

THEY FLITTED LIKE BIRDS IN A DREAM

Nazrelo's group had lost Warren and eight others, leaving twelve. A search revealed two walkway corridor connections from the ship to the walls of the landing cradle, and a huge loading bay linked to the landing area by a dock extension. While Nazrelo and Marande and most of their team sealed off the corridors, Andrew and Jeddin and two of the soldiers explored the loading bay's contents: a huge rectangular array of stacks of coffin-shaped boxes that gleamed rainbows at them.

"Could they be for andros?" Andrew ran his fingers over the edge of one box. "These look very old," Jeddin said.

They're humans. Turiosten. And they're not dead. I see them in innerspace. These are for making initial contacts.

Andrew's helm light flared at him. He shoved the helm on and Angie said, *"Nazrelo says we have company. He found a woman with an ArCorp badge hiding not far from where we came on board. And a lot of RhoCorp andro boxes. And there's a force of alien soldiers outside the doors."*

"Nazrelo," Andrew called, "Anybody find the controls yet?"

"You in the loading bay? Go up six and head for axis centerline. We're okay so far — the aliens haven't reacted. The woman worked for Arlen. She's one of his materials researchers."

Andrew and Jeddin and the two soldiers sprinted for the stairwell and hauled themselves up to the place Nazrelo had named. They came out into a huge warehouse-like space filled on one side with large canisters. On the other side squatted a shell-like huddle of a room that appeared to have been cut from a house and cabled into place on the warehouse floor. The room contained what looked to Andrew like control instruments.

"What's that?" He pointed the room out to Jeddin. Together they examined the room and its connections. The two soldiers with them poked at the controls of one of the tall containers, trying to get it to open.

Jeddin poked some controls, and said, "This is all dummy stuff. It doesn't respond." He closed his eyes. "Wait a bit. Let me check innerspace."

Andrew closed his eyes, slipping through a curtain; then, amazed, he opened them again. He looked at Jeddin, whose face reflected Andrew's astonishment. "We're inside a ship, in here," Andrew said.

"But— how did you get to innerspace?" Jeddin asked. "The only way you can come in is for one of the aliens to bring you, for the qaqanhialh."

We did nothing, Turiosten said to Andrew. *You did this yourself, like the andros.*

"It must be the virus," Jeddin said.

"The one you had, maybe? So that's what that Trinculo headsmith was? It gave me this?" Andrew shut his eyes, slipping again, and moved into the other space inside. Again, a slightly different ship.

Jeddin joined Andrew. "This is bigger than the ship in the City. Or we're smaller." Here, the shining figures of Turiosten and Onnhasshakh and Arnhashokha stood next to Jeddin and Andrew staring upward with excited smiles on their radiant faces.

Around the five of them soared the halls and arches of a vast edifice, in transparent and milky tinted steel, three times the height of a man. Like children the five stared up at the ceiling with vast light fixtures burning like a train of too-close suns. A control panel shone on the wall next to Andrew, high above their heads.

"Come," said Onnhasshakh, "We are nearly there." She moved off along the corridor they faced, and the others followed her without a word.

They flitted like birds in a dream, along great gleaming corridors and stairs that twisted and shrank and undulated until everything around Andrew had once again shrunk to a little larger than normal size. Onnhasshakh opened a rosy-silver door.