

HALF-CASTE

by

Ethan Somerville

and

Max Kenny

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Halfcaste

Somerville

Part One

Half-caste

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I

The Awakening

1

...so what kind of being is this vile creature? Lying there peacefully sleeping it looks so much like me. But it is nothing like me! It is a monster, an abomination! If I allow it to live, it will surely undo all the good my Mother has wrought!

Like a snake slithering into its secret lair, the mysterious voice insinuated itself into his mind and began dragging him towards awareness. *Who ... who are you?* he mentally responded. *And why are you calling me such horrible names? Anger rose. Monster? Abomination? I am neither! I am ... I am...* With an icy jolt he realised that he didn't know.

Who speaks to me? the intruder responded like a whiplash, its mental tone quivering with fury, fear and hatred. *Who dares to eavesdrop on my thoughts?*

I do! The "monster" you condemn! he blurted. Whoever you are, I'll have you know that I'm a living, thinking being JUST - LIKE - YOU!

NO! Not like me! Never! I imagined its response, imagined it, imagined it...

The rabid voice retreated, leaving him floundering alone in darkness. Fear gripped him; where was he?

Above, a tiny white star broke through the canopy; a pinprick of light he knew he had to reach. The struggle reminded him of swimming up from the bottom of a diving pool, lungs clamouring for air. The blackness snapped at his mental heels, threatening to swallow him if he dared slow his pace. Finally he smashed through an invisible wall into a bright world where the hungry emptiness couldn't follow. Swirling colours and whispers soothed him, welcoming him to a new state of consciousness. As he concentrated on the static it resolved itself into a conversation between a man, a woman - and one whose gender he wasn't sure of.

"He's waking up!" the female cried, her excited voice without discernable accent.

"At long last," the man breathed. "The brain-monitor is finally registering higher functions."

The one of uncertain sex snorted derisively. "This pitiful hybrid *has* higher functions?"

"Of course!" the male retorted. "Probably more than you have, Adelrid Merylon," he added under his breath.

He'd had enough of being treated like a lab animal. Slowly he opened his eyes. Stark light stabbed into his sensitive retinas. He groaned, twisting and burying his fists into his sockets, cleaning away what felt like a month's worth of grime.

"What a historic day this is!" the male cried.

When hands gently rolled him back over and removed soft pads from his temples, he hazarded another look. He blinked a few times and three hazy, hovering faces slowly appeared.

"Hello," he said thickly, his flaccid tongue slurring the 'l's as though he was drunk. Again he rubbed his eyes. The images clarified, and he realised he was looking up at two males and a female. A youthful brunette with her in numerous braids falling over her shoulders, the woman smiled uncertainly to reveal a neat row of pearly white teeth. He found her strikingly attractive; she didn't need any make-up to enhance her large, grey eyes, Grecian nose, or soft ruby-coloured lips. Her skin appeared as smooth and pale as marble. He had to touch her - make sure she was real. But as his broad-fingered hand lifted into his field of vision he gaped disbelievingly at his grimy fingernails. They were almost an inch long, more like claws than nails.

"Holy shit," he gasped.

"What did it say?" asked the men with the effeminate voice. He was a youthful, mephistophelian individual with thick black hair scraped back in an immaculate plait at the back of his neck.

"Er - 'sacred excrement', I think," the other man answered. The short, hawk-faced blonde with a gold ring in his left ear scratched his beaky nose with a long finger. Like the dark man he also wore his hair in a braid, but his was longer and untidier.

"What's that supposed to mean?" The acidity in the dark one's voice could have dissolved glass.

"I have no idea, Adelrid," The blonde glared fearlessly at the young man, "Why don't you ask him?"

Slowly, the newly wakened sat up and looked around. He found himself on a gurney in a room resembling an untidy cross between a laboratory and an operating theatre. Immediately surrounding him were floating machines, covered with flickering readouts, and bright lamps bathing him in a powerful yellow glow.

I must be in some kind of hospital, he thought as he surveyed the room. Gas cylinders clustered beside overloaded metal shelves, wires snaked across the dusty floor, and one entire corner was filled with some sort of computer.

So who are these guys? He directed his attention back to the three individuals standing over him. They certainly don't look like doctors! He opened his mouth to ask - when abruptly they backed away covering their eyes, as though protecting them from an intense glare. Now he could see their strange clothes; the woman's semi-transparent gown, short cape, black tights and white boots; the dark man's loose black shirt and clinging vinyl trousers, and the blonde one's long grey robe. Black medallions encircled their necks.

"He's powerful," the young woman gasped, still concealing her eyes. "That thought-wave hit me like a kick in the head!"

"Concentrate on holding your mindveil secure around him," the blonde man advised, "or he could scramble your thoughts without realising."

The wakened rubbed a trembling hand across his forehead. "Where am I?" he asked plaintively.

"So it can speak sense!" The dark man's flippancy appeared to be hiding shock. "Amazing."

The woman hurried to the wakened's side and gently, but firmly pushed him back down. "Don't worry. You're perfectly safe."

"Maybe so, but I'd still like to know where I am."

"Uh - Eridon." She turned to the blonde man for help. "Manreth?"

"Eridon?" The wakened sat up again. "Hey - is this one of those secret government research facilities?"

Manreth fiddled nervously with the woven belt around his slender waist. "Uhm..." He glanced over his shoulder at Adelrid, as though seeking help from the haughty young dark man.

Adelrid smiled thinly and folded his arms. "Deal with the consequences yourselves."

Manreth gulped and turned to the wakened. "Er - this may be a little difficult for you to comprehend -"

"Probably almost impossible," Adelrid interjected.

The wakened began to share Manreth's dislike for Adelrid. "Wait a minute - am ... am I dead?"

"Wrong," Adelrid declared, obviously enjoying himself, "Try again."

The charades were starting to get on the wakened's nerves. "How many guesses do I get?"

"You're not dead," Manreth assured.

"Go on. I'm all ears."

"All ears?" Manreth queried. "Er ... is that anything like ... 'holy shit'?"

The wakened twirled a finger around one ear. "You people are weird."

"Maybe it would make more sense if we took our translators off," Adelrid muttered.

"Why don't we link with him, Manreth?" the woman asked.

"Not at the moment, Toralan. His thoughts are still too erratic from the after-effects of the coma to sustain something as complex as a mindlink."

"I hadn't thought of that," Toralan muttered, eyes downcast.

"The experience will come to you in time," Manreth said kindly, and patted her on a shoulder. "You can't hope to be as experienced as your mother in only a few short days."

"Will someone *please* tell me what's going on here?" the wakened demanded.

Manreth was about to answer when a hidden intercom buzzed. A message followed, announced crisply in a mysterious foreign language.

"K'fia dosta!" Toralan cried before the wakened could ask another question. "T-the Great Council wants to see us!"

"No doubt they've discovered what you've done and want to punish you accordingly," Adelrid said airily. "You should have left that wretched planet to its own devices."

Toralan paled.

"And allow the half-castes to destroy it?" Manreth retorted. "I could not live with myself if that happened!"

"Very nobly spoken, Kamryte, but your backward, philanthropic beliefs won't save you from the correction centre!"

Toralan and the wakened watched in horror as a spectacular shouting match ensued. Soon reduced to speechless fury, Manreth stormed from the room, an electronic door sliding open for him.

Toralan turned nervously to the wakened and whispered, "Stay here until we return. We won't be long - I promise."

The wakened took a deep breath. "Okay, but then you've *got* to tell me what's going on!"

"I promise."

Adelrid stalked out, a picture of self-satisfied arrogance. Toralan spun and hurried after the men, pausing only to touch the base of a strange machine hovering beside the door.

The wakened hesitated for a few seconds, and then dropped his bare toes onto a warm lino floor. Looking down he noticed more long, clawlike nails, grubby, pointed and curled at the ends.

As he straightened and stretched, he realised he was clad in a long white robe made from what felt like soft cotton. It reminded him of a white monk's habit, with its wide, baggy sleeves and thin woven belt encircling his waist. Wait a minute? Was he wearing a *veil*? Something shifted against his back and a strange weight tugged at his head. Slowly, disbelievingly, he ran his fingers through his hair. It tumbled down his back in lush, red-brown waves.

"This is so weird," he muttered.

Dismissing his long hair he started exploring the theatre-cum-laboratory, hoping to discover some clue as to his location. But as he hunted through the mysterious devices he found nothing, not even an abandoned magazine or pamphlet. He felt as though he had woken up ... on another planet!

Deciding that he wouldn't find any answers here, he headed for the electronic door. But as he was about to step through, a small machine beside it beeped in annoyance.

He bent to examine the device, a flat, weightless object with a cubic glass box on top. Alien letters appeared inside the glass, but they meant nothing to him. A lecture in the flowing tongue he'd heard earlier emerged from the concealed speaker.

"What was that?" he asked, not knowing what else to do. The contraption didn't appear to have a keyboard. Suddenly the symbols adjusted before his eyes, transforming into characters he could comprehend.

"Stop, you cannot leave here," a surprisingly human voice declared.

The wakened straightened, putting his hands on his hips. Was this something he could communicate with, or merely a security device? "What are you?" he asked simply.

"Please be more specific."

The wakened scratched behind one ear with one of his long fingernails. "Er ... what is your function?"

"This unit is a terminal belonging to the HEHMC computer."

"What was that? Could you tell me where I am?"

"You are inside the HEHMC, located on the top floor of the Kerant building."

"And where's the Kerant Building?"

"North Saren."

"Er - and where's North Saren?" he continued, starting to feel stupid.

"Mynorax-" The machine spat out a string of meaningless coordinates.

He hazarded another question. "Where's Mynorax?"

"Eridon." The computer fired another series of numbers.

The wakened scratched his head again, cursing the annoyingly literal nature of computers. Maybe if he rephrased his questions he would acquire more information. "Er - are Eridon and Earth different planets?"

"Yes."

He'd anticipated an affirmative answer, but hearing his suspicion confirmed still shocked him. How could he be on another planet when Earth was the only world he knew? He had to take several deep, calming breaths before he could ask another question.

"What am I doing here?"

"Please be more specific."

"Uh - how did I get here?"

"By a courier-class spaceship."

The wakened took another deep, trembling breath, hoping the exasperating machine would understand his next question. "Why was I brought here?"

The computer's answer was short and simple. "To recover."

"From what?"

"Your injuries."

"Can you please - be more specific?"

"What do you want to know, Rhys Kelly?"

Who's Rhys Kelly? he asked himself. "Uh - w-what was that you called me?"

"Rhys Kelly."

"Rhys Kelly...?"

A flood gate opened and precious identity flowed into the dry desert of his mind.

He clapped his hands to his chest. "Rhys Kelly is *my* name!"

"Yes."

Tantalising droplets plopped into his brain. He recalled pictures without sound, and sounds without pictures. Random emotions accompanied some of the recollections; fear, hate, disgust, contempt. He tried to coax forth more information, but it refused to answer his call. He yanked two bunches of his thick auburn hair in frustration. Somehow, whole sections of his mind had been blanked.

Talking to the mindless computer was starting to irk him. Deciding to seek out a person, he spun from the contraption. But as the metal door whispered to one side, the machine once again declared; "Stop! You cannot leave here!"

"No," Rhys told it. "I'm going out to find some concrete answers, not stay cooped up in here like some lab-rat!"

"You cannot leave here!"

Before he could step through, bright bars of light shot across the open doorway from tiny, previously unnoticed nozzles set into the jamb. Tentatively, Rhys reached out a hand - and recoiled as knives of heat stabbed into his flesh. He swore poisonously, realising he was trapped.

He began to explore the floating terminal's base, and as soon as his fingers brushed against its cool, hard surface, a warm pulse of energy throbbed into his hand. Gasping in surprise, he yanked his fingers back. The sensation stopped. What was that? he wondered. It certainly hadn't been painful. Had the machine been trying to tell him something? Tentatively he reached out, brushing the machine again. Another pulse. Carefully, he took it in both hands, pressing his digits against the smooth plastic – if that's what it was.

He felt a jolt like a kick in the back - and suddenly he was cannoning forward into darkness.

Before he could scream, his vision returned. He watched a flat square of intricate circuitry explode in front of him into a enormous plateau of huge, hexagonal machine-cells. Angry sparks leapt from one to another.

I must be inside the computer, Rhys realised. He started to float over the seemingly-infinite matrix, his terror fading into wonder. But before he could ponder on *how* he had arrived here, the tentacles of energy had concentrated in a blazing nimbus around his floating ethereal body.

Still clutching the floating terminal, his body didn't see the writing on its 3D screen change, or hear its urgent voice.

"System being attacked by machine-virus - endeavouring to destroy infection!"

Bright tendrils snapped angrily at his mental form, trying to drive him back. He felt his distant body jump in shock, his back arching.

Anger flooded into him. *That hurt, you electronic scumbag!*

Hulking in its dusty corner, the HEHMC's computer realised that the intruder was far more powerful than it had anticipated. It began to shut down all unnecessary machinery and draw all available energy into it.

Rhys retaliated, unleashing his pent-up fury. He had to destroy the fiery halo that was surrounding him, burning him. A roaring ball of fire billowed from his consciousness and engulfed the computer's suddenly feeble energy matrix. Alien strength surged into his mind and body. Without knowing how, he began gobbling the machine's power into himself, expanding to encompass all available memory-cells. Only then was he satisfied that no power remained to hurt him. Below, the great cells lay in darkness.

He thought of returning to his body - and jolted back. Blinking, he found himself gripping the now silent terminal. His fingers ached and his entire body throbbed like he'd just run a marathon.

"What ... the hell ... *was that?*" he gasped, surprised by the loudness of his voice. He looked down at the dead machine in his hands, then over his shoulder at the theatre-cum-laboratory. It lay dark and silent devoid of power. In contrast his head buzzed with energy, his thoughts chasing each other like hunting foxes. Releasing the terminal, he turned to see the doorway clear of fiery gaol-bars.

Whatever he had done, he had achieved his objective. He was free.

Baffled but strangely satisfied, the young man stepped from the laboratory.

2

Outside lay a vaulted passage, its dirty walls glowing with a jaundiced light. The arched ceiling was covered with faded mosaics, almost medieval in design. Rhys noticed missing ceiling-tiles, greasy stains on the walls, and up the passage, a web of cracks dividing a pair of frosted glass doors into bizarre geometric shapes. Graffiti decorated the dented metal door behind him. The building had seen grander days.

What kind of place is this? He studied the entrance behind him. Above the illegible, fluorescent-pink scrawls, were rows of the same intricate hieroglyphs he'd glimpsed on the terminal's 3D screen.

Perplexed, Rhys pushed his long bangs from his face. Suddenly, he remembered that his hair had been short before.

Before what?

The Dark Time?

He looked inwards, again prompted to search the emptiness for something tangible. But all he found were his hair length, his name, and a few fuzzy memories floundering in the void his mind had become. He recalled a stark hospital room, the sinisterly masked faces of doctors, a fat boy laughing as he broke one of Rhys' favourite toys, a messy bedroom - images without meaning or connection to the bizarre reality he was now experiencing.

"My name is Rhys Kelly," he told himself in a soft, trembling voice, "I'm twenty-one years old. I turn twenty two on the twenty-second of March. I live at - I live at-" A hazy picture depicting a white fibro house with a battered car parked outside nudged into his mind, but its location eluded him. "I live at..." He clapped his hands to his head, unable to believe that he'd forgotten such an important detail. Think damnit! He ground the heels of his hands into his temples. For a few minutes he wandered aimlessly down the narrow passage, passing several doors without seeing them.

When he tried to recall his family no images or names appeared. Only emotions flooded his mind; sadness, hate, contempt. Similar sensations entered when he tried to recall school, his job and his boss.

Negative feelings had indeed been powerful before the Dark Time. But what about happiness and love? When he tried to recall them, he found only a yawning abyss. He would have cried had not something held the tears back.

"Maybe I am dead," he whispered. "Maybe I was reincarnated into this body." Impulsively, he rolled up his right sleeve. He found a four-inch long scar running down his firm biceps, the result of a muscle biopsy. Unfortunately, he couldn't remember why he'd undergone the painful procedure. A longer but similar scar marred his right thigh. Unconsciously he rubbed his ankle. It also bore white, jagged ridges criss-crossing his skin.

Suddenly, another memory burrowed up from the past. In his mind's eye he saw an enormous German Shepherd lung forward and bury its fangs in his seven year old flesh. His heart lurched painfully and started to pound. Collapsing against the wall behind him, he furiously shook his head to clear it. He realised that he hated dogs with a passion!

The only recent memory which surfaced of its own accord came from a movie he'd seen before the Dark Time.

A man with curly black hair dressed in old-fashioned clothes leapt from the back of a cart, hands tied behind his back. When the rope around his throat reached its full extension, he jerked to a stop, his neck snapping with a sound like a rifle-crack. He flopped limply, black eyes staring into oblivion, his mouth hanging slackly.

Rhys shuddered and thrust the image from his mind. It had been trying to tell him something, but what? He had no idea.

Like a lost, frightened child, he pinched himself in a last, desperate attempt to end the nightmare.

Of course nothing happened.

He sighed. "Stupid, Rhys. You might as well keep exploring." Maybe time would restore his memory and explain his current predicament.

Lining the passage outside the battered glass doors were other portals. He tried them, but found them all locked. At the end of the corridor an old-fashioned, rather dilapidated staircase spiralled to the ground some five storeys below. He was about to start down when he noticed a middle-aged woman with a big box in her arms, climbing laboriously towards him. Her rippling red hair, had she worn it loose, would have cascaded to the backs of her knees. She appeared to be grumbling under her breath.

"Er - excuse me," Rhys began tentatively, "but could you please-"

She looked up, slowly meeting his gaze. Her dark grey eyes bulged in terror. "*Delsheron!*" She dropped her box with a reverberating crash. "Marn nall!" She backed off,

slim hands twisting into a strange gesture of protection. Before Rhys could protest, she'd bolted past him and fled up the passage towards the glass doors.

"Jeez, all I wanted was some directions!" Rhys complained after her. As he grabbed the wooden railing and started down, he remembered something the beautiful Toralan had said.

"He's powerful! That thought-wave hit me like a kick in the head!"

"What's a thought-wave?" he wondered.

The staircase ended in a large, once-grand foyer. As Rhys crossed a worn marble floor, he noticed stained-glass windows cracked and clogged with grease and grime, and a chandelier probably held together only by the dust coating it. A young man with shoulder-length black hair slouched behind a battered reception desk. He didn't bother concealing a jaw-dislocating yawn as Rhys approached.

"Er - excuse me but -"

Gaping, the youth covered his eyes and ducked out of sight before he could finish.

"Shit!" Rhys swore. He turned away in embarrassment and headed towards the front doors. My thought-waves must have kicked him in the head too, he realised. Somehow, I freak people out when I catch their eye. Maybe I'd better stop doing that. He stopped by the doors and examined his face in a cracked mirror. What had happened to him during the Dark Time? Had he turned into some kind of freak?

But save for a few small changes, the perplexed face in the glass was his own. He couldn't see any pimples, or rough black stubble darkening his jaw. His flesh was as smooth and unmarred as a baby's. At least I still *look* human, he thought, and pulled a gruesome face which sorely tested that conclusion.

He stepped out of the double doors into overcast daylight and took a deep breath, steeling his mind for the unexpected.

The twisted street in front looked almost medieval. Rickety, half-timbered houses were wedged tightly along its flanks, upper storeys wider than their lower ones. People crowded glass-fronted shops and street-stalls, all clad in bizarre clothes. Everyone had long, beautiful hair that shimmered like spun metal. Only little children wore their hair above their shoulders.

The young man rubbed his eyes and looked up at the heavy sky, wondering why everything possessed a strange bluish tint. Then he turned to examine the Kerant Building's facade. Huge Roman columns supported a triangular pediment covered with crumbling bas-reliefs, and tendrils of lush green vines softened the brickwork, sprinkled with hundreds of tiny white flowers.

Rhys took a deep, shaking breath. I guess I should have expected something like that! He noticed intricate casts on the bronze doors, and leaned forward to examine them. They depicted a long-haired man in an old-fashioned warrior's outfit, riding a huge furry dragon with pointed ears. *Dragons?* What next?

He had just gathered up the courage to descend the Kerant Building's front steps when a thunderous rumble froze him in his tracks. He spun in horror, looking over his left shoulder. Above a row of ancient stone battlements complete with well-worn arrow-loops, billowed an enormous cloud of steam. Rhys felt his jaw drop. Slowly, a gigantic spaceship rose above the wall, hundreds of metres long and bristling with lights, jets and armaments. Rear-jets fired with a deep, almost subsonic roar, and the huge ship roared upwards through the sound-barrier. Thin streamers of white slowly dispersed behind it.

II

Beware of the Dragon

1

Rhys looked down at the old-fashioned market place, half-expecting to see shock and disbelief on the people's faces. Instead, he saw only saw anger and disapproval. A burly vendor shook a furious fist after the departing ship, swearing venomously in the flowing language of Eridon, and a tall blonde girl in a shiny, low-cut frock hurled a half-eaten piece of fruit at the fortified wall. It flew an admirably long way before falling.

Maybe I'll find some answers at the launch-pad! Rhys hurried down the Kerant building's front stairs and onto the cobbled street.

He tried not to stare at the noisy, strangely-clad people as he pushed his way through them. When they chanced to meet his eyes they shrank in fear like the middle-aged woman on the stair, and the dark youth behind the counter. My thought-waves must be scaring them all, Rhys realised, but that still doesn't tell me why, or even what the Hell thought-waves *are!*

People jostled him, their musical, fluid tongue filling his ears as he forced his way down to the ancient battlements. Beneath ran a tall, arched passage hung with flat light panels; another unnerving mixture of old and new technology. It seemed to him that these Eridons couldn't decide whether to modernise their old buildings or simply rip everything down.

Reaching the end of the stone passage, Rhys found himself gazing down on an enormous sprawl of metallic buildings, connected by an intricate spider-web of walkways and catwalks. Nestling in a gentle valley below, the modern city restored his faith in the order of the universe.

"That's more like it!" he cried. As he started down the covered walkway leading to it, a sign bolted to the brick wall caught his eye. It was written in several different foreign languages - none of which he could understand. Beneath the strange glyphs was a silhouette of an attacking winged monster.

"Strange," Rhys muttered, scratching behind his ear. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say this means 'Beware of the Dragon!'" Shaking his head in disbelief, he continued on.

On his left lay a beautiful landscape relatively untouched by civilisation. Small, dense clusters of trees dotted the rolling hills, and herds of horse-like creatures wandered the grasslands. Rhys wondered why they didn't fear civilisation's close proximity. On his right lay an enormous plateau on which were parked numerous different kinds of space-craft. Large hovercraft buzzed around freighters like angry bees, disgorging their contents into maw-like openings in the ships' sides, and uniformed workers barked orders. As Rhys watched, the freighter nearest him was cleared for take-off. Its hull doors slid closed and sealed with a thud, and the hovercraft flew off to a safe distance. Powerful engines fired and clouds of steam erupted from the ship's base. It lifted easily into the air and shot into the sky. Following its path Rhys saw, winging its way towards the modern complex-
-an enormous white dragon with broad, batlike wings.

"*Holy shit!*" he gasped, clapping a hand to his face. He tried to follow the creature's path, but it vanished behind the domes with a graceful flap of its wings and flick of its long, sinewy tail. "There *are* dragons here! What kind of bizarro planet *is* this?"

About twenty minutes later he arrived at an enormous airport terminal, crowded with long-haired people and luggage. Rhys noticed, with no real surprise, that most of the bags were trundling along by themselves, unerringly following their owners. Shaking his head he wandered from the enormous foyer into a brightly lit terminal at least a kilometre long and fifty metres high, crowded with more strangely dressed individuals. He was trying to stare at everything at once when a huge man rudely shouldered him aside. Rhys

stumbled, almost tripping over the hem of his long white robe. "Watch where you're going!" he cried indignantly.

The hulk turned to glare at him. Rhys recoiled in horror at the sight of a huge alien monster with pointed ears, whiskery snout, five centimetre long tusks and narrow predator eyes the colour of polished steel. Standing over two metres tall it wore an elaborate leather battledress complete with floor-length cape and metal studded boots. Rhys backed off, expecting the canine monster to lunge forward and bite his head off. Suddenly, its evil expression transformed into one of humble apology. Fingering a black medallion around its almost non-existent neck with an enormous clawed paw, it rumbled, "Awfully sorry, Eridon. Didn't see you." Hurriedly, it lumbered off before Rhys could voice his incredulity.

That thing actually understood me! Rhys tried to follow the beast to ask it more questions, but it had already vanished in the throng. Baffled, Rhys started across the spotless corridor. Suddenly, a frosted glass gate opened a few metres in front of him, and spewed out a horde of small, furry aliens. Again Rhys stumbled back; these beings were just as alien as the doglike beast that had pushed him. Small and lithe instead of tall and thickset, the feline beasts were clad in brightly coloured jumpsuits and wore black medallions around their slender necks. They carried large backpacks and chattered excitedly - in English - as they hurried eagerly after a human guide.

Alien tourists? That speak English? This place is getting weirder by the minute!

"Woreg!" someone near Rhys shouted.

"Woreg!" Several others took up the cry and Rhys thought he was the object of attention until a hideous animal smell assaulted his nostrils. Groaning, he buried his face his baggy white sleeve, everyone around him doing the same. Eridons cleared space around another gate, and slowly it creaked open. The musky stench intensified. Slowly, a huge six-footed creature lumbered through it, roughly the same size and shape as a rhino. It even had a thick, almost bullet-proof hide. But there the similarity between it and the earthly creature ended. It had three big, mournful eyes, each able to see ninety degrees, and huge webbed paws with long, curving claws that clicked on the concrete. Gently, its bulky body rocked from side to side. It carried a machine strapped to its back, which delivered an opaque substance into the its wide, toothless mouth via a thin transparent tube. It too wore a black medallion around its thick throat.

Generously, people cleared a passage ten metres wide for it.

From his position Rhys heard the creature say in a throaty rumble, "Can I help it if my pheromones smell a little off to you? My kind happen to find them irresistible!"

Some people laughed, but others pelted objects at the woreg and hurled insults in words Rhys didn't understand. The beast answered, "Go home?" It stopped dead, glaring at the baleful crowds, "But I just got here!"

After the strange creature's departure, Rhys decided to resume his search for a teacher. He left the main terminal via a long side-passage. After passing through a set of double doors, he found himself at the edge of the enormous airfield. He shivered as a cool breeze whipped his long hair across his face and billowed his loose robes. Several spaceships towered ominously above him, and as he watched, another craft burst through the cloud-cover and touched down on a nearby landing-pad. It was smaller and sleeker than the rest, its gleaming exterior perfectly streamlined and decorated with bright red symbols. Rhys realised it was a VIP ship, when crowds of uniformed beings clustered around it to welcome an important-looking official in elaborate robes.

He started to walk around the airfield's perimeter, towards a sprawl of old warehouses, hangers, blockhouses and battered workers' huts. Behind them towered an ostentatious building capped with a rotating sculpture Rhys realised was a tesseract; a cube within a cube, their corners joined. It had to be some kind of research-centre. Maybe the answers he sought lay inside it.

To reach it he had to walk through a maze of dilapidated buildings, shrouded with shadows. He thought they were abandoned until a pretty, scantily-clad female appeared.

She smiled and beckoned seductively from a low doorway. He didn't need a university degree to realise that she was a prostitute. Her short sparkling dress barely covered an ample bottom, impressive breasts billowed over her tight bodice, and multicoloured hair tumbled untamed down her back. An unusual tattoo marked the space between her upswept eyebrows, resembling a stylised bird in flight.

When Rhys noticed the hair he suddenly *remembered*.

Matina...

The girl looked like someone named Matina!

He clung to the memory, hoping to build on it as he studied the strange girl. He took great care to avoid her eyes, not wanting her to flee like all the others. She beckoned him closer with a long-nailed hand and he drifted forward, still searching the void for more of the mysterious Matina.

Murmuring seductively in her beautiful native tongue, the strange woman touched the V-neck of his robe and gently ran her slim fingers over his chest. So engrossed in his search, Rhys didn't realise what she was doing until she'd untied his belt and dragged the robes from his bare shoulders with an eagerness-

-like Matina's.

"Nuva je ay," she whispered. When he didn't respond, she cupped his chin in a warm hand and lifted his head so she could peer into his eyes with her own dark blue ones.

At such close range, the effect of Rhys' stare was catastrophic. The woman didn't even scream or cover her temples. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she crumpled to the ground, mouth gaping slackly like the hanged man's. Shocked, Rhys dropped to his knees to feel for a pulse. But before he could touch her, she moaned and her eyelids flickered. Rhys bolted he could scare her again.

Matina - who are you? he asked himself. Did I love you?

No answers came to soothe his confusion.

As he hurried through tumbledown buildings, the dirty concrete cold and rough against his bare feet, he detected the unexpected sound of screaming children. Rounding the next corner he stumbled across three pre-pubescent boys harassing a fourth; a skinny lad with honey-coloured, shoulder-length hair. His tormenters pelted him with insults, rocks and food-scrap until Rhys could stand the injustice no more. But before he could act he *remembered*.

He'd suffered similar humiliation. Why? He had no idea. When? He didn't know that either. All he remembered were taunting words and the pain they'd caused.

Stepping out of the shadows he cried, "Leave the poor kid alone, you bullies!" He pointed accusingly at the three boys. They froze in horror at the sight of his outstretched digit. "Three against one is not fair!"

The boys screamed, covered their chests with grubby hands and disappeared down the narrow alleys like spooked rats. The golden-haired child turned to him, his emerald green eyes brimming with a mixture of fear and relief. He nodded his thanks, then fled in the opposite direction. Rhys watched him disappear in confusion.

Why did pointing at the boys frighten them so much? he wondered. Maybe they caught a whiff of my thoughtwaves. Sighing heavily, he dropped onto the front step of a warehouse and buried his face in his hands.

2

"Ahhh - there you are!"

Rhys whirled around, welcoming the sound of an English voice. A small, elderly woman stood in the doorway of the building opposite, leaning heavily on a gnarled wooden staff. She looked both young and old; her face seamed with wrinkles, but her hip-length hair a lustrous, unblemished brown. Even though she needed the stick to walk, she conveyed limitless energy. She wore a simple robe like his, with a floor-length grey cloak

draped over it. A grubby white cloth covered her eyes, a tarnished gold ring dangled from her left ear, and a black medallion hung around her neck.

"I've bin expectin' you, Rhys Kelly," she declared. Although thin with age, her voice still resonated with the enthusiasm of youth. "Me name's Meljana-ain-rae, but you may call me Meljana." She extended a gnarled right hand.

"Praise the Lord!" cried Rhys, clasping her fingers. "At last - someone who can explain this whole insane mess to me!"

Meljana smiled kindly, a small lifting of her thin, pale lips. "How'd you know my name?" he gasped, the initial shock already wearing off. "Until some computer told me, I didn't even know it myself!"

"I learnt it," she said mysteriously.

"Next question - how do you see through that old rag?"

She removed the frayed cloth and opened her lids. Rhys recoiled. Beneath gaped a pair of empty, lifeless sockets.

"Ye gods!"

"I kin still see more than you think, me boy." Carefully, she retied the cloth. "I'm a seeress. That's why I have 'ain-rae' after me name."

"A ... a seeress?"

"One who possesses the inner Sight - one who sees," She paused dramatically, "into the future!"

"Into the future?" Rhys laughed hysterically. "Right now I need someone who can see into the past!" He changed the subject. "How d'you see, anyway? You've got no eyes." An image of Meljana tapping a time-line with a collapsible white stick entered his mind, evoking more giggles.

"Who needs eyes to see, Rhys?" Meljana grinned mysteriously, displaying an inner power and wisdom contrasting with her unassuming appearance.

"What d'you mean?"

"The Seerkind look through Time not with their eyes, but with their *minds*. When I saw you comin' yesterday I decided to meet you and give you the answers yer seekin'." Taking him by an elbow, she guided him towards the building she'd emerged from.

Rhys allowed himself to be led. "What happened to your eyes, anyway?"

She shrugged. "F' some reason I was born without 'em. Healers tried to help me grow new ones, but they failed. Seers don't have particularly good self-healin' abilities, you see. Then they tried to give me cybernetic eyes, but by that stage it was too late. My visual cortex hadn't formed properly, and couldn't handle all the sensory input. At least that's what my mother told me."

"C-cybernetic eyes?" Rhys gasped.

"Don't they have them where you come from?"

"Er - no." Rhys studied his dim surroundings, gaining a confused impression of squalor and futuristic technology. Meljana didn't live alone. The golden-haired boy with the beautiful green eyes jumped off a low, unmade bed and scurried into another room as Rhys and Meljana stepped inside. A skinny, dark-haired man, younger than Meljana, but clad in the same simple robes, lay on another untidy bed. An alcoholic haze shrouded his rumbling form. Muttering disapprovingly under her breath, the old seeress thumped a panel set into the low ceiling with her stick. Almost apologetically, it glowed into life. "Nothing seems to work around here anymore," she told Rhys as the room was bathed in a dim, colourless light, "Includin' him." She poked the comatose drunk with her staff. He whimpered but didn't wake. She dropped into a plastic antigravity chair that sank a few centimetres under her weight. "Take a seat, but not too far - they're all the chairs I got."

Rhys obeyed, choosing to ignore the old woman's archaic wit. "Why'd the boy run away?"

"You scared him." She groped the untidy anti-gravity table, knocking several things to the floor before grabbing a cloudy bottle. She poured herself a drink, taking care not to spill a single drop of the blood-coloured liquid. "You haven't learnt to veil yer mind. Yer

untamed mindwaves are so powerful they confuse any Sightless Eridon you focus yer attention on."

"Mindwaves? Are they anything like thought-waves?"

"Yes - they're the same thing. Mei-menteitha - you know less than I thought!" Gently she patted his hand, her palm smooth and warm. "Don't worry. I'll try to explain."

"Thank God!"

Meljana looked up. "Which god might that be?"

Rhys was taken off guard by the question. "Er - Jehovah."

Meljana grunted. "S'long as it's not Necronis."

Rhys took a deep breath. "I *am* on another planet, aren't I?"

"Yep. Eridon." Meljana handed him a plastic cup of the thick red liquid. "Have a drink."

Tentatively, Rhys took a swig from the cup's contents, and instantly regretted his decision. The fluid tasted like hot lava laced with needles. His throat turned inside out. His eyeballs bulged out of their sockets. A nuclear reaction flared out of control in his stomach. "*Arrgh!*" He dropped the cup and grabbed his burning throat, "Water - fire-extinguisher - liquid hydrogen! *Anything!*"

"I should've started you on something a little milder!" Chuckling, Meljana lurched to her feet and fetched some water from a metal sink beside the sleeping drunk.

Gratefully Rhys gulped the cool liquid down, dousing his internal melt-down. "Wh-what the Hell was *that?*" he wheezed.

"Kyroxiam. It's made from fermented belsar fruit. One of the most powerful drinks around. One of the most expensive, too." She poured herself another liberal dosage. "Now where were we ... ah yes, Eridon. Eridon is the fourth planet orbiting Danira, a blue star on one of the outer arms of the Kylora Ring."

"What's the Kylora Ring?"

"What we call this galaxy," she said. "You call it 'the Milky Way', don't you?"

"Uh - yes. How did I get here?"

"By spaceship, obviously," Meljana said smugly. "Don't they have spaceships where you come from?"

"Yes, but -"

"Then you should know what I'm talking about." She smiled sweetly.

Rhys sucked in an exasperated breath. Like the computer, Meljana wasn't making herself terribly clear. "What am I doing here?"

"The HEHMT brought you here for study."

"For - for *study?*!" Rhys suddenly remembered the strange interaction between the three at his bedside. "What does HEHMT stand for, anyway?"

"Human/Eridon Half-caste Monitoring Team. They keep track of all the Human/Eridon Half-castes on Earth with a mindwave transceiver dish on Earth's moon."

"What's a Human/Eridon Half-caste?"

"It's a creature that's part human and part Eridon. I was never much good at science, so I can't tell you exactly how they came about."

Adelrid's words rang hauntingly in Rhys's mind:

"This pitiful hybrid has higher functions?"

Pitiful *hybrid*.

"Am ... am *I* a Human/Eridon Half-caste?" he asked in a croaky whisper.

"You are."

"Ye gods!" Rhys dropped his head into his hands, trying to assimilate this shocking new information.

The Dark Time paled.

He remembered.

A blinding flash of colour - thousands of voices screaming *we are one* inside his head - and confusion - endless sensory confusion he couldn't decipher. Whispering voices. Distant sobbing. Then nothing but a muffled *thud thud thud* that gradually tapered into frightening silence. A burst of more sensory confusion, then darkness of a friendlier kind.

Rhys lifted his head, his dark eyes haunted.

Although Meljana was blind she seemed to look understandingly at him through the cloth over her eyes. She reached out and grasped his hand, reassuringly squeezing his fingers. "I'm sorry, Rhys."

"H-how did this happen?" he croaked.

"It's a long story, and I'm afraid I don't know enough of it to explain it properly. But be assured it will eventually be revealed to you, by a much better narrator than I. I know, 'cause my eyes have Seen." She smiled. "That's an old Seerkind excuse."

"Fair enough. So what did you mean when you said that I'd been brought back for study?"

"Because yer the first Human/Eridon Half-caste to've ever bin brought back to Eridon, the HEHMT want to see what ... you know, makes you work."

"What? I really am a lab-rat?"

"A lab-*what*?"

"A laboratory specimen?!"

"Yes, I'm afraid you are. But look at it this way - you would've died if they'd left you behind. They saved yer life."

"What do you mean?"

"As far as I know, yer human friends left you to die of yer injuries. The HEHMT healed you."

Rhys gaped, then shook his head. "I-I still don't know what you mean. It doesn't make any sense."

Meljana sighed. "I'm sorry, Rhys. I've never bin good at explanations."

"No, no - it's me, Meljana. I'm to blame. I should try to understand my past before I attempt the present."

"Wise words, Rhys Kelly." Both lapsed into silence for a few minutes until Rhys asked; "So what happens now?"

"As soon as the HEHMT discovers you missin' they'll send their people out lookin' for you. They can't risk havin' you wander the streets, you know." She grinned. "They think yer dangerous 'cause you scramble Sightless minds."

Rhys paled. "I *won't* let them treat me like an experiment! I have to get out of here!"

"Yes - you do," Meljana agreed.

"But where can I go? I don't know the first thing about this planet - why, only half an hour ago I saw a dragon!"

"That was a kyrox, Rhys. We call them Messengers from Heaven. They're the only creatures who regularly fly above the clouds."

"Eh?"

"Our cloud-cover is practically permanent." She gestured upwards. "Only kyroxes and space-travellers ever see Danira." Meljana straightened with a grunt. "If you want to go you must go now. The HEHMT 'ave realised yer absence and will soon be comin' after you." She motioned for Rhys to get up. When he glimpsed the golden-haired boy, peering nervously around a doorframe, he ducked out of sight. "Poor boy," Meljana whispered as his frightened footsteps faded. "If it wasn't fer me and that brain-dead idiot snorin' his head off he wouldn't have any friends at all."

"Why's that?"

Meljana led Rhys back outside. "His brother Delsaron turned Necronite and murdered their father Raston. The other children call him 'the Murderer's Brother' and other awful names. They won't let the evil man's reputation die."

Rhys shivered. Somehow he'd thought things on an alien planet would be different. What did she mean by "turned Necronite"? he wondered. But she continued before he could ask.

"Even worse is the ridiculous importance people place on their lineage, young Omadon included. He swears to one day clear his name or die trying." She spat on the ground in disgust. "I'm glad I rejected my name. These days no-one wants to be related to a seer..."

Her sentence degenerated into an unintelligible mumble as she led Rhys back out into the cool daylight.

Something occurred to the young man. "Meljana?"

"Yeees?"

"You should be able to see what happens to me, shouldn't you?"

She sighed. "I knew you were goin' to ask that. I was lookin' into yer future the whole time you were with me, but all I found were disordered images. I'd never before seen anythin' like it! It was like someone cut the spacetime continuum into a jigsaw and put it back together all wrong."

"Don't I have a future?!"

"Of course you do, but what path it takes I've no idea, I'm afraid. For once I'm truly blind."

Rhys frowned. Whichever way he interpreted her message it still sounded ominous. "There must be someone in authority who'll help me!"

"Ky Jalsad Varen maybe," she said thoughtfully, reverence apparent in her tone. "But you've got to reach him first! No - I advise you to run as far away from here as you can." She pointed across the spaceport towards the distant green valley where he'd seen the horses. "Go that way - it'll lead you away from the ocean."

"But what'll I do about food and clothes?"

Meljana smiled. "You'll find what you need along the way - that much I know."

"I sure hope you're right, Mel."

"Visions are never wrong," she declared haughtily, "Despite what the Time-Controllers say."

"Who are they?"

"A bunch of bigoted delsheronos so obsessed by their own non-existent lineages, that they can't see past their snotty noses!" Meljana spat on the ground again. "They're the main reason why we Seerkind are so badly treated these days!"

The seeress's sudden fury surprised him. "Wh-what do they do?"

Meljana turned away. "What don't they do," she muttered. "When Ardalla Merylon, the inventor of time-travel, was still alive, we Seerkind were well-treated and even respected. But now her son's taken her place he's made sure we starve."

"Why?"

"He's convinced all the Sightless save the Kamrytes that all seers are frauds! I wish Adelrid Merylon was dead!"

"Did you say *Adelrid Merylon*?"

"I did." She spat a third time.

"I've met him."

"And lived to talk about it?" She was incredulous. "He hates half-castes even more than seers! In fact he hates everyone except himself!"

"His face was one of the first things I saw!"

"You poor thing. I wonder what he was doing with the HEHMT? He thinks they're a bunch of lunatics!"

"I already realised that." Rhys recalled Adelrid's arrogance with a shiver.

Meljana jerked and lifted her blind eyes skywards. "You'd better get movin', Rhys." She pulled the black medallion from her neck and hung it around his own. "And take this."

"What is it?"

"It's a translator. It'll help you understand what people are sayin'."

Suddenly he realised that everyone who had spoken English had worn one. "What does it translate?" he asked, studying the black metal disc with interest.

"Everything."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. It translates the language of every creature that thinks."

"Ye Gods - That means I'd *never* understand Jerome!"

He froze. What made me say that? he wondered. Jerome? Who the Hell is Jerome? He wracked his brains, trying to remember someone with that name. Only a strange mixture of pity and contempt rose.

"Take care," Meljana whispered, tenderly touching his long hair.

"I will." He patted her shoulder. "One more thing, Meljana, if it isn't too much to ask."

"What is it?"

"Can I borrow a pair of shoes? My feet are numb!"

Meljana laughed. "Of course. But first you have to get rid of those claws first - you look like a kyrox!" She hurried him back inside and fetched him a pair of scissors.

While she tracked him down a pair of shoes, Rhys inexpertly cut off the long nails on both his hands and feet, then wiped his toes dry on an old rag. She handed him a pair of white ankle-boots, warm and comfortable after hours of cold, bare concrete. "Thank you, Meljana."

"Don't thank me," She brought her face close to his, jerking a thumb at the still unconscious drunk. "They're his, but he's always so out of it he wouldn't notice if one of his arms went missin' - let alone a pair of shoes!"

Rhys grinned and stood up. "Thank you again, Meljana."

"It was nothin'," she said, taking his hand and squeezing his fingers again.

He ruffled her hair and left.

Meljana sighed wistfully after he'd gone. "I was hopin' for a kiss goodbye." She limped up to the double doors and pulled them shut as night was approaching. She didn't want any of its insidious cold to slide in. Then she sat down and poured herself another drink, preparing for another deep delve into Rhys's future. She gathered her concentration together and drifted from her body onto the ethereal plane only her kind could access. The disjointed images she'd glimpsed earlier were gone, replaced by a succession of clear, unmisted pictures. When she saw what would happen to Rhys, she gasped and clapped a hand to her chest to still the frantic pounding of her old heart. "Kamrys Mei-Illamareth!" she exclaimed. Painfully she wrenched herself from deep within the temporal vortex. She took several long breaths, trying to clear her befuddled mind of the incredible future. She couldn't accept it. Not yet.

"Meljana-ain-rae?"

She recognised the high-pitched voice at once. "Li?"

"Who was that strange man?" She heard Omadon Delfay sit down next to her, and felt him touch her arm in concern. "He ... he was nice to me. He scared Eelan and his horrible friends away."

A little concentration and the future told her what to say to him. Meljana smiled, realising Omadon wouldn't have to spend his life hiding in this squalid blockhouse.

"A friend," she answered. "You'll meet him again, don't worry." She slipped an affectionate arm around his narrow shoulders and pulled him close.

3

Rhys hurried back the way he'd come, new purpose in his rapid steps. He had no reason not to trust Meljana's uneducated words - she was the only person on this entire mad planet who'd made an effort to help him.

When he finally reached the grassy valley opposite the spaceport he slowed to a walk. Eventually he stopped for a rest by an ancient circle of mossy standing stones. After discretely relieving himself behind a huge megalith, he sank down on a fallen rock and unconsciously rubbed his legs, wondering absently why he didn't feel any pain.

Pain? Why should he feel pain?

He got up after he'd caught his breath and stretched. He bent - and easily touched his toes. Something was wrong - he'd *knew* he'd never been able to touch his toes before. Again he tried to remember, but as usual his efforts proved fruitless. He only ever

remembered when he *didn't* try. He touched his toes again, hoping the exercise would dig up another memory, but nothing came.

Sighing regretfully, he stopped his aerobics. Realising that dusk was approaching, he departed the stone circle, wrestling with all the unsolved mysteries he'd encountered since the Dark Time. As Alice would say "Curiouser and curiouser"!

He crested a grassy hill behind the megaliths and stopped to scan the horizon. The ancient city in which he'd woken circled a rocky hilltop like a battered stone crown, and the spaceport complex sprawled in the valley beside it, studded with lights and noise. Beyond stretched an ocean over which massed ominous storm-clouds. Lightning flickered in their convoluted depths.

For some reason he shivered. The sight of the storm had disturbed a deeply-buried memory, but not nearly enough. It floundered in the mud at the base of his mind for a couple of seconds, then gave up the fight and sank back into nothingness. Shrugging his shoulders he turned to the northwest, looking past the medieval hill-fort. A soft sprinkling of lights gleamed on the horizon. Rhys assumed they belonged to another town.

Maybe I ought to head for it, he thought as he scrambled down the hillside. His new boots, not made for bushwalking, slipped on the grass. A loud whinny froze him in his tracks.

Grazing peacefully below were a group of the black horse-like creatures he'd seen earlier. Not wanting to frighten them, Rhys dropped into the long grass and began to creep forward on his hands and knees. He soon realised the beasts weren't horses at all, but some kind of unicorn. Curved white horns grew out of their noses, and they pawed at the ground with cloven hooves. As Rhys watched in fascination, two larger beasts he assumed were males started circling in a complex dance of threats and retreats. It's either mating season, or they're fighting for leadership, he thought.

Suddenly, the larger of the pair whinnied a warning, tossed his shaggy head and galloped off. Immediately the others abandoned their grazing and fighting to follow his cue. They must have spotted me, Rhys thought, rising from his hiding place. But as he hurried down to their grazing-site, he realised with an icy tremble of horror that he hadn't scared them off.

The white dragon had returned.

It circled about five hundred metres above, occasionally flapping its wide, batlike wings to hold its altitude. As Rhys watched, wonderstruck, he realised that it measured at least a hundred metres from the tip of its whiskery snout to the end of its fanned tail. Tucking its four clawed feet up under its lean, furry body, it prepared to dive towards its prey. Pulling its wings close to its muscular body, it plunged like a huge hairy bullet, pointed ears flattened against its wolfen skull.

Too late Rhys realised it was after *him*.

Beware of the Dragon.

Shrieking in terror, he bolted across the valley. The beast swooped down behind him, claws extended. Desperately he increased his already dangerous pace to an all out dash, aided by terror-fired adrenalin. But huge front paws grabbed him around the waist and lifted him off the ground. Screaming, kicking and struggling, he fought desperately. As the dragon extended its massive wings the ground fell away in a frightening blur of grey and green.

Rhys threw up. The wind whipped the thin stream of bile into the atmosphere as he lost consciousness and dangled limply from the kyrox's almost human hands.

III

Jalsad

1

The pretty blonde receptionist, proud of her position as a Great Council's secretary, looked up from filing her long nails as Adelrid, Manreth and Toralan burst into the waiting room. A pair of old-fashioned bronze swing-doors banged in their wake. Toralan gaped at her surroundings in wonder, but Manreth managed to hide his awe. He had no wish to appear humbled by mere material beauty.

Priceless antique paintings adorned the glowing walls, and exotic indoor plants thrived in every corner. The rib-vaulted ceiling was devoid of cheap chromic crystal panels, instead covered with brightly coloured mosaics, many times cleaner and neater than the Kerant building's. When Toralan stepped forward to examine them, Manreth pulled her back.

"Stay with me," he whispered.

"The Great Council has no quarrel with you, Kara Adelrid." The receptionist inclined her elaborately coiffured head in acknowledgment the young Chief Time-Controller's status.

Adelrid leaned over the young woman's impeccable desk and smiled. It didn't suit him. "I may be able to help the Great Council with their ... inquiries," he purred.

Manreth finally reached the end of his normally infinite temper. "Adelrid - why don't you go and ooze back under your stone?"

Adelrid turned, a look of contempt replacing his superior smile. "You personally invited me to witness the awakening of that *monster* because you wanted to prove to me that such *travesties* of nature exist," he explained coldly, "I have every right to be here because I was witness to your crime."

Toralan began nibbling the end of one long braid. "I'm too young to go to a correction centre!" she whimpered.

Manreth slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders. "It's alright, Toralan - I don't think the council will be too harsh on us."

"I wouldn't bet on that."

Even the receptionist felt like telling Adelrid he was being a bit too harsh. "Er - Nea Manreth Eskan?"

Manreth approached her desk. "Yes?"

"Where are the other members of the Human/Eridon Half-caste Team?"

"They weren't present when we received your message, Kara, but they should be along soon."

Satisfied with his answer, she turned to a gleaming triangular monitor screen set into her desk. She pressed a button and waited.

Microscopic pixels converged to form the beautiful ageless face of the Leader, Ky Jalsad Varen. He spoke, his voice both gentle and powerful, "Has the Half-caste Team arrived?"

"Two members are here, Leader. The Chief Time-Controller is with them."

"You may send him back to the Time-Control Centre - I have no need of his help."

"He insists that he's a witness, Ky."

Jalsad passed a hand over his eyes, sighing wearily. "Oh very well. Send them all in."

Two silver doors at the far end of the waiting room creaked ominously open, revealing a long, dark passage stretching into torchlit dimness.

"After you, Adelrid," Manreth said, extending a hand.

"No," Adelrid stepped nimbly aside. "After *you!*"

Resigned, Manreth took Toralan's clammy fingers and drew the frightened young woman into the ancient corridor. It harkened back many thousands of years to Eridon's first true Leader; Kamrys Elservarlyn Mei-Illamareth. His influence showed in the peaceful designs on the walls, almost childlike in their beauty and simplicity. The ostentatious bronze, silver and gold decorations had been overlaid many years later.

Their footsteps echoed eerily across the worn tiled floor as they approached a pair of enormous gold doors, set with beautiful casts of the great Peacemaker himself. "I'm frightened," Toralan whispered, her eyes brimming with foreboding.

Manreth squeezed her slender fingers. "So am I. And I'm not afraid to admit it."

"I-I've never been up before the Great Council, Manreth - I-I-" Toralan broke off, gulping, "I don't think they'll forgive us."

Manreth compressed her hand again, hoping his presence would give her courage.

Slowly the heavy gold doors parted to reveal the enormous throne room which had once belonged to the great Elservarlyn dynasty. Now the Great Council used it for their daily meetings. Three high, arched windows flanked by massive marble columns overlooked the tossing Dorina ocean, and many metres above the floating lights, the columns fanned out in a cathedral-like splendour. The walls sported mosaics so finely detailed they resembled paintings. The carefully preserved wooden throne that had once stood on the raised dais at the room's centre, was now pushed up against a far wall. A plain round antigravity table occupied the platform. At it sat the five members of the Great Council of Eridon.

Ky Jalsad Varen, resplendent in his glittering robes, stood up and inclined his head. The golden doors clanged shut, obeying his telekinetic command. "Come forward," he called. "I don't want to have to shout."

Wishing that he didn't look so small and untidy, Manreth led Toralan across a mosaic floor worn smooth by countless generations of royal feet. He glanced at the young woman, realising by the paleness of her face that she was on the verge of fainting. He wished the Council chamber wasn't so big and intimidating.

"Sit down," Jalsad suggested, gesturing towards three spare seats. They obeyed, Toralan still gaping at the timeless splendour. Although almost two hundred Eridon years old, Jalsad possessed the athletic physique and handsome appearance of a man only half his age. In fact, the only thing that denoted his great wealth of years was the length of his hair. The unbound auburn curls tumbled to the backs of his knees. Muscles rippled beneath his embroidered robe as he sat back down and folded his hands in front of him. Although gentle and understanding, his clear, dark brown eyes missed nothing as he studied the visitors, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. He picked up an opaque bottle and poured everyone a much-needed glass of yem juice. Toralan gratefully gulped hers down without pausing.

"What are you doing here, Adelrid?" caustically asked a small, pretty blonde named Ky Katryse Hanarin.

The youthful Chief Time-Controller laced his slender fingers together under his prominent chin. "I observed the returning to life of a monster," he solemnly answered the Great Council's newest member.

"A monster? Human/Eridon Half-castes have as much right to life as we have!" Katryse exploded. They belong to both the human and Eridon races."

"They belong to *neither* - they're delsheron - *mutants!*" Fanatic fire blazed in Adelrid's normally cold black eyes.

"Enough!" Jalsad nipped the potential fight in the bud. "You two can argue about ethics during your own time. Right now we need the full story. Toralan and Manreth?"

Toralan looked pleadingly at her mentor, and the old blonde man nodded understandingly. "Well, uh, about forty days ago, the remote-controlled transceiver dish we'd installed on Earth's moon collected the terrified mindwaves of a pure Eridon."

"A pure Eridon?" exclaimed sandy haired Ky Astaran Selra. "But there aren't any pure Eridons on Earth at the moment!"

"Exactly!" Manreth answered. "At first we thought our equipment was failing. But then we analysed the waves. Although unformed and childlike they couldn't be the production of a malfunctioning computer - the terror and pain broadcast was too constant - too *real*. We had to travel to Earth and find out what was happening. And for that we needed your permission."

"B-but your receptionist said our request wouldn't get through for three days because you - you had an emergency on your hands," Toralan stammered, finding her tongue at last.

"And if there was an injured Eridon stranded on Earth, three days was time we simply didn't have," Manreth finished. "During that period he or she might have died. We had to act immediately."

"An emergency..." The oldest councillor, a thin, nervous individual with darting blue eyes and curly, dirty-blond hair, thoughtfully rubbed his receding chin. "The Crystal," Ky Elvarin Kalmaris declared.

"The Crystal of Power which the Mandoras expedition brought back from Beldara Kayi!" Katryse banged the table with a small fist. "For days we were trying to decide what to do with that thing!"

"And are still trying to decide," declared the fifth councillor, a hatchet-faced woman named Ky Rameella Ethrish.

Everyone ignored her.

"During the first few days of the Crystal affair, no other requests except the vitally important could pass through," Astaran explained.

"Obviously our empty-headed receptionist didn't consider a request from the Half-caste Team to be particularly important," Katryse said bitterly.

Jalsad lifted a hand. "I'm afraid we're getting a little sidetracked. Please continue with your story, Manreth."

Manreth stared at his work-hardened hands. "We decided not to wait for permission."

"That's perfectly obvious!" Rameella muttered.

"We - er - 'borrowed' a small courier ship, packed all our equipment and took off for Earth," Manreth continued hesitantly.

"'Stole' would be a more appropriate word. The Eridon Historical Society was looking for that ship for days!"

"Please be quiet, Rameella!" Jalsad ordered the sharp-faced dark woman. "It's difficult enough for Manreth and Toralan to explain without your snide comments."

"Sorry Ky." Rameella shut up.

She and Adelrid should get together, Toralan thought darkly.

"Go on."

"Well, when we checked our equipment on Earth's moon, we discovered that it was still working perfectly. Everything was as we'd expected, so we zeroed in on the mindwave source." He paused, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "The humans - the *barbarians* - had buried the Eridon alive. Weak and unable to free himself from his entombment, he'd sent out waves of terror in the hope one of his own kind would rescue him." Manreth paused, pushing a sweat-soaked string of hair from his pale face. "We dug him out just in time - he was in a metabolic coma, but he was dying."

"Then," said Adelrid, carefully articulating his words, "because of this you discovered he wasn't a true Eridon at all!"

"Not a true Eridon?"

"He was a Human/Eridon Half-caste," Manreth said lamely, Adelrid having stolen his moment of glory.

"A half-caste?" Astaran gasped incredulously. "What half-caste has the power to exude Eridon mindwaves?"

"This half-caste had somehow been transformed into an Eridon!" Adelrid cried triumphantly, again stealing Manreth's lines.

"Impossible!" Astaran and Rameella cried together.

"Could you please explain yourself, Manreth," Jalsad asked gently.

"The man we exhumed was obviously human - he had human body hair, scars, skin-conditions - but he was cold compared to his surroundings - very cold! His body temperature was no more than ours at its lowest point - three degrees above the freezing point of water. What human can survive with a body temperature that low? We concluded that the half-caste had somehow become Eridon. That explained the strength of his unformed mindwaves, his low body heat - and the fact that he had managed to push himself into a metabolic coma. Only because of his human heritage and severe wounds, he hadn't done it properly. He wasn't healing faster than his physical and mental degeneration."

"What could have transformed him?" Jalsad queried. "I know of no possible way to change a half-caste to an Eridon, save complete molecular rearrangement."

"Well, Peldira discovered that the humans had listed the half-caste as having died of electrocution. The - uhm - massive influx of electrical energy into his body could have triggered the change. Ranados, our geneticist, could explain it all to you."

"That's incredible!" Jalsad fingered the gold Kamryte earring in his left ear. Manreth sent Toralan a thought-impulse;

He's a Kamryte - he should treat us fairly.

I certainly hope so! Toralan sent back. But what about the others?

I can't say, I'm afraid.

When Adelrid smiled coldly, Manreth realised that he'd intercepted their short mental interchange. Was there no end to the delsheron's interference?

"So now we have a half-caste who's somehow been magically transformed into one of us!" Katryse breathed. "Wow!"

"What's the situation now, Manreth?" Jalsad asked.

"They're keeping this - this mutant in their laboratory, Leader," Adelrid answered a little too quickly.

"I asked Manreth, not you!" Jalsad's normally kind brown eyes hardened into fierce gemstones.

Adelrid met Jalsad's fierce glare and smiled thinly, his pale, stony features inscrutable. "My apologies, Leader," he oozed.

Manreth sighed. "He speaks the truth, Ky. We are keeping this half-caste in the Half-caste Centre - we have nowhere else."

"And - and when you called us he'd just woken up!" Toralan butted in.

"Emerged from his metabolic coma for the first time, Ky," Manreth explained.

Jalsad drew a sharp breath. "Was he cognisant when you left to come here?"

"Yes."

"And you left him alone in the centre?"

"Er - yes."

"Unguarded?!"

"It's alright, Ky," Toralan said quickly, "our security system will make sure he doesn't try to escape."

"Good." Jalsad relaxed. "Now, what's your part in all this, Adelrid?"

Adelrid studied the ageless mosaics above. "I told Manreth that I did not believe in the existence of such creatures as Human/Eridon Half-castes. He tried to convince me otherwise, but I would not be swayed from my belief that our race could never have done something so - so - *disgusting* so long ago. Then Manreth told me he'd brought the delsheron back from Earth, and invited me to look upon it with my own eyes. Out of morbid curiosity I took up his invitation. What I saw ... shocked me, I must admit. It looked so ... Eridon and yet so ... alien." He paused to rub his eyes. "I watched the mutant wake from the coma in which it had been sleeping for almost thirty days, and realised I had no other choice but to accept the existence of such - unnatural hybrids."

"Did this creature frighten you, Adelrid?" Katryse taunted, blue eyes glinting with a hint of malice.

"Certainly not!" he retorted, glaring venomously at her. "It was a vastly inferior being - it posed no threat to me."

Toralan and Manreth exchanged glances, clearly remembering the half-caste's powerful, untamed mindwaves.

Mindwaves many times stronger than the average Eridon's.

"Well Councillors," Jalsad turned to the four kys, "under the circumstances it seems that we must drop all charges barring the theft of the EHS courier ship. Katryse - since you're head of the Eridon Historical Society, you should decide the Half-caste Team's punishment."

"We-ell," Katryse fiddled with one of her many ornate finger-rings. "It was only a dilapidated old courier-class crate. Now, had they taken one of the TCC's time-ships..." Smiling, she allowed her sentence to tail off. "Thirty days suspension of privileges."

"Thank Kamrys!" Manreth breathed, realising he and Toralan had virtually been pardoned. Suspension of privileges meant that unless you had an official escort, you couldn't travel outside an allocated city or wander outside after eight After Noon. You had to report to a guard station every five days and perform one community service.

"Sounds good to me, Katryse, but only on one condition." Jalsad turned to Manreth and Toralan.

"What is it?" Manreth asked.

"I want full custody of the half-caste."

Manreth, Toralan and Adelrid exchanged incredulous glances. But only Adelrid was audacious enough to ask why.

"Because the Half-caste Monitoring Team, despite their endless hours of monitoring, know very little about human nature," Jalsad answered airily. "Because I've spent a long time on Earth I know how to deal with them. This half-caste, despite the fact he has somehow become Eridon, will still behave in an essentially human manner. I can help him assimilate into our culture."

Adelrid lifted his mephistophelian eyebrows. It seemed very strange to him that Eridon's Great Leader should want to take care of a mere changeling!

"I know what you're thinking Adelrid, but my business is no concern of yours. Your information has been very helpful, but now I would like you to return to the Time-Control Centre and mind your own business."

"Hear hear," muttered Katryse.

Adelrid stood up and bowed stiffly, his long plait dropping over his shoulder. "Very well, Leader."

At that moment the gold doors flew open with a crash and another member of the Half-caste Team cycloned in; wild-haired Illya Peldira Ranan.

"What is the meaning of this unauthorised entrance?" Astaran shouted, jumping angrily to his feet.

When Katryse and Elvarin told him who the intruder was, he reddened and shrank back into his chair. He had always been too obsessed with correct procedures and etiquette.

"It's escaped!" Peldira screamed, "Great Aeyana - the delsheron's *loose!*"

The blood drained from Adelrid's already sallow face. "It must be caught and destroyed!" he shrieked before he could stop himself.

Eridons gaped at him in the thunderous silence following his outburst.

"I-it must be re-captured," he hurriedly corrected, his voice a ghost of its former self, "It's dangerous."

"I'm afraid he's right." Manreth sighed. "Even untamed, the half-caste is stronger than all of us put together! His unveiled mindwaves are powerful enough to loosen most mindveils."

"It scrambled me!" Peldira cried. "I was walking up to the office with a box of equipment from the supply depot, when it sprang out of nowhere and started talking to me

in some stilted foreign language! The next thing I knew, I was cowering in the HEHMC laboratory, my hands over my temples."

"You don't where he went after that?" Jalsad asked gently.

"No, Great Leader. By the time I managed to gather my wits and follow the half-caste, it had left the building." She lowered her eyes. "I ... I'm afraid it affected me pretty badly."

"That's alright, Peldira." Jalsad took a deep breath. "Does anyone know how he escaped?"

"Somehow he managed to wipe out our entire computer system," Peldira exclaimed. "Lucky we had everything backed up on lattice crystals, or he would have destroyed all our information on half-castes!"

"How soon before you can get your machines back into working order?" Jalsad got to his feet and crossed to Peldira, thumbs hooked through his jewelled belt.

"We need to restore the computer, Leader. But that should only take a couple of hours."

"Good." Jalsad turned to the other councillors. "I want you four to stay here until the end of the session in case any more requests come through."

"Where are you going?" Katryse asked.

"To the Half-caste Centre, of course!"

2

"See?" Peldira gestured towards the dead terminal hovering beside the door. "Somehow the half-caste shut down our entire system! Ranados and Taresh are still on the roof trying to re-route the extra power we'll need to boot it up from scratch."

A magnificent figure out of place in the dirty, cluttered laboratory, Jalsad had to hitch up his glittering robes to step over the wires stretching from one outdated device to another. He examined the dusty brain-monitor to which the half-caste had been connected only a few hours earlier. "Sweet Eridos, this can only be the equipment Ky Jerava Keloren gave your predecessors two hundred years ago," he mused. "I haven't seen machines this old outside of Tyrian museum!"

The truthful observation stung.

"If the k'fia Science Society considered half-caste study a worthy branch of research, we wouldn't have to use such antiquated contraptions!" Peldira smacked the lifeless EEG in a temper.

"You mean the SS is not giving you your portion of the yearly science allowance?"

"What portion?" Manreth asked.

"I didn't even know we *got* a portion!" Toralan cried.

"I don't believe this!" Jalsad drew himself up to his full height of one metre ninety. "The first thing I'm going to do after we've tracked down the half-caste, is pay a little visit to the Science Society! Your research is much too important to be allowed to stagnate like this."

Why was the Great Leader suddenly showing so much concern for their work?

Manreth didn't dare ask why; although Jalsad was also a Kamryte, his presence terrified him.

Suddenly, Toralan jumped up from the main computer in the corner. "We have power!"

"Start the restore before any corruption occurs," Manreth ordered.

"Right." Toralan slid gracefully back into her seat and took two handgrips protruding from the front of machine. With the power of her mind, she initiated the process.

"Night is falling. How long do we have?"

"Half an hour at the most, Leader - All the process entails is a basic..." Jalsad only half-listened to Peldira's long-winded explanation. He knew exactly how to restore a computer, even one as primeval as the HEHMC's.

Roj Taresh Rahuin and Roj Ranados Taithlin, two hyperactive youngsters fresh from Saren academy, returned from the roof and were quickly put to work by Peldira and Manreth, running tests on the computer.

As soon as the machine was working properly, Manreth activated the mindwave detector, a small plastic box bristling with aerials. At the moment it was connected to the central computer, but it could be detached and used as a separate unit. Numbers flashed on its outdated LCD screen, and Manreth began adjusting knobs, tuning in on the half-caste's mindwaves.

"I can hardly read this thing!" he complained. "Did you two manage to restore full power?"

"Seventy-five percent only, Nea," called Taresh, a handsome dark-haired youth. "Some vandal must have used our cosmic energy collector for target-practise last night. We had to weld it back together before we could reroute the power."

Forgetting both Jalsad's existence and his own vows, Manreth spat a long string of expletives. "Why can't people just leave us *alone*?" He thumped the mindwave detector. Still muttering under his breath, he studied the faint figures and twiddled the knobs again.

"I'll make sure you are never disturbed again," Jalsad said, peering over Manreth's shoulder. "By Eridos I swear it."

"Kamrys the Peacemaker! You should see what the half-caste did to our computer!" In her element, Toralan was nothing like the terrified female who'd been led by the hand into the Council Chamber.

"What happened?" Manreth looked up from the mindwave detector.

"According to the initial status report, he somehow bypassed the Mental Input Adaptor and invaded the Crystal Retrieval Access Storage System. After overriding its security program he ... he engulfed its entire memory. The computer had no other recourse but to shut down. Otherwise he would have fried its cells. Lucky he didn't manage to get into the Central Data Core. That could have proven very untidy. He could have rampaged across every computer in Saren - on *Eridon*."

"But that's impossible!" scoffed the effeminate Ranados. He straightened and hurried across the room. "No Eridon - let alone an untutored half-caste - can wipe an entire CRASS!"

"Until we know what exactly we're dealing with," Jalsad said soberly, "we assume this half-caste can do ... anything."

3

"I think I've got him!" Manreth shouted some time later.

Everyone rushed over as he held up the bulky detector. Its little screen read; "45.34%". As they watched, the percentage dropped another 0.05 points.

"As you can see by the steadily decreasing waves, the half-caste is moving from Saren in a south-westerly direction," Manreth explained. "Judging by his speed and trajectory he's either on a skimmer or small airship." He pointed at another section of the screen, which depicted the direction the half-castes' mindwaves were coming from.

"We must follow the reading right away!"

"But Leader - it's pitch black outside!" Taresh protested.

"The fact that it's night might have something to do with that. Now bring a portable cosmic-energy collector and your machines - I'm going to ready my skimmer. Meet me at North Spaceport in fifteen minutes." He swept off.

"Why is the Leader is so interested in this half-caste?" Manreth whispered after Jalsad had gone.

4

South Saren was a bizarre mixture of modern city and tumbledown warehouses, and rarely frequented by respectable people. At night the Maynari emerged from their seedy dwellings to prowl the dark streets and alleys. These male and female prostitutes boasted

that they could bed any alien life-form - so long as he, she or it had enough money. Crowds of rowdy offworlders roamed the streets, filling the taverns and drug dens and fighting over drink, narcotics, prostitutes and hard currency. A ruthless Karogin Huntress, who'd somehow managed to sneak her amazing arsenal of offensive weapons through customs, combed the dockside dives for employment. A broke eliviras from Ortagas lurked at the mouth of a dark alley, waiting for a weak, foolish and preferably wealthy victim. Across the street two small, furry tri-norkats, their brightly-coloured jumpsuits ripped and stained, were launched from a famous drug den for not paying for their last trip. Not far away, five wharfies brawled on the concrete outside a mindwrap pit, and a crowd hundreds strong watched, cheered, and lay bets. Finally, alone in an alley a long way from the main action, squatted an unhappy woreg from Mu'Taah, wishing his pheromones weren't quite so potent.

Closely followed by the five members of the Human/Eridon Half-caste Team, Ky Jalsad Varen strolled towards the airfield to where his private skimmer waited.

"I swear I can smell a woreg," Peldira exclaimed, delicately covering her nose.

"You're always smelling woregs, Peldira," Taresh retorted. "Every time we come down here its 'I swear I can smell a woreg'! You must fantasise about them in your sleep!"

"Better than fantasising about you, you rude little brat!" Peldira snarled.

"Shut up you two!" Manreth hissed. He gestured towards Jalsad's broad back.

"Remember your manners!"

"Look!" screamed someone outside the mindwrap pit. "It's the Leader!"

"Oh no," sighed Jalsad, "I was hoping to avoid this."

Drunken wharfies forgotten, the crowd collected around Jalsad and the half-caste team, eager to acquire an autograph or two.

"Let me past! I have to talk to the Leader!" a thin female voice cried, "Let me through, Necronis take you kyrox-kellers!"

Jalsad caught a glimpse of a small, frail woman with bound eyes attempting to shoulder her way through the seething crowd. Then his view was blocked by bodies and hands brandishing scraps of paper.

"You've a lot of nerve comin' here, Seerkind-filran!" A hulking wharfie, as big as he was stupid, pushed the little woman back. "Go back to your kyroxiam!"

"Drop dead or get out of my way, you waste of DNA!" she snarled, trying to push past him and lose herself in the crowd. She found her way blocked by a huge, sweaty torso.

"What was that you called me, filran?"

She gulped, hoping the Leader's presence would prevent the burly wharfie from reducing her to a bleeding pulp. Seer-bashing was the latest wharfie craze. "Touch me and you'll regret it," she said, her sightless eyes seeming to glare at him through their shroud.

"Oh yeah?" the wharfie growled. "I suppose your Sight told you that, eh?"

"Yes." She flipped her staff up between his legs, where it struck his groin with a satisfying thud. He folded, groaning.

The little seeress would have managed to escape if another docker hadn't seen her dispatch his friend. Enraged, he grabbed a couple of mates, and they surrounded her, blocking off her escape.

"Dosta," she swore, realising the crowd had swept Jalsad away.

The man she'd struck painfully straightened up and lumbered towards her, hands fisted. She tried to back off, sensing the punch's approach, but too many bodies blocked her way. The massive blow hurled her to the hard, cold concrete, head spinning, ears ringing.

A shrill scream rent the air.

"Get *back!*"

Jalsad saw the swirl of bodies before any more harm could come to the seeress. He watched the bully step back, readying himself to drive a steel-capped boot into the old woman's frail ribs. He witnessed the wharfie's movements clearly-

-despite the fact he was facing the other way.

Jalsad's Sight was never wrong.

As he turned he screamed, "Get *back!*" and pointed.

The crowds scattered, screaming at the sight of Jalsad's outstretched finger. The didn't need the Sight to know what was to come.

The Leader tensed as the psychic discharge leapt from his outstretched digit, locking all the muscles in his right arm. The lightning snarled across the cleared street and slammed into the wharfie's side as he started to turn. The man crashed to the ground unconscious, lightning sparkling and crackling all over his body. Jalsad hurried to the seeress's side.

The old woman heard approaching footsteps, and immediately knew who they belonged to. "My Leader!" she gasped. "I guess I should've seen that one coming, eh?" She rubbed her aching jaw.

"Are you badly hurt, sister?" he whispered.

"Just my pride."

He helped her to her feet. "I'd tell the whole world I have the Sight if I thought it would make a difference."

"You'd be thrown off the Great Council for sure," the seeress muttered. "I'm grateful for what you did for me, but the general public won't react so favourably."

"I know," Jalsad said sadly. "But this whole affair just makes me so *angry*. I don't know how Adelrid got away with what he did. Time-bubble theory?" He threw his hands into the air as the Half-caste Team approached, confused by the bizarre twist of events. "Complete nonsense! What is it you wanted to tell me, Meljana?"

She grinned and touched the Leader's gold Kamryte earring. "About your quarry, Ky. The half-caste ... Rhys Kelly."

"What about him?"

"A kyrox has him."

"*What?!*"

Meljana continued to smile as the members of the Half-caste Team joined them.

"You're joking!" Manreth gasped. "A kyrox? But they don't eat Li Kari!"

"I only know what I saw. While Rhys was crossin' the valley behind Verhuil's Circle, this huge hairy brute swooped down behind him, extended its claws and-

"I don't want to hear any more!" Manreth cried in horror.

"If we go now, we can still save him." Meljana nudged Manreth's mindwave detector with her staff. "Use your machine."

Manreth glanced down at the reading. "Twenty-one point sixty seven percent, and still dropping - but he's alive!"

"Not for much longer," Ranados announced. "Kyroxes usually kill their prey when they get back to the clan-nest."

"Thank you for that interesting tidbit of information, Ranados," Peldira growled.

"What by Eridos are we doing dawdling here for?" Jalsad shouted. "Let's go! Come on, Meljana." He took the old woman's arm and headed off. The others followed.

5

An Eridon, jerked from the sweaty embrace of a young maynari by screams outside, hurried to the brothel's foggy window. He pushed it open and peered down into the smoky street below. When he saw the Leader blast a wharfie into unconsciousness from a hundred metres away, waves of dark jealousy consumed him. "How can an old man like Jalsad Varen be so strong?" he hissed.

As he watched the Leader help an old woman to her feet, the maynari peered around his shoulder.

"Kamrys," the prostitute breathed, "The Leader! That must have been some fight!"

"The Half-caste Team!" The Eridon strained to see further. "What are they doing down here this time of night? Didn't they get temporary suspension of privileges?"

"I dunno. Come back to bed." The maynari tugged his arm. He threw the whore's hands off and began to struggle into his clothes.

"Don't go yet," the maynari pleaded.

The Eridon yanked on his boots. "I'm sure you'll find someone else to warm your bed." He headed for the door.

"What about my money?"

"Wasn't a chance with me payment enough?" His dark eyes glinting wickedly, the Eridon shoved the prostitute in the chest, knocking him onto the floor.

"Thief! Delsheron! Dosta-yur!" The maynari shook a furious fist. "I hope yer k'fia eridyas rots off!"

Ignoring the insults, the Eridon hurried through the maze of buildings and alleys he knew better than anyone, heading towards the gigantic floodlit Time-Control Centre.

6

After Jalsad, the Half-caste Team and Meljana the Seeress had climbed aboard the skimmer, the small craft took off and streaked into the dark night sky. A glowing ribbon of ionised particles from its anti-gravity pods dispersed in its wake. There would be no sleep for any of them until they rescued the half-caste.

7

No-one aboard the Leader's skimmer knew that a spy, sent by the great Kara Adelrid Merylon himself, was following at a discrete distance.