More than quite convincing: very, very convincing.

After a lengthy wait in the large chamber, I was told that our ship STORMBIRD was on its way, and that our crew was already assembled aboard. Everything was in order and I should get some rest. The bringer of this message, another humanoid robot, suggested to me a more suitable place, somewhere 'very pleasant', and when I nodded my agreement it went on: 'There are special compartments for rest and relaxation after great exertions. Our guests also use them very frequently.' The robot invited me to follow it. But the explanation that the Sensins had special rest compartments on this asteroid was slightly at odds with my experiences up till now. Tired Sensins were certainly not a common sight. Had I ever actually seen any? And yet on this asteroid, at least that was the impression I got from what the robot said, they were used to dealing with the tiredness of Sensins. Tired from what? I thought of the Sensin by the transparent sphere. I wonder?

The robot led me into a large chamber with comfortable bunks along the walls, six rows of couches distributed around the centre of the room, and a circular path along which a number of Sensins were walking in a kind of trance. Others were resting on the couches or bunks. All of them looked very different from the Sensins I had been used to up till now. One walked past me with an absent expression, eyes fixed ahead of him, which gave him a slightly strange appearance. The robot stopped in front of a pair of bunks. The lower one was still free. For me, the robot seemed to imply. I sat on the bunk and began to look around. A Sensin reclining on a couch a few

metres away from me was breathing deeply and slowly opening and closing his eyes. A little further on a female Sensin was dozing. Another male Sensin walked slowly past me with such a total absence of spirit that he reminded me of a living corpse. He really could have been a ghost. And yet it wasn't as though the other Sensins in this room were much different. The same absence of life was apparent in all of them. Very strange. I had never seen anything like this before.

I was assailed by doubts of every type. For me the idea of ghosts was still strange and I couldn't simply accept the explanations of that Acutin. Ghosts, yes, ghosts... Despite everything, I still couldn't see anything more definite. I had never believed in ghosts. Why should I suddenly start believing in them? Not just like that. Ever since my first encounter with the Sensins I had been dealing with alien concepts, with things that were evidently possible even though until recently I had believed them to merely the stuff of imagination. Could ghosts also exist in this reality? As Sensins? This thought lifted me from my bunk. Once again I let my gaze roam across the room. In the dim recesses of the room, just behind a seated Sensin, I caught sight of an indistinct female form that somehow made me think of the scene by the transparent sphere. I couldn't help comparing her to the figure of that Sensin who had run away so quickly when the alarm sounded. Could this woman here actually be her? Oh no. If she is, that means that these Sensins here are also something like her. Something like what? I didn't exactly know, of course. But what are the possibilities? These ghosts here, around me... No, no. I no longer knew what to think. As though they had died or just risen from the dead... That was it. Those were the two categories into which it was easiest to fit them. I could easily picture the body down there on Earth from which that thing, whatever it was, it could even be a soul as far as I was concerned, had migrated into the Sensin. But why have they got such an empty look on their faces? Do ghosts have

an empty look on their faces? Corpses yes, but ghosts? What expression do ghosts have, anyway? What expression should they have? I really didn't know enough about ghosts. I had seen cadavers in a mortuary. And this atmosphere here occasionally provoked the same sensation, although only when I looked at some of the Sensins in this room. Only a few individuals had that effect. But they were very convincing. Were they in shock? Because they had just been resurrected? Or because they still hadn't got over the shock of their own death. Or rather the death of the human being whose soul had then migrated into them. I looked round the room again and, as before, saw the outline of the face of that Sensin. It really was her sitting there... I looked again, even more carefully, and tried to find familiar features in that face sunk in semidarkness behind a much larger Sensin seated in front of her. He looked rather cadaveric too. Or did it only seem like that? I wonder? I had to go over to her. If I sat next to her, it would certainly be easier to tell. But I would have to sit between her and that cadaveric Sensin in front of her. Hmm... I just couldn't get used to this atmosphere here. If anything, the opposite was true... I was beginning to get the creeps. It wasn't that I was exactly scared. But it wasn't exactly pleasant either. Should I pretend to be stupid and simply sit down between them? Do that among ghosts? Well, I didn't have any other options. I'd got myself into a real mess. Or rather been thrown into it. And now I was going to jostle my way between ghosts? Yes, I was going to have to push my way between them. Because I couldn't ask these Sensins around me what to do.

Once again I looked round the room. A Sensin two or three metres away had turned in my direction. Yes, he was staring straight at me. Had he read my thoughts? Strange as they are, these Sensins really might have this ability... I'm even going to have to be careful what I think about in here. I looked at the Sensin again. He was still standing there motionlessly, turned

towards me. That was more than clear. And I was going to have to go past him. He wasn't exactly a friendly type. Was he really looking at me? Actually I couldn't make out what he was looking at.

I made up my mind. Slowly I stood up, looked round the room one more time, and slipped past him. Another Sensin was wandering along the side, similar to the first except that he gave the impression of a certain combativeness: at least his sharper movements had that effect. I walked on as calmly as possible, staring in front of me as though deep in thought. In fact I wasn't thinking about anything except not attracting attention by acting differently from the others. Then I stopped beside the female Sensin in the semidarkness. My presence didn't disturb her, nor the Sensin sitting in front of her. He didn't even notice me and continued to look past me. He didn't appear to be dangerous and showed no signs of aggression, although he was quite big. I took a quick look around me and then sat on a nearby bunk, as I had seen the Sensins do in this room. Then for a little while I stared in front of me, which the Sensin next to me must have noticed, although apparently I didn't interest her at all. Then I stretched out on my back and propped myself up on my elbows so that I could keep the room in view without having to turn my head. The Sensin's face was still covered in tears. Slowly she moved her hand to her cheek and, first on one side, then on the other, she wiped away her tears, murmuring something from time to time. I listened. That murmuring might tell me something. But it was no good. The murmuring was too indistinct. It faded to a whisper, or just the moving of lips. I sat up and looked at the Sensin again, pretending to be looking past her when in fact I was trying to read her lips and make out at least the odd word. It seemed to be a kind of commiseration. 'Poor...' I could make out, followed by something unintelligible. And then again 'poor...' Perhaps she was saying 'my poor children...' She repeated this at the end of each murmur. I listened

even more attentively and furtively observed the Sensin's face. Yes, she was expressing pity for 'her' relatives. Just like people do on Earth. A perfectly human response to the death of one's relatives or close acquaintances. Except that here the situation was reversed. The one who had died was lamenting her living relatives. Hmm? That's a good one. I shook my head as though this explanation were too simple to accept. What I was seeing was probably real in its own way. But the fact remained that this woman next to me was a Sensin, yet she was acting as though she were that woman, that dead Earthwoman, as though that dead woman had come back to life and was watching her surviving relatives. Hmm... 'Poor children...' I repeated her words myself in a low murmur.

The Sensin gave a start. Not too much though. Just a little, enough for her to notice me. 'Was I talking too loudly?' she asked.

I shook my head. It's true that she was a little louder than the other Sensins in this room, but that was the least of my problems. I waved my hand and the Sensin accepted the gesture as something normal, which suggested that in this case my response conformed to what she expected. She looked at me another two, three times. She was probably trying to remember something. But what should I say? What does one say on such occasions? Something commonplace? What was commonplace for Sensins in such cases? I looked at the other faces around me. All of them seemed more or less absent. Just like I had pretended to be a little earlier? Hmm, no, that wouldn't be it. They don't pretend. Should I perhaps mention some of what I had been thinking?

'I feel sorry for the children,' I said, murmuring as though lost in thought.

'Yes.' The Sensin nodded. 'Although they are all provided for now, they've all got jobs, a regular income, families, children...' She brushed away a tear. In her words there was a hint of a

parent's satisfaction that her children were provided for. How human.

She dabbed at her tears again: 'Yes, they've lost their mother. It's hard for them. It's hard for me to see them crying.'

I replied with a slow nod. I wanted to say something but on reflection I decided to keep quiet. That had worked quite well up till now. I didn't know enough about what constituted normal conversation among Sensins on such occasions to hazard a more relaxed chat. And yet... these customs of the Sensins. Or ghosts? Ghosts or Sensins? Were they, after all, one and the same thing? How was I supposed to penetrate the mystery of this civilisation? Perhaps that wasn't the right word, but at any right it was a specific 'civilisation'. Whatever they are, they are a civilisation of some kind, even though the Acutins don't recognise them as living beings.

A robohostess came towards me. Her appearance was pleasant but different from the Sensins, who had evidently ensured that there was a sufficiently visible difference between them and the robots. Hmm... Between them and the robots? She told me I had a visitor. Honaja had arrived. They had come for me with our ship.

I stood up quickly. I looked once again at the tearful Sensin and then set off behind the robohostess.

Chapter XIV

Honaja and I were walking down the entrance corridor of the STORMBIRD. She had come to the asteroid to get me but after all that I had been through I was still mentally shattered and I wasn't able to relax completely, despite Honaja's happiness at our being reunited. She had been frightened for me, she told me. That collision had been terrible. No-one knew what had happened to the others. For my part, I hadn't even known where I was myself. I had been carried off in an unknown direction on one of the torn-off pieces of the ship-carrier. The ship-carrier had reconstituted itself rapidly - very rapidly, in fact - but before that there had been casualties. A lot of casualties, Honaja said. I nodded. I felt awkward because I wasn't fully able to share her enthusiasm at our being back together. I even found myself involuntarily doubting the sincerity of her feelings. That business about the ghosts had got so far under my skin that I was simply unable to shake of the uneasy feelings that filled my mind. Eventually even her playfulness

became more subdued, and that was awkward too, so I started to look for a more cheerful subject to talk about: but nothing suitable came to mind. Strange. I had never had been lost for words with Honaja before. If anything the opposite was true: the words poured from us effortlessly. They just came out, without any effort. But now I was walking next to her and forcing myself to smile.

“You know, Peter,” began Honaja after a pause – not a long one, but still quite disturbing, “my fatigued kinsmen in that rest chamber seem to have made quite a strong impression on you.”

I smiled. At that moment the word “impression” seemed faintly amusing. Various blackly humorous witticisms occurred to me.

“They seemed different from the Sensins here. I mean, different...” It was hard to explain. Honaja was smiling too as she watched me struggle to find the right word to describe a concept that was evidently not very clear to me.

“There on the asteroid, they captured an Acutin,” she said.

“Yes, hmm, an Acutin, yes,” I said.

Honaja looked away. She had read my thoughts in a flash. It was no longer difficult for me to read hers either. At least not then; I had the feeling that I was not mistaken.

Suddenly Honaja gave a peal of laughter. She turned towards me and shot me a playful look: “An Acutin, huh?”

I didn’t know how to answer. A teasing expression flitted between her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

“We are not friends with the Acutins,” she went on. “You have already had an opportunity to convince yourself of that, haven’t you?”

I continued to look at her without speaking. She was beautiful. Like this, the way she was talking... I couldn’t help admiring her. There was so much life in her eyes, and doubts were creeping into my already tired mind.

“You talked to the Acutin, didn’t you?”

Honaja didn’t actually need an answer. The question was a mere formality. I could tell from her face. She had already guessed everything from the way I was acting.

“And what did this Acutin tell you about us? That we are ghosts?”

Honaja seemed to find this funny, and she had lost none of her self-assurance. This made it even harder for me to sort out my feelings.

She looked at me: “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Hmm,” was the only reply I could think of. “No. Actually no,” I added.

“So, you see,” replied Honaja immediately. “You don’t believe!” I shook my head: “No.”

Honaja smiled at me: “Then you can believe me that I am not a ghost either.”

Now I had everything: a lot of information. Too much information, of every kind. And Honaja was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful.

My search for an answer – a process that involved analysing all my random thoughts and then reassembling them to form different conclusions – must have been reflected in my face. I loved her. Despite everything. She was smiling at me.

“You know, Peter,” she began again, “we are an old civilisation. So old that your word ‘tradition’ is only partly useful in our case. At least in the sense that we connect various concepts to it. Here there are certain principles, sacred to us, which in our opinion have a profound meaning. Life is sacred to us. Everything that lives is sacred to us. All living things. We nurture a deep respect for all life.”

I smiled approvingly: “Nicely put. It is nice to hear you talking like this.”

“Talking? Well, all right. There are still some things I have to

tell you about us, but before that you need to know about the Acutins.”

Honaja paused. I listened in silence, since although my mind was full of doubts I didn't have anything worth saying.

“That Acutin talked to you about their nuclear war, didn't he?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yes, he mentioned it. And also those survivors, were supposed to be the best among them according to their criteria at the time.”

“Yes, they were supposed to be their best warriors. But the problem is not so much the over-emphasis on certain abilities that formed the basis of their choice. A bigger problem was caused by an unfortunate coincidence. Above all, the fact that the group of survivors was very small in number. Only a few dozen individuals in total.”

“What? Only a few dozen?” Such a small number came as a surprise to me. “I had understood that there were some tens of thousands of them.”

“Oh yes? The Acutins don't like talking about this number or about their chosen ones, for whom emotional suppression if not actual emotionlessness is an innate characteristic. They were already aware of this at the time of their test selection, but at that time the most important thing for them was the ability to react rapidly in conditions of war. A whole range of important abilities that the average Acutin possessed were missing in the members of this elite. They were genuinely handicapped in the sphere of the emotions. And not only in the emotional sphere. And then these surviving Acutins continued the development of their civilisation with a deep belief in the superiority of their own elite minority and in their mission. They forged myths about the abilities on the basis of which they had been chosen. And they simply “forgot” about the warning signs pointing to their weaknesses. What they actually did was minimise their importance and push them to the margins of their thinking, until over time these views of theirs

became habit, which they later called tradition. And this has become this tradition based on lore that they mention so often, as you have already heard for yourself. It was like this until they met us. Or to be more precise: to begin with we lived for quite a long time as neighbours with relatively little contact between us. Nevertheless, we slowly got to know each other better and we began to see this defect of theirs increasingly clearly. We also mentioned it to them, in a very circumspect way. We are an older civilisation and we are familiar with the development paths of many other civilisations on different planets. We know what was lost in that nuclear war of theirs. And we told them how they could remedy individual weaknesses. At first they listened to us. It even appeared that they were going to agree to gradual genetic supplementation. But then they got bogged down in a dispute about deviating from their tradition. Then they started asking themselves what derived from genes and what from loyalty to their values, their tradition, which some of them once again began to stress at the top of their voices. A powerful group emerged claiming that progress could be achieved without modifying genes, and finally the whole business was complicated by a growing exaltation of their own development. It ended with them claiming that it was us who should be changed and not them. That is when the problems started. They hadn't understood anything. Everything we had told them about themselves, they rejected as unacceptable. All of a sudden, nothing about us was right any longer. Everything bothered them. And in the end they decided that only they could be responsible for future development and that we could never be, although we had told them much about our civilisation, considerably older than theirs. We have travelled a path of development that is longer than theirs and much more thorough. Not as narrow as theirs, oriented only towards the technology of war, but also in the spheres of the arts and new forms of life. Particularly with regard to the latter we are at an incomparably higher level of development than them. Yet they

reject this fact both through a simple denial that alternative forms of life could also be acceptable for them, and by denying our higher level of civilisation as a whole, with the result that the differences between us have merely intensified, right up to their attempt to break into our energy fields.”

“Would capturing your energy fields have guaranteed them superiority over you?” I asked.

“They cannot capture them. But some of them are utterly convinced of their skills as warriors, and this is the result of countless myths from what they call their history, although the majority of them were invented later by magnifying and distorting relatively minor incidents and turning them into utterly unbelievable stories. We have carried out an analysis of the origin of these stories. Their ancestors also had many military leaders, and thus a basis of this kind does exist. But many of the brilliant exploits of individuals are to a considerable extent the fruit of later imagination. Owing to the constant presence of these legends in their everyday lives, some Acutins have already lost a sense of reality. Then some extremists found themselves, as you say on Earth, in the right place at the right time, and this is when they decided to try and break into our energy fields. As you have seen, they did considerable damage to us, but they were not able to break through our protection. It is hard for us to understand what can have given them such an idea. They deciphered some data about us and that was enough for them to decide to attack.”

“But now you can’t get into your energy fields either. There is no denying that it was a serious attack,” I said, referring to the danger represented by the Acutins. Judging from Honaja’s words, she underestimated them a little too much, at least in the military sphere. From my point of view the victor in this war of theirs was by no means clear. But Honaja shook her head:

“They cannot vanquish us. Even on the battlefield we are a match for them. These energy fields were merely an advantage. The real shame is that this will only become apparent after a conflict, after a war that could be avoided if we were to release our forces from those energy fields. Even so, all is not yet lost. We can still ensure peace, which is so vital for the survival of you Earthmen.”

“Why for us?” I asked.

“Because the fighting will also take place in your part of the galaxy, and where there are conflicts nothing will be left alive. Your whole planet will be destroyed. We must prevent this.”

“Er, yes,” I mumbled. That could also be true. Although perhaps Honaja was exaggerating a little. I wasn’t simply going to believe something like that just because she said it. On the other hand, with all the terrible weaponry that both Acutins and Sensins had at their disposal, it wouldn’t take much to destroy life on Earth. A catastrophe might even happen by mistake. Damn it! Even so, Honaja was exaggerating. I could sense it somehow. But that didn’t alter the fact that the whole business was extremely problematic.

“It seems very odd that a highly developed civilisation should concern itself only with building its military potential,” I said doubtfully. “Still, it’s a good thing that at least you have followed a normal evolutionary path.”

“Yes,” agreed Honaja with a smile, as she watched the changes in my expression. My words certainly weren’t entirely convincing: at that moment they coincided with what I actually thought, but the rest of the time they probably didn’t. So many things needed to be taken into account and I wasn’t capable of saying anything more specific, despite my best efforts. I sighed helplessly. This wasn’t how things were either.

Honaja continued to observe me. Once again she immediately guessed what I was thinking.

“Look Peter, there are no longer any obstacles. It is no longer necessary for me to conceal anything from you. You have seen our battles. You had to. Now you know how quickly the Earth’s destruction could come about. After all you have seen, this must be clear to you. We are on the side of peace. Not only that: we have also maintained peace right up until now, and will continue to do so. You too can contribute something to this. And since you Earthmen cannot bypass this conflict between us and the Acutins, we have to work together. Up until now we have relied more on your powers of perception and your ability to follow your feelings. We knew that you would be able to perceive our friendly feelings towards you Earthmen, and that has been enough until now.”

Honaja was talking very calmly. And confidently. She seemed sincere when she continued:”Peter, our native planet, where our people now live, is quite far away. We are pioneers. When we reached a high level of development we built great spaceships for voyages lasting thousands of years. And thus it was that one of these ships arrived here, where we are now. We arrived here before the Acutins. They came later. We were the first alien civilisation they had encountered, so that this was something new for them. For this reason they responded to us very rationally. They were very friendly during our first encounters and we accepted them as our neighbours. There is enough space here for us, for them, and for the people of Earth too. We left them in peace, since the proximity of other civilisations is actually agreeable to us, while at the same time they represented no danger to us. We maintained our acquaintance at occasional encounters at which we gradually got to know each other through discussions, and we would visit each other. A considerable amount of time passed like this, and everything suggested that lasting neighbourly relations had been established. We all had enough of everything and there was no apparent need to change anything. It is true that some on our side warned that we should be careful because the

Acutins were beginning to catch us up in terms of technology. The warnings also related to their military tradition, imbued with legends full of cruelty and veneration of military leaders. And yet all our analyses of the comparability of their military potential with ours indicated that we had a sufficiently large advantage. Everything appeared to be in order. According to estimates, surprises were not possible either. Then came that unexpected attack or attempt to break into the energy fields, and that immediately converted the formerly peaceful neighbourly coexistence into a state of hostility. Why did you do it, we immediately asked them at the first negotiations. But all of a sudden they dragged up arguments based on some studies and analyses that they had carried out and insisted that their ridiculous findings were correct.”

“Where did they get such an idea from?” I asked, shaking my head at the behaviour of the Acutins towards the friendly Sensins. Everything seemed to be based on artificial constructs. Suddenly curious, I asked: “What did they actually come up with?”

My fingers toyed with Honaja’s wrist as we exchanged glances. Whenever she looked at me I could feel her emotional warmth, but not always with the same intensity: she was having to choose her words carefully and this inhibited what would otherwise have been an entirely spontaneous demonstration of her feelings. After my initial reserve, when my mind was still full of ghosts, I was now trying to express my own feelings more openly.

“Peter, you have already realised that our relations with the Acutins are not simple, but it is probably more difficult for you to imagine the dimensions of these differences. You probably haven’t even considered the possibility that the difference between us and the Acutins is greater than, for

example, the difference between us and human civilisation on Earth.”

I nodded my head to indicate my provisional acceptance of this possibility: “That your differences have brought you to a state of war is something I already know. Conflicts over specific advantages are something that are familiar to us too. That you and the Acutins are also different in other ways is something that I have only recently realised, and the situation is still not entirely clear to me.” I smiled, feeling slightly embarrassed. “There are quite a few things here that are difficult to reconcile. What is it that most bothers the Acutins?”

“Our endorsement of different forms of life,” was Honaja’s immediate reply, without hesitation.

“Oh yes?”

Various thoughts flashed through my brain. It really was difficult for me to reconcile that business with the ghosts and Honaja. Unpleasant was perhaps a better word. Suddenly a possible internal difference occurred to me: That among the Sensins there were ghosts and but also “different” Sensins, like Honaja for example. That was a pleasant thought. That would make everything a lot easier. I wouldn’t have anything against these “different” Sensins, since they hadn’t troubled me up till now. At least not excessively.

“In the Acutins’ opinion,” continued Honaja, “our merging with the human form of life on Earth is demeaning. For them it means acknowledging the equality, if not the superiority, of primitive races. In vain we explained to them that this wasn’t true, and that all we take from people are their passions, their longings. Yes, Peter, human longings refresh us. Human existence is rich in feelings and when we take over your already exhausted souls, empty, drained of feelings, they reanimate us because they forces us to build our own personalities and

because this provokes creativity in us, which fills us with life once again. This means that we are in constant transformation, first because of our merging with an interesting human personality, a being full of life, full of every type of existential responses, from wrath and rage to happiness and joy, and then because of our union with an empty, dull creature, with such misery in it that resistance to accepting such a thing into our ourselves inflames us even more. And yet all that the Acutins have been able to ascertain from all of these varied forms of life of ours is that we are merely the robots of some very developed civilisation, nothing more. In their opinion the only logical explanation for our behaviour is that all the members of the crew of our pioneering fleet died and that only we robots were left, along with programs for maintaining life, and therefore we sought a specific living species with which to establish symbiosis. In the Acutins' opinion, the living representatives of highly developed civilisations would never have done something like this. This is of course nonsense. And yet such thinking may well be the most natural thinking for the representatives of a civilisation that is as arrogant and inward-looking as that of the Acutins."

Honaja's explanation had the effect of making everything even less clear than it had been before. All the explanations seemed, if not convincing, at least possible, although I did not like the Acutins' definition of the Sensins as robots, which would of course mean that Honaja was a robot. I wasn't convinced by it either. Yet in the end, Honaja's explanation was also possible. It was equally difficult to accept that no truly living beings would have chosen the form of development adopted by the Sensins. There was too much Acutin arrogance in this explanation.

"All these forms of life are certainly very interesting," I said finally, after a short pause.

"Yes, Peter, much can be interesting," replied Honaja. "There

are many forms and each of them has its own advantages, which for the casual observer can be difficult to understand.”

“And do you Sensins know some other form of life in more detail?” I smiled, this time a little more easily, because I already had too many of these findings and opinions in my head.

“Yes, there is one other interesting form of life,” said Honaja, with a mysterious smile. “We know quite a lot about you Earthmen, about humanity, about people on Earth. Some of our findings are very amusing. You have already achieved a level of development that involves quite complex demands on the individual, and yet you still use merely a tiny percentage of your intellectual capacities. With you, building the personality is subordinated to more random occurrences. In this we are quite different from you. This is actually the key to the greatest differences between our two civilisations. Building the personality is, for us, simultaneously a science and an art. We enjoy building ourselves. Naturally you cannot do this in the same way that we do, but you could do a great deal more. We know the abilities of individual Earthmen; it is not merely about their passions, their sensuality, but also about their dormant characteristics. We absorb them into ourselves and then build on them according to our customs.”

“How do you do that?”

“That is something that would be difficult to explain in just a few words. And anyway you do not need to know that. You yourselves will gradually discover how it is possible to make better use of your abilities. And of course, as you can probably imagine, the individual’s diligence is not enough here. It is necessary to know how to do it.”

“I see,” I said. “I think that most people would certainly do something in this direction if they knew how to. That is to say, if they could. Or as far as I know they would. Could you give us some of this knowledge?”

Honaja laughed: "We Sensins have more passion, sensuality and longings than you Earthmen, and it is on this basis that we build our personalities. There are many differences between us. But you Earthmen also have many different passions and yearnings in you which you have to harmonise logically with the environment in which you are situated. In this you are very amusing. At least to the outside observer." Her voice became more serious: "Until, of course, a confusion occurs in the interweaving of your passions with your intellect, when finally you don't know what will prevail. We on the other hand are better able to control ourselves."

"How did you achieve that?"

"We had to. Otherwise, by taking over all the impulses of a murderously inclined individual, one of us could have caused a massacre among us. And naturally we could not allow that. We have also obtained sufficient experience. We have developed the right mental systems."

"And so you can take from a human being his passions, emotions and everything that defines the individual and build on this with your own knowledge in order to build a personality and in this way obtain a new living being?" I guessed.

"Yes. We have already achieved quite good results in this direction." Honaja seemed to be enjoying herself. "Very good results."

"But you could send knowledge of this kind to some other planet via any data transfer medium and then build a civilisation similar to yours on this basis? Would this knowledge be enough on its own? You wouldn't need anything else?"

"Yes, it could be enough."

"And if you were a civilisation of this kind, how would I distinguish you, or recognise you?"

"You wouldn't. Even for us it is almost impossible." Honaja put her arms round me and pulled herself towards me. She was

now completely relaxed and clearly enjoyed being with me, but I was not entirely comfortable.

“But from what you have told me,” I began doubtfully, “I can assume that if this knowledge was already present aboard the ship you came here on, and if the crew died...”

Honaja laughed again, more heartily this time. Everything was clear to her. Not only that, she found my doubts amusing. She transmitted such self-assurance through those few glances when she saw how difficult it was for me to express my thoughts.

“It is right for you to give your imagination free rein.” Her voice became slightly patronising. “Many things are possible. Very many. Too many for us to comprehend everything quickly. But thinking about all these possibilities is fun in its own way, isn’t it?”

Once again I had to repeat my noncommittal “Hmm”. Honaja’s last comment had started an amusing, though slightly confused train of thought. “Amusing?” I ran my eyes over her face. There was nothing robotic about her. Nothing. Abundant femininity was all that she transmitted. An abundance of life. No doubt of mine could seriously connect her to any kind of robot. Not even that explanation of the Acutins according to which the crew of Sensins were supposed to have died and left the development of their civilisation to be continued by robots. Because in that case Honaja would be a robot, and that was something I simply couldn’t accept. Just as I couldn’t accept the idea that she was a ghost. And yet some doubts still remained... I was starting to get irritated. And now she was suggesting that thinking about all this was amusing for her. Hah! Maybe. If I were able to ponder all these things somewhere on Earth, lying on a sofa, I would probably have found it amusing too. But I have to participate here. There is going to be fighting here:

there is going to be a war. Actually I was already a participant in this war. I was even one of the key participants, and yet even now it was not entirely clear whether I was on the right side. Well... That thought... Where had it come from? Why wouldn't I be on the right side? What sort of doubt... I already knew something about all of this, that was true at any rate. But I couldn't be completely sure, since after all some of the explanations of that Acutin had seemed quite pertinent. Very pertinent, in fact. If Honaja had not been there, I probably would not have been able to decide. Even now it was hard. I shook my head to try and get rid of the nagging thought that perhaps I should be helping the Acutins...

“Peter,” began Honaja once again, “don't worry yourself by thinking too much. It is better to let yourself be guided by your feelings, as people usually do when things are not clear in the rational sense.”

I nodded and looked doubtfully at Honaja:

“You know, relying on your feelings is also more...” I paused. “Even thinking about this subject can be amusing. Like your consideration of various possibilities. You never get to the end of them... How many stupid decisions people make just like that – on the basis of feelings.”

“And important ones too.” A smile continued to play on Honaja's face. “At least when you have no other possibility left than to trust your feelings, it is easier to do so.”

“That's true. If you can.”

“Of course, sometimes there is no other way.”

* * *

Lost in thought, I observed the distribution of the various conflicts shown in the holo-display. Thousands of battles were already taking place across all the boundary areas separating the Sensins and Acutins, and new conflicts continued to flare up in hitherto calm areas. Flashes and sparks appeared in the holo-display and spread out rapidly in all directions. These sparks meant the explosion of powerful nuclear weapons or energy bombs made of antimatter. Thousands or perhaps millions of them must have exploded in these mutually destructive battles between Sensins and Acutins. And before the glow of an individual explosion had time to die down, new flashes appeared next to it in the form of brightly shining spherical lights - or at least that is how they appeared in the holo-display. Each of these lights, with the release of its enormous energy, could have destroyed all life on Earth. Both Sensins and Acutins have more than enough of these bombs. Judging from the flashes in the display, billions of them had already exploded. A billion didn't mean much at this scale. And the Earth meant even less. It was so vulnerable.

* * *

I brushed Honaja's cheek with my lips and moved down her neck with slow kisses.

"Honaja!"

"Yes, Peter?"

"If the opening of your energy fields leads to a re-establishing of the balance of power and, consequently, to peace..."

"...everything will be like before, Peter."

"Like before?"

"Yes. What's troubling you?"

"Us, Honaja. Will we go our own way too?"

Honaja did not answer, she just moved a little closer. I pulled her towards me.

"What about your husband?"

"My husband?"

"And this similarity between me and him? It still isn't clear to me how this is possible."

"Peter, you know, as I have already told you, that in our civilisation we devote the greatest attention to building personality."

"Yes, that's interesting. With us on Earth this is merely something that sort of forms itself. Some individuals talk loudly about it, there are even "experts" on it, although as far as I can tell they don't meet with much of a response. But it is certainly something that people think about."

"I know, Peter. I know your conditions. The basic struggle for survival is still too present among you for you to be capable of self-building in a more natural way."

"I don't know. It would be hard for me to say anything more definite about this. And then there is the fact that to date no one has ever complained to me about their own personality. As far as I can tell, we are more bothered about the shortcomings of the people around us than about our own."

Tickled at my own witticism, I carried on in the same vein:

"Well, of course, if we asked an individual on Earth about the personalities of the people around him, he would certainly agree they urgently needed further development or even a

complete overhaul, since most of them are hopeless cases. Everyone on Earth could immediately provide you with a list of acquaintances who are suitable candidates for a total overhaul.” I laughed at my own wit but stopped when I saw Honaja’s serious face. “Perhaps we are too flippant about this issue, but it is evidently difficult to change anything in this sphere. We don’t actually know how to,” I added.

“You could do a lot more, although a small percentage of you have already achieved something.” Honaja smiled for a moment and then became serious again: “You said that the affinity between my husband and you interests you.”

I nodded: “Yes, of course.”

I had thought about the possible connection between their practice of building personality and the similarity between me and Honaja’s late husband, but I hadn’t found anything I could really get hold of.

“You know, Peter, unlike the Acutins we are a lot more open to accepting different forms of life.”

“Different forms of life?” I repeated. Perhaps this was what it was really about. Honaja was clearly different from, for example, that female Sensin there in “purgatory”, or whatever it was, but at the same time equating Honaja with some robotic form was not something I could accept. There was no possible comparison either with robots or with ghosts. I couldn’t have done it even if I had wanted to. It was all very complicated. And then there was this question of Honaja’s husband. And building personalities. Perhaps it was all connected somehow.

“When it comes to understanding different forms of life, problems most commonly arise because we are too isolated, and on the basis of experience and specific knowledge we leap too quickly to superficial conclusions. It’s a pity we don’t have enough time. I would love to initiate you in our art of building the personality.”

“Won’t it be possible later?”

“It will, but I wish I could give you a closer understanding of our civilisation now, so that you can love it as I love it.”

“Well of course if you belong to this civilisation, that already means a lot to me. In a way your civilisation is already dear to me...”

Honaja smiled: “We have grown very close to each other in this short time, haven’t we?”

“We’ll be able to see each other once peace has been re-established, won’t we? If the opening of your energy fields can re-establish peace...”

“Of course. In our case they will have to make an exception.”

“And what does your late husband still mean to you?”

“Actually, it is getting harder and harder for me to distinguish between the two of you. You are very similar. We Sensins interpret the building of personality very freely. We have the necessary knowledge for this, and also enough experience. But every individual makes his own decisions about how to continue building his personality. This is something in which we differ significantly from you Earthmen, although we still have an unbelievable amount of things in common. For you Earthmen your personality is built on the basis of wishes and abilities, but also passions and the given circumstances into which you are thrown. We Sensins know all this. But with us it is different: besides our basic self, determined by evolution, other living beings live in us. We transfer most of these into ourselves after their death, but we also establish some connections with living individuals – although these are rarer because we are prohibited from disturbing the evolution of less developed civilisations.”

“And your husband established such a connection with me?”

“It didn’t bother you, did it?”

“No. I never noticed anything. At least not until you came for me.”

Honaja smiled at this admission.

“It’s not so simple. Even for me it was not simple when I lost him. I knew about you, because he mentioned you often. But I did not know how deep the tie was between you, and above all how alive it was. We can transfer into ourselves all the passions and inclinations of the chosen individual, but how much of this we then allow to come to life in us is another question. Often it depends on the time involved, but we always act according to our artistic sense for creating the personality. That means that it was impossible for me to estimate the degree of similarity between the two of you.”

“And what is this degree?” I asked automatically.

Honaja looked at me mischievously: “What do you think?”

“Did he like you?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“Well, you are so beautiful that your husband could have got his liking for you from someone else, not only from me.”

“Yes. But he didn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I know!”

“Hmm.”

“Peter, you Earthmen live in us and you live for a good long time. The transfer takes place after the death of the Earthman. But in some cases the situation is like this one with you and my husband.”

“Ah!” Various doubts nagged at me again. That purgatory of theirs kept troubling me. It couldn’t be the real purgatory. Although it was hard to say what it actually was.

“Honaja, you know, that business of yours in the asteroid cloud... it’s hard for me to call it ‘purgatory’...”

She giggled, slightly awkwardly, it seemed to me.

“It’s a kind of halfway station. No-one has complained so far

about their stay there. Quite the opposite. Most of them called it a very interesting idea. We have succeeded quite well in all of this, at least in the opinion of people from Earth.”

“A halfway station? Why halfway?”

“Peter, we Sensins do not own all the truth in the universe. But we do know how to do quite a number of things. We have already done a lot.”

“Oh yes?”

“Peter...” Honaja looked me in the eyes: “we are going to have to get going. They are waiting for us. The path to the energy fields will still be in our hands for a little longer, but then the fighting will overwhelm these sectors too.”

“Yes, of course.” I nodded. The danger appeared all too convincing. It would be good to hear what the Acutins had to say about all of this, but now there was clearly no more time. But how convinced they were that they were right! On the grounds that this was wrong. Things like these experiments of the Sensins. In their own way, the doings of the Sensins were unusual to say the least. How I wished I could just think things over for a little longer. But according to Honaja most people considered the Sensins’ operations “an interesting idea”. And the Acutins continue to call them robots. On the other hand the Acutins are so self-sufficient that for this reason alone they could be dangerous to Earthmen. Because we Earthmen held no value for them. They had reconciled themselves to the fact that we were harmless to them. And what will happen once I have got through all those tests and barriers and opened the way into the energy fields? I will probably be on my own at that point. I will be able to decide according to what seems most reasonable. But no. Honaja was too convincing. In the end there really was enough room for everyone in the universe; as far as it was possible to judge, before all the present complications at the entrance to the energy fields, peace reigned in this part of space. It lasted for

a long time. A very long time. And it was very possible that it would soon reign again, and for even longer. That was it: I had to open up the entrances to the energy fields. I had to do this for them. And for myself. And for Honaja...

THE END