

A Deepness in the Sky Study Guide

A Deepness in the Sky by Vernor Vinge

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Plot Summary

Two races of people, the Emergents and the Qeng Ho, arrive at the OnOff star at the same time. The star is an anomaly in which the energy is literally switched off for two hundred fifteen of every two hundred fifty years. The two races have very different goals. The Emergents plan to mine and exploit the area for everything they can find of value while the Qeng Ho hope to establish a profitable trading relationship. The goals being at such odds, the two races clash and the Emergents mount a surprise attack in which the Qeng Ho are all but annihilated. The surviving Qeng Ho are forced into something akin to slavery with no real freedom to make their own decisions. The Emergents, however, are also crippled during the fight and realize that they are going to have to wait years for the Spiders to develop the technology necessary to allow them to travel back to their home.

Meanwhile, the Spiders are involved in something akin to a civil war. The various nations are at odds and war seems possible. A young Spider named Sherkaner Underhill marries a young military general named Victory Smith. The two shun tradition, having children out of the traditionally-accepted phase. This sparks a national crisis and a kidnapping that results in the death of one of the children. Meanwhile, Sherkaner's brilliant mind comes up with ideas for expanding the nation's ability to withstand the rigors of the Dark. Though the thought of remaining above ground throughout the "off" years when the star puts out no energy is abhorrent to some, the possibility soon becomes reality.

The Emergents and Qeng Ho are diverse groups. The leaders include a man who was taken from his home as a youngster and a young woman who has spent the majority of her life aboard the Qeng Ho ship. The Spiders are equally diverse, ranging from traditionalists who believe life must go on as it has for generations to the free-thinkers who believe that progress is within reach.

The Emergents plan to begin an international war among the Spiders, hoping to effectively cripple the entire planet in order to mount a takeover. It's not until a crew is landing on the planet's surface that they discover that Sherkaner has long been monitoring the humans and that the military is prepared for the invasion. The Spiders prevail over the Emergents. While all this is taking place, a Qeng Ho named Pham Nuwen plans to regain control of the fleet. Pham is successful, gaining control just as the Emergents are defeated by the Spiders. The humans make formal contact and set up trade agreements with the Spiders while the Spiders themselves learn to handle their emerging technological advances that change their world forever.

Chapters 1 through 8

Chapters 1 through 8 Summary

The story opens during an elaborate dinner hosted by the Emergents, one of two groups who have arrived at the planet Arachna at almost the same time. The other group is the Qeng Ho and they are interested in establishing a trading relationship with the inhabitants of the planet. Trixia Bonsol, a linguistics expert, is in attendance from the Qeng Ho as is Ezr Vinh, an apprentice Trader, and Pham Trilini, a programmer who seems willing to share confidential information with a member of the Emergents. The Qeng Ho leader, Captain Park, is seated near the Emergent leader, Thomas Nau. Another Emergent leader, Director Reynolt, is also at that table. They are discussing the fact that the Qeng Ho and Emergents have arrived at the planet at almost the same time. Nau says that it's time for the two groups to find a way to cooperate. After the dinner, Ezr says that he feels uneasy about the situation. Trixia predicts that the Emergents plan to force the planet inhabitants into servitude and urges Ezr to talk to Captain Park about her fears. Ezr says that even though his family owns interest in the expedition, he can't possibly request to speak to the captain. They kiss and part with Ezr's promise that he'll think about Trixia's concerns.

In Chapter Two, Ezr encounters a girl he calls "The Brat." Her name is Qiwi Lin Lisolet and she's younger than anyone else on the ship and her parents are both working for the fleet. While the majority of the crew has been in cold sleep for most of the voyage, she has been awake a great deal, having begun the voyage when she was only eight years old. She's now fourteen and very smart. Ezr feels sorry for her because she's spent so much of her childhood aboard a ship with no other children for companionship. On this particular day, Qiwi is relating her own observations and gossip overheard regarding the possibility of a fight with the Emergents.

Ezr is summoned to a meeting with Captain Park and members of the Trading Committee. When he arrives, he learns that the ruling members of the fleet are torn as to whether they should attack the Emergents, try to establish trade with the Spiders independent of the Emergents, or simply return home. Captain Park says that, as a member of the crew with a family owning interest in the expedition, Ezr's insight would be considered in the decision. Ezr says they have little experience that would make an attack successful and that he would rather see some profit from the journey than to see them return home empty handed.

In Chapter Three, Ezr is among the crew members exploring the planet Arachna. The conditions are horrible because the star is currently off, meaning it's frigid and dark. All information is being sent back to the Qeng Ho ship and shared with the Emergents. Ezr's group finds what is probably the remains of a city and find what they believe to be a library. He also finds a group of statues of Spiders. Ezr wonders briefly if they're underestimating the race of people known as Spiders and reminds himself that these creatures are aliens.

In Chapter Four, the perspective switches to Sherkaner Underhill, a Spider who is headed to Lands Command. The time is shortly before the beginning of the Great Dark, a period known as the Waning. Sherk is in an automobile and notes a number of pregnant females and males carrying "welts on their backs." He watches many people traveling and some military convoys. He finds a former teacher with a room to rent for the night. She asks where he's going and he says he's considering enlisting in the military.

In Chapter Five, he arrives at Lands Command where the military conducts serious research. Seven years have lapsed since Sherk's arrival at Lands Command in Chapter Six. It's nearing the time when the star will turn off and the planet is ravaged by storms. There are still some living above the surface though there's danger from the storms and from other Spiders. There are two factions, the Crown and the Tiefstadt. Sherk is working for the Crown. The military for both sides continue to battle during this time, though they face dangers from the elements as well as each other. There's a plan in place for a small force to wake during the Dark and to attack the Tiefstadt's major supply center. Victory and Sherk have become close during this time and she wants to marry but he refuses, making plans to go with the group that will wake during the Dark.

In Chapter Seven, the elderly Qeng Ho named Pham Trilini is on the captain's bridge, a place he wouldn't have been welcome except for his age. He is observant but not very bright. Meanwhile, Qiwi's mother, Kira, is angry that the Qeng Ho are not going to attack. Ezr is among the crew members returning from the surface of the planet when he's struck by horrific pain. He vaguely hears a heated exchange between the Emergents and the Qeng Ho, and then sees missiles fired. Another member of the crew, Jimmy Diem, reports seeing missiles targeting the Qeng Ho flagship and then reports that the ship is gone. Ezr's only comfort is that Trixia had not been aboard that ship.

In Chapter Eight, a mechanism comes to life and prompts the spread of organics that raises the temperature surrounding Sherk and the other members of his crew, including a Spider named Gil and another named Amber. Each has some problems thawing but they are eventually mobile. Sherk acts on instinct, planning which direction he should move. At one point, he sees a flash of light in the sky and endures a blast of heat, which is apparently the attack of the Emergents on the Qeng Ho. Unnerby asks for an explanation and Sherk says that he doesn't have one, but that they'll someday explain it. One of the Spiders, Gil, becomes crazed with fear and dies. They find their target and carry out their mission so that the opposing army will have no supplies at this location upon their awakening. Sherk predicts that this is the final opportunity for such a mission and that soon everyone will remain awake through the Dark.

Chapters 1 through 8 Analysis

The inhabitants of Arachna are referred to as Spiders. The nature of this race will not be revealed until later but the reader is given some other details about the Qeng Ho, Emergents and the regions of the planet Arachna. The Qeng Ho are traders and tend to search for ways of establishing trading agreements wherever they are. This second

nature becomes evident later when the Qeng Ho are basically forced into servitude but still manage to find ways of creating underground trading networks. The Emergents, on the other hand, are domineering and can't imagine establishing relationships based on anything other than enforced slavery. This gives the Emergents an upper hand in one respect because the Qeng Ho aren't willing to fight until they're provoked.

The region of the planet Arachna is provided light and warmth only about thirty-five years out of every cycle of two hundred fifty years. The sun is called the "On/Off Star" and it literally turns itself off for two hundred fifteen of every two hundred fifty-year cycle. The inhabitants of the planet are Spiders and seem to resemble what the reader would imagine. They have multiple legs and sets of eyes and they "perch" whenever they need to sit. The Spiders have to live underground while the sun is turned off because the planet becomes wrapped in icy conditions that make survival impossible.

The organics being used by Sherk and his team are the result of research during the seven years of Sherk's involvement with the military. The process is not fully explained but seems to be a warming agent that melts snow and creates light though the organisms are not impervious to the cold and not all live to burrow through the snow.

The entire Spider civilization is strange and is never fully explained though the reader has clues from the actions and thoughts of the various characters. It's noted that a marriage between Spiders is accepted during the Waning but not during the Awakening years. That's never fully explained. Victory Smith says that she would have married Sherk just before the Dark and that a marriage at that time would have been appropriate for her career. But later, she'll admit that she and Sherk are united during the early years of the Awakening and Unnerby will seem to censor that action. Another interesting point is made when Sherk learns that there is a group - or maybe just a couple - living near the home of the former teacher who puts Sherk up on his way to Lands Command, and that the couple have lots of children though most die in childhood. The teacher says that the children who do survive are treated badly and become unmanageable and uncivilized. The full impact of this situation is not explained. Another interesting scene is during the attack on the opposing military's supply station during the Dark. Sherk notes that there are two hibernating pools there. The "creature" inside was male with welts on his back. It's not clear why this is referred to as a creature. Sherk calls it a Tarant and says that the creature is a carnivore and is "not nearly as bright as thracts." These references are typical of hard-core science fiction and are likely meant to prompt images for the reader. The civil war going on among the Spiders is not really central to the storyline and a great deal of interpretation is left to the reader.

It will be some time before Pham Trilini's true identity is revealed. He seems to be something of a bumbling older person who is simply along for the ride with little in the way of expectations and few abilities. However, the reader will later learn that Pham is really Pham Nuwen, who is essentially the creator of the entire Qeng Ho trading civilization.

It's not until after the Emergents attack the Qeng Ho that the reader learns that the mindrot, a disease that has been harnessed by the Emergents, was imposed on the

Qeng Ho. The Emergents then calculated the exact time that the Qeng Ho would begin to fall ill and timed their attack to coincide. The mindrot is actually used to focus people.

Chapter 9 through 19

Chapter 9 through 19 Summary

In Chapter Nine, Ezr awakes to find Thomas Nau and Anne Reynolt at his bedside. Nau tells Ezr that he's to become the new fleet manager for the Qeng Ho. Ezr learns that the majority of senior crew members who were not killed in the attack are being held in coldsleep. He learns that others have been "focused" to work on specific projects and problems. The next day, Ezr is visited again by Nau who says that the Emergents are not in good shape following the fight with the Qeng Ho. Nau says that the Emergents can return to their home planet but that they'd have to do so "empty-handed." He points out the progress being made on an operation to mine huge diamond mountains.

In Chapter Ten, Ezr takes over duties as fleet manager and the Emergents slowly back off, leaving him to his duties without their constant presence. The Qeng Ho are operating with less technology than usual because the Emergents have taken much of the technology away. Ezr learns that the Qeng Ho put up a good fight, more than the Emergents had expected, and almost won though the Emergents had prompted the attack. He also learns that the pain he'd felt was a virus given to many of the Qeng Ho, designed to keep them incapacitated during the battle. Ezr learns of a Qeng Ho plan to retaliate against the Emergents. He knows that he's watched too closely to participate but ignores the signs, his only means of providing support for his people. One day Ezr is called to the bactry - a section of the ship where the waste is handled. He's told there's a problem and the smell permeating the ship confirms this. When he arrives, he discovers Jimmy Diem who questions Ezr's loyalty. They discuss their people who are reportedly being held hostage above a ship called "Far Treasure," and Jimmy reveals a plan to free them.

Ezr checks in on other crew members and finds Gonle Fong who is a junior quartermaster and who is angry over the lack of technology available. During a meeting of the crew, Ezr makes a show of demanding obedience to the Emergents' demands for Qeng Ho crewmembers to work on the surface, stabilizing a rock pile in preparation of the mining effort. In Chapter Eleven, crew members are gathered to watch the relighting of the On/Off Star. Qiwi has ideas for the job but is forced to remain on board while Jimmy handles the project. On the surface, Jimmy and several members of his crew work while planning an attack on the Far Treasure. The plan is to release the hostages and then move on to another target. During the Relight, Jimmy's crew takes advantage of the chaos and changing light to move to the Far Treasure. They gain entrance to the ship. In Chapter Twelve, those watching the Relight from a ship realize that Jimmy's crew isn't in place and there's immediate concern, knowing that if they were exposed to the dramatic sunlight, they'd be killed by the heat. Aboard the Far Treasure, Jimmy discovers that the ship is filled with dead bodies. He decides to try to negotiate anyway, threatening Nau with an attack if the Qeng Ho are not released. But the Relight is causing all sorts of problems and rocks are floating near several of the ships. With no real explanation, the Far Treasure explodes and the attack is brought to a halt. In



Chapter Thirteen, Nau points out that they now have no choice but to concentrate on joint survival. He tells Ezr that he's to remain in the position of fleet manager and Ezr reluctantly accepts the assignment, hoping that he can atone for past mistakes. He's taken to Trixia who has been focused. She notes his presence but ignores him as an inconvenient interruption.

Chapter Fourteen is the first chapter of Part Two. In Chapter Fourteen, Victory Smith is driving with Unnerby and Sherkaner as passengers in the vehicle. Smith tells Unnerby that she's pleased he was willing to come out of military retirement for a short term of service. Sherkaner reveals that he and Smith have married and, despite tradition to do otherwise, will be carrying "welts" soon. Sherkaner then explains that he has a plan to keep cities operating during the Dark. He talks about atomic power, a fact that makes Unnerby predict mass destruction.

In Chapter Fifteen, Thomas Nau is looking over the operations he's overseeing. He feels a little sorry for himself because the rest of the crew is divided into "watches," so that anyone not on watch goes into deep sleep. Thomas does not allow himself into deep sleep and will therefore age more than any other crew members. Qiwi goes to visit her father, Ali Lin. Ali has been focused and is working on a project in the park within the main ship. Ali notices Qiwi whenever she hands him lists of mathematical problems she's completed and he praises her for being right. Later, Ritsel Brughel, identified as a vice-podmaster, arrives in the garden. He is angry because the park is closed and Qiwi is there. After he leaves, Qiwi notes that her life has changed dramatically. First, her father would have come rushing to her side to see what was wrong once she and Ritsel began arguing had he not been focused. She also notes that Ritsel seemed on the verge of trying to kill her and might have if he'd been certain of not being caught. Later, there's a meeting in which Thomas learns that one of the men focused on a particular project has become so caught up in the technicalities that he is no longer making progress. In Chapter Sixteen, Ritsel briefs Thomas on specific issues and accuses Qiwi of "subversion." Thomas listens as Ritsel talks about others and is eventually able to calm him down. Ritsel says that he's facing difficulties dealing with the stress of the mission. Ritsel says that he believes the mission can be accomplished sooner if they take over at least one of the Spider nations rather than "hiding" in space.

In Chapter Seventeen, a man named Benny Wen has created a club of sorts. Though not sanctioned by the Emergents, the club is allowed to exist and draws a great many visitors. Pham Trilini is there and he sees Qiwi which prompts memories of his own childhood. Pham was a boy of only seven on his home planet of Canberra when a group of traders arrive. His father sends him away with the traders and Pham, refusing cold sleep for several years, absorbs all the knowledge he can during the ensuing voyage. He comes up with the idea to create a race of traders and begins planning toward that end. Pham recalls that he was ultimately betrayed in that endeavor and pledges to himself that he'll do better this time.

In Chapter Eighteen, eight years pass though most of the crew members spend a great deal of time in cold sleep. The Spiders are evolving and the linguistic crews work to monitor Spider communication. The sounds are squawks but Trixia and the others soon



learn to decipher them. One of the programs being broadcast is a children's show about science, and Trixia uses this as a source of information about the Spiders. In Chapter Nineteen, the Spiders are half way through their Light years and they have made progress on the rebuilding that has to occur each time, including the completion of the University. Unnerby visits Sherkaner and is surprised to see two youngsters - named Rhapsa and Hrunken - pop up out of the fur on Sherkaner's back. Unnerby tells Sherkaner that the use of atomic energy in theory is a good one, but that there are practical problems and that he's worried about the amount of poisonous byproducts being produced. Sherkaner waves off the objections. Sherkaner takes Unnerby on a tour of classes being held adjacent to his house and explains that the students are given free rein to study as they want, whatever they want, with no formal instruction. One theory that has arisen is that the flash Unnerby and Sherkaner saw in the sky is still in place and that it has something to do with the starting of the On/Off Star, though Sherkaner has his doubts. Unnerby soon discovers that there are four other children - two at age five and two at age twelve. Unnerby learns that the two older children have roles in Sherkaner's science program that is broadcast from the site.

Chapter 9 through 19 Analysis

The Emergents use a term known as "focused." The person who is focused spends all his or her time studying a particular problem or working on a specific project. The person is completely unwilling to be distracted for anything or anyone and has no interest in anything else. Ezr's visit to Trixia is an example of this and it's evident that she knows who he is but has no time to be bothered by his presence. This is such a difference from the lives the Qeng Ho are accustomed to living that they see it as a horrible fate.

The situation aboard the Far Treasure isn't fully explained. Jimmy has an opportunity to tell what he knows about the Qeng Ho - that the people are all dead - but he doesn't. He seems to hope that he can push Nau into releasing the Qeng Ho aboard the Emergents' ship but that doesn't seem reasonable. Nau says that the explosives Jimmy had with him caused the devastation to the Far Treasure but it seems more likely that the Emergents caused the explosion.

It's after the destruction of the Far Treasure that the reader learns more about Focus. There are several mentions of a disease called Mindrot. This disease causes death but Nau tells Ezr that "focus" is "mindrot on a leash," indicating that they've somehow harnessed the disease. However, it seems impossible that they could also induce the disease to create the situation unless they were in control of it. It's left to the reader to decide.

Ezr thinks about Jimmy's voice that came over the airwaves in the moments before the Far Treasure exploded. He knows that the voice was Jimmy's and that the inflections were that of Jimmy's family. What he can't believe is the enthusiasm he heard in Jimmy's voice. Ezr says that the words don't seem to be those Jimmy would have chosen and that the enthusiasm isn't something he would have expected from Jimmy.

The parks aboard the ships are luxuries not seen in every race. The Qeng Ho have an extensive park and Ali Lin, Qiwi's father, is in charge of it. There's an important clue here when Qiwi sees the spiders being used to clear up debris in the park. These cleaning spiders are genetically altered to serve a purpose and it will eventually be revealed that there's a connection between these and the spiders that inhabit the planet.

Thomas is pretty young to have been handed the command of the mission to the On/Off Star but there's a reason for it. He is heir to his family dynasty and, as a rule, the control is passed at a specific point in the current ruler's life. His uncle is that ruler and doesn't want to hand over the command until he lives out his life naturally. Thomas's trip to the On/Off Star is a way to give him responsibility while keeping his uncle in full control.

The practice among Spiders is to have children during the waning years though the reader isn't given much insight as to why this is the case. It is, however, society's norm and those who do differently are not held in high regard. That's why Unnerby is so unnerved to discover that Sherkaner and Victory have six young ones and that they are of greatly varying ages, meaning two are twelve at the time of Unnerby's visit. The names of the six are Rhapsa, Hrunken, Victory Junior, Brent, Jirlib and Gokna. Unnerby points out that one of the older boys seems typical of an "out-of-phase child" and that he might even "be retarded." He says that the boy is "sullen" and immature. Though the child has "plenty of eyes," he tends to look directly at things as would be the habit of a much younger Spider. Later, Unnerby and Sherkaner talk about the situation and Unnerby says that just because Sherkaner has plans to eliminate the need to hibernate throughout the Dark doesn't mean that he should be willing to throw away all the rules of society. Sherkaner says that he believes people will become more tolerant if they're given the knowledge and Unnerby says that he can't accept the "perversions."

Chapters 20 through 25

Chapters 20 through 25 Summary

In Chapter Twenty, Qiwi reveals that there are problems stabilizing the rock piles they are trying to mine. As they talk about the situation, Pham Trilini gives up information about Qeng Ho technology. Ezr is furious but has to hide it. Ezr also learns that Thomas Nau has people looking for any information that might lead to more Qeng Ho secrets. Later, Ezr learns that the information Trilini described doesn't actually exist. In Chapter Twenty-one, Qiwi thinks about the plans Thomas has to hollow out a cave in one of the orbiting diamonds as she heads in for tea with another Qeng Ho, Floria Peres. As the two talk, Qiwi reveals that she doesn't love Thomas Nau but does respect him for having helped her through the difficult time after the explosion of the Far Treasure, where she believes her mother was being held. Floria says that another woman, Luan, is missing and that the explanation is that she died during cold sleep when her container failed. Floria doesn't believe it and thinks Luan is actually alive but is under Ritser's control. Floria saw Ritser with the woman shortly before the woman's death and says that she's now afraid for her own life. As Qiwi prepares to leave, Floria warns her to be careful and Qiwi promises that she will. Qiwi discovers that Ezr is going to be in cold sleep for the next two years, much longer than typical cold sleep. He admits to Qiwi that he's worried about Trixia and she promises to keep an eye on her. Qiwi goes to Ritser's living area out of curiosity and discovers many in cold sleep who have been reported dead, including her mother. She wonders how Ritser could be carrying on this operation without Thomas's knowledge but then Thomas arrives and is angry at Ritser for not having stopped Qiwi. Thomas then instructs others to find out who Qiwi has been talking to.

In Chapter twenty-two, Pham is invited to see the focused in an effort to put a stop to his "silly" assertions about the focusing process. Pham learns that Anne Reynolt has been focused and sees groups of the focused working on various problems. Later, he thinks over the process and believes that it could be made to be "gentler," but sees that having focused people in the Qeng Ho could increase the power of the traders. He remembers more about his life. He'd fallen in love with Sura Vinh and they'd had many children, some while he was away building the empire they dreamed of. She assures him that all the children are really his and that they are all with loving families. She says that they must have a larger population in order to realize their dreams. Pham believes that, ultimately, he will build an empire so large that even the destruction of an entire solar system will be something to be managed rather than the end of the empire. He'd eventually come upon a civilization that had technology called "stabilizers." These were used for many purposes and Pham's initial contact with them included the owner's use of them to read Pham's organ functions and thought processes without his knowledge that it was happening. He makes a successful trade for the technology. He continues planning toward his ultimate goal against the Emergents.

In Chapter twenty-three, Ezr wakes during the twenty-first year after the Relight. Ezr realizes that the Qeng Ho are slowly but surely becoming immersed in the Emergents' society and are accepting the situation. Watching the Spider's science show has become a popular pastime for those in space. There is extensive discussion about the idea of the "perversion" of having children out of cycle which is a concept the humans have trouble grasping. They note that the Spider children on the show are replaced by new cast members who are younger each time but that there's no reference made to the switch. Meanwhile, on the planet, there's anger over the "perversion" of using out-of-phase children on the children's program. The radio station is legal and privately-owned, meaning the only effective method of shutting it down lies in a church-oriented boycott of the radio station. A debate about the issue is aired on the radio and the humans listening to Trixia and other linguists who translate the broadcast are confused.

In Chapter twenty-four, the debate against allowing the program to continue is voiced by "Honored Pedure" and two of Sherkaner's children, Gokna and Victory Junior, talk about the appearance of Pedure, saying they'd never seen a cleric's cowl before. Gokna, in an effort to be funny, climbs a shelf and swings forward, "splatting" herself against the glass separating the control room with the area set up for the debate, and hanging there until her brother grabs her down. As the debate continues, Sherkaner argues that Spiders don't need to go through a Dark in order to have a soul. The arguments go on with Sherkaner saying that the tradition of having all Spiders born at a specific time means that all are the same age at the Relighting. He says this means that school supplies are used only for a short time before the students no longer need them. He calls this a "waste." Pedure calls one of Sherkaner's children, Brent, a "cretin." This obviously upsets Sherkaner but he recovers, saying only that Brent "learns differently." Pedure then accuses Sherkaner of having had other children in worse shape than Brent and asks if Sherkaner killed them. Sherkaner denies it. Pedure then turns the topic of conversation and Sherkaner begins telling of his plans for using atomic energy to live through the Dark and outlines the possibility of space exploration. Just as the time for the debate comes to an end, Pedure says that the plans to remain during the Dark sounds like a plan to commit a mass murder. After the broadcast comes to an end, the humans begin to discuss the program, wondering whether the statement about space flight might impact their own plans. Suddenly, Trixia, who has been translating the words of Sherkaner during the broadcast, becomes violent and strikes the woman who was translating the words of Pedure. The attack is sudden and Trud, the man assigned to oversee the focused linguists during the translation, rushes back to face Thomas Nau, knowing that he's going to be blamed for not providing adequate oversight. Pham insists on going along and mentions how this might impact a deal he'd arranged. Ezr insists on going as well, saying that he has to see Trixia.

In Chapter Twenty-five, Sherkaner takes the children home and Gokna goes looking for him. She finds her parents together and Victory is angry, telling Sherkaner that he's revealed a great deal of information too quickly. She says that Pedure is actually from Tiefstadt and that Pedure's church, The Church of the Dark, is creating problems with the tenuous peace between Victory's people and those from Tiefstadt. Victory Junior is caught eavesdropping and sent away before she can hear more. Meanwhile, Ezr is watching as Ann Reynolt and others treat Trixia and others who suddenly seem out of

control. He hears "mindrot runaway," and knows that the situation is serious with at least one dying from the disease. Back on the main ship, Ezr encounters Qiwi and he's angry because Qiwi is behind the broadcast translations that led to Trixia's fight. Ezr is about to hit Qiwi when Pham intervenes. Pham tries to act impotent but delivers a serious punch. Ezr is aware of the subterfuge, a fact that makes Pham angry with himself.

Chapters 20 through 25 Analysis

There are interesting similarities to human prejudices and ideas among the Spider nation. One is seen when the listeners seem to come to realize that the hosts of the Children's hour are children who are born out-of-phase. This is considered to be a perversion of societal laws and therefore prompts church-based opposition. While it's difficult to see any real reason for the societal dictate that children be born only in specific times of the Light years, the bottom line is that it's considered abnormal to do otherwise. The belief is that a Spider doesn't get its soul until it goes through a Dark period. This means that Spiders born in the early years of the Light will live for thirty years or more without having a soul. Apparently, the belief is that these will wreak havoc and be completely immoral for the first years of their lives. Another interesting aspect of this situation is that Sherkaner wants people to realize that the children were born out-of-phase and is initially upset when people don't seem to realize it from the radio broadcasts. He seems happy to have the situation discovered so that it brings about public debate. Sherkaner is a typical black sheep, trying to rock society into realizing that what's been considered abnormal should actually be tolerated. He seems to be a good parent in most ways but is expecting that his children will be willing to face the public scorn they're bound to incur. Victory seems equally indifferent to putting the children out there for public ridicule but it could be for a different reason. Unnerby has noted that Victory was a child born out-of-phase and that he has never blamed her for it because she couldn't choose. This entire situation could be compared to the public scorn for children born out of wedlock during many times in history.

Qiwi returns to the scene with no explanation about what happened to her upon being discovered by Nau and Ritsel. Pham is angry with himself for having put his cover in jeopardy but can't make himself stand by while Ezr hits Qiwi. He notes that Qiwi is being mistreated by Nau and Ritsel and swears that her pain at their hands will be avenged. He also notes that he's probably the only person who knows what happened to Jimmy Diem's crew, other than the murderers, and pledges to avenge that group as well.

Chapters 26 through 43

Chapters 26 through 43 Summary

In Chapter Twenty-six, Ritsel's headquarters are located on the ship named the Invisible Hand. He is overseeing groups of focused snoops who are looking for any threats from the Qeng Ho. On this particular day, he sees video of Ezr's attack on Qiwi and laughs, thinking that the "mindscrubs" that had been performed on Qiwi over the years had become a highlight of entertainment for him. Ezr, meanwhile, is ashamed of his attack on Qiwi and wonders about Pham's intervention. He knows Pham as Pham Trilini and knows that Pham is doing something positive for the Qeng Ho though he can't decide exactly what that is. He also knows that Pham's identity is probably false and tries to think of who he might really be. He begins research in search of that information and comes up with the idea that he's Pham Nuwen. That night, Pham contacts Ezr through a children's game called "blinkertalk" that should be indistinguishable to the Emergents who are monitoring the actions of everyone. Ezr reveals that he knows Pham's identity and Pham apologizes for taking so long to make contact. The next day Ezr encounters Pham and knows that it wasn't a dream. He suddenly sees Pham in a completely different light.

In Chapter Twenty-seven, Victory Junior and Brent are outside their home, called Hill House, playing in snow. They slip away from home and discover Gokna and Jirlib have done the same. In Chapter Twenty-eight, the four arrive at the Royal Museum. They encounter two babies who are less than two years old. Their parents, Trenchet and Alendon Suabism, say that there are more people beginning to believe that they'll be awake through the Dark. They are suddenly grabbed by Spiders who are dressed as guards though the children don't recognize them. All six children are taken away. In Chapter Twenty-nine, Unnerby breaks military rules by broadcasting the news of the kidnappings through an unsecure channel. They soon learn that the kidnappers were obviously professional military and part of the group known as the Kindred. Meanwhile, the children begin looking for a means of escape. In Chapter Thirty, Nau learns that those listening to Spider broadcasts have learned where the children are being held, even though the Spiders themselves are unable to figure it out. At one point, Unnerby laments the fate of the children and Victory becomes enraged, telling him to take his "moral baggage" and leave her house. He wants to apologize but knows it's too late. In Chapter Thirty-one, the children are hungry and the two babies are angry. They hear sirens just as the kidnappers arrive and try to move them to a different location, but are rescued anyway. In Chapter Thirty-two, the children have been free for about three hours and have only minor injuries except Gokna, who is dead. Victory Junior is inconsolable and feels guilty for all the arguments they'd had over the years. Later, her mother follows her and explains that there are consequences to actions, and that the kidnapping had not been random but was the work of the Kindred. She also points out that, in a jam, the children had behaved well. With her mother's help, she realizes that she, her siblings and her parents are a team.



In Chapter Thirty-three, Reynolt notes that Ezr is valuable to the Emergents' cause because of his interest in human development during a time that mimicked that of the current age of Spider development. Pham and Ezr discuss Reynolt and come to the conclusion that she's very dangerous to their own cause and Pham says if she becomes a threat, he'll kill her. In Chapter Thirty-four, Ezr comes off his coldsleep period earlier than he'd expected and goes to Benny Wen's bar, a place that's not technically legal but is accepted. Ezr sees Qiwi and realizes that she's grown into a beautiful young woman. He weighs that information with what he knows about her victimization at Nau's hands. Qiwi tells someone else that she believes they'll be revealing themselves to the Spiders within the next twelve years. In Chapter Thirty-five, Thomas now fully believes that there are many valuable commodities to be had in the region and that the Spider's emerging technology will be the key to his ability to "exploit" all of them.

In Chapter Thirty-six, Ezr tells Thomas that he predicts the Spiders will detect the presence of the humans in less than a decade, especially if others are as curious as Sherkaner. Thomas uses technology that shows each nuance of Ezr's reaction as they talk. Thomas says that he has information about Pham Nuwen and that the information has been moved to a place where Ezr can read about the "atrocities." In Chapter Thirty-seven, Ezr tells Pham that he doesn't believe the reports and Pham offers feedback to help Ezr deal with future interviews. Pham thinks back, remembering when he'd been involved with a young military man named Sammy Park. In Chapter Thirty-eight, Pham recalls a meeting that was set up, theoretically to announce the emerging plans of the Qeng Ho. He'd shown up as expected but found himself involved in a plot to kill billions of people. In Chapter Thirty-nine, Pham discovers that Sura Vinh, a woman he'd loved, was behind the plot to eliminate his plans. Sura says that his plans to create an empire have never been reasonable but says that she does admire that he's created a huge trading nation that will certainly last for many generations to come. Pham expects to be killed but instead is sent out with other refugees, all on ragged ships with barely enough room for the exiled people and their coldsleep equipment.

In Chapter Forty, the Spiders have the first official day of the Dark. Unnerby notes that it's an important mental designation. His two bodyguards are out-of-phase twenty-year-olds. They note the people, citing the fact that many are frantic in their playing. There is no sunshine but the area is warmed artificially. There would be no possibility of living underground here because the hibernating body would "rot in its shell." Unnerby is interested to hear his bodyguards talking about the unnatural aura around the people and the place, especially considering that both are out-of-phase. He knows that they would not have been immersed in traditional teaching but still realize that this isn't normal.

In Chapter Forty-one, Unnerby visits Sherkaner and Victory where he learns that Victory Junior has enlisted in the military. The discussion turns to "magic rock flour" that was recently discovered in the Kindred region of control. Victory reveals that Sherkaner isn't aging well.

In Chapter Forty-two, there's a gathering of those aboard the ships and Thomas proposes a toast, pointing out that some thirty-eight years prior, the two sides had

almost killed each other off. He cites his call then to come together in order to survive and says that they've accomplished that goal. The humans are gathered at the new park planned by Qiwi. The park is the center of the diamond and nearby is the entrance to the area where the focused are held. Pham creates an opportunity to slip away with the intention of sabotaging the focus center. Ann Reynolt is waiting for him and they fight. He knocks her unconscious, makes it appear an accident and wipes her memory before returning to the reception in the park.

In Chapter Forty-three, rumors abound about Reynolt's accident. When Pham and Ezr have a chance to talk, Ezr tells Pham that he realizes that killing Reynolt would have been just as easy as wiping her memory and that it could also have been made to look like an accident. Ezr says that he realizes Pham had an incredible idea with his plan to build an empire and that he knows Pham might be tempted to use focus in order to make it happen. Ezr insists that the "price is too high." Pham finally agrees that his dream was a good one, but that it's time to give it up. He wants, however, to free those enslaved by the Emergents. He counts Ann Reynolt among those slaves and vows that he will protect them all.

Chapters 26 through 43 Analysis

One day Qiwi and Thomas are together and viewing one of the huge diamond surfaces. Qiwi reveals her plans to make it resemble a scene from Thomas's childhood. He is pleased but says it's not possible. She says that it is and it's obvious that she's spent a great deal of time working on the planning stage. She's happy to have pleased him. Thomas is interesting in that he wants to know what other people think about things. For example, he notes that it would be impossible to allow children on the ships because it would make a huge drain on the resources available. However, he looks at Qiwi as something of a child because she sees things differently. Her ability to be in awe of something is contagious and Thomas desperately wants that.

It's not until this section of the book that the reader can fully make sense of the beginning of the book. The prologue talks about Captain Park finding "The Man" with the help of Captain Lisolet. Captain Park is referred to in the prologue as "Sammy," which misdirects the reader. Captain Lisolet is Qiwi's mother. "The Man" is Pham Nuwen.

There's an interesting change seen in Unnerby as the Dark officially begins. He goes to visit Victory and Sherkaner and, once there, wonders where the children are. He's not fully accepted the idea of out-of-phase children but has come to realize that he cares about Victory and Sherkaner's children. He hasn't learned the tolerance Sherkaner seeks but has taken a step in that direction.

Chapters 44 through 66

Chapters 44 through 66 Summary

In Chapter Forty-four, Gonle Fong is a Qeng Ho who had joined the mission to the On/Off Star with the idea that there were profits to be made. With the Emergents' take-over of the mission, she's given up on that idea but has made acceptable profits, considering that she is basically a slave to the Emergents. Gonle is among those invited to Thomas's house at the lake park for a meeting where it's revealed that the Spiders have a satellite orbiting the planet, a product of the Kindred. They know that the Spiders will have a computer network within the next five years and the plan had been to interact with them through that, but now there's talk of moving that deadline up. Thomas says that they'll make contact within a year and that he plans to bring everyone out of coldsleep. Later, Reynolt and Ritser talk about the situation on the planet. Reynolt says that several of the Spider nations have nuclear capabilities and Ritser instructs that she "start a war" that will leave the Spiders' financial situation intact but make it necessary that the humans take over control. Ritser says that they'll concoct a story of the humans' efforts to prevent a total genocide after they are in control.

In Chapter Forty-five, Unnerby goes to visit Sherkaner. He knows that Sherkaner is no longer actively involved in research and that the anti-gravity ideas he'd hatched had been completed by the Kindred who now have satellites. Sherkaner's questions and comments are a statement of his inability to think clearly. He brings up the idea of aliens orbiting the planet, a fact that makes Unnerby angry. Sherkaner recalls the light they'd seen that day in the Dark but Unnerby calls Sherkaner's idea that there is life on other planets as his "craziest." Just then Victory appears and is angry, telling Sherkaner that he's welcome to play with his toys as much as he wants but that he can't bother people who have "real work" pressing. Sherkaner, now dependent on a seeing-eye creature, is led to the door as Unnerby prepares to leave. When Unnerby leaves the house, he encounters a military patrol that includes Brent and Victory Junior. Unnerby tells Victory Junior, who is now an intelligence officer, that Sherkaner's whims can't be allowed to utilize valuable resources at this critical time. She says that her mother is allowing Sherkaner some small pleasures, such as bandwidth and processor time. Unnerby notices Victory Junior's name tag which reads "Victory Lighthill." She says she chose the last name because of her father's choice of placement of the house high on a hill where they would have the advantage of capturing the most light.

In Chapter Forty-six, Victory Smith is overseeing a military meeting and one of the military leaders, Belga Underville, complains that Victory Lighthill, heading up the Lighthill team, has been snooping into her command area. When Victory Smith reveals that her daughter's "snooping" has revealed a traitor, no one else complains about the intrusion. In Chapter Forty-seven, Ritser is looking forward to the coming days when his plan will become reality. He notes that there are rumors on the planet of aliens in the region and hopes that it doesn't impact his plans. Aboard the spaceships, a podsergeant

named Omo prepares a ship for a "short hop" across the planet. He oversees the loading of various supplies and equipment, including weapons.

In Chapter Forty-eight, dozens of people who have been focused are being led out of their work areas. An Emergent named Trud Silipan is overseeing the process. He notes that there were many of the Qeng Ho who visited these people early in the exile but that few of them continued to keep up the visits after years took away their hope that things could change. Among those left behind is Trixia who sees Ezra and demands to know why she isn't being allowed to go to the planet in order to continue her work. Ezra says that she and the others left behind are needed to work on projects, a statement that seems to calm them, and they return to their work. Ezr grabs onto the hope that Trixia trusts him, which prompted her acceptance of his words.

In Chapter Forty-nine, Unnerby is waiting to see Victory Smith and thinks about the changes that have been made. He knows that, five years into the Dark, everyone would have been underground and the war that seems imminent would have been forestalled. When Victory enters, she predicts they will be engaged in an all-out war within three days. She says that she plans to go to a region known as Southmost in an attempt to make the war less traumatic on her people. Unnerby objects, saying that she is needed as a military leader and should not put herself in jeopardy, but she says that she helped create the situation and now feels the need to do what she can to fix it. One of the researchers at the University, Nethering, is wishing he could go home but knows that he'll have to remain working. Just as he's thinking this, a young student arrives with news that communications are down and there's nothing but static on the airwaves. Nethering isn't certain whether the problem is a natural occurrence or the beginning of the war but sets in to find out.

In Chapter Fifty, Unnerby and Victory are traveling when there's an anomaly that they believe to be either a test of the weapons to be used against them or a warning of the attack to come. Meanwhile, Nau is pretending that the mission headed for the surface is benign and wishes the travelers well. Onboard the mission shuttle, Brughel says that it's almost time to "fry some Spiders." Back at the University, Nethering sees the shape of a large ship pass over and the student relates "gossip" recently predicting the "end of the world." In Chapter Fifty-one, Qivi says that they'll have images of the Spider people soon.

In Chapter Fifty-two, Victory is addressing the Parliament of the opposing Spider nation while the humans watch video of the event and Trixia provides translation. Victory suggests that three of her people take up residence at their embassy in the Southmost to provide assurance that her people will not attack. In Chapter Fifty-three, Reynolt tells Thomas that she's almost certain that Pham is the spy in their midst and that he's "stepping up the pace" on his own plans. Thomas isn't certain and he has planned to use Pham to help with a cover story after the Spiders are annihilated. Nau takes control of Ezr and is waiting for him to regain consciousness in order to torture him into some answers. The ship landing on the surface is the Invisible Hand. Members of the crew catch on to the plan but have family members they know will be murdered if they don't follow orders. Meanwhile, Pham is working his way into a new position. He encounters

Trud who says that Reynolt is making claims that Pham has been involved in a conspiracy. Pham says that he has, and that he's now going to take back control of his fleet. Reynolt enters the room just then and Pham fires a dart gun at her. She convulses and drops to the ground. Trud is confused until Pham says that it's an exploding dart that "makes hamburger" of a person's organs. Pham waits until Trud is walking away as ordered to check on Reynolt. He notes that she's only stunned and hopes that his act will not arouse suspicion with Trud.

In Chapter Fifty-four, Victory tells Unnerby that three missiles are headed toward Southmost and Unnerby knows this means a full-scale war. He knows there are seven minutes until the missiles will strike and relishes the fact that there's no time for planning or scheming. In Chapter Fifty-five, Victory's people are discussing her proposal when they learn that the missile has been launched and that it's apparently their own, headed for Southmost. Victory Lighthill is talking with Belga Underville when Belga comes to realize that Victory is actually the traitor they'd been searching for. She can't imagine when or why Victory came to work for the Kindred but is suddenly certain that she is.

In Chapter Fifty-six, Spider, accused of being a traitor, visits Sherkaner with his own discovery regarding a problem with their automation system. Before he can reveal the information, the house explodes around them. Both are injured but not killed and know that the high command has been hit by missiles. In Chapter Fifty-seven, Qiwi learns of the attack and is heartbroken, comparing it to the massacre she believes Jimmy Diem committed. Thomas knows that if Qiwi hadn't been recently subjected to a mindscrub, she'd figure out the truth. Pham comes up with Reynolt's notes and learns the details of the plot concocted by Thomas. In Chapter Fifty-eight, Pham has Trud's help in accomplishing his next goal. In Chapter Fifty-nine, Victory Lighthill makes an announcement to the crew of the Invisible Hand, saying that they've taken control of the ship and urging that they not resist. The ship crashes and one of the crew jubilantly declares that Ritser's plot has failed.

In Chapter Sixty, Sherkaner is aboard a helicopter that crashes. The pilot is talking to him when he discovers that Sherkaner has simply disappeared. In Chapter Sixty-one, Qiwi, Ezr and Thomas are on the same ship when it's attacked. Qiwi suddenly recalls memories that she'd lost and realizes what Thomas really is. She kills him. In Chapter Sixty-two, Reynolt wakes to find Pham caring for her and telling her of Thomas's death and saying that they are now free. In Chapter Sixty-three, Pham sends Ezr to negotiate for peace and trading opportunities with the Spiders. He slowly but surely resolves each issue. Ezr learns that Ritser is being held captive by the Spiders who need a live human on which to experiment. In Chapter Sixty-three, much of life returns to normal with many of the focused successfully going through treatment. Trixia isn't among those and Ezr is angry, realizing that he's always known that there'd be a need for focused workers in Pham's plan. Pham, however, explains that Trixia and others have refused to submit to further treatment, preferring to remain focused.

In Chapter Sixty-six, Trixia and Victory Lighthill are on a mission searching for Sherkaner. Victory says that Sherkaner had worked for years studying the humans and that she believes that her mother would have shared that information with Unnerby. She

also says that she is pleased to know that she made difficult choices, including bombing Southmost while her mother was there, but that all the decisions had been made because they were necessary.

Chapters 44 through 66 Analysis

Unnerby is angry and sad when he sees Sherkaner again. Unnerby says that he's heard rumors of Sherkaner's condition but had wanted desperately for it to be just rumors. Unnerby had described the relationship between Sherkaner and Victory, saying that whenever Sherkaner's ideas had become too outrageous, Victory was there to rein him in. By the same token, Victory had grabbed onto ideas that could be implemented so that the two have literally changed the world.

Victory tells Unnerby during their conversation in which she predicts war that she hates him. She has never forgiven him for his attitude toward her chosen lifestyle, which he referred to as perversion. It's interesting that Victory and Sherkaner should surely have expected that most people wouldn't like their choices and would shun them for having gone against the norm, but she seems to have believed that Unnerby's loyalty would have kept him from that group of people.

Victory Lighthill's "traitorous" actions are never fully explained but it seems likely that her purpose was to put a stop to the war while countering the actions of the humans. She is also putting right the wrong that was done to her family when Gokna was killed by the Kindred. An interesting twist as the story comes to a close is seen when Victory tells Trixia that her father had been studying humans for many years. There is supposition about Sherkaner's fate and many believe he's dead, but others want to believe that he's managed to find a way to live. As Victory and Trixia are talking, Victory reveals her hope that her mother has managed to find a way to survive as well. She says that there are places within the rubble of the Southmost Parliament building that are large enough to provide a place for a Spider and she hopes that her mother has managed to reach one of those. However, Trixia points out that it's been declared too dangerous to dig there and that the next Relighting will certainly cause the rubble to further collapse. Victory says she believes the Spiders can improve on current excavation methods sufficiently to manage a rescue operation.

The epilogue describes a scene in which several of the major characters are gathered for an event. The Spiders are obviously borrowing from human technology and ideas and are advancing more rapidly than had been previously expected. Meanwhile, the humans are learning to live with their current situation.

Characters

Sherkaner Underhill

A Spider, Sherkaner Underhill is something of a dreamer and has many great ideas about research to be used by the military. It's Sherkaner's idea to have a small group come out of cold sleep early in order to attack their opposition's military center. Sherkaner is a free-thinker and doesn't believe that he should be confined by the dictates of society. He marries a young general named Victory Smith and the two have six out-of-phase children. Sherkaner cares deeply for the children and is furious with himself when the four older ones are kidnapped. Sherkaner is a dreamer and comes up with the idea that the Spiders can remain above ground during the Dark if they harness atomic power. However, like most of his caliber, he soon loses interest in projects and moves on to other ideas. Sherkaner becomes enamored with the idea that there are aliens circling the planet and his talk makes others uneasy. By the time the story comes to a close, Sherkaner is nearly blind and is dependent on a creature to help him in daily living. When there's an attack on the city and Sherkaner is injured and is taken out of the city by a former military leader. He disappears and is never seen again.

Pham Nuwen

Posing as Pham Trilini, he seems to be a Programmer-at-Arms of the Qeng Ho. He's seen as something of a bumbling old guy who has few responsibilities and little skill or talent. In reality, he's essentially the man responsible for founding the Qeng Ho as a trading nation. He is taken from his home planet of Canberra as a young boy of only about seven years old. His father sends him away with the warning that he is to be strong, but he's upset when he learns he's being sent away. In reality, it was his father's way of ensuring that Pham didn't try to take over control as ruler of their family dynasty. He is very afraid of entering deep sleep and spends years of the voyage awake, learning everything he can and proving himself an adept pupil in many areas. Pham seems to be blindly accepting of whatever fate awaits the Qeng Ho after the Emergents attack them but actually begins plotting for a way to take his people out of captivity. Pham believes in a single empire that would rule all galaxies and doesn't understand that some people don't see this as reasonable. He realizes that his goal could be accomplished if he were to use the focus. However, he's willing to give up his dream of an empire when Ezr points out the impact of focus on the humans who undergo the procedure. Pham returns to power as the story ends, putting a stop to Thomas's rein and it's Pham who decides that Ezr should be responsible for establishing a relationship and trade agreement with the Spiders.

Qiji Linsolet

A member of the Qeng Ho, Qiji Linsolet is only eight when the group sets out for the On/Off Star. She is fourteen when they arrive. Ezr calls her "The Brat" but feels sorry for her, having spent her entire childhood on a spaceship without other children for companionship. Qiji is brilliant and soon becomes Thomas's constant companion. She believes that her mother was killed when a member of the Qeng Ho boarded the ship where Qeng Ho captives were being held and caused an explosion. She later learns that her mother was murdered by Thomas Nau and, in a moment with full memory of that event, kills Thomas.

Trixia Bronsol

A member of the Qent Ho, Trixia Bronsol is among the first to be "focused" by the Emergents. She's a linguistics expert and her task as one of the focused is to learn all she can about the Spiders.

Ezr Vinh

A member of one of the families that owns interest in the Qeng Ho expedition to Arachna, Ezr Vinh is young and is working as an apprentice Trader when the ships reach Arachna. Ezr is called upon to take a leadership role after the Emergents attack and destroy the majority of the Qeng Ho fleet. Ezr realizes that Pham Nuwen is not what he appears and works to help Pham in his plan to overpower the Emergents and release the Qeng Ho from captivity.

Director Ann Reynolt

A redhead who is a member of the Emergents, Director Ann Reynolt is among those who have been focused. Reynolt is a problem-solver of sorts and the focus makes her very adept at this job. Though not as one-tracked as some others, she has little time for anything other than her job. She seems cruel but it is likely mainly due to the focus.

Thomas Nau

Head of the Emergents' expedition, Thomas Nau is a man whose greed makes him oblivious to everything else. Thomas is willing to kill thousands of humans in order to give the Emergents the upper hand in exploiting the Spiders' world. He uses any means necessary to reach his goals without regard to the cost. Thomas is killed by Qiji in a moment when her memory returns so that she knows that Thomas killed her mother.



Hrunkner Unnerby

A sergeant in the Spider military, Hrunkner Unnerby is very serious and has been involved in combat. He has "medical casts on all his left legs" when he and Sherk meet for the first time.

Victory Smith

Victory Smith is a Spider who is a lieutenant in the military when she and Sherk meet for the first time. She's quickly promoted through the ranks, at least in part because she supported Sherk's ideas. She and Sherk eventually unite personally as well.

Ritsel Brughel

An assistant podmaster, Ritsel Brughel is a cruel man who is interested only in furthering his own ambitions. Ritsel and Qiwi clash on several occasions and Ritsel finally gets his revenge on her when Qiwi enters his quarters and discovers that he has many bodies held there.

Objects/Places

Arachna

Arachna is the name of the planet on which the spiders live.

Spiders

The Spiders are a race of people who inhabit the planet near the On/Off Star.

The On/Off Star

The On/Off Star is a sun that literally turns itself off periodically which is a mystery to scientists and produces extreme temperature on the planet Arachna.

Emergents

Emergents are members of one of two races of people who arrive at Arachna with the intention of exploiting the resources of the planet and its people.

Qeng Ho

Traders by nature, the Qeng Ho are one of two races that arrive at Arachna with the intention of exploring the planet and its people and establishing a lucrative trade.

Lands Command

Lands Command is where the Spiders conduct their most serious research projects.

Far Treasure

Far Treasure is the name of the ship that is reportedly holding hostages but is actually holding only dead bodies.

Canberra

Canberra is the name of Pham Nuwen's home planet.

The Invisible Hand

The name of the ship on which Ritsel's headquarters are located is The Invisible Hand.

Hill House

Sherkaner's family lives at Hill House.

Themes

Human Nature

The Spiders exhibit a strong human nature in their actions throughout the story. They have lived for hundreds of years in a specific pattern - sleeping through the Dark periods when their planet becomes inhospitable. But human nature dictates that there would come a time in which the Spiders began to work on advances that would allow them to live out the years without retreating to underground caves. It's also human nature that some would focus on specific aspects of this problem while others looked toward other aspects. This is seen clearly in the interaction between Sherkaner, Unnerby and Victory. Sherkaner is the brains while Victory serves as a sounding board, eliminating the ideas that are completely unworkable. Unnerby, meanwhile, is the person who puts the ideas into practical use. Another example of this is seen with Thomas and his use of the Focus. The Focus is actually a barely-controlled disease and Thomas exploits those with particular skills and talents, creating in them a focus that would never be possible otherwise. Pham sees the good this focus can accomplish and considers using it. This is human nature for Pham because he wants so desperately to create an empire and knows that it could be done with this power. But Pham's better human nature comes to the surface when he's reminded of the cost.

Societal Dictates

The dictates of society are a recurring theme in the book, most notably in the traditions of the Spiders. Among the most important of these is the tradition to have children only "in phase." When Sherkaner and Victory buck tradition and have six "out-of-phase" children, they are shunned by many people who call the act an abomination or perversion of nature. The dictate comes from the notion that children don't have a soul until they've gone through a Dark. This is not true but the societal norms are so ingrained that people don't accept that the six children could possibly be normal, caring, functional Spiders. Sherkaner believes he can change the opinions of others and tries to prove that his children are not what society expects of out-of-phase children. What's interesting is that Sherkaner seems surprised when he cannot change the minds of specific people. Hrunknur Unnerby is among the characters that has lived through a Dark and is fully accepting of the societal dictates regarding out-of-phase children. He is initially repulsed by the children and tells Sherkaner that they are a perversion. However, he later realizes that he loves them and at least one of the children realizes it as well.

Greed

Greed is an overwhelming theme as seen in the actions of the Emergents throughout the story. The Qeng Ho want to establish a trading agreement that will be profitable for

both their race and the Spiders, but the Emergents want only to exploit the Spiders' natural and technological resources without giving anything in return. Their greed is so strong that their leader, Thomas Nau, sees years into the future and plans accordingly. He knows that he can't allow the Qeng Ho to carry on their trading mission with the Spiders because that will interfere with the Emergents' goal of exploitation. With that knowledge, the Emergents plan and carefully execute an attack on the Qeng Ho. They didn't imagine that the Qeng Ho would fight back so gallantly and were almost wiped out, but Thomas's greed isn't quelled at all by the near-disaster. Instead, he lays careful plans that will not see fruition for some thirty years. The theme is seen to a lesser degree in Pham Nuwen, though his greed is not for tangible wealth. Pham is greedy for the power that an empire would hold. He imagines that he can create such an empire that would stretch for galaxies and can't believe that it isn't reasonable. The difference in Pham's greed and that of Thomas is seen in the fact that Pham is willing to give up the dream when the price becomes too high. Thomas kills hundreds and is coldly indifferent when those around him are hurt. Pham initially believes that using the Focus would be of benefit but comes to realize that he would become something less than honorable in doing that.

Style

Point of View

The story is presented from an omniscient perspective, which is the only option available considering the vast cast of characters and the fact that action occurs in several places. This means that the reader has access to various perspectives which is necessary for full understanding. An example of this is seen when Jimmy Diem's crew goes aboard the ship named "Treasure." Their goal is to rescue members of their own race whom they have been lead to believe are just being held captive. However, when Diem arrives, they find the people are all dead. They don't have time to share that information before the ship is destroyed but the reader knows the truth, which is important to the suspense of the story. In some cases, information is provided through the perspective of a particular character. This is seen with the explanation of "focus." Ezr and the other Qeng Ho are told that the people who have been through a process known as "focus" will do their duty toward a certain goal, then will be released from their focus. The Qeng Ho have no experience with that process and don't realize what it really is until Ezr is taken to visit a friend who has been "focused." It's only then that the reader understands what impact the process has and how it changes a person. This is important information because the Qeng Ho will not be able to rely on these people if they rebel. While the author could have simply put the information out there as an explanation, he chose to demonstrate through Ezr's perspective, which is an effective choice. The constant changing of perspective among characters is sometimes difficult to follow. For example, the reader is given information only about the Qeng Ho and Emergents and their arrival at the On/Off Star up through Chapter Three. The perspective up to this point is about the characters of the two invading races. Then, abruptly, the perspective changes to that of Sherkaner Underhill who is a Spider. The reader who is not expecting this dramatic change may find it difficult to follow this switch. The fact that there are dozens of characters makes the perspective difficult to follow because the mention of a particular character may not spark immediate understanding of a change of perspective in every reader.

Setting

There are dozens of specific settings in the story but the overall setting is on the surface and in orbit of a planet known as Arachna. The setting is obviously fictional but is described in great detail. The planet is near the "On/Off Star," a large star that literally turns itself off for 215 years at a time, a phenomenon unexplained by scientists. The specific settings include several spaceships. Some are the property of the Qeng Ho and others belong to the Emergents - both races of people who had hoped to be the first to arrive at Arachna. The spaceships are typically divided into rooms by something similar to portable partitions. Several specific settings on the planet are also described in great detail. As an example, Sherkaner Underhill is traveling to the Spider's base of operations during a time referred to as the "Waning," which is shortly before the sun



turns off. Underhill is in a vehicle and describes the thirty-year-old trees which grew "straight and high and green." The trees are growing near the highway and Underhill can smell the resin from the forest. These details - the smell of the forest and the sight of trees - provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the setting. In other instances, the descriptions are less detailed so that the reader has to use a greater degree of imagination. The time is the distant future when space travel is accepted and races of people have developed with an eye toward colonizing various planets. Characters spend a great deal of time in some sort of cryo-chamber that allows them to sleep for years at a time. Details such as these, though fictional, are in keeping with the time setting.

Language and Meaning

The storyline is fairly straight-forward, considering that the book is hardcore science fiction. Two competing races have made plans to explore and exploit a planet at the same time while the inhabitants of that planet deal with their own controversies. However, the races have their own languages and there are many made-up words and phrases, making the story sometimes very difficult to follow. The names of a huge cast of characters are unfamiliar to the traditional English-speaking reader which makes it difficult to keep track of characters' identities. For example, one of the spiders is named Underhill while another is named Unnerby. The two interact often and Underhill is sometimes referred to by his first name - Sherkaner. Other names are lacking in traditional placement of vowels and consonants, such as is the case with the character named Ezr Vinh. Some terms are used with little explanation, such as "fleet manager" and "podmaster." The reader is left to discern the meanings based almost solely on the roles of the characters and their actions. Time is referred to in "Msecs and "Ksecs," and characters sometimes refer to time in seconds. For example, Ezr Vinh has "fifteen hundred seconds" allotted for his break while exploring Arachna. In some cases, the author uses dialogue that is apparently supposed to represent the culture of that character. For example, some characters say "tas" when they apparently mean "was." Interestingly, there are cases in which modern-day slang is used, as is seen in a scene in which one character says that a particular situation is "gross." The overall tone of the book is supposed to be one of suspense but the book is too long to sustain that tone continuously. In addition, some readers may find themselves struggling to keep track of the various characters and terms to catch onto that tone.

Structure

The book is divided into sixty-six chapters with most chapters having fewer than fourteen pages. Each chapter is simply numbered with no chapters titled. The book is further divided into three parts. Each is titled by number - Part One, Part Two and Part Three. Part One includes the first thirteen chapters of the book and concludes on page 135. Part Three begins with Chapter Forty-four and continues to the end of the book. The first part includes the story of how the Emergents and Qeng Ho arrive at Arachna and the battle between the two groups that leads to the realization that they'll have to

remain there for many decades. The introduction of the Spiders is also included in this section as is the explanation of the various races involved in the story. The second part includes the various exploits of the races as they fight to survive and learn to get along with each other. The final part is a continuation of those efforts and the eventual resolution. The book also includes a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue is vague and the reader will not understand the significance for some time. The epilogue describes the outcome of the conflict resolution as the various races learn to live together. The structure of the book is roughly chronological though there are some scenes that skip around in time. This is seen mostly in situations in which the reader follows the action of one group of characters and then switches to another. For example, early in the story the Emergents attack the Qeng Ho and there's a massive explosion as one of the ships is struck and destroyed. The next chapter drops back in time and follows the actions of a Spider on the planet surface. The time aspect is made clear when a Spider sees the burst of light from the exploding ship.

Quotes

"The Qeng Ho fleet was the first to arrive at the OnOff star. That might not matter. For the last fifty years of their voyage, they had watched the torchplumes of the Emergent fleet as it decelerated toward the same destination." Chapter 1, Page 27

"The OnOff star might better have been called 'old faithful.' Its catastrophic variability had first been noticed by the Dawn Age astronomers of Old Earth." Chapter 11, Page 105

"Victory Smith had bought into Underhill's scheme - and sold it to the High Command. The next thirty years were going to be even more exciting than Hrunknur Unnerby had thought." Chapter 14, Page 147

"If we could take over some Spider nation - maybe just pretend to ally with it - we could speed things up." Ritsner, Chapter 16, Page 170

"Brent, the other twelve-year-old, was more like the stereotype of an out-of-phase child: withdrawn, a little but sullen, perhaps retarded. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands and feet, and though he had plenty of eyes, he favored his foreview as though he were still much younger." Chapter 19, Page 207

"So Spider tradition only allowed new children at the beginning of a New Sun. Generations were strictly separated, each marching through life as a same-aged group." Chapter 23, Page 266

"Mothers - their mother, anyway - was not around every minute, and could not be depended upon to buckle to every childish demand." Chapter 32, Page 347

"Sherk used to describe the process more colorfully, back when he thought artificial intelligence was the wave of the future: 'I'm the idea-generating component and Victory is the crap-detector; we're an intelligence greater than anything on ten legs.' Those two had transformed the world." Chapter 41, Page 416

"He's not himself anymore. He's all into alien monsters and videomancy." Unnerby about Sherkaner, Chapter 45, Page 461

"A few more days and Greenval would have closed down his operation, and the Great War would have been frozen in its own deadly sleep. But in this generation, we just go on and on, headed for the most terrible war of all time." Unnerby, Chapter 49, Page 483

"You know the Spiders better than any of our other unFocused people, certainly better than me." Pham on his reason for sending Ezr to negotiate, Chapter 63, Page 571

"He was the most loyal friend we ever had. He loved us even though he thought we were a perversion." Victory Lighthill, Chapter 66, Page 593

Topics for Discussion

Describe the two races that arrive at the OnOff star at the same time. What are the goals of each? How do their plans differ? Why do their plans differ?

Why are Spider children only to be born "in phase"? What happens when a child is born "out-of-phase"? Why? Compare this to a modern-day stigma about specific actions.

Describe the Spider race. How do they cope with the lack of sunlight from their star prior to Sherkaner's ideas? What changes with his ideas? What is the reaction of people to these changes? Why?

How does Sherkaner meet Victory Smith? Compare their relationship to that of Qiwi and Ezr. What are the similarities? The differences?

Who is Pham Nuwen? Who is Pham Trilini? Describe Nuwen's childhood. What is his ultimate goal? How does he believe it can be accomplished? What opposition does he encounter?

Who is Thomas Nau? Who is Captain Park? How are the two men similar? How are they different? Compare each of the characters to any other characters in the story.

Who is Qiwi? What was her childhood like? What is her role in the activities once they reach the OnOff star? Why does she take on that role? What is the important action she takes as the book draws to a close?