

- Aatol -

by Tim Machan

Note: UNEDITED COPY

He was tired. "It's just another mission," they'd told him. "A tough one," they'd said, but that was nothing new for him. Then it had happened, what seemed an eternity had only been three days mind-linked to a clone. It had been tough, nothing like anything he'd experienced before. It had started like just another mission to yet another remote corner of the universe to test, search for or contact yet another new species. But, it hadn't ended like that. When he'd landed the shit had hit the fan big time. Captured, he'd spent his days and nights in anguish and pain. His masters had subjected him to this spectacular experience with their own grandiose purpose in mind.

The concept was to test him without risk, establishing a link between human and a clone so real that the human would have no idea that the clone was experiencing the reality they had constructed. Aatol thought he was suffering, but it was the clone who was tortured. Their plan worked they had been able to press a human's mind beyond its limits, but without destroying it. For Aatol, in retrospect it had been an intimate connection with a body that had not been his. The torture had been real, a bizarre form of sensory depravation, yet with blinding pain. Disoriented, and alone his mind traveled to edge of, and finally over the brink into the black whirlpool of insanity. When the link was broken, the clone suffered the indignities of scientific surgical dissection. Aatol drained, recovered. He knew he's always be able to feel what it had been like, and he knew that even though he'd survived, that something of his mind had been lost never to be reclaimed.

But luckily, now, he was on his way to home!

Home wasn't really the name of the planet he'd "visited" thirty long years ago and where he'd build his home. It was his favorite place in the universe, and he sat in the transport and longed to be in his house near the sea.

After landing and being greeted by his house people, Aatol slipped out of his protective space suit, the one he had to wear unless he was in the controlled environment of his house, and put on only a thin silken robe which he secured with a sash. Time for the sunset! he thought.

The paired stars shone weakly through the heavy lavender atmosphere of this planet his home, Clareon.

Aatol had walked the short distance down one tunnel of his dwelling, and now strode into one of his habitat's transparent domes, one at the end of a long tunnel which had been burned right out of solid granite. The dome hovered fifteen feet over a wild flower field. Aatol thought he could almost smell the sweet aroma of the glistening blossoms around him. Beyond the meadow, only one hundred feet away a cliff dropped away. Far below in the distance, an angry dark green sea assaulted the black granite. There must have been quite a storm, he thought, noticing that a number of older flowers had their stems broken and were bent towards the ground. Just as this thought crossed his mind, a "ground crew" arrived at the damaged plants. Three squat cylindrical beasts seemed to almost pop up out of the ground. The lids on top of each opened and their sticky tentacles looped around the broken stems. They quickly ripped the flowers out of the ground and dragged the plant into the waiting mouth under the lid. The three grounds keepers, as Aatol lovingly called them, disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

"Excuse me sir?" a tentative soft voice called to Aatol. A voice that came from behind him, from the tunnel opening he'd just exited.

"Yes, Baba," Aatol answered, recognizing the voice of the eldest of his house people.

"Sir, I've brought you a beverage. Would you like it?"

"Why thank you Baba, I was about to call for one," Aatol answered. Of course, he hadn't really been about to do so, but he knew that his words would not only please the old woman, but also shorten her interruption of his privacy. "You can place it over there," he indicated a low table next to his favorite chair, one he knew he would soon occupy, the chair in which he knew he would sleep tonight.

A three foot two woman of incalculable years of age walked quietly into the room and hastily placed a tall cobalt blue glass onto the table that Aatol had indicated. "If you want a late sup, please just call," she added.

"Thank you Baba, but the in-flight food, although not nearly as good tasting as yours, was nearly forced down my throat by that medical crew that brought me home.

"Oh sir, I was so glad to see that they left you here alone."

"I couldn't agree more... Now, I'd just like to rest quietly and watch the suns..." Aatol was tired, and the trailing off of his voice, and its distant intonation was his hint to this caring old housekeeper that he just wanted to be left alone. On other similar occasions, she would have insisted that he tell her all about of his latest adventures, but this evening, she knew to leave him in peace. Baba shuffled out of the room, and Aatol was again alone.

After standing looking at the colorful flowers in bloom, Aatol settled into a large soft recliner. He spent the better part of two hours going back over the experiment to which he had been subjected. Because he resented the treatment which he and the clone had received, he sought to find way to give greater meaning to the event. It took time, but Aatol found that which he needed, a manner by he was able to design a new level of offence and defense within his mind based on the experience. Having given the death of the clone higher purpose, he allowed his mind to rest, focusing his attention on the beauty beyond the dome.

The suns were now almost set, the lavender ground gasses of the early evening had almost risen to touch the bottom of Aatol's dome, but his mind was now focused far from them. Even though his eyes seemed focused on the deep crimson and green sunset, Aatol's mind began to drift far away . . . Just as the fatigue from his long journey home overcame him, a low beep sounded from a wall communications plate. The beep was accompanied by a flashing purplish red strobe which lit the room. Although intended to awaken him, this alarm went unanswered as Aatol blended its sound and illumination into the dreams of a restless sleep.

"No answer yet?" questioned Malvina.

"No mam, none" replied her aid.

"Do we have any conventional ships in the area?"

"The transport he took on the way out is near, but unfortunately it's drive is antiquated."

"How antiquated?"

"Course reversal would be excessively time consuming."

"How excessively?"

"The soonest it could effect a pick up is forty two hours." "And with the latest update on the situation, we need him here tomorrow . . ." Malvina thought out loud.

"There's a jump ship near enough to get to him in ten hours," noted Raquell.

"Well, we don't like to upset planetary orbits, but I guess we have no choice. Call in the order and I'll sign off on it."

"Yes Mam"

'I sure hope that the PPC doesn't ream us for this one,' Malvina thought to herself. 'Hell, we don't even know if Jussard is even ready to take this on . . .'

"A jump ship!? Right into the heart of his system!? Did I hear you right!?" screamed Wheaton.

"Yes sir."

"Do those idiots have any idea just what that's going to do to Clareon?"

"I believe they know sir," replied the nervous officer who had just informed the committee chairman of the Planetary Planning Consortium of the plans to transport Aatol from his present location to the labs.

"But we're talking about the ending of tens of thousands of species, millions of creatures!" Wheaton was beside himself with anger. "Those tunnel visioned brain burners have no right, I'll block the flight!"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that sir."

"WHAT!"

"The jump ship's due in the Clareon System in twenty minutes."

"Denti? Got a fix on his place?"

"Sure boss, but it's not going to be an easy one!"

"Data?" asked the pilot, Renald. "Sealed environment built right into granite cliffs"

"Airlocks grade ten or above?"

"Yeah, but it looks like he's got access eleven locked out!"

"How can that be?" "Jussard's the whiz kid who built the place, not one of the standard engineers . . ."

"So? . . . " "He's kind of customized his security ."

"Kind of?"

"Yeah, he's got unregistered BPs"

"Hey, no one, not even the Presidium's top brass, have blue prints that are secret."

"Well, I can only tell you that once we drop in, he's going to have to let us in."

"And he hasn't even acknowledged the communiques?"

"Not theirs, not ours."

"OK, so we might not be welcome."

"No, we're NOT going to be welcome."

"How do you know that?"

"We're going to bump his rest world with a push of seven point oh nine, and you wonder why I know we're not going to be welcome?"

"OK, so we're going to push his little world a little."

"A little? A six point two took down a twin star system with ten planets that had been stable for seventy six billion years."

"So, he's not going to like us. Is it our job to make him like us, or just to go in and get him?"

"Ours is not to reason why . . ."

"Old song, same tune . . . How long until the bump?" "Looking at sixteen and ten"

"Give me a fix on where Clareon's going to go when we hit it."

"Right about there." Denti told Renald, as the navigation officer projected an image onto his captain's head's up display.

"Wow, that is going to be one hell of a bump!"

"We're making history."

"Shit, we're either going to make it, or be it!"

WHOOMP! The room in which Aatol was sleeping shuddered violently. "What the FU . . ." Aatol began, but never finished his words, as he found himself suddenly plastered against the ceiling of his domed study. Several gees forced the air from his lungs. He lost consciousness two seconds later.

Imagine, considering some knowledge of planetary dynamics, what it would be like to suddenly shove the room you're in right now four hundred miles due west in the next twenty seconds. Seven gees plus

would take your body and the contents of your room and force them due east against a wall. If you were lucky to survive the battering you might take from the furniture breaking apart against you while on that wall, you'd be experiencing the forces exerted on Aatol at this moment.

If Clareon wasn't a planet afflicted by severe tidal earthquakes, Aatol would have already died. However, his habitat had been built to withstand the shocks that regularly shook the planet. The furniture was all secured to the floor and only a few stray articles either plastered themselves to the ceiling along with Aatol, or smashed themselves to pieces around him. The cobalt blue glass missed ending his life by ten inches as it thudded heavily to his right. Luckily, being knocked unconscious spared Aatol the sight of what took place outside of his dome. In an instant, his planet was stripped of its atmosphere, which now trailed out behind the planet's mass now accelerating out of orbit. The plants, ground keepers and rest of Clareon's creatures outside of his citadel all lived for approximately three seconds.

The massive jump ship Avion was a spacecraft capable of exceeding the speed of light utilizing Continuum Displacement. In order to reach Aatol as quickly as possible the flight plan for the Avion did not allow for the usual arrival well away from planetary systems. The Avion's arrival therefore disrupted the time space continuum and the physical shock of its arrival "bumped" Clareon right out of its orbit. Usually the bump dispersed safely, rippling into the void well away from inhabited worlds. Unfortunately for Clareon, the Avion had dropped into the Clareon System in what was the only manner suitable to effect the timely pickup of Aatol Jussard.

FOOMPH! Renald and Denti and a crew of eleven others were spared the violent jostling that Aatol was experiencing, because they were protected in fluid filled cocoons. The computers feed full of the orbital data and planetary composition detail were hard at work coordinating the data of the actual "bump" with the one it had hypothesized only minutes before. This was necessary in order to allow the jump crew to locate Jussard's hideaway before the instability the bump had caused took full effect. What the computers projected was two minutes in which the containment holding Aatol could be locked onto and bubbled in an energy shield so it could be blown free of its granite anchoring. Then the jump ship would envelope that in its own field and jump back away from the planet. Aatol had his habitat both well constructed and well secured, so while one minute and twenty seconds had gone by, the crew of the Avion still hadn't been able to activate the bubble.

"SHIT!"

"What?"

"We're headed toward the outside of the envelope on this one!"

"Are you telling me we're going to lose him?" Renald asked Porick who was overseeing the automated sequencing of the snatch.

"Ten more seconds and the numbers will begin to work exponentially against us!" "That's three gone by already! MAKE IT WORK!", yelled Renald. 'Damn, I haven't spent ninety six years getting ready for failure of this magnitude,' he thought as he contemplated what would be like to report negative results to his superiors. His thought was interrupted by a cry - -

"GOT HIM!"

"DO IT THEN!"

"It's going down in three ... two ... one ..."

KABLAMM! The room turned on its side and Aatol slid forty feet to his right, he accelerated into a rounded seam that was unforgiving. CRACK! Aatol lost the better part of half of one lung and most of his ribs on his right side while suffering a major bludgeoning of his skull. It luckily didn't fracture.

FLAOOMPH! A glowing ball encircled Aatol's habitat.

five men and three women. Renald headed the table with Sharor to his right, and Denti to his left. Aatol, who looked rather battered and weary, sat opposite the Jump Ship's Chief Officer, .

'I wonder how they're going to get him ready for the mission,' wondered Renald after looking over the reports that now lay strewn across the table in front of him. 'And I wonder just how effective he can be after what we put him through.'

In almost a whisper, Aatol said, "It was Nibos, Sharor."

"What did you say?" the startled officer questioned.

"I said it was Nibos, not Mindos"

Sharor mouth agape, stared at Aatol, momentarily transfixed, as the words registered.

"Are you saying that you just remembered that the word Sharor shouted, the word after which, you decided to believe him was wrong?" questioned Renald.

"No, I knew it was wrong when he said it, that's why I asked him to explain."

"So your finger stayed on the trigger longer than you lead us to believe."

"As long as you had me in my dome, I could have winked out our lives in an instant."

"Why are you telling us this now?" Sharor asked having, recovered from the shock of Aatol's words.

"Well, that's just to let you all know ... Renald, Denti, Sharor, Mitchell, Darlos, Helenea and Farkop," Aatol paused after saying each name slowly while looking face to face to each of the men present and the holographic transmitted images of the three women at the table. "That every detail of every mission is important."

"Please make your point, Commander," requested the female image named Darlos, who wore an impressive black satin uniform unlike those worn by all the others present.

"Your mission to come and get me has cost dearly ..." Aatol began.

"We've told you that we had no alternative method to get to you faster ..." interrupted the image Helenea, dark haired, and a tall stately looking older woman uniformed in gray.

"None," said Aatol flatly, obviously rejecting for the third time this premise.

"None!" reinforced Darlos.

"Jussard," Farkop interjected. "This all has no bearing on the reason for this meeting."

"Dear Madam Farkop," Aatol began icily, "You have no idea just how wrong you are. What you did boggles my mind. If, and I do wish this were true, if an enemy of mine did one tenth of what you did, I'd fry him or her, his or her control, and his of her home world!" Aatol wasn't shouting because he was far too weak to do so, yet the anger in his eyes bespoke of his fury.

"Jussard, you're out of order," Farkop stated.

"Is destroying a world out of order?" Aatol countered.

"It had to be done!"

"HAD TO BE DONE?" fired Aatol, while seeking to lock eyes with the image named Farkop, while raising his voice to the highest volume he was able.

"Yes! Had to!" "WHY!?"

"A sixty-seven percent failure rate on a fringe world," answered Farkop.

'Sixty-percent?' wondered Renald, amazed at this extremely high rate of implant failure.

Aatol, who had been livid a moment before, simply seemed to freeze.

Sharor and Denti were shocked.

After a few seconds passed, Aatol asked, "How sure are they that it isn't just an epidemic like that had on Yuriard?"

"Ninty eight percent plus," Farkop responded.

"Meteor? Sunspot?" Aatol still questioned.

"Neither, nothing natural is causing it," Darlos stated. "Renald, give him report A21 point 641."

After shuffling through the reports on the table in front of him, Renald slid the report to Aatol, via Sharor. The report was covered with gold foil and across the face of this cover was a black band.

'Priority Eleven?' wondered Sharor as he dutifully passed the thin report to Jussard.

Picking up the report, Aatol was torn. On one hand he wanted to lash out at the people, no matter who they were who had ordered his rest world destroyed. On the other, he was taken by the firm stand taken by these around him and now the report in hand. Also noting the high priority marking affixed to the paper, he opened the cover. The first page was the usual warning against breaking the seal holding the reports pages together. Somewhat out of frustration, he tore at the sealing band roughly. It broke, but not before crumpling the rest of the pages.

Farkop was startled as she saw Aatol's rough action with such a valuable report, but held her own anger in check, keeping in mind just how tumultuous and disastrous the last few days had been for him.

It took Aatol only three minutes to scan the information the report contained. No matter how difficult it should have been to control his emotions in regard to the last few days, Aatol's conditioning took over after he finished reading the data and looking at the graphs. His cool calculating mind went hard to work on the mission that now faced him. He looked up at Renald, Denti and Sharor, and ordered, "Commander, you and your men are excused."

It was hard for Renald to take orders from Aatol, but the report that was now in Jussard's gave him authority, almost above that of the three highly placed women who almost seemed to be physically present. As he stood to leave, Renald spoke to his men, "Denti, Sharor, anything Commander Jussard requires is his as though I gave the order, is that clear?"

Both officers nodded as they rose to join their ship's commander. Only Sharor spoke to Aatol who was again scanning the report.

"Commander Jussard, I am sorry about Clarion ..."

"That no longer matters," Aatol replied seemingly without emotion. He didn't even look up. "Please seal this room, Level Eleven." "Yes, Sir," Denti replied.

The Jump Ship's Commander, and second and third in command left the room, puzzled.

When Aatol saw the projections of the three women fade and heard the clicks indicating that audio channels had now been specially scrambled, he spoke. "So, it's happened," he said matter of factly.

"We believe so," Farkop's voice replied.

"All the indicators point to it," added Helenea.

"Darlos, what about your input?" Aatol asked the military commander.

"I wish it hadn't come this way."

"Meaning?"

"We've no telemetry, no concrete data, only concrete mysteries."

"And you, Mitchell?" Aatol quizzed.

"Science and Religion together never could answer everything."

"Now you know why Clarion had to be sacrificed."

"That no longer matters." repeated Aatol flatly. Then after a moment's pause, added, "So, we only have the answer So, we only have the answer to the question, where?, right?"

"No Aatol, two answers, where and who," replied Farkop.

Aatol didn't delay, "I'm ready," he replied.

Denti, quizzed Renald. "What's this all about?"

"It's all on a need to know basis."

"Meaning I don't, need to know?"

"No, meaning, you not only don't need to know but you don't want to know." He paused then added, "And Sharor, none of your questions will be answered either."

"Commander, I trust your judgement implicitly."

"Don't try to bullshit me Sharor. After you lucked out getting Jussard out of that dome, you shouldn't press your luck further or anything else for that matter."

The threesome continued quietly to the command bridge of the jump ship. They'd worked well together, but the circumstances of the meeting placed a strain on them which none greeted. They'd never felt barriers of any nature in their command group. Each silently resented the mission and Jussard.

In the meeting room, Aatol asked Farkop, "Alteration?"

"Major"

"How soon?"

"The surgical jump ship should hit you in roughly ten minutes."

"After alteration?"

"Renald will jump you to your destination."

"No launch vehicle?"

"No time."

"Insertion craft?"

"Something new"

"What's the risk level of taking me in that way?" "Unknown," Farkop answered.

"In that case I have all the information I'm going to get. May I rest?"

"We'll leave you here, but make sure you're locked in."

"Thank you"

"Good luck Jussard"

"I'll take as much of that as I can get."

"We know you'll need it"

"Thank you"

The room around Aatol fell silent. The last sounds were those of the communications links clicking off and a soft hiss as the seat in which Aatol sat near soundlessly slid a padded lap and chest restrainer into place to protect him from the coming event, a head rest also slid up behind his head and a soft headband slipped over his head and tightened.

In the bridge, each console was responding the same way, and a loud alarm was sounding throughout the mammoth ship, sending to their action stations.

The Continuum disturbance which shook the jump ship was like of a severe earthquake. The first shock was the most severe, and after it hit, everyone in the ship braced themselves against forces unseen. Renald, who was usually in control of the movements of his ship, was perhaps the most uncomfortable as he was bounced around in his seat. The padding reduced the initial shock and following ripple shocks so that they didn't hurt him. He found the minutes before the last of these from the arrival of the surgical jump ship nearly intolerable. 'Now I have an idea what we put Jussard through,' he thought. 'The poor bastard never knew it was coming and was completely unprotected. If it hadn't been a planet being bumped, he would have been squashed!'

As soon as it was safe, Aatol was taken to the second ship by shuttle where he was taken directly to a special surgical suite where a surgical team went to work immediately. Little information was given him except that he would be drugged unconscious not only for the duration of the operation, but also until he was inserted.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" he argued. "What if something develops where I'm on my way

down that I should be aware of?"

The surgeon in charge, answered, "There'll be no telemetry coming in, Farkop blew the pickups hours ago."

"How many units?"

"Six thousand"

"That's one out of every one five thousand 'Inhabitants'! Doesn't that seem a little risky?"

"Aatol, I am but a pawn ..."

"Never mind," interrupted Jussard. He fell silent for the next twenty minutes as he was prepped. 'Damn disturbing news,' he thought.

As he was put under for the altering operation, he though he saw something odd being moved into the operating room, but he was so far gone that he just relaxed and let the drugs do their work

Half a day later, a container forty feet long and twenty square was off-loaded from the surgical ship to the Renald's jump ship.

"What the hell?" Denti expressed seeing the size of the unit.

"Remember," Sharor kidded, "no questions will be answered."

"Actually, you could go ahead and ask," Renald chimed in, "I haven't the foggiest idea either."

"They don't think you need to know what you're loading into your cargo hold?" Denti asked.

"I don't want to know," replied Renald.

"If I can make an observation?" Sharor wondered.

"Yes, you may," Renald answered.

"Damn queer!"

"Damn right!" added Denti.

"I guess we all share the same opinion about this mission," suggested Renald.

Now the tension had been building between the last twenty hours broke as all three simultaneously bellowed, "IT SUCKS!" Looking at each other, they laughed for about thirty seconds, then as the bizarre struck home, they sobered.

"Shit that thing smells, one technician remarked to another as they loaded the insertion craft with its passengers."

"Can it Geo!"

Geo, not to be silenced, responded, "What you gonna do put me in prison?"

The technician was taunting his team leader, who wasn't to be trifled with today.

"Yeah, something like that is in the stars."

"Hey man, wadda mean?" asked another of the team.

"Well, don't blame Geo, but the pisser is that after we drop this thing outta here, we're going into quarantine."

"Hey! I thought that this was low risk transfer!" complained yet another technician.

"Look guys," the green eyed woman answered, "I don't make the rules, I just follow them.

Anyhow, it ain't a medical quarantine!"

"What the fuck!?" Geo complained.

"Hey baby," green eyed Rady taunted, "It ain't like it's just you. We're take'n everyone."

"Ok, so the seven of us load this ship, then it good night."

"No, Geo, then its good night for the whole ship."

"Like a said at first, this stinks!"

The team fell silent as they finished prepping the lander for its insertion flight.

"Explosives?" exclaimed Denti.

"Landing zone sterilization? They aren't foolin' around," stated Sharor flatly.

'Boots of Lechon's Bark woven to keep the heat from the trail.' answered the creature.

'Shit,' Aatol thought, dropping his thought level even lower. 'The damn thing is becoming more sensitive! Or will it be just during this protective state?'

'Cool the trail!' This had been a lesson from Korlun. We can't travel to communicate without covering our trail. The Sors can follow the track of the slowest Belok from under its rock to where it dies two days after the carcass has been eaten. Carefully cool the trail, or you will be a Sors' plaything! Luckily, with hoofs covered, Zebish'd touched nothing on the trail ... were there "arms" padded when he had reached for the Berroot? Shit! No wonder the Searcher is looking so hard!

The faint heat track had begun nowhere, then had extended up a section of the cliff face. No normal creature dwelling in this zone could have made it, they'd been told, so scan carefully. The heat track hungered the craft's leader, he'd become ready for a kill, a carcass to take back and present to Warthout. Oh Great One, the animal ran so we had to disable it ... Oh yes, then it had tried to tear loose from the nets, so unfortunately, we'd had to harpoon it ... We are sorry that the harpoon touched the circ- organ. We tried to bring it back to life. See how we cut it open! What a story it would make, and all a story woven out of lies. Oh, to taunt, to make it hurt, to KILL will feel so good!

Loud noises, bright lights outside his night's sanctuary, luckily deep inside the crevice out of sight, hopefully undetectable!

Misfortune for the Trelig, it had wandered up the path in its old age. Trembling where it hid under a shelf when the Searcher arrived, the large animal began to lose its grip. With a sudden shower of rock, it fell from above and half a mile to the right of the crevice where Aatol hid. Unfortunately not far away enough from Aatol's hiding place for its motion to be undetected.

Suddenly, the noise and light ceased! Why?

The craft banked back away from the cliff face and bore down on the old Trelig. The old animal accelerated down the dark black face of the cliff. After it dove downward, it dared to open its ninety foot gliding wings which swept the cold night air and slowed its descent as it dove down the cliff face trying not to be seen by the Searcher. Brushing the base of the cliff, the old but wise animal utilized every trick it knew to avoid being seen. But luck was not of its side, the Searcher homed in on its trail and dove after it.

The Sor leader now knew why the heat trail had appeared out of nowhere. He also knew how much fun it was to hunt Trelig! Young ones just panicked and tried to fly away. This had to be an old one! More fun, more fight in the old ones, they thought they were smart. Playing with his quarry like it was a toy, the Sor followed far behind it, then closed the gap, backed off and then repeated the trick.

The huge Trelig flew like an ominous grey bat, flew for its life, and hoped to reach a haven. A few existed near, places where the crevices bore into the cliff face like tunnels, tunnels that interconnected, and if he reached Melich's Rest, which was near, he could stop flying and run ...

The Searcher craft after playing with its prey had moved high above and now descended, its hover tubes' hot draft drove the Trelig into the ground where its left wing snapped. Unable to draw it in properly to be able to run, the Trelig began to flop about. The Searcher landed a short distance away and three smiling Sors walked slowly its way to finish the kill.

attack vessels without enemies. Its shielding was not only minimal, it had never been used before, so the ship simply disintegrated. One moment a dark shadow above, now a falling rain of burning debris.

Unaware of the demise of the ship above, and taking no chances because other ships were usually soon to arrive, the creatures continued their flight in both directions along the underside of the purple flow. They scurried with or against the flow looking for places of turbulence where they could make their way upwards and to the cover of the landscape.

"Send a flotilla!" Warthout screamed when he heard that a ship had been lost. "Better yet, scorch the area!"

"Yes lord," his commanding general replied.

As General Gre walked away, he called to his legions. A suicide ship was quickly made ready and a pair of dedicated high order pilots ran to it.

"In the name of Warthout!" they shouted as they saluted.

In the bowels of a stormy mountain, ten Wors in red and gold uniforms marched to their ship. For years they had excelled in performance for their lord. Now, given the chance, they would enter their death ship and fly to where ever ordered and blow themselves to oblivion without hesitancy.

They fled as did Zebish. All knew that penetration from above was only a calling card from Worthout.

Aatol, still a bit surprised by the events past, watched in awe as the massive beast navigated the river bottom, always maintaining a safe distance from the purple ribbon above. As the river twisted and turned, Zebish matched its course. The planets mantle was composed of hardened volcanic rock and a dense granite-like material. When Zebish missed a stroke with her powerful hind leg that now showed its three large toe like projections and the webbing between. Somehow, the beast can 'swim' through the softer ground! Even though she could "see" through all the materials around her, Zebish was only able to move through the less dense ground. Above, the purple band flowed as a sped far above that of the creature. It appeared as though it was glowing and here and there, there were sparkling lines of brightness. Zebish swam faster than many of the villagers, and soon, only a few were felt to be ahead.

After what seemed to be two hours, the sounds of those ahead lessened. Minutes later, Zebish came past their exits. They passed a place that looked familiar. Hours before, they'd dove through a whirlpool, and here again was another, smaller, yet like what he'd seen before.

"Not big enough"

"What Zebish?"

It was the first time she'd spoken to Aatol since the mating. "We cannot go through there!"

"Why do we need to?"

"Warthout knows where to look for us, and we need to get out so we can fly away."

"How does he know?"

"He's getting better at tracking us, soon we may not be able to survive."

"How far have we come?"

"Not far enough!"

"Why not?"

"Scorch!"

Aatol didn't have to ask. It was the single most universal term throughout the universe. From "fry" and "bake" to "burn" or "scorch", it always meant that someone had harnessed the elemental fabric of

'They are also below.'

'Zebish,' Aatol warned. 'If they go out, we'll die.'

'No death now,' the shadow stated flatly. 'Now show me from where you come.'

'How?' Zebish asked.

'Think it and I will see it.'

There appeared the image of the lay of the land before the dive into the village. Two suns still were aloft, and at that, Zebish stopped.

'From THERE you come?'

'That is the place ...'

'Far below that is,' the shadow commented.

Aatol fell silent, realizing that without his link with this amazing beast he would have been lost in this land, let alone on this planet.

'Why are you here?' the shadow continued.

Another image appeared, the moment before the swirling blackness when Zebish dove towards one of the two whirlpools while fleeing the village. It was another brief flash of an image, but it brought the event into vivid focus for Aatol. He realized that something unlike anything of his worlds' technologies equated to what had happened, he fell silent.

'So, you came unaware through one of those,' the shadow continued. 'My help you'll need ...'

'Why did you come, why do you offer help, what is the price?'

Zebish queried.

'Your fight was to lose, yet you didn't lose hope, you showed valor in the face of death, most who die here give up when the numbers are high. I want to know how you continued.'

'You saved us because you are curious?'

'More than that, but we have to move.'

'Why?'

'Clean up crews are always attracted to a fight, they come from below and have no discretion between victor and victim.'

'Then what do the victors do to keep their prize?'

'Feed quickly or move parts to high places.'

'How high is safe?'

'Half the way up that.' The shadow somehow directed Zebish's attention to a treelike spire much like the one they had climbed.'

'They are that big?'

'No, they are bigger, just that's as high as they can reach ...'

Zebish tried to conceive of a beast that large. From where she came, only two other beasts were larger than she, and they were only marginally so. 'We move there!' the shadow motioned and drew Zebish along towards a cliff in the distance.

Aatol watched as they moved silently along the ground, behind, not a trace of their passage remained. And, where the fight had taken place, he saw the snow covered ground begin to shift. They were too far to see more, but Aatol saw two carcasses simply slide below the shimmering surface. Not a single sound, just the erasure of the beast and how it met its fate, it was as though the battle had never taken place. 'How bizarre, a place of desolate beauty where life and death pass without leaving their mark,' Aatol thought to himself.

The shadow moved carrying the weakened Casarack with it and contemplated. 'The things above must not know of this. It comes from the north and I know its arrival is important ... It is three but one is not from here ... How it got here and how it intends to leave -- This I must know.'

the Shadow bringing them under its cover she could only have faith that her dive was into the right place. She dove, and the world quickly changed color, first greeted by a tannish grey, she broke through that first layer into the area above the purple flow which was the color of blue ice. The flow was the largest she had ever seen, stretching to either side for what looked to be miles. She could not see its edges. Ahead was only the icy blue with the band of glowing purple stretching out of sight into the distance. She was used to swimming in a thick soupy material, here the blue was more a like a thick oil, the going was already more difficult than she had expected. Zebish noted that she was able to move at only about one third her usual pace. She attributed this too the icy material, in fact, her passage had she been uninjured would have been easier.

The Shadow, not knowing the usual speed of the beast felt the feelings above. 'We will move as best we can, the danger at the end of the journey will wait for us.'

The flow had never before been so disrupted. Often shifted, comparably a gentle nudge to what was happening on the plain. At first blocked by the energy of the initial explosion, it absorbed the power and from both side had tried to flow around the epicenter, however as it spread out, a strong new force applied itself. Like a whip, on each side of the explosion, it pulled the twin pairs of searching arms of the flow back together. In the past when this happened, the arms would rejoin by twisting together and rebonding, of course, in the past the interfering force had never been strong enough to block the flow. So, in the past the whiplash simply impacted the surface like a severe earthquake, and the bed in which the flow had moved for centuries was moved to a new location to one side or other of the initial disturbance. This time, with the interference continuing to present an obstruction, as the arms twisted back on each side of the site of the explosion, they each had snapped to opposite sides. With renewed force they each broke through around their respective sides. As the flow now rejoined, the site of the explosion became the center of an immense whirlpool without a Shard at its center. This created a vortex into which the flow was pulled, not diverted by a buffering Shard. As this vortex imploded it unleashed incredible amounts of new altered energies, energy which rippled the Continuum as it had never been before. As bad as it was, it was being added to by the ships sent by Warthout. The nearest Shards were saturated by the forces and spewed destruction in every direction. Bolts or blinding light, molten rock and plasma rocketed skyward and earthward.

The Shadow that had moved nearest the disturbance monitored it. It sent to its brethren all it saw and felt. Aatol's Shadow guiding Zebish listened and watched.

'This is not good, ' it thought. We are headed away from this area now, yet somehow I know we'll end up near it.'

In the icy blue Zebish above noted the thin arrow like ripple in the purple surface below her. From that place came the thoughts of the Shadow. Some she could hear and some she could feel. 'There is a disturbance?'

'Yes'

'Where?'

'From where you came.'

'Did I cause it?'

'It does not matter what caused it, we've seen this coming for along time. We've been able to disrupt Warthout, but we cannot stop him.'

'Can the man I carry do so?'

'His presence is important, I do not know if he alone can do this.'

'He believes he can.'

'Belief is not a thing that my being can deal with, so I can only guide and assist.'

'Do you know prayer?'

'It is linked with both your and his beliefs?'

more powerfully.

"This from the OKW Sir!" a communication officer relayed to the captain of the jump ship.

"Holy Shit!" the commander exclaimed.

"Put the ship on full alert, this is going to be a bumpy ride."

"Anything else sir?"

"Tell them to pray -- a lot!"

Had the captain not known all his crew so well, he would not have added this note.

'Shit! We'll be really lucky to get out of this one!' he thought as he looked back to the control panel in front of him.

An encapsulating shell closed around him as was happening at all the consoles around him. The few remaining crew not assigned to consoles, but with important roles, pulled on breathing devices as the rooms around them filled with a gelatinous fluid to protect them from the coming shock waves. It was to be like nothing they had ever felt before. Even the crew that had extracted Aatol from Clarion hadn't been subjected to the forces that were about to tear at the Jump Ship, Sibilis.

'Shadows?' Aatol cried out.

'Yes Jussard'

'Call Zebish, tell her to get to me fast!'

'We will try.'

'He need me!' Zebish responded, rushing out of her hiding place, and lashing out at the stunned Sors who remained, or dared impede her progress. Although the smells of fresh hot flesh made her want to feed, she knew that she had to reach Aatol. 'Is he injured?'

Aatol picked up several fully charged weapons and carefully picked his way higher up into the citadel. 'Awaken Darla!' he told the shadows. 'Have her ready to move.'

'We will try to comply,' came their answer.

The floor was shuddering under Aatol and he knew that the planet was in trouble.

'Tell me of the shock waves.'

'The valley of the village is no longer.'

'What?!'

'The flow has grown and moved through this planet for longer than our history,' the shadow voice came. 'Never has it been disrupted, now we fear the worst -- At that place it no longer flows, it now draws the life from the planet.'

'What is going to happen?'

'We do not know -- we only know that which has been set in motion has never happened before and the planet shakes.'

Zebish reached the ladder upward and seven rungs at a time rushed upward. Aatol was now crouching and firing at all that moved in his path, now only two levels from the highest floor of Warthout's retreat.

Karla almost swiped at the shadow being that awoke her. The transition from coma state to reality was difficult for an educated and trained Casarack, for Karla it was very disturbing.

"What?" she screamed as she came alert.

'You need to be ready!' the shadow thought to her.