

I.

“Lean back, and get some minutes’ peace”

Xchurch, New Zealand, Terra

Solday, 28 February TE 219

Danger!

Danger?

Maj Thovold pulls herself upright in her sleep cocoon. A meter-high tetrahedron of brushed metal glides noiselessly over, hovering half a meter off the floor. The autoservant, triggered by her movement, awaits her command. She waves it away.

What awakened her? Fragments of a dream still cling: giant spiders the size of her fist, hitting the ground and bursting into thousands of pinhead-sized babies — a hint of danger, a taste of anxiety — but what the cause?

For half a second she ponders calling her Ministers, Defense and Security and all the others, demanding of them the source of her anxiety. Then sense returns. They would only say that the Empress is having bad dreams again, humor her, the old gal is getting no younger. Senile hallucinations.

So what if the Empress is getting old? Her hunches have saved them all, time and again.

And yet there are bad dreams, more now than when she was younger.

Maj rolls out of the warm cocoon and pulls a light robe about her. Seeing that she is on her way to the balcony, five autoservants race ahead, an assortment of geometric shapes ready to jump at an instant in case of an assassination attempt. Once Maj used Human bodyguards — she finds the cybs much more reliable. Besides, the Empress has ways to defend herself.

The night sky is alight with stars in their thousands. To her right Maj sees the outline of the dome that covers the city Xchurch, the few lights that still twinkle under the dome. New Zealand followed standing orders in preparing for the Empress' visit; her temporary palace is well outside the city

dome. Maj doesn't like being within a city. She is always claustrophobic, knowing that a barrier stands between her and the open sky of a world. Never, in all her thousands of hours in Navy starships or within the curving walls of settlements orbiting free in space, has she felt the least bit cramped. Only on a world. Only under the domes.

She takes a deep, meditative breath and stretches, feeling for a moment like the reincarnation of one of her ancient Maori ancestors, come back through time and space to this valley once again. She smiles, and turns her eyes skyward.

Look at the stars, Ancestor, she says as if the flesh of her progenitor were before her. Alpha Centauri, Epsilon Indi, Epsilon and 40 Eridani...can you pick them out at the end of a pointing finger? They haven't moved since you sailed these trackless waters in your canoe. The centuries that separate you and I are nothing to the stars. Ah, but you have not seen the *worlds* of those stars, worlds that I have walked upon. Euphrates, Metikos, Flajol and Promethia — the massed cities and settlements of those planets, four billion souls owing allegiance to Terra and her Empire — and these are but the beginning.

Over twenty-five hundred inhabited worlds, Ancestor, and probably ten times as many settlements. Could I name them for you, even if I knew all their names? It would take far too long, and an Empress needs her sleep.

A sleepless night's worth of names, Maj thinks, hugging her robe about her. Hours and hours of planets all across the Galaxy, all members of the Terran Empire. And she, their Empress.

Nearly two trillion Human souls in the Galaxy: all served and protected, fed and kept happy, by the day after-day work of Mai Thovold and all her subordinates.

And not only this Galaxy alone. For our ships have reached further, and our explorers have stood on the shoals of other star-islands. You would be proud of us, my distant forbear who set out in a reed canoe to find a land you didn't know existed.

Maj squints — three corneal transplants make her eyes work, but nothing can ever make them see as they had when she was young, and she is too proud to use artificial aids — squints, and sees what she is looking for, two pale clouds of starstuff high in the heavens.

From nowhere, a shiver and a dream-memory come to her, and she stiffens. The Magellanic Clouds? Is *this* where the danger lies? Were those the Clouds in her dream, or just swirls in the turbulent atmosphere of almost any Terran world? And by what right does she place credence in the warning of what was, after all, only a dream?

"I am the Empress," she whispers, half to herself and half to her ancestor. "I do as I please."

Danger.

Maj frowns. Danger means change. And change all too likely means entropy. With war conquered and most forms of Human suffering under control, entropy is the last thing she wants loosed upon the Empire — and upon Humanity, for the two are synonymous. Maj Thovold bears entropy an antagonism almost personal. For entropy is the greatest enemy of this Admiral-turned-Empress.

She holds out her wrinkled hands, lets a rueful smile cross her lips. Entropy is winning the battle. Joints creak a little, these days, and too much dampness starts up unpleasant reverberations of pain in her bones. It is long past time that she should have something done, if she doesn't want entropy to claim another victory. With a word, the best gerontologists in the Galaxy are at her service.

Why bother? she fancies her Ancestor asking. She turns back to the city and the stars.

For them, Ancestor. For two trillion people who have yet to produce one among their number who could manage this Empire half as well as I. Because if I take my peace, the next day the chiefs of half a dozen Idara will be swarming over the Palace clawing one another for my position. And not one of them is strong enough to hold it, if she *did* manage to reach the Throne.

The balcony railing is comfortingly solid beneath hands that quiver a bit. We had the rule of the Imperial Council, nearly two centuries of constitutional oligarchy before I came along and took over. And it took twenty years to clean up the mess made by too many cooks. You didn't see it as I did, Ancestor. Some worlds where excess food went to waste as reaction mass, and others only a kiloparsec away where people starved, children with distended bellies and empty eyes, just because they were across a boundary of Idara control. Can I let that happen again, no matter what it costs me?

She lets a sigh join the night breeze. If danger is coming, from the Magellanic Clouds or wherever else, she must be prepared to meet it. To deal with the changes it brings. I am not dead, can not accept death — and a living being must respond to change.

At least it will — she can hope — break the daily tedium of the Imperial Court, the never-ending succession of crises which surround her.

The Magellanic Clouds. Hmm....

She limps back to bed, imagining relief in the way the guardian autoservants scurry back to their cubbyholes.

There are no more dreams that night.

II.

*“A star upon your birthday burned”
Tarantula Nebula, Large Magellanic Cloud
Solday, 28 February TE 219*

“Of course I’m a rebel.” Paula Adelhardt lifts a white, vaguely-spongy morsel to her mouth and sniffs. The same syntho-stuff as yesterday, with a flavor slightly reminiscent of fish and a texture like foam rubber. She gulps it down, makes a face, and takes a quick drink of water. With luck, the water in her bottle will last the meal. “I spent my formative years on Leikeis, remember, hotbed of the Engelbach Rebellion.”

“The Engelbachs never had a great following — and you can hardly call a tenday strike a rebellion.” For once Paula envies her companion, Drav Lokys. Cyborgs never eat. To be spared this meal, might be worth the transformation into a multi-limbed packing crate forever hovering on antigravs at just below eye-level.

“Nevertheless,” she continues, “When I came up the air was full of the Engelbachs and it was considered great fun to buck Authority. All the kids did it. Look at the holodramas of twenty years ago — we were raised on a steady diet of rebel, rebel, rebel.”

She brushes back her long ebony hair. “Of course, now we’re grown up and we *are* Authority. And now we have the chance we wanted all along, to change the system.”

Drav produces a laugh. “How much change do you think you’ll actually accomplish?”

She pushes her plate away into the grip of a hovering autoservant. “Probably only one in a thousand of us will ever amount to anything. I intend to be that one. Look at it logically — I’m in the best position to work massive change. Fifty kiloparsecs from home, out of contact with the Empire except for one mail ship every tenday; almost total command of a place that very obviously needs reforming...it would be harder to *avoid* accomplishing something.”

Drav laughs again, hovers forward. Then movement and sound stop. One of his cameras drifts away from Paula's face.

"What is it?"

Drav holds up one waldo, claw splayed. "Just a second." He floats poised almost like a dog straining after a distantly-heard twilight bark. Then both his cameras focus on her. "Get your vacuum suit on and follow me. We have trouble."

"What?" It still takes a conscious effort to reach for her vacuum suit, to pull the coarse fabric tight over her body. She'd been through tendays of drills before she even arrived, and they continued during the six tendays she's been here — but one became lazy, living in the Headquarters pressure-volume.

It is nearly ninety seconds before she closes the last seal and is ready to move against spring resistance of heavily-woven fibers. A little puter display within her helmet signals that her suit is properly sealed.

By this time Drav is halfway down the main corridor towards the docking bays. Paula trots to catch up with him. "What's happening?"

"Omega Sohrab has flared up." Strange to hear Drav's voice dimly carried through the permaplastic of her helmet as well as sharply on the comm. "It's been moving through the Web toward an inhabited volume for years now; the flare shell will reach those regions much sooner. We have to evacuate them."

They reach the docking bay, a cavernous space outlined with bright red guide lights. Four Imperial Navy Class G Troop Carriers and two Class N Gunboats are in dock. Paula unsnaps her datapad from her belt and punches an inquiry, smiles at what the tiny screen shows. The remaining two ships of her small fleet are on detached duty around the Nebula; they are answering the summons to Omega Sohrab and will arrive quickly, perhaps even before the main fleet.

She dashes aboard the Headquarters gunboat, *Quick Punch*, with barely time to greet the crew, then straps into an acceleration couch on the bridge. She grins. The six tendays

she's been in command of Tarantula Facility have all been like this, crisis after crisis. Through it all, she is learning more and more about the job that her father left in such a muddle. Soon, now, she should be able to start working on the real task, the reforms so desperately needed.

The boat launches.

The sky is bleached muslin in all directions, tinted here and there with rainbow streaks and jots and textured eddies that veil stars-to-be. Seen from within, the Tarantula Nebula is most impressive. Yet something else draws her eye and her mind. This chalk-picture beauty is everywhere overlaid with a tar-splatter of filament, reticule, and globule: the Web.

Debates still rage in the Empire, a generation after the Web's creation, about its nature. That it is organic cannot be denied — the genetic labs of Hlekkar and other settlements did their jobs well. Formed of complex molecules of nebular hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon — plus a smattering of other elements — the Web is a strong, flexible network of endless chains of self-replicating molecules that absorb starlight and use its energy to feed continuing growth.

The chemical nature of the Web is not at issue — detailed records and analyses are in the Imperial Library. But is the Web alive? It grows. It produces mutated sections beyond the predictions of its creators. It concentrates thinly scattered spaceborne molecules and produces atmospheres, proteins and amino acids, even a leavening of trace elements that serve to keep Human beings alive. Through a volume measuring over five hundred cubic parsecs and still growing, the Web stitches together a fragile set of environments that just barely keeps its inhabitants from death.

In all this immense volume, the Web takes on many forms. Tendrils stretch across lightyears, superconducting flashes of current; habitable regions hang suspended in the biospheres of newborn stars, with pockets of oxy-nitrogen and oxy-helium and water; apparently free-floating globules connect with the body of the Web by diamond threads, responding to light, heat, gravity, magnetism like colossal, fragile sensory organs

— and somewhere in the unexplored cubic parsecs of the Web are rumored huge lumps of tissue that resemble neural or circuit patterns, great brains the size of continents, dreaming their own visions incomprehensible to the maggots that crawl among their far-flung strands....

Quick Punch dips into tachyon phase and back out, lightyears in a few breaths. Omega Sohrab is a brilliant disk on the viewscreens, a disk with black cobwebs silhouetted against it and stretching behind it. All around the star is the chromatic beauty of gas-shells interacting with nebula dust and the fabric of the Web itself.

"Wolf-Rayet stars are like that," Drav tells her. "Too active for their own good — throwing off shells of atmosphere the way other stars throw off flares."

Paula shields her eyes and squints at the Web. "People should have known better than to settle this near to such an unstable star."

"They didn't have much of a choice. Omega Sohrab isn't motionless, you know. Most of the stars in this Nebula have irregular proper motions. Too much gravitational disturbance. They were safely beyond any shell-danger when they settled years ago. Sixty kilometers per second is pretty fast, when it's a star flying at your habitat and getting closer each day."

"We should have done something sooner." The inhabitants of the Web have no starships — which is the whole point of locating them in a dense nebula in the Greater Magellanic Cloud. No ships, terrific gravitational strain that would wreck any but the most durable antigravs, and throughout the whole galaxy a dearth of the vital and delicate tachyon vesicles so necessary to build antigravs and tachyon converters. After all, the Empire has a vested interest in seeing that none of the prisoners sent to the Web ever escape. Still, leaving the people without ships makes it even more necessary that the Empire be ready to succor them in situations like this one.

"If the star hadn't burped so far ahead of schedule," Drav says, his mechanical voice unemotional, "They would have been all right. As it is, we're here to rescue them now, so what

does it matter?"

As they speak, the rest of the fleet appears. All the Imperial ships in the Greater Magellanic Cloud are gathered here in this hollow of the Web.

The Captain leans forward in his command chair. "Jambo. What's that?" He touches his lapboard; one viewscreen zooms onto a section of the Web less than a million kilometers away, hours from the expanding gas shell. "That's in our records as the primary area of settlement here."

"What's going on?" Drav reaches out a waldo and plugs a contact into control panel before him; Paula imagines he's receiving visual impressions directly from ship's instruments.

The viewscreen image jiggles and fuzzes, then ship's comp firms it up. The magnification tightens, and Paula starts to get an idea of what she is seeing.

Diminutive Human figures in vacuum suits are tethered to the fibers of the Web, surrounding a large nodule of Web-stuff. They look like insects swarming on a tree, carpenter ants entering their burrows as they squeeze one-by-one into a hole in the nodule. At some signal, a few of the Humans stop the flow and seal the open hole. The remaining crowd draws back and the nodule stirs, tears itself free from the Web, and spreads a gigantic reflective sail that balloons out under light pressure. The irregularly-shaped nodule moves against the brightness of Omega Sohrab, while those left behind move on across the Web to another waiting nodule.

The view shifts; Drav points with a waldo. "Focus on that."

Another such nodule, this one with a fully-extended sail, much closer to the gas shell. The view hunts, and Paula sees yet another nodule, and another still further away, and....

"Ship says they're curving around the star just outside the gas shell. The outer surface of the nodules is ablative. If we could see beyond the star, I'll bet we'd see more of those hulks parabolizing around to the other edge of the Web."

"We just learned of the danger, and all this time they've been saving themselves." The orbits of those nodules have to be tendays long...Paula's mind boggles at the concerted effort

necessary to build and launch rescue vessels with no raw materials but the Web.

View returns to the original site. There are only a hundred or so people in evidence; they are busily clambering about a much smaller nodule.

Drav emits a sound of pity. "That final vessel isn't going to succeed. They miscalculated the star's eruptive period just as we did. The last three launched are going to be hit by the plasma shell."

"For gods' sakes, go rescue them. Put one troop carrier on each of those three nodules...tow them to a safe place where they can be released. "

Drav gives orders. "What about the people at the launch site?"

"We'll pick them up ourselves." Paula touches her own controls, recessed in the arm of her couch; the view zooms even tighter, reaching the extreme limit of magnification. One figure, in a bright red vacuum suit, is apparently in charge; she cannot distinguish a face, but every gesture carries command.

"That must be their leader. I want to talk with her." As the new Administrator of the Tarantula Facility, Paula needs to learn more about the lives and living conditions of the prisoners. If she is going to do any good in the long run, she needs to know what she fights against. Besides, the person who could lead a fantastic operation like this one, would be a powerful ally among the prisoners.

Antigravs surge, and *Quick Punch* moves toward the launch site as yet another part of the Web is consumed by Omega Sohrab's fiery breath.