

# Soul Jumper

By Anthony Marker

“You can’t cheat Death.”

Ted’s grandmother, Sadie, had whispered that portentous warning in his ear as she lay dying, alcohol having consumed her. Ted remembered every detail of that brisk autumn day: the crispness of the apples he’d picked at the orchard down by the river, the dry rattle of leaves as he shuffled through thick piles of them on his way home, the ominous black gravcar hovering over the lawn. He remembered how his grandmother had squeezed his hands. There had been urgency in them, as if she were hoping to imbue her words through the vice-like grip of her emaciated fingers. But mostly he remembered the words that had haunted him the ten years since.

“You can’t cheat Death,” Sadie had repeated, her eyes boring into his very soul. “If you try, Death will reach out and take you for your arrogance.”

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with a khaki shirtsleeve, Ted took a deep breath. Even in the reduced gravity his stomach was doing pirouettes on his bladder and his dinner, inhaled between battle drills, gurgled threateningly in his stomach. He wondered how he had gotten himself into this situation: he was just hours, maybe only minutes, away from combat in a backwater of the asteroid belt that was so insignificant it hardly warranted a spot on the charts. He wasn’t with the other Marines in his squad preparing for the upcoming battle, but was instead getting ready to stand watch over two soul jumpers as they played roulette with Death. Wasn’t this exactly what he’d been trying to avoid when he had joined the Corps?

Ted shook his head sharply from side to side, attempting to clear away the echo of his grandmother’s warning. The nameplate on the hatch before him, “Lt. Barsodovitch,” had been crossed out with a single defiant stroke of black shoe polish. Below it, in heavy block letters was written CLANCY’S PLACE.

When he’d been assigned to escort Lieutenants Barsodovitch and Derenger, the other Marines in his unit had confirmed his misfortune with carefully averted eyes. Sergeant Rogers, his brooding squad leader, had been the only one to offer advice. “Derenger is okay,” he had warned without smiling, “but stay the hell out of Clancy’s way.”

Ted raised his hand to knock and his dinner skootched its way into the bottom of his esophagus.

“Come!” The voice from behind the hatch preceded his knock with all the muffled welcome of a concussion grenade under water. Ted jerked his hand away from the cool plasteel hatch in alarm and stifled the urge to loosen his collar. Despite the fact that the Pendergass’ climate control was on the fritz and everyone was wearing extra layers, the air had become uncomfortably warm. When Ted didn’t respond immediately, the command from beyond the hatch was repeated. This time a hint of irritation colored the explosive voice.

Ted pressed the access control. As the hatch cover slid aside, he snapped to parade rest, feet shoulder width apart, arms folded behind him and eyes focused unblinkingly forward.

Lt. Joan Derenger sat perched amid a chaos of photographs and tactical data sheets strewn across the compartment’s single bed. Her short athletic legs were folded lotus style in front of her, doubling as a makeshift desk. Next to her, Lt. Barsodovitch, Clancy, seemed to have defied several physical laws by stuffing himself into the solitary seat at the desk built into the wall. Clancy glanced at Ted with only cursory interest and returned his attention to the mission briefing in front of him.

Ted found them an odd pair. Lt. Derenger was, Ted thought, the only person who could possibly fit into the tiny compartment with Clancy and not cause the room to burst at the seams.

“Where’s Corporal Mendez?” Clancy growled.

“He, ... ah, he reported in sick this morning, sir. I was assigned to escort your jump just ten minutes ago,” Ted said, feeling his chest tighten.

Why couldn’t they have assigned one of the other squad members to this damnable escort duty. He would rather have been part of the boarding party to the alien ships than stand guard in the lab with a couple of cadavers.

Ted thought back to his reasons for joining the Corps. The threat of dying was not the problem, at least not directly. He had joined the Marines in order to meet Death honestly or to come to terms with Sadie’s only enduring legacy—a warning that had somehow given Death access to the darkened corners and hallways of his mind. But if he were able survive this dreadful war. Or even if he were just able to die honestly, fighting his way through a hive of alien spiders somehow he knew he would be free. Death would have to release the grip it had held on him for the past ten years. The spiders, he thought, and felt his skin start to grow clammy. Why couldn’t they have fought a war with an alien species that looked like reptiles or jellyfish or anything other than spiders. He hated spiders.

“What’s your name, Private?” Joan Derenger’s voice was firm but comforting next to that of her monster cohort’s.

“Private Chalmers, ma’am,” Ted said stiffly, gluing his eyes to the tactical holo-image of the approaching enemy ship that rotated silently in the middle of the compartment. He worked to keep the tension out of his voice but he knew he was perilously close to squeaking.

“Yes. I can read your name tag, ‘Private Chalmers.’” Joan’s voice was tinged with mirth. “What’s your first name?”

Caught off guard, he stammered, “Ah,... Ted, ma’am.” But his inflection made it come out more like a question. The hint of a grin that had been hiding in the corners of Joan’s mouth blossomed now into a wide smile, revealing two rows of perfect white teeth. A chuckle escaped her. Instead of mocking him, her levity seemed to invite his participation. Ted resisted. He did not want to know these people on a first name basis. What they did was dangerous, terribly dangerous. If he allowed himself to be pulled into this ungodly activity he might not be able to pull himself out before . . . His stomach tightened again and his shoulders remained stiff.

“Relax, Ted,” Joan chided, looking back down at the design specs for the enemy ship she was soon to reconnoiter. “You’re going to bust a gut standing there like that. And you’re to call me ‘Joan.’ I don’t have much use for titles, not in this life and certainly not in the next.”

“Yes, ma’—, . . . ah, Joan.” A scowl briefly darkened Clancy’s face but he remained silent. Ted wondered if Clancy’s disapproval might be aimed at Joan’s invitation to relax military protocol. He didn’t think so; most jumpers’ favored minimal adherence to what they considered worldly trivialities. He decided Clancy’s scowl was probably a result of the upcoming mission. Regardless, Ted found the requested informality unsettling. Military protocols provided clear boundaries and guidelines that told him how to act under stress. They were a thin but important layer of protection that he wasn’t sure he could give up on short notice even if he’d wanted, and in truth, he had no such desire. Right now he wanted the reassuring familiarity of those guidelines more than ever.

Ted took a deep breath to steady himself and said, "We'll be in range in one hour." He averted his gaze before continuing, "Lt. Col. Hodgeson wants you dead and on your way in fifty-five minutes."

Clancy exchanged looks with Joan, his brow furrowed. "Hodgeson?" His voice curled at the edges with barely controlled contempt.

Turning to Joan, Clancy said, "Our chances for reanimation just dropped by five percent."

"You don't know that." But her tone betrayed her unease. She began to gather the papers around her into piles.

Clancy's hand slapped the desk. "Sturgis and Peterson both have a year of rehab' ahead of them because of that bastard. Hodgeson should have been discharged months ago." He stood, his shoulder plunging into the holographic image of the enemy ship, distorting it briefly before the projectors snapped off. "How he has avoided a court martial is one of the Marine Corps' great unsolved mysteries."

Joan nodded. To Ted, she asked, "Who's assisting?"

"Lieutenant Delorio, ma'am." The honorific had slipped and was out of his mouth before he could censor it. Joan swiveled fully to face him.

"This is your first time escorting a jump isn't it?" Ted found himself returning her gaze. She had the most intense green eyes, so alive. How did she possibly deal with the ramifications of this assignment? The intensity of her stare unnerved him and he dropped his eyes to examine the amorphous reflections in his polished boots.

"Yes, ma'am."

To Clancy she said, "Delorio's the best there is on this bucket. He'll look after us and keep Hodgeson from doing any harm." Clancy only grunted in response and finished logging out of the ship's computer.

Ted shifted his weight uneasily. Uncomfortable as he was with the prospect of artificially induced death, "Soul Jumping," he knew that the best way to protect himself was with more information.

When he had received the assignment he'd been forced to admit that aside from the usual rumors, he actually knew very little about the jumpers and what was involved in making a jump. It was hazardous, that much was obvious. In the three months since his assignment to the unit it had experienced an eleven percent failed-reanimation rate—permanent death. It was a bleak statistic. Nonetheless the two other jump units envied it: each had experienced failure rates in the upper teens. Soul jumpers taunted Death on a regular basis, got to know Him intimately. The fact that Joan and Clancy felt compelled to participate in the voluntary program was a frightening indicator of how badly Earth's Central Command Authority felt the war was going.

Joan sighed. Standing, she bundled the papers together and locked them away in Clancy's wall safe. "Okay, Clancy. Let's get our raggedy-asses down to the jump bay."

Ted fell in behind the two officers as they stepped into the corridor.

"Uh, . . . Joan?" A hint of falsetto in his voice betrayed his sense of unease.

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering. Why do you take the risk? I mean, aren't you afraid when—"

Clancy stopped in his tracks and whirled like a bear caught in a tornado. Following only a step behind, Ted rebounded off the behemoth's barrel chest in mid-sentence and stood paralyzed against the wall like a first year inductee caught sleeping on guard duty. The larger man's arms slammed into the wall on either side of him and Clancy leaned in until his face was just inches from Ted's own. The smell of fear permeated the air between them where their breath intermingled and Ted felt the color drain from his face.

“Listen, Private. I’m going to cut you some slack because you’re new to escort duty, but you’ll only get one warning.” Clancy’s coarse black hair crept toward his eyebrows. Like everything else about him, Clancy’s hair danced at the edge of regulation and frequently crossed over. “Just before a jump my nerves are ragged and my thoughts are my own. None of us much mind talking with angels but skipping back and forth between worlds with a fool like Hodgeson at the controls is about as close to hell as I hope to ever come. Unless you want to be one of the angels I meet on my way to spider ship in an hour, you’d do well to keep quiet.”

“Easy, Clancy.” Joan’s hand appeared small as it rested on Clancy’s bicep. “Private Chalmer’s timing leaves a bit to be desired but he’s got a right to ask the question.”

Clancy’s arms seemed welded to the plasteel bulkhead on either side of Ted, but it was the big man’s icy stare that pinned him to the wall. Ted felt a deep cold creep into him as the sweat on his back carried the chill of the wall directly to his spine.

“Then you can answer his questions.” Clancy turned and was five steps down the corridor before Ted remembered to breathe.

Ted’s knees wouldn’t cooperate and he remained struggling to control his breath as Clancy disappeared around a bend in the corridor. Yeah, his timing was definitely off.

Joan stood to his right and regarded him with a neutral stare. “Better stay out of Clancy’s way for the next few days.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Joan turned and started after Clancy. Ted lurched awkwardly away from the wall and fell into step to her left and slightly behind her.

At the next junction in the corridor they passed Sergeant Rogers escorting two other jumpers toward their bay at the opposite side of the ship. Rogers and his two charges had clearly passed Clancy on his way ahead of them. Rogers shook his head in exasperation. Ted avoided the sergeant’s eyes and continued shadowing Joan down the corridor.

A minute had passed in a an uncomfortable silence. “Sorry, Ma’am. I had no business prying . . .”

“We’re all afraid.” Joan answered abruptly. After a pause during which she succeeded in refitting her rigid composure, she continued. “Only a fool wouldn’t be and they don’t allow fools into the program. The psychological requirements for jumpers are stiffer than those for the Marine Corps as a whole. I suppose they reason that unless we fear death, or at least respect it, we won’t return for reanimation. Letting go of the pain and suffering associated with this body is pretty tempting, even for those who are satisfied with their lives.” She stopped and looked at Ted, her eyes dark with seriousness, “I’ve jumped three times. On each of those occasions, it’s been a struggle not to just let go, to leave this body, and this life, behind.”

Ted could only return her intense gaze with a blank stare. Shakily he said, “Frankly, ma’am, I don’t know much about the process but it seems you’re . . .” he stopped worried that she might have taken offense. “I mean, it seems we’re playing with fire.”

She only nodded and started once more toward the jump bay.

“The basic premise is easy enough, at least on paper” she continued. Ted noticed that her voice had taken on the disassociated monotone normally associated with official briefings. “The doctors induce a state of death in our bodies—they kill us.” She paused, perhaps to allow the weight of that statement to sink in, or perhaps, Ted thought, to allow herself to adjust to its absolute lunacy.

“The ‘temporary’ death of the body allows our consciousness to travel and observe events at great distances or areas of extreme physical danger,” she continued. “Because we aren’t hampered by physical limitations when released from our bodies, we can search for survivors in submarine accidents, examine highly radioactive nuclear

accident sites, or in this case, cross space to determine the configuration and strength of enemy ships. After forty to sixty minutes, the resuscitation team reanimates us and the Intel Analysts get to harvest our information. Any longer than sixty minutes and even well prepared jumpers are taking chances.”

“Yes, I understand that. But the risk!” Ted insisted. “This is playing with the worst kind of fire. Do we really have any business sending people across the line between life and death simply for . . .” He was at a loss to complete the sentence. Why were they doing this? He didn’t know.

“Listen, Ted,” Joan sighed. “Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t be averse to sending fellow Marines into uncertain combat environments—there’s always a risk in combat. But each of the spider ships is put together differently.”

“The modular structure.”

“That’s right. They pick and choose from an almost infinite possibility of configurations. You haven’t been on a boarding party yet, so you don’t know how confusing combat can be. Hell, even when you do know where you’re going, the spider ships seem like a maze. Some of their ships have almost no defense against a boarding party. Others are flying hornets nests just waiting for an unsuspecting captain to send in a battalion of young soldiers like yourself.”

“Yes I know that, but surely we must be able to identify certain patterns.”

Joan shook her head vigorously. “The spiders have learned to adjust the size of the modules to disguise their function. Before we started using jumpers we had to systematically search a maze of corridors and chambers trying to hunt down the queen. In the meantime their heavier weapons pounded our battle groups to pulp. You know the losses we took.”

Ted thought he detected a note of personal loss in her voice and risked a discreet glance in her direction. What he could see of Joan’s profile, framed in the short dirty blonde hair, revealed only detached neutrality.

“It’s not so much the dying part that bothers me . . .” Ted hesitated, trying to form his reservations into some coherent shape that he could communicate. Seeing the puzzlement on her face, he plunged into deeper, darker waters. “I mean, we all put ourselves at physical risk every time we cross the street back on Earth. But aren’t you tempting fate, putting your soul out on a limb and daring God to cut it off behind you?”

Joan didn’t answer immediately. They had reached the hatch to the Jump Bay Four and she stopped and turned toward him. There was weary softness in her gaze. Ted simultaneously felt the urge to shake her by the lapels and to hug her for comfort.

“Make no mistake, I don’t want to die. Clancy and I and the other jumpers will be taking a one-in-ten chance of either singing with angels or dancing with demons.” She laughed and shook her head, “Perhaps more literally than any of us wants to admit.” Her voice suddenly became earnest, tempered by countless hours of lonely reflection. “But if we do this, we just might find where this ship’s queen has herself hidden. She’s the key. She controls the spiders’ actions. If we can do that,” she explained, “we’ll save dozens of the one hundred and forty marines on this ship. If we can’t find her then there’s a better than even chance the Pendergass won’t survive to rejoin the battle group. I thought about dropping out once. It didn’t work. I found that when I looked into the faces of the other Marines, when I saw their smiles, all I could think about was how many of them would be dead, so much biological space refuse, before the end of the year.” She looked at him. “I’ve seen enough of what lies on the other side of life to know that when I die, when I’m really gone forever, I want know that I saved as many souls as I could. I can’t quit, Ted. There are just too many lives at stake.”

“But—”

Joan abruptly held up a hand, cutting off any further discussion. "Time to go, Ted. Suck it up and let's get on with the mission. We can talk about it later, that is, if you still want to after watching the procedure." She threw Ted a brief but portentous look and slapped the access control for the jump bay with the flat of her free hand. The door slid away with a hiss and Ted followed Joan's slender form into the lab. Cold air, laced with the metallic taste of strong medical chemicals, rolled across them like a wave of arctic surf. Ted watched as his breath turned into wisping silent phantoms that billowed from his lips and disappeared.

The room was dark and thick with shadows. Only the dim florescent lamps that ran the length of each of the two open jump tubes in the center of the bay cast any appreciable illumination in the confined space. On the far side of the bay, Clancy had already disrobed and now stretched out, his eyes strangely serene in the larger of the two tubes. Ted noticed that Clancy seemed impervious to the chill that pinched the faces of everyone else in the room. Lt. John Delorio stood over Clancy in white thermal medical overalls, his young face a mask of concentration, oblivious to the monstrous silhouette he cast against the wall behind him. Delorio quickly and efficiently checked the equipment and attached additional monitor relays to Clancy's chest.

"Be right with you, Joan." Delorio said.

Ted's shoulders shook involuntarily as fingers of air, kept at a constant 7° C, invaded the openings in his uniform at the neck, wrists and waist. It caused the sweat on his back to crawl and skitter like ants. "Geez," he said through clenched teeth, "it's freezing in here!"

"I hate this part," Joan conceded, her lips pulled into a taut thin line, pale even against her light complexion. Ted opened a locker next to the entryway and shrugged on one of the insulated jackets. Shifting the butt of his pistol to assure quick and easy access, Ted engaged the security program on the control panel next to the room's only entrance and took up a position facing into the room, his back against the wall.

The jump tubes resembled nothing so much as caskets: made of steel and glass, they seemed to have been placed carefully, atop two specially configured medical tables, for a public viewing. The lids of both tubes stood open. To Ted, the jump bay held all the inviting ambiance of some high tech morgue in the basement of any nameless big city back on Earth. This time the icy shiver that wormed its way past his ribcage and gnawed at his poise had nothing to do with the room's temperature.

"They keep the room cold as a precaution." Joan's unexpected explanation startled him. "That way, if the power gets cut the room temperature won't be warm enough to heat our bodies and cause additional damage." She crossed to the empty tube and shed her uniform.

Ted averted his eyes and noticed Lt. Col. Hodgeson's gray head just visible over the master control console in the corner. Hearing them enter, the ship's senior medical officer emerged from behind the green glow of the console's panels. Hodgeson cautiously approached Joan, as if he were less than convinced of her non-hostile intentions.

"We're running a bit behind lieutenant." Hodgeson's voice was calm but his eyes flitted into the bay's darkened corners as if in search of ethereal assailants. Ted thought it peculiar that a man who'd made the lofty rank of Lieutenant Colonel, an experienced doctor no less, would be intimidated by jumpers. Perhaps the doctor shared at least a portion of Ted's discomfort with these activities.

Joan stowed her clothing in a small compartment built into the jump tube's base. Now dressed only in the same white shorts as those worn by Clancy, she climbed and lay down in its cold, sterile embrace. Ted could see that her skin was entirely covered with goose bumps. "Lt. Derenger" appeared in block letters just below where the metal joined with the glass at the top of her tube at face level. Even in the shadowy gloom of

the jump bay's reduced illumination, Ted was sure that he could detect a slight discoloration where another name had been removed—Joan had apparently inherited her tube from a previous, less fortunate, jumper.

Jesus, Ted thought, this can't really be happening, they can't really be doing this. He became aware that his head was shaking back and forth with disapproval and fear. Its twitching was only subdued with effort. The events of the morning had opened the door to fear. He could feel tension bunching the muscles in his shoulders; it seemed to have spent the last hour, busily setting up permanent shop there. Ted inhaled deeply, held the breath for three seconds, and exhaled in a long slow blast of frosty vapor. He had to repeat the process three times before his shoulders fell back to a position resembling something close to normal.

Hodgeson reached over and selected a hypodermic from the magnetic equipment tray and reached for Joan's arm with his free hand.

"No." Joan's voice emerged from between teeth clenched tightly against the cold. Hodgeson froze, the hypodermic halted like a missile suddenly stopped in its tracks. He raised an eyebrow at her, the question in his face clear but unspoken.

"Delorio, c-can handle my p-prep." Joan said. The cold was clearly getting to her; her teeth chattered like a geiger counter at a nuclear accident site and her words seem to bounce. "Besides, y-you're better off double ch-checking the equipment."

Their gazes locked and Ted could see a flush creeping into Hodgeson's cheeks as he realized she was questioning his medical ability.

A klaxon sounded in the corridor outside and a red light began flashing urgently over the door. The first salvo of missiles from the enemy ship was coming within range of the Pendergass' defense grid. Ted felt the thrumming of the engines increase through the soles of his boots as the energy weapons were powered up.

"We don't have time for this, lieutenant," Hodgeson said. The hypodermic resumed its course toward her arm. Joan reached out and caught Hodgeson at the wrist. This time she merely maintained eye contact with her superior and shook her head. Behind Hodgeson, Delorio had finished prepping Clancy and said, "I can handle that, sir."

Hodgeson didn't answer immediately. The strident klaxon seemed to fade into the background giving way to the more urgent bleep of Clancy's vital signs issuing from the main console and the constant jittering of Joan's teeth. Ted shifted his weight uneasily as the silent confrontation threatened to throw the room into a strangely warped purgatory where time would stand still and no one could breathe. Next to Joan, Clancy lay eerily placid, eyes closed. The wrinkles that furrowed his forehead and creased the skin around his eyes when he'd cornered Ted in the corridor were gone now, and his chest rose and fell in a slow, regular cadence. Running boots thundered through the corridor outside as a group of marines sprinted toward their battle stations. The air in the room was alive with an almost electrical tension and Ted's skin prickled. He was about to break protocol and speak when Hodgeson broke the silence.

"Okay." Hodgeson said coldly, his eyes never leaving Joan's. "Prep this jumper for departure."

Joan released her grip, letting her arm fall to her side. The veins stood out on Hodgeson's neck as he passed the hypodermic to Delorio's outstretched hand. Then he turned away, his face tight with controlled rage, and retreated to the master control console.

Delorio inconspicuously double-checked the dosage of the anesthetic and administered it to Joan's trembling arm. Her features relaxed almost immediately, her body tremors subsided, and within seconds her teeth ceased their cacophony. With practiced efficiency, Delorio quickly reached over Joan's now unresisting body and began placing the wireless medical relays that would allow them to keep tabs on her

vital signs. Even when Joan and Clancy were technically dead, their body temperatures and the levels of free-radical buildup in their bloodstreams had to be carefully monitored if they were to be safely reanimated.

Delorio lowered the lids on each of the jump tubes with hiss and a solid ker-chunk. He checked the instrument panel on Joan's tube, then with a satisfied nod moved over to check Clancy's.

"Blood pressure, and heart rates are stable," he said to Hodgeson. "Body temp is in the acceptable range. Everything appears clear for initiation."

Hodgeson nodded. "All relays are providing strong signals. We're clear for jump. I'm flooding the tubes."

Ted watched, dumbfounded as liquid was pumped into the tubes. In thirty seconds it lapped at their ears. Ted's eyes were riveted on Joan's face as he searched it for signs of panic. But her countenance, encased in a metal sheath and visible through the long window that ran the entire length of the tube, was completely calm. Ted decided that her serenity, her unnatural calm as the cold liquid boiled around her, was almost worse than if she'd struggled, grasping at the inside of the tube trying to hold onto life.

Within forty seconds the liquid had covered both jumpers' faces. The large string of bubbles that issued from their noses quickly diminished to a trickle.

"You can't cheat death," his grandmother's voice warned with clarity from the musty warmth of her bedroom in Cleveland ten years ago. "If you try," he heard her say, "Death will reach out and take you for your arrogance."

Ted's eyes were bulging and his chest ached. With a start he realized he'd been holding his breath in sympathetic horror, trying to hold on to the air that Joan and Clancy so easily surrendered. He exhaled in a ragged gasp and sucked in the lab's sterile recycled air. It was all he could do not to rush over and throw open the lids of the tubes, allowing the liquid to wash over the floor.

The once steady blip of the heart monitors stuttered. Ted could just see the electronic readout on the tubes from his position by the door. The jumping red cardiac line on Clancy's tube was the first to falter. It was joined quickly by Joan's. The two harmonized tones sang together relaying a single message; the jumpers' hearts had stopped beating.

As Delorio joined Hodgeson at the console, there was an audible bleep. The extremely sensitive sensors built into the keypad next to Clancy's tube lit up as Clancy's bio-electrical signature was detected and identified.

"Clancy's confirmed," Hodgeson said matter-of-factly. "He's requesting the latest position data for the spider ship."

Delorio punched in several commands on the keyboard in front of him and a holographic image of the spider ship, similar to the one that had crowded Clancy's cabin, appeared in the air over the jump tubes. The boxy image of the spider vessel was larger than any Ted had yet read about. Large protrusions and appendages seemed to have been slapped together in a random, haphazard array governed more by whim than engineering concerns or strategy.

"Holy mother..." he heard himself whisper.

"The chart's coming up now," Delorio said.

A three-dimensional tactical display appeared beside the image of the enemy vessel. The Pendergass was represented by a steady blue dot. A flashing red dot indicated the relative position of the approaching enemy vessel. But it was the smaller yellow markers that caused Ted's stomach to contract. Three swarms of rapidly moving yellow dots, incoming missiles, were converging on the Pendergass.

Jesus, Ted thought, there's no way we'll be able to stop that many. He glanced at Hodgeson and Delorio to see if they shared his pessimistic analysis. Hunched over the consoles, they seemed oblivious to the approaching danger.

"I'm routing the feedback from the keypads to the holo-emitters, that will let us see everything at once" Hodgeson said.

Delorio nodded.

Several seconds clicked by. "Where's Joan?" Delorio asked. "She should have checked in by this time."

Hodgeson scanned Joan's vital signs. "Stable," he reported as Delorio got up to glance over his shoulder. "Give her a few more sec—" He was interrupted by a second bleep as Joan's keypad came to life.

Ted watched as the lights on several of the keys on Joan's keypad flashed in response to, ... to what, he wondered. Her fingers? How could the sensors in the keypad detect what wasn't there?

In the air above the tubes, green holographic characters appeared in time with the flashes on the keypad built into Joan's tube.

DERENGER HERE. COMMO CHECK.

"There she is." Delorio breathed a sign of relief.

"Where were you, lieutenant?" Hodgeson inquired of the air a little sourly. "We were beginning to get concerned."

"You two have just fifty-five minutes remaining to make it to the enemy ship, return and make your preliminary report. At that time, we'll need to begin reanimation." Delorio said, looking toward the air above the tubes. "Good luck and Godspeed." He glanced once more at the hulking image of the spider vessel and quietly added, "You're going to need it."

The distances portrayed on the tactical display were deceptive. It had taken forty-eight excruciating minutes for the yellow dots to intersect the Pendergass' course.

Delorio's fingers tapped the keyboard in front of him again and the tactical display suddenly changed perspective. The view zoomed in to show only the Pendergass and the incoming missiles. As Ted watched, two dozen lances of blue thread stabbed out from the Pendergass' turrets and nearly half of the yellow dots silently disappeared. Ted gazed at the mute deadly grace of the battle, helplessly enthralled. Sixty seconds later another web of threads vaporized all but two of the remaining missiles. Ted allowed himself to exhale as it appeared the Pendergass would successfully fend off the attack.

There was a soft bleep from the master console. "They're back a few minutes early," Hodgeson said. "That was a fast run. You'd think they want to live or something" He added sardonically, throwing a skeptical glance at Delorio. The younger officer seemed intent on the instruments in front of him.

Ted looked over toward where Joan and Clancy's bodies were still immersed in frigid liquid. The sight still produced goose bumps. Lights on Clancy's keypad began to wink: it was clear that learning how to type quickly wasn't one of Clancy's top priorities. The initial report of any critical information, details that couldn't wait for the slow reanimation process, appeared reluctantly before them.

Delorio read out loud as, with excruciating languor, the report crawled its way onto his display.

THIS ONE'S A REAL MOTHER. THE PASSAGE WAYS ARE THICK WITH SPIDERS. I --

He'd better hurry the hell up," Hodgeson commented. "or we're going to die of old age before we get a chance to revive him." In this instance, Ted felt inclined to agree.

--FOUND THE QUEEN IN A CONCEALED COMPARTMENT OFF THE SIDE  
OF A CORRIDOR. OUR SQUADS WILL HAVE TO MAKE THEIR WAY  
THROUGH A TIGHT SPOT JUST UP FROM THE--

Ted felt the hull shudder through the rubber soles of his boots. Instinctively he reached back and braced himself using one of the zero-g maneuver grips on the wall. The holo-image of the Pendergass' tactical situation stuttered, then stabilized. The change in the tactical situation was obvious even to Ted. The two surviving spider missiles had given birth to a dozen or more fast moving yellow offspring who were now converging on the Pendergass with increasing speed. Hodgeson and Delorio starred unblinking at the holographic image, gripped by the same paralysis that now wrapped its hairy arms around Ted. The ship's defensive computer adjusted its targeting priorities. The three or four seconds the Pendergass required to roll and bring the majority of its turrets to bear might as well have been a month. Ted heard Delorio mutter a barely audible, "Oh shit." Before them, the Pendergass' single blue light began to merge with the cluster of yellow attackers. Even as several threads of blue leaped out to intercept the missiles, another pulsing yellow orb made it through. The Pendergass shuddered as an explosion tore a sizable chunk out of its hull. The tactical display blinked out, followed by the lights. The jump bay was thrown into total darkness.

Seconds might have passed or it could have been minutes. The darkness was disorienting. Ted noticed that the klaxon was silent at about the same time he noticed that his feet were no longer connected to the floor. That last missile must have taken out the ship's artificial gravity generator as well as the lights. It was a minor miracle, he thought, that he'd retained his hold on the maneuver grip. The prospect of floating weightless, without light and in the company of at least two corpses would probably have reduced him to a gibbering mass of raw nerves. As it was, he could already feel his mind taking strides in that direction.

"Delorio. Status report," Hodgeson's voice broke through darkness.

"Uh, . . . I'm over here, sir." Delorio responded, then added, "wherever here is. I wasn't holding on to anything when the grav units went out."

"Stay put. No sense ricocheting around the room and braining yourself."

"What's with the emergency generators? They should have kicked in when the power went out."

Ted thought he detected a woozy quality in Delorio's voice. Not everyone dealt with zero-g as well as Ted did, especially with the sudden transition. If someone didn't get the power back on soon—

A pale glow pushed feebly at the darkness as tiny emergency lamps in the jump tubes stuttered into existence. Ted could see that his feet had floated toward the center of the room. Looking down between his dangling khaki-covered legs, the jump tubes appeared to hang untethered in space. Suspended between this world and the next, the jumpers' faces seemed almost white in the insufficient glow of the weak emergency lamps. Ted glanced at his watch; fifty-eight minutes had passed since the jumpers had gone flatline. Jumpers normally had sixty minutes before their safety margin started its sharp, steady decline.

It seemed Delorio had also noticed the rapid passage of time. Ted watched as he pushed off from the ceiling perpendicular to Ted and slid in a slow motion trajectory toward the jump tubes. "We're going to have to reanimate manually," Delorio said. Ted was sure the lieutenant would have looked a little green even in normal light.

Hodgeson nodded from his position at the console. He'd apparently had the presence of mind to strap himself into the chair while Ted and Delorio gawked at the incoming missiles. "Doesn't look good," he said. "Main Medical is still off. We're not likely to have time to bring them both back. Clancy is the senior officer. We revive him first." All emotion was gone from Hodgeson's voice, he was falling back on years of training and experience—and, if the rumors were right, lost jumpers.

The comm unit in the access panel next to his hand came to life and beeped insistently, but Ted's attention was fixed on Joan Derenger's face. Eyes closed, lips slightly parted, she might merely have been asleep were it not for the liquid that surrounded her and caused her blonde hair to float out, away from her head. With stomach-tightening surety, Ted felt he wouldn't get to talk with her about this experience. His eyes probed the shadows that still crowded the room, wondering if her soul was somehow still with them, or if, as his grandmother had warned, Death had come to drag her off to some unending purgatory for daring to play this pernicious game.

Ted touched the response key on the comm unit, cutting short its insistent bleating. "Jump Bay Four. Private Chalmers, sir."

"Damnit, Chalmers. It took you long enough," Sergeant Rogers was clearly irritated.

"Sorry, sergeant. We've—"

"Not now." The sergeant cut him off. "The spiders are closing to boarding distance and we've lost power to our main weapon system and maneuvering thrusters. Twenty Marines got sucked out the hole on deck two when the first missile hit and Henderson in squad three doesn't respond. Lock down and don't open up unless you hear from me or can verify it's a friendly."

A dozen questions clamored into Ted's mind but he somehow managed an obedient "Yes, Sergeant."

Spiders boarding?! In the past, spiders had always been content allowing Marines to board so they could conduct the fight on their own turf, in corridors designed for providing them with good cover and concealment. In the few instances of which Ted was aware, when spiders had successfully repelled a marine boarding party, they had only twice followed the Marines back to the Earth ship. Both attempts had been unsuccessful but each battle had been close and particularly vicious. Never had they been the ones to initiate a boarding procedure. The Pendergass wasn't designed to fend off an internal attack. Ted reached down and touched the pistol at his waist, it seemed pitifully feeble and not for the last time that day he wished for the reassuringly solid grip of one of the assault rifles.

Ted craned his head up to double check the security interlocks. It might be a long time before the grav units were restored. Ted's train of thought came to a screeching inspirational halt. That was it! That was why the spiders were boarding. On both occasions when they'd counterattacked and tried to board Earth ships, the gravity generators had been damaged or off line. The spiders' eight multi-jointed limbs gave them a significant advantage in zero-g. The Marines on those ships had only been able to beat back the intruders after the gravity had been restored. Jesus, if the spiders are somehow able to isolate the Pendergass' gravity generators we're cooked! I should be with my unit, he thought. He slammed the hatch with the palm of his left hand. The force of the blow arced his weightless body in the opposite direction and up against the wall, facing the action in the center of the bay.

"Lungs are clear," Delorio reported. Hodgeson and Delorio had already removed the liquid from Clancy's tube. The lid was thrown back off to the side and they had fastened restraining belts across his forehead, wrists, waist and ankles to keep him from floating about the bay in zero-g. Droplets of renegade liquid formed a slowly expanding silver

halo in the air around the two men and shown off Clancy's skin like a scattering of diamonds.

"Good. Administer standard doses of Vitamins C and E and tirilizad mesylate.

Ted looked at his watch. Sixty-nine minutes had passed since the jumpers had flatlined. He remembered Delorio saying they needed to start reanimation in fifty-five minutes to assure a safety margin. Ted shifted his gaze to Joan. He found himself wondering if she wasn't better off where she was: if the spiders actually boarded the Pendergass, her passing would likely be among the most peaceful.

No, he thought, shaking his head, she's not better off. Dying in battle was nothing compared to a potential eternity in hell.

Hodgeson had rigged Clancy to a blood bypass machine through an IV in his thigh. The machine would heat the blood before returning it to the big man's body. Across from him, Delorio unexpectedly started to hum some antiquated tune about a yellow submarine that had, itself, been resurrected by one of the ship's crew a few weeks ago. With practiced ease, Delorio introduced neutralizers into IV ports in Clancy's muscular arms. The neutralizers were meant to scavenge for the huge buildups of free-radical molecules that had accumulated in the body due to the lack of oxygenated blood. The neutralizers would then break those toxins down before they had a chance to damage the jumper's brain.

"Could you please stop humming that damnable tune," Hodgeson said with unconcealed irritation.

Delorio gave him a quick appraising stare and resumed his work, still humming but more quietly now.

A slight tremor ran through the hull. The spider ship had evidently latched itself onto the Pendergass' slim back. Ted imagined the huge bulk of the spider ship, sitting like a Black Widow preparing to make a meal of its diminutive mate. He put his ear to the hatch in the hope that he might take reassurance from the sound of Marines or the ship's crew moving through the corridors outside the bay. There was nothing. It was as if the Pendergass had already had the life sucked out of it and was now a huge empty shell spinning through space, the crew frozen lifeless at their posts.

Interrupting his tune, Delorio said, "Seventy-three minutes."

"He's not responding," Hodgeson said. "What do you think about manual defibrillation?"

Delorio looked up sharply, startled that the senior officer would ask his opinion. It was an indicator to all of them just how deeply Hodgeson's recent failures had shaken his self-confidence. Delorio glanced down at Clancy's face and then scanned the still flatlined EEG and EKG readouts. It was risky, Clancy's body was in an extremely delicate condition right now and they wouldn't have the help of the medical computer, which was still off line. He was silent a moment longer, appearing to weigh the risks and then nodded. "Agreed. His heart should have restarted on its own by now," he said.

Hodgeson retrieved the two small defib pads from their waterproof pocket inside Clancy's tube. Wiping the excess liquid from Clancy's chest, he placed each pad with deliberate care. Meanwhile, Delorio tapped data into the portable defib console he'd removed from a compartment in the base of the examination table.

"Ready," Hodgeson announced.

"Charging." Delorio returned. "And, . . . now"

Delorio pressed a green button on the defib console and Clancy's body bucked against its restraints.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward the monitor displaying Clancy's vital signs. "No, response," Hodgeson said, an edge of desperation creeping into his voice.

Hodgeson and Delorio spent the next four minutes laboring frantically over Clancy's body. An electric hum rose in the bay but went unnoticed. In a few moments, the normal light's flickered back to life. Clancy's body, however, remained lifeless on the table.

Hodgeson yanked the defib pads off Clancy's chest and began manual CPR. "Come on, God damn it! Start that stubborn heart of yours!"

Delorio looked up at the pads as they careened off the ceiling and then shifted his gaze back to Hodgeson. "It's no use sir, he's gone." He reached over and placed his hand on the colonel's arms.

Hodgeson shook it off angrily and continued his futile attempts over Clancy's corpse. "It's not fair!" he shouted. "I'm not going to lose another one."

Gradually, Hodgeson's efforts over Clancy subsided. He shook his head slowly. Then he let his head float backwards and his arms drifted listlessly out to his sides as his he let his fatigued body sag into the weightlessness of the bay around him.

The panel with Joan's vital signs was back on line, red lines decorating her EEG and EKG displays in a discouragingly regular monotone. With a start, Ted noticed that the liquid level in Joan's tube was dropping.

"What's happening to Joan's tube?" Ted's voice was almost a shout.

Hodgeson and Delorio pivoted simultaneously.

"The computer is running its emergency reanimation protocol. It does that when a jumper has been gone for more than an hour or if the jump is interrupted for any reason." Delorio checked the time and shook his head. "In her case, it's been nearly eighty-five minutes. Even on the off chance we could bring her back, she'd likely have brain damage." Then to Hodgeson, he said, "sir, we should probably interrupt the sequence at this point and just turn her off, don't you think?"

Hodgeson just stared at Joan's face through the glass as if lost in thought. There was a hiss as the computer broke the seal on her tube.

Ted was halfway to the tubes before realizing he'd moved from his post by the door.

"Colonel Hodgeson, sir?"

Hodgeson looked up.

"I think Lt. Derenger would want to live, sir." Ted stopped himself as he reached the two officers and swallowed hard.

"You don't understand private," Delorio said. "If we bring her back at this point there's a good chance she'll have sustained significant damage to her higher brain functions."

All eyes turned toward Joan's tube. Her blonde hair, darkened by the liquid, was plastered her head in a tangled mess and droplets of liquid were sprinkled liberally across her body and the inside of the tube. Ted shivered sympathetically.

"I think she'd want to live, sir," Ted repeated.

Hodgeson came out of his stupor. "The comm link has been down since the power went out. Do a quick check and see if she's still with us, lieutenant."

Delorio pushed and pulled himself over to the main control console, his breath steaming with the exertion, and tapped a few keys. A soft glow crept into the comm keypad built into the outer cover of Joan's tube, illuminating the alphanumeric characters.

Several seconds passed. A tone sounded. Ted was so intent on the keypad that the tone had sounded twice more before he realized it was coming from the hatch behind him. Reluctantly, he shifted his attention from Joan's tube to the blinking light on the hatch access panel. Even in the small bay, crossing back to the hatch seemed to take forever.

"Jump Bay Four," he spoke into the wall mike. Glancing at the current cryptographic prompt at his wrist, he read, "verify Oscar-Romeo-Delta-Twelve."

"I verify, . . ." The woman's voice paused as she identified the correct response. "Tango-Zulu-Beta-Three."

In spite of the correct reply, Ted drew his pistol before disconnecting the security interlock and sliding back the hatch. Three Marines in combat armor floated in the corridor outside the bay. Two faced outward toward opposite ends of the corridor. Stabilizing themselves to maneuver grips with their left hands, each clutched the plassteel grip of an Stalverson-Maretti assault rifle to their hips with their right hand. Blood saturated a battle compress tied tightly to one of the Marine's shoulders. Sergeant Rice, a wiry Marine Ted recognized from the intelligence detachment, floated directly in front of the hatch opening. A scowl dominated her face and her intense gray eyes urgently probed the cold gloom of the bay where Hodgeson was attempting to reanimate Joan over Delorio's objections. Delorio looked pissed.

"Did any of your jumpers make it back?" she asked, pushing past Ted and into the bay.

"No, sergeant. Clancy started to make a report but the power went off before he completed it."

"Your emergency power didn't come on?" It was more a statement than a question.

"No. Lt. Col. Hodgeson and Lt. Delorio tried to reanimate Clancy manually. They're still—"

"Shit." Sergeant Rice pushed herself recklessly over to the main control console. After a brief struggle, she removed a data cartridge from a locked compartment and stuffed it into the blue zero-g utility tote that was strapped securely across her chest.

"Preliminary reports are automatically routed to us for analysis but Clancy's was cut off in mid-sentence," she explained. "We were hoping that it was merely the connection that had failed and that the information we needed had been recorded locally. We still have no idea where that damn queen is." She glanced at the two officers working over Joan's body. Ted could see tendrils of steam snaking out from the sergeant's head as the sweat evaporated through her close-cropped hair. Bringing her gaze back to Ted, she asked, "What's her prognosis?"

"Not good," was all Ted could manage in response.

The muscles on sergeant Rice's face seemed to be held in some sort of suspended animation, unmoving and lifeless. She was counting on one of our jumpers getting back. Gathering her feet under her, the sergeant worked herself back toward the bay's hatch with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

"What about the other jumpers?" Ted asked.

Sergeant Rice shook her head, confirming Ted's growing concern. "Clancy was the only jumper to report anything positive." When she reached the hatch she turned to look in at him.

"I wish I had an assault rifle I could leave with you, Private Chalmers, but there's a good chance we'll have to fight our way back. The commander's going to order a counter attack in about twenty minutes but without knowing where the queen is, . . ." her voice trailed off. Our chances of surviving are slim to none, Ted finished for her mentally.

Glancing down to ensure the tote containing the data cartridges was closed, she said, "My advice to you is to get yourselves back to the mess hall on deck four before the spiders make it through this section of the ship." As she and the other two Marines disappeared from view, Ted heard her add, "You don't have much time."

Ted closed the hatch and engaged the lock, thinking of the other Marines in his squad: Patrice DeVasquez, the demolition expert and ship chess champion; Martin Banner, the squad's best rifleman who hated to lose at anything; Mike Lester, Sam Carpello, and the others. They'd be double checking their equipment and cracking nervous jokes right now, getting ready to mount a counter attack and knowing that

their chances of living through the day were low enough to make even a card shark wince. Ted's reverie was interrupted by colonel Hodgeson's victorious shout.

"We've got a heartbeat!"

The colonel's frantic efforts had indeed paid off—a feeble and erratic blip was working its way almost hesitantly across Joan's EKG monitor. Ted glanced at his watch. Ninety-two minutes. It's been so long, he thought. Could they really bring her back after that amount of time without her suffering brain damage?

Delorio administered additional neutralizers to the IV ports in her arm.

"Will she live?" Ted asked.

"You're damn right, she'll live," Hodgeson responded forcefully.

But Delorio shared a look with Ted that revealed the depth of his mistrust for Hodgeson's optimistic assessment. "Perhaps." Delorio said quietly. "But she'll be out of it for several days."

"We don't have several days." Ted said, his voice taking on the flat quality of a two-day old open bottle of beer. "We need the information now."

Delorio shook his head. "We're not going to get it from this jumper. If we tried to wake her up we'd kill her for sure and she'd never even regain consciousness." He reached over and smoothed a strand of blonde hair back from her face. "She may well have been better off wherever she was ten minutes ago."

Ted found that he was examining the lines on his left hand, absorbing the fascinating whorls and steeply arced patterns the lines made as they traversed his palms. The pale jagged scar left by a kitchen knife on his unsuspecting index finger when he was just seven appeared to hold some meaning for him that was just beyond his ability to recognize. Ted looked from his hand toward Joan again. Her blood was still cycling through a transparent tube that carried it to the machine where it was heated it before it returned to her body through a tube in her opposite thigh. Her face was pale and he could barely detect the slight rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. She had been willing to risk her present condition in order to save the lives of her fellow Marines. Seeing Joan in her present state, Ted began to appreciate the simultaneous fragility and resilience of the body through which he and the others so tenaciously clung to life. He reached a decision that at once seemed liberating and horrifying and his stomach seemed suddenly hollow, as if he had missed his last several meals.

"I've got to go" he heard himself say.

"You'd leave Lt. Derenger here undefended?" Delorio asked, surprise giving way almost immediately to anger.

"No. I mean I'll jump to the other ship." Ted said flatly.

Understanding crept onto Delorio's and his face seemed to pull downward.

Now Ted had the attention of both officers.

"Someone has to learn where the queen is or we're all going to die."

"No." Hodgeson shook his head, rejecting the idea after only a moment's hesitation. "I've already considered sending someone else. None of us has been prepared for jumping, physically or psychologically. And it's almost certain that the communication pads wouldn't recognize the bioelectric signature of someone other than the original jumper for whom it was calibrated—you probably couldn't communicate in jump and you'd have put yourself in extreme peril with nothing to show for it. No." He concluded, "The risks are too high."

"Too high." Ted felt himself on the edge of nervous laughter but smothered the urge. "If I don't go we'll all be arm wrestling those god awful . . ." he struggled for the appropriate word and gave up, "things in a couple of hours. Considering they have eight arms, I'd say my chances are better in one of your tubes there than wandering the corridors in zero-g with a pistol for defense." He drew the small weapon from its holster

at his waist and held it out for them to see. It seemed pitifully inadequate to Ted and he knew that the officers would recognize how little protection such a weapon would offer.

Delorio nodded. Hodgeson was silent, his face immobile and hip deep in a muddy frown.

“Private Chalmers’ analysis is probably pretty close,” Delorio said. “We have to get a tactical fix on the queen. The only way to do that, reasonably or otherwise, is to jump someone next door for a quick look around. He’s younger and in better shape than either one of us.”

“He won’t know how to navigate.” Hodgeson protested.

Ted wondered if the colonel objected to the plan on the basis of technical feasibility or if he simply feared the likelihood of losing another patient and further marring his already scarred record.

“He won’t have to navigate across open space. The Pendergass and the spider ship are already linked. He’ll just have to pass through the combat zones and stroll aboard their ship. And if he can do it within thirty minutes our chances for bringing him back are excellent.”

Ted waited, his internal organs intent on creating a realistic imitation of a pretzel, as the two doctors debated. He felt absurdly sure he had argued for the wrong side as it dawned on him that they were discussing whether or not to drown him in ice-cold saline solution.

Ten minutes later, Ted lay shivering in Clancy’s recently vacated tube—they’d tethered Clancy’s corpse into the corner so it wouldn’t float back into the center of the room at some inopportune moment.

Delorio hovered above him, attaching relay monitors to Ted’s head and chest to monitor his vital signs.

“When you first notice you’re in jump you’ll experience a few seconds of disorientation followed closely by a rushing sensation,” he instructed. “You’ll seem like you’re in some sort of wind tunnel. Your instinct will be to allow yourself to be pulled into that tunnel. It’s critical that you resist that instinct or you won’t be coming back.” Delorio looked down at him meaningfully. He slid a needle underneath the skin of Ted’s arm and injected an anesthetic. Almost immediately his shivering stopped.

“I understand.”

“Many jumpers say they feel a strong sensation of unabashed joy. Others say its terrifying, like a black train bearing down on you in the dark from all directions at once. Either way, simply move out of the mouth of the tunnel and you’ll find yourself back in this room.”

“You’ve jumped?” Ted swallowed.

Delorio shook his head. “No. But I have it on the word of several reliable sources.” He grinned down at Ted. “Relax, Private Chalmers. And remember, you have thirty minutes so don’t waste any time trying to do a communications check. Get upstairs, get our info, and get back. We’ll debrief you as soon as you’re awake.”

“How do I move?”

“Don’t know really. They say you just sort of ‘think’ your way around.” He looked over toward where Hodgeson was sitting at the main control console and asked, “Is the read okay?”

Hodgeson’s reply that Ted’s vital signs were stable seemed to struggle back to him through several feet of cotton. Cotton? The room seemed to be getting soft around the edges. Funny, he thought vaguely, one of the officers must have brought it in.

Delorio looked back down at him.

“Feel good. Not afraid.” Ted mumbled with a tongue that wouldn’t quite cooperate.

“Don’t doubt it.” Delorio said. “On your way, jumper.”

Soft warm clouds were invading his vision, filling everything. He wondered with mild interest if the spiders could move through cotton.

Delorio smoothly lowered the lid on the tube. With a hiss the seals engaged and Ted was locked inside the steel and glass coffin borrowed from Clancy on short notice. Moments later, Ted barely noticed when his tube started filling with icy liquid. Only a small part of him, shoved way to the back of his mind, told him to be concerned. The anesthetic had muffled the voice to no more than a whisper, however, and Ted felt himself drifting effortlessly into a place where dreams merged freely with reality.

He couldn't understand why after all the debate they had pulled him out. He was floating beside Clancy's tube. Something must have gone wrong. Delorio and Hodgeson were over at the main console, both intent on the monitors that showed his vital signs. A thin but familiarly urgent tone sounded somewhere close by.

Delorio looked up. There was something disquieting about his expression. Ted couldn't quite put his finger on it.

*What went wrong?* Ted asked.

The softness induced by the anesthetic was entirely absent now. In its place was a clarity, a sharpness of detail, that lent the edges and corners and colors of the bay a stark hyper-reality, as if someone had turned up the amperage on the visual and auditory portions of his brain. Ted felt as if he had woken up from a dream only to find himself part of a retouched photograph, the colors all enhanced for some artistically unclear but overwhelming affect.

"God speed, kid." Delorio's low voice flowed with shifting nuances of intonation.

He could hear, almost feel, each slow-motion breath that the officers took.

*What went wrong?*, he asked again. The words had formed in his mind but they lacked any substance. No sound had emerged from him to disturb the cacophony of muted mechanical whispers that filled the bay.

With a start, Ted realized that Delorio wasn't looking at him at all, the lieutenant's gaze was fixed on the jump tube in front of him. Jerking his attention downward, Ted found his own lifeless blue eyes staring back at him through half-open lids. A thin dusting of translucent bubbles clung in delicate clusters to his lips and nose.

He now recognized that single, almost musical tone who's singing filled the bay. It was the tone of a flatlined signature on an EKG monitor.

Jesus, he thought. I'm dead.

He might have remained there indefinitely, hovering over his body, absorbed in the fascinating contours of the bubbles that clung like tiny pearls to the rims of his nostrils, had he not felt himself tugged gently upward. It was as if he were a moth caught in the soft updraft of a nearby flame.

Ted turned. The ceiling seemed to have melted into a dimly lit tunnel. Ted was unsure if he was looking down or up and the sense of vertigo that tugged lightly at the edges of his mind was unnerving. The sensation faded almost as soon as it began, however, and shapes and outlines began to form. Indistinct against their foggy backdrop, the shapes seemed to belong to people. But people, Ted noticed, who were missing the lower halves of their bodies, their legs lost in the obscure kaleidoscope that formed the sides of the tunnel. As strange as this murky hole in Ted's world was in appearance, there was an unexpected but unmistakable sense of warmth and comfort here. Ted let himself drift closer, trying to make out more detail, as if doing so would inevitably allow him to find a face among the silent forms. A voice, seeming to originate both inside and outside his cluttered mind, spoke to him.

"It's not your time, Ted. Soon, dear one, but not now."

“Sadie?” There was no doubt, it was the same voice that had issued that earnest warning to the ten year old boy who sat alone at his grandmother’s death bed. It was hers, he realized, and yet not hers. There was something different about it.

“... not now...”

The flood of nightmares and demons Sadie’s warning had spawned during the decade that followed her death now rushed in on him, preventing further reflection. No, there was something wrong with this too.

“You can’t cheat Death.” This time the voice was only the mental echo of his grandmother’s warning but its paranoiac affect on him was immediate.

This isn’t a golden highway to some wonderful place, Ted thought. It’s a trap set by Death Himself. Vertigo welled up in him again and he clawed himself desperately back to the mouth of the tunnel, back toward Hodgeson’s voice.

“Twenty-five minutes left.”

Even the colonel’s deadpan drawl was a comfort. The tunnel was gone. Its disappearance was so sudden that Ted wondered if it had only been the product of the intense stress of the past hour. Instead of the tunnel, Ted was looking down at his body in Clancy’s tube from what was normally the ceiling. The constantly changing visual perspective was beginning to take its toll and he suffered several seconds of discomfort, uncertain of where he was and how he’d gotten here.

“But sir, we’ve got a man in jump here.” The sound of lieutenant Delorio’s protests pulled him partially back to the present.

“Peterson and Nichols are your priority now, lieutenant. If we can revive one or both of them we might have a chance to learn where the...”

Ted didn’t recognize the second voice. It was distant, as if coming over a communications link. Tuning the conversation out, Ted risked a glance over his shoulder, half expecting to be pulled back into the endless tunnel from which he’d just escaped. There was nothing but gray. Not the tunnel, but something just as strange. It took several seconds to realize that he was staring directly at the ceiling itself but from a distance of only about two centimeters. Had he still had a nose, it would have been pressed uncomfortably against the cold plassteel surface. No nose. No sensation of cold either, he realized.

“Yes, sir. On my way. Be there in five minutes.” Delorio’s voice again, clear but distant this time, as if from farther away.

Ted very tentatively stuck out his tongue until he was sure it should have been touching the ceiling’s surface. Again, nothing. No taste. No touch. No smell. Only his hypersensitive eyes and ears seemed in working order.

An image of the Pendergass spinning discarded end-over-end through an eternity of frozen space came to him unbidden. He could almost see the frozen corpses drifting aimlessly around the corridors and compartments, bouncing off bulkheads before drifting back to join in a silent dance with the other cadavers. The realism of the morbid vision sent a jagged chill sliding across the already raw edges of his mind.

The meaning of Hodgeson’s earlier status report jarred him out of his reverie—twenty-five minutes! Irritated at the loss of self-control that had already cost him five precious minutes, he pulled himself back from the ceiling. Looking back toward the main control console he noticed that Delorio was curiously absent. Ted wanted to ask where the lieutenant had gone but he discounted the idea. Time was running out. In twenty-five minutes he sure as hell intended to be back here.

He turned his attention toward the entryway. Out and up. The sense of urgency that gripped him was almost overwhelming now. Intuitively he ignored the locked hatch and passed without sound into the corridor beyond. His passage was so quick that he did not

notice the flashing red light on the hatch's panel. In his haste, Delorio had forgotten to re-engage the security interlocks behind him.

Even though he'd received the standard Marine Corps briefing on assault tactics for spider ships, Ted was startled at the lack of illumination. He vaguely remembered the staff sergeant saying something about spiders relying almost entirely on the infrared spectrum and having little need for more than minimal internal lighting.

Round passages, curiously ribbed like the inside of an artery caked with foul plaque, wound without clear intent through the ship's infrastructure.

A soft slapping sound, like someone dribbling dollops of mud on a concrete floor, approached him from around a turn in the passage some twenty meters ahead. One of the spiders was approaching, and Ted instinctively shrank back halfway into the wall. There was at least one small advantage to not having a body. Where the spiders had gotten there nickname was immediately apparent; the thing had a compact, muscular shape, eight multi-jointed appendages extending downward from a blackish-brown body. But the creature resembled more than just a spider. To Ted it seemed that some deranged deity had somehow managed to squeeze all the kick-ass ugly of a spider, a grisly bear and balding porcupine into a single grotesque killing machine.

Ted could almost hear Sergeant Rogers' voice. "You usually have about three seconds from the time you see it to the time it hits you," Rogers' had said, "and your aim had better be damn good 'cause if it gets a hold of you, your armor will just mean the agony lasts a bit longer. I'd just as soon fight demons from hell." A twitchy, nervous sort of smile, a smile that had unsettled Ted at the time, had accompanied the sergeant's last comment. Primed to false courage, Ted and the other young Marines quickly discounted the stories as tall tales intended to instill in the newcomers a sense of awe for the vets. He was momentarily glad he had no stomach from which to launch his most recently eaten meal.

Ted found that it was impossible to pull his gaze from the approaching spider as it drew closer. Ungh, they're so freakin' big, he thought, it's no wonder we have to chance explosive bullets. This particular specimen appeared to be four meters in length, half a meter tall and covered with a sparse prickly gray hair reminiscent of quills. Its head, located low and between its foremost legs, was the size of a large, albeit triangular, melon and was dominated by a single oblong sensory organ. This eye—Ted could think of no better analogy for the thing—wrapped fully half way around the spider's triangular head. Marines had learned the hard way that this arrangement gave their adversaries extraordinary peripheral vision.

The spider came to an abrupt halt and held motionless just two meters from where Ted hovered. It seemed to be searching, almost smelling the air around it. He had to remind himself that he wasn't visible. Ted wasn't sure how, but this thing clearly sensed that something was out of place. He found that he was holding tightly to his immaterial breath and wondering if, in his present form, he gave off any infrared radiation that might be in the spider's visual spectrum. After all, he reasoned, human history was rife with sightings of apparitions, so on some level spirits had to be visible. He searched his memory. He couldn't remember any of the jumpers ever saying anything about it. Given jumpers' proclivity for keeping to themselves, he thought, that doesn't mean shit.

Ted mirrored the spider's apparent paralysis. He hadn't felt this vulnerable and alone since the day Sadie had died and the city social worker had come to take him to the orphanage. Trying to wish himself dark and cold, he conjured up Joan Derenger's face from his memory. Somehow she had survived two jumps like this and had returned to try another an hour earlier. Yes, paranoia whispered hoarsely in his ear, but look

where Joan is now. How she *is* now. Ted shook off the image and turned his attention to the spider in front of him.

Even in the dim light of the tunnel his sensitive vision allowed him to clearly see the creature's six rear legs. Each leg ended in a leathery suction-cupped pad that was bracketed by a pair of long claws, about four centimeters in length. These dual-gripping mechanisms gave the spider amazing quickness regardless of surface conditions or gravity. Its two foremost appendages, used as arms, were tipped with three opposing finger-like protrusions that could be extended and withdrawn at will.

Ted watched as the spider used its arms to remove some sort of device from a utility belt looped just behind its first to sets of legs. It held the device low, in front of its head. Ted was near enough to see faint yellow patterns on the iridescent eye shifting and moving as if bubbles were working their way to the eye's gelatinous surface and sending murky spirals outward. Tucking the curious device away, the spider sprang ahead, as if a dam had suddenly burst behind it and it were being propelled by several tons of rushing water. The movement was so unexpected that Ted felt his mind convulse in a massive paralyzing hiccup. Frozen in place, he watched in horror as the spider passed through where his chest should have been. Spirit or not, he half expected the thing to whirl, wrap several of its prickly arms around him and drag him screaming back down the corridor. After it disappeared around the next bend, Ted's psyche gurgled a shuddering sigh. It hadn't seen him. And besides, he thought, meekly summoning the remains of his tattered bravado, what could it do if it had seen him, he couldn't very well be killed twice. Or so he hoped.

Not knowing where to start, Ted thought himself in the direction from which this the spider had come.

Ted realized he didn't have the slightest notion where he was, or for that matter, where he'd already been. He had been flitting in and out of passages for what, by his internal reckoning, was about ten minutes. He was getting nowhere. All the passages looked the same. If he were right about the time, he now had about fifteen minutes to discover the queen's hiding place and get back. At this rate it would take him hours. He found himself wishing he could leave ghost breadcrumbs or something as he went along so he could at least tell what passages he'd already visited. If this was what jumpers had to deal with in this war, Ted figured they were welcome to their damned private compartments.

He had ceased moving aside for the spiders and two now hurried through him at breakneck speed. Ted could almost feel their hairy quills but forced his mind to the increasingly difficult task of clear thought.

Now what, he asked himself. Perhaps he should follow them. He discarded the idea; he had come across dozens of the creatures and had no reason to believe these would be on their way to the queen's refuge. It's much more likely they're on their way to the Pendergass.

What else did he know? The creatures were a hive species. Okay, but so what? That didn't really tell him anything. Perhaps if he were an entomologist that bit of knowledge might offer a clue, but he doubted it.

What about Clancy? As far as anyone knew, Clancy was the only jumper to find the queen. Where would Clancy have looked? He realized with desperation that he knew almost as little about Clancy Barsodovitch as he did about the spiders. This was getting him nowhere. Slick snakelike fibers of panic began wrapping themselves around his thoughts, slowing his already tired mind to a crawl.

Four more creatures hurried past.

Four? Ted turned and looked after the four shapes already disappearing in the gloom. That was odd. Until then, the spiders had restricted themselves to traveling in pairs. This was the only unusual activity he'd encountered during his entire foray into this damned hellhole and he decided to follow. Feeling even less consequential than one of the creatures' nonexistent shadows, Ted fell in behind them. They had already rounded the next turn and were passing through a hatch that resembled a heart valve by the time he caught up with them.

No sooner had the hatch closed behind the last spider than a rapid barrage of bullets exploded into the first creature in line. The unfortunate spider's first two legs were blown from its body and its head exploded like a water balloon filled with sludge. Gray and yellow gore immediately filled the corridor's air. The three remaining spiders scrambled backward several meters to the hatch. There, two of them appeared to be busy melting into the wall.

Ted moved closer and saw the two spiders pulling what appeared to be a latex-like cover, indistinguishable in the gloom from the surrounding corridor, back over an alcove recessed in the wall.

The third, and last, spider scurried by him, opened the hatch, and positioned itself on the inside curve of the corridor beyond the opening. From there, Ted saw it would be able to view the Marines as they rounded the corner with minimal exposure to the automatic weapons that had torn apart its companion.

Ted turned his attention in the direction from which the bullets had come. The floating cloud of body parts and fluids glistened as someone on the other side focused a flashlight beam on it. The debris prevented him from seeing the squad. There was a very real chance that friends were on the other side of that stomach-turning haze; one of the squads from first platoon, or perhaps even his squad.

Whoever they were, he knew they would be moving very cautiously now. The point man would be attaching suction-cupped grips to the wall to provide squad members a purchase from which to move and brace themselves while firing. Each grip also served as an electronic beacon that could be activated to call for reinforcements or rescue. When Ted had been assigned to the point position for zero-g practice assaults, placing the grips had made him feel like a mountain climber anchoring cramming devices into a vertical cliff face. The analogy had come complete with a sense of vertigo when he'd peered down into the emptiness between his feet.

The second and third marines in line would be training their automatic weapons into the darkness beyond the point man. If the squad was lucky, it had one of the few functioning robotic sensor units. The unit would provide the squad with hands-free illumination. That benefit also explained why functional units were so scarce—they were a popular first target for the spiders who recognized darkness as an ally. If the squad wasn't so fortunate, it would have to rely on the less powerful lamps that were attached to the squad members' helmets. In this case it would hardly make a difference how they illuminated the corridor. The squad's visibility was impeded by a mess of its own creation and the Marines would have substantially less time to train their weapons on any real or suspected threat. The spiders were lightning fast. The dual advantages of the near total darkness and a zero-g environment would be enough to tip the scales in the spiders' direction with lethal results. Ted could see that this additional impediment to visibility was merely icing on an already well-decorated cake.

Looking back toward where the spiders had disappeared into the wall, Ted found that it was impossible to make out the precise locations of the two hiding places. It's a blind, he thought. It's a goddamn duck blind and the Marines down there are the ducks.

The ambush was a good one and Ted had no doubt about how effective it would turn out to be. Marines boarding spider ships hadn't found such hiding places before but it explained a great deal about how the spiders were able to close with Marine combat units and overwhelm them with such uncanny regularity.

The third spider hung motionless on the wall nearby, its arms twitching in a way that Ted would quickly have interpreted as nervousness had it been displayed by a human. He was unsure how to read the gesture on a spider.

Ted started down the corridor toward the squad, intent on finding some way, any way, to warn his fellow Marines of the danger into which they were advancing. He had reached the near side of the biological screen of gore when he noticed a familiar shape float with slow-motioned grace into the middle of the mess.

Flash grenade!

Some resourceful Marine had apparently had a brainstorm on how to clear the corridor of the debris with minimal risk. Ted's combat training, honed to the level of instinct, took precedence over the knowledge that he no longer had a body to protect. He executed a forceful mental leap backward against the bulkhead and braced himself for the inevitable impact of his spine against the wall followed by an intense flash of heat. Instead he found himself adrift in a large oblong chamber about twenty-five meters long. The chamber was honeycombed with narrow openings. Ted's enhanced visual acuity pierced the gloom to the edges of those openings but not beyond.

The muted whump of another grenade behind him told Ted that he had not passed far from the corridor where the Marines were methodically clearing a path. Turning in that direction, Ted saw that the alcove was more than what it had appeared from the outside. It was, in fact, a short passage that connected the corridor he'd just vacated to this larger labyrinth of chambers. Several spiders, Ted counted seven, were gathered on this side of the hidden opening, apparently waiting until the Marines were drawn past so they could counterattack from the flank.

Lord, Ted thought, that squad doesn't have a chance.

Despite the noise, Ted found his attention drawn to dozens of yellow watermelon-sized orbs covering what Ted suspected was usually the floor. A russet colored gluey substance had been used to fasten them to the floor, perhaps, Ted thought, to prevent them from floating around on just such occasions as this one. He looked again at the seven creatures waiting purposefully around the camouflaged opening to the corridor. Ted felt the urge to swallow nervously but he had no body with which to satisfy the impulse. Given the spiders' appearance and lack of auditory communication it was all too easy to mistake the spiders for a less threatening semi-intelligent species. The careful planning and guile they were exhibiting in this encounter was a graphic reminder: underestimating them could easily lead to fatal consequences.

An eternity passed as the next sixty seconds ticked grudgingly by. Ted knew that he should be taking the time to search for the queen but he floated motionless, mesmerized by the universal dance of the hunter and the hunted. He felt detached. It was like watching a surrealistic scene in a holo-movie back on Earth with the sound turned off.

Finally, the staccato thip-thip-thip of assault rifles shattered the dreamlike quality of the illusion. The Marines had spotted the spider serving as a decoy and were taking no chances. Explosive shells tore more chunks out of the corridor walls but some miracle of chance prevented anything from penetrating the camouflaged opening. From the sound of movement and weapons, the squad was now directly opposite the opening. Ted expected to see the group of spiders rush through, but they remained motionless. Several seconds later, the rifles sounded again, this time from farther away. Still, the spiders remained motionless.

What are they waiting for, he wondered? The opportunity for a close ambush seemed to have come and gone without the spiders taking any action at all. He studied the disciplined group of alien bodies that ringed the door more carefully. They seemed oddly dispersed. There was almost a meter and a half of space between each spider. Curious, he thought, if they intended to charge through the opening in quick succession, it would have made a lot more sense for them to line up single file or to hug the entrance.

The spiders' intent squirmed and forced its way laboriously into Ted's tired mind. Comprehension brought with it both elation and embarrassment. Oh Jesus, Ted, it's no wonder you're still a private. They're not waiting in ambush, they're set up in a defensive position. He was no expert but he suspected there were damn few things these creatures would consider important enough to justify passing up a perfect ambush. It was an assumption but it was also the only prospect he had. Time was short. Turning, he plunged through the nearest opening in the surrounding honeycomb of chambers.

He got lucky on his second try and pulled up abruptly in a small chamber. This chamber, adjacent to the one through which he'd entered, allowed him a clear view of the group of spiders arranged in a motionless and silent ring. There was less light here but his enhanced vision had quickly adjusted to the reduced level of illumination.

Ted's headlong mental plunge had put him all the way through the enormous abdomen of a huge spider and he cringed reflexively. Executing a slow mental pirouette, he directed his attention back the way he'd come and stared in fascination. This spider, perhaps twice the size of the others he had encountered, had a huge distended abdominal section that floated ponderously above the floor. Its abdomen bulged to the point of bursting with the same spherical objects that littered the floor in the next room. Good God, Ted thought, this has got to be the queen! The distended portion of the spider's abdomen was a pale yellow jelly-like substance that seemed to writhe with a life of its own in the weightlessness, like a giant maggot in some grotesque feeding frenzy.

She was seemingly intent on the positions of the spiders gathered defensively in the adjoining chamber. Ted moved around to allow him a view of her head and forelimbs. While her abdomen seemed repulsively active, her face was devoid of any movement whatsoever. Were it not for the dark rings expanding outward from the center of the yellow sensory organ, from this perspective she might well have been some lifeless mummified shell.

Ted allowed himself a brief sense of hope and satisfaction. I don't know if you can feel fear, he thought, but now I know where you are. Now you've got a reason to be afraid.

He wished fervently for a flash grenade, or even the pistol he'd been carrying earlier. It would be so easy to trash this monstrosity. It would be so simple to . . . He shook himself free of the tantalizing pull of his futile daydreams.

So what are you going to do now, Chalmers? Somehow you've managed to stumble onto the queen. Somehow you've found the creature that's controlling the attack on the Pendergass. You're the only one who knows. Do you really expect you'll make it back to tell anyone when so many specially trained officers have died trying?

His sense of impending victory was replaced by despair. He was already dead and yet he was the only one who had the information that his comrades on the Pendergass needed to survive. He knew that his chances for success, low to begin with, were decreasing with every minute. Now that he finally had the information, the enormity of the odds against him draped across his shoulders like a wet blanket, damp and cold and heavy. In all his twenty-one years he had never felt anything so immense, so immovable.

The memory of his own lifeless eyes looking back at him from within the liquid-filled jump tube chilled him. If you don't get back to the jump bay and wake up, this information will be about as useful as a drinking fountain in zero-g. He remembered

Joan's words, spoken with determination less than an two hours ago, "I don't want to die." Joan had been afraid of death too, he remembered. But she had said something else as well. Ted struggled to remember. Slowly, grudgingly, the words formed in his mind's ear as if Joan were sitting next to him, dolling them out one at a time, "When I die, when I'm really gone forever, I need to leave this life knowing that I saved as many souls as I could. I *can't* quit."

"You can't cheat Death." Sadie's warning welled up forcefully within him, pushing back the comforting echoes of Joan Derenger's words. But it wasn't Sadie this time, Ted realized. The voice was hollow and forbidding and familiar. The voice was his own, savage and unforgiving, given life and honed to a fine edge by hundreds of sleepless nights. "You can't cheat Death!" A tunnel seemed to be forming around him, dark this time and black; no hint of the light from the first tunnel he'd experienced was present at all. This was the impenetrable black of an oil slick on a dark sea, moving, writhing and searching. The darkness pulled and probed at him, determined to drag him forcefully off the mental precipice to which he so tenuously hung and suck him down.

No! Ted's mind recoiled and pushed back. His fought to wrench himself free from a decade of fear. He felt his mind, his soul, gasping with the internal struggle. This is no game, he thought. This is Death's playground but it's not His game. Not this time. Not this time.

The struggle may have taken only seconds. Or perhaps it had taken hours or days. It was impossible to tell; his sense of time was irrevocably warped by the disconcerting events of the past two hours. When Ted's mind finally cleared, the darkness was gone. His mind felt cleansed and clear but unbearably weary, as if he'd finished running a marathon. Time to go now, he thought. There's more at stake here than your own soul, Ted Chalmers. It's time to go.

Pulling free of the remaining lethargic tendrils that still clung to him, he willed himself past the silent ring of sentries and back into the corridor. He was about to start off in the direction from which the Marines had first appeared when he noticed the flashing red light of one of the zero-g maneuver grips the Marines had planted on the wall. He knew he couldn't activate the beacon in his present condition, but if he could relate the beacon's identification number to the Pendergass' intelligence section, an assault squad might be able to trace their way back to this location. Moving quickly to the grip nearest the concealed entrance, he paused long enough to memorize the electronic tracer number stamped into the plassteel handle. Seconds later he was following the string of flashing red lights—electronic bread crumbs left by the squad—thinking himself rapidly through the dimly lit corridors toward the Pendergass.

Ted's spirits soared as he passed hatch to Jump Bay Three. He was actually going to make it. He would survive this nightmare and be joking about it next week with the members of his fire team. There had been heavy fighting on two levels, particularly on the deck with the Pendergass' gravity generators. The spiders were using smoke and visibility was next to nothing but so far the Marines' heavy weapons were allowing them to withstand the assault.

Ted rounded the last corner and flashed toward the hatch to Jump Bay Four. Halfway down the corridor he froze. The hatch was open and he could clearly discern of the bay beyond—the lights were out. Maybe there had been another power failure, Ted told himself. Or maybe they had moved Joan to the medical bay and . . . No, it's no use, he thought. Something is wrong, really wrong.

He moved carefully, despite the lack of physical danger. He had no desire to go forward at all but was forced to admit that other options didn't exist. His body was in a

tube in Jump Bay 4. If he were going to be reanimated it would have to be there, and it would have to be soon.

He eased himself into the hatch, half expecting someone or something to crash through him, leaving an uncomfortable icy imprint on his soul; instead he was greeted only by the steady impersonal bleep of the medical monitors on Joan's tube.

Ted's vision quickly adjusted to the darkness of the bay and he noticed a fine mist of dark globules hanging in the air over the main medical console. Letting his attention drift to the center of the bay, he noticed someone had replaced the lid on Joan's tube. Her face was pale under the dim internal tube lights but her hair was dry now. He shifted his gaze and stared at his own tube. No, not his tube, it was Clancy's tube. The name 'Lt. Barsodovitch' was stenciled in neat black letters on the burnished metal next to Ted's head. Liquid still filled the space around his body and he could see that his eyes were still open. Keep focused, he thought to himself. Keep focused.

A digital readout that monitored the elapsed jump time was projected on the glass next to Ted's face. The numbers jumped out and slapped him. Forty-two minutes and sixteen seconds had passed since he'd jumped. How had that happened? Instinctively he attempted to retrace his passage to the spider ship but panic had turned his ability to think to mush; he abandoned the attempt almost immediately. Forty-two minutes. Ted watched, immobilized by the flash of the numbers. Several more seconds ticked off the counter before he regained some measure of self-control. It hardly makes a difference, he thought wryly. Whether he could determine where he'd lost those precious minutes or not, he was still way overdue. Ted sensed that his pool of emotional responses was nearly empty. Too much had happened to him and his reserves had drained away. He felt his mind sagging inward, threatening to collapse. His head felt like someone had filled it with lead. It would be so pleasant to just let go, to just let himself drift. He pulled his attention inward, hoping to push back the listlessness that threatened to envelop him but it didn't help. He found it difficult to care about anything right now.

When he refocused his eyes, he was looking at main console again, at the liquid that hovered above it. They were supposed to have reanimated him twelve minutes ago but so far there was no sign of either Hodgeson or Delorio. Delorio had promised him, damnit. How could they have left him? But that's not quite true, is it, he thought? There is someone here.

Ted summoned enough willpower to move over to the main console. Light from the displays cast a greenish tint on the dark cloud of pea-sized droplets. Greenish tint, yes, but as he looked more closely it was possible to see that they were deep red. It was blood. He felt nothing. He turned his attention inward again, hunting through the pockets of his soul for some type of emotional response: horror, regret, disgust? But there was nothing. Curious he thought. He examined the cloud of expanding liquid with detached interest. Whatever had caused the cloud had occurred recently, the blood hadn't yet drifted into other parts of the bay. Apparently there hadn't been much of a struggle after the blood was first spilled either or it would have been flung all around the confined space.

Ted moved behind the console and discovered Lt. Col. Hodgeson's body floating face down in the foot space below the keyboard. Even from behind it was clear that the officer's head had been crushed by something terribly powerful. He could see that Hodgeson's legs had gotten tangled around the base of the seat. Ted guessed that was the only thing that was preventing the colonel's body from slowly cart wheeling around the bay. For a brief moment Ted allowed himself to vaguely wonder what that might look like and his gaze swept the confined space, trying to imagine the scene. Looking into the corner, he noticed Clancy, his legs still tethered to some unknown piece of medical equipment in the corner. The body resembled a huge carp attached to a stringer,

forgotten beneath some ancient and abandoned fishing boat. This is going to be one hell of a mess when the gravity comes back on, he thought absently. There's nothing but death here now. How could I possibly have thought I could play games with Death and win, he wondered.

A thought bumped against the edges of his mind with just enough persistence to restore his curiosity. If Hodgeson had been killed recently, then perhaps his soul was still here. And if he were here, perhaps between the two of them . . . Ted snapped his attention around the bay, his sensitive vision probing the shadows and corners for some sign of movement. Only Clancy's gently bobbing body and the quiet, sterile electronic whispers of the medical equipment broke the dark stillness of the bay.

Ted looked back at the digital readout on the tube that held his body. Forty-seven minutes and twenty nine seconds.

What now? He asked himself.

The question was answered by the sound of shouting voices and automatic weapons fire in the corridor.

Ted looked toward the hatch in time to see four marines scrambling hand over hand through the small opening. Last through the hatch was Lt. Delorio, his drawn face streaked red from a gash over his right eye. As soon as the lieutenant had cleared the hatch, one of the marines, a corporal with dark skin and singed hair, plucked a grenade from her utility belt and backhanded it down the corridor in the direction from which they'd fled. Ted could hear it as it careened out of sight and off plassteel bulkheads like some slow motion pinball at an arcade.

"Good God," she said, "there must be half a dozen of the damned things."

"Get the hatch. Get the hatch." Delorio shouted.

"I'm trying, sir, but the controls aren't responding." A young female private, her face pale even in the darkness of the bay, jabbed repeatedly at the access panel with no visible effect.

When Ted saw the lieutenant, a surge of hope filled the emptiness that moments before had seemed intent on occupying his mind and heart. Perhaps there was still time. He called out, *Lieutenant Delorio!* and was momentarily confused when Delorio didn't turn to look at him.

A deafening explosion rocked the bay and the four marines struggled to maintain their positions by the hatch—they had all seen graphic illustrations of what would happen if they drifted away from their anchor points. If they drifted toward the center of the room, out of reach of anything from which to push off, they would have trouble moving quickly and would be easy targets.

"Move out the way, Singleton." Ted recognized the raspy voice of Sergeant Rogers. When the private working the hatch controls didn't respond immediately, Rogers took one huge hand and gave her a sharp shove. The force of the push sent Private Singleton's small body in a short arc around her grip on the wall and bounced her boots off the plassteel surface with a bone-jarring clunk.

"Colonel Hodgeson?" Delorio said. When there was no reply, Delorio spun in place to examine the room. For just a second the lieutenant's eyes rested on the jump tubes and Ted thought the lieutenant would remember him.

Look at me, damnit! Ted's thoughts were loud in his mind's ear but clearly carried no impact outside warped confines of his own dead reality. Lieutenant, Ted thought with an urgency born of desperation, you've got to wake me up now! But Delorio was fully focused on the task at hand. When the lieutenant's gaze picked out wide cloud of blood over the console the lieutenant uttered a barely audible curse and turned his attention back to the door.

Ted watched with frustrated fascination as Sergeant Rogers pried the cover off the manual hatch controls. Ten seconds later the sergeant had successfully freed the hydraulic pump and had the hatch halfway closed. Without warning, a clawed leg shot through the opening. Hovering next to Rogers, the corporal gasped, wide-eyed with horror. Within two seconds she regained enough of her composure to pump a concentrated stream of fire through the opening with her assault rifle. A few of the explosive rounds hit their mark and the claw was retracted but not before the spider's razor sharp claws had severed Roger's arm at the wrist. The big man screamed as blood fountained out of the neatly severed stump in great spurts.

As soon as the sergeant lost his hand, he had instinctively shoved himself away from the source of the pain. Now his face contorted in agony and he tumbled in a writhing trajectory toward the center of the bay where Joan Derenger slept, oblivious to the chaos around her.

"Use another grenade!" Delorio shouted, launching himself toward Rogers. "And save that hand, we might be able to reattach it."

Delorio's jump was well aimed and he intercepted the screaming Rogers before the man could further injure himself. In an unexpectedly graceful move, Delorio caught Rogers, brought his legs beneath him and shoved the toe of one boot through a maneuver grip on the ceiling, stabilizing them.

"Sonofabitch!" the private cursed. Near hysterics, she was frantically trying to remove Roger's severed hand from the hydraulic pump that closed the hatch. "His fingers won't let go!"

"Then work the mechanism with the hand attached if you have to but get that hatch closed now!" The dark-haired corporal shoved another grenade through the opening and followed it with a wide arc of blind covering fire. "Fire in the hole." she warned, flattening her back against the wall to avoid the blast.

Following the corporal's lead, the private made herself small against the protecting wall. This time the grenade was closer and the concussion was fierce. Ted noticed that Private Singleton's face was alarmingly pale. For a moment he was sure that she was going to pass out. Then, with an apparent effort, she reached out, grasped the severed hand where it attached to the lever, and worked the hydraulic pump up and down until the hatch was securely closed.

For a brief moment, a relieved silence filled the dark space. Steam exploded in great billowing clouds from each of the Marines as they struggled to catch their collective breath in the reduced temperature of the bay.

Sergeant Rogers had ceased his screaming but a hollow groan escaped him and all eyes turned toward the center of the tomb-like space. Delorio had fastened a makeshift tourniquet just below the sergeant's elbow and now was quietly injecting Rogers with a powerful anesthetic. Time seemed somehow to have stopped temporarily and the sterile electronic patter of the equipment only sharpened the sense of morgue-like stillness that suddenly blanketed the room.

"Feels . . . like my hand's . . . on fire," Rogers hissed haltingly between clenched teeth.

"The anesthetic should take effect in just a couple more seconds." Delorio reassured him, simultaneously feeling for the miniature D-shaped carabiner at his belt. The clip was attached to a small spring-loaded reel which, when pulled, revealed the first of twenty meters of retractable anchor wire. His foot still moored gracefully in the maneuver grip on the ceiling, Delorio pressed open the carabiner's gate with his thumb and secured the wire to a ring on the front of the sergeant's body armor. Sweat covered Delorio's forehead and stained the front of his uniform. "The bigger problem will be keeping your body temperature up, sergeant. The missiles knocked out the atmospheric controls. I'm afraid we're stuck with winter weather for the time being."

After closing the door, the young private managed to pull and claw her way shakily into one of the corners where she anchored herself to the open grill of a ventilation duct. Her back to the wall, she chewed savagely at her bottom lip as her eyes shifted wildly between the corpses that seemed to fill the confined space of the bay.

At the hatch, the corporal, looking a little pale herself Ted thought, had engaged the hatch's electronic security interlock and succeeded in prying the fingers of Roger's severed hand from the lever. Holding the hand away from her body in disgust, she gave a gentle shove with her feet and joined Lt. Delorio in the center of the room. Her brown eyes, like the private's, were making nervous, twitching circuits from bodies in the tubes, to Clancy's immense bulk, bobbing head down from its tether in the far corner, to the cloud of blood over the console. Delorio relieved her of the errant appendage.

"Corporal Meyers. There's a compartment in the base of that jump tube." Delorio said pointing to Ted's body. "Bring me two sterile blankets. The sergeant is going into shock. If we don't keep him warm we'll lose him."

"Yes, sir."

A loud clang echoed from the corridor, followed immediately by unmistakable abrasion of claws dragging across the plassteel hatch. The screeching was vaguely reminiscent of fingernails being pulled mercilessly across an endless blackboard. Private Singleton emitted a pitiful whimper. She's close to the edge, Ted thought.

Ted moved to hover over the jump tubes, his gaze alternating between Joan's contented close-eyed slumber and the blank unblinking stare of his own blue eyes. Looking upward, he saw that Delorio had secured the now unconscious Rogers to a maneuver grip on the ceiling. For just a moment, he thought that Delorio saw him. But the lieutenant's eyes shifted slightly and Ted could now see that Delorio was looking back and forth between Joan and himself, enclosed in the jump tubes below him. A scowl, tinged with a hint of sadness, played across Delorio's features.

There had to be some way for Ted to communicate with him. He looked frantically around the bay, his eyes lighting from one machine to the next: consoles, monitors, surgical equipment. Centuries of medical knowledge had helped to shape this small space but there was nothing that presented the slightest glimmer of hope. Perhaps Sadie was right, he thought, perhaps death is a playing field that can't be leveled.

Ted's attention was pulled back to the jump tubes by Delorio's sigh. The lieutenant seemed to have come to a decision. Ted watched as Delorio, moving with all the heavy slowness of a high g environment, wearily put a touch of bend in his knees, launched himself through the bay and executed a half somersault to land feet first next to tube containing Ted's body. The lieutenant paused again.

Ted felt a wash of relief as he realized what Delorio was doing. Finally! Ted thought. It's about damn time you remembered me, lieutenant. He looked at the clock. Fifty-eight minutes had passed. Perhaps it wasn't too late. *Come on*, Ted screamed silently.

Ted watched as Delorio examined the monitors on Ted's tube. Everything was taking place with excruciating slowness and Ted counted off eight more irretrievable seconds while Delorio seemed to deliberate.

*Come on, lieutenant*, Ted thought savagely. *What the hell are you waiting for?*

Delorio took a deep breath and stretched out a reluctant finger to press a button marked "DRAIN."

"What are you doing, Lieutenant?" The corporal's voice seemed small.

Delorio didn't answer for a moment, his attention lost in the turbulence of the liquid being forced out of the tube and replace by air. Ted felt his mind sag with relief. He's waking me up, he thought, I'm actually going to make it.

Another clang resounded from the hatch, louder this time.

But Delorio's answer sent a mind-numbing chill into the very depths of his emancipated soul. "The kid's been gone too long. It was a valiant attempt but we didn't get back here in time." His voice dropped to a whisper. "We'll need to put Sergeant Rogers in this tube to maintain his body temperature if he's going to have any chance at all."

What? The meaning of those words evaded his comprehension as they worked their way through the thick layer of befuddlement that had suddenly welled within him. But Delorio's intent wormed its way through his defenses. When it finally lept through his confusion, it slammed into Ted with all the impact of a twenty pound sledge. He had no body but he would have nonetheless sworn that a massive slab of concrete had fallen across his chest. Delorio had given up on him; he was going to take his body out of the tube.

Despondency turned to rage. *You idiot*, he shouted silently. *You can't do this. I know where she is! I know where the queen is!*

Delorio reached to remove Ted's wrist from its restraint and Ted instinctively dove toward the lieutenant's arm. The combined frustration and rage of the past hour channeled itself into a single-minded fury and Ted directed that energy into a shove intended to knock Delorio's hand away from his body. His hands slashed through Delorio's arm with enough mental momentum that his fingers crashed into communication keypad attached to the jump tube. There was a sharp tingling sensation, as though he'd received a low voltage electric shock. Ted turned and struck out again at Delorio's hand as it reached across his body to unfasten the restraint on his opposite wrist.

"Lieutenant?"

"What is it, corporal?"

Ted continued his futile assault against Delorio's unknowing hands as they worked to release his body from the jump tube.

"Sir, what does that mean?"

"Corporal, I'm a bit busy right now. What does that mean?" Delorio said irritably as he moved to loosen the straps at Ted's ankles.

"Sorry, sir." Meyers said. "Forget it. It's probably nothing. I mean, with all the damage the ship has taken there are bound to be some quirks, right?" Ted stopped his tirade, conceding to himself that it was having no effect and turned, exhausted, to see what had sparked the corporal's curiosity. Delorio turned too, the skin around his mouth pulled tight with exasperation. There were dark circles under his eyes and he appeared to have aged noticeably in the past hour.

"Don't mince words, corporal, if there's something wrong that I should know about then . . ." Delorio's eyes had followed hers to the air directly above him, cutting off his voice in mid sentence. "What the hell?"

In the air directly above him, painted in neon green were the seemingly random holographic characters, "JMKL<>?". Delorio floated without saying anything for several moments, his eyebrows crowding his eyes and his mouth pulled tight. He looked at Ted's body and then his eyes made a slow suspicious circuit around the cluttered room. Ghosts exploded from his mouth in clouds of white steam as his breath contacted the chill air.

Ted tore his gaze from the letters and looked back at Delorio. It could have been a hardware glitch, as the corporal suggested, but he didn't think so. Somehow he had made that those letters appear, but how? His eyes darted frantically, trying to see what had registered his presence. Delorio reached over and ran his hand gingerly around the edge of the electronic communications keypad built into the tube.

“Well I’ll be damned, Hodgeson must not have turned off the holo-emitters.” Delorio whispered, casting a doubtful glance to either side of him. “Is that you, Ted?”

*Hell, yes, its me,* Ted thought with relief.

“Who’s Ted?” Corporal Meyers asked.

Delorio held up an abrupt hand to silence her, his head cocked to one side, as if he were a dog listening for an intruder. “I think we’ve got company . . .”

The stillness of the cold jump bay was broken by the low screeching groan of resisting plassteel as the hatch was pried open several centimeters.

“Oh, Jesus,” the corporal shouted, grabbing frantically at the assault rifle floating just within arm’s reach. Her aim was off. The back of her hand slapped the stock with a painful crack and it spun uncontrolled toward where Private Singleton huddled weightless in the corner. Corporal Meyers cursed and dove after it, shouting for Singleton to cover the door.

Ted was only peripherally aware of the renewed threat. He found himself paralyzed somewhere between relief and apprehension as he watched Delorio hurriedly refasten the straps across his wrists and ankles. The lieutenant’s movements were quick, almost reckless.

The hatch screeched again as it was forced another four or five centimeters to the side.

Across the bay Corporal Meyers was chasing down her errant weapon and turning the air blue with curses designed to jar Private Singleton out of her shock-induced paralysis. However, one glance at Singleton’s distant eyes told Ted that she would be no help in the current crisis.

“Talk to me, Ted.” Delorio’s voice had taken on a brittle quality. “If you’re here then you’d better talk to me.”

Talk to him? But how was he supposed to do that, Ted wondered. He looked at Delorio for help. The lieutenant had removed the defib pads from their storage place in the jump tube lid above his body. He noticed with superstitious alarm that they were the same pads that Delorio and the Colonel had used unsuccessfully on Clancy. Stop it, he told himself, there’s no mileage to be gained thinking about that.

“Come on, Ted,” Delorio urged. “You have to talk to me before your body is brought back. Once your consciousness is back in your body you’ll be out of it for hours. Anything you know will be lost and . . .” Delorio left the sentence unfinished, his lips pressed together in a thin line. He didn’t need to finish it; Ted could imagine in graphic detail what would happen to the Marines and crew of the Pendergass if they didn’t learn the spider queen’s whereabouts soon. Was there still time? He glanced at the widening crack in the door and saw the muzzle of a Marine assault rifle emerge from the murky smoke-filled corridor beyond. The spiders had apparently taken the weapon off one of the Marines they’d killed. Though it was not an uncommon tactic, the reality of it here and now filled Ted with a sickening dread. His first look was toward the corner; Corporal Meyers had succeeded in retrieving her weapon but was facing Singleton and did not yet see it. Ted jerked his gaze back to Delorio who was busy attaching the defib pads to Ted’s body. He too had not looked up. Powerless to shout a warning, Ted watched in frustrated silence as the muzzle began to flash. By some miracle, the long barrage of bullets missed the glass covers on the jump tubes. Instead, fist sized holes appeared in a jagged line across the base of Clancy’s tube. The line of destruction slashed across the keypad, tearing gaping holes into the delicate sensors inside. The spider on the other side of the door seemed to be firing blind but before the wide slow-motion arc of the muzzle finished its traverse, it ripped into Sergeant Rogers floating unconscious near the ceiling, cutting the large man nearly in half. No sooner had the deafening explosions ceased when Corporal Meyers responded with three or four short

bursts of return fire from the corner. Time is running out, he thought. How the hell do I talk to them?

Crouched behind Ted's tube for protection, Delorio pulled the cover down over Ted's body and keyed in the sequence that would begin the reanimation process. Curiously the lieutenant seemed to be paying no attention to the fighting just meters away. Instead, the lieutenant was staring wide-eyed toward the communications pad. Delorio's face seemed to have suddenly aged; his shoulders sagged and much of the color had drained from his face. Gripping the side of Ted's tube for support, Delorio slowly turned his head to look at the random string of letters that still hung in the air. All hope had gone out of the lieutenant's eyes. Ted struggled to understand. The letters? What was it about the letters that could possibly have had such a profound effect on the lieutenant? He stared at them, hoping for some glimmer of understanding. Nothing came. No sudden insight. No clearing of the fog that was holding increasing chunks of his mind hostage. And yet, it was almost as if those green letters were teasing him. Their message was hidden, like a word or a memory laying just below the surface of consciousness, twitching and squirming to get out, but evading all attempts at retrieval. Why would the lieutenant be worried about the damned keypads when there were several spiders right outside the hatch? Think, Ted! He ordered himself. What has the communication equipment got to do with . . .

It took a moment for Delorio's train of thought to work its way through the mud that had collected in Ted's mind. There was something about the holographic letters that was important. He looked at the meaningless string of consonants again. How could the keypads help? They weren't calibrated to his bioelectric signature. He paused and stared at the letters, willing himself to understand their hidden message. An embarrassed understanding pushed its way through his muddled thoughts. When his hands had passed through Clancy's communications pad, it must have somehow picked up at least a trace of his presence.

The hatch screamed in protest as the spiders in the corridor forced it another few centimeters. Corporal Meyers had relieved Singleton of her spare magazine. When she heard the hatch's groan of resistance, she instinctively fired a short burst at the opening. The angle was a difficult one though and five rounds exploded into the hatch access control sending a shower of orange sparks into the growing fissure. The opening was nearly half a meter at this point. If the spiders continued at this rate, Ted calculated, they would have it completely open in a matter of minutes.

Ted looked down at the tubes below him, his gaze focused intently on the fragile sensors. Two large chunks had been torn out of the delicate latticework of integrated circuits of the keypad attached to Clancy's tube. The delicate green board was visibly cracked and charred black on the edge around two fist-sized holes, as if some giant had take searing bites out of a thin electronic cracker. And how many tubes was the Pendergass equipped with? He thought back to the assignments that had been passed out that morning. There were four escorts assigned, one for each pair of jumpers. Assuming that each of the four bays was outfitted to accommodate two tubes, he figured the Pendergass must have a total of eight. And it was a sure bet that all eight of the tubes were equipped with similar keypads. Perhaps one of those would match his bioelectric signature enough to allow him to get a coherent message through. There are only seven keypads left, he thought, Clancy's keypad was destroyed, and who knows how many of the others may have been rendered inoperative during the past hour.

He would have to try each of the remaining keypads before he was reanimated and pulled back into his body. Could Delorio really bring him back after such a long time? Even as the question entered his mind, he knew it was a long shot. Ted looked at his body again lying motionless in the tube. He could distinctly see the dark crimson of his

blood as it was pumped through the clear IV tube, heated and then returned via a second IV port in his opposite thigh. The readout on the jump tube monitor told him that in the past sixty seconds his body temperature had already begun to rise. The jump bays were widely dispersed in four separate areas of the ship to prevent a single missile from destroying all of them at once. If it turned out to be necessary for him to try all seven of the remaining keypads in order to find one that would allow him to communicate, he would have to work quickly.

Clancy's keypad would have been the obvious first choice since it had registered his hands as they passed through it. He looked downward. That was obviously no longer an option; the charred terminal was a total loss. What little hope had started to emerge in him threatened to slip away and he clung to it before it could disappear. You have to stop thinking about probabilities and consequences, he told himself. Time to stop thinking and start moving.

Ted moved quickly to a position directly over Joan's keypad and reached a tentative finger out toward the pad. He pressed downward on the key labeled 'T' and experienced a soft tingling sensation, as if he his fingertip was brushing the feathery tips of a long soft fur pelt. Ted looked upward at the display area. The letters that had appeared when he had been trying to knock Delorio's hand away from his body still remained but there was no 'T' to join then. He pressed harder and once more felt the furry brush of contact with his fingertip. Again, there was no response. "JMKL<>?" The pale green question mark at the end of the string now seemed to mock him.

The sound of labored breathing seemed to be growing nearer and he looked up. Corporal Meyers, apparently displeased with her poor defensive position, was working her way toward the center of the room. Her weightless three-legged crab walk toward the jump tubes would have been comical were it not for the look of terrified desperation that covered her face. She was clearly having to work hard to control her breathing which exploded in great spouts of irregularly timed steam in the cold air. She had just released her grip and was reaching for a hold that would put her next to Delorio when a grenade appeared from the dark opening and spun slowly toward the center of the room.

Meyers saw the grenade and froze, her lips pulled back and her eyes wide in an expression of sheer panic. Ted watched as Delorio reached out and roughly grabbed Meyers by one ragged bloodstained sleeve. He gave a strong yank and Meyers crashed into the floor beside him, behind the protective shelter of Ted's tube. An instant later the room was filled with the familiar blinding flash and KA-WHAM of the grenade.

Ted didn't so much feel the explosion that consumed the air around him as he sensed it. The world seemed to turn white for a brief moment and an instant later a rush of sound enveloped the room, filling even the tiniest cracks of unoccupied space with a palpable vibration as air rushed in to fill the vacuum. Then there was silence. Ted offered up a quick prayer of thanks that flash grenades didn't throw shrapnel, in the closed environments of spacecraft; undirected metal fragments would have been suicidal. Flash grenades were fierce but localized in their effect. Perhaps the keypad will be able to survive heat and concussion if it wasn't too close, he thought hopefully. But when Ted looked down, he found that the exterior of board beneath his ethereal hands was melted. Lights on several of the characters were pulsing in silent protest to the damage they'd received. His heart sank. He pushed at one of the keys with his index finger but this time there was no sensation at all. Another keypad trashed. Now, I'm down to six, he thought.

Ted's eyes swept the room to take inventory of its more fragile occupants. In the corner, Private Singleton was floating free on her anchor line. Severe burns covered her face and hands. Ted hoped she were dead. Behind the cover of the jump tubes, Delorio and Meyers seemed to have fared somewhat better. Both were unconscious, and there

was blood ringing the entrance to their ears but telltale wisps of steam escaped their nostrils. When he directed his attention to the tubes he felt another push against the surface of his composure; there were cracks in the glass covers of both tubes. Joan's tube, being closest to the blast, had suffered the greater damage and Ted could see one series of cracks that completely spanned the width of the glass lid. Any sharp impact would likely finish the work already begun and shatter the fragile barrier that protected Joan's recovering body from the chill of the bay. The monitor lights on her tube were out as well. The increased air temperature inside her tube made it impossible to tell if she had survived the blast or not. His own tube was in somewhat better shape and Ted watched in subdued awe as on one panel, two lights in a series of five changed from red to green in close succession.

The howl of protesting plassteel resumed as the bay's reluctant hatch was again forced farther open. Ted looked at Lieutenant Delorio and Corporal Meyers. Both were still unconscious. Ted's instinct was to remain and watch over the two wounded soldiers. But the emotional distance he was beginning to feel for the scene around him worked on his behalf this time. If he was to help anyone at all, himself included, he needed to find a keypad that would accept his input. In any case, whatever happened in this bay while he was gone was beyond his immediate influence. Moving to the hatch, he turned and allowed himself one long look at his body encased beneath the cracked and charred glass. The faint pulses of red and green light emanating from the damaged equipment made the tube seemed infinitely frail. It doesn't really matter whether I relay the queen's location to others or not, he thought, at this point it's probably too late. Even now, a sense of morbid fascination almost caused him to stay and watch the slaughter that would inevitably take place in the next few minutes. He almost succumbed to the temptation. An unlikely sense of duty stopped him. At eighteen years old he had agreed to defend the Earth from all enemies foreign and domestic. In his desire to face Death, to come to terms with the great shadow of fear that had hung over him since the death of his aunt, he had agreed to give his life, if need be, to fulfill that pledge. Despite the graphic destruction on newscasts, neither he nor any of the other young recruits had really expected to die. Yet now here he was, faced with the bizarre reality of something far worse.

Odds be damned, he thought. Like it or not, I'm a Marine. I'm going to try. But even as the thoughts formed, he knew they were hollow. Though their content was suitably Marine, and indeed might have been worthy of an approving nod from his drill sergeant in basic training, he recognized that his conviction was conspicuously absent.

Sixty seconds later, having hardly paused when he exited the hatch and passed the two spiders prying it open, he was two decks down inside Jump Bay Three. The bodies of two jumpers were still in their tubes and Ted could clearly hear the steady bleep of the EKG monitors as they ticked off the rhythm of their recovering heartbeats. A lone Marine Corpsman floated nervously behind the main control panel, clicking the safety on his assault rifle on and off maddeningly and flicking his wide eyes from the jumpers in their tubes, to the bay's hatch.

Ted moved to the first keypad. What was he going to say? After nearly a minute of internal debate he decided that it made the most sense to try a short message containing just the essentials of the queen's whereabouts until he was sure he had found a keypad that was working. His fingers, such as they were, were poised over the keypad, waiting for instructions. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to compose anything that would make much sense. Finally, in frustration, he directed his fingers to the keys and simply typed, "QUEEN BEHIND FALSE WALL AT MANEUVER GRIP 65632. BEWARE AMBUSH. CHALMERS." Again Ted experienced a faintly fuzzy sensation in his fingertips and he looked up expectantly. The air above the tube was empty. He tried the same message on

the keypad attached to the second tube with similarly depressing results. Damn, he thought, and headed toward the hatch.

Traveling at the speed of thought had its advantages. He was able to pass through two fire fights in his search for the next bay. This time he didn't flinch or slow down as he passed unseen through bodies, shouts and explosions in the scattered areas of combat.

Only another minute had passed before Ted was able to track down Jump Bay Two. This time a beefy Sergeant with red hair and arms as big as Ted's thighs stood guard. A side-arm floated unheeded several feet away. The man was preoccupied by the words his two sausage-sized index fingers were laboriously pecking into the document on the screen in front of him. Hell of a time to type your memoirs, Ted thought, and turned his attention to the jump tubes. Both held occupants but only the monitors on the first tube registered life. The dead jumper, a female lieutenant with a thin face and dark closely cropped hair, floated slack faced, in her tube, eyes and mouth open. Her expression reminded Ted of the look he'd seen in his own eyes as he'd looked down on his body from above. Suddenly it occurred to Ted that her soul, like his, might be hovering somewhere in the room. If she were, shouldn't he be able to see her? Ted looked around for any sign of movement; the bay seemed empty except for the electronic voices of medical equipment and the sweating behemoth bent over the keyboard. Perhaps, he speculated, souls can't see one another after all. He wondered why he supposed that they would.

Cutting off further speculation, Ted tried the keypads, typing in the queen's location as he'd done in the previous jump bay. Again he felt the familiar fuzzy tingling in his fingertips but when he looked up to where the images were supposed to appear he was rewarded only with emptiness. No glowing green characters broke the stillness. I don't suppose I really thought this would work, he thought. With decreasing enthusiasm, Ted set out to find the last jump bay, his already meager hopes diminishing with each dead Marine he found floating in a cloud of gore in the corridors.

Three minutes later he found Jump Bay One, tucked inconspicuously into a corner at the far end of deck six. The lights were out in this section of the Pendergass and several blast marks scarred the walls around the bay's white plassteel hatch. The hatch itself stood a quarter of the way open. The top half of a dead corporal was wedged tightly in the dark opening, blocking Ted's view of the bay beyond, as if someone had used the body as a cork in a desperate attempt to plug a ruptured damn. Ted knew that time was short, that he should hurry, but he stopped to examine dead Marine before entering.

The man was young, perhaps a year or two older than Ted. Ted glanced across at the name tag stitched above the breast pocket of the Marine's medical coveralls. His name had been Jones. The man's brown eyes stared questioningly at Ted through half-opened lids and his lips were slightly parted as if he had been about to say something when he died. He seemed to be asking Ted, "Why me? I'm so young. Why did Death have to choose me?"

*I don't know who you were, or why Death has chosen us today,* Ted answered silently. *But I'll do my best to remember you, Corporal Jones.*

Reaching forward with his right hand, Ted brushed his fingers over the corporal's face, wishing he had enough substance to close the man's eyes. As he retracted his hand, Ted noticed with surprise that the thought of Death no longer filled him with the same uncontrolled sense of horror and panic it once had. The cowed figure Death, ever lurking in the darkness behind the next trunk in the attic of Ted's imagination, ever ready to pounce on Ted during his moments of weakness, had vanished. In Death's absence, Ted found a void, a hole in his soul that was both cold and hollow but the fear, at least, was gone.

Tugging his reluctant eyes from those of the dead man, Ted turned to the hatch. He knew what he would find even before he entered. His sensitized hearing could pick up the background noise of the bay's medical monitoring equipment but nothing else. The faint but steady blips of two EKG monitors singing in mournful harmony testified to the two jumpers clutching desperately to life in their sterile tubes. Ted listened carefully for sounds of human breathing or movement but no other sounds dared to disturb the unnatural stillness that hung heavily over this remote corner of the ship. Aside from the unconscious jumpers, there was nothing alive in there. Ted guessed that the guard and technicians must have been either called away or killed. Taking what, in his body, would have been a deep breath, Ted pushed himself through the plassteel hatch and into the darkness of the bay beyond.

Immediately inside the hatch Ted felt himself jerk with surprise. He had passed through the long bent leg of a spider hanging from what would normally have been the ceiling. Jesus, he thought, looking at the ominous bulk clinging to the ceiling above him. For a moment he was sure that the creature was dead but as he watched its forelimb twitched, as if it somehow sensed Ted's scrutiny. Why is it here, he wondered, why were the spiders devoting so much attention to the jump bays? As far as he could remember, on their previous boarding attempts the jump bays had been pretty much ignored. Was it possible they had divined the purpose of the bays and recognized them as a threat?

There will be plenty of time for speculation later, he reminded himself. Perhaps a great deal of time. He glanced down at the first tube's occupant as he slipped up to the keypad. It was a Marine sergeant, male, late twenties with a strong jaw and blond hair. Ted noticed with relief that this jumper's eyes were closed and he watched as the man's chest rose and fell with one shallow breath after another before quickly pressing his message into the keypad. The tingling sensation again, but when he looked up, the cold air above the tube was devoid of any indication that the message had gotten through. Dear Lord, if there is any justice in this universe, let this next keypad work, he prayed silently. Not for me. I know it's too late for me. But for the other Marines here...

Ted moved hesitantly to hover over the second keypad. If this one didn't work it was over. Ted supposed it had been too much to expect that a second keypad on the ship would register his presence. He remembered Delorio's look of astonishment when he'd seen Ted's random letters displayed unexpectedly in the air in Jump Bay Four. He supposed that even the fact that a single keypad, Clancy's, had registered him, then that was some sort of a minor miracle.

He looked down at his hands; even in their absence they were suddenly filled with lead and refused to move. Carefully, Ted shifted his gaze downward to avoid the space above the tube where the message would be displayed; he didn't want to watch when the air remained empty as he typed. His fingers moved and he meticulously pressed out the necessary letters, "QUEEN LOCATED AT . . ."

The darkness that swirled in front of his vision appeared so quickly that he didn't have time to react. Suddenly the world seemed to be closing down around him and Ted felt as if someone had tied huge lead weights to his ankles and dropped him into an ocean. He was being sucked inexorably downward into darkness. In the instant before his world became black, before the immense pull and pressure overwhelmed him, he felt himself screaming in protest. *No. Not now! Not yet!* But even as he did so he knew it was too late, he had taken too long. He and the Pendergass had played a shell game with Death and lost. As the darkness became complete he felt himself filled not with fear, but with sorrow at his inability to prevent the deaths of so many others.

The darkness receded somewhat and was replaced by an opaque milky light. It took Ted nearly a minute to realize that the light was being filtered through his eyelids. At

that same moment he felt himself take a deep ragged breath that rattled in his chest forever before his diaphragm contracted and expelled it into the warm air around him. Other sensations were now making their way into his fog-cluttered brain; his back ached fiercely, as if someone had slapped him across the kidneys with an oak two-by-four and his lips and throat were painfully parched. I must be aboard the spider ship, he thought, they've taken the Pendergass and somehow they managed to revive me. Keeping his eyes closed, he tentatively wiggled the fingers of his right hand. He found that even that small action required tremendous concentration and energy.

"He's awake, doctor."

The familiarity of the voice started him and he struggled to connect it with a face. The connection was there but his brain was just too groggy. The images refused to sort and gel themselves into something understandable. I must be drugged he thought.

The voice returned, this time close enough to his ear that he could feel the warmth of the person's breath. It was a woman's voice, and she was speaking in soft reassuring tones. The meaning of the woman's words slowly started to seep in through the barrier of drugs.

"... been in a coma. You were touch and go for almost two weeks, Ted. The doctors weren't sure you were going to come out of it."

Ted managed to lift his eyelids enough to let in a flash of dazzling light. He blinked instinctively several times. He could hear the soft rustle of clothing nearby and the lights dimmed enough for him to keep his eyes open. A face swam out of the periphery of his narrow field of vision. Intense green eyes highlighted a expression of seriousness that was somewhat softened by a slightly upturned nose. And short blond hair. . . Joan Derenger's name came to him at about the same time that she spoke.

"Can you hear me, Ted?"

"What?" The voice trembled forth and pushed past the respirator mask that covered his lips like the voice of a frog that has found its comfortable pond suddenly frozen.

"Shhh." Joan Derenger raised her finger to her lips. "Time enough for questions later."

He was about to croak once more when darkness closed in over him again and he closed his eyes. This was a ride he had no strength to resist.

When he opened his eyes again the room was dim but he found that the world was no longer shrouded in fog. The respirator was gone as was the ache in his kidneys. He felt the tug of gravity pulling him into the bed.

Moments later a hatch hissed open to his right and Joan Derenger's face appeared wearing a smile of approval. She crossed the room with easy confident steps and sat in a chair beside the hospital bed.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth," Ted said, "I'm surprised to be feeling at all."

She nodded, her smile dissolving into an expression of thoughtfulness.

"So are we, really. For a while there you were damn close to calling it quits."

"Lieutenant -" he began.

She cut him off with a simple shake of blond hair. "It's 'Joan,' remember?" she said lightly, but her eyes were still serious. "All the other jumpers call me 'Joan.'"

"Other jumpers?"

She nodded. "You're a member of the club now, Ted. Like it or not, you've been to the other side and back on a jump mission. That makes you a full-fledged member of the club."

Ted lay quietly for several moments, contemplating her words. When he spoke, he said simply, "What happened?"

Joan's eyes seemed to probe his own. "I'll save the long version for another time. Suffice it to say that Sergeant Rice, in intelligence, received your message on her ops screen. She couldn't figure out how a message was being sent from the keypad of a jumper who was both alive and unconscious. The keypads only register the bio-electric signature of a person 'in jump.' If you hadn't included your name at the end of your message she might not had figured it out in time. She remembered your name from when she'd come by the bay to check on Clancy's message. As it was, by the time she'd decided to take a chance on your information being legit, dispatched Marines to the location you'd given her and sent some Marines to Jump Bay Four, Delorio and the others were already dead."

"My message got through?" Ted asked.

Joan nodded and leaned back in her chair. "The keypad on the second tube in Jump Bay Three relayed your message. Actually, the one you were beginning to type in from the second tube in Bay One was registering also."

"How? I mean, I didn't see it displayed in the air above any of the tubes."

"None of the technicians or doctors in the other bays chose to turn the hollow emitters on for the keypads. They had their hands full just dealing with the reanimation sequences on emergency power. Your message was displayed on the main medical panel in both of the bays where your message registered and all messages from the keypads are automatically relayed to the intelligence section."

"But I thought the keypads were synchronized to a single person's bio-electric signature."

"That's right." She began, and leaned forward in her chair to look at him closely.

"But it appears that your own bio-electric signature is somewhat unique, Ted. You seem to have a pattern that acts somewhat like a skeleton key. Three out of the eight pads responded to your presence. The doctors here confess they haven't seen *anyone* with a bio-electric pattern like yours." Joan shook her head in bewilderment. She got up and walked to the center of the room, stopping with her back to him.

Ted thought she was going to leave but instead she asked a question that was simultaneously simple and startling.

"Were they angels or demons?"

Ted thought back to the moment when he'd first passed over the threshold into death, when the Sadie voice told him it wasn't time. "I don't know," he admitted. "Angels, I guess. Though I thought they were demons at first."

Joan didn't say anything but just nodded, as if she'd already known the answer. She turned back toward him.

"I know this seems soon, but I've been directed to make you an offer, Ted." She paused, and he watched as the fingers of her left hand nervously caressed the identification bracelet on her right wrist. He tried to remember having ever seen her nervous before. He was sure he hadn't.

"After you were revived," she continued, "you were given a battlefield commission and promoted to the rank of second lieutenant. Your next assignment, after you recover, will be to attend the Officer Basic Course." Joan paused, and moved closer to the bed. "After that, if you chose, you can attend the training to become a soul jumper."

Ted felt the muscles in his face twitch involuntarily. "Crawl back into one of those tubes again?" he shook his head. "Thanks, Joan, but I don't think so."

Joan smiled again, her face relaxed for perhaps the first time since she entered the room. "I know something of what you went through, Ted, and I'm not going to push you. In fact, I'm a little relieved to hear you say you're not interested. I told them I wouldn't even make the offer if your experience had been a 'dark' one—"

"'Dark' one?"

She nodded, "If you'd said you'd seen or felt demons or some other dark presence. Some of us do. Clancy did."

Ted felt his eyes widen.

"It scared him shitless each time he climbed into that tube but he managed to do it four times anyway. I guess he felt the only way to deal with them was to confront them."

Ted nodded. He had had his own demons to deal with, even if they'd been in his head.

"In any case, if the war weren't going so badly right now, I wouldn't be making the offer right now regardless of how you'd answered the question." Joan stopped and reached out, taking Ted's hand and cradling it between her own. The tenderness of her touch was at once soothing and frightening.

"More importantly, Ted, you've had an experience that will set you apart from others. You may find that you can't adjust to being part of a regular unit now." Joan met his eyes for several more moments before releasing his hand. Drawing a card from one of her uniform pockets, she lay it on the bedside table next to him. "Whatever you decide, here's my number. You may need someone to talk to. If you do change your mind, give me a call. We could use someone like you."

"Thank you, Joan," he said.

"My pleasure, lieutenant." This time her smile was wide and Ted felt a grin grow across his own face.

The crash of a dropped food tray in the corridor pulled him out of his reverie. He glanced at the wall chronometer. He'd been gazing at his hands as they rested in his lap, at the intricate whorls and patterns on the skin of his palms and fingers, for nearly forty minutes. Reaching into the dim circle of light on the beside table, he retrieved Joan's card and his thoughts involuntarily turned to the still lifeless bodies of jumpers encased in their cold steel and glass tubes. His mind tensed itself for the expected onslaught of adrenaline: Three seconds passed. Five. Ten. The heart-pounding panic once associated with thoughts of dying didn't appear. Probing tentatively at that corner of his mind once ruled over by his fear of death, he found that panic had been replaced by an amorphous but controllable dread—the panic was gone. He forced himself to take a deep breath and exhaled in a long controlled sigh. Looking toward the hatch, he remembered his last glimpse of Joan's uniformed back as she left turned into the corridor. He had the intense feeling, at once pleasurable and disquieting, that he would be seeing more of Lt. Derenger.