

Outer Diverse Excerpt: Prologue and Chapter One

I'm a human. Despite my human mother having tecked me for baldie traits earlier than I can even remember, I still look human, still feel human ... most of the time ...

The psychology books claim that by age five most of us are sufficiently formed emotionally, socially and cognitively to define our remaining lives from our experiences and actions. I defined mine with violence.

Perhaps I was born to it. I can't blame my mother, though I did for much of my life. She couldn't help being what she was anymore than I could help being what I was. I am my mother's daughter. Passion was our ruin. I do blame the Vos. If that brutal alien race had not attacked Earth, the baldies wouldn't have come to save us, and I would not have stumbled one night in confused alarm, thick from a broken slumber, into my mother's bedroom and found her there in an unnatural coupling with one—and done the unthinkable. I would not have later enslaved myself on a career of killing for a baldie elite guard, executing criminals for them, while imagining a baldie face each time I pulled the trigger. I'm my mother's daughter; she gave away her body and I gave away my soul.

The spiritual books claim that we are driven by our soul's yearning to be whole and cleansed of that deep wound—the original sin—we all carry inside us. Perhaps we are all no more than difference engines, fuelled by the desires and longings for redemption that steer us to the occasional and fatal collision of the heart.

I knew nothing of this when I was five—and killed an innocent man with my eyes; nor did I think of it today, as I was about to kill another ...

ONE

My heart pounded up my throat. I gazed past the long barrel of the Q-gun drilled into my face to V'mer's menacing grin. The shapeshifter bent over me like a vulture as I lay on my back in the mud. My chest heaved with pain and acid rain stung my eyes, forcing me to blink.

"Now whose fear do you smell, bitch?" V'mer snarled. He shoved the gun further up my nose. The sour smell of congealing blood cloyed in my nostrils. I gulped in sobbing breaths, tasting blood. V'mer sneered down at me out of yet another alien face he'd taken on. He'd assumed the giant form of a hairless purple-skinned Eosian. He'd literally torn out of his clothes. Rain sluiced down the smooth muscular flesh of his naked body, and his bald head shone in the amber street light. "I heard about you," he went on. "Rhea Hawke, the only human Galactic Enforcer. She loved baldies so much she *tecked* herself into one—"

I squirmed up in sudden rage, but he slammed his boot hard on my torn shoulder and laughed sharply. I seized in an agonized breath and let my head fall back. White spots strobed in front of my eyes.

"You're one to talk," I hissed out between wheezing breaths and fought against passing out.

"You mean the form I've taken on? I did it so you could feast on my magnificent body and use your baldie *tecks* to smell all of me." He barked out a stuttering laugh. "Wanna kiss me, Officer Hawke?" He went into a mock sing-song: "*Rhea, scare-ya, wouldn't you cry? She kissed the baldies and made them die ...*"

Alarm seized my heart. How did V'mer know about that malicious tease at the precinct?

V'mer let his laugh die down to a frown of concentration and stroked his face, mock-philosopher style. "Or is it more that you hate your own kind so much ...?"

My eyelids involuntarily fluttered shut, and I felt myself slide into darkness. How did it come to this? It was only minutes ago that I was the one in control ...

⊖

I found myself absently curling a lock of my hair around one finger and resting my leg on the console as Benny eased into a large circle of Del City. I peered down into the darkness and barely made out the AI city sprawled on a large island surrounded by a rough sea. The dark sea occupied 98 percent of this bleak water planet.

"Mar Delena's ocean is toxic with a pH of less than two," Benny informed me. My ship's voice was a calm tenor. I dropped my leg to lean forward and gazed down at the lights of the city. I made adjustments to the primary controls as Benny descended. Sheets of rain veiled the sentient city in shifting curtains of a shimmering skyscape. "That's because the sulphurous rain has a pH of three," Benny went on. "The caustic rain is a maintenance chore for the AIs that run the city's infrastructure. They're always repairing. That's why all the streets are just left as dirt. The dirt lets the acid rain percolate into the ground. Of course it makes for a muddy place, but the Delenians don't seem to mind."

“Wonderful,” I muttered, gazing at the towering buildings, whose rounded roofs encouraged the corrosive rain to sheer off harmlessly to the ground. “Remind me to come here for my summer vacation ...”

Understanding my sarcasm for what it was, Benny ignored my remark and nattered on, “The indigenous people have evolved thick hides of oily fur that protect them against the acid rain. They also have a digestive system that enables them to drink the water.”

“Ugh!” I groaned. “Like a lemon juice cocktail.”

“There it is, Rhea,” Benny said.

“I see it.” I peered out my portside window through the rain and recognized V’mer’s small *scythe-wing* below. The ship resembled a bird of prey with a head-like cockpit flanked by crescent-shaped wings that flared out to the bow in a point. By analyzing its heat signature, Benny confirmed that the *scythe-wing* had only set down moments ago.

We’d just jacked the particle-wave stream thousands of light-years to this ancient dusty solar system. I chased V’mer here from a mining colony on Nexus, where the Badowin ran the largest illicit manufacture of Dust in the galaxy for Dark Sun—all cleverly under cover of a mining operation for Spice, a less dangerous narcotic. A little Dust showed you ‘God’; but in larger quantities it threw you convulsing over the precipice straight to chaos. I’d pursued V’mer to the planet Nexus in the M103 star cluster on the Perseus Arm and shadowed him into a crowded bar that smelled like a cross between a garbage can and a distillery. He was too busy making a deal with another Badowin to notice me initially. But he managed to slip away when my own appearance caused a stir. He ducked out through a rear exit, and I sprinted after him, leaving a wake of confused relief behind me. He stole a Badowin *scythe-wing* and escaped with five kilos of Dust. The logical choice for him was to come here, to Del City, home of one of the largest Dust-addict populations this side of the galaxy. Originally built by the Badowins, Del City was run entirely by AIs with the help of a native slave population. The sentient city produced the best AI parts in the galaxy. Machines making more machines and quietly doing business with yet other machines.

“I’ll take us in.” I took the controls and aggressively swung the ship for a swift landing. Benny was perfectly capable of doing it, but I enjoyed the thrill of landing and taking off too much.

As the ship touched down, I congratulated myself. Yet again, I’d anticipated V’mer’s move. He’d be unloading his Dust on these poor addicts for a choice payment. Dust was in great demand; the galaxy’s most dangerous and addictive but most euphoric narcotic on the slipstream market. Fortunately, it was rare, not easily produced, and very expensive, as a result. The payment V’mer would receive for this load alone would fuel his ship for a whole year. And keep a whole community in euphoric intoxication for a month. That wasn’t his concern. It wasn’t mine either: *he* was. Taking him in was my prime directive. V’mer was a member of the largest crime syndicate, Eclipse, and guilty of murder and major Dust smuggling. It was his dubious connection with the Uma 1 massacre and the Vos, the hostile alien race that had almost destroyed my own planet, which made him valuable to the Guardians just now. And had me chasing him through the galaxy to bring him back for interrogation.

Which brought me here, to this gloomy planet orbiting Fomalhaut, a bright isolated star below the galactic plane about twenty-five light-years from Earth.

The Badowin race originally came to Mar Delena looking for profit. They found a semi-intelligent furry species with six appendages and large orange eyes. They lured the Delenians with Dust and inducted them as slave labor to create the machine city. The Badowin then abandoned them to their fate. All Dust addicts by then, Delenians lived for illicit shipments from smuggling rangers like V’mer. Luckily for the Delenians, the sentient city needed them to help run its machine shops and therefore kept them housed and nourished and with sufficient currency to pay for their expensive habit. Otherwise, the city paid no mind to biological intelligence when it chanced to make its way here, which was mostly in the form of Dust smugglers.

And those who chased them, I thought with a faint smile as I shrugged into my Great Coat and pulled my hair out from under the collar. I hastened out of the cockpit, closing the coat with a press of my hand. I then opened the starboard hatch and hauled myself out of the *ray* class ship into the rain. As I climbed down the retractable ladder, the wind sent the rain sideways, lashing my hair across my face. A strong sulphur smell stung my nostrils. The whole planet stank like a swamp.

I leapt down lightly from the ladder and pulled away the curls of wet hair plastered to my face then hastily tied it back with an elastic I'd fished out of my Great Coat pocket. I commanded Benny through my internal mouth com to lock down and scramble the *scythe-wing's* signals, trapping V'mer's vehicle here. *You're not getting away from me this time.* I dug into another pocket for my soyka gum, threw a stick into my mouth and started chewing, as I picked my way through the litter. I slid occasionally over soaked discarded wrappers. The pungency of urine, cheap drug, and vomit cut through the sulfur odor: the typical smells of an AI city unconcerned with biological ergonomics and hygiene. And a community intoxicated with Dust.

Several barefoot Delenians in tattered rags appeared as if out of nowhere and swarmed me, begging for Dust. Even in their alien eyes, I recognized the telltale pigment glow that betrayed long-term users of Dust. Vermin. *I'm helping you ...* Not that they'd see it that way. In fact, if they knew I was here to take away their Dust supplier, I might be the one in trouble—except for the fact that I was an Enforcer. They knew my ebony Great Coat concealed an arsenal of maiming and killing weapons. The Delenians rightly feared us; but they worshipped Dust.

I swiped at them like flies and glared at them. Hardly worth saving, I thought. They scattered but continued to follow me as I walked briskly toward the dark city streets.

A particularly intense-eyed youth lunged forward and snagged the hem of my calf-length Great Coat with four groping hands. "Are you a Guardian?"

I snatched the coat out of his multiple hands and strode on, ignoring him.

"Save us!" cried another. "Give us Dust!"

Head right, Benny instructed through my com implant. V'mer's signature is still warm. You can't be more than a hundred meters away. He's heading for the seedy part of town.

"Like this isn't?" I murmured, rolling the gum in my mouth with my tongue. I jogged into a narrow dirt street and left the murmuring Delenians behind. I turned a corner and halted, drawing in my breath. My quarry stood barely twenty meters ahead, watching me with a smirk, as if waiting for me. He was still in the hunched form of a Badowin miner. The miner's dull yellow overalls were plastered against his hairy skin. I snatched the MEC holstered to my thigh and aimed in a two-handed grip, but V'mer dashed around another corner.

I pelted after him.

I halted again at yet another junction and realized I'd lost him as quickly as I'd found him. I could only hear my own racing breaths and the hissing of the rain.

I threw impatient glances left and right and tongued my com: "Where, Benny?"

I'm sorry. I can't detect a clear signature anymore.

Damn the creon! He'd probably changed form again. I re-evaluated my three choices and drew in a long inhale. The sharp odor of rotting garbage and old solvents cut the undercurrent of cheap smoke and unwashed bodies. Then I caught it: confusion and fear. My lips curled into a feral smile as I turned right, in the direction of the scent: it was a dead end. Even better. And it explained the rancid spike I'd inhaled. A dim street light cast my lurching shadow ahead of me as I ditched silence for speed and pounded down the dark alley.

I'd been tailing V'mer for close to a month. But even considering my unique intuitive abilities to detect shapeshifting Borrs, I'd begun to feel that he was playing with me, baiting me: every time I closed in, he eluded me, but never managed to get so far that I couldn't sniff him out again. This time I finally had him, though. He was caught in a dead-end alley on a forgotten planet in the wasteland of the outer

galactic North Pole. Changing shape wasn't going to do him any good this time.

"I've got you, creon," I whispered smugly, slowing to a walk and raising my MEC pistol. The sour odor of garbage and waste-chemicals grew overpowering. The alley opened to a small courtyard with no other exit. I spotted the Borr after a quick scan: a very tall naked shape scrambling along the top of the garbage piles that crept up the edge of the courtyard. Damn! He'd shifted into an Eosian.

When he saw me, V'mer halted and stood up to full height, splendidly and completely naked, except for his boots. With the exception of Ennos, my boss, who sat behind a desk all day, most Eosians were extremely fit with bodies of corded muscle. V'mer stood in defiant challenge at the far end of the courtyard, as if daring me to close the distance between us. I didn't have to: my MEC would do the job. I had set it to knock out the sturdiest Borr. If I was lucky, he'd tumble to the ground and I wouldn't have to haul him out of the garbage pile. I would have preferred to drag back a small Badowin than this large Eosian, though.

Snarling in a predatory smile, I blew out a bubble and popped it with my teeth. "*When you go up to the mountain often, you will eventually encounter the tiger ... Chinese proverb,*" I said. "Where's the thorn on your rose now, V'mer?" I said with a sneer. Last month Bas in cryptology had passed me a decrypted message between two Eclipse agents. He wasn't supposed to, but I knew he was sweet on me, although I never let on. The message alluded to an elite assassin who was part of a group called the Nihilists and went simply by the code name of The Rose. My subsequent stealth work had since revealed a coded, as yet to-be-decrypted hit list that was specifically meant for The Rose. I was certain V'mer was The Rose. I stepped forward and took aim—

The ground gave way.

I yelped in shock and inhaled my gum. The MEC flew out of my hand with a clatter. I smashed my right shoulder against something sharp and plummeted through blackness until I hit bottom, left leg collapsing under me with a white flash of pain and a bone-wrenching crunch. I heard V'mer's laughter through a febrile daze and made out his black silhouette against the rainy sky above. Damn my hubris! I'd misinterpreted his spike of excitement—the smell of burnt toast—as I'd stepped forward and into his trap.

I sucked in shallow raw breaths, certain that I'd broken my leg and a few ribs. I had a good idea of what my shoulder, which pulsed with pain, looked like. I'd fallen into the waste crusher. The soft garbage and the shielding fabric of my Great Coat had saved me from a worse fate. Then again, I was trapped here, immobilized by my wounds. Would V'mer solicit the Delenians to turn on the crusher? It might have been better to have died quickly.

I heard the whirring of a motor and panicked. But the walls didn't move. Within moments a mechanical arm maneuvered down. It gruffly scooped me up and lifted me out of the garbage chute then dropped me painfully to the ground beside the gaping hole. Several Delenians crowded around to watch and murmured among themselves. Someone whispered "Guardian."

Before I had a chance to even think of moving, V'mer tore off my Great Coat with its arsenal of weapons. He discarded it behind him and laughed, swinging his slim Q-gun toward my face. Then, as if reading my mind, he stepped hard on my gun-hand, immobilizing it with a 'tsk tsk'.

I glanced longingly past the MEC to my Great Coat and felt naked. Millions of thixotropic nano-sensors incorporated into its durable yet flexible fabric let it respond to any number of internal and external stresses, providing me with a shield from the cold or from a weapon's discharge. But it had to be on me to work.

He sneered. "That coat saved your life. Just enough for me to kill you the way I want. Nice to have friends, eh?" He pointed to the mechanical arm with the long barrel of the gun and threw a cursory glance at the small crowd of Delenians. "But, then again, you wouldn't know about that, would you? Guardians don't have friends. Especially *you*. And why should you? You're such a pathetic human, Hawke. Living a lie. Keeping secrets. Bad secrets." He drilled the cold muzzle of the Q-gun into my

nostril, tearing skin. It made my eyes water.

I wheezed out sobbing breaths, realizing that everything V'mer said disturbed me viscerally. It resonated with personal hatred and made my heart pound with unreasonable fear. I'd only met him once, briefly on the *Ulysses*, then caught glimpses of him during the course of my pursuit. Why had he taken such a macabre interest in my life?

What did it matter? I was headed for chaos. My MEC lay in the dirt, beyond my reach. The pistol hidden in my boot was equally unreachable and the hidden weapon embedded in my arm was immobilized beneath the crushing weight of his foot. I was supposed to bring him in alive anyway — not kill him. As for my ultimate weapon of insanity — that's exactly what I'd have to be to use it on him.

The metalloid muzzle of his Q-gun tore into the soft flesh of my nose, trigger poised to turn my face to mush. As I fought to stay conscious, I wondered why V'mer hadn't killed me already.

Θ

"I know!" V'mer barked with sudden macabre inspiration, pulling the Q-gun from my nostril and stroking my cheek with its barrel like a cruel lover's hand. "It's *you* you hate!" He cackled with laughter and heaved a solid kick into my ribs. I cried out and saw stars, unable to move.

He dropped the Q-gun and scooped up my MEC then squatted gleefully down beside me, keeping my arms pinned.

"Ah, the MEC." He ran the thick gun barrel through my wet hair and leaned closer. "Operates like a sophisticated Q-gun."

He couldn't have been more wrong. The Magnetic-Electro Concussion pistol was the best—and worst—thing I'd ever made. The image of Officer Asphalios's face melting in front of me came back to haunt me. Out of hubristic genius, I'd tailored the MEC to behave uniquely by species, based on their DNA structure. I could sweep my MEC in a crowded room and melt all the shapeshifters, only knock out Eosians and leave humans totally unscathed. But Asphalios hadn't been what I'd thought he was. He wasn't what *anyone* thought he was. And I was still paying for that.

"The specs on the info-pod you gave T'lem were wrong," V'mer went on. "I know this weapon. What it can do. I saw evidence of your handiwork on Omicron 12. This weapon does everything you said it did—you just gave T'lem the wrong instructions. If that stray Q-shot hadn't killed him, T'lem would've been really ripped that you jagged him." V'mer deftly fingered the weapon's control network. "Let's see ..." He glanced from the MEC to my shivering face. "It's set to stun a shapeshifter. Well, let's change that to a Delenian." He played with the settings.

He aimed recklessly at one of the Delenians, and shot him. The young man promptly crumpled to the ground. Two friends scrambled to him, and he stirred with a soft moan but remained unconscious.

"He's alive!" one of the more lucid Delenians announced.

"Good," said V'mer. "I wouldn't want to kill a customer." He turned back to me with a nasty grin. "Of course, it's set to leave a human totally unscathed." The grin turned malevolent. I saw him change the setting on the MEC and knew what he'd done before he said it: "Let's set it to kill a human ..."

The smile curled into something vicious and he pressed the gun against my forehead. "Imagine," he said as a spike of sick pain surged up my gut, "getting killed by the weapon of your own design. Doomed by your own Doomsday device."

"If you kill me you won't ever get the design," I got out between panicked breaths.

"I don't need the design," he shot back, evil smile taking over his entire face. "I've got the MEC. So—"

"You're wrong!" I panted, straining my weapon-arm from underneath the weight of his knee. "You can't build another one by taking it apart. I built a failsafe mechanism into it. The MEC'll be incomplete and useless. The parts won't match the whole—"

"Well, I don't really give a jag," he drawled, lips curling with pure hatred. "Everybody wants your MEC to destroy some race. But I just want *you* dead. So ..."

Before I had a chance to inhale sharply and do the unthinkable, he pressed the trigger—

Nothing happened. My heart slammed as I barked out a hysterical laugh of relief. I'd only felt a brief vibration. I was still alive. Incomprehensibly.

V'mer flung the MEC away in anger.

"What the jag!" He spat out. "Of course you made it so it would never kill a human."

I hadn't, although it was a very good idea.

"But I have something better," he said with new inspiration. "It'll make you happy," he continued cheerfully. "More happy than you've ever been in your pathetic Galactic Enforcer life. So happy you'll die from it."

He leaned over to pull out a soggy package stuffed into the soaked overalls that he'd discarded on the ground when he'd changed shape. Then he brandished a dispenser. Dust. I couldn't believe it. He was going to overdose me with Dust!

I gasped out a sharp laugh of disbelief. "You're going to waste it on ... *me*?"

"It won't be a waste, Hawke," he said venomously, closing in on me. "I'm going to have a good time watching you convulse to death."

Why didn't he just shoot me with the Q-gun? He was being totally illogical! Wasting precious Dust in front of these Delenians, who desperately coveted it. I'd never tried Dust, but I'd read enough about it to know that I'd rather be shot in the face by a quintle particle gun than suffer the effects of Dust overdose. The dark energy quintle particles would resonate with my tissue and mush my face into nothing. But it was fast and it beat the torture of Dust. In quantities meant for commercial use, the potent drug acted as a nerve stimulant and created a state of euphoria, inducing the release of chemicals that resembled those produced during orgasm—dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin. Side-effects—excess salivation; a runny or bleeding nose; with prolonged use leading to eventual blindness—seemed worthwhile to its clients, mostly Gnostics looking to experience God first hand. I would bypass all that. An overdose would send me screaming over the edge, hemorrhaging in painful death spasms.

V'mer applied the dispenser to the container of Dust, then turned to me. "What good did it do to *teck* yourself, eh? None of those baldie skills can help you now, Hawke." Dispenser full, he squatted over me. I shivered from more than the cold. "Like the ability to smell emotions." He sneered. "By the time I'm done with you, you'll be able to smell your own death wish."

He leaned closer. "So this is what fear smells like, eh?" He inhaled deeply, savoring it, as if for the first time. I knew better. His confidence and stature told me that he'd shaped as an Eosian often enough; he'd said that purely for my benefit. Not only could I distinguish a shifter from the original article, but I could tell by the smell if a shifter had worn a form long enough to become comfortable in it. It wasn't often that I'd encountered a shifter who was. V'mer came awfully close. If he had shifted as an Eosian rather than a Xhix on the space station, I might not have smelled him out.

"Fear smells a little sour, doesn't it?" He stood up. "At least *yours* does!" he cackled menacingly, stepping firmly down on my hand. "Can you smell my amusement?" He barked out a startled, titillated laugh and straightened to glance down at himself. "Chaos, what they say about these baldies is true, eh?" He was obviously referring to the Eosian's heightened libido. "I'm getting a hard-on just thinking about what's going to happen to you!"

I looked up from his erect penis to his leering face and sobbed, "Why are you doing this?"

He laughed malevolently. "Because you're the gate to my nightmares. You're a menace, Hawke. To yourself and to others. To all of us. You're a jagging disease."

God! He was insane. He didn't make any sense. I forced my screaming muscles to move.

Annoyed, V'mer kicked me. I grunted, sucking in my agony through burning lungs.

"That's better," he muttered. "Tasting your fear is so delicious. I can't wait to devour your death

convulsions.”

Shapeshifters had a peculiar vernacular, I thought with bizarre objectivity: everything exciting and thrilling, particularly if it was sexual in nature, was often related in metaphors of food and eating—

I felt a sharp prick as he drilled the dispenser against my thigh. Instantly, a surge of heat flamed out in all directions and my heart raced. A tingling numbness rippled through me, then lanced me like a million razor blades. My vision exploded into sharp focus, colors brightened, and images fluoresced into garish contrast: the first step to Dust blindness. Oh, God! I had a few minutes left before I went into convulsions and lost my ability to breathe or fell comatose and bled to death as my systems spasmed offline one by one.

Then, as if he was handing a dead person a chance to live, V’mer stepped off my hand and laughed like a mad man.

My arm was free! In a sudden adrenalin rush, saliva pouring into my mouth, I stretched out my arm, aimed, and fired my implanted explosive dart by digging my fingers into my palm. I barely noticed the smart of torn flesh. V’mer’s eyes widened and gaped at the bloody tear in my arm through which the projectile had issued. He stumbled back and looked down at deep purple blood already weeping out of the hole in his chest. He lunged for his Q-gun and picked it up, shouting, “You little fucker—”

Something snapped inside me at his words and triggered a buried reflex, one I dreaded as much as dying. Rage flared up and lit me on fire. An insane energy blazed up and poured out of my eyes.

I saw V’mer’s terrified face as he recognized his fate—an instant before I wiped his face right off with a melting stare. My mouth fell open, and I released an open-throated roar of anguished hatred, willing V’mer’s flesh off him.

I might have shrilled out words of fury, I wasn’t sure. I vaguely heard Benny, as if in the back of my mind: *You killed him, Rhea! STOP!*

I couldn’t. It was as though something in my brain had snapped. I couldn’t stop until there was nothing left of V’mer, except a steaming pile of bubbling flesh and viscera. Only then could I stop screaming.

I collapsed and felt the sudden urge to vomit. God! What had I done? I retched out my dinner in convulsive coughs. Oh, God! It was like the time before. What had I done? Oh, God! Oh—

The first violent spasm shook me, and I tasted salt as my nose, already running from the drug, began to bleed again. Dust was kicking in hard. My ears popped and I felt something wet trickle down my face. Blood. I was already hemorrhaging! I glimpsed the Delenians, scrambling around the discarded Dust and dispenser. Dust happily in hand, they turned their attention on me again. They didn’t look friendly. In fact their hostile intention was obvious. I’d killed their Dust supplier, after all. Once he’d wasted a pile of it on me. Three of them courageously advanced on me, brandishing pieces of metalloid piping. They recognized my pathetic condition.

I crawled to my Great Coat, dragging my useless leg behind me until the excruciating pain in my chest knocked me flat to the ground. I craned and aggressively pushed out my face with a menacing grunt and glared at the advancing Delenians. They backed off momentarily. Then, seeing that no incandescent glow formed in my eyes, they crept forward again. Gasping for breath, I stretched out with a trembling hand to my Great Coat, just out of reach. In response to my forceful thought, the sentient coat jerked into my groping hand, and I shakily pulled it on. I instantly felt its attempts to help my body cope with the shocking onslaught of the drug overdose, pumping me with atropine, pralidoxine chloride, and benzodiazepines. Apart from stopping my nosebleed and letting me breathe a little more easily, nothing else changed: I still felt my body violently shutting down.

The Delenians backed off, recognizing the power of the Great Coat. They peered at me with dull curiosity as I retrieved my MEC and holstered it with a shaking hand. Knowing I was safe from them now, I concentrated on dragging myself down the alley. I had a few precious minutes to get back to Benny before the drug took me. It wouldn’t be enough. After several attempts, I managed to tongue on

my com.

"Benny!" I stuttered out between halting breaths. "I'm not going to make it!"

Hang on, Rhea! Benny responded in my ear. *Maybe I can get to you, if you could only get out of the alley. It's too narrow for me to get into.*

"I can't!" I sobbed. It was like asking me to fly. The Delenians mutely watched me drag myself, sucking in air that burned my lungs. Everything broke up like a pointillist painting. Then, in a flash, it all winked out to pitch dark. I scrambled by feel ...

... A violent seizure sent me into agonizing pain ... I felt a sudden warmth between my legs that I knew was blood ... then my bladder and bowels emptied. *Oh, God! Not already!* ... Ghoulis images struck me like hot coals ... I smelled my own fear ... It stank like a bog ... Now scrabbling blindly, not sure what direction ... Wheezing in painful breaths ... Suddenly unable to breathe, throat squeezing shut ... Heart seizing ... Dizzy in a haze of ... was it thunder ...? Must be ... I was lying face up with the rain pelting my face and a thunderous roar that sounded a little like mad laughter ... then the darkness was taking me and I knew I was falling into a death coma ...