

## Chapter 1

*The wisest saw most distant future. All Pressers could see the next step on the path. Some could see the nearest bend. The wise could spy the great horizon. The great one realized the end. Simultaneously, two Pressers reached to grasp the other's forearm.*

*"I see the finish," the elder exercised his right to opening words.*

*"A singular end of us all," the younger saw just as clearly. "Horrible!"*

*The elder waited for a future tangle to unravel. "In 6 springs, all that we know is gone."*

*"Where do we place our steps?" the younger one's voice was slow and sad. "I see no steps beyond the smooth wall."*

*"The end of us all still demands obedient steps," the elder's voice rose overpowering the younger. "Listen to this thought – for the first time in our lives, we perceive a difference in steps."*

*The younger felt a profound shock, but felt his heart quicken. "Does the elder see life?"*

*"I see only death," the elder's grip became gentler. "But, you must trust the steps I show you. You must reach for the unyielding wall in the place of a small crack."*

*A ghostly arm of the elder's spirit reached to the edge of vision. A course thread, buried and tangled within confusion, rose to the elders touch and was pulled taught for the younger to reach.*

*"This thread is odd, but it still leads to the finish," the younger traced along the length of the thread with his spectral touch. "Is there no other way?"*

*"Would you have us wander to the finish instead?" the elder moved to the younger Presser's place of thought – and felt a yield of will. "I tell you that the steps before the finish are the greatest of our race's history!"*

*"Our people will see this end later, as clearly as we do now!" the younger shook at the smooth wall beyond his thread. "Will they step the same way?"*

*"All see a personal finish when it is a few steps away," the elder's voice was soothing; he moved back to his thought place. "You will carry the burden of the steps until our kin see this end. When all see this finish, you and I can know that our kind has no regret with meeting that end."*

*"I follow my thread," the younger drew back his arm as he stepped away. Before his fingers parted with the elder he lowered his voice. "And you?"*

*"My silken thread that is easier than yours," the elder's hand swept over the tumult to lift a single, delicate line, "but it is so fragile! I wonder if my sight is keen enough..."*

*"I will meet you at the finish!" the younger called as the touch broke. "Fare well."*

A red glow spread beneath the keel of the silver craft as it scratched the atmosphere above Frobe's world. Though the private ship *Gash* could camouflage itself from sight and sink into the atmospheric soup of the gravity well, there was no need for stealth. *Gash* visited a world that could not see the telltale flare of conventional landing. No ear heard *Gash*'s low rumble. Frobe's world was a senseless place.

Within the shuddering craft, the lone human advisor gripped the arms of the acceleration seat and felt Frobe's millstone of gravity settle on his chest. Thad Jaron nervously bit a lip as the mission neared a climax. *Could the alien Pressers be captured and returned to Earth?* Thad could only imagine the worst in dealing with the Pressers.

Jaron's bony frame rattled within the too-large pressure suit. A few strands of black hair slid across his brow to flee a gleaming pate. As his right eye blinked at the poking hair, another pitch of the ship sent his teeth through his lower lip. Thad yelped in pain.

"Human draws first blood," the Oot's translator carried a degree of digital sarcasm, "on himself."

The metal-on-stone grinding laugh of the other Oot mercenaries echoed within the 8-meter box of the cargo bay. Jaron twisted in his seat to look at Fengor Ool, the Oot mercenary captain. Four slits of burning yellow glared at him from within the bony, black carapace of natural armor. Beneath the eyes, twelve white fangs extended past the sharp, serrated edge of the lower jaw. Red remnants of the hunter's last meal had dried on two blackened tusks.

"I don't want blood spilled on this mission," Thad shuddered as the captain's bright eyes suddenly darkened in Ootish anger. The human looked away from the stare that could not blink. Thad saw the tilted mane of fibrous quills about the Oot's head. *Never rub an Oot the wrong way* was the popular saying that came to mind.

"Blood of Presser is Oot matter," Fengor Ool lifted his upper lateral arm to point back to the four squat acceleration couches in the rear of the compartment. "Human picks four Pressers to be safe."

We Oot capture. No harm to four. The rest are game for us."

Jaron noticed that the Oot was standing on the rolling deck, and none of the eight arms, interior or lateral, held the metal tie-downs. The multiple Earth gravities of reentry barely swayed the 300 kilogram monster. The sudden curiosity triggered Faction, Thad's TobrNet implant. An anatomical drawing floated in his mind's eye and the data flowed into understanding. Using a long blink to shut out the fearsome image of Fengor Ool, Thad studied the image. The Oot counterpart of a human semicircular canal had its own cardiac muscle that kept the fluids constantly circulating under high pressure. It took more than the disorienting motion of reentry to unbalance an Oot.

"You know the Pressers hidden talent," Thad's worries returned as the ship's ride smoothed. "An entire army could be awaiting us. You have only four Oot."

*Four minutes until landing*, Faction was quick to anticipated his budding thought.

"Oot indestructible," Fengor Ool's lower left interior arm brought up a plasma rifle while the low right lateral struck hard against its chest carapace. The Pyros flame thrower nestled in the tight grip of the companion arm on the right gained a dent from the gesture. "Pressers have no metal. Stone is poor match."

*Never bring a rock to a plasma fight*, Faction hoped the dry comment would help his host's mood.

Jaron nearly smiled and settled back to recall Fengor Ool's personal file once more. *That one*, his phantom hand reached for a prominent icon within Faction's catalog. Closing his eyes to fully concentrate on the scene, Thad let the vision spring to life.

Fengor Ool was running over a scarred landscape: a battlefield littered with charred bodies and broken machines. The Oot's rear legs cast the black body 10 meters before the 8 arms dug into the ground to maintain breakneck speed. With a mighty bound, Fengor Ool topped a low wall and fell to the soft earth in the shadows. Without pause, the Oot unfolded the layers of armor on its back, tucked in its head, arms and legs and snapped the shell into a sealed, black egg. In fewer than two seconds, the blinding flash and tower of flame that was a HelioNuclear blast ended the recording. Faction switched viewpoints to a satellite recon view. Even from high above, Fengor Ool's carapace could be seen to smoke from the blast. He ran for his troop transport without any visible sign of injury. Jaron's implant spoke to his particular curiosities.

*Fengor Ool completed the mission and survived radiation levels fatal to all known great-races except the Oot*, Faction highlighted scale of radiation levels. *Extreme resistance to radiation is attributed to special cellular shielding and...*

Thad opened his eyes to end *Faction's* report. Fengor Ool and his Oot warriors were the best bet against the damnable Pressers. "We must go over our strategy prior to landing."

The 4 Oot marched to the front airlock at the right of the cargo bay. Thad's acceleration seat tilted forward, his bulky boots slapped the floor to gain a purchase. Under the 2.6 Earth gravities, Jaron overcorrected his motion in the pressure suit, and he fell back on the front of the chair. Sliding abruptly from the edge, he rattled heavily onto the floor.

"Our leader," the translator could not do justice to the Oot's growl. Its lower right lateral arm clamped on the shoulder of the human's pressure suit. "Forsake the position of death."

*Never rest in battle*, the implant explained the translator's idiom. Thad looked directly into Fengor Ool's center armor plate that was adorned with Comets of Omen – the comet pattern on Ootare at the moment of an Oot's birth. The yellow jewel in the center of the armor represented Ootare itself, the home world that had forged the fearsome fighters.

*Nearly half of the Oot who try to obtain the yellow jewel, Yarjar, fail and are executed*, Faction floated from within that darkened corner of his mind. *To lead the Oot in battle, one must obtain Yarjar. The Comets of Omen form the basis of Oot religion and prophesy. Fengor Ool's pattern of comets is a particularly favorable one, according to the clergy of his nest grounds.*

"We will land beyond the..." Jaron began and stopped suddenly. The four Oot slapped their upper lateral hands over their rigid bat-ears. Quills bristled in a display of annoyance. "What are you doing? I know you can still hear me because your translators lead directly to your auditory nerve clusters."

"Oot must have sensory-truth," Fengor Ool kept his claws clenched over his head. "A commander must be one with us."

*You must be able to touch and smell them to command them*, Faction's thought sensation returned. *You must follow this tradition of Oot leadership. Oot only take orders from field commanders who fight.*

Jaron slid both gloves from his hands and set them on the edge of the seat. Inhaling deeply, Jaron popped the filters from his nose and the mask from his mouth. Pausing to imagine the stench that would meet this next breath, he eyed the massive Oot with an imperious stare... and inhaled once more.

Thad fell to the deck and vomited violently. The maintenance robot scurried from its niche on six spindly legs. A telescoping arm attacked Jaron's last meal as he christened more of the ribbed, gray floor.

"Assassinate the human," the Oot nearest Fengor Ool grated to his superior. "Assume command."

*The oldest Oot military tradition for unfit commanders, the implant's mental voice was grave. Get to your feet quickly. Grasp the impaling horns on either side of the Yarjar jewel. Stare at the kill point beneath the extension of the chin. Threaten the Oot.*

*I'm no military man, Thad whined inside his mind.*

*The Oot kill by dismembering prey, Faction spurred Jaron's adrenal glands as it spoke. Act now!*

Seeing Fengor Ool's plasma rifle come to the ready, Thad set his teeth against the gagging stench and wrenched his body upright. His bare hands took the barrels of the impaling horns and he immediately felt the natural acid of the Oot's carapace sear his tender palms. Staring at the only sensitive point on the Oot, he yelled "Obey me or... or..."

*Physical threat, Faction gave him a mental shake by increasing the simulated volume.*

"Your eyes will be cast to my dog," Jaron blurted with a strength he didn't feel. The Oot captain froze and Thad felt the cold sweat run down his curved back. Tears dropped from his eyes as wisps of smoke curled around his burning hands.

*Excellent! Thad barely heard Faction through the noise of his pain. The Oot know the Earth hunters use dogs as companions!*

To his surprise, Fengor Ool's rifle fell back to a resting position in the crook of the interior arm. "Human's word is heard. BlueGreen power is great. Human has truth of scent and touch."

*BlueGreen is the Oot term for Earth, Faction's voice was back to normal translation volume. Release the Oot and give your orders. Before your hands become infected, apply the salve in the pocket of your right arm.*

"We will land in a remote area of Frobe's world, at least 5 kilometers from the nearest Presser settlement," Thad pushed away from the Oot before slapping at the release on the medical pouch. The ointment spread over one palm and Thad thankfully rubbed his burning hands together. "We will use the rocky terrain for cover and slip into the Presser village in the light of the afternoon. I will direct the capture of four Pressers. You will carry the captives back to this ship and guard them vigilantly until we reach Earth... BlueGreen."

"Payment..." the last Oot's claws flexed on all 8 hands. "Payment..."

*Mercenaries need the promise of fortune, Faction reminded Thad. They stay loyal to the wealth alone.*

"The weapons you crave will be yours," the man's voice found strength as the throbbing in his hands began to fade. Thad felt Faction inflate the panels in the suit's torso to make him stand tall against the added gravity. "This is a generous payment for the capture of 4 stone-age aliens."

"Yes!" the Oot drooled at the thought; splatters of saliva dripped from long incisors and gnawed at the deck. As Jaron jumped back from the caustic spill, the robot scrambled to spray a neutralizing cleanser and hop aside to miss being scarred by fresh streams of acid.

*Faction returned instantly. The Oot salivate in response to strong desires, much as humans do. They value the success of the hunt and these weapons will make them warlords on Ootare.*

As if he heard the human implant's virtual voice, Fengor Ool stepped back into ranks and licked his teeth with the thick, red band of muscle that was the Oot tongue.

*Landing procedure complete, the implant advised. Visible perimeter is clear. Atmosphere acceptable as predicted. Cycling airlock.*

The four Oot heard the whistle of air from the outer lock and crouched to fit through the human-sized port. With the first ray of light, Fengor Ool collapsed his armor plates, smoothed his quills and squeezed through the slowly expanding opening. The remaining three Oot pounded down the outer walkway as soon as the door locked in the open position. With the deck rocking from the rhythm and weight of the Oot charge, Jaron fought to keep his balance in a stiff-legged walk.

The world beyond the airlock was a plain of organic desolation: pure nature and no technology. Golden weed spread past *Gash* and flowed down to the base of the valley. The rocky grade above the

craft gradually choked out the grasses until only the stony ground remained.

The Oot sprinted off and carved a weaving path through the meter-high grass. Once the soldiers reached full speed, they began to bound in loping strides. The grass looked as if a four-toed giant had paced about *Gash*.

As the Oot traced the distant perimeter of the ship, Jaron held his breath. There was no sign of a Presser army. No sudden attacks. No hail of stones, knives or clubs.

Thad finally took a gasp of the hot, dry air as he realized the mission was not doomed from the start. Faction's biometrics in his mind showed a reduced pulse rate at 120 beats per minute. Feeling the bite of panic recede, Thad looked up in the evening sky of Frobe's world. Low in the reddening horizon, the Frobe gateway's two massive silver loops reflected the light from the opposing sun. Panic reached for him again as Jaron imagined the telltale flash announcing another ship's arrival. Perhaps a military robot, or manned cruiser or even the Triad flagship!

*Thad!* Faction suppressed the building thoughts.

Thad looked back to the Oot as they rounded a ridge and hopped easily over the earth equivalent of a hedge. The greater gravity of Frobe did not restrict the boss' Oot. The added weight only seemed to exhilarate them.

*Faction, how far is our home?*

*We are on the last world of the Livingston chain, Faction began with the equivalent of a digital sigh. There are 19 WormPipe jumps back to Earth that can be negotiated in less than 2 days. Take a look at that bright star just above the east horizon. That is Polaris – the human race is more than halfway to reaching that star!*

Bounding away from his sprinting comrades, Fengor Ool returned to *Gash's* landing ramp. Frobe's yellow sun, full in the Oot's face, failed to reflect from the black of the Oot's natural armor.

"Oot own perimeter," Fengor Ool's translator was barely audible.

"Very good," Jaron turned back to the port. *Faction, lock down the ship*, he thought. The outer hatch slid shut, but did not pressurize. A hasty retreat to the ship might be needed. "We will be able to open the portal quickly when we have the Pressers. Do you remember your access code?"

"It burns my mind," Fengor Ool's head dipped straight down into his armor before lifting from hiding. It was the closest movement the Oot had to the human nod.

Looking at the keypad on the outer door, Jaron shook his head. Since the Oot could not use the genetic verifier that broke down pliant human DNA, Thad had been forced to install an ancient keypad access system. If the decision had been up to Thad, the Oot would not know how to get back onto the ship by themselves. The boss saw it another way: Jaron didn't have to return. Nor did the Oot. The Pressers were the only priceless item and were not negotiable.

*Faction, change the access code for the Oot to match mine*, Thad shrugged at the thought before the implant echoed the answer.

*All Oot codes have been locked by Darian Tobr*, Faction answered before his thought was complete. *You cannot be the sole carrier of ship access codes. Prediction mode determined that there is a possibility of casualties. No one team member is critical to success.*

*I love you, too*, Jaron chewed his lip again and winced at the swollen knot in his mouth. He turned to see the Oot captain waiting, his 8 arms flexing slowly: alien impatience. "We march to the west. There is a Presser village 5 kilometers away. We will select our captives."

With a low hiss, Fengor Ool called in the other Oot. They formed a triangle around the captain, and Fengor Ool reached out to lift Jaron into a chair formed by his four interior arms.

"Our leader," Fengor Ool's translator picked up the undertone of the Oot's laughter, "commands us to advance west. Red Fellowship rises above our march. White Enemy fades among the horizon."

*A traditional morale-booster*, Faction returned as the Oot began a hopping march on long, rear legs. *Red Fellowship was a red comet near Ootare 80 years ago. It signaled the commencement of a successful war against the first human explorers on Ootare. White Enemy, a comet seen as a predictor of strength in battle, told of human weakness.*

The Oot bounded to the rocky slope and crouched low to find stealth among the dagger-leaved bushes. Though the terrain was difficult and the Oot looked like ponderous insects, the group moved in silent haste. While being battered between the Oot's armored arms, the man was thankful for the pressure suit that shielded him from the Oot's body acid.

"Gods don't trust Frobe," Fengor Ool's voice was more a vibration than a sound.

"Why do you say that?" Thad whispered as he turned his head and nearly poked his nose on a sharp impaling horn.

"No hiding places," the upper arms swung to encompass the landscape. "Where are nests for young? Niches for healing? Tree limbs of confusion for chase? Muddy springs for mating? Gods watch Pressers. Gods don't trust Pressers. Gods want to see all."

*Faction, display a clip of an Ootare landscape,* Thad closed his eyes and strained to see the murky picture. Rains fell and mists rose to blur features beyond 20 meters. Tangle trees, the cement of Ootare's crust, wound together to form a wooden net. As swirls of mud flowed beneath the rising trunks, a driving wind snapped lengths of vine among the motionless limbs. Rock from the mantle of the planet, once disturbed by a comet strike, was slowly pushed back to the depths by climbing roots.

*I doubt you could pick one out, but there are 7 Oot in this picture,* the implant highlighted a hulking shape in the lee of a crooked tree. Six other arrows identified areas with formless shadows. *The troop carrier that landed at the edge of this swamp was ambushed seconds after this clip. This frame was the last up-link from the craft.*

"Frobe is battlefield, nothing else," Fengor Ool continued. "One army is astride. One army feeds soil. No withdraw - no hiding. Gods laugh at wounded for they will be killed."

*Though ferocious battles are Oot tradition,* Faction rushed to head off Thad's questions, *the Ootare wars rarely result in complete victory or defeat. Battles are short, hand to hand melees that stop periodically so the captains can determine losses. If the struggle is going badly, the losing side can withdraw into the landscape and fight another day. On an open plain with no hiding places, the victorious side can immediately press the advantage, because there is no mystery in the outcome. Wounded are killed without the advantage of retreat. Think of the human prophesy about the desert battle of Armageddon, and you know what Fengor Ool feels about this plain. Open spaces mean a complete victory or defeat to the Oot warrior. There is no room for error.*

Thad watched the silent lope of the Oot in front of Fengor Ool. It deftly bounded from rocky outcropping to threadbare bush to illustrate the captain's worries about hiding places. There was one fact lost on the Oot: the Pressers knew this expedition was coming. The Pressers had plenty of time to prepare. The damn aliens had all of the advantages on a world that offered no hiding places to visitors. The Pressers could pick their own hand before the cards were dealt!

"Korbec Oos sees beasts," Fengor Ool lengthened his stride and caught the leading Oot in two hops. "Cattle beasts."

"Put me down," Jaron had to plant his legs immediately as the Oot obeyed. One interior arm steadied the human in the high gravity.

From the top of a rocky slope, Thad looked down upon another expanse of the golden grass. Nestled in the bowl formed by a distant, gentle rise, a dozen Pessimists munched at the tops of the waving sprouts.

The Pessimist was similar to the Earth llama, Thad decided, but it had shorter, prickly hair and, being a plains dweller, had a heavier, less athletic body. Unlike their Earth relative, two sharp horns jutted forth from a raised bone at the back of the skull. Several of the young beasts played a simple game of hide and seek in the tall grass while the parents grazed with the calm of their greater age and weight.

*Notice the various colors of furs on the Pessimists,* Faction reappeared within his mind. *Yellow, dark green, brown, gold and two shades of red. As prey on Frobe's world, there is no advantage to matching the yellow color of the grass. Camouflage did not fool the top predator, the Frobedozer.*

One Pessimist trotted nearer Thad's group, and he saw the unusual facial features of the long-necked adult. Heavy folds of skin pressed down over what might have been eyes. Nubs were all that were left of the Pessimist's ears; the snout ended in a jaw of under-slung teeth with no hint of nostrils. Shaking his head in disbelief, Thad still wondered how these blind, deaf and mute creatures had survived the millennia.

"And no sense of smell," Jaron muttered. "It has a completely atrophied olfactory system."

*Prediction mode alert,* Faction's voice was suddenly at maximum volume within his mind. *Imperative mission action.*

*What is it?* Thad's training had prepared him for this. The Pressers must be making their move.

*You must kill this herd of Pessimists,* Faction boosted Jaron's adrenalin level again. *Tell the Oot now!*

*Why?* Thad fought against the rising tide of emotion. The beat of his gravity-tired heart was a constant fist-fall on his chest. *They're dumb herd beasts.*

*Jaron, you idiot,* Faction's voice became the gravely avalanche that was Darian Tobr's bellow. His boss seemed to shake the very core of his brain with rough hands. *Pessimists attract the*

*Frobedozer! The Pressers might be able to avoid those giants, but I don't want to find out if the Oot can handle one. Kill those Pessimists immediately.*

Yes, Mr. Tobr, Thad knew the real Tobr was far out of communications range on old Earth. Still, Faction was recording every word of the simulated conversation, and there was no reason to disobey.

"Fengor Ool," Jaron motioned for the Oot to bend closer and gagged again as the festering mouth dipped nearer. "Tobr has commanded us to kill these Pessimists. Live Pessimists will attract a Frobedozer..."

*No!* Faction's belated warning was simultaneous with the wall of Oot bodies that suddenly surrounded the man. *Do not mention...*

"Frobedozer near?" Fengor Ool's corrosive saliva dripped on Thad's boots and steamed as it touched the mesh. "Kill Frobedozer?"

*The Oot have heard about Frobe's massive predator, Faction reminded Jaron of his training. They would consider the stalking and killing of a Frobedozer to be a great honor. They would be revered on their world if they could bring back the head. Do not mention the beast again, because it will only distract the Oot. The Pressers are your only target.*

Thad's neck ached as he looked up at the 3 meter Oot captain. "The Frobedozer is to be avoided at all times."

The three Oot soldiers swiveled their heads to their captain.

"Oot desire strong," Fengor Ool's four interior arms lifted to form a ring around the man. "Oot keep secret. Not tell fat man. Take good care of Jaron-leader."

"Return with your new weapons," Jaron didn't wait for Faction's prompt. He stood on his toes to glare at the Oot. "Hunt the Frobedozer with your entire clan. You will be a legend and chief many brave Oot."

"Yes... more fame," the head bobbed in the forced nod. The other Oot broke the closed ranks and raced off to surround the unsuspecting Pessimists. Fengor Ool retracted his interior arms and crouched low to watch his warriors dash to the distant hills. When Korbec Oos was directly across from the main body of the herd, Fengor Ool dug his hind legs into the dirt. "Attack order?"

Faction immediately presented a portrait of the Oot body with the attack code names labeling each limb.

"Lock/Grapple/Smite and Rend," Jaron pointed to the seven adult Pessimists. Then, to the playing offspring, "Cast and Rend. Remember, no Lance or Flame. Those human weapons can be traced."

Fengor Ool growled into his translator to send the commands to the other Oot. Jaron nearly fell back among the rocks as the four mercenaries let out a long, baying call.

*Faction, that sounds just like a hound's bay,* he listened to Faction's recorded call of a bloodhound. The softer, throatier version of the dog echoed in Thad's mind.

Fengor Ool and his warriors struck the Pessimists in unison. With a first bound to close the distance from the perimeter, Fengor Ool spread his lower lateral arms, Lock and Grapple, to form a wide, 4-meter span. The next lunge drove the Oot's impaling horns deep into the beast's flank as the arms snapped about around the victim in a deadly hug. Suddenly feeling the weight of the attacker, the Pessimist reared back on hind legs, lifting the clawing Oot from the ground. The upper right lateral arm called Smite lifted in a quick arc and caved in the beast's brain case. Pushing away from the toppling Pessimist, Fengor Ool readied the upper left interior arm, a collection of blades called Rend, to slash at the unprotected throat.

Korbec Oos felled one adult before breaking away to use Cast: a handful of heavy metal darts at the end of an upper lateral arm. A quick snap of the Cast arm sent a blur of weapons at a nearby youngster. As the wounded Pessimist stumbled and rolled in the grass, Korbec Oos lunged to finish the job with Rend.

Jaron stood at the rocky summit, stunned by the display of cold, ferocious efficiency. As Fengor Ool bounded up the slope, Thad shuddered at the gory alien that would continue to carry him. The red splatters of Pessimist blood created a hundred comets on the Oot's breast plate; the red and yellow fur of the victims stuck to the hard edges of the joints of the lower lateral arms.

"Victory," the Oot troop chanted as they faced Jaron. A new wave of stench spilled over the shivering human as he swallowed back bile.

*What could they do to a man?* Thad took a step back. *Heaven forbid a war with them!*

"Your orders now, commander?" Fengor Ool smelled the fear of the man. The translator couldn't hide the blood-lust in his voice.

"The four Pressers," his hand trembled as he pointed past the ruined Pessimists. "We have to capture...."

The Oot spun in the direction of the distant spaceship. Thad, thankful that something else had distracted them, looked in the same direction. The ship was hidden behind 3 kilometers of rolling hills.

*Gash's external cameras have sighted a group of Pressers approaching the ship*, Faction's alert was loud in his ears. Before Jaron could turn to order the Oot back to *Gash*, Fengor Ool's interior arms swept him into a rough facedown embrace, and Thad watched waves of grass and knots of rock flash past.

*The Pressers are moving up the ramp*, the implant's voice held a hint of surprise. *They are at the outer lock....*

Without warning, Faction disappeared from within Thad's mind. The comfort of its perfect memory, the companionship of the electronic being and the added senses of the mind's eye tore away from him. The cowering glimmer that was his true self was left naked to a crippling fear. His mental beast assaulted him with a fateful imagination.

Thad looked at the pumping legs of the Oot and saw himself tumbling beneath the relentless claws. Next, he felt the arms of Fengor Ool tightening slowly around his brittle ribs. Soon, he knew, his life would be squeezed out of him by the unfeeling alien grip. Looking up, Thad saw the impaling horns and the mane of quills beneath the long teeth and sharp chin. It would be so easy for Fengor Ool to lift him inexorably to that waiting mouth. Slowly, Thad would be pulled over the horns and feel the posts jab into his stomach. The quills would be next, hundreds of stabbing barbs setting into the tender skin of his arms, chest and throat. Finally, the Oot would bring those jaws to bear and clamp down on his head.

A silver glare in the distance caused Jaron to momentarily forget the Oot. *Gash*, still sleek and perfect, sat in the center of the Frobe plain. There was no sign of the frightening Pressers, but the aliens had done something to *Gash*. The ship's computer was Faction's current home, and the Pressers had shut down the implant's communications link.

The Oot troop was at the landing ramp in three great bounds. Fengor Ool, after dropping his human cargo at the base of the ramp, turned to his soldiers and gave them two quick signals with his lower exterior arms.

"Wait human," Fengor Ool's face appeared in prone man's field of vision. "Perimeter check."

Forcing himself to one elbow, Thad watched the jerky lunge of the Oot as they sprinted along the hills of the valley. In less than a minute, the four Oot skidded to a stop at Thad's feet.

"Perimeter clear," Fengor Ool's upper right exterior pointed to one long, unbroken path in the frail grass. "One path here, none leave. Pressers in ship."

"No!" Jaron found the strength to get back to his feet and fall into the interior arms of the captain. "Go in and get them!"

With a lower exterior arm, Fengor Ool took the human by the back of the pressure suit and dragged him to the top of the ramp. Standing aside, the Oot motioned to his companions to take positions at the outer airlock. Turning his four gleaming eyes to the ship's door, Fengor Ool tapped his access code into the keypad. The ship pitched heavily to port as the Oot charged in. As soon as the lock opened, Faction flooded back into Thad's mind.

*The Pressers entered your access code*, the implant went to work sealing off the emotions within the man's mind. *They entered my disconnect code just before opening the door. Only Tobr knows that code!*

Feeling the fear submerge beneath the implant's presence, Jaron shook free of Fengor Ool's light grip and followed the Oot into the cargo bay. The three mercenaries stood at the back of the bay, every arm's weapon brandished and aimed at the hidden Presser invaders.

"Aside," Fengor Ool commended his soldiers. They parted to reveal four Pressers, neatly tucked into the specially designed acceleration seats.

Jaron chewed his lip again, ignoring the renewed throb. The Pressers were squat, muscular creatures that looked as if they had been built from the ground up. Heavily padded, three-toed feet formed the foundation of the two stocky legs. Bulges of muscles surrounded a slightly flexible knee joint.

*The Pressers knew how to adjust the leg rests to match their stiff legs*; Faction played a recording of a Presser tapping commands into the chair controller. *I thought it was best not to intervene.*

Jaron noticed that the two males had slimmer torsos over wide hips, while the females were

slightly more round. The body continued to narrow until shoulders and neck connected at a ring of bone. The arms were stout, sporting the same muscular bulges of the legs. Supporting a heavy head in Frobe's high gravity, the short neck provided plenty of strength but little mobility. Thad shuddered as his attention shifted to the Presser face. They had solid bone within eye sockets, flattened cartilage in place of nostrils and closed, fleshy cones for ears. Like the Pessimists, only fine hair and a series of flat teeth gave the face any character. The eyes, nose and ears of a Presser were now no more than contours in the leathery, sun-browned skin.

*Faction, this is no coincidence*, Thad continued to match the uninvited guests with Tobr's requirements for capturing Pressers in the village.

*The two females are young and appear to have borne one child previously*, Faction sounded surprised as well. *This means they are fertile and are likely to bear more children. The younger male is the heaviest of the group and seems to be in excellent physical condition. The older male carries the markings of a Visionary, or tribal leader. This is an exact match to your mission parameters.*

"These are the ones we came for, Fengor Ool," Jaron grabbed the arm of his acceleration chair and pulled himself into it. "Have your soldiers stand guard."

"Mission over?" Fengor Ool's disappointment seemed near heartbreak through the translator. "Oot not successful?"

"You will be paid," Jaron told Faction to prepare *Gash* for orbit. "You are bringing back four Pressers, as you promised. Tobr will honor you with this success."

"No battle," Fengor Ool quills flattened in Oot embarrassment. "No pay for surrender."

"You battled the Pessimists at Tobr's command," Thad reminded the Oot. "The objectives were still met. The details aren't important."

Fengor Ool's quills fanned slightly, but Jaron allowed the Oot to fidget in doubt. More hand signals to the other Oot caused them to fold their weapons back into their arms and brace their legs for the take-off.

As Thad thankfully donned his nose filters and breath mask, he knew that Tobr was right. The Pressers must be able to see the future... and act it out as fate.