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REVELATION
SPACE

"BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL OF THE YEAR"
—*Science Fiction Chronicle*



REVELATION SPACE

ONE

Mantell Sector, North Nekhebet, Resurgam, Delta Pavonis system, 2551

There was a razorstorm coming in.

Sylveste stood on the edge of the excavation and wondered if any of his labours would survive

the night. The archaeological dig was an array of deep square shafts separated by baulks of sheer-

sided soil: the classical Wheeler box-grid. The shafts went down tens of metres, walled by

transparent cofferdams spun from hyperdiamond. A million years of stratified geological history

pressed against the sheets. But it would take only one good dustfall -- one good razorstorm -- to fill

the shafts almost to the surface.

'Confirmation, sir,' said one of his team, emerging from the crouched form of the first crawler.

The man's voice was muffled behind his breather mask. 'Cuvier's just issued a severe weather

advisory for the whole North Nekhebet landmass. They're advising all surface teams to return to the

nearest base.'

'You're saying we should pack up and drive back to Mantell?'

'It's going to be a hard one, sir.' The man fidgeted, drawing the collar of his

jacket tighter around

his neck. 'Shall I issue the general evacuation order?'

Sylveste looked down at the excavation grid, the sides of each shaft brightly lit by the banks of

floodlights arrayed around the area. Pavonis never got high enough at these latitudes to provide

much useful illumination; now, sinking towards the horizon and clotted by great cauls of dust, it

was little more than a rusty-red smear, hard for his eyes to focus on. Soon dust devils would come,

scurrying across the Ptero Steppes like so many overwound toy gyroscopes. Then the main thrust of

the storm, rising like a black anvil.

'No,' he said. 'There's no need for us to leave. We're well sheltered here -- there's hardly any

erosion pattering on those boulders, in case you hadn't noticed. If the storm becomes too harsh, we'll

shelter in the crawlers.'

The man looked at the rocks, shaking his head as if doubting the evidence of his ears. 'Sir, Cuvier

only issue an advisory of this severity once every year or two -- it's an order of magnitude above

anything we've experienced before.'

'Speak for yourself,' Sylveste said, noticing the way the man's gaze snapped involuntarily to his

eyes and then off again, embarrassed. 'Listen to me. We cannot afford to abandon this dig. Do you

understand?'

The man looked back at the grid. 'We can protect what we've uncovered with sheeting, sir. Then

bury transponders. Even if the dust covers every shaft, we'll be able to find the site again and get

back to where we are now.' Behind his dust goggles, the man's eyes were wild, beseeching. 'When

we return, we can put a dome over the whole grid. Wouldn't that be the best, sir, rather than risk

people and equipment out here?'

Sylveste took a step closer to the man, forcing him to step back towards the grid's closest shaft.

'You're to do the following. Inform all dig teams that they carry on working until I say otherwise,

and that there is to be no talk of retreating to Mantell. Meanwhile, I want only the most sensitive

instruments taken aboard the crawlers. Is that understood?'

'But what about people, sir?'

'People are to do what they came out here to do. Dig.'

Sylveste stared reproachfully at the man, almost inviting him to question the order, but after a

long moment of hesitation the man turned on his heels and scurried across the grid, navigating the

tops of the baulks with practised ease. Spaced around the grid like down-pointed cannon, the

delicate imaging gravimeters swayed slightly as the wind began to increase.

Sylveste waited, then followed a similar path, deviating when he was a few boxes into the grid.

Near the centre of the excavation, four boxes had been enlarged into one single slab-sided pit, thirty

metres from side to side and nearly as deep. Sylveste stepped onto the ladder which led into the pit

and moved quickly down the side. He had made the journey up and down this ladder so many times

in the last few weeks that the lack of vertigo was almost more disturbing than the thing itself.

Moving down the cofferdam's side, he descended through layers of geological time. Nine hundred

thousand years had passed since the Event. Most of that stratification was permafrost -- typical in

Resurgam's subpolar latitudes; permanent frost-soil which never thawed. Deeper down -- close to

the Event itself -- was a layer of regolith laid down in the impacts which had followed. The Event

itself was a single, hair-fine black demarcation -- the ash of burning forests.

The floor of the pit was not level, but followed narrowing steps down to a final depth of forty

metres below the surface. Extra floods had been brought down to shine light into the gloom. The

cramped area was a fantastical hive of activity, and within the shelter of the pit there was no trace of

the wind. The dig team was working in near-silence, kneeling on the ground on mats, working away

at something with tools so precise they might have served for surgery in another era. Three were

young students from Cuvier -- born on Resurgam. A servitor skulked beside them awaiting orders.

Though machines had their uses during a dig's early phases, the final work could never be entirely

trusted to them. Next to the party a woman sat with a compad balanced on her lap, displaying a

cladistic map of Amarantin skulls. She saw Sylveste for the first time -- he had climbed quietly --

and stood up with a start, snapping shut the compad. She wore a greatcoat, her black hair cut in a

geometric fringe across her brow.

'Well, you were right,' she said. 'Whatever it is, it's big. And it looks amazingly well-preserved,

too.'

'Any theories, Pascale?'

'That's where you come in, isn't it? I'm just here to offer commentary.' Pascale Dubois was a

young journalist from Cuvier. She had been covering the dig since its inception, often dirtying her

fingers with the real archaeologists, learning their cant. 'The bodies are gruesome, though, aren't

they? Even though they're alien, it's almost as if you can feel their pain.'

To one side of the pit, just before the floor stepped down, they had unearthed two stone-lined

burial chambers. Despite being buried for nine hundred thousand years -- at the very least -- the

chambers were almost intact, with the bones inside still assuming a rough anatomical relationship to

one another. They were typical Amarantin skeletons. At first glance -- to anyone who happened not

to be a trained anthropologist -- they could have passed as human remains, for the creatures had

been four-limbed bipeds of roughly human size, with a superficially similar bone-structure. Skull

volume was comparable, and the organs of sense, breathing and communication were situated in

analogous positions. But the skulls of both Amarantin were elongated and birdlike, with a

prominent cranial ridge which extended forwards between the voluminous eye-sockets, down to the

tip of the beaklike upper jaw. The bones were covered here and there by a skein of tanned,

desiccated tissue which had served to contort the bodies, drawing them -- or so it seemed -- into

agonised postures. They were not fossils in the usual sense: no mineralisation

had taken place, and

the burial chambers had remained empty except for the bones and the handful of technomic

artefacts with which they had been buried.

'Perhaps,' Sylveste said, reaching down and touching one of the skulls, 'we were meant to think

that.'

'No,' Pascale said. 'As the tissue dried, it distorted them.'

'Unless they were buried like this.'

Feeling the skull through his gloves -- they transmitted tactile data to his fingertips -- he was

reminded of a yellow room high in Chasm City, with aquatints of methane icescapes on the walls.

There had been liveried servitors moving through the guests with sweetmeats and liqueurs; drapes

of coloured crepe spanning the belvedered ceiling; the air bright with sickly entoptics in the current

vogue: seraphim, cherubim, hummingbirds, fairies. He remembered guests: most of them associates

of the family; people he either barely recognised or detested, for his friends had been few in

number. His father had been late as usual; the party already winding down by the time Calvin

deigned to show up. This was normal then; the time of Calvin's last and greatest project, and the

realisation of it was in itself a slow death; no less so than the suicide he would bring upon himself at

the project's culmination.

He remembered his father producing a box, its sides bearing a marquetry of entwined ribonucleic

strands.

'Open it,' Calvin had said.

He remembered taking it; feeling its lightness. He had snatched the top off to reveal a bird's nest

of fibrous packing material. Within was a speckled brown dome the same colour as the box. It was

the upper part of a skull, obviously human, with the jaw missing.

He remembered a silence falling across the room.

'Is that all?' Sylveste had said, just loud enough so that everyone in the room heard it. 'An old

bone? Well, thanks, Dad. I'm humbled.'

'As well you should be,' Calvin said.

And the trouble was, as Sylveste had realised almost immediately, Calvin was right. The skull

was incredibly valuable; two hundred thousand years old -- a woman from Atapuerca, Spain, he

soon learned. Her time of death had been obvious enough from the context in which she was buried,

but the scientists who had unearthed her had refined the estimate using the

best techniques of their

day: potassium-argon dating of the rocks in the cave where she'd been buried, uranium-series dating

of travertine deposits on the walls, fission-track dating of volcanic glasses, thermoluminescence

dating of burnt flint fragments. They were techniques which -- with improvements in calibration

and application -- remained in use among the dig teams on Resurgam. Physics allowed only so

many methods to date objects. Sylveste should have seen all that in an instant and recognised the

skull for what it was: the oldest human object on Yellowstone, carried to the Epsilon Eridani system

centuries earlier, and then lost during the colony's upheavals. Calvin's unearthing of it was a small

miracle in itself.

Yet the flush of shame he felt stemmed less from ingratitude than from the way he had allowed

his ignorance to unmask itself, when it could have been so easily concealed. It was a weakness he

would never allow himself again. Years later, the skull had travelled with him to Resurgam, to

remind him always of that vow.

He could not fail now.

'If what you're implying is the case,' Pascale said, 'then they must have been

buried like that for a
reason.'

'Maybe as a warning,' Sylveste said, and stepped down towards the three students.

'I was afraid you might say something like that,' Pascale said, following him.
'And what exactly

might this terrible warning have concerned?'

Her question was largely rhetorical, as Sylveste well knew. She understood exactly what he

believed about the Amarantin. She also seemed to enjoy needling him about those beliefs; as if by

forcing him to state them repeatedly, she might eventually cause him to expose some logical error

in his own theories; one that even he would have to admit undermined the whole argument.

'The Event,' Sylveste said, fingering the fine black line behind the nearest cofferdam as he spoke.

'The Event happened to the Amarantin,' Pascale said. 'It wasn't anything they had any say in. And

it happened quickly, too. They didn't have time to go about burying bodies in dire warning, even if

they'd had any idea about what was happening to them.'

'They angered the gods,' Sylveste said.

'Yes,' Pascale said. 'I think we all agree that they would have interpreted the Event as evidence of

theistic displeasure, within the constraints of their belief system -- but there wouldn't have been

time to express that belief in any permanent form before they all died, much less bury bodies for the

benefit of future archaeologists from a different species.' She lifted her hood over her head and

tightened the drawstring -- fine plumes of dust were starting to settle down into the pit, and the air

was no longer as still as it had been a few minutes earlier. 'But you don't think so, do you?' Without

waiting for an answer, she fixed a large pair of bulky goggles over her eyes, momentarily disturbing

the edge of her fringe, and looked down at the object which was slowly being uncovered.

Pascale's goggles accessed data from the imaging gravimeters stationed around the Wheeler

grid, overlaying the stereoscopic picture of buried masses on the normal view. Sylveste had only to

instruct his eyes to do likewise. The ground on which they were standing turned glassy,

insubstantial -- a smoky matrix in which something huge lay entombed. It was an obelisk -- a single

huge block of shaped rock, itself encased in a series of stone sarcophagi. The obelisk was twenty

metres tall. The dig had exposed only a few centimetres of the top. There was evidence of writing

down one side, in one of the standard late-phase Amarantin graphicforms.
But the imaging

gravitometers lacked the spatial resolution to reveal the text. The obelisk
would have to be dug out

before they could learn anything.

Sylveste told his eyes to return to normal vision. 'Work faster,' he told his
students. 'I don't care if

you incur minor abrasions to the surface. I want at least a metre of it visible
by the end of tonight.'

One of the students turned to him, still kneeling. 'Sir, we heard the dig would
have to be

abandoned.'

'Why on earth would I abandon a dig?'

'The storm, sir.'

'Damn the storm.' He was turning away when Pascale took his arm, a little
too roughly.

'They're right to be worried, Dan.' She spoke quietly, for his benefit alone. 'I
heard about that

advisory, too. We should be heading back toward Mantell.'

'And lose this?'

'We'll come back again.'

'We might never find it, even if we bury a transponder.' He knew he was
right: the position of the

dig was uncertain and maps of this area were not particularly detailed;

compiled quickly when the

Lorean had made orbit from Yellowstone forty years earlier. Ever since the corn sat girdle had been

destroyed in the mutiny, twenty years later -- when half the colonists elected to steal the ship and

return home -- there had been no accurate way of determining position on Resurgam. And many a

transponder had simply failed in a razorstorm.

'It's still not worth risking human lives for,' Pascale said.

'It might be worth much more than that.' He snapped a finger at the students. 'Faster. Use the

servitor if you must. I want to see the top of that obelisk by dawn.'

Sluka, his senior research student, muttered a word under her breath.

"Something to contribute?" Sylveste asked.

Sluka stood for what must have been the first time in hours. He could see the tension in her eyes.

The little spatula she had been using dropped on the ground, beside the mukluks she wore on her

feet. She snatched the mask away from her face, breathing Resurgam air for a few seconds while

she spoke. 'We need to talk.'

'About what, Sluka?'

Sluka gulped down air from the mask before speaking again. 'You're pushing your luck, Dr

Sylveste.'

'You've just pushed yours over the precipice.'

She seemed not to have heard him. 'We care about your work, you know. We share your beliefs.

That's why we're here, breaking our backs for you. But you shouldn't take us for granted.' Her eyes

flashed white arcs, glancing towards Pascale. 'Right now you need all the allies you can find, Dr

Sylveste.'

'That's a threat, is it?'

'A statement of fact. If you paid more attention to what was going on elsewhere in the colony,

you'd know that Girardieau's planning to move against you. The word is that move's a hell of a lot

closer than you think.'

The back of his neck prickled. 'What are you talking about?'

'What else? A coup.' Sluka pushed past him to ascend the ladder up the side of the pit. When she

had a foot on the first rung, she turned back and addressed the other two students, both minding

their own business, heads down in concentration as they worked to reveal the obelisk. 'Work for as

long as you want, but don't say no one warned you. And if you've any doubts as to what being

caught in a razorstorm is like, take a look at Sylveste.'

One of the students looked up, timidly. 'Where are you going, Sluka?'

'To speak to the other dig teams. Not everyone may know about that advisory. When they hear, I

don't think many of them will be in any hurry to stay.'

She started climbing, but Sylveste reached up and grabbed the heel of her mukluk. Sluka looked

down at him. She was wearing the mask now, but Sylveste could still see the contempt in her

expression. 'You're finished, Sluka.'

'No: she said climbing. 'I've just begun. It's you I'd worry about.'

Sylveste examined his own state of mind and found -- it was the last thing he had expected --

total calm. But it was like the calm that existed on the metallic hydrogen oceans of the gas giant

planets further out from Pavonis -- only maintained by crushing pressures from above and below.

'Well?' Pascale said.

'There's someone I need to talk to,' Sylveste said.

Sylveste climbed the ramp into his crawler. The other was crammed with equipment racks and

sample containers, with hammocks for his students pressed into the tiny niches of unoccupied

space. They had to sleep aboard the machines because some of the digs in the

sector -- like this one

-- were over a day's travel from Mantell itself. Sylveste's crawler was considerably better appointed,

with over a third of the interior dedicated to his own stateroom and quarters. The rest of the

machine was taken up with additional payload space and a couple of more modest quarters for his

senior workers or guests: in this case Sluka and Pascale. Now, however, he had the whole crawler to

himself.

The stateroom's decor belied the fact that it was aboard a crawler. It was walled in red velvet, the

shelves dotted with facsimile scientific instruments and relics. There were large, elegantly annotated

Mercator maps of Resurgam dotted with the sites of major Amarantin finds; other areas of wall

were covered in slowly updating texts: academic papers in preparation. His own beta-level was

doing most of the scutwork on the papers now; Sylveste had trained the simulation to the point

where it could imitate his style more reliably than he could, given the current distractions. Later, if

there was time, he would need to proof those texts, but for now he gave them no more than a glance

as he moved to the room's *escritoire*. The ornate writing desk was decorated in marble and

malachite, inset with japanwork scenes of early space exploration.

Sylveste opened a drawer and removed a simulation cartridge, an unmarked grey slab, like a

ceramic tile. There was a slot in the escritoire's upper surface. He would only have to insert the

cartridge to invoke Calvin. He hesitated, nonetheless. It had been some time - months, at least --

since he had brought Calvin back from the dead, and that last encounter had gone spectacularly

badly. He had promised himself he would only invoke Calvin again in the event of crisis. Now it

was a matter of judging whether the crisis had really arrived -- and if it was sufficiently troublesome

to justify an invocation. The problem with Calvin was that his advice was only reliable about half

the time.

Sylveste pressed the cartridge into the escritoire.

Fairies wove a figure out of light in the middle of the room: Calvin seated in a vast seigneurial

chair. The apparition was more realistic than any hologram -- even down to subtle shadowing

effects -- since it was being generated by direct manipulation of Sylveste's visual field. The beta-

level simulation represented Calvin the way fame best remembered him, as he had been when he

was barely fifty years old, in his heyday on Yellowstone. Strangely, he looked older than Sylveste,

even though the image of Calvin was twenty years younger in physiological terms. Sylveste was

eight years into his third century, but the longevity treatments he had received on Yellowstone had

been more advanced than any available in Calvin's time.

Other than that, their features and build were the same, both of them possessing a permanent

amused curve to the lips. Calvin wore his hair shorter and was dressed in Demarchist Belle Epoque

finery, rather than the relative austerity of Sylveste's expeditionary dress: billowing frock shirt and

elegantly chequered trousers hooked into buccaneer-boots, his fingers aglint with jewels and metal.

His impeccably shaped beard was little more than a rust-coloured delineation along the line of his

jaw. Small entoptics surrounded his seated figure, symbols of Boolean and three-valued logics and

long cascades of binary. One hand fingered the bristles beneath his chin, while the other toyed with

the carved scroll that ended the seat's armrest.

A wave of animation slithered over the projection, the pale eyes gaining a glisten of interest.

Calvin raised his fingers in lazy acknowledgement. 'So...' he said. 'The shit's about to match

coordinates with the fan.'

'You presume a lot.'

'No need to presume anything, dear boy. I just tapped into the net and accessed the last few

thousand news reports.' He craned his neck to survey the stateroom. 'Nice pad you've got here. How

are the eyes, by the way?'

'They're functioning as well as can be expected.'

Calvin nodded. 'Resolution's not up to much, but that was the best I could do with the tools I was

forced to work with. I probably only reconnected forty per cent of your optic nerve channels, so

putting in better cameras would have been pointless. Now if you had halfway decent surgical

equipment lying around on this planet, I could perhaps begin to do something. But you wouldn't

give Michelangelo a toothbrush and expect a great Sistine Chapel.'

'Rub it in.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Calvin said, all innocence. 'I'm just saying that if you had to let her take

the *Lorean*, couldn't you at least have persuaded Alicia to leave us some medical equipment?'

His wife had led the mutiny against him twenty years earlier; a fact Calvin never allowed

Sylveste to forget.

'So I made a kind of self-sacrifice.' Sylveste waved an arm to silence the image. 'Sorry, but I

didn't invoke you for a fireside chat, Cal.'

'I do wish you'd call me Father.'

Sylveste ignored him. 'Do you know where we are?'

'A dig, I presume.' Calvin closed his eyes briefly and touched his fingers against his temples,

affecting concentration. 'Yes. Let me see. Two expeditionary crawlers out of Mantell, near the Ptero

Steppes... a Wheeler grid... how inordinately quaint! Though I suppose it suits your purpose well

enough. And what's this? High-res gravitometer sections... seismograms... you've actually found

something, haven't you?'

At that moment the escritoire popped up a status fairy to tell him there was an incoming call from

Mantell. Sylveste held a hand up to Calvin while he debated whether or not to accept the call. The

person trying to reach him was Henry Janequin, a specialist in avian biology and one of Sylveste's

few outright allies. But while Janequin had known the real Calvin, Sylveste was fairly sure he had

never seen Calvin's beta-level... and most certainly not in the process of being solicited for advice

by his son. The admission that he needed Cal's help -- that he had even considered invoking the sim

for this purpose -- could be a crucial sign of weakness.

'What are you waiting for?' Cal said. 'Put him on.'

'He doesn't know about you... about us.'

Calvin shook his head, then -- shockingly -- Janequin appeared in the room. Sylveste fought to

maintain his composure, but it was obvious what had just happened. Calvin must have found a way

to send commands to the escritoire's private-level functions.

Calvin was and always had been a devious bastard, Sylveste thought. Ultimately that was why he

remained of use.

Janequin's full-body projection was slightly less sharp than Calvin's, for Janequin's image was

coming over the satellite network -- patchy at best -- from Mantell. And the cameras imaging him

had probably seen better days, Sylveste thought -- like much else on Resurgam.

'There you are,' Janequin said, noticing only Sylveste at first. 'I've been trying to reach you for the

last hour. Don't you have a way of being alerted to incoming calls when you're down in the pit?'

'I do,' Sylveste said. 'But I turned it off. It was too distracting.'

'Oh,' Janequin said, with only the tiniest hint of annoyance. 'Very shrewd indeed. Especially for a

man in your position. You realise what I'm talking about, of course. There's trouble afoot, Dan,

perhaps more than you...' Then Janequin must have noticed Cal for the first time. He studied the

figure in the chair for a moment before speaking. 'My word. It is you, isn't it?'

Cal nodded without saying a word.

'This is his beta-level simulation,' Sylveste said. It was important to clear that up before the

conversation proceeded any further; alphas and betas were fundamentally different things and

Stoner etiquette was very punctilious indeed about distinguishing between the two. Sylveste would

have been guilty of an extreme social gaffe had he allowed Janequin to think that this was the long-

lost alpha-level recording.

'I was consulting with him... with it,' Sylveste said.

Calvin pulled a face.

'About what?' Janequin said. He was an old man -- the oldest person on Resurgam, in fact -- and

with each passing year his appearance seemed to approach fractionally closer to some simian ideal.

His white hair, moustache and beard framed a small pink face in the manner of some rare

marmoset. On Yellowstone, there had been no more talented expert in genetics outside of the

Mixmasters, and there were some who rated Janequin a good deal cleverer than any in that sect, for

all that his genius was of the undemonstrative sort, accumulating not in any flash of brilliance, but

through years and years of quietly excellent work. He was well into his fourth century now, and

layer upon layer of longevity treatment was beginning to crumble visibly. Sylveste supposed that

before very long Janequin would be the first person on Resurgam to die of old age. The thought

filled him with sadness. Though there was much upon which Janequin and he disagreed, they had

always seen eye to eye on all the important things.

'He's found something,' Cal said.

Janequin's eyes brightened, years lifting off him in the joy of scientific discovery. 'Really?'

'Yes, I... ' Then something else odd happened. The room was gone now. The three of them were

standing on a balcony, high above what Sylveste instantly recognised as Chasm City. Calvin's doing

again. The escritoire had followed them like an obedient dog. If Cal could access its private-level

functions, Sylveste thought, he could also do this kind of trick, running one of the escritoire's

standard environments. It was a good simulation, too: down to the slap of wind against Sylveste's

cheek and the city's almost intangible smell, never easy to define but always obvious by its absence

in more cheaply done environments.

It was the city from his childhood: the high Belle Epoque. Awesome gold structures marched into

the distance like sculpted clouds, buzzing with aerial traffic. Below, tiered parks and gardens

stepped down in a series of dizzying vistas towards a verdant haze of greenery and light, kilometres

beneath their feet.

'Isn't it great to see the old place?' Cal said. 'And to think that it was almost ours for the taking; so

much within reach of our clan... who knows how we might have changed things, if we'd held the

city's reins?'

Janequin steadied himself on the railing. 'Very nice, but I didn't come to sight-see, Calvin. Dan,

what were you about to tell me before we were so...'

'Rudely interrupted?' Sylveste said. 'I was going to tell Cal to pull the gravitometer data from the

escritoire, as he obviously has the means to read my private files.'

'There's really nothing to it for a man in my position,' Cal said. There was a moment while he

accessed the smoky imagery of the buried thing, the obelisk hanging in front of them beyond the

railing, apparently life-size.

'Oh, very interesting,' Janequin said. 'Very interesting indeed!'

'Not bad,' Cal said.

'Not bad?' Sylveste said. 'It's bigger and better preserved than anything we've found to date by an

order of magnitude. It's clear evidence of a more advanced phase of Amarantin technology...

perhaps even a precursor phase to a full industrial revolution.'

'I suppose it could be quite a significant find,' Cal said, grudgingly. 'You -- um -- are planning to

unearth it, I assume?'

'Until a moment ago, yes.' Sylveste paused. 'But something's just come up. I've just been... I've

just found out for myself that Girardieau may be planning to move against me a lot sooner than I

had feared.'

'He can't touch you without a majority in the expeditionary council,' Cal said.

'No, he couldn't,' Janequin said. 'If that was how he was going to do it. But Dan's information is

right. It looks as if Girardieau may be planning on more direct action.'

'That would be tantamount to some kind of... coup, I suppose.'

'I think that would be the technical term,' Janequin said.

'Are you sure?' Then Calvin did the concentration thing again, dark lines etching his brow. 'Yes...

you could be right. A lot of media speculation in the last day concerning Girardieau's next move,

and the fact that Dan's off on some dig while the colony stumbles through a crisis of leadership...

and a definite increase in encrypted comms among Girardieau's known sympathisers. I can't break

those encryptions, of course, but I can certainly speculate on the reason for the increase in traffic.'

'Something's being planned, isn't it?' Sluka was right, he thought to himself. In which case she

had done him a favour, even as she had threatened to abandon the dig. Without her warning he

would never have invoked Cal.

'It does look that way,' Janequin said. 'That's why I was trying to reach you. My fears have only

been confirmed by what Cal says about Girardieau's sympathisers.' His grip tightened on the railing.

The cuff of his jacket -- hanging thinly over his skeletal frame -- was patterned with peacocks' eyes.

'I don't suppose there's any point my staying here, Dan. I've tried to keep my contact with you below

suspicious levels, but there's every reason to think this conversation is being tapped. I shouldn't

really say any more.' He turned away from the cityscape and the hanging obelisk, then addressed

the seated man. 'Calvin... it's been a pleasure to meet you again, after such a long time.'

'Look after yourself,' Cal said, elevating a hand in Janequin's direction. 'And good luck with the

peacocks.'

Janequin's surprise was evident. 'You know about my little project?'

Calvin smiled without answering; Janequin's question had been superfluous after all, Sylveste

thought.

The old man shook his hand -- the environment ran to full tactile interaction - - and then stepped

out of range of his imaging suite.

The two of them were left alone on the balcony.

'Well?' Cal asked.

'I can't afford to lose control of the colony.' Sylveste had still been in nominal command of the

entire Resurgam expedition, even after Alicia's defection. Technically, those who had chosen to

stay behind on the planet rather than return home with her should have been his allies, meaning that

his position should have been strengthened. But it had not worked like that. Not everyone who was

sympathetic to Alicia's side of the argument had managed to get aboard the *Lorean* before it left

orbit. And amongst those who had stayed behind, many previously sympathetic to Sylveste felt he

had handled the crisis badly, or even criminally. His enemies said that the things the Pattern

Jugglers had done to his head before he met the Shrouders were only now emerging into the light;

pathologies that bordered on madness. Research into the Amarantin had carried on, but with slowly

lessening momentum, while political differences and enmities widened beyond repair. Those with

residual loyalty to Alicia -- chief among them Girardieu -- had amalgamated into the

Inundationists. Sylveste's archaeologists had become steadily embittered, a siege-mentality setting

in. There had been deaths on both sides which were not easily explained as accidents. Now things

had reached a head, and Sylveste was in nowhere like the right place to resolve the crisis. 'But I

can't let go of that, either,' he said, indicating the obelisk. 'I need your advice, Cal. I'll get it because

you depend on me absolutely. You're fragile; remember that.'

Calvin stirred uneasily in the chair. 'So basically you're putting the squeeze on your old dad.

Charming.'

'No,' Sylveste said, through clenched teeth. 'What I'm saying is that you could fall into the wrong

hands unless you give me guidance. In mob terms you're just another member of our illustrious

clan.'

'Although you wouldn't necessarily agree, would you? By your reckoning I'm just a program, just

evocation. When are you going to let me take over your body again?'

'I wouldn't hold your breath.'

Calvin raised an admonishing finger. 'Don't get stroppy, son. It was you who invoked me, not the

other way around. Put me back in the lantern if you want. I'm happy enough.'

'I will. After you've advised me.'

Calvin leaned forward in the seat. 'Tell me what you did with my alpha-level simulation and I

might consider it.' He grinned, impishly. 'Hell, I might even tell you a few things about the Eighty

you don't know.'

'What happened,' Sylveste said, 'is seventy-nine innocent people died. There's no mystery to it.

But I don't hold you responsible. It would be like accusing a tyrant's photograph of war crimes.'

'I gave you sight, you ungrateful little sod.' The seat swivelled so that its high solid back was

facing Sylveste. 'I admit your eyes are hardly state of the art, but what could you expect?' The seat

spun round. Calvin was dressed like Sylveste now, his hair similarly styled and his face possessing

the same smooth cast. 'Tell me about the Shrouders,' he said. 'Tell me about your guilty secrets, son.

Tell me what really happened around Lascaille's Shroud, and not the pack of lies you've been

spinning since you got back.'

Sylveste moved to the escritoire, ready to flip out the cartridge. 'Wait,' Calvin said, holding up his

hands suddenly. 'You want my advice?'

'Finally, we're getting somewhere.'

'You can't let Girardieau win. If a coup's imminent, you need to be back in Cuvier. There you can

muster what little support you may have left.'

Sylveste looked through the crawler's window, towards the box grid. Shadows were crossing the

baulks -- workers deserting the dig, moving silently towards the sanctuary of the other crawler.

'This could be the most important find since we arrived.'

'And you may have to sacrifice it. If you keep Girardieau at bay, you'll at least have the luxury of

returning here and looking for it again. But if Girardieau wins, nothing you've found here will

matter a damn.'

'I know,' Sylveste said. For a moment there was no animosity between them. Calvin's reasoning

was flawless, and it would have been churlish to pretend otherwise.

'Then will you be following my advice?'

He moved his hand to the escritoire, ready to eject the cartridge. 'I'll think about it.'

TWO

Aboard a lighthugger, interstellar space, 2543

The trouble with the dead, Triumvir Ilia Volyova thought, was that they had no real idea when to

shut up.

She had just boarded the elevator from the bridge, weary after eighteen hours in consultation with

various simulations of once-living figures from the ship's distant past. She had been trying to catch

them out, hoping one or more of them would disclose some revealing fact about the origins of the

cache. It had been gruelling work, not least because some of the older beta-level personae could not

even speak modern Norte, and for some reason the software which ran them was unwilling to do

any translating. Volyova had been chain-smoking for the entire session, trying to get her head

around the grammatical peculiarities of middle Norte, and she was not about to stop filling her

lungs now. In fact, back stiff from the nervous tension of the exchanges, she needed it more than

ever. The elevator's air-conditioning was functioning imperfectly, so it took only a few seconds for

her to veil the interior with smoke.

Volyova hoisted the cuff of her fleece-lined leather jacket and spoke into the bracelet which

wrapped around her bony wrist. 'The Captain's level,' she said, addressing the *Nostalgia for Infinity*,

which would in turn assign a microscopic aspect of itself to the primitive task of controlling the

elevator. A moment later, the floor plunged away.

'Do you wish musical accompaniment for this transit?'

'No, and as I've had to remind you on approximately one thousand previous occasions, what I

wish is silence. Shut up and let me think.'

She rode the spinal trunk, the four-kilometre-long shaft which threaded the entire length of the

ship. She had boarded somewhere near the nominal top of the shaft (there were only 1050 levels

that she knew of) and was now descending at ten decks a second. The elevator was a glass-walled,

field-suspended box, and occasionally the lining of the trackless shaft turned transparent, allowing

her to judge her location without reference to the elevator's internal map. She was descending

through forests now: tiered gardens of planetary vegetation grown wild with neglect, and dying, for

the UV lamps which had once supplied the forest with sunlight were mostly broken now, and no

one could be bothered repairing them. Below the forests, she ghosted through the high eight

hundreds; vast realms of the ship which had once been at the disposal of the crew, when the crew

numbered thousands. Below 800 the elevator passed through the vast and now immobile armature

which spaced the ship's rotatable habitat and nonrotatable utility sections, and then dropped through

two hundred levels of cryogenic storage bays; sufficient capacity for one hundred thousand sleepers

-- had there been any.

Volyova was now more than a kilometre below her starting point, but the ship's ambient pressure

remained constant, life-support one of the rare systems which still functioned as intended.

Nonetheless some residual instinct told her that ears should be popping with the rush of descent.

'Atrium levels,' said the elevator, accessing a long-redundant record of the ship's prior layout. 'For

your enjoyment and recreation needs.'

'Very droll.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I mean, you'd need a pretty odd definition of recreation. Unless your idea of relaxation happened

to be suiting-up in full vacuum-rated armour and dosing on a bowel-

loosening regimen of anti-

radiation therapies. Which doesn't strike me as being particularly pleasurable.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Forget it,' Volyova said, sighing.

For another kilometre she passed through only sparsely pressurised districts. Volyova felt her

weight lessen and knew she was passing the engines -- braced beyond the hull on elegant, swept-

back spars. Gape-mouthed, they sucked in tiny amounts of interstellar hydrogen and subjected the

harvest to some frankly unimaginable physics. No one, not even Volyova, pretended to know how

the Conjoiner engines worked. What mattered was that they functioned. What also mattered was

that they gave off a steady warm glow of exotic particle radiation, and while most would have been

mopped up by the ship's hull shielding, some of it would get through. That was why the elevator

sped up momentarily as it dropped past the engines, and then slowed down to its normal descent

speed once it had passed out of danger.

Now she was two-thirds of the way down the ship. She knew this district better than any of the

other crew members: Sajaki, Hegazi and the others seldom came down this far unless they had

excellent reason. And who could blame them? The further down they went, the closer they got to

the Captain. She was the only one who was not terrified by the very idea of his proximity.

No; far from fearing this realm of the ship, she had made an empire of it. At level 612 she could

have disembarked, navigated to the spider-room and taken it outside the hull, where she could listen

to the ghosts which haunted the spaces between the stars. Tempting -- always so. But she had work

to do -- she was on a specific errand -- and the ghosts would still be there another time. At level

500, she passed the floor which contained the gunnery, and thought of all the problems which it

represented, and had to resist stopping to carry out a few new investigations. Then the gunnery was

gone and she was falling through the cache chamber -- one of several huge, non-pressurised

inclusions within the ship.

The chamber was enormous; the best part of half a kilometre from end to end, but it was dark

now and Volyova had to imagine for herself the forty things which it contained. That was never

hard. While there were many unanswered questions relating to the functions and origins of the

things, Volyova knew their shapes and relative positions perfectly, as if they

were the carefully

positioned furnishings of a blind person's bedroom. Even in the elevator she felt she could reach out

and stroke the alloy husk of the nearest of them, just to reassure herself that it was still there. She

had been learning what she could of the things for most of the time since she had joined the

Triumvirate, but she would not have claimed to have been at ease with any of them. She approached

them with the nervousness of a new lover, knowing that the knowledge she had gleaned to date was

entirely skin-deep, and that what lay below might shatter every illusion she had.

She was never entirely sorry to exit the cache.

At 450 she shot through another armature, spacing the utility section from the ship's tapering

conic tail, which extended below for another kilometre. Again a surge as the elevator rode through a

rad-zone, then the beginning of prolonged deceleration which would eventually bring it to a halt. It

was passing through the second set of cryogenic storage decks, two hundred and fifty levels capable

of holding one hundred and twenty thousand, though of course there was currently only one sleeper,

if one was so generously inclined as to describe the Captain's state as sleep. The elevator was

slowing now. Midway through the cryo levels it stopped, cordially announcing that it had reached

her destination.

'Passenger cryogenic sleep level concierge,' said the elevator. 'For your in-flight reefersleep

requirements. Thank you for using this service.'

The door opened and she stepped across the threshold, glancing down at the converging,

illuminated walls of the shaft framed by the gap. She had travelled almost the entire length of the

ship (or height -- it was difficult not to think of the ship as a tremendously tall building) and yet the

shaft seemed to drop down to infinite depths below. The ship was so large -- so stupidly large -- that

even its extremities beggared the mind.

'Yes, yes. Now kindly piss off.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Go away.'

Not that the elevator would, of course -- at least not for any real purpose other than placating her.

It had nothing else to do but wait for her. Being the sole person awake, Volyova was the only one

who had any cause to use the elevators at all.

It was a long hike from the spinal shaft to the place where they kept the

Captain. She could not

take the most direct route either, since whole sections of the ship were inaccessible, riddled with

viruses which were causing widespread malfunction. Some districts were flooded with coolant,

while others were infested with rogue janitor-rats. Others were patrolled by defence drogues which

had gone berserk and so were best avoided, unless Volyova felt in the mood for sport. Others were

filled with toxic gas, or vacuum, or too much high-rad, or were rumoured to be haunted.

Volyova did not believe in hauntings, (though of course she had her own ghosts, accessed via the

spider-room), but the rest she took very seriously indeed. Some parts of the ship she would not enter

unless armed. But she knew the Captain's surroundings well enough not to take excessive

precautions. It was cold, though, and she hiked up the collar of her jacket, tugged the bib of her cap

tighter down, its mesh fabric crunching against her scalp stubble. She lit another cigarette, hard

sucks perishing the vacuum in her head, replacing it with a frosty military alertness. Being alone

suited her. She looked forward to human company, but not with any great fervour. And certainly

not if that company also entailed dealing with the Nagorny situation. Perhaps

when they reached the

Yellowstone system she would consider locating a new Gunnery Officer.

Now, how had that worry escaped from her mental partitioning?

It was not Nagorny that concerned her now, but the Captain. And here he was, or at least the

outermost extent of what he had now become. Volyova composed herself. That composure was

necessary. What she had to examine always made her sick. It was worse for her than for the others;

her repulsion stronger. She was *brezgati*; squeamish.

The miracle was that the reefersleep unit which cased Brannigan was still functional. It was a

very old model, Volyova knew -- sturdily built. It was still striving to hold the cells of his body in

stasis, even though the shell of the reefer had ruptured in great Palaeolithic cracks, fibrous metallic

growth spilling out. The growth came from within the reefer, like a fungal invasion. Whatever

remained of Brannigan remained at its heart.

It was bitterly cold near the reefer, and Volyova soon found herself shivering. But there was work

to do. She fished a curette from her jacket and used it to burn off slivers of the growth for analysis.

Back in her lab she would attack them with various viral weapons, hoping to find one which had an

edge on the growth. She knew from experience that the routine was largely futile -- the growth had

a fantastic capacity for corrupting the molecular tools with which she probed it. Not that there was

any pressing hurry: the reefer kept Brannigan at only a few hundred millikelvin above absolute

zero, and that cold did appear to offer some hindrance to the spread: On the negative side, Volyova

knew that no human being had ever survived revival from such a cold, but that seemed oddly

irrelevant against the Captain's condition.

She spoke into her bracelet, voice hushed. 'Open my log file on the Captain and append this

entry.'

The bracelet chirped to indicate readiness.

'Third check on Captain Brannigan since my revival. Extent of spread of the...'

She hesitated, aware that an ill-judged phrase might anger Triumvir Hegazi; not that she

particularly cared. Dared she call it the Melding Plague, now that the Yellowstoners had given it a

name? Perhaps that would be unwise.

'... of the illness, seems unchanged since last entry. No more than a few millimetres of

encroachment. Cryogenic functions are still green, miraculously. But I think

we should resign

ourselves to the inevitability of the unit's failure at some point in the future...'
Thinking to herself,

that when it did fail, if they were not speedy in transferring the Captain to a
new reefer (exactly how

was an unanswered question), then he would certainly be one less problem
for them to worry about.

His own problems would be over as well -- she sincerely hoped.

She told the bracelet: 'Close log file.' And then added, wishing devoutly that
she had spared

herself one smoke for this moment: 'Warm Captain's brain core by fifty
millikelvins.'

Experience had told her that this was the minimum necessary temperature
increase. Short of it,

his brain would remain locked in glacial stasis. Above, the plague would
begin to transform him too

rapidly for her tastes.

'Captain?' she said. 'Can you hear me? It's Ilia.'

Sylveste stepped down from the crawler and walked back towards the grid.
During his meeting with

Calvin the wind had increased appreciably; he could feel it stinging his
cheeks, the scouring dust a

witch's caress.

'I hope that little conversation was beneficial,' Pascale said, snatching away
her mask to bellow

into the wind. She knew all about Calvin, even though she had never spoken to him directly. 'Have

you agreed to see sense now?'

'Get Sluka for me.'

Ordinarily she might have rejected an order like that; now she just accepted his mood and

returned to the other crawler, emerging shortly afterwards with Sluka and a handful of other

workers.

'You're ready to listen to us, I take it?' Sluka stood before him, the wind whipping a loose strand

of hair across her goggles. She took periodic inhalations from her mask, cupped in one hand, while

the other hand rested on her hip. 'If so, I think you'll find we can be reasonable. We all have your

reputation in mind. None of us will speak of this matter once we return to Mantell. We'll say you

gave the order to withdraw once the advisory came in. The credit will be yours.'

'And you think any of that matters in the long term?'

Sluka snarled: 'What's so damned important about one obelisk? For that matter, what's so damned

important about the Amarantin?'

'You never really saw the big picture, did you?'

Discreetly -- but not so discreetly that he missed her doing it -- Pascale had begun taping the

exchange, standing to one side with her compad's detachable camera in one hand. 'Some people

might say there never was one to see,' Sluka said. 'That you inflated the significance of the

Amarantin just to keep the archaeologists in business.'

'You'd say that, wouldn't you, Sluka? But then again, you were never exactly one of us to begin

with.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning that if Girardieau had wanted to plant a dissenter in our midst, you'd have made an

excellent candidate.'

Sluka turned back to what Sylveste was increasingly thinking of as her mob. 'Listen to the poor

bastard -- sinking into conspiracy theories already. Now we're getting a taste of what the rest of the

colony has seen for years.' Then her attention snapped back to him. 'There's no point talking to you.

We're leaving as soon as we have the equipment packed -- sooner, if the storm intensifies. You can

come with us.' She caught her breath from the mask, colour returning to her cheeks. 'Or you can

take your chances out here. The choice is entirely yours.'

He looked beyond her, to the mob. 'Go on, then. Leave. Don't allow anything as trivial as loyalty

to get in your way. Unless one of you has the guts to stay here and finish the job they came to do.'

He looked from face to face, meeting only awkwardly averted gazes. He barely knew any of their

names. He recognised them, but only from recent experience; certainly none of them had come on

the ship from Yellowstone; certainly none had known anything other than Resurgam, with its

handful of human settlements strewn like a few rubies across otherwise total desolation. To them he

must have seemed monstrously atavistic.

'Sir,' one of them said -- possibly the one who had first alerted him to the storm. 'Sir; it's not that

we don't respect you. But we have to think of ourselves as well. Can't you understand that?

Whatever's buried here, it isn't worth this risk.'

'That's where you're wrong,' Sylveste said. 'It's worth more risk than you can possibly imagine.

Don't you understand? The Event didn't happen to the Amarantin. They caused it. They made it

happen.'

Sluka shook her head slowly. 'They made their sun flare up? Is that what you actually believe?'

'In a word, yes,'

'Then you're a lot further gone than I feared.' Sluka turned her back to him to address her mob.

'Power up the crawlers. We're leaving now.'

'What about the equipment?' Sylveste said.

'It can stay here and rust for all I care.' The mob began to disperse towards the two hulking machines.

'Wait!' Sylveste shouted. 'Listen to me! You only need to take one crawler -- there's enough room

for all of you in one, if you leave the equipment behind.'

Sluka faced him again. 'And you?'

'I'll stay here -- finish the work myself, along with anyone else who wants to stay.'

She shook her head, snatching off her mask to spit on the ground in disgust. But when she left,

she caught up with the rest of her brigade and directed them towards the nearest crawler, leaving the

other -- the one containing his stateroom -- for him alone. Sluka's mob entered the machine, some of

them carrying small items of equipment or boxed artefacts and bones recovered from the dig:

scholarly instincts prevailing even in rebellion. He watched the crawler's ramps and hatches fold

shut, then the machine rose on its legs, shuffled around and moved away from the dig. In less than a

minute it had passed out of view completely, and the noise of its engines was no longer audible

above the roar of the wind.

He looked around to see who was still with him.

There was Pascale -- but that was almost inevitable; he suspected she would dog him to his grave

if there was a good story in it. A handful of students who had resisted Sluka; ashamedly he could

not place their names. Perhaps half a dozen more still down in the Wheeler grid, if he was lucky.

Composing himself, he snapped his fingers towards two of those who had stayed. 'Start

dismantling the imaging gravimeters; we won't need them again.' He addressed another pair.

'Begin at the back of the grid and start collecting all the tools left behind by Sluka's deserters,

together with field notes and any boxed artefacts. When you're done, you can meet me at the base of

the large pit.'

'What are you planning now?' Pascale said, turning off her camera and allowing it to whisk back

into her compad.

'I would have thought it was obvious,' Sylveste said. 'I'm going to see what it

says on that

obelisk.'

*

Chasm City, Yellowstone, Epsilon Eridani system, 2524

The suite console chimed as Ana Khouri was brushing her teeth. She came out of the bathroom,

foam on her lips.

'Morning, Case.'

The hermetic glided into the apartment, his travelling palanquin decorated in ornate scrollwork,

with a tiny, dark window in the front side. When the light was right she could just make out K. C.

Ng's deathly pale face bobbing behind an inch of green glass.

'Hey, you look great,' he said, voice rasping through the box's speaker grille.

'Where can I get

hold of whatever perks you up?'

'It's coffee, Case. Too much of the damned stuff.'

'I was joking,' Ng said. 'You look like shit warmed over.'

She drew her palm across her mouth, removing the foam. 'I've only just woken up, you bastard.'

'Excuses.' Ng managed to sound as if the act of waking up was an outmoded physical affectation

he had long since discarded, like owning an appendix. Which was entirely

possible: Khouri had

never got a good look at the man inside the box. Hermetics were one of the more peculiar post-

plague castes to emerge in the last few years. Reluctant to discard the implants which the plague

might have corrupted, and convinced that traces of it still lingered even in the relative cleanliness of

the Canopy, they never left their boxes unless the environment itself was hermetically sealed;

limiting their mobility to a few orbital carousels.

The voice rasped again, 'Pardon me, but we do have a kill scheduled for this morning, if I'm not

very much mistaken. You remember this fellow Taraschi we've been trying to take out for the last

two months? Ring any bells in there? It's rather crucial that you do, because you happen to be the

individual assigned to put him out of misery.'

'Off my back, Case.'

'Anatomically problematic even if I desired to locate myself thus, dear Khouri. But seriously, we

have a probable kill location pegged, and an estimated time of demise. Are you sharpness

personified?'

Khouri poured herself a final few sips of coffee and then left the rest of it on the stove for when

she got back. Coffee was her only vice, one acquired in her soldiering days on the Edge. The trick

was to reach a knife-edge of alertness, but not be so buzzing that she could not point the weapon

without shaking.

'I think I've reduced the amount of blood in my caffeine system to an acceptable level, if that's

what you mean.'

'Then let us discuss matters of a terminal nature, at least where Taraschi is concerned.'

Ng began to hit her with the final details for the kill. Most of it was already in the plan, or stuff

that she had guessed for herself, based on her experience of previous kills. Taraschi was to be her

fifth consecutive assassination, so she was beginning to grasp the wider scope of the game. Though

they were not always obvious, the game had its own rules, subtly reiterated in the grand movements

of each kill. The media attention was even picking up, her name being bandied around Shadowplay

circles with increasing frequency, and Case was apparently setting up some juicy, high-profile

targets for her next few hunts. She was, she felt, on the way to becoming one of the top hundred or

so assassins on the planet; elite company indeed.

'Right,' she said. 'Under the Monument, plaza level eight, west annex, one hour. Couldn't be

easier.'

'Aren't you forgetting one thing?'

'Right. Where's the kill weapon, Case?'

Ng's form nodded behind her. 'Where the tooth fairy left it, dear girl.'

And then he turned his box and retreated from the room, leaving only a faint whiff of lubricant.

Khouri, frowning, reached a hand slowly beneath the pillow on her bed. There was something, just

as Case had said. There had been nothing there when she went to sleep, but this sort of thing hardly

bothered her these days. The company always had moved in mysterious ways.

Soon, she was ready.

She called a cable-car from the roof, the kill weapon snuggling under her coat. The car detected

the weapon and the presence of implants in her head, and would have refused to carry her had she

not shown it her Omega Point ident, grafted beneath the nail of her right index finger, making a tiny

holographic target symbol seem to dance beneath the keratin. 'Monument to the Eighty,' Khouri

said.

Sylveste stepped off the ladder and walked across the stepped base of the pit until he reached the

pool of light around the obelisk's exposed tip. Sluka and one of the other archaeologists had

deserted him, but the one remaining worker -- assisted by the servitor -- had managed to uncover

nearly a metre of the object, peeling away the nested layers of the stone sarcophagi to reach the

massive block of obsidian, skilfully carved, on which Amarantin graphicforms had been engraved

in precise lines. Most of it was textual: rows of ideopicts. The archaeologists understood the basics

of Amarantin language, though there had been no Rosetta stone to aid them. The Amarantin were

the eighth dead alien culture discovered by humanity within fifty light years of Earth, but there was

no evidence that any of those eight species had come into contact with each other. Nor could the

Pattern Jugglers or the Shrouders offer assistance: neither had revealed anything remotely

resembling a written language. Sylveste, who had come into contact with both the Jugglers and the

Shrouders -- or at least the latter's technology -- appreciated that as well as anyone.

Instead, computers had cracked the Amarantin language. It had taken thirty years -- correlating

millions of artefacts -- but finally a consistent model had been evolved which could determine the

broad meaning of most inscriptions. It helped that, at least towards the end of their reign, there had

only been one Amarantin tongue, and that it had changed very slowly, so that the same model could

interpret inscriptions which had been made tens of thousands of years apart. Of course, nuances of

meaning were another thing entirely. That was where human intuition -- and theory -- came in.

Amarantin writing was not, however, like anything in human experience. All Amarantin texts

were stereoscopic -- consisting of interlaced lines which had to be merged in the reader's visual

cortex. Their ancestors had once been something like birds -- flying dinosaurs, but with the

intelligence of lemurs. At some point in their past their eyes had been situated on opposite sides of

their skulls, leading to a highly bicameral mind, each hemisphere synthesising its own mental model

of the world. Later, they had become hunters and evolved binocular vision, but their mental wiring

still owed something to that earlier phase of development. Most Amarantin artefacts mirrored their

mental duality, with a pronounced symmetry about the vertical axis.

The obelisk was no exception.

Sylveste had no need for the special goggles his co-workers needed to read Amarantin

graphicforms: the stereoscopic merging was easily accommodated within his own eyes, employing

one of Calvin's more useful algorithms. But the act of reading was still tortuous, requiring strenuous

concentration.

'Give me some light here,' he said, and the student unclipped one of the portable floods and held

it by hand over the side of the obelisk. From somewhere above lightning strobed: electricity

coursing between dust planes in the storm.

'Can you read it, sir?'

'I'm trying,' Sylveste said. 'It isn't the easiest thing in the world, you know. Especially if you don't

keep that light steady.'

'Sorry sir. Doing my best. But it is getting windy here.'

He was right: vortices were forming, even in the pit. It would soon get very much windier, and

then the dust would begin to thicken, until it formed sheets of grey opacity in the air. They would

not be able to work for very long in those conditions.

'I apologise,' Sylveste said. 'I appreciate your help.' Feeling that something more was called for,

he added: 'And I'm grateful that you chose to stay with me, rather than Sluka.'

'It wasn't difficult, sir. Not all of us are ready to dismiss your ideas.'

Sylveste looked up from the obelisk. 'All of them?'

'We at least accept they should be investigated. After all, it's in the colony's best interests to

understand what happened.'

'The Event, you mean?'

The student nodded. 'If it really was something the Amarantin caused to happen... and if it really

did coincide with them achieving spaceflight -- then it might be of more than academic interest.'

'I despise that phrase. Academic interest -- as if any other kind were automatically more worthy.'

But you're right. We have to know.'

Pascale came closer. 'Know what, exactly?'

'What it was they did that made their sun kill them.' Sylveste turned to face her, pinning her down

with the oversized silvery facets of his artificial eyes. 'So that we don't end up making the same

mistake.'

'You mean it was an accident?'

'I very much doubt that they did it deliberately, Pascale.'

'I realise that.' He had condescended to her, and she hated that, he knew. He

also hated himself

for doing it. 'I also know that stone-age aliens just don't have the means to influence the behaviour

of their star, accidentally or otherwise.'

'We know they were more advanced than that,' Sylveste said. 'We know they had the wheel and

gunpowder; a rudimentary science of optics and an interest in astronomy for agrarian purposes.

Humanity went from that level to spaceflight in no more than five centuries. It would be prejudiced

to assume another species was not capable of the same, wouldn't it?'

'But where's the evidence?' Pascale stood to shake rivulets of settled dust from her greatcoat. 'Oh,

I know what you're going to say -- none of the high-tech artefacts survived, because they were

intrinsically less durable than earlier ones. But even if there was evidence -- how does that change

things? Even the Conjoiners don't go around tinkering with stars, and they're a lot more advanced

than the rest of humanity, us included.'

'I know. That's precisely what bothers me.'

'Then what does the writing say?'

Sylveste sighed and looked back at it again. He had hoped that the distraction would allow his

subconscious to work at the piece, and that now the meaning of the inscription would snap into

clarity, like the answer to one of the psychological problems they had been posed before the

Shrouder mission. But the moment of revelation stubbornly refused to come; the graphic forms were

still not yielding meaning. Or perhaps, he thought, it was his expectations that were at fault. He had

been hoping for something momentous; something that would confirm his ideas, terrifying as they

were.

But instead, the writing seemed only to commemorate something that had happened here --

something that might have been of great importance in Amarantin history, but which -- set against

his expectations -- was bound to be parochial in the extreme. It would take a full computer analysis

to be sure, and he had only been able to read the top metre or so of the text -- but already he could

feel the crush of disappointment. Whatever this obelisk represented, it was no longer of interest to

him.

'Something happened here,' Sylveste said. 'Maybe a battle, or the appearance of a god. That's all it

is -- a marker stone. We'll know more when we unearth it and date the context layer. We can run a

TE measurement on the artefact itself, too.'

'It's not what you were looking for, is it?'

'I thought it might be, for a while.' Then Sylveste looked down, towards the lowest exposed part

of the obelisk. The text ended a few inches above the highest layer of cladding, and something else

began, extending downwards out of sight. It was a diagram, of some sort -- he could see the topmost

arcs of several concentric circles, and that was all. What was it?

Sylveste could not -- would not -- begin to guess. The storm was growing stronger. No stars at all

were visible now, only a single occluding sheet of dust, roaring overhead like a great bat's wing. It

would be a kind of hell when they left the pit.

'Give me something to dig with,' he said. And then started scraping away at the permafrost

around the topmost layer of the sarcophagus, like a prisoner who had until dawn to tunnel from his

cell. Only a few moments passed before Pascale and the student joined him in the work, while the

storm howled above.

'I don't remember much,' the Captain said. 'Are we still around Bloater?'

'No,' Volyova said, trying not to make it seem as if she had already explained this to him a dozen

times, each time she had warmed his mind. 'We left Kruger 60A some years ago, once Hegazi

negotiated us the shield ice we needed.'

'Oh. Then where are we?'

'Heading towards Yellowstone.'

'Why?' The Captain's basso voice rumbled out of speakers arranged some distance from his

corpse. Complex algorithms scanned his brain patterns and translated the results into speech,

fleshing out the responses when required. He had no real right to be conscious at all, really -- all

neural activity should have ended when his core temperature had dropped below freezing. But his

brain was webbed by tiny machines, and in a way it was the machines which were thinking now,

even though they were doing so at less than half a kelvin above absolute zero.

'That's a good question,' she said. Something was bothering her now and it was more than just

this conversation. 'The reason we're going to Yellowstone is...'

'Yes?'

'Sajaki thinks there's a man there who can help you.'

The Captain pondered this. On her bracelet she had a map of his brain: she could see colours

squirming across it like armies merging on a battlefield. 'That man must be

Calvin Sylveste,' the

Captain said.

'Calvin Sylveste is dead.'

'The other one, then. Dan Sylveste. Is that the man Sajaki seeks?'

'I can't imagine it's anyone else.'

'He won't come willingly. He didn't last time.' There was a moment of silence; quantum

temperature fluctuations pushing the Captain back below consciousness.

'Sajaki must be aware of

that,' he said, returning.

'I'm sure Sajaki has considered all the possibilities,' Volyova said, in a manner which made it

clear she was sure of anything *but* that. But she would be careful of speaking against the other

Triumvir. Sajaki had always been the Captain's closest adjutant -- the two of them went back a long

way; times long before Volyova had joined the crew. To the best of her knowledge, no one else --

including Sajaki -- ever spoke to the Captain, or even knew that there was a way to do so. But there

was no point taking stupid risks -- even given the Captain's erratic memory.

'Something's troubling you, Ilia. You've always been able to confide in me. Is it Sylveste?'

'It's more local than that.'

'Something aboard the ship, then?'

It was not something to which she was ever going to become totally accustomed, Volyova knew,

but in recent weeks visiting the Captain had begun to take on definite tones of normality. As if

visiting a cryogenically cooled corpse infected with a retarded but potentially all-consuming plague

was merely one of life's unpleasant but necessary elements; something that, now and again,

everyone had to do. Now, though, she was taking their relationship a step further -- about to ignore

the same risk which had stopped her expressing her misgivings about Sajaki.

'It's about the gunnery,' she said. 'You remember that, don't you? The room from which the

cache-weapons can be controlled?'

'I think so, yes. What about it?'

'I've been training a recruit to become Gunnery Officer; to assume the gunnery seat and interface

with the cache-weapons through neural implants.'

'Who was this recruit?'

'Someone called Boris Nagorny. No; you never met him -- he came aboard only recently, and I

tended to keep him away from the others when I could help it. I would never have brought him

down here, for obvious reasons.' Namely that the Captain's contagion might have reached Nagorny's

implants if she had allowed the two of them to get too close. Volyova sighed. She was getting to the

crux of her confession now. 'Nagorny was always slightly unstable, Captain. In many ways, a

borderline psychopath was more useful to me than someone wholly sane -- at least, I thought so at

the time. But I underestimated the degree of Nagorny's psychosis.'

'He got worse?'

'It started not long after I put the implants in and allowed him to tap into the gunnery. He began

to complain of nightmares. Very bad ones.'

'How unfortunate for the poor fellow.'

Volyova understood. What the Captain had undergone -- what the Captain was still in the process

of undergoing -- would make most people's nightmares seem very tame phantasms indeed. Whether

or not he experienced pain was a debatable point, but what was pain anyway, compared to the

knowledge that one was being eaten alive -- and transformed at the same time -- by something

inexpressibly alien?

'I can't guess what those nightmares were really like,' Volyova said. 'All I know is that for

Nagorny -- a man who already had enough horrors loose in his head for most of us -- they were too

much.'

'So what did you do?'

'I changed everything -- the whole gunnery interface system, even the implants in his head. None

of it worked. The nightmares continued.'

'You're certain they had something to do with the gunnery?'

'I wanted to deny it at first, but there was a clear correlation with the sessions when I had him in

the seat.' She lit herself another cigarette, the orange tip the only remotely warm thing anywhere

near the Captain. Finding a fresh packet of cigarettes had been one of the few joyful moments of

recent weeks. 'So I changed the system again, and still it didn't work. If anything, he just got worse.'

She paused. 'That was when I told Sajaki of my problems.'

'And Sajaki's response was?'

'That I should discontinue the experiments, at least until we'd arrived around Yellowstone. Let

Nagorny spend a few years in reefersleep, and see if that cured his psychosis. I was welcome to

continue tinkering with the gunnery, but I wasn't to put Nagorny in the seat again.'

'Sounds like very reasonable advice to me. Which of course you disregarded.'

She nodded, paradoxically relieved that the Captain had guessed her crime, without her having to

spell it out.

'I woke a year ahead of the others,' Volyova said. 'To give me time to oversee the system and

keep an eye on how you were doing. That was what I did for a few months, too. Until I decided to

wake Nagorny as well.'

'More experiments?'

'Yes. Until a day ago.' She sucked hard on the cigarette.

'This is like drawing teeth, Ilia. What happened yesterday?'

'Nagorny disappeared.' There; she'd said it now. 'He had a particularly bad episode and tried to

attack me. I defended myself, but he escaped. He's elsewhere in the ship. I have no idea where.'

The Captain pondered this for long moments. She could tell what he must be thinking. It was a

big ship and there were whole regions of it through which nothing could be tracked, where sensors

had stopped working. It would be even harder trying to find someone who was actively hiding.

'You're going to have to find him,' the Captain said. 'You can't have him still at large when Sajaki

and the others awaken.'

'And then what?'

'You'll probably have to kill him. Do it cleanly, and you can put his body back in the reefersleep

unit and then arrange for the unit to fail.'

'Make it look like an accident, you mean?'

'Yes.' There was, as usual, absolutely no expression on the part of the Captain's face she could see

through the casket window. He was no more capable of altering his expression than a statue.

It was a good solution -- one that, in her preoccupation with the nature of the problem, she had

failed to devise herself. Until then, she had feared any confrontation with Nagorny because it might

put her in the position of having to kill him. Such an outcome had seemed unacceptable -- but as

always, no outcome was unacceptable if you looked at it the right way.

'Thank you, Captain,' Volyova said. 'You've been very helpful. Now -- with your permission --

I'm going to cool you again.'

'You'll be back again, won't you? I do so enjoy our little conversations, Ilia.'

'I wouldn't miss them for the world,' she said, and then told her bracelet to drop his brain

temperature by fifty millikelvin; all it would take to send him to dreamless,

thoughtless oblivion. Or

so she hoped.

Volyova finished her cigarette in silence and then looked away from the Captain, along the dark

curve of the corridor. Somewhere out there -- somewhere else in the ship -- Nagorny was waiting,

bearing her what she knew to be the deepest of grudges. He was ill himself now; sick in the head.

Like a dog that had to be put down.

'I think I know what it is,' Sylveste said, when the last obstructing block of stone had been removed

from the obelisk's cladding, revealing the upper two metres of the object.

'Well?'

'It's a map of the Pavonis system.'

'Something tells me you'd already guessed that,' Pascale said, squinting through her goggles at the

complex motif, which resembled two slightly offset groups of concentric circles. Stereoscopically

merged, they fell into one group which seemed to hang some distance above the obsidian. And they

were planetary orbits; no doubt of that. The sun Delta Pavonis lay at the centre, marked with the

appropriate Amarantin glyph -- a very human-looking five-pointed star. Then came correctly sized

orbits for all the major bodies in the system, with Resurgam marked with the Amarantin symbol for

world. Any doubts that this was just a coincidental arrangement of circles was banished by the

carefully marked moons of the major planets.

'I had my suspicions,' Sylveste said. He was fatigued, but the night's work -- and the risk -- had

surely been worthwhile. It had taken them much longer to unearth the second metre of the obelisk

than the first, and at times the storm had seemed like a squadron of banshees, only ever a moment

away from inflicting shrieking death. But -- as had happened before, and would certainly happen

again -- the storm had never quite reached the fury that Cuvier had predicted. Now the worst of it

was done, and though streaks of dust were still rippling in the sky like dark banners, pink dawnlight

was beginning to chase away the night. It seemed they had survived after all.

'But it doesn't change anything,' Pascale said. 'We always knew they had astronomy; this just

shows that at some point they discovered the heliocentric universe.'

'It means more than that,' Sylveste said, carefully. 'Not all of these planets are visible to the naked

eye, even allowing for Amarantin physiology.'

'So they used telescopes.'

'Not long ago you described them as stone-age aliens. Now you're ready to accept that they knew

how to make telescopes?'

He thought she might have smiled, but it was hard to tell when she wore the breather mask.

Instead, she looked skywards. Something had crossed between the baulks; a bright deltoid moving

under the dust.

'I think someone's here,' she said.

They climbed the ladder quickly, out of breath when they reached the top. Though the wind had

lessened from its peak of several hours earlier, it was still an ordeal to move around topside. The dig

was in disarray, with floods and gravimeters toppled and broken, equipment strewn around.

The aircraft was hovering above them, veering to and fro as it scouted landing sites. Sylveste

recognised it immediately as one of Cuvier's; Mantell had nothing as large. Aircraft were in short

supply on Resurgam: the only means of crossing distances more than a few hundred kilometres. All

the aircraft in existence now had been manufactured during the early days of the colony by servitors

working from local raw materials. But the constructional servitors had been destroyed or stolen

during the mutiny, and consequently the artefacts they had left behind were of incalculable value to

the colony. The aircraft regenerated themselves if they were involved in minor accidents, and never

needed maintenance -- but they could still be ruined by sabotage or recklessness. Over the years the

colony had steadily depleted its supply of flying machines.

The deltoid hurt his eyes. The underside of the plane's wing was sewn with thousands of heat

elements which glowed white-hot, generating lift thermally. The contrast was too much for Calvin's

algorithms.

'Who are they?' one of his students asked.

'I wish I knew,' Sylveste said. But the fact that this plane had originated in Cuvier entirely failed

to cheer him. He watched it lower, casting actinic shadows across the ground before the heat

elements slid down the spectrum and the plane settled onto skids. After a moment a ramp folded out

and a cluster of figures trooped from the plane. His eyes snapped to infrared - he could see the

figures clearly now, even as they moved away from the plane towards him. Clad in dark clothes,

they wore breather masks, helmets and what looked like strap-on armour, flashed with the

Administration insignia: the closest the colony came to a fully-fledged militia. And they were

carrying things -- long, evil-looking rifles held in double-grips, with a torch slung under each barrel.

'This doesn't look good,' Pascale said, accurately.

The squad halted a few metres from them. 'Doctor Sylveste?' called a voice, attenuated by the

wind, which was still considerable. 'I've got some bad news, I'm afraid, sir.'

He had been expecting nothing else. 'What is it?'

'The other crawler, sir -- the one that left earlier tonight?'

'What about it?'

'They never made it back to Mantell, sir. We found them. There'd been a landslide -- dust had

built up on the ridge. They didn't have a chance, sir.'

'Sluka?'

'They're all dead, sir.' The Administration man's heavy breather mask made him look like an

elephantine god. 'I'm sorry. It's lucky not all of you tried to get back at the same time.'

'It's more than luck,' Sylveste said.

'Sir? There's one other thing.' The guard tightened his grip on his rifle, emphasising its presence

rather than aiming it. 'You're under arrest, sir.'

K. C. Ng's rasp of a voice filled the cable-car's cockpit like a trapped wasp.
'You developing a taste

for it yet? Our fair city, I mean.'

'What would you know?' Khouri said. 'I mean, when was the last time you set
foot outside of that

damned box, Case? It can't have been in living memory.'

He was not with her, of course -- there was nowhere near enough room for a
palanquin aboard

her cable-car. The car was necessarily small; nothing that would attract
attention so close to the

conclusion of a hunt. Parked on the roof, the vehicle had looked like a tailless
helicopter which had

partially furled its rotors. But rather than blades, the cable-car's arms were
slender telescopic

appendages, each terminating in a hook as viciously curved as a sloth's
foreclaw.

Khouri had entered the car, and the door had slumped shut, barriering the rain
and the low

background noise of the city. She had stated her destination, which was the
Monument to the

Eighty, down in the deep Mulch. The car had paused momentarily,
undoubtedly calculating the

optimum route based on current traffic conditions and the generally shifting
topology of the

cableways which would carry it there. The process took a moment because
the car's computer brain

was not especially smart.

Then Khouri had felt the car's centre of gravity shift slightly. Through the upper window of the

gullwing door, she had seen one of the car's three arms extend to more than twice its previous

length, until the clawed end was able to grasp one of the cables which overran the top of the

building. Now one of the other arms found a similar grasping point on an adjacent cable, and with a

sudden heave they were, in a manner, airborne. For a moment the car slid down the two cables to

which it had attached itself, but after a few seconds the latter of the two cables had diverged too far

for the car to reach. Smoothly, it released its grasp, but before it could fall the car's third arm

swooped out and grabbed another handy cable which happened to cross their approximate path.

And then they slid for another second or so, and then fell again, and then rose again, and Khouri

began to recognise a too-familiar feeling in her gut. What failed to assist matters was that the car's

pendulous progress felt arbitrary, as if it was just making up its trajectory as it proceeded, luckily

finding cables when it needed them. To compensate, Khouri ran through breathing exercises,

restlessly tightening each finger of her black leather gloves in sequence.

'I admit,' Case said, 'that I haven't exposed myself to the city's native fragrances for some time

now. But you shouldn't knock it. The air isn't quite as filthy as it seems. The purifiers were one of

the few things still running after the plague.'

Now that the cable-car had lofted itself past the huddle of buildings which defined her

neighbourhood, a much greater expanse of Chasm City was coming slowly into view. It was strange

to think that this twisted forest of malformed structures had once been the most prosperous city in

human history; the place from which -- for nearly two centuries -- a welter of artistic and scientific

innovations had sprung. Now even the locals were admitting that the place had seen better days.

With little in the way of irony they were calling it the City That Never Wakes Up, because so many

thousands of its one-time rich were now frozen in cryocrypts, skipping centuries in the hope that

this period was only an aberration in the city's fortunes.

Chasm City's border was the natural crater which hemmed the city, sixty kilometres from edge to

edge. Within the crater the city was ring-shaped, encircling the central maw of the chasm itself. The

city sheltered under eighteen domes which spanned the crater wall and reached inwards to the

chasm's rim. Linked at their edges, supported here and there by reinforcing towers, the domes

resembled sagging drapery covering the furniture of the recently deceased. In local parlance it was

the Mosquito Net, though there were at least a dozen other names, in as many languages. The

domes were vital to the city's existence. Yellowstone's atmosphere -- a cold, chaotic mix of nitrogen

and methane, spiced with long-chain hydrocarbons -- would have been instantly deadly. Fortunately

the crater sheltered the city from the worst of the winds and liquid methane flash-floods, and the

broth of hot gases belching from the chasm itself could be cracked for breathable air with relatively

cheap and rugged atmospheric processing technology. There were a few other settlements

elsewhere on Yellowstone, much smaller than Chasm City, and they all had to go to much more

trouble to keep their biospheres running.

Sometimes, in her early days on Yellowstone, Khouri had asked a few of the locals why anyone

had ever bothered settling the planet in the first place if it was so inhospitable. Sky's Edge might

have its wars, but at least you could live there without domes and atmosphere-cracking systems.

She had quickly learned not to expect anything resembling a consistent

answer, if the question itself

was not deemed an outsider's impudence. Evidently, though, this much was clear: the chasm had

drawn the first explorers and around them had accreted a permanent outpost, and then something

like a frontier town. Lunatics, chancers and wild-eyed visionaries had come, driven by vague

rumours of riches deep within the chasm. Some had gone home disillusioned. Some had died in the

chasm's hot, toxic depths. But a few had elected to stay because something about the nascent city's

perilous location actually appealed to them. Fast forward two hundred years and that huddle of

structures had become... this.

The city stretched away infinitely in all directions, it seemed, a dense wood of gnarled interlaced

buildings gradually lost in murk. The very oldest structures were still more or less intact: boxlike

buildings which had retained their shapes during the plague because they had never contained any

systems of self-repair or redesign. The modern structures, by contrast, now resembled odd, up-

ended pieces of driftwood or wizened old trees in the last stages of rot. Once those skyscrapers had

looked linear and symmetrical, until the plague made them grow madly, sprouting bulbous

protrusions and tangled, leprous appendages. The buildings were all dead now, frozen into the

shapes which seemed calculated to induce disquiet. Slums adhered to their sides, lower levels lost in

a scaffolded maze of shanty towns and ramshackle bazaars, aglow with naked fires. Tiny figures

were moving in the slums, walking or rickshawing to business along haphazard roadways laid down

over old ruins. There were very few powered vehicles, and most of the contraptions Khouri saw

looked like they were steam-driven.

The slums never reached more than ten levels up the sides of the buildings before collapsing

under their own weight, so for two or three hundred further metres the buildings rose smoothly,

relatively unscathed by plague transformations. There was no evidence of occupation in these mid-

city levels. It was only near the very tops that human presence again re-asserted itself: tiered

structures perched like cranes' nests among the branches of the malformed buildings. These new

additions were aglow with conspicuous wealth and power; bright apartment windows and neon

advertisements. Searchlights swept down from the eaves, sometimes picking out the tiny forms of

other cable-cars, navigating between districts. The cable-cars picked their

way through a network of

fine branches, lacing the buildings like synaptic threads. The locals had a name for this high-level

city-within-a-city: the Canopy.

It was never quite daytime, Khouri had noticed. She could never feel fully awake in this place,

not while the city seemed caught in an eternal twilight gloom.

'Case, when are they going to get around to scraping the muck off the Mosquito Net?'

Ng chuckled, a sound like gravel being stirred around in a bucket. 'Never, probably. Unless

someone figures a way of making some money out of it.'

'Now who's bad-mouthing the city?'

'We can afford to. When we finish our business we can hightail it back to the carousels with all

the other beautiful people.'

'In their boxes. Sorry, Case, count me out of that particular party. The excitement might kill me.'

She could see the chasm now, since the car was skirting close to the sloping inner rim of the

toroidal dome. The chasm was a deep gully in the bedrock, weathered sides curving lazily over

from horizontal before plunging vertically down, veined by pipes which reached down into belching

vapour, towards the atmospheric cracking station which supplied air and heat to the city. 'Talking of

which... being killed, I mean -- what's the deal with the weapon?'

'Think you can handle it?'

'You pay me to, I'll handle it. But I'd like to know what I'm dealing with.'

'If you have a problem with that you'd better talk to Taraschi.'

'He specified this thing?'

'In excruciating detail.'

The car was over the Monument to the Eighty now. Khouri had never seen it from this precise

angle. In truth, without the grandeur that it attained from street level, it looked weatherworn and

sad. It was a tetrahedral pyramid, slatted so that it resembled a stepped temple, its lower levels

barnacled in slums and reinforcements. Near the apex the marble cladding gave way to stained-

glass windows, but portions of glass were shattered or sheeted-over in metal; damage one never saw

from the street. This was to be the venue for the kill, apparently. It was unusual to know that in

advance, unless it was another thing that Taraschi had actually had written into his contract.

Contracting to be hunted by a Shadowplay assassin was only usually done if the client thought that

they stood a good chance of evading the pursuer over the period determined by the contract. It was

the way the virtually immortal rich kept ennui at bay, forcing their behaviour patterns out of

predictable ruts -- and ending up with something to brag about when they outlived the contract, as

the majority did.

Khourī could date her involvement in Shadowplay very precisely; it was the day she was revived

in Yellowstone orbit in a carousel run by an order of Ice Mendicants. Although there had been no

Ice Mendicants around Sky's Edge, she had heard stories of them and knew something of their

function. They were a voluntary religious organisation who dedicated themselves to assisting those

who had suffered some form of trauma while crossing interstellar space, such as the revival amnesia

which was a common side-effect of reefersleep.

That in itself was very bad news. Perhaps her amnesia was so bad that it had erased years of her

previous life, but Khourī had no recollection even of embarking on an interstellar journey. Her last

memories were quite specific, in fact. She had been in a medical tent on the surface of Sky's Edge,

lying in a bed next to her husband Fazil. They had both been wounded in a firefight; injuries which

-- while not actually life-threatening -- could best be treated in one of the orbital hospitals. An

orderly had come around and prepped them both for a short immersion in reefersleep. They would

be cooled, carried to orbit in a shuttle, then stacked up in a cryogenic holding facility until surgical

slots were available in the hospital. The process might take months, but -- as the orderly smilingly

assured them -- there was every chance that the war would still be going on when they were again

fit for duty. Khouri and Fazil had trusted the orderly. They were both professional soldiers, after all.

Later, she was revived. But instead of coming around in the recuperation ward in the orbital

hospital, Khouri was confronted by Ice Mendicants with Yellowstone accents. No, they explained,

she was not amnesiac. Nor had she suffered any kind of injury in the reefersleep process. It was

considerably worse than that.

There had been what the lead Mendicant chose to call a clerical error. It had happened around

Sky's Edge, after the cryogenic holding facility was hit by a missile. Khouri and Fazil had been

among the lucky few not to have been killed by the missile, but the attack had still wiped all the

data records in the facility. The locals had done their best to identify the

frozen, but inevitably they

had made mistakes. In Khouri's case they had confused her with a Demarchist observer who had

come to Sky's Edge to study the war and who had been ready to return home to Yellowstone when

she was caught in the same missile attack. Khouri had been fast-tracked for surgery and then placed

aboard a starship scheduled for immediate departure. They had, unfortunately, not made the same

mistake in Fazil's case. While Khouri was asleep, winging her way across the light-years to Epsilon

Eridani, Fazil was growing older, one year for every year that she flew. Of course, said the

Mendicants, the error was discovered quickly -- but by then it was much too late. There were no

other ships due to follow that route for decades. And even if Khouri had immediately returned to

Sky's Edge (which was again impossible given the stated destinations of all the ships now parked

around Yellowstone), the best part of forty years would have passed before she met Fazil again.

And during most of that time Fazil could have no knowledge that she was coming home; nothing to

prevent him picking up the pieces of his life, remarrying, having children and perhaps even

grandchildren before she returned, a ghost from a part of his life he might

have nearly consigned to

oblivion by then. Assuming, of course, that he had not died as soon as he returned to combat.

Until that moment when the Ice Mendicant explained the situation to her, Khouri had never really

given much thought to the slowness of light. There was nothing in the universe that moved faster...

but, as she now saw, it was glacial compared to the speed that would be needed to keep their love

alive. In one instant of cruel clarity, she understood that it was nothing less than the underlying

structure of the universe, its physical laws, which had conspired to bring her to this moment of

horror and loss. It would have been so much easier, infinitely easier, if she had known he was dead.

Instead, there was this terrible gulf of separation, as much in time as in space. Her anger had

become something sharp inside her, something that needed release if it was not going to kill her

from within.

Later that day, when the man came to offer her a job as a contract assassin, she found it

surprisingly easy to accept.

The man's name was Tanner Mirabel; like her he was an ex-soldier from the Edge. He was a kind

of talent scout for potential new assassins. His network taps had flagged her soldiering skills as

soon as she was defrosted. Mirabel gave her a business contact: a Mr Ng, a prominent hermetic. An

interview with Ng swiftly followed, then a spread of psychometric tests. Assassins, it turned out,

had to be among the sanest, most analytic people on the planet. They had to know exactly when a

kill would be legal -- and when it would cross the sometimes blurred line into murder and send a

company's stocks crashing into the Mulch.

She passed all these tests with ease.

There were other kinds of tests, too. The contractees sometimes specified arcane modes of

execution for themselves, while secretly assuring themselves that it would never actually come to

that, because they imagined themselves clever and resourceful enough to outrun the assassin, even

over weeks or months. But Khouri had to learn an easy familiarity with all manner of weapons, and

that turned out to be a talent she had never even suspected in herself.

But she had never seen anything quite like the weapon which the tooth fairy had left.

It had only taken her a minute or so to figure out how the gun's precision parts fitted together.

Assembled, it had the form of a sniper's rifle with a ridiculously fat perforated barrel. The clip

contained a number of dartlike slugs: black swordfishes. Near the snout of each slug was a tiny

biohazard symbol. It was that holographic death's head which had set her wondering. She had never

used toxins against a target before.

And what was this business with the Monument?

'Case,' Khouri said. 'There's one more thing...'

But then the car thumped down on the street, rickshaw drivers peddling furiously to avoid its

descent. The toll burst onto her retina. She swiped her little finger through the credit slot, debiting a

secure Canopy account which had no traceable links to Omega Point. That was vital, for any well-

connected target could have easily traced the movements of their assassin via the ripples they left in

the planet's ragged financial systems. Screens and blinds had to be maintained.

Khouri pushed back the gullwing and hopped out. It was, as ever down here, softly raining.

Interior rain, they called it. The smell of the Mulch assailed her instantly, a melange of sewage and

sweat, cooking spices, ozone and smoke. The noise was just as inescapable. The constant trundling

of rickshaws and the ringing of their bells and horns created a steady clamorous background, spiced

with the cries of vendors and caged animals, bursts of song from singers and holograms voicing

languages as diverse as Modern Norte and Canasian.

She pulled on a wide-brimmed fedora and closed the raised collar of her kneelength coat. The

cable-car rose, grasping high for a dangling cable. It was soon lost among the other specks swinging

through the brown depths of the roofed sky.

'Well, Case,' she said. 'It's your show now.'

His voice came through her skull now. 'Trust me. I have a very good feeling about this one.'

The Captain's advice had been excellent, Ilia Volyova thought. Killing Nagorny really had been her

only viable option. And Nagorny had made the task that much easier by trying to kill her first,

neatly obviating any moral considerations.

All that had happened some months of shiptime ago, and she had delayed attending to the job that

now confronted her. But very shortly the ship would arrive around Yellowstone, and the others

would emerge from reefersleep. When that happened, her options would be severely limited by the

need to maintain the lie that Nagorny had died while sleeping, via some

plausible malfunction of his

reefersleep casket.

Now she had to steel herself to act. She sat silently in her lab and willed the strength to do what

had to be done. Volyova's quarters were not large, by the standards of the *Nostalgia for Infinity*: she

could have allocated herself a mansion of rooms, had she wished. But what would have been the

point? Her waking hours were consumed with weapon systems, and little else. When she slept, she

dreamed of weapon systems. She allowed herself what few luxuries she had time to use -- enjoy

was too strong a term -- and she had sufficient space for her needs. She had a bed and some

furniture, utilitarian in design, even though the ship could have outfitted her with any style

imaginable. She had a small annex which contained a laboratory, and it was only here that much in

the way of attention to detail had been lavished. In the lab, she worked on putative cures for the

Captain; modes of attack too speculative to share with the other crew, for fear of raising their hopes.

It was here, also, that she had kept Nagorny's head since killing him.

It was frozen, of course; entombed within a space helmet of old design which had gone into

emergency cryopreservation mode the instant it detected that its occupant was no longer living.

Volyova had heard of helmets with razor-sharp irises built into the neck, which quickly and cleanly

detached the head from the rest of the body in dire circumstances -- but this had not been one of

those.

He had died in an interesting manner, though.

Volyova had woken the Captain and explained the whole Nagorny situation to him: how the

Gunnery Officer had appeared to have lost his mind as a consequence of her experiments. She had

told the Captain about the problems she had encountered in linking Nagorny into the gunnery

systems via the implants she had put in his head. She had even mentioned the fact that Nagorny had

been somewhat troubled by recurrent nightmares, before getting quickly to the point that the recruit

had attacked her and disappeared into the depths of the ship. The Captain had not drawn her on the

subject of the nightmares, and at the time Volyova had been glad of that, for she was not entirely

comfortable with discussing them herself, much less analysing their content.

Afterwards, however, she had found it much harder to ignore the subject. The problem lay in the

fact that these were not simply random nightmares, however disturbing that might have been. No,

from what she could gather, Nagorny's nightmares had been highly repetitious and detailed. For the

most part they had concerned an entity called Sun Stealer. Sun Stealer was Nagorny's private

tormentor, it seemed. It was not at all clear how Sun Stealer had manifested to Nagorny, but what

was beyond doubt was the sense of overwhelming evil the apparition had brought. She had

glimpsed something of this in sketches she had found in Nagorny's quarters once: feverish pencil

marks limning hideous birdlike creatures, skeletal and empty-socketed. If that was a glimpse into

Nagorny's madness, a glimpse was more than adequate. How were these phantasms related to the

gunnery sessions? What unsuspected glitch in her neural interface was leaking current into the part

of the mind which sparked terrors? With hindsight, it was obvious that she had pushed too hard, too

fast. Equally, she had only been following Sajaki's orders to bring the weaponry to a state of full

readiness.

So Nagorny had snapped, escaping into the ship's unmonitored warrens. The Captain's

recommendation -- that she hunt down and kill the man -- had tallied with her

own instincts. But it

had taken many days, Volyova deploying webs of sensor gear through as many corridors as she

could manage, listening to her rats for any evidence of Nagorny's whereabouts. It had begun to look

hopeless. Nagorny would be still at large when the ship arrived in the Yellowstone system and the

other crew were woken...

Then, however, Nagorny had made two mistakes: the final flourishes of his madness. The first

mistake had been to break into her quarters and leave a message daubed in his own arterial blood on

her wall. The message was very simple. She could have guessed in advance the two words Nagorny

would choose to leave her.

SUN STEALER.

Afterwards, on the edge of rationality, he had stolen her space helmet, leaving the rest of her suit.

The break-in had drawn Volyova to her cabin, and while she had taken precautions, Nagorny had

still managed to ambush her. He had relieved her of the gun she was carrying, and then

frogmarched her down a long curving corridor to the nearest elevator shaft. Volyova had tried

resisting, but Nagorny's strength was that of the psychotic and his hold on her

might as well have

been steel. Still, she assumed a chance for escape would present itself as Nagorny took her to

wherever he had in mind, once the elevator arrived.

But Nagorny had no intention of waiting for the elevator. With her gun, he forced the door,

revealing the echoing depths of the shaft. With nothing in the way of ceremony -- not even a

goodbye -- Nagorny pushed Volyova into the hole.

It was a dreadful mistake.

The shaft threaded the ship from top to bottom; she had kilometres to fall before she hit the

bottom. And for a few almost heart-stopping moments, she had assumed that was exactly what

would happen. She would drop until she hit -- and whether it took a few seconds or the better part

of a minute was of no consequence at all. The walls of the shaft were sheer and frictionless; there

was no way to gain a purchase or arrest her fall in any way whatsoever.

She was going to die.

Then -- with a detachment which later shocked her -- part of her mind had re-examined the

problem. She had seen herself, not falling through the ship, but stationary: floating in absolute rest

with respect to the stars. What moved, instead, was the ship: rushing upwards around her. She was

not accelerating at all now -- and the only thing that made the ship accelerate was its thrust.

Which she could control from her bracelet.

Volyova had not had time to ponder the details. An idea had formed -- exploded -- in her mind,

and she knew that either she executed the idea almost immediately or accepted her fate. She could

stop her fall -- her apparent fall -- by ramping the ship's thrust into reverse for however long it took

to achieve the desired effect. Nominal thrust was one gee, which was why Nagorny had found it so

easy to mistake the ship for something like a very tall building. She had fallen for perhaps ten

seconds while her mind processed things. What was it to be, then? Ten second of reverse thrust at

one gee? No -- too conservative. She might not have enough shaft to fall through. Better to ramp up

to ten gees for a second -- she knew the engines were capable of that. The manoeuvre would not

harm the other crew, safely cocooned in reefersleep. It would not harm her, either -- she would just

see the rushing walls of the shaft slow down rather violently.

Nagorny, though, was not so well protected.

It had not been easy -- the rush of air had almost drowned out her voice as she screamed the

appropriate instructions into the bracelet. Agonising moments had followed before the ship seemed

to take any notice of her.

Then -- dutifully -- it had moved to her whim.

Later, she had found Nagorny. The ten gees of thrust, sustained for a second, would not

ordinarily have been fatal. Volyova had, however, not whittled her speed down to zero in one go.

She had achieved that through trial and error, and with each impulse Nagorny had been flung

between ceiling and floor.

She had been hurt herself; the impacts with the side of the shaft as she fell had broken one leg,

but that was healed now and the pain no more than a foggy memory. She remembered using the

laser-curette to remove Nagorny's head, knowing that she would need to open it to get at the

dedicated implants buried in his brain. They were delicate, those implants, and because they had

come into being through laborious processes of mediated molecular growth, she would not be best

pleased if they had to be duplicated.

Now it was time to remove them.

She took the head out of the helmet, immersing it in a bath of liquid nitrogen.
Then she pushed

her hands into two pairs of gauntlets suspended above the workbench within
a scaffold of pistons.

Tiny, glistening medical instruments whirled into life and descended on the
skull, ready to slice it

open in pieces which would later lock back together with fiendish precision.
Before reassembling

the head, Volyova would insert dummy implants so that -- if the head were
ever examined -- it

would not seem as if she had removed anything from it. It would have to be
re-attached to the body,

too -- but there was no need to worry herself too much over that. By the time
the others found out

what had happened to Nagorny -- what she going to convince them had
happened -- they would not

be in a hurry to examine him in any kind of detail. Sudjic might be a
problem, of course -- she and

Nagorny had been lovers, until Nagorny went insane.

Like many others that remained before her, Ilia Volyova would cross that
bridge when she came

to it.

In the meantime, as she delved deep into Nagorny's head for what was hers,
she began to give the

first thought to who was going to replace him.

Certainly no one now aboard the ship.

But perhaps around Yellowstone she would find a new recruit.

'Case, are we getting warm?'

The voice came back, blurred and trembly through the mass of the building above her. 'So warm

we're incandescent, dear girl. Just hold on and make sure you don't waste those toxin darts.'

'Yes, about those, Case, I----'

Khouri dived aside as three New Komuso trooped past, their heads enveloped in basketlike

wicker helmets. Shakuhachi -- bamboo flutes -- cut the air ahead of them like majorettes' staffs,

dispersing a gang of capuchin monkeys into the shadows. 'I mean,' she continued, 'what if we take

out a collateral?'

'It can't happen,' Ng said. 'The toxin's keyed directly to Taraschi's biochemistry. Hit anyone else

on the planet and what they'll have to show for it is a nasty puncture wound.'

'Even if I hit Taraschi's clone?'

'You think you might?'

'Just a question.' It struck her that Case was unusually jumpy.

'Anyway, if Taraschi had a clone, and we killed him by mistake, that would be Taraschi's

problem, not ours. It's all in the fine print. You should read it sometime.'

'When I'm gripped by existential boredom,' Khouri said, 'I might try it.'

She stiffened, then, because all of a sudden it was different. Ng was silent, and in place of his

voice was a clear pulsing tone. It was soft and evil, like the echolocation pulse of a predator. She

had heard that tone a dozen times in the last six months, each time signifying her proximity to the

target. It meant that Taraschi was no more than five hundred metres away. That fact, coupled with

the onset of the pulse, strongly suggested that he was within the Monument itself.

The moves of the game were now public property. Taraschi would know it, for an identical

device -- implanted in a secure Canopy clinic -- was generating similar pulses in his own head.

Across Chasm City, the various media networks which concentrated on Shadowplay would even

now be sending their field teams across town to the location of the kill. A lucky few would already

be in the vicinity.

The tone hastened as they walked further under the Monument's concourse, but not quickly.

Taraschi must have been overhead -- actually in the Monument -- so that the relative distance

between them was not changing swiftly.

The concourse beneath was cracked by land subsidence, lying perilously close to the chasm.

Originally there had been an underground mall complex beneath the structure, but the Mulch had

infiltrated it. The lowest levels were flooded, sunken walkways emerging from water the colour of

caramel. The tetrahedron of the Monument was elevated well above the concourse and the flooded

plaza by a smaller inverted pyramid abutted deep into rock foundations. There was only one

entrance to the structure. That meant that Taraschi was as good as dead already, if she caught him

aside. But to reach it she had to cross a bridge across the plaza, and her approach would be obvious

to the man inside. She wondered what kind of primal thoughts were slipping through his mind now.

In her dreams, she had often found herself in some half-deserted city being chased by some

implacable hunter, but Taraschi was experiencing that terror in reality. She remembered that in

those dreams the hunter never had to move quickly. That was part of its unpleasantness. She would

run desperately, as if through thickened air with weighted-down legs, and the hunter would move

with a slowness born of great patience and wisdom.

The pulsing quickened as she crossed the bridge, the ground beneath her feet wet and gritty.

Occasionally the pulsing would slow and requicken, evidence that Taraschi was moving around in

the structure. But there was no real escape for him now. He could arrange to be met on the roof of

the Monument, perhaps, but in utilising aerial transport he would forfeit the terms of the contract. In

the parlours of the Canopy, the shame of that might be less desirable than being killed.

She walked through into the atrium within the Monument's supporting pyramid. It was dark

inside and it took a few moments for her eyes to adjust. She slipped the toxin gun out of her coat

and checked the exit in case Taraschi had planned to sneak out. His absence was unsurprising, the

atrium almost empty, ransacked by looters. Rain drummed on metal. She looked up into a

suspended cloud of rusted, damaged sculptures hung on copper cables from the ceiling. A few had

fallen to the marbled terrazzo, metal birds' wings stabbing into the ground with the impact. They

were softly defined in dust, its whiteness like mortar between the primary feathers.

She looked towards the ceiling.

'Taraschi?' she called. 'Can you hear me yet? I'm coming.'

She wondered, briefly, why the television people had not yet arrived. It was strange to be this

close to the termination of the kill and not have them baying for blood around her, along with the

usual impromptu crowd which they invariably drew.

He had not answered her. But she knew he was above the ceiling, somewhere. She walked across

the atrium, towards the spiral staircase that led higher. She climbed quickly, then cast around for

large objects she could budge, to obstruct Taraschi's escape route. There were plenty of ruined

exhibits and pieces of furniture. She began to assemble an obstructing pile atop the staircase. It

would hinder Taraschi more than block his exit completely, but that was all she needed.

By the time it was half done she was sweating and her back was stiff. She took a moment to

collect herself and take in her surroundings; the constant arpeggiating note in her head confirming

that Taraschi was still nearby.

The upper part of the pyramid had been dedicated to individual shrines to the Eighty. These little

memorials were set in recesses within the impressive black marble walls which rose partway to the

dizzily high ceilings, framed by pillars adorned with suggestively posed caryatids. The walls,

pierced by corniced archways, blocked her view for a few tens of metres in any direction. The three

triangular sides of the ceiling had been punctured in places; sepia shafts of light entering the

chamber. Rain fell in steady streamers from the larger rents. Khouri saw that many of the recesses

were empty; evidently, those shrines had either been looted or the families of those members of the

Eighty had decided to remove their memorials to some safer place. Perhaps half remained. Of those,

roughly two-thirds had been arranged in a similar manner -- images, biographies and keepsakes of

the dead, placed in a standard fashion. Other exhibits were more elaborate. There were holograms

or statues, even, in one or two grisly cases, the embalmed corpses of the actual people being

celebrated, doubtless subjected to some skilled taxidermy to offset the worst damage wrought by

the procedure which had killed them.

She left the well-tended shrines alone, plundering only those that were obviously derelict, even

then uncomfortable with the act of vandalism. The busts were useful -- just large enough to move if

she got both fingers under the base. Rather than placing them in an ordered pile at the top of the

stairs, she just let them drop. Most of them had had their jewelled eyes

gouged out already. The

full-size statues were much harder to move, and she managed to shift only one of them.

Soon her barricade was done. For the most part it was a rubble-like pile of toppled heads,

dignified faces unembarrassed by what she had done to them. The pile was surrounded by smaller,

foot-tangling bric-a-brac: vases, Bibles and loyal servitors. Even if Taraschi began to dismantle the

pile to reach the stairs, she was sure she would hear him doing it and be able to reach the site long

before he was finished. It might even be good to kill him on that pile of heads, since it did slightly

resemble Golgotha.

All this time she had been listening to his ponderous footsteps somewhere behind the black

dividing walls.

'Taraschi,' she called. 'Make this easy for yourself. There's no escape from here.'

His reply sounded remarkably strong and confident. 'You're so wrong, Ana. The escape's why

we're here.'

Shit. He was not supposed to know her name.

'Escape is death, right?'

He sounded amused. 'Something like that.'

It was not the first time she had heard such eleventh-hour bravado. She rather admired them for

it. 'You want me to come find you, is that it?'

'Now that we've come this far, why not?'

'I understand. You want your money's worth. A contract with as many clauses in it as this one

couldn't have come cheap.'

'Clauses?' -- the pulse in her head shifting minutely, rhapsodically.

'This weapon. The fact that we're alone.'

'Ah,' Taraschi said. 'Yes. That did cost. But I wanted this to be a personal matter. When it came to

finalities.'

Khoury was getting edgy. She had never had an actual conversation with one of her targets.

Usually it would have been impossible, in the roaring bloodlust of the crowd she generally

attracted. Ready to fire the toxin gun, she began to walk slowly down the aisle.

'Why the privacy

clause?' she asked, unable to sever the contact.

'Dignity. I may have played this game, but I didn't have to dishonour myself in the process.'

'You're very close,' Khoury said.

'Yes, very close.'

'And you're not frightened?'

'Naturally. But of living, not dying. It's taken me months to reach this state.'
His footsteps

stopped. 'What do you think of this place, Ana?'

'I think it needs a bit of attention.'

'It was well chosen, you must admit.'

She turned the aisle. Her target was standing next to one of the shrines,
looking preternaturally

calm, almost calmer than one of the statues which watched the encounter.
The interior rain had

darkened the burgundy fabric of his Canopy finery, his hair was plastered
unglamorously to his

forehead. In person he looked younger than any of her previous kills, which
meant he was either

genuinely younger or rich enough to afford the best longevity therapies.
Somehow she knew it was

the former.

'You do remember why we're here?' he asked.

'I do, but I'm not sure I like it.'

'Do it anyway.'

One of the shafts of light falling from the ceiling shifted magically onto him.
It was only an

instant, but long enough for her to raise the toxin gun.

She fired.

'You did well,' Taraschi said, no pain showing in his voice. He reached out with one hand to

steady himself against the wall. The other touched the swordfish protruding from his chest and

prised it free, as if picking a thistle from his clothes. The pointed husk dropped to the floor, serum

glistening from the end. Khouri raised the toxin gun again, but Taraschi warded her off with a

blood-smeared palm. 'Don't overdo it,' he said. 'One should be sufficient.'

Khouri felt nauseous.

'Shouldn't you be dead?'

'Not for a little while. Months, to be precise. The toxin is very slow-acting. Plenty of time to

think it over.'

'Think what over?'

Taraschi raked his wet hair and wiped dust and blood from his hands onto the shins of his

trousers.

'Whether I follow her.'

The pulsing stopped and the sudden absence of it was enough to make Khouri dizzy. She fell in a

half-faint to the floor. The contract was over, she grasped. She had won -- again. But Taraschi was

still alive.

'This was my mother,' Taraschi said, gesturing at the nearest shrine. It was one of the few that

were well-tended. There was no dust at all on the woman's alabaster bust, as if Taraschi had cleaned

it himself just before their meeting. Her skin was uncorrupted and her jewelled eyes were still

present, aristocratic features unmarred by dent or blemish. 'Nadine Weng-da Silva Taraschi.'

'What happened to her?'

'She died, of course, in the process of being scanned. The destructive mapping was so swift that

half her brain was still functioning normally while the other half was torn apart.'

'I'm sorry -- even though I know she volunteered for it.'

'Don't be. She was actually one of the lucky ones. Do you know the story, Ana?'

'I'm not from around here.'

'No; that was what I heard -- that you were a soldier once, and that something terrible happened

to you. Well, let me tell you this much. The scannings were all successful. The problem lay in the

software which was supposed to execute the scanned information; to allow

the alphas to evolve

forward in time and experience awareness, emotion, memory -- everything that makes us human. It

worked well enough until the last of the Eighty had been scanned, a year after the first. But then

strange pathologies began to emerge amongst the early volunteers. They crashed irrecoverably, or

locked themselves in infinite loops.'

'You said she was lucky?'

'A few of the Eighty are still running,' Taraschi said. 'They've managed to keep doing so for a

century and a half. Even the plague didn't hurt them -- they'd already migrated to secure computers

in what we now call the Rust Belt.' He paused. 'But they've been out of direct contact with the real

world for some time now -- evolving themselves in increasingly elaborate simulated environments.'

'And your mother?'

'Suggested I join her. Scanning technology's better now; it doesn't even have to kill you.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'It wouldn't be me, would it? Just a copy -- and my mother would know it. Whereas now...' He

fingered the tiny wound again. 'Whereas now, I will definitely die in the real world, and the copy

will be all that's left of me. There's time enough for me to be scanned before the toxin leads to any

measurable deterioration in my neural structure.'

'Couldn't you just have injected it?'

Taraschi smiled. 'That would have been too clinical. I am killing myself, after all -- nothing

anyone should take lightly. By involving you, I prolonged the decision and introduced an element

of chance. I might decide life was preferable and resist you, and yet you might still win.'

'Russian roulette would have been cheaper.'

'Too quick, too random, and not nearly so stylish.' He stepped towards her and -- before she could

draw back -- reached for her hand and shook it, for all the world like someone concluding an

auspicious business deal. 'Thank you, Ana.'

'Thank you?'

Without answering he walked past her, towards noise. The sacrificial mound of heads was

tumbling, footsteps clattering on the staircase. A cobalt vase shattered as the barricade gave way.

Khouri heard the whisper of floatcams, but when the people emerged, they had none of the faces

she expected. They were respectably dressed without being ostentatious, old-money Canopy. Three

older men wore ponchos and fedoras and tortoiseshell floatcam glasses, the cameras hovering above

them like attendant familiars. Two bronze palanquins rose behind them, one small enough to have

held a child. A man with a plum matador's jacket carried a tiny hand-held camera. Two teenage

girls carried umbrellas painted with watercolour cranes and Chinese pictograms. Between the girls

was an older woman, her face so colourless she might as well have been a lifesize origami toy,

infolded, white and easily crushed. She fell to her knees in front of Taraschi, weeping. Khouri had

never seen the woman before, but she knew intuitively that this was Taraschi's wife and that the

little toxin-filled swordfish had robbed her of him.

She looked at Khouri, her eyes limpid smoke-grey. Her voice, when she spoke, was bleached of

anger. 'I hope they paid you well.'

'I just did my job,' Khouri said, but she hardly managed to force the words out. The people were

helping Taraschi towards the stairs. She watched them descend out of sight, the wife turning to

direct one last reproachful glance at Khouri. She heard the reverberation of their retreat and the

sound of footsteps across the terrazzo. Minutes passed, and then she knew that she was completely

alone.

Until something moved behind her. Khouri spun round, automatically bringing the toxin gun to

bear, another dart in the chamber.

A palanquin emerged from between two shrines.

'Case?' She lowered the gun -- it was of little use anyway, with the toxin keyed so precisely to

Taraschi's biochemistry.

But this was not Case's palanquin: it was unmarked, unornamented black. And now it opened --

she had never seen a palanquin do that -- divulging a man who stepped fearlessly towards her. He

wore a plum matador's jacket; not the hermetic clothing she might have expected from someone

who feared the plague. In one hand he carried a fashion accessory: a tiny camera.

'Case has been taken care of,' the man said. 'He's of no concern to you from now on, Khouri.'

'Who are you -- someone connected to Taraschi?'

'No -- I just came along to see if you were as efficient as your reputation implied.' The man spoke

with a soft accent which was not local -- not from this system, nor the Edge. 'And, I'm afraid, you

were. Which means -- as of now -- you're working for the same employer as myself.'

She wondered if she could put a dart in his eye. It would not kill him, but it might take the edge

off his cockiness. 'And who would that be?'

'The Mademoiselle,' the man said.

'I've never heard of her.'

He raised the lensed end of the little camera. It split open like a particularly ingenious Faberge

egg, hundreds of elegant jade fragments sliding to new positions. Suddenly she was looking down

the barrel of a gun.

'No, but she's heard of you.'

THREE

Cuvier, Resurgam, 2561

He was woken by shouting.

Sylveste checked his tactile bedside clock, feeling the position of the hands. He had an

appointment today; in less than hour. The commotion outside had beaten the alarm by a few

minutes. Curious, he threw aside the sheets of his bunk and fumbled towards the high, barred

window. He was always half-blind first thing in the morning, as his eyes stammered through their

wake-up systems check. They threw planar sheets of primary colour across his surroundings,

making it seem as if the room had been redecorated overnight by a squad of overenthusiastic

cubists.

He pulled aside the curtain. Sylveste was tall, but he could not see through the little window -- at

least not at a useful angle -- unless he stood on a pile of books appropriated from his shelves; old

printed facsimile editions. Even then the view was less than inspiring. Cuvier was built in and

around a single geodesic dome, most of which was occupied with six- or seven-storey rectangular

structures thrown up in the first days of the mission, designed for durability rather than aesthetic

appeal. There had been no self-repairing structures, and the need to safeguard against a dome failure

had resulted in buildings which were not only able to withstand razorstorms, but which could also

be pressurised independently. The grey, small-windowed structures were linked by roadways, along

which a few electric vehicles would normally be moving.

Not today, though.

Calvin had given the eyes a zoom/record facility, but it took concentration to use, rather like that

needed to invert an optical illusion. Stick figures, foreshortened by the angle, enlarged and became

agitated individuals rather than amorphous elements of a swarm. It was not so that he could now

read their expressions or even identify their faces, but the people in the street defined their own

personalities in the way they moved, and he had become acutely good at reading such nuances. The

main mob was moving down Cuvier's central thoroughfare behind a barricade of slogan boards and

improvised flagstuffs. Apart from a few daubed storefronts and an uprooted japonica sapling down

the mall, the mob had caused little damage, but what they failed to see was the troop of Girardieau

militia mobilising at the far end of the mall. They had just disgorged from a van and were buckling

on chameleoflage armour, flicking through colour modes until they all wore the same calming

shade of chrome-yellow.

He washed with warm water and a sponge, then carefully trimmed his beard and tied back his

hair. He dressed, slipping on a velvet shirt and trousers followed by a kimono, decorated with

lithographic Amarantin skeletons. Then he breakfasted -- the food was always there in a little slot

by the time the alarm rang -- and checked the time again. She would be here shortly. He made the

bed and upended it so that it formed a couch, in dimpled scarlet leather.

Pascale, as always, was accompanied by a human bodyguard and a couple of armed servitors, but

they did not follow her into the room. What did was a tiny buzzing blur like a clockwork wasp. It

looked harmless, but he knew that if he so much as broke wind in the biographer's direction, what

he would have to show for it would be an additional orifice in the centre of his forehead.

'Good morning,' she said.

'I'd say it's anything but,' Sylveste said, nodding towards the window.

'Actually, I'm surprised you

made it here at all.'

She sat down on a velvet-cushioned footstool. 'I have connections in security. It wasn't difficult,

despite the curfew.'

'It's come to a curfew, now?'

Pascale wore a pillbox hat in Inundationist purple, the geometric line of her blunt black fringe

beneath emphasising the pale expressionless cast of her face. Her outfit was tight-fitting, striped

purple and black jacket and trousers. Her entoptics were dewdrops, seahorses and flying fish,

trailing pink and lilac glitter. She sat with her feet angled together, touching at the toes, her upper

body leaning slightly towards him, as his did towards hers.

'Times have changed, Doctor. You of all people should appreciate that.'

He did. He had been in prison, in the heart of Cuvier, for ten years now. The new regime which

had succeeded his after the coup had become as fragmentary as the old, in the time-honoured way

of all revolutions. Yet while the political landscape was as divided as ever, the underlying topology

was quite different. In his time, the schism had been between those who wanted to study the

Amarantin and those who wanted to terraform Resurgam, thereby establishing the world as a viable

human colony rather than a temporary research outpost. Even the Inundationist terraformers had

been prepared to admit that the Amarantin might once have been worthy of study. These days,

however, the extant political factions differed only in the rates of terraforming they advocated,

ranging from slow schemes spread across centuries to atmospheric alchemies so brutal that humans

might have to evacuate the planet's surface while they were being wrought. One thing was clear

enough: even the most modest proposals would destroy many Amarantin secrets for eternity. But

few people seemed particularly bothered by that -- and for the most part those who did care were

too scared to raise their voices. Apart from a skeleton staff of bitter, underfunded researchers,

hardly anyone admitted to an interest in the Amarantin at all now. In ten years, study of the dead

aliens had been relegated to an intellectual backwater.

And things would only get worse.

Five years earlier, a trade ship had passed through the system. The lighthugger had furled its

ramscoop fields and moved into orbit around Resurgam; a bright and temporary new star in the

heavens. Its commander, Remilliod, had offered a wealth of technological marvels to the colony:

new products from other systems, and things which had not been seen since before the mutiny. But

the colony could not afford everything Remilliod had to sell. There had been bloody arguments in

favour of buying this over that; machines rather than medicine; aircraft rather than terraforming

tools. Rumours, too, of underhand deals; trade in weapons and illegal technologies, and while the

general standard of living on the colony was higher than in Sylveste's time -- witness the servitors,

and the implants Pascale now took for granted -- unhealable divisions had opened amongst the

Inundationists.

'Girardieau must be frightened,' Sylveste said.

'I wouldn't know,' she said, a touch too hastily. 'All that matters to me is that we have a deadline.'

'What is it you want to talk about today?'

Pascale glanced down at the compad she balanced on her knees. In six centuries computers had

assumed every shape and architecture imaginable, but something like a simple drawing slate -- flat,

with a handwritten entry-mode -- had seldom been out of fashion for long. 'I'd like to talk about

what happened to your father,' Pascale said.

'You mean the Eighty? Isn't the whole thing already sufficiently well-

documented for your

needs?'

'Almost.' Pascale touched the tip of her stylus against her cochineal-dark lips. 'I've examined all

the standard accounts, of course. For the most part they've answered my questions. There's just one

small matter I haven't been able to resolve to my total satisfaction.'

'Which is?'

He had to hand it to Pascale. The way she answered, without the slightest trace of real interest in

her voice, it really was just as if this were a loose end that needed clearing up. It was a skill; one

that almost lulled him into carelessness. 'It's about your father's alpha-level recording,' Pascale said.

'Yes?'

'I'd like to know what really happened to it afterwards.'

In the soft interior rain, the man with the trick gun directed Khouri to a waiting cable-car. It was as

unmarked and inconspicuous as the palanquin he had abandoned in the Monument.

'Get in.'

'Just a moment----' But as soon as Khouri opened her mouth, he pushed the end of the gun into

the small of her back. Not painfully -- it was done firmly, not to hurt -- but to

remind her that it was

there. Something in that gentleness told her the man was a professional, and that he was far more

likely to use the gun than someone who would have prodded her aggressively. 'All right; I'm

moving. Who is this Mademoiselle anyway? Someone behind a rival Shadowplay house?'

'No; I've already told you; stop thinking so parochially.'

He was not going to tell her anything useful; she could see that. Certain it would not get her far,

she said: 'Who are you, then?'

'Carlos Manoukhian.'

That worried her more than the way he handled the gun. He said it too truthfully. It was not a

cover-name. And now that she knew it -- and guessed that this man was at best some kind of

criminal, laughable as that category seemed in Chasm City's lawlessness -- it meant he planned to

kill her later.

The cable-car's door clammed shut. Manoukhian pressed a button on the console which purged

the Chasm City air, blasting out in steam jets below the car as it lofted itself via a nearby cable.

'Who are you, Manoukhian?'

'I help the Mademoiselle.' As if that was not blindingly obvious. 'We have a special relationship.

We go back a long way.'

'And what does she want with me?'

'I would have thought it was obvious by now,' Manoukhian said. He was still keeping the gun on

her, even as he kept one eye on the car's navigation console. 'There's someone she wants you to

assassinate.'

'That's what I do for a living.'

'Yeah.' He smiled. 'Difference is, this guy hasn't paid for it.'

The biography, needless to say, had not been Sylveste's idea. Instead, the initiative had come from

the one man Sylveste would have least suspected. It had been six months earlier; during one of the

very few occasions when he had spoken face to face with his captor. Nils Girardieau had brought up

the subject almost casually, mentioning that he was surprised no one had taken on the task. After

all, the fifty years on Resurgam virtually amounted to another life, and even though that life was

now capped by an ignominious epilogue, it did at least put his earlier life into a perspective it had

lacked during the Yellowstone years. 'The problem was,' Girardieau said, 'your previous

biographers were too close to the events -- too much part of the societal milieu they were attempting

to analyse. Everyone was in thrall to either Cal or yourself, and the colony was so claustrophobic

there was no room to step back and see the wider perspective.'

'You're saying Resurgam is somehow less claustrophobic?'

'Well, obviously not -- but at least we have the benefit of distance, both in time and space.'

Girardieau was a squat, muscular man with a shock of red hair. 'Admit it, Dan -- when you think

back to your life on Yellowstone, doesn't it sometimes seem like it all happened to someone else, in

a century very remote from our own?'

Sylveste was about to laugh dismissively, except that -- for once -- he found himself in complete

agreement with Girardieau. It was an unsettling moment, as if a basic rule of the universe had been

violated.

'I still don't see why you'd want to encourage this,' Sylveste said, nodding towards the guard who

was presiding over the conversation. 'Or are you hoping you can somehow profit from it?'

Girardieau had nodded. 'That's part of it -- maybe most of it, if you want the truth. It probably

hasn't escaped your attention that you're still a figure of fascination to the

populace.'

'Even if most of them would be fascinated to see me hung.'

'You've a point, but they'd probably insist on shaking your hand first -- before helping you to the

gibbet.'

'And you think you can milk this appetite?'

Girardieau had shrugged. 'Obviously, the new regime determines who gains access to you -- and

we also own all your records and archival material. That gives us a headstart already. We have

access to documents from the Yellowstone years which no one beyond your immediate family even

knows exist. We'd exercise a certain discretion in using them, of course -- but we'd be fools to

ignore them.'

'I understand,' Sylveste said, because suddenly it was all very clear to him.

'You're actually going

to use this to discredit me, aren't you.'

'If the facts discredit you...' Girardieau left the remark hanging in the air.

'When you deposed me... wasn't that good enough for you?'

'That was nine years ago.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning long enough for people to forget. Now they need a gentle reminder.'

'Especially as there's a new air of discontent abroad.'

Girardieau winced, as if the remark was in spectacularly poor taste. 'You can forget about True

Path -- especially if you think they might turn out to be your salvation. They wouldn't have stopped

at imprisoning you.'

'All right,' Sylveste said, boring rapidly. 'What's in it for me?'

'You assume there has to be something?'

'Generally, yes. Otherwise, why bother telling me about it?'

'Your co-operation might be in your best interest. Obviously, we could work from the material

we've seized -- but your insights would be valuable. Especially in the more speculative episodes.'

'Let me get this straight. You want me to authorise a hatchet job? And not just give it my blessing

but actually help you assassinate my character?'

'I could make it worth your while.' Girardieau nodded around the confines of the room in which

Sylveste was held. 'Look at the freedom I've given Janequin, to continue his peacock hobby. I could

be just as flexible in your case, Dan. Access to recent material on the Amarantin; the ability to

communicate with your colleagues; share your opinions -- perhaps even the occasional excursion

beyond the building.'

'Field work?'

'I'd have to consider it. Something of that magnitude...' Sylveste was suddenly, acutely aware that

Girardieau was acting. 'A period of grace might be advisable. The biography's in development now,

but it'll be several months before we need your input. Maybe half a year. What I propose is that we

wait until you've begun to give us what we need. You'll be working with the biography's author, of

course, and if that relationship is successful -- if she considers it successful -- then perhaps we'll be

ready to enter into discussions about limited field work. Discussions, mind -- no promises.'

'I'll try and contain my enthusiasm.'

'Well, you'll be hearing from me again. Is there anything you need to know before I leave?'

'One thing. You mentioned that the biographer would be a woman. Might I ask who it'll be?'

'Someone with illusions waiting to be shattered, I suspect.'

Volyova was working near the cache one day, thinking of weapons, when a janitor-rat dropped

gently onto her shoulder and spoke into her ear.

'Company,' said the rat.

The rats were a peculiar quirk of the *Nostalgia for Infinity*; quite possibly unique aboard any

lighthugger. They were only fractionally more intelligent than their feral ancestors, but what made

them useful -- what turned them from pest into utility -- was that they were biochemically linked

into the ship's command matrix. Every rat had specialised pheromonal receptors and transmitters

which allowed it to receive commands and transmit information back to the ship, encoded into

complex secreted molecules. They foraged for waste, eating virtually anything organic which was

not nailed down or still breathing. Then they ran some rudimentary preprocessing in their guts

before going elsewhere in the ship, excreting pellets into larger recycler systems. Some of them had

even been equipped with voiceboxes and a small hardwired lexicon of useful phrases, triggered into

vocalisation when external stimuli satisfied biochemically programmed conditions.

In Volyova's case, she had programmed the rats to alert her as soon as they began to process

human detritus -- dead skin cells, and the like -- which had not come from her. She would know

when the other crew members were awake, even if she was in a completely different district of the

ship.

'Company,' the rat squeaked again.

'Yes, I heard first time.' She lowered the little rodent to the deck, and then swore in all the

languages at her disposal.

The defensive wasp which had accompanied Pascale buzzed a little nearer to Sylveste as it picked

up the stress overtones in his voice. 'You want to know about the Eighty? I'll tell you. I don't feel

the slightest hint of remorse for any of them. They all knew the risks. And there were seventy-nine

volunteers, not eighty. People conveniently forget that the eightieth was my father.'

'You can hardly blame them.'

'Assuming stupidity is an inherited trait, then no, I can't.' Sylveste tried to relax himself. It was

difficult. At some point in the conversation, the militia had begun to dust the domed-in air outside

with fear gas. It was staining the reddened daylight to something nearer black. 'Look,' Sylveste said

evenly. 'The government appropriated Calvin when I was arrested. He's quite capable of defending

his own actions.'

'It isn't his actions I want to ask you about.'

Pascale made an annotation in her compad. 'It's what became of him -- his alpha-level simulation

-- afterwards. Now, each of the alphas comprised in the region of ten to the power eighteen bytes --

of information,' she said, circling something. 'The records from Yellowstone are patchy, but I was

able to learn a little. I found that sixty-six of the alphas resided in orbital data reservoirs around

Yellowstone; carousels, chandelier cities and various Skyjack and Ultra havens. Most had crashed,

of course, but no one was going to erase them. Another ten I traced to corrupted surface archives,

which leaves four missing. Three of those four are members of the seventy-nine; affiliated to either

very poor or very extinct family lines. The other is the alpha recording of Calvin.'

'Is there a point to this?' he asked, trying not to sound as if the issue particularly concerned him.

'I just can't accept that Calvin was lost in the, same way as the others. It doesn't add up. The

Sylveste Institute didn't need creditors or trustees to safeguard their heirlooms. It was one of the

wealthiest organisations on the planet right up until the plague hit. So what became of Calvin?'

'You think I brought it to Resurgam?'

'No; the evidence suggests it was already long lost by then. In fact, the last

time it was definitely

present in the system was more than a century before the Resurgam expedition departed.'

'I think you're wrong,' Sylveste said. 'Check the records more closely and you'll see that the alpha

was moved into an orbital data cache in the late twenty-fourth. The Institute relocated premises

thirty years later, so it was certainly moved then. Then in '39 or '40 the Institute was attacked by

House Reivich. They wiped the data cores.'

'No,' Pascale said. 'I excluded those instances. I'm well aware that in 2390 around ten to the

eighteen bytes of something was moved into orbit by the Sylveste Institute, and the same amount

relocated thirty-seven years later. But ten to the eighteen bytes of information doesn't have to be

Calvin. It could as easily be ten to the eighteen bytes of metaphysical poetry.'

'Which proves nothing.'

She passed him the compad, her entourage of seahorses and fish scattering like fireflies. 'No, but

it certainly looks suspicious. Why would the alpha vanish around the time you went to meet the

Shrouders, unless the two events were related?'

'You're saying I had something to do with it?'

'The subsequent data-movements could only have been faked by someone within the Sylveste

organisation. You're the obvious suspect.'

'A motive wouldn't go amiss.'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' she said, returning the compad to her lap. 'I'm sure I'll think of one.'

Three days after the janitor-rat had warned her of the crew's awakening, Volyova felt sufficiently

prepared to meet them. It was never something she particularly looked forward to, for although she

did not actively dislike human company, neither had Volyova ever had any difficulty in adjusting to

solitude. But things were worse now. Nagorny was dead, and by now the others would be well

aware of that fact.

Ignoring the rats, and subtracting Nagorny, the ship now carried six crew members. Five, if one

elected not to include the Captain. And why include him, when -- as far as the other crew were

aware, he was not even capable of consciousness, let alone communication? They carried him only

because they hoped to make him well. In all other respects the ship's real centre of power was

vested in the Triumvirate. That was Yuuji Sajaki, Abdul Hegazi and -- of course -- herself. Below

the Triumvirate there were currently two more crew, of equal rank. Their names were Kjarval and

Sudjic; chimerics who had only recently joined ship. Finally -- the lowest rank of all -- was the

Gunnery Officer, the role Nagorny had filled. Now that he was dead the role had a certain

potentiality, like a vacant throne.

During their periods of activity, the other crew tended to stay within certain well-defined

districts of the ship, leaving the rest to Volyova and her machines. It was morning now, by

shiptime: here up in the crew levels, the lights still followed a diurnal pattern, slaved to a twenty-

four hour clock. She went first to the reefersleep room and found it empty, with all but one of the

sleep caskets open. The other one, of course, belonged to Nagorny. After reattaching his head

Volyova had placed the body in the casket and cooled it down. Later, she had arranged for the unit

to malfunction, allowing Nagorny to warm. He had been dead already, but it would take a skilled

pathologist to tell that now. Clearly none of the crew had felt much inclined to examine him closely.

She thought about Sudjic again. Sudjic and Nagorny had been close, for a while. It would not pay

to underestimate Sudjic.

Volyova left the reefersleep chamber, explored several other likely places of meeting, and then

found herself entering one of the forests, navigating through immense thickets of dead vegetation

until she neared a pocket where UV lamps were still burning. She approached a glade, making her

way unsteadily down the rustic wooden stairs which led to the floor. The glade was quite idyllic --

more so now that the rest of the forest was so bereft of life. Shafts of yellow sunlight knifed through

a shifting bower of palm trees overhead. There was a waterfall in the distance, feeding a steep-

walled lagoon. Parrots and macaws occasionally kited from tree to tree or made ratcheting calls

from their perches.

Volyova gritted her teeth, despising the artificiality of the place.

The four living crew were eating breakfast around a long wooden table, piled high with bread,

fruit, slices of meat and cheese, jars of orange juice and flasks of coffee. Across the glade, two

holographically projected jousting knights were doing their best to disembowel each other.

'Good morning,' she said, stepping from the staircase onto the authentically dewy grass.

'I don't suppose there's any coffee left?'

They looked up, some of them twisting around on their stools to meet her. She registered their

reactions as their cutlery clinked discreetly down, three of them murmuring a hushed greeting.

Sudjic said nothing at all, while only Sajaki actually raised his voice.

'Glad to see you, Ilia.' He snatched a bowl from the table. 'Care for some grapefruit?'

'Thanks. Perhaps I will.'

She walked towards them and took the plate from Sajaki, the fruit glistening with sugar.

Deliberately she sat between the two other women: Sudjic and Kjarval. Both were currently black-

skinned and bald, apart from fiery tangles of dreadlocks erupting from their crowns. Dreadlocks

were important to Ultras: they symbolised the number of reefersleep stints that each had done; the

number of times each had almost kissed the speed of light. The two women had joined after their

own ship had been pirated by Volyova's crew. Ultras traded loyalties as easily as the water ice,

monopoles and data they used for currency. Both were overt chimerics, although their

transformations were modest compared to Hegazi. Sudjic's arms vanished below her elbows into

elaborately engraved bronze gauntlets, inlaid with ormoluwork windows which revealed constantly

shifting holographics, diamond nails projecting from the too-slender fingers of her mock hands.

Most of Kjarval's body was organic, but her eyes were feline cross-hatched red ellipses, and her flat

nose exhibited no nostrils; merely sleekly rilled apertures, as if she was partially adapted to aquatic

living. She wore no clothes, but apart from eyes, nostrils, mouth and ears, her skin was seamless,

like an all-enveloping sheath of ebony neoprene. Her breasts lacked nipples; her fingers were dainty

but without nails, and her toes were little more than vague suggestions, as if she had been rendered

by a sculptor anxious to begin another commission. As Volyova sat down, Kjarval observed her

with indifference that was a little too studied to be genuine.

'It's good to have you with us,' Sajaki said. 'You've been very busy while we were sleeping.

Anything much happen?'

'This and that.'

'Intriguing.' Sajaki smiled. 'This and that. I don't suppose that between "this" and "that" you noticed anything which might shed some light on Nagorny's death?'

'I wondered where Nagorny was. Now you've answered my question.'

'But you haven't answered mine.'

Volyova dug into her grapefruit. 'The last time I saw him he was alive. I have

no idea... how did

he die, incidentally?'

'His reefersleep unit warmed him prematurely. Various bacteriological processes ensued. I don't

suppose we need to go into the details, do we?'

'Not over breakfast, no.' Evidently they had not examined him closely at all: if they had, they

might have noticed the injuries he had sustained during his death, for all that she had tried to

disguise them. 'I'm sorry,' she said, flashing a glance towards Sudjic. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'Of course not,' Sajaki said, tearing a hunk of bread in half. He fixed Sudjic with his close-set

ellipsoidal eyes, like someone staring down a rabid dog. The tattoos which he had applied during

his infiltration of the Bloater Skyjacks were gone now, but there were fine whitish trails where they

had been, despite the patient ministrations which had been visited upon him in reefersleep. Perhaps,

Volyova thought, Sajaki had instructed his medichines to retain some trace of his exploits among

the Bloaterians; a trophy of the economic gains he had wrested from them. 'I'm sure we all absolve

Ilia of any responsibility for Nagorny's death -- don't we, Sudjic?'

'Why should I blame her for an accident?' Sudjic said.

'Precisely. And there's an end to the matter.'

'Not quite,' Volyova said. 'Now may not be the best time to raise the matter, but...' She trailed off.

'I was going to say that I wanted to extract the implants from his head. But even if I was allowed to

do so, they'd probably be damaged.'

'Can you make new ones?' Sajaki said.

'Given time, yes.' She said it with a sigh of resignation. 'I'll need a new candidate, too.'

'When we lay over around Yellowstone,' Hegazi said, 'you can search for someone there, can't

you?'

The knights were still clashing across the glade, but no one was paying them very much attention

now, even though one of them seemed to be having difficulties with an arrow inserted through his

faceplate.

'I'm sure someone suitable will turn up,' Volyova said.

The cold air in the Mademoiselle's house was the cleanest Khouri had tasted since arriving on

Yellowstone. Which was really saying very little. Clean, but not fragrant. More like the smells she

remembered from the hospital tent on Sky's Edge, redolent of iodine and cabbage and chlorine, the

last time she had seen Fazil.

Manoukhian's cable-car had carried them across the city, through a partially flooded subsurface

aqueduct. They had arrived in an underground cavern. From there, Manoukhian had ushered Khouri

into a lift which ascended with ear-popping speed. The lift had brought them to this dark, echoey

hallway. More than likely it was just a trick of acoustics, but Khouri felt as if she had just stepped

into a huge unlit mausoleum. Filigreed windows floated overhead, but the light which leaked

through them was midnight pale. Given that it was still day outside, the effect was subtly disturbing.

'The Mademoiselle has no passion for daylight,' Manoukhian said, leading her on.

'You don't say.' Khouri's eyes were starting to adjust to the gloom. She began to pick out big

hulking things standing in the hall. 'You're not from around here, are you, Manoukhian?'

'I guess that makes two of us.'

'Was it a clerical error that brought you to Yellowstone as well?'

'Not quite.' She could tell that Manoukhian was deciding how much he could get away with

telling. That was his one weakness, Khouri thought. For a hit-man, or whatever he was, the man

liked to talk too much. The trip over had been one long series of brags and boasts about his exploits

in Chasm City -- stuff, which, if it had been coming from anyone other than this cool customer with

the foreign accent and trick gun, she would have dismissed out of hand. But with Manoukhian, the

worrying thing was that a lot of it might have been true. 'No,' he said, his urge to spin a story

obviously triumphing over his professional instincts towards surliness. 'No; it wasn't a clerical error.

But it was a kind of mistake -- or an accident, at any rate.'

There were lots of the hulking things. It was difficult to make out their overall shapes, but they all

rested on slim poles jutting from black plinths. Some were like sections of smashed eggshell, while

others more resembled delicate husks of brain coral. Everything had a metallic sheen, rendered

colourless in the sallow light of the hallway.

'You had an accident?'

'No... not me. She did. The Mademoiselle. That's how we met each other. She was... I shouldn't

be telling you any of this, Khouri. She finds out, I'm dead meat. Pretty easy to dispose of bodies in

the Mulch. Hey, you know what I found there the other day? You're not going to believe any of this,

but I found a whole fucking...'

Manoukhian went off on a boast. Khouri brushed her fingers against one of the sculptures,

feeling its cool metal texture. The edges were very sharp. It was as if she and Manoukhian were two

furtive art lovers who had broken into a museum in the middle of the night. The sculptures seemed

to be biding their time. They were waiting for something -- but not with infinite reserves of

patience.

She was perplexingly glad of the gunman's company.

'Did she make these?' Khouri asked, interrupting Manoukhian's flow.

'Perhaps,' Manoukhian said. 'In which case you could say she suffered for her art.' He stopped,

touching her on the shoulder. 'All right. You see those stairs?'

'I guess you want me to use them.'

'You're learning.'

Gently, he stuck the gun in her back -- just to remind her it was still there.

Through a porthole in the wall next to the dead man's quarters Volyova could see a tangerine-

coloured gas giant planet, its shadowed southern pole flickering with auroral storms. They were

deep inside the Epsilon Eridani system now; coming in at a shallow angle to the ecliptic.

Yellowstone was only a few days away; already they were within light-minutes of local traffic,

threading through the web of line-of-sight communications which linked every significant habitat or

spacecraft in the system. Their own ship had changed, too. Through the same window Volyova

could just see the front of one of the Conjoiner engines. The engines had automatically hauled in

their scoop fields as the ship dropped below ramming speed, subtly altering their shapes to in-

system mode, the intake maw closing like a flower at dusk. Somehow the engines were still

producing thrust, but the source of the reaction mass or the energy to accelerate it was just another

mystery of Conjoiner technology. Presumably there was a limit on how long the drives could

function like this, or else they would never have needed to trawl space for fuel during interstellar

cruise mode...

Her mind was wandering, trying to focus on anything but the issue at hand.

'I think she's going to be trouble,' Volyova said. 'Serious trouble.'

'Not if I read her correctly.' Triumvir Sajaki dispensed a smile. 'Sudjic knows me too well. She

knows I wouldn't take the trouble of actually reprimanding her if she made a move against a

member of the Triumvirate. I wouldn't even give her the luxury of leaving the ship when we get to

Yellowstone. I'd simply kill her.'

'That might be a little harsh.'

She sounded weak and despised herself for it, but it was how she felt. 'It's not as if I don't

sympathise with her. After all Sudjic had nothing personal against me until I... until Nagorny died.

If she does anything, couldn't you just discipline her?'

'It's not worth it,' Sajaki said. 'If she has the mind to do something to you, she won't stop at petty

aggravation. If I just discipline her she'll find a way to hurt you permanently. Killing her would be

the only reasonable option. Anyway -- I'm surprised that you see her side of things. Hasn't it

occurred to you that some of Nagorny's problems might have rubbed off on her?'

'You're asking me whether I think she's completely sane?'

'It doesn't matter. She won't move against you -- you have my word on that.' Sajaki paused. 'Now,

can we get this over with? I've had enough of Nagorny for one life.'

'I know exactly how you feel.'

It was several days after her first meeting with the crew. They were standing outside the dead

man's quarters, on level 821, preparing to enter his rooms. They had remained sealed since his death

-- longer, as far as the others were concerned. Even Volyova had not entered them, wary of

disturbing something which might place her there.

She spoke into her bracelet. 'Disable security interdict, personal quarters Gunnery Officer Boris

Nagorny, authorisation Volyova.'

The door opened before them, emitting a palpable draught of highly chilled air.

'Send them in,' Sajaki said.

The armed servitors took only a few minutes to sweep the interior, certifying that there were no

obvious hazards. It would have been unlikely, of course, since Nagorny had probably not planned to

die quite when Volyova had arranged it. But with characters like him, one could never be sure.

They stepped in, the servitors having already activated the room lights.

Like most of the psychopaths she had encountered, Nagorny had always seemed perfectly happy

with the smallest of personal spaces. His quarters were even more determinedly cramped than her

own. A fastidious neatness had been at work there, like a poltergeist in reverse. Most of his

belongings -- there were not many -- had been securely racked down, and so

had not been disturbed

by the ship's manoeuvres when she killed him.

Sajaki grimaced and held a sleeve up to his nose. 'That smell.'

'It's borscht. Beetroot. I think Nagorny was partial to it.'

'Remind me not to try it.'

Sajaki closed the door behind them.

There was a residual fridity to the air. The thermometers said that it was now room

temperature, but it seemed as if the molecules in the air carried an imprint of the months of cold.

The room's overpowering spartanness did not offset this chill. Volyova's quarters seemed opulent

and luxurious by comparison. It was not simply a case of Nagorny neglecting to personalise his

space. It was just that in so doing he had so miserably failed by normal standards that his efforts

actually contradicted themselves and made the room seem even bleaker than had it been empty.

What failed to help matters was the coffin.

The elongated object had been the only thing in the room not lashed down when she killed

Nagorny. It was still intact, but Volyova sensed that the thing had once stood upright, dominating

the room with a fearful premonitory grandeur. It was huge and probably

made of iron. The metal

was as ebon and light-sucking as the surface of a Shrouder emboitement. All its surfaces had been

carved in bas-relief, too intricately rendered to give up all their secrets in one glance. Volyova

stared in silence. Are you trying to say, she thought, that Boris Nagorny was capable of this?

'Yuuji,' she said. 'I don't like this at all.'

'I don't very much blame you.'

'What kind of madman makes his own coffin?'

'A very dedicated one, I'd say. But it's here, and it's probably the only glimpse into his mind we

have. What do you make of the embellishments?'

'Undoubtedly a projection of his psychosis, a concretisation.' Now that Sajaki was forcing calm

she was slipping into subservience. 'I should study the imagery. It might give me insight.' She

paused, added: 'So that we don't make the same mistake twice, I mean.'

'Prudent,' Sajaki said, kneeling down. He stroked his gloved forefinger over the intagliated

rococo surface. 'We were very lucky you were not forced to kill him, in the end.'

'Yes,' she said, giving him an odd look. 'But what are your thoughts on the embellishments,

Yuuji-san?'

'I'd like to know who or what Sun Stealer was,' he said, drawing her attention to those words,

etched in Cyrillic on the coffin. 'Does that mean anything to you? Within the terms of his psychosis,

I mean. What did it mean to Nagorny?'

'I haven't the faintest.'

'Let me hazard a guess, anyway. I'd say that in Nagorny's imagination Sun Stealer represented

somebody in his day-to-day experience, and I see two obvious possibilities.'

'Himself or me,' Volyova said, knowing that Sajaki was not to be easily distracted. 'Yes, yes, that

much is obvious... but this doesn't in any way help us.'

'You're quite sure he never mentioned this Sun Stealer?'

'I would remember a thing like that.'

Which was quite true. And of course she did remember: he had written those words on the wall in

her quarters, in his own blood. The expression meant nothing to her, but that did not mean she was

in any sense unfamiliar with it. Towards the unpleasant termination of their professional

relationship, Nagorny had spoken of little else. His dreams were thick with Sun Stealer, and -- like

all paranoiacs -- he saw evidence of Sun Stealer's malignant work in the most

humdrum of daily

annoyances. When one of the ship's lights failed unaccountably or a lift directed him to the wrong

level, this was Sun Stealer's doing. It was never a simple malfunction, but always evidence of the

deliberate machinations of a behind-the-scenes entity only Nagorny could detect. Volyova had

stupidly ignored the signs. She had hoped -- in fact come as close to praying as was possible for her

-- that his phantom would return to the netherworld of his unconscious. But Sun Stealer had stayed

with Nagorny; witness the coffin on the floor.

Yes... she would remember a thing like that.

'I'm sure you would,' Sajaki said, knowingly. Then he returned his attention to the engravings. 'I

think first we should make a copy of these marks,' he said. 'They may help us, but this damned

Braille effect isn't easy to make out with the eye. What do you think these are?' He moved his palm

across a kind of radial pattern. 'Birds' wings? Or rays of sunlight shining from above? They look

more like birds' wings to me. Now why would he have bird wings on his mind? And what kind of

language is this meant to be?'

Volyova looked, but the crawling complexity of the coffin was too much to

take in. It was not

that she was uninterested -- not at all. But what she wanted was the thing to herself, and Sajaki as

far away from it as possible. There was too much evidence here of the canyon depths to which

Nagorny's mind had plummeted.

'I think it merits more study,' she said carefully. 'You said "first". What do you intend to do after

we make a copy of it?'

'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'Destroy the damned thing,' she surmised.

Sajaki smiled. 'Either that or give it to Sudjic. But personally I'd settle for destroying it. Coffins

aren't good things to have on a ship, you know. Especially home-made ones.'

The stairs went up for ever. After a while -- already in the two hundreds -- Khouri lost count. But

just when her knees felt as if they were going to buckle, the staircase came to an abrupt end,

presenting her with a long, long white corridor whose sides were a series of recessed arches. The

effect was like standing in a portico under moonlight. She walked along the corridor's echoey length

until she arrived at the double doors which ended it. They were festooned with organic black

scrollwork, inset with faintly tinted glass. A lavender light poured through them from the room

beyond.

Evidently she had arrived.

It was entirely possible that this was a trap of some kind, and that to enter the room beyond

would be a form of suicide. But turning back was not an option either -- Manoukhian, for all his

charm, had made that abundantly clear. So Khouri grasped the handle and let herself in. Something

in the air made her nose tickle pleasantly, a blossomy perfume negating the sterility of the rest of

the house. The smell made Khouri feel unwashed, although it was only a few hours since Ng had

woken her and told her to go and kill Taraschi. In the meantime she had accumulated a month's

worth of dirt from the Chasm City rain, suffused with her own sweat and fear.

'I see Manoukhian managed to get you here in one piece,' said a woman's voice.

'Me or him?'

'Both, dear girl,' the invisible speaker said. 'Your reputations are equally formidable.'

Behind her the double doors clicked shut. Khouri began to take in her surroundings; difficult in

the strange pink light of the room. The enclosure was kettle-shaped, with two eyelike shuttered

windows set into one concave wall.

'Welcome to my place of residence,' the voice said. 'Make yourself at home, won't you.'

Khouri walked to the shuttered windows. To one side of the windows sat a pair of reefersleep

caskets, gleaming like chromed silverfish. One of the units was sealed and running, while the other

was open; a chrysalis ready to enfold the butterfly.

'Where am I?'

The shutters whisked open.

'Where you always were,' the Mademoiselle said.

She was looking out across Chasm City. But it was from a higher vantage point than she had ever

known. She was actually above the Mosquito Net, perhaps fifty metres from its stained surface. The

city lay below the Net like a fantastically spiny sea-creature preserved in formaldehyde. She had no

idea where she was; except that this had to be one of the tallest buildings; one that she had probably

assumed was uninhabited.

The Mademoiselle said: 'I call this place the Chateau des Corbeaux; the House of Ravens; by

virtue of its blackness. You've undoubtedly seen it.'

'What do you want?' Khouri said, finally.

'I want you to do a job for me.'

'All this for that? I mean, you had to kidnap me at gunpoint just to ask me to do a job? Couldn't

you go through the usual channels?'

'It isn't the usual sort of job.'

Khouri nodded towards the open reefersleep unit. 'Where does that come into it?'

'Don't tell me it alarms you. You came to our world in one, after all.'

'I just asked what it meant.'

'All in good time. Turn around, will you?'

Khouri heard a slight bustle of machinery behind her, like the sound of a filing cabinet opening.

A hermetic's palanquin had entered the room. Or had it been here all along, concealed by some

artifice? It was as dark and angular as a metronome, lacking ornamentation, and with a roughly

welded black exterior. It had no appendages or obvious sensors, and the tiny viewing monocle set

into its front was as dark as a shark's eye.

'You are doubtless already familiar with my kind,' said the voice emanating from the palanquin.

'Do not be disturbed.'

'I'm not,' Khouri said.

But she was lying. There was something disturbing about this box; a quality she had never

experienced in the presence of Ng or the other hermetics she had known. Perhaps it was the

austerity of the palanquin, or the sense -- entirely subliminal -- that the box was seldom unoccupied.

None of this was helped by the smallness of the viewing window, or the feeling that there was

something monstrous behind that dark opacity.

'I can't answer all your questions now,' the Mademoiselle said. 'But obviously I didn't bring you

here just to see my predicament. Here. Perhaps this will assist matters.'

A figure grew to solidity next to the palanquin, imaged by the room itself.

It was a woman, of course -- young, but paradoxically clothed in the kind of finery which no one

had worn on Yellowstone since the plague; enrobed in swirling entoptics. The woman's black hair

was raked back from a noble forehead, held in a clasp inwoven with lights. Her electric-blue gown

left her shoulders bare, cut away in a daring décolletage. Where it reached the floor it blurred into

nothingness.

'This is how I was,' the figure spoke. 'Before the foulness.'

'Can't you still be like that?'

'The risk of leaving enclosure is too great -- even in the hermetic sanctuaries. I distrust their precautions.'

'Why have you brought me here?'

'Didn't Manoukhian explain things fully?'

'Not exactly, no. Other than explaining how it wouldn't be good for my health not to go along with him.'

'How indelicate of him. But not inaccurate, it must be admitted.' A smile upset the pale

composure of the woman's face. 'What do you suppose were my reasons for bringing you here?'

Khoury knew that, whatever else had happened, she had seen too much to return to normal life in the city.

'I'm a professional assassin. Manoukhian saw me at work and told me I was as good as my

reputation. Now -- maybe I'm jumping to conclusions here -- but it occurs to me you might want

someone killed.'

'Yes, very good.' The figure nodded. 'But did Manoukhian tell you this would not be the same as

your usual contracts?'

'He mentioned an important difference, yes.'

'And would this trouble you?' The Mademoiselle studied her intensely. 'It's an interesting point,

isn't it? I'm well aware that your usual targets consent to be assassinated before you go after them.

But they do so in the knowledge that they will probably evade you and live to boast about it. When

you do catch them, I doubt that many of them go gently.'

She thought of Taraschi. 'Usually not, no. Usually they're begging me not to do it, trying to bribe

me, that kind of thing.'

'And?'

Khoury shrugged. 'I kill them anyway.'

'The attitude of a true professional. You were a soldier, Khoury?'

'Once.' She did not really want to think about that now. 'How much do you know about what

happened to me?'

'Enough. That your husband was a soldier as well -- a man named Fazil -- and that you fought

together on Sky's Edge. And then something happened. A clerical error. You were put aboard a ship

destined for Yellowstone. No one realised the error until you woke up here, twenty years later. Too

late by then to return to the Edge -- even if you knew Fazil was still alive. He would be forty years

older by the time you got back.'

'Now you know why becoming an assassin didn't exactly give me any sleepless nights.'

'No; I can imagine how you felt. That you owed the universe no favours -- nor anyone living in

it.'

Khouri swallowed. 'But you don't need an ex-soldier for a job like this. You don't even need me: I

don't know who you want to take out, but there are better people around than me. I mean, I'm

technically good -- I only miss one shot in twenty. But I know people who only miss one in fifty.'

'You suit my needs in another manner. I need someone who is more than willing to leave the

city.' The figure nodded towards the open reefersleep casket. 'And by that, I mean a long journey.'

'Out of the system?'

'Yes.' Her voice was patient and matronly, as if the rudiments of this conversation had been

rehearsed dozens of times. 'Specifically, a distance of twenty light-years. That's how far away

Resurgam is.'

'I can't say I've heard of it.'

'I would be troubled if you had.' The Mademoiselle extended her left hand, and a little globe

sprang into existence a few inches above her palm. The world was deathly grey -- there were no

oceans, rivers or greenery. Only a skein of atmosphere -- visible as a fine arc near the horizon -- and

a pair of dirty-white icecaps suggested this was anything other than some airless moon. 'It's not even

one of the newer colonies -- not what we'd call a colony, anyway. There are only a few tiny research

outposts on the whole planet. Until recently Resurgam has been of no significance whatsoever. But

all that has changed.' The Mademoiselle paused, seeming to collect her thoughts, perhaps debating

how much to reveal at this stage. 'Someone has arrived on Resurgam -- a man called Sylveste.'

'That's not a very common name.'

'Then you are aware of his clan's standing in Yellowstone. Good. That simplifies matters

enormously. You will have no difficulty finding him.'

'There's more to it than just finding him, isn't there?'

'Oh yes,' the Mademoiselle said. Then she snatched at the globe with her hand, crushing it

between her fingers, rivulets of dust pouring between them. 'Very much more.'

FOUR

Carousel New Brazilia, Yellowstone, Epsilon Eridani, 2546

Volyova disembarked from the lighthugger's shuttle and followed Triumvir Hegazi down the exit

tunnel. Via twisting gaskets, the tunnel led them into the weightless hub of a spherical transit

lounge at the heart of the carousel.

Every fractured strain of humanity was there; a bewildering free-floating riot of colour, like

tropical fish in a feeding frenzy. Ultras, Skyjacks, Conjoiners, Demarchists, local traders,

intrasystem passengers, freeloaders, mechanics, all following what seemed to be completely random

trajectories, but never quite colliding, no matter how perilously close they came. Some -- where

their bodyplans allowed it -- had diaphanous wings sewn under their sleeves, or attached directly to

the skin. The less adventurous made do with slim thrust-packs, or allowed themselves to be pulled

along by tiny rented tugs. Personal servitors flew through the throng, carrying baggage and folded

spacesuits, while liveried, winged capuchin monkeys foraged for litter, tucking what they found into

marsupial pouches under their chests. Chinese music tinkled pervasively

through the air, sounding

to Volyova's untutored ear like windchimes stirred by a breeze with a particular taste for

dissonance. Yellowstone, thousands of kilometres below, was an ominous yellow-brown backdrop

to all this activity.

Volyova and Hegazi reached the far side of the transit sphere and moved through a matter-

permeable membrane into a customs area. It was another free-fall sphere, wall festooned with

autonomic weapons which tracked each arrival. Transparent bubbles filled the central volume, each

three metres wide and split open along an equatorial bisector. Sensing the newcomers, two bubbles

drifted through the airspace and clamped themselves around them.

A small servitor hung inside Volyova's bubble, shaped like a Japanese Kabuto helmet, with

various sensors and readout devices projecting from beneath the rim. She felt a neural tingle as the

thing trawled her, like someone daintily rearranging flowers in her head.

'I detect residual Russish linguistic structures but determine that Modern Norte is your standard

tongue. Will this suffice for bureaucratic processing?'

'It'll do,' Volyova said, miffed that the thing had detected the rustiness of her native language.

'Then I shall continue in Norte. Apart from reefersleep mediation systems, I detect no cerebral

implants or exosomatic perceptual modification devices. Do you require the loan of an implant

before the continuation of this interview?'

'Just give me screen and a face.'

'Very well.'

A face resolved beneath the rim. The face was female and white, with just a hint of Mongolism,

hair as short as Volyova's own. She guessed that Hegazi's interviewer would appear male,

moustached, dark-skinned and heavily chimeric, just like the man himself.

'State your identity,' the woman said.

Volyova introduced herself.

'You last visited this system in... let me see.' The face looked down for a moment. 'Eighty-five

years ago; '461. Am I correct?'

Against her best instincts, Volyova leaned nearer the screen. 'Of course you're correct. You're a

gamma-level simulation. Now dispense with the theatrics and just get on with it. I've wares to trade

and every second you detain me is a second more we have to pay to park our ship around your

useless dog-turd of a planet.'

'Truculence noted,' the woman said, seeming to jot a remark in a notebook just out of sight. 'For

your information, Yellowstone records are incomplete in many areas owing to the data corruption

of the plague. When I asked you the question I did so because I wanted to confirm an unverified

record.' She paused. 'And by the way; my name is Vavilov. I'm sitting with a rancid cup of coffee

and my last cigarette in a draughty office eight hours into a ten-hour shift. My boss will assume I

was dozing if I don't turn back ten people today and so far I've only notched up five. With two hours

to go I'm looking at ways to fill my quota, so please, think very carefully before your next outburst.'

The woman took a drag and blew the smoke in Volyova's direction. 'Now. Shall we continue?'

'I'm sorry, I thought----' Volyova trailed off. 'Your people don't use simulations for this kind of

work?'

'We used to,' Vavilov said, with a long-suffering sigh. 'But the trouble with simulations is that

they put up with far too much shit.'

From the carousel's hub Volyova and Hegazi rode a house-sized elevator down one of the wheel's

four radial spokes, their weight mounting until they reached the circumference. Gravity there was

Yellowstone normal, not perceptibly different to the standard Earth gravity adopted by Ultras.

Carousel New Brazilia orbited Yellowstone every four hours, in an orbit which meandered to

avoid the 'Rust Belt' -- the debris rings which had come into existence since the plague. It had a

wheel configuration: one of the commonest carousel designs. This one was ten kilometres in

diameter and eleven hundred metres wide, all human activity wound on the thirty-kilometre strip

around the wheel. It was sufficient size for a scattering of towns, small hamlets and bonsai

landscape features, even a few carefully horticultured forests, with azure snowcapped mountains

carved into the rising valley sides of the strip to give the illusion of distance. The curved roof

around the concave part of the wheel was transparent, rising half a kilometre above the strip. Metal

rails were fretted across its surface, from which hung billowing artificial clouds, choreographed by

computer. Apart from simulating planetary weather, the clouds served to break up the upsetting

perspectives of the curved world. Volyova supposed they were realistic, but having never seen real

clouds with her own eyes, at least not from below, she could not be wholly sure.

They had emerged from the elevator onto a terrace above the carousel's main community, a

collision of buildings piled between stepped valley sides. Rimtown, they called it. It was an eyesore

of architectural styles reflecting the succession of different tenants which the carousel had enjoyed

throughout its history. A line of rickshaws waited at ground level, the driver of the closest

quenching his thirst from a can of banana juice which sat in a holder rigged to the taxi's handlebars.

Hegazi passed the driver a piece of paper marked with their destination. The driver held it closely to

his black, close-set eyes, then grunted acknowledgement. Soon they were trundling through the

traffic, electric and pedal vehicles barging recklessly around each other, pedestrians diving bravely

between openings in the seemingly random flow. At least half the people Volyova saw were

Ultranaughts, evidenced by their tendency towards paleness, spindly build, flaunted body

augmentations, swathes of black leather and acres of glinting jewellery, tattoos and trade-trophies.

None of the Ultras she saw were extreme chimerics, with the possible exception of Hegazi, who

probably qualified as one of the half-dozen most augmented people in the carousel. But the majority

wore their hair in the customary Ultra manner, fashioned in thick braids to indicate the number of

reefersleep stretches they had done, and many of them had their clothes slashed to expose their

prosthetic parts. Looking at these specimens, Volyova had to remind herself that she was part of the

same culture.

Ultras, of course, were not the only spacegoing faction spawned by humanity. Skyjacks -- at least

here -- made up a significant portion of the others she saw. They were spacedwellers to be sure, but

they did not crew interstellar ships and so their outlook was very different to the wraithlike Ultras,

with their dreadlocks and old-fashioned expressions. There were others still. Icecombers were a

Skyjack offshoot; psychomodified for the extreme solitude which came from working the Kuiper

belt zones, and they kept themselves to themselves with ferocious dedication. Gillies were

aquatically modified humans who breathed liquid air; capable of crewing short-range, high-gee

ships: they constituted a sizeable fraction of the system's police force. Some gillies were so

incapable of normal respiration and locomotion that they had to move around in huge robotic

fishtanks when not on duty.

And then there were Conjoiners: descendants of an experimental clique on Mars who had

systematically upgraded their minds, swapping cells for machines, until something sudden and

drastic had happened. In one moment, they had escalated to a new mode of consciousness – what

they called the Transenlightenment -- precipitating a brief but nasty war in the process. Conjoiners

were easy to pick out in crowds: recently they had bio-engineered huge and beautiful cranial crests

for themselves, veined to dissipate the excess heat produced by the furious machines in their heads.

There were fewer of them these days, so they tended to draw attention. Other human factions -- like

the Demarchists, who had long allied themselves with the Conjoiners -- were acutely aware that

only Conjoiners knew how to build the engines which powered lighthuggers.

'Stop here,' Hegazi said. The rickshaw darted to the streetside, where wizened old men sat at

folding tables playing card games and mah-jong. Hegazi slapped payment into the driver's fleshy

palm and then followed Volyova onto the streetside. They had arrived at a bar.

'The Juggler and the Shrouder,' Volyova said, reading the holographic sign above the door. It

showed a naked man emerging from the sea, backdropped by strange,

phantasmagoric shapes

among the surf. Above him, a black sphere hung in the sky. 'This doesn't look right.'

'It's where all the Ultras hang out. You'd better get used to it.'

'All right, point made. I suppose I wouldn't feel at home in any Ultra bar, come to think of it.'

'You wouldn't feel at home in anything that didn't have a navigational system and a lot of nasty

firepower, Ilia.'

'Sounds like a reasonable definition of common sense to me.'

Youths barged out into the street, plastered in sweat and what Volyova hoped was spilt beer.

They had been arm wrestling: one of their number was nursing a prosthetic which had ripped off at

the shoulder, another was riffling a wad of notes he must have won inside. They had the regulation

sleep-stretch locks and the standard-issue star-effect tattoos, making Volyova feel simultaneously

ancient and envious. She doubted that their anxieties extended much beyond the troubling question

of where their next drink or bed was coming from. Hegazi gave them a look - he must have seemed

intimidating to them, even given their chimeric aspirations, since it was difficult to tell which parts

of Hegazi were not mechanical.

'Come on,' he said, pushing through the disturbance. 'Grin and bear it, Ilia.'

It was dark and smoky inside, and with the combined synergistic effects of the noise from the

music -- pulsing Burundi rhythms overlaid with something that might have been human singing --

and the perfumed, mild hallucinogens in the smoke, it took Volyova a few moments to get her

bearings. Then Hegazi pointed to a miraculously spare table in the corner and she followed him to it

with the minimum of enthusiasm.

'You're going to sit down, aren't you?'

'I don't suppose I have much choice. We have to look as if we at least tolerate each other's

company or people will get suspicious.'

Hegazi shook his head, grinning. 'I must like something about you, Ilia, otherwise I'd have killed

you ages ago.'

She sat down.

'Don't let Sajaki hear you talking like that. He doesn't take kindly to threats being made against

Triumvir members.'

'I'm not the one who has a problem with Sajaki, in case you forgot. Now, what are you drinking?'

'Something my digestive system can process.'

Hegazi ordered some drinks -- his physiology allowed that -- waiting until the overhead delivery

system brought them.

'You're still annoyed by that business with Sudjic, aren't you?'

'Don't worry,' Volyova said, crossing her arms. 'Sudjic isn't anything I can't handle. Besides, I'd

be lucky to lay a finger on her before Sajaki finished her off.'

'He might let you have second pickings.' The drinks arrived in a little perspex cloud with a flip-

top, the cloud suspended from a trolley which ran along rails mounted on the ceiling. 'You think

he'd actually kill her?'

Volyova attacked her drink, glad of something to wash away the dust of the rickshaw ride. 'I

wouldn't trust Sajaki not to kill any of us, if it came to that.'

'You used to trust him. What made you change your mind?'

'Sajaki hasn't been the same since the Captain fell ill again.' She looked around nervously, well

aware that Sajaki might not be very far from earshot. 'Before that happened, they both visited the

Jugglers, did you know that?'

'You're saying the Jugglers did something to Sajaki's mind?'

She thought back to the naked man stepping from the Juggler ocean. 'That's what they do,

Hegazi.'

'Yes, voluntarily. Are you saying Sajaki chose to become crueller?'

'Not just cruel. Single-minded. This business with the Captain...' She shook her head. 'It's

emblematic.'

'Have you spoken to him recently?'

She read his question. 'No; I don't think he's found who he's looking for, though doubtless we'll

find out shortly.'

'And your own quest?'

'I'm not looking for a specific individual. My only constraint is that whoever I find should be

saner than Boris Nagorny. That ought not to pose any great difficulties.' She let her gaze drift

around the drinkers in the bar. Although none of the people looked definitely psychotic, neither was

there anyone who exactly looked stable and well-adjusted. 'At least I hope not.'

Hegazi lit a cigarette and offered Volyova a second. She took it gratefully and smoked it solidly

for five minutes, until it resembled a glowing speck of fissile material wrapped in glowing embers.

She made a mental note to replenish her supply of cigarettes during this stopover. 'But my search is

only just beginning,' she said. 'And I have to handle it delicately.'

'You mean,' Hegazi said with a knowing smile, 'that you're not actually going to tell people what

the job is before you recruit them.'

Volyova smirked. 'Of course not.'

The sapphire-hulled shuttle he was riding had not come far: only a short inter-orbital hop from the

Sylvestes' familial habitat. Even so, it had been difficult to arrange. Calvin strongly disapproved of

his son having any contact with the thing which now resided in the Institute, as if the thing's state of

mind might infect Sylveste by some mysterious process of sympathetic resonance. Yet Sylveste was

twenty-one. He chose his own associations now. Calvin could go hang, or bum his neurons to ash in

the madness he was about to inflict on himself and his seventy-nine disciples... but he was not going

to dictate who Sylveste could see.

He saw SISS looming ahead, and thought, none of this is real; just a narrative strand from his

biography. Pascale had given him the rough-cut and asked for his comments. Now he was

experiencing it, still walled in his prison in Cuvier, but moving like a ghost through his own past,

haunting his younger self. Memories, long buried, were welling up unbidden.

The biography, still

far from complete, would be capable of being accessed in many ways, from many viewpoints, and

with varying degrees of interactivity. It would be an intricately faceted thing, detailed enough that

one could easily spend more than a lifetime exploring only a segment of his past.

SISS looked as real as he remembered. The Sylveste Institute for Shrouder Studies had its

organisational centre in a wheel-shaped structure dating from the Amerikano days, although there

was not a single cubic nanometre which had not been reprocessed many times over the intervening

centuries. The wheel's hub sprouted two grey, mushroom-shaped hemispheres, pocked with docking

interfaces and the modest defence systems permitted by Demarchist ethics. The wheel's edge was a

hectic accretion of living modules, labs and offices, embedded in a matrix of bulk chitin polymer,

linked by a tangle of access tunnels and supply pipes walled in shark-collagen.

'It's good.'

'You think so?' Pascale's voice was distant.

'That's how it was,' Sylveste said. 'How it felt when I visited him.'

'Thanks, I... well, this was nothing -- the easy part. Fully documented. We

had blueprints for

SISS, and there are even some people in Cuvier who knew your father, like Janequin. The hard

part's what happened afterwards -- where we have so little to go on except what you told them on

your return.'

'I'm sure you've done an excellent job of it.'

'Well, you'll see -- sooner rather than later.'

The shuttle coupled with the docking interface. Institute security servitors were waiting beyond

the lock, validating his identity.

'Calvin won't be thrilled,' said Gregori, the Institute's housekeeper. 'But I suppose it's too late to

send you home now.'

They had been through this ritual two or three times in the last few months, Gregori always

washing his hands of the consequences. It was no longer necessary to have someone escort Sylveste

through the shark-collagen tunnels to the place where they kept him; the thing.

'You've nothing to worry about, Gregori. If Father gives you any trouble, just tell him I ordered

you to show me around.'

Gregori arched his eyebrows, the emotionally attuned entoptics around him

registering

amusement.

'Isn't that just what you're doing, Dan?'

'I was trying to keep things amicable.'

'Utterly futile, dear boy. We'd all be much happier if you just followed your father's lead. You

know where you are with a good totalitarian regime.'

It took twenty minutes to navigate the tunnels, moving radially outwards to the rim, passing

through scientific sections where teams of thinkers -- human and machine -- grappled endlessly

with the central enigma of the Shrouds. Although SISS had established monitoring stations around

all the Shrouds so far discovered, most of the information-processing and collating took place

around Yellowstone. Here elaborate theories were assembled and tested against the facts, which

were scant, but unignorable. No theory had lasted more than a few years.

The place where they kept him, the thing Sylveste had come to see, was a guarded annex on the

rim; a generously large allocation of volume given the lack of evidence that the thing within was

actually capable of appreciating the gift. The thing's name -- his name -- was Philip Lascaille.

He did not have many visitors now. There had been lots in the early days, shortly after his return.

But interest had dwindled when it became clear that Lascaille could tell his inquisitors nothing,

useful or otherwise. But, as Sylveste had quickly appreciated, the fact that no one paid Lascaille

much attention these days could actually work to his advantage. Even Sylveste's relatively

infrequent visits -- once or twice a month -- had been sufficiently far from the norm to enable a kind

of rapport to form between the two of them... between himself and the thing Lascaille had become.

Lascaille's annex contained a garden, under an artificial sky glazed the deep blue of cobalt. A

breeze had been created, sufficient to finger the windchimes suspended from the bower of over-

arching trees which fringed the garden.

The garden had been landscaped with paths, rockeries, knolls, trellises and goldfish ponds, the

effect being of a rustic maze, so that it always took a minute or so to find Lascaille. When Sylveste

did find him the man was usually in the same state: naked or half-naked, filthy to some degree, his

fingers smeared with the rainbow shades of crayons and chalks. Sylveste would always know he

was getting warm when he saw something scrawled on the stone path; either

a complex

symmetrical pattern, or what looked like an attempt at mimicking Chinese or Sanskrit calligraphy,

without actually knowing any real letters. At other times the things which Lascaille marked on the

path looked like Boolean algebra or semaphore.

Then -- it was always only a question of time -- he would round a corner and Lascaille would be

there, working on another marking, or carefully erasing one he had worked on previously. His face

would be frozen in a rictus of total concentration, and every muscle in his body would be rigid with

the exertion of the drawing, and the process would take place in complete silence, except for the

stirring of the windchimes, the quiet whisper of the water or the scraping of his crayons and chalks

against stone.

Sylveste would often have to wait hours for Lascaille to even register his presence, which would

generally amount to nothing more than the man turning his face to him for an instant, before

continuing. Yet the same thing always happened in that instant. The rictus would soften, and in its

place would be -- if only for a moment -- a smile; one of pride or amusement or something utterly

beyond Sylveste's fathoming.

And then Lascaille would return to his chalks. And there would be nothing to suggest that this

was a man -- the only man -- the only human being -- to ever touch the surface of a Shroud and

return alive.

'Anyway,' Volyova said, quenching what remained of her thirst, 'I'm not expecting it to be easy, but

I have no doubts that I will find a recruit sooner or later. I've begun to advertise, stating our planned

destination. As far as the work is concerned, I say only that it requires someone with implants.'

'But you're not going to take the first one that comes along,' Hegazi said. 'Surely?'

'Of course not. Though they won't know it, I'll be vetting my candidates for some kind of military

experience in their backgrounds. I don't want someone who's going to crack up at the first hint of

trouble, or someone unwilling to submit to discipline.' She was beginning to relax now, after all her

difficulties with Nagorny. A girl was playing on stage, working a gold teeconax through endlessly

spiralling ragas. Volyova did not greatly care for music; never had done. But there was something

mathematically beguiling about the music which for a moment worked against her prejudices. She

said: 'I'm confident of success. We need only concern ourselves with Sajaki.'

At that moment Hegazi nodded towards the door, where bright daylight forced Volyova to squint.

A figure stood there, majestically silhouetted in the glare. The man was garbed in a black

anklelength cloak and a vaguely defined helmet, the light making it resemble a halo cast around his

head. His profile was split diagonally by a long smooth stick which he gripped two-handedly.

The Komuso stepped into the darkness. What looked like a kendo stick was only his bamboo

shakuhachi; a traditional musical instrument. With well-rehearsed rapidity he slid the thing into a

sheath concealed behind the folds of his cloak. Then, with imperial slowness, he removed the

wicker helmet. The Komuso's face was difficult to make out. His hair was brilliantined, slickly tied

back in a scythe-shaped tail. His eyes were lost behind sleek assassin's goggles, infrared sensitive

facets dully catching the room's tinted light.

The music had come to an abrupt stop, the girl with the teeconax vanishing magically from the

stage.

'They think it's a police bust,' Hegazi breathed, the room quiet enough now that he didn't need to

raise his voice. 'The local cops send in the basket-cases when they don't want to bloody their own

hands.'

The Komuso swept the room, flylike eyes targeting the table where Hegazi and Volyova sat. His

head seemed to move independently of the rest of his body, like some species of owl. With a bustle

of his cloak he cruised towards them, appearing to glide more than locomote. Nonchalantly Hegazi

kicked a spare seat out from under the table, simultaneously taking an unimpressed drag on his

cigarette.

'Good to see you, Sajaki.'

He dropped the wicker helmet next to their drinks, ripping the goggles away from his eyes as he

did so. He lowered himself into the vacant chair, then turned casually around to the rest of the bar.

He made a drinking gesture, imploring the people to get on with their own business while he

attended to his. Gradually the conversation rumbled back into life, although everyone was keeping

half an eye on the three of them.

'I wish the circumstances merited a celebratory drink,' Sajaki said.

'They don't?' Hegazi said, looking as crestfallen as his extensively modified face permitted.

'No, most certainly not.' Sajaki examined the nearly spent glasses on the table and lifted

Volyova's, downing the few drops which remained. 'I've been doing some spying, as you might

gather from my disguise. Sylveste isn't here. He isn't in this system any more. As a matter of fact, he

hasn't been here for somewhere in the region of fifty years.'

'Fifty years?' Hegazi whistled.

'That's quite a cold trail,' Volyova said. She tried not to sound gloating, but she had always

known this risk existed. When Sajaki had given the order to steer the lighthugger towards the

Yellowstone system, he had done so on the basis of the best information available to him at the

time. But that was decades ago, and the information had been decades old even when he received it.

'Yes,' Sajaki said. 'But not as cold as you might think. I know exactly where he went to, and

there's no reason to assume he's ever left the place.'

'And where would this be?' Volyova asked, with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

'A planet called Resurgam.' Sajaki placed Volyova's glass down on the table. 'It's quite some

distance from here. But I'm afraid, dear colleagues, that it must be our next port of call.'

He fell into his past again.

Deeper this time; back to when he was twelve. Pascale's flashbacks were non-sequential; the

biography was constructed with no regard for the niceties of linear time. At first he was

disorientated, even though he was the one person in the universe who ought not to have been adrift

in his own history. But the confusion slowly gave way to the realisation that her way was the right

one; that it was right to treat his past as shattered mosaic of interchangeable events; an acrostic

embedded with numerous equally legitimate interpretations.

It was 2373; only a few decades after Bernsdottir's discovery of the first Shroud. Whole academic

disciplines had sprung up around the central mystery, as well as numerous government and private

research agencies. The Sylveste Institute for Shrouder Studies was only one of dozens of such

organisations, but it also happened to be backed by one of the wealthiest -- and most powerful --

families in the whole human bubble. But when the break came, it was not via the calculated moves

of large scientific organisations. It was through one man's random and dedicated madness.

His name was Philip Lascaille.

He was a SISS scientist working at one of the permanent stations near what was now called

Lascaille's Shroud, in the trans Tau Ceti sector. Lascaille was also one of a team kept on permanent

stand-by should there ever be a need for human delegates to travel to the Shroud, although no one

considered that this was very likely. But the delegates existed, with a ship kept in readiness to carry

them the remaining five hundred million kilometres to the boundary, should the invitation ever

arrive.

Lascaille decided not to wait.

Alone, he boarded and stole the SISS contact craft. By the time anyone realised what was

happening, it was far too late to stop him. A remote destruct existed, but its use might have been

construed by the Shroud as an act of aggression, something no one wanted to risk. The decision was

to let fate take its course. No one seriously expected to see Lascaille come back alive. And though

he did eventually return, his doubters had in a sense been right, because a large portion of his sanity

had not come back with him.

Lascaille had come very close indeed to the Shroud before some force had propelled him back

out again -- perhaps only a few tens of thousands of kilometres from the surface, although at that

range there was no easy way of telling where space ended and the Shroud began. No one doubted

that he had come closer than any other human being, or for that matter any living creature.

But the cost had been horrific.

Not all of Philip Lascaille -- not even most of him -- had come back. Unlike those who had gone

before him, his body had not been pulped and shredded by incomprehensible forces near the

boundary. But something no less final appeared to have happened to his mind. Nothing remained of

his personality, except for a few residual traces which served only to heighten the almost absolute

obliteration of everything else. Enough brain function remained for him to keep himself alive

without machine assistance, and his motor control seemed completely unimpaired. But there was no

intelligence left; no sense that Lascaille perceived his surroundings except in the most simplistic

manner; no indication that he had any grasp of what had happened to him, or was even aware of the

passage of time; no indication that he retained the ability to memorise new experiences or retrieve

those that had happened to him before his trip to the Shroud. He retained the

ability to vocalise, but

while Lascaille occasionally spoke well-formed words, or even fragments of sentences, nothing he

uttered made the slightest sense.

Lascaille -- or what remained of Lascaille -- was returned to the Yellowstone system, and then to

the SISS habitat, where medical experts desperately tried to construct a theory for what might have

happened. Eventually -- and it was more out of desperation than logic -- they decided that the

fractal, restructured spacetime around the Shroud had not been able to support the information

density of his brain. In passing through it, his mind had been randomised on the quantum level,

although the molecular processes of his body had not been noticeably affected. He was like a text

which had been transcribed imprecisely -- so that much of the meaning was lost -- and then

retranscribed.

Yet Lascaille was not the last person to attempt such a suicide mission. A cult had grown up

around him, its chief rumour being that, despite his exterior signs of dementia, the passage close to

the Shroud had bestowed on him something like Nirvana. Once or twice every decade, around the

known Shrouds, someone would attempt to follow Lascaille into the boundary, and the results were

miserably uniform, and no improvement on what Lascaille himself had achieved. The lucky ones

came back with half their minds gone, while the unlucky ones never made it back at all, or did so in

ships so mangled that their human remains resembled a salmon-coloured paste.

While Lascaille's cult bloomed, people soon forgot about the man himself. Perhaps the salivating,

mumbling reality of his existence was a touch too uncomfortable.

Sylveste, however, did not forget. More than that, he had become obsessed with teasing a last,

vital truth out of the man. His familial connections guaranteed him an audience with Lascaille

whenever he wanted -- provided he ignored Calvin's forebodings. And so he had taken to visiting,

and waiting in absolute patience while Lascaille attended to his pavement drawings, ever watchful

for the one, transient clue which he knew the man would eventually bequeath him.

In the end, it was a lot more than a clue.

It was difficult to remember how long he had waited, on that day when the waiting finally paid

off. For all that he intended to focus his mind with absolute attentiveness on what Lascaille was

doing, he had been finding it increasingly difficult. It was like staring intently at a long series of

abstract paintings -- one's concentration inevitably began to wane, no matter how much one tried to

keep it fresh. Lascaille had been halfway through the sixth or seventh hopeless chalk mandala of the

day, executing the task with the same fervent dedication he brought to every mark he made.

Then, with no forewarning, he had turned to Sylveste and said, with complete clarity: 'The

Jugglers offer the key, Doctor.'

Sylveste was too shocked to interrupt.

'It was explained to me,' Lascaille continued blithely. 'While I was in Revelation Space.'

Sylveste forced himself to nod, as naturally as possible. Some still-calm part of his mind

recognised the phrase which Lascaille had spoken. As far as anyone had ever been able to tell, it

was what Lascaille now called the Shroud boundary -- 'space' in which he had been granted certain

'revelations' too abstruse to relate.

Yet now his tongue seemed to have been loosened.

'There was a time when the Shrouders travelled between the stars,' Lascaille said. 'Much as we do

now -- although they were an ancient species and had been starfaring for

many millions of years.

'They were quite alien, you know.' He paused to switch a blue chalk for a crimson one, placing it

between his toes. With that, he continued his work on the mandala. But with his hand -- now free

from that task -- he began to sketch something on an adjacent patch of ground. The creature he drew

was multi-limbed, tentacled, armour-plated, spined, barely symmetrical. It looked less like a

member of a starfaring alien culture than something which might have flopped and oozed its way

across the bed of a Precambrian ocean. It was utterly monstrous.

'That's a Shrouder?' Sylveste said, with a shiver of anticipation. 'You actually met one?'

'No; I never truly entered the Shroud,' Lascaille said. 'But they communicated with me. They

revealed themselves to my mind; imparted much of their history and nature.'

Sylveste tore his gaze away from the nightmarish creature. 'Where do the Jugglers come into it?'

'The Pattern Jugglers have been around for a long time and they're to be found on many worlds.

All starfaring cultures in this part of the galaxy encounter them sooner or later.' Lascaille tapped his

sketch. 'Just like we did, so did the Shrouders, only very much earlier. Do you understand what I'm

saying, Doctor?'

'Yes...' He thought he did, anyway. 'But not the point of it.'

Lascaille smiled. 'Whoever -- or whatever -- visits the Jugglers is remembered by them.

Remembered absolutely, that is -- down to the last cell; the last synaptic connection. That's what the

Jugglers are. A vast biological archiving system.'

This was true enough, Sylveste knew. Humans had gleaned very little of significance concerning

the Jugglers, their function or origin. But what had become clear almost from the outset was that the

Jugglers were capable of storing human personalities within their oceanic matrix, so that anyone

who swam in the Juggler sea -- and was dissolved and reconstituted in the process -- would have

achieved a kind of immortality. Later, those patterns could be realised again; temporarily imprinted

in the mind of another human. The process was muddy and biological, so the stored patterns were

contaminated by millions of other impressions, each subtly influencing the other. Even in the early

days of Juggler exploration it had been obvious that the ocean had stored patterns of alien thought;

hints of otherness bleeding into the thoughts of the swimmers -- but these impressions had always

remained indistinct.

'So the Shrouders were remembered by the Jugglers,' Sylveste said. 'But how does that help us?'

'More than you realise. The Shrouders may look alien, but the basic architectures of their minds

were not completely dissimilar to our own. Ignore the bodyplan; realise instead that they were

social creatures with a verbal language and the same perceptual environment. To some degree, a

human could be made to think like a Shrouder, without becoming completely inhuman in the

process.' He looked at Sylveste again. 'It would be within the capabilities of the Jugglers to instil a

Shrouder neural transform within a human neocortex.'

It was a chilling thought: achieve contact not by meeting an alien, but by becoming it. If that was

what Lascaille meant. 'How would that help us?'

'It would stop the Shroud from killing you.'

'I don't follow you.'

'Understand that the Shroud is a protective structure. What lies within are... not just the Shrouders

themselves, but technologies which are simply too powerful to be allowed to fall into the wrong

hands. Over millions of years, the Shrouders combed the galaxy seeking harmful things left over by

extinct cultures -- things which I can almost not even begin to describe to you. Things which may

once have served good, but which are also capable of being used as weapons of unimaginable

horror. Technologies and techniques which may only be deployed by ascended races: means of

manipulating spacetime, or of moving faster-than-light... other things which your mind literally

can't encompass.'

Sylveste wondered if that really were the case. 'Then the Shrouds are -- what? Treasure chests,

where only the most advanced races get the keys?'

'More than that. They defend themselves against intruders. A Shroud's boundary is almost a

living thing. It responds to the thought patterns of those who enter it. If the patterns do not resemble

those of the Shrouders... it fights back. It alters spacetime locally, creating vicious eddies of

curvature. Curvature equals gravitational shear stress, Doctor. It rips you apart. But the right kinds

of mind... the Shroud admits them; guides them closer, protects them in a pocket of quiet space.'

The implications, Sylveste saw, were shattering. Think like a Shrouder and one could slip past

those defences... into the glittering heart of the treasure box. So what if humans were not advanced

enough by Shrouder reckoning to behold that treasure? If they were clever enough to break open the

box, were they not entitled to take what they found? According to Lascaille, the Shrouders had

assumed the role of galactic matron when they secreted those harmful technologies... but had

anyone asked them to do it? Then another question ghosted into his mind.

'Why did they let you know this, if what was inside the Shrouds had to be protected at all costs?'

'I don't know if it was intentional. The barrier around the Shroud that bears my name must have

failed to identify me as alien, if only fleetingly. Perhaps it was damaged, or perhaps my... state of

mind... confused it. Once I had begun to penetrate the Shroud, information began to flow between

us. That was how I learned these things. What the Shroud contained, and how its defences might be

circumvented. It's not a trick machines can learn, you know.' The last remark seemed to have come

from nowhere; for a moment it hung there before Lascaille continued. 'But the Shroud must have

begun to suspect that I was foreign. It rejected me; flung me back out into space.'

'Why didn't it just kill you?'

'It must not have been completely confident in its judgement.' He paused. 'In Revelation Space, I

did sense doubt. Vast arguments taking place around me, quicker than thought. In the end, caution

must have won the day.'

Now another question; the one he had wanted to ask since the moment Lascaille had opened his

mouth.

'Why have you waited until now to tell us these things?'

'I apologise for my earlier reticence. But first I had to digest the knowledge that the Shrouders

had placed in my mind. It was in their terms, you see -- not ours.' He hesitated, his attention

seemingly drawn to a smudge of chalk which was marring the mathematical purity of his mandala.

He licked his finger and rubbed it away. 'That was the easy part. Then I had to remember how

humans communicate.' Lascaille looked at Sylveste, his animal eyes veiled by a Neanderthal tangle

of uncombed hair. 'You've been kind to me, not like the others. You had patience with me. I thought

this might help you.'

Sylveste sensed that this window of lucidity might soon be closing. 'How exactly do we persuade

the Jugglers to imprint the Shrouder consciousness pattern?'

'That's the easy part.' He nodded at the chalk drawing. 'Memorise this figure, and hold it in mind

when you swim.'

'That's all?'

'It will suffice. The internal representation of this figure in your mind will instruct the Jugglers as

to your needs. You'd better take them a gift, of course. They don't do something of this magnitude

for free.'

'A gift?'

Sylveste was wondering what kind of gift one could possibly offer to an entity which resembled a

floating island of seaweed and algae.

'You'll think of something. Whatever it is, make sure it's information-dense. Otherwise you'll

bore them. You wouldn't want to bore them.' Sylveste wanted to ask further questions, but

Lascaille's attention had returned to his chalk drawings. 'That's all I have to say,' the man said.

It turned out to be the case.

Lascaille never spoke to Sylveste, or anyone else again. A month later they found him dead,

drowned in the fishpond.

'Hello?' Khouri said. 'Is there anyone here?'

She had awoken, that was all she knew. Not from a catnap, either, but from something much

deeper, longer and colder. A reefersleep fugue, almost certainly -- they were not something you

forgot, and she had woken from one before, around Yellowstone. The physiological and neural

signs were exactly right. There was no sign of a reefersleep casket -- she was lying, fully-clothed,

on a couch -- but someone could easily have moved her before she was properly conscious. Who,

though? And where was she? It seemed as if someone had tossed a grenade into her memory,

blowing it into frags. The place where she found herself now was only teasingly familiar.

Someone's hallway? Wherever it was, it was filled with ugly sculptures. She had either walked

past these things a matter of hours ago, or else they were recessive figments from the depths of her

childhood; nursery horrors. Their curved, jagged and burnt shapes loomed over her, casting

demonlike shadows. Groggily she intuited that these things fitted together in some way, or had once

done so, though they were perhaps too warped and torn for that now.

Footsteps padded unsteadily across the hallway.

She twisted her head to view the approaching person. Her neck felt stiffer than cured wood.

Years of experience had told her that the rest of her body would be no more supple after the sleep

fugue.

The man stopped a few paces from her bed. In the moonlight glow of the chamber it was hard to

read his features, but there was a familiarity within the shadowed jowliness that tugged at her

memory. Someone she had known, many years ago.

'It's me,' he said, the voice wet and phlegmatic. 'Manoukhian. The Mademoiselle thought you

might appreciate a familiar face when you woke up.'

The names meant something to her, but exactly what, it was hard to say. 'What happened?'

'Simple. She made you an offer you couldn't refuse.'

'How long have I been asleep?'

'Twenty-two years,' Manoukhian said, offering her a hand. 'Now, shall we go and see the

Mademoiselle?'

Sylveste woke facing a wall of black which swallowed half the sky -- a black so total that it seemed

like a nullification of existence itself. He had never noticed it before, but now he saw -- or imagined

he saw -- that the ordinary darkness between the stars was in fact aglow with its own milky

luminosity. But there were no stars in the circular pool of emptiness which was Lascaille's Shroud;

no source of any light whatsoever, no photons arriving from any part of the detectable

electromagnetic spectrum; no neutrinos of any flavour, no particles, exotic or otherwise. No gravity

waves, electrostatic or magnetic fields -- not even the slight whisper of Hawking radiation which,

according to the few extant theories of Shroud mechanics, ought to be bleeding out of the boundary,

reflecting the entropic temperature of the surface.

None of these things happened. The only thing a Shroud did -- so far as anyone had ever been

able to tell -- was to comprehensively obstruct all forms of radiation attempting to pass through it.

That, of course, and the other thing: which was to shred any object daring to pass too close to its

boundary.

They had woken him from reefersleep, and now he was in the state of sickening disorientation

which accompanied the crash revival, yet young enough to weather the effects: his physiological

age was only thirty-three, despite the fact that more than sixty years had passed since his birth.

'Am I... all right?' he struggled to ask the revival medicos, while all the time his attention was

being snared by the nothingness beyond the station window, like someone staring into the black

counterpart of a snowstorm.

'You're almost clear,' said the medico next to him, watching neural readouts scroll through

midair, digesting their import with quiet taps of a stylus against his lower lip. 'But Valdez faded.

That means Lefevre's bumped up to primary. Think you can work with her?'

'Bit late for doubts now, isn't it?'

'It's a joke, Dan. Now, how much do you remember? Revival amnesia's the one thing I haven't

scanned for.'

It seemed like a stupid question, but as soon as he interrogated his memory, he found it

responding sluggishly, like a document retrieval system in an inefficient bureaucracy.

'Do you remember Spindrift?' the medico asked, with a note of concern in his voice. 'It's vital that

you remember Spindrift...'

He remembered it, yes -- but for a moment he could not connect it with any other memories.

What he remembered -- the last thing he remembered which was not adrift -- was Yellowstone.

They left it twelve years after the Eighty; twelve years after Calvin's corporeal death; twelve years

after Philip Lascaille had spoken to Sylveste; twelve years after the man had drowned himself, his

purpose seemingly fulfilled.

The expedition was small but well equipped -- a lighthugger crew, partially chimeric, Ultranauts

who seldom mingled with the other humans; twenty scientists largely culled from SISS, and four

potential contact delegates. Only two of the four would actually travel to the surface of the Shroud.

Lascaille's Shroud was their objective, but not their first port of call. Sylveste had heeded what

Lascaille had told him; the Pattern Jugglers were vital to the success of his mission. It was first

necessary to visit them on their own world, tens of light-years from the Shroud. Even then Sylveste

had little idea of what to expect. But, rash as it seemed, he trusted Lascaille's advice. The man

would not have broken his silence for nothing.

The Jugglers had been a curiosity for more than a century. They existed on a number of worlds,

all of them dominated by single planet-sized oceans. The Jugglers were a biochemical

consciousness distributed through each ocean, composed of trillions of co-acting micro-organisms,

arranged into island-sized clumps. All the Jugglers' worlds were tectonically active, and it was

theorised that the Jugglers drew their energy from hydrothermal outlet vents on the seabed; that the

heat was converted to bioelectrical energy and transferred to the surface via tendrils of organic

superconductor draping down through kilometres of black cold. The Jugglers' purpose -- assuming

they had a purpose -- remained completely unknown. It was clear that they had the ability to

mediate the biospheres of the worlds in which they had been seeded, acting like a single,

intelligently acting mass of phytoplankton -- but no one knew if this was merely secondary to some

hidden, higher function. What was known -- and again not properly understood -- was that the

Jugglers had the capacity to store and retrieve information, acting like a single, planet-wide neural

net. This information was stored on many levels, from the gross connectivity patterns of surface-

floating tendrils, down to free-floating strands of RNA. It was impossible to say where the oceans

began and the Jugglers ended -- just as it was impossible to say whether each world contained many

Jugglers or merely one arbitrarily extended individual, for the islands themselves were linked by

organic bridges. They were world-sized living repositories of information; vast informational

sponges. Almost anything entering a Juggler ocean would be penetrated by microscopic tendrils,

partially dissolved, until its structural and chemical properties had been revealed, and that

information would then be passed into the biochemical storage of the ocean itself. As Lascaille had

intimated, the Jugglers could imprint these patterns as well as encode them. Supposedly those

patterns could include the mentalities of other species which had come into contact with the

Jugglers -- such as the Shrouders.

Human study teams had been investigating the Pattern Jugglers for many decades. Humans

swimming in the Juggler-infested ocean were able to enter rapport states with the organism, as

Juggler micro-tendrils filtered temporarily into the human neocortex, establishing quasi-synaptic

links between the swimmers' minds and the rest of the ocean. It was, they said, like communing

with sentient algae. Trained swimmers reported feeling their consciousness expand to include the

entire ocean, their memories becoming vast, verdant and ancient. Their perceptual boundaries

became malleable, although at no point was there any sense that the ocean itself was truly self-

aware; more that it was a mirror, massively reflecting human consciousness: the ultimate solipsism.

Swimmers made startling breakthroughs in mathematics, as if the ocean had

enhanced their creative

faculties. Some even reported that these boosts persisted for some time after they had left the

oceanic matrix and returned to dry land or orbit. Was it possible that some physical change had

taken place in their minds?

So it was that the concept of the Juggler transform arose. With additional training, the swimmers

learned how to select specific forms of transform. Neurologists stationed on the Juggler world

attempted to map the brain alterations wrought by the aliens, but with only partial success. The

transformations were extraordinarily subtle, more akin to retuning a violin than ripping it apart and

building it from scratch. They were rarely permanent -- days, weeks or, very occasionally, years

later, the transform would fade.

Such was the state of knowledge when Sylveste's expedition reached the Juggler world Spindrift.

Now he remembered it, of course -- the oceans; the tides; the volcanic chains and the constant,

overpowering seaweedy stench of the organism itself. Smell unlocked the rest. All four potential

Shrouder contact delegates had learnt the chalk diagram on a deep level of recall. After months of

training with expert swimmers, the four entered the ocean and filled their minds with the form

Lascaille had given them.

The Juggler had reached into them, partially dissolved their minds, and then restructured them

according to its own embedded templates.

When the four emerged, it seemed at first that Lascaille had been crazy after all.

They did not exhibit freakishly alien modes of behaviour, nor had they suddenly gained answers

to the great cosmic mysteries. Questioned, none of them reported feeling particularly different, nor

were they any the wiser about the identity or nature of the Shrouders. But sensitive neurological

tests probed deeper than human intuition. The spatial and cognitive skills of the four had changed,

though in ways that were perplexingly difficult to quantify. As days passed, they reported

experiencing states of mind that were -- paradoxically -- both familiar and yet utterly alien.

Evidently something had changed, though no one could be sure that the states of mind they were

experiencing had any connection with the Shrouders.

Nonetheless, they had to move quickly.

As soon as the initial tests were complete, the four delegates entered

reefersleep. The cold

prevented the Juggler transforms from decaying, though they would inevitably begin to fade once

the four were awakened, despite a complicated regimen of experimental neuro-stabilising drugs.

They were kept asleep throughout the voyage to Lascaille's Shroud, then for weeks in the vicinity of

the object itself, as their study station was manoeuvred closer, within the nominal 3 AU safe

distance which it had maintained until that point. Even then, the delegates were not awoken until the

eve of their trip to the surface.

'I... remember,' Sylveste said. 'I remember Spindrift.' And then there was a moment while the

medico kept tapping his stylus against his lips, assimilating the reams of information pouring from

the medical analysis systems, before nodding and passing him fit for the mission.

'The old place has changed a bit,' Manoukhian said.

He was right, Khouri saw. She was looking out over something she hardly recognised as Chasm

City. The Mosquito Net was gone. Now the city was open to the elements once more, its buildings

rising nakedly into Yellowstone's atmosphere where once they had sheltered beneath the merged

drapery of the domes. The Mademoiselle's black chateau was no longer amongst the tallest

structures. Tiered, aero-formed monsters knifed into the broiling brown sky, like sharks' fins, or

blades of spinifex, slashed by countless scores of tiny windows, emblazoned with the giant

Boolean-logic symbols of the Conjoiners. Like yacht sails, the buildings rose from what remained

of the Mulch on slim masts so that their leading edges cut into the wind. Only a scattering of the old

gnarled architecture remained, and only a vestigial remnant of the Canopy. The old city forest had

been slashed into history by the shining bladelike towers.

'They grew something in the chasm,' Manoukhian said. 'Right down in the depths. They call it the

Lilly.' His voice took on a tone of fascinated repulsion. 'People who've seen it say it's like a huge

piece of breathing viscera, like a piece of God's stomach. It's fastened to the walls of the chasm. The

stuff belching out of the depths is poisonous, but by the time it's been through the Lilly it's just

about breathable.'

'All this in twenty-two years?'

'Yes,' someone answered. Movement played in the gloss-black armour of the shutters. Khouri

turned around in time to catch a palanquin resting silently. Seeing it, she remembered the Mademoi-

selle, and much else too. It was as if no more than a minute had elapsed since their last meeting.

'Thank you for bringing her here, Carlos.'

'Will that be all?'

'I think so.' Her voice echoed slightly. 'Time is of the essence, you see. Even after all these years.

I've located a crew who need someone like Khouri, but they won't wait for more than a few days

before leaving the system. She will need to be educated, primed in her role, and introduced to them

before we lose this opportunity.'

'What if I say no?' Khouri said.

'But you won't, will you? Not now that you know what I can do for you. You do remember, don't

you?'

'It's not something you forget very easily.' She remembered clearly now what the Mademoiselle

had shown her: that the other reefersleep casket held someone. The person inside had been Fazil,

her husband. Despite what she had been told, she had never been separated from him. The two of

them had both come from Sky's Edge, the clerical error more benign than she had imagined. Yet she

had still been deceived. Evidence of the Mademoiselle's handiwork was clear from the outset.

Khouris job working as a Shadowplay assassin had come about a little too easily: in hindsight, the

role had served only to demonstrate her fitness for the task ahead. As for ensuring her compliance,

that was simplicity itself. The Mademoiselle had Fazil. If Khouri refused to do what was required of

her, she would never see her husband again.

'I knew you would see sense,' the Mademoiselle said. 'What I ask of you is really not so difficult,

Khouris.'

'What about the crew you've found?'

'They're just traders,' Manoukhian said soothingly. 'I used to be one myself, you know. That's

how I came to rescue...'

'Enough, Carlos.'

'Sorry.' He looked back at the palanquin. 'All I'm saying is, how bad can they be?'

By accident or subconscious design -- it was never entirely clear -- the SISS contact craft resembled

an infinity symbol: two lobelike modules packed with life support equipment, sensors and comms

gear, spaced by a collar rimmed with thrusters and additional sensor arrays. Two people could fit

into either of the lobes, and in the event of a mid-mission neural fadeout, one or both of the lobes

could be ejected.

Ramping up thrust, the contact craft fell towards the Shroud, while the station made a retreat back

beyond the safe range, towards the waiting lighthugger. Pascale's narrative showed the craft

dwindling to ever-smaller size, until only the livid glare of its thrust and the pulsing red and green

of its running lights remained, and then grew steadily fainter; the surrounding blackness seeming to

occlude it like spreading ink.

No one could be certain of what happened thereafter. In the events which followed, most of the

information gleaned by Sylveste and Lefevre on their approach was lost, including the data

transmitted back to the station and the lighthugger. Not only were the timescales uncertain, but even

the precise order of events was questionable. All that was known was what Sylveste himself

remembered -- and as Sylveste, by his own admission, underwent periods of altered or diminished

consciousness in the vicinity of the Shroud, his memories could not be taken as the literal truth of

events.

What was known was this.

Sylveste and Lefevre approached closer to the Shroud than any human being had ever done, even

Lascaille. If what Lascaille had told them was true, then their transforms were fooling the Shroud's

defences; forcing it to envelop them in a pocket of flattened spacetime while the rest of the

boundary seethed with vicious gravitational riptides. No one, even now, pretended to understand

how this might be happening: how the Shroud's buried mechanisms were able to curve spacetime

through such insanely sharp geometries, when a folding a billion times less severe should have

required more energy than was stored in the entire rest-mass of the galaxy. Nor did anyone

understand how consciousness could bleed into the spacetime around the Shroud, so that the Shroud

itself could recognise the sorts of minds which were attempting to gain passage into its heart, and at

the same time reshape the thoughts and memories of those same minds. Evidently there was some

hidden link between thought itself and the underlying processes of spacetime; the one influencing

the other. Sylveste had found references to an antiquated theory, centuries dead, which had

proposed a link between the quantum processes of consciousness and the

quantum-gravitational

mechanisms which underpinned spacetime, through the unification of something called the Weyl

curvature tensor... but consciousness was no better understood now; the theory was as speculative

as it had ever been. Perhaps, though, in the vicinity of the Shroud, any faint linkage between

consciousness and spacetime was massively amplified. Sylveste and Lefevre were thinking their

way through the storm, their reshaped minds calming the gravitational forces which seethed around

them, only metres from the skin of their ship. They were like snake-charmers, moving through a pit

of cobras, their music defining a tiny region of safety. Safe, that was, until the music stopped

playing -- or began to grow discordant -- and the snakes began to break out of their hypnotic

placidity. It would never be entirely clear how close Sylveste and Lefevre got to the Shroud before

the music soured and the cobras of gravity began to stir.

Sylveste claimed they were never within the Shroud boundary itself -- by his own visual

evidence, more than half of the sky remained full of stars. Yet what little data was salvaged from

the study ship suggested that the contact module was by then well inside the fractal foam

surrounding the Shroud -- well within the object's own infinitely blurred boundary, well within what

Lascaille had called Revelation Space.

She knew when it began to happen. Terrified, but icily calm, she told Sylveste the news. Her

Shrouder transform was breaking up, her veil of alien perception beginning to thin, leaving only

human thoughts. It was what they had feared all along, but prayed would not happen.

Quickly they informed the study station and ran psych tests to verify what she was saying. The

truth was appallingly clear. Her transform was collapsing. In a few minutes, her mind would lack

the Shrouder component and would be unable to calm the snakes through which they walked. She

was forgetting the music.

Even though they had prayed this would not happen, they had taken precautions. Lefevre

retreated into the opposite half of the module and fired the separation charges, amputating her part

of the ship from Sylveste's. By then her transform was almost gone. Via the audio-visual link

between the two separated parts of the craft, she informed Sylveste that she could feel gravitational

forces building, twisting and pulling at her body in viciously unpredictable ways.

Thrusters sought to move her module away from the curdled space around the Shroud, but the

object was just too large, and she too small. Within minutes the stresses were tearing at the craft's

thin hull, though Lefevre remained alive, huddled foetally in the last dwindling pocket of quiet

space focused on her brain. Sylveste lost contact with her just as the craft burst asunder. Her air was

sucked quickly out, but the decompression did not happen quickly enough to entirely snatch away

her screams.

Lefevre was dead, Sylveste knew it. But his transform was still holding the snakes at bay.

Bravely, more alone than any human being in history, Sylveste continued his descent into the

Shroud boundary.

Some time later Sylveste awoke in the silence of his craft. Disorientated, he tried to contact the

study station which was supposedly awaiting his return. But there was no answer. The study station

and the lighthugger were lifeless, almost destroyed. Some kind of gravitational spasm had passed

him by and peeled them open, eviscerating them just as thoroughly as Lefevre's craft had been. The

crew and back-up members of his team had been killed instantly, along with the Ultras. He alone

had survived.

But for what? To die, only far more slowly?

Sylveste steered his module back to what remained of the station and the lighthugger. For a

moment his thoughts were empty of the Shrouders, focused only on survival.

Working alone, living within the cramped confines of the pod, Sylveste spent weeks learning

how to jump-start the lighthugger's crippled repair systems. The Shroud spasm had vaporised or

shredded thousands of tonnes of the lighthugger's mass, but it only had to carry one man home now.

When the recuperative processes were in swing he was able to sleep, finally -
- not daring to believe

that he would actually succeed. And in those dreams, Sylveste gradually became aware of a

momentous, paralysing truth. After Carine Lefevre was killed, and before he regained

consciousness, something had happened. Something had reached into his mind and spoken to him.

But the message that was imparted to him was so brutally alien that Sylveste could not begin to put

it into human terms.

He had stepped into Revelation Space.

FIVE

Carousel New Brazilia, Yellowstone, Epsilon Eridani, 2546

'I'm at the bar,' Volyova said into her bracelet, pausing at the entrance to the Juggler and the

Shrouder. She regretted suggesting that this be the meeting point -- she despised the establishment

almost as much as she despised its clientele -- but when she had arranged a rendezvous with the

new candidate she had not been able to suggest an alternative.

'Is the recruit there yet?' Sajaki's voice said.

'Not unless she's very early. If she arrives on time, and our meeting proceeds favourably, we

should be leaving in an hour.'

'I'll be ready.'

Squaring her shoulders she pushed on in, instantly assembling a mental map of the occupants.

The air was still full of cloying pink perfume. Even the girl playing the teeconax was making the

same nervous moves. Disturbingly liquid sounds emanated from the girl's cortex, amplified by the

instrument and then modulated by the pressure of her fingers on its complex, spectrally coloured

touch-sensitive fretboard. Her music toiled up staircase-like ragas, then

splintered into nerve-

shredding atonal passages which sounded like a pride of lions dragging their foreclaws down sheets

of rusty iron. Volyova had heard that you had to have specialised neuro-auditory implants before

teeconax music made any sense.

She found a barside stool and ordered a single vodka; a hypo was stashed in her pocket ready to

blast her back to sobriety when she needed it. She was resigned to the fact that it might be a very

long evening waiting for the recruit to show up. Usually this would have made her impatient but --

to her surprise -- she felt relaxed and attentive, despite the surroundings. Perhaps the air was spiked

with psychotropic chemicals, but she felt better than she had in months, even allowing for the news

that the crew were now to journey to Resurgam. Yet it was good to be around humans again, even

the specimens who frequented the bar. Whole minutes passed while she watched their animated

faces, serenely entranced by conversations she could not hear, imagining for herself the travellers'

tales they were imparting. A girl inhaled from a hookah and blew out a long jetstream of smoke

before cracking up as her partner reached the punchline in some outlandish joke. A bald man with a

dragon tattoo on his scalp was boasting about how he had flown through a gas giant's atmosphere

with his autopilot dead, his Juggler-configured mind solving atmospheric flow equations like he had

been born to it. Another group of Ultras, turned ghostly by the wan blue lighting above their alcove,

played a heated card game. One man was having to payoff his debt by losing a lock from his hair.

His friends were holding him down while the winner claimed his pleated prize, slicing through the

man's braid with a pocket knife.

What did Khouri look like again?

Volyova fished the card from her jacket, palming it unobtrusively and taking a last look at it. Ana

Khouri, the name said, along with a few terse lines of biographical data. There was nothing about

this woman that would make her stand out in any normal bar, but here her very ordinariness would

have the same effect. Judging by the photograph, she would look slightly more out of place than

Volyova herself, if that was possible.

Not that Volyova was complaining. Khouri looked like a remarkably suitable candidate for the

vacant position. Volyova had already hacked into the system's remaining data-networks -- those

which still functioned after the plague -- and drawn up a shortlist of individuals who might suit her

needs. Khouri had been among that number; an ex-soldier from Sky's Edge. But Khouri had been

impossible to trace, and eventually Volyova had given up, concentrating on other candidates. None

of the others had really been what she was looking for, but she had kept searching anyway, growing

steadily more despondent as each candidate failed to fit the bill. More than once Sajaki had

suggested they just kidnap someone -- as if recruiting someone under false pretences was somehow

less of a crime. But kidnapping was too random: it still did not guarantee she would end up with

someone she could work with.

Then Khouri had approached them out of the blue. She had heard that Volyova's crew were

looking for someone to join their ship, and she was ready to leave Yellowstone. She had not

mentioned her military background, but Volyova already knew about that; doubtless Khouri was

just being cautious. The odd thing was, Khouri had not actually approached them until Sajaki -- in

accordance with the standard protocols of trade -- had announced the change of destination.

'Captain Volyova? It's you, isn't it?'

Khourī was small, wiry and dourly dressed, and did not subscribe to any recognisable Ultra

fashions. Her black hair was cut only an inch longer than Volyova's; short enough to make it

obvious that her skull was not pierced by any clumsy input jacks or nerve-link interfaces. No

guarantee that her head was not jam-packed with humming little machines, but it was certainly

nothing she flaunted. The woman's face was a neutral composite of the genotypes which

predominated on her homeworld, Sky's Edge; harmonious without being striking. Her mouth was

small, straight and inexpressive, but that blandness was counterbalanced by the woman's eyes. They

were dark, almost colourlessly so, but they glistened with a disarming inner prescience. For a tiny

fraction of a moment, Volyova believed that Khourī had already seen through her tawdry skein of

lies.

'Yes,' Volyova said. 'You must be Ana Khourī.' She kept her voice low, for having reached

Khourī, the last thing she wanted was any other hopefuls within earshot trying to barge aboard. 'I

understand you contacted our trade persona regarding possibilities for crewing with us.'

'I only just reached the carousel. I thought I'd try you first, before I went on to

the crews who are

advertising now.'

Volyova sniffed at her vodka. 'Odd strategy, if you don't mind my saying so.'

'Why? The other crews are getting so many applicants they're only interviewing via sim.' She

took a perfunctory sip of her water. 'I prefer dealing with humans. It was just a question of going

after a different crew.'

'Oh,' Volyova said. 'Ours is very different, believe me.'

'But you're traders, right?'

Volyova nodded enthusiastically. 'We've almost finished our dealings around Yellowstone. Not

too productive, I must say. Economy's in the doldrums. We'll probably pop back in a century or two

and see if things have picked up, but personally, I wouldn't mind if I never saw the place again.'

'So if I wanted to sign up for your ship I'd have to make my mind up pretty soon?'

'Of course, we'd have to make our minds up about you first.'

Khoury looked at her closely. 'There are other candidates?'

'I'm not really at liberty to discuss that.'

'I imagine there would be. I mean, Sky's Edge... there must be plenty of people who'd want to hop

a lift there, even if they had to crew to pay their way.'

Sky's Edge? Volyova tried to keep a straight face, marvelling at their luck.
The only reason

Khouri had come forward was because she still thought they were going to
the Edge, rather than

Resurgam. Somehow she remained unaware of Sajaki's announced change of
destination.

'There are worse places one could imagine,' Volyova said.

'Well, I'm keen to jump to the head of the line.' A perspex cloud sailed
between them, dangling

from its ceiling track, wobbling with its cargo of drinks and narcotics. 'What
exactly is this position

you have open?'

'It would be a lot easier if I explained things aboard the ship. You didn't
forget that overnight bag,

did you?'

'Of course not. I want this position, you know.'

Volyova smiled. 'I'm very glad to hear it.'

Cuvier, Resurgam, 2563

Calvin Sylveste was manifesting in his luxurious seigneurial chair at one end
of the prison room.

'I've got something interesting to tell you,' he said, stroking his beard.

'Though I don't think you're

going to like it.'

'Make it quick; Pascale will be here shortly.'

Calvin's permanent look of amusement deepened. 'Actually, it's Pascale I'm talking about. You're

rather fond of her, aren't you?'

'It's no concern of yours whether I am or not.' Sylveste sighed; he had known this would lead to

difficulties. The biography was nearing completion now and he had been privy to most of it. For all

its technical accuracies, for all the myriad ways in which it could be experienced, it remained what

Girardieau had always planned: a cunningly engineered weapon of precision propaganda. Through

the biography's subtle filter, there was no way to view any aspect of his past in a light which was

not damaging to him; no way to avoid his depiction as an egomaniacal, single-minded tyrant:

capacious of intellect, but utterly heartless in the way he used people around him. In this, Pascale

had been undoubtedly clever. If Sylveste had not known the facts himself, he would have accepted

the biography's slant uncritically. It had the stamp of truth.

That was hard enough to accept, but what made it immeasurably harder was how much of this

harming portrait had been shaped by the testimonials of people who had known him. And chief

among these -- the most hurting of all -- had been Calvin. Reluctantly, Sylveste had allowed Pascale

access to the beta-level simulation. He had done so under duress, but there had been -- at the time --

what appeared to be compensations.

'I want the obelisk relocated and excavated,' Sylveste said. 'Girardieau promised me access to

field data if I assisted in destroying my own character. I've kept my side of the deal handsomely.

How about the government reciprocating?'

'It won't be easy...' Pascale had begun.

'No; but neither will it be a massive drain on Inundationist resources.'

'I'll speak to him,' she said, without much in the way of assurance. 'Provided you let me talk to

Calvin whenever I want.'

It was the devil of all deals; he had known so at the time. But it had seemed worth it, if only to

see the obelisk again, and not just the tiny part which had been uncovered before the coup.

Remarkably, Nils Girardieau had kept his word. It had taken four months, but a team had found

the abandoned dig and removed the obelisk. It had not been painstakingly done, but Sylveste had

not expected otherwise. It was enough that the thing had been unearthed in one piece. Now a

holographic representation of it could be called into existence in his room at his whim; any part of

the surface enlarged for inspection. The text had been beguiling; difficult to parse. The complicated

map of the solar system was still unnervingly accurate to his eyes. Below it -- too deep to have been

seen before -- was what looked like the same map, on a much larger scale, so that it encompassed

the entire system out to the cometary halo. Pavonis was actually a wide binary; two stars spaced by

ten light hours. The Amarantin seemed to have known that, for they had marked the second star's

orbit conspicuously. For a moment, Sylveste wondered why he had never seen the other star at

night: it would be dim, but still much brighter than any of the other stars in the sky. Then he

remembered that the other star no longer shone. It was a neutron star; the burnt-out corpse of a star

which would once have shone hot and blue. It was so dark that it had not been detected before the

first interstellar probes. A cluster of unfamiliar graphicforms attended the neutron star's orbit.

He had no idea what it meant.

Worse, there were similar maps lower down the obelisk which were at least consistent with other

solar systems, although it was nothing he could prove. How could the

Amarantin have obtained

such data -- the other planets, the neutron star, other systems -- without a spacefaring capability

comparable to humankind's?

Perhaps the crucial question was the age of the obelisk. The context layer suggested nine hundred

and ninety thousand years, placing the burial within a thousand years of the Event -- but in terms of

validating his theory, he needed a much more precise estimate than that. On her last visit he had

asked Pascale to run a TE measurement on the obelisk; he hoped she was going to give him the

answer when she arrived.

'She's been useful to me,' he said to Calvin, who responded with a look of derision. 'I don't expect

you to understand that.'

'Perhaps not. I could still tell you what I've learned.'

There was no point delaying it. 'Well?'

'Her surname isn't Dubois.' Calvin smiled, drawing out the moment. 'It's Girardieau. She's his

daughter. And you, dear boy, have been had.'

They exited the Juggler and the Shrouder into the carousel's sweaty impression of planetary night.

Outlaw capuchin monkeys were descending from the trees which lined the

mall, ready for a session

of prehensile pickpocketing. Burundi drums pounded from somewhere around the curve. Neon

lightning strobed in serpentlike shapes in the billowing clouds which hung from the rafters. Khouri

had heard that it sometimes rained, but so far she had been spared this particular piece of

meteorological verisimilitude.

'We've a shuttle docked at the hub,' Volyova said. 'We'll just need to take a spoke elevator and

clear outbound customs.'

The elevator car they rode in was rattling, unheated, piss-smelling and empty, apart from a

helmeted Komuso who sat pensively on a bench, his shakuhachi resting between his knees. Khouri

assumed that his presence had made other people decide to wait for the next car in the endless

paternoster which rode between the hub and the rim.

The Mademoiselle stood next to the Komuso, hands clasped matronly behind her back, dressed in

a floorlength electric-blue gown, black hair pulled into a severe bun.

'You're much too tense,' she said. 'Volyova will suspect you have something to hide.'

'Go away.'

Volyova glanced in her direction. 'Did you say something?'

'I said it's cold in here.'

Volyova seemed to take far too long to digest the statement. 'Yes. I suppose it is.'

'You don't have to speak out loud,' the Mademoiselle replied. 'You don't even have to

subvocalise. Just imagine yourself speaking what you wish me to hear. The implant detects the

ghost impulses generated in your speech area. Go on; try it.'

'Go away,' Khouri said, or rather imagined herself thinking it. 'Get the hell out of my head. This

was never in the contract.'

'My dear,' the Mademoiselle said, 'there never was any contract, merely a -- what shall I say? A

gentlewomen's agreement?' She looked directly at Khouri as if expecting some kind of response.

Khouri merely stared, venomously. 'Oh, very well,' the woman said. 'But I promise you I shall be

back before very long.'

She popped out of existence.

'Can't wait,' Khouri said quietly.

'Pardon?' Volyova asked.

'I said I can't wait,' Khouri answered. 'I mean until we get out of this damn elevator.'

Before very long they reached the hub, cleared customs and boarded the shuttle, a non-

atmospheric craft consisting of a sphere with four thruster pods splayed out at right angles. The ship

was called the *Melancholia of Departure*, the kind of ironic name Ultras favoured for their craft.

The interior had the ribbed look of a whale's gut. Volyova told her to go forward through a series of

bulkheads and gullet-like crawlspaces until they reached the thing's bridge. There were a few bucket

seats, together with a console displaying reams of avionics gibberish, latticed by delicate entoptics.

Volyova thumbed one of the visual readouts, causing a small, traylike device to chug out of a black

recess in the side of the console. The tray was gridded with an oldstyle keyboard. Volyova's fingers

danced on the keys, causing a subtle change to sweep through the avionics data.

Khouri realised with a tingling feeling that the woman had no implants; that her fingers were

actually one of the ways by which she communicated.

'Buckle in,' Volyova said. 'There's so much garbage floating round Yellowstone we might have to

pull some gee-loads.'

Khouri did as she was told. For all the discomfort which ensued, it was her first chance to relax in

days. Much had happened since her revival, all of it hectic. In all the time she had been asleep in

Chasm City, the Mademoiselle had been waiting for a ship to arrive which was carrying on to

Resurgam, and -- given Resurgam's lack of importance in the ever-shifting web of interstellar

commerce -- the wait had been a long one. That was the trouble with lighthuggers. No individual,

no matter how powerful, could ever own one now unless it had already been in their possession for

centuries. The Conjoiners were no longer manufacturing drives and people who already owned

ships were in no mind to sell them.

Khouri knew that the Mademoiselle had not been searching passively. Nor had Volyova.

Volyova -- so the Mademoiselle said -- had unleashed a search program into Yellowstone's data

network, what she called a bloodhound. A mere human -- even a mere computerised monitor --

could not have detected the dog's elaborate sniffing. But the Mademoiselle was seemingly neither of

these things, and she sensed the dog the way a pond-skater feels ripples in the membrane on which

it walks.

What she did next was clever.

She whistled to the bloodhound until it came bounding towards her. Then she casually broke the

thing's neck, but not before she had flensed it open and examined its informational innards, working

out just what it was that the dog had been sent to find. The gist was that the dog had been sent to

retrieve supposedly secret information relating to individuals who had had slaver experience;

exactly what one would have expected from a group of Ultras who were searching for a crewperson

to fill a vacancy on their ship. But there was something else. Something a tiny bit strange, which

pricked the Mademoiselle's curiosity.

Why were they looking for someone with military activity in their backgrounds?

Perhaps they were disciplinarians: professional traders who were operating one level above the

normal state of play of commerce, ruthless experts who used slippery constructs to glean the

knowledge they wanted, and who were not averse to travelling to backwater colonies like Resurgam

when they saw a chance of some massive reward, perhaps centuries hence. It was probable that their

entire organisation was structured along military lines, rather than the quasi-anarchy which existed

on most trade craft. So by searching for military experience in the

backgrounds of their candidates,

what they were doing was ensuring themselves that the candidate would fit into their crew.

That was it, naturally.

Things had gone well so far, even allowing for the strange way in which Volyova had not

corrected Khouri when she made obvious her ignorance of the ship's true destination. Khouri had

known all along that the destination was Resurgam, of course -- but if the Ultras knew this was

where she really wanted to go to, she would have been forced to use one of several cover stories to

explain her motivations for visiting the backwater colony. She had been ready to employ one of the

stories as soon as Volyova corrected her -- except she had failed to do so, seemingly willing to let

her recruit keep on thinking they were really travelling to Sky's Edge.

That was indeed odd, though understandable if one assumed they were now desperate to recruit

anyone who came forward. It said little for their honesty, of course, but then again, it saved Khouri

using a cover story. It was, she decided, nothing to worry about. It would, in fact, all have been

roses, were it not for what the Mademoiselle had placed in her head while she was sleeping. The

implant was tiny and would not elicit suspicion from the Ultras, designed to resemble -- and

function as -- a standard entoptic splice. If they got too inquisitive and removed the damn thing, all

its incriminating parts would self-erase or reorganise. But that was not the point. Khouri's objection

to the implant was not on the grounds that it was risky or unnecessary, but rather that the last person

she wanted in her head on a daily basis was the Mademoiselle. Of course, it was just a beta-level

simulation constructed to mimic her personality, projecting an image of the Mademoiselle into

Khouri's visual field and tickling her aural centre to allow her to hear what the ghost said. No one

else would be privy to the woman's apparitions, and Khouri would be able to communicate silently

with her.

'Call it need to know,' the ghost had said. 'As an ex-soldier, I'm certain you understand this

principle.'

'Yes, I understand it,' Khouri said with sullen acceptance. 'And it stinks, but I don't suppose

you're about to take the damned thing out of my head just because I don't like it.'

The Mademoiselle smiled. 'To burden you with too much knowledge at this point would be to

risk a momentary indiscretion in the presence of the Ultras.'

'Wait a minute,' Khouri said. 'I already know you want me to kill Sylveste. What more could

there possibly be to find out?'

The Mademoiselle repeated her smile, maddeningly. Like many beta-level sims, her compendium

of facial expressions was small enough to make repetition inevitable, like a bad actor constantly

falling into the same characterisations.

'I'm afraid,' she said, 'that what you now know is not even a fragment of the whole story. Not

even a splinter.'

When Pascale arrived, Sylveste made a point of studying her face, matching it against his memories

of Nils Girardieau. As usual he rammed against the limitations of his vision. His eyes were poor at

curves, tending to approximate the nuances of the human face as a series of stepped edges.

But what Calvin had said was not obviously untrue. Pascale's hair was Bible-black and straight;

Girardieau's curly and red. But the bone structure had too many points of similarity for coincidence.

If Calvin had not made the remark, perhaps Sylveste would never have guessed... but now that the

idea was there, it explained far too much.

'Why did you lie to me?' he said.

She seemed genuinely taken aback. 'About what?'

'Everything. Starting with your father.'

'My father?' She was quiet now. 'Ah. Then you know.'

He nodded, tight-lipped. Then, 'That was one of the risks you ran by collaborating with Calvin.'

Calvin is very clever.'

'He must have established some kind of data link with my compad; accessed private files. The

bastard.'

'Now you know how I feel. Why did you do it, Pascale?'

'At first, because I had no choice. I wanted to study you. And the only way I could earn your trust

was under another name. It was possible; few people even knew I existed, much less what I looked

like.' She paused. 'And it worked, didn't it? You did trust me. And I did nothing to betray that trust.'

'Is that the truth? You never told Nils anything that might have helped him?'

She looked wounded. 'You had forewarning of the coup, remember? If anyone was betrayed in

all this, it was my father.'

He tried to find an angle that would prove her wrong, without really being sure he wanted to.

Perhaps what she said was true. 'And the biography?'

'That was my father's idea.'

'A tool to discredit me?'

'There's nothing in the biography which isn't truthful -- unless you know otherwise.' She paused.

'It's nearly ready for release, actually. Calvin's been very helpful. It'll be the first major work of

indigenous art produced on Resurgam, do you realise? Since the Amarantin, of course.'

'It's a piece of art all right. Are you going to release it under your real name?'

'That was always the idea. I was hoping you wouldn't find out until then, of course.'

'Oh, don't worry about that. None of this will change our working relationship, believe me. After

all, I always knew Nils was the real author behind it.'

'That makes it easier for you, doesn't? To write me off as an irrelevance?'

'Do you have the TE dates you promised me?'

'Yes.' She passed a card to him. 'I don't break my promises, Doctor. But I'm afraid the little

respect I have for you is in serious danger of vanishing altogether.'

Sylveste glanced at the trapped-electron summary scrolling down the card as he flexed it between

thumb and forefinger. Some part of his mind was entirely unable to detach itself from what the

numbers represented, even as he spoke to Pascale. 'When your father told me about the biography,

he said the woman who would be authoring it was someone whose illusions were on the point of

being shattered.'

She stood up. 'I think we should leave this until another time.'

'No; wait.' Sylveste reached out and held her hand. 'I'm sorry. I need to talk to you about this, do

you understand?'

She flinched at the contact, then slowly relaxed. Her expression was still watchful. 'About what?'

'This.' He tapped his thumb against the TE summary. 'It's very interesting.'

Volyova's shuttle was approaching a shipyard; up near the Lagrange point between Yellowstone

and its moon, Marco's Eye. About a dozen lighthuggers were parked in the yard; more ships than

Khouri had ever seen in her life. At the yard's hub was a major carousel, smaller in-system vessels

attached to the wheel's rim like suckling pigs. A few of the lighthuggers were encased in skeletal

support structures for major ice-shield or Conjoiner-drive overhauls (Conjoiner ships were here,

too: sleek and black, as if chiselled from space itself); but the rest of the starships were basically

drifting, following lazy and slow orbits around the Lagrange point's centre of

gravity. Khouri

guessed that there must be complex rules of etiquette governing the way those ships were parked;

who had to move out the way of whom to avoid a collision which a computer might predict days in

advance. The expenditure of fuel which might have to be burned to nudge a ship off a collision

course would be tiny against the profit margin of a typical trade stopover... but the loss of face

would be much harder to amortise. There had never been as many ships as this parked around Sky's

Edge, but even then she had heard of skirmishes between crews over issues of parking priority and

trade rights. It was a common groundsider's misapprehension that Ultras were a homogeneous

splinter of humanity. In truth, they were as factional, and as paranoid about one another, as any

other human strain.

Now they were approaching Volyova's ship.

The thing, like all the other lighthuggers, was improbably streamlined. Space only approximated

a vacuum at slow speeds. Up near lightspeed -- which was where these ships spent most of their

time -- it was like cutting through a howling gale of atmosphere. That was why they looked like

daggers: conic hull tapering to a needle-sharp prow to punch the interstellar medium, with two

Conjoiner engines braced at the back on spars like an ornate hilt. The ship was sheathed in ice, so

glisteningly pure that it looked like diamond. The shuttle swooped in low over Volyova's ship, and

for a moment Khouri apprehended the ship's vastness. It was like flying over a city, not another

vessel. Then a door irised open in the hull, revealing a glowing docking bay. Volyova guided the

shuttle home with expert taps on her thruster controls, latching onto a berthing cradle. Khouri heard

thumps as umbilicals and docking connectors thudded home.

Volyova was first out of her seat restraints. 'Shall we step aboard?' she asked, with something that

was not quite the politeness Khouri had been expecting.

They propelled themselves through the shuttle and out into the spacious environment of the ship.

They were still in free-fall, but at the end of the corridor they were facing Khouri could see a

complex arrangement where the stationary and rotating sections were joined together.

She was beginning to feel nauseous, but she was damned if she was going to let Volyova see this.

'Before we go ahead,' the Ultra woman said, 'there's someone you have to meet.'

She was looking over Khouri's shoulder, back towards the corridor that led to the shuttle which

had brought them aboard. Khouri heard the shuffling sound of someone working hand-over-hand

along the rails which ribbed the passage. But that could only mean that there had been another

person aboard the shuttle.

Something was wrong here.

Volyova's attitude was not that of someone who was trying to impress a potential recruit. It was

more as if she cared little what Khouri thought; as if it was of no consequence at all. Khouri looked

around, in time to see the Komuso who had come with them in the elevator. His face was lost under

the expressionless wicker helmet they all wore. He carried his shakuhachi in the crook of his arm.

Khouri started to speak, but Volyova silenced her. 'Welcome aboard the *Nostalgia for Infinity*,

Ana Khouri. You've just become our new Gunnery Officer.' Then she nodded towards the Komuso.

'Do me a favour, will you, Triumvir?'

'Anything particular?'

'Knock her out before she tries to kill either one of us.'

The last thing Khouri saw was a golden blur of bamboo.

Sylveste thought he smelt Pascale's perfume before his eyes separated her from the crowd outside

the prison building. He made a reflex move towards her, but the two burly militiamen who had

escorted him from his room quickly restrained him. Catcalls and muffled insults came from the

cordoned-off crowd, but Sylveste barely noticed them.

Pascale kissed him diplomatically, half hiding the conjunction of their mouths behind her lace-

gloved hand.

'Before you ask,' she said, her voice barely audible above the noise of the crowd, 'I have no more

idea what this is about than you.'

'Is Nils behind it?'

'Who else? Only he's got the clout to get you out of that place for more than a day.'

'Pity he's not so keen to prevent me returning.'

'Oh, he might -- if he didn't have to placate his own people, and the opposition. It's about time

you stopped thinking of him as your worst enemy, you know.' They stepped into the sterile hush of

the waiting car. The vehicle was adapted from one of the smaller surface exploration buggies, four

balloon wheels at the extremities of its air-smoothed body, comms gear stowed in a matt-black

hump on the roof. It was painted Inundationist purple, with Hokusai wave pendants mounted on the

front.

'If it wasn't for my father,' Pascale continued, 'you'd have died during the coup. He protected you

from your worst enemies.'

'That doesn't make him a very competent revolutionary.'

'And what does that say about the regime he managed to overthrow?'

Sylveste shrugged. 'Fair point, I suppose.'

A guard climbed into the front seat, behind a partition of armoured glass, and then they were

moving, rushing through the crowd, speeding towards the edge of the city. They passed through one

of the arboreta, then descended down one of the ramps which passed beneath the perimeter. Two

other government cars accompanied them, also modified from surface buggies, but painted black

and with masked militia riding postilion, holding rifles to their shoulders. After travelling for a

kilometre along an unlit tunnel, the convoy arrived in an airlock and halted while the breathable city

air was exchanged for Resurgam's atmosphere. The guards remained at their posts, pausing only to

adjust their breather masks and goggles. Then the vehicles moved on, ascending back towards the

surface. They arrived in greyish daylight, surrounded by concrete blast walls, driving across a

surface patterned in red and green lights.

An aircraft was waiting for them, parked on the apron on a tripod of skids, the undersides of its

wings already uncomfortably bright to look at, already beginning to ionise the boundary layer of air

below them. The driver reached into a dashboard compartment and removed breather masks,

passing them back through the security grill, motioning for them to place them over their faces.

'Not that you have to,' he said. 'Oxygen's up two hundred per cent since you were last outside

Resurgam City, Doctor Sylveste. Some people have breathed naked atmosphere for tens of minutes

with no longterm effects.'

'Those must be the dissidents I keep hearing about,' Sylveste said. 'The renegades Girardieau

betrayed during the coup. The ones that are supposed to be communicating with True Path's leaders

in Cuvier. I don't envy them. The dust must clog their lungs almost as much as it clogs their minds.'

The escort looked unimpressed. 'Scavenger enzymes process the dust particles. It's old Martian

biotech. Anyway; dust levels are down. All the moisture we pumped into the atmosphere allowed

the dust particles to bind into bigger grains which aren't so easily transported by the wind.'

'Very good,' Sylveste applauded. 'Pity it's still such a miserable hellhole.'

He palmed the mask to his face and waited for the door to open. A moderate wind was blowing,

no more than a stinging abrasion.

They dashed across the ground.

The aircraft was a welcome oasis of space and quiet, its sumptuous interior outfitted in

governmental purple. The occupants of the other two cars boarded by a different door, Sylveste

catching a glimpse of Nils Girardieau crossing the apron. Girardieau walked with a swaying motion

that began somewhere near his shoulders, like a pair of architect's dividers being walked across a

drawing board point to point. There was a momentum to him, like a glacier compressed into a man's

volume. The leader vanished out of sight and then a few minutes later the visible edge of the closest

wing turned violet, enveloped in a nimbus of excited ions, and the aircraft climbed from the apron.

Sylveste sketched a window for himself and watched Cuvier -- or Resurgam City, as they now

called it -- grow small beneath him. It was the first time he had seen the place in its entirety since

the coup, back before the statue of the French naturalist had been toppled.
The old simplicity of the

colony was gone. A froth of human habitation extended messily beyond the
dome perimeters; air-

sealed structures linked by covered roads and walkways. There were many
smaller outlying domes,

emerald-green with plantations. Even a few undomed strips of trial organisms
laid out in eye-

hurting geometric patterns, waiting to be unleashed far beyond the city.

They circled the city and then took off on a northerly course. Lacework
canyons furled below.

Occasionally they overflow a small settlement, usually just an opaque dome
or streamlined shack,

the glare from the wings momentarily illuminating whatever they overflow.
Mostly it was

wilderness, uncrossed by road, pipe or power line.

Sylveste catnapped intermittently, waking to see tropical deserts of ice and
imported tundra

washing below. Presently a settlement came over the horizon and the aircraft
made loitering spirals

towards the ground. Sylveste moved his window to get a better look.

'I recognise this area. It's where we found the obelisk.'

'Yes,' Pascale said.

The landscape was craggy and mostly unvegetated, the horizon ruined by
uprearing broken

arches and improbable rock pillars, all of which looked on the point of imminent collapse. There

was little flat ground, just deep fissures, like a calcified unmade bed. They came in over a solidified

lava stream then landed on a flat hexagonal pad surrounded by armoured surface buildings. It was

only midday, yet the dust in the air attenuated the sunlight so severely that it was necessary to bathe

the pad in floodlights. Militia dashed across the ground to meet the flight, hiding their eyes against

the light from the aircraft's underside.

Sylveste grabbed his mask, regarded it disdainfully, then left it on the seat. He needed no help

making it the short distance to the building, and if he did, no one was going to know about it.

The militia escorted them into the shack. It was years since Sylveste had been this close to

Girardieau. He was shocked at how small his adversary now seemed. Girardieau was built like

some piece of squat mining machinery. He looked capable of scrabbling his way through solid

basalt. His red hair was short and wirelike, sprinkled with white. His eyes were wide and quizzical,

like a startled Pekinese pup.

'Strange allegiances,' he said, as one of the guards sealed the door behind them. 'Who'd have

thought you and I would ever find ourselves with so much in common, Dan?

'Less than you imagine,' Sylveste said.

Girardieau led the team forward through a ribbed corridor lined with discarded machines, grimed

beyond recognition. 'I suppose you're wondering what all this is about.'

'I have my suspicions.'

Girardieau's laughter boomed off the derelict equipment around them.

'Remember that obelisk

they dug up hereabouts? Of course -- it was you who pointed out the phenomenological difficulty

with the TE dating method used on the rock.'

'Yes,' Sylveste said tartly.

The implications of the TE dating had been enormous. No natural crystalline structure was ever

completely perfect in its lattice geometry. There would always be gaps in the lattice where atoms

were missing, and in those holes, electrons would gradually build up over time, knocked out of the

rest of the lattice by cosmic-ray bombardments and natural radioactivity. Since the holes tended to

fill up with electrons at a steady rate, the number of trapped electrons provided a dating method

which could be used on inorganic artefacts. There was a catch, of course: the TE method was only

useful if the traps had been emptied at some point in the past. Luckily, firing or exposure to light

was enough to bleach – empty -- the outermost traps in the crystal. TE analysis of the obelisk had

shown that all the surface-layer traps had been bleached at the same time, which happened to be

nine hundred and ninety thousand years earlier, within the errors of the measurement. Only

something like the Event could have bleached an object as large as the obelisk.

There was nothing new in this; thousands of Amarantin artefacts had been dated back to the

Event using the same technique. But none of them had been buried deliberately. The obelisk, on the

other hand, had been emplaced deliberately in a stone sarcophagus after it had been bleached.

After the Event.

Even in the new regime, this realisation had been enough to draw attention to the obelisk. It had

stimulated renewed interest in the inscriptions over the last year. On his own, Sylveste's

interpretation had been sketchy at best, but now what remained of the archaeological community

came to his aid. There was a new freedom in Cuvier; Girardieau's regime had relaxed some of its

proscriptions on Amarantin research, even as the True Path opposition grew

more fanatical.

Strange allegiances, as Girardieau had said.

'Once we had an idea of what the obelisk was telling us,' Girardieau said, 'we sectioned the whole

area and excavated down sixty or seventy metres. We found dozens more of them -- all bleached

prior to burial, all carrying basically the same inscriptions. It isn't a record of something that

happened in this area at all. It's a record of something buried here.'

'Something big,' Sylveste said. 'Something they must have planned before the Event -- perhaps

even buried before it, and then placed the markers afterwards. The last cultural act of a society

poised on annihilation. Just how big, Girardieau?'

'Very.' And then Girardieau told him how they had surveyed the area first using an array of

thumpers: devices for generating ground-penetrating Rayleigh waves, sensitive to the density of

buried objects. They'd had to use the largest thumpers, Girardieau said, which meant that the depth

of the object had to be at the extreme range of the technique; hundreds of metres down. Later they

had brought in the colony's most sensitive imaging gravitometers, and only then had they gained

any idea of what it was they were seeking.

It was nothing small.

'Is this dig connected with the Inundationist program?'

'Completely independent. Pure science, in other words. Does that surprise you? I always

promised we'd never abandon the Amarantin studies. Maybe if you'd believed me all those years

ago we'd be working together now, opposing the True Pathers -- the real enemy.'

Sylveste said, 'You showed no interest in the Amarantin until the obelisk was discovered. But

that scared you, didn't it? Because for once it was incontrovertible evidence; nothing I could have

faked or manipulated. For once you had to allow the possibility that I might have been right all

along.'

They stepped into a capacious elevator, outfitted with plush seats, Inundationist aquatints on the

walls. A thick metal door hummed shut. One of Girardieau's aides flipped open a panel and palmed

a button. The floor fell away sickeningly, their bodies only sluggishly catching up.

'How far down are we going?'

'Not far,' Girardieau said. 'Only a couple of kilometres.'

When Khouri awakened they had already left orbit around Yellowstone. She could see the planet

through a porthole in her quarters, much smaller than it had looked before.
The region around

Chasm City was a freckle on the surface. The Rust Belt was only a tawny
smoke ring, too far away

for any of its component structures to be visible. There would be no stopping
the ship now: it would

accelerate steadily at one gee until it had left the Epsilon Eridani system
completely, and it would

not stop accelerating until it was moving barely a whisker below the speed of
light. It was no

accident that they called these vessels lighthuggers.

She had been tricked.

'It's a complication,' the Mademoiselle said, after long minutes of silence. 'But
no more than that.'

Khourri rubbed at the painful lump on her skull where the Komuso -- Sajaki
was his name, she

now knew -- had knocked her out with his shakuhachi.

'What do you mean, a complication?' she shouted. 'They've kidnapped me,
you stupid bitch!'

'Keep your voice down, dear girl. They don't know about me now and there's
no reason they have

to in the future.' The entoptic image smiled jaggedly. 'In fact, I'm probably
your best friend right

now. You should do your best to safeguard our mutual secret.' She examined
her fingernails. 'Now,

let's approach this rationally. What was our objective?'

'You know damn well.'

'Yes. You were to infiltrate this crew and travel with them to Resurgam. What is now your

status?'

'The Volyova bitch keeps calling me her recruit.'

'In other words, your infiltration has been spectacularly successful.' She was strolling

nonchalantly around the room now, one hand on her hip, the other tapping an index finger against

her lower lip. 'And where exactly are we now headed?'

'I've no reason to suspect it isn't still Resurgam.'

'So in all the essential details, nothing has happened to compromise the mission.'

Khouri wanted to strangle the woman, except it would have been like strangling a mirage. 'Has it

occurred to you that they might have their own agenda? You know what Volyova said just before I

was knocked out? She said I was the new Gunnery Officer. What do you suppose she meant by

that?'

'It explains why they were looking for military experience in your background.'

'And what if I don't go along with her plans?'

'I doubt it matters to her.' The Mademoiselle stopped her strolling, adopting an expression of

seriousness from her internal compendium of facial modes. 'They're Ultras, you see. Ultras have

access to technologies considered taboo on colony worlds.'

'Such as?'

'Instruments for manipulating loyalty might be among them.'

'Well, thanks for giving me this important information well in advance.'

'Don't worry -- I always knew there was a chance of this.' The Mademoiselle paused and touched

the side of her own head. 'I took precautions accordingly.'

'That's a relief.'

'The implant I put inside you will fabricate antigens for their neural medichines. More than that,

it will also broadcast subliminal reinforcement messages into your subconscious mind. Volyova's

loyalty therapies will be completely neutralised.'

'So why bother even telling me this is going to happen?'

'Because, dear girl, once Volyova begins the treatment, you'll have to let her think it's working.'

The descent took only a few minutes, the air-pressure and temperature stabilised at surface normal.

The shaft which the car descended was walled in diamond, ten metres wide. Occasionally there

were recesses, stash-holes for equipment or small operations shacks, or switching points where two

elevators could squeeze past one another before continuing their journeys. Servitors were working

the diamond, extruding it in atomic-thickness filaments from spinnerettes. The filaments zipped

neatly into place under the action of protein-sized molecular machines. Looking through the glass

ceiling, the faintly translucent shaft seemed to reach towards infinity.

'Why didn't you tell me you'd found this?' Sylveste asked. 'You must have been here for months

at the very least.'

'Let's just say your input wasn't critical,' Girardieu said, and then added, 'until now, that is.'

At the shaft's bottom, they exited into another corridor, silver-clad, cleaner and cooler than the

one they had walked through at ground level. Windows along its length offered glimpses into a

disarmingly large cavern filled with geodesic scaffolding and industrial structures. Sylveste was

able to freeze-frame the view with his eyes, then do some image-processing and expand the captured

view when he was ten paces further along the corridor. For that he offered grudging thanks to

Calvin.

What he saw was enough to quicken his heartbeat.

Now they pushed through a pair of armoured doors ghosted by security entoptics, writhing

snakes which seemed to hiss and spit at the group. They trooped on through into an ante-room with

another set of doors at the far end, flanked by militia. Girardieau waved them aside, then turned to

Sylveste. The roundness of his eyes, the Pekinese aspect of his features, suddenly made him think

of a painted Japanese devil on the point of belching fire.

'Now this,' Girardieau said, 'is where you either ask for your money back or stand in awed

silence.'

'Impress me,' Sylveste said, with as much droll nonchalance as he could muster, despite his

racing pulse and feverish internal excitement.

Girardieau opened the rear doors. They walked into a room half the size of the freight elevator,

empty apart from a row of simple escritaires inlaid into the wall. A headset and wraparound mike

lay on one of them, next to a compad displaying pencil-sketch engineering diagrams. The walls

sloped outwards, the area of the ceiling greater than the floor. Combined with the huge glass

windows set in three of the walls, it made Sylveste feel as if he was in the

gondola of an airship,

cruising under a starless night sky across an unnavigated ocean.

Girardieau killed the lights, enabling them to see what lay beyond the glass.

Floods swung from the roof of the chamber beyond, curving down towards the Amarantin object

which lay below. It was emerging from one nearly sheer wall of the cave; a hemisphere of pure

black, hemmed by gantries and geodesic scaffolding. Scabrous lumps of hardened magma still

clung to it, yet across the large areas where the magma had been chipped away, the thing was as

smooth and dark as obsidian. The underlying shape was spherical; at least four hundred metres

wide, although more than half still lay entombed.

'You know who made this?' Girardieau said, finally whispering. He did not wait for an answer:

'It's older than human language, but my goddamn wedding ring has more scratches on it.'

Girardieau led the party back to the elevator shaft for the final short descent down to the

operations floor of the hollowed-out chamber. The ride lasted no more than thirty seconds, but for

Sylveste it seemed like a grindingly slow Homeric odyssey. The object felt like his own personal

prize; as hard-won as if he had unearthed it with his own bloodied

fingernails. It loomed over them

now, its curved, rock-encrusted side jutting unsupported into the air. There was a faint groove

scored around the object, running obliquely from one side to the other. It looked like little more

than a shallow hairline fracture from where he was, but it was a metre or so wide, and probably just

as deep.

Girardieau led them into the nearest chock: a concrete structure with its own inner rooms and

operations levels abutting the object. Inside they took another elevator, rising up through the

building into the haze of scaffolding which erupted from it. Sylveste's stomach crawled with

conflicting impulses of claustro- and agoraphobia. He felt hemmed in by the unthinkable

megatonnes of rock looming hundreds of metres over his head, while simultaneously racked with

vertigo as they ascended the scaffolding high up the side of the object.

Small shacks and equipment huts floated in the geodesic framework. The lift connected with one

of these structures and they trooped out into a complex of rooms still abuzz with the afterhum of

recently curtailed activity. All the warning signs and notices were decals or painted, the area too

makeshift for entoptic generators.

They walked over a tremoring girderwork bridge which extended through a loom of scaffolding

towards the black skin of the Amarantin object. They were halfway up the object's height, level

with the groove. The object no longer seemed spherical; they were too close for that. It was a single

black wall blocking their progress, as vast and depthless as the view of Lascaille's Shroud he

remembered after he had travelled from Spindrift. They walked onwards, until the bridge took them

into the groove.

The path immediately swung to the right. On three sides -- to the left, and above and below --

they were hemmed in by the eerily unmarked black substance of the artefact. They walked on a

trelliswork path fixed to the underlying floor via suction pads, since the alien material was nearly

frictionless. To the right was a waist-high safety railing and then several hundred metres of nothing.

Every five or six metres on the inside wall was a lamp, attached via epoxy pads, and every twenty

or so metres was a panel marked with cryptic symbols.

They continued along the steep incline of the groove for three or four minutes until Girardieau

brought them to a halt. The place where they had arrived was a tangled nexus of power lines, lamps

and communications consoles. The left-hand wall of the groove folded inwards here.

'Took us weeks to find the way in,' Girardieau said. 'Originally the trench was plugged by basalt.

It was only after we'd chipped it all out that we found this one place where the basalt seemed to

continue inwards, as if it were plugging some kind of radial tunnel which emerged in the trench.'

'You've been busy little beavers, I can see.'

'Digging it out was hard work,' Girardieau said. 'Excavating the trench was easy by comparison,

but here we had to drill and remove material through the same tiny hole. Some of us wanted to use

boser torches to cut a few secondary tunnels in to make the job easier, but we never went that far.

And our mineral-tipped drills couldn't touch the stuff.'

Sylveste's scientific curiosity momentarily beat his urge to belittle Girardieau's attempts at

impressing him. 'You know what this material is?'

'Basically carbon, with some iron and niobium and a few rare metals as trace elements. But we

don't know the structure. It's not simply some allotropic form of diamond we haven't invented yet,

or even hyperdiamond. Maybe the top few tenths of a millimetre are close to diamond, but the stuff

seems to undergo some kind of complex lattice transformation deeper down. The ultimate form --

far deeper than we've yet sampled -- may not even be a true crystal at all. It could be that the lattice

breaks up into trillions of carbon-heavy macromolecules, locked together in a co-acting mass.

Sometimes these molecules seem to work their way to the surface along lattice flaws, which is the

only time we see them.'

'You're talking as if it's purposeful.'

'Maybe it is. Maybe the molecules are like little enzymes tooled-up to repair the diamond crust

when it becomes damaged.' He shrugged. 'But we've never isolated one of the macromolecules, or

at least not in a stable form. They seem to lose coherence as soon as they're removed from the

lattice. They fall apart before we can get a look inside them.'

'What you're describing,' Sylveste said, 'sounds very much like a form of molecular technology.'

Girardieau smiled at Sylveste, seeming to acknowledge the private game in which they were

enmeshed.

'Except we know that the Amarantin were far too primitive for such a thing.'

'Of course.'

'Of course.' Girardieau smiled again, only this time to the group as a whole.
'Shall we forge

inwards?'

Navigating the tunnel system which led from the groove was trickier than
Sylveste had at first

imagined. He had assumed that the radial tunnel would continue inwards for
the necessary distance

to traverse the shell of the object, and they would then enter the thing's
hollow interior. But it was

not like that at all. The thing was a deliberate labyrinth. The path did progress
radially, for perhaps

ten metres, but then it jerked to the left and soon branched into multiple
tunnel systems. The routes

were colour-coded with adhesive markers, but the coding system was too
cryptic to make much

sense to Sylveste. Within five minutes he was thoroughly disorientated,
though he had the suspicion

that they had not strayed very deep into the object. It was as if the tunnel
system was the work of a

demented maggot which preferred the part of the apple immediately under
the skin. Eventually,

however, they crossed what seemed to be a regular fissure in the fabric of the
object. Girardieau

explained that the thing was structured in a series of concentric shells. They
continued to worm

their way through another confusing tunnel system while Girardieau regaled them with dubious

stories about the initial exploration of the object.

They had known about it for two years -- ever since Sylveste had drawn Pascale's attention to the

oddity of the obelisk's burial sequence. Excavating the chamber had taken most of that time,

detailed study of the object's warrenlike interior only happening in the last few months. There had

been a few deaths in those early days. Nothing mysterious, it eventually transpired -- just teams

getting lost in unmapped sections of the labyrinth and stumbling into vertical shafts in the tunnel

system where the safety flooring had not yet been fixed. One worker had starved to death when she

ventured too far without laying a breadcrumb trail behind her -- servitors found her two weeks after

she went missing. She had been wandering in a series of doodle-like circles, at times only a few

minutes from the safe zones.

Progress through the final concentric shell was slower and more deliberate than the four they

traversed before it. They worked downwards, eventually reaching a gratifyingly horizontal stretch

of tunnel, the far end of which was milky with light.

Girardieau spoke to his sleeve and the light dimmed.

They moved on in semi-darkness. Gradually their breathing ceased to echo from the walls as the

confining space opened out. The only sound came from the laboured purring of nearby air pumps.

'Hold on,' Girardieau said. 'Here it comes.'

Sylveste steeled himself for the inevitable disorientation when the lights returned. For once he

did not mind Girardieau's theatrics. It permitted him a sense of discovery, albeit at second hand. Of

course, he alone understood this surrogacy for what it was. But he did not begrudge the others the

moment. That would have been churlish, for after all, they would never know what true discovery

felt like. He almost pitied them, though in that moment the sight revealed in the lights purged all

normal thought.

It was an alien city.

SIX

En Route to Delta Pavonis, 2546

'I expect,' Volyova said, 'that you're one of those otherwise rational people who pride themselves on

not believing in ghosts.'

Khouri looked at her, frowning slightly. Volyova had known from the outset that the woman was

no fool, but it was still interesting to see how she reacted to the question.

'Ghosts, Triumvir? You can't be serious.'

'One thing you'll quickly learn about me,' Volyova said, 'is that I'm very seldom anything other

than completely serious.' And then she indicated the door at which they had arrived, set

unobtrusively into one rusty-red interior wall of the ship. The door was of heavy construction, a

stylised drawing of a spider discernible through layers of corrosion and staining. 'Go ahead. I'll be

right behind you.'

Khouri did as she was told without hesitation. Volyova was satisfied. In the three weeks since the

woman had been snared -- or recruited, if one wanted to be polite about it -- Volyova had

administered a complex regimen of loyalty-altering therapies. The treatment

was almost complete,

apart from the top-up doses which would continue indefinitely. Soon the woman's loyalty would be

so strongly instilled that it would transcend mere obedience and become an animating compulsion,

a principle to which she could no more fail to adhere than a fish could choose to stop breathing

water. Taken to an extreme which Volyova hoped would prove unnecessary, Khouri could be made

not only to desire to do the crew's will, but to love them for giving her the chance. But Volyova

would relent before she programmed the woman that deeply. After her less than fruitful experiences

with Nagorny, she was wary of creating another unquestioning guinea pig. It would not displease

her if Khouri retained a trace of resentment.

Volyova did as she had promised, following Khouri into the door. The recruit had halted a few

metres beyond the threshold, realising that there was no way to go further.

Volyova sealed the great iron iris of a door behind them.

'Where are we, Triumvir?'

'In a little private retreat of my own,' Volyova said. She spoke into her bracelet and made a light

come on, but the interior remained shadowy. The room was shaped like a fat torpedo, twice as long

as it was wide. The interior was sumptuously outfitted, with four scarlet-cushioned seats installed

on the floor, next to each other, and space for another two behind, though nothing remained but

their anchor-points. Where they were not upholstered in cushioned velvet, the room's brass-ribbed

walls were curved and glossily dark, as if made of obsidian or black marble. There was a console of

black ebony, attached to the armrest of the front seat in which Volyova now sat. She folded down

the console, familiarising herself with the inset dials and controls, all of which were tooled in brass

or copper, with elaborately inscribed labels, offset by flowered curlicues of differently inlaid woods

and ivories. Not that it took much familiarising, since she visited the spider-room with reasonable

regularity, but she enjoyed the tactile pleasure of stroking her fingertips across the board.

'I suggest you sit down,' she said. 'We're about to move.'

Khouri obeyed, sitting next to Volyova, who threw a number of ivory-handled switches,

watching some of the dials on the panel light up with roseate glows, their needles quivering as

power entered the spider-room's circuits. She extracted a certain sadistic pleasure in observing

Khouri's disorientation, for the woman clearly had no idea where she was in

the ship, nor what was

about to happen. There were clunking sounds, and a sudden shifting, as if the room were a lifeboat

which had just come adrift from a mother vessel.

'We're moving,' Khouri diagnosed. 'What is this -- some kind of luxury elevator for the

Triumvirate?'

'Nothing so decadent. We're in an old shaft which leads to the outer hull.'

'You need a room just to take you to the hull?' Some of Khouri's scornful disregard for the

niceties of Ultra life was coming to the fore again. Volyova liked that, perversely. It convinced her

that the loyalty therapies had not destroyed the woman's personality, only redirected it.

'We're not just going to the hull,' Volyova said. 'Otherwise we'd walk.'

The motion was smooth now, but there were still occasional clunks as airlocks and traction

systems assisted their passage. The shaft walls remained utterly black, but -- Volyova knew -- all

that was about to change. Meanwhile, she watched Khouri, trying to guess whether the woman was

scared or merely curious. If she had sense she would have realised by now that Volyova had

invested too much time in her simply to kill her -- but on the other hand, the woman's military

training on Sky's Edge must have taught her to take absolutely nothing for granted.

Her appearance had changed considerably since her recruitment, but little of that was due to the

therapies. Her hair had always been short, but now it was absent entirely. Only up close was the

peachy fuzz of regrowth visible. Her skull was quilted with fine, salmon-coloured scars. Those were

the incision marks where Volyova had opened her head in order to emplace the implants which had

formerly resided in Boris Nagorny.

There had been other surgical procedures, too. Khouri's body was peppered with shrapnel from

her soldiering days, in addition to the almost invisibly healed scars of beam-weapon or projectile

impact points. Some of the shrapnel shards lay deep -- too deep, it seemed, for the Sky's Edge

medics to retrieve. And for the most part they would have caused her no harm, for they were

biologically-inert composites not situated close to any vital organs. But the medics had been sloppy,

too. Near the surface, dotted under Khouri's skin, Volyova found a few shards they really should

have removed. She did it for them, examining each in turn before placing it in her lab. All but one

of the shards would have caused no problems to her systems; non-metallic

composites which could

not interfere with the sensitive induction fields of the gunnery's interface machinery. But she

catalogued and stored them anyway. The metal shard she frowned at, cursing the medics'

procedures, and then laid it next to the rest.

That had been messy work, but not nearly as bad as the neural work. For centuries, the

commonest forms of implant had either been grown *in situ* or were designed to self-insert painlessly

via existing orifices, but such procedures could not be applied to the unique and delicate gunnery

interface implants. The only way to get them in or out was with a bone-saw, scalpel and a lot of

mopping up afterwards. It had been doubly awkward because of the routine implants already resting

in Khouri's skull, but after giving them a cursory examination Volyova had seen no reason to

remove them. Had she done so, she would sooner or later have had to re-implant very similar

devices just so Khouri could function normally beyond the gunnery. The implants had grafted well,

and within a day -- with Khouri unconscious -- Volyova had placed her in the gunnery seat and

verified that the ship was able to talk to her implants and vice versa. Further testing had to wait until

the loyalty therapies were complete. That would mainly be done while the rest of the crew were

asleep.

Caution: that was Volyova's current watchword. It was incaution that had resulted in the whole

unpleasantness with Nagorny.

She would not make that mistake again.

'Why do I get the idea this is some kind of test?' Khouri said.

'It isn't. It's just----' Volyova waved a hand dismissively. 'Indulge me, will you? It's not much to

ask.'

'How do I oblige -- by claiming to see ghosts?'

'Not by seeing them, Khouri, no. By hearing them.'

A light was visible now, beyond the black walls of the moving room. Of course, the walls were

nothing but glass, and until that moment they had been surrounded only by the unlit metal of the

shaft in which the room rested. But now illumination was shining from the shaft's approaching end.

The rest of the short journey took place in silence. The room pushed itself towards the light, until

the chill blue luminance was flooding in from all angles. Then the room pushed itself beyond the

hull.

Khoury upped from her seat and went to the glass, edging towards it with trepidation. The glass

was, of course, hyperdiamond, and there was no danger that it would shatter or that Khoury would

stumble and plunge through it. But it looked ridiculously thin and brittle, and the human mind was

able to take only so many things on trust. Looking laterally, she would have seen the articulated

spider-legs, eight of them, anchoring the room to the exterior hull of the ship. She would have

understood why Volyova called this place the spider-room.

'I don't know who or what built it,' Volyova said. 'My guess is that they installed it when the ship

itself was constructed, or when it was due to change hands, assuming anyone could ever afford to

buy it. I think this room was a very elaborate ploy for impressing potential clients -- hence the

general level of luxury.'

'Someone used it to make a sales pitch?'

'It makes a kind of sense -- assuming one has any need in the first place to actually be outside a

vessel like this. If the ship's under thrust, then any observation pod sent outside also has to match

that level of thrust, or else it gets left behind. No problem if that pod's just a camera system, but as

soon as you put people aboard it it gets a lot more complicated; someone actually has to fly the

damned thing, or at the very least know how to program the autopilot to do what you want. The

spider-room avoids that difficulty by physically attaching itself to the ship. It's child's play to

operate; just like crawling around on all-eights.'

'What happens if...'

'It loses its grip? Well, it's never happened -- even if it did, the room has various magnetic and

hull-piercing grapples it can deploy; and even if those failed -- which they wouldn't, I assure you --

the room can propel itself independently; certainly for long enough to catch up with the ship. And

even if that failed...' Volyova paused. 'Well, if that failed, I'd consider having a word with my deity-

of-choice.'

Although Volyova had never taken the room more than a few hundred metres from its exit point

on the hull, it would have been possible to crawl all around the ship. Not necessarily wise, however,

for at relativistic speed the ship pushed through a blizzard of radiation which was normally screened

by the hull insulation. The spider-room's thin walls only shielded a fraction of the flux, lending the

whole exercise of being outside an odd and hazardous glamour.

The spider-room was her little secret; it was absent from the major blueprints, and to the best of

her knowledge none of the others knew anything about it at all. In an ideal world, she would have

kept it that way, but the problems with the gunnery had forced her into some necessary

indiscretions. Even given the state of the ship's decay, Sajaki's network of surveillance devices was

extensive, leaving the spider-room as one of the few places where Volyova could guarantee

absolute privacy when she needed to discuss something sensitive with one of her recruits;

something that she did not want the other Triumvirs to know about. She had been forced to reveal

the spider-room to Nagorny so that she could talk with him frankly about the Sun Stealer problem,

and for months -- as his condition deteriorated -- she had regretted that decision, always fearful that

he would reveal the room's existence to Sajaki. But she need not have worried. By the end, Nagorny

had been far too occupied with his nightmares to indulge in any subtleties of shipboard politick.

Now he had taken the secret to his grave and for the time being Volyova had been able to sleep

easy, safe in the knowledge that her sanctuary was not about to be betrayed.

Perhaps what she was

doing now was an error she would later regret -- she had certainly sworn to herself not to violate the

room's secrecy again -- but as always, current circumstances had forced her to amend an earlier

decision. There was something she needed to discuss with Khouri; the ghosts were merely a pretext

so that Khouri would not become overly suspicious of Volyova's deeper motives.

'I'm not seeing any ghosts yet,' the recruit said.

'You'll see, or rather hear them, shortly,' Volyova said.

The Triumvir was acting oddly, Khouri thought. More than once she had hinted that this room

was her private retreat aboard the ship, and that the others -- Sajaki, Hegazi, and the other two

women -- were not even aware that it existed. It seemed strange indeed that Volyova was prepared

to reveal the room to Khouri so soon in their working relationship. Volyova was a solitary,

obsessive figure, even aboard a ship crewed by militaristic chimerics -- not someone with a natural

instinct for trustfulness, Khouri would have thought. Volyova was going through the motions of

friendliness towards her, but there was something artificial about all her efforts... they were too

planned, too lacking in anything resembling spontaneity. When Volyova made some kind of

friendly overture to Khouri -- a piece of smalltalk, shipboard gossip or a joke -- there was always

the feeling that Volyova had spent hours rehearsing, hoping she would sound off-the-cuff. Khouri

had known people like that in the military; they seemed genuine at first, but they were usually the

ones who turned out to be foreign spies or intelligence-gathering stooges from high command.

Volyova was doing her best to act casually about the whole spider-room business, but it was

obvious to Khouri that the ghost thing was not all that it appeared. A number of disquieting

thoughts struck Khouri, prime among them the idea that perhaps Volyova had brought her to this

room with no intention of her ever leaving... alive, anyway.

But that turned out not to be the case.

'Oh, something I've been meaning to ask you,' Volyova said, breezily. 'Does the phrase Sun

Stealer mean anything to you yet?'

'No,' Khouri said. 'Should it?'

'Oh; there's no reason it should -- just a question, that's all. Too tedious to explain why, of course

-- don't worry about it, will you?'

She was about as convincing as a Mulch fortune-teller.

'No,' Khouri said. 'I won't worry, no...' And then added: 'Why did you say "yet"?'

*

Volyova cursed inwardly: had she blown it? Perhaps not; she had delivered the question as blithely

as she dared, and there was nothing in Khouri's demeanour to suggest that she had taken it as

anything other than a casual enquiry... and yet... now was emphatically *not* the time to start making

errors.

'Did I say that?' she said, hoping to inject the right degree of surprise-mingled-with-indifference

into her voice. 'Slip of the tongue, that's all.' Volyova groped for a change of subject, quickly. 'See

that star, the faint red one?'

Now that their eyes had adjusted to the ambient light-levels of interstellar space, with even the

blue radiance of the engine exhausts no longer seeming to blot out everything, a few stars were

visible.

'That's Yellowstone's sun?'

'Epsilon Eridani, yes. We're three weeks beyond the system. Pretty soon you wouldn't have such

an easy time finding it. We're not moving relativistically now -- only a few per cent of light -- but

we're accelerating all the time. Soon the visible stars will move, the constellations warping, until all

the stars in the sky are bunched ahead and behind us. It'll be as if we're poised midway down a

tunnel, with light streaming in from either end. The stars will change colour as well. It isn't simple,

since the final colour depends on the spectral type of each star; how much energy it emits in

different energies, including the infrared and ultraviolet. But the tendency will be for those stars

ahead of us to shift to the blue; those behind us to the red.'

'I'm sure it'll be very pretty,' Khouri said, somewhat spoiling the moment. 'But I'm not quite sure

where the ghosts come into it.'

Volyova smiled. 'I'd almost forgotten about them. That would have been a shame.'

And then she spoke into her bracelet, vocalising softly so that Khouri would not hear what it was

she had to ask the ship.

Voices of the damned filled the chamber.

'Ghosts,' Volyova said.

Sylveste hovered in midair above the buried city, bodyless.

The encaging walls rose around him, densely engraved with the equivalent of ten thousand

printed volumes of Amarantin writing. Although the graphic forms of the writing were mere

millimetres high and he floated hundreds of metres from the wall, he only had to focus on any one

part of it for the words to slam into clarity. As he did so, parallel translating algorithms processed

the text into something approaching Canasian, while Sylveste's own quick semi-intuitive thought

processes did likewise. More often than not he came to broad agreement with the programs, but

occasionally they missed what might have been a crucial, context-dependent subtlety.

Meanwhile in his quarters in Cuvier, he made rapid, cursive notes, filling page after page of

writing pad. These days, he favoured pen and paper over modern recording devices where possible.

Digital media were too susceptible to later manipulation by his enemies. At least if his notes were

pulped they would be lost for ever, rather than returning to haunt him in a guise warped to suit

somebody else's ideology.

He finished translating a particular section, coming to one of the folded-wing glyphs which

signified the end of a sequence. He pulled back from the dizzying textual

precipice of the wall.

He slipped a blotter into the pad and closed it. By touch he slipped the pad back into a rack and

removed the next pad along. He opened it at the page marked by its own blotter, then ran his fingers

down the page until he felt the roughness of the ink vanish. Positioning the book exactly parallel

with the desk, he stationed the pen at the start of the first new blank line.

'You're working too hard,' Pascale said.

She had entered the room unheard; now he had to visualise her standing at his side -- or sitting,

whichever was the case.

'I think I'm getting somewhere,' Sylveste said.

'Still banging your head against those old inscriptions?'

'One of us is beginning to crack.' He turned his bodyless point of view away from the wall,

towards the centre of the enclosed city. 'Still, I didn't think it would take this long.'

'Me neither.'

He knew what she meant. Eighteen months since Nils Girardieu had shown him the buried city;

a year since their wedding had been mooted and then put on hold until he had made significant

progress on the translating work. Now he was doing exactly that -- and it

scared him. No more

excuses, and she knew it as well as he did.

Why was that such a big problem? Was it only a problem because he chose to classify it as such?

'You're frowning again,' Pascale said. 'Are you having problems with the inscriptions?'

'No,' Sylveste said. 'They aren't the problem any more.' And it was the truth; it was now second

nature for him to merge the bimodal streams of Amarantin writing into their implied whole, like a

cartographer studying a stereographic image.

'Let me look.'

He heard her move across the room and address the *escritoire*, instructing it to open a parallel

channel for her sensorium. The console -- and, indeed, Sylveste's whole access to the data-model of

the city -- had come not long after that first visit. For once the idea had not been Girardieau's, but

something Pascale had initiated. The success of *Descent into Darkness*, the recently published

biography, and the upcoming wedding had increased her leverage over her father, and Sylveste had

known better than to argue when she had offered him -- literally -- the keys to the city.

The wedding was the talk of the colony now. Most of the gossip which

reached its way back to

Sylveste assumed that the motives were purely political; that Sylveste had courted Pascale as a way

of marrying his way back into something close to power; that -- seen cynically -- the wedding was

only a means to an end, and that the end was a colonial expedition to Cerberus/Hades. Perhaps, for

the briefest of instants, Sylveste had wondered that himself; wondered if his subconscious had not

engineered his love for Pascale with this deeper ambition in mind. Perhaps there was the tiniest

grain of truth in that, as well. But from his current standpoint, it was mercifully impossible to tell.

He certainly felt as if he loved her -- which, as far as he could tell, was the same thing as loving her

-- but he was not blind to the advantages that the marriage would bring. Now he was publishing

again; modest articles based on tiny portions of translated Amarantin text; co-authorship with

Pascale; Girardieau himself acknowledged as having assisted in the work. The Sylveste of fifteen

years ago would have been appalled, but now he found it hard to stir up much self-disgust. What

mattered was that the city was a step towards understanding the Event.

'I'm here,' Pascale said -- louder now, but just as bodyless as Sylveste. 'Are we sharing the same

point of view?'

'What are you seeing?'

'The spire; the temple -- whatever you call it.'

'That's right.'

The temple was at the geometric centre of the quarter-scale city, shaped like the upper third of an

egg. Its topmost point extended upwards, becoming a spiriform tower which ascended -- narrowing

as it did -- towards the roof of the city chamber. The buildings around the temple had the fused look

of weaver-bird nests; perhaps the expression of some submerged evolutionary imperative. They

huddled like misshapen orisons before the vast central spire which curled from the temple.

'Something bothering you about this?'

He envied her. Pascale had visited the real city dozens of times. She had even climbed the spire

on foot, following the gulletlike spiral passage which wound up its height.

'The figure on the spire? It doesn't fit.'

It looked like a small, daintily carved figurine by comparison with the rest of the city, but was

still ten or fifteen metres tall, comparable to the Egyptian figures in the Temple of Kings. The

buried city was built to an approximate quarter-scale, based on comparisons

with other digs. The

full-size counterpart of the spire figure would have been at least forty metres tall. But if this city had

ever existed on the surface, it would have been lucky to survive the firestorms of the Event, let

alone the subsequent nine hundred and ninety thousand years of planetary weathering, glaciation,

meteorite impacts and tectonics.

'Doesn't fit?'

'It isn't Amarantin -- at least not any kind I've ever seen.'

'Some kind of deity, then?'

'Maybe. But I don't understand why they've given it wings.'

'Ah. And this is problematic?'

'Take a look around the city wall if you don't believe me.'

'Better lead me there, Dan.'

Their twin points of view curved away from the spire, dropping down dizzyingly.

Volyova watched the effect the voices had on Khouri, certain that somewhere in Khouri's armour of

self-assurance was a chink of fearful doubt -- the thought that maybe these really were ghosts after

all, and that Volyova had found a way to tune into their phantom emanations.

The sound that the ghosts made was moaning and cavernous; long drawn-out

howls so low that

they were almost felt rather than heard. It was like the eeriest winter night's wind imaginable; the

sound that a wind might make after blowing through a thousand miles of cavern. But this was

clearly no natural phenomenon, not the particle wind streaming past the ship, translated into sound;

not even the fluctuations in the delicately balanced reactions in the engines. There were souls in that

ghost-howl; voices calling across the night. In the moaning, though not one word was

understandable, there remained nonetheless the unmistakable structure of human language.

'What do you think?' Volyova asked.

'They're voices, aren't they? Human voices. But they sound so... exhausted; so sad.' Khouri

listened attentively. 'Every now and then I think I understand a word.'

'You know what they are, of course.' Volyova diminished the sound, until the ghosts formed only

a muted, infinitely pained chorus. 'They're crew. Like you and me. Occupants of other vessels,

talking to each other across the void.'

'Then why----' Khouri hesitated. 'Oh, wait a minute. Now I understand. They're moving faster

than us, aren't they? Much faster. Their voices sound slow because they are,

literally. Clocks run

slower on ships moving near the speed of light.'

Volyova nodded, the tiniest bit saddened that Khouri had understood so swiftly. 'Time dilation.

Of course, some of those ships are moving towards us, so doppler-blueshifting acts to reduce the

effect, but the dilation factor usually wins...' She shrugged, seeing that Khouri was not yet ready for

a treatise on the finer principles of relativistic communications. 'Normally, of course, *Infinity*

corrects for all this; removes the doppler and dilatory distortions, and translates the result into

something which sounds perfectly intelligible.'

'Show me.'

'No,' Volyova said. 'It isn't worth it. The end product is always the same. Trivia, technical talk,

boastful old trade rhetoric. That's the interesting end of the spectrum. At the boring end you get

paranoid gossip or brain-damaged cases baring their souls to the night. Most of the time it's just two

ships handshaking as they pass in the night; exchanging bland pleasantries. There's hardly ever any

interaction since the light-travel times between ships are seldom less than months. And anyway,

half the time the voices are just prerecorded messages, since the crew are

usually in reefersleep.'

'Just the usual human babble, in other words.'

'Yes. We take it with us wherever we go.'

Volyova relaxed back in her seat, instructing the sound-system to pump out the sorrowful, time-

stretched voices even louder than before. This signal of human presence ought to have made the

stars seem less remote and cold, but it managed to have exactly the opposite effect; just like the act

of telling ghost stories around a campfire served to magnify the darkness beyond the flames. For a

moment -- one that she revelled in, no matter what Khouri made of it -- it was possible to believe

that the interstellar spaces beyond the glass were really haunted.

'Notice anything?' Sylveste asked.

The wall consisted of chevron-shaped granite blocks, interrupted at five points by gatehouses.

The gatehouses were surmounted by sculptural Amarantin heads, in a not-quite-realistic style

reminiscent of Yucatan art. A fresco ran around the outer wall, made from ceramic tiles, depicting

Amarantin functionaries performing complex social duties.

Pascale paused before answering, her gaze tracking over the different figures in the fresco.

They were shown carrying farming implements which looked almost like actual items from

human agricultural history, or weapons -- pikes, bows and a kind of musket, although the poses

were not those of warriors engaged in combat, but were far more formalised and stiff, like Egyptian

figurework. There were Amaranthin surgeons and stoneworkers, astronomers - they had invented

reflecting and refracting telescopes, recent digs had confirmed -- and cartographers, glassworkers,

kitemakers and artists, and above each symbolic figure was a bimodal chain of graphic forms picked

out in gold and cobalt-blue, naming the flock which assumed the duty of the representational figure.

'None of them have wings,' Pascale said.

'No,' Sylveste said. 'What used to be their wings turned into their arms.'

'But why object to a statue of a god with a pair of wings? Humans have never had wings, but

that's never stopped us investing angels with them. It strikes me that a species which really did once

have wings would have even fewer qualms.'

'Yes, except you're forgetting the creation myth.'

It was only in the last years that the basic myth had been understood by the archaeologists;

unravelling from dozens of later, embroidered versions. According to the

myth, the Amarantin had

once shared the sky with the other birdlike creatures which still existed on Resurgam during their

reign. But the flocks of that time were the last to know the freedom of flight. They made an

agreement with the god they called Birdmaker, trading the ability to fly for the gift of sentience. On

that day, they raised their wings to heaven and watched as consuming fire turned them to ash, for

ever excluding them from the air.

So that they might remember their arrangement, the Birdmaker gave them useless, clawed wing-

stubs -- enough to remind them of what they had forsaken, and enough to enable them to begin

writing down their history. Fire burned in their minds too, but this was the unquenchable fire of

being. That light would always burn, the Birdmaker told them -- so long as they did not try to defy

the Birdmaker's will by once more returning to the skies. If they did that, it was promised, the

Birdmaker would take back the souls they had been given on the Day of Burning Wings.

It was, Sylveste knew, simply the understandable attempt of a culture to raise a mirror to itself.

What made it significant was the complete extent to which it had permeated their culture -- in

effect, a single religion which had superseded all others and which had persisted, through different

tellings, for an unthinkable span of centuries. Undoubtedly it had shaped their thinking and

behaviour, perhaps in ways too complex to begin guessing.

'I understand,' Pascale said. 'As a species, they couldn't deal with being flightless, so they created

the Birdmaker story so they could feel some superiority over the birds which could still fly.'

'Yes. And while that belief worked, it had one unexpected side-effect: to deter them from ever

taking flight again: Much like the Icarus myth, only exhibiting a stronger hold over their collective

psyche.'

'But if that's the case, the figure on the spire...'

'Is a big two-fingered salute to whatever god they used to believe in.'

'Why would they do that?' Pascale said. 'Religions just fade away; get replaced by new ones. I

can't believe they'd build that city, everything in it, just as an insult to their old god.'

'Me neither. Which suggests something else entirely.'

'Like what?'

'That a new god moved in. One with wings.'

Volyova had decided it was time to show Khouri the instruments of her

profession. 'Hold on,' she

said, as the elevator approached the cache chamber. 'People don't generally like this the first time it

happens.'

'God,' Khouri said, instinctively pressing herself against the rear wall as the vista suddenly

expanded shockingly; the elevator a tiny beetle crawling down the side of the vast space. 'It looks

too big to fit inside!'

'Oh, this is nothing. There are another four chambers this large. Chamber two is where we train

for surface ops. Two are empty or semi-pressurised; the fourth holds shuttles and in-system

vehicles. This is the only one dedicated to holding the cache.'

'You mean those things?'

'Yes.'

There were forty cache-weapons in the chamber, though none exactly resembled any other. Yet

in their general style of construction, a certain affinity was betrayed. Each machine was cased in

alloy of a greenish-bronze hue. Though each of the devices was large enough to be a medium-sized

spacecraft in its own right, none exhibited any indication that this was their function. There were no

windows or access doors visible in what would have been their hulls, no markings or

communications systems. While some of the objects were studded with what might have been

vernier jets, they were only there to assist in the moving around and positioning of the devices,

much as a battleship was only there to assist in moving around and positioning its big guns.

Of course, that was exactly what the cache devices were.

'Hell-class,' Volyova said. 'That was what their builders called them. Of course, we're going back

a few centuries here.'

Volyova watched as her recruit appraised the titanic size of the nearest cache-weapon. Suspended

vertically, its long axis aligned with the ship's axis of thrust, it looked like a ceremonial sword

dangling from a warrior-baron's ceiling. Like all the weapons, it was surrounded by a framework

which had been added by one of Volyova's predecessors, to which were attached various control,

monitoring and manoeuvring systems. All the weapons were connected to tracks -- a three-

dimensional maze of sidings and switches -- which merged lower down in the chamber, feeding into

a much smaller volume directly below, large enough to contain a single weapon. From there, the

weapons could be deployed beyond the hull, into space.

'So who built them?' Khouri said.

'We don't know for sure. The Conjoiners, perhaps, in one of their darker incarnations. All we

know is how we found them -- hidden away in an asteroid, circling a brown dwarf so obscure it has

only a catalogue number.'

'You were there?'

'No; this was long before my time. I only inherited them from the last caretaker -- and he from

his. I've been studying them ever since. I've managed to access the control systems of thirty-one of

them, and I've figured out -- very roughly -- about eighty per cent of the necessary activation codes.

But I've only tested seventeen of the weapons, and of that number, only two in what you might term

actual combat situations.'

'You mean you've actually used them?'

'It wasn't something I rushed into.'

No need, she thought, to burden Khouri with details of past atrocities -- at least, not immediately.

Over time, Khouri would come to know the cache-weapons as well as Volyova knew them --

perhaps even more intimately, since Khouri would know them via the

gunnery, through direct

neural-interface.

'What can they do?'

'Some of them are more than capable of taking planets apart. Others... I don't even want to guess.

I wouldn't be at all surprised if some of them did unpleasant things to stars. Exactly who'd want to

use such weapons...' She trailed off.

'Who did you use them against?'

'Enemies, of course.'

Khouri regarded her for long, silent seconds.

'I don't know whether to be horrified that such things exist... or relieved to know that at least it's

us who have our fingers on the triggers.'

'Be relieved,' Volyova said. 'It's better that way.'

Sylveste and Pascale returned to the spire, hovering. The winged Amarantin was just as they had

left it, but now it seemed to brood over the city with imperious disregard. It was tempting to think

that a new god really had moved in -- what else could have inspired the building of such a

monument, if not fear of the divine? But the accompanying text on the spire was maddeningly hard

to unscramble.

'Here's a reference to the Birdmaker,' Sylveste said. 'So chances are good the spire had some

bearing on the Burning Wings myth, even though the winged god clearly isn't a representation of

the Birdmaker.'

'Yes,' Pascale said. 'That's the graphicform for fire, next to the one for wings.'

'What else do you see?'

Pascale concentrated for a few long moments. 'There's some reference here to a renegade flock.'

'Renegade in what sense?' He was testing her, and she knew it, but the exercise was valuable in

itself, for Pascale's interpretation would give him some indication of how subjective his own

analysis had been.

'A renegade flock which didn't agree to the deal with the Birdmaker, or reneged on the deal

afterwards.'

'That's what I thought. I was worried I might have made an error or two.'

'Whoever they were, they were called the Banished Ones.' She read back and forth, testing

hypotheses and revising her interpretation as she went. 'It looks like they were originally part of the

flock who agreed to the Birdmaker's terms, but that they changed their minds

sometime later.'

'Can you make out the name of their leader?'

She began: 'They were led by an individual called...' But then Pascale trailed off. 'No, can't

translate that string; at least not right now. What does all this mean, anyway? Do you think they

really existed?'

'Perhaps. If I had to take a guess, I'd say they were unbelievers who came to realise that the

Birdmaker myth was just that -- myth. Of course, that wouldn't have gone down very well with the

other fundamentalist flocks.'

'Which is why they were Banished?'

'Assuming they ever existed in the first place. But I can't help thinking, what if they were some

kind of technological sect, like an enclave of scientists? Amarantin who were prepared to

experiment, to question the nature of their world?'

'Like mediaeval alchemists?'

'Yes.' He liked the analogy immediately. 'Perhaps they even tried experimenting with flight, the

way Leonardo did. Against the backdrop of general Amarantin culture, that would have been like

spitting in God's eye.'

'Agreed. But assuming they were real -- and were Banished -- what happened to them? Did they

just die out?'

'I don't know. But one thing's clear. The Banished Ones were important -- more than just a minor

detail in the overall story of the Birdmaker myth. They're mentioned all over the spire; all over this

damned city, in fact -- far more frequently than in any other Amarantin relics.'

'But the city is late,' Pascale said. 'Apart from the marker obelisk, it's the most recent relic we've

found. Dating from near the Event. Why would the Banished Ones suddenly crop up again, after so

long an absence?'

'Well,' Sylveste said. 'Maybe they came back.'

'After -- what? Tens of thousands of years?'

'Perhaps.' Sylveste smiled privately. 'If they did return -- after that long away -- it might be the

kind of thing to inspire statue-building.'

'Then the statue -- do you think it might portray their leader? The one called-- --' Pascale took

another stab at the graphicform. 'Well, this is the symbol for the sun, isn't it?'

'And the rest?'

'I'm not sure. Looks like the glyph for the act of... theft -- but how can that

be?'

'Put the two together, what have you got?'

He imagined her shrugging, noncommittally. 'One who steals suns? Sun Stealer? What would

that mean?'

Sylveste shrugged himself. 'That's what I've been asking myself all morning. That and one other

thing.'

'Which would be?'

'Why I think I've heard that name before.'

After the weapons chamber, the three of them rode another elevator further into the ship's heart.

'You're doing well,' the Mademoiselle said. 'Volyova honestly believes that she's turned you to

her side.'

She had, more or less, been with them the whole time -- silently observing Volyova's guided tour,

only occasionally interjecting with remarks or prompts for Khouri's ears only. This was extremely

disquieting: Khouri was never able to free herself of the feeling that Volyova was also privy to

these whispered asides.

'Maybe she's right,' Khouri answered, automatically thinking her response. 'Maybe she's stronger

than you.'

The Mademoiselle scoffed. 'Did you listen to anything I told you?'

'As if I had any choice.'

Shutting out the Mademoiselle when she wanted to say something was like trying to silence an

insistent refrain playing in her head. There was no respite from her apparitions.

'Listen,' the woman said. 'If my countermeasures were failing, your loyalty to Volyova would

force you to tell her of my existence.'

'I've been tempted.'

The Mademoiselle looked at her askance, and Khouri felt a brief frisson of satisfaction. In some

respects the Mademoiselle -- or rather, her implant-distilled persona -- seemed omniscient. But

apart from the knowledge which had been instilled in it upon its creation, the implant's learning was

restricted entirely to what it could perceive through Khouri's own senses. Maybe the implant could

hook into data networks even if Khouri herself were not interfaced, but while that might have been

possible, it seemed unlikely; there was too much risk of the implant itself being detected by the

same systems. And although it could hear her thoughts when Khouri chose to communicate with it,

it could not read her state of mind, other than by the most superficial biochemical cues in the neural

environment in which it floated. So for the implant, there was a necessary element of doubt

concerning the efficacy of its countermeasures.

'Volyova would kill you. She killed her last recruit, if you haven't worked that out for yourself.'

'Maybe she had good reason.'

'You don't know anything about her -- or any of them. Neither do I. We haven't even met her

Captain yet.'

There was no arguing with that. Captain Brannigan's name had come up once or twice when

Sajaki or one of the others had been indiscreet in Khouri's presence, but in general they did not

speak often of their leader. Clearly they were not Ultras in the usual sense, although they

maintained a meticulous front even the Mademoiselle had not seen through. The fiction was so

absolute that they went through the motions of trade just like all the other Ultra crews. But what

was the reality behind the facade?

Gunnery Officer, Volyova had said. And now Khouri had seen something of the cache of

weapons stored within the ship. It was rumoured that many trade vessels

carried discreet

armaments, for resolving the worst sorts of breakdown in client-customer relations, or for staging

acts of blatant piracy against other ships. But these weapons looked far too potent to be used in

mere squabbles, and in any case, the ship clearly had an extra layer of conventional weaponry for

just those circumstances. So what exactly was the point behind this arsenal? Sajaki must have had

some long-term plan in mind, Khouri thought, and that was disturbing enough -- but even more

worrying was the thought that perhaps there was no plan at all; that Sajaki was carrying the cache

around until he found an excuse for using it, like a tooled-up thug stumbling around in search of a

fight.

Over the weeks, Khouri had considered and discarded numerous theories, without coming close

to anything that sounded plausible. It was not the military side of the ship's nature that troubled her,

of course. She had been born to war; war was her natural environment, and while she was ready to

consider the possibility that there were other, more benign states of being, there was nothing about

war that felt alien to her. But, she had to admit, the kinds of wars which she had known on Sky's

Edge were hardly comparable to any of the scenarios in which the cache-weapons might be used.

Though Sky's Edge had remained linked to the interstellar trade network, the average technological

level of the combatants in the surface battles had been centuries behind the Ultras who sometimes

parked their ships in orbit. A campaign could be won just by one side gaining one item of Ultra

weaponry... but those items had always been scarce; sometimes too valuable even to use. Even

nukes had been deployed only a few times in the colony's history, and never in Khouri's lifetime.

She had seen some vile things -- things that still haunted her -- but she had never seen anything

capable of instant, genocidal death. Volyova's cache-weapons were much worse than that.

And perhaps they had been used, once or twice. Volyova had said as much -- pirate operations,

perhaps. There were plenty of thinly populated systems, only loosely connected to the trade nets,

where it would be entirely possible to exterminate an enemy without anyone ever finding out. And

some of those enemies might be as amoral as any of Sajaki's crew; their pasts littered with acts of

random atrocity. So, yes, it was quite likely that parts of the cache had been tested. But Khouri

suspected that this would only have ever been a means to an end; self-preservation, or tactical

strikes against enemies with resources they needed. The heavier cache-weapons would not have

been tested. What they eventually planned to do with the cache -- how they planned to discharge the

world-wrecking power they possessed -- was not yet clear, perhaps not even to Sajaki. And perhaps

Sajaki was not the man in whom the ultimate power lay vested. Perhaps, in some way, Sajaki was

still serving Captain Brannigan.

Whoever the mysterious Brannigan was.

*

'Welcome to the gunnery,' Volyova said.

They had arrived somewhere near the middle of the ship. Volyova had opened a hole in the

ceiling, folded down a telescopic ladder and beckoned Khouri to climb its sharp-edged rungs.

Her head was poking into a large spherical room full of curved, jointed machinery. At the centre

of this halo of bluish-silver was a rectilinear hooded black seat, festooned with machinery and a

seemingly random tangle of cables. The seat was fixed within a series of elegant gyroscopic axes,

arranged so that its motion would be independent of that of the ship. The

cables passed into sliding

armatures which transmitted power between each concentric shell, before the final thigh-thick

clump dove into the machinery-clotted spherical wall of the room. The room reeked of ozone.

There was nothing in the gunnery which looked much newer than a few hundred years old, and

plenty that looked as if it had been around for considerably longer. All of it, though, had been

scrupulously cared for.

'This is what it's all been building up to, isn't it?' Khouri pushed herself through the trapdoor into

the heart of the chamber, slithering between the curved skeletal shells until she reached the seat.

Massive as it was, it seemed to beckon to her with promises of comfort and security. She could not

stop herself from sliding into it, letting its cumbersome black bulk softly encase her with a whirr of

buried servomechanisms.

'How does it feel?'

'Like I've been here before,' she said wonderingly, voice distorted by the bulk of the studded

black helmet which had slid over her head.

'You have,' Volyova answered. 'Before you were properly conscious. Besides, the gunnery

implant in your head already knows its way around here -- that's where half the sense of familiarity

comes from.'

What Volyova said was true. Khouri felt as if the chair were some familiar piece of furniture she

had grown up around, its every wrinkle and scratch known to her. She already felt powerfully

relaxed and calm, and the urge to actually do something -- to use the power that the chair bestowed

on her -- was building by the second.

'I can control the cache-weapons from here?'

'That's the intention,' Volyova said. 'But not just the cache, of course. You'll also be directing

every other major weapon system aboard the *Infinity* -- with as much fluency as if these instruments

were simply extensions of your own anatomy. When you're fully subsumed by the gunnery, that's

how it'll feel -- your own body image swelling out to take in the ship itself.'

Khouri had already begun to feel something similar; the sense at least that her body was blurring

into the chair. Tantalising as it was, she had no wish for the sense of subsumption to continue any

further. With a conscious effort she eased herself from the chair, its enfolding panels whirring aside

to release her.

'I'm not sure I like this,' the Mademoiselle said.

SEVEN

En Route to Delta Pavonis, 2546

Never quite forgetting that she was aboard a ship (it was the ever-so-slightly irregular pattern of the

induced gravity, caused by tiny imbalances in the thrust stream, which in turn reflected mysterious

quantum capriciousness in the bowels of the Conjoiner drives) Volyova entered the green seclusion

of the glade alone and hesitated at the top of the rustic staircase which led down to the grass. If

Sajaki was aware of her presence, he chose not to show it, kneeling silently and motionlessly next

to the gnarled tree stump which was their informal meeting place. But he undoubtedly sensed her.

Volyova knew that Sajaki had visited the Pattern Jugglers on the aquatic world Wintersea,

accompanying Captain Brannigan, back when Captain Brannigan was capable of leaving the ship.

She did not know what the purpose of that trip had been -- for either of them -
- but there had been

rumours that the Pattern Jugglers had tampered with his neocortex, embossing neural patterns which

configured an unusual degree of spatial awareness: the ability to think in four or five dimensions.

The patterns had been the rarest kind of Juggler transform: one that lingered.

Volyova ambled down the staircase and allowed her foot to creak on the lowest tread. Sajaki

turned to regard her with no visible hint of surprise.

'Something up?' he asked, reading her expression.

'It concerns the *stavlennik*,' she said, momentarily lapsing back into Russish. 'The protegee, I

mean.'

'Tell me about it,' Sajaki said absently. He wore an ash-grey kimono, damp grass darkening his

knees to olive-black. His Komuso's shakuhachi rested on the stump's mirror-smooth, elbow-

polished surface. He and Volyova were now the only two crewmembers yet to enter reefersleep,

two months out from Yellowstone.

'She's one of us now,' Volyova said, kneeling opposite him. 'The core of her indoctrination is

complete.'

'I welcome this news.'

Across the glade a macaw screeched, then left its perch in a flurry of clashing primary colours.

'We can introduce her to Captain Brannigan.'

'No time like the present,' Sajaki said, smoothing a wrinkle from his kimono. 'Or do you have

second thoughts?'

'About meeting the Captain?' She clucked nervously. 'None at all.'

'Then it's deeper than that.'

'What?'

'Whatever's on your mind, Ilia. Come on. Spit it out.'

'It's Khouri. I'm no longer willing to risk her suffering the same kind of psychotic episodes as

Nagorny.' She stopped, expecting -- hoping, even -- for some response from Sajaki. But instead all

she got was the white-noise of the waterfall, and a total absence of expression on her crewmate's

face. 'What I mean,' she continued -- almost stammering with her own uncertainty -- 'is that I'm no

longer sure she's a suitable subject at this stage.'

'At this stage?' Sajaki spoke so softly she largely read his lips.

'I mean, to go into the gunnery immediately after Nagorny. It's too dangerous, and I think Khouri

is too valuable to risk.' She stopped, swallowed, and drew breath into her lungs for what she knew

would be the hardest thing to say. 'I think we need another recruit -- someone less gifted. With an

intermediate recruit I can iron out the remaining wrinkles before going ahead with Khouri as

primary candidate.'

Sajaki picked up his shakuhachi and sighted along it thoughtfully. There was a little raised burr at

the end of the bamboo, perhaps from the time when he had used the stick on Khouri. He rubbed it

with his thumb, smoothing it back down.

When he spoke, it was with a calm so total that it was worse than any possible display of anger.

'You're suggesting we look for another recruit?'

He made it sound as if what she was proposing was easily the most absurd, deranged thing he had

ever heard uttered.

'Only in the interim,' she said, aware that she was speaking too quickly, hating herself for it,

despising her sudden deference to the man. 'Just until everything's stable. Then we can use Khouri.'

Sajaki nodded. 'Well, that sounds sensible. Goodness knows why we didn't think of it earlier, but

I suppose we had other things on our minds.' He put down the shakuhachi, although his hand did

not stray far from its hollow shaft. 'But that can't be helped. What we have to do now is find

ourselves another recruit. Shouldn't be too hard, should it? I mean, we hardly taxed ourselves

recruiting Khouri. Admittedly we're two months into interstellar space and our next port of call is a

virtually unheard-of outpost -- but I don't envisage any great problem in finding another subject. I

expect we'll have to turn them away in droves, don't you?

'Be reasonable,' she said.

'In what sense am I being anything other than reasonable, Triumvir?'

A moment ago she had been scared; now she was angry. 'You haven't been the same, Yuuji-san.

Not since...'

'Not since what?'

'Not since you and the Captain visited the jugglers. What happened there, Yuuji? What did the

aliens do to your head?'

He looked at her oddly, as if the question were a perfectly valid one which it had never struck

him to ask himself. It was, fatefully, a ruse, Sajaki moved quickly with the shakuhachi, so that all

Volyova really saw was a teak-coloured blur in the air. The blow was relatively soft -- Sajaki must

have pulled at the last moment -- but, gashing into her side, it was still sufficient to send her

sprawling into the grass. For the first instant, it was not the pain or the shock of being attacked by

Sajaki that overwhelmed her, but the prickly cold wetness of the grass brushing against her nostrils.

He stepped casually round the stump.

'You're always asking too many questions,' Sajaki said, and then drew something from his

kimono that might have been a syringe.

Nekhebet Isthmus, Resurgam, 2566

Sylveste reached anxiously into his pocket, feeling for the vial which he felt sure would be missing.

He touched it; a minor miracle.

Down below, dignitaries were filing into the Amarantin city, moving slowly towards the temple

at the city's heart. Snatches of their conversation reached him with perfect clarity, though never long

enough for him to hear more than a few words. He was hundreds of metres above them, on the

human-installed balustrade which had been grafted to the black wall of the city-englobing egg.

It was his wedding day.

He had seen the temple in simulations many times, but it had been so long since he had actually

visited the place that he had forgotten how overpowering its size could be. That was one of the odd,

persistent defects of simulations: no matter how precise they became, the participant remained

aware that they were not reality. Sylveste had stood beneath the roof of the Amarantin spire-temple,

gazing up to where the angled stone arches intersected hundreds of metres above, and had felt not

the slightest hint of vertigo, or fear that the age-old structure would choose that moment to collapse

upon him. But now -- visiting the buried city for only the second time in person -- he felt a

withering sense of his own smallness. The egg in which it was encased was itself uncomfortably

large, but that at least was the product of a recognisably mature technology -- even if the

Inundationists elected to ignore the fact. The city which rested within, on the other hand, looked

more like the product of some fifteenth-century fever-dream fantasist, not least because of the

fabulous winged figure which rested atop the temple spire. And all of it -- the more he looked --

seemed to exist only to celebrate the return of the Banished Ones.

None of it made sense. But at least it forced his mind off the ceremony ahead.

The more he looked, the more he realised -- against his first impression -- that the winged thing

really *was* an Amarantin, or, more accurately, a kind of hybrid Amarantin/angel, sculpted by an

artist with a deep and scholarly understanding of what the possessing of wings would actually

entail. Seen without his eyes' zoom facility, the statue was cruciform, shockingly so. Enlarged, the

cruciform shape became a perched Amarantin with glorious, outspread wings. The wings were

metalled in different colours, each small trailing feather sparkling with a slightly different hue. Like

the human representation of an angel, the wings did not simply replace the creature's arms, but were

a third pair of limbs in their own right.

But the statue seemed more real than any representation of an angel Sylveste had ever seen in

human art. It appeared -- the thought seemed absurd -- anatomically correct. The sculptor had not

just grafted the wings onto the basic Amarantin form, but had subtly re-engineered the creature's

underlying physique. The manipulatory forelimbs had been moved slightly lower down the torso,

elongated to compensate. The chest of the torso swelled much wider than the norm, dominated by a

yokelike skeletal/muscular form around the creature's shoulder area. From this yoke sprouted the

wing, forming a roughly triangular shape, kitelike. The creature's neck was longer than normal, and

the head seemed even more streamlined and avian in profile. The eyes still faced forwards -- though

like all Amarantin, its binocular vision was limited -- but were set into deep, grooved bone

channels. The creature's upper mandible nostril parts were flared and rilled,

as if to draw the extra

air into the lungs required for the beating of the wings. And yet not everything was right. Assuming

that the creature's body was approximately similar in mass to the Amarantin norm, even those

wings would have been pitifully inadequate for the task of flying. So what were they -- some kind

of gross ornamentation? Had the Banished Ones gone in for radical bio-engineering, only to burden

themselves with wings of ridiculous impracticality?

Or had there been another purpose?

'Second thoughts?'

Sylveste was jolted suddenly from his contemplation.

'You still don't think this is a good idea, do you?'

He turned around from the balustrade which looked across the city.

'It's a little late to voice my objections, I think.'

'On your wedding day?' Girardieau smiled. 'Well, you're not home and dry yet, Dan. You could

always back out.'

'How would you take that?'

'Very badly indeed, I suspect.'

Girardieau was dressed in starched city finery, cheeks lightly rouged for the attendant swarms of

float-cams. He took Sylveste by the forearm and led him away from the edge.

'How long have we been friends, Dan?'

'I wouldn't exactly call it friendship; more a kind of mutual parasitism.'

'Oh come on,' Girardieau said, looking disappointed. 'Have I made your life any more of a misery

these last twenty years than was strictly necessary? Do you think I took any great pleasure in

locking you away?'

'Let's say you approached the task with no little enthusiasm.'

'Only because I had your best interests at heart.' They stepped off the balcony into one of the low

tunnels which threaded the black shell around the city. Cushioned flooring absorbed their footsteps.

'Besides,' Girardieau continued, 'if it wasn't transparently obvious, Dan, there was something of a

feeding frenzy at the time. If I hadn't put you in custody, some mob would eventually have taken

out their anger on you.'

Sylveste listened without speaking. He knew much of what Girardieau said was true on a

theoretical level, but that there was no guarantee that it reflected the man's actual motives at the

time.

'The political situation at the time was much simpler. Back then we didn't

have True Path making

trouble.' They reached an elevator shaft and entered the carriage, its interior antiseptically clean and

new. Prints hung on the wall, showing various Resurgam vistas before and after the Inundationist

transformations. There was even one of Mantell. The mesa in which the research outpost was

embedded was draped in foliage, a waterfall running off the top, blue, cloud-streaked skies beyond

it. In Cuvier, there was a whole sub-industry devoted to creating images and simulations of the

future Resurgam, ranging from water-colour artists to skilled sensorium designers.

'And on the other hand,' Girardieau said, 'there are radical scientific elements coming out of the

woodwork. Only last week, one of True Path's representatives was shot dead in Mantell, and believe

me, it wasn't one of our agents who did it.'

Sylveste felt the carriage begin to convey them down, towards the city level.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that with fanatics on both sides, you and I are beginning to look like distinct

moderates. Depressing thought, isn't it?'

'Out-radicalised on both fronts, you mean.'

'Something like that.'

They emerged through the black, graven wall of the city-shell into a small crowd of media types

who were running through last-minute preparations for the event. Reporters wore buff-coloured

float-cam glasses, choreographing the cams which hovered around them like drab party balloons.

One of Janequin's genetically engineered peacocks was pecking around the group, its tail hissing

behind it. Two security officers stepped forwards garbed in black with gold Inundationist sigils on

their shoulders, surrounded by flocks of deliberately threatening entoptics. Servitors loitered behind

them. They ran full-spectrum ident scans on Sylveste and Girardieau, then motioned them to a small

temporary structure which had been placed near a nestlike froth of Amarantin dwellings.

The inside was almost bare, apart from a table and two skeletal chairs. There was a bottle of

Amerikano red wine on the table, next to a pair of wine goblets, engraved with frosted-glass

landscapes.

'Sit down,' Girardieau said. He swaggered around the table and decanted measures of wine into

both glasses. 'I don't know why you're so damned nervous. It isn't as if this is your first time.'

'My fourth, actually.'

'All Stoner ceremonies?'

Sylveste nodded. He thought of the first two: small-scale affairs, to minor-league Stoner women,

the faces of whom he could almost not separate in his memory. Both had withered under the glare

of publicity that the family name attracted. By contrast, his marriage to Alicia -- his last wife -- had

been sculpted as a publicity move from the onset. It had focused attention on the upcoming

Resurgam expedition, giving it the final monetary push it needed. The fact that they had been in

love had been almost inconsequential, merely a happy addendum to the existing arrangement.

'That's a lot of baggage to be carrying around in your head now,' Girardieau said. 'Don't you ever

wish you could be rid of the past each time?'

'You find the ceremony unusual.'

'Perhaps I do.' Girardieau wiped a red smear of wine from his lips. 'I was never part of Stoner

culture, you see.'

'You came with us from Yellowstone.'

'Yes, but I wasn't born there. My family were from Grand Teton. I only arrived on Yellowstone

seven years before the Resurgam expedition departed. Not really enough time to become culturally

adapted to Stoner tradition. My daughter, on the other hand... well, Pascale's never known anything

but Stoner society. Or at least the version of it we imported when we came here.' He lowered his

voice. 'You must have the vial with you now, I suppose. May I see it?'

'I could hardly refuse you.'

Sylveste reached in his pocket and removed the little glass cylinder he had been carrying with

him all day. He passed it to Girardieau, who nervously tinkered with it, tipping it this way and that.

He watched the bubbles within, slipping to and fro as if in a spirit level. Something darker hung

within the fluid, fibrous and tendrilled.

He placed the vial down; it made a delicate glassy chime as it settled on the tabletop. Girardieau

studied it with barely masked horror.

'Was it painful?'

'Of course not. We're not sadists, you know.' Sylveste smiled, secretly enjoying Girardieau's

discomfort. 'Would you rather we exchanged camels, perhaps?'

'Put it away.'

Sylveste slipped the vial back into his pocket. 'Now tell me who's the nervous

one, Nils.'

Girardieau poured himself another measure of wine. 'Sorry. Security are edgy as hell. Don't know

what's got them so bothered, but it's rubbing off on me, I suppose.'

'I didn't notice anything.'

'You wouldn't.' Girardieau shrugged; a bellows-like movement that began somewhere below his

abdomen. 'They claim everything's normal, but after twenty years I read them better than they

imagine.'

'I wouldn't worry. Your police are very efficient people.'

Girardieau shook his head briefly, as if he had taken a bite from a particularly sour lemon. 'I don't

expect the air between us to ever be completely cleared, Dan. But you could at least give me the

benefit of the doubt.' He nodded towards the open door. 'Didn't I give you complete access to this

place?'

Yes, and all that had done was to replace a dozen questions with a thousand more. 'Nils...' he

began, 'how are the colony's resources these days?'

'In what sense?'

'I know things have been different since Remilliod came through. Things which would have been

unthinkable in my day... could be done now, if the political will was there.'

'What kinds of things?' Girardieau asked dubiously.

Sylveste reached into his jacket again, but this time, instead of the vial, he removed a piece of

paper which he spread before Girardieau. The paper was marked with complex circular figures.

'You recognise these marks? We found them on the obelisk and all over the city. They're maps of

the solar system, made by the Amarantin.'

'Somehow, having seen this city, I find that easier to believe now than I once did.'

'Good, then hear me out.' Sylveste drew his finger along the widest circle.

'This represents the

orbit of the neutron star, Hades.'

'Hades?'

'That was the name it was given when they first surveyed the system. There's a lump of rock

orbiting it, too -- about the size of a planetary moon. They called it Cerberus.' Then he brushed his

finger across the cluster of graphicforms attending the neutron star/planet double system.

'Somehow, this was important to the Amarantin. And I think it might have some bearing on the

Event.'

Girardieau buried his head in his hands theatrically, then looked back at Sylveste. 'You're serious,

aren't you?'

'Yes.' Carefully -- never allowing his gaze to move from Girardieau's eyes -- he folded away the

paper and replaced it in his pocket. 'We have to explore it, and find out what killed the Amarantin.

Before it kills us as well.'

When Sajaki and Volyova came to Khouri's quarters, they told her to put on something warm.

Khouri noticed that they were both wearing heavier than usual shipwear -- Volyova in a zipped-up

flying jacket, Sajaki in muffled, high-collared thermals, quilted in a mosaic of nova-diamond

patches.

'I've screwed up, haven't I?' Khouri said. 'This is where I get the airlock treatment. My scores in

the combat simulations haven't been good enough. You're going to ditch me.'

'Don't be stupid,' Sajaki said, only his nose and forehead protruding above the furline of his

collar. 'If we were going to kill you, do you think we'd worry about you catching a chill?'

'And,' Volyova said, 'your indoctrination finished weeks ago. You're now one of our assets. To

kill you now would be a form of treason against ourselves.' Beneath the bib

of her cap only her

mouth and chin were visible; she exactly complemented Sajaki, the two of them forming one bland

composite face.

'Nice to know you care.'

Still unsure of her position -- the possibility that they might be planning something nasty was still

looming large -- she dug through what passed for her belongings until she found a thermal jacket.

Manufactured by the ship, it was similar to Sajaki's harlequin job, except that it fell almost to her

knees.

An elevator journey took them into an unexplored region of the ship -- at least, well away from

what Khouri considered known territory. They had to change elevators several times, walking

through interconnecting tunnels which Volyova said were necessary because of virus damage taking

out large sections of the transit system. The décor and technological level of the walk-through areas

was always subtly different, suggesting to Khouri that whole districts of the ship had been left

fallow at different stages over the last few centuries. She remained nervous, but something in Sajaki

and Volyova's demeanour told her that what they had in mind was more akin

to an initiation

ceremony than a cold execution. They reminded her of children embarked on some piece of

malicious tomfoolery -- Volyova at least, though Sajaki looked and acted a good deal more

authoritarian, like a functionary carrying out a grim civic duty.

'Since you're part of us now,' he said, 'it's time you learnt a little more about the set-up. You

might also appreciate knowing our reason for going to Resurgam.'

'I assumed it was trade.'

'That was the cover story, but let's face it, it was never very convincing. Resurgam doesn't have

much in the way of an economy -- the purpose of the colony is pure research -- and it certainly lacks

the resources to buy much from us. Of course, our data on the colony is necessarily old, and once

we're there we'll trade what we can, but that could never be the sole reason for our voyage there.'

'So what is?'

The lift they were in was decelerating. 'The name Sylveste mean anything to you?' Sajaki asked.

Khouri did her best to act normally, as if the question were reasonable, and not one which had

gone off in her cranium like a magnesium flare.

'Well, of course. Everyone on Yellowstone knew about Sylveste. Guy was practically a god to

them. Or maybe the devil.' She paused, hoping her reactions sounded normal. 'Wait though; which

Sylveste are we talking about here? The older one, the guy who botched up those immortality

experiments? Or his son?'

'Technically speaking,' Sajaki said, 'both.'

The lift thundered to a halt. When the doors opened it was like being slapped in the face with a

cold wet cloth. Khouri was glad for the advice about the warm clothes, although she still felt

mortally chilled. 'Thing was,' she continued, 'they weren't all bastards. Lorean was the old guy's

father, and he was still some kind of a folk hero, even after he died, and the old guy -- what was his

name again?'

'Calvin.'

'Right. Even after Calvin killed all those people. Then Calvin's son came along -- Dan, that would

have been -- and he tried to make amends, in his own way, with the Shrouder thing.' Khouri

shrugged. 'I wasn't around then, of course. I only know what people told me.'

Sajaki led them through gloomy grey-green lit corridors, huge and perhaps mutant janitor-rats

scrabbling away as their footfalls neared. What he took them into resembled the inside of a

choleraic's trachea -- corridors thick and glutinous with dirty carapacial ice; venous with buried

tentacular ducts and power lines, slick with something nastily like human phlegm. Ship-slime,

Volyova called it -- an organic secretion caused by malfunctioning biological recycler systems on

an adjacent level.

Mostly, though, it was the cold of which Khouri took heed.

'Sylveste's part in things is rather complex,' Sajaki said. 'It'll take a while to explain. First, though,

I'd like you to meet the Captain.'

Sylveste walked around himself, checking that nothing was seriously out of place. Satisfied, he

cancelled the image and joined Girardieau in the pre-fab's ante-room. The music reached a

crescendo, then settled into a burbling refrain. The pattern of lights altered, voices dropping to a

hush.

Together, they stepped into the glare, into the basso sound-field of the organ's drone. A

meandering path led to the central temple, carpeted for the occasion. Chime-trees lined it, cased in

protective domes of clear plastic. The chime-trees were spindly, articulated

sculptures, their many

arms tipped with curved, coloured mirrors. At odd times, the trees would click and reconfigure

themselves, moved by what seemed to be million-year-old clockwork buried in pedestals. Current

thinking had it that the trees were elements of some city-wide semaphore system.

The organ's noise magnified as they stepped into the temple. Its egg-shaped dome was permeated

by petal-shaped expanses of elaborate stained-glass, miraculously intact despite the slow predations

of time and gravity. Filtered through the toplights, the air in the temple seemed suffused with a

calming pink radiance. The central portion of the enormous room was taken up by the rising

foundation of the spire which rose above the temple; wide and flared like the base of a sequoia.

Temporary seating for a hundred top-level Cuvier dignitaries bowed out in a fan-shape from one

side of the pillar; easily accommodated by the building, despite its one-quarter scale. Sylveste

scanned the racks of watchers, recognising about a third of them. Perhaps a tenth had been his allies

before the coup. Most of them wore heavy outer garments, plump with furs. He recognised Janequin

amongst them, sagelike with his smoke-white goatee and long silvery hair

waterfalling from his

bald pate. He looked more simian than ever. Some of his birds were in the hall, released from a

dozen bamboo boxes. Sylveste had to admit that they were now strikingly good facsimiles, even

down to the bobbed crest and the speckle-shimmer of their turquoise plumage. They had been

adapted from chickens by careful manipulation of homeobox genes. The audience, many of whom

had not seen the birds before today, applauded. Janequin turned the colour of bloodied snow, and

seemed anxious to sink into his brocade overcoat.

Girardieau and Sylveste reached a sturdy table at the focus of the audience. The table was

ancient: its woodwork eagle and Latinate inscriptions dated back to the Amerikano settlers on

Yellowstone. Its corners were chipped. A varnished mahogany box sat on the table, sealed by

delicate gold clasps.

A woman of serious demeanour stood behind the table, dressed in an electric-white gown. The

gown's clasp was a complex dual sigil, combining the Resurgam City/Inundationist governmental

seal with the emblem of the Mixmasters: two hands holding a cat's cradle of DNA. She was,

Sylveste knew, not a true Mixmaster. The Mixmasters were a cliquish guild of Stoner bioengineers

and geneticists, and none of their sanctum had journeyed to Resurgam. Yet their symbol -- which

had travelled -- denoted general expertise in life-sciences: genesculpting, surgery or medicine.

Her unsmiling face was sallow in the stained light, hair collected in a bun, pierced by two

syringes.

The music quietened.

'I am Ordinator Massinger,' she said, voice ringing out across the chamber. 'I am empowered by

the Resurgam expeditionary council to marry individuals of this settlement, unless such union

conflicts with the genetic fitness of the colony.'

The Ordinator opened the mahogany box. Just below the lid lay a leather-bound object the size of

a Bible. She removed it and placed it on the table, then folded it open with a creak of leather. The

exposed surfaces were matt grey, like wet slate, glistening with microscopic machinery.

'Place one hand each on the page nearest you, gentlemen.'

They placed their palms on the surface. There was a fluorescent sweep as the book took their

palm-prints, followed by a brief tingle as biopsies were taken. When they

were done, Massinger

took the book and pressed her own hand against the surface.

Massinger then asked Nils Girardieau to state his identity to the gathered.
Sylveste watched faint

smiles ghost the audience. There was something absurd about it, after all,
though Girardieau made

no show of this himself.

Then she asked the same of Sylveste.

'I am Daniel Calvin Lorean Soutaine-Sylveste,' he said, using the form of his
name so rarely

employed that it almost took an effort of memory to bring it to mind. He went
on, 'The only

biological son of Rosalyn Soutaine and Calvin Sylveste, both of Chasm City,
Yellowstone. I was

born on the seventeenth of January, in the hundred and twenty-first standard
year after the

resettlement of Yellowstone. My calendrical age is two hundred and twenty-
three. Allowing for

medichine programs, I have a physiological age of sixty, on the Sharavi
scale.'

'How do you knowingly manifest?'

'I knowingly manifest in one incarnation only, the biological form now
speaking.'

'And you affirm that you are not wittingly manifested via alpha-level or other
Turing-capable

simulacra, in this or any other solar system?'

'None of which I am aware.'

Massinger made small annotations in the book using a pressure stylus. She had asked Girardieau

precisely the same questions: standard parts of the Stoner ceremony. Ever since the Eighty, Stoners

had been intensely suspicious of simulations in general, particularly those that purported to contain

the essence or soul of an individual. One thing they especially disliked was the idea of one

manifestation of an individual -- biological or otherwise -- making contracts to which the other

manifestations were not bound, such as marriage.

'These details are in order,' Massinger said. 'The bride may step forward.'

Pascale moved into the roseate light. She was accompanied by two women wearing ash-coloured

wimples, a squad of float-cams and personal security wasps and a semi-transparent entourage of

entoptics: nymphs, seraphim, flying-fish and hummingbirds, star-glitter dewdrops and butterflies, in

slow cascade around her wedding dress. The most exclusive entoptic designers in Cuvier had

created them.

Girardieau raised his thick, hauserlike arms and bid his daughter forward.

'You look beautiful,' he murmured.

What Sylveste saw was beauty reduced to digital perfection. He knew that Girardieau saw

something incomparably softer and more human, like the difference between a swan and a hard

glass sculpture of a swan.

'Place your hand on the book,' the Ordinator said.

An imprint of moisture from Sylveste's hand was still visible, like a wider shoreline around

Pascale's island of pale flesh. The Ordinator asked her to verify her identity, in the same manner as

she had asked Girardieau and Sylveste. Pascale's task was simple enough: not only had she been

born on Resurgam, but she had never left the planet. Ordinator Massinger delved deeper into the

mahogany box. While she did so, Sylveste's eyes worked the audience. He saw Janequin, looking

paler than ever, fidgety. Deep within the box, polished to a bluish antiseptic lustre, lay a device like

a cross between an old-style pistol and a veterinarian's hypodermic.

'Behold the wedding gun,' the Ordinator said, holding the box aloft.

Bone-splinteringly cold as it was, Khouri soon stopped noticing the temperature except as an

abstract quality of the air. The story that her two crewmates was relating was far too strange for

that.

They were standing near the Captain. His name, she now knew, was John Armstrong Brannigan.

He was old, inconceivably so. Depending on the system one adopted in measuring his age, he was

anywhere between two hundred and half a thousand years old. The details of his birth were unclear

now, hopelessly tangled in the countertruths of political history. Mars, some said, was the place

where he had been born, yet it was equally possible that he had been born on Earth, Earth's city-

jammed moon or in any one of the several hundred habitats which drifted through cislunar space in

those days.

'He was already over a century old before he ever left Sol system,' Sajaki said. 'He waited until it

was possible to do so, then was among the first thousand to leave, when the Conjoiners launched

the first ship from Phobos.'

'At least, someone called John Brannigan was on that ship,' Volyova said.

'No,' Sajaki said. 'There's no doubt. I know it was him. Afterwards... it becomes less easy to place

him, of course. He may have deliberately blurred his own past, to avoid being tracked down by all

the enemies he must have made in that time. There are many sightings, in

many different systems,

decades apart... but nothing definite.'

'How did he come to be your Captain?'

'He turned up centuries later -- after several landfalls elsewhere, and dozens of unconfirmed

apparitions -- on the fringe of the Yellowstone system. He was ageing slowly, due to the relativistic

effects of starflight, but he was still getting older, and longevity techniques were not as well

developed as in our time.' Sajaki paused. 'Much of his body was now prosthetic. They said that John

Brannigan no longer needed a spacesuit when he left his ship; that he breathed vacuum, basked in

intolerable heat and quenching cold, and that his sensory range encompassed every spectrum

imaginable. They said that little remained of the brain with which he had been born; that his head

was merely a dense loom of intermeshed cybernetics, a stew of tiny thinking machines and precious

little organic material.'

'And how much of that was true?'

'Perhaps more of it than people wished to believe. There were certainly lies: that he had visited

the Jugglers on Spindrift years before they were generally discovered; that the aliens had wrought

wondrous transformations on what remained of his mind, or that he had met and communicated

with at least two sentient species so far unknown to the rest of humanity.'

'He did meet the Jugglers eventually,' Volyova said, in Khouri's direction. 'Triumvir Sajaki was

with him at the time.'

'That was much later,' Sajaki snapped. 'All that's germane here is his relationship with Calvin.'

'How did they cross paths?'

'No one really knows,' Volyova said. 'All that we know for sure is that he became injured, either

through an accident or some military operation that went wrong. His life wasn't in danger, but he

needed urgent help, and to go to one of the official groups in the Yellowstone system would have

been suicide. He'd made too many enemies to be able to place his life in the hands of any

organisation. What he needed were loosely scattered individuals in whom he could place personal

trust. Evidently Calvin was one of them.'

'Calvin was in touch with Ultra elements?'

'Yes, though he would never have admitted so in public.' Volyova smiled, a wide toothy crescent

opening beneath the bib of her cap. 'Calvin was young and idealistic then. When this injured man

was delivered to him, he saw it as a godsend. Until then he had had no means of exploring his more

outlandish ideas. Now he had the perfect subject, the only requirement being total secrecy. Of

course, they both gained from it: Calvin was able to try out his radical cybernetic theories on

Brannigan, while Brannigan was made well and became something more than he had been before

Calvin's work. You might describe it as the perfect symbiotic relationship.'

'You're saying the Captain was a guinea pig for that bastard's monstrosities?'

Sajaki shrugged, the movement puppetlike within his swaddling clothes.

'That was not how Brannigan saw it. As far as the rest of humanity was concerned, he was

already a monster before the accident. What Calvin did was merely take the trend further.

Consume it, if you like.'

Volyova nodded, although there was something in her expression which suggested she was not

quite at ease with her crewmate. 'And in any case, this was prior to the Eighty. Calvin's name was

unsullied. And among the more overt extremes of Ultra life, Brannigan's transformation was only

slightly in excess of the norm.' She said it with tart distaste.

'Carry on.'

'Nearly a century passed before his next encounter with the Sylveste clan,' Sajaki said. 'By which

time he was commanding this ship.'

'What happened?'

'He was injured again. Seriously, this time.' Gingerly, like someone testing himself against a

candle flame, he whisked his fingers across the limiting extent of the Captain's silvery growth. The

Captain's outskirts looked frothy, like the brine left on a rockpool by the retreating tide. Sajaki

delicately swabbed his fingers against the front of his jacket, but Khouri could tell that they did not

feel clean; that they itched and crawled with subepidermal malignance.

'Unfortunately,' Volyova said, 'Calvin was dead.'

Of course. He had died during the Eighty; had in fact been one of the last to lose his corporeality.

'All right,' Khouri said. 'But he died in the process of having his brain scanned into a computer.

Couldn't you just steal the recording and persuade it to help you?'

'We would, had that been possible.' Sajaki's low voice reverberated from the throated curve of the

corridor. 'His recording, his alpha-level simulation, had vanished. And there were no duplicates --

the alphas were copy-protected.'

'So basically,' Khouri said, hoping to shatter the morguelike atmosphere of the proceedings, 'you

were up shit creek without a Captain.'

'Not quite,' Volyova said. 'You see, all this took place during a rather interesting period in

Yellowstone's history. Daniel Sylveste had just returned from the Shrouders, and was neither insane

nor dead. His companion hadn't been so lucky, but her death only gave additional poignancy to his

heroic return.' She halted, then asked, with birdlike eagerness: 'Did you ever hear of his "thirty days

in the wilderness", Khouri?'

'Maybe once. Remind me.'

'He vanished for a month a century ago,' Sajaki said. 'One minute the toast of Stoner society, the

next nowhere to be found. There were rumours that he'd gone out of the city dome; jammed on an

exosuit and gone to atone for the sins of his father. Shame it isn't true; would have been quite

touching. Actually,' Sajaki nodded at the floor, 'he came here for a month. We took him.'

'You kidnapped Dan Sylveste?' Khouri almost laughed at the audaciousness of it all. Then she

remembered they were talking about the man she was meant to kill. Her impulse to laugh

evaporated quickly.

'Invited aboard is probably a preferable term,' Sajaki said. 'Though I admit he didn't have a great

deal of choice in the matter.'

'Let me get this straight,' Khouri said. 'You kidnapped Cal's son? What good was that going to do

you?'

'Calvin took a few precautions before he subjected himself to the scanner,' Sajaki said. 'The first

was simple enough, although it had to be initiated decades before the culmination of the project.

Simply put, he arranged to have every subsequent second of his life monitored by recording

systems. Every second: waking, sleeping, whatever. Over the years, machines learnt to emulate his

behaviour patterns. Given any situation, they could predict his responses with astonishing accuracy.'

'Beta-level simulation.'

'Yes, but a beta-level sim orders of magnitude more complex than any previously created.'

'By some definitions,' Volyova said, 'it was already conscious; Calvin had already transmigrated.

Calvin may or may not have believed that, but he still kept on refining the sim. It could project an

image of Calvin which was so real, so like the actual man, that you had the

forceful sense that you

were really in his presence. But Calvin took it a step further. There was another mode of insurance

available to him.'

'Which was?'

'Cloning.' Sajaki smiled, nodded almost imperceptibly in Volyova's direction.

'He cloned himself,' she said. 'Using illegal black genetics techniques, calling in favours from

some of his shadier clients. Some of them were Ultra, you see -- otherwise we wouldn't know any

of this. Cloning was embargoed technology on Yellowstone; young colonies almost always outlaw

it in the interests of ensuring maximum genetic diversity. But Calvin was cleverer than the

authorities, and wealthier than those he was forced to bribe. That way he was able to pass off the

clone as his son.'

'Dan,' Khouri said, the monosyllabic word carving its own angular shape in the refrigerated air.

'You're telling me Dan is Calvin's clone?'

'Not that Dan knows any of this,' Volyova said. 'He'd be the last person Calvin wanted to know.'

No; Sylveste is as much party to the lie as any of the populace ever were. He thinks he's his own

man.'

'He doesn't realise he's a clone?'

'No, and as time goes by his chances of ever finding out get smaller and smaller. Beyond Calvin's

Ultra allies, almost no one knew, and Calvin set up incentives to keep those that did quiet. There

were a few unavoidable weak links -- Calvin had no choice but to recruit one of Yellowstone's top

geneticists -- and Sylveste picked the same man for the Resurgam expedition, not realising the

intimate connection they shared. But I doubt that he's learnt the truth since, or even come close to

guessing it.'

'But every time he looks in a mirror...'

'He sees himself, not Calvin.' Volyova smiled, evidently enjoying the way their revelation was

upsetting some of Khouri's basic certainties. 'He was a clone, but that didn't mean he had to

resemble Cal down to the last skin pore. The geneticist -- Janequin -- knew how to induce cosmetic

differences between Cal and Dan's makeup, enough so that people would see only the expected

familial traits. Obviously, he also incorporated traits from the woman who was supposed to be

Dan's mother, Rosalyn Soutaine.'

'The rest was simple,' Sajaki said. 'Cal raised his clone in an environment carefully structured to

emulate the surroundings he had known as a boy -- even down to the same stimuli at certain periods

in the boy's development, because Cal couldn't be sure which of his own personality traits were due

to nature or nurture.'

'All right,' Khouri said. 'Accepting for the moment that all of this is true -- what was the point?

Cal must have known Dan wouldn't follow the same developmental path, no matter how closely he

manipulated the boy's life. What about all those decisions that take place in the womb?' Khouri

shook her head. 'It's insane. At the very best, all he'd end up with would be a crude approximation to

himself.'

'I think,' Sajaki said, 'that that was all that Cal hoped for. Cal cloned himself as a precaution. He

knew the scanning process that he and the other members of the Eighty would have to endure would

destroy his material body, so he wanted a body to which he could return if life in the machine

turned out not to be to his liking.'

'And did it?'

'Maybe, but that was beside the point. At the time of the Eighty, the retransfer

operation was still

beyond the technology of the day. There was no real hurry: Cal could always have the clone put in

reefersleep until he needed it, or simply reclone another one from the boy's cells. He was thinking

well ahead.'

'Assuming the retransfer ever became possible.'

'Well, Calvin knew it was a long shot. The important thing was that there was a second fall-back

option apart from retransfer.'

'Which was?'

'The beta-level simulation.' Sajaki's voice had become as slow, cold and icy as the breezes in the

Captain's chamber. 'Although not formally capable of consciousness, it was still an incredibly

detailed facsimile of Calvin. Its relative simplicity meant it would be easier to encode its rules into

the wetware of Dan's mind. Much easier than imprinting something as volatile as the alpha.'

'I know the primary recording -- the alpha -- disappeared,' she said. 'There was no Calvin left to

run the show. And I guess Dan began to act a little more independently than Calvin might have

wished.'

'To put it mildly,' Sajaki said, nodding. 'The Eighty marked the beginning of the decline of the

Sylveste Institute. Dan soon escaped its shackles, more interested in the Shrouder enigma than

cybernetic immortality. He kept possession of the beta-level sim, though he never realised its exact

significance. He thought of it more as an heirloom than anything else.' The Triumvir smiled. 'I think

he would have destroyed it had he realised what it represented, which was his own annihilation.'

Understandable, Khouri thought. The beta-level simulation was like a trapped demon waiting to

inhabit a new host body. Not properly conscious, but still dangerously potent, by virtue of the subtle

ingenuity with which it mimicked true intelligence.

'Cal's precautionary measure was still useful to us,' Sajaki said. 'There was enough of Cal's

expertise encoded in the beta to mend the Captain. All we had to do was persuade Dan to let Calvin

temporarily inhabit his mind and body.'

'Dan must have suspected something when it worked so easily.'

'It was never easy,' Sajaki admonished. 'Far from it. The periods when Cal took over were more

akin to some kind of violent possession. Motor control was a problem: in order to suppress Dan's

own personality, we had to give him a cocktail of neuro-inhibitors. Which meant that when Cal

finally got through, the body he found himself in was already half-paralysed by our drugs. It was

like a brilliant surgeon performing an operation by giving orders to a drunk. And -- by all accounts -

- it wasn't the most pleasant of experiences for Dan. Quite painful, he said.'

'But it worked.'

'Just. But that was a century ago, and now it's time for another visit to the doctor.'

'Your vials,' said the Ordinator.

One of the wimpled aides from Pascale's party stepped forward, brandishing a vial identical in

size and shape to the one which Sylveste removed from his pocket. They were not the same colour:

the fluid in Pascale's vial had been tinted red, against the yellow hue of Sylveste's. Similar darkish

fronds of material orbited within. The Ordinator took both vials and held them aloft for a few

moments before placing them side by side on the table, in clear view of the audience.

'We are ready to begin the marriage,' she said. She then performed the customary duty of asking

if there were anyone present who had any bioethical reasons as to why the marriage should not take

place.

There was, of course, no objection.

But in that odd, loaded moment of branching possibilities, Sylveste noted a veiled woman in the

audience reach into a purse and uncap a dainty, jewel-topped amber perfume jar.

'Daniel Sylveste,' said the Ordinator. 'Do you take this woman to be your wife, under Resurgam

law, until such time as this marriage is annulled under this or any prevailing legal system?'

'I do,' Sylveste said.

She repeated the question to Pascale.

'I do,' Pascale said.

'Then let the bonding be done.'

Ordinator Massinger took the wedding gun from the mahogany box and snapped it open. She

loaded the reddish vial -- the one Pascale's party had delivered -- into the breech, then reclosed the

instrument. Status entoptics briefly haloed it. Girardieau placed his hand on Sylveste's upper arm,

steadying him as the Ordinator pressed the conic end of the instrument against his temple, just

above his eye-level. Sylveste had been right when he told Girardieau that the ceremony was not

painful, but neither was it entirely pleasant. What it was was a sudden flowering of intense cold, as

if liquid helium were being blasted into his cortex. The discomfort was brief, however, and the

thumb-sized bruise on his skin would not last more than a few days. The brain's immune system

was weak by comparison with the body as a whole, and Pascale's cells -- floating as they did in a

stew of helper medicines -- would soon bond with Sylveste's own. The volume was tiny -- no more

than a tenth of one per cent of the brain's mass -- but the transplanted cells carried the indelible

impression of their last host: ghost threads of holographically distributed memory and personality.

The Ordinator removed the spent red vial and slotted the yellow one in its place. It was Pascale's

first wedding under the Stoner custom, and her trepidation was not well disguised. Girardieau held

her hands as the Ordinator delivered the neural material, Pascale visibly flinching as it happened.

Sylveste had let Girardieau think the implant was permanent, but this was never the case. The

neural tissue was tagged with harmless radioisotope trace elements, enabling it to be routed out and

destroyed, if necessary, by divorce viruses. So far, Sylveste had never taken that option, and

imagined he never would, no matter how many marriages down the line he was. He carried the

smoky essences of all his wives -- as they carried him -- as he would carry Pascale. Indeed, on the

faintest level, Pascale herself now carried traces of his previous wives.

That was the Stoner way.

The Ordinator carefully replaced the wedding gun in its box. 'According to Resurgam law,' she

began, 'the marriage is now formalised. You may----'

Which was when the perfume hit Janequin's birds.

The woman who had uncapped the amber jar was gone, her seat glaringly vacant. Fragrant,

autumnal, the odour from the jar made Sylveste think of crushed leaves. He wanted to sneeze.

Something was wrong.

The room flashed turquoise blue, as if a hundred pastel fans had just opened. Peacocks' tails,

springing open. A million tinted eyes.

The air turned grey.

'Get down!' Girardieau screamed. He was scrabbling madly at his neck. There was something

hooked in it, something tiny and barbed. Numbly, Sylveste looked at his tunic and saw half a dozen

comma-shaped barbs clinging to it. They had not broken the fabric, but he

dared not touch them.

'Assassination tools!' Girardieau shouted. He slumped under the table, dragging Sylveste and his

daughter with him. The auditorium was chaos now, a frenzied mass of agitated people trying to

escape.

'Janequin's birds were primed!' Girardieau said, virtually screaming in Sylveste's ear. 'Poison

darts -- in their tails.'

'You're hit,' Pascale said, too stunned for her voice to carry much emotion. Light and smoke burst

over their heads. They heard screams. Out of the corner of his eye, Sylveste saw the perfume

woman holding a sleekly evil pistol in a two-handed grip. She was dousing the audience with it, its

fanged barrel spitting cold pulses of boser energy. The float-cams swept round her, dispassionately

recording the carnage. Sylveste had never seen a weapon like the one the woman used. He knew it

could not have been manufactured on Resurgam, which left only two possibilities. Either it had

arrived from Yellowstone with the original settlement, or it had been sold by Remilliod, the trader

who had passed through the system since the coup. Glass -- Amarantin glass that had survived ten

thousand centuries -- broke shrilly above. Like pieces of shattered toffee, it crashed down in jagged

shards into the audience. Sylveste watched, powerless, as the ruby planes buried themselves in

flesh, like frozen lightning. The terrified were already screaming loud enough to drown out the cries

of those in pain.

What remained of Girardieau's security team was mobilising, but terribly slowly. Four of the

militia were down, their faces punctured by the barbs. One had reached the seating, struggling with

the woman who had the gun. Another was opening fire with his own sidearm, scything through

Janequin's birds.

Girardieau meanwhile was groaning. His eyes were rolling, bloodshot, hands grasping at thin air.

'We have to get out of here,' Sylveste said, shouting in Pascale's ear. She seemed still dazed from

the neural transfer, blearily oblivious to what was happening.

'But my father...'

'He's gone.'

Sylveste eased Girardieau's dead weight onto the cold floor of the temple, careful to keep behind

the safety of the table.

'The barbs were meant to kill, Pascale. There's nothing we can do for him. If we stay, we'll just

end up following him.'

Girardieau croaked something. It might have been 'Go', or it might only have been a final

senseless exhalation.

'We can't leave him!' Pascale said.

'If we don't, his killers end up winning.'

Tears slashed her face. 'Where can we go?'

He looked around frantically. Smoke from concussion shells was filling the chamber, probably

from Girardieau's own people. It was settling in lazy pastel spirals, like scarves tossed from a

dancer. Just when it was almost too dark to see, the room plunged into total blackness. The lights

beyond the temple had obviously been turned off, or destroyed.

Pascale gasped.

His eyes slipped into infrared mode, almost without him having to think about it.

'I can still see,' he whispered to her. 'As long as we stay together, you don't have to worry about

the darkness.'

Praying that the danger from the birds was gone, Sylveste rose slowly to his feet. The temple

glowed in grey-green heat. The perfume woman was dead, a fist-sized hot hole in her side. Her

amber jar was smashed at her feet. He guessed it had been some kind of hormonal trigger, keyed to

receptors Janequin had put in the birds. He had to have been part of it. He looked -- but Janequin

was dead. A tiny dagger sat in his chest, trailing hot rivulets down his brocade jacket.

Sylveste grabbed Pascale and shoved her along the ground towards the exit, a vaulted archway

gilded with Amarantin figurines and bas-relief graphicforms. It seemed that the perfume woman

had been the only assassin actually present, if one discounted Janequin. But now her friends were

entering, garbed in chameleoflage. They wore closefitting breather masks and infrared goggles.

He pushed Pascale behind a jumble of upturned tables.

'They're looking for us: he hissed. 'But they probably think we're already dead.'

Girardieau's surviving security people had fallen back and taken up defensive positions, kneeling

within the fan-shaped auditorium. It was no match: the newcomers carried much heavier weapons,

heavy boser-rifles. Girardieau's militia countered with low-yield lasers and projectile weapons, but

the enemy were cutting them apart with blithe, impersonal ease. At least half

the audience were

unconscious or dead; they had caught the brunt of the peacock venom salvo.
Hardly the most

surgically precise of assassination tools, those birds -- but they had been
allowed into the

auditorium completely unchecked. Sylveste observed that two were still
alive, despite what he had

at first imagined. Still triggered by trace molecules of the perfume which
remained aloft, their tails

were flicking open and shut like the fans of nervous courtesans.

'Did your father carry a weapon?' Sylveste said, instantly regretting his use of
the past tense. 'I

mean, since the coup.'

'I don't think so,' Pascale said.

Of course not; Girardieau would never have confided such a thing to her.
Quickly Sylveste felt

around the man's still body, hoping to find the padded hardness of a weapon
beneath his ceremonial

clothes.

Nothing.

'We'll have to do without,' Sylveste said, as if the stating of this fact would
somehow alleviate the

problem it encapsulated. 'They're going to kill us if we don't run,' he said,
finally.

'Into the labyrinth?'

'They'll see us,' Sylveste said.

'But maybe they won't think it's us,' Pascale said. 'They might not know you can see in the dark.'

Though she was effectively blind, she managed to look him square in the face. Her mouth was

open, an almost circular vacancy of expression or hope. 'Let me say goodbye to my father first.'

She found his body in the darkness, kissed him for the last time. Sylveste looked to the exit. At

that moment the soldier guarding it was hit by a shot from what remained of Girardieau's militia.

The masked figure crumpled, his body heat pooling liquidly into the floor around his body,

spreading smoky white maggots of thermal energy into the stonework.

The way was clear, for the moment. Pascale found his hand and together they began to run.

EIGHT

En Route to Delta Pavonis, 2546

'I take it you've heard the news concerning the Captain,' Khouri said, when the Mademoiselle

coughed discreetly from behind her. Other than the Mademoiselle's illusory presence, she was alone

in her quarters, digesting what Volyova and Sajaki had told her of the mission.

The Mademoiselle's smile was patient. 'Rather complicates matters, doesn't it? I'll admit I

considered the possibility that the crew might have some connection with him. It seemed logical,

given their intention of travelling to Resurgam. But I never extrapolated anything this convoluted.'

'I suppose that's one word for it.'

'Their relationship is...' the ghost seemed to take a moment to choose her words, though Khouri

knew it was all annoying fakery. 'Interesting. It may limit our options in the future.'

'Are you still sure you want him killed?'

'Absolutely. This news merely heightens the urgency. Now there is the danger that Sajaki will try

to bring Sylveste aboard.'

'Won't it be easier for me to kill him then?'

'Certainly, but at that point killing him would not suffice. You would then have to find a way of

destroying the ship itself. Whether or not you found a way to save yourself in the process would be

your problem.'

Khourri frowned. Perhaps it was her, but very little of this made very much sense.

'But if I guarantee that Sylveste's dead...'

'That would not suffice,' said the Mademoiselle, with what Khourri sensed was a new candour.

'Killing him is part of what you must do, but not the entirety. You must be specific in the manner of

killing.'

Khourri waited to hear what the woman had to say.

'You must allow him absolutely no warning; not even seconds. Furthermore, you must kill him in

isolation.'

'That was always part of the plan.'

'Good -- but I mean precisely what I say. If it isn't possible to ensure solitude at any given

moment, you must delay his death until it is. No compromises, Khourri.'

This was the first time they had discussed the manner of his death in any detail. Evidently the

Mademoiselle had decided that Khouri was now fit to know slightly more than before, if not the

whole picture.

'What about the weapon?'

'You may use any which suits you, provided the weapon incorporates no cybernetic components

above a certain level of complexity, which I will stipulate at a later date.' Before Khouri could

object she added, 'A beam weapon would be acceptable, provided the weapon itself was not brought

into proximity with the subject at any stage. Projectile and explosive devices would also serve our

purpose.'

Given the nature of the lighthugger, Khouri thought, there ought to be enough suitable weapons

lying around for her use. When the time came, she should be able to appropriate something

moderately lethal and allow herself time to learn its nuances before deploying it against Sylveste.

'I can probably find something.'

'I'm not finished. You must not approach him, nor must you kill him when he is in the proximity

of cybernetic systems -- again, I will stipulate my requirements nearer the time. The more isolated

he is, the better. If you can manage to do it when he is alone and far from

help, on Resurgam's

surface, you will have accomplished your task to my complete satisfaction.'
She paused. Evidently

all this was hugely important to the Mademoiselle, and Khouri was doing her
best to remember it,

but so far it sounded no more logical than the incantations of a Dark Age
prescription against fever.

'But on no account must he be allowed to leave Resurgam. Understand that,
because when a

lighthugger arrives around Resurgam -- even this lighthugger -- Sylveste will
try and find a way to

get himself aboard. That must not be allowed to happen, under any
circumstances.'

'I get the message,' Khouri said. 'Kill him down below. Is that everything?'

'Not quite.' The ghost made a smile; a ghoulish one Khouri had never seen
before. Maybe, she

thought, the Mademoiselle had yet to exhaust her reservoir of expressions,
keeping a few in store

for moments such as this. 'Of course I want proof of his death. This implant
will record the event,

but on your return to Yellowstone I also want physical evidence to
corroborate what the implant

records. I want remains, and more than just ashes. Preserve what you can in
vacuum. Keep the

remains sealed and isolated from the ship. Bury them in rock if that suits you,
but just bring them

back to me. I must have proof.'

'And then?'

'Then, Ana Khouri, I will give you your husband.'

Sylveste did not stop to catch his breath until he and Pascale had reached and passed the ebony shell

encasing the Amarantin city, taking several hundred footsteps into the tangled maze which

wormholed through it. He chose his directions as randomly as was humanly possible, ignoring the

signs added by the archaeologists, desperately trying to avoid following a predictable path.

'Not so quickly,' Pascale said. 'I'm worried about getting lost.'

Sylveste put a hand to her mouth, even though he knew that her need to talk was only a way to

obliterate the fact of her father's assassination.

'We have to be quiet. There must be True Path units in the shell, waiting to mop up escapees. We

don't want to draw them down on us.'

'But we're lost,' she said, her voice now hushed. 'Dan, people died in this place because they

couldn't find their way out before they starved.'

Sylveste pushed Pascale down a constricting bolthole into steadily thickening darkness. The

walls were slippery here; no friction flooring had been installed. 'The one

thing that isn't going to

happen,' he said, more calmly than he felt, 'is that we get lost.' He tapped his eyes, though it was

already much too gloomy for Pascale to notice the gesture. Like a seeing person among the blind,

he had trouble remembering that much of his nonverbal communication was wasted. 'I can replay

every step we take. And the walls reflect infrared from our bodies reasonably well. We're safer here

than back in the city.'

She panted along behind him, saying nothing for long minutes. Finally she mumbled, 'I hope this

isn't one of the rare occasions when you're wrong. That would be a particularly inauspicious start to

our marriage, don't you think?'

He did not much feel like laughing; the hall's carnage was still garishly fresh in his mind. He

laughed all the same, and the gesture seemed to lessen the reality of it all. Which was all for the

better, because when he thought about it rationally, Pascale's doubts were perfectly justified. Even if

he knew the precise way out of the maze, that knowledge might be unusable, if the tunnels were too

slippery to climb, or if, as rumour had it, the labyrinth occasionally changed its own configuration.

Then, magic eyes or no, they would starve along with all the other poor fools who had wandered

away from the marked path.

They worked deeper into the Amarantin structure, feeling the lazy curve of the tunnel as it wound

its way maggottishly through the inner shell. Panic was as much an enemy as disorientation, of

course. But forcing oneself to stay calm was never easy.

'How long do you think we should stay here?'

'A day,' Sylveste said. 'Then we leave after them. By then, reinforcements will have arrived from

Cuvier.'

'Working for whom?'

Sylveste shouldered into a wasp-waist in the tunnel. Beyond, it bottled out into a triple-junction;

he made a mental coin-flip and took the left way. 'Good question,' he said, too softly for his wife to

hear him.

But what if the incident had merely been part of a colony-wide coup, rather than an isolated act

of publicly visible terrorism? What if Cuvier was now out of Girardieau government control, fallen

to True Path? Girardieau's death left behind a lumbering party machine, but many of its cogs had

been removed in the wedding hall. In this moment of weakness, blitzkrieg revolutionaries might

accomplish much. Perhaps it was already over, Sylveste's former enemies dethroned, strange new

faces assuming power. In which case, waiting in the labyrinth might be completely futile. Would

True Path regard him as an enemy, or as something infinitely more ambiguous; an enemy's enemy?

Not that Girardieau and he had even been enemies, at the end.

Finally, they came to a wide, flat-bottomed throat where a number of tunnels converged. There

was room to sit down, and the air was fresh and breezy; pumped air currents reached this far. In

infrared, Sylveste watched Pascale slump cautiously down, hands scrabbling the frictionless floor

for rats, sharp stones or grinning skulls.

'It's all right,' he said. 'We're safe here.' As if by the very act of saying as much, he made it more

likely. 'If anyone comes, we can pick our escape routes. We'll lie low and see what happens.'

Of course, now that the immediate flight was over, she would begin thinking about her father

again. He did not want that; not now.

'Stupid dumb Janequin,' he said, hoping to steer her thoughts at least tangentially away from what

had happened. 'They must have blackmailed him. Isn't that the way it always happens?'

'What?' Pascale asked labouredly. 'Isn't that the way what always happens?'

'The pure becomes corrupted.' His voice was so low it threatened to crack into a whisper. The gas

used in the auditorium attack had not properly reached his lungs, but he could still feel its effect on

his larynx. 'Janequin was working on those birds for years; all the time I knew him in Mantell. They

started as innocent living sculptures. He said any colony orbiting a star named Pavonis ought to

have a few peacocks around the place. Then someone thought of a better use for them.'

'Perhaps they were all poisonous,' Pascale said, stretching the final word into a long slither of

sibilant esses. 'Primed like little walking bombs.'

'Somehow I doubt he tampered with more than a few of them.' Maybe it was the air, but Sylveste

felt suddenly weary, needful of immediate sleep. He knew they were safe for now. If the killers had

been following them -- and the killers might not even realise they were not among the dead -- they

would have reached this part of the shell already.

'I never believed he had real enemies,' Pascale said, her sentence seeming to writhe unattached in

the confined space. He imagined her fear: without vision, with only his assurances, this dark place

must be exquisitely frightening. 'I never thought anyone would kill him for what they wanted. I

didn't think anything was worth that much.'

Along with the rest of the crew, Khouri would eventually enter reefersleep for the bulk of the time

that the ship took to reach Resurgam. But before then she spent much of her waking time in the

gunnery, being subjected to endless simulations.

After a while it began to invade her dreams, to the point where boredom was no longer an

adequate term to encompass the repetitiousness of the exercises Volyova had conceived for her. Yet

losing herself in the gunnery environment was something she began to welcome, since it offered

temporary respite from her worries. In the gunnery, the whole Sylveste problem became a small

anxious itch, nothing more. She remained aware that she was in an impossible situation, but that

fact no longer seemed critical. The gunnery was all, and that was why she no longer feared it. She

was still herself after the sessions, and she began to think that the gunnery hardly mattered at all;

that it would not ultimately make any difference to the outcome of her mission.

All that changed when the dogs came home.

They were the Mademoiselle's bloodhounds: cybernetic agents she had unleashed into the

gunnery during one of Khouri's sessions. The dogs had clawed their way into the system itself via

the neural interface, exploiting the system's one forgivable weakness. Volyova had hardened it

against software attack, but had obviously never imagined that the attack might come from the brain

of the person hooked into the gunnery. The dogs barked back safe assurances that they had entered

the gunnery's core. They had not returned to Khouri during the session in which they were

unleashed, since it would take more than a few hours for them to sniff every nook and cranny of the

gunnery's Byzantine architecture. So they had stayed in the system for more than a day, until

Volyova once again hooked Khouri in.

Then the dogs returned to the Mademoiselle, and she decrypted them and unravelled the prey

they had located.

'She has a stowaway,' the Mademoiselle said when she and Khouri were alone after a session.

'Something has hidden itself in the gunnery system, and I'm prepared to bet she knows nothing

about it at all.'

Which was when Khouri stopped regarding the gunnery chamber with such total equanimity. 'Go

on,' she said, feeling her body temperature plummet.

'A data entity; that's as well as I can describe it.'

'Something the dogs encountered?'

'Yes, but...' Once again the Mademoiselle sounded lost for words. Occasionally Khouri suspected

it was genuine: the implant was having to deal with a situation light-years away from anything in

the real Mademoiselle's expectations. 'It's not that they saw it, or even saw a part of it. It's too subtle

for that, or else Volyova's own counter-intrusion systems would have caught it. It's more that they

sensed the absences where it had just been; sensed the breeze it stirred when it moved around.'

'Do me a favour,' Khouri said. 'Try not to make it sound so damned scary, will you?'

'I'm sorry,' the Mademoiselle answered. 'But I can't deny that the thing's presence is disturbing.'

'Disturbing to you? How do you think I feel?' Khouri shook her head, stunned at the casual

viciousness of reality.' All right; what do you think it is? Some kind of virus, like all the others

which are eating away this ship?'

'The thing seems much too advanced for that. Volyova's own defences have kept the ship

operational despite the other viral entities, and she's even kept the Melding Plague at bay. But this...'

The Mademoiselle looked at Khouri with a convincing facsimile of fear. 'The dogs were frightened

by it, Khouri. In the way it evaded them, it revealed itself to be much cleverer than almost anything

in my experience. But it didn't attack them, and that troubles me even more.'

'Yes?'

'Because it suggests that the thing is biding its time.'

Sylveste never found out how long they had slept. It might only have been minutes, packed with

fevered, adrenalin-charged dreams of chaos and flight, or it might have been hours, or even a whole

portion of the day. No way of knowing. Whatever the case, it had not been natural fatigue that sent

them under. Roused by something, Sylveste realised with a stunned jolt that they had been

breathing sleeping gas, pumped into the tunnel system. No wonder the air had seemed so fragrant

and breezy.

There was a sound like rats in the attic.

He pawed Pascale awake; she came to consciousness with a plaintive moan, assimilating her

surroundings and predicament in a few troubled seconds of reality-denial. He studied the heat-

signature of her face, watching waxy neutrality cave in to an expressive melange of remorse and

fear.

'We have to move,' Sylveste said. 'They're after us -- they gassed the tunnels.'

The scrabbling sound grew closer by the second. Pascale was still somewhere between

wakefulness and dream, but she managed to open her mouth -- it sounded as if she were speaking

through cotton wool -- and ask him, 'Which way?'

'This way,' Sylveste said, grabbing her and propelling her forwards, down the nearest valvelike

opening. She stumbled on the slipperiness. Sylveste helped her up, squeezed beyond her and took

her hand. Gloom lay ahead, his eyes revealing only a few metres of the tunnel beyond their position.

He was, he realised, only slightly less blind than his wife.

Better than nothing.

'Wait,' Pascale said. 'There's light behind us, Dan!'

And voices. He could hear their wordless, urgent babble now. The rattle of sterile metal.

Chemosensor arrays were probably already tracking them; pheromonal sniffers were reading the

airborne human effluent of panic, graphing data directly into the sensoria of the chasers.

'Faster,' Pascale said. He snatched a glance back, his eyes momentarily overloaded by the new

light. It was a bluish radiance limning the shaft's far reach, quivering, as if someone were holding a

torch. He tried to increase speed, but the tunnel was steepening, making it harder to find traction on

the glassily smooth sides: too much like trying to scramble up an ice chimney.

Panting sounds, metal scraping against the walls, barked commands.

Too steep now. It was now a constant battle just to hold balance, just to keep from slipping

backwards. 'Get behind me,' he said, turning to face the blue light.

Pascale rushed past him.

'What now?'

The light wavered, crept in intensity. 'We have no choice,' Sylveste said. 'We can't outrun them,

Pascale. Have to turn and face them.'

'That's suicide.'

'Maybe they won't kill us if they see our faces.'

He thought to himself that four thousand years of human civilisation put the lie to that hope, but,

given that it was the only one he had, it hardly mattered that it was forlorn.

His wife locked her

arms round his chest and pressed her head against his, looking the same way.
Her breathing was

pulsed and terrified. Sylveste had no doubt that his own sounded much the same.

The enemy could probably smell their fear, quite literally.

'Pascale,' Sylveste said. 'I need to tell you something.'

'Now?'

'Yes, now.' He could no longer separate his own rapid breathing from hers, each exhalation a

quick hard beat against the skin. 'In case I don't get a chance to tell anyone else. Something I've kept

a secret for too long.'

'You mean in case we die?'

He avoided answering her question directly, one half of his mind trying to guess how many

seconds or tens of seconds they had left. Perhaps not enough for what had to be said. 'I lied,' he said.

'About what happened around Lascaille's Shroud.'

She started to say something.

'No, wait,' Sylveste said. 'Hear me out. I have to say this. Have to get it out.'

Her voice was barely audible. 'Say it.'

'Everything that I said happened out there was true.' Her eyes were wide now;

oval voids in the

heat-map of her face. 'It just happened in reverse. It wasn't Carine Lefevre's transform that began to

break down when we were close to the Shroud.'

'What are you saying?'

'That it was mine. I was the one who nearly got both of us killed.' He paused, waiting either for

her to say something, or for the chasers to erupt from the blue light which was slowly creeping

closer. When neither happened he continued, lost in the momentum of confession. 'My Juggler

transform started to decay. The gravity fields around the Shroud began to lash at us. Carine was

going to die unless I separated my half of the contact module from hers.'

He could imagine the way she was trying to fit this over the existing template she carried in her

mind, part of the consensus history with which she had been born. What he was saying was not,

could not, should not be the truth. The way it was was very simple. Lefevre's transform had begun

to decay; Lefevre had made the supreme sacrifice, jettisoning her half of the contact module so that

Sylveste stood a chance at surviving this bruising encounter with the totally alien. It could not be

any other way. It was what she knew.

Except it was all untrue.

'Which is what I should have done. Easy to say now, after the fact. But I couldn't, not there and

then.' She could not read his expression, and he was unsure whether this pleased or displeased him

at this moment. 'I couldn't blow the separation charges.'

'Why not?'

And he thought: what she wants me to say is that it was not physically possible; that the quiet

space had become too restricted for physical movement; that the gravity vortices were pinning him

immobile, even as they worked to rip him flesh from bone. But that would have been a lie, and he

was beyond that now.

'I was scared,' Sylveste said. 'More scared than I've ever been in my life. Scared of what dying in

an alien place would mean. Scared of what would happen to my soul, around that place. In what

Lascaille called Revelation Space.' He coughed, knowing there wasn't much time left. 'Irrational,

but that was how I felt. The simulations hadn't prepared us for the terror.'

'Yet you made it.'

'Gravity torsions ripped the craft apart; did the job the explosive charges were meant to do. I

didn't die... and that I don't understand, because I should have.'

'And Carine?'

Before he could answer -- as if he even had an answer -- a sickly-sweet smell hit them. Sleeping

gas again, only this time in a much thicker dose. It flooded his lungs. He wanted to sneeze. He

forgot about Lascaille's Shroud, forgot Carine, forgot his own part in whatever had become of her.

Sneezing was suddenly the most important thing in his universe.

That and clawing his skin off with his fingers.

A man stood against the blue. His expression was unreadable beneath his mask, but his stance

conveyed nothing more than bored indifference. Languidly, he raised his left arm. At first it

appeared that he was holding a trigger-grip megaphone, but the way he held the device was

infinitely more purposeful. Calmly he sighted until the flared weapon was pointed straight at

Sylveste's eyes.

He did something -- it was completely silent -- and molten agony spiked into Sylveste's brain.

NINE

Mantell, North Nekhebet, Resurgam, 2566

'Sorry about the eyes,' the voice said, after an eternity of pain and motion.

For a moment Sylveste drifted in confused thought, trying to arrange the order of recent events.

Somewhere in his recent past lay the wedding, the murders, their flight into the labyrinth, the

tranquilliser gas, but nothing connected with anything else. He felt as if he were trying to

reassemble a biography from a handful of unnumbered fragments, a biography whose events

seemed tantalisingly familiar.

The unbelievable pain in his head when the man had pointed the weapon at him----

He was blind.

The world was gone, replaced by an unmoving grey mosaic; the emergency shutdown mode of

his eyes. Severe damage had been wrought on Calvin's handiwork. The eyes had not merely

crashed; they had been assaulted.

'It was better that you not see us,' said the voice, very close now. 'We could have blindfolded you,

but we weren't sure what those little beauties could do. Maybe they could see

through any fabric we

used. It was simpler this way. Focused mag pulse... probably hurt a bit.
Blitzed a few circuits. Sorry

for that.'

He managed not to sound sorry at all.

'What about my wife?'

'Girardieu's kid? She's okay. Nothing so drastic was required in her case.'

Perhaps because he was blind, Sylveste was more sensitive to the motion of his environment.

They were in an aircraft, he guessed, steering through canyons and valleys to avoid dust storms. He

wondered who owned the aircraft, who was now in charge. Were Girardieu government forces still

holding Cuvier, or had the whole colony fallen to the True Path uprising?
Neither was particularly

appealing. He might have struck an alliance with Girardieu, but he was dead now and Sylveste had

always had enemies in the Inundationist power structure; people who resented the way Girardieu

had allowed Sylveste to live after the first coup.

Still, he was alive. And he had been blind before. The state was not unfamiliar to him; he knew it

was something he could survive.

'Where are we going?' he asked. They had bound him with tight, circulation-

inhibiting restraints.

'Back to Cuvier?'

'What if we were?' asked the voice. 'I'm surprised you'd be in much of a hurry to get there.'

The aircraft tilted and 'banked sickeningly, plummeting and jerking aloft like a toy yacht in a

squall. Sylveste tried to relate the turns to his mental map of the canyon systems around Cuvier, but

it was hopeless. He was probably much closer to the buried Amarantin city than home, but he could

also be anywhere on the planet by now.

'Are you...' Sylveste hesitated. He wondered if he ought to fake some ignorance about his

situation, then crushed the idea. There was little he needed to fake. 'Are you Inundationists?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you're True Path.'

'Give the man a round of applause.'

'Are you running things now?'

'The whole show.' The guard tried to put some swagger into his answer, but Sylveste caught the

momentary hesitation. Uncertainty, Sylveste thought. Probably they had no real idea how well their

takeover was going. What he said could have been true, but, given that

communications across the

planet might have been damaged, there was no way of knowing; no way of confirming the

thoroughness of their control. It could easily be that Girardieau-loyal forces retained the capital, or

another faction entirely. These people must be acting out of faith, hoping that their allies had also

succeeded.

They could, of course, be completely right.

Fingers placed the mask over his face, its hard edges knifing into his skin. The discomfort was

tolerable, though: against the permanent pain from his damaged eyes it hardly registered at all.

Breathing with the mask in place took some effort. He had to work hard to draw air through the

dust-collector built into the mask's snout. Two-thirds of the oxygen which entered his lungs would

now come from Resurgam's atmosphere, while the remaining third came from a pressurised canister

slung beneath the proboscis. It was doped with enough carbon dioxide to trigger the body's

breathing response.

He had barely felt the aircraft touch down -- had not even been certain that they had arrived

somewhere until the door was opened. Now the guard undid his restraints and

shoved him

peremptorily towards the coldness and the wind of the exit.

Was it dark or daytime out there?

He had no idea; no way of telling.

'Where are we?' he called. The mask muffled his voice and made him sound moronic.

'You imagine it makes any difference?' The guard's voice was not distorted. He was breathing the

air directly, Sylveste realised. 'Even if the city was within walking distance -- which it isn't -- you

wouldn't get beyond spitting distance of where you are now without killing yourself.'

'I want to speak to my wife.'

The guard grabbed his arm and pivoted it back to the point where Sylveste felt it was going to be

dislocated. He stumbled, but the guard refused to let him fall. 'You'll speak to her when we're good

and ready. Told you she was fine, didn't I? You don't trust me or something?'

'I just watched you kill my new father-in-law. What do you think?'

'I think you should keep your head down.'

A hand ducked him, forcing him into shelter. The wind ceased stinging his ears; voices suddenly

had an echoey quality. Behind, a pressure door hove shut and amputated the sound of the storm.

Though blind, he sensed that Pascale was nowhere near him, and hoped that that meant she had

been escorted separately, and that his captors were not lying when they said she was safe.

Someone snatched the mask away.

What followed was a forced march down narrow, shoulder-bruising corridors which stank of

brutal hygiene. His escort helped him descend rattling stairwells and ride two lurching elevators

down an unguessable distance. They exited into an echoey subterranean space, the air metallic and

breezy .They walked past a gusting air duct; from the surface came the shrill proclamation of the

wind. Intermittently he heard voices, and though he thought he recognised intonations, he could not

begin to put names to the sounds.

Finally there was a room.

He was sure it was painted white. He could almost sense the blank cubic pressure of its walls.

Someone stepped next to him; cabbage breath. He felt fingers touch his face, delicately. They

were sheathed in something textureless, reeking faintly of disinfectant. The fingers touched his

eyes, tapping their facets with something hard.

Each tap was a small nova of pain behind his temples.

'Fix them when I say,' said a voice which, beyond any doubt, he knew. It was female, but with a

throaty quality which rendered it almost masculine. 'For now keep him blind.'

Footsteps left; the speaker must have dismissed the escort with a silent gesture. Alone now, with

no reference points, Sylveste felt his balance go. No matter how he moved, the grey matrix

remained in front of him. His legs felt weak, but there was nothing with which to support himself.

For all he knew he was standing on a plank of wood ten storeys above the floor.

He began to topple, arms flailing pathetically.

Something snatched at his forearm and stabilised him. He heard a pulsing rasp, like someone

sawing through timber.

His breathing.

He heard a moist click, and knew that she had opened her mouth to speak again. Now she must

be smiling, contemplating.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'You hopeless bastard. You don't even remember my voice.'

Her fingers gouged his forearm, expertly locating nerves and pinching them in the appropriate

place. He let out a doglike yelp; it was the first stimulus which had made him

forget the pain in his

eyes. 'I swear,' Sylveste said, 'I don't know you.'

She released the pressure. As his nerves and tendons sprang back into place there was more pain,

subsiding into a numb discomfort which gloved his entire arm and shoulder.

'You should,' said the wrecked voice. 'I'm someone you think died a long time ago, Dan, buried

under a landslide.'

'Sluka,' he said.

Volyova was on her way to the Captain when the disturbing thing happened. Now that the rest of

the crew were sleeping out the journey to Resurgam -- including Khouri -- Volyova had again fallen

into her old habit of conversing with the slightly warmed Captain; elevating his brain temperature

by the fraction of a kelvin necessary to allow him some kind of consciousness, however

fragmentary. This had been her routine now for the better part of two years, and would continue for

another two and half, until the ship arrived around Resurgam and the others came out of reefersleep.

Of course, the conversations were infrequent -- she could not risk warming the Captain too often,

for with each warming the plague claimed a little more of both him and the surrounding matter --

but they were little oases of human interaction in weeks otherwise filled only with the

contemplating of viruses, weapons and the general matter of the ship's ailing fabric.

So, in her own way, Volyova looked forward to their talks, even though the Captain seldom

showed much sign of remembering what they had talked about previously. Worse, a certain

frostiness had entered their relationship of late. Partly this was due to Sajaki's lack of fortune in

locating Sylveste in the Yellowstone system, condemning the Captain to another half-decade of

torment at the very least -- or longer, if Sylveste could not be found on Resurgam either, which

struck Volyova as an at least theoretical possibility. What made matters difficult was that the

Captain kept asking her how the search for Sylveste was going, and she kept having to break the

news to him that it was not going as auspiciously as one might wish. The Captain would become

sullen at that point -- she could hardly blame him for that -- and the tone of the conversation would

darken, often to the point where the Captain became completely incommunicative. When, days or

weeks later, she tried to speak to him again, he would have forgotten what she had told him before

and they would go through the same process again, except this time Volyova would do her best to

break the bad news more gently, or put some kind of optimistic spin on it.

The other thing that was casting a shadow over their talks stemmed from Volyova's side, which

was her nagging insistence on probing the Captain about the visit he and Sajaki had made to the

Pattern Jugglers. It was only in the last few years that Volyova had become interested in the details

of the visit, for it now seemed to her that Sajaki's change of personality had occurred around the

same time. Of course, having one's mind altered was the whole point of visiting the Jugglers -- but

why would Sajaki have allowed the aliens to change him for the worse? He was crueller than he had

been before; despotic and single-minded where once he had been a firm but fair leader; a valued

member of the Triumvirate. Now she hardly trusted him at all. And yet -- instead of casting some

light on the change -- the Captain deflected her questions aggressively, and left her even more

obsessed with what had happened.

She was on her way to speak to him, then, with these things foremost in her mind; wondering

how she would deal with the inevitable question about Sylveste, and what new approach she would

take when probing the Captain about the Jugglers. And, because she was taking her usual route, she

was obliged to pass through the cache-chamber.

And she saw that one of the weapons -- one of the most feared, as it happened -- appeared to have

moved.

'There have been developments,' said the Mademoiselle. 'Both fortuitous and otherwise.'

It was a surprise to be conscious at all; let alone to hear the Mademoiselle. The very last thing

Khoury remembered was climbing into a reefersleep casket with Volyova looking down on her,

tapping commands into her bracelet. Now she could neither see nor feel anything, not even a sense

of cold, yet she knew she was still -- somehow -- in the reefer, and still by some measure asleep.

'Where -- when -- am I?'

'Still aboard the ship; about halfway to Resurgam. We are moving very quickly now; less than

one per cent slower than light. I have raised your neural temperature slightly - - enough for

conversation.'

'Won't Volyova notice?'

'Her noticing may be the least of our problems, I am afraid. Do you remember the cache, how I

found something hiding in the gunnery architecture?' The Mademoiselle did not wait for an answer.

'The message that the bloodhounds brought back was not easy to decipher. Over the subsequent

three years... their auguries have become clearer, now.'

Khoury had a vision of the Mademoiselle disembowelling her dogs, studying the topology of the

outspilled entrails.

'So is the stowaway real?'

'Oh yes. And hostile too, though we'll come to that in a moment.'

'Any idea what it is?'

'No,' she said, though the answer was guarded. 'But what I have learnt is almost as interesting.'

What the Mademoiselle had to say related to the gunnery's topology. The gunnery was an

enormously complex assemblage of computers: layers accreted over decades of shiptime. It was

doubtful that any one mind -- even Volyova's -- could have grasped more than the very basics of

that topology; how the various layers interpenetrated each other and folded back on themselves. But

in one sense the gunnery was easy to visualise, since it was almost totally disconnected from the

rest of the ship, which was why most of the higher cache-weapon functions could only be accessed

by someone physically present in the gunnery seat. The gunnery was surrounded by a firewall, and

data could only pass from the rest of the ship to the gunnery. The reasons for this were tactical;

since the gunnery's weapons (and not just those in the cache) would project outside the ship when

they were used, they potentially offered routes for enemy weapons to penetrate the ship by viral

means. So the gunnery was isolated: protected from the rest of the ship's dataspace by a one-way

trapdoor. The door only allowed data to enter the gunnery from the rest of the ship; nothing within

the gunnery could traverse it.

'Now,' said the Mademoiselle, 'given that we have discovered something in the gunnery, I invite

you to draw the logical conclusion.'

'Whatever it was got there by mistake.'

'Yes.' The Mademoiselle sounded pleased, almost as if the thought had not struck her. 'I suppose

we must consider the possibility that the entity found its way into the gunnery via the weapons, but

I think it is far more likely it entered via the trapdoor. I also happen to know when the door was last

traversed.'

'How long ago?'

'Eighteen years ago.' Before Khouri could interject, the Mademoiselle added, 'Shiptime, that is. In

worldtime, I estimate between eighty and ninety years prior to your recruitment.'

'Sylveste,' Khouri said, wonderingly. 'Sajaki said that the reason Sylveste went missing was

because they brought him aboard this ship, to fix Captain Brannigan. Do the dates tie together?'

'Conclusively, I would say. This would have been 2460 -- twenty or so years after Sylveste

returned from the Shrouders.'

'And you think he brought -- whatever it is -- with him?'

'All we know is what Sajaki told us, which is that Sylveste accepted the Calvin simulation in

order to heal Captain Brannigan. At some point during the operation Sylveste must have been

connected to the ship's dataspace. Perhaps that was how the stowaway gained access. Thereafter --

very soon after, I suspect -- it entered the gunnery through the one-way door.'

'And it's been there ever since?'

'So it appears.'

This seemed to be a pattern: whenever Khouri felt she had things ordered in her head, or at least

approximately so, some new fact would dash her scheme to shreds. She felt like a mediaeval

astronomer, creating ever more intricate clockwork cosmologies to incorporate every new

observational oddity. Now, in some way she could not begin to guess, Sylveste was related to the

gunnery. At least she could take comfort in her ignorance. Even the Mademoiselle was foxed.

'You mentioned the thing was hostile,' she said carefully, not really sure she wanted to ask any

more questions, in case the answers were too difficult to assimilate.

'Yes.' Hesitating now. 'The dogs were a mistake,' she said. 'I was too impetuous. I should have

realised that Sun Stealer----'

'Sun Stealer?'

'What it calls itself. The stowaway, I mean.'

This was bad. How did she know the thing's name? Fleetinglly, Khouri remembered that Volyova

had once asked her if that name meant anything to her. But there was more to it than that. It was as

if she had been hearing that name in her dreams for some time now. Khouri opened her mouth to

speak, but the Mademoiselle was already talking. 'It used the dogs to escape, Khouri. Or at least for

a part of itself to escape. It used them to get into your head.'

Sylveste had no reliable way of marking the time in his new prison. All he remained certain of was

that many days had passed since his capture. He suspected he was being drugged, forced into

comalike sleep, barren of dreams. When he did dream, which was rarely, he had sight, but his

dreams always revolved around his imminent blindness and the preciousness of the sight he

retained. When he awoke he saw only grey, but after some time -- days, he guessed -- the grey had

lost its geometric structure. The pattern had been imposed on his brain for too long; now his brain

was simply filtering it out. What remained was a colourless infinity, no longer even recognisably

grey, but simply a bright absence of hue.

He wondered what he was missing. Perhaps his actual surroundings were so dull and Spartan that

his mind would sooner or later have performed the same filtering trick, even if he still had his sight.

He sensed only the echoless enclosure of rock; many megatonnes of it. He thought constantly of

Pascale, but it became harder by the day to hold her in his mind. The grey seemed to be seeping into

his memories, smearing over them like wet concrete. Then there came a day, just after Sylveste had

finished his rations, when the cell door was unlocked and two voices joined him.

The first was that of Gillian Sluka.

'Do what you can with him,' her croak of a voice said. 'Within limits.'

'He should be put under while I operate,' said the other voice, male and treacle-thick. Sylveste

recognised the cabbagy smell of the man's breath.

'He should, but he won't be.' The voice hesitated, then added: 'I'm not expecting any miracles,

Falkender. I just want the bastard to see me.'

'Give me a few hours,' Falkender said. There was a thump as the man placed something down on

the cell's blunt-edged table. 'I'll do my best,' he said, almost mumbling. 'But from what I know,

these eyes were nothing special before you had him blinded.'

'One hour.'

She slammed the door as she exited. Sylveste, cocooned in silence since his capture, felt its

reverberations jar his skull. For too long he had been striving to pick up the softest of noises, clues

to his fate. There had been none, but in the process he had become sensitised to silence.

He smelled Falkender loom nearer. 'A pleasure to work with you, Dr Sylveste,' he said, almost

diffidently. 'I'm confident I can undo most of the damage she had inflicted on you, given time.'

'She gave you one hour,' Sylveste said. His own voice sounded foreign; it had been too long since

he had done much except mumble incoherently to himself in his sleep. 'What can you possibly do in

one hour?'

He heard the man rummage through his tools. 'At the very least improve things for you.' He

punctuated his remarks with clucking noises. 'Of course, I can do more if you don't struggle. But I

can't promise that this will be pleasant for you.'

'I'm sure you'll do your best.'

The man's fingers skated over his eyes, lightly probing.

'I always admired your father, you know.' Another cluck, reminding Sylveste of one of Janequin's

chickens. 'It's well known that he fashioned these eyes for you.'

'His beta-level simulation,' Sylveste corrected.

'Of course, of course.' He could visualise Falkender waving aside this vaporous distinction. 'And

not the alpha, either -- we all know that vanished years ago.'

'I sold it to the Jugglers,' Sylveste said blankly. After years of holding it in, the truth had popped

out of his mouth like a small sour pip.

Falkender made an odd tracheal sound which Sylveste eventually decided might be the man's

mode of chuckling. 'Of course, of course. You know, I'm surprised no one ever accused you of that.'

But that's human cynicism for you.' A shrill whirring sound filled the air, followed by a nerve-

searing vibration. 'I think you can say goodbye to colour perception,' Falkender said.

'Monochrome's going to be about the best I can manage.'

Khoury had been hoping for some mental breathing-space, some time in which to collect her

thoughts, in which to listen quietly for the breathing of the invasive presence in her head. But the

Mademoiselle was still speaking.

'I believe Sun Stealer has already attempted this once before,' she said. 'I'm speaking of your

predecessor, of course.'

'You mean the stowaway tried to get into Nagorny's head?'

'Exactly that. Except in Nagorny's case, there would have been no bloodhounds on which to hitch

a ride. Sun Stealer must have had to resort to something cruder.'

Khoury considered what she had learnt from Volyova about this whole incident.

'Crude enough to drive Nagorny mad?'

'Evidently so,' her companion nodded. 'And perhaps Sun Stealer only attempted to impose his

will on the man. Escape from the gunnery was impossible, so Sun Stealer merely tried to make

Nagorny his puppet. Perhaps it was all done via subconscious suggestion, while he was in the

gunnery.'

'Exactly how much trouble am I in?'

'Little, for now. There were only a few dogs -- not enough for him to do much damage.'

'What happened to the dogs?'

'I decrypted them, of course -- learnt their messages. But in doing so, I opened myself up to him.

To Sun Stealer. The dogs must have limited him somewhat, because his attack on me was far from

subtle. Fortunately, because otherwise I might not have deployed my defences in time. He was not

particularly hard to defeat, but of course I was only dealing with a tiny part of him.'

'Then I'm safe?'

'Well, not quite. I ousted him -- but only from the implant in which I reside. Unfortunately my

defences do not extend to your other implants, including those Volyova installed in you.'

'He's still in my head?'

'He may not have even needed the dogs,' the Mademoiselle said. 'He might have entered

Volyova's implants as soon as she placed you in the gunnery for the first time. But he certainly

found the dogs advantageous. If he hadn't tried to invade me with them, I might not have sensed his

presence in your other implants.'

'I feel the same.'

'Good. It means my countermeasures are effective. You recall how I used countermeasures

against Volyova's loyalty therapies?'

'Yes,' Khouri said, gloomily uncertain that those had worked quite as well as the Mademoiselle

liked to imagine.

'Well, these are much the same. The only difference is, I'm using them against those sites in your

mind which Sun Stealer has occupied. For the last two years, we've been waging a kind of...' She

paused, and then seemed to experience a moment of epiphany. 'I suppose you could call it a cold

war.'

'It would have to be cold.'

'And slow,' the Mademoiselle said. 'The cold robbed us of the energies for anything more. And,

of course, we had to be careful that we did not harm you. Your being injured was no use to either

myself or Sun Stealer.'

Khouri remembered why this conversation was possible in the first place.

'But now that I'm warmed...'

'You understand well. Our campaign has intensified since the warming. I think Volyova may

even suspect something. A trawl is reading your brain even now, you see. It may have detected the

neural war Sun Stealer and I are waging. I would have relented -- but Sun Stealer would have used

the moment to overwhelm my countermeasures.'

'But you can hold him at bay...'

'I believe so. But should I not succeed in holding Sun Stealer at bay, I felt you needed to know

what happened.'

That much was reasonable: better to know that Sun Stealer was in her than to suffer the delusion

that she was clean.

'I also wished to warn you. The bulk of him remains in the gunnery. I've no doubt that he will try

to enter you fully, or as fully as is possible, when he finds the chance.'

'You mean, next time I'm in the gunnery?'

'I admit the options are limited,' the Mademoiselle said. 'But I thought it best that you knew the

entirety of the situation.'

Khouri was, she thought, still a long way from anything that approximated that. But what the

ghost said was correct. Better to appreciate the danger than ignore it.

'You know,' she said, 'if Sylveste really was responsible for this thing, killing him won't pose too

many problems for me.'

'Good. And the news is not unremittingly bad, I assure you. When I sent those dogs into the

gunnery I also sent in an avatar of myself. And I know from the reports that the dogs returned that

my avatar remained undetected by Volyova, at least during those early days. That was, of course,

more than two years ago... but I've no reason to suspect that the avatar has been found since.'

'Assuming it hasn't been destroyed by Sun Stealer.'

'A reasonable point,' she conceded. 'But if Sun Stealer is as intelligent as I suspect, he won't do

anything that might draw attention to himself. He can't know for certain that this avatar isn't

something Volyova has sent into the system. She has enough doubts of her own, after all.'

'Why did you do it?'

'So that, if necessary, I might gain control of the gunnery.'

If Calvin had had any grave, Sylveste thought, then his father would be spinning in it faster than

Cerberus spun around the neutron star Hades, aggrieved at the abuse of his own handiwork. Except

Calvin had already been dead, or at least non-corporeal, long before his simulation had engineered

Sylveste's vision. Such thought-games held the pain at bay, at least part of the time. And, in truth,

there had never really been a time since his capture when he had not been in pain. Falkender was

flattering himself if he imagined his surgery was exacerbating Sylveste's agony to any significant

degree.

Eventually -- miraculously -- it began to abate.

It was like a vacuum opening in his mind, a cold, void-filled ventricle which had not been there

before. Taking the pain away was like taking away some inner buttress. He felt himself collapsing,

whole eavestones of his psyche grinding loose under their suddenly unsupported weight. It took an

effort to restore some of his own internal equilibrium.

And now there were colourless, evanescent ghosts in his vision.

By the second they hardened into distinct shapes. The walls of a room -- as bland and

unfurnished as he had imagined -- and a masked figure crouched low over him. Falkender's hand

was immersed in a kind of chrome glove which ended not in fingers but in a crayfish-like explosion

of tiny glistening manipulators. One of the man's eyes was monocled by a

lens system, connected to

the glove by a segmented steel cable. His skin had the pallor of a lizard's underbelly: his one visible

eye was unfocused and cyanotic. Dried specks of blood sprinkled his brow. The blood was grey-

green, but Sylveste knew well enough what it was.

In fact, now that he noticed, everything was grey-green.

The glove retracted, and Falkender pulled it from his wrist with the other hand. A caul of

lubricant sheened the hand which had been under the glove.

He began to pack his kit away. 'Well, I never promised miracles,' he said. 'And you shouldn't

have been expecting any.'

When he moved, it was jerkily, and it took moments for Sylveste to grasp that his eyes were only

perceiving three of four images a second. The world moved with the stuttering motion of the pencil

cartoons children made in the corners of books, flicked into life between thumb and forefinger.

Every few seconds there were upsetting inversions of depth, when Falkender would appear to be a

man-shaped recess carved into the cell's wall, and sometimes part of his visual field would jam, not

changing for ten or more seconds, even if he looked to another part of the room.

Still, it was vision, or at least vision's idiot cousin.

'Thank you,' Sylveste said. 'It's... an improvement.'

'I think we'd better move,' said Falkender. 'We're five minutes behind schedule as it is.'

Sylveste nodded, and just the action of tipping his head was enough to spark pulsing migraines.

Still, they were nothing compared with what he had endured until Falkender's work.

He helped himself from the couch and stepped towards the door. Maybe it was because he now

moved to the door with a purpose -- because, for the first time, he actually expected to step through

it -- but the action suddenly seemed perverse and alien. He felt as if he were casually stepping off a

precipice. He now had no balance. It was as if his inner equilibrium had become accustomed to no

vision, and was now thrown by its return. The dizziness faded, though, just as two True Path

heavies emerged from the outer corridor and took him by the elbows.

Falkender trailed behind. 'Be careful. There may be perceptual glitches...'

But though Sylveste heard his words, they meant nothing to him. He knew where he was now,

and that knowledge was momentarily too overpowering. He was back home, after more than twenty

years of exile.

His prison was Mantell, a place he had not seen -- and barely even visited in his memory -- since

the coup.

TEN

Approaching Delta Pavonis, 2564

Volyova sat alone in the huge sphere of the bridge, under the holographic display of the Resurgam

system. Her seat, like the other vacant ones around her, was mounted on a long, telescopic, highly

articulated arm, so that it could be steered to almost any point in the sphere. Hand under chin, she

had been staring into the orrery for hours, like a child transfixed by some glittery toy.

Delta Pavonis was a chip of warm-red ambergris fixed at the middle, the system's eleven major

planets spaced around it on their respective orbits, positioned at their true positions; smears of

asteroidal debris and comet-shards following their own ellipses; the whole orrery haloed by a

tenuous Kuiper belt of icy flotsam; tugged into slight asymmetry by the presence of the neutron star

which was Pavonis's dark twin. The picture was a simulation, rather than an enlargement of what

lay ahead. The ship's sensors were acute enough to glean data at this range, but the view would have

been distorted by relativistic effects, and -- worse -- would have been a snapshot of the system as it

was years earlier, with the relative positions of the planets bearing no resemblance to the present

situation. Since the ship's approach strategy would depend critically on using the system's larger gas

giants for camouflage and gravitational braking, Volyova needed to know where things would be

when they got there, not how they had been five years ago. And not only that. Before the ship

arrived in the Resurgam system, its advance envoys would already have skimmed by invisibly, and

it was just as crucial to arrange their passage at the optimum planetary alignment.

'Release pebbles,' she said, satisfied now that she had run enough simulations. Heeding her,

Infinity deployed one thousand of the tiny probes, firing them ahead of the decelerating ship in a

slowly spreading pattern. Volyova spoke a command into her bracelet and a window opened ahead

of her, captured by a camera on the hull. The entire ensemble of pebbles contracted into the

distance, apparently tugged away by an invisible force. The cloud diminished as it fell further and

further ahead of the ship, until all Volyova could see was a blurred nimbus, diminishing quickly.

The pebbles were moving at almost the speed of light, and would reach the Resurgam system

months ahead of the ship. The swarm, by then, would be wider than the orbit of Resurgam around

the sun. Each tiny probe would align itself towards the planet and catch photons across the

electromagnetic spectrum. The data from each pebble would be sent in a tightly focused laser pulse

back towards the ship. The resolution of any one unit in the swarm would be tiny, but by combining

their results, a very sharp and detailed picture of Resurgam could be assembled. It would not tell

Sajaki where Sylveste was, but it would give him an idea of the likely centres of power on the

planet, and -- more importantly -- what kind of defences they were capable of mustering.

That was one thing on which Sajaki and Volyova had been in complete agreement. Even if they

found Sylveste, it seemed unlikely that he would agree to come aboard without coercion.

'Do you know what they did to Pascale?' Sylveste said.

'She's safe,' said the eye surgeon, as he led Sylveste along tracheal, rock-clad tunnels deep in

Mantell. 'That's what I've heard, at least,' he added, lessening Sylveste's ease. 'But I could be wrong.

I don't think Sluka would have killed her without good reason, but she may have had her frozen.'

'Frozen?'

'Until she's useful. You'll understand by now that Sluka thinks long-term.'

Continual waves of nausea kept threatening to overwhelm him. His eyes hurt, but, as he kept

reminding himself, it was vision. That at least was something. Without it he was powerless, not

even capable of effective disobedience. With it, escape might still be impossible, but at least he was

spared the stumbling indignity of the blind. What vision he had, though, would have shamed the

lowliest invertebrate. Spatial perception was haphazard, and colour existed in his world now only

via nuances of grey-greens.

What he knew -- what he remembered -- was this.

He had not seen Mantell since the night of the coup twenty years earlier. The *first* coup, he

corrected himself. Now that Girardieau had been overthrown, Sylveste had to get used to thinking

of his own dethronement in purely historical terms. Girardieau's regime had not immediately closed

the place down, even though its Amarantin-directed research conflicted with their Inundationist

agenda. For five or six years after the coup they had kept the place running, but one by one they had

moved Sylveste's best researchers back to Cuvier, replacing them with eco-engineers, botanists and

geopower specialists. Finally, Mantell had been reduced to a skeleton-crewed test station, whole

portions mothballed or derelict. It should have stayed that way, but trouble was already looming

from outside elements. For years it had been rumoured that True Path's leaders in Cuvier, Resurgam

City, or whatever they were calling it now, were under direction from individuals beyond, a clique

of one-time Girardieau sympathisers who had fallen out of favour during the machinations of the

first coup. Supposedly, these brigands had altered their physiologies to cope with the dusty, oxygen-

depleted atmosphere beyond the domes, using biotech purchased from Captain Remilliod.

Stories like that could be expected. But after sporadic attacks against a number of outposts, they

began to look far less speculative. Mantell had been abandoned at some point, Sylveste knew,

which meant that the current occupants might have been here for much longer than the time since

Girardieau's assassination. Months, or possibly even years.

Certainly they acted as if they owned the place. He knew when they entered a room that it was

the one where Gillian Sluka had addressed him upon his arrival, however long ago that was. He

failed to recognise it, though: it was entirely possible that during his tenancy

in Mantell he had

known this room intimately, but there were no longer any points of reference to aid him. The room's

decor and furnishings -- such as there were -- had been completely replaced. She stood with her

back to him, next to a table, gloved hands knitted primly above her hip. She wore a knee-length

fluted jacket with leather shoulder patches, the colour rendered as murky olive by his eyes. Her hair

was collected in a braided tail which hung between her shoulder blades. She was not projecting

entoptics. On either side of the room, planetary globes orbited on slender, swan-necked plinths.

Something approximating daylight slatted down from the ceiling, though his eyes leached it of any

warmth.

'When we first spoke after your imprisonment,' she said, in her croak of a voice, 'I almost had the

impression you couldn't place me.'

'I'd always assumed you were dead.'

'That was what Girardieau's people wished you to think. The story about our crawler being hit by

a landslide -- all lies. We were attacked -- they thought you were aboard, of course.'

'Why didn't they kill me later, when they found me at the dig?'

'They realised you were more useful to them alive than dead, of course. Girardieau was no fool --

he always used you profitably.'

'If you'd stayed with the dig, none of it would have happened. How did you survive, anyway?'

'Some of us got out of the crawler before Girardieau's henchmen reached it. We took what

equipment we could; made it into the Bird's Claw canyons and set up bubbletents. That's all I saw

for a year, you know: the inside of a bubbletent. I was hurt quite badly in the attack.'

Sylveste brushed his fingers over the mottled surface of one of Sluka's pedestal-mounted globes.

What they represented, he saw now, was the topography of Resurgam at different epochs during the

planned Inundationist terraforming program. 'Why didn't you join Girardieau in Cuvier?' he asked.

'He considered me too embarrassing to admit back into his fold. He was prepared to let us live,

but only because killing us would have attracted too much attention. There were lines of

communication, but they broke down.' She paused. 'Fortunately we took some of Remilliod's

trinkets with us. The scavenger enzymes were the most useful. The dust doesn't hurt us.'

He studied the globes again. With his impaired vision, he could only guess at

the colours of the

planetscapes, but he assumed that the spheres represented a steady march towards blue-green

verdure. What were now merely upraised plateaux would become landmasses limned by ocean.

Forests would fester across steppes. He looked to the furthest globes, which represented some

remote version of Resurgam several centuries hence. Nightside, cities glistened in chains, and a

spray of tinkertoy habitats girdled the planet. Gossamer starbridges reached from the equator

towards orbit. How would that delicate future vision fare, he wondered, if Resurgam's sun again

erupted, as it had done nine hundred and ninety thousand years ago, just when Amarantin

civilisation was approaching a human level of sophistication?

Not, he ventured, terribly well.

'Apart from the biotech,' he said, 'what else did Remilliod give you? You appreciate I'm curious.'

She seemed ready to humour him.

'You haven't asked me about Cuvier. That surprises me.' She added: 'Or your wife.'

'Falkender told me Pascale was safe.'

'She is. Perhaps I'll allow you to join her at some point. For now, I wish your attention. We

haven't secured the capital. The rest of Resurgam is ours, but Girardieu's people still hold Cuvier.'

'The city's still intact?'

'No,' she said. 'We...' she looked over his shoulder, directly at Falkender. 'Fetch Delaunay, will

you? And have him bring one of Remilliod's gifts.'

Falkender left, leaving them alone.

'I understand there was some agreement between you and Nils,' Sluka said. 'Although the

rumours I've heard are too contradictory to make much sense. Do you mind enlightening me?'

'There was never anything formal,' Sylveste said. 'No matter what you may have heard.'

'I understand his daughter was brought in to paint you in an unflattering light.'

'It made sense,' Sylveste said wearily. 'There'd be a certain cachet in having the biography

scripted by a member of the family who was holding me prisoner. And Pascale was young, but not

so young that it wasn't time for her to make her mark. There were no losers: Pascale could hardly

fail, though in fairness she applied herself to the task excellently.' He winced inwardly,

remembering how close she had come to exposing the truth about Calvin's alpha-level simulation.

More than ever he was convinced that she had correctly guessed the facts, but

had held back from

committing them to the biography. Now, of course, she knew much more: what had happened

around Lascaille's Shroud, and how Carine Lefevre's death was not the clear-cut thing he had made

it seem upon his return to Yellowstone. But he had not spoken to her since that announcement. 'As

for Girardieau,' he said, 'he had the satisfaction of seeing his daughter associated with a genuinely

important project. Not to mention the fact that I was opened to the world for closer scrutiny. I was

the prize butterfly in his collection, you see -- but until the biography, he'd had no easy means of

showing me off.'

'I've experienced the biography,' Sluka said. 'I'm not entirely sure Girardieau got what he wanted.'

'All the same, he promised to keep his word.' His eyes faltered, and for a moment the woman he

was addressing seemed to be a woman-shaped hole cut in the fabric of the room's volume, a hole

through which infinities lay.

The odd moment passed. He continued, 'I wanted access to Cerberus/Hades. I think -- towards

the end -- Nils was almost ready to give it to me, provided the colony had the means.'

'You think there's something out there?'

'If you're acquainted with my ideas,' Sylveste said, 'then you must bow to their logic.'

'I find them intriguing -- like any delusional construct.'

As she spoke, the door opened and a man Sylveste had not seen before entered, shadowed by

Falkender. The new man -- whom he assumed to be Delaunay -- was bulldog-stocky. His wore

several days' growth of beard, a purple beret resting on his scalp. There were red weals around his

eyes and a pair of dust goggles around his neck. His chest was crossed by webbing and his feet

vanished into ochre mukluks.

'Show the nasty little thing to our guest,' Sluka said.

Delaunay was carrying an obviously heavy black cylinder in one hand, gripped in a thick handle.

'Take it,' Sluka told Sylveste.

He did; it was as heavy as he had expected. The handle was attached to the top of the cylinder;

beneath it was a single green key. Sylveste put the cylinder down on the table; it was too heavy to

hold comfortably for any length of time.

'Open it,' Sluka said.

He pressed the key -- it was the obvious thing to do -- and the cylinder split

open like a Russian

doll, the top half rising on four metal supports which surrounded a slightly smaller cylinder hidden

until now. Then the inner cylinder split open similarly, revealing another nested layer, and the

process continued until six or seven shells had been revealed.

Inside was a thin silver column. There was a tiny window set into the column's side, showing an

illuminated cavity. Cradled in the cavity was what looked like a bulbous-headed pin.

'I assume by now you understand what this is,' Sluka said.

'I can guess it wasn't manufactured here,' Sylveste said. 'And I know nothing like this was

brought with us from Yellowstone. Which leaves our excellent benefactor Remilliod. He sold this to

you?'

'This and nine others,' she said. 'Eight now, since we used the tenth against Cuvier.'

'It's a weapon?'

'Remilliod's people called it hot-dust,' she said. 'Antimatter. The pinhead contains only a

twentieth of a gramme of antilithium, but that's more than sufficient for our purposes.'

'I didn't realise such a weapon was possible,' he said. 'Something so small, I mean.'

'That's understandable. The technology's been outlawed for so long almost nobody remembers

how to actually make one.'

'What yield does this have?'

'About two kilotonnes. Enough to put a hole in Cuvier.'

Sylveste nodded, absorbing the implication of what she had said. In his mind's eye he tried to

imagine what it must have been like, for those who had either died in or had been blinded by the

pinhead True Path had used against the capital. The slight pressure differential between the domes

and the outside air would have led to ferocious winds combing through the ordered municipal

spaces. He imagined the trees and plants of the arboreta uprooted and shredded by the force of it,

the birds and other animals carried aloft on the hurricane. Those people who survived the initial

breach -- no guessing how many -- would have had to seek shelter underground, quickly, before the

choking outside air replaced the leaking dome air. Admittedly the air was closer to being breathable

now than it had been twenty years ago, but it took skill to learn how to do it, even for a few minutes

only. Most of the inhabitants of the capital had never left it. He did not greatly value their chances.

'Why?' he asked.

'It was a...' She paused. 'I was going to call it a mistake, but you could argue that there are no

mistakes in war, only fortunate and less fortunate events. The intention, at least, was not to use the

pinhead. Girardieau's loyalists were to surrender the city once they knew we possessed the weapon.

But it didn't work like that. Girardieau himself had known of the existence of the pinheads, but he

hadn't communicated that knowledge to his subordinates. No one would believe we had it.'

It was not necessary for her to tell him the rest; what had taken place was clear enough.

Frustrated by the fact that their weapon was not taken seriously, the brigands had used it anyway.

Yet the capital was still inhabited; Sluka had made that clear early on. Girardieau's loyalists still held

it. He imagined them running things from subsurface bunkers, while overhead dust storms fingered

through the open latticework of the ruined domes.

'So you see,' the woman said, 'no one should underestimate us, much less anyone who retains any

lingering attachment to Girardieau's rule.'

'What do you plan to use the others for?'

'Infiltration. Remove the shrouding, and the pinhead itself is tiny enough to

be implanted in a

tooth. You'd never find it, except with the most detailed medical scan.'

'Is that your plan?' he asked. 'To find eight volunteers, and have those things surgically

implanted? Then have your eight infiltrate the capital again? This time they'd believe you, I think.'

'Except we don't even need volunteers,' Sluka said. 'They might be preferable, but they're not

necessary.'

Ignoring his own better judgement, Sylveste said, 'Gillian, I think I liked you better fifteen years

ago.'

'You can take him back to his cell,' she said to Falkender. 'I'm bored with him for now.'

He felt the surgeon tug at his sleeve.

'May I spend more time with his eyes, Gillian? There was more I could do, but at the expense of

greater discomfort.'

'Do what you like,' Sluka said. 'But don't feel any obligation. Now that I have him, I have to

confess I'm a little disappointed. I think I liked him better in the past as well, before Girardieau

turned him into a martyr.' She shrugged. 'He's too valuable to throw away, but in the absence of

anything better, I might just have him frozen, until I find a use for him. That might be a year from

now, or it might be five years. All I'm saying is, it would be a shame to invest very much time in

something we might soon tire of, Dr Falkender.'

'Surgery has its own rewards,' the man said.

'I can see well enough now,' Sylveste said.

'Oh no,' Falkender answered. 'There's much more I can do for you, Dr Sylveste. Very much more.

I've barely begun.'

Volyova was down with Captain Brannigan when a janitor-rat informed her that the pebbles had

sent back their reports. She was gathering fresh samples from the Captain's periphery, encouraged

by recent successes of one of her retrovirus strains against the plague. Her virus was adapted from

one of the military cyberviruses which had struck the ship, suitably modified for Plague-

compatibility. Amazingly, it actually seemed to be working -- at least against the tiny samples she

had so far tried it against. How irritating to be snatched from this by something she had set in

motion nine months earlier, and had in the meantime all but forgotten. For a moment she refused to

believe that so much time could possibly have passed. Yet she was excited by

what she might learn.

She took the lift upship. Nine months, yes. It hardly seemed possible -- but that was what

happened when you were working. And she should have been expecting it. Rationally she had

known that so much time had passed -- but the information had managed not to tunnel into the part

of her mind where she actually acknowledged such things and began to deal with them. But the

clues had been there all along. The ship was now cruising at only one quarter of lightspeed. In about

a hundred days they would be making final insertion into Resurgam orbit, and they would need a

strategy when they got there. That was where the pebbles came in.

Snapshots of Resurgam and near-Resurgam space were assembling in the bridge, in various EM

and exotic-particle bands. It was the first recent glimpse of a possible enemy. Volyova let the salient

facts mole deep into her consciousness, so that she could recall them with instinctive ease during a

crisis. The pebbles had whipped past either side of Resurgam so that there was data from both its

day and night sides. Additionally, the pebble cloud had elongated itself in the line of flight until

fifteen hours spaced the passage of its first and last unit through the system, enabling the entire

surface of Resurgam to be glimpsed under both illumination and darkness. The dayside pebbles

were looking away from Delta Pavonis, so they snooped for neutrino leakage from fusion and

antimatter power units on the surface. The nightside pebbles snooped for the heat signatures of

population centres and orbital facilities. Other sensors sniffed the atmosphere, measuring oxygen,

ozone and nitrogen levels; sensing the extent to which the colonists had tampered with the native

biome.

Given that the colonists had been here for more than half a century, it was striking how much

they had managed to live without. There were no large structures in orbit; no evidence of local

spaceflight within the system. Only a few comsats girdled the planet, and given the lack of large-

scale industrialisation on the surface, it was doubtful whether they could be repaired or replaced if

any were damaged. It would be a simple matter to disable or confuse those that remained, if that

fitted in with the as yet unformulated plan.

Yet they had not been entirely idle; the atmosphere showed signs of extensive modification, with

free oxygen now well above what Volyova would have expected. The infrared sensors revealed

geothermal taps aligned along what were certainly continental subduction zones. Neutrino leakage

from the polar zones hinted at oxygen factories; fusion-powered units which would crack open

water-ice molecules to extract oxygen and hydrogen. The oxygen would be bled into the

atmosphere -- or pumped to domed-over communities -- while the hydrogen was cycled back into

the fusors. Volyova identified upwards of fifty communities, but most were small affairs, and none

approximated the size of the main settlement. She assumed there were other, tinier outposts --

family-tended stations and homesteads -- but the pebbles would miss these.

So what did she have to report? No orbital defences, almost certainly no capability for

spaceflight, and most of the planet's inhabitants still crammed into one community. At least from a

standpoint of relative strengths, persuading the Resurgamites to give up Sylveste ought to be the

simplest of matters.

But there was something else.

The Resurgam system was a wide binary. Delta Pavonis was the life-giving star, but -- as she had

known -- it possessed a dead twin. The dark companion was a neutron star, separated by ten light

hours from Pavonis, far enough for stable planetary orbits to be possible around both stars. And

indeed, the neutron star had claimed a planet of its own. The fact of the planet's existence was

known to her in advance of the information from the pebbles. All it warranted in the ship's database

was a line of comment and a scrawl of terse numerics. These worlds were invariably chemically

dull, atmosphereless and biologically inert, flensed sterile by the wind that the neutron star had

blown when it was a pulsar. Little more, Volyova thought, than lumps of stellar slag-iron, and about

as interesting.

But near this world was a neutrino source. It was weak -- almost at the limit of detectability -- but

nothing she could ignore. Volyova digested this knowledge for a few moments before regurgitating

it as a tiny, troublesome cud of certainty. Only a machine could create such a signature.

And that worried her.

'You've really been awake all this time?' Khouri asked, shortly after waking herself, as she and

Volyova journeyed down to see the Captain.

'Not literally,' Volyova said. 'Even my body needs sleep occasionally. I tried dispensing with it

once; there are drugs you can take. And implants which can be put into the RAS... that's the

reticular activating system, the region of the brain which mediates sleep -- but you still need to

clean out those fatigue poisons.' She winced. It was evident to Khouri that Volyova found the topic

of implants about as pleasant as toothache.

'Much happen?' Khouri asked.

'Nothing you need concern yourself with,' Volyova said, taking a drag on a cigarette. Khouri

assumed that would be the end of it, but then her tutor fixed her with an uneasy expression. 'Well,

now you mention it, there was something. Two things, in fact, though I'm not sure to which I should

attach the greater significance. The first need not concern you immediately. As for the second...'

Khouri searched Volyova's face for concrete evidence of the seven additional years the woman

had aged since their last meeting. There was nothing; not a hint of it, which meant that she had

balanced the seven years with infusions of anti-senescence drugs. She looked different, but only

because she had permitted her hair to grow out from her usual crop. It was still short, but the extra

volume served to ameliorate the sharp lines of her jaw and cheekbones. If anything, Khouri thought,

Volyova looked seven years younger, rather than older. Not for the first time, she attempted to

assess the woman's actual physiological age, and failed miserably.

'What was it?'

'There was something unusual about your neural activity while you were in reefersleep. There

shouldn't have been any. But what I saw didn't even look normal for someone awake. It looked like

a small war going on in your head.'

The elevator had arrived at the Captain's level. 'That's an interesting analogy,' Khouri said,

stepping into the chill of the corridor.

'Assuming it is one. I doubted that you'd have been aware of much, of course.'

'I don't remember anything,' Khouri said.

Volyova was silent until they reached the human nebula which was the Captain. Glittering and

uncomfortably mucoid, he less resembled a human being than an angel which had dropped from the

sky onto a hard, splattering surface. The antiquated reefer which had until recently cased him was

now shattered and fissured. It still functioned, but only barely, and the cold it offered was no longer

adequate to stifle the plague's relentless encroachment. Captain Brannigan had sunk dozens of

tendrill-like roots into the ship now, roots which Volyova tracked but was powerless to prevent

spreading. She could sever them, but what effect would that have on the Captain? For all she knew,

the roots were all that was keeping him alive, if she dared dignify his state with the word.

Eventually, Volyova said, the roots would permeate the whole vessel, and by then it would probably

be unwise to make much of a distinction between the ship and the Captain. Of course, she could

arrest that spread if she wished, by the simple expedient of ejecting this portion of the ship; cutting

it entirely free from the rest of the vessel, the way an oldtime surgeon might have dealt with a

particularly voracious tumour. The volume Brannigan had subsumed was tiny now, and the ship

would certainly not miss it. Undoubtedly his transformations would continue, but lacking sustaining

material they would be turned incestuously inwards, until entropy drove the life from what he had

become.

'You'd consider doing that?' Khouri asked.

'Consider it, yes,' Volyova replied. 'But I'm hoping it won't come to that. All these samples I've

been taking -- I think I'm actually getting somewhere. I've found a counteragent -- a retrovirus

which seems stronger than the plague. It subverts the plague machinery faster than the plague

subverts it. Only tested it on tiny pieces so far -- and there's really no way I can do any better than

that, because testing it on the Captain would be a medical matter, and I'm not qualified to do that.'

'Of course,' Khouri said hastily. 'But if you won't do that, you're really trusting all on Sylveste,

aren't you?'

'Maybe, but one shouldn't underestimate his skills. Or Calvin's, I should say.'

'And he'll help you, just like that?'

'No, but he didn't willingly help us the first time either, and we still found a way.'

'Persuasion, you mean?'

Volyova took a moment to take a scraping from one of the pipelike tendrils, just before it dove

into an intestinal mass of ship plumbing. 'Sylveste is a man with obsessions,' she said. 'And people

like that are more easily manipulated than they imagine. They're so intent on whatever goal it is

they have in mind that they don't always notice that they're being bent to someone else's will.'

'Like yours, for instance.'

She took the sliver-thin sample and popped it away for analysis. 'Sajaki told you that we brought

him aboard during his missing month?'

'Thirty days in the wilderness.'

'Stupid name, that,' Volyova said, gritting her teeth. 'Did they have to make it sound so damned

Biblical? Wasn't as if he didn't already have a messiah complex, if you ask me. Anyway, yes, that

was when we brought him aboard. And the interesting thing was, this was fully thirty years before

the Resurgam expedition ever left Yellowstone. Now, I'll let you in on a secret. Until we returned to

Yellowstone and recruited you, we didn't even know of the existence of this expedition. We still

expected to find Sylveste on Yellowstone.'

Khouri knew well enough from her own experience with Fazil the kind of difficulty Volyova's

crew must have faced, but she decided a little fake ignorance would seem more plausible.

'Careless of you not to check firsthand.'

'Not at all. In fact we did -- it was just that our best information was already decades old before

we obtained it. And then by the time we'd acted on it -- made the hop to Yellowstone -- it was twice

as old again.'

'I suppose it wasn't a bad gamble. The family had always been associated with Yellowstone, so

you'd have expected to find the rich young brat still hanging around the old place.'

'Except we were wrong. But the interesting thing is, it looks as if we could have spared ourselves

the bother all along. Sylveste may have had the Resurgam expedition in mind when we first brought

him aboard. If only we'd listened, we could have gone there directly.'

As they traversed the complicated series of elevators and access tunnels which led from the

Captain's corridor to the glade, Volyova spoke beneath audibility into the bracelet which she never

let slip from her wrist. Khouri knew that she must be addressing one of the ship's many artificial

personae, but Volyova gave no hint of what it was she was arranging.

The green light of the glade was a sensual feast after the unremitting cold and gloom of the

Captain's corridor. The air was warm and bouquet-fresh, and the painted birds which owned the

aerial spaces of the chamber were almost too gaudy for Khouri's dark-adapted eyes. For a moment

she was too overwhelmed to notice that Volyova and she were not alone. Then she saw the three

other people who were present. The trio sat facing each other around a stump of wood, kneeling in

the dew-moistened grass. Sajaki was one of them, though he wore his hair in a different style from

those Khouri had seen before: he was entirely bald apart from a topknot. The second person she

recognised was Volyova herself -- hair short now, which accentuated the angular form of her skull

and made her look older than the version of Volyova which was standing next to Khouri. The third

person, Khouri realised, was Sylveste himself.

'Shall we join them?' Volyova said, leading the way down the rickety staircase which descended

to the lawn.

Khouri followed. 'This dates from...' She paused and recalled the date when Sylveste had gone

missing from Chasm City. 'Around 2460, right?'

'Spot on,' Volyova said, turning to fix Khouri with a look of mild amazement. 'What are you, an

expert on Sylveste's life and times? Oh, never mind. The point is, we recorded his entire visit, and I

knew there was one particular remark he made which... well, in the light of what we now know, I

find curious.'

'Intriguing.'

Khouri jumped, because it was not she who had spoken, and the voice had appeared to come

from behind her. It was then that she became conscious of the Mademoiselle, loitering some

distance up the staircase.

'I should have known you'd show your ugly face,' Khouri said, not even bothering to subvocalise,

since the constant chatter of the songbirds served to mask her words from Volyova, who had gone

on ahead to the others. 'You're like a bad penny, you know.'

'At least you know I'm still around,' she said. 'If I weren't, you'd have real grounds to worry. It

would mean Sun Stealer had overwhelmed my countermeasures. Your sanity would be next, and I

hate to speculate about what that would do for your employment prospects where Volyova's

concerned.'

'Shut up and let me concentrate on what Sylveste has to say.'

'Be my guest,' the Mademoiselle said curtly, not straying from her vantage point.

Khouri joined Volyova next to the trio.

'Of course,' the standing Volyova said, addressing Khouri, 'I could have replayed this

conversation from any point in the ship. But it took place here, so this is where I chose to re-enact

it.' As she spoke, she reached into her jacket pocket and slipped out a pair of smoke-coloured

goggles which she proceeded to place over her eyes. Khouri understood: lacking implants, Volyova

could only witness this playback with the aid of direct retinal projection.
Until she slipped on the

goggles, she would not have seen the figures at all.

'So you see,' Sajaki was saying, 'it's in your best interests to do what we want.
You've made use

of Ultra elements in the past -- your trip out to Lascaille's Shroud, for
instance -- and it's highly

probable you'll want to do so in the future.'

Sylveste placed his elbows on the tree stump. Khouri studied the man. She
had seen plenty of

lifelike evocations of Sylveste before, but this image seemed more real than
any she had yet

experienced. She guessed it was because Sylveste was in conversation with
two people she knew,

rather than anonymous figures from Yellowstone's history. That made a lot of
difference. He was

handsome; improbably so, in her opinion, but she doubted that the image had
been cosmetically

doctored. His long hair hung in tangles either side of his magisterial brow; his
eyes were acutely

green. Even if she had to look him in the eyes before killing him -- and the
Mademoiselle's

specifications about the killing did not make that unlikely -- it would be
something to see those eyes

for real.

'That sounds awfully like blackmail,' Sylveste said, his voice the lowest of those present. 'You

talk as if you Ultras have some kind of binding agreement. It might fool some people, Sajaki, but

I'm afraid I'm not one of them.'

'Then you may be in for a surprise the next time you attempt to enlist Ultra assistance,' Sajaki

answered, toying with a splinter of wood. 'Let's be quite clear on this. If you refuse us -- in addition

to whatever else that might bring upon yourself -- you'd ensure that you never leave your home

planet.'

'I doubt that that would greatly inconvenience me.'

Volyova -- the seated version -- shook her head. 'Not what our spies tell us. Rumour has it you're

trying to find funding for an expedition to the Delta Pavonis system, Dr Sylveste.'

'Resurgam?' Sylveste snorted. 'I don't think so. There's nothing there.'

The real, standing Volyova said, 'He's clearly lying. It's obvious now, though at the time I just

assumed the rumour I had heard was false.'

Sajaki had replied to Sylveste, and now Sylveste was speaking again, defensively. 'Listen,' he

said. 'I don't care what rumours you've heard -- you'd better ignore them. There's not a scrap of a

reason to go there. Check the records if you don't believe me.'

'But that's the odd thing,' the standing Volyova said. 'I did just that, and damned if he wasn't right.'

Based on what was known at the time, there was absolutely no reason to consider an expedition to

Resurgam.'

'But you just said he was lying...'

'And he was, of course -- hindsight proves that much.' She shook her head. 'You know, I've never

really thought about this, but it's actually very strange -- paradoxical, even. Thirty years after this

meeting took place the expedition left for Resurgam, which means the rumour was correct after all.'

She nodded at Sylveste, embroiled in heated discussion with her seated image. 'But back then

nobody knew about the Amarantin! So what in hell's name gave him the idea to go to Resurgam in

the first place?'

'He must have known he'd find something there.'

'Yes, but where did that information come from? There were automated surveys of the system

prior to his expedition, but none of them were thorough. As far as I know, none of them scanned the

planetary surfaces close enough to find evidence that there'd once been intelligent life on Resurgam.

Yet Sylveste knew.'

'Which makes no sense.'

'I know,' Volyova said. 'Believe me, I know.'

At which point she joined her twin next to the stump and leant so close to the image of Sylveste

that Khouri could see the reflection of his unwavering green eyes in the smoky facets of her

goggles. 'What did you know?' she asked. 'More to the point, how did you know?'

'He isn't going to tell you,' Khouri said.

'Maybe not now,' Volyova said. And then smiled. 'But before very long it'll be the real one sitting

there. And then we may get some answers.'

As she was speaking, her bracelet began to emit a sonorous chiming. The sound was unfamiliar,

but it obviously connoted alarm. Above, without any fuss, the synthetic daylight turned blood-red

and began to pulse in rhythm with the chiming.

'What's that?' Khouri asked.

'An emergency,' Volyova said, holding the bracelet close to her jaw. She snatched the retinal-

projection goggles from her face and studied a little display inset into the bracelet. It was also

pulsing red, in perfect time with the sky and the chiming. Khouri could see

words trickling onto the
display, but not clearly enough to read them.

'What sort of emergency?' Khouri breathed, wary of disturbing the woman's attention. Though

she had not noticed their departure, the trio had vanished quietly back into whatever portion of the

ship's memory had tricked them to life.

Volyova looked up from the bracelet, face quite pale. 'One of the cache-weapons.'

'Yes?'

'It's arming itself.'

ELEVEN

Approaching Delta Pavonis, 2565

They were running down a curving corridor, one that led from the glade towards the nearest radial

elevator shaft.

'What do you mean?' Khouri shouted, straining to be heard above the klaxon.

'What do you mean

it's arming itself?'

Volyova wasted no breath replying, not until they had reached the waiting elevator car, and she

had ordered the thing to shuttle them straight to the nearest spinal-trunk elevator shaft, ignoring all

the usual acceleration limits. When the car began to move she and Khouri were rammed back into

its glass walling, almost knocking what wind they had left from their chests. The car's interior lights

were pulsing red; Volyova could feel her heart starting to pulse in sympathy. But somehow she

managed to talk.

'Exactly what I said. There are systems monitoring each cache-weapon -- and one has just

detected a power-surge in its weapon.'

Volyova did not add that the reason she had installed those monitors in the

first place was

because of the weapon which had appeared to move. Ever since, she had clung to the hope that the

move had been imagined -- a hallucination brought on by the loneliness of her vigil -- but she now

knew that it had been nothing of the sort.

'How can it arm itself?'

The question was perfectly reasonable. It was one for which Volyova had a decided absence of

glib answers.

'I'm just hoping the glitch is in the monitoring systems,' she said, if only to be saying something.

'Not the weapon itself.'

'Why would it be arming itself?'

'I don't know! Haven't you noticed I'm not exactly taking this calmly?'

The axial lift decelerated abruptly, transitioning to the trunk shaft with a series of nauseous

lurches. Then they were dropping quickly, so fast that their apparent weight dwindled almost to

nothing.

'Where are we going?'

'The cache chamber, of course.' Volyova glared at the recruit. 'I don't know what's going on,

Khoury, but whatever it is, I want visual confirmation. I want to see what the damned things are

actually doing.'

'It arms itself, what else can it do?'

'I don't know,' Volyova said, as calmly as possible. 'I've tried all the shutdown protocols --

nothing worked. This isn't exactly a situation I anticipated.'

'But surely it can't deploy? It can't actually find a target and go off?'

Volyova glanced down at her bracelet. Maybe the readings were going haywire; maybe there

really had been a glitch in the watchdog systems. She hoped that was the case, because what the

bracelet was telling her now was very bad news indeed.

The cache-weapon was moving.

Falkender was true to his word: the operations he performed on Sylveste's eyes were seldom

pleasant and frequently much worse, with occasional forays into absolute agony. For days now

Sluka's surgeon had been exploring the envelope of his skill, promising to restore such basic human

functions as colour perception and the ability to sense depth and smooth movement, but not quite

convincing Sylveste that he had the means or the expertise to do so. Sylveste had told Falkender

that the eyes had never been perfect in the first place; Calvin's tools had been too limited for that.

But even the crude vision which Calvin had given him would have been preferable to the insipidly

coloured, flicker-motion parody of the world through which he now moved. Not for the first time,

Sylveste found himself doubting that the discomfort of the repair was likely to be justified by the

results.

'I think you should give up,' he said.

'I fixed Sluka,' Falkender said, a lividly coloured laminate of flat, man-shaped apertures dancing

into Sylveste's visual field. 'You're no great challenge.'

'So what if you restore my vision? I can't see my wife because Sluka won't let us be together. And

a cell wall's a cell wall, no matter how clearly you see it.' He stopped as waves of pain lashed his

temples. 'Matter of fact, I'm not sure it isn't better being blind. At least that way you don't have

reality rammed down your optic nerve every time you open your eyes.'

'You don't have eyes, Doctor Sylveste.' Falkender twisted something, sending pink pain-rosettes

into his vision. 'So stop feeling sorry for yourself, please; it's most unbecoming. Besides, it's

possible you won't have to stare at these particular walls for very much

longer.'

Sylveste perked up.

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning things may soon start moving, if what I've heard is halfway to the truth.'

'Very informative.'

'I've heard that we may soon have visitors,' Falkender said, punctuating his remark with another

stab of pain.

'Stop being cryptic. When you say "we", which faction do you mean? And what kind of visitors?'

'All I've heard is rumour, Doctor Sylveste. I'm sure Sluka will tell you in good time.'

'Don't count on it,' Sylveste said, who happened to be under no illusions as to his usefulness from

Sluka's point of view. Since the time of his arrival in Mantell he had come to the forcible conclusion

that Sluka was retaining him only because he offered her some transient entertainment; that he was

some fabulous captured beast of dubious use but undoubted novelty. It was not at all clear that she

would ever confide in him regarding any matter of true seriousness -- and even if she did, it would

be for only one of two reasons: either because she wanted something other than a wall to talk to, or

because she had devised some new means of tormenting him verbally. More than once she had

spoken of putting him to sleep until she thought of a use for him. 'I was right to capture you,' she

would say. 'And I'm not saying you don't have your uses -- they're just not immediately apparent to

me. But I don't see why anyone else should be allowed to exploit you.' From that point of view, as

Sylveste had soon realised, it mattered little to Sluka whether or not she kept him alive. Alive, he

provided her with some amusement -- and there was always the possibility he might become more

useful to her in the future, as the colony's balance of power shifted. But, equally, it would not

greatly inconvenience her to have him killed now. At least that way he would never become a

liability; could never turn against her.

Eventually there came an end to the tenderly administered agonies, a passage into calmer light

and almost plausible colours. Sylveste held his own hand before his gaze and turned it slowly,

absorbing its solidity. There were furrows and trceries embossed into his skin which he had almost

forgotten, yet it could not be more than tens of days -- a few weeks -- since he had been blinded in

the Amarantin tunnel system.

'Good as new,' Falkender said, placing his tools back into their wooden autoclave. The strange,

ciliated glove went last of all; as Falkender peeled it from his womanly fingers, it twitched and

spasmed like a beached jellyfish.

'Get some illumination here,' Volyova said into her bracelet as the elevator entered the cache

chamber.

Weight rushed back as the box slowed to a halt. Immediately they had to squint as the chamber

lights glared on, shining on the enormous, cradled shapes of the weapons.

'Where is it?' Khouri asked.

'Wait,' Volyova said. 'I have to get my orientation.'

'I don't see anything moving.'

'Me neither... yet.'

Volyova was squashed flat against the glass side of the elevator, straining to peer around the

corner of the weapon which bulked largest. Swearing, she made the elevator descend another

twenty, thirty metres, then found the order which killed the pulsing red lighting and the interior

klaxon.

'Look,' Khouri said, in the relative calm which followed. 'Is that something moving?'

'Where?'

She pointed, almost vertically downwards. Volyova squinted after her, then spoke into the

bracelet again. 'Auxiliary lighting -- cache chamber quadrant five. 'Then to Khouri: 'Let's see what

the *svinoi*'s up to.'

'You weren't really serious, were you?'

'About what?'

'A glitch in the monitoring systems.'

'Not really,' Volyova said, squinting even more as the auxiliaries came online, spotlighting a

portion of the chamber far beneath their feet. 'It's called optimism -- but I'm losing the hang of it

fast.'

The weapon, Volyova said, was one of the planet-killers. She was not really sure how it

functioned; still less exactly what it was capable of doing. But she had her suspicions. She had

tested it years ago at the very lowest range of its destructive settings... against a small moon.

Extrapolating -- and she was very good at extrapolating -- the weapon would have no trouble

dismantling a planet even at a range of hundreds of AU. There were things inside it which had the

gravitational signatures of quantum black holes, yet which, strangely, refused to evaporate.

Somehow the weapon created a soliton -- a standing-wave -- in the geodesic structure of spacetime.

And now the weapon had come alive, without her bidding. It was gliding through the chamber,

riding the network of tracks which would eventually deliver it to open space. It was like watching a

skyscraper crawl through a city.

'Can we do anything?'

'I'm open to suggestions. What did you have in mind?'

'Well, you have to appreciate I haven't given this a hell of a lot of thought...'

'Say it, Khouri.'

'We could try blocking it.' Khouri's forehead was furrowed, as if, on top of all this, she was

battling with a sudden migraine attack. 'You've got shuttles on this thing, haven't you?'

'Yes, but----'

'Then use one to block the exit. Or is that too crude for you?'

'Right now, the expression "too crude" isn't in my vocabulary.'

Volyova glanced at her bracelet. All the while the weapon was moving down the chamber wall,

for all the world like an armoured slug retracing its own slime-trail. At the bottom of the chamber a

vast iris was opening; the track led through the aperture into the dark chamber nested below this

one. The weapon was almost level with the aperture.

'I can move one of the shuttles... but it'll take too long to get it outside the ship. I don't think we'd

get there in time...'

'Do it!' Khouri said, every muscle in her face screaming tension. 'Piss around any more and we

won't even have this option!'

Volyova nodded, regarding the recruit suspiciously. What did Khouri know about all this? She

seemed less bewildered than Volyova, although she also looked far more agitated than Volyova

would have expected. But she had a point; the shuttle idea was worth a try, even though it was

unlikely to succeed.

'We need something else,' she said, calling up the shuttle-control subpersona.

The weapon was halfway through the transfer iris, sliding into second chamber.

'Something else?'

'In case this doesn't work. The problem's in the gunnery, Khouri -- and maybe that's where we

should attack it.'

She blanched. 'What?'

'I want you in the seat.'

While they dropped towards the gunnery, accelerating so hard that the floor inverted to become the

ceiling -- and Khouri's stomach felt like it had done something similar -- Volyova whispered frantic,

breathless instructions into her bracelet. It took a maddening few seconds to access the right

subpersona, another few to bypass the safeguards which prevented unauthorised remote control of

the shuttles. Still more to warm up the engines of one of the shuttles, and then longer still while the

machine declamped from the docking restraints and vectored out of its holding bay, beyond the

hull, handling -- Volyova said -- like the damn thing was still half asleep. The lighthugger was still

under thrust, so the manoeuvre was doubly tricky.

'What worries me,' Khouri said, 'is what the weapon plans to do once it gets outside. Are we in

range of anything?'

'Resurgam, conceivably.' Volyova raised her eyes from the bracelet. 'But maybe now it won't get

a chance.'

The Mademoiselle chose that moment to blink into existence, somehow managing to

accommodate herself within the elevator without intruding on the volume

already claimed by

Khouri and the Triumvir. 'She's wrong. This isn't going to work. I control more than just the cache-

weapon.'

'Admitting it now, are you?'

'What's to deny?' The Mademoiselle smiled pridefully. 'You recall that I downloaded an avatar of

myself into the gunnery? Well my avatar now controls the cache. Nothing I can do can influence

her actions. She's as far beyond my reach as I am beyond the reach of my original self on

Yellowstone.'

The elevator was slowing now, Volyova engrossed by the complex little readouts patterning her

bracelet. A schematic holo showed the shuttle moving along the lighthugger's hull; a tiny remora

nosing along the smooth flank of a basking shark.

'But you gave her orders,' Khouri said. 'You know what the hell she's up to, don't you.'

'Oh, her orders were very simple. If control of the gunnery placed at her disposal any systems

which could quicken the completion of the mission, she was to make whatever arrangements were

necessary to hasten that end.'

Khouri shook her head in abject disbelief.

'I thought you wanted me to kill Sylveste.'

'The weapon may now make that end achievable rather sooner than I anticipated.'

'No,' Khouri said, after the Mademoiselle's remark had had time to settle in.
'You wouldn't wipe

out a planet just to kill one man.'

'Discovered a conscience all of a sudden, have we?' The Mademoiselle shook her head, lips

pursed. 'You exhibited no qualms over Sylveste. Why should the deaths of others trouble you so

much? Or is it simply a question of scale?'

'It's just...' Khouri hesitated, knowing what she was about to say would not trouble the

Mademoiselle. 'Inhuman. But I don't expect you to understand that.'

The elevator halted, door opening to reveal the semi-flooded access way which led to the

gunnery. Khouri took a moment to get her bearings. Ever since the descent had begun, she had been

suffering the worst headache imaginable. It seemed to be lessening now, but she had no wish to

dwelt on what might have caused it.

'Quickly,' Volyova said, traipsing out.

'What you don't understand,' the Mademoiselle said, 'is why I would go to the

trouble of

destroying an entire colony just to ensure one man's death.'

Khourī followed Volyova, boots disappearing to the knees in the flood.

'Damn right I don't. And I'd try and stop you whether I did or not.'

'Not if you grasped the facts, Khourī. You'd actually be urging me on.'

'Then it's your fault for not telling me.'

They pushed through bulkhead seals, dead janitor-rats bobbing by as the water levels equalised,

loosened from the little crannies where they had curled up to expire.

'Where's the shuttle?' Khourī called.

'Parked over the space-door,' Volyova said, turning back to look Khourī in the eye. 'And the

weapon hasn't emerged yet.'

'Does that mean we won?'

'Means we haven't lost yet. But I still want you in the gunnery.'

The Mademoiselle had gone now, but her disembodied voice lingered, wrongly echoless in the

cramped corridor.

'It won't do you any good. There's no system in the gunnery that I can't override, so your presence

would be futile.'

'So why are you obviously so keen to talk me out of going in there?'

The Mademoiselle did not answer.

Two bulkheads further, they reached the ceiling access point which led to the chamber. They

were running by that point, and it took a few moments for the water to stop sloshing up and down

the angled sides of the corridor. When it did, Volyova frowned.

'Something's up,' she said.

'What?'

'Can't you hear it? There's a noise.' She angled her head. 'Seems to be coming from the gunnery

itself.'

Khouri could hear it for herself now. It was a high-pitched mechanical sound, like ancient industrial

machinery going haywire.

'What is it?'

'I don't know.' Volyova paused. 'At least, I hope I don't. Let's get inside.'

Volyova reached up and tugged at the overhead access door, budging it open, a small shower of

ship-sludge loosening from its seals, spattering their shoulders. The alloy ladder descended, the

industrial noise intensifying. It was clearly coming from the gunnery itself. The gunnery's bright

internal lights were on, but they appeared to be unsteady, as if something were moving around up

there interrupting the light-beams. Whatever it was was moving quickly as well.

'Iliia,' she said. 'I'm not sure I like this.'

'Join the club.'

Her bracelet chimed. Volyova was bending to examine it when an almighty shudder rammed

through the entire fabric of the ship. The two of them slipped into the floodwater, falling against the

slippery corridor-sides. Khouri was struggling to her feet when a tiny tidal wave of viscous sludge

upended her. She hit the deck. For a moment she was swallowing the stuff, the closest to eating shit

since her army days. Volyova hooked her by the elbows, hauling her to her feet. Khouri gagged and

spat out the sludge, though the awful taste lingered.

Volyova's bracelet was in scream-mode again.

'What the hell...'

'The shuttle,' Volyova said. 'We just lost it.'

'What?'

'I mean it just got blown up.' Volyova coughed. Her face was wet; she must have taken a good

mouthful of the stuff herself. 'Far as I can tell, the cache-weapon didn't even have to push its way

out. Secondary weapons did the job -- turned on the shuttle.'

Above, the gunnery was still making frightening noises.

'You want me to go up there, don't you?'

Volyova nodded. 'Right now, getting you in the chair is the only option we have left. But don't

worry. I'm right behind you.'

'Listen to her,' the Mademoiselle said, quite suddenly. 'All ready to have you do what she hasn't

the guts to do herself.'

'Or the implants,' Khouri shouted, aloud.

'What?' Volyova said.

'Nothing.' Khouri planted one foot on the lowest rung. 'Just telling an old friend to go stuff

herself.' Her foot slid off the slime-encrusted rung. Next attempt, she found something

approximating a grip and planted her second foot on the same rung. Her head was poking into the

little access tunnel which fed into the gunnery, no more than two metres above.

'You won't get in,' the Mademoiselle said. 'I'm controlling the chair. As soon as you put your

head into the chamber, you lose it.'

'I'd love to see the look on your face, in that case.'

'Khouri, haven't you grasped things yet? The loss of your head would be no more than a minor

inconvenience.'

Her head was just below the chamber entrance now. She could see the gimballled chair, moving in

whiplash arcs through the chamber's volume. It had never been designed for such acrobatics;

Khourri could smell the ozone of fried power-systems greasing the air. 'Volyova,' she called,

shouting above the din. 'You built this set-up. Can you cut the power to the chair from below?'

'Cut power to the chair? Certainly -- but what good would it do us? I need you linking in to the

gunnery.'

'Not everything -- just enough to stop the bastard moving around.'

There was a brief pause, during which Khourri imagined Volyova summoning ancient wiring

diagrams to mind. The woman had constructed the gunnery herself -- but it might have been

decades and decades of subjective time ago, and something as vulgarly functional as the main

power trunk had probably never needed to be upgraded since.

'Well,' Volyova said, eventually. 'There's a main feed line here -- I suppose I could sever it...'

Volyova left, trudging quickly out of sight below. It sounded simple; severing the power feed.

Maybe, Khourri thought, Volyova would have to fetch a specialised cutter

from elsewhere. Surely

there was not that much time. But no; Volyova had something. There was that little laser, the one

she used to flense away samples from Captain Brannigan. She always carried it. Agonising seconds

passed, Khouri thinking of the cache-weapon, easing slowly beyond the hull, entering naked space.

By now it would be locking on target -- Resurgam -- going to final power-up, preparing to unleash a

pulse of gravitational death.

Above, the noise stopped.

All was still, the light steady. The chair hung motionless within its gimbals, a throne imprisoned

within an elegantly curved cage.

Volyova shouted, 'Khouri, there's a secondary power-source. The gunnery can tap it, if it senses a

drain from the main feed. Means you might not have much time to reach the chair...'

Khouri sprang into the gunnery, heaving her body weight out of the hole in the floor. The slender

alloy gimbals now looked sharper than before. She moved fast, monkeying through the feed lines,

hopping under or above the gimbals. The chair was still static, but the closer she got, the less room

she would have if the apparatus swung into motion again. If it happened now,

she thought, the walls

would be rapidly redecorated in sticky, coagulating red.

And then she was in. Khouri buckled, and the instant she closed the clasp, the chair whined and

shot forwards. The gimbals rolled about her, swerving the chair backwards and forwards, upside

down and sideways, until all sense of orientation was lost. The motion was neck-breaking, and

Khouri felt her eyeballs bulging out of their sockets with each hairpin reversal -- but the motion was

surely less vicious than before.

She wants to deter me, Khouri thought, but not kill me... yet.

'Don't attempt to hook in,' the Mademoiselle said.

'Because it might screw up your little plan?'

'Not at all. Might I remind you of Sun Stealer? He's waiting in there.'

The chair was still bucking, but not so violently as to hinder conscious thought.

'Maybe he doesn't exist,' Khouri said, subvocalising. 'Maybe you invented him to have more

leverage over me.'

'Go ahead then.'

Khouri made the helmet lower itself down over her head, masking the whirling motion of the

chamber. Her palm rested on the interface control. All it would take was slight pressure to initiate

the link; to close the circuit which would result in her psyche being sucked into the military data-

abstraction known as gunspace.

'You can't do it, can you? Because you believe me. Once you open that connection, there's no

going back.'

She increased the pressure, feeling the slight give as the control threatened to close. Then -- either

via some unconscious neuromuscular twitch, or because part of her knew it had to be done, she

closed the connection. The gunnery environment enfolded around her, as it had done in a thousand

tactical simulations. Spatial data came first: her own body-image become nebulous, replaced by the

lighthugger and its immediate surroundings, and then a series of hierarchical overlays conveying the

tactical/strategic situation, constantly updating, self-checking its own assumptions, running frantic

realtime-extrapolated simulations.

She assimilated.

The cache-weapon was holding station, several hundred metres away from the hull. Its prong was

pointed in the direction of flight, straight towards Resurgam -- allowing,

Khourī knew, for the tiny

relativistic light-bending effects caused by their moderate velocity. Near the space-door from which

the weapon had emerged, the shuttle had left a black smear along the side of the hull. There were

damage-points there; Khourī felt them as little pricks of discomfort, numbing as auto-repair systems

phased in. Gravity sensors felt ripples emanating from the weapon; Khourī felt periodic -- and

quickenings -- breezes wash over her. The black holes in the weapon must be spinning up, orbiting

quicker and quicker around the torus.

A presence sniffed her, not from outside, but from within the gunnery itself.

'Sun Stealer's detected your entry,' the Mademoiselle said.

'No problem.' Khourī reached out into gunspace, slipping abstract hands into cybernetically

realised gauntlets. 'I'm accessing ship's defences. A few seconds is all I need.'

But something was wrong. The weapons felt differently from the way they had in simulation;

unwilling to budge to her whims. Quickly she intuited: they were being fought over, and she was

merely joining in the struggle.

The Mademoiselle -- or rather, her avatar -- was trying to block the hull defences, prevent them

from being turned on the cache-weapon. The weapon itself was firmly out of Khouri's reach, veiled

by numerous firewalls. But who -- or what -- was resisting the Mademoiselle, trying to bring those

weapons to bear? Sun Stealer, of course. She could sense him now. Vast, powerful, but also intent

on invisibility and slyness, careful to camouflage his actions behind routine data movements. For

years that had worked, and Volyova had known nothing of his presence. But now Sun Stealer was

driven to recklessness, like a crab forced to scuttle from one hideaway to another by the retreating

tide. Nothing remotely human; no sense that this third presence in the gunnery was anything so

mundane as another downloaded personality simulation; what Sun Stealer felt like was pure

mentality, as if this data-representation was all that he had ever been; all that he ever would be.

It felt like absolutely nothing -- but a locus of nothingness which had somehow achieved a

terrifying degree of organisation.

Was she seriously contemplating joining forces with this thing?

Maybe. If that was what it took to stop the Mademoiselle.

'You can still back out,' the woman said. 'He's busy at the moment -- can't spare his energies to

invade you. But in a moment that won't be the case.'

Now the aiming systems were at least under her control, although they operated sluggishly. She

bracketed the cache-weapon, encasing the whole bulk in a potential sphere of annihilation. Now all

that had to happen was for the Mademoiselle to surrender control of the weapons, if only for the

microsecond necessary for them to slew, target and fire.

She felt them loosen. She -- or rather, she and Sun Stealer -- seemed to be winning.

'Don't do this, Khouri. You don't know what's at stake...'

'Then clue me in, bitch. Tell me what's so important.'

The cache-weapon was moving away from the hull, surely a sign that the Mademoiselle was

worried about its safety. But the pulses of gravitational radiation were quickening, now coming

almost too rapidly to separate. No guessing how long it would be before the cache-weapon fired,

but Khouri suspected it could only be seconds away.

'Listen,' the Mademoiselle said. 'You want the truth, Khouri?'

'Damn right I do.'

'Then you'd better brace yourself. You're about to get the whole thing.'

And then -- as soon as she had adjusted to being sucked into gunspace -- she felt herself being

sucked somewhere else entirely. The odd thing was that it seemed to be a part of herself she had

until that moment completely overlooked.

They were on a battlefield, surrounded by the chameleoflaged bubbletents, the temporary

enclosures of some hospital or forward command post. The sky above the compound was azure,

cloud-streaked, but littered with dirty, intermingling vapour trails. It was as if some world-spanning

squid were spilling its viscera into the stratosphere. Sowing the trails, and darting between them,

were numerous arrow-winged jet aircraft. Lower, there were drone-dirigibles and, lower still,

bulbous-bodied transport helicopters, tilt-wings and veetols, skimming the periphery of the

compound, occasionally dropping to disgorge armoured personnel carriers or walking troops,

ambulances or armed servitors. There was a scorched, grass-covered apron to one side of the

compound, where six delta-winged, windowless aircraft were parked on skids, their upper surfaces

precisely mimicking the sun-bleached hue of the ground, their VTOL irises open for inspection.

Khoury felt herself stumbling, falling towards the grass at her feet. She wore chameleoflage

fatigues, currently emitting in dappled khaki. There was a lightweight

projectile weapon in her

hands, its alloy grip contour-moulded to match her palm. She was helmeted, a two-d readout

monocle dangling down from the helmet's rim, showing a false-colour heat-map of the battlezone,

telemetered from one of the dirigibles.

'This way, please.'

A whitehat was directing her into one of the bubbletents. Inside, an aide took her gun, ident-

chipped it and racked it with eight other weapons, varying in firepower from projectile units like her

own to medium-yield party-poopers and a ferocious shoulder-held ack-am weapon, something one

would really not want to use on the same continent as one's adversary. The feed from the dirigibles

fuzzed and vanished, occluded by the anti-surveillance shroud around the bubbletent. She reached

up with her now free hand and flicked the monocle back over the helmet rim, raking a strand of

sweaty hair away from her eye with the same movement.

'Through here, Khouri.'

They led her into a partitioned back area of the tent, through a room filled with bunkbeds,

injured, and quietly humming med-servitors, craning over their patients like mechanised green

swans. From outside she heard a shriek of jets, then a series of concussive explosions, but no one

inside the tent seemed to even notice the sound.

Finally they let her into a tiny, square-walled room outfitted with a single desk. The walls were

draped with the transnational flags of the Northern Coalition and there was a large bronze-mounted

globe of Sky's Edge on one corner of the desk. The globe was currently in geological mode,

showing only the varying landmasses and terrain-types on the surface, rather than the hotly

contested political boundaries. But Khouri paid it no more than cursory attention, because what

snared her attention was the person sitting behind the desk, in full military dress: cross-buttoned

olive-drab tunic, gold epaulettes, a conspicuous panoply of NC medals ranked across his chest, his

black hair slicked back in brilliant grooves.

'I'm sorry,' Fazil said. 'That it had to happen this way. But now that you're here...' He motioned

across the room. 'Have a seat; we need to talk. Rather urgently, as it happens.'

Khouri recalled, distantly, another place. She remembered a chamber, metallic, containing a seat,

but while there was something about the memory that made her nervous -- as if time were precious -

- it felt unreal compared to the present, which was this room. Fazil absorbed her attention totally.

He looked exactly as she remembered him (remembered him from where, she wondered?), although

his cheek bore evidence of a scar she did not recall, and he had grown a moustache, or at least (she

could not be sure) changed something about the one he had worn last time; thickened it or allowed

it to grow out from simply thick black stubble, to the point where it now had the onset of a rakish

droop on either side of his upper lip.

She did as he had suggested, easing herself into a folding chair.

'She -- the Mademoiselle -- worried that it might come to this,' Fazil said, his lips barely moving,

or seeming to move, beneath the moustache. 'So she took certain measures. While you were still on

Yellowstone, she implanted a series of closed-access memories. They were tagged to activate -- to

become accessible to your conscious mind -- only when she deemed them useful.' He reached

across the desk and spun the globe, allowing it to whirl before stopping it abruptly. 'As a matter of

fact, the process of unlocking those memories began some while ago. Do you remember a slight

migraine attack in the elevator?'

Khoury grasped for some anchor-point; some objective reality she could place her trust in.

'What is this?'

'A convenience,' Fazil said. 'Woven partially out of existing memory patterns the Mademoiselle

appropriated and found useful. This meeting, for instance -- isn't it a little like how we first met,

darling? That time in the ops unit on Hill Seventy-Eight, in the central provinces campaign, before

the second red-peninsula offensive? You'd been sent to me because I needed someone for an

infiltration mission; someone with knowledge of the unshielded SC-controlled sectors. We made a

great team, didn't we? In more ways than one.' He fondled his moustache and tapped the globe

again. 'Of course, I didn't -- or rather she didn't -- bring you here just to reminisce. No; the mere fact

that this memory has been accessed means that certain truths have to be revealed to you. The

question is, are you ready for them?'

'Of course I'm...' Khoury trailed off. What Fazil was saying made no sense, but she was being

troubled by that memory of the other place; of the brutal chair in the metallic room. She had the

feeling something was unresolved there -- even, possibly, in the process of being resolved. She felt

that, wherever that room was, she was meant to be there, adding her weight to the struggle.

Whatever that struggle concerned, she had the sense that there was not much time left, and certainly

not enough for this diversion.

'Oh, don't worry about that,' Fazil said, appearing to read her mind. 'None of this is really taking

place in realtime; not even the accelerated realtime of the gunnery. Haven't you ever had it happen

to you that someone wakes you abruptly from a dream, and yet somehow their actions were

incorporated into the dream's narrative, long before they actually woke you? You know what I

mean: your dog licks your face to wake you, and in your dream you fall overboard from a ship into

the sea. Yet you'd been on that ship for the entirety of the dream.' He paused. 'Memory, Khouri.

Memory being laid down instantaneously. The dream felt real, but it was created in an instant when

the dog began licking your face. Back-constructed. You never actually lived through it. It's the same

with these memories.'

Fazil's mention of the gunnery had crystallised the concept of the room. More than ever she felt

as if she had to be back there, engaging in a struggle. The details of it still escaped her, it seemed

very important that she rejoin it.

'The Mademoiselle,' Fazil continued, 'could have selected any venue from your past, or

manufactured one from scratch. But she felt that -- in some way -- it would assist matters if you

were put in a frame of mind where the discussion of military matters seemed natural.'

'Military matters?'

'Specifically, a war.' He smiled then, causing the tips of his moustache to angle momentarily

upwards, like a demonstration of the engineering principles of a cantilever bridge. 'But not one

you're likely to have ever read about. No; I'm afraid it happened rather too long ago for that.' He

stood without warning, pausing to straighten his tunic, tugging down the belt. 'It might help if we

adjourned to the briefing room, actually.'

TWELVE

Sky's Edge, 61 Cygni-A, 2483 (simulated)

The briefing room into which Fazil escorted Khouri was unlike any she had ever visited. It was

clearly far too large for the bubbletent to have ever held it. And while Khouri had experienced many

projection devices, none of them would have been capable of displaying the thing that was now

being presented to her. It covered the entire floor, across a space about twenty metres wide, and was

circumnavigated by a metal-railinged walkway.

It was a map of the entire galaxy.

And what made it impossible that the map could ever have been projected by the devices with

which she was familiar was one simple fact. Looking at it, she apprehended -- saw, and, somehow

noted -- every single star in the galaxy, from the coolest, barely fusing brown dwarf up to the

brightest, transient white-hot supergiant. And it was not just that every star in the galaxy was there

to be noticed, if her gaze chanced upon it. It went beyond that. It was, simply, that the galaxy was

knowable in one glance. She was assimilating it in its entirety.

She counted the stars.

There were four hundred and sixty-six billion, three hundred and eleven million, nine hundred

and twenty-two thousand, eight hundred and eleven of them. As she watched, one of the white

supergiants expired in a supernova, so she revised her count down by one.

'It's a trick,' Fazil said. 'A codification. There are more stars in the galaxy than there are cells in

the human brain, so for you to know them all would tie up an undesirable fraction of your total

connective memory. Which doesn't mean that the sensation of omniscience can't be simulated, of

course.'

The galaxy was in fact too perfectly detailed to really be described as a map. Not only had every

star been accorded due prominence -- colours, sizes, luminosities, binary associations, positions and

space velocities all represented with absolute fidelity -- but there were also star-forming regions,

wispish, gently glowing veils of condensing gas, in which were embedded the hottening embers of

embryo suns. There were newly formed stars surrounded by disks of protoplanetary material, and --

where she cared to apprehend them -- planetary systems themselves, ticking round their central suns

like microscopic orreries, at a vastly accelerated rate. There were also aged stars which had ejected

shells of their own photospheres into space, enriching the tenuous interstellar medium: the basic

protoplasmic reservoir from which future generations of stars, worlds and cultures would eventually

be created. There were regular or irregular supernova remnants, cooling as they expanded and shed

their energy to the interstellar medium. Sometimes, at the heart of one of these stellar death-events,

she observed a newly forged pulsar, emitting radio bursts with ever-slowing but stately precision,

like the clocks in some forgotten imperial palace which had been wound one final time and would

now tick until they died, the time between each tick lengthening towards some chill eternity. There

were also black holes in the hearts of some of these remnants, and one massive (though now

dormant) one at the heart of the galaxy, surrounded by an attendant shoal of doomed stars which

would one day spiral into its event-horizon and fuel an apocalyptic burst of X-rays as they were

ripped asunder.

But there was more to this galaxy than astrophysics. As if a new layer of memories had been

quietly overlaid over her previous ones, Khouri found herself knowing

something more. That the

galaxy was teeming with life; a million cultures dispersed pseudo-randomly across its great slowly

rotating disk.

But this was the past -- the deep, deep past.

'Actually,' Fazil said, 'somewhere in the region of a billion years ago. Given that the Universe is

only about fifteen times older than that, that's quite a hefty chunk of time, especially on the galactic

timescale.' He was leaning over the railined walkway next to her, as if they were a couple pausing

to stare at their reflections in a dark, bread-strewn duckpond. 'To give you some perspective,

humanity didn't exist a billion years ago. In fact, neither did the dinosaurs. They didn't get around to

evolving until less than two hundred million years ago; a fifth of the time we're dealing with here.

No; we're deep into the Precambrian here. There was life on Earth, but nothing multicellular -- a

few sponges if you were lucky.' Fazil looked at the galaxy representation again. 'But that wasn't the

case everywhere.'

The million or so cultures (although she could be infinitely precise about the number, it suddenly

struck her as childishy pedantic to do so, like specifying one's age to the

nearest month) had not all

arisen at the same time, nor they did all hang around for the same length of time. According to Fazil

(though she understood it on some basic level) it had taken until four billion years ago for the

galaxy to reach the required state at which intelligent cultures could begin to arise. But once that

point of minimal galactic maturity had been reached, the cultures had not all suddenly appeared in

unison. It had been a progressive emergence of intelligence, some cultures having arisen on worlds

where, for one reason or another, the pace of evolutionary change was slower than the norm, or

life's ascendancy was subject to more than the usual quota of catastrophic setbacks.

But eventually -- two or three billion years after life had first arisen on their homeworlds -- some

of these cultures had become spacefaring. When that point was reached, most cultures expanded

rapidly into the galaxy, although there were always a few stay-at-homes who preferred to colonise

only their own solar systems, or sometimes even just their own circum-planetary environments. But

generally the pace of expansion was rapid, with a mean drift rate between one tenth and one

hundredth of the speed of light. That sounded slow, but was in fact blindingly

fast, given that the

galaxy was billions of years old and only a hundred thousand light-years wide. Unrestricted, any of

these spacefarers could have dominated the entire galaxy in the totally inconsequential time of a

few tens of millions of years. And maybe if it had happened like that -- a neatly imperialist

domination by one power -- things would have been very different.

But instead, the first culture had been at the slower end of the expansionist speed-range, and had

impacted on the expansion wave of a second, younger upstart. And while younger, the second

civilisation was not technologically inferior to the first, nor less capable of mustering aggression

when it was required. There was what -- for want of a better word -- one might describe as a

galactic war; a sudden sparking friction where these two swelling empires brushed against one

another, grinding like vast flywheels. Soon, other ascendant cultures were embroiled in the conflict.

Eventually -- to one degree or another -- several thousand spacefaring civilisations fell into the fray.

They had many names for it, in the thousand primary languages of the combatants. Some of these

names could not easily be translated into any meaningful human referent. But more than one culture

called it something which might -- with due allowance for the crudities of interspecies

communication -- be termed the Dawn War.

It was a war encompassing the entire galaxy (and the two smaller satellite galaxies which orbited

the Milky Way) -- one which consumed not just planets, but whole solar systems, whole star

systems, whole clusters of stars, and whole spiral arms. She understood that evidence of this war

was visible even now, if one knew where to look. There were anomalous concentrations of dead

stars in some regions of the galaxy, and still-burning stars in odd alignments; husked components of

weapons-systems light-years wide. There were voids where there ought to have been stars, and stars

which -- according to the accepted dynamics of solar-system formation -- ought to have had worlds,

but which lacked them: only rubble, cold now. The Dawn War had lasted a long, long time -- longer

even than the evolutionary timescale of the hottest stars. But on the timescale of the galaxy, it had

indeed been mercifully brief; a transforming spasm.

It was possible that no culture emerged intact; that none of the players who entered the Dawn

War actually emerged, victorious or otherwise. The lengthscale of the war, while short by galactic

time, was nonetheless hideously long by species-time. It was long enough for species to self-evolve,

to fragment, to coalesce with other species or assimilate them, to remake themselves beyond

recognition, or even to jump from organic to machine-life substrates. Some had even made the

return trip, becoming machine, then returning to the organic when it suited their purposes. Some

had sublimed, vanishing from the theatre of the war entirely. Some had converted their essences to

data and found immortal storage in carefully concealed computer matrices. Others had self-

immolated.

Yet in the aftermath, one culture emerged stronger than the others. Possibly they had been a

fortunate small-time player in the main fray, now rising to supremacy amongst the ruins. Or

possibly they were the result of a coalition, a merging of several battle-weary species. It hardly

mattered, and they themselves probably had no hard data on their absolute origin. They were -- at

least then -- a hybrid machine-chimeric species, with some residual vertebrate traits. They did not

bother giving themselves a name.

'Still,' Fazil said, 'they acquired one, whether they liked it or not.'

Khoury looked at her husband. As he had been relating to her the story of the Dawn War, she had

come to a kind of understanding about where she was, and the unreality of it all. What Fazil had

said about the Mademoiselle had finally connected with some lingering memory of the true-present.

She remembered the gunnery room clearly now, and knew that this place, this tampered-with shard

of her past -- was no more than an interlude. And this was not properly Fazil, though -- because he

had been resurrected from her memories -- he was at least as real as the Fazil she recalled.

'What were they called?' she asked.

He waited before answering, and when he did, it was with almost theatrical gravity. 'The

Inhibitors. For a very good reason, which will shortly become apparent.'

And then he told her, and she knew. The Knowledge crashed home, vast and impassive as a

glacier, something she could never begin to forget. And she knew something else, which was, she

supposed, the whole point of this exercise. She understood why Sylveste had to die.

And why -- if it took the death of a planet to ensure his death -- that was an entirely reasonable

price to pay.

Guards came just as Sylveste was falling into shallow dreams, exhausted by the latest operation.

'Wake up, sleepy-head,' said the taller of the two, a stocky man with a drooping grey moustache.

'What have you come for?'

'Now that would spoil the surprise,' said the other guard, a weaselly individual hefting a rifle.

The route along which they took him was clearly intended to disorientate, its convolutions too

frequent to be accidental. Quickly they succeeded in their aim. The sector where they arrived was

unfamiliar; either an old part of Mantell extensively refurbished by Sluka's people, or else a

completely new set of tunnel workings dug since the occupation. For a moment he wondered if he

were being moved permanently to a different cell, but that seemed unlikely -- they had left his other

clothes in the first room, and had only just changed the bedsheets. But Falkender had spoken of the

possibility of his status altering, in connection with the visitors he had mentioned, so maybe there

had been a sudden change of plan.

But there been no change of plan, as he soon discovered.

The room where they left him was no less Spartan than his own; a virtual duplicate down to the

same blank walling and food hatch; the same crushing sense that the walls were infinitely thick,

reaching endlessly back into the mesa. So similar, in fact, that for a moment he wondered if his

senses had deceived him, and all that had happened was the guards had frog-marched him in a loop

which eventually returned to his own place of imprisonment. He would not have put it past them...

and at least it was exercise.

But as soon as he had absorbed the room's contents fully, he knew it was not his own. Pascale

was sitting on her bed -- and when she glanced up, he could tell she was just as astonished as

Sylveste.

'You've got an hour,' the moustachioed guard said, patting his partner on the back.

And then he closed the door, Sylveste having already entered the room without their bidding.

The last time he had seen her, she had been wearing the wedding dress; her hair sculpted in

brilliant purple waves, entoptics adorning her like an army of attendant fairies. He might as well

have dreamt that. Now she wore overalls, as drab and shapeless as those Sylveste himself was

dressed in. Her hair was a lank black bowl, eyes rouged by sleeplessness or bruising, possibly both.

She looked thinner and smaller than he remembered -- probably because she was hunched over,

bare feet hooked under her calves, and the room's whiteness seemed so large.

He was unable to remember a time when she had looked more fragile or beautiful; when it had

been harder to believe that she was his wife. He thought back to the night of the coup, when she had

waited in the dig with her patient, probing questions; questions which would later open a wound

into the very core of who he was; what he had done and was capable of doing. It seemed very

strange indeed that a confluence of events had brought them together, in this loneliest of rooms.

'They kept telling me you were alive,' he said. 'But I don't think I ever really believed them.'

'They told me you'd been hurt,' Pascale said, her voice quiet, as if she dared not shatter a dream

by speaking aloud. 'They wouldn't say what -- and I didn't want to ask too much -- in case they told

me the truth.'

'They blinded me,' Sylveste said, touching the hard surface of his eyes; the first time he had done

so since the surgery. Instead of the little nova of pain to which he had become accustomed there

was only a vague fog of discomfort which faded as soon as he removed his fingers.

'But you can see now?'

'Yes. As a matter of fact you're the first thing it's been worth having sight for.'

And then she rose from the bed, slipping into his arms, hooking a leg round his own. He felt her

lightness and delicacy; was almost afraid to return her embrace in case he crushed her. Yet he drew

her nearer, and she reciprocated, seemingly just as nervous of damaging him, as if the two of them

were spectres uncertain of each other's reality. They held each other for what seemed like many

more hours than the one they had been allocated; not because time dragged, but because for now

time was unimportant; it was in abeyance, and it seemed as if it could be held that way by the act of

will alone. Sylveste drank in the vision of her face; her eyes found something human even in the

blankness of his own. There had been a time when Pascale had lacked the courage to look at him

face-on, let alone stare into his eyes -- but that time had long passed. And for Sylveste, gazing into

Pascale's eyes had never been difficult, since she need never be aware of his scrutiny. Now, though,

he wished she could tell when he was staring; wished her the vicarious pleasure of knowing that he

found her intoxicating.

Soon they were kissing, and then they slumped awkwardly to the bed. In a moment they were

free of their Mantell clothes, shucking them in drab heaps beside the bed. Sylveste wondered if they

were being observed. It seemed possible -- likely even. It also seemed possible not to care. For now

-- for as long as this hour lasted -- he and Pascale were absolutely alone; the room's walls really

infinite; the room the only open enclosure in the whole universe. It was not the first time they had

made love, though the previous occasions had been rare indeed; in those few instances when the

opportunity for privacy had arisen. Now -- the thought almost made Sylveste laugh -- they were

married, and there was even less need for any subterfuge. And yet here they were again, once more

snatching what intimacy they could. He felt an edge of guilt, and for a long time he wondered where

it came from. Eventually, as they lay together, his head buried softly in her chest, he realised why

he felt that way. Because there was so much to speak about, and instead they had squandered their

time in the fevered archaeology of their bodies. But it had to be that way, Sylveste knew.

'I wish there was longer,' he said, when his sense of time had returned to something like

normality, and he began to wonder how much of the hour remained.

'The last time we spoke,' Pascale said, 'you told me something.'

'About Carine Lefevre, yes. It was something I had to tell you, do you understand? It sounds

ridiculous, but I thought I was going to die. I had to tell you; tell anyone. It was something I'd kept

inside me for years.'

Pascale's thigh was a cool pressure against his own. She drew her hand across his chest, mapping

it. 'Whatever happened out there, there's no way I or anyone else can begin to judge you.'

'It was cowardice.'

'No, it wasn't. Just instinct. You were in the most terrifying place in the universe, Dan, don't

forget that. Philip Lascaille went there without a Juggler transform -- look what happened to him.

That you stayed sane at all was a kind of bravery. Insanity would have been a lot easier on you.'

'She could have lived. Hell, even leaving her to die the way I did -- even that would have been

acceptable if I'd had the courage to tell the truth about it afterwards. That would have been some

atonement; God knows she deserved better than to be lied about, even after I'd killed her.'

'You didn't kill her; the Shroud did.'

'I don't even know that.'

'What?'

He leant on his side, momentarily pausing to study Pascale. Before, his eyes could have frozen

her image for posterity. But that feature no longer functioned.

'What I mean is,' Sylveste said, 'I don't even know she died out there -- I mean, not at first. I

survived, after all -- and I was the one who lost the Juggler transform. Her chances would have been

better, though not by much. But what if she came through it, the way I did? What if she found a way

to stay alive, but just couldn't communicate her presence to me? She might have drifted halfway to

the edge of the Shroud before I came round. After I'd repaired the lighthugger, I never thought to

look for her. It never crossed my mind she might still be alive.'

'For a very good reason,' Pascale said. 'She wasn't. You can question what you did now, but back

then intuition told you she was dead. And if she didn't die -- she'd have found a way to get in touch

with you.'

'I don't know that. I never can.'

'Then stop dwelling on it. Or else you'll never escape the past.'

'Listen,' he said, thinking of something else Falkender had said. 'Do you ever

Speak to anyone

apart from the guards? Like Sluka, or anyone like that?

'Sluka?'

'The woman who's holding us here.' Sylveste realised with a yawning sensation that they had told

her next to nothing. 'There isn't time for me to explain in anything but the simplest terms. The

people who killed your father were True Path Inundationists, as near as I can tell, or at least one

offshoot of the movement. We're in Mantell.'

'I knew it had to be somewhere outside Cuvier.'

'Yes, and from what they told me Cuvier has been attacked.' He held back from telling her the

rest, which was that the city had most probably been rendered uninhabitable above ground. She did

not have to know that -- not just yet, when it was the only place she had ever known properly. 'I'm

not really sure who's running it now -- whether people loyal to your father, or a rival group of True

Pathers. The way Sluka tells it, your father didn't exactly welcome her with open arms once he'd

gained control of Cuvier. Seems there was enough enmity there for her to arrange his assassination.'

'That's a long time to hold a grudge.'

'Which is why Sluka is possibly not the most stable person on this planet. Actually, I don't think

capturing us figured in her plans -- but now she's got us, she isn't quite sure what to do. Clearly

we're too potentially valuable to discard... but in the meantime----' Sylveste paused. 'Anyway,

something may be about to change. The man who fixed my eyes told me there was a rumour about

visitors.'

'Who?'

'My question as well. But that's as much as he said.'

'It's tempting to speculate, isn't it?'

'If anything was likely to change things on Resurgam, it would be the arrival of Ultras.'

'It's a bit soon for Remilliod to return.'

Sylveste nodded. 'If there really is a ship coming in, you can bet it isn't Remilliod. But who else

would want to trade with us?'

'Maybe trade isn't what they've come for.'

Possibly it was a sign of arrogance, but Volyova was not physically capable of letting someone else

do her work, no matter how absurd the alternative. She was perfectly happy -- if happy was the

word -- to let Khouri sit in the gunnery and do her best at shooting the cache-

weapon out of the sky.

She was also willing to admit that using Khouri was the only sensible option available. But that did

not mean that she was prepared to sit calmly by and await the outcome. Volyova knew herself too

well for that. What she needed -- what she craved -- was some way to attack the problem from

another angle.

' *Svinoi*,' she said, because, no matter how hard she tried, an answer obdurately failed to pop into her

mind. Every time she thought she had hit on an approach, a way to circumvent the weapon's

progress, another part of her mind had already jumped ahead and found some impasse further down

the logical chain. It was, in a way, a testament to the fluidity of her thought that she was able to

critique her own solutions as soon as they came to mind; in fact, almost before she became

consciously aware of them. But it also felt -- maddeningly -- as if she was doing her level best to

sabotage her own chances of success.

And now there was this aberration to deal with.

She called it that now, because the word served to contain the melange of incomprehension and

disgust she felt whenever she forced her mind onto the topic. The topic was

whatever was going on

inside Khouri's head. And, now that Khouri was immersed in the abstracted mental landscape of

gunspace, the aberration necessarily included the gunnery itself, and by extension Volyova, since it

was her handiwork. She was monitoring the situation closely, via neural readouts on her bracelet.

There was quite a storm going on in that woman's skull; no doubt about it. And the storm was

extending troubled, flickering tendrils into gunspace.

Volyova knew that, somehow, all of this had to be related. The whole problem with the gunnery,

from the beginning: Nagorny's madness, the Sun Stealer business, and latterly the self-activation of

the cache-weapon. Somehow, also, the storm in Khouri's head -- the aberration -- also fitted in with

things. But knowing that a solution existed, or at the very least an answer -- a unifying picture

which would explain everything -- did not help at all.

Perhaps the most annoying aspect was that, even in a moment like this, part of her mind was

dwelling on that problem, not giving itself over fully to the more pressing issue at hand. Volyova

felt as if her brain consisted of a room full of precocious schoolchildren: individually bright, and --

if only they would pool themselves -- capable of shattering insights. But some of those

schoolchildren were not paying attention; they were staring dreamily out of the window, ignoring

her protestations to focus on the present, because they found their own obsessions more

intellectually attractive than the dull curriculum she was intent on dispensing.

A thought budged to the front of her mind; a recollection. It concerned a series of firewall

systems she had installed in the ship, upwards of four decades earlier by shiptime. She had intended

that they be called into use as a final countermeasure against incursion by subversive viruses. It had

not occurred to her that they would ever really be needed, and most certainly not under

circumstances like this.

But all the same, she remembered them.

'Volyova,' she said, almost gasping, into her bracelet, straining to tug the requisite commands

from her memory. 'Access counterinsurgent protocols; lambda-plus severity, maximum battle-

readiness concurrence and counter-check to be assumed, full autonomous denial-suppression,

criticality-nine Armageddon defaults, red-one-alpha security-bypass, all Triumvirate privileges

invoked at all levels; all non-Triumvirate privileges rescinded.' She collected her breath; hoping that

the string of incantations had opened enough doors for her into the heart of the ship's operational

matrix. 'Now,' she said. 'Retrieve and run the executable coded Palsy.' To herself she muttered, 'And

do it damned quickly!'

Palsy was the program which initiated the sealing of the firewalls she had installed. She had

written Palsy herself -- but it was so long ago that she barely remembered what Palsy did, or how

much of the ship Palsy was liable to affect. It was a gamble -- she wanted to immobilise enough to

inconvenience the cache-weapon, but most certainly not enough to hamper her own attempts at

stopping it.

' *Svinoi, svinoi, svinoi...*'

Error-messages were scrolling across her bracelet. They were telling her, very helpfully, that the

various systems which Palsy had attempted to access and disable were no longer within Palsy's

remit; they were out-of-bounds to the program's interference. Most of them, anyway -- especially

the deeper ship systems. If Palsy had functioned correctly, it would have had the same general

effect on the ship as a blow on the head had to a human being -- massive shut-down of all

nonessential systems, and a general collapse into a state of recuperative immobility. Real damage

would have been done, but mostly on a superficial level, and of a sort that Volyova would have

been able to fix, disguise or invent lies about before the other crewmembers were awakened. But

Palsy had worked differently. If likened to a human affliction, what the ship had suffered was more

akin to an episode of mild paralysis immobilising only the epidermal layers, and then only partially.

That was not at all in accordance with Volyova's plans.

But, she realised, it would have immobilised the autonomous hull weapons, those which were not

directly slaved to the gunnery and which had already blown up the shuttle. Now at least she could

try the same gambit again. Of course, the weapon would have advanced further now; there was no

longer an option of simply obstructing it. But if she could at least get another shuttle out into space,

certain possibilities presented themselves.

A second or so later, her optimism had been shattered into a few dismal crumbs of dejection.

Maybe Palsy had been meant to work this way, or maybe in the intervening forty years various

ship-systems had become tangled up and interconnected, so that Palsy killed certain parts Volyova

had never meant it to touch... but, for whatever reason, the shuttles were inoperative, locked out by

firewalls. She tried, perfunctorily, the usual Triumvirate-level bypass commands, but none of them

worked. Hardly surprising: Palsy had set up physical breaks in the command network, chasms that

no amount of software intervention could possibly bridge. To get the shuttles online, Volyova

would have to physically reset all those breaks -- and to do that, she would have to find the map she

had made, four decades earlier, of the installations. That would entail, conservatively, several days'

work.

Instead, she had minutes in which to act.

She was sucked into -- not so much a pit of despondency, as a bottomless, endlessly plummeting

gravitational well. But, when she had dropped deep into its maw -- and several of those precious

minutes had elapsed -- she remembered something; something so obvious she should have thought

of it long before.

Volyova began running.

Khoury crashed back into the gunnery.

A quick check on the status-clocks confirmed what Fazil had promised her, which was that no

real time had passed. That was some trick; she really felt as if she had spent the best part of an hour

in the bubbletent, when in fact the whole experience had just been laid down a fraction of a second

earlier. She had lived through none of it, but that was almost impossible to accept. Yet she could not

now relax -- events had been frantic enough even before the memories had been triggered. The

situation had not lost any of its urgency.

The cache-weapon must be nearly ready to blow now: its gravitational emissions were no longer

detectable by the ship, like a whistle which had passed into the ultrasonic. Maybe the weapon was

already able to fire. Was the Mademoiselle actually holding back? Was it important to her that

Khourri come over to her side? If the weapon failed, Khourri would again be her only means of

acting.

'Relinquish,' the Mademoiselle said. 'Relinquish, Khourri. You must realise by now that Sun

Stealer is something alien! You're assisting it!'

The mental effort involved in subvocalising was almost too much for her now.

'Yeah, I'm quite prepared to believe that it's alien. The trouble is, what does that make you?'

'Khouri, we don't have time for this.'

'Sorry, but now seems as good a time as ever to get this into the open.' While she communicated

her thoughts, Khouri kept up her side in the struggle, though part of her -- the part that been swayed

by what she had been shown in the memories -- implored her to give up; to let the Mademoiselle

assume total control of the cache-weapon. 'You led me into thinking Sun Stealer was something

Sylveste brought back from the Shrouders.'

'No; you saw the facts and jumped to the only logical conclusion.'

'Did I hell.' Khouri found new strength now, though it remained insufficient to tip the balance.

'All along, you were desperate to turn me against Sun Stealer. Now, that may or may not have been

justified -- maybe he is an evil bastard -- but it does beg a question. How would you know? You

wouldn't. Not unless you were alien yourself.'

'Assuming -- for the moment -- that that were the case----'

Something new snared Khouri's attention. Even given the severity of the battle she was waging,

this new thing was sufficiently important for her to relax momentarily; allocating some additional

part of her conscious mind to assess the situation.

Something else was joining the fray.

This newcomer was not in gunspace; it was not another cybernetic entity, but a physical object,

one which until now had not been present -- or at least not noticed -- in the arena of battle. At the

moment Khouri had detected it, it was very close to the lighthugger; dangerously close by her

reckoning -- in fact, so close that it seemed to be physically attached, parasitic.

It was the size of a very small spacecraft, its central mass no more than ten metres from end to

end. It resembled a fat, ribbed torpedo, sprouting eight articulated legs. It was walking along the

hull of the ship. Most miraculously, it was not being shot at by the same defences which had

destroyed the shuttle.

'Ilia...' Khouri breathed. 'Ilia, you aren't seriously thinking----' And then, a moment later, 'Oh shit.

You were, weren't you?'

'What foolishness,' the Mademoiselle said.

The spider-room had detached itself from the hull, each of its eight legs releasing its grip

simultaneously. Since the ship was still decelerating, the spider-room seemed to fall forwards with

increasing speed. Ordinarily, so Volyova had said, the room would have fired its grapples at that

point, to re-establish contact with the ship. Volyova must have disabled them, because the room

kept falling, until its thrusters kicked in. Although Khouri was perceiving the scene via many

different routes, and in some modes which would not have been assimilable to someone lacking the

gunspace implants, a small aspect of that sensory stream was devoted to the optical, relayed from

the external cameras on the ship. Via that channel she saw the thrusters burn violet-hot, jetting from

pinprick-apertures around the midsection of the spider-room, where the torpedo-shaped body was

attached to the turret from which sprouted the now purchaseless legs. The glare underlit the legs,

picking them out in rapid strobing flashes as the room adjusted its fall, negated it and began to

heave-to alongside the ship once more. But Volyova did not use the thrusters to bring the room

within grasping range. After loitering for a few seconds, the room fell laterally away, accelerating

towards the weapon.

'Ilia... I really don't think-----'

'Trust me,' the Triumvir's voice replied, cutting into gunspace as if she were speaking from

halfway across the universe, not merely a few kilometres from Khouri's position. 'I've got what you

might charitably refer to as a plan. Or at the very least an option on going out fighting.'

'I'm not sure I liked the last bit.'

'Me neither, in case you were wondering.' Volyova paused. 'Incidentally, Khouri, when all this is

over -- assuming we both survive all of this, which I admit isn't exactly guaranteed at this juncture...

I rather think we ought to set aside time for a little chat.'

Maybe she was talking to blank out the fear she must be feeling. 'A little chat?'

'About all of this. The whole problem with the gunnery. It might also be a chance for you to ease

yourself of any... niggling little burdens you might have been well advised to share with me much

earlier.'

'Like what?'

'Like who you are, for a start.'

The spider-room covered the distance to the weapon rapidly, using its thrusters to slow down, but

still holding station relative to the ship, maintaining a standard one-gee aft burn. Even with its legs

splayed, the spider-room was less than a third the size of the cache-weapon. It looked less like a

spider now, and more like a hapless squid, about to vanish into the maw of a slowly cruising whale.

'That's going to take more than a little chat,' Khouri said, feeling -- with, she suspected, no little

justification -- that there was really no point holding much back from Volyova any more.

'Good. Now excuse me for a moment; what I'm about to try is somewhat on the tricky side of

downright impossible.'

'She means suicidal,' the Mademoiselle said.

'You're enjoying all this, aren't you?'

'Immensely -- more so given that I have no control over anything that transpires.'

Volyova had positioned the spider-room near the projecting spike of the cache-weapon, although

she was too far from it for the wriggling mechanical legs to gain a scramblehold on the pitted

surface. In any case, the weapon was moving around now, oscillating slowly and randomly from

side to side with fierce bursts of its own thrusters, seemingly trying to evade Volyova's approach,

but restricted in its movements by its own inertia -- just as if the mighty hell-class weapon was

scared of a tiny little spider. Khouri heard four rapid pops, almost too closely spaced to

discriminate, as if a projectile weapon had emptied its chamber.

She watched as four grapple lines whipped out from the body of the spider-room, impacting

silently with the cache-weapon's spike. The grapples were penetrators; designed to burrow a few

tens of centimetres into their target before widening, so once they had bitten home there was no

possibility of their breaking loose. The guy lines were illuminated by the arcing thrusters, taut now,

and the spider-room was already hauling itself in, even though the weapon had kept up its

ponderous evasions.

'Great,' Khouri said. 'I was all ready to shoot the bastard -- now what do I do?'

'You get a chance, you shoot,' Volyova said. 'If you can focus the blast away from me, I'll take

my chances -- this room's better armoured than you'd think.' A moment's silence, then: 'Ah, good.

Got you, you vicious piece of junk.'

She had the legs of the spider-room wrapped around the spike now. The weapon appeared to

have given up all hope of dislodging her, and perhaps with good reason: it struck Khouri that

Volyova had not achieved much, despite her valiant attempt. In all probability, the cache-weapon

was not going to be greatly hindered by the arrival of the spider-room.

The struggle for control of the hull weapons had, meanwhile, resumed in earnest. Occasionally

Khourī felt them budge slightly, the Mademoiselle's systems momentarily losing the battle, but

these tiny slippages were never enough to allow Khourī to target and deploy. And if Sun Stealer

was assisting her, she did not feel it, although possibly that absence of presence was simply an

artefact of his extreme cunning. Perhaps if Sun Stealer had not been there, she would have lost the

battle completely, and -- freed of this diversion -- the Mademoiselle would already have unleashed

whatever it was that the weapon held. Right now the distinction felt rather irrelevant. She had just

noticed what it was that Volyova was doing. The spider-room's thrusters were firing in concert now,

resisting the thrust that the larger but clumsier weapon was applying.

Volyova was dragging the weapon downship, towards the spewing blue-white radiance that was

the lighthugger's nearest thrust-beam. She was going to kill the damned thing by taking it into the

searing exhaust of the Conjoiner drive.

'Ilia,' Khourī said. 'Are you sure this is... considered?'

'Considered?' This time there was no mistaking the woman's clucking laughter, even though it

sounded institutional. 'It's the most ill-considered thing I've ever done, Khouri. But right now I don't

see many alternatives. Not unless you get those guns online damn quickly.'

'I'm... working on it.'

'Well work on it some more and stop bothering me. In case it hadn't occurred to you, I've got

rather a lot on my mind right now.'

'Her whole life flashing before her eyes, I should imagine.'

'Oh, you again.' Khouri ignored the Mademoiselle, realising by now that her interjections served

the sly purpose of distracting her; that by doing so she was indeed interfering in the course of the

battle; not nearly so ineffective a bystander as she maintained.

Volyova had now less than five hundred metres to go before she dragged the cache-weapon into

the flames. It was putting up a fight, thrusters going haywire, but its overall thrust capacity was less

than that of the spider-room. Understandable, Khouri thought. When its designers had conceived the

ancillary systems which would be required to move and position the device, the idea that it would

also have to fend for itself in a wrestling match had probably not been uppermost in their minds.

'Khouri,' Volyova said, 'in about thirty seconds I'm going to release the *svinoi*. Assuming my

sums are right, no amount of corrective thrust will be able to stop it drifting into the beam.'

'That's good, isn't it?'

'Well, sort of. But I feel I ought to warn you...' Volyova's voice faded in and out of clarity,

reception compromised by the broiling energies of the propulsion beam, which she was now

approaching at distances not usually considered wise for the organic. 'It's occurred to me that even if

I succeed in destroying the cache-weapon... some part of the blast -- something exotic, perhaps --

might get sent back up the drive beam, into the propulsion core.' A pause that was definitely

intentional. 'If that happens, the results might not be... optimal.'

'Well, thanks,' Khouri said. 'I appreciate the morale-building.'

'Damn,' Volyova said, quietly and calmly. 'There's a slight flaw in my plan. The weapon must

have hit the spider-room with some kind of defensive EM-pulse; either that or the radiation from the

drive is interfering with the hardware.' There was the sound -- possibly -- of someone making

repeated attempts to throw antique metal switches on a console. 'What I mean,' Volyova said, 'is

that I don't seem to be able to break free. I'm stuck to the bastard.'

'Then shut off the damned drive -- you can do that, can't you?'

'Of course; how do you think I killed Nagorny?' But she didn't sound optimistic. ' *Nyet* -- I'm

locked out of the drive; must have blocked my intercession pathways when I ran Palsy...' She was

practically gabbling now. 'Khouri, this is getting a tiny bit desperate... if you have those weapons...'

The Mademoiselle spoke now, sounding appropriately smug. 'She's dead, Khouri. And at the

angle you'd now have to fire, half those weapons would be disabled to prevent them inflicting

damage on the ship. You'll be lucky to scorch the cache-weapon's hull with what remains.'

She was right -- almost without Khouri noticing, whole blocks of potentially available armament

had safed themselves, since she was now requesting them to point dangerously close to critical ship

components. What remained were the lightest armaments, almost by definition incapable of doing

any serious damage.

Perhaps sensing this, something relented.

The weapons were suddenly more under Khouri's control than not, and -- she realised -- the fact

that the remaining systems were limited in their firepower was actually to her advantage. Her plan

had changed. What she needed now was surgical precision, not brute force.

In the hiatus, before the weapons were regained by the Mademoiselle, Khouri ditched the prior

target pattern and issued re-aiming orders. Her instructions were specific in the extreme. Now,

oozing into position as if immersed in toffee, the weapons aligned themselves on the impact points

she had selected. Not the cache-weapon now, but something else entirely...

'Khouri,' the Mademoiselle began, 'I really think you should consider this...'

But by then Khouri had already fired.

Gouts of plasma streamed out towards the cache-weapon connecting -- not with the weapon

itself, but with the spider-room, neatly severing all eight of its legs, and then all four of its grapple-

lines. The room flung itself away from the lancing spear of the drive, its legs truncated abruptly at

the knees.

The cache-weapon drifted into the beam, like a moth brushing into an incandescent lamp.

What happened thereafter took place in an inhumanly brief series of instants; almost too rapid for

Khouri to comprehend until afterwards. The physical exterior of the cache-weapon evaporated in a

millisecond, boiling away in a gasp of predominantly metallic vapour. It was impossible to tell

whether it was the touching of the beam which led to what followed, or

whether, at the instant of its

destruction, the cache-weapon was already committed to the act of turning itself inside out.

Either way, things did not proceed quite as its builders had intended.

Simultaneously -- or as near as mattered -- what was left of the cache-weapon beneath its

eviscerated hide emitted a prolonged gravitational eruption, a burp of shearing spacetime.

Something very horrible was happening to the fabric of reality in the immediate vicinity of the

weapon, but not in the way which had been planned. A rainbow of bent starlight flickered around

the curdling mass of plasma-energy. For a millisecond the rainbow was approximately spherical and

stable, but then it began to wobble, oscillating unevenly like a soap-bubble on the point of bursting.

A fraction of a millisecond later, it collapsed inwards, and accelerating exponentially, vanished.

For another moment there was nothing left, not even debris, just the normal star-speckled

backdrop of space.

Then a glint of light appeared, shading to ultraviolet. The glint magnified and swelled, bloating

into an intense, malignant sphere. The wave of expanding plasma hit the ship, juddering it so

violently that Khouri felt the impact even with the cushioning gimbals of the gunnery. Data rushed

in, telling her -- not that she was particularly keen on knowing -- that the blast had not seriously

compromised any hull-based systems, and that the brief spike of background radiation from the

flash was within tolerable norms. Gravimetric scans had abruptly returned to normal.

Spacetime had been punctured, penetrated at the quantum level, releasing a minuscule glint of

Planck energy. Minuscule, that is, compared with the normally seething energies present in the

spacetime foam. But beyond normal confinement that negligible release had been like a nuke going

off next door. Spacetime had instantly healed itself, knitting back together before any real damage

was done, leaving only a few surplus monopoles, low-mass quantum black holes and other

anomalous/exotic particles as evidence that anything untoward had happened.

The cache-weapon had malfunctioned, badly.

'Oh, very good,' the Mademoiselle said, sounding more disappointed than anything. 'I hope you're

proud of what you've done.'

But what had Khouri's attention now was the absence streaking towards her, rushing through

gunspace. She tried to back out in time; tried to disengage the link----

But she was not quite fast enough.

THIRTEEN

Resurgam Orbit, 2566

'Seat,' Volyova said, entering the bridge.

A chair craned eagerly towards her. She buckled herself in and then gunned the seat away from

the bridge's tiered walls, until she was orbiting the enormous holographic projection sphere which

occupied the room's middle.

The sphere was showing a view of Resurgam, although one might have easily concluded that it

was really the desiccated eyeball of an ancient and mummified corpse, magnified several hundred

times. But Volyova knew that the image was more than just an accurate portrayal of Resurgam

dredged from the ship's database. It was being imaged in realtime; captured by the cameras which

were even now pointing down from the lighthugger's hull.

Resurgam was not a beautiful planet, by anyone's standards. Apart from the sullied white of the

polar caps, the overall colour was a skullish grey, offset by scabs of rust and a few desultory chips

of powder-blue near the equatorial zones. The larger oceanic water masses were still mostly cauled

under ice, and those motes of exposed water were almost certainly being artificially warmed against

freeze-over; either by thermal energy grids or carefully tailored metabolic processes. There were

clouds, but they were wispy plumes rather than the great complex features Volyova knew one could

usually expect from planetary weather systems. Here and there they thickened towards white

opacity, but only in small gangliar knots near the settlements. Those were the places where the

vapour factories were working, sublimating polar ice into water, oxygen and hydrogen. There were

few patches of vegetation large enough to be seen without magnification down to kilometre-

resolution, and by the same token no obvious visible evidence of human presence, save for a

sprinkling of settlement lights when the planet's nightside rolled around every ninety minutes. Even

with the zoom, the settlements were elusive, since -- with the exception of the capital -- they tended

to be sunk into the ground. Often, very little projected beyond the surface apart from antennae,

landing pads and air-smoothed greenhouses. Of the capital...

Well, that was the disturbing part.

'When does our window with Triumvir Sajaki open?' she asked, snapping her gaze across the

faces of the other crewmembers, whose seats were arranged in a loosely defined cluster, facing each

other beneath the ashen light of the imaged planet.

'Five minutes,' Hegazi said. 'Five tortuous minutes and then we'll know what delights dear Sajaki

has to share with us regarding our new colonist friends. Are you sure you can bear the agony of

waiting?'

'Why don't you have a guess, *svinoi*.'

'That wouldn't be much of a challenge, would it?' Hegazi was grinning, or at least trying very

hard to approximate the gesture; no mean feat given the amount of chimeric accessories which

encrusted his face. 'Funny, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you weren't exactly enthralled by any

of this.'

'If he hasn't found Sylveste...'

Hegazi raised a gauntleted hand. 'Sajaki hasn't even made his report yet. No sense jumping the

gun...'

'You're confident he'll have found him, then?'

'Well, no. I didn't say that.'

'If there's one thing I hate,' Volyova said, looking coldly at the other Triumvir, 'it's mindless

optimism.'

'Oh, cheer up. Worse things happen.'

Yes, she had to admit, they did. And with an annoying regularity, they seemed to have decided to

keep happening to her. What was astonishing about her recent run of misfortune was that it had

managed to keep escalating with each new bout of bad luck. It had reached the point where she was

beginning to look back nostalgically on the merely irksome problems she had encountered with

Nagorny; when all she had to deal with was someone trying to kill her. It made her wonder --

without a great deal of enthusiasm -- if there would soon come a day when she would look back

even on this period with longing.

The trouble with Nagorny had been the precursor, of course. It was obvious now; at the time she

had regarded the whole thing as an isolated incident, but what it had really been was just the initial

indications of something far worse in the future, like a heart murmur presaging an attack. She had

killed Nagorny -- but in doing so, she had not come to any understanding of the problem that had

driven him psychotic. Then she had recruited Khouri, and the problems had not so much repeated

themselves as reiterated a grander theme, like the second movement of a grim symphony. Khouri

was not obviously mad -- yet. But she had become a catalyst for a worse, less localised madness.

There had been the storms in her head, beyond anything Volyova had ever seen. And then there had

been the incident with the cache-weapon, which had almost killed Volyova, and might have gone

on to kill all of them, and perhaps a significant number of the people on Resurgam as well.

'It's time for some answers, Khouri,' she had said, before the others were revived.

'Answers about what, Triumvir?'

'Forget the charade of innocence,' Volyova said. 'I'm far too tired for it, and I assure you I will get

to the truth one way or the other. During the crisis with the cache-weapon, you gave too much

away. If you were hoping I would forget some of the things you said, you were mistaken.'

'Like what?' They were down in one of the rat-infested zones; it was, Volyova reckoned, as safe

from Sajaki's listening devices as any area of the ship save the spider-room itself.

She shoved Khouri against the wall, hard enough to knock some wind out of the woman; letting

her know Volyova's wiry strength should not be underestimated, nor her

patience stretched too far.

'Let me make something clear to you, Khouri. I killed Nagorny, your predecessor, because he failed

me. I successfully concealed the truth of his death from the rest of the crew. Be under no illusions

that I will do the same to you, if you give me sufficient justification.'

Khouri pushed herself back from the wall, regaining some colour. 'What is it you want to know,

exactly?'

'You can start by telling me who you are. Begin with the assumption that I know you are an

infiltrator.'

'How can I be an infiltrator? You recruited me.'

'Yes,' Volyova said, for she had already thought this through. 'That was the way it was made to

seem, of course... but it was deception, wasn't it? Whatever agency is behind you managed to

manipulate my search procedure, making it seem as if I had selected you... whereas the choice was

ultimately not mine at all.' Volyova had to admit to herself that she had no direct evidence to

support this, but it was the simplest hypothesis which fitted all the facts. 'So, are you going to deny

this?'

'Why would you think I was an infiltrator?'

Volyova paused to light up a cigarette; one of those she had bought from the Stoners in the

carousel where Khouri had been recruited, or found. 'Because you seem to know too much about

the gunnery. You seem to know something about Sun Stealer... and that troubles me deeply.'

'You mentioned Sun Stealer shortly after you brought me aboard, don't you remember?'

'Yes, but your knowledge goes deeper than can be explained by the information you could have

gleaned from me. In fact there are times when you seem to know somewhat more about the whole

situation than I do.' She paused. 'There's more to it than that, of course. The neural activity in your

brain, during reefersleep... I should have examined the implants you came aboard with more

carefully. They obviously aren't all that they seem. Do you want to have a stab at explaining any of

this?'

'All right...' Khouri's tone of voice was different now. It was clear that she had given up any hope

of bluffing her way out of this one. 'But listen carefully, Ilia. I know you've got your little secrets,

too -- things you really don't want Sajaki and the others to find about. I'd already guessed about

Nagorny, but there's also the business with the cache-weapon. I know you don't want that to become

common knowledge, or you wouldn't be going to such lengths to cover up the whole thing.'

Volyova nodded, knowing it would be fruitless to deny these things. Maybe Khouri even had an

inkling of her relationship with the Captain. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying, whatever I say to you now, it had better stay between us. Isn't that reasonable of me?'

'I just said I could kill you, Khouri. You're not exactly in a strong bargaining position.'

'Yes, you could kill me -- or at least have a go -- but despite what you said, I doubt you'd manage

to cover up my death as easily as you did Nagorny's. Losing one Gunnery Officer is bad luck. Two

begins to look like carelessness, doesn't it?'

A rat scampered by, splashing them. Irritatedly, Volyova flicked her cigarette butt towards the

animal, but it had already vanished through a duct in the wall. 'So you're saying I don't even tell the

others I know you're an infiltrator?'

Khouri shrugged. 'You do what you like. But how do you think Sajaki would take that? Whose

fault would it have been that the infiltrator ever came aboard in the first place?'

Volyova took her time before answering. 'You've got it all worked out, haven't you?'

'I knew you'd want to ask me some questions sooner or later, Triumvir.'

'So let's start with the obvious one. Who are you, and who are you working for?'

Khoury sighed and spoke with resignation. 'A lot of what you already know is the truth. I'm Ana

Khoury and I was a soldier on Sky's Edge... although about twenty years earlier than you thought.

As for the rest...' She paused. 'You know, I could really use some coffee.'

'There isn't any, so get used to it.'

'All right. I was in the pay of another crew. I don't know their names -- there was never any direct

contact -- but they've been trying to get their hands on your cache-weapons for some time.'

Volyova shook her head. 'Not possible. No one else knows about them.'

'That's what you'd like to think. But you have used parts of the cache, right? There must have

been survivors, witnesses, you never knew about. Gradually word got about that your ship was

carrying some serious shit. Maybe no one knew the whole picture, but they knew enough of it to

want to have their own slice of the cache.'

Volyova was silent. What Khoury was saying was shocking -- like finding out that her most

private of habits was public knowledge -- but, she had to admit, not beyond the bounds of

possibility. Conceivably there had been a leak. Crew had left the ship, after all -- not always

willingly -- and while those who had done so were not supposed to have had access to anything

sensitive -- certainly nothing pertaining to the cache -- there was always the chance that an error had

been made. Or perhaps, as Khouri had said, someone had witnessed the cache being used and had

lived to pass on that information.

'This other crew -- you may not have known their names, but did you know what their ship was

called?'

'... no. That would have been just as sloppy as letting me know who they were, wouldn't it?'

'What *did* you know, in that case? How were they expecting to steal the cache from us?'

'That's where Sun Stealer comes into it. Sun Stealer was a military virus they snuck aboard your

ship when you were last in the Yellowstone system. A very smart, adaptive piece of infiltration

software. It was designed to worm its way into enemy installations and wage psychological warfare

on the occupants, driving them mad through subliminal suggestion.' Khouri paused, giving Volyova

time to digest that. 'But your own defences were too good. Sun Stealer was weakened, and the

strategy never really worked. So they bided their time. They didn't get another chance until you

were back in the Yellowstone system, nearly a century later. I was the next line of attack: get a

human infiltrator aboard.'

'How was the original viral attack made?'

'They got it in via Sylveste. They knew all about you bringing him aboard to fix up your Captain.

They planted the software on him without him knowing, then let it infect your systems while he was

hooked in to your medical suite, fixing the Captain.'

There was, Volyova thought, something deeply and worryingly plausible about that. It was just

an example of another crew being as predatory as they were. It would be arrogance in the extreme

to assume that only Sajaki's Triumvirate were capable of such subterfuge.

'And what was your function?'

'To assess the state of Sun Stealer's corruption of your gunnery systems. If possible, to gain

control of the ship. Resurgam was a good destination for that -- sufficiently out of the way not to be

under any kind of system-wide police jurisdiction. If a takeover could be staged, there would be no

one to observe it except maybe a few colonists.' Khouri sighed. 'But believe me, that plan's well and

truly shit-canned. The Sun Stealer program was flawed; too dangerous and too adaptive. It drew too

much attention to itself when it drove Nagorny mad -- but on the other hand, he was the only one it

could reach. Then it started screwing around with the cache itself...'

'The rogue weapon.'

'Yeah. That scared me, as well.' Khouri shivered. 'I knew Sun Stealer was too powerful by then.

There was nothing I could do to control it.'

Over the next few days, Volyova would ask Khouri more questions, testing different aspects of her

story against what passed for the known facts. Certainly, Sun Stealer could have been some kind of

infiltration software... even if it was more subtle, more insidious, than anything she had heard of in

all her years of experience. But did that mean she could dismiss it? No; of course not. After all, she

knew the thing existed. Khouri's story, in fact, was the first explanation she had encountered that

made any kind of objective sense at all. It explained why her attempts to cure Nagorny had failed.

He had not been sent mad by any subtle combination of effects stemming from her gunnery

implants. He had been driven mad, purely and simply, by an entity that had been designed for just

that purpose. No wonder it had been so hard to find any explanation for Nagorny's problems. Of

course, there remained the irksome question of why exactly Nagorny's madness had expressed itself

so forcefully in the manner it had -- all those fevered sketches of nightmarish birds' parts, and the

designs on his coffin -- but who was to say that Sun Stealer had not simply amplified some pre-

existing psychosis, letting Nagorny's subconscious work with whatever imagery suited it?

The mysterious other crew could also not be dismissed too easily. Shipboard records revealed

that another lighthugger -- the *Galatea* -- had been present in Yellowstone on both occasions when

they had last visited the system. Could they have been the crew responsible for sending Khouri

aboard?

For now, it was as good an explanation as any. And one thing was absolutely clear. Khouri was

quite right in saying that none of this information could be presented to the rest of the Triumvirate.

Sajaki would indeed blame Volyova totally for what was a grievous lapse in security. He would

punish Khouri, of course... but Volyova could also expect some kind of

retribution. The way their

relationship had been strained of late, it was entirely possible that Sajaki would try and kill her. He

might succeed, too -- he was at least as strong as Volyova. It would not greatly trouble him that he

would be losing his chief weapons expert and the only person who had any real insight into the

cache. His argument would no doubt be that she had already demonstrated her incompetence in that

regard. But there was something else, too: something Volyova could not entirely dismiss. No matter

what had really transpired with the cache-weapon, the unavoidable truth was that Khouri had saved

Volyova's life.

Hateful though the thought was, she owed the infiltrator.

Her only option, when she considered the situation dispassionately, was to proceed as if nothing

had happened. Khouri's mission was in any case no longer viable; there would be no attempted

takeover now. The woman's hidden reason for being aboard the ship had no impact on the

upcoming attempt to bring Sylveste aboard again, and in many respects Khouri would be needed

simply as a crewmember. Now that Volyova knew the truth, and now that the original purpose of

Khouris mission had been abandoned, Khouri would surely do everything in her power to fit into

her pre-assigned position. It hardly mattered whether the loyalty treatments were working or not:

Khouris would have to behave as if they were, and gradually the act would become indistinguishable

from the truth. She might not even want to leave the ship when the opportunity arose to do so. After

all, there were worse places to be. Over months or years of subjective time, she would become one

of the crew, and her past duplicity could remain a secret shared only by her and Volyova. In time, it

might even be something Volyova almost forgot.

Eventually, Volyova managed to convince herself that the infiltration question had been settled.

Sun Stealer would remain a problem, of course -- but now Khouri would be working with her to

conceal it from Sajaki. And in the meantime, there were other things that needed to be concealed

from the Triumvir. Volyova had set herself the task of eradicating every shred of evidence that the

cache-weapon incident had ever happened. She had intended to do this before Sajaki and the others

were revived, but it had not proved easy. Her first task had been to repair the damage to the

lighthugger itself, patching the areas of the hull which had been hurt by the

weapon's detonation.

Largely this consisted of coaxing the auto-repair routines to work faster, but she also had to ensure

that all pre-existing scars, impact-craters, or areas of imperfect repair were precisely duplicated. She

then had to hack into the auto-repair memory and erase the knowledge that the repairs had been

orchestrated at all. She had to repair the spider-room, even though Sajaki and the others were not

meant to know it even existed. Better to be safe than sorry, though, and that had been by far the

simplest of the repairs. Next, she had to erase all evidence that the Palsy routine had been run; at

least a week's work.

The loss of the shuttle was much harder to hide. For a while, she considered making a new one:

harvesting tiny amounts of raw materials from all over the ship, until she had what she needed. She

would only have to use one ninety-thousandth of the entire mass of the ship. But it was too risky,

and she doubted her ability to weather the shuttle authentically; to make it look as old as it should

have been. Instead, she took the simpler option of editing the ship's database so that it would always

look as if there had been one shuttle fewer aboard. Sajaki might notice -- all the crew might notice -

- but there would be absolutely nothing that anyone could prove. Finally, of course, she remade the

cache-weapon. It was only a facade; a replica designed to lurk in the cache chamber and look

threatening on the rare occasions when Sajaki paid a visit to her domain. Covering her tracks took

six days of manic work. On the seventh day she rested, and endeavoured to compose herself, so that

none of the others would guess what labours she had been through. On the eighth day Sajaki had

awakened and asked her what she had been up to in the years he had been in reefer sleep.

'Oh,' she had said. 'Nothing to write home about.'

His reaction -- like much else about Sajaki these days -- had been difficult to judge. Even if she

had succeeded this time, she thought, she could not risk another mistake. Yet, already -- though they

had not even made contact with the colonists -- things were drifting beyond the arena of her

understanding. Her thoughts returned to the neutrino signature she had detected around the system's

neutron star, and of the feeling of unease which had been with her ever since. The source was still

there, and while it remained weak, she had now studied it well enough to know that it was in orbit

not just around the neutron star, but also around the moon-sized rocky world

which attended the

star. It had certainly not been present when the system had been surveyed decades earlier,

immediately suggesting that it was something to do with the colony on Resurgam. But how could

they have sent it? The colonists did not even seem capable of reaching orbit, let alone sending some

kind of probe to the edge of their system. Even the ship which should have brought them here was

missing; she had expected to find the *Lorean* in orbit around Resurgam, but there was no sign of it.

Now, no matter what the evidence said, she kept in the back of her mind the possibility that the

colonists might be capable of something completely unexpected. It was another burden to add to her

mounting stockpile of worries.

'Ilia?' said Hegazi. 'We're almost ready now. The capital's about to emerge from nightside.'

She nodded. The ship's high-magnification cameras, dotted around the hull, would be zooming in

on a very specific site several kilometres beyond the city boundary, focusing on a spot which had

been identified and agreed upon before Sajaki's departure. If no misfortune had befallen him, he

should now be waiting at that spot, standing on the upper surface of an unshielded mesa, looking

directly towards the rising sun. Timing was critical here, but Volyova did not doubt that Sajaki

would be on the mark.

'Got him,' Hegazi said. 'Image stabilisers phasing in...'

'Show us.'

A window opened in the globe near the capital, rapidly swelling. At first what lay within the

window was unclear; a blurred smear that might have been a man standing on a rock. But the image

quickly sharpened, until the figure was recognisably Sajaki. In place of the bulky adaptive armour

which Volyova had last seen him wearing, Sajaki wore an ash-coloured overcoat, its long tails

flapping around his booted legs, evidencing the mild wind playing over the mesa's topside. The

suit's collar was drawn up around his ears, but his face was unobstructed.

It was not quite his own. Prior to leaving the ship, Sajaki's features had been subtly remoulded,

according to an averaged ideal derived from the genetic profiles of the original expedition members

who had travelled to Resurgam from Yellowstone, in turn reflecting the Franco-Sino genes of the

Yellowstone settlers. Sajaki would arouse nothing more than a curious glance if he chose to walk

through the capital's streets at midday. There was nothing to betray him as a

newcomer, not even his

accent. Linguistic software had analysed the dozen or so Stoner dialects carried by the expedition

members, applying complex lexicostatistic models to merge these modes of speech into a new,

planetwide dialect for Resurgam as a whole. If Sajaki chose to communicate with any of the

settlers, his look, cover-story and manner of speaking would convince them that he was merely

from one of the remoter planetary settlements, not an offworlder.

That at least was the idea.

Sajaki carried no technological implements which would give him away, save the implants

beneath his skin. A conventional surface-to-orbit communication system would have been too

susceptible to detection, and far too difficult to explain had he been captured for some reason or

other. Yet now he was speaking; reciting a phrase repeatedly, while the ship's infrared sensors

examined the bloodflow around Sajaki's mouth region, assembling a model of his underlying

muscular and jaw movements. By correlating these movements against the extensive archives of

actual conversation already recorded, the ship could begin to guess the sounds he was making. The

final step was to include grammatical, syntactical and semantic models for the words Sajaki was

likely to be saying. It sounded complex -- it was -- but to Volyova's ears there was no perceptible

timelag between his lip movements and the simulated voice she was hearing, eerily clear and

precise.

'I must presume you can now hear me,' he said. 'For the record, let this be my first report from the

surface of Resurgam after landing. You will forgive me if I occasionally digress from the point, or

express myself with a certain inelegance. I did not write this report down beforehand; it would have

constituted too great a security risk if I were found with it while leaving the capital. Things are very

different than we expected.'

True enough, Volyova thought. The colonists -- or at least a faction of them - - certainly knew that

a ship had arrived around Resurgam. They had bounced a radar beam off it, surreptitiously. But

they had made no attempt to contact *Infinity* -- no more so than the ship had attempted to contact

anyone on the ground. As much as the neutrino source, that worried her. It spoke of paranoia, and

hidden intentions -- and not just her own. But she forced herself not to think about that now, for

Sajaki was still speaking, and she did not want to miss any of what he had to report.

'I have much to tell concerning the colony,' he said, 'and this window is short. So I will begin

with the news you are undoubtedly waiting for. We have located Sylveste; now it is simply a matter

of bringing him into our custody.'

Sluka was pushing coffee down her throat, sitting across from Sylveste with a black oblong table

positioned between them. Early morning Resurgam sun was filtering into the room via half-closed

jalousies, casting fiery contours across her skin.

'I need your opinion on something.'

'Visitors?'

'How astute.' She poured him a cup, offered the palm of her hand towards the chair. Sylveste sank

down into the seat, until he was the lower of the two. 'Indulge my curiosity, Doctor Sylveste, and

tell me exactly what you've heard.'

'I've heard nothing.'

'Then it won't take much of your time.'

He smiled through the fog of tiredness. For the second time in a day he had been awakened by

her guards, dragged in a state of semi-consciousness and disorientation from

his room. He still

smelt Pascale, her scent cloaking him, and wondered if she was still sleeping in her own cell

somewhere across Mantell. As lonely as he now felt, the feeling was tempered by the gladdening

news that she was alive and unharmed. They had told him as much in the days before their meeting,

but he had had no reason to believe Sluka's people were telling the truth. What use, after all, was

Pascale to the True Pathers? Even less than he -- and it was already clear enough that Sluka had

been debating the value of retaining him alive.

Yet now, perceptibly, things were changing. He had been allowed time with Pascale, and he

believed that this would not be the only occasion. Did this development stem from some basic

humanity on Sluka's behalf, or did it imply something entirely different -- perhaps that she might

have need of one of them in the near future, and that now was the time when she had to begin

winning favour?

Sylveste swigged the coffee, blasting away his residual tiredness. 'All I've heard is that there may

be visitors. From then on I drew my own conclusions.'

'Which I presume you'd care to share with me.'

'Perhaps we could discuss Pascale for a moment?'

She peered at him over the rim of her cup, before nodding with the delicacy of a clockwork

marionette. 'You're venturing an exchange of knowledge in return for -- what? Certain relaxations in

the regime under which you're held?'

'That wouldn't be unreasonable, I feel.'

'It would all depend on the quality of your speculations.'

'Speculations?'

'As to who these visitors might be.' Sluka glanced towards the slatted rising sun, eyes narrowed

against the ruby-red glare. 'I value your point of view, though heaven knows why.'

'First you'd have to tell me what it is you know.'

'We'll come to that.' Sluka bit on a smile. 'First I should admit that I have you at something of a

disadvantage.'

'In what way?'

'Who are these people, if they aren't Remilliod's crew?'

Her remark meant that his conversations with Pascale -- and by implication everything that had

gone on between them -- had been monitored. The knowledge shocked him less than he would have

expected. He had obviously suspected it must be so the whole time, but perhaps he had preferred to

ignore his own qualms.

'Very good, Sluka. You ordered Falkender to mention the visitors, didn't you? That was quite

clever of you.'

'Falkender was just doing his job. Who are they, then? Remilliod already has experience trading

with Resurgam. Wouldn't it make sense for him to return here for a second bite?'

'Much too soon. He'll have barely had time to reach another system, let alone anything with

trading prospects.' Sylveste freed himself of the chair's embrace, strolling to the slatted window.

Through the iron jalousies he watched the northerly faces of the nearest mesas radiate cool orange,

like stacked books on the point of bursting into flame. The thing he noticed now was the bluer tone

of the sky; no longer crimson. That was because megatonnes of dust had been removed from the

winds; replaced with water vapour. Or maybe it was a trick of his impaired colour perception.

Fingering the glass, he said, 'Remilliod would never return so quickly. He's among the shrewdest

of traders, with very few exceptions.'

'Then who is it?'

'It's the exceptions I'm bothered about.'

Sluka called an aide to remove the coffee. With the table bare, she invited Sylveste back to his

seat. Then she printed a document from the table and offered it to him.

'The information you're about to see reached us three weeks ago, from a contact in the East

Nekhebet flare-watch station.'

Sylveste nodded. He knew about the flare-watches. He had pushed to set them up himself; small

observatories dotted around Resurgam, monitoring the star for evidence of abnormal emission.

Reading was too much like trying to decipher Amarantin script: creeping letter by letter along a

word until the meaning snapped into his mind. Cal had known that much of reading boiled down to

mechanics -- the physiology of eye movement along the line. He had built routines into Sylveste's

eyes to accommodate this need, but it had not been within Falkender's gift to restore everything.

Still, this much was clear:

The flare-watch in East Nekhebet had picked up an energy pulse, much brighter than anything

seen previously. Briefly, there was the worrying possibility that Delta Pavonis was about to repeat

the flare which had wiped out the Amarantin: the vast coronal mass ejection known as the Event.

But closer examination revealed that the flare did not originate from the star, but rather from

something several light-hours beyond it, on the edge of the system.

Analysis of the spectral pattern of the gamma-ray flash indicated that it was subject to a small but

measurable Doppler shift; a few per cent of the speed of light. The conclusion was inescapable: the

flash originated from a ship, on the final phase of deceleration from interstellar cruising speed.

'Something happened,' Sylveste said, absorbing the news of the ship's demise with calm

neutrality. 'Some kind of malfunction in the drive.'

'That was our guess as well.' Sluka tapped the paper with her fingernail. 'A few days later we

knew it couldn't possibly be the case. The thing was still there -- faint, but unmistakable.'

'The ship survived the blast?'

'Whatever it was. By then we were getting a detectable blueshift off the drive flame. Deceleration

was continuing normally, as if the explosion had never happened.'

'You've got a theory for this, I presume.'

'Half of one. We think the blast originated from a weapon. What kind, we haven't a clue. But

nothing else could have liberated so much energy.'

'A weapon?' Sylveste tried to keep his voice completely calm, allowing only natural curiosity to

show, purging it of the emotions he really felt, which were largely variations on pure dread.

'Odd, don't you think?'

Sylveste leant forwards, a damp chill along his spine.

'These visitors -- whoever they are, I presume they understand the situation here.'

'The political picture, you mean? Unlikely.'

'But they'd have attempted contact with Cuvier.'

'That's the funny thing. Nothing from them. Not a squeak.'

'Who knows this?'

His voice by now was almost inaudible, even to himself, as if someone were standing on his

windpipe.

'About twenty people on the colony. People with access to the observatories, a dozen or so of us

here; somewhat fewer in Resurgam City... Cuvier.'

'It isn't Remilliod.'

Sluka let the paper be reabsorbed by the table, its sensitive content digested away.

'Then do you have any suggestions as to who it might be?'

Sylveste wondered how close to hysteria his laugh sounded. 'If I'm right about this -- and I'm not

often wrong -- this isn't just bad news for me, Sluka. This is bad news for all of us.'

'Go on.'

'It's a long story.'

She shrugged. 'I'm not going anywhere in a hurry. Nor are you.'

'Not for now, certainly.'

'What?'

'Just a suspicion of my own.'

'Stop playing games, Sylveste.'

He nodded, knowing there was no real point in holding back. He had shared the deepest of his

fears with Pascale already, and for Sluka it would now be just a case of filling in the gaps; things

which were unobvious from her eavesdropping. If he resisted, he knew, she would find a way to

learn what she wished, either from him or -- worse -- Pascale.

'It goes back a long way,' he said. 'Way back, to the time when I'd just returned to Yellowstone

from the Shrouders. You recall that I disappeared back then, don't you?'

'You always denied anything had happened.'

'I was kidnapped by Ultras,' Sylveste said, not waiting to observe her

reaction. 'Taken aboard a

lighthugger in orbit around Yellowstone. One of their number was injured, and they wanted me to...

"repair" him, I suppose.'

'Repair him?'

'The Captain was an extreme chimeric.'

Sluka shivered. It was clear that -- like most colonialists -- her experience with the radically

altered fringes of Ultra society had been confined largely to lurid holo-dramas.

'They were not ordinary Ultras,' Sylveste said, seeing no reason not to play on Sluka's phobias.

'They'd been out there too long; too long away from what we'd think of as normal human existence.

They were isolated even by normal Ultra standards; paranoid; militaristic...'

'But even so...'

'I know what you're thinking -- that, even if these were some outlandish offshoot culture, how

bad could they be?' Sylveste deployed a supercilious smile and shook his head. 'That's exactly what

I thought, at first. Then I found out more about them.'

'Such as?'

'You mentioned a weapon? Well, they have them. They have weapons which could comfortably

dismantle this planet, should they wish.'

'But they wouldn't use them without reason.'

Sylveste smiled. 'We'll find out when they reach Resurgam, I think.'

'Yes...' Sluka said this last word on a falling note. 'Actually, they're already here. The explosion

happened three weeks ago, but the -- um -- significance of it was not immediately clear. In the

meantime they've decelerated and assumed orbit around Resurgam.'

Sylveste took a moment to regulate his breathing, wondering just how deliberate Sluka's

piecewise revelation was. Had she really neglected to mention this detail -- or had she spared it,

disclosing the facts in a manner calculated to keep him permanently disorientated?

If so, she was succeeding admirably.

'Wait a minute,' Sylveste said. 'Just now you said only a few people knew about this. But how

easy would it be to miss a lighthugger orbiting a planet?'

'Easier than you imagine. Their ship's the darkest object in the system. It radiates in the infrared,

of course -- it must do -- but it seems able to tune its emissions to the frequencies of our

atmospheric vapour bands; the frequencies which don't penetrate down to the surface. If we hadn't

spent the last twenty years putting so much water into the atmosphere...'
Sluka shook her head

ruefully. 'In any case, it doesn't matter. Right now, no one's paying much
attention to the sky. They

could have arrived lit up in neon and no one would have noticed.'

'But instead they haven't even announced their presence.'

'Worse than that. They've done everything possible not to let us know they're
here. Except for

that damn weapon blast...' For a moment she trailed off, looking towards the
window, before

snapping her attention back to Sylveste. 'If these people are who you think,
you must have an idea

what it is they want.'

'That's easy enough, I think. What they want is me.'

Volyova listened intently to the rest of Sajaki's report from the surface. 'Very
little information had

reached Yellowstone from Resurgam; even less after the first mutiny. We
now know that Sylveste

survived the mutiny, but was ousted in a coup ten years later; ten years ago
from the present date.

He was imprisoned -- in some luxury, I might add -- at the expense of the
new regime, who saw him

as a useful political tool. Such a situation would have suited us extremely
well, since Sylveste's

whereabouts would have been easy to deduce. We would also have been in

the fortunate position of

being able to negotiate with people who might have had few qualms about turning him over to us.

Now, however, the situation is immeasurably more complex.'

Sajaki paused at this point, and Volyova noticed that he had turned slightly, bringing a new

background into view behind him. Their angle of sight was altering as they passed overhead and to

the south, but Sajaki was aware of this and was making the necessary adjustments in his position to

keep his face in view of the ship at all times. To an observer on one of the other mesas he would

have looked strange indeed: a silent figure facing the horizon, whispering unguessable incantations,

slowly pivoting on his heels with almost watchlike precision. No one could have guessed that he

was engaged in one-way communication with an orbiting spacecraft, rather than lost in the

observances of some private madness.

'As we ascertained as soon as we were in scan range, the capital Cuvier has been gutted by a

number of large explosions. As we were also able to deduce by examining the degree of

reconstruction, these events happened very recently on the colonial timescale. My investigations

here have established that the second coup -- when these weapons were used -- took place barely

eight months ago. However, the coup was not entirely successful. The old regime still control what

remains of Cuvier, though their leader -- Girardieau -- was killed during the disturbance. The True

Path Inundationists -- those responsible for the attacks -- control many of the outlying settlements,

but they seem to lack cohesion, and may even have fallen into factional squabbles. In the week in

which I have been here there have been nine attacks against the city, and some suspect internal

saboteurs: True Path infiltrators working from within the ruins.' Sajaki collected his thoughts at this

point, and Volyova wondered if he felt some distant kinship with the infiltrators he had mentioned.

If so, there was not a hint of it in his expression.

'Concerning my own actions, my first task, of course, was to order the suit to dismantle itself. It

would have been tempting to use it to make the journey overland to Cuvier, but the risk would have

been excessive. Yet the journey was easier than I had feared, and on the outskirts I hitched a ride

with a gang of pipeline technicians returning from the north, using them as cover to enter Cuvier.

They were suspicious at first, but the vodka soon persuaded them to take me

aboard their vehicle. I

told them we distilled it in Phoenix, the settlement where I said I'd come from. They'd never heard

of Phoenix, but they were more than happy to drink to it.'

Volyova nodded. The vodka -- along with a satchel-full of trinkets -- had been manufactured

aboard ship shortly before Sajaki's departure.

'People mostly live underground now, in catacombs which were dug fifty or sixty years ago. Of

course, the air is tolerably adapted for breathing, but you have my assurance that the procedure is

not exactly comfortable, and one is never far away from the onset of hypoxia. The exertion which

was required to reach this mesa was considerable.'

Volyova smiled to herself. If Sajaki even admitted such a thing, his ascent of the mesa must have

been close to torture.

'They say that the True Pathers have access to Martian genetic technology,' he continued, 'which

facilitates easier breathing, though I've seen nothing to prove this. My pipeline friends helped me

find a room in a hostel used by miners from beyond the city, which of course fitted in perfectly with

my cover story. I wouldn't describe the accommodation as salubrious, but it suited my purpose well

enough, which was of course to gather data. In the course of my enquiries,' Sajaki added, 'I learnt

much that was contradictory, or at best vague.'

Sajaki had now turned almost from horizon to horizon. The sun was now beyond his right

shoulder, making his image increasingly difficult to interpret. The ship, of course, would simply

switch to infrared, reading Sajaki's speech in the shifting blood-patterns of his face.

'Eyewitnesses say Sylveste and his wife managed to escape the assassination attempt which killed

Girardieau, but they have not resurfaced since. That was eight months ago. The people I have

spoken to, and the covert data sources I have intercepted, lead me to one conclusion. Sylveste is

someone's prisoner again, except this time he is being held outside the city, probably by one of the

True Path cells.'

Volyova was tense now. She could see where all this was leading: there had always been a kind

of inevitability to it. The only difference was that in this case it stemmed from what she knew about

Sajaki, rather than the man he sought.

'It would be futile to negotiate with the official powers here -- whoever they are,' Sajaki said. 'I

doubt that they could give us Sylveste even if they wanted to hand him over, which of course they

wouldn't. Which unfortunately leaves us only one option.'

Volyova bridled. Here it was.

'We must arrange things so that it is in the best interests of the colony as a whole to give us

Sylveste.' Sajaki smiled again, teeth flashing against the shadow of his face. 'Needless to say, I have

already begun laying the necessary groundwork.' And now he really was addressing her directly, no

doubt about it. 'Volyova; you may make the necessary formal overtures at your discretion.'

Ordinarily she might have felt some consolatory pleasure at having judged Sajaki's intentions so

accurately. Not now. All she felt was a slow-burning horror, the realisation that, after all this time,

he was going to ask her to do it again. And the worst component of her horror stemmed from the

realisation that she would probably do what he wanted.

'Go on,' Volyova said. 'It won't bite.'

'I do know suits, Triumvir.' Khouri paused, and took a step into the room's whiteness. 'It's just I

didn't think I'd see one again. Let alone get to actually wear the bastard.'

The four waiting suits rested against the wall in the oppressively white storage room, six hundred

levels below the bridge, adjacent to Chamber Two, where the training session would take place.

'Listen to her,' one of the two other women present said. 'Talking as if she's going to do more than

just wear the damn thing for a few minutes. It's not like you're going down with us, Khouri, so don't

wet yourself.'

'Thanks for the advice, Sudjic -- I'll bear it in mind.'

Sudjic shrugged -- a sneer would have been too much of an emotional expenditure, Khouri

figured -- and stepped towards her designated suit, followed by her companion, Sula Kjarval.

Preparing to welcome their occupants, the suits resembled frogs which had been exsanguinated,

eviscerated, dissected, stretched and pinned out on a vertical table. In their current configurations

the suits were at their most androform, with well-defined legs and outstretched arms. There were no

fingers on the 'hands' -- for that matter, no obvious hands at all, simply streamlined flippers --

although at the user's wish the suits could extrude the necessary manipulators and digits.

Khouri did indeed know suits, just as she had claimed. The suits on Sky's Edge had been rare

imports, purchased from Ultra traders who made stopover around the war-torn planet. No one on

the Edge had the expertise to actually duplicate them, which meant that those units which her side

had bought were fabulously valuable: powerful totems dispensed from gods.

The suit scanned her, assessing her bodily dimensions before adjusting its own interior to

precisely match her contours. Khouri then allowed it to step forward and surround her, suppressing

the tinge of claustrophobia that accompanied the process. Within a few seconds the suit had locked

tight and filled itself with gel-air, enabling manoeuvres which would otherwise have crushed its

occupant. The suit's persona interrogated Khouri regarding small details she might wish changed,

allowing her to customise her weapons suite and adjust its autonomous routines. Of course, none

but the lightest weapons would actually be deployed in Chamber Two; the combat scenarios which

were to be enacted would be a seamless mixture of real, physical action and simulated weapons-

usage, but it was the point that counted. One had to treat every aspect of the enterprise with the

utmost seriousness, including the limitless choices which the suit offered for the convenience of

despatching any enemies who might have the misfortune to stray into its sphere of superiority.

There were three of them, apart from Khouri herself, but she was the only

one who was not in

serious contention for the surface operation. Volyova took the lead. Although her conversations

with Khouri suggested that she had been born in space, she had visited planets on more than one

occasion, and had acquired the appropriate, near-instinctive reflexes which bettered the chances of

surviving a planetary excursion; not least amongst these being a profound respect for the law of

gravitation. The same went for Sudjic; she had been born in a habitat, or possibly a lighthugger, but

had visited enough worlds to gain the right moves. Her bladelike thinness, which made it look as if

she could not possibly have taken a footstep on a large planet without breaking every bone in her

body, did not fool Khouri for a moment; Sudjic was like a building designed by a master architect,

who knew the precise stresses which had to be obeyed by every articulation and strut, and took an

aesthetic pride in allowing for no additional tolerances. Kjarval, the woman who was always with

Sudjic, was different again. Unlike her friend, she exhibited no extreme chimeric traits; all her limbs

her own. But she resembled no human Khouri had ever known. Her face was sleek, as if optimised

for some unspecified aquatic environment. Her catlike eyes were gridded red

orbs with no pupils.

Her nostrils and ears were rilled apertures, and her mouth was a largely expressionless slot; one that

barely moved when the woman spoke, but was permanently curved in an expression of mild exalta-

tion. She wore no clothes; not even in the relative cool of the suit storage room, yet to Khouri's eyes

she did not seem truly naked. Rather, she looked like a naked woman who had been dipped in some

infinitely flexible, quick-drying polymer. A true Ultra, in other words, of uncertain and almost

certainly non-Darwinian provenance. Khouri had heard tales of bioengineered human splinter-

species cultured under the ice of worlds like Europa, or of merpeople, bio-adapted for life in totally

flooded spacecraft. Sula seemed to be the living, freakishly hybrid embodiment of these myths.

Alternatively, she might be something else entirely. Maybe she had wrought these transformations

on herself for a whim. Maybe they were purposeless, or served only the deeper purpose of masking

another identity entirely. Whatever; she knew worlds, and that -- seemingly -- was all that mattered.

Sajaki knew worlds as well, of course, but he was already on Resurgam, and it was not clear what

role he would play in the recovery of Sylveste, if and when it happened. Of

Triumvir Hegazi Khouri

knew little, but through chance remarks, she had gleaned enough to know that the man had never

set foot on anything which had not been manufactured. It was no wonder that Sajaki and Volyova

had relegated Triumvir Hegazi to the more clerical aspects of their profession. He would not be

allowed -- nor did he even wish -- to make the journey to Resurgam's surface, when the time came.

Which left Khouri. There was no arguing with her experience; unlike any of the crew, she had

demonstrably been born and raised on a planet, and -- vitally -- had seen action on one. It was

probable -- nothing she had heard led her to doubt the fact -- that the Sky's Edge war had placed her

in situations far graver than any the crew had experienced beyond their ship. Their excursions had

been shopping trips, trade missions or simple tourism; coming down to gloat at the compressed

lives of ephemerals. Khouri had been in situations where, at times, it had seemed very unlikely that

she would survive. Yet -- because she had never been anything less than a competent soldier, and

she was also lucky -- she had come through relatively unscathed.

No one aboard the ship actually argued with this.

'It's not that we wouldn't want you along,' Volyova had said, not long after the incident with the

cache-weapon. 'Far from it. I've no doubt that you'd handle a suit as well as any of us, and you

wouldn't be likely to freeze under fire.'

'Well, then...'

'But I can't risk losing my Gunnery Officer again.' They had been having the discussion in the

spider-room, but Volyova had lowered her voice all the same. 'Only three people need to go down

to Resurgam, and that means we don't have to use you. Apart from me, Sudjic and Kjarval can

handle the suits. In fact we've already begun training up.'

'Then at least let me join in the sessions.'

Volyova had raised an arm, apparently to dismiss this suggestion. But as soon as she had done so

she relented. 'All right, Khouri. You get to train with us. But it doesn't mean anything, understand?'

Oh yes, she understood. Things were different between Khouri and Volyova now -- they had been

ever since Khouri had told Volyova the lie about being an infiltrator for another crew. The

Mademoiselle had long ago primed her for that particular little chat and it seemed to have worked

perfectly, even down to the sly way the *Galatea* -- completely innocent, of

course -- had

deliberately not been mentioned, leaving Volyova to make that deduction herself, and thereby

allowing her to feel some quiet satisfaction in the process. It was a red herring, but it mattered only

that Volyova found it a plausible one. Volyova had also accepted the story about Sun Stealer being

a piece of human-designed infiltration software, and for now her curiosity seemed satisfied. Now

they were almost equals, both having something to hide from the rest of the crew, even if what

Volyova thought she had on Khouri was not even close to the truth.

'I understand,' Khouri said.

'Still, it's a shame, though.' Volyova smiled. 'I get the impression you always wanted to meet

Sylveste. You'll get your chance, of course, once we bring him aboard...'

Khouri smiled. 'That'll have to do then, won't it?'

Chamber Two was an empty twin of the chamber where the cache-weapons were kept.

Unlike the weapon-filled chamber, it had been pressurised up to one standard atmosphere. This

was no mere extravagance; it constituted the largest single pocket of breathable air aboard the

lighthugger, and was therefore used as a reservoir for supplying normally vacuum-filled regions of

the ship with air when they needed to be entered by unsuited humans.

Usually the drive would have supplied an illusory one-gee of gravity, acting along the long axis

of the ship, which was also the long axis of the roughly cylindrical chamber. But now that the drive

had been quenched -- now that the ship was in orbit around Resurgam -- the illusion of gravity came

from rotating the whole chamber, which meant that gravity acted at ninety degrees to the long axis,

pushing radially outwards from the chamber's middle. Near the middle, there was almost no gravity

at all; objects could free-float there for minutes before their inevitable small initial drift slowly

pushed them away from the middle. Thereafter, the increasing wind-pressure of the co-rotating air

would tug them faster and lower. But nothing 'fell' in straight lines in the chamber, at least not from

the point of view of someone standing on the rotating wall.

They entered at one end of the cylinder, via an armoured clamshell door whose inner face was

pitted with blast-marks and projectile impact-craters. Every visible surface of the chamber was

similarly weathered; as far as Khouri could see (and the suit's vision-augmentation routines meant

she could see as far as she wished) there was no square metre of the chamber's skin which had not

been harried, scarred, gouged, buckled, assaulted, melted or corroded by some kind of weapon. It

might once have been silver; now it was purple, like an all-enveloping metallic bruise. Illumination

was supplied not from a stationary light source, but from dozens of free-floating drones, each of

which picked out a spot on the chamber's wall with a floodlight of actinic brilliance. The drones

were constantly moving around, like a swarm of agitated glow-worms. The result was that no

shadow in the chamber stayed still for more than a second or so, and it was impossible to look in

any direction for more than a second before a blinding light-source entered it, washing everything

else out.

'You sure you can handle this?' Sudjic said, as the door locked shut behind them. 'You wouldn't

want to damage that suit. You break it, you bought it, you know?'

'Concentrate on not damaging your own,' Khouri said. Then she switched to the private channel,

addressing Sudjic alone. 'Maybe it's just my imagination, but do I get the impression you don't like

me very much?'

'Now why would you think that?'

'I think it might have something to do with Nagorny.' Khouri paused. It had

occured to her that

the private channels might not be private at all, but then again, nothing she was about to say would

not already be completely obvious to anyone listening in; most especially not to Volyova. 'I don't

know exactly what happened with him, except that you were close.'

'Close isn't the word for it, Khouri.'

'Lovers, then. I wasn't going to say that in case I offended you.'

'Don't worry about offending me, kid. It's way too late for that.'

Volyova's voice interrupted them. 'Kick off and descend to the chamber wall, you three.'

They obeyed her, using their suits on mild amplification to jump away from the plate which

capped the end of the cylinder. They had been in freefall from the moment they entered the place,

but now, as they descended towards the wall/floor, and picked up circumferential speed, their sense

of weight mounted. The change was small, cushioned within the gel-air, but it gave enough small

cues to engender a sense of up and down.

'I understand why you resent me,' Khouri said.

'Bet you do.'

'I took his position. Filled his role. After... whatever happened to him, you suddenly had me to

deal with.' Khouri did her best to sound reasonable, as if she was taking none of this personally. 'If I

was in your shoes, I think I'd feel the same. In fact I'm sure of it. But that doesn't make it right,

either. I'm not your enemy, Sudjic.'

'Don't delude yourself.'

'About what?'

'That you understand one tenth of what this is about.' Sudjic had positioned her suit close to

Khouri's now: seamless white armour stark against the damaged wall of the chamber. Khouri had

seen images of ghostly white whales which lived -- or used to live; she wasn't sure -- in Earth's seas.

Belugas, they were called, and they came to mind now. 'Listen,' Sudjic said. 'Do you think I'm

simplistic enough that I'd hate you just because you fill the space Boris left? Don't insult me,

Khouri.'

'Not my intention, believe me.'

'If I hate you, Khouri, it's for a perfectly good reason. It's because you belong to her.' She emitted

the last word as a gasp of pure animosity. 'Volyova. You're her trinket. I hate her, so naturally I hate

her possessions. Especially those whom she values. And of course -- if I found a way to harm one

of her possessions -- do you imagine I wouldn't do it?

'I'm nobody's possession,' Khouri said. 'Not Volyova's; not anyone's.' She immediately hated

herself for protesting so vigorously, and then began to hate Sudjic for pushing her to the cusp of this

defensiveness. 'Not that it's any of your business. You know what, Sudjic?'

'I'm dying to hear.'

'From what I heard, Boris wasn't the sanest individual who ever lived. From what I hear, Volyova

didn't so much drive him mad as try and use his madness for something constructive.' She felt her

suit decelerate, softly depositing her feet-first on the crumpled wall. 'So it didn't work. Big deal.

Maybe you two deserved each other.'

'Yeah, maybe we did.'

'What?'

'I don't necessarily like anything that you just said, Khouri. Fact is, if we didn't have company,

and if we weren't suited up, I might take a few moments to teach you how easily I could break your

neck. Might still do it, one of these days. But I've got to admit. You've got spite. Most of her

puppets usually lose that straight away; if she doesn't fry them first.'

'You're saying you misjudged me? Excuse me if I don't sound grateful.'

'I'm saying maybe you aren't as much her possession as she imagines.' Sudjic laughed. 'It's not a

compliment, kid -- just an observation. It might be worse for you once she realises. It doesn't mean

you're off my shit-list, either.'

Khouri might have replied, but anything she intended to say was drowned out by Volyova, who

was again speaking over the general suit channel, addressing the three of them from her vantage

point high above, near the chamber's middle. 'There is no structure to this exercise,' she said. 'At

least none that you need know about. Your sole obligation is to stay alive until the scenario is over.

That's all there is to it. The exercise begins in ten seconds. I won't be available for questions during

the course of it.'

Khouri absorbed this without any undue worry. There had been many unstructured exercises on

the Edge, and many more in the gunnery. All it meant was that the deeper purpose of the scenario

was masked, or that it was -- literally -- an exercise in disorientation intended to represent the chaos

which might follow an operation which had gone badly wrong.

They began with warm-up exercises. Volyova watched them from on high while a variety of

drone-targets emerged from previously concealed trapdoors in the wall of the chamber. The targets

were not much of a challenge; at least, not at first. At the beginning the suits retained enough

autonomy to detect and react to the targets before the wearer had even noticed them, so that all the

wearer needed to do was issue consent for the kill. But it became harder. The targets stopped being

passive and began to shoot back -- usually indiscriminately, but with steadily mounting firepower,

so that even wide-shots posed a threat. The targets also got smaller and faster, popping out of the

trapdoors with increasing frequency. And -- keeping pace with the increasing danger posed by the

enemy -- the suits suffered progressive losses of functionality. By the sixth or seventh round most

of the suit autonomy had been eroded, and the sensor webs which each suit draped around itself

were breaking up, so that the wearers had to rely increasingly on their own visual cues. Yet though

the exercise had increased in difficulty, Khouri had worked through similar scenarios so often that

she did not begin to lose her cool. One had to remember how much of the suit functionality

remained: one still had the weapons, the suit power and flight-capability.

The three of them did not communicate during the initial exercises; they were

too intent on

finding their own mental edges. Eventually it was like getting a second wind; a state of stability

which lay beyond what at first seemed like the limits of normal performance. Getting there was a

little like entering a trance state. There were certain tricks of concentration one could call into play:

rote mantras which mediated the transition. It was never just a matter of wishing it and being there;

it was more like climbing onto some awkward ledge. But as one did it -- and did it over again -- one

found that the move became more fluid, and the ledge no longer seemed quite so high or

inaccessible. But it was never reached simply, or without some expenditure of mental effort.

It was during the ascension to that state that Khouri half thought she had seen the Mademoiselle.

It was not even a glimpse, just a peripheral awareness that -- momentarily -- there had been

another body out there in the chamber, and that its shape might have been that of the Mademoiselle.

But the sensation vanished as quickly as it had come.

Could it have been her?

Khouri had not seen or heard from the Mademoiselle since the incident in the gunnery room. The

Mademoiselle's last communiqué to her had been more pique than anything else; delivered after

Khourī had helped Volyova finish off the cache-weapon. She had warned her that by remaining in

the gunnery so long she had brought Sun Stealer on herself. And -- indeed -- the moment that

Khourī tried to leave gunspace, she had felt something rushing towards her. It had come at her like a

largening shadow, but she had not felt anything when the shadow seemed to engulf her. It was if a

hole had opened in the shadow and she had passed unscathed through it, but she doubted that that

had really been the case. The truth was almost certainly less palatable. Khourī did not want to

consider the possibility that the shadow might have been Sun Stealer, but it was a conclusion she

could not ignore. And in accepting that, she also had to accept the likelihood that Sun Stealer had

now managed to ensconce a much larger part of himself in her skull.

It had been bad enough knowing that a small part of that thing had come back with the

Mademoiselle's bloodhounds. But that at least had been contained; it had been within the

Mademoiselle's powers to hold him at bay. Now Khourī had to accept that a more substantial

fragment of Sun Stealer had reached her. And the Mademoiselle had been

curiously absent ever

since -- until this voiceless half-glimpse, which might have been nothing at all; less than a figment

of her imagination; something which any sane person would have dismissed as a trick of the light at

the edge of vision.

If it had been her... what did it mean, after all this time?

Eventually the initial phase of exercises finished, and some of the suit functionality was

reinstated. Not everything, but enough to let the three of them know that a certain slate had been

wiped clean, and that from now the rules would be different.

'All right,' Volyova said. 'I've seen worse.'

'I'd take that as a compliment,' Khouri said, hoping to elicit some vague camaraderie from her

compatriots. 'But the trouble with Ilia is she means it literally.'

'At least one of you gets it,' Volyova said. 'But don't let it go to your head, Khouri. Especially as

it's about to get serious.'

At the far end of the chamber another clamshell door was easing open. Because of the constantly

shifting light, Khouri saw what happened more as a series of frozen, glare-saturated images than

actual motion. Things were spilling out: an expanding mass of ellipsoidal

objects, each perhaps half

a metre long, metallic-white in colour, with various protrusions, gun-nozzles, manipulators and

apertures interrupting its surface.

Sentry drones. She knew them -- or something similar -- from the Edge. They had called them

wolfhounds, because of the ferocity of their attack, and the fact they always moved in packs.

Although their main military use was as an instrument of demoralisation, Khouri knew what they

could do, and she knew that wearing a suit was no guarantee of safety. Wolfhounds were built for

viciousness, not intelligence. They carried relatively light weapons -- but they did so in large

numbers, and, more to the point, they acted in unison. A pack of wolfhounds could collectively

target their fire against a single individual, if their pooled-processors deemed that the action was

strategically useful. It was that singlemindedness which made them terrifying.

But there was more. Embedded in the mass of erupting drones were several larger objects, also

metallic-white in colour, but lacking the spherical symmetry of the wolfhounds. It was difficult to

make them out clearly in the intermittent bursts of illumination, but Khouri thought she knew what

they were. They were other suits, and they were very unlikely to be friendly.

The wolfhounds and the enemy suits were dropping away from the central axis now, vectoring

towards the three waiting trainees. Perhaps two seconds had elapsed since the other door had

opened, but it had seemed much longer as Khouri's mind easily switched to the mode of rapid

consciousness which combat demanded. Many of the suit's higher autonomous functions were

disabled, but its target-acquisition routines were still operable, so she ordered the suit to lock onto

the wolfhounds, not actually firing, but keeping a bead on each one. She knew that her suit would

confer with its two partners; between them devising a moment-by-moment strategy and allocating

targets to each other, but that process was largely invisible to the wearer.

Where the hell was Volyova?

Was it possible she could have moved from one end of the chamber to the other, in time to appear

in the pack? Yes, probably -- motion in a suit, at least on a scale this compressed, could be so rapid

that a person might seem to disappear from one point and appear hundreds of metres further away

an eyeblink later. But the enemy suits Khouri had seen had definitely come through the other door,

which would have necessitated Volyova leaving the chamber and making her way to the other end

through normal ship corridors and accessways. Even in a suit, even with the route keyed in

beforehand, Khouri doubted that anyone could do that so quickly; not without becoming liquid en

route. But maybe Volyova had a short-cut; a clear shaft through which she could move much more

rapidly...

Shit.

Khouri was being shot at.

The wolfhounds were firing, lancing her with small-grade laser fire, emerging in twin beams

from malignant, closely spaced eyes in the upper hemisphere of their ellipsoid shells. By now their

chameleoflage had adapted to the floor metal, turning them into purple lozenges which seemed to

dance in and out of clarity. Her suit skin had silvered to an optically perfect mirror, deflecting most

of the energy, but some of the initial blasts had done real damage to the suit integrity. She would

lose points for that -- she had been too busy cogitating on Volyova's vanishing act to pay attention

to the attack. That diversion, of course, had almost certainly been Volyova's intention. She looked

around, confirming what the suit readouts were telling her, which was that her compatriots had all

survived. Flanking her, Sudjic and Kjarval resembled androform blobs of mercury, but they were

not hurt and were returning fire.

Khouri set her escalation protocols to stay one offensive step ahead of the enemy, but not to

obliterate them. Her suit sprouted low-yield lasers, popping up on both shoulders, pivoting on

turrets. She watched the beams converge ahead of her, knifing forwards, each burst leaving a lilac

contrail of ionised air. When hit, the shining, flying purple wolfhounds tended to crash out of the

sky, bouncing to the ground or just exploding in hot blossoms. It would have been unwise in the

extreme to be out in the chamber without a suit.

'You were slow,' Sudjic said, on the general-suit, even as the attack continued. 'This was real,

we'd be hosing you off the walls.'

'How many times you seen close-quarters action, Sudjic?'

Kjarval -- who until then had said next to nothing -- cut in on them. 'We've all seen action,

Khouri.'

'Yeah? And did you ever get close enough to the enemy to hear them scream for mercy?'

'What I mean is... fuck.' Kjarval had just taken a hit. Her suit spasmed momentarily, flicking

through a series of incorrect chameleoflage modes: space-black; snow-white and then florid,

tropical foliage, making it look as if Kjarval were a door leading out of the chamber into the heart of

some remote planetary jungle.

Her suit stammered, and then regained its reflective sheen.

'I'm worried about those other suits.'

'That's what they're for. To make you worry, and louse up.'

'We need help to louse up? That's a new one.'

'Shut it, Khouri. Just concentrate on the damned war.'

She did. That part was easy.

Roughly a third of the attacking wolfhounds had been shot down, and no new forces were

emerging through the chamber's still-open end door. But the other suits -- there were three of them,

Khouri saw -- had done nothing so far except loiter near the hole, and were now slowly moving

towards the floor, correcting their descent with bursts of needle-thin thrust from their heels. As they

did so they too assumed a colour and texture which matched the shot-up floor. It was impossible to

tell which -- if any -- were occupied.

'This is part of the scenario; those suits -- they've got to mean something.'

'I said shut it, Khouri.'

But she continued, 'We're on a mission, right? We have to assume that much. We have to impose

some structure on the damned thing or we don't know who the hell's the enemy!'

'Good idea,' Sudjic said. 'Let's schedule a meeting.'

By now the wolfhounds, and their fire-returning suits, were using particle-beams. Maybe the

lasers had been real -- it was just within the bounds of possibility -- but it seemed certain that any

significantly more powerful weapon would be only simulated. After all, it would not be an

auspicious end to the exercise if one of them blasted a hole in the chamber wall and vented all the

air into space.

'Let's assume,' Khouri said, 'that we know who the hell we are and why we're here -- wherever

here happens to be. The next question is, do we know those bastards in the other three suits?'

'This is getting way too philosophical for me,' Kjarval said, loping away to draw fire.

'If we're having this conversation,' Khouri said, doggedly talking over Sudjic's interjections, 'then

we have to assume we don't know who they are. That they're hostile. And that

means we should

shoot the scum first, before they do whatever they're going to do to us.'

'I think you could be tucking up big-time, Khouri.'

'Yeah, well, as you kindly pointed out, I'm the one who isn't going down anyway.'

'Amen to that.'

'Er... people...' This was Kjarval, who had noticed what it took Khouri and Sudjic another

moment to absorb. 'I don't like the look of that.'

What she had seen was that the wrists of the three other suits were morphing, each extruding an

as yet unformed weapon. The process was unnervingly rapid, like watching a party balloon inflate

into the shape of an animal.

'Shoot the fuckers,' Khouri said, with a voice so calm it almost scared her.

'Full fire-convergence

on the leftmost suit. Go to minimum-yield ack-am pulse mode, conic dispersal with lateral cross-

sweep.'

'Since when are you giving...'

'Just fucking do it, Sudjic!'

But she was already firing, Kjarval too; the three of them were now standing apart by ten metres,

directing their suits' fire towards the enemy. The accelerated antimatter pulses were simulated... of

course. If they had been real, there would have been little of the chamber left to stand on.

There was a flash, one so bright that Khouri felt it reach out and push taloned fingers into her

eyes. It felt too intense to have been properly simulated... too concussive. The noise of the blast hit

with a force that seemed almost gentle by comparison, but the shock was still enough to throw her

backwards, keeling into the mottled chamber wall. The bump was like bouncing onto a mattress in

an expensive hotel room. For a moment her suit was out cold; even when her eyes began to clear

she could see that the readouts had either died or turned to unreadably cryptic mush. They lingered

in that state for a few agonising seconds before the suit's back-up brain staggered on line, reinstating

what it could. A simpler -- but at least comprehensible -- display returned to life, detailing what

remained and what had been destroyed. Most of the major weapons were out. Suit autonomy was

down by fifty per cent, the persona slipping towards machine autism. There was extensive loss of

servo-assistance in three articulation points. Flight capability was impaired, at least until the repair

protocols could get to work, and they needed a minimum two hours to finesse a bypass solution.

Oh, and -- according to the bio-medical readout -- she was now minus one upper limb, from the elbow down.

She struggled to a sitting position and -- though every instinct told her to spend the time getting

safe and assessing the surroundings -- she had to look at the shot-away limb. Her right arm ended

just where the med-readout said it would; truncating in a crumpled mass of scorched bone, flesh and

intermingled metal. Further up the stump, the gel-air would have shock-congealed to prevent

pressure and blood loss, but that was a detail she had to take for granted. There was no pain, of

course -- another aspect in which the simulation was utterly realistic, since the suit would be telling

her pain centre to shut down for the time being.

Assess, assess...

She had lost her orientation completely in the blast. She looked around, but the suit's head

articulation was jammed. There was suddenly an awful lot of smoke out there; hanging in coils in

the air venting from the chamber itself. The intermittent illumination provided by the aerial drones

was now only a stuttering strobe-effect. There were the wrecks of two suits over there, suffering the

kind of comprehensive damage which might indicate that they had been hit by combined ack-am

pulses. But the suits were too mangled up for her to tell if they had -- or had ever had -- occupants.

A third suit -- less critically damaged, and perhaps only stunned, as her own had been -- rested ten

or fifteen metres away around the great curve of the chamber's scarred wall. The wolfhounds were

gone, or destroyed; it was impossible to tell which.

'Sudjic? Kjarval?'

Silence; not even her own voice properly audible, and certainly nothing resembling a reply.

Intersuit comms were compromised, she saw now -- a detail on the damage readout she had ignored

until then. Bad, Khouri. Very bad.

Now she had no idea who the enemy was.

The ruined suit arm was fixing itself by the second, scorched parts sloughing to the ground, while

the exterior skin crawled forwards to envelop the stump. It was faintly disgusting to watch, even

though Khouri had seen it happen many times before, in other simulation scenarios on the Edge.

What was really nauseating was knowing that no such immediate repair was

possible for her own

wounds; that they would have to wait until she was med-evacked out of the zone.

The other suit, the one less damaged, was moving now, raising itself to a standing position, just

as she was doing. The other suit had a full complement of limbs, and many of its weapons were still

deployed, jutting from various apertures. They were locking onto Khouri, like a dozen vipers

poising for the strike.

'Who's that?' she asked, before remembering that the comms were offline, probably for good. Out

of the corner of her eye she saw another two suits off to one side, emerging from banners of

languid, charcoal-dark smoke. Who were they? Remnants of the original three which had come

down with the wolfhounds, or her comrades?

The single suit with the weapons was approaching her, very slowly, as if she were a bomb which

might go off at any moment. The suit stopped, motionless. Its skin was trying to mimic the

combination of the background colour of the chamber wall and the smoke screens, with only

moderate success. Khouri wondered how her own suit was doing. Was her faceplate opaque or

transparent? It was impossible to tell from inside, and the minimalist readout told her nothing. If the

one with the weapons saw a human face within, would that incite it to kill or hold fire? Khouri had

locked her own usable weapons on the figure, but nothing she had seen told her whether she was

pointed at the enemy or a mute comrade.

She moved to raise her good arm, to indicate her face, asking the other to make its faceplate

transparent.

The other fired.

Khouri was blown back into the wall, an invisible piledriver ramming into her stomach. Her suit

started screaming, all manner of gibberish scrolling across her vision. There was a roar of sound

before she hit the wall, the compressed burst of a frantic return-fire from her own available

weapons.

Fuck, Khouri thought. That actually hurt, at the visceral level which somehow betrayed it as not

having been simulated.

She struggled to her feet again, just as another charge from the attacker slammed past and the

third caught her on the thigh. She started wheeling back, both arms flailing at the periphery of

vision. There was something wrong with her arms; or more accurately, something not wrong where

something should have been. They were completely intact; no sign that one of them had just been

blasted off.

'Shit,' she said. 'What the fuck is happening?'

The attack was continuing, each blast impacting her and driving her back.

'This is Volyova,' said a voice, not in any way calm and detached. 'Listen to me carefully, all of

you! Something's going wrong with the scenario! I want you all to stop firing----'

Khoury had hit the deck again, this time with enough force that she felt it through the gel-air

cushion, like a slap against her spine. Her thigh felt injured, and the suit was doing nothing to

ameliorate the discomfort.

It's gone live, she thought.

The weapons were for real now; or at least those which belonged to the suit attacking her.

'Kjarval,' Volyova said. 'Kjarval! You have to stop firing! You're killing Khoury!'

But Kjarval -- Khoury guessed that she was the attacker -- was not listening, or not capable of

listening, or, more terrifyingly, not capable of stopping.

'Kjarval,' the Triumvir said again, 'if you don't stop, I'm going to have to disarm you!'

But Kjarval did not stop. She kept on firing, Khouri feeling each impact like a lash, writhing

under the assault, desperate to claw her way through the tortured alloy of the chamber into the

sanctuary beyond.

And then Volyova descended from the chamber's middle, where she had apparently been all

along, unseen. As she descended, she opened fire on Kjarval, at first with the lightest weapons she

had, but with steadily mounting force. Kjarval countered by directing some portion of her fire

upwards, towards the lowering Triumvir. The blasts hit Volyova, gouging black scars into her

armour, chipping fragments from the flexible integument, slicing off weapons as her suit tried to

extrude and deploy them. But Volyova maintained an edge on the trainee. Kjarval's suit began to

wilt, losing integrity. Its weapons went haywire, missing their targets and then shooting

haphazardly around the chamber.

Eventually -- it could not have been more than a minute after she had first started firing on

Khouri -- Kjarval dropped to the ground. Her suit, where it was not blackened by the hits it had

sustained, was a quilt of mismatched psychedelic colours and rapidly morphing hyper-geometric

textures, sprouting half-realised weapons and devices. Her limbs were thrashing crazily. The ends

of the limbs had gone berserk, extruding -- and then budding off -- various manipulators and rough,

baby-sized approximations of human hands.

Khoury got to her feet, stifling a scream of pain as her thigh protested against the movement. Her

suit was a stiffening deadweight around her, but somehow she managed to walk, or at least totter, to

the place where Kjarval lay.

Volyova and another suited figure -- she had to be Sudjic -- were already there, leaning over what

remained of the suit, trying to make some sense of its medical diagnostic readouts.

'She's dead,' Volyova said.

FOURTEEN

Mantell, North Nekhebet, Resurgam, 2566

On the day that the newcomers announced their presence, Sylveste was woken by a stab of

unforgiving white light. He held his arm up in supplication while he waited for his eyes to cycle

through their initialisation routines. It was almost useless speaking to him in those moments; Sluka

evidently realised this. With so many of their original functions gone, the eyes took longer than ever

now to reach functionality. Sylveste experienced a slow rote of errors and warnings, little spectral

prickles of pain as the eyes investigated critically impaired modes.

He was half aware of Pascale sitting up in bed next to him, lifting the sheets around her chest.

'You'd better wake up,' Sluka said. 'Both of you. I'll wait outside while you dress.'

The two of them struggled into clothes. Beyond the room, Sluka stood patiently with two guards,

neither conspicuously armed. Sylveste and his wife were escorted towards Mantell's commons,

where the morning shift of True Path Inundationists were gathered around an oblong wallscreen.

Flasks of coffee and breakfast rations lay undisturbed on the commons table.

Whatever was going

on, Sylveste surmised, was enough to kill any normal appetite. And the screen evidently held the

key. He could hear a voice speaking, amplified and harsh, as if from a loudspeaker. There was so

much background conversation taking place that he could do no more than snatch the odd word

from the narrative. Unfortunately, that odd word tended to be his own name, spoken at too-frequent

intervals by whoever was booming from the screen.

He pushed to the front, aware that the watchers deferred to him with more respect than he'd felt

for several decades. But was it possibly only pity being afforded to a condemned man?

Pascale joined him at his side. 'Do you recognise that woman?' she asked.

'What woman?'

'On the screen. The one you're standing in front of.'

What Sylveste saw was only an oblong of pointillist silver-grey pixels.

'My eyes don't read video too well,' he said, addressing Sluka as much as Pascale. 'And I can't

hear a damned thing. Maybe you'd better tell me what I'm missing.'

Falkender had appeared out of the crowd. 'I'll patch you in neurally, if you wish. It'll only take a

moment.' He shunted Sylveste away from the watchers, towards a private

alcove in one corner of

the commons, Pascale and Sluka following. There, he opened his toolkit and removed a few

glistening instruments.

'Now you're going to tell me this won't hurt at all,' Sylveste said.

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Falkender said. 'After all, it wouldn't be the complete truth, would it?'

Then he clicked his fingers, either at an aide or Pascale; Sylveste was unsure, and his visual field

was now too restricted to discriminate. 'Get the man a mug of coffee; that'll take his mind off it. In

any case, when he's able to read that screen, I think he'll need something stronger.'

'That bad?'

'I'm afraid Falkender isn't joking,' Sluka said.

'My, aren't you all enjoying yourselves.' Sylveste bit his lip at the first cascade of pain from

Falkender's probings, although, as the minor operation proceeded, the pain never worsened. 'Are

you going to put me out of my misery? After all, it seemed important enough to wake me.'

'The Ultras have announced themselves,' Sluka said.

'That much I extrapolated for myself. What have they done? Landed a shuttle in the middle of

Cuvier?'

'Nothing so obtrusive. Yet. There may be worse to come.'

Someone pushed a mug of coffee into his hands; Falkender relented in his ministrations long

enough for Sylveste to sip a mouthful. It was acrid and not entirely warm, but sufficed to propel him

fractionally closer towards alertness. He heard Sluka say, 'What we're showing on the screen is a

repeating audiovisual message, one that's been transmitting continuously now for about thirty

minutes.'

'Transmitted from the ship?'

'No, seems they've managed to tap straight into our comsat girdle, piggybacking their message on

our routine transmissions.'

Sylveste nodded, then regretted the movement. 'Then they're still edgy about being detected.' Or

else, he thought, they merely want to reaffirm their absolute technological superiority over us; their

ability to tap into and manipulate our existing data systems. That seemed more likely: it smacked

not only of the arrogant Ultra way of doing things, but of one Ultra crew in particular. Why

announce your presence in a mundane way, when you can do a full burning bush and impress the

natives? But he hardly needed confirmation that he knew these people. He had known ever since the

ship had entered the system.

'Next question,' he said. 'Who was the message directed to? Do they still think there's some kind

of planetary authority with whom they can deal?'

'No,' Sluka said. 'The message was addressed to the citizens of Resurgam, irrespective of political

or cultural affiliation.'

'Very democratic,' Pascale said.

'Actually,' Sylveste said, 'I rather doubt that democracy comes into it. Not if I know who we're

dealing with.'

'Regarding that,' Sluka said, 'you never did quite explain to my total satisfaction why these people

might...'

Sylveste cut her off. 'Before we go into any detailed analysis, do you think I could see the

message for myself? Particularly as I seem to hold something of a personal stake in the matter.'

'There.' Falkender retreated and closed his toolkit with a decisive snap. 'I told you it wouldn't take

a moment. Now you can jack straight into the screen.' The surgeon smiled.

'Now, do me a favour

and be sure not to kill the messenger, won't you?'

'Let me see the message,' Sylveste said. 'Then I'll decide.'

It was far worse than he had feared.

He pushed to the front again, though by now the watchers had thinned out, dispersed reluctantly

to duties elsewhere in Mantell. It was much easier to hear the speaker now, and he recognised

cadences in the woman's speech as she repeated phrases which had cycled around a few minutes

earlier. The message was not a long one, then. Which was ominous in itself. Who crossed light-

years of interstellar space, only to announce their arrival around a colony in terms which were,

frankly, curt? Only those who had no interest whatsoever in ingratiating themselves, and whose

demands were supremely clear. And again that suspicion accorded well with what he already knew

of the crew he believed had come for him. They had never been talkative.

He could not yet see the face, although the voice was already whispering across the years to him.

When vision came -- when Falkender completed the neural interface -- he remembered.

'Who is she?' Sluka asked.

'Her name -- when last we met -- was Ilia Volyova.' Sylveste shrugged. 'It may or may not have

been real. All I do know is that whatever threats she goes on to make, she's fully capable of backing

them up.'

'And she's -- what? The Captain?'

'No,' Sylveste said, distracted. 'No, she's not.'

The woman's face was unremarkable. Almost monochromatically pale of complexion, short dark

hair, and a facial structure somewhere between elfin and skeletal, framing deepset, narrow, slanted

eyes which dispensed little compassion. She had hardly changed at all. But then, that was the point

of Ultras. If subjective decades had passed for Sylveste since their last meeting, then for Volyova it

might only have been a handful of years; a tenth or a twentieth of the time. For her, their last

meeting would be a thing of the relatively recent past, whereas for Sylveste it felt like an event

consigned to the dusty annals of history. It placed him at a disadvantage, of course. For Volyova,

his mannerisms -- the more predictable aspects of his behaviour -- would still be fresh in her mind;

he would be an adversary not long met. But Sylveste had barely recognised Volyova's voice until

now, and when he tried to recall whether she had been more or less sympathetic to him on their

previous meeting, his memory failed him. Of course, it would all come back, but it was that very

slowness of recall which gave Volyova her undoubted edge.

Odd, really. He had assumed -- stupidly, perhaps -- that it would be Sajaki who was making this

announcement. Not the true Captain, of course, or else why would they have come for him? The

Captain had to be ill again.

But then where was Sajaki?

He forced his mind to disregard these questions and concentrate on what Volyova had to say.

After two or three repetitions, he had the whole of her monologue assembled in his head, and was

almost certain he could have regurgitated it word for word. It was indeed curt. They knew what they

wanted, these Ultras. And they knew what it would take to get it. 'I am Triumvir Ilia Volyova of the

lighthugger *Nostalgia for Infinity*' was how she introduced herself. No hellos; not even a

perfunctory admission of gratitude for the fates having allowed them to cross space to Resurgam.

Such niceties, Sylveste knew, were not exactly Ilia Volyova's style. He had always thought of her

as the quiet one; more concerned with housekeeping her hideous weapons than condescending to

engage in anything resembling normal social intercourse. More than once he had heard the other

crewmembers joke -- and they hardly ever joked -- about how Volyova preferred the company of

the vessel's indigenous rats over her human crewmates.

Perhaps they had not really been joking.

'I am addressing you from orbit,' was how she continued. 'We have studied your state of

technological advancement and concluded that you pose us no military threat.' And then she paused,

before continuing in what to Sylveste sounded like the tones of a schoolteacher warning pupils

against committing an act of minor disobedience, like gazing out the window, or not keeping their

com pads well organised. 'However, should any act be construed as a deliberate attempt at inflicting

damage on us, we will retaliate in a massively disproportionate sense.' She almost smiled at that

point. 'Not so much an eye for an eye, so to speak, as a city for an eye. We are fully capable of

destroying any or all of your settlements from orbit.'

Volyova leant forwards, her leonine grey eyes seeming to fill the screen. 'More importantly, we

also have the resolve to do it, should the need arise.' Volyova again allowed herself an over-

dramatic pause, doubtless aware that she had a captive audience at this point.
'If I chose, it could

happen in a matter of minutes. Don't imagine I'd lose much sleep over it.'

Sylveste could see where all this was heading.

'But let us put aside such vulgarities, at least for the moment.' She really smiled at that point,

though as smiles went, it was near-cryogenic in its frostiness. 'You're doubtless wondering why

we're here.'

'Not me,' Sylveste said, loud enough that Pascale heard him.

'There is a man amongst you we seek. Our desire to find him is so absolute, so pressing, that we

have decided to bypass the usual...' Volyova's smile reappeared; an even colder phantom of itself.

'... diplomatic channels. The man's name is Sylveste; no further explanation should be necessary, if

his reputation hasn't waned since our last meeting.'

'Tarnished, perhaps,' Sluka commented. Then, to Sylveste, 'You're really going to have to tell me

more about this prior meeting, you know. It can hardly do you any harm.'

'And knowing the facts won't do you a blind bit of good,' Sylveste said, immediately returning his

attention to the broadcast.

'Ordinarily,' Volyova said, 'we'd establish lines of dialogue with the proper

authorities and

negotiate for Sylveste's handover. Possibly that was our original intention. But a cursory scan of

your planet's main settlement from orbit -- Cuvier -- convinced us that such an approach would be

doomed to failure. We surmised that there was no longer any power worth dealing with. And I'm

afraid we don't have the patience to bargain with squabbling planetary factions.'

Sylveste shook his head. 'She's lying. They never intended to negotiate, no matter what state we

were in. I know these people; they're vicious scum.'

'So you keep telling us,' Sluka said.

'Our options are therefore rather limited,' Volyova continued. 'We want Sylveste, and our

intelligence has confirmed that he is not... how shall I put it -- at large?'

'All that from orbit?' Pascale asked. 'That's what I call good intelligence.'

'Too good,' Sylveste said.

'This then,' Volyova added, 'is how things will proceed. Within twenty-four hours Sylveste will

make his presence and location known to us via a radio-frequency broadcast. Either he emerges

from hiding or those who are holding him set him free. We leave the details to you. If Sylveste is

dead, then irrefutable evidence of his death must be offered in place of the man himself. Whether

we accept it will be entirely at our discretion, of course.'

'Good job I'm not dead, in that case. I doubt there's anything you could do to convince Volyova.'

'She's that intransigent?'

'Not just her; the whole crew.'

But Volyova was still speaking: 'Twenty-four hours, then. We will be listening. And if we hear

nothing, or suspect deception in any form, we will enact a punishment. Our ship has certain

capabilities -- ask Sylveste, if you doubt us. If we have not heard from him within the next day, we

will use that capability against one of your planet's smaller surface communities. We have already

selected the target in question, and the nature of the attack will be such that no one in the

community will survive. Is that clear? No one. Twenty-four hours after that, if we have still heard

nothing of the elusive Dr Sylveste, we will escalate to a larger target. Twenty-four hours after that,

we will destroy Cuvier.' And Volyova proffered another brief smile at that point. 'Though you seem

to be doing an admirable job there yourselves.'

The message ended, then recommenced from the beginning, with Volyova's

blunt introduction.

Sylveste listened to it in its entirety twice more before anyone dared interrupt his concentration.

'They wouldn't do it,' Sluka said. 'Surely not.'

'It's barbaric,' Pascale added, eliciting a nod from their captor. 'No matter how much they need

you -- they couldn't possibly intend to do what she said. I mean, destroy a whole settlement?'

'That's where you're wrong,' Sylveste said. 'They've done it before. And I don't doubt that they'll

do it again.'

There had been never been any real certainty in Volyova's mind that Sylveste was alive -- but on the

other hand, the fact that he might not be present was something she had carefully avoided dwelling

on, because the consequences of failure were too unpleasant to bring to mind. It mattered not that

this was Sajaki's quest, rather than her own. If it failed, he would punish her just as severely as if

she had contrived the whole thing herself; as if it were Volyova who had brought them to this

dispiriting place.

She had not really expected anything to happen in the first few hours. That was too optimistic; it

presumed that Sylveste's captors were awake and immediately aware of her

warning. Realistically,

it might be a fraction of a day before the news was passed along the chain of command to the right

people; yet more time while it was verified. But as the hours became tens of hours, and then most of

a day, she was forced to the conclusion that her threat would have to be enacted.

Of course, the colonists had not been entirely silent. Ten hours earlier, one unnamed group had

come forward with what they claimed were Sylveste's remains. They had left them on the top of a

mesa, then retreated into caves through which the ship's sensors could not peer. Volyova sent down

a drone to examine the remains, but while they were a close genetic match, they did not agree

precisely with the tissue samples retained since Sylveste's last visit to the ship. It would have been

tempting to punish the colonists for this, but on reflection she decided against such a course of

action: they had acted solely out of fear, with no prospect of personal gain except their own -- and

everyone else's -- survival, and she did not want to deter any other parties coming forward.

Likewise she had stilled her hand when two independently acting individuals announced themselves

as Sylveste, since it was obvious that the people in question were not really

lying, but genuinely

believed themselves to be the man himself.

Now, however, there was not even time left for deception.

'I'm actually rather surprised,' she said. 'I thought by now they would have given him over. But

evidently one party in this arrangement is seriously underestimating the other.'

'You can't back down now,' Hegazi said.

'Of course not.' Volyova said it with surprise, as if the thought of clemency had never once

occurred to her.

'No; you have to,' Khouri said. 'You can't go through with this.'

This was almost the first thing she had said all day. Perhaps she was having trouble coming to

terms with the monster for whom she now worked: this suddenly tyrannical incarnation of the

previously fair Volyova. It was difficult not to sympathise. When she examined herself, what she

saw was indeed something monstrous, even if it was not entirely the truth.

'Once a threat's made,' Volyova said, 'it's in everyone's interests to carry it through if the terms

aren't met.'

'What if they can't keep the terms?' Khouri said.

Volyova shrugged. 'That's their problem, not mine.'

She opened the link to Resurgam and said her piece -- reiterating the demands she had made, and

stating her deep disappointment that Sylveste had not been brought to light. She was wondering

how convincing she sounded -- whether the colonists truly believed her threats -- when she was

struck by an inspirational idea. She unclipped her bracelet, whispering the command which would

instruct it to accept limited input from a third party, rather than injuring them.

She passed the bracelet to Khouri.

'You want to salve your conscience, be my guest.'

Khouri examined the device as if it might suddenly extrude fangs, or spit venom into her face.

Finally she raised it to her mouth, not actually slipping it around her wrist.

'Go ahead,' Volyova said. 'I'm serious. Say whatever you want -- I assure you it won't do a blind

bit of good.'

'Speak to the colonists?'

'Certainly -- if you think you can convince them better than I can.'

For a moment Khouri said nothing. Then -- diffidently -- she started speaking into the bracelet.

'My name is Khouri,' she said. 'For whatever it's worth, I want you to know I'm not with these

people. I don't agree with what they're doing.' Khouri's large and frightened eyes scanned the

bridge, as if she expected any moment to be punished for this. But the others showed only mild

interest in what she had to say.

'I was recruited,' she said. 'I didn't understand what they were. They want Sylveste. They're not

lying. I've seen the weapons they've got in this ship, and I think they will use them.'

Volyova affected a look of bored indifference, as if all of this were exactly what she would have

expected; tiresomely so.

'I'm sorry none of you have brought Sylveste forward. I think Volyova's serious when she says

she's going to punish you for that. All I want to say is, you'd better believe her. And maybe if some

of you can bring him forward now it won't be too----'

'Enough.'

Volyova took back the bracelet. 'I'm extending my deadline by one hour only.'

But the hour passed. Volyova barked cryptic commands into her bracelet, causing a target-

designator to spring into place over the northerly latitudes of Resurgam. The red cross-hairs hunted

with sullen, sharklike calm, until they latched onto a particular spot near the

planet's northern

icecap. Then they pulsed a bloodier red, and status graphics informed Volyova that the ship's

orbital-suppression elements -- almost the puniest weapons system it could deploy -- were now

activated, armed, targeted and ready.

Then she resumed her address to the colonists.

'People of Resurgam,' Volyova said. 'Our weapons have just aligned themselves on the small

settlement of Phoenix; fifty-four degrees north by twenty west of Cuvier. In fractionally less than

thirty seconds Phoenix and its immediate environs will cease to exist.'

The woman dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue before continuing. 'This will be our last

announcement for twenty-four hours. You have until then to produce Sylveste, or we escalate to a

larger target. Count yourselves lucky that we began with one as small as Phoenix.'

The general tenor of her pronouncements, Khouri realised, had been that of a schoolteacher

patiently explaining why the punishment she was about to visit upon her pupils was both in their

best interests and entirely brought about by their own actions. She avoided saying, 'This will hurt

me more than it hurts you,' but if she had, Khouri would not have been at all

surprised. In fact, she

wondered if there was anything Volyova could now do which would surprise her in any way. It

seemed that she had not so much misjudged the woman as assigned her to completely the wrong

species. And not just Volyova, but the entire crew. Khouri felt a pang of revulsion, shuddering to

think how much a part of them she had recently dared imagine herself to be. It was as if they had all

pulled masks from their faces, revealing snakes.

Volyova fired.

For a moment -- a long, pregnant moment -- there was nothing. Khouri began to entertain the

idea that maybe the entire thing had been a bluff after all. But that hope lasted until the walls of the

bridge shuddered, as if the entire ship were an ancient sea vessel scraping past an iceberg. Khouri

felt none of the motion, since the articulated seat boom moved to smother the vibrations. But she

had no doubts that she had seen it, and seconds later she heard what sounded like distant thunder.

The hull weapons had discharged.

On the projected image of Resurgam, the weapons readouts recast themselves, changing to

illuminate the conditions of the armaments in the moments after they had

been deployed. Hegazi

consulted his seat readouts, his eyepiece clicking and whirring as it assimilated the news.

'Suppression elements discharged,' he said, voice clipped and devoid of emphasis. 'Targeting

systems confirm correct acquisition.' Then, with magisterial slowness, he elevated his gaze to the

globe.

Khoury looked with him.

There was -- where previously there had been nothing -- a tiny red-hot smear near the edge of

Resurgam's northern polar cap, like a foul rat's eye in the crust of the world. It was darkening now,

like a hot needle just pulled from a brazier. But it was still hurtlingly bright, darkening less through

its own cooling than because it was being progressively shrouded by titanic veils of uplifted

planetary debris. In windows which opened fleetingly in the curdling dark storm, Khoury observed

dancing tendrils of lightning, their bright ignitions strobing the landscape for hundreds of

kilometres around. A near-circular shockwave was racing from the site of the attack. Khoury

observed its movement via a subtle change in the refractive index of the air, the way a ripple in

shallow water caused the rocks below to acquire a momentary fluidity of their own.

'Preliminary sit-rep coming in now,' Hegazi said, still managing to sound like a bored acolyte

reciting the duller of scriptures. 'Weps functionality: nominal. Ninety-nine point four per cent

probability that target was completely neutralised. Seventy-nine per cent probability that no one

within two hundred kilometres could have survived, unless they were behind a kilometre of

armour.'

'Good enough odds for me,' Volyova said. She studied the wound in the surface of Resurgam for

a moment longer, evidently satiating herself with the thought of planetary-scale destruction.

FIFTEEN

Mantell, North Nekhebet, 2566

'They bluffed,' Sluka said, just as a sudden, false dawn shone over the north-easterly horizon,

turning the intervening ridges and bluffs into serrated black cutouts. The glare was magnesium-

bright, edged in purple. Briefly it overloaded whole strips of Sylveste's vision, leaving numb voids

where it had burned.

'Care to take another guess?' he asked.

For a moment Sluka seemed unable to answer. She only stared at the flare, mesmerised by its

radiance and the message of atrocity it brought.

'He told you they'd do it,' Pascale said. 'You should have listened to him. He knew these people.

He knew they'd do exactly what they promised.'

'I never thought they would,' Sluka said, her voice so quiet that it seemed she was talking to

herself. Despite the glare, it was still a totally silent evening, free even of the usual music of

Resurgam's winds. 'I thought their threat was too monstrous to take seriously.'

'Nothing's too monstrous for them.' Sylveste's eyes were returning to normality now; enough that

he could read the expressions of the women who were standing next to him on Mantell's mesa.

'From now on, you'd better take Volyova at her word. She means what she said. In twenty-four

hours she'll do it all again, unless you turn me over.'

It was as if Sluka had not heard him. 'Perhaps we ought to get down,' was all she said.

Sylveste agreed, though before they headed back into the mesa they took time to crudely measure

the direction from which the flash had come. 'We know when it happened,' Sylveste said. 'And we

know the direction. When the pressure wave comes-through, we'll know how far away it was.

Settlements on Resurgam are still widely spread, so we should be able to pinpoint it.'

'She said the name of the place,' Pascale said.

Sylveste nodded.

'But while I'd believe any threat she made, I also know Volyova's not to be trusted.'

'I don't know anything about Phoenix,' Sluka said, as they descended via a cargo elevator. 'I

thought I knew most of the recent settlements. But then again I've not exactly been at the heart of

government these last few years.'

'She would have started with something small,' Sylveste said. 'Otherwise she

wouldn't have room

to escalate. We can assume Phoenix was a soft target; a scientific or geological outpost; something

on which the rest of the colony wasn't materially dependent. Just people, in other words.'

Sluka shook her head. 'We're talking about them in the past tense, and we never even discussed

them in the present. It's like their only reason for existing was so they could die.'

Sylveste felt physically sick; on the nauseous cusp of actually vomiting. It was, he thought, the

only occasion in his life when this feeling had been engendered by an external event; something in

which he was not directly participating. He had not even felt this way when Carine Lefevre had

died. The mistake -- the error -- had not been his to commit. And while he had argued with Sluka

that the crew would inflict what they threatened, some part of him had clung to the idea that,

ultimately, they would not; that he was wrong and Sluka and the other humanitarians were correct.

Perhaps, had he been in Sluka's position, he too would have ignored the warning, irrespective of

how sure he had felt before the attack. The cards always look different when it's your turn to play

them; loaded with subtly different possibilities.

The pressure wave came three hours later. By then it was little more than a gust, but it was a gust

completely out of place on such a still night. After it had passed, the air was turbulent, prone to

sudden squalls, as if a full-blooded razorstorm was on the verge. Timing of the shock indicated that

the site of the attack was somewhat less than three and a half thousand miles away (seismic data

also confirmed this); almost due north-east, according to the visual evidence. Retiring under guard

to Sluka's stateroom, they pushed themselves beyond sleep with strong coffee, calling up global

maps of the colony from Mantell's archives.

Feeling edgy, Sylveste sipped his drink.

'Like you say, it could be a new settlement they've hit. Are these maps up to date?'

'As good as,' Sluka said. 'They were refreshed from Cuvier's central cartographics section about a

year ago, before things became too serious around here.'

Sylveste looked at the map, projected over Sluka's table like a ghostly, topographic tablecloth.

The area displayed by the map was two thousand kilometres square, large enough to contain the

destroyed colony, even if their directional estimate was crude.

But there was no sign of Phoenix.

'We need more recent maps,' he said. 'It's possible this place was founded in the last year.'

'That's not going to be easy to arrange.'

'Then you'd better find a way. You have to make a decision in the next twenty-four hours.'

Probably the biggest of your life.'

'Don't flatter yourself. I've as good as decided to let them have you.'

Sylveste shrugged, as if it were of no consequence to him. 'Even so, you should still be in

possession of the facts. You're going to be dealing with Volyova. If you can't be sure that her threats

are genuine, you might be tempted to call her bluff.'

She looked at him, long and hard.

'We do still have -- in principle -- data links to Cuvier, via what remains of the comsat girdle. But

they've barely been used since the domes were blown. It would be risky to open them -- the data-

trail could lead back to us.'

'I'd say that's the least of anyone's worries right now.'

'He's right,' Pascale said. 'With all this going on, who's going to care about a minor breach of

security in Cuvier? I'd say it would be worthwhile just to get the maps updated.'

'How long will it take?'

'An hour; two hours. Why, were you planning on going somewhere?'

'No,' Sylveste said, conspicuously failing to smile. 'But someone else might be deciding for me.'

They went surfaceside again while they were waiting for the maps to be revised. There were no

stars visible in the low north-east; just a hump of sooty nothingness, as if a gargantuan crouched

figure were looming over the horizon. It must have been an uplifted wall of dust, edging towards

them. 'It'll blanket the world for months,' Sluka said. 'Just as if a massive volcano had gone off.'

'The winds are getting stronger,' Sylveste said.

Pascale nodded. 'Could they have done that -- changed the weather, this far from the attack?

What if the weapon they used caused radioactive contamination?'

'It needn't have been,' Sylveste said. 'Some kind of kinetic-energy weapon would have sufficed.

Knowing Volyova, she wouldn't have done anything more than was absolutely necessary. But

you're right to worry about radiation. That weapon probably opened a hole right through the

lithosphere. It's anyone's guess what was released from the crust.'

'We shouldn't spend too much time surfaceside.'

'Agreed -- but that probably goes for the colony as a whole.'

One of Sluka's aides appeared in the exit door.

'You've got the maps?' she asked.

'Give us another half-hour,' he said. 'We've got the data, but the encryption's pretty heavy. There's

news from Cuvier, though. We just picked it up, publicly broadcast.'

'Go on.'

'It seems the ship took pictures of the -- uh -- aftermath. They transmitted them to the capital, and

now they've been sent around the planet.' The aide took a battered compad from his pocket, its

flatscreen throwing his features into lilac relief. 'I have the images.'

'You'd better show us.'

The aide placed the compad on the mesa's gritty, wind-smoothed surface. 'They must have used

infrared,' he said.

The pictures were awesome and terrifying. Molten rock was still snaking from the crater and

beyond, or spraying in fountainlike cascades from dozens of suddenly birthed baby volcanoes. All

evidence of the settlement had been obliterated, completely swallowed by the wide cauldron of the

crater, which must have been a kilometre or two across. There were vast patches of glassy

smoothness near its centre, like solidified tar; black as night.

'For a moment I hoped we were wrong,' Sluka said, 'I hoped that the flash, even the pressure-

wave -- I hoped that somehow they'd been faked, like a theatrical effect. But I can't see how they

could have faked this without actually blowing a hole in the planet.'

'We'll know in a while,' the aide said. 'I presume I can speak freely?'

'This concerns Sylveste,' Sluka said. 'So he may as well hear it.'

'Cuvier has a plane heading towards the site of the attack. They'll be able to confirm that this

imagery wasn't fabricated.'

By the time they returned underground the maps had been cracked, replacing the outdated copies

in Mantell's archive. Once again they retired to Sluka's stateroom to view the data. This time the

map's accompanying information showed that it had been updated only a few weeks earlier.

'They've done pretty well,' Sylveste said. 'To have kept up with the business of cartography while

the city was crumbling around them. I admire their dedication.'

'Never mind their motives,' Sluka said, brushing her fingers against one of the pedestal-mounted

globes which flanked the room, seemingly to anchor herself to the planet which now seemed to be

spinning irrevocably beyond her control. 'As long as Phoenix -- or whatever they called it -- is there,

that's all I care.'

'It's there all right,' Pascale said.

Her finger penetrated the projected terrain, arrowing a tiny, labelled dot in the otherwise

unpopulated north-eastern ranges. 'It's the only thing so far north,' she said. 'And the only settlement

in remotely the right direction. It's called Phoenix, too.'

'What else do you have on it?'

Sluka's aide -- he was a small man with a delicately oiled moustache and goatee -- spoke softly

into his sleeve-mounted compad, instructing the map to zoom in on the settlement. A series of

demographic icons popped into existence above the table. 'Not much,' he said. 'Just a few multi-

family surface shacks linked by tubes. A few underground workings. No ground connections,

although they did have a landing pad for aircraft.'

'Population?'

'I don't think population's quite the word for it,' the man said. 'Just a hundred or so; about

eighteen family units. Most of them from Cuvier, by the look of this.' He shrugged. 'Actually, if this

was her idea of a strike against the colony, I think we did remarkably well. A hundred or so people -

- well, it's a tragedy. But I'm surprised she didn't play her hand against a more populous target. The

fact that none of us really knew this place existed -- it almost nullifies the act, don't you think?

'A splendidly inept thing,' Sylveste said, nodding despite himself.

'What?'

'The human capacity for grief. It just isn't capable of providing an adequate emotional response

once the dead exceed a few dozen in number. And it doesn't just level off -- it just gives up, resets

itself to zero. Admit it. None of us feels a damn about these people.' Sylveste looked at the map,

wondering what it must have been like for the inhabitants, given those few seconds of warning

which Volyova had prescribed them. He wondered if any of them had taken the trouble to leave

their dwellings and face the sky, in order to quicken -- fractionally -- the coming annihilation. 'But I

do know one thing. We have all the evidence we need that she's a woman of her word. And that

means you have to let me go to them.'

'I'm reluctant to lose you,' Sluka said. 'But it isn't like I have much choice in the matter. You'll be

wanting to contact them, of course.'

'Naturally,' Sylveste said. 'And of course Pascale will be coming with me. But

there's one thing

I'd like you to do for me first.'

'A favour?' Sluka sounded amused, as if this were the last thing in the world she would have

expected from him. 'Well, what can I do for you, now that we've become such firm friends?'

Sylveste smiled. 'Actually it's not so much what you can do for me as what Doctor Falkender can.

It concerns my eyes, you see.'

From the vantage point of her floating, boom-suspended seat, the Triumvir observed the handiwork

she had wrought on the planet below. It was all perfectly clear, imaged precisely on the bridge's

projection sphere. In the last ten hours she had observed the wound extend dark cyclonic tendrils

away from its focus, evidence that the weather in that region -- and, by implication, elsewhere on

the planet -- had been tipped towards a violent new equilibrium. According to the locally culled

data, the colonists on Resurgam called such phenomena razorstorms, on account of the merciless

flensing quality of the airborne dust. It was fascinating to watch, much like the dissection of some

unfamiliar animal species. Although she had had more experience with planets than many of her

crewmates, there were still things about them which she found surprising and not a little disturbing.

It was disturbing that simply puncturing a hole in the planet's integument could have this much

effect -- not just on the immediate locality of the place she had attacked, but thousands of

kilometres beyond. Eventually, she knew, there would not be a spot on the planet which had not

been in some measurable way affected by her action. The dust she had caused to be elevated would

eventually settle; a fine blackened, faintly radioactive caul deposited fairly uniformly around the

planet. In the temperate regions it would soon be washed away by the weather processes which the

colonists had instigated, assuming of course that those processes still functioned. But in the arctic

regions there was never any rain, so the fine fall of dust would remain unperturbed for centuries to

come. Eventually other deposits would cover it, and it would become part of the irrevocable

geological memory of the planet. Perhaps, the Triumvir mused, in a few million years other beings

would arrive on Resurgam, sharing something of humanity's curiosity. They would want to learn of

the planet's history, and in doing so they would take core samples, reaching far back into

Resurgam's past. Doubtless that deposited layer of dust would not be the only mystery they had to

solve, but nonetheless they would mull on it, if only fleetingly. And she had no doubt that those

hypothetical future investigators would come to a totally wrong conclusion regarding the layer's

origin. It would never occur to them that it had been put there by an act of conscious volition...

Volyova had slept only a few hours in the last thirty, but her nervous energy currently seemed

limitless. She would, of course, pay a price for it at some point in the near future, but for now she

felt like she was careering, imbued with unstoppable momentum. Even so, she did not immediately

snap to alertness when Hegazi steered his chair next to hers.

'What is it?'

'I'm getting something which might very much be our boy.'

'Sylveste?'

'Or someone pretending to be him.' Hegazi entered one of his intermittent phases of fugue, which

to Volyova signified that he was in deep rapport with the ship. 'Can't trace the communication route

he's using. It's coming from Cuvier, but you can bet Sylveste isn't physically there.'

She did not raise her voice, even though the two of them were quite alone in

the bridge.

'What's he saying?'

'He's just asking to speak to us. Over and over again.'

Khouri heard footsteps sloshing through the inch-thick sludge which flooded the entire Captain's

level.

She did not have a rational answer for why she had come down here. Perhaps that was the point,

really: now that she no longer trusted Volyova -- the one person she had thought she could place her

faith in -- and now that the Mademoiselle was absent, as she had been ever since the attack against

the cache-weapon, Khouri had to turn to the irrational. The only person left on the ship who had not

in some way betrayed her, or had not earned her hatred, was the one she could never expect an

answer from.

She knew almost immediately that the footsteps did not belong to Volyova, but there was a

purposefulness to them which suggested that the person knew exactly where they were going, and

had not simply strolled into this area of the ship by accident.

Khouri got up out of the muck. The seat of her trousers was wet and cold with the stuff, but the

darkness of the fabric concealed most of the damage.

'Relax,' said the person, strolling casually round the bend, her boots sloshing through the sludge.

There was a glint of metal from the woman's free-swinging arms and a multicoloured glow from the

holographic designs worked into the arms' metalwork.

'Sudjic,' Khouri identified. 'How the hell did you----'

Sudjic shook her head with a tight-lipped smile. 'How did I find my way down here? Simple,

Khouri. I followed you. Once I saw which general direction you'd gone, it was obvious you must be

headed here. So I came after you, because I reckon you and I could use a little chat.'

'A chat?'

'About the situation here.' Sudjic gestured expansively. 'On this ship. More specifically, the

fucking Triumvirate. It can't have escaped you that I have a grievance against one of them.'

'Volyova.'

'Yes, our mutual friend Ilia.' Sudjic managed to make the woman's name sound like a particularly

unsavoury expletive. 'She killed my lover, you know that.'

'I understand there'd been... problems.'

'Problems, ha. That's a good one. Do you call turning someone psychotic a

problem, Khouri?' She

paused, stepped a little closer, but still kept a respectful distance from the fused, angelic core of the

Captain. 'Or maybe I should call you Ana, now that we're on -- uh -- closer terms.'

'Call me what you want. It doesn't alter anything. I may hate her guts right now, but that doesn't

mean I'm about to betray her. We shouldn't even be having this conversation.'

Sudjic nodded sagely. 'She really hit you with that loyalty therapy, didn't she? Look, Sajaki and

the others are not nearly as omniscient as you'd think. You can tell me everything.'

'There's a lot more to it than that.'

'Such as?' Sudjic was standing akimbo now, her gauntleted hands placed daintily against her

narrow hips. The woman was beautiful, in the emaciated way which was common among the

spaceborn. Her physiology was wraith-like; had her underlying skeletal-muscular structure not been

chimerically enhanced, it was doubtful she would have been fully ambulatory in normal gravity.

But now, with those subcutaneous augmentations, Sudjic was undoubtably stronger and faster than

any non-augmented human. Her strength was double-edged, because she looked so fragile. She was

like an origami sculpture of a woman folded from razor-sharp paper.

'I can't tell you,' Khouri said. 'But Ilia and I -- we have mutual secrets.'
Instantly she regretted

saying that, but she wanted to deflate the smug superiority of the Ultra. 'What I mean is----'

'Listen, I'm sure that's the way she wants you to feel. But ask yourself this, Khouri. How much of

what you remember is real? Isn't it possible that Volyova's been screwing with your memories? She

tried it with Boris. She tried to cure him by erasing his past, but it didn't work. He still had the

voices to deal with. That go for you too? Any new voices floating around in your head?'

'If there are,' Khouri said, 'they haven't got anything to do with Volyova.'

'So you admit it.' Sudjic smiled primly, like a valiant schoolgirl acknowledging victory in a game,

but hoping not to look too proud of the fact. 'Well, whether you do or don't, it doesn't matter. The

fact is you're disillusioned with her. With the Triumvirate as a whole. You can't kid yourself you

liked what they just did.'

'I'm not sure I understand what it was they just did, Sudjic. There are a few things I haven't got

right in my head.' Khouri felt the cold, wet fabric of her trousers clinging to her buttocks. 'That's

why I came down here, as a matter of fact. For some peace and quiet. To get my head together.'

'And see if he had wisdom to spare?'

Sudjic had nodded towards the Captain.

'He's dead, Sudjic. I may be the only person here who recognises that, but it's true all the same.'

'Maybe Sylveste can cure him.'

'Even if he could, would Sajaki want it to happen?'

Sudjic nodded knowingly. 'Of course, of course. I understand totally. But listen.' Her voice

lowered to a conspiratorial whisper, though the only possible eavesdroppers were the skulking rats.

'They've found Sylveste -- I just heard, before I came down.'

'Found him? You mean he's here?'

'No, of course not. They've just made contact. They don't even know where he is yet, just that he's

alive. Still got to get the bastard aboard somehow. And that's where you come in. Me too, in fact.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't pretend to understand what happened with Kjarval in the training chamber, Khouri.

Maybe she just cracked, although I knew her better than anyone else on this ship, and I'd say she

wasn't really the cracking type. Whatever it was, it gave Volyova an excuse

to finish her off -- not

that I ever thought the bitch really hated her that much...'

'It wasn't Volyova's fault...'

'Whatever.' Sudjic shook her head. 'That's not important -- just now. But what it means is she

needs you for the mission. You and me, Khouri -- and maybe the bitch-queen herself -- are going

down there to retrieve him.'

'You can't know that yet.'

Sudjic shook her head. 'Not officially I can't. But when you've been aboard this ship as long as I

have, you'll know a thing or two about bypassing the usual channels.'

For a moment there was only silence, broken by the distant dripping of a leaking conduit, some

distance down the flooded corridor.

'Sudjic, why are you telling me this? I thought you hated my guts.'

'Maybe I did,' the woman said. 'Once. But now we need all the allies we can get. And I thought

you might appreciate forewarning. Especially if you've got any sense, and you know who to trust.'

Volyova addressed her bracelet. ' *Infinity*, I want you to correlate the voice you're about to hear

against shipboard records of Sylveste. If you can't confirm a match, let me know immediately via

secure readout.'

Sylveste's voice burst in on them, mid-sentence: '... if you are reading me. Repeat, I need to know

if you are reading me. I demand that you acknowledge me, bitch. I demand that you fucking

acknowledge me!'

'That's him all right,' Volyova said, speaking over the man's voice, 'I'd know that petulant tone

anywhere. Better put him out of it. I presume we still don't have a fix on him?'

'Sorry. You're going to have to address the colony as a whole and assume he has a means of

reading you.'

'I'm sure he won't have neglected that detail.' Volyova consulted her bracelet, observing that the

ship could so far not disprove the hypothesis that the voice she was hearing belonged to Sylveste.

There was room for error, since the Sylveste who had come aboard the ship once before was a much

younger counterpart of the one they were now looking for, and so the voice match was not expected

to be perfect. But even allowing for that, it looked increasingly likely that they had found him, and

that this was not simply another hapless impersonator coming forward to 'save' the colony. 'All

right, patch me through. Sylveste? This is Volyova. Tell me if you're hearing this.'

His voice was clearer now. 'About fucking time.'

'I think we'll take that as a "yes",' Hegazi said.

'We need to discuss the logistics of picking you up, and I believe it would be very much easier if

we could do so on a secure channel. If you give me your current location, we can make a detailed

sensor-sweep of that region and pick up your transmission at source, avoiding the relay at Cuvier.'

'Now why would you need to do that? Is there something you want me to know that the colony as

a whole can't share?' Sylveste paused, but Volyova mentally inserted a sneer at that point. 'After all,

you haven't been slow in bringing them into it so far.' Another pause.

'Incidentally, it troubles me

that I'm dealing with you and not Sajaki.'

'He's indisposed,' Volyova said. 'Give me your position.'

'Sorry, but that isn't possible.'

'You'll have to do better than that.'

'Why should I bother? You're the ones with all the firepower. You figure out a solution.'

Hegazi waved his hand, signalling Volyova to cut the audio link. 'Maybe he can't reveal his

position.'

'Can't?'

Hegazi tapped a steel forefinger against his steel-bridged nose.

'His captors might not let him. They're ready to let him go, but they don't want to give up their

position.'

Volyova nodded, admitting that Hegazi's suggestion was probably close to the truth. She

reinstated the link. 'All right Sylveste. I think I understand your predicament. I propose the

following compromise, assuming that you have the means to move around. Your -- uh -- hosts can

doubtless arrange something at short notice, I presume?'

'We have transportation, if that's what you're asking.'

'You have six more hours, in that case. Enough time to get to a location sufficiently far from

where you are now that you won't compromise it when you reveal your position. But if in six hours

we don't hear from you, we will bring forward the attack against the next target. Is that perfectly

clear to all concerned?'

'Oh yes,' Sylveste said, tartly. 'Perfectly clear.'

'There's one more thing.'

'Yes?'

'Bring Calvin with you.'

SIXTEEN

North Nekhebet, 2566

Sylveste felt the aircraft haul itself aloft, at first moving horizontally to clear Mantell's dugout

hangar, then making rapid height and swerving to avoid dashing itself against the stacked strata of

the adjacent mesa wall. He made himself a window, but the thickening dust allowed him only a

glimpse of the base, the mesa in which it had been tunnelled falling away below the brilliant

undercurve of the plasma-wing. He knew, with absolute certainty, that he would not be returning. It

was not just Mantell that he sensed he was seeing for the last time, but -- and he could not have

articulated exactly why -- the colony itself.

The machine was the smallest and least valuable aircraft that the settlement could muster; barely

larger than one of the volantors which he had flown in Chasm City a lifetime earlier. It was also fast

enough to make that six hours of grace count; capable of putting a useful distance between itself

and the mesa. The aircraft could have carried four, but only Sylveste and Pascale were riding it. Yet

-- insofar as their freedom of movement went -- they were still Sluka's

captives. Her people had

programmed the aircraft's route before it left Mantell, and it would only deviate from that flight-

plan if the autopilot judged that the weather conditions merited a different course. Unless ground

conditions at the site became intolerable, it would deposit Sylveste and his wife at a pre-agreed

location which had still not been revealed to Volyova and her crew. If conditions were bad, another

site could be picked in the same area.

The plane would not linger at the delivery point. After Sylveste and Pascale had been let off --

with enough provisions to survive in the storm for a few hours at most -- the plane would return

swiftly to Mantell, evading the few extant radar systems which could have alerted Resurgam City to

its trajectory. Sylveste would then contact Volyova and inform her of his location, although,

because he would then be broadcasting directly, she would have no difficulty triangulating his

position. Thereafter things would be in Volyova's hands. Sylveste had no real idea how events

would proceed, how she would bring him aboard the ship. That was her problem, not his. All he

knew was that it was very unlikely that this whole affair was a trap. Although the Ultras wanted

access to Calvin, Calvin was essentially useless without Sylveste. They would want to take very

good care of him indeed. And if the same logic did not automatically apply to Pascale, Sylveste had

taken steps to amend that deficiency.

The aircraft levelled now. It was flying below the average height of the mesas, using their bulk

for cover. Every few seconds it would veer, steering through the narrow, canyonlike corridors

which spaced the mesas. Visibility was near zero. Sylveste hoped that the terrain map on which the

plane was basing its manoeuvres had not been compromised by any recent landfalls, or else the ride

would be very much shorter than the six hours Volyova had allocated.

'Where the hell...' Calvin, who had just appeared in the cabin, looked around frantically. He was,

as usual, reclining in an enormous, fussily upholstered chair. There was not enough room for its

bulk in the fuselage, so its extremities had to vanish awkwardly into the walls. 'Where the hell am I?

I'm not getting anything! What the hell's happened? Tell me!'

Sylveste turned to his wife. 'The first thing he does, on being woken, is sniff the local cybernetic

environment -- allows him to get his bearings, establish the time frame, and so on. Trouble is, right

now there isn't a local cybernetic environment, so he's a bit disorientated.'

'Stop talking about me like I'm not here. Wherever the hell here is!'

'You're in a plane,' Sylveste said.

'A plane? That's novel,' Cal nodded, regaining some of his composure. 'Very novel indeed. Don't

think I've ever been in one of those before. I don't suppose you'd mind filling your old dad in on a

few key facts?'

'That's exactly why I've woken you.' Sylveste paused to cancel the windows; there was no view

now and the unchanging pall of dust served only to remind him of what lay ahead once the plane

had deposited them. 'Don't for one moment imagine it was because I felt in need of a fireside chat,

Cal.'

'You look older, son.'

'Yes, well, some of us have to get on with the business of being alive in the entropic universe.'

'Ouch. That hurts, you know.'

Pascale said, 'Stop it, will you? There isn't time for this bickering.'

'I don't know,' Sylveste said. 'Five hours -- seems like more than enough to me. What do you

think, Cal?'

'Too right. What does she know anyway?' Cal glared at her. 'It's traditional, dearie. It's how we --

how shall I put it? Touch base. If he showed even the remotest hint of cordiality towards me, then

I'd really start worrying. It would mean he wanted some excruciatingly difficult favour.'

'No,' Sylveste said. 'For merely excruciatingly difficult favours, I'd just threaten you with erasure.

I haven't needed anything big enough from you to justify being pleasant, and I doubt I ever will.'

Calvin winked at Pascale. 'He's right, of course. Silly me.'

He was manifesting in a high-collared ash-coloured frock coat, its sleeves patterned with inter-

locked gold chevrons. One booted foot was resting on the knee of his other leg, and the frock's tail

draped over the raised leg in a long curtain of gently rippling fabric. His beard and moustache had

attained some realm beyond the merely fussy, sculpted into a whole of such complexity that it could

only have been maintained by the fastidious attention of an army of dedicated grooming-servitors.

An amber data-monocle rested in one socket (an affectation, since Calvin had been implanted for

direct interfacing since birth), and his hair (long now) extended beyond the back of his skull in an

oiled handle, reconnecting with his scalp somewhere above his nape.

Sylveste attempted to date the

ensemble, but failed. It was possible that the look referred to a particular era from Calvin's days on

Yellowstone. It was equally possible that the simulation had invented it entirely from scratch, to kill

the time while all his routines booted.

'So, anyway...'

'The plane's taking me to meet Volyova,' Sylveste said. 'You remember her, of course?'

'How could we forget.' Calvin removed the monocle, polishing it absently against his sleeve.

'And just how did all this come about?'

'It's a long story. She's put the squeeze on the colony. They had little choice but to hand me over.

You too, in fact.'

'She wanted me?'

'Don't look all surprised about it.'

'I'm not; just disappointed. And of course this is rather a lot to take in all of a sudden.' Calvin

popped the monocle back in, one eye glaring magnified behind the amber. 'Do you think she wanted

us together as a safeguard, or because she has something specific in mind?'

'Probably the latter. Not that she's been exactly open about her intentions.'

Calvin nodded thoughtfully. 'So you've been dealing only with Volyova, is that it?'

'Does that strike you as odd?'

'I would have expected our friend Sajaki to show his face at some point.'

'Me too, but she hasn't made any reference to his absence.' Sylveste shrugged. 'Does it really

matter? They're all as bad as each other.'

'Granted, but at least with Sajaki we knew where we were.'

'Shafted, you mean?'

Calvin rocked his head equivocally. 'Say what you like about the man, at least he kept his word.

And he -- or whoever is running things -- has at least had the decency not to bother you again until

now. How long has it been since we were last aboard that Gothic monstrosity they call *Nostalgia*

for Infinity?'

'About a hundred and thirty years. A lot less for them, of course -- only a few decades as far as

they were concerned.'

'I suppose we'd better assume the worst.'

'The worst what?' Pascale said.

'That,' Calvin began, with laboured patience, 'we have a certain task to perform, in connection

with a certain gentleman.' He squinted at Sylveste. 'How much does she know, anyway?'

'Rather less than I imagined, I suspect.' Pascale did not look amused.

'I told her the minimum,' Sylveste said, glancing between his wife and the beta-level simulation.

'For her own good.'

'Oh, thanks.'

'Of course, I had some doubts of my own...'

'Dan, just what is it these people want with you and your father?'

'Ah, well, that's another very long story, I'm afraid.'

'You've got five hours -- you just said so yourself. Assuming, of course, you two can bear to

break off from your mutual admiration session.'

Calvin raised one eyebrow. 'Never heard it called that before. But maybe she's got something, eh,

son?'

'Yes,' Sylveste said. 'What she's got is a severe misapprehension of the situation.'

'Nonetheless, maybe you should tell her a bit more -- keep her in the picture and all that.'

The aircraft executed a particularly abrupt turn, Calvin the only one amongst them impervious to

the motion. 'All right,' Sylveste said. 'Though I still say she'd be better off knowing less rather than

more.'

'Why don't you let me be the judge of that?' Pascale said.

Calvin smiled. 'Start by telling her about dear Captain Brannigan, that's my advice.'

So Sylveste told her the rest of it. Until then, he had deliberately skirted the issue of what exactly

it was that Sajaki's crew wanted of him. Pascale had always had every right to know, of course... but

the subject itself was so unpalatable to Sylveste that he had done his best to avoid it at all times. It

was not that he had anything personal against Captain Brannigan, or even any lack of sympathy for

what had become of the man. The Captain was a unique individual with a uniquely horrifying

affliction. Even if he was not in any sense aware now (to the best of Sylveste's knowledge), he had

been in the past, and could be again in the future, in the admittedly unlikely event that he could be

cured. So what if the Captain's murky past quite possibly contained crimes? Surely the man had

atoned for prior sins a thousand times over in his present state. No; anyone would have wished the

Captain well, and most people would have been willing to expend some energy in helping him,

provided they ran no risk to themselves. Even some small risk might have been accepted.

But what the crew were asking of Sylveste was much more than just the acceptance of personal

risk. They would require him to submit to Calvin; to allow Cal to invade his mind and take

command of his motor functions. The thought alone was repulsive. It was bad enough dealing with

Cal as a beta-level simulation; as bad as being haunted by his father's ghost. He would have

destroyed the beta-level years ago if it had not proven so intermittently useful, but just knowing it

existed made him uncomfortable. Cal was too perceptive; too shrewd in his... in *its* judgements. It

knew what he had done with the alpha-level simulation, even if it had never come out and said it.

But every time he allowed it into his head, it seemed to sink deeper tendrils into him. It seemed to

know him better each time; seemed able to predict his own responses more closely. What did that

make him, if what seemed like his own free will was so easily mimicked by a piece of software

which had no theoretical consciousness of its own? It was worse than simply the dehumanising

aspect of the channelling process, of course. The physical procedure was itself far from pleasant, for

his own voluntary motor signals had to be blocked at source, obstructed by a stew of neuro-

inhibitory chemicals. He would be paralysed, yet moving -- as close to demonic possession as

anyone ever came. It had always been a nightmarish experience; never one he was in a hurry to

repeat.

No, he thought. The Captain could go to hell, for all he cared. Why should he lose his own

humanity to save someone who had lived longer than most people in history? Sympathy be damned.

The Captain should have been allowed to die years ago, and the greater crime now was not the

Captain's suffering, but what his crew were prepared to put Sylveste through to alleviate it.

Of course, Calvin saw it differently... less an ordeal, more an opportunity...

'Of course, I was the first,' Calvin said. 'Back when I was still corporeal.'

'The first what?'

'First to serve him. He was heavily chimeric even then. Some of the technologies holding him

together dated from before the Transenlightenment. God knows how old the flesh parts of him

were.' He fingered his beard and moustache, as if needing to remind himself how artful the

combination was. 'This was before the Eighty, of course. But I was known even then as an

experimenter on the fringe of the radical chimeric sciences. I wasn't just

content with renovating the

techniques developed before the Transenlightenment. I wanted to go beyond what they'd attained. I

wanted to leave them in my dust. I wanted to push the envelope so far it ripped into shreds, and then

remake it from the pieces.'

'Yes, enough about you Cal,' Sylveste said. 'We were discussing Brannigan, remember?'

'It's called setting the scene, dear boy.' Calvin blinked. 'Anyway, Brannigan was an extreme

chimeric, and I was someone prepared to consider extreme measures. When he became sick, his

friends had no choice but to hire my services. Of course, this was all strictly below-board -- and it

was a total diversion, even for me. I was increasingly uninterested in physiological modifications, at

the expense of a growing fascination -- obsession, if you will -- with neural transformations.

Specifically, I wanted to find a way of mapping neural activity straight into---
-' Calvin broke off,

biting his lower lip.

'Brannigan used him,' Sylveste continued. 'And in return, helped him to establish ties with some

of the Chasm City rich; potential clients for the Eighty program. And if he'd done a good job of

healing Brannigan, that would have been the end of the story. But he botched the job -- did the

minimum he could get away with, to get Brannigan's allies off his back. If he'd taken the trouble to

do it properly, we wouldn't be in this mess now.'

'What he means,' Calvin cut in, 'is that my repair of the Captain could not be considered

permanent. It was inevitable, given the nature of his chimerism, that some other aspect of his

physiology would eventually need our attention. And by then -- because of the complexity of the

work I'd done on him -- there was literally no other person they could turn to.'

'So they came back,' Pascale said.

'This time he was commanding the ship we're about to board.' Sylveste looked at the simulation.

'Cal was dead; the Eighty a publicly staged atrocity. All that remained of him was this beta-level

simulation. Needless to say Sajaki -- he was with the Captain by then -- was not best pleased. But

they found a way, all the same.'

'A way?'

'For Calvin to work on the Captain. They found he could work through me. The beta-level sim

provided the expertise in chimeric surgery. I provided the meat it needed to move around to get the

job done. "Channelling" was what the Ultras called it.'

'Then it needn't have been you at all,' Pascale said. 'Provided they had the beta-level simulation --

or a copy of it -- couldn't one of them have acted as the -- as you so charmingly put it -- meat?'

'No, though they probably would have preferred it that way: it would have freed them of any

dependency on me. But channelling only worked when there was a close match between the beta-

level sim and the person it was working through. Like a hand fitting into a glove. It worked with me

and Calvin because he was my father; there were many points of genetic similarity. Slice open our

brains and you'd probably have trouble telling them apart.'

'And now?'

'They're back.'

'Now if only he'd done a good job last time,' Calvin said, dignifying his remark with a thin smile

of self-satisfaction.

'Blame yourself; you were in the driving seat. I just did what you told me.' Sylveste scowled. 'In

fact for most of it I wasn't even what you'd term conscious. Not that I didn't hate every minute of it,

all the same.'

'And they're going to make you do it again,' Pascale said. 'Is that all it's about? Everything that's

happened here? The attack on that settlement? Just to get you to help their Captain?'

Sylveste nodded. 'In case it hasn't escaped your attention, the people we're about to do business

with are not what you'd properly term human. Their priorities and timescales are a little... abstract.'

'I wouldn't call it business, in that case. I'd call it blackmail.'

'Well,' Sylveste said. 'That's where you're wrong. You see, this time Volyova made a small

miscalculation. She gave me some warning of her arrival.'

Volyova glanced up at the imaged view of Resurgam. At the moment Sylveste's location on the

planet's surface was completely unknown, like a quantum wave function which had not yet

collapsed. Yet in a moment they would have an accurate triangulation fix on his broadcast, and that

wave function would shed a myriad unselected possibilities.

'You have him?'

'Signal's weak,' Hegazi said. 'That storm you made is causing a lot of ionospheric interference. I

bet you're really proud, aren't you?'

'Just a get a fix, *svinoi*.'

'Patience, patience.'

Volyova had not really doubted that Sylveste would call in on time. Nonetheless, when she heard

from him, she could not help but feel relief. It meant that another element in the tricky business of

getting him aboard had been achieved. She did not, however, deceive herself that the job was in any

way complete. And there had been something arrogant about Sylveste's demands -- the way he

seemed to be ordering how things should happen -- which left her wondering if her colleagues

really did have the upper hand. If Sylveste had set out to sow a seed of doubt in her mind, the man

had certainly succeeded. Damn him. She had prepared herself, knowing that Sylveste was adept at

mind games, but she had not prepared herself enough. Then she took a mental back step and asked

herself how things had so far proceeded. After all, Sylveste was shortly to be in their custody. He

could not possibly desire such an outcome, especially as he would know just what it was they

wanted from him. If he were in control of his destiny, he would not now be on the verge of being

brought aboard.

'Ah,' Hegazi said. 'We have a fix. You want to hear what the bastard has to say?'

'Put him on.'

The man's voice burst in on them again, as it had done six hours previously, but there was a

difference now, very obviously. Every word Sylveste spoke was backgrounded -- almost drowned

out -- by the continuous howl of the razorstorm.

'I'm here, where are you? Volyova, are you listening to me? I said are you listening to me? I want

an answer! Here are my coordinates relative to Cuvier -- you'd better be listening.' And then he

recited -- several times, for safety -- a string of numbers which would pinpoint him to within one

hundred metres; redundant information, given the triangulation which had now been performed.

'Now get down here! We can't wait for ever -- we're in the middle of a razorstorm, we're going to

die out here if you don't hurry.'

'Mmm,' Hegazi said. 'I think at some point it might not be a bad idea to answer the poor fellow.'

Volyova took out and lit a cigarette. She savoured a long intake before replying. 'Not yet,' she

said. 'In fact, maybe not for an hour or two. I think I'll let him get really worried first.'

Khoury heard only the faintest of scuffling sounds as the open suit shuffled towards her. She felt its

gently insistent pressure against her spine and the backs of her legs, arms and head. In her

peripheral vision she observed the wet-looking side-parts of the head fold around her, and then felt

the legs and arms of the suit meld around her limbs. The chest cavity sealed, with a sound like

someone taking the last slurp from a pudding bowl.

Her vision was restricted now, but she could see enough to watch the suit's limbs closing up

along their dissection-lines. The seals lingered for a second or so before becoming invisible, lost in

the bland whiteness of the rest of the suit's hide. Then the head formed over her own, and for a

moment there was darkness before a transparent oval appeared ahead of her. Smoothly, the darkness

around the oval lit up with numerous readouts and status displays. Later the suit would flood itself

with gel-air, to protect its occupant against the gee-loads of flight, but for now Khouri was

breathing mintily fresh oxygen/nitrogen air at shipboard pressure.

'I have now run through my safety and functionality tests,' the suit informed her. 'Please confirm

that you wish to accept full control of this unit.'

'Yes, I'm ready,' Khouri said.

'I have now disabled the majority of my autonomous control routines. This

persona will remain

online in an advisory capacity, unless you request otherwise. Full suit-autonomous control can be

reinstated by----'

'I get the deal, thanks. How are the others doing?'

'All other units report readiness.'

Volyova's voice cut in: 'We're set, Khouri. I'll lead the team; triangular descent formation. I

shout, you jump. And don't make a move unless I authorise it.'

'Don't worry; I had no plans to.'

'I see you have her well under your thumb,' Sudjic said, on the open channel. 'Does she shit to

order as well?'

'Shut it, Sudjic. You're only along because you know worlds. One step out of line...' Volyova

paused. 'Well, put it this way; Sajaki won't be around to intercede if I lose my temper, and I've got a

lot of firepower with which to lose it.'

'Talking of firepower,' Khouri said, 'I'm not seeing any weapons data on my readout.'

'That's because you're not authorised,' Sudjic said. 'Ilia doesn't trust you not to shoot at the first

thing that moves. Do you, Ilia?'

'If we run into trouble,' Ilia said, 'I'll let you have weps usage, trust me.'

'Why not now?'

'Because you don't need it now, that's why. You're along for the ride; to assist if things deviate

from the plan. Which of course they won't...' She drew breath audibly. 'But if they do, you get your

precious weapons. Just try and be discreet if you have to use them, that's all.'

Once outside, the shipboard air was purged and replaced by gel-air: breathable fluid. For a moment

it felt like drowning, but Khouri had made the transition enough times on Sky's Edge not to feel

much discomfort. Normal speech was impossible now, but the suit helmets contained trawls which

were able to interpret subvocal commands. Speakers in the helmets shifted incoming sounds by the

appropriate frequency to compensate for the gel-air-induced distortions, which ensured that the

voices she heard sounded perfectly normal. Although it was a harder and heavier descent than any

shuttle insertion, it felt easier, apart from an occasional pressure above Khouri's eyeballs. It was

only by reference to the suit's readouts that she knew they were routinely exceeding six gees of

acceleration, impelled by the tiny antilithium-fed thrusters buried in the suit's spine and heels. With

Volyova leading the descent, the suits formed a deltoid pattern, the two inhabited suits following

her and the three slaved empty suits trailing behind. For the first part of the descent, the suits

remained in the configuration they had assumed aboard the lighthugger, making a rough concession

to human anatomy. But by the time the first traces of Resurgam's upper atmosphere began to glow

around them, the suits had silently transformed their exteriors. Now -- although none of this was

obvious from within -- the membrane linking the arms to the body had thickened, until the arms and

body were no longer easily divisible. The angle of the arms had altered as well; now they were held

rigid but slightly bent, at an angle of forty-five degrees to the body. Since the head had retracted and

flattened, there was now a smooth arc running from the tip of each arm, over the head and down

again. The columnar legs had fused into a single flared tail, and any transparent patches defined by

the user had been forcibly re-opaquet, to protect against the glare of re-entry. The suits met the

atmosphere chest-on, with the tail hanging slightly lower than the head: complex shockwave

patterns being tamed and exploited by the morphing geometry of the suit hide. While direct vision

was no longer possible, the suits were continuing to perceive their surroundings in other EM bands,

and were perfectly capable of adapting this data for human senses. Looking around and below,

Khourī saw the other suits, each seemingly immersed in a radiant teardrop of pinkish plasma.

At twenty kilometres' altitude the suits used their thrusters to drop to merely supersonic speeds.

Now they remoulded themselves to adapt to the thickening atmosphere, transforming into human-

sized aircraft. The suits grew stabilising fins along their backs, and the face parts again returned to

transparency. Snug in the suit's embrace, Khourī barely felt these changes, only a slight pressure

from the surrounding suit material which nudged her limbs from one position to another. At fifteen

kilometres, the sixth suit broke formation and went hypersonic, configuring itself into an

aerodynamically optimum shape into which no human could have fitted without drastic surgery. It

disappeared over the horizon in a few seconds, probably moving faster than any artificial object

which had ever entered Resurgam's atmosphere, exerting upward thrust to keep itself from escaping

from the planet entirely. Khourī knew that the suit was heading to pick up Sajaki -- it would meet

with him near the designated site where he had last communicated with the ship, now that his work

on Resurgam was complete.

At ten kilometres -- maintaining silence, even though the com-laser links between the suits were

totally secure -- they hit the first traces of the razorstorm Volyova had stirred to life. From space it

had looked black and impenetrable, like a plateau of ash. Inside, there was more illumination than

Khouri had expected. The light was gritty and sepia, like a bad afternoon in Chasm City. A

muddyish rainbow haloed the sun, and then that too vanished as they sank deeper into the storm.

Now light did not so much stream down to them as stumble haphazardly, navigating layer upon

layer of elevated dust like a drunkard descending stairs. Since there was no feeling of weight in the

gel-air, Khouri rapidly lost all sensation of up and down, but she instinctively trusted the suit's own

inertial systems to figure things out. Now and again -- even though the thrusters were trying to

smooth out the ride -- she felt lurches as the suit hit a pressure cell. As the speed of the ensemble

dropped below that of sound, the suits reconfigured again, becoming more statuesque. The ground

was only a few kilometres below, and the highest peaks of the mesa system

were only hundreds of

metres under them, though they remained unseen. It was increasingly hard now to make out the

other four suits in the formation; they kept fading in and out of the dust.

Khouri began to get a little concerned. She had never used a suit in conditions anything like this.

'Suit,' she asked. 'Are you quite sure you can handle this stuff? I wouldn't want you dropping out of

the sky on me.'

'Wearer,' it said, managing to sound sniffy. 'When the dust becomes a problem I shall

immediately inform you of that fact.'

'All right; just asking.'

Now there was hardly anything to see. It was like swimming through mud. There were occasional

rents in the storm which afforded glimpses of towering canyon and mesa walls, but most of the time

the dust was completely featureless. 'Can't see anything,' she said.

'Is this an improvement?'

It was. The storm had casually blinked out of existence. She could see around her for tens of

kilometres; all the way to the relatively near horizon, where it was unobstructed by closer rock

walls. It was just like flying on a dazzlingly clear day, except that the entire

scene was rendered in

sickly variations of pale green. 'A montage,' the suit said. 'Constructed from ambient infrared,

interpolated random-pulse/snapshot sonar and gravimetric data.'

'Very nice, but don't get cocky about it. When I get annoyed with machines, even very

sophisticated ones, I have a nasty habit of abusing them.'

'Duly noted,' the suit said, shutting up.

She called up an overlay which gave her some idea where she was on a larger scale. The suit

knew exactly where to go -- homing in on the coordinates where Sylveste had called from -- but it

made her feel more professional to actually take an active interest in things. Three and a half hours

had passed now since Volyova and Sylveste had spoken, which, assuming he was on foot, would

not allow Sylveste to get seriously far from the agreed rendezvous point. Even if, for some reason,

he now tried to evade the pick-up, the suit's sensors would have no trouble locating him, unless he

had found a conveniently deep cave in which to ensconce himself: but then the suit's detector

systems would do their level best to track him down, using the thermal and biochemical evidence he

would have unavoidably left behind on his route.

'Listen up,' Volyova said, using the intersuit com for the first time since they had entered the

atmosphere. 'We'll be at the reception point in two minutes. I've just had a signal from orbit.

Triumvir Sajaki's suit has located him and made successful pick-up. He's currently en route to meet

us, but because his suit can't move so quickly now he won't make it for another ten minutes.'

'He's meeting us?' Khouri asked. 'Why doesn't he just return to the ship? Doesn't he believe we

can do the job without him breathing down our necks?'

'Are you kidding?' Sudjic asked. 'Sajaki's waited years -- decades -- for this. He wouldn't miss it

for the world.'

'Sylveste won't put up a struggle, will he?'

'Not unless he's feeling incredibly lucky,' Volyova said. 'But don't take anything for granted. I've

dealt with this bastard before; you two haven't.'

Khouri felt her suit slither to a configuration very similar to the one it had first had aboard the

ship. The wing membrane had vanished entirely now, and her limbs were properly defined and

articulated, rather than just being flattened winglike appendages. The tips of the arms had bifurcated

into mittenlike claws, but a more developed hand could be formed, if she

needed to do delicate

manipulations. Now she was tipping back into a near-vertical posture, while still moving forwards.

The suit was now maintaining altitude solely by thrust, utterly impervious to the dust.

'One minute,' Volyova said. 'Altitude two hundred metres. Expect visual acquisition of Sylveste

any moment now. And remember we'll also be looking for his wife; I doubt they'll be far apart.'

Tiring of the pale-green false image, Khouri reverted to normal vision. She could hardly make

out the other suits. They were now a long way from the canyon walls of any major rock features or

crevasses. The terrain was flat for thousands of metres in any direction, apart from the odd boulder

or gully. But even when pockets opened in the storm, calm ventricles in the chaos, it was impossible

to see more than a few tens of metres, and the ground was ceaselessly aswirl in dust eddies. Yet in

the suit it was totally cool and silent, lending the whole situation a dangerous air of unreality. If she

had wished it, the suit could have relayed the ambient sound to her, but it would have told her

nothing except that it was hellishly windy out there.

She returned to the pale-green.

'Ilia,' she said. 'I'm still weaponless here. Starting to feel a bit itchy.'

'Give her something to play with,' Sudjic said. 'It can't hurt, can it? She can go away and shoot

some rocks while we take care of Sylveste.'

'Fuck you.'

'In spades, Khouri. Didn't it occur to you I might be trying to do you a favour? Or do you think

you can persuade Ilia all on your lonesome?'

'All right Khouri,' Volyova said. 'I'm enabling your minimal-volition defence protocols. That suit

you?'

Not exactly, no. While Khouri's suit had now been given the autonomous privileges to defend

itself against external threats -- even, to some extent, to act proactively towards that goal -- Khouri

still did not have her finger on the trigger. And that might prove to be a problem if she wanted to

kill Sylveste, which was an objective she had not entirely jettisoned.

'Yeah, thanks,' she said. 'Excuse me if I don't whoop for joy.'

'My pleasure...'

A second or so later they landed, soft as five feathers. Khouri felt a shiver as her suit depowered

its thrusters, then made a further series of minute readjustments to its anatomy. The status readouts

had now flicked over from flight to ambulatory mode, signifying that she could, if she wished, walk

around normally. At this point she could even ditch the suit entirely, but without protective gear she

would not have lasted long in the razorstorm. She was more than happy to remain encased in the

suit's silence, even if it meant that she did not feel entirely participatory.

'We split,' Volyova said. 'Khouri; I'm assigning control of the two empty suits to your own;

they'll shadow you when you move. The three of us move apart for one hundred paces; initiate

active sensor sweep in all EM and supplemental bands. If Sylveste is anywhere nearby we'll find the

svinoi.'

The two empty suits had shuffled next to Khouri already, latching onto her like stray dogs. This

was, she knew, definitely the short straw choice; Volyova was letting her look after the empty units

as a consolation prize for not being better armed. But there was no point whining. Her only

reasonable argument for being properly armed was so that she could use those defences to kill

Sylveste. It was probably not an argument which would prove entirely effective against Volyova.

Still, it was worth bearing in mind that the suits could be deadly even without their armaments. In

training on Sky's Edge, she had been shown how someone wearing a suit could inflict damage on an

enemy by the exertion of sheer brute force, literally tearing an opponent apart.

Khoury watched Sudjic and Volyova move off in their respective directions, walking with the

deceptively plodding slowness of the suits in their default ambulatory modes. Deceptive, because

the suits were capable of moving with gazelle-like speed if required, but there was no need to

deploy such swiftness at the moment. She switched off the pale-green overlay, returning to normal

vision. Sudjic and Volyova were not visible at all now, unsurprisingly. And while occasional

pockets continued to open in the storm, Khoury was generally unable to see beyond the end of her

own outstretched arm.

With a jolt, though, she realised she had seen something -- someone -- moving in the dust. It had

only been there for a moment; not even something she could properly dignify by calling it a

glimpse. Khoury was just beginning -- without too much concern -- to rationalise the apparition as a

chance swirling of dust, momentarily assuming a vaguely human shape. But then she saw it again.

Now the figure was better defined. It lingered, teasingly. And stepped out of

the maelstrom, into

clear vision.

'It's been a long time,' the Mademoiselle said. 'I thought you'd be happier to see me.'

'Where the hell have you been?'

'Wearer,' the suit said. 'I am not able to interpret your last subvocalised statement. Would you

mind rephrasing what you had to say?'

'Tell it to ignore you,' the Mademoiselle's dust-ghost said. 'I don't have very long.'

Khoury told the suit to ignore what she was subvocalising, until she gave a codeword. The suit

acceded with a note of stuffy displeasure, as if it had never ever been asked to do something so

irregular, and that it would have to seriously rethink the terms of their working relationship in

future.

'All right,' she said. 'It's just you and me, Mad. Care to tell where you've been?'

'In a moment,' the woman's projected image said. She had stabilised now, but was certainly not

rendered with the fidelity Khoury had come to expect. She looked more like a crude sketch of

herself, or a blurred photograph, subject to rippling waves of distortion.

'Firstly I'd better do what I

can for you, or else you'll be forced into foolishness like trying to ram Sylveste. Now let's see;

accessing primary suit systems... bypassing Volyova's restriction codes... remarkably simple, in fact

-- I'm rather disappointed she didn't give me more of a challenge, especially as this is the last time

I'm likely----

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about giving you firepower, dear girl.' As she was speaking, the status-readouts

reconfigured, indicating that a number of previously locked-out suit weapons systems had just come

online. Khouri appraised the sudden arsenal at her fingertips, only half believing what she had just

witnessed. 'There you are,' Mademoiselle said. 'Anything else you'd like me to kiss better before I

go?'

'I suppose I should say thanks...'

'Don't bother, Khouri. The last thing I'd expect from you would be gratitude.'

'Of course, now I actually have no choice but to kill the bastard. Am I supposed to thank you for

that as well?'

'You've seen the -- uh -- evidence. The case for the prosecution, if you will.'

Khouri nodded, feeling her scalp squidging against the suit's internal matrix.

You were not meant

to make gestures in a suit. 'Yes, that stuff about the Inhibitors. 'Course, I still don't know if any of

it's true...'

'Consider the alternative, in that case. You refrain from killing Sylveste, and yet what I've told

you turns out to be the truth. Imagine how bad you'd feel after that, especially if Sylveste...' the dust

apparition attempted a grisly smile, 'fulfils his ambition.'

'T'd still have a clear conscience, wouldn't I?'

'Undoubtedly. And I hope that would be sufficient consolation while your entire species is being

eradicated by Inhibitor systems. Of course, in all likelihood you wouldn't even be around to regret

your mistake. They're rather efficient, the Inhibitors. But you'll find that out in due course...'

'Well, thanks for the advice.'

'That isn't all, Khouri. Did it not occur to you that there might have been a very good reason for

my absence until now?'

'Which is?'

'I'm dying.' The Mademoiselle let the word hover in the dust storm before continuing. 'After the

incident with the cache-weapon, Sun Stealer managed to inject another

portion of himself into your

skull -- but of course, you're aware of that. You felt him enter, didn't you? I remember your

screams. They were graphic. How odd it must have felt; how invasive.'

'Sun Stealer hasn't exactly made an impression on me since.'

'But did it ever occur to you to ask why?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, dear girl, that I've spent the last few weeks doing my damndest to stop him spreading

further into your head. That's why you haven't heard anything from me. I've been too preoccupied

with containing him. It was bad enough dealing with the part of him that I inadvertently let return

with the bloodhounds. But at least then we reached a kind of stalemate. This time, though, it's been

rather different. Sun Stealer has become stronger, while I have become successively weaker with

each of his onslaughts.'

'You mean he's still here?'

'Very much so. And the only reason you haven't heard from him is that he's been equally

preoccupied in the war the two of us have been waging within your skull. The difference is, he's

been making progress all the time -- corrupting me, co-opting my systems,

exploiting my own

defences against me. Oh, he's a crafty one, take my word for it.'

'What's going to happen?'

'What's going to happen is that I'm going to lose. I can be quite certain about this; it's a

mathematical certainty based on his current rate of gains.' The Mademoiselle smiled again, as if she

were perversely proud of this analytical detachment. 'I can delay his onslaught for a few days more,

and then it's all over. It might even be shorter. I've significantly weakened myself just by the act of

presenting myself to you now. But I had no choice. I had to sacrifice time in order to reinstate your

weapons privilege.'

'But when he wins...'

'I don't know, Khouri. But be prepared for anything. He's likely to be a rather less charming

tenant than I've endeavoured to be. After all, you know what he did to your predecessor. Drove the

poor man psychotic.' The Mademoiselle stepped back, seeming to partially cloak herself in the dust,

as if she were stepping offstage via the curtains. 'It's doubtful that we'll have the pleasure again,

Khouri. I feel I should wish you well. But right now I ask only one thing of you. Do what you came

here to do. And do it well.' She retreated further, her form breaking up, as if she were no more than

a charcoal sketch of a woman, dispersed by wind. 'You have the means now.'

The Mademoiselle was gone. Khouri waited a moment -- not so much collecting her thoughts as

kicking them into some vaguely cohesive mass which she hoped might stay bundled together for

more than a few seconds. Then she issued the codeword which put the suit back online. The

weapons, she observed with nothing remotely resembling relief, were all still functioning, just as

the Mademoiselle had promised.

'I'm sorry to interrupt,' the suit said. 'But if you'd care to reinstate full-spectrum vision you'll

observe that we have company.'

'Company?'

'I've just alerted the other suits. But you're the closest.'

'Sure this isn't Sajaki?'

'It isn't Triumvir Sajaki, no.' It might have been Khouri's imagination, but the suit sounded

peevish that she had even doubted its judgement in this matter. 'Even if it exceeds all safety limits,

the Triumvir's suit will not arrive here for another three minutes.'

'Then it must be Sylveste.'

Khouri had by then switched to the recommended sensory overlay. She could see the

approaching figure -- or more accurately, figures, since there were two of them, easily resolved. The

other two occupied suits were converging on the location, at the same unhurried pace with which

they had first departed. 'Sylveste, I'm assuming you can hear us,' Volyova said. 'Stop where you are.

We're zeroing in on you from three sides.'

His voice cut across the suit channel. 'I assumed you'd left us here to die. Nice of you to say you

were coming.'

'I'm not in the habit of breaking my word,' Volyova said. 'As you undoubtedly know by now.'

Khouri began to make preparations for the kill she was still not sure she could commit herself to.

She called up a target overlay, boxing Sylveste, then allocated one of her less ferocious suit-

weapons: a medium-yield laser built into the head. It was puny by comparison with the other suit

armaments; really just intended to warn prospective attackers to go away and pick another target.

But against an unarmoured man, at virtually zero-range, it would more than suffice.

It would take only an eyeblink now, and Sylveste would die, in strict compliance with the

Mademoiselle's terms.

Sudjic was moving more rapidly now, moving more swiftly towards Volyova than Sylveste. It

was then that Khouri noticed something odd about the suit Sudjic was wearing. There was

something projecting from one end of her clawed arm, something small and metallic. It looked like

a weapon, a light hand-held bosser-pistol. She was raising her arm with unhurried calm, the way a

professional would have done. For an instant Khouri experienced a shocking sense of dislocation. It

was as if she were seeing herself from beyond her own body; watching herself raise a weapon in

readiness to kill Sylveste.

But something was wrong.

Sudjic was pointing the weapon at Volyova.

'I take it you have a plan here----' Sylveste said.

'Ilia!' Khouri shouted. 'Get down, she's going to----'

Sudjic's weapon was more powerful than it looked. There was a flash of horizontal light -- the

containment laser for the coherent matter-beam -- streaking laterally across Khouri's field of view,

knifing into Volyova's suit. Various warning alarms went haywire, signifying an excessive energy-

discharge in the vicinity. Khouri's suit automatically jumped to a higher, more hair-trigger level of

battle readiness, indices on the display changing to indicate that their respective subordinated

weapons systems were set to go off without her conscious say-so if her suit were similarly

threatened.

Volyova's suit was badly hit; a significant acreage of the chest was gone, revealing densely

laminated hypodermal armour layers and outspilling cabling and power lines.

Sudjic took aim again, fired.

This time the blast went deeper, cutting into the wound it had already opened. Volyova's voice

cut across the channel, but it sounded weak and distant. All Khouri could make out was a kind of

questioning groan; more of shock than pain.

'That was for Boris,' Sudjic said, her own voice obscenely clear. 'That was for what you did to

him in your experiments.' She levelled the gun again, no less calmly than if she were an artist about

to put the finishing dab of paint on a masterpiece. 'And this is for killing him.'

'Sudjic,' Khouri said, 'stop it.'

The woman's suit did not turn to look at her. 'Why stop, Khouri? Didn't I make it clear I had a

grudge against her?'

'Sajaki'll be here in minute or so.'

'By which time I'll have made it look like Sylveste fired at her.' Sudjic snorted derisively. 'Shit;

didn't it occur to you I'd have thought of that? I wasn't going to let myself get stuffed just to get

revenge on the old hag. She isn't worth the expense.'

'I can't let you kill her.'

'Can't let me? Oh, that's funny, Khouri. What are you going to stop me with? I don't recall her

reinstating your weapons privilege, and right now I don't think she's in much of a state to do it.'

Sudjic was right.

Volyova was slumped over now, her suit having lost integrity. Maybe the wound reached into her

by now. If she were making any sound, her suit was too damaged to amplify it.

Sudjic relevelled the boser, aiming low now. 'One shot to finish you off, Volyova -- then I plant

the gun on Sylveste. He'll deny everything, of course -- but there'll only be Khouri as a witness, and

I don't think she's going to go out of her way to back up his story. I'm right, aren't I? Admit it,

Khouri, I'm about to do you a favour. You'd kill the bitch if you had the means.'

'That's where you're wrong,' Khouri said. 'On two counts.'

'What?'

'I wouldn't kill her, despite everything she's done. And I do have the means.'
She took a moment -

- not even a fraction of second -- to target the laser. 'Goodbye, Sudjic. Can't say it's been a pleasure.'

And fired.

By the time Sajaki arrived, not much more than a minute later, what was left of Sudjic was not

worth burying.

Her suit had retaliated, of course, escalating to a higher level of response, directed plasma bolts

emitting from projectors which had popped up on either side of her head. But Khouri's suit had been

expecting something like that. In addition to changing the exterior state of its armour to maximally

avert the plasma (retexturing itself and applying massive plasma-deflective electric currents to its

own hide), it was already returning fire at a yet higher level of aggression, dispensing with childish

weapons like plasma and particle-beams and opting for the more decisive deployment of ack-am

pulses, releasing tiny nano-pellets from its own antilithium reservoir; each pellet caulked in a shield

of ablative normal-matter, and the whole thing accelerated up to a significant

fraction of the speed

of light.

Khoury had not even had time to gasp. After issuing the initial fire-order, her suit had done all the

rest on its own.

'There's been... trouble,' she said, as the Triumvir descended and made touch-down.

'You don't say,' he said, surveying the carnage: the wounded husk of a suit containing Volyova;

the liberally strewn and now radioactive residual pieces of what had once been Sudjic, and -- in the

middle of it -- unharmed by the blast, but seemingly too stunned to speak or try to evade capture,

Sylveste and his wife.

SEVENTEEN

Rendezvous Point, Resurgam, 2566

Sylveste had rehearsed the meeting in his head many times.

He had done his best to consider every possible eventuality; even those that -- based on his

understanding of the situation -- seemed fantastically unlikely to actually occur. But he had

considered nothing like this, and with good reason. Even as it happened around him, he could not

begin to make sense of what was going on; let alone why it deviated so far from the path of sanity.

'If it's any consolation,' Sajaki said, his voice booming above the wind, amplified from the head

of his monstrous suit, 'I don't understand much of this either.'

'That consoles me no end,' Sylveste said, speaking on the same radio frequency channel he had

used for all his negotiations with the crew, even though their representatives - - or what remained of

them -- were now standing within shouting distance. In the unrelenting howl of the razorstorm,

shouting was not much of an option. 'Call me naïve but at this point I was hoping you'd have taken

things over with your usual ruthless efficiency, Sajaki. All I can say is that you appear to be

slacking.'

'I don't like it any more than you do,' the Ultra said. 'But you'd better believe me -- for your sakes

-- that things are now very much under control. Now, I'm about to divert my attention to my

wounded colleague. At this point I strongly recommend that you resist the temptation to do

anything foolhardy. Not that the thought ever crossed your mind, eh, Dan?'

'You know me better than that.'

'The problem, Dan, is that I know you only too well. But let's not dwell on the past.'

'Let's not.'

Sajaki moved over to the wounded one. Sylveste had known he was dealing with Triumvir Yuuji

Sajaki even before the man had spoken. As soon as his suit hove into view, emerging from the

storm, his faceplate had been rendered transparent, the man's over-familiar features peering intently

at the damage he surveyed. Although it was hard to tell, Sajaki looked largely unchanged from their

last meeting. For him, only a few years of subjective time would have elapsed. Sylveste by contrast

had squeezed the equivalent of two or three old-style human lives into that space. It was a dizzying

moment.

But Sylveste could not establish the identities of the other two crew. There had been a third, of

course... but he or she was now past the point at which he could ever hope to make acquaintance.

And of the two who were not obviously dead, one was perhaps perilously close -- this was the one

now receiving Sajaki's ministrations -- and one was standing in what looked like shocked silence off

to one side. Oddly, the uninjured one was keeping some suit weapons trained on Sylveste, even

though he was unarmed and had no intention -- no intention whatsoever -- of resisting capture.

'She'll live,' Sajaki said, after a moment in which his suit must have communed with the suit of

the fallen one. 'But we need to get her back to the ship fast. Then we can find out what actually

happened down here.'

'It was Sudjic,' said a voice Sylveste didn't know; female. 'Sudjic tried to kill Ilia.'

Then the wounded one was the bitch herself: Triumvir Ilia Volyova.

'Sudjic?' Sajaki said. For a moment the word hung between them, and it seemed as if Sajaki could

not -- or would not -- accept what the other, nameless woman was saying. But then, after the wind

had torn at them for several more seconds, he said the name again, only this time on a falling note

of acceptance. 'Sudjic. Yes, it would make sense.'

'I think she planned----'

'You can tell me later, Khouri,' Sajaki said. 'There'll be plenty of time -- and your role in the

incident of course will have to be explained to my total satisfaction. But for now we should deal

with priorities.' He nodded down at the injured Volyova. 'Her suit will keep her alive for a few more

hours, but it isn't capable of reaching the ship.'

'I take it,' Sylveste said, 'that you envisaged a way of getting us off the planet?'

'A word of advice,' Sajaki said. 'Don't irritate me too much, Dan. I've expended a considerable

amount of trouble in getting you. But don't imagine I wouldn't stretch to killing you just to see how

it feels.'

Sylveste had expected something like that from Sajaki -- he would have been more worried if the

man had said something dissimilar, downplaying the act of finding him. But if Sajaki believed a

word of what he said -- which was doubtful -- then he was a fool. He had come from at least as far

away as the Yellowstone system, perhaps even further, in his quest for Sylveste. No guessing what

the human costs of it had actually been; quite aside from the sheer number of

years which had been

consumed.

'Good for you,' Sylveste said, injecting as much insincerity into his voice as he could muster. 'But

as a scientific man you must respect my impulse to experiment; to determine the limits of your

tolerance.' He whipped his arm out from under his windcloak, holding something tightly between

two fingers of his gloved hand. He had almost expected the one with the guns to fire at him at that

point, thinking that he was drawing a weapon. It was, he considered, a reasonable risk to take. But

he had not produced a gun. What he held was a smallish sliver of quantum-state memory.

'You see this?' he said. 'This is what you asked me to bring. Calvin's beta-level simulation. You

need it, don't you? You need it very badly.'

Sajaki watched him without a word.

'Well fuck you,' Sylveste said, crushing the simulation, until its dust was blown away into the

storm.

EIGHTEEN

Resurgam Orbit, 2566

They lifted from Resurgam, quickly lancing into the clear skies above the storm. Eventually there

was something above Sylveste, small at first and really only visible because it occasionally

occluded the stars behind it. It looked no larger than a sliver of coal, but it kept on growing, until its

roughly conical shape became obvious, and what had at first seemed like a silhouette of total

blackness began to show faint details within its own shape, gloomily underlit by the world around

which it was orbiting. The lighthugger grew until it seemed impossibly large, blocking half the sky,

and then kept on growing. The ship had not changed greatly since his last trip aboard. Sylveste

knew -- without being much impressed by the fact -- that ships like this were always redesigning

themselves, although the changes would usually be subtle modifications of the interior, rather than

radical overhauls of the exterior layout (although that did happen as well, perhaps once every

century or two). For a moment he worried that it might now lack the capability he wished -- but

then he remembered what the ship had done to Phoenix. It was hard to forget, in truth, since the

evidence of that attack was still glaringly visible below him; a lotus-bloom of grey destruction set

into the face of Resurgam.

A door had opened in the dark hull of the ship. The door looked far too small to accept even one

of the suited, let alone all of them, but as they neared it became obvious that the door was tens of

metres wide and would admit them all with ease. Sylveste, his wife and the other two Ultras from

the ship, one of whom held the wounded Volyova, vanished inside, and the door closed on them.

Sajaki brought them to a holding area where they sloughed the suits and breathed normally.

There was a taste to the air which slammed him back to his last visit aboard. He had forgotten how

the ship smelled.

'You wait here,' Sajaki said, while their suits tidied themselves up and moved to one wall. 'I have

to attend to my colleague.'

He knelt down and busied himself with Volyova's armour. Sylveste toyed with the idea of telling

Sajaki not to expend too much effort in helping the other Triumvir, then decided that was possibly

not the best course of action. He might have already pushed Sajaki to the edge of his patience when

he crushed the Cal sim. 'What exactly happened down there?'

'I don't know.' That was typical Sajaki; like all the genuinely clever people Sylveste had met he

knew better than to feign understanding where none existed. 'I don't know and for the moment -- for

the moment -- it doesn't matter.' He studied a readout in Volyova's suit. 'Her injuries, while serious,

don't seem to be fatal. Given time, she can be healed. Also, I now have you. Everything else is

detail.' Then he cocked his head towards the other woman, who had slipped out of her suit. 'Still,

something troubles me, Khouri...'

'What?' she said.

'It doesn't matter... for the moment.' He looked back at Sylveste. 'Incidentally, that little trick you

did with the sim -- don't imagine for one instant that I was impressed by that.'

'You should be. How are you going to get me to fix the Captain now?'

'With Calvin's help, of course. Don't you remember that I kept a back-up the last time you

brought Cal aboard? Granted, it's slightly out-of-date, but the surgical expertise is all there.'

It was a good bluff, Sylveste thought, but that was all it was. Still, there was a back-up, of sorts...

or else he would never have destroyed the sim.

'Talking of which... is the Captain so grievously unwell that he can't meet me in person?'

'You'll meet him,' Sajaki said. 'All in good time.'

The other woman and Sajaki were removing scabs of damaged hide from Volyova's suit, a

process which resembled the shelling of a crab. Eventually Sajaki murmured something to the

woman and they halted their work, evidently deciding that it was too delicate to be continued here.

Presently a trio of servitors glided into the room. Two of the machines lofted Volyova between

them and then left with her, accompanied by Sajaki and the woman. Sylveste had not seen her

during his last visit aboard, but she seemed to have assumed a fairly elevated role in the ship's

hierarchy. The third servitor squatted down and observed Sylveste and Pascale with one sullen

camera eye.

'He didn't even ask me to take off my mask and goggles,' Sylveste said. 'It's like he hardly cares

that he has me.'

Pascale nodded. She was fingering her clothes, seemingly convinced that the suit's gel-air should

have left some sticky residue behind on them. 'Whatever happened down

there must have thrown

his plans completely. Maybe he'd be more triumphant if things had gone according to plan.'

'Not Sajaki; triumphant just isn't his style. But I'd at least have expected him to spend a few

minutes gloating.'

'Maybe the fact that you destroyed the sim...'

'Yes; that'll have thrown him.' As he spoke, he did so in the knowledge that his words were

almost certainly being recorded. 'There may still be some residual functionality in the copy he made

of Cal, even allowing for the self-destruct routines, though probably not enough for any kind of

channelling, even with one-to-one neural congruency between sim and recipient.' Sylveste found a

pair of storage crates and moved them over to use for chairs. 'I'm sure he already tried to run the sim

in some poor fool's body, though.'

'And it must have failed.'

'Messily, probably. He's probably hoping now that I can work with the damaged copy without

channelling; just relying on my knowledge of Cal's instincts and methodologies.'

Pascale nodded. She was shrewd enough not to ask the obvious question: what kind of plan

would Sajaki have if his own copy was too damaged even for that? Instead, she said, 'Do you have

any idea what happened down there?'

'No -- and I think Sajaki was telling the truth when he said the same thing. Whatever it was, it

wasn't to plan. Maybe some kind of power-struggle within the crew, acted out on the surface

because whoever was involved never got a chance aboard.' But while the idea sounded halfway

plausible to him, that was as far as his thinking took him. Too much time had gone by, even within

Sajaki's reference frame, for Sylveste to trust his usually infallible processes of insight.

He would have to play things very carefully indeed until he understood the dynamics of the

current crew. Assuming they gave him the luxury of time...

Pascale knelt down next to her husband. They had both removed their masks now, but only

Pascale had removed her dust-goggles. 'We're in a lot of danger, aren't we? If Sajaki decides he

can't use you...'

'He'll return us to the surface unharmed.' Sylveste took Pascale's hands. Ranks of empty suits

towered around them, as if the two of them were unwanted despoilers in an Egyptian tomb and the

suits were mummies. 'Sajaki can't ever rule out my being useful to him again, in the future.'

'I hope you're right... because that was quite a risk you took.' She looked at him now with an

expression he had rarely seen before. It was one of quiet, calm warning. 'With my life as well.'

'Sajaki isn't my master. I just had to remind him of that; to let him know no matter how clever he

gets, I'll always be ahead of him.'

'But he is your master now, don't you understand? He may not have the sim, but he's got you.

That still puts him ahead in my book.'

Sylveste smiled and reached for an answer that was both true and exactly what Sajaki would

expect of him. 'But not as far as he thinks.'

Sajaki and the other woman came back less than an hour later, accompanied by a huge chimeric.

Sylveste recognised the man from his previous trip aboard as Triumvir Hegazi, but only just.

Hegazi had always been an extreme example of his kind -- almost as comprehensively cyborgised

as his Captain -- but in the intervening time, Hegazi had further submerged his core humanity in

machine supplements, exchanging various prosthetic parts for newer or more elegant substitutes,

and had gained a whole new entourage of entoptics, most of which were designed to interact with

the motion of his body parts, creating an off-spilling cascade of rainbow-coloured ghost limbs

which lingered in the air for a second or so before fading. Sajaki wore unassuming shipboard

clothes devoid of rank or ornamentation, emphasising the lightness of his build. But Sylveste was

wise enough not to judge the man by his lack of bulk and absence of obvious weapons prosthetics.

Machines undoubtedly seethed beneath his skin, giving him inhuman speed and strength. He was at

least as dangerous as Hegazi and a good deal quicker, Sylveste knew.

'I can't exactly say it's entirely a pleasure,' Sylveste said, addressing Hegazi. 'But I admit to

experiencing a mild *frisson* of surprise at the fact that you haven't imploded under the weight of

your prosthetics, Triumvir.'

'I suggest you take that as a compliment,' Sajaki said to the other Triumvir. 'It's the closest you'll

get from Sylveste.'

Hegazi fingered the moustache which he still cultivated, despite the encroaching prosthetics

which cased his skull.

'Let's see how witty he sounds when you've shown him the Captain, Sajaki-

san. That'll wipe the

smile off his face.'

'Undoubtedly,' Sajaki said. 'And talking of faces, why don't you show us a little more of yours,

Dan?' Sajaki fingered the haft of a gun resting in a hip-holster.

'Gladly,' Sylveste said. He reached up and pulled away the dust-goggles. He let them clatter to the

floor, watching the expressions -- or what passed for expressions -- on the faces of the people who

had taken him prisoner. For the first time they were seeing what had become of his eyes. Perhaps

they knew already, but the shock of seeing Calvin's handiwork could never be underestimated. His

eyes were not sleek improvements on the originals, but brutalist substitutes which only

approximated the functionality of the human eye. There were more sophisticated things in ancient

medical textbooks... not far removed from wooden legs. 'You knew that I lost my sight, of course?'

he said, examining each of them in turn with his blank, eyeless gaze. 'It's common knowledge on

Resurgam... hardly even worth mentioning.'

'What kind of resolution do you get out of those?' Hegazi said, with what sounded like genuine

interest. 'I know they're not completely state-of-the-art, but I bet you've got

full EM sensitivity from

the IR into the UV, right? Maybe even acoustic imaging? Got a zoom capability?'

Sylveste looked at Hegazi long and hard before answering. 'You need to understand one thing,

Triumvir. In the right light, when she's not standing too far away, I can just about recognise my

wife.'

'That good...' Hegazi kept looking at him, fascinated.

They were escorted deeper into the ship. The last time he had been aboard, they had taken him

straight to the medical centre. The Captain had been more or less capable of walking then, at least

for short distances. But they were not taking him anywhere he recognised now. Which was not

necessarily to say that he was far from the medical centre, for the ship was as intricate as a small

city and as difficult to memorise, even though he had once spent nearly a month aboard it. But he

sensed that this was entirely new territory; that he was passing through regions of the ship -- what

Sajaki and the crew called districts -- which he had never been shown before. If his reckoning was

good, the elevator was carrying them away from the ship's sleek prow, down to where the conic hull

broadened to its maximum width.

'Minor technical defects in your eyes don't concern me,' Sajaki said. 'We can repair them easily enough.'

'Without a working version of Calvin? I don't think so.'

'Then we rip out your eyes and replace them with something better.'

'I wouldn't do that. Besides... you still wouldn't have Calvin, so what good would it do you?'

Sajaki said something beneath his breath and the elevator crawled to a halt. 'So you never

believed me when I said we had a back-up? Well, you're right, of course. Our copy had some

strange flaws in it. Became quite useless long before we asked anything of it.'

'That's software for you.'

'Yes... perhaps I may kill you after all.' With one smooth movement he drew the gun from his

holster, giving Sylveste time enough to notice the bronze snake which spiralled around the barrel.

The weapon's mode of killing was not at all obvious; it might have been a beam or projectile gun,

but he had no doubts that he was comfortably within its lethal range.

'You wouldn't kill me now; not after all the time you spent looking for me.'

Sajaki's finger tightened on the trigger. 'You underestimate my propensity for acting on a whim,

Dan. I might kill you just for the sheer cosmic perversity of the act.'

'Then you'd have to find someone else to heal the Captain.'

'What would I have lost?' Under the snake's jaw, a status light flicked from green to red. Sajaki's

finger whitened.

'Wait,' Sylveste said. 'You don't have to kill me. Do you honestly think I'd have destroyed the

only copy of Cal left in existence?'

Sajaki's relief was evident. 'There's another?'

'Yes.' Sylveste nodded towards his wife. 'And she knows where to find it. Don't you, Pascale?'

Some hours later Cal said, 'I always knew you were a cold, calculating bastard, son.'

They were near the Captain. Sajaki had taken Pascale away, but now she was back again -- along

with all the other crew-members Sylveste knew about, and the apparition he had hoped never to see

again. 'An insufferable, treacherous... nonentity.' The apparition was speaking quite calmly, like an

actor running through lines purely to judge the timing, without imparting any actual emotion. 'You

unthinking rat.'

'From nonentity to rat, eh?' Sylveste said. 'From some perspectives, that's almost an

improvement.'

'Don't believe it, son.' Calvin leered at him, stretching forward from the seat which held him.

'Think you're so intolerably clever, don't you? Well now I've got you by the balls; assuming you

have any. They told me what you did. How you killed me purely on the pretext of ruining their

plans.' He raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'I mean, what a pathetic justification for patricide! I'd have

at least thought you'd do me the courtesy of killing me for a halfway decent reason. But no. That

would have been asking too much. I'd almost say I was disappointed, except that would imply I

once had higher expectations.'

'If I'd actually killed you,' Sylveste said, 'this conversation would pose certain ontological

problems. Besides, I always knew there was another copy of you.'

'But you murdered one of me!'

'Sorry, but that's a category mistake if ever I heard one. You're just software, Cal. Being copied

and erased is your natural state of being.' Sylveste steeled himself for another protest from Cal, but

for the moment he was silent. 'I didn't do it to ruin Sajaki's plans. I need his... co-operation as much

as he needs mine.'

'My co-operation?' The Triumvir's eyes narrowed.

'We'll get to that. All I'm saying is that when I destroyed the copy, I knew another existed and

that you'd soon force me into revealing its whereabouts.'

'So the act was pointless?'

'No; not at all. For a while I had the pleasure of seeing you imagine your plans in ruins, Yuuji-

san. The risk was worth it for that glimpse into your soul. It wasn't a pretty sight, either.'

'How did you... know?' Cal said. 'How did you know I'd been copied?'

'I thought you couldn't copy him,' said the woman he had been introduced to as Khouri. She was

small and foxlike, but perhaps, like Sajaki, not entirely to be trusted. 'I thought they had spoilers...

copy-protection... that kind of shit.'

'That's alpha-level simulations, dear,' Calvin said. 'Which -- for better or for worse -- I happen not

to be. No; I'm just a lowly beta-level. Capable of passing all the standard Turings, but not -- from a

philosophical standpoint -- actually capable of consciousness. Hence, no soul. And therefore no

ethical problems about there being more than one of me. However...' he drew in breath, filling the

silence which someone else might have been tempted to fill with their own thoughts '... I no longer

believe any of that neuro-cognitive rubbish. I can't speak for my alpha-level self, since my alpha-

level self disappeared some two centuries ago, but for whatever reason, I am now fully conscious.

Perhaps all beta-levels are capable of this, or perhaps my sheer connectional complexity ensured

that I exceeded some state of critical mass. I have no idea. All I know is that I think, and therefore

I'm exceedingly angry.'

Sylveste had heard all this before. 'He's a Turing-compliant beta-level. They're meant to say this

sort of thing. If they didn't claim to be conscious, they'd automatically fail the standard Turings. But

that doesn't mean that what he says -- the noises he makes... the noises it makes -- have any

validity.'

'I could apply the same reasoning to you,' Calvin said. 'And where it's leading to, dear son, is this:

since I can't speculate about the alpha, I have to assume that I'm all that remains. Now, this may be

hard for you to understand, but the mere fact that I'm something precious and unique makes me

object even more strenuously to the idea of anyone making a copy of me. Every act of copying me

cheapens what I am. I am reduced to a mere commodity; something to be created, duplicated and

disposed of whenever I happen to fit someone else's inadequate notion of usefulness.' He paused.

'So -- while I'm not saying I wouldn't take steps to increase my likelihood of survival -- I would not

willingly have consented to be copied by anyone.'

'But you did. You allowed Pascale to copy you into *Descent into Darkness*.' She had been clever

about it, too; for years he had never suspected a thing. He had given her access to Calvin to assist

with the construction of the biography. She had allowed him to return to the object of his obsession,

the Amarantin, with access to research tools and his dwindling network of sympathisers.

'It was his idea,' Pascale said.

'Yes... I admit that much.' Cal drew in a lungful of breath, appearing to take stock before his next

utterance, despite the fact that the Calvin simulation 'thought' far more rapidly than unaugmented

humans. 'Those were dangerous times -- no worse than now, of course, from what I've gathered

since my re-awakening -- but hazardous all the same. It seemed prudent to ensure some part of me

would survive my original's destruction. I wasn't thinking of a copy, though -- more a sketch, a

likeness; perhaps not even fully Turing-compliant.'

'What made you change your mind?' Sylveste said.

'Pascale began to embed parts of me in the biography over a period of time -- months, in fact. The

encryption was very subtle. But once she had copied enough of the original for the copied parts to

start interacting, they -- or rather me -- became rather less enthralled by the notion of committing

cybernetic suicide just to prove a point. In fact I felt rather more alive -- more myself -- than I ever

had before.' He vouchsafed his audience a smile. 'Of course, I soon realised why this was the case.

Pascale had copied me into a more powerful computer system; the governmental core in Cuvier,

where *Descent* was being assembled. The system was connected to more archives and networks

than you ever allowed me, even back in Mantell. For the first time I actually had something to

justify the attentions of my massive intellect.' He held their gaze for a moment before adding, very

softly: 'That's a joke, by the way.'

'Copies of the biography were freely available,' Pascale said. 'Sajaki had already obtained one

without even realising it contained a version of Calvin. How did you know he was in it, though?'

She was looking at Sylveste now. 'Did the copied version of Cal tell you?'

'No, and I'm not even sure he would have wanted to if a way had existed. I figured it out for

myself. The biography was too large for the amount of simulational data it contained. Oh, I know

you'd been clever -- encoding Cal into least significant digits of data files -- but there was just too

much of Cal to hide away that easily. *Descent* was fifteen per cent longer than it should have been.

For months I thought there had to be a whole hidden layer of scenarios; aspects of my life not

supposedly documented but which you'd put in anyway, for anyone persistent enough to find them.

But finally I realised that the missing capacity was enough to store a copy of Cal, and then it made

sense. Of course I could never be completely sure...' He looked at the projected image. 'Though I

suppose you'd say you're the real Cal now and what I erased was just a copy?'

Cal raised a hand from the armrest, disputatiously. 'No; that would be much too simplistic a

version of things. After all, I was that copy, once. But what I was then -- and what the copy

remained, until you killed it -- was just a shadow of what I am now. Let's just say I had a moment of

epiphany, shall we, and leave it at that?'

'So...' Sylveste stepped forward, finger tapping against his lip. 'In that case, I never really killed

you, did I?'

'No,' Calvin said, with deceptive placidity. 'You didn't. But it's what you might have been doing

that counts. And on that score, dear boy, I'm afraid you're still a callous, patricidal bastard.'

'Touching, isn't it?' Hegazi said. 'Nothing I like better than a good old family reunion.'

They proceeded to the Captain. Khouri had been here before, but despite her minor familiarity with

the place, she still felt unnerved; obtrusively aware of the contaminating matter which was only

barely contained by the envelope of cold which been caulked around the man.

'I think I should know what you want from me,' Sylveste said.

'Isn't it obvious?' Sajaki said. 'Do you think we went to all this trouble just to ask you how you

were doing these days?'

'I wouldn't put it past you: Sylveste said. 'Your behaviour never made much sense to me in the

past, so why should it start doing so now? And besides, let's not deceive ourselves that what went

on back there was everything it seemed.'

'What do you mean?' Khouri asked.

'Oh, don't tell me you haven't figured it out yet?'

'Figured what out?'

'That it never actually happened.' Sylveste fixed her with the blank depths of his eyes; a scrutiny

which felt more like the scanning of a mindless automatic surveillance system than any human

apperception. 'Or perhaps not,' he added. 'Perhaps you haven't actually figured it out yet. Who are

you anyway?'

'You'll get your chance to ask all the questions you want,' Hegazi said, edgy now that they were

within a stone's throw of the Captain.

'No,' Khouri said. 'I want to know. What do you mean, none of that actually happened?'

Sylveste's voice was slow and calm. 'I'm talking about that business with the settlement Volyova

wiped out.'

Khouri stepped ahead of the entourage, blocking their progress. 'You'd better explain that.'

'That can wait,' Sajaki said, stepping forward to push her aside. 'Certainly until you've explained

your role in things to my complete satisfaction, Khouri.' The Triumvir was eyeing her suspiciously

all the time now, convinced that the two deaths in her presence had to be more than coincidence.

With Volyova out of the way -- and the Mademoiselle silent -- she had no one to shelter her. It

would be only a matter of time before Sajaki acted on his suspicions and did something drastic.

But Sylveste said, 'No. Why need it wait? I think we should all be absolutely clear about what's

going on here. Sajaki; you didn't go down to Resurgam just to obtain a copy of the biography, did

you? What would have been the point? You had no knowledge that *Descent* contained a copy of Cal

until I told you. You only picked up the biography because it might have come in useful in your

negotiations with me. But it wasn't the reason you went down there. That was something else

entirely.'

'Intelligence gathering,' Sajaki said, carefully.

'More than that. You went there to glean information, yes. But you also had to plant some.'

'About Phoenix?' Khouri said.

'Not just about Phoenix, the place itself. It never existed.' Sylveste allowed a pause before

continuing. 'It was a ghost planted there by Sajaki. It wasn't even on the old maps we kept at

Mantell, but as soon as we updated them from the master copies in Cuvier it appeared. We just

assumed it was a new settlement; too recent to show up on the previous maps. That was stupid, of

course -- I should have seen through it then. But we assumed the master copies hadn't been

corrupted.'

'Doubly stupid,' Sajaki said. 'Given that you must have wondered where I was.'

'If I'd given it more than a moment's thought...'

'Pity you didn't,' Sajaki said. 'Or we might not be having this conversation. But then again, we'd

have only resorted to another means of securing you.'

Sylveste nodded. 'I suppose your next logical step would have been to blow up a bigger fictitious

target. But I'm not entirely sure you could have pulled off the same trick twice. I've a nasty

suspicion you might have had to hit somewhere real.'

The cold had a steely texture to it, like a thousand pieces of barbed metal constantly scraping softly

against the skin; threatening to pierce to the bone with each movement. But as soon as they were

truly in the Captain's realm, it became impossible to notice the cold, since the cold in which he was

imprisoned was so obviously deeper.

'He's sick,' Sajaki said. 'With a variant of the Melding Plague. You know all about that, of

course.'

'We heard reports from Yellowstone,' Sylveste said. 'I can't say they were exceptionally detailed.'

All the while he had not actually looked directly at the Captain.

'We haven't been able to contain it,' Hegazi said. 'Not properly, anyway. Extreme cold goes some

way to slowing it, but no more than that. It -- or rather, he -- is spreading slowly, incorporating the

mass of the ship into his own template.'

'Then he's still alive, at least by some biological definition?'

Sajaki nodded, 'Of course, no organism can really be said to be alive at these temperatures. But if

we were to warm the Captain now... parts of him would function.'

'That's hardly reassuring.'

'I brought you aboard to heal him, not to hear reassurances.'

What the Captain resembled was a statue smeared in ropelike silver tendrils, extending tens of

metres in either direction; beautifully aglisten with sinister biochimeric malignancy. The reefersleep

unit at the heart of the frozen explosion was still, by some miracle of design or accident, nominally

functional. But its once symmetrical form had been tugged and warped by the glacially slow but

unyielding forces of the Captain's spread. Most of its status readouts were now dead; there were no

active entoptics surrounding it. Of the display devices which still worked, some showed unreadable

mush; the senseless hieroglyphics of machine senility. Khouri was grateful that there were no

entoptics. She had the feeling that if there had been any, they too would have been corrupted; a host

of malignant seraphim or disfigured cherubim signifying the excessive state of the Captain's illness.

'You don't need a surgeon here,' Sylveste said. 'You need a priest.'

'That isn't what Calvin thought,' Sajaki said. 'He was rather eager to begin the work.'

'Then the copy they had in Cuvier must have been delusional. Your Captain isn't sick. He isn't

even dead, since there isn't enough left which was ever alive in the first place.'

'Nonetheless,' Sajaki said. 'You will help us. You'll have Ilia's assistance, as well -- as soon as

she's well herself. She thinks that she has created a counteragent for the plague -- a retrovirus. I'm

told it works on small samples. But she's a weaponeer. Applying it to the Captain would be strictly

a medical matter. But at least she can provide you with a tool.'

Sylveste directed a smile at Sajaki. 'I'm sure you've discussed the matter with Calvin already.'

'Let's just say he's been briefed. He's willing to try it -- he thinks it might even work. Does this

encourage you?'

'I would have to bow to Calvin's wisdom,' Sylveste replied. 'He's the medical man, not me. But

before I enter into any commitment we'd have to negotiate terms.'

'There won't be any,' Sajaki said. 'And if you resist us, don't imagine we won't consider ways of

persuading you via Pascale.'

'You'd probably regret it.'

Khouri prickled. For the dozenth time this day, something felt seriously wrong. She sensed that

the others were also attuned to it, though there was nothing to read in their expressions. Sylveste

sounded too cocksure; that was it. Too cocksure for someone who had been abducted and was about

to be forced to undergo a painful ordeal. Instead he sounded like someone who was about to reveal

a winning hand.

'I'll fix your damn Captain,' Sylveste said. 'Or at least prove it can't be done; one of the two. But

in return, there's a small favour you have to do for me.'

'Excuse me,' Hegazi said, 'but when negotiating from a position of weakness, you don't ask for

favours.'

'Who said anything about weakness?' Sylveste smiled again, this time with

unconcealed ferocity,

and something which looked dangerously like joy. 'Before I left Mantell, my captors did me a small,

final favour. I don't think they particularly felt they owed me anything. But the act was a small

thing, and it allowed them to spite you, which did, I think, rather appeal to them. They were losing

me, after all -- but they saw no reason why you should get quite what you thought you were getting.'

'I don't like this at all,' Hegazi said.

'Believe me,' Sylveste said, 'you're about to like it a lot less. Now; I have to ask a question, just to

clarify our positions.'

'Go ahead,' Sajaki said.

'Are you all completely familiar with the concept of hot-dust?'

'You're talking to Ultras,' Hegazi said.

'Well, of course. Just wanted to make sure you weren't under any illusions. And you'll know that

hot-dust fragments can be sealed within containment devices smaller than pinheads? Of course you

do.' He tapped his finger against his chin, extemporising like an expert lawyer. 'You heard about

Remilliod's visit, of course? The last lighthugger to trade with the Resurgam system before you

came?'

'We heard about it.'

'Well, Remilliod sold hot-dust to the colony. Not many fragments; just enough for a colony

which might want to do some hefty landscape-rearranging in the near future. Of his sample, a dozen

or less fell into the hands of the people who were holding me prisoner. Do you want me to continue,

or are you ahead of me already?'

'I fear I may be,' Sajaki said. 'But continue anyway.'

'One of those pinheads is now installed in the vision system which Cal made for me. It draws no

current, and even if you dismantled my eyes, you would not be able to tell which component was

the bomb. But you wouldn't want to try that, because even tampering with my eyes will detonate the

pinhead, with a yield sufficient to turn the front kilometre of this ship into a very expensive and

useless piece of glass sculpture. Kill me, or even harm me to the extent that certain bodily functions

are compromised beyond a preset limit, and the device triggers. Clear on that?'

'As crystal.'

'Good. Harm Pascale and the same thing happens: I can trigger it deliberately, by executing a

series of neural commands. Or I could of course simply kill myself -- the result would be

indistinguishable.' He clasped his hands together, beaming like a statue of Buddha. 'So. How does a

little negotiation sound to you?'

Sajaki said nothing for what seemed like an eternity; doubtless considering every ramification of

what Sylveste had said. Finally he said, without having consulted Hegazi: 'We can be... flexible.'

'Good. Then I expect you're keen to hear my terms.'

'Burning with enthusiasm.'

'Thanks to the recent unpleasantness,' Sylveste said, 'I have a reasonably good idea what this ship

can do. And I suspect that little demonstration was very much at the timid end of things. Am I

right?'

'We have... capabilities, but you'd have to talk to Ilia. What did you have in mind?'

Sylveste smiled.

'First you have to take me somewhere.'

NINETEEN

Delta Pavonis system, 2566

They retired to the bridge.

Sylveste had visited this room during his previous period aboard the ship and had spent hundreds

of hours in it then, but it still impressed him. With the encircling ranks of empty seats rising

towards the ceiling, it felt more like a court of law where some momentous case was about to be

tried; the jurors about to take their places in the concentric seats. Judgement seemed to be waiting in

the air, about to be voiced into being. Sylveste examined his state of mind and found nothing

resembling guilt, so he did not place himself in the role of the accused. But he felt a weight. It was

the weight that some legal functionary might feel; the burden of a task which had to be performed

not only in public but to the highest possible standards of excellence. If he failed, more than his own

dignity might be at stake. A long and elaborately connected chain of events leading to this point

would be severed, a chain that stretched unimaginably far into the past.

He looked around and made out the holographic projection globe which jutted into the chamber's

geometric centre, but his eyes were barely able to make out the object which it was imaging, though

there were enough ancillary clues to suggest it was a realtime representation of Resurgam.

'Are we still in orbit?' he asked.

'Now that we've got you?' Sajaki shook his head. 'That would be pointless. We have no more

business with Resurgam.'

'You're worried about the colonists trying something?'

'They could inconvenience us, I admit.'

For a moment they were silent, before Sylveste said, 'Resurgam never interested you, did it? You

came all this way just for me. I find that singleminded to the point of monomania.'

'It was only the work of a few months, if that.' Sajaki smiled. 'From our perspective, of course.

Don't flatter yourself that I'd have chased you for years.'

'From my perspective, of course, that's just what you did.'

'Your perspective isn't valid.'

'And yours is? Is that what you're saying?'

'It's... longer. That has to count for something. Now; to answer your earlier question, we've left

orbit. We've been accelerating away from the ecliptic ever since you came aboard.'

'I haven't told you where I want us to go.'

'No, our plan was simply to put an AU or so between us and the colony, then lock into a constant-

thrust holding pattern while we think things over.' Sajaki clicked his fingers, causing a robotic seat

to angle down beside him. He boarded it, then waited while another quartet of seats appeared for

Sylveste and Pascale, Hegazi and Khouri. 'During which time, of course, we anticipated that you'd

assist with the Captain.'

'Did I say I wouldn't do it?'

'No,' Hegazi said. 'But you sure as hell came with some unanticipated fine print.'

'Don't blame me for making the best of a bad situation.'

'We're not, we're not,' Sajaki said. 'But it would help if you were a little clearer on your

requirements. Isn't that reasonable?'

Sylveste's seat was hovering next to the one holding Pascale. She was looking at him now, as

much in expectation as any of the crew who had captured him. Except that she knows so much

more, he thought, almost everything there was to know, in fact -- or at least as much as he knew,

however insignificant a part of the truth that knowledge actually constituted.

'Can I call up a map of the system from this position?' Sylveste asked. 'I mean, of course I can, in

principle -- but will you give me the freedom to do so and some instructions?'

'The most recent maps were compiled during our approach,' Hegazi said. 'You can retrieve them

from ship memory and project them into the display.'

'Then show me how. I'm going to be more than just a passenger for some time to come -- you

might as well get used to it.'

It took a minute or so to find the right maps; another half a minute to project the right composite

into the projection sphere in the form Sylveste desired, eclipsing the realtime image of Resurgam.

The image had the form of an orrery, the orbits of the system's eleven planets and largest minor

planets and comets denoted by elegant coloured tracks, with the positions of the bodies themselves

shown in their current relative positions. Because the scale adopted was large, the terrestrial planets

-- Resurgam included -- were crammed into the middle; a tight scribble of concentric orbits banded

around the star Delta Pavonis. The minor planets came next, followed by the gas giants and comets,

occupying the system's middle ground. Then came two smaller sub-Jovian gas worlds, hardly giants

at all, then a Plutonian world -- not much more than a captured cometary husk, with two attendant

moons. The system's Kuiper belt of primordial cometary matter was visible in infrared as a

curiously distorted shoal, one nubby end pointing out from the star. And then there was nothing at

all for twenty further AU, more than ten light-hours out from the star itself. Matter here -- such as

there was -- was only weakly bound to the star; it felt its gravitational field, but orbits here were

centuries long and easily disrupted by encounters with other bodies. The protective caul of the star's

magnetic field did not extend this far out, and objects here were buffeted by the ceaseless squall of

the galactic magnetosphere; the great wind in which the magnetic fields of all stars were embedded,

like tiny eddies within a vaster cyclone.

But that enormous volume of space was not completely empty. It appeared at first only as one

body -- but that was because the default magnification scale was too large to show its duplicity. It

lay in the direction in which the Kuiper halo was pointing; its own gravitational drag had pulled the

halo out of sphericity towards that bulged configuration, betraying its existence. The object itself

would have been utterly invisible to the naked eye, unless one were within a

million kilometres of

it; at which point seeing the object would have been the least of one's problems.

'You'll know of this,' Sylveste said. 'Even though you might not have paid it very much attention

until now.'

'It's a neutron star,' Hegazi said.

'Good. Remember anything else?'

'Only that it has a companion,' Sajaki said. 'Which doesn't in itself make it unusual, of course.'

'Not really, no. Neutron stars often have planets -- they're supposed to be the condensed remnants

of evaporated binary stars. Either that or the planet somehow managed to avoid being destroyed

when the pulsar was formed during the supernova explosion of a heavier star.' Sylveste shook his

head. 'But not unusual, no. So -- you may be asking -- why am I interested in it?'

'That's a reasonable question,' Hegazi said.

'Because there's something strange about it.' Sylveste enlarged the image, until the planet was

clearly visible, streaking around the neutron star in its ludicrously rapid orbit.

'The planet was of extraordinary significance to the Amarantin. It appears in their late-phase

artefacts with increasing frequency as one approaches the Event -- the stellar flare which wiped

them out.'

He knew he had their attention now. If the threat to destroy their ship had appealed to them on the

level of self-preservation, now he had fully snared their intellects. He had never doubted that this

part would be simpler than with the colonists, for Sajaki's crew already had the advantage of a

cosmic perspective.

'So what is it?' Sajaki said.

'I don't know. That's what you're going to help me find out.'

Hegazi said, 'You think there might be something on the planet?'

'Or inside it. We won't know for sure until we get a lot closer, will we?'

'It could be a trap,' Pascale said. 'I don't think we should dismiss that possibility -- especially if

Dan's right about the timing.'

'What timing?' Sajaki said.

Sylveste steepled his fingers. 'It's my suspicion -- no; not a suspicion, my conclusion -- that the

Amarantin eventually progressed to the point where they could achieve space travel.'

'From what I gathered on the surface,' Sajaki said, 'there's very little in the fossil record to

substantiate that.'

'But there wouldn't be, would there? Technological artefacts are inherently less durable than more

primitive items. Pottery endures. Microcircuits crumble to dust. Besides, it took a technology

comparable to our own to bury the city under the obelisk. If they were capable of that, we've no

grounds for presuming they weren't also capable of reaching the edge of their solar system --

perhaps even interstellar space.'

'You don't think the Amarantin reached other systems?'

'I don't rule it out, no.'

Sajaki smiled. 'Then where are they now? I can accept one technological civilisation being wiped

out without a trace, but not one spread across many worlds. They would have left something

behind.'

'Perhaps they did.'

'The world around the neutron star? You think that's where you'll find the answers to your

questions?'

'If I knew that, I wouldn't need to go there. All I'm asking is that you let me find out, which

means taking me there.' Sylveste rested his chin on his steepled fingers.

'You'll get me as close to

the planet as possible, and ensure my safety at the same time. If that means putting the nastier

capabilities of this vessel at my disposal, so be it.'

Hegazi looked fascinated and fearful. 'Do you think we'll encounter something when we get there

-- something we need the weapons for?'

'There's no harm in taking precautions, is there?'

Sajaki turned to his fellow Triumvir. For a moment it was as if none of the others were present at

all as something flickered between them, perhaps on the level of machine thought. When they

spoke, it might only have been to repeat the discussion for Sylveste's benefit. 'What he said about

the device in his eyes -- is that possible? I mean, assuming what we know of the technical expertise

on Resurgam, could they have installed such an implant in the time we gave them?'

Hegazi took his time before answering. 'I think, Yuuji-san, that we should seriously consider the

possibility.'

Most of Volyova woke up in the recovery suite of the medical bay. She did not need to be told that

she had been unconscious for more than a few hours. She had only to examine her state of mind, the

feeling that she had been dreaming, deeply so -- for centuries -- to know that her injuries, and her

recuperation, had not been trivial. Sometimes one could feel like one had been dreaming for a

lifetime in the shortest of catnaps. But not now, for these dreams were as long, and as saturated with

event, as the most turgid of pretechnological fables. She felt that she had lived through dusty,

deathless volumes of her own wanderings.

Yet she remembered very little. She had been aboard this ship, yes, and then not aboard it --

somewhere else, though where, she was not yet clear -- and then something dreadful had happened.

All she really remembered was the sound and the fury -- but what did they signify? Where had she

been?

Dimly -- at first wary that it was merely a dislodged fragment of the dream -- she remembered

Resurgam. And then, slowly, events returned, not as a tidal wave, or even as a landslide, but as a

slow, squelching slippage: a disembowelment of the past. They did not even have the decency to

return in anything like chronological order. But when she ordered things to her own satisfaction, she

remembered the delivering of ultimata, in her voice, oddly enough, announced from orbit to the

waiting world below. And then waiting in the storm, and feeling at first a terrible hotness and then

an equally terrible coolness in her stomach, and seeing Sudjic standing over her, dispensing pain.

The room's door opened; Ana Khouri entered, alone.

'You're awake,' she said. 'Thought so. I had the system advise me when your neural activity

passed a certain level consistent with conscious thought. It's good to have you back, Ilia. We could

use some sanity around here.'

'How long...' Volyova swallowed her words -- they sounded broken and slurred -- before

beginning again. 'How long have I been here? And where are we now?'

'Ten days since the attack, Ilia. We're -- well, I'll come to that. It's a long story. How do you feel?'

'I've felt worse.' Then she wondered why she had said it, because she could not think of an

occasion when she had felt this bad, ever. But it seemed to be what one said under the

circumstances. 'What attack?'

'I don't think you remember much, do you?'

'I did just ask that question, Khouri.'

She had joined Volyova, the room extruding a blocky chair by the bedside for her comfort.

'Sudjic,' she said. 'She tried to kill you when we were on Resurgam -- you remember, don't you?'

'Not really.'

'We'd gone down to escort Sylveste up to the ship.'

Volyova was silent for a moment, the man's name ringing in her head with a peculiarly metallic

quality, as if a scalpel had just crashed to the floor. 'Sylveste, yes. I remember that we were about to

bring him in. Did it work, then? Did Sajaki get what he wanted?'

'Yes and no,' Khouri said, after deliberation.

'And Sudjic?'

'She wanted to kill you because of Nagorny.'

'No pleasing some people, is there?'

'I think she'd have found some excuse, whatever happened. She thought I'd join with her, as well.'

'And?'

'I killed her.'

'Then I'd hazard a guess that you saved my life.' For the first time Volyova lifted her head from

the pillow; it felt as if it were attached to the bed by elastic cables. 'You really ought to cut down on

it, Khouri, before it becomes a habit. But if there was another death... you can probably expect

Sajaki to start asking questions.' That was as much as she would risk saying now; the warning she

had just given was exactly what any senior crewperson might give to an understudy; it did not

necessarily mean -- to anyone listening in -- that Volyova knew anything more about Khouri than

the other Triumvirs.

But the warning was sincere enough. First the killing in the training chamber... then another on

Resurgam. In neither situation had Khouri exactly instigated the trouble, but if her proximity to both

happenings was enough to trouble Volyova, it would certainly give Sajaki pause for thought.

Asking questions was probably at the milder end of the Triumvir's likely interrogative process, if it

came to that. Sajaki might opt for torture... perhaps even a dangerous deep-memory trawl. Then -- if

he did not fry Khouri's mind in the process -- he might learn her identity as infiltrator, put aboard to

steal the cache. His next question would almost certainly be: how much of this did Volyova know?

And if he deemed it worthwhile to trawl Volyova as well...

It must not come to that, she thought.

As soon as she was well enough, she would have to get Khouri to the spider-room where they

could talk more freely. For now, it was senseless to dwell on things beyond her control.

'What happened afterwards?' she asked.

'After Sudjic bought it? Everything continued according to plan, believe it or not. Sylveste still

had to be escorted aboard the ship, and Sajaki and I hadn't been injured.'

She thought of Sylveste, somewhere in the ship now. 'Then Sajaki really did get what he wanted.'

'No,' Khouri said, guardedly. 'That's only what he thought he'd got. But the truth was a bit

different.'

Over the next hour she told Volyova everything that had happened since Sylveste had been

brought back aboard the lighthugger. It was all general ship-knowledge; nothing that Sajaki would

not expect her to tell Volyova. But all the while, Volyova reminded herself that she was being told

events as filtered by Khouri's perception of things, which might not necessarily be complete, or

even reliable. There were nuances of shipboard politics which would elude Khouri; would, indeed,

elude anyone who had not been aboard for years. But at the end it seemed unlikely that any large

portion of the truth had not been related, whether Khouri knew it or not. And what Volyova had

been told was not good; not good at all.

'You think he lied?' Khouri asked.

'About the hot-dust?' Volyova approximated a shrug. 'It's certainly possible. Granted, Remilliod

did sell hot-dust to the colony -- we've seen the evidence of that already -- but manipulating it isn't

child's play. And they wouldn't have had long to install it in his eyes, assuming they waited until the

strike against Phoenix had already taken place, which seems likely. On the other hand... the risk's

just too great to assume he was lying. No remote-scan could detect hot-dust without risking a

trigger... it puts Sajaki in a double-bind. He can't not assume Sylveste was telling the truth. He has

to take Sylveste at his word, or risk everything. At least this way the risk's marginally quantifiable.'

'You call Sylveste's request a quantifiable risk?'

Volyova clucked, thinking of his demands. In all her life, she had never been near anything

potentially alien; anything so potentially outside of her experience. There would surely be much

there that could teach her... many lessons she could absorb. Sylveste need hardly have bothered

with his threat...

'He should have known better than to offer us such a tantalising lure,' she

said. 'I've been

intrigued by that neutron star ever since we entered the system, do you know?
I found something

near it on our approach -- a weak neutrino source. It seems to be orbiting the
planet, which itself

orbits the neutron star.'

'What could produce neutrinos?'

'Many things -- but of this energy? I can only think of machinery. Advanced
machinery.'

'Left there by the Amarantin?'

'It's a possibility, isn't it?' Volyova smiled, with effort. That was exactly what
she was thinking,

but there was no sense in stating her desires so blatantly. 'I suppose we will
find out when we get

there.'

Neutrinos are fundamental particles; spin-half leptons. They come in three
forms, or flavours:

electron, mu- or tau-neutrinos, depending on the nuclear reactions which
have birthed them. But

because they have mass -- because they move fractionally slower than the
speed of light -- neutrinos

oscillate between flavours as they fly. By the time the ship's sensors
intercepted these neutrinos,

they were a blend of the three possible flavour states, difficult to untangle.
But as the distance to the

neutron star decreased -- and with it the time available for the neutrinos to oscillate away from their

creation state -- the blend of flavours became increasingly dominated by one type of neutrino. The

energy spectrum became easier to read, too, and the time-dependent variations in the source

strength were now much simpler to follow and interpret. By the time the distance between the ship

and the neutron star had narrowed to one-fifth of one AU -- about twenty million kilometres --

Volyova had a much clearer idea about what was causing the steady flux of particles, dominated by

the heaviest of the neutrino flavours, tau-neutrinos.

And what she learned disturbed her enormously.

But she decided to wait until they were closer before announcing her fears to the rest of the crew.

Sylveste was, after all, still controlling them; it seemed unlikely that her worries would greatly

dissuade him from his current course of action.

Khoury was getting used to dying.

One of the niggling aspects of Volyova's simulations was the way they routinely carried on

beyond the point where any real observer would have been killed, or at the very least so gravely

injured as to be incapable of perceiving any subsequent events, let alone

capable of having any

influence over them. Like this time. Something had lanced out from Cerberus -- an unspecified

weapon of arbitrary destructiveness -- and casually shredded the entire lighthugger. Nothing could

have survived that attack, but Khouri's disembodied consciousness was still stubbornly present,

watching the riven shards drift lazily apart in a pinkish halo of their own ionised guts. It was, she

supposed, Volyova's way of rubbing it in.

'Haven't you ever heard of morale-building?' Khouri had asked.

'Heard of it,' Volyova said. 'Don't happen to agree with it. Would you rather be happy and dead,

or scared and alive?'

'But I keep dying anyway. Why are you so convinced we're going to run into trouble when we get

there?'

'I'm only assuming the worst,' Volyova said, depressingly.

The next day Volyova felt strong enough to talk to Sylveste and his wife. She was sitting up in bed

when they came into the medical bay, a compad propped on her lap, scrolling through a plethora of

attack scenarios which she would later test against Khouri. She hastily closed the display and

replaced it with something less ominous, though she doubted that the cryptic code of her

simulations would have made much sense to Sylveste anyway; even to herself, her scribbles some-

times resembled a private language in which she had only passing fluency.

'You're healed now,' Sylveste said, sitting next to her, flanked by Pascale. 'That's good.'

'Because you care about my well-being, or because you need my expertise?'

'The latter, obviously. There's no love lost between us, Ilia, so why pretend otherwise?'

'I wouldn't dream of it.' She put the compad aside. 'Khoury and I had a discussion about you. I --

or we -- concluded that it was better to give you the benefit of the doubt. So for the time being,

assume that I assume that everything you've told us,' she touched a finger against her brow, 'is

completely true. Of course, I reserve the right to alter this judgement at any point in the future.'

'I think it's best for all of us if we adopt that line of thinking,' Sylveste said. 'And I assure you,

scientist to scientist, it's utterly true. Not just about my eyes, either.'

'The planet.'

'Cerberus. Yes. I presume they briefed you?'

'You expect to find something there which may relate to the Amarantin extinction. Yes; that

much I gleaned.'

'You know about the Amarantin?'

'Orthodox thinking, yes.' She lifted the compad again, quickly scrolling to a cache of documents

uplinked from Cuvier. 'Of course, very little of this is your work. But I have the biography, as well.

It conveys a great deal of your speculation.'

'Framed from the point of view of a sceptic,' Sylveste said, glancing towards Pascale -- a visible

shift in the angle of his head, for it was impossible to judge the direction of his gaze from his eyes.

'Naturally. But the essence of your thinking comes through. Within that paradigm... I concur that

Cerberus/Hades is of some interest.'

Sylveste nodded, clearly impressed that she had remembered the proper nomenclature for the

planet/neutron-star binary system they were now approaching. 'Something drew the Amarantin

there, in their end days. I want to know what it was.'

'And does it concern you that this something might have been related to the Event?'

'It concerns me, yes.' His answer was not quite what she was expecting. 'But it would concern me

more if we were to ignore it entirely. After all, the threat to our own safety might be just as present.

At least if we learn something we have a chance of avoiding the same fate.'

Volyova tapped a finger against her lower lip, thoughtfully. 'The Amarantin may have thought

similarly.'

'Better, then, to approach the situation from a standpoint of power.' Sylveste looked to his wife

again. 'It was providential that you arrived, in all honesty. There was no way for Cuvier to finance

an expedition out here, even if I had been able to persuade the colony of its importance. And even if

they had, nothing they could have prepared would have equalled the offensive capabilities of this

ship.'

'That little demonstration of our fire-power was really rather ill-judged, wasn't it?'

'Perhaps -- but without it, I might never have been released.'

She sighed. 'That, unfortunately, is precisely my point.'

The better part of a week later -- when the ship had arrived within twelve million kilometres of

Cerberus/Hades, and had assumed orbit around the neutron star -- Volyova convened a meeting of

the entire crew, and their guests, in the ship's bridge. Now, she thought, was the time to reveal that

her deepest fears had indeed been justified. It was hard enough for her, but how would Sylveste take

matters? What she was about to tell him not only confirmed that they were approaching something

dangerous, but it also touched on something of deep personal significance for him. She was not an

adept judge of character at the best of times -- and Sylveste was entirely too complex a beast to

submit to easy analysis -- but she saw no way that her news could be anything other than painful.

'I found something,' she said, when she had everyone's attention. 'Quite some time ago, in fact: a

source of neutrinos, near Cerberus.'

'How long ago?' Sajaki said.

'Before we arrived around Resurgam.' Watching his expression darken, she added: 'There was

nothing worth telling you, Triumvir. We did not even know we would be sent out here at that point.

And the nature of the source was very unclear.'

'And now?' Sylveste said.

'Now I have... a clearer idea. As we approached Hades, it became obvious that the emissions at

source were pure tau-neutrinos of a particular energy spectrum; unique, in fact, amongst the

signatures of any human technology.'

'Then it's something human that you've found out here?' Pascale said.

'That was my assumption.'

'A Conjoiner drive,' Hegazi said, and Volyova nodded slightly.

'Yes,' she said. 'Only Conjoiner drives produce tau-neutrino signatures which match the source

around Cerberus.'

'Then there's another ship out here?' Pascale said.

'That was my first thought,' Volyova said, sounding uneasy. 'And, in fact, it isn't entirely wrong,

either.' Then she whispered commands into her bracelet, causing the central display sphere to warm

to life and begin running through a pre-programmed routine she had set up just before the meeting.

'But it was important to wait until we were close enough for visual identification of the source.'

The sphere showed Cerberus. The moon-sized world was like a less inviting version of

Resurgam: monotonously grey, densely cratered. It was dark, too: Delta Pavonis was ten light-hours

away, and the other nearby star -- Hades -- offered almost no light at all. Although it had been born

furiously hot in a supernova explosion, the tiny neutron star had long since cooled into the infrared,

and to the naked eye it was only visible when its gravitational field tricked background stars into

arcs of lensed light. But even if Cerberus had been bathed in light, there was

no suggestion of

anything which might have lured the Amarantin. Even the best of Volyova's scans, however, had

only mapped the surface at a resolution of kilometres, so very little could be ruled out at this stage.

But she had studied the object orbiting Cerberus in considerably greater detail.

She zoomed in on it now. At first it was just a slightly elongated whitish-grey smudge,

backdropped by stars, with one edge of Cerberus visible to one side. That was how it had looked to

her days ago, before the ship had deployed all its long-baseline eyes. But even then she had found it

hard to ignore her suspicions. As more details appeared, it became harder still.

The smudge took on definite attributes of solidity and form now. It was a vaguely conic shape,

like a splinter of glass. Volyova made a dimensional grid envelop the object, showing its

approximate size. It was clearly several kilometres from end to end: three or four, easily.

'At this resolution,' Volyova said, 'the neutrino emission resolved into two distinct sources.' She

showed them: grey-green blurs spaced either side of the thickened end of the conic shape. As more

details phased in, the blurs could be seen to be attached to the body of the

splinter by elegant, back-

swept spars.

'A lighthugger,' Hegazi said. He was right; even at this relatively crude resolution, there was no

doubt about it. What they were looking at was another ship, much like their own. The two

individual sources of neutrino emission originated from the two Conjoiner engines mounted either

side of the hull.

'The engines are dormant,' Volyova said. 'But they still give off a stable flux of neutrinos even

when the ship's not under thrust.'

'Can you identify the ship?' Sajaki said.

'It isn't necessary,' Sylveste said, the deep calm in his voice surprising them all. 'I know which

ship it is.'

On the display, the final wave of detail shimmered across the ship, and the view enlarged until

the craft filled almost the entire sphere. It was obvious now, even if it had not been completely so

before. The ship was damaged; gutted: pocked by great spherical indentations, acres of the hull

flensed open to reveal an intricate and queasy complexity of sub-layers which ought never to have

been exposed to vacuum.

'Well?' Sajaki said.

'It's the wreck of the *Lorean*,' Sylveste said.

TWENTY

Approaching Cerberus/Hades, 2566

Calvin assumed existence in the lighthugger's medical suite, still incongruously posed in his

enormous hooded chair.

'Where are we?' he asked, rummaging in the corner of one eye with his finger, as if he had just

awoken from a satisfactorily deep sleep. 'Still around that shithole of a planet?'

'We've left Resurgam,' said Pascale, who sat in the seat next to Sylveste, who in turn was

reclining on the operation couch, fully clothed and conscious. 'We're on the edge of Delta Pavonis's

heliosphere, near the Cerberus/Hades system. They've found the *Lorean*.'

'Sorry; I think I misheard you.'

'No; you heard me perfectly well. Volyova showed it to us -- it's definitely the same ship.'

Calvin frowned. Like Pascale -- like Sylveste -- he had assumed that the *Lorean* was no longer

anywhere near the Resurgam system. Not since Alicia and the other mutineers had stolen it to return

to Yellowstone back in the early days of the Resurgam colony. 'How can it be the *Lorean*?'

'We don't know,' Sylveste said. 'All we know is what we've told you. You're as much in the dark

as the rest of us.' At such a point in their conversation, he normally inserted a barb against Calvin,

but for once something made him hold his tongue.

'Is it intact?'

'Something must have attacked it.'

'Survivors?'

'I doubt it. The ship was heavily damaged... whatever it was came suddenly, or they would have

tried moving out of range.'

Calvin was silent for a few moments before answering. 'Alicia must have died, then. I'm sorry.'

'We don't know what it was, or how the attack came about,' Sylveste said. 'But we may learn

something shortly.'

'Volyova's launched a probe,' Pascale said. 'A robot -- capable of crossing over to the *Lorean* very

quickly. It should have arrived by now. She said it will enter the ship and find whatever electronic

records have survived.'

'And then?'

'We'll know what killed them.'

'But that won't be enough, will it? No matter what you learn from the *Lorean*, it won't be enough

to make you turn back, Dan. I know you better than that.'

'You only think you do,' Sylveste said.

Pascale stood up, coughing. 'Can we save this for later? If you can't work together, Sajaki's not

going to have much use for either of you two.'

'Irrelevant what he thinks about me,' Sylveste said. 'Sajaki still has to do whatever I say.'

'He has a point,' Calvin said.

Pascale asked the room to extrude an *escritoire*, with controls and readouts in the Resurgam style.

She made a seat and sat herself beneath the *escritoire*'s curved ivory fascia. Then she called up a

map of the data connections in the suite, and set about establishing the necessary links between

Calvin's module and the suite's medical systems. She looked like she was spinning an elaborate cat's

cradle in thin air. As the connections were created, Calvin acknowledged them, and told her

whether to increase or decrease bandwidth along certain pathways, or whether additional topologies

were needed. The procedure lasted only a few minutes, and when it was complete Calvin was able

to operate the medical suite's servo-mechanical equipment, causing a mass of

tipped alloy arms to

descend from the ceiling, like the sculpture of a medusa.

'You have no idea how this feels,' Calvin said. 'It's the first time in years I've been able to act on a

part of the physical universe -- not since I first repaired your eyes.' And as he spoke, the multi-

jointed arms executed a shimmering dance, blades, lasers, claws, molecular-manipulators and

sensors scything the air in a whirl of vicious silver.

'Very impressive,' Sylveste said, feeling the breeze on his face. 'Just be careful.'

'I could rebuild your eyes in a day,' Calvin said. 'I could make them better than they ever were. I

could make them look human -- hell; with the technology here I could implant biological eyes just

as easily.'

'I don't want you to rebuild them,' Sylveste said. 'Right now they're all I have on Sajaki. Just

repair Falkender's work.'

'Ah, yes -- I'd forgotten about that.' Calvin, who remained essentially immobile, raised an

eyebrow. 'Are you sure this procedure is wise?'

'Just be careful what you poke.'

Alicia Keller Sylveste had been his last wife before Pascale. They had

married on Yellowstone,

during the long years when the Resurgam expedition had been planned in excruciating detail. They

had been together at the founding of Cuvier and had worked in harmony during the earliest years of

the digs. She had been brilliant; too much so, perhaps, to stay comfortably within his orbit.

Independently minded, she had begun to draw away from him -- both personally and professionally

-- as their time on Resurgam entered its third decade. Alicia was not alone in her conviction that

enough had been learned of the Amarantin; that it was time for the expedition -- never meant to be

permanent -- to return to Epsilon Eridani. After all, if they had not learned anything shattering in

thirty years, there was no promise that the next thirty years, or the next century, would bring

anything more overwhelming. Alicia and her sympathisers believed that the Amarantin did not

merit further detailed study; that the Event had only been an unfortunate accident of no actual

cosmic significance. It was not hard to see the sense in this. The Amarantin, after all, were not the

only dead species known to humankind. Out in the ever-expanding bubble of explored space, it was

entirely possible that other cultures were about to be discovered, potent with

archaeological

treasures waiting to be unearthed. Alicia's faction felt that Resurgam should be abandoned; that the

colony's finest minds should return to Yellowstone and select new targets of study.

Sylveste's faction, of course, disagreed in the strongest terms. By then Alicia and Sylveste were

estranged, but even in the depths of their enmity they preserved a cool respect of each other's

abilities. If love had withered, detached admiration remained.

Then came the mutiny. Alicia's faction had done just what they always threatened to do:

abandoned Resurgam. Unable to convince the rest of the colony to travel with them, they had stolen

the *Lorean* from its parking orbit. The mutiny had been quite bloodless, but in their theft of the ship,

Alicia's faction had inflicted a much more insidious harm upon the colony. The *Lorean* had

contained all the intra-system vessels and shuttles, meaning that the colonists were confined to

Resurgam's surface. They had no means to repair or upgrade the comsat girdle until Remilliod's

arrival, decades later. Servitors, replicating technology and implants had all been in excruciatingly

short supply after Alicia's departure.

But, in fact, Sylveste's faction had been the fortunate ones.

'Log entry,' said Alicia's ghost, floating disembodied in the bridge. 'Twenty-five days out from

Resurgam. We've decided -- against my better judgement -- to approach the neutron star on our way

out. The alignment's propitious; it doesn't take us very far from our planned heading for Eridani,

and the net delay to our journey will be tiny compared with the years of flight that are ahead of us in

any case.'

She was not quite what Sylveste remembered. It had been a long time, in any case. She no longer

seemed hateful to him; merely errant. She wore dark green clothes of a kind no one had worn in

Cuvier since the mutiny itself, and her hairstyle seemed almost theatrical in its antiquity.

'Dan was convinced there was something important out here, but the evidence was always

lacking.'

That surprised him. She was speaking from a time long before the unearthing of the obelisk with

its curious orrery-like inscriptions. Had his obsession been that strong, even then? It was entirely

possible, but the realisation was not a comfortable one. Alicia was right in what she said. The

evidence had been lacking.

'We saw something strange,' Alicia said. 'A cometary impact on Cerberus, the planet orbiting the

neutron star. Such impacts must be quite rare, this far out from the main Kuiper swarm. It naturally

drew our attention. But when we were close enough to examine the surface of Cerberus, there was

no sign of a new impact crater.'

Sylveste felt the hairs on the back of his neck tingle. 'And?' he found himself mouthing, almost

silently, as if Alicia were standing before them in the bridge, and not a projection dredged from the

memory banks of the wrecked ship.

'It was not something we could ignore,' she said. 'Even if it seemed to lend tacit support to Dan's

theory that there was something strange about the Hades/Cerberus system. So we altered our course

to come in closer.' She paused. 'If we find something significant... something we can't explain... I

don't think we'll have any ethical choice but to inform Cuvier. Otherwise we could never again hold

our heads high as scientists. We will know better tomorrow, anyway. We'll be within probe range

by then.'

'How much more of this is there?' Sylveste asked Volyova. 'How much

longer did she continue

with log entries?'

'About a day,' Volyova said.

Now they were in the spider-room, safe -- or so Volyova wished to believe -- from the prying eyes

of Sajaki and the others. They had still not listened to everything Alicia had to say, for the very act

of sifting through the spoken records was time-consuming and emotionally draining. Yet the basic

shape of the truth was emerging, and it was far from encouraging. Alicia's crew had been attacked

by something near Cerberus, suddenly and decisively. Shortly Volyova and her crewmates would

know a great deal more about the danger they were being impelled towards.

'You realise,' Volyova said, 'that if we encounter trouble, you may have to enter the gunnery.'

'I don't think that would necessarily be for the best,' Khouri said. Justifying herself, she added,

'We both know there have been some worrying events related to the gunnery recently.'

'Yes. As a matter of fact... during my convalescence, I convinced myself that you know more

than you admit.' Volyova relaxed back into the maroon plush of her seat, toying with the brass

controls in front of her. 'I think you told me the truth when you said you were

an infiltrator. But I

think that was as far as it went. The rest was a lie, designed to satisfy my curiosity and yet stop me

taking the matter to the rest of the Triumvirate... which worked, of course. But there were too many

things you didn't explain to my satisfaction. Take the cache-weapon, for instance. When it

malfunctioned, why did it point itself at Resurgam?'

'It was the closest target.'

'Sorry; too glib. It was something *about* Resurgam, wasn't it? And the fact that you infiltrated this

ship only when you knew our destination... yes; an out-of-the-way place would have made a good

venue for staging an attempted take-over of the cache -- but that was never on the cards anyway.

You may have been resourceful, Khouri, but there was no way you were ever going to wrest control

of those weapons from either myself or the rest of the Triumvirate.' She put her hand beneath her

chin now. 'So -- the obvious question. If your initial story was untrue, what exactly are you doing

aboard this ship?' She looked at Khouri, awaiting an answer. 'You may as well tell me now, because

I swear the next person to ask you will be Sajaki. It can't have escaped your notice that Sajaki has

his suspicions, Khouri -- especially since Kjarval and Sudjic died.'

'I didn't have anything to do with...' Then her voice lost conviction. 'Sudjic had her own vendetta

against you; that was none of my doing.'

'But I had already disabled your suit's weapons. Only I could have undone that order, and I was

too busy being killed to do so. How did you manage to override the lock in order to kill Sudjic?'

'Someone else did it.' Khouri paused before continuing. 'Some *thing* else, I should say. It was the

same something that got into Kjarval's suit and made her turn against me in the training session.'

'That wasn't Kjarval's doing?'

'No... not really. I don't think I was her favourite person in the universe... but I'm fairly sure that

she wasn't planning to kill me in the training chamber.'

This was a lot to take in, even if it did finally feel like the truth. 'So what happened, exactly?'

'The thing inside my suit had to arrange matters so I'd be on the team to recover Sylveste. Getting

Kjarval out of the picture was the only option.'

Yes; she could almost see the logic in that. She had never once questioned the manner in which

Kjarval had died. It had seemed so predictable that one of the crew would turn against Khouri –

especially Kjarval or Sudjic. Equally, one or other would surely have turned against Volyova before

too long. Both things had happened, but now she saw them as part of something else... ripples of

something she did not pretend to understand, but which moved with sharklike stealth beneath the

surface of events.

'What was so important about being in on the Sylveste recovery?'

'I...' Khouri had been on the verge of saying something, but now she faltered. 'I'm not sure this is

the best time, Ilia -- not when we're so close to whatever destroyed the *Lorean*.'

'I didn't bring you here just to admire the view, in case you thought otherwise. Remember what I

said about Sajaki? It's either me, now -- the closest thing on this ship you have to either an ally or a

friend -- or it's Sajaki, later, with some hardware you probably don't want to even think about.' That

was no great exaggeration, either. Sajaki's trawl techniques were not exactly state-of-the-art in their

subtlety.

'I'll start at the beginning, then.' What Volyova had just said seemed to have done the trick. That

was good -- or else she would have to think about dusting off her own coercion methods. 'The part

about being a soldier... all that was true. How I got to Yellowstone is... complicated. Even now I'm

not sure how much of it was an accident; how much of it was her doing. All I know is, she singled

me out early on for this mission.'

'Who was she?'

'I don't really know. Someone with a lot of power in Chasm City; maybe the whole planet. She

called herself the Mademoiselle. She was careful never to use a real name.'

'Describe her. She may be someone we know; someone we've had dealings with in the past.'

'I doubt it. She wasn't...' Khouri paused. 'She wasn't one of you. Maybe once, but not now. I got

the impression she'd been in Chasm City for a long time. But it wasn't until after the Melding

Plague that she came to power.'

'She came to power and I haven't heard of her?'

'That was the whole point of her power. It wasn't blatant, and she didn't have to make her

presence known to get something done. She just made shit happen. She wasn't even rich -- but she

controlled more resources than anyone else on the planet, by sleight of hand. Not enough to conjure

up a ship, though -- which is why she needed you.'

Volyova nodded. 'You said she might have been one of us, once. What did you mean by that?'

Khouri hesitated. 'It wasn't anything obvious. But the man working for her -- Manoukhian, he

called himself -- definitely used to be an Ultra. He dropped enough clues to suggest that he'd found

her in space.'

'Found -- as in rescued?'

'That was how it sounded to me. She had these jagged metal sculptures, too -- at least I thought

they were sculptures to start with. Later, they began to look like parts of a wrecked spaceship. Like

she was keeping them around her as a reminder of something.'

Something tugged at Volyova's memory, but for the moment she allowed the thought process to

remain below the level of consciousness. 'Did you get a good look at her?'

'No. I saw a projection, but it needn't have been accurate. She lived inside a palanquin, like the

other hermetics.'

Volyova knew a little about the hermetics. 'She needn't have been one at all. A palanquin could

simply have been a way of masking her identity. If we knew more about her origin... Did this

Manoukhian tell you anything else?'

'No; he wanted to -- I could tell that much -- but he managed not to give anything useful anyway.'

Volyova leaned closer. 'Why do you say he wanted to tell you?'

'Because that was his style. The guy never stopped mouthing off. The whole time I was being

driven around by him, he never stopped telling me stories about all the things he'd done; all the

famous people he'd known. Except for anything to do with the Mademoiselle. That was a closed

subject; maybe because he was still working for her. But you could tell he was just itching to tell me

stuff.'

Volyova drummed her fingers on the fascia. 'Maybe he found a way.'

'I don't understand.'

'No; I wouldn't expect you to. It was nothing he told you, either... but I think he *did* find a way to

tell you the truth.' The memory process she had suppressed a moment earlier had indeed dredged

something. She thought back to the time of Khouri's recruitment; to the examination she had given

the woman after she had been brought aboard. 'I can't be sure yet, of course...'

Khouri looked at her. 'You found something on me, didn't you? Something Manoukhian planted?'

'Yes. It seemed quite innocent, at first. Fortunately, I have an odd character defect, common

amongst those of us who indulge in the sciences... I never, *ever* throw anything away.' It was true;

disposing of the thing she had found would have demanded a greater expenditure of effort than

simply leaving it in her lab. It had seemed pointless at the time -- the thing was just a shard, after all

-- but now she could run a compositional analysis on the metal splinter she had pulled from Khouri.

'If I'm right, and this was Manoukhian's doing, it may tell us something about the Mademoiselle.

Perhaps even her identity. But you still need to tell me what exactly she wanted you to do for her.

We already know it involves Sylveste in some way or another.'

Khouri nodded. 'It does. And I'm afraid this is the part you're *really* not going to like.'

'We've completed a more detailed inspection of the surface of Cerberus from our present orbit,'

Alicia's projection said. 'And there's still no evidence of the cometary impact point. Plenty of

cratering, yes -- but none of it recent. Which just doesn't make any sense.' She elaborated the one

plausible theory they had, which was that the comet had been destroyed just before impact. Even

that explanation implied the use of some form of defensive technology, but at least it avoided the

paradox of the unchanged surface features. 'But we saw no sign of anything

like that, and there's

certainly no evidence of any technological structures on the surface. We've decided to launch a

squadron of probes down to the surface. They'll be able to hunt for anything we might have missed -

- machines buried in caves, or sunk in canyons below our viewing angle -- and they might provoke

some kind of response, if there are automated systems down there.'

Yes, Sylveste thought acidly. They had indeed provoked some kind of response. But it was

almost certainly not the kind Alicia had anticipated.

Volyova located the next segment in Alicia's narrative. The probes had been deployed; tiny

automated spacecraft as fragile and nimble as dragonflies. They had fallen towards the surface of

Cerberus -- there was no atmosphere to retard them -- only arresting their descent at the last

moment, with quick spurts of fusion flame. For a while, seen from the vantage point of the *Lorean*,

they had been sparks of brightness against the unremitting grey of Cerberus. But as the sparks had

become tiny, they were a reminder that even this tiny, dead world was orders of magnitude larger

than most human creations.

'Log entry,' said Alicia, after a gap in the narrative. 'The probes are reporting

something unusual -

- it's just coming in now.' She looked to one side, consulting a display beyond the projection

volume. 'Seismic activity on the surface. We were expecting to see it already, but until now the

crust hasn't moved at all, even though the planet's orbit isn't quite circularised and there should be

tidal stresses. It's almost as if the probes have triggered it, but that's quite ridiculous.'

'No more so than a planet that erases all evidence of a cometary impact on its surface,' Pascale

said. Then she looked at Sylveste. 'I didn't mean that as a criticism of Alicia, by the way.'

'Perhaps you didn't,' he said. 'But it would have been valid.' Then he turned to Volyova. 'Did you

recover anything other than Alicia's log entries? There must have been telemetered data from her

probes...'

'We have it,' Volyova said cautiously. 'I haven't cleaned it up. It's a little on the raw side.'

'Patch me in.'

Volyova breathed a string of commands into the bracelet she always wore and the bridge burned

away, a barrage of synaesthesia jumbling Sylveste's senses. He was being immersed in the data

from one of Alicia's probes -- the surveyor's sensorium fully as raw as Volyova had warned. But

Sylveste had known more or less what to expect; the transition was merely jarring rather than -- as

could easily have been the case -- agonising.

He floated above a landscape. Altitude was difficult to judge, since the fractal surface features --

craters, clefts and rivers of frozen grey lava -- would have looked very similar at any distance. But

the surveyor told it he was only half a kilometre above Cerberus. He looked down at the plain,

hunting for some sign of the seismic activity Alicia had mentioned. Cerberus looked eternally old

and unchanging, as if nothing had happened to it for billions of years. The only hint of motion came

from the fusion jets, casting radial shadows away from his position as the machine loitered.

What had the drones seen? Certainly nothing in the visual band. Feeling his way into the

sensorium -- it was like slipping on an unfamiliar glove -- Sylveste found the neural commands

which accessed different data channels. He turned to thermal sensors, but the plain's temperature

showed no signs of variation. Across the complete EM spectrum there was nothing anomalous.

Neutrino and exotic particle fluxes remained steadfastly within expectation.

Yet when he switched

to the gravitational imagers, he knew that something was very wrong with Cerberus. His visual field

was overlaid with coloured, translucent contours of gravitational force. The contours were moving.

Things -- huge enough to register via the mass sensors -- were travelling underground,

converging in a pincer movement directly below the point where he was hovering. For a moment,

he allowed himself to believe that these moving forms were only vast, buried flows of lava -- but

that comforting delusion lasted no more than a second.

This was nothing natural.

Lines appeared on the plain, forming a starlike mandala centred on the same focus. Dimly, on the

limits of his perception, he was aware that similar starlike patterns were opening below the other

probes. The cracks widened, opening into monstrous black fissures. Through the fissures, Sylveste

had a glimpse into what seemed to be kilometres of luminous depth. Coiled mechanical shapes

writhed, sliding blue-grey tendrils wider than canyons. The motion was busy; orchestrated,

purposeful, machinelike. He felt a special kind of revulsion. It was the feeling of biting an apple and

exposing a colony of wrigglingly industrious maggots. He knew now.
Cerberus was not a planet.

It was a mechanism.

Then the coiled things erupted through the star-shaped hole in the plain,
rushing dreamily

towards him, as if reaching to snatch him out of the sky. There was a horrible
moment of whiteness

-- a whiteness in every sense he had -- before Volyova's sensorium-feed
ended with screaming

suddenness, Sylveste almost shrieking with existential shock as his sense of
self crashed back into

his body in the bridge.

He had time enough, after he had gathered his faculties, to observe Alicia
mouthing something

soundlessly, her face carved in what might have been fear, and what might
equally have been the

dismay at learning -- in the instant prior to her death -- that she had been
wrong all along.

Then her image dissolved into static.

'Now at least we know he's mad,' Khouri said, hours later. 'If that didn't
persuade him against going

any closer to Cerberus, I don't think anything will.'

'It may well have had the opposite effect,' Volyova said, voice low despite the
relative security

furnished by the spider-room. 'Now Sylveste knows there is something worth

investigating, rather

than merely suspecting so.'

'Alien machinery?'

'Evidently. And perhaps we can even guess at the purpose, too. Cerberus clearly isn't a real

world. At the very least, it's a real world surrounded by a shell of machines, with an artificial crust.

That explains why the cometary impact-point was never found -- the crust, presumably, repaired

itself before Alicia's crew could get close enough.'

'Some kind of camouflage?'

'So it would seem.'

'So why draw attention by attacking those probes?'

Volyova had evidently given the matter some prior thought. 'The illusion of verisimilitude

obviously can't be foolproof at distances less than a kilometre or so. My guess is the probes were

about to learn the truth just before they were destroyed, so the world lost nothing and gained some

additional raw material in the bargain.'

'Why, though? Why surround a planet with a false crust?'

'I have no idea, and neither, I suspect, does Sylveste. That's why he's now even more likely to

insist on going closer.' She lowered her voice. 'He's already asked me to devise a strategy, in fact.'

'A strategy for what?'

'For getting him inside Cerberus.' She paused. 'He knows about the cache-weapons, of course. He

presumes they'll be sufficient to achieve his aims, by weakening the crustal machinery in one area

of the planet. More than that will be needed, of course...' Her tone of voice shifted. 'Do you think

this Mademoiselle of yours always knew this would be his objective?'

'She was pretty damn clear he shouldn't be allowed aboard the ship.'

'The Mademoiselle told you that before you joined us?'

'No; afterwards.' She told Volyova about the implant in her head; how the Mademoiselle had

downloaded an aspect of herself into Khouri's skull for the purposes of the mission. 'She was a

pain,' she said. 'But she made me immune to your loyalty therapies, which I suppose was something

to be grateful for.'

'The therapies worked as intended,' Volyova said.

'No, I just pretended. The Mademoiselle told me what to say and when, and I guess she didn't do

too bad a job, or else we wouldn't be having this discussion.'

'She can't rule out the possibility that the therapies worked partially, can she?'

Khouri shrugged again. 'Does it matter? What kind of loyalty would make any sense now?

You've as good as told me you're waiting for Sajaki to make the wrong move. The only thing

holding this crew together is Sylveste's threat to kill us all if we don't do what he wants. Sajaki's a

megalomaniac -- maybe he should have double-checked the therapies he was running on you.'

'You resisted Sudjic when she tried to kill me.'

'Yeah, I did. But if she'd told me she was going after Sajaki -- or even that prick Hegazi -- I don't

know what I would have said.'

Volyova spent a moment in consultation with herself.

'All right,' she said finally. 'I suppose the loyalty issue is moot. What else did the implant do for

you?'

'When you hooked me into the weapons,' Khouri said, 'she used the interface to inject herself --

or a copy of herself -- into the gunnery. To begin with I think she just wanted to assume control of

as much of the ship as possible, and the gunnery was her only point of entry.'

'The architecture wouldn't have allowed her to reach beyond it.'

'It didn't. To the best of my knowledge, she never gained control of any part of the ship other than

the weapons.'

'You mean the cache?'

'She was controlling the rogue weapon, Ilia. I couldn't tell you at the time, but I knew what was

happening. She wanted to use the weapon to kill Sylveste at long-range, before we'd ever arrived at

Resurgam.'

'I suppose,' Volyova said, heavy with resignation, 'that it makes a kind of twisted sense. But to

use that weapon just to kill a man... I told you, you're going to have to tell me why she wanted him

dead so badly.'

'You won't like it. Especially not now, with what Sylveste wants to do.'

'Just tell me.'

'I will, I will,' Khouri said. 'But there's one other thing -- one other complicating factor. It's called

Sun Stealer, and I think you may already be acquainted with it.'

Volyova looked as if some recently healed internal injury had just relapsed; as if some painful

seam had opened in her like ripping cloth.

'Ah,' she said eventually. 'That name again.'

TWENTY-ONE

Approaching Cerberus/Hades, 2566

Sylveste had always known this point would come. But until now he had managed to keep it

quarantined from his thoughts, acknowledging its existence without focusing his attention on what

it actually entailed, the way a mathematician might ignore an invalidated part of a proof until the

rest was rigorously tested and found to be free not just of glaring contradictions but of the least hint

of error.

Sajaki had insisted that they journey alone to the Captain's level, forbidding Pascale or any of the

crew to accompany them. Sylveste did not argue the point, although he would have preferred his

wife to be with him. It was the first time that Sylveste had been alone with Sajaki since arriving on

the *Infinity*, and as they took the elevator downship, Sylveste ransacked his mind for something to

talk about; anything except the atrocity that lay ahead of them.

'Ilia says her machines aboard the *Loreau* will need another three or four days,' Sajaki said.

'You're quite certain you wish her work to continue?'

'I have no second thoughts,' Sylveste said.

'Then I have no choice but to comply with your wishes. I've weighed the evidence and decided to

believe your threat.'

'You imagine I hadn't worked that out for myself already? I know you too well, Sajaki. If you

didn't believe me, you'd have forced me into helping the Captain while we were still around

Resurgam, and then quietly disposed of me.'

'Not true, not true.' Sajaki's voice had an amused quality to it. 'You underestimate my sheer

curiosity. I think I'd have indulged you this far just to see how much of your story was true.'

Sylveste was incapable of believing that for a moment, but equally, he saw no point in debating

it. 'Just how much of it don't you believe, now that you've seen Alicia's message?'

'But that could so easily have been faked. The damage to her ship could have been inflicted by

her own crew. I shan't believe things entirely until something jumps out of Cerberus and starts

attacking us.'

'I rather suspect you'll get your wish,' Sylveste said. 'In four or five days. Unless Cerberus really

is dead.'

They spoke no more until they had reached their destination.

It was not, of course, the first time he had seen the Captain -- not even during this visit. But the

totality of what had become of the man was still shocking; each time it was as

if Sylveste had never

properly set eyes on the scene before. True enough: this was his first visit to the Captain's level

since Calvin had renewed his eyes using the ship's superior medical capabilities, but there was more

to it than that. It was also the case that the Captain had changed since last time; perceptibly now --

as if his rate of spread was accelerating, racing towards some unguessable future state even as the

ship raced towards Cerberus. Perhaps, Sylveste thought, he had arrived in the nick of time --

assuming that any intervention at all could help the Captain now.

It was tempting to think that this quickening was significant; perhaps even symbolic. The man,

after all, had been sick -- if one could properly call this state sickness -- for many decades, and yet

he had chosen this period in which to enter a new phase of his malady. But that was an erroneous

view. One had to consider the Captain's timeframe: relativistic flight had compressed those decades

to a mere handful of years. His latest blooming was less unlikely than it seemed; there was nothing

ominous about it.

'How does this work?' Sajaki asked. 'Do we follow the same procedures as last time?'

'Ask Calvin -- he'll be running things.'

Sajaki nodded slowly, as if the point had only just occurred to him. 'You should have a say in

things, Dan. It's you he'll be working through.'

'Which is exactly why you don't need to consider my feelings -- I won't even be present.'

'I don't believe that for one moment. You'll be there, Dan -- fully aware, too, from what I

remember last time. Maybe not in control, but you'll be participating. And you won't like it -- we

know that much from last time.'

'You're an expert all of a sudden.'

'If you didn't hate this, why would you have kept away from us?'

'I didn't. I wasn't in any position to run.'

'I'm not just talking about the time when you were in prison. I'm talking about you coming here in

the first place; to this system. What were you doing if you weren't running from us?'

'Maybe I had reasons for coming here.'

For a moment Sylveste wondered if Sajaki was going to push the matter further, but the moment

passed and the Triumvir seemed to mentally discard that line of enquiry. Perhaps the topic bored

him. It struck Sylveste that Sajaki was a man who existed in the present and

thought largely about

the future, and for whom the past held few enticements. He was not interested in sifting through

possible motivations or might-have-beens, perhaps because, on some level, Sajaki was not really

capable of grasping these issues.

Sylveste had heard that Sajaki had visited the Pattern Jugglers, as he himself had done prior to the

Shrouder mission. There was only one reason for visiting the Jugglers, which was to submit oneself

to their neural transformations, opening the mind to new modes of consciousness unavailable

through human science. It was said -- rumoured, perhaps -- that no Juggler transform was without

its deficits; that there was no resculpting of the human mind which did not result in some pre-

existing faculty being lost. There were, after all, only a finite number of neurones in the human

brain, and a corresponding finite limit to the number of possible interneuronal connections. The

Jugglers could rewire that network, but not without destroying prior connectional pathways.

Perhaps Sylveste himself had lost something, but if that were the case, he could not locate the

absence. In Sajaki's case, it might be more obvious. The man was missing some instinctive grasp of

human nature, almost an autism. There was an aridity in his conversations, but it was only clear if

one paid proper attention. In Calvin's laboratories back on Yellowstone, Sylveste had once spoken

to an early, historically preserved computer system which had been created several centuries before

the Transenlightenment, during the first flourishing of artificial intelligence research. The system

purported to mimic natural human language, and initially it did, answering inputted questions with

apparent cognisance. But the illusion lasted for no more than a few exchanges; eventually one

realised that the machine was steering the conversation away from itself, deflecting questions with a

sphinxlike impassiveness. It was far less extreme with Sajaki, but the same sense of evasion was

present. It was not even particularly artful. Sajaki made no effort to disguise his indifference to

these matters; there was no sociopathic gloss of superficial humanity. And why should Sajaki even

bother to deny his nature? He had nothing to lose, and in his own way, he was no more or less alien

than any of the other crew.

Eventually, when it became obvious that he was not going to pursue Sylveste any further about

his reasons for coming to Resurgam, Sajaki addressed the ship, asking it to

invoke Calvin and

project his simulated image onto the Captain's level. The seated figure appeared almost

immediately. As usual Calvin subjected his witnesses to a brief pantomime of burgeoning

awareness, stretching in his seat and looking around him, though without a glimmer of real interest.

'Are we about to begin?' he asked. 'Am I about to enter you? Those machines I used on your eyes

were like a tantalus, Dan -- for the first time in years I remember what I've been missing.'

'Fraid not,' Sylveste said. 'This is just a -- how should we call it? Exploratory dig?'

'Then why bother invoking me?'

'Because I'm in the unfortunate position of requiring your advice.' As he spoke, a pair of servitors

emerged from the darkness along the corridor. They were hulking machines which rode on tracks

and whose upper torsos sprouted a glistening mass of specialised manipulators and sensors. They

were antiseptically clean and highly polished, but they looked about a thousand years old, as if they

had just trundled out of a museum. 'There's nothing in them that the plague can touch,' Sylveste

said. 'No components small enough to be invisible to the naked eye; nothing replicating, self-

repairing or shape-shifting. All the cybernetics are elsewhere -- kilometres away upship, with only

optical connections to the drones. We won't hit him with anything replicating until we use

Volyova's retrovirus.'

'Very thoughtful.'

'Of course,' Sajaki said, 'for the delicate work, you'll have to hold the scalpel yourself.'

Sylveste touched his brow. 'My eyes aren't so immune. You'll have to be very careful, Cal. If the

plague touches them...'

'I'll be more than careful, believe me.' From the monolithic enclosure of his seat, Calvin threw

back his head and laughed like a drunkard amused by his own drollery. 'If your eyes go up, even I

won't get a chance to put my affairs in order.'

'Just so long as you appreciate the risk.'

The servitors lurched forwards, approaching the shattered angel of the Captain. More than ever

he looked like something which had not so much crept with glacial slowness from his reefer, but

had burst with volcanic ferocity, only to be frozen in a strobe flash. He radiated in every direction

parallel to the wall, extending far into the corridor on either side, for dozens of metres. Nearest to

him, his growth consisted of trunk-thick cylinders, the colour of quicksilver, but with the texture of

jewel-encrusted slurry, constantly shimmering and twinkling, hinting at phenomenally industrious

buried activity. Further away, on his periphery, the branches subdivided into a bronchial-like mesh.

At its very boundary, the mesh grew microscopically fine and blended seamlessly with the fabric of

its substrate: the ship itself. It was glorious with diffraction patterns, like a membrane of oil on

water.

The silver machines seemed to dissolve into the silver background of the Captain. They

positioned themselves on either side of the wrecked shell of the reefer unit at his heart, no more

than a metre from the violated carapace. It was still cold there -- if Sylveste had touched any part of

the Captain's reefer, his flesh would have stayed there, soon to be incorporated into the chimeric

mass of the plague. When the operation proper began, they would have to warm him just to work.

He would quicken then -- or rather, the plague would seize the opportunity to increase its rate of

transformation -- but there was no other way to work on him, for at the temperature he had reached

now, all but the crudest of tools would themselves become inoperable.

The machines now extended booms tipped with sensors; magnetic resonance imagers to peer

deep into the plague, differentiating between the machine, chimeric and organic strata which had

once been a man. Sylveste had the drones pass what they saw to his eyes, appearing as a lilac-tinged

overlay superimposed on the Captain. It was only with effort that he could make out the residual

outline of the human inside which had become this; it was like a ghostly outline beneath the paint

on a recycled canvas. But as the MRI sweep continued, the details grew progressively sharper, the

man's plague-distorted anatomy bleeding into clarity. That was when the horror of it could no

longer be ignored. But Sylveste just stared.

'Where are we -- I mean you -- going to begin?' he asked, towards Calvin. 'Are we healing a man

or sterilising a machine?'

'Neither,' Calvin said drily. 'We're fixing the Captain, and I'm afraid he's rather transcended both

those categories.'

'You understand magnificently,' Sajaki said, standing back from the cold tableau to allow the

Sylvestes an unimpeded view. 'It's no longer a matter of healing, or even repairing. I prefer to think

of it as restoration.'

'Warm him,' Calvin said.

'What?'

'You heard. I want him warmed -- just temporarily, I assure you. But long enough to take a few

biopsies. I understand Volyova restricted her examinations to the plague periphery. That was

diligent of her; she did well, and the samples she obtained are invaluable indices of the growth

pattern, and of course she couldn't have engineered her retrovirus without them. But now we need

to reach into the core; to where there's still living meat.' He smiled, undoubtedly enjoying the

revulsion which flickered across Sajaki's face. So maybe there was some empathy there after all,

Sylveste thought -- or at least the atrophied stump of what it had once been. For an instant he felt

kinship with the Triumvir.

'What are you so interested in?'

'His cells, of course.' Calvin fingered the curlicued arm of his seat. 'They say the Melding Plague

corrupts our implants, blends them into the flesh, by subverting their replicating machinery. I think

it goes beyond that. I think it tries to hybridise -- tries to achieve some harmony between the living

and the cybernetic. That's what it's doing here, after all -- nothing more malign than trying to

hybridise the Captain with his own cybernetics and the ship. It's almost benign; almost artistic,

almost purposeful.'

'You wouldn't be saying that if you were where he is now,' Sajaki said.

'Of course not. That's why I want to help him. And why I need to see into his cells. I want to

know if the plague has touched his DNA -- whether it's tried to hijack his own cellular machinery.'

Sajaki extended a hand towards the chill. 'Go ahead, in that case. You've permission to warm

him. But only for as long as it takes. Then I want him back under, until it's time to operate. And I

don't want those samples leaving here.'

Sylveste noticed that the Triumvir's outstretched hand was shaking.

'All this has something to do with a war,' Khouri said in the spider-room. 'That much I'm clear

about. The Dawn War, they called it. It was a long time ago. Millions of years back.'

'How would you know?'

'The Mademoiselle gave me a lesson in galactic history, just so I'd appreciate what was at stake.

And it worked, too. Can't you accept that going along with Sylveste is not a good idea?'

'I was never remotely of the opinion it was.'

Pull the other one, Khouri thought. Volyova was still childishly curious about Cerberus/Hades,

even now that she knew it contained something dangerous. More so, in fact. Before, the mystery

had consisted of a single anomalous neutrino signature. Now she had seen the alien machinery for

herself, via Alicia's recording. No; in some respects Volyova was as fascinated by the place as

Sylveste. The difference was, she could still be reasoned with. Volyova still had a residual core of

sanity.

'Do you think we'd stand a chance of persuading Sajaki of the risks?'

'Not much. We've kept too much from him. He'd kill us just for that. I'm still worried about him

trawling you. He mentioned it again just now, you know. I managed to deflect him, but...' She

sighed. 'In any case, Sylveste is the one pulling the strings now. What Sajaki does or doesn't want is

almost irrelevant.'

'Then we have to get to Sylveste.'

'It won't work, Khouri. No amount of rational argument is going to sway him now -- and I'm

afraid what you've told me doesn't even qualify as that.'

'But you believe it.'

Volyova raised a hand. 'I believe some of it, Khouri -- but that isn't the same thing. I've witnessed

some of the things you claim to understand, like the incident with the cache-weapon. And we know

alien forces are involved on some level, which makes it difficult for me to dismiss your Dawn War

story completely. But we still don't have anything resembling the big picture.' She paused. 'Maybe

when I've finished analysing that splinter...'

'What splinter?'

'The one Manoukhian planted on you.' Volyova told her the rest; how she had found the splinter

during the medical examination she had conducted after Khouri's recruitment. 'At the time I just

assumed it was a piece of shrapnel from your soldiering days. Then I wondered why your own

medics hadn't removed it earlier. I suppose I should have realised there was something strange

about it even then... but it clearly wasn't any kind of functional implant, just a piece of jagged

metal.'

'And you haven't worked out what it is yet?'

'No, I...' But that was the truth of it, as Khouri learned. There was a lot more to that little shard

than met the eye. The blend of metals was fairly unusual, even for someone who had worked with

some very strange alloys indeed. Also, Volyova said, it had what looked like odd manufacturing

flaws, but which could just as easily have been stresses worked into the metal long afterwards;

bizarre nanoscale fatigue patterns. 'Still, I'm nearly there,' she said.

'Maybe it'll tell us what we need. But one thing won't change. I can't do the one thing which

would get us out of this mess, can I? I can't kill Sylveste.'

'No. But if the stakes become higher -- if it becomes absolutely clear that he must be killed --

then I think we have to begin thinking about what would be required.'

It took a moment for the true meaning of what Volyova was saying to sink in.

'Suicide?'

Volyova nodded dourly. 'Meanwhile I have to do the best possible job I can of granting Sylveste's

wish, or else I put us all in danger.'

'That's what you don't understand,' Khouri said. 'I'm not saying that we'll all die if the attack

against Cerberus isn't successful, which is what you seem to assume. I'm saying that something

terrible is going to happen, even if the attack works. That's exactly why the Mademoiselle wanted

him dead.'

Volyova had sealed her lips and shaken her head slowly, for all the world like a parent

admonishing a child.

'I can't start a mutiny on the basis of some vague premonition.'

'Then maybe I'll have to start it myself.'

'Be careful, Khouri. Be very careful indeed. Sajaki's a more dangerous man than you can even

begin to imagine. He's waiting for any excuse to crack your head open and see what's inside. He

might not even wait for one. Sylveste is... I don't know. I'd think twice about crossing him as well.

Especially now that he has the smell of it.'

'Then we have to get to him indirectly. Through Pascale. Do you understand? I'll tell her

everything, if I think she can get him to see sense.'

'She won't believe you.'

'She might if you back me up. You'll do it, won't you?' Khouri looked at Volyova. The Triumvir

stared back for a long moment, and might have been on the verge of answering when her bracelet

began chirping. She pulled back the cuff of her sleeve and looked at the readout. She was wanted

upship.

*

The bridge, as always, seemed too large for the few people in it, dispersed sparsely throughout the

chamber's enormous and redundant volume. Pathetic, Volyova thought -- and for a moment

considered calling up some of her beloved dead, to at least fill out the place a bit and add a sense of

ceremony to the occasion. But that would be demeaning, and in any case -- despite the amount of

thought she had expended on this project -- she was not feeling remotely elated. Her recent

discussions with Khouri had killed any lingering positive feelings she might have had for this whole

enterprise. Khouri was right, of course -- they really were taking an unthinkable risk just by being

near to Cerberus/Hades -- but there was nothing she could do about that. It was not simply that they

ran the risk of the ship being destroyed. According to Khouri, that might actually be preferable to

having Sylveste succeed in getting inside Cerberus. The ship and its crew might just survive that...

but their short-term good fortune would be only a prelude to something much, much worse. If what

Khouri had told her about the Dawn War was halfway to being the truth, it would be very bad

indeed, not just for Resurgam -- not just for this system -- but for humanity as

a whole.

She was about to make what might be the worst mistake of her career, and it was not even

properly a mistake, since she had no choice in the matter.

'Well,' Triumvir Hegazi said, lording over her from his seat, 'I hope this is worth it, Ilia.'

So did she -- but the last thing she was going to do was concede any of her feelings of unease to

Hegazi. 'Bear in mind,' she said, addressing them all, 'that as soon as this is done, there won't be any

going back. This is going to look like bad news in anyone's book. We might elicit an immediate

response from the planet.'

'Or we might not,' Sylveste said. 'I've told you repeatedly, Cerberus won't do anything to draw

unwarranted attention to itself.'

'Then we'd better hope your theories are right.'

'I think we can trust the good doctor,' Sajaki said from Sylveste's flank. 'He's just as vulnerable as

the rest of us.'

Volyova felt an urge to get things over with. She illuminated the previously dark holo, filling it

with a realtime image of the *Lorean*. The wreck showed no sign of having changed in any way

since they had first found it -- the hull was still peppered with awful wounds, inflicted, as they now

knew, immediately after Cerberus had attacked and destroyed the probes. But within the ship,

Volyova's machines had been busy. There had been only a tiny swarm of them at first, spawned by

the robot she had sent to find Alicia's log entries. But the swarm had grown swiftly, consuming

metal in the ship to fuel expansion, interfacing with the ship's own self-replicating repair and

redesign systems, most of which had failed to reboot after the Cerberus attack. Other populations

would have followed -- and then, a day or so after the first impregnation, the work proper would

commence: transformation of the ship's interior and skin. To a casual observer, none of this activity

would have been apparent, but any kind of industry produced heat, and the outer layer of the

wrecked ship had grown slightly warmer over the last few days, betraying the furious activity

inside.

Volyova stroked her bracelet, doublechecking that all the indications were nominal. In a moment

it would begin; there was now nothing that she could do to arrest the process.

'My God,' Hegazi said.

The *Lorean* was changing: shedding its skin. Sections of the damaged outer hull were flaking

away in great acres, the ship enveloping itself in a slowly expanding cocoon of shards. What was

revealed underneath still had the same form as the wreck, but it was smoothly carapaced, like a

snake's new skin. The transformations had been really rather easy to impose - the *Lorean*, unlike

the *Infinity*, did not fight back with replicating viruses of its own; did not resist her sculpting hand.

If reshaping the *Infinity* was like trying to carve fire, the other ship had been clay in her hands.

The angle of the view shifted, as the sloughing debris caused the *Lorean* to turn about its long

axis. The Conjoiner engines were still attached and working -- and now she had control of them,

delegated to her bracelet. They would probably never have reached sufficient functionality to push

the ship to the edge of light, but that was not Volyova's intention. The journey it had to make -- the

last journey it would ever make -- was almost insultingly small for such a ship. And now the ship

was mostly hollow, the interior volume compressed into the thickened walls of the conic hull. The

cone was open at the base; the ship was like a huge pointed thimble.

'Dan,' she said. 'My machines found Alicia's body, and the other crew, of

course. Most of the

mutineers had been in reefersleep... but even they didn't survive the attack.'

'What are you saying?'

'I can have them returned here, if you wish. There'll be a delay, of course -- we'd have to send a

shuttle over to retrieve them.'

Sylveste's answer, when it came, was swifter than she had expected. She had assumed he would

want to dwell on it for anything up to an hour or so. Instead, he said: 'No. There can't be any delay

now. You're right -- Cerberus will have witnessed this activity.'

'Then the bodies?'

When he spoke, it was as if his answer were the only reasonable course of action. 'They'll have to

go down with it.'

TWENTY-TWO

Cerberus/Hades Orbit, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

It was beginning.

Sylveste sat with steepled fingers before a luminous entoptic projection which occupied a good

fraction of the volume of his quarters. Pascale, half consumed by shadow, was a series of abstract

sculptural curves on their bed; he was cross-legged on a tatami mat, reeling in

the delicious reprisals

from a few millimetres of ship-distilled vodka he had downed minutes earlier. After years of forced

abstinence, his tolerance for alcohol was abysmally low, which in this instance was a distinct

advantage, hastening the process by which he negated the outside world. The vodka did not quell

his inner voices, and, if anything, the withdrawal served only to create an echo-chamber, in which

the voices took on an additional insistence. One in particular rose above the clamour. It was the

voice which dared ask exactly what it was he expected to find in Cerberus; what it was that would

make any kind of objective sense. And he had no idea. Not having an answer to that question was

like descending a staircase in darkness and miscounting the number of steps; expecting floor and

feeling sudden, heart-stopping vertigo.

Like a shaman shaping air-spirits with his fingers, Sylveste made the orrery which was projected

ahead of him tick to life. The entoptic was a schematic of the little pocket of space englobing

Hades, encompassing the orbit of Cerberus and -- at its very limit -- the approaching human

machines, no longer cloaked by an asteroid. At the geometric centre was Hades itself, burning foul,

abscessive red. The tiny neutron star was only a few kilometres wide, yet it dominated all around it;

its gravitational field was whirlpool-fierce.

Objects which were two hundred and twenty thousand kilometres from the neutron star orbited

twice an hour. Now that they had more thoroughly investigated Alicia's testimony, they knew that

another of the surveyor probes had been destroyed near that point, so Sylveste marked the radius

with a red death-line. Cerberus had killed it, just as if the little world were as intent on protecting

the secrets of Hades as its own felicities. Another mystery -- what possible advantage lay in that?

Sylveste had grasped for an answer and failed. But it had told him one thing: nothing here was

predictable, or even logical. If he kept those two truths foremost, he might stand a chance where the

dumb machines -- and his wife -- had failed.

Cerberus orbited further out; nine hundred thousand kilometres from Hades, in an orbit which

whipped it around once every four hours and six minutes. He had marked its orbit in cool emerald --

it seemed safe, at least until one strayed too close to the planet itself.

Now Volyova's weapon -- what had once been the *Lorean* -- had moved under its own power to a

lower orbit; it had not so far triggered a response from Cerberus. But Sylveste did not doubt for one

moment that something down there knew they were here; that something had its eye on the waiting

weapon. It was just waiting to see what would happen next.

He made the orrery contract, until the lighthugger hove into proper view. It was two million

kilometres from the neutron star; a mere six light seconds, which was within the conceivable strike

range of energy weapons, although they would have to be very large indeed to do their job: the

targeting arrays alone would have to be kilometres wide just to resolve the ship. No material

weapons could touch them at this range, save for a brute-force swarm attack by relativistic

weapons, but that again was unlikely -- the lesson of the *Lorean* was that the planet acted swiftly

and discreetly, rather than in some gauche display of firepower which would betray the careful

camouflaging of the crust.

Oh yes, he thought -- all so neatly predictable. And there was the trap.

'Dan,' said Pascale, who had stirred awake. 'It's late. You need to rest before tomorrow.'

'Was I talking aloud?'

'Like a true madman.' Her eyes moved nervously around the room, alighting

on the entoptic map.

'Is it really going to happen? It all feels so unreal.'

'Are you talking about this or the Captain?'

'Both, I suppose. It's not like we can separate them any more. The one depends on the other.' She

stopped speaking and he moved from the mat to her bedside, stroking her face, old buried memories

stirring, those he had held sacrosanct during all the years of imprisonment on Resurgam. She

reciprocated his caress and in minutes they were making love, with all the efficiency of those on the

eve of something epochal -- knowing that there might never be another moment like this, and that

every second was therefore heightened in its preciousness. 'The Amarantin have waited long

enough,' Pascale said. 'And that poor man they want you to help. Can't we leave both of them

alone?'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Because I don't like what it's doing to you. Don't you feel you've been driven here, Dan? Don't

you feel that none of this was really of your own doing?'

'It's too late to stop now.'

'No! It isn't, and you know it. Tell Sajaki to turn back now. Offer to do what

you can for his

Captain if you wish, but I'm sure he's sufficiently scared of you now that he'll accede to any terms

you propose. Abandon Cerberus/Hades before it does to us what it did to Alicia.'

'They weren't prepared for the attack. We will be, and that will make all the difference in the

world. In fact, we'll be attacking first.'

'Whatever you're hoping to find in there, it just isn't worth this kind of risk.' She held his face in

her hands now. 'Don't you understand, Dan? You've won. You've been vindicated. You've got what

you always wanted.'

'It isn't enough.'

She was cold, but she stayed beside him as he passed in and out of shallow dreams. It was never

anything that felt like true sleep. She was almost correct. The Amarantin did not have to flock

through his mind; not for one night. She wanted him to forget them for eternity. No; that had never

been remotely an option -- more so now. But even willing them away for a few hours took more

strength than he had. His dreams were Amarantin dreams. And whenever he woke, which was

often, beyond the curved silhouette of his wife, the walls were alive with

interlocking wings,

balefully regarding wings, waiting.

For what was on the eve of beginning.

'You won't feel much,' Sajaki said.

The Triumvir was telling the truth, at least initially. Khouri felt no sensation when the trawl

began, except for the slight pressure of the helmet, locking itself rigid against her scalp so that its

scanning systems could be targeted with maximum accuracy. She heard faint clicks and whines, but

that was all: not even the tingling sensation she had half expected.

'This isn't necessary, Triumvir.'

Sajaki was finessing the trawl parameters, tapping commands into a grotesquely outdated

console. Cross-sections of Khouri's head -- quick, low-resolution snapshots -- were springing up

around him. 'Then you have nothing to fear, do you? Nothing to fear at all. It's a procedure I should

have run on you when you were recruited, Khouri. Of course, my colleague was against the idea...'

'Why now? What have I done to make you do this?'

'We're nearing a critical time, Khouri. I can't afford not to be able to trust any of my

crewmembers totally.'

'But if you fry my implants, I won't be any use to you at all!'

'Oh; you shouldn't pay too much attention to Volyova's little scare stories. She only wanted to

keep her little trade secrets from me, in case I decided I could do her job as well as she does.' Her

implants were showing up on the scans now; little geometric islands of order amid the amorphous

soup of neural structure. Sajaki tapped in commands and the scan image zoomed in on one of the

implants. Khouri felt her scalp tingle. Layers of structure peeled away from the implant, exposing

its increasingly intricate innards in a series of dizzying enlargements, like a spysat gazing at a city,

resolving first districts, then streets and then the details of buildings. Somewhere in that intricacy,

stored in some ultimately physical form, was the data from which the Mademoiselle's simulation

sprang.

It had been a long time since her last visitation. Then -- in the midst of the storm on Resurgam --

the Mademoiselle had told Khouri that she was dying; losing the war against Sun Stealer. Had Sun

Stealer won since then, or was the continued silence of the Mademoiselle simply evidence that she

was putting all her energies into prolonging the war? Nagorny had gone mad as soon as Sun Stealer

established tenancy in his head. Did that still lie ahead for Khouri, or was Sun Stealer's residency in

her going to be more stealthy? Perhaps -- it was a disquieting thought -- he had learnt from his

mistakes with Nagorny. How much of this would be evident to Sajaki, after he had run the trawl?

He had taken her from her quarters; Hegazi there to add back-up. The other Triumvir was gone

now, but even if Sajaki had come alone, Khouri would not have considered resisting him. Volyova

had already warned her that Sajaki was stronger than he looked, and, adept at close-quarters combat

as Khouri was, she had very little doubt that Sajaki would have been better than her.

The trawling room had the atmosphere of a torture chamber. There had been terror here, once --

maybe not for decades, but it was not something that could ever be erased. The trawl equipment

was ancient, as bulky and monstrous as anything Khouri had seen on the ship so far. Even if the

gear had been subtly modified to work better than its original spec, it was never going to be as

sophisticated as the kind of trawls her side's intelligence wing had possessed on Sky's Edge. Sajaki's

trawl was the kind that left a trail of neural damage behind as it scanned, like a frantic burglar

ransacking a house. It was scarcely more advanced than the destructive scanning machines which

Cal Sylveste had used during the Eighty... perhaps less so.

But he had her now. He was already learning things about her implants... unravelling their

structures, reading out their data. Once he had those, he would adjust the trawl to resolve cortical

patterns, pulling webs of neuronal connectivity from her skull. Khouri knew a lot about trawling

just by knowing people in intelligence. Embedded in those topologies lay longterm memories and

personality traits, tangled together in ways that were not easy to separate. But if Sajaki's equipment

was not the best, chances were good that he had excellent algorithms to distil memory traces. Over

centuries, statistical models had studied patterns of memory storage in ten billion human minds,

correlating structure against experience. Certain impressions tended to be reflected in similar neural

structures -- internal qualia -- which were the functional blocks out of which more complex

memories were assembled. Those qualia were never the same from mind to mind, except in very

rare cases, but neither were they encoded in radically different ways, since nature would never

deviate far from the minimum-energy route to a particular solution. The

statistical models could

identify those qualia patterns very efficiently, and then map the connections between them out of

which memories were forged. All Sajaki had to do was identify enough qualia structures, map

enough hierarchical linkages between them, and then let his algorithms chew through them, and

there would be nothing about her that he could not in principle know. He could sift through her

memories at leisure.

An alarm sounded. Sajaki glanced up at one of the displays, seeing how Khouri's implants were

now glowing red; red which was leaking into surrounding brain areas.

'What's happening?' she asked.

'Inductive heat,' Sajaki said, unconcernedly. 'Your implants are getting a little hot.'

'Shouldn't you stop?'

'Oh; not yet. Volyova would have hardened them against EM pulse attack, I think. A little

thermal overload won't do any irreversible damage.'

'But my head hurts... it doesn't feel right.'

'I'm sure you can take it, Khouri.'

The migrainous pressure had come from nowhere, but it was really quite unbearable now, as if

Sajaki had her head in a vice and was screwing it tighter. The heat build-up in her skull must be a

lot worse than the scans suggested. Doubtless Sajaki -- who must seldom have had the best interests

of his clients at heart -- had calibrated the displays not to show lethal brain temperature until it was

already much too late...

'No, Yuuji-san. She can't take it. Get her out of that thing.'

The voice, miraculously, was Volyova's. Sajaki looked to the door. He must have been aware of

her entrance long before Khouri, but even now he only affected a look of bored indifference.

'What is it, Ilia?'

'You know exactly what it is. Stop the trawl before you kill her.' Volyova stepped into view now.

Her tone of voice had been authoritative, but Khouri could see that she was unarmed.

'I haven't learned anything useful yet,' Sajaki said. 'I need a few more minutes...'

'A few more minutes and she'll be dead.' With typical pragmatism, she added: 'And her implants

will be damaged beyond repair.'

Perhaps the second thing worried Sajaki more than the first. He made a tiny adjustment to the

trawl. The red hue faded to a less alarming pink. 'I thought these implants

would be adequately

hardened.'

'They're just prototypes, Yuuji-san.' Volyova stepped closer to the displays and surveyed them for

herself. 'Oh, no... you fool, Sajaki. You damned fool. I swear you may have already damaged them.'

It was as if she were talking to herself.

Sajaki waited silently for a moment. Khouri wondered if he was going to lash out and kill

Volyova in an eyeblink of furious motion. But then, scowling, the Triumvir snapped the trawl

controls to their off settings, watched the displays pop out of existence, then hoisted the helmet off

Khouri's head.

'Your tone of voice -- and choice of wording -- was inappropriate there, Triumvir,' Sajaki said.

Khouri saw his hand slip into his trouser pocket and finger something -- something that, for an

instant, looked like a hypodermic syringe.

'You nearly destroyed our Gunnery Officer,' Volyova said.

I'm not finished with her. Or you, for that matter. You rigged something to this trawl, didn't you,

Ilia? Something to alert you when it was running? Very clever.'

'I did it to protect a shipboard resource.'

'Yes, of course...' Sajaki left his answer hanging in the air, its threat implicit, and then quietly

walked out of the trawl room.

TWENTY-THREE

Cerberus/Hades Orbit, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

It was, Sylveste thought, a situation of disturbing symmetry. In a matter of hours Volyova's cache-

weapons would begin to combat the buried immunological systems of Cerberus; virus against virus,

tooth against tooth. And here, on the eve of that attack, Sylveste was preparing to go to war against

the Melding Plague which was consuming -- or, depending on one's point of view, grotesquely

enlarging -- Volyova's afflicted Captain. The symmetry seemed to hint at an underlying order to

which he was only partly privy. It was not a feeling he enjoyed; like being a participant in a game

and realising, halfway through, that the rules were far more complicated than he had so far

imagined.

In order that Calvin's beta-level simulation be allowed to work through him, Sylveste had to slip

into a state of ambulatory semi-consciousness akin to sleepwalking. Calvin would puppet him,

receiving sensory input directly through Sylveste's own eyes and ears,

tapping directly into his

nervous system to achieve mobility. He would even speak through Sylveste. The neuro-inhibitor

drugs had already kicked him into a queasy full-body paralysis; as unpleasant as he remembered

from the last time.

Sylveste thought of himself as a machine in which Calvin was about to become the ghost...

His hands worked the medical analysis tools, skirting the periphery of the growth. It was

dangerous to stray too close to the heart; too high a risk of plague transmission into his own

implants. At some point -- this session, or perhaps the next -- they would have to skirt the heart; that

was inevitable, but Sylveste did not really want to think about that. For now, when they needed to

work closer, Calvin used the simple, mindless drones which were slaved from elsewhere in the ship,

but even those tools were susceptible. One drone had malfunctioned close to the Captain, and was

even now being enmeshed in fine, fibrous plague tendrils. Even though the machine contained no

molecular components, it still seemed that it was of use to the plague; still able to be digested into

the Captain's transformative matrix; fuel for his fever. Calvin was having to resort to cruder

instruments now, but this was only a stopgap: at some point -- soon now, undoubtedly -- they would

have to hit the plague with the only thing which could really work against it: something very like

itself.

Sylveste could feel Calvin's thought processes churning somewhere behind his own. It was

nothing that could be called consciousness -- the simulation which was running his body was no

more than mimesis, but somewhere in the interfacing with his own nervous system... it was as if

something had arisen, something which was riding that chaotic edge. The theories and his own

prejudices denied that, of course -- but what other explanation could there be for the sense of

divided self Sylveste felt? He did not dare ask if Calvin experienced something similar, and would

not necessarily have trusted any answer he received.

'Son,' Calvin said. 'There's something I've waited until now before discussing. I'm rather worried

about it, but I didn't want to discuss it in front of, well... our clients.'

Sylveste knew that only he could hear Calvin's voice. He had to subvocalise to respond, Calvin

momentarily relinquishing vocal control to his host. 'This isn't the time, either. In case you weren't

paying attention, we're in the middle of an operation.'

'It's the operation I want to talk about.'

'Make it quick, in that case.'

'I don't think we're meant to succeed.'

Sylveste observed that his hands -- driven by Calvin -- had not ceased working during this last

exchange. He was conscious of Volyova, who was standing nearby, awaiting instructions. He

subvocalised, 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I think Sajaki is a very dangerous man.'

'Great -- that makes two of us. But it hasn't stopped you co-operating with him.'

'I was grateful to begin with,' Calvin admitted. 'He saved me, after all. But then I started

wondering how things must seem from his side. I began to wonder if he wasn't just a touch insane.

It struck me that any sane man would have left the Captain for dead years ago. The Sajaki I knew

last time was fiercely loyal, but at least then there was some sense to his crusade. At least then there

was a hope we could save the Captain.

'And now there isn't?'

'He's been infected with a virus which the entire resources of the Yellowstone system couldn't

combat. Admittedly, the system itself was under attack from the same virus, but there were still

isolated enclaves which survived for months -- places where people with techniques as

sophisticated as our own struggled to find a cure -- and yet they never succeeded. Not only that, but

we don't even know which blind alleys they pursued, or which approaches might almost have

worked, if they'd had more time.'

'I told Sajaki he needed a miracle worker. It's his problem if he didn't believe me.'

'The problem is, I think he did believe you. That's what I mean when I said we weren't meant to

succeed.'

Sylveste happened to be looking at the Captain, Calvin having judiciously arranged the view.

Confronted with the thing before his eyes, he experienced a moment of epiphany in which he knew

that Calvin was absolutely right. They could go through the preliminary motions of healing the

Captain -- the rituals of establishing just how corrupted the man's flesh was -- but it could never

progress beyond that. Whatever they tried, no matter how intelligent, no matter how conceptually

brilliant, could not possibly succeed. Or, more significantly, could not be permitted to succeed. It

was that latter realisation which was the most disturbing, because it had come from Calvin, rather

than Sylveste. He had seen something which to Sylveste was still opaque, and now it seemed

obvious; shatteringly so.

'You think he'll hinder us?'

'I think he already has. We both observed that the Captain's rate of growth had accelerated since

we were brought aboard, but we dismissed it -- either just a coincidence or our imaginations. But I

don't think so. I think Sajaki allowed him to warm.'

'Yes... I was drawn to that conclusion myself. There's something else, isn't there?'

'The biopsies -- the tissue samples I asked for.'

Sylveste knew where this was leading. The drone that they had sent in to extract the cell samples

was now half-digested by the plague. 'You don't think that was a genuine malfunction, do you? You

think Sajaki made it happen.'

'Sajaki, or one of his crewmates.'

'Her?'

Sylveste felt himself glance towards the woman. 'No,' Calvin said, effecting an entirely

unnecessary murmur. 'Not her. That doesn't mean I trust her, but on the other

hand, I don't see her

as one of Sajaki's automatic minions.'

'What are you discussing?' asked Volyova, stepping towards them.

'Don't come too close,' Calvin said, speaking through Sylveste, who, for the moment, was unable

to form his own sounds even subvocally. 'Our investigations may have unleashed plague spore --

you wouldn't want to inhale them.'

'It wouldn't harm me,' Volyova said. 'I'm *brezgatnik*. I have nothing in me that the plague can

touch.'

'Then why are you looking so stand-offish?'

'Because it's cold, *svinoi*.' She paused. 'Wait a minute. Which one of you am I actually talking to?

It's Calvin, isn't it? I suppose I owe you fractionally more respect -- it isn't you holding us to

ransom, after all.'

'You're too kind,' Sylveste found himself saying.

'I trust you've arrived at a strategy here? Triumvir Sajaki won't be pleased if he suspects you

aren't keeping up your side of the bargain.'

'Triumvir Sajaki,' Calvin said, 'may well be part of the problem.'

She had come closer now, even though she was visibly shivering, lacking the

thermal protection

which Sylveste wore. 'I'm not sure I understand that remark.'

'Do you honestly think he wants us to heal the Captain?'

She looked as if he had slapped her across the face. 'Why wouldn't he?'

'He's had a long time to get used to being in command. This Triumvirate of yours is a farce --

Sajaki's your Captain in all but name, and you and Hegazi know it. He isn't going to relinquish that

without a fight.'

She answered too hastily to be totally convincing. 'If I were you I'd concentrate on the job in hand

and stop worrying about the Triumvir's wishes. He brought you here, after all. He came light-years

for your services. That's hardly the work of a man who doesn't want to see his Captain reinstated.'

'He'll ensure that we fail,' Calvin said. 'But in the course of our failure, he'll find another glimmer

of hope; something or someone else who can heal the Captain, if only he can find it or them. And

before you know it, you'll be on another century-long quest.'

'If that's the case,' she said slowly, as if fearful of being drawn into a trap, 'then why hasn't Sajaki

already killed the Captain? That would safeguard his position.'

'Because then he'd have to find a use for you.'

'A use?'

'Yes, think about it.' Calvin let go of the medical tools and stepped away from the Captain, like an

actor preparing to enter the limelight for his soliloquy. 'This quest to heal the Captain is the only

god you're capable of serving. Maybe there was a time when it was a means to an end... but that end

never came, and after a while it didn't even matter. You have the weapons aboard this ship; I know

all about those, even the ones you don't really like talking about. For now, the only purpose they

serve is bargaining power when you need someone like me -- someone who can go through the

motions of healing the Captain, without actually making any real difference.' Sylveste was glad

when Calvin did not speak for a few seconds, for he needed to catch his breath and lubricate his

mouth. 'Now, if Sajaki suddenly became Captain, what would he do next? You'd still have the

weapons -- but who could you use them against? You'd have to invent an enemy from scratch.

Maybe they wouldn't even have something you wanted -- after all, you're the ones with the ship;

what else do you need? Ideological enemies? Tricky, because the one thing I haven't noticed among

you is an ideological attachment to anything, except perhaps your own

survival. No; I think Sajaki

knows what would happen, deep down. He knows that if he became Captain, sooner or later you'd

have to use those weapons just because they existed. And I don't mean the kind of minimalist

intervention you demonstrated on Resurgam. You'd have to go all the way: use every one of those

horrors.'

Volyova was quick; Sylveste had already been impressed by that. 'In which case, we owe

Triumvir Sajaki our gratitude, don't we? By not killing the Captain, he's keeping us from the brink.'

But the way she spoke, it was as if she were reciting the argument of a devil's advocate, saying it

aloud only to better illuminate its heresies.

'Yes,' Calvin said, dubiously. 'I suppose you're right.'

'I don't believe any of this,' Volyova said, with sudden fire. 'And if you were one of us, it would

be treason just to entertain those thoughts.'

'Suit yourself. But we've already seen evidence that Sajaki wants to sabotage the operation.'

For a moment curiosity flashed in her expression, but she crushed it just as efficiently. 'I'm not

interested in your paranoia, Calvin -- assuming it's Calvin I'm talking to. I have an obligation to

Dan, which is to get him into Cerberus. And I have an obligation to you, which is to help with the

healing. The discussion of any other topics is superfluous.'

'So you have the retrovirus, I take it?'

Volyova reached into her jacket and removed the vial she had been carrying. 'It works against the

plague samples I was able to isolate and keep in culture. Whether or not it will work against *that* is

another question entirely.'

Sylveste felt his hands jerk forward to catch the vial as she threw it. The tiny glass autoclave

reminded him of the vial he had carried before his wedding, but only fleetingly.

'It's a pleasure doing business with you,' Calvin said.

Volyova left Calvin or Dan Sylveste -- she had never been entirely sure who she had been dealing

with -- having given the man explicit instructions concerning the administration of the counteragent.

Her relationship to him had been that of an apothecary to a surgeon, she thought: she had

formulated a serum which worked in the laboratory, and she could offer broad guidelines regarding

the manner in which it should be administered, but the ultimate decisions, the true life-and-death

questions; those were at the discretion of the surgeon only, and she had no

desire to intervene. After

all, if the manner of the administration had not been so critical, there would have been no need to

bring Sylveste aboard in the first place. And her retrovirus would form only one element of the

treatment, though it might prove decisive.

She rode the elevator back to the bridge, trying hard not to think about what Calvin (it had been

him, surely?) had been saying to her about Sajaki. But it was difficult; there was too much internal

logic -- too much reason to what he said. And what was she to make of the alleged sabotage against

the healing process? She had almost dared ask, but was perhaps too fearful of hearing something

she could not refute. As she had said -- and it was true, in a way -- just thinking along those lines

was treasonable.

But in many ways she had already committed treason.

Sajaki was beginning to have his doubts about her; that much was obvious. Disagreeing with him

over whether or not Khouri should have been trawled was one thing. But rigging the trawl to inform

her when Sajaki activated it was something else entirely -- not the act of someone exhibiting mild

professional concern over her charge, but one which spoke of quiet paranoia,

fear and brooding

hatred. Luckily she had reached him in time. The trawl had not done any lasting damage and it was

doubtful that Sajaki had mapped enough neural volume in sufficient detail to pullout anything more

than blurred impressions, rather than fully fledged incriminating memories. Now, she thought,

Sajaki would be more cautious: it would be no good losing their Gunnery Officer now. But what if

he turned the focus of his suspicion towards Volyova herself? She could be trawled, too. Sajaki

would have few qualms about that, other than the fact that it would completely destroy any

lingering sense of equality between them. Certainly she had no implants to damage. And to some

extent, with the work aboard the *Lorean* progressing autonomously, her period of maximum

usefulness to him had passed.

She consulted her bracelet. That little splinter she had pulled from Khouri was causing more

headaches than she had ever thought possible. Now she had the composition and stress patterning

more or less pinned down, she had asked the ship to match the sample against something in its

memory. Her hunch about it being Manoukhian's doing was looking good, for the shard had clearly

not originated on Sky's Edge. But the ship was still searching, burrowing deeper and deeper into its

memory. Now it was working through technological data from nearly two centuries previously.

Absurd to search such antiquity... but, on the other hand, why stop now? In a matter of hours the

ship would have correlated right back to the founding of the colony; to the few records surviving

from the Amerikano era. She would at least be able to tell Khouri that the search had been

exhaustive -- even if it had been futile.

She entered the bridge, alone.

The gigantic chamber was dark except for the glow cast by the display sphere, which was locked

in a schematic of the whole Pavonis-Hades binary. There were no other crewmembers (of the few

who remained alive, she thought), and none of the dead were currently being recalled from archival

posterity to share their views in languages hardly anyone now spoke. The solitude suited Volyova.

She had no wish to deal with Sajaki (most especially not him), and Hegazi's was a species of

company she did not especially prize. She did not even want to talk to Khouri; not just now. Being

with Khouri raised too many questions; forced her mind onto topics with which it did not wish to be

preoccupied. Now, for a few minutes at least, Volyova could be alone, and in her element, and --

however foolishly -- forget everything that threatened to transform order into chaos.

She could be with her beautiful weapons.

The transfigured *Lorean* had dropped to an even lower orbit without provoking a response from

Cerberus -- only ten thousand kilometres above the planet's surface. She had named the vast conic

object the bridgehead, because that was its function. As far as the others were concerned, it was just

Volyova's weapon, if they bothered calling it anything. The thing was four thousand metres long;

almost the same length as the lighthugger which had given birth to it. Very little of it was solid;

even the walls were honeycombed with pores, in which lay clades of primed military cyberviruses,

similar in structure to the counteragent about to be used against the Captain. Larger energy and

projectile weapons were set inside caverns in the walls. The whole thing was sheathed in several

metres of hyperdiamond which would be ablated sacrificially upon impact. Shock waves would

rush up the length of the bridgehead as it hit the surface, but piezoelectric crystal boundaries would

gradually bleed energy from the shock waves, energy which could be

redirected into weapons

systems. The impact speed would be relatively slow, in any case -- less than a kilometre a second,

since the bridgehead would decelerate massively just before puncturing the crust. And the crust

would be softened up beforehand; apart from the bridgehead's own frontal guns, Volyova would

deploy as much of the cache armament as she dared.

She interrogated the weapon via her bracelet. It was not the most riveting of conversations. The

device's controlling personality was rudimentary; nothing more could be expected from something

mere days old. In a sense that was good. Better that the thing be pigeon-minded, or it might start

getting ideas above its station. And, as she reminded herself, the bridgehead might not have very

long to enjoy its sentience in the first place.

Numerics dancing in the sphere told her of the bridgehead's total readiness. She had to trust what

the summarising systems told her, for the weapon was in many ways unknown to her. She had

sketched out her basic requirements, but the dogwork had been done by autonomous design

programs, and they had not deigned to inform her of every technical problem and solution

encountered along the way. But as profound as her ignorance of the bridgehead might be, it was not

so very different from the way a mother managed to create a child without knowing the precise

location of every artery and nerve... or even the precise biochemistry of its metabolism. It was no

less her creation for that -- no less her child.

A child she was consigning to an early, ignominious death -- but by no means a meaningless one.

Her bracelet chirped. She glanced down at it, expecting that it would be a technical squirt from

the bridgehead; a brief update concerning some last-minute inflight redesign which had been put in

place by the replicating systems still at work in its core.

But it was not that at all.

It was from the ship, and it had found a match for the splinter. It had needed to look back into

technical files more than two centuries old, but it had found a match all the same. And apart from

the stress patterning -- which must have come after the shard's manufacture -- the agreement was

absolute, within the errors of measurement.

She was still alone in the bridge.

'Put it on the display,' Volyova said.

A magnified, visible-light image of the splinter appeared in the sphere. A series of zoom-ins

appeared, beginning with a grey-scale electron-microscopy view which showed the shard's tortured

crystalline structure, and ending with a gaudily hued atomic-scale resolution ATM image,

individual atoms blurred together. X-ray crystallographic and mass spectrograph plots popped into

separate windows, jostling for her attention with reams of technical summary data. Volyova paid no

attention to these results; they were completely familiar to her for she had made most of the

measurements herself.

Instead, she waited while the entire display shuffled to one side and a very similar set of graphics

sprang into existence next to it, arrayed around a sliver of similar-looking material, identical at

atomic resolution, but showing none of the stress patterning. The compositions, isotopic ratios and

lattice properties were identical: lots of fullerenes, knitted into structural allotropes, threading a

bafflingly complex matrix of sandwiched metal layers and odd alloys. Spikes of yttrium and

scandium, with a whole slew of stable-island transuranic elements in trace quantities, presumably

adding some arcane resilience to the shard's bulk properties. Still, by

Volyova's reckoning, there

were stranger substances aboard the ship, and she had synthesised a few of them herself. The

splinter was unusual, but it was clearly human technology -- the buckytube filaments, in fact, were a

typical Demarchist signature, and stable-island transuranics had been in massive vogue in the

twenty-fourth and -fifth centuries.

The shard, in fact, looked a lot like the kind of thing a spacecraft hull from that era might have

been made of.

The ship seemed to think so too. What was Khouri doing with a piece of hull buried in her? What

kind of message had Manoukhian intended by that? Perhaps she was wrong, and this was none of

Manoukhian's doing -- just an accident. Unless this had been a very specific spacecraft...

It seemed that it was. The technology was typical for that era, but in every specific, the shard was

unique -- manufactured to tighter tolerances than would have been required even in a military

application. In fact, as Volyova digested the results, it became clear that the shard could only have

come from one kind of ship: a contact vessel owned by the Sylveste Institute for Shrouder Studies.

Subtleties of isotopic ratio established that it had come from one ship in particular: the contact

vessel that had carried Sylveste to the boundary of Lascaille's Shroud. For a moment, that discovery

was enough for Volyova. There was a circularity about it; confirmation that Khouri's Mademoiselle

really did have some connection with Sylveste. But Khouri already knew that... which meant that

the message must be telling them something more profound. Of course, Volyova had already seen

what it must be. But for an instant she flinched at the enormity of it. There was no way it could be

her, could it? No way she could have survived what had happened around Lascaille's Shroud. But

Manoukhian had always told Khouri that he had found his paymistress in space. And it was entirely

possible that her disguise of a hermetic masked an injury more savage than anything the plague

could have inflicted...

'Show me Carine Lefevre,' Volyova said, retrieving the name of the woman who should have

died around the Shroud.

Vast as a goddess, the face of the woman stared down at her. She was young, and from the little

of her that was visible below her face, it could be seen that she was dressed in the fashions of the

Yellowstone Belle Epoque, the glittering golden age before the Melding Plague. And her face was

familiar -- not shatteringly so, but enough for Volyova to know she had seen this woman before.

She had seen this woman's face in a dozen historical documentaries, and in every one of them the

assumption had been made that she was long dead; murdered by alien forces beyond human

comprehension.

Of course. Now it was obvious what caused that stress patterning. The gravitational riptides

around Lascaille's Shroud had squeezed matter until it bled.

Everyone thought Carine Lefevre had died the same way.

' *Svinoi*,' said Triumvir Ilia Volyova, because now there could be no doubt.

Ever since she was a child, Khouri had noticed that something happened when she touched

something that was too hot, like the barrel of a projectile rifle which had just discharged its clip.

There would be a flash of premonitory pain, but so brief that it was hardly pain at all; more a

warning of true pain which was about to come. And then the premonitory pain would subside, and

there would be an instant when there was no sensation at all, and in that instant she would snatch

back her hand, away from whatever it was that was too hot. But it would be

too late; the true pain

was already coming, and there was nothing she could do about it except ready herself for its arrival,

like a housekeeper forewarned about the imminent arrival of a guest. Of course, the pain was never

so bad, and she had usually withdrawn her hand from whatever was its source, and there would

usually not even be a scar afterwards. But it always made her wonder. If the premonitory pain was

enough to persuade her to remove the hand -- and it always was -- what was the purpose of the

tsunami of true pain which lagged behind it? Why did it have to come at all, if she had already

received the message and removed her hand from harm? When, later, she found out that there was a

sound physiological reason for the delay between the two warnings, it still seemed almost spiteful.

That was how she felt now, sitting in the spider-room with Volyova, who had just told her who

she thought the face belonged to. Carine Lefevre; that was what she had said. And there had been a

flash of premonitory shock, like an echo from the future of what the real shock of it was going to be

like. A very faint echo indeed, and then -- for an instant -- nothing.

And then the true force of it.

'How can it be her?' Khouri said, afterwards, when the shock had not so much subsided as

become a normal component of her emotional background noise. 'It isn't possible. It doesn't make

any sense.'

'I think it makes too much sense,' Volyova said. 'I think it fits the facts too well. I think it's

something we can't ignore.'

'But we all know she died! And not just on Yellowstone, but halfway across colonised space. Ilia,

she died, violently. There's no way it can be her.'

'I think it can. Manoukhian said he found her in space. So perhaps he did. Perhaps he found

Carine Lefevre drifting near Lascaille's Shroud -- he might have been looking to salvage something

from the wreckage of the SISS facility -- and then rescued her and took her back to Yellowstone.'

Volyova stopped, but before Khouri could speak, or even think about speaking, the Triumvir was on

a roll again. 'That would make sense, wouldn't it? We'd at least have a connection to Sylveste -- and

maybe even a reason for her wanting him dead.'

'Ilia, I've read what happened to her. She was shredded by the gravitational stresses around the

Shroud. There wouldn't have been anything left for Manoukhian to bring

home.'

'No... of course not. Unless Sylveste was lying. Remember that we have only Sylveste's word that

any of it happened the way he said it did -- none of the recording systems survived the encounter.'

'She didn't die, is that what you're saying?'

Volyova raised a hand, the way she always did when Khouri failed to read her mind perfectly.

'No... not necessarily. Perhaps she did die -- just not in the way Sylveste had it. And maybe she

didn't die in the way we understand, and perhaps she isn't really alive, even now -- despite what you

saw.'

'I didn't see much of her, did I? Just the box she used to move around in.'

'You assumed she was a hermetic, because she rode something like a hermetic's palanquin. But

that might have been a piece of misdirection on her behalf.'

'She'd have been shredded. Nothing changes that.'

'Perhaps the Shroud didn't kill her, Khouri. Perhaps something dreadful happened to her, but

something kept her alive afterwards. Perhaps something actually saved her.'

'Sylveste would know.'

'Even if he doesn't admit it to himself. We have to talk to him, I think -- here, where we won't be

bothered by Sajaki.' Volyova had hardly finished speaking when her bracelet chirped and filled with

a human face, eyes lost behind blank globes. 'Speak of the devil,' Volyova murmured. 'What is it,

Calvin? You are Calvin, aren't you?'

'For now,' the man said. 'Though I fear my usefulness to Sajaki may be coming to an ignominious

end.'

'What are you talking about?' Quickly she added: 'There's something I have to discuss with Dan;

it's rather on the urgent side, if you'd oblige.'

'I think what I have to say is more urgent,' Calvin said. 'It's your counteragent, Volyova. The

retrovirus you fabricated.'

'What about it?'

'It doesn't seem to be working quite as intended.' He took a step backwards; Khouri glimpsed part

of the Captain behind him, silvery and muculent, like a statue covered with a palimpsest of snail

tracks.

'As a matter of fact, it seems to be killing him faster.'

TWENTY-FOUR

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

Sylveste did not have long to wait. When Volyova arrived, she was accompanied by Khouri; the

woman who had saved Volyova's life on the surface. If Volyova was something of a rogue variable

in his plans then Khouri was worse, because he had not so far ascertained where her loyalties lay;

whether to Volyova or Sajaki, or somewhere else entirely. But for now he suppressed his concerns,

sharing Calvin's urgency.

'What do you mean, it's killing him faster?'

'I mean just that,' Calvin made him say, before either of the two women had drawn breath. 'We

administered it according to your instructions. But it's as if we've given the plague a massive shot in

the arm. It's spreading faster than ever. If I didn't know better I'd say your retrovirus has actually

helped it.'

'Damn,' Volyova said. 'I'm sorry, but you'll have to excuse me. It's been a wearying few hours.'

'Is that all you're going to say?'

'I tested the counteragent against small samples of isolated plague,' she said defensively. 'It

worked against them. I couldn't promise it would work against the main body of the plague so

effectively... but at the very least, in the worst possible scenario... I assumed

it would have some

effect, however limited. The plague has to expend *some* of its resources against the counteragent;

there's no getting around that. It has to direct some of the energy it would ordinarily use for

expansion into resisting the agent. I hoped it would kill it -- subvert it, I mean, into a form we could

manipulate -- but even when I was being pessimistic, I assumed the plague would catch a cold; that

it would slow down perceptibly.'

'That's not what we're seeing,' Calvin said.

'But she has a point,' Khouri said, and Sylveste felt himself glare at her, as if questioning the very

reason for her existence.

'What are you seeing?' Volyova asked. 'You understand, I'm more than a little curious.'

'We've stopped administering,' Calvin said. 'So for now the growth has stabilised. But when we

gave the Captain the counteragent, he spread faster. It was as if he were incorporating the mass of

the counteragent into his matrix more rapidly than he could convert the substrate of the ship.'

'But that's ridiculous,' Volyova said. 'The ship doesn't even resist the plague. For him to spread

faster... that would mean that the counteragent was giving itself over to him;

converting itself faster

than the plague could subvert it.'

'Like frontline soldiers defecting before they've even heard any propaganda,' Khouri said.

'Exactly like that,' Volyova said, and for the first time, Sylveste sensed something between the

two women, something suspiciously like mutual respect. 'But that just isn't possible. For that to

happen, the plague would have to have hijacked the replication routines almost without trying --

almost as if they were willingly hijacked. I'm telling you, it isn't possible.'

'Well, try it for yourself.'

'No thanks. It isn't that I don't believe you, but you have to see it from my side. From my point of

view -- and I engineered the damn thing -- it doesn't make much sense.'

'There is something,' Calvin said.

'What?'

'Could sabotage have done this? I told you already that we think someone doesn't want this

operation to succeed. You know who I'm talking about.' He was being circumspect now, unwilling

to say too much in Khouri's presence, or within range of Sajaki's listening systems. 'Could your

counteragent have been tampered with?'

'I'll have to think about it,' she said.

Sylveste had not administered all of the vial Volyova had given him, so she was able to run a check

on the molecular structure of that sample and the other batches which remained in her laboratory,

using the same tools she had employed on Khouri's splinter. When she compared the sample against

her lab batches, they were identical, within the normal boundaries of quantum accuracy. The sample

Calvin had given to the Captain was exactly as she had intended it to be, down to the humblest

chemical bond linking the least significant atoms in the smallest and least essential molecular

component...

Volyova checked the counteragent's structure against her records, and observed that it had not

deviated from the blueprint she had held in her head for subjective years. It was exactly as she had

planned it. Her virus had not been tampered with; its teeth had not been pulled. So much for

Calvin's sabotage theory. She felt a surge of relief -- she had not really wanted to believe that Sajaki

was actually hampering the whole process; the notion that he might be consciously prolonging the

Captain's illness was too hideous, and she was glad when examination of the counteragent gave her

a justification for flushing the idea of sabotage from her mind. She still had misgivings about

Sajaki, of course; but there was at least no evidence that he had become something as monstrous as

that.

But there was another possibility.

Volyova left the lab and returned to the Captain, cursing herself for not thinking of this earlier

and sparing herself the runaround. Sylveste asked what she was doing now. She looked at him for

long moments before speaking. Yes, there was a connection with Lascaille's Shroud; she was sure

of that. Was it purely revenge on the Mademoiselle's part -- in payment for his cowardice, or

treachery, or whatever it was that had almost killed her in the Shroud boundary? Or did it go

beyond that, connected in some way with the aliens themselves; the ancient, protective minds

Lascaille had touched during his own flyby? Was it human spite they were dealing with here, or

some imperative as alien and old as the Shrouders themselves? There was much she needed to

discuss with Sylveste -- but it would have to be in the sanctuary of the spider-room.

'I need another sample,' she said. 'From the infection boundary, where you administered the

counteragent.' And she fished out her laser-curette, made the deft light-guided incisions and popped

the sample -- it felt like a metallic scab -- into a waiting autoclave.

'What about the counteragent? Was it altered?'

'It hadn't been touched,' she said. Then she turned down the curette's yield and used it to scratch

in tiny letters a quick message in the ship's fabric, just ahead of the Captain's encroachment. Long

before Sajaki stood a chance of reading it, the Captain would have flowed over it like an erasing

tide.

'What are you doing?' Sylveste said.

But before the man could ask anything else, she was gone.

*

'You were right,' Volyova said, when they were safely beyond the hull of the *Nostalgia for Infinity*,

perched on its outer carapace like some adventurous steel parasite. 'It was sabotage. But not in the

way I first imagined.'

'What do you mean?' said Sylveste, who by now was grudgingly impressed by the existence of

the spider-room. 'I thought you cross-referenced the retrovirus against your earlier batches, those

which worked against small samples of the plague.'

'I did, and -- as I said -- there was no difference. Which only left one possibility.'

Silence hung in the air. Finally, it was Pascale Sylveste who broke it. 'He -- it -- must have been

inoculated. That's what must have happened, isn't it? Someone must have stolen a batch of your

retrovirus and denatured it -- removed its lethality, its urge to replicate -- and then shown it to the

Melding Plague.'

'It's the only thing which would explain it,' Volyova said.

Khouri said, 'You think Sajaki did it, don't you?' She was talking to Sylveste.

He nodded. 'Calvin had as good as predicted that Sajaki would try and ruin the operation.'

'I don't follow,' Khouri said. 'You're talking about the Captain being inoculated -- isn't that for the

better?'

'Not in this case -- and it wasn't the Captain who was inoculated, really, but the plague resident in

him.' It was Volyova speaking now. 'We've always known that the Melding Plague is

hyperadaptive. That's always been the problem -- every molecular weapon we throw at it ends up

being co-opted, smothered and reprocessed into the plague's own all-consuming offensive. But this

time I hoped we'd steal an advantage. The retrovirus was extraordinarily potent -- there was a

chance it could outmanoeuvre the plague's normal corruption pathways. But what happened was

that the plague got a sneak look at the enemy before it ever encountered it in its active form. It got a

chance to dismantle and know the counteragent before it ever posed a threat

to it. And by the time

Calvin administered it, the plague already knew all its tricks. It had worked out a way to disarm the

virus and persuade it to join the plague without even expending any energy in the process. So the

Captain grew faster.'

'Who could have done this?' Khouri asked. 'I thought you were the only person on this ship who

could do something like that.'

Sylveste nodded. 'As much as I still think Sajaki's trying to sabotage the operation... this doesn't

look like it could be his handiwork.'

'I agree,' Volyova said. 'Sajaki just doesn't have the expertise to have done this.'

'What about the other man?' Pascale asked. 'The chimeric.'

'Hegazi?' Volyova shook her head. 'You can ignore him. He might become a problem if any of us

ever move against the Triumvirate, but this isn't within his capabilities any more than Sajaki's. No;

the way I see it, there are only three people on this ship who could have done it, and I'm one of

them.'

'Who are the other two?' Sylveste asked.

'Calvin is one of them,' she said. 'Which rather removes him from suspicion

as well.'

'And the other?'

'That's the -- problematic part,' she said. 'The only other person who could do this to a cybervirus

is the one we've been trying to heal all this time.'

'The Captain?' Sylveste said.

'He could have done it -- from a theoretical standpoint, I mean.' Volyova clucked. 'Were he not

already dead.'

Khouri wondered how Sylveste would react to that, but he seemed unimpressed. 'It doesn't matter

who it was -- if it wasn't Sajaki himself, it was someone acting for him.' Now he addressed

Volyova. 'I take it this convinces you.'

She graced him with a nod. 'Regrettably, yes. What does it mean to you and Calvin?'

'Mean to us?' Sylveste seemed surprised by the question. 'It means absolutely nothing. I never

promised we could heal the Captain in the first place. I told Sajaki I considered the task impossible,

and I wasn't exaggerating. Calvin agreed with me as well. In all honesty, I'm not even sure Sajaki

had to sabotage the operation. Even if your retrovirus hadn't been denatured, I doubt that it would

have given the plague much trouble. So what has changed? Calvin and I will continue with the

pretence of healing the Captain, and at some point it will be clear that we can't succeed. We won't

let Sajaki know that we're aware of his sabotage. We don't want a confrontation with the man –

especially not now, with the attack against Cerberus about to happen.' Sylveste smiled placidly.

'And I don't think Sajaki will be particularly disappointed to hear that our efforts have been in vain.'

'You're saying that nothing changes, is that it?' Khouri looked around at the others for support,

but their expressions were inscrutable. 'I don't believe this.'

'The Captain doesn't matter to him,' said Pascale Sylveste. 'Isn't that obvious to you? He's only

doing this to keep his side of the bargain with Sajaki. Cerberus is all that matters to him. It's been

like a magnet to Dan.' She was talking as if her husband were somewhere else entirely.

'Yes,' Volyova said. 'Well, I'm glad you raised that subject, because there's something Khouri and

I need to discuss with all of you. It concerns Cerberus.'

Sylveste looked scornful. 'What do you know about Cerberus?'

'Too much,' Khouri said. 'Too damned much.'

She began where it made sense to begin, at the beginning, with her revival on

Yellowstone, her

work as an assassin in Shadowplay, and how the Mademoiselle had recruited her and made it very

difficult for her not to accept the woman's offer.

'Who was she?' Sylveste asked, when the preliminaries had been dispensed with. 'And what did

she want you to do?'

'We'll come to that,' Volyova said. 'Just be patient.'

Khouri continued; repeating to Sylveste the story that she had not long ago told Volyova, though

it felt that an eternity spaced the two recitations. How she had infiltrated the ship, and how –

simultaneously -- she had been tricked by Volyova, who needed a new Gunnery Officer,

irrespective of whether anyone volunteered for that role. How the Mademoiselle had been in her

head all this time, revealing only as much information as Khouri needed at any moment. How

Volyova had interfaced Khouri into the gunnery, and how the Mademoiselle had detected

something lurking in the gunnery, something -- a software entity -- that called itself Sun Stealer.

Pascale looked at Sylveste. 'That name,' she said. 'It... means something. I've heard it before; I'd

swear it. Don't you remember?'

Sylveste looked at her, but said nothing.

'This thing,' Khouri said. 'Whatever it was -- it had already tried to get out of the gunnery into the

head of the last poor sucker Volyova recruited. Drove him insane.'

'I don't see where this concerns me,' Sylveste said.

So Khouri told him. 'The Mademoiselle worked out that this thing had to have entered the

gunnery at a certain time.'

'Very good; continue.'

'Which was when you were last aboard this ship.'

She had wondered what it would take to shut Sylveste up, or at the very least wipe the look of

smug superiority off his face. Now she knew, and realised that in the midst of everything, this

achievement had been one of life's small and unexpected pleasures. Breaking the spell, with

admirable self-control, Sylveste said: 'What does that mean?'

'It means what you think it means, but don't want to consider.' The words had tumbled out of her

mouth. 'Whatever it was, you brought it with you.'

'Some kind of neural parasite,' Volyova said, taking the burden of explication from Khouri. 'It

came aboard with you and then hopped into the ship. It could have ridden your implants, or perhaps

your mind itself, independent of any hardware.'

'This is ridiculous.' But something in his tone of voice failed to convince.

'If you weren't aware of it,' Volyova said, 'then you could have been carrying it around for years.

Maybe even since you came back.'

'Came back from where?'

'Lascaille's Shroud,' Khouri said, and, for the second time, her words seemed to lash against

Sylveste like squalls of wintery rain. 'We checked the chronology; it fits. Whatever it was, it got

into you around the Shroud, and stayed with you until you came here. Maybe it didn't even leave

you; just split off part of itself into the ship, hedging its bets.'

Sylveste stood up, motioning for his wife to do likewise. 'I'm not staying to hear any more of this

madness.'

'I think you should,' Khouri said. 'We still haven't told you about the Mademoiselle, or what she

wanted me to do.'

He just looked at her, poised on the verge of leaving, his face a study in disgust. Then -- perhaps

a minute later -- he returned to his seat and waited for her to continue.

TWENTY-FIVE

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

'I'm sorry,' Sylveste said. 'But I don't think this man can be cured.'

His only companions, save the Captain himself, were the two members of the Triumvirate other

than Volyova.

The closest, Sajaki, stood with his arms folded in front of the Captain, as if inspecting a

challengingly modern fresco, his head tilted just so. Hegazi maintained a respectful distance from

the plague, refusing to approach within three or four metres of the outer extent of the Captain's

recently invigorated growth. He was doing his best to look nonchalant, but, despite the relatively

sparse acreage of his face which was actually visible, fear was written across it like a tattoo.

'He's dead?' Sajaki asked.

'No, no,' said Sylveste hastily. 'Not at all. It's just that all our therapies have failed, and our one

best shot turned out to hurt him more than to heal him.'

'Your one best shot?' Hegazi parroted, his voice echoing from the walls.

'Ilia Volyova's counteragent.' Sylveste knew he had to be very careful now; that it would not do

for Sajaki to realise that his sabotage had come to light. 'For whatever reason, it didn't work in the

way she thought it would. I don't blame Volyova for that -- how could she predict how the main

body of the plague would behave, when all she had to work on was tiny samples?'

'How indeed,' Sajaki said, and in that short declamation, Sylveste decided that he hated the man,

with a hatred as irrevocable as death. But he also knew that Sajaki was a man he could work with,

and that -- as much as he despised him -- nothing that had occurred here would make any difference

to the attack against Cerberus. It was better than that, in fact: much better. Now that he was certain

that Sajaki had no desire to see the Captain healed -- quite the opposite -- there was nothing to

prevent Sylveste from turning his full attention to the matter of the imminent attack. Perhaps he

would have to endure Calvin's presence in his head for a little while longer, until this charade had

run its course, but that was a small price to pay, and he felt up to the task. Besides: now he rather

welcomed Calvin's intrusion. There was too much going on; too much to be assimilated, and for the

time being it was good to have a second mind parasitising his own, gleaning patterns and forging

inferences.

'He's a lying bastard,' Calvin whispered. 'I had my doubts before, but now I

know for sure. I hope

the plague consumes every atom of the ship and takes him with it. It's all he deserves.'

Sylveste said to Sajaki, 'It doesn't mean we've given up hope. With your permission Cal and I

will continue trying...'

'Do what you can,' Sajaki said.

'You want to let them continue?' Hegazi said. 'After what they've almost done to him?'

'You've got a problem with that?' said Sylveste, feeling that the conversation was as ritualised as

a play; its conclusion just as preordained. 'If we don't take risks...'

'Sylveste is right,' Sajaki said. 'Who's to say how the Captain would respond to the most innocent

of interventions? The plague is a living thing -- it isn't necessarily obedient to any set of logical

rules, so every act we make carries some risk, even something as seemingly harmless -- as sweeping

it with a magnetic field. The plague might interpret it as a stimulus to shift to a new phase of

growth, or it might cause the plague to turn to dust in seconds. I doubt that the Captain would

survive either scenario.'

'In which case,' Hegazi said, 'we might as well give up now.'

'No,' Sajaki said, so calmly that Sylveste feared for the other man's well-being. 'It doesn't mean

that we give up. It means that we need a new paradigm -- something beyond surgical intervention.

Here we have the finest cyberneticist born since the Transenlightenment, and no one has a finer

grasp of molecular weapons than Ilia Volyova. The medical systems we have aboard this ship are as

advanced as any in existence. And yet we've failed; for the simple reason that we're dealing with

something stronger, faster and more adaptable than anything we can imagine. What we've always

suspected is true: the Melding Plague is of alien origin. And that's why it will always beat us.

Provided, that is, we continue to wage war against it on our terms, rather than on its own.'

Now, Sylveste thought, this play had arrived at an unwritten epilogue all of its own.

'What kind of new paradigm do you have in mind?'

'The only logical answer,' Sajaki said, as if what he was about to reveal had always been

blindingly obvious. 'The only effective medicine against an alien illness would be an alien

medicine. And that's what we have to seek now, no matter how long it takes us, or how far.'

'Alien medicine,' Hegazi said, as if trying on the phrase for size. Perhaps he

imagined that he

would be hearing it rather frequently in the future. 'And just what kind of alien medicine did you

have in mind?'

'We'll try the Pattern Jugglers first,' Sajaki said, absently, as if no one else were present, merely

toying with the notion. 'And if they can't heal him, we'll look further.' Suddenly his attention

snapped back onto Sylveste. 'We visited them once, you know, the Captain and I. You aren't the

only one to have tasted the brine of their ocean.'

'Let's not spend a second longer in the company of this madman than absolutely necessary,'

Calvin said, and Sylveste nodded silent assent.

Volyova checked her bracelet again, for the sixth or seventh time in the last hour, even though what

it had to tell her had barely changed. What it told her -- and what she already knew -- was that the

calamitous marriage of bridgehead and Cerberus was due to happen in just under half a day, and

that no one looked likely to voice any objections, let alone make any attempt to avert the union.

'You looking at that thing every other second isn't going to change anything,' said Khouri, who,

together with Volyova and Pascale, remained in the spider-room. For most of

the last few hours

they had been beyond the outer hull, venturing inside only to return Sylveste into the ship so that he

could meet the other Triumvirs. Sajaki had not queried Volyova's absence: doubtless he assumed

she was busy in her quarters, putting the finishing touches to her attack strategy. But in an hour or

two she would need to show her face if she wished to avoid suspicion. Not long after that, she

would need to begin the softening-up procedure, deploying elements of the cache against the point

on Cerberus where the bridgehead was scheduled to arrive. As she glanced at the bracelet again --

involuntarily, this time -- Khouri said, 'What are you hoping for?'

'Something unexpected from the weapon -- a fatal malfunction would do very nicely.'

'Then you really don't want this to succeed, do you?' Pascale said. 'A few days ago you were

gloating over that thing like it was your finest hour. This is quite some turnaround.'

'That was before I knew who the Mademoiselle was. If I'd had any idea earlier...' Volyova found

herself running out of anything to say. It was obvious now that using the weapon was an act of

almost staggering recklessness -- but would knowing that have altered a thing? Would she have felt

compelled to make the weapon just because she could; just because it was elegant and she wanted

her peers to see what fabulous creatures could spring forth from her mind; what Byzantine engines

of war? The thought that she might have done so was sickening, but -- in its own way -- entirely

plausible. She would have given birth to the bridgehead and hoped that she could prevent it

completing its mission at some later point. She would, in short, have been in exactly the position in

which she now found herself.

The bridgehead -- the converted *Lorean* -- was nearing Cerberus now, slowing as it did so. By the

time it touched Cerberus it would be moving no faster than a bullet, but it would be a bullet massing

millions of tonnes. If the bridgehead hit an ordinary planetary surface at that speed, its kinetic

energy would be converted into heat rather efficiently: there would be a colossal explosion and her

toy would be destroyed in a flash. But Cerberus was not a normal planet. Her assumption -- backed

up by endless simulations -- was that the sheer grinding bulk of the weapon would be sufficient to

push it through the thin layer of artificial crust overlaying the world's interior. Once it had thrust

below that, once it had impaled the world, she had no real idea what it would

encounter.

And now that scared her beyond words. Intellectual vanity had brought Sylveste to this point --

and something else, perhaps -- but she was not unguilty of obeying the same unquestioning drive.

She wished she had taken the project less seriously; made the bridgehead less likely to succeed. It

terrified her to think what would happen if her child did not disappoint her.

'Had I known...' she said, finally. 'I don't know. But I didn't, so what does it matter?'

'If you'd listened to me,' Khouri said, 'I told you we had to stop this madness. But my word wasn't

good enough; you had to let it come to this.'

'I was hardly going to confront Sajaki on the basis of a vision you had in the gunnery. He'd have

killed both of us, I'm sure of it.' Although now, she thought, they might have to move against Sajaki

anyway -- they could only do so much from the spider-room, and soon that might not be nearly

enough.

'You could have decided to trust me,' Khouri said.

If circumstances had been any different, Volyova thought, she might have hit Khouri at the point.

Instead, mildly, she answered, 'You can talk to me about trust when you haven't lied and cheated

your way aboard my ship, but not before.'

'What did you expect me to do? The Mademoiselle had my husband.'

'Did she?' Volyova leant forward now. 'Do you know that for sure, Khouri? I mean, did you ever

meet him, or was that another of the Mademoiselle's little deceptions? Memories can be implanted

easily enough, can't they?'

Khouri's voice was soft now; as if there had never been an angry word between the two of them.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean maybe he never made it, Khouri. Did you ever consider that? Maybe he never left

Yellowstone; the way you always believed it had happened.'

Pascale pushed her face between the two of them. 'Look, stop arguing, will you? If something

awful is going to happen here, the last thing we need is division amongst ourselves. In case it has

escaped your attention, I'm the only person on this ship who didn't ask or want to come aboard.'

'Yeah, well that's just tough luck,' Khouri said.

Pascale glared at her. 'Well maybe what I just said wasn't all true. I *am* after something. I've got a

husband as well, and I don't want him to hurt himself -- or anyone around him -- just because of

something he wants so bad. And that's why I need you now -- both of you, because you seem to be

the only two around here who feel the same way I do.'

'How do you feel?' Volyova asked.

'That none of this is right,' she said. 'Not from the moment you mentioned that name.'

Volyova didn't have to ask what name Pascale meant. 'You acted as if you recognised it.'

'We did -- both of us. Sun Stealer's an Amarantin name; one of their gods, or mythic figures --

maybe even a real historical individual. But Dan was too pigheaded -- or perhaps too scared -- to

admit it.'

Volyova checked her bracelet again, but there was still no news. Then she waited while Pascale

told her story. She told it well; there was no preamble, no scene-setting, and with the few carefully

chosen facts which Pascale deployed, Volyova found herself visualising all that was necessary;

events sketched with artful economy. She could see now why Pascale had helmed Sylveste's

biography. What she had to say concerned the Amarantin, the extinct avian-descended creatures

who had lived on Resurgam. By now the crew had absorbed enough knowledge from Sylveste to

place this story in its proper context, but it was still disturbing to find a connection to the

Amarantin. After all, Volyova had found it troubling enough to think that her problems were in

some way associated with the Shrouders. At least there the causality was clear enough. But how did

the Amarantin fit into everything? How could there be a link between two radically different alien

species, both now long since vanished from galactic affairs? Even the timescales were in radical

disagreement: according to what Lascaille had told Sylveste, the Shrouders had vanished -- perhaps

by retreating into their spheres of restructured spacetime -- millions of years before the Amarantin

had ever evolved, taking with them artefacts and techniques too hazardous to be left within the

reach of less experienced species. That, after all, was what had driven Sylveste and Lefevre to the

Shroud boundary: the lure of that stored knowledge. The Shrouders were as alien in form as

anything in human experience -- carapacial, multi-limbed things brewed from nightmares. The

Amarantin, by contrast, with their avian ancestry and four-limbed, bipedal body-plan, were less

shatteringly alien.

Yet Sun Stealer showed a link. The ship had never before visited Resurgam;

had never had

aboard it anyone openly familiar with any aspect of the Amarantin -- and yet Sun Stealer had been

part of Volyova's life for subjective years, and several decades of planetary time. Sylveste was

clearly the key -- but any kind of logical connection steadfastly refused to reveal itself to Volyova.

Pascale continued, while an unsupervised part of Volyova's mind raced ahead and tried to fit

things into some kind of order. Pascale was talking about the buried city; a vast Amarantin structure

discovered during Sylveste's imprisonment. About how the city's central feature, a huge spire, had

been surmounted by an entity which was not quite Amarantin, but looked like the Amarantin analog

of an angel -- except that this was an angel designed by someone with a scrupulous attention to the

limits of anatomy. An angel that almost looked like it could fly.

'And that was Sun Stealer?' Khouri asked, awed.

'I don't know,' Pascale said. 'All we know is that the original Sun Stealer was just an ordinary

Amarantin, but one who formed a renegade flock -- a renegade social clade, if you like. We think

they were experimentalists, studying the nature of the world; questioners of myth. Dan had this

theory that Sun Stealer was interested in optics; that he made mirrors and lenses; literally, that he

stole the sun. He may also have experimented with flight; simple machines and gliders. Whatever it

was, it was heresy.'

'So what was the statue?'

Pascale told them the rest; how the renegade flock became known as the Banished Ones; how

they effectively disappeared from Amarantin history for thousands of years.

'If I can interject a theory at this point,' Volyova said, 'is it possible that the Banished Ones went

away to a quiet corner of the planet and invented technology?'

'Dan thought so. He thought they went the whole way -- until they had the power to leave

Resurgam entirely. And then one day -- not long before the Event -- they came back, but by then

they were like gods compared to those who had stayed behind. And that was what the statue was --

something raised in honour of the new gods.'

'Gods who became angels?' Khouri asked.

'Genetic engineering,' Pascale said, with conviction. 'They could never have flown, even with

those wings they gave themselves, but then again, they'd already left gravity behind; become

spacefaring.'

'What happened?'

'Much later -- centuries afterwards, or even thousands of years -- Sun Stealer's people returned to

Resurgam. It was almost the end. We can't resolve the archaeological timescale, it's so short. But it's

as if they brought it with them.'

'Brought what?' Khouri said.

'The Event. Whatever it was that ended life on Resurgam.'

As they trudged through the effluent which lay ankle-deep along the corridor floor, Khouri said, 'Is

there a way to stop your weapon reaching Cerberus? I mean, you still have control of it, don't you?'

'Be quiet!' Volyova hissed. 'Anything we say down here...' She trailed off, pointing to the walls,

presumably indicating all manner of concealed spy devices; part of the surveillance web she

believed Sajaki controlled.

'Might get back to the rest of the Triumvirate. So what?' Khouri kept her voice low -- no point in

taking needless risks, but she spoke anyway. 'The way things are going, we're going to be openly

resisting them before too long. My guess is Sajaki's listening network isn't as comprehensive as you

think, anyway -- that's what Sudjic said. Even if it is, he's likely to be preoccupied right now.'

'Dangerous, very dangerous.' But perhaps recognising the sense in what Khouri had said -- that at

some very imminent time subterfuge would have to become rebellion -- she elevated the cuff of her

jacket to reveal her bracelet, glowing with schematics and slowly updating numerics. 'I can control

almost everything with this. But what good does it do me? Sajaki'll kill me if he thinks I'm trying to

sabotage the operation -- and he'll know the instant the weapon deviates from its intended course.

And let's not forget that Sylveste is holding all of us to ransom -- I don't know how *he'd* react.'

'Badly, I suspect -- but that doesn't change anything.'

Now Pascale spoke. 'He won't do what he's been threatening. There's nothing in his eyes; he told

me. But because Sajaki could never be sure -- because it was possible -- Dan said he was sure it

would work.'

'And you're absolutely certain he wasn't lying to you?'

'What kind of a question is that?'

'A perfectly legitimate one, under the circumstances. I fear Sajaki, but I can confront him with

force if the need arises. But not your husband.'

'It never happened,' Pascale said. 'Trust me on that.'

'Like we've got a choice,' Khouri said. They had arrived at an elevator; the door opened and they

had to step up to reach the elevator's floor. Khouri kicked the slime from her boots, hammered the

wall and said, 'Ilia, you have to stop that thing. If it reaches Cerberus, we're all dead. That's what the

Mademoiselle knew all along; that's why she wanted to kill Sylveste. Because she knew that, one

way or another, he was going to try and get there. Now, I haven't got all of this straight in my head,

but I do know one thing. The Mademoiselle knew it was going to be really bad news for all of us if

he ever succeeded. And I mean *really* bad news.'

The elevator was rising now, but Volyova had not stated their destination.

'It's like Sun Stealer was pushing him on,' Pascale said. 'Putting ideas in his head, shaping his

destiny.'

'Ideas?' Khouri asked.

'Like coming here in the first place -- to this system.' Volyova was animated now. 'Khouri; don't

you remember how we retrieved that recording of Sylveste from ship's memory, from when he was

last aboard?' Khouri nodded; she remembered it well enough: how she had looked into the eyes of

the recorded Sylveste and imagined killing the real man. 'And how he dropped hints that he was

already thinking of the Resurgam expedition? And that bothered us because there was no logical

way he could know about the Amarantin? Well, now it makes perfect sense. Pascale's right. It was

Sun Stealer, already in his head, pushing him here. I don't think he even knew it was happening

himself, but Sun Stealer was in control, all that time.'

Khoury said, 'It's like Sun Stealer and the Mademoiselle are fighting each other, but they need to

use us to wage their war. Sun Stealer's some kind of software entity, and she's confined to

Yellowstone, in her palanquin... so they've been pulling our strings, puppeting us against each

other.'

'I think you're right,' Volyova said. 'Sun Stealer has me worried. Deeply worried. We haven't

heard from him since the cache-weapon went up.'

Khoury said nothing. What she knew was that Sun Stealer had entered her head during her last

session in the gunnery. Later, during her final visitation, the Mademoiselle had appeared to tell her

that Sun Stealer was consuming her; that he would inevitably overwhelm her in hours or -- at most -

- days. Yet that had been weeks earlier. According to her estimated rate of losses, the Mademoiselle

should be now be dead, and Sun Stealer victorious. Yet nothing had changed. If anything, her head

had been quieter than at any time since she had been revived around Yellowstone. No damn

Shadowplay proximity implant; no damn midnight apparitions from the Mademoiselle. It was as if

Sun Stealer had died just as he triumphed. Not that Khouri believed that, and his utter absence was

all the more stressing; heightening the waiting until -- as she was sure would happen -- he appeared.

And somehow she sensed he would be even less pleasant company than her previous lodger.

'Why should he show his face?' Pascale said. 'He's almost won, in any case.'

'Almost won,' Volyova agreed. 'But what we're about to do might make him intervene. I think we

should be ready for that -- you especially, Khouri. You know he found his way into Boris Nagorny,

and you can take it from me, it wasn't nice knowing either of them.'

'Maybe you should lock me up now, before it's too late.' Khouri hadn't given the statement much

thought, but she said it with deadly seriousness. 'I mean it, Ilia -- I'd rather you did that than be

forced into shooting me later.'

'I'd love to do that,' said her mentor. 'But it isn't as if we're already vastly outnumbering the

others. At the moment it's the three of us against Sajaki and Hegazi -- and God only knows whose

side Sylveste will choose, if it comes to that.'

Pascale said nothing.

They reached the warchive, the destination Volyova had always had in mind, though she had said

nothing until they arrived. Khouri had never been to this sector of the ship, but she did not need to

have it identified to her. She had been in plenty of armouries before and there was a smell to them.

'This is some heavy shit we're getting ourselves into,' she said. 'Right?'

The vast oblong room constituted the display and dispensary section of the warchive, with

somewhere in the region of a thousand weapons racked for immediate use. Tens of thousands more

could be manufactured in short order, assembled according to blueprints distributed holographically

through the mass of the ship.

'Yes,' Volyova said, with something worryingly close to relish. 'In which case we'd better have

some obnoxiously effective firepower at our disposal. So, use your skill and discretion, Khouri, and

kit us up. And be quick about it -- we don't want Sajaki locking us out before

we've got what we

came for.'

'You're actually enjoying this, aren't you?'

'Yes. And you know why? Suicidal or not, we're finally doing something. It might get us killed --

and it might not do any good -- but at least we'll go out with a fight, if it comes to that.'

Khouri nodded slowly. Now that Volyova put it like that, she was right. It was a soldier's

prerogative not to let events take their course without some kind of intervention, no matter how

futile. Quickly Volyova showed her how to use the warchive's lower-level functions -- luckily, it

was almost intuitive -- then took Pascale by the arm and turned to leave.

'Where are you going?'

'The bridge. Sajaki will want me there for the softening-up operation.'

TWENTY-SIX

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

Sylveste had not seen his wife for hours, and now it seemed as if she would not even be present for

the culmination of all that he had striven for. Only ten hours remained until Volyova's weapon was

due to impact Cerberus, and in less than an hour from now, the first wave of her softening-up

assault was scheduled to commence. This in itself was momentous -- yet it appeared that he would

have to witness it without Pascale's company.

The ship's cameras had never lost sight of the weapon, and even now it hovered in the bridge's

display, as if only a few kilometres away, rather than more than a million. They were seeing it side-

on, since it had begun its approach from the Trojan point, whereas the ship remained in a holding

pattern ninety degrees clockwise, along the line which threaded Hades and its furtive planetary

companion. Neither machine was in a true orbit, but the weak gravitational field of Cerberus meant

that these artificial trajectories could be maintained with minimal expenditure of correcting thrust.

Sajaki and Hegazi were with him, bathed in the reddish light which spilled from the display.

Everything was red now; Hades close enough that it was a perceptible prick of scarlet, and Delta

Pavonis -- faint as it was -- also casting ruddy light on all that orbited it. And because the display

was the only source of light in the room, some of that redness leaked into the bridge.

'Where the hell is that *brezgatnik* cow Volyova?' Hegazi said. 'I thought she was meant to be

showing us her chamber of horrors in action by now.'

Had the woman actually done the unspeakable, Sylveste thought? Had she actually decided to

ruin the attack, even though she had masterminded the whole thing? If that was the case, he had

misread her badly. She had inflicted her misgivings on him, fuelled by the delusions of the woman

Khouri, but surely she hadn't taken any of that seriously? Surely she had been playing devil's

advocate; testing the limits of his own confidence?

'You'd better hope that's the case, son,' Calvin said.

'You're reading my thoughts now?' Sylveste said, aloud, nothing to conceal from the partial

Triumvirate convened around him. 'That's quite a trick, Calvin.'

'Call it a progressive adaptation to neural congruency,' the voice said. 'All the theories said that if

you allowed me to stay in your head for long enough, something like this would occur. Really all

that's happening is that I'm constructing a steadily more realistic model of your neural processes. To

begin with I could only correlate what I read against your responses. But now I don't even have to

wait for the responses to guess what they'll be.'

So read this, Sylveste thought. *Piss off.*

'If you want rid of me,' Calvin said, 'you could have done so hours ago. But I think you're

beginning to rather like having me where I am.'

'For the time being,' Sylveste said. 'But don't get used to it, Calvin. Because I'm not planning on

having you around on a permanent basis.'

'This wife of yours worries me.'

Sylveste looked at the Triumvirs. Suddenly he did not want his half of the conversation to be

public knowledge, so he switched to mentalising what he would say.

'I worry about her too, but that doesn't happen to be any of your business.'

'I saw the way she responded when Volyova and Khouri tried to turn her.'

Yes, Sylveste thought -- and who could honestly blame her? It had been hard enough for him

when Volyova had dropped Sun Stealer's name into the conversation, like a depth charge. Of

course, Volyova had not known how significant that name was -- and for a moment Sylveste had

hoped that his wife would not remember where she had heard it, or even that she had ever heard it

before. But Pascale was too clever for that; it was half the reason he loved her. 'It doesn't mean they

managed, Cal.'

'I'm glad you're so sure.'

'She wouldn't try and stop me.'

That rather depends,' Calvin said. 'You see, if she imagines that you're putting yourself in harm's

way -- and if she loves you as much I think she does -- then stopping you is going to be something

she does as much out of love as logic. Maybe more so. It doesn't mean she's suddenly decided to

hate you, or that she even gets pleasure out of denying you this ambition. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I rather imagine it's hurting her.'

Sylveste looked at the display again; at the conic, sculpted mass of Volyova's bridgehead.

'What I think,' Calvin said, eventually, 'is that there maybe rather more to any of this than meets

your eye. And that we should proceed with caution.'

'I'm hardly being incautious.'

'I know, and I sympathise. The mere fact that there could be danger in this is fascinating in itself;

almost an incentive to push further. That's how you feel, isn't it? Every argument they could use

against you would only strengthen your resolve. Because knowledge makes you hungry, and it's a

hunger you can't resist, even if you know that what you're feasting on could kill you.'

'I couldn't have put it better myself,' Sylveste said, and wondered, but only for an instant. Then he

turned to Sajaki and spoke aloud. 'Where the hell is that damned woman? Doesn't she realise we

have work to do?'

'I'm here,' Volyova said, stepping into the bridge, followed by Pascale. Wordlessly, she

summoned a pair of seats, and the two women rose into the central volume of the room, positioning

themselves near the others, where the spectacle playing on the display could best be appreciated.

'Then let battle commence,' Sajaki said.

Volyova addressed the cache; the first time she had accessed any of these horrors since the incident

with the rogue weapon.

In the back of her mind was the thought that at any time one of these weapons could act in the

same way; violently ousting her from the control loop and taking charge of its own actions. She

could not rule that out, but it was a risk she was prepared to take. And if what Khouri had said was

true, then the Mademoiselle -- who had been controlling the rogue cache-weapon -- was now dead,

ruthlessly absorbed by Sun Stealer, then at the very least it would not be she who tried to turn the

weapons renegade.

Volyova selected a handful of cache-weapons, those at (she assumed and

hoped) the lower end of

the destructive scale available, where their destructive potential overlapped with the ship's native

armaments. Six weapons came to life and communicated their readiness via her bracelet, morbid

skull-icons pulsing. The devices moved via the network of tracks, slowly threading their way out of

the cache chamber into the smaller transfer chamber, and then deploying themselves beyond the

hull, becoming, in effect, hugely overcannoned robotic spacecraft. None of the six devices

resembled any of the others, except in the underlying signature of common design which was

shared by all the hell-class weapons. Two were relativistic projectile launchers, and so bore a

certain similarity, but no more than as if they were competing prototypes constructed by different

design teams to satisfy a general brief. They looked like ancient howitzers; all elongated barrel,

festooned with tubular complications and cancerous ancillary systems. The other four weapons, in

no particular order of pleasantness, consisted of a gamma-ray laser (bigger by an order of

magnitude than the ship's own units), a supersymmetry beam, an ack-am projector and a quark

deconfinement device. There was nothing to compare with the planet-

demolishing capability of the

rogue weapon, but then again, nothing which one would wish to have pointed at oneself -- or

indeed, the planet one happened to be standing on. And, Volyova reminded herself, the plan was not

to inflict arbitrary damage on Cerberus; not to destroy it -- but merely to crack it open, and for that a

certain amount of finesse was in order.

Oh, yes... this was finesse.

'Now give me something a novice can use,' Khouri said, dithering in front of the warchive's

dispensary. 'I'm not talking about a toy, though -- it's got to have real stopping power.'

'Beam or projectile, madame?'

'Make it a low-yield beam. We don't want Pascale putting holes in the hull.'

'Oh, marvellous choice, madame. Would madame care to rest her feet while I search for

something which matches madame's discerning requirements?'

'Madame will stand, if you don't mind.'

She was being served by the dispensary's gamma-level persona, which consisted of a rather glum

and simpering holographic head projected at chest height above the slot-topped counter. At first she

had restricted her choices to those arms which were arrayed along the walls,

stowed behind glass

with little illuminated plaques detailing their operation, era-of-origin and history of usage. That was

fine, in principle, and she had soon selected lightweight weapons for herself and Volyova, choosing

a pair of electromagnetic needle-guns which were similar in design to Shadowplay equipment.

Volyova had, rather ominously, mentioned heavier ordnance, and Khouri had taken care of that

as well, but only partially from the displayed wares. There had been a nice rapid-cycle plasma rifle,

manufactured three centuries ago, but by no means outdated, and its neural-feed aiming system

would make it very useful in close combat. It was light, as well, and when she hefted it, she felt that

she knew the weapon immediately. There was also something obscenely alluring about the

weapon's protective jacket of black leather: mottled and oiled to a high sheen, with patches cut

away to expose controls, readouts and attachment points. It would suit her, but what could she bring

back for Volyova? She perused the shelves for as long as she dared (which could not have been

more than five minutes), and while there was no shortage of intriguing and even bewildering

hardware, there was nothing which exactly matched what she had in mind.

Instead, she had turned to the warchive's memory. There were, Khouri was reliably informed,

exemplars of in excess of four million hand weapons, spanning twelve centuries of gunsmithery,

from the simplest spark-ignited projectile blunderbusses to the most gruesomely compact

concentrations of death-directed technology imaginable.

But even that vast assortment was small compared to the warchive's total potential, because the

warchive could also be creative. Given specifications, the warchive could sift its blueprints and

merge the optimum characteristics of pre-existing weapons until it had forged something new and

highly customised. Which, in minutes, it could synthesise.

When it was done -- as it was with the little pistol Khouri had imagined for Pascale -- the slot in

the tabletop would whirl open and the finished weapon would rise on a little felt-topped platter,

gleaming with ultrasterility, still warm with the residual heat of its manufacture.

She lifted Pascale's pistol, sighting along the barrel, feeling the balance, running through the

beam-yield settings, accessed by a stud recessed into the grip.

'Suits you, madame,' said the dispensary.

'It isn't for me,' Khouri said, hiding the gun in a pocket.

Volyova's six cache-weapons powered up their thrusters and vectored rapidly away from the ship,

following a complex course which would position them to strike against the impact point, albeit

obliquely. And the bridgehead, meanwhile, continued to reduce the distance between itself and the

surface, always slowing. She was certain that the world had already decided that it was being

approached by an artificial object, and a big one at that. The world might even recognise that the

thing approaching it had once been the *Lorean*. Doubtless, somewhere down in that machine-

permeated crust, a kind of debate was going on. Some components would be arguing that it was

best to attack now; best to strike against the nearing thing before it became a real problem. Other

components would be urging caution, pointing out that the object was still a long way from

Cerberus, and that any attack against it now would have to be very large to ensure the object was

annihilated before it could retaliate, and that such an open display of strength might attract more

attention from elsewhere. And furthermore, the pacifist systems might say, so far this object had

done nothing unambiguously hostile. It might not even suspect the artificiality of Cerberus. It might

only want to sniff the world and leave it alone.

Volyova did not want the pacifists to win. She wanted the advocates of a massive pre-emptive

strike to win, and she wanted it to happen now, before another minute passed. She wanted to

observe Cerberus lash out and remove the bridgehead from existence. That would end their

problems, and -- because something similar had already happened to Sylveste's probes -- they

would not be any worse off than they were now. Perhaps the mere incitement of a counterstrike

from Cerberus would not constitute the interference which the Mademoiselle had sought to prevent.

After all, no one would have entered the place. And then they could admit defeat and go home.

Except none of that was going to happen.

'These cache-weapons,' Sajaki said, nodding at the display. 'Are you planning to arm and fire

them from here, Ilia?'

'There's no reason not to.'

'I would have expected Khouri to direct them from the gunnery. After all, that's her role.' He

turned to Hegazi and whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear, 'I'm beginning to wonder why

we recruited that one -- or why I allowed Volyova to stop the trawling.'

'I presume she has her uses,' said the chimeric.

'Khoury is in the gunnery,' Volyova lied. 'As a precaution, of course. But I won't call on her unless

absolutely necessary. That's fair, isn't it? These are my weapons as well -- you can't begrudge me

the use of them when the situation is so controlled.'

The readouts on her bracelet -- partially echoed on the display sphere in the middle of the bridge -

- informed her that in thirty minutes the cache-weapons would arrive at their designated firing

positions nearly a quarter of a million kilometres away from the ship. At that point there would be

no plausible reason not to fire them.

'Good,' Sajaki said. 'For a moment I worried that we didn't have your complete commitment to

the cause. But that sounds suspiciously like a flash of the old Volyova.'

'How very gratifying,' Sylveste said.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

The black icons of the cache-weapons swarmed towards their firing points, their terrible potency

waiting to be unleashed against Cerberus. In all that time there had been no response from the

world; no hint that it was anything other than what it appeared to be. It just

hung there, grey and

sutured, like the cranium of a skull tipped in prayer.

When, finally, the moment came, there was only a soft chime from the projection sphere, and the

numerals briefly cycled through zero, before commencing the long count upwards.

Sylveste was the first to speak. He turned to Volyova, who had made no visible movement in

minutes. 'Isn't something supposed to have happened? Aren't your damned weapons supposed to

have gone off?'

Volyova looked up from the bracelet readout which was consuming her attention like someone

snapping out of a trance.

'I never gave the order,' she said, so softly that it took conscious effort to hear her words. 'I never

told the weapons to fire.'

'Pardon?' Sajaki said.

'You heard what I said,' she answered, with mounting volume. 'I didn't do it.'

Once again Sajaki's resolute calm managed to seem more threatening than any histrionics. 'There

are a number of minutes remaining in which the attack may yet be made,' he said. 'Perhaps you had

best consider utilising them, before the situation becomes irretrievable.'

'I think,' Sylveste said, 'that the situation did so some time ago.'

'That's a matter for the Triumvirate,' Hegazi said, his steel-clad knuckles glinting on the edge of

his seat rests. 'Ilia, if you give the order now, maybe we can----'

'I'm not about to,' she said. 'Call it mutiny if you wish, or treason; I don't care. But my

involvement in this madness ends here.' She looked at Sylveste with unexpected bile. 'You know

my reasons, so don't pretend otherwise.'

'She's right, Dan.'

Now it was Pascale who had joined the conversation, and for a moment she had all their

attention.

'You know what she's been saying is true; how we just can't take this risk, no matter how much

you want it.'

'You've been listening to Khouri as well,' Sylveste said, although the news that his wife had gone

over to Volyova's side was hardly surprising, drawing less bitterness than he might have expected.

Aware of the perversity of his feelings, he nonetheless rather admired her for doing it.

'She knows things that we don't,' Pascale said.

'What the hell does Khouri have to do with any of this?' Hegazi asked,

glancing peevishly

towards Sajaki. 'She's just a grunt. Can we omit her from the discussion?'

'Unfortunately not,' Volyova said. 'Everything that you've heard is true. And carrying on with this

really would be the worst mistake any of us have ever made.'

Sajaki veered his seat away from Hegazi, approaching Volyova.

'If you aren't going to give the attack order, at least surrender control of the cache to me.' And he

reached out his hand, beckoning her to unclasp the bracelet and pass it to him.

'I think you should do what he says,' Hegazi said. 'It could be very unpleasant for you otherwise.'

'I don't doubt that for a moment,' Volyova said, and with one deft motion she snapped the

bracelet from her hand. 'It's completely useless to you, Sajaki. The cache will only listen to me or

Khouri.'

'Give me the bracelet.'

'You'll regret it, I'm warning you.'

She passed it to him all the same. Sajaki grasped it as if it were a valuable gold amulet, toying

with it briefly before locking it around his wrist. He watched as the little display reignited, filling

with the same schematic data which had flashed from Volyova's wrist a

moment earlier.

'This is Triumvir Sajaki,' he said, licking his lips between each word, savouring the power. 'I'm

not sure of the precise protocol required at this point, so I ask for your co-operation. But I want the

six deployed cache-weapons to commence----'

Sajaki stopped mid-sentence. He looked down at his wrist, at first in puzzlement, and then,

moments later, in something much closer to fear.

*

'You sly old dog,' Hegazi said, wonderingly. 'I imagined you might have a trick up your sleeve, but

I never thought you'd have one literally.'

'I'm a very literal-minded person,' Volyova said.

Sajaki's face was a rigid mask of pain now, and the constricting bracelet had visibly cut into his

wrist. His hand was locked open, now as white and bloodless as wax. With his free hand he was

making a valiant effort to claw the bracelet free, but it was futile; she had seen to that. The clasp

would have sealed shut now, and what remained was only a painful and slow process of constrictive

amputation, as the memory-plastic polymer chains in the bracelet slithered ever tighter. The bracelet

had known from the instant he placed it around his wrist that his DNA was not correct; that it failed

to match her own. But it had not begun to constrict until he had tried to issue an order, which, she

supposed, was a kind of leniency on her behalf.

'Make it stop,' he managed to say. 'Make it stop... you fucking bitch... please...'

Volyova estimated he had one to two minutes before the bracelet had his hand off; one to two

minutes before the main sound in the room would be the cracking of bone, assuming it was audible

above Sajaki's whimpers.

'Your manners let you down,' she said. 'What kind of a way to ask is that? You'd think now

would be the one time when you had some courtesy to spare.'

'Stop it,' Pascale said. 'I'm begging you, please -- whatever's happened, it isn't worth this...'

Volyova shrugged, and addressed herself to Hegazi. 'You may as well remove it, Triumvir,

before it gets too messy. I'm sure you have the means.'

Hegazi held one of his own steel hands up for inspection, as if having to reassure himself that

they were no longer flesh.

'Now!' Sajaki shrieked. 'Get it off me!'

Hegazi positioned his seat next to the other Triumvir and set to work. It was a process which

seemed to cause Sajaki fractionally more pain than the constriction itself.

Sylveste said nothing.

Hegazi worked the bracelet free; his metal hands were lathered with human blood by the time he

was done. What remained of the bracelet fell from his fingers, dropping to the floor twenty metres

below.

Sajaki, who had not stopped moaning, looked with revulsion at the damage that had been

wrought to his wrist. His hand was still attached, but the bones and tendons were hideously

exposed, blood pulsing out in red gouts, cascading in a thin scarlet rope to the distant floor. Trying

to stifle the loss, he pressed the agonised limb against his belly. Finally he ceased to make any

sound, and after long moments, his blanched face turned to Volyova and spoke.

'You'll pay for this,' he said. 'I swear it.'

Which was when Khouri entered the bridge and began shooting.

Of course, she had always had a plan in mind, even if it was not a very detailed one. And when

Khouri had taken her first step into the chamber, and seen the cataract of what was obviously blood,

she had not taken the time to run her plan through a set of elaborate last-minute revisions. Instead,

she had decided to start shooting the ceiling, until she had everyone's attention.

It had not taken very long.

Her weapon of choice was the plasma rifle, set to its lowest possible yield, with the rapid-fire

mode disengaged so that she had to squeeze the trigger for each pulse. The first one bit a metre-

wide crater into the ceiling, causing the cladding to rain down in jagged, heat-scorched shards.

Wary of blasting right through, she directed her next pulse a little to the left, and then a little to the

right. One of the shards crashed onto the glowing sphere of the holo-display, and for an eyeblink the

sphere flickered and warped, before resuming stability. Then -- because she had rather

comprehensively announced her presence -- she powered down the gun and slung it back over her

shoulder. Volyova, who had obviously anticipated her next move, jetted her seat down towards

Khoury, and when they were barely five metres apart, Khoury threw her one of the lightweight guns;

the needle-projectors she had found on the warchive's wall. 'Take this for Pascale,' she said,

throwing the low-yield beamer after it. Volyova caught both weapons

expertly and quickly passed

Pascale her own.

Khouri, who had by now assimilated the situation, observed that the rain of blood -- which had

now ceased -- had originated from Sajaki. He looked in a bad way, cradling one arm as if it was

broken or as if he had taken a hit.

'Ilia,' Khouri said, 'you started all the fun without me. I'm disappointed.'

'Events rather demanded it,' Volyova said.

Khouri looked at the display, trying to figure out what had happened beyond the ship. 'Did the

weps fire?'

'No; I never gave the order.'

'And now she can't,' Sylveste said. 'Because Hegazi just destroyed her bracelet.'

'Does that mean he's on our side?'

'No,' Volyova said. 'It just means he can't stand the sight of blood. Especially when it's Sajaki's.'

'He needs help,' Pascale said. 'For God's sake, you can't just let him bleed to death.'

'He won't,' Volyova said. 'He's chimeric, like Hegazi -- just not so obviously. Already the

medichines in his blood will be initiating cellular repair at a vastly accelerated rate. Even if the

bracelet had taken his hand off, he'd have grown another one. Isn't that right, Sajaki?'

He looked at her with a face so drained of strength that it looked as if he'd have trouble growing a

new fingernail, let alone a new hand. But eventually he nodded.

'Someone should still help me to the infirmary -- there's nothing magical about my medichines;

they have their limitations. And my pain receptors are alive and well, trust me.'

'He's right,' Hegazi said. 'You shouldn't overestimate the capabilities of his 'chines. Do you want

him dead or not? You'd better decide now. I can help him to the infirmary.'

'And stop off for a browse at the warchive on the way?' Volyova shook her head. 'Thanks, but no

thanks.'

'Then me,' Sylveste said. 'I'll take him. You trust me that far, don't you?'

'I trust you about as far as I could piss you, *svinoi*,' Volyova said. 'But on the other hand, you

wouldn't know what to do at the warchive even if you got there. And Sajaki isn't in a fit state to give

you any particularly cogent suggestions.'

'Is that a yes?'

'Be quick about it, Dan.' Volyova emphasised the point with a stab of the needler, her finger tense

on the trigger. 'If you aren't back here in ten minutes I'm sending Khouri after you.'

In a minute the two men had left, Sajaki slumped on Sylveste, barely capable of walking without

support from the other man. Khouri wondered if Sajaki would still be conscious by the time he was

brought to the infirmary, and found that she did not particularly care.

'About the warchive,' she said. 'I don't think you have to worry too much about anyone else using

it. I shot the fucking place to bits as soon as I had what I wanted.'

Volyova mulled on that and then nodded appreciatively.

'That was sound tactical thinking, Khouri.'

'Tactics didn't come into it. It was that persona running the place. I just decided to open up and

torch the bastard.'

Pascale said, 'Does this mean we've won? I mean, have we actually achieved what we set out to

do?'

'Guess so,' Khouri said. 'Sajaki's out of the picture, and I don't think our friend Hegazi is going to

make too much trouble for himself. And it doesn't look like your husband is going to keep his word

about killing us all if he doesn't get what he wants.'

'How very disappointing,' Hegazi said.

'I told you,' Pascale said. 'He was always bluffing. That's it, then? We can still call off those

weapons, can't we?' She was looking at Volyova, who nodded instantly.

'Of course.' And then she reached in her jacket and snapped a new bracelet around her wrist, as if

it were the most natural thing in the world. 'You think I'd be so foolish as not to carry a spare with

me?'

'Not you, Ilia,' Khouri said.

She raised the bracelet to her mouth and spoke into it; a mantralike sequence of commands

designed to bypass various levels of security. Finally, when everyone's attention was on the

armillary, she said, 'All cache-weapons return to ship; repeat, all cache-weapons return to ship.'

But nothing happened; not even when enough seconds had elapsed for the expected light-travel

timelag. Nothing, that is, except that the icons representing the cache-weapons changed from black

to red, and began to flash with evil regularity.

'Ilia,' Khouri said. 'What does that actually mean?'

'It means they're arming up and preparing to fire,' she said, very evenly, as if barely surprised. 'It

means that something very bad is about to happen.'

TWENTY-EIGHT

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

She had lost control again.

Volyova watched helplessly as the cache-weapons opened fire on Cerberus.
The beam weapons

found their mark first, of course, and the first indication that returned was a
spark of blue-white

light, winking open against the arid grey backdrop of the world, in the precise
spot where, shortly,

the bridgehead would reach the surface. The relativistic projectile weapons
were only slightly

tardier, and reports of their success followed a few seconds later; spectacular
stuttering pulses as the

projectiles rained home, slugs of neutronium and antimatter slamming into
the world. All the while,

she kept barking the disarming commands into the bracelet, but with steadily
draining hope that she

could have any influence over the weapons. For one foolish instant she had
assumed that the

replacement bracelet was faulty, but of course that could not be why the
weapons were now

behaving autonomously. They had fired for a purpose; just as they had
disregarded her order to

return to the bowels of the ship.

Because someone -- or some *thing* -- now had control.

'What's happening?' Pascale asked, in the tones of someone who did not honestly expect a

comprehensible answer.

'It must be Sun Stealer,' Volyova said, finally giving up on the bracelet, relinquishing all hope of

the weapons returning to her steerage. 'Because it can't possibly be Khouri's Mademoiselle. Even if

she were still capable of influencing the cache, she'd be doing everything in her power to prevent

this.'

'Part of him must have stayed behind in the gunnery,' Khouri said. She seemed to regret that,

because she went quiet very abruptly, before adding, 'I mean, we always knew he could control the

gunnery -- that was why he resisted the Mademoiselle when she wanted to kill Sylveste with the

other weapon.'

'But with this precision?' Volyova shook her head. 'Not all my commands to the cache-weapons

are routed through the gunnery; I knew that was too big a risk to take.'

'And you're saying even those aren't working?'

'So it would appear.'

The display now showed that the weapons had ceased their attack, depleted of energy and

munitions, drifting into useless orbits around Hades, where they would remain for millions of years,

until swept by random gravitational perturbations into trajectories which would smash them into

Cerberus or fling them out towards the Trojan points, where they would endure even the red-giant

death of Delta Pavonis. Volyova extracted a residual grain of comfort in knowing that the weapons

could not be used again; could not be turned against her. But it was far too late for such succour.

The damage against Cerberus had already been done, and there would now be very little to hinder

the bridgehead when it arrived. She could already see the evidence of their attack displayed on the

display, plumes of pulverised regolith fanning into space around the impact point.

Sylveste arrived at the ship's medical centre, Sajaki increasingly heavy against his shoulders. The

man seemed to weigh far too much for his lean frame. Sylveste wondered if it was because of the

sheer mass of machines streaming through his blood; waiting dormant in every cell, biding their

time until a crisis such as this stirred them to life. Sajaki was hot too; feverishly so -- perhaps

evidence that the medichines had gone into an emergency breeding frenzy, building up their forces

to deal with the situation, conscripting molecules from the man's 'normal' tissue until the hazard was

averted. When Sylveste glanced reluctantly at the Triumvir's ruined wrist, he saw that the blood had

stopped flowing, and the dreadful circumferential wound was now enveloped in a membranous

caul. A faint amber luminosity shone through the tissue.

Servitors emerged from the centre as he approached, taking the burden from him, lofting Sajaki

to a couch. The machines fussed over him for a few minutes, swanlike monitors angling over the

bed; various neural monitors settled gently over his scalp. They did not seem overly concerned by

the wound. Perhaps the medical systems were already communicating with his medichines, and

there was no need for further intervention at this stage. He was still conscious, Sylveste observed,

despite his weakness.

'You should never have trusted Volyova,' he said angrily. 'Now everything's ruined because she

had too much power. That was a fatal mistake, Sajaki.'

His voice was barely there. 'Of course we trusted her. She was one of us, you fool! Part of the

Triumvirate!' Then he added, in a croak, 'What is it you know about Khouri?'

'She was an infiltrator,' Sylveste said. 'Put aboard this ship to find me and kill

me.'

Sajaki reacted to this as if it were only mildly diverting. 'That's all?'

'That's all I believed. I don't know who sent her, or why -- but she had some absurd justification,

which Volyova and my wife seem to have taken as the literal truth.'

'It isn't over yet,' Sajaki said, his eyes wide, rimmed in yellow.

'What do you mean, it isn't over?'

'I just know,' Sajaki said, and then closed his eyes, relaxing back into the couch. 'Nothing is

finished.'

'He's going to survive,' Sylveste said, entering the bridge, obviously unaware of what had just taken

place.

He looked around him, and Volyova could imagine his confusion. Superficially, nothing had

changed in the time it had taken him to escort Sajaki to the infirmary -- the same people holding the

same guns, but the mood had undergone a dire transition. Hegazi, for instance, despite being on the

wrong end of Khouri's needler, did not wear the expression of a man on the defeated side. Neither,

however, did he look particularly jubilant.

It's out of all our hands now, Volyova thought, and Hegazi knows it.

'Something went wrong, didn't it?' Sylveste said, who had by then taken in the view of Cerberus

on the display, with its ruptured crust bleeding into space. 'Your weapons actually opened fire, just

as we wanted.'

'Sorry,' Volyova said, shaking her head. 'It was none of my doing.'

'You'd better listen to her,' Pascale said. 'Whatever's going on here, we don't want any part of it.'

It's bigger than us, Dan. Bigger than you, anyway -- hard as that may be to believe.'

He looked scornful. 'Haven't you realised yet? This is exactly how Volyova wanted it to happen.'

'You're mad,' Volyova said

'Now you get your chance,' Sylveste said. 'You get to see your planet-penetrator in action, while

at the same time salving your conscience with this conveniently unsuccessful display of eleventh-

hour caution.' He clapped his hands twice. 'No; honestly -- I'm genuinely impressed.'

'You'll be genuinely dead,' Volyova said.

But while she hated him for saying what he had said, there was part of her which refused easy

denial. She would have done anything in her power to stop the weapons from completing their

mission -- hell; she *had* done everything in her power, and none of it had

worked. Even if she had

not given the order to release them from the ship, Sun Stealer would surely have found a way; she

was sure of that. But now that the attack had taken place, a kind of fatalistic curiosity had settled

over her. The bridgehead's arrival would proceed as planned, unless she could find a way of

stopping it, and thus far she had tried everything she knew. And therefore, because there was no

way of preventing it from happening, a detached part of her was beginning to look forward to the

event, tantalised not just by what would be learnt, but how well her child would endure its trials.

Whatever happened, she knew -- no matter how fearful the consequences might be -- it could not

help but be the most fascinating thing she had ever witnessed. And perhaps the most terrible.

There was nothing to do now except wait.

The hours passed neither swiftly nor slowly, because this was an event she was dreading as much

as longing for. One thousand kilometres above Cerberus, the bridgehead commenced its final

braking phase. The brilliance of the two Conjoiner drives was like a pair of miniature suns flaring

into ignition above Cerberus, shocking the landscape into stark clarity, craters and ravines assuming

enormously exaggerated prominence. For a moment, under that merciless glare, the world really did

look artefactual; as if its makers had striven too hard to make Cerberus look weathered by aeons of

bombardment.

On her bracelet now she was seeing images recorded from the downlooking cameras studded

around the bridgehead's flanks. There were rings of cameras every hundred metres along the length

of the four-kilometre cone, so that, no matter how deeply it penetrated, some cameras would always

be above and below the crustal layer. She was looking through that crust now; through the still

unhealed wound which had been opened by the cache.

Sylveste had not been lying.

There were things down there. Huge and organic and tubular, like a nest of snakes. The heat of

the cache attack had dissipated now, and although greyish clouds were still smoking from the hole,

Volyova suspected they were more to do with incinerated machinery than boiled crustal matter.

None of the snakelike tubes were moving, and their segmented silvery sides were marred by black

smears and hundred-metre-wide gashes, through which a whole intestinal mass of smaller snakes

had exploded.

Volyova had hurt Cerberus.

She did not know if it was a mortal wound, or just a graze which would heal in days, but she had

hurt it, and the realisation of that made her shiver. She had hurt something alien.

Soon, however, the alien thing retaliated.

She jumped when it happened, even though -- intellectually, if not emotionally -- she had been

expecting it. It happened when the bridgehead was two kilometres from the surface -- half its own

length away.

The event itself was almost too swift to absorb. Between one moment and the next the crust

changed with startling swiftness. A series of grey dimples had formed, ringed concentrically around

the kilometre-wide wound, blistering like stone pustules. Almost as soon as Volyova noticed their

existence, they ruptured, unleashing twinkling spore, silver glints which swarmed towards the

bridgehead like fireflies. She had no idea what they were, whether they were chips of naked

antimatter, tiny warheads, viral capsules or miniature gun batteries, except that they intended harm

to her creation.

'Now,' she whispered. 'Now...'

She was not disappointed. Perhaps, on some level, it would have been better if her weapon had

been destroyed in that moment -- but then she would have been denied the thrill of seeing it react,

and react with all the efficacy she had intended. The armaments in the bridgehead's circular rim

erupted into life, tracking, lasering and bosering each of the glints before many of them had touched

the conic weapon's hyperdiamond carapace.

The bridgehead accelerated now, covering the final two kilometres in a third of a minute, the

crust around the wound constantly blistering and releasing glitter, the bridgehead parrying the

strikes. There were craters in the weapon's hull now, where a few of the glitter-spore had impacted

with brief pink radiance, but the bridgehead's operational integrity remained uncompromised. The

needle-sharp tip pushed below the level of the crust, accurately positioned in the middle of the

wound.

Seconds passed, and then the widening haft of the weapon began to brush against its ragged

periphery. The ground began to rupture, fracture lines racing away. The blisters were still sprouting,

but now at a greater radial distance from the wound, as if the underlying mechanisms were damaged

or depleted within that circumference. The bridgehead was now hundreds of metres into Cerberus,

shockwaves radiating out from the entry point and haring up the weapon's length. The piezoelectric

crystal buffers which Volyova had integrated into the hyperdiamond would damp those shocks,

converting their energy into heat which would then be channelled into the defensive armaments.

'Tell me we're winning,' Sylveste said. 'For God's sake, tell me we're winning!'

She speed-read the detailed status summaries spilling onto her bracelet. For a moment there was

no antagonism between them; only a shared curiosity. 'We're coping,' she said. '... Weapon is now

one kilometre in; maintaining steady descent rate at one kilometre every ninety seconds. Thrust

level increasing to maximum; that must mean it's encountering mechanical resistance...'

'What is it passing through?'

'Can't tell,' she said. 'Alicia's data said the fake crust was no more than half a kilometre deep, but

there are few sensors in the weapon's skin -- they would have increased its vulnerability to

cybernetic attack modes.'

What showed on the armillary, relayed from the ship's cameras, was a piece of abstract sculpture:

a cone sliced off midway and positioned with its narrowest end resting on a scabrous grey surface.

Anguished patterns were playing over the surrounding terrain, blisters spewing spore in random

directions, as if their underlying targeting had gone awry. The weapon was slowing now, and

though the scene was playing in absolute silence, Volyova could imagine the awful grinding

friction; what it would have sounded like, had there been air to carry the sound and ears to be

deafened by that titanic scraping roar. Now her bracelet told her, the pressure on the tip had fallen

drastically, as if the weapon had finally punctured all the way through the crust, and was now

probing into the relative hollowness beneath: the domain of the snakes.

Slowing.

Skull-and-crossbones symbols danced on her bracelet, signifying commencement of molecular

weapon attack against the bridgehead. Volyova had expected as much. Already, antibodies would

be oozing through the carapace, meeting and matching the alien attackers.

Slowing... and now stopping.

This was as deep as they were going to get. One and one-third of a kilometre

of the cone still

projected above the cracked surface of Cerberus; what it looked like was some kind of top-heavy

cylindrical fortification. The rim armaments were still lancing away at the crustal countermeasures,

but now the spore discharges were coming from tens of kilometres away, and it was clear that no

immediate threat was posed, unless the crust was capable of improbably rapid regeneration.

The bridgehead would now commence anchoring itself, consolidating its gains, analysing the

forms of the molecular weapons being used against it, devising subtly matched reverse strategies.

It had not let Volyova down.

She pivoted her couch round to face the others, noticing -- for the first time in ages -- that her fist

was still locked around a needle-gun.

'We're in,' she said.

It looked like a biology lesson for gods, or a snapshot of the kind of pornography which might be

enjoyed by sentient planets.

In the hours immediately after the weapon's anchoring, Khouri stayed in close consultation with

Volyova, reviewing the constantly changing status of the sluggishly fought battle. The geometric

forms of the two protagonists reminded her of a conic virus dwarfed by the much larger spherical

cell which it was in the business of corrupting. Yet she had to keep reminding herself that even that

insignificant cone was the size of a mountain; that the cell was a world.

Nothing very much seemed to be happening now, but that was only because the conflict was

being waged primarily on the molecular level, across an invisible, near-fractal front which extended

for tens of square kilometres. At first, and without success, Cerberus had tried to repel the invader

with highly entropic weapons; trying to degrade the enemy into megatonnes of atomic ash. Now its

strategy had evolved towards one of digestion. It was still trying to dismantle the enemy atom by

atom, but systematically, like a child deconstructing a complex toy rather than smashing it to pieces,

diligently placing each component into its assigned compartment so that it could be used again in

the future, in some as yet undreamt-of project. There was logic to this, after all; a few cubic

kilometres of the world had been annihilated by the cache-weapons, and Volyova's device

presumably consisted of matter in much the same elemental and isotopic ratios as that which had

been destroyed. The enemy was a huge potential reservoir of repair material,

obviating the need for

Cerberus to consume its own finite resources in the process. And perhaps it always sought

motherlodes like this, to repair the inevitable damage wrought by millennia of meteorite strikes and

the constant ablative toll of cosmic ray bombardment. Perhaps it had seized Sylveste's first probe

more because it was hungry than out of a misguided sense that it was preserving its own secrecy; as

much acting out of blind stimulus as a Venus flytrap, with no thought for the future.

But Volyova's weapon was not designed to be digested without putting up a struggle.

'See, Cerberus is learning from us,' she said from her bridge seat, graphing up schematics of the

several dozen different components in the molecular arsenal which the world was now deploying

against her weapon. What she was showing looked like a page from an entomology textbook: an

array of metallic, differently specialised bugs. Some of them were disassemblers: the front line of

the Amarantin defence system. These would physically attack the surface of the bridgehead,

dislodging atoms and molecules with their manipulators, tugging apart chemical bonds. They would

also engage in hand-to-hand combat with Volyova's own front-line forces.

What matter they

succeeded in wresting free they passed back to fatter bugs, behind the immediate battle-front. Like

tireless clerks, these units endlessly categorised and sorted the chunks of matter they received. If it

was structurally simple, like a single undifferentiated chunk of iron or carbon, they tagged it for

recycling and passed it to other even fatter factory bugs which were manufacturing more bugs

according to their internal templates. And if the chunks of matter had been organised so that within

them was true structure, they were not passed for immediate recycling, but were instead passed to

other bugs which dismantled the chunks and tried to figure out if they embodied any useful

principles. If so, the principles would be learnt, tailored and passed to the factory bugs. That way,

the next generation of bugs would be fractionally more advanced than the last. 'Learning from us,'

Volyova said again, as if she found the prospect as glorious as it was disturbing. 'Unpicking our

countermeasures and incorporating their design philosophies into its own forces.'

'You don't have to sound so cheerful about it.' Khouri was eating a ship-grown apple.

'But why not? It's an elegant system. I can learn from it, of course, but it isn't

the same thing.

What's happening down there is methodical, endless -- and there isn't the tiniest grain of sentience

behind any of it.'

She said it with genuine awe.

'Yes, very impressive,' Khouri said. 'Blind replication -- nothing smart about it, but because it's

happening simultaneously in a billion-odd places, they win over us by sheer weight of numbers.

Isn't that what's going to happen? You're going to sit here and think like hell, and it won't make a bit

of difference to the outcome. Sooner or later they'll learn every trick you have.'

'But not just yet.' Volyova cocked her head towards the schematic. 'You think I'd have been

stupid enough to hit them with the most advanced countermeasures we have? You never do that in

war, Khouri. You never expend any more energy -- or intelligence -- against an enemy than is

absolutely appropriate to the situation at hand, just as you never play your best card first in a poker

game. You wait, until the stakes justify it.' And then she explained how the current countermeasures

being deployed by her weapon were really very old, and not especially sophisticated. She had

adapted them from ancient entries in the holographically distributed database of the warchive.

'About three hundred years behind the current day,' she said.

'But Cerberus is catching up.'

'Correct, but that rate of technical gain is actually rather stable -- probably because of the

thoughtless way in which our secrets are being used. There are no intuitive jumps possible, so the

Amarantin systems evolve linearly. It's like someone trying to crack a code by sheer brute-force

computation. And because of that, I know rather precisely how long it will take for them to overtake

our current level. At the moment they're catching up by about a decade for every three or four hours

of shiptime. Which gives us slightly less than a week before things get interesting.'

'And this isn't?' Khouri shook her head, feeling -- not for the first time -- that there were many

things she did not understand about Volyova. 'Just how do these escalations take place? Does your

weapon carry a copy of the warchive?'

'No; too dangerous.'

'Right; it'd be like sending a soldier behind enemy lines with every secret you've got. How do you

do it? Transmit the secrets down to the weapon only when they're needed?

Isn't that just as risky?'

'That's how it happens, but it's much safer than you think. The transmissions are encrypted using

a one-time pad; a randomly generated string of digits which specifies the change to be made to each

bit in the raw signal; whether you add a zero or a one to it. After you've encrypted the signal with

the pad, there's no way the enemy can recover the meaning without their own copy of the pad. The

weapon needs one, of course -- but the copy it carries is stored deep inside, beyond tens of metres of

solid diamond, with hyper-secure optical links to the assembler control systems. Only if the weapon

were under major attack would there be any risk of the pad being captured -- and in that case, I'd

simply refrain from transmitting anything.'

Khoury finished the apple down to the seedless core. 'So there is a way,' she said, after thinking

for a moment.

'A way to what?'

'To end all this. We want to do that, don't we?'

'You don't think the damage has already been done?'

'We can't know for sure, but supposing it hasn't? After all, what we've seen so far is just a layer of

camouflage, and below that a layer of defences designed to protect the camouflage. It's amazing,

yes -- and the mere fact that it's an alien technology means we could probably learn from it -- but

we still don't know what it's hiding.' She thumped her chair in emphasis, gratified to see Volyova

react with a small shiver. 'It's something we haven't reached yet; haven't even glimpsed -- and we

won't, until Sylveste actually goes down there.'

'We'll stop him from leaving.' Volyova patted the needler which was tucked into her belt. 'We

control things now.'

'And take the risk that he'll kill us all by triggering the thing in his eyes?'

'Pascale said it was a bluff.'

'Yeah, and I'm sure she believes it.' Khouri didn't need to say any more; it was obvious from the

slow way she nodded that Volyova understood. 'There's a better way,' she continued. 'Let Sylveste

leave if he wants, but we'll make damn sure he doesn't have an easy time getting inside.'

'By which you mean...'

'I'll say it, even if you won't. We have to let it die, Volyova. We have to let Cerberus win.'

TWENTY-NINE

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

'All we know,' Sylveste said, 'is that Volyova's weapon has reached below the outer skin of the

planet; perhaps into the level occupied by the machines I saw in my first exploration.'

It was fifteen hours since the bridgehead had anchored itself, during which time Volyova had

done nothing, refusing to send in the first of her mechanical spies until now.

'It seems that those machines are dedicated to maintaining the crust; keeping it repaired when it is

punctured, maintaining the illusion of realism, and amassing raw material when it comes by.

They're also the first line of defence.'

'But what lies below?' Pascale said. 'We didn't get a clear look the night you were attacked, and I

don't think they're simply resting on bedrock; that there's a real rocky planet below this mechanised

facade.'

'We'll know soon enough,' Volyova said, tight-lipped.

Her spies were laughable in their simplicity; cruder even than the robots which Sylveste and

Calvin had used in their initial work on the Captain. It was all part of her philosophy of not letting

Cerberus see any technology more sophisticated than was absolutely necessary for the task at hand.

The drones were capable of being manufactured in vast numbers by the bridgehead, a profligacy

which would outweigh their general lack of intelligence. Each was the size of a fist, equipped with

just enough limbs for independent locomotion; just enough eyes to justify its existence in the first

place. They had no brains; not even simple networks with a few thousand neurons; not even brains

which would have made the average insect seem precociously cranial. Instead, they had little

spinnerettes which extruded sheathed optical fibre. The drones were operated by her weapon; all

commands and everything they saw routed back and forth through that cable, with quantum privacy

guaranteed.

'I think we'll find another layer of automation,' Sylveste said. 'Perhaps another layer of defences.

But there has to be something worth protecting.'

'Does there?' asked Khouri, who had kept her vicious-looking plasma-rifle pointing at him since

this meeting had convened. 'Aren't you guilty of a few unwarranted assumptions? You keep talking

as if there's something valuable in there we aren't meant to get our greasy fingers all over, and that's

all that the camouflage is there for; to keep us monkeys out. But what if it's not like that at all?

What if there's something bad in there?'

Pascale said, 'She could be right.'

Sylveste contemplated the gun.

'You shouldn't patronise yourself into imagining there's any possibility I haven't already

considered,' he said, scarcely caring whether it was Khouri or his wife who thought they were being

addressed.

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Khouri said.

Ninety minutes after the first spy had unwound its cable and dropped from the opening into the sub-

crustal chamber, Sylveste had his first view of what awaited him. At first, he had no idea what it

was he was seeing. The giant snakelike forms -- damaged and, for all he knew, dead -- towered over

the drones like the limbs of fallen gods, tangled and haphazard. There was no guessing at the

multitude of functions which these vast machines served, although the welfare of the overlying

crust seemed likely to be paramount, and it was probably within them that the molecular weapons

were first stirred to activity, before being released to attack newcomers. The crust itself was a

machine of sorts, of course, but it was a machine constrained by the limitation of resembling a

planet. The snakes had no such constraints.

It was less dark than he had been expecting, even though no light was straying through the wound

now, which was plugged tight by the intruding weapon. Instead, the snakes themselves seemed to

radiate a silvery glow, like the entrails of some phosphorescent deep-sea creature, radiant with

bioluminous bacteria. It was impossible to guess at the function of this light; if there even was one.

Perhaps it was an unavoidable byproduct of Amarantin nanotechnics. One could see for tens of

kilometres, in any case -- to the point where the ceiling of the overlying crust curved down to meet

the horizon of the floor on which the snakes were coiled. Things with the gnarled, rooty shape of

tree trunks supported the roof at irregular intervals. It was like gazing into the moonlit depths of an

arboreal forest; unable to glimpse the sky and barely able to glimpse the ground, so thick was the

undergrowth. The roots of the trunks tangled and retangled with each other, until they formed a

matrix of interlocked roots; graphite-coloured. That was the floor.

'I wonder what we'll find below,' Sylveste said.

Volyova considered infanticide. There was no escaping it: by denying the bridgehead the

information it needed to keep evolving counteragents to the machinery being deployed by Cerberus,

she was consigning it to a slow death. Without the necessary updates from the ship, the molecular

weapon templates in the bridgehead's core could not be revised. They would remain frozen; capable

only of generating spore which were more than two centuries out of date, incapable of parrying the

relentless moronic march of progress exhibited by the alien defences. Her wonderful and brutal

creation would be digested down to its last usable atom; spread thinly throughout the crustal matrix,

where its remains would serve another function entirely, for uncountable millions of years.

Yet it had to be done.

Khouri was right: sabotaging the bridgehead was the only line of influence now remaining. They

could not even destroy the weapon, since the cache was under Sun Stealer's jurisdiction. He would

prevent any attempt at that. So what remained was to kill the weapon by slow starvation of

knowledge.

Crueller by far.

Although none of the others could see it, her bracelet display was pulsing with the bridgehead's

repeated requests for additional data. The weapon had noticed the omission an hour ago, when the

scheduled update hadn't arrived. The first query had been merely technical; a check to see that the

communication beam was still online. Later, the weapon had become more urgent; adopting tones

of polite insistence. Now it was getting far less diplomatic, throwing the machine equivalent of a

tantrum.

It was not yet harmed, since the Cerberus systems had not exceeded its own retaliatory

capabilities, but it was getting very agitated, even informing her of how many minutes it had left

based on current escalation rates. There were not many. In rather less than two hours Cerberus

would match it, and thereafter its fate would simply be a question of the sizes of the opposed forces.

Cerberus would win, with absolute mathematical certainty.

Die quickly, Volyova thought.

But even as the plea ran through her mind, something impossible happened.

What little composure Volyova possessed dropped suddenly from her face.

'What's wrong?' said Khouri. 'You look like you've seen----'

'I have,' she said. 'A ghost, I mean. He's called Sun Stealer.'

'What's happened?' Sylveste asked.

She looked up from the bracelet, jaw slack. 'He's just reinstated the transmissions to the

bridgehead.' Her gaze snapped back to her bracelet, as if hoping that whatever she had just seen

there had been a mirage. But it was obvious from her expression that whatever inauspicious portent

she had read was still there to be divined.

'What was it that had to be reinstated in the first place?' Sylveste asked. 'I'd rather you told me.'

Khoury tightened her grip on the warm leather-cladding of the plasma-rifle. She had been

uncomfortable with the situation before, but now she was riding a knife-edge of constant terror.

'The weapon lacks the protocols for recognising its own obsolescence,' she said, and then seemed

to shiver, as if shaking off possession. 'No... what I mean is... there are things the weapon can't be

allowed to know; except when it needs to know them----' She paused, glancing anxiously around at

her crewmates, unsure that she was making any sense. 'It can't be allowed to know how to evolve its

own defences before the moment when that evolution has to be expedited; the timing of the

upgrades is crucial----'

'You were trying to starve it,' Sylveste said. Hegazi, next to him, said nothing, but acknowledged

his remark with a barely perceptible nod, like a despot casting judgement.

'No, I...'

'Don't apologise,' he said, with great insistence. 'If I wanted what you want -- to sabotage this

whole operation -- I'm sure I'd have done something similar. Your timing was impeccable, as well --

you waited until you'd had the satisfaction of seeing it work; the satisfaction of knowing that your

toy functioned.'

'You prick,' Khouri said, spitting in the process. 'You narrowminded, egotistical prick.'

'Congratulations,' Sylveste said. 'Now you can progress to words with six syllables. But in the

meantime would you mind pointing that unpleasant piece of hardware somewhere other than my

face?'

'With pleasure,' she said, not allowing the rifle to waver. 'I've got just the anatomical region in

mind.'

Hegazi turned to the other member of the Triumvirate present. 'Would you mind explaining

what's going on?'

'Sun Stealer must have control of the ship's communications systems,' Volyova said. 'That's the

only possibility; the only way my command to stop the transmissions could have been rescinded.'

But even as she was speaking she was shaking her head.

'Which isn't possible. We know he's confined to the gunnery, and there's no physical link between

the gunnery and comms.'

'There must be now,' Khouri said.

'But if there is...' The whites of her eyes were showing now; bright crescents against the gloom of

the bridge. 'There are no logical barriers between comms and the rest of the ship. If Sun Stealer

really has got that far, there isn't anything he can't touch.'

It was a long time before anyone spoke; as if everyone -- even Sylveste -- needed time to adjust

to the gravity of the situation. Khouri tried to read him, but there was no way to tell how much of

this he accepted, even now. She still suspected that he viewed everything as a paranoid fantasy that

she had woven from her own subconscious; one that had somehow infected both Volyova and,

latterly, Pascale.

Perhaps a part of him was still refusing to believe, despite all the evidence.

What evidence, though? Apart from the reinstated signal -- and all that it implied -- there was

nothing to suggest that Sun Stealer had reached beyond the gunnery. But if he had...

'You,' Volyova said, breaking the silence. She was pointing her gun at Hegazi. 'You, *svinoi*. You

had to have a part in this, didn't you? Sajaki's out of the frame, and Sylveste doesn't have the

expertise -- so it had to be you.'

'I'm not sure what you're talking about.'

'Helping Sun Stealer. You did it, didn't you?'

'Get a grip, Triumvir.'

Khouri wondered in which direction she should be pointing the plasma-rifle. Sylveste looked as

shaken as Hegazi; as surprised at Volyova's sudden line of enquiry.

'Listen,' Khouri said. 'Just because he's had his tongue up Sajaki's arse ever since I came aboard,

it doesn't mean he'd do anything that stupid.'

'Thanks,' Hegazi said. 'I think.'

'You're not off the hook,' Volyova said. 'Not by a long mark. Khouri's right; doing what you did

would have been an act of gross stupidity. But that hardly disqualifies you from having done it. You

had enough expertise to do it. And you're chimeric as well -- maybe Sun Stealer's in you too. In

which case I'm afraid it's just too dangerous to have you around.'

She nodded at Khouri. 'Khouri; take him down to one of the airlocks.'

'You're going to kill me,' Hegazi said, as she prodded him along the flooded corridor with the barrel

of the plasma-rifle, watching janitor-rats scatter ahead of them. 'That's what you're going to do, isn't

it? You're going to space me.'

'She just wants you somewhere where you can't do any harm,' Khouri said, not especially in the

mood for a protracted conversation with her prisoner.

'Whatever it was she thinks, I didn't do it. Sorry to admit it, but I haven't got the expertise. Does

that satisfy you?'

Now he was annoying her, but she sensed that he would only shut up if she talked back to him.

'I'm not sure you did do it,' she said. 'After all, you'd have had to make the arrangements before

you had any idea that Volyova was going to sabotage her weapon. You can't have done it since;

you've been on the bridge the whole time.'

They had reached the nearest airlock. It was a small unit, just large enough to take a suited

human. Like virtually everything else in this part of the ship, the controls on the door were caked in

grime and corrosion and odd fungal growth. Yet it still functioned, miraculously.

'So why are you doing this?' Hegazi asked, as the door hummed open and she poked him into the

cramped, sullenly lit interior. 'If you don't think I was capable of doing it?'

'It's because I don't like you,' she said, and closed the door on him.

THIRTY

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

When they were at last alone in their quarters, Pascale said, 'You can't go through with this, Dan.

Do you understand what I'm saying?'

He was tired; they all were, but with his mind racing, the last thing he felt like now was sleep.

Still, if the bridgehead survived long enough for his entry into Cerberus to proceed as planned, now

might be the last opportunity he had for proper sleep for tens of hours; perhaps even days. He would

need to be functioning as keenly as he ever had in his life when he descended beneath the alien

world. Yet now, obviously, Pascale was going to do her best to talk him out of it.

'It's far too late now,' he said, wearily. 'We've already announced ourselves; done harm to

Cerberus. The world knows of our presence; already knows something of our nature. My entering it

won't make much difference now, except that I'll learn much more than Volyova's clunking spy

robots will ever tell me.'

'You can't know what's waiting for you down there, Dan.'

'Yes, I can. An answer to what happened to the Amarantin. Can't you see that humanity needs to

have that information?'

He could see that she did, if only on some theoretical level. But she said, 'What if it was the same

kind of curiosity you're showing now that brought extinction upon them? You saw what happened

to the *Lorean*.'

Once again he thought of Alicia, dying in that attack. What exactly was it that had made him so

unwilling to spare the time that would have been needed to recover her body from the wreck? Even

now, the way he had ordered that she go down with the bridgehead struck him as chillingly

impersonal, as if -- for a fleeting instant -- it had not been him giving that order; not even Calvin,

but something hiding behind both of them. The thought made him flinch, so he crushed it beneath

conscious concern, the way one crushed an insect.

'Then we'll know, won't we?' he said. 'Finally, we'll know. And even if it kills us, someone else

will know what happened -- someone on Resurgam, or even in another system. You have to

understand, Pascale, that I think it's worth that kind of risk.'

'There's more to it than just curiosity, isn't there?' She looked at him,

obviously expecting some

kind of answer. He just looked back at her, knowing how intimidating the lack of focus of his gaze

could be, until she continued speaking. 'Khouri was put aboard to kill you. She even admitted as

much. Volyova said she was sent here by someone who might have been Carine Lefevre.'

'That's not only impossible, it's insulting.'

'But it still might be the truth. And there might be more to it than just a personal vendetta, too.

Maybe Lefevre did die, after all, but something assumed her shape, inherited her body, or whatever

-- something that knows the danger you're playing with. Can't you at least accept that as a remote

possibility?'

'Nothing that happened around Lascaille's Shroud can have any bearing on what happened to the

Amarantin.'

'How can you be so damned sure?'

Angry now, he said, 'Because I was there! Because I went where Lascaille went, into Revelation

Space, and what they'd shown Lascaille, they showed to me.' He tried to calm his voice, taking both

of Pascale's hands in his own. 'They were ancient; so alien they made me shiver. They touched my

mind. I saw them... and they were nothing like the Amarantin.'

For the first time since leaving Resurgam, he thought back to that instant of screaming

comprehension, as his damaged contact module had skirted the Shroud. Old as fossils, the

Shrouders' minds had crawled into his; a moment of abyssal knowing. What Lascaille had said was

true. They might have been alien in their biology, inspiring a kind of visceral revulsion simply

because they were so far from what the human mind considered the right and proper form for

sentience, but in the dynamics of their thought, they were a lot closer to people than their shapes

would ever have implied. For a moment, the strangeness of that dichotomy troubled him... but it

could not have been otherwise, for how else could the Pattern Jugglers have wired his mind to think

like a Shrouder, if the basic modes of thought were not similar? Then he remembered the festering

queasiness of their communion -- and a spillage of memory crashing over him, a glimpse of the

vastness of Shrouder history. Across millions of years, they had scoured a younger galaxy than the

present one, hunting down and collecting the discarded and dangerous playthings of other, even

older, civilisations. Now those fabulous things were almost within reach;

behind the membrane of

the Shroud... and he had almost tricked his way inside. And then something else...

Something parting, momentarily, like a curtain, or a gap in clouds -- something so fleeting, he

had almost forgotten it until the present moment. Something revealed to him that should have

remained hidden -- hidden behind layers of identity. The identity and memories of a long-dead

race... worn as camouflage...

And something else entirely within the Shroud; and another reason entirely for its existence...

But the recollection itself seemed elusive, seemed to slip out of mental reach, until he was left

again with Pascale, and only the aftertaste of doubt.

'Promise me you won't go,' she said.

'We'll talk about it in the morning,' Sylveste said.

He woke in his quarters, the little sleep he had snatched insufficient to purge fatigue from his blood.

Something had stirred him awake, but for a moment he could not see or hear any disturbance.

Then Sylveste noticed that the bedside holo screen was glowing palely, like a mirror turned to

moonlight.

He moved to activate the link, taking care not to wake Pascale. Not that there seemed any danger

of that; she was sleeping soundly. The discussion they had shared before sleeping seemed to have

given her the mental calm she needed for that.

Sajaki's face appeared on the holo, backdropped by the apparatus of the clinic. 'Are you alone?'

he asked, softly.

'My wife is here,' Sylveste said, whispering. 'She's sleeping.'

'Then I'll be brief.' He held up his damaged hand for inspection, revealing how the glistening caul

had now filled out, returning his wrist to its normal profile, although the caul still glowed with

subcutaneous industry. 'I am well enough to leave here. But I have no intention of duplicating

Hegazi's current predicament.'

'Then you've got a problem. Volyova and Khouri have all the weapons, and they've made sure we

won't get our hands on any more.' He lowered his voice even further. 'I don't think it would take

much to persuade her to lock me up as well. My threats against the ship don't seem to have

impressed her.'

'She's assuming you'd never go that far.'

'What if she's right?'

Sajaki shook his head.

'None of this matters any more. In a matter of days -- five at the most -- her weapon will begin to

fail. You have that window in which to get inside. And don't pretend that her little robots will teach

you anything.'

'I know that much already.'

Next to him Pascale stirred.

'Then accept this proposition,' Sajaki said. 'I will lead you inside. The two of us; no one else. We

can take two suits, of the same type that brought you here from Resurgam. We don't even need a

ship. We'll reach Cerberus in less than a day. That gives you two days to get in, a day to look

around and then a day to leave the way you came in. By which time of course you will know the

route.'

'What about you?'

'I accompany you. I told you already how I believe we should proceed with the Captain.'

Sylveste nodded. 'You think you'll find something inside Cerberus; something that can heal him.'

'I have to start somewhere.'

Sylveste looked around. Sajaki's voice had been like the wind stirring trees, and the room seemed

preternaturally still; more like a tableau glimpsed through a magic lantern than anything real. He

thought of the fury taking place on Cerberus at that very moment; the fury of clashing machines,

even if they were, for the most part, smaller than bacteria; and the din of their conflict inaudible to

any human senses. But it was happening and Sajaki was right: they had only days before the

numberless machines owing allegiance to Cerberus would begin to erode Volyova's mighty siege

engine. Every second he delayed entering that place was a second less he would have to spend

inside it, and a second which would make his eventual return take place that much closer to the end;

that much more hazardous, since by then the bridge would be closing. Pascale stirred again, but he

sensed that she was still deep in dream. She seemed no more present than the interlocked birds

which mosaicked the room's walls; no more capable of being quickened to wakefulness.

'It's all very sudden,' he said.

'But you've waited for this moment all your life,' Sajaki said, his voice rising. 'Don't tell me

you're not ready to seize it. Don't tell me you're scared of what you might

find.'

Sylveste knew he had to make a decision before the true alienness of the moment had registered.

'Where do I meet you?'

'We'll meet outside the ship,' Sajaki said, and then explained why it had to be that way; why it

was too risky for them to meet, because then Sajaki would run the risk of meeting Volyova or

Khouri, or even Sylveste's wife. 'They still think I'm ill,' Sajaki added, rubbing the membrane casing

his wounded wrist. 'But if they find me outside the clinic, they'll do to me what they did to Hegazi.

But from here, I can reach a suit in a few minutes, without entering any areas of the ship still

capable of registering my presence.'

'And me?'

'Go to the nearest elevator. I'll arrange for it to take you to a suit nearer to you. You don't have to

do anything. The suit will take care of everything.'

'Sajaki, I...'

'Just be outside in ten minutes. Your suit will bring you to me.' Sajaki smiled before signing off.

'And I strongly advise that you don't wake your wife.'

Sajaki was true to his word: the elevator and the suit both seemed to know

exactly where it was that

Sylveste had to go. He met no one during his journey, and no one troubled him as the suit measured

him, adjusted itself and then folded affectionately around him.

There was no indication that the ship even noticed as the airlock opened; still less as he reached

space.

Volyova was startled awake, interrupted from monochromatic dreams of raging insect armies.

Khouri was banging on her door, shouting something, though Volyova was too bleary to make it

out. When she opened the door she was looking down the barrel of the leatherclad plasma-rifle.

Khouri hesitated for a fraction of a second before lowering it, as if unsure just what she had been

expecting beyond the door.

'What is it?' Volyova asked.

'It's Pascale,' Khouri said, sweat beading her forehead, shining in slick patches around the gun's

grips. 'She woke up and Sylveste wasn't there.'

'Wasn't there?'

'He'd left this. She's pretty cut up about it, but she wanted me to show it to you.' Khouri let the

gun drop in its sling and fished out a sheet of paper from her pocket.

Volyova rubbed her eyes and took the paper. Tactile contact activated its stored message;

Sylveste's face appeared on it, sketched darkly against a background of interlocking birds.

'I'm afraid I've lied to you,' he said, his voice buzzing from the paper. 'Pascale, I'm sorry -- you're

entitled to hate me for this, but I hope you won't; not after what we went through.' His voice was

very low now. 'You asked me to promise I wouldn't go into Cerberus. But I'm going, and by the

time you read this I'll be well on my way, far too late to stop. There's no justification I can give for

this, except it's something I have to do, and I think it's something you've always known I would do,

if we ever got this close.' He paused, either to draw breath or think what he would say next.

'Pascale, you were the only one who guessed what really happened around Lascaille's Shroud. I

admired you for that, you know. That was why I wasn't afraid to admit the truth to you. I swear,

what I told you was the way I thought it happened; not just another lie. But now this woman --

Khouri -- says that she has been sent by someone who might have been Carine Lefevre, and that

she's been sent to kill me because of what I might do.'

Again the paper was silent for a moment.

'I acted as if I didn't believe a word of it, Pascale, and maybe that was how I thought at the time.

But I have to put those ghosts to rest; finally convince myself that none of this has any connection

to what happened back around the Shroud.

'You understand that, don't you? I have to go this extra mile, just so I can silence these phantoms.

Perhaps I owe Khouri thanks for that. She's given me a reason to take this step, when my fear of

what I'll find is the greatest I've known. I don't believe she -- or any of them -
- are bad people. And

not you, either, Pascale. I know you were persuaded by what they said, but that wasn't your fault.

You tried to talk me out of it because you love me. And what I was doing --
what I was going to do

-- hurt me more, because I knew I was betraying that love.

'Does that make any sense to you? And will you be able to forgive me when I get back? It won't

be long, Pascale -- no more than five days; maybe a lot less.' He paused again, before adding a final

postscript: 'I took Calvin with me. He's in me now, as I speak. I'd be lying if we said that the two of

us haven't come to a new... equilibrium. I think he'll prove of value to me.'

And then the image on the paper faded.

'You know,' Khouri said, 'there have been moments when he almost had my

sympathy. But I

think he's just blown it.'

'You said Pascale had taken it badly.'

'Wouldn't you?'

'It depends. Maybe he was right: maybe she always knew it would come to this. Maybe she

should have thought twice before marrying the *svinoi*.'

'You think he's got far?'

Volyova looked at the paper again, as if hoping to siphon fresh wisdom from its wrinkles.

'He must have had assistance. There aren't many of us left who could have helped him. No one,

really, if you discount Sajaki.'

'Maybe we shouldn't have discounted him. Perhaps his medicines healed him faster than we

expected.'

'No,' Volyova said. She tapped her magic bracelet. 'I know where the Triumvirate is at any

moment. Hegazi's still in the airlock; Sajaki's in the clinic.'

'You mind if we check on them, just in case?'

Volyova grabbed another layer of clothing, warm enough that she could enter any of the

pressurised parts of the ship without catching hypothermia. She slipped the

needler into her belt,

then slung over one shoulder the heavy ordnance Khouri had obtained from the warchive. It was a

dual-gripped hypervelocity sports slug-gun from the twenty-third century; a product of the first

European Demarchy, clad in curving black neoprene, ruby-eyed Chinese dragons in beaten gold and

silver worked into the sides.

'Not in the slightest,' she said.

They reached the airlock where Hegazi had been waiting all this time, with nothing to amuse

himself but the contemplation of his reflection in the chamber's burnished steel walls. That at least

was how Volyova imagined it, in the rare moments when she bothered to give the imprisoned

Triumvir any thought at all. She did not really hate Hegazi, or even particularly dislike him. He was

too weak for that; too obviously a creature incapable of dwelling anywhere except in Sajaki's

shadow.

'Did he give you any trouble?' Volyova asked.

'Not really, except that he kept protesting his innocence; saying it wasn't him who had released

Sun Stealer from the gunnery. Sounded like he meant it as well.'

'It's an ancient technique known as lying, Khouri.'

Volyova shrugged back the Chinese-dragon gun and landed her fists on the handle which would

open the airlock inner door. Her feet were already planted apart in the sludge.

She struggled.

'I can't open it.'

'Let me try.' Khouri pushed her gently aside and tried to work the handle.

'No,' she said, after

grunting and then relenting. 'It's jammed tight. I can't move it.'

'You didn't weld it shut or anything like that?'

'Yes, stupid me, I forgot.'

Volyova knuckled the door. 'Hegazi, you hear me? What have you done to the door? It won't

open.'

There was no answer.

'He's in there,' Volyova said, consulting her bracelet again. 'But maybe he can't hear us through

the armour.'

'I don't like this,' Khouri said. 'There was nothing wrong with that door when I left it. I think we

should shoot the lock.' Without waiting for Volyova's agreement, she said, 'Hegazi? If you can hear

this, we're shooting our way in.'

In a flash she had the plasma-rifle in one hand, its weight drawing the muscles taut in her

forearm. She was shielding her face with the other hand, looking away.

'Wait,' Volyova said. 'We're being too hasty. What if the outer door is open? The vacuum would

trip the pressure-sensors and lock the inner door.'

'If that's the case, Hegazi isn't going to be causing us any more problems. Not unless he can hold

his breath for a few hours.'

'Granted -- but we still don't want to put a hole in that door.'

Khoury moved closer.

If there was a panel showing the pressure status beyond the door, it was well-concealed behind

the grime.

'I can set the beam to its narrowest collimation. Put a needle-hole in the door.'

'Do it,' Volyova said, after a moment's hesitation.

'Change of plan, Hegazi. Gonna put a hole in the top of the door. If you're standing up, now

would be a good time to sit down, maybe think about putting your affairs in order.'

There was still no answer.

It was almost an insult to the plasma-rifle to ask it to do this, Volyova thought -- too precise and

dainty an operation by far, like using an industrial laser to cut a wedding cake. But Khouri did it

anyway. There was a flash and a crack, as the gun spat a tiny elongated seed of ball-lightning into

the door. For a moment smoke coiled from the woodworm-sized hole which she had cut.

But only for a second.

Then something spurted from the door, in a dark hissing arc.

She wasted no time putting a bigger hole in the door. By then, neither Khouri nor Volyova

considered it very likely that there was going to be anyone living behind the airlock. Either Hegazi

was dead -- and there was no guessing how -- or Hegazi had already left the lock, and this jetting

stream of high-pressure fluid was his perplexing idea of a message to his former captors.

Khouri shot through, and the stream became an arm-thick eruption of the brackish fluid, ramming

out with such explosive force that she was thrown backwards into the ship-sludge underfoot,

plasma-rifle clattering into the same pool of ankle-deep effluent. The stuff hissed fiercely as it

touched the gun's hot maw. By the time she had struggled to her feet, however, the flow had

dwindled to a dribble, slurping in noisy eruptions through the punctured door. She picked up the

gun and shook the muck off it, wondering if it would work again.

'It's ship-slime,' Volyova said. 'The same stuff we're standing in. I'd recognise that stench

anywhere.'

'The lock was full of ship-slime?'

'Don't ask me how. Just open a bigger hole in the door.'

Khouri did so, until she could squeeze her arm through and work the lock's interior controls

without brushing against the plasma-heated edges of the cut metal. Volyova was right, she thought,

it had been the pressure switches which had tripped the locking mechanism. The chamber must

have been pumped to bursting with ship-slime.

The door opened, allowing a final slick of slime to ooze into the corridor.

Along with what remained of Hegazi. It was unclear whether this stemmed from the pressure he

had been subjected to, or its explosive release, but his metal and flesh components seemed to have

arrived at a less than amicable separation.

THIRTY-ONE

Cerberus/Hades, Delta Pavonis Heliopause, 2566

'I think this calls for a cigarette,' Volyova said, and for a moment she had to remember where she

had last stowed the smokes. When she found them, in a little-visited pocket of her flying jacket, she

did not rush either to open the pack or fish out one of the crumpled, yellowing tubes which resided

within. She took her time, and when at last she was ready, she took an unhurried inhalation and

allowed her nerves to settle, like a blizzard of feathers slowly returning to the ground.

'The ship killed him,' she said, staring down at the remnants of Hegazi, but doing her best not to

think too hard about what she was looking at. 'That's the only thing that makes sense.'

'Killed him?' Khouri asked, still directing the barrel of her plasma-rifle at the elements of the

Triumvir which floated in suspension in the slick of ship-slime around their feet, as if nervous that

his disassociated remains might be on the verge of spontaneously reassembling. 'You mean this

wasn't an accident?'

'No, it wasn't an accident. I know he was in league with Sajaki, and therefore Sylveste. Yet Sun

Stealer still killed him. Makes you think, doesn't it?'

'Yeah, I guess it does.'

Perhaps Khouri had already worked it out for herself, but Volyova decided to spell it out anyway.

'Sylveste is gone. He's on his way to Cerberus, and because I didn't manage to sabotage the weapon,

there'll be very little to stop him getting inside. Do you understand? It means Sun Stealer has won.

Nothing remains for him to achieve. The rest is only a question of time, and of maintaining the

status quo. And what threatens that?'

'We do,' Khouri said, hesitantly, like a clever pupil who wanted to impress teacher but not draw

the derision of her classmates.

'More than that. Not just you and I; not even when we include Pascale. Hegazi was also a threat,

as far as Sun Stealer was concerned. And for no other reason than that he was human.' She was

guessing, of course, but it seemed to make complete sense to her. 'To something like Sun Stealer,

human loyalty is fluid and chaotic -- maybe not even properly comprehensible. He'd turned Hegazi

-- or at the very least those to whom Hegazi was already loyal. But did he understand the dynamics

which governed that loyalty? I doubt it. Hegazi was a component which had served its usefulness,

and which might malfunction at some point in the future.' She felt the icy calm which came from

contemplating her own oblivion, knowing that there were few times when she had ever been so

close to it. 'So he had to die. And now that his objective is almost achieved, I think Sun Stealer will

want to do the same to all of us.'

'If he wanted to kill us...'

'He'd already have done so? He may well have already tried, Khouri. Whole parts of the ship are

no longer under any central control, which means that Sun Stealer is limited in what he can do. He's

taken possession of a body already half-paralysed; already half-leprous and half afflicted with the

palsy.'

'Very poetic, but what does it mean to us, then?'

Volyova lit another cigarette; she had thoroughly seen off the first of them. 'It means he will try

and kill us, but that his options are difficult to predict. He can't simply depressurise the whole ship,

since there are no command channels which allow for that -- even I couldn't do it, other than by

physically opening all the locks, and to do that I'd have to disable thousands of electromechanical

safeties. He would probably find it difficult to flood an area larger than the airlock. But he will think

of something; I'm sure of it.'

Suddenly, and it was almost without thinking, she had the slug-gun in her hands and she was

pointing it down the dark lengths of the flooded corridor which led to the lock.

'What is it?'

'Nothing,' Volyova said. 'I'm just scared. Remarkably so. I don't suppose you have any

suggestions, Khouri?'

She did, as a matter of fact.

'We'd better find Pascale. She doesn't know her way around as well as we do. And if it gets

nasty...'

Volyova stubbed out what was left of her cigarette, mashing it against the barrel of the slug-gun.

'You're right; we should stay together. And we will. Just as soon as...'

Something emerged noisily from the gloom and halted ten metres from them.

Volyova had the gun on it immediately, but she did not fire; some instinct was telling her that the

thing had not come to kill them, or at least not yet. It was one of the tracked servitors which she had

seen Sylveste using in the aborted operation to heal the Captain; one of the units lacking any great

internal sophistication. One of those, in short, which was primarily controlled by the ship, rather

than its own brain.

Its chunkily mounted sensor eyes locked onto them.

'It's not armed,' Volyova breathed, realising as she did so that whispering was useless. 'I think it's

just been sent to scout us out. This is one of the parts of the ship which the ship can't see into; one

of its blind spots.'

The servitor's sensors made little swivelling motions from side to side, as if triangulating their

exact positions. Then it began to reverse back into the gloom.

Khoury shot it.

'Why did you do that?' Volyova asked, when the concussive echoes of the blast had died down

and she no longer had to squint against the glare of the machine's demise. 'Whatever it saw was

already transmitted back to the ship. Shooting it was pointless.'

'I didn't like the way it was looking at me,' Khoury said. Then she frowned. 'And besides -- it's

one less we have to worry to about.'

'Yes,' Volyova said. 'And given the speed at which the ship can manufacture a drone that simple,

it may be ten or twenty seconds before it's replaced.'

Khoury looked at her as if she'd just said a joke with an impenetrable punchline. But Volyova was

serious. What she had just noticed had chilled her far more deeply than the appearance of the

servitor. It was, after all, logical that the ship would soon resort to the drones for its sense-gathering

operations; logical too that it would explore ways to outfit the machines for the murder of the

remaining human crew and passengers. It was something she would have predicted herself, sooner

or later. But not this. Not what had just poked itself above the ooze of the ship-slime; for the instant

it took its black rodent eyes to spot her, before turning tail and swimming into the darkness.

Ship controlled the janitor-rats, she remembered.

*

When consciousness returned -- and for a moment Sylveste did not remember precisely when it had

left -- he was surrounded by an audience of blurred stars. They were doing a very complex dance,

and if he had not already felt nauseous, he felt sure that sight alone would have been sickening.

What was he doing here? And why did he feel so strange; so much as if cotton-wool had been

pressed into every cell in his body? Because he was in a suit, that was why. One of the special suits

which the crew owned; of the sort which had carried him and Pascale up from the surface of

Resurgam. The suit had forced his lungs to accept the fluid it filled itself with instead of air.

'What's happening?' he subvocalised, in the way he knew that the suit would be able to read, via

the simple speech-centre trawl built into its helmet.

'I'm reversing,' the suit informed him. Midpoint thrust inversion.'

'Where the hell are we?' Picking through his memories was still arduous, like finding the end of a

tangled rope. He had no idea where to begin.

'More than a million kilometres from the ship; somewhat less than that distance from Cerberus.'

'We've come all that way so----' He stopped. 'No, wait. I've no idea how long it's been.'

'We departed seventy-four minutes ago.' Hardly more than an hour, Sylveste thought. Yet if the

suit had told him it had been a day he would have accepted it unquestioningly. 'Our average

acceleration was ten gees. I was instructed to make all haste by Triumvir Sajaki.'

Yes, now he remembered more. Sajaki's midnight call, and the hurried rush to the suits. He

remembered leaving a message for Pascale, though not the details. That had been his only

concession; the one luxury he permitted himself. Yet even if there had been days to prepare for the

entry, there would have been very little that he could have changed. He had no requirements for

extra documentation or recording apparatus, since he had access to the suit's libraries and integral

sensors. The suits were armed, he knew, and capable of defending themselves autonomously,

against much the same modes of attack which Volyova's weapon was now experiencing. They were

also able to extrude scientific analysis tools, or create compartments in themselves for the storing of

samples. Quite apart from that, they were as independent as any spacecraft. He realised with a snap

that he was thinking wrongly; the suits *were* actually spacecraft; just very flexible spacecraft with

room inside for only one occupant; spacecraft which became their own atmospheric shuttles, and --

if needed -- their own surface rovers. Rationally, there was no other way he would rather be

entering Cerberus.

'I'm glad I slept through that acceleration,' Sylveste said.

'You had no choice,' the suit said, evincing a complete lack of interest. 'Consciousness was

suppressed. Now please ready yourself for the deceleration phase. When you resume wakefulness,

we will have arrived in the vicinity of our destination.'

Sylveste began to frame a question in his head; intending to ask the suit why Sajaki had not yet

shown himself, despite his assurance that he would accompany Sylveste. Yet, before he had even

begun to concretise his thoughts into the unspoken state which the trawl could read, the suit made

him sleep again, as dreamlessly as before.

While Khouri went to find Pascale Sylveste, Volyova made her way back up to the bridge. Now she

dared not take the elevators, but thankfully there were fewer than twenty levels to climb; an

exertion, but bearable. It was also relatively safe: the ship could not send drones into the stairwells,

she knew; not even the floating machines which rode through the normal corridors on

superconducting magnetic fields. All the same, she kept the slug-gun at readiness, sweeping it

ahead of her as she endlessly rounded the ascending spiral, occasionally stopping and holding her

breath, listening for the sounds of things following her, or lurking some distance ahead.

On the way up, she tried to think of the myriad ways in which the ship could kill her. It was an

interesting intellectual challenge; testing her knowledge of the vessel in a way she had not

previously considered. It made her look at things in a new light. Once -- not so very long ago -- she

had been in much the same position as the ship was now. She had wanted to

kill Nagorny, or at the

very least prevent him from becoming a threat to her, which practically amounted to the same thing.

In the end she had killed him because he first tried to kill her -- but it was the manner of his

execution that preyed on her mind now. She had killed Nagorny by accelerating and decelerating

the ship so fiercely that he had been pulped alive. Sooner or later -- and she could think of no

pressing reason why it should not be the case -- the ship would surely think of that for itself. When

that happened, it would be a very good idea not to be in the ship any more.

She reached the bridge unhindered, although that did not stop her checking every shadow for a

lurking machine, or -- worse, now -- rat. She did not know what the rats could do to her, but she

was less than minded to find out.

The bridge was empty, much as when she had left it. The damage Khouri had wrought on it was

still there; even the staining of Sajaki's blood on the floor of the vast spherical meeting place. The

holodisplay was still aglow, looming over her with its constantly updating progress report on the

establishment of the Cerberus bridgehead. For a moment she could not help but take a proprietorial

interest in her creation, which was still gamely holding its own against the antibiotic forces

deployed by the alien world. Yet even as she experienced a flush of pride, she willed it to fail, so

that Sylveste would be denied entry. Assuming that he had not already arrived.

'What have you come for?' asked a voice.

She whipped around, and there was a figure, looking down at her from one of the curved levels of

the bridge. It was no one she recognised; just a darkly cloaked male with clasped hands and a

sunken skull of a face. She blasted it, but the figure remained, even after the slug-gun's discharges

had ripped through it, ion trails lingering in the air like banners.

Another figure, differently dressed, had appeared next to it. 'Your tenancy here has expired,' it

said, in the oldest variant of Norte, Volyova's processing of it so tardy that she did not immediately

understand his words.

'You must understand, Triumvir, that this domain is no longer yours,' said another, shivering to

life on the chamber's opposite side, clad in the body section of a fantastically ancient spacesuit,

ribbed with cooling lines and boxy attachments. The language he spoke was the oldest strain of

Russish she could parse.

'What do you hope to achieve here?' asked the first figure, even as another appeared next to it,

and began talking to her, and another; figures from the past hectoring her from all sides. 'This is

outrageous...' But the voice blurred into that of another ghost, speaking to her from her right.

'... lack a mandate here, Triumvir. I have to tell you...'

'... gravely exceeded your authority and must now submit to...'

'... bitterly disappointed, Ilia, and must politely request that you...'

'... rescind... privileges...'

'... completely unacceptable...'

She screamed as the welter of voices became a constant wordless roar, the congregation of the

dead filling the chamber totally, until all she could see in any direction was a mass of ancient faces,

their mouths moving as if each one were the only one speaking; as if each imagined that he had her

absolute attention. It was as if they were praying to her; as if they thought she was omniscient.

Praying, but at the same time complaining; carpingly at first, as if disappointed, but -- with every

second -- with more hate and scorn, as if she had not only let them down in the bitterest way

possible, but that she had also committed some atrocity so dire it was unspeakable even now, but

could only be acknowledged in the curved revulsion of their lips and the naked shame in their eyes.

She hefted the gun. The temptation to empty a slug-clip into the ghosts was overwhelming. She

could not kill them, of course, but she could seriously disable their projection systems. But she

needed to conserve her ammo now that the warchive was inaccessible.

'Go away!' she shouted. 'Get away from me!'

One by one, the dead grew silent and vanished. As each departed, each shook its head

disappointedly, as if ashamed of staying in her presence a moment longer. Finally, she had the room

to herself. She was breathing in hard rasps and needed to calm down. She lit another cigarette and

smoked it slowly, trying to give her mind a few minutes' rest. She palmed the gun, glad she had not

wasted the clip, for all the transient pleasure it would have given her to destroy the bridge. Khouri

had chosen well. Emblazoned along the gun's flanks were silver and gold Chinese dragon motifs.

A voice spoke from the display.

Volyova looked up into the face of Sun Stealer.

It was as she had known it must be, after Pascale had first told her the

significance of the

creature's name. As she had known it must be, and yet also much worse. Because she was not

simply seeing how the alien looked. She was seeing how the alien looked to itself -- and there was

evidently something very wrong with Sun Stealer's mind. She thought back to Nagorny, and

understood how the man had been driven mad. She could hardly blame him, now -- not if he had

lived with this thing in his head all that time, and yet had lacked an inkling of where it came from or

what it wanted from him. No; she sympathised with the dead Gunnery Officer, the poor, poor

bastard. Perhaps she too would have sunk into psychosis when faced with this apparition, looming

behind every dream, every waking thought.

Once Sun Stealer might have been Amarantin. But he had changed, perhaps deliberately, through

the selective pressure of genetic engineering, sculpting himself and his Banished brethren into a

new species entirely. They had reshaped their anatomy for flight in zero-gravity; grown immense

wings. She could see those wings now; looming behind the curved, sleek head which seemed to

thrust down towards her.

The head was a skull. The eye sockets were not exactly vacant; not exactly hollow, but seemed

abrim with reservoirs of something infinitely black and infinitely deep, as dark and depthless as she

imagined the membrane of a Shroud. The bones of Sun Stealer shone with colourless lustre.

'Despite what I said earlier,' she said, when the initial shock of what she was seeing had passed,

or at least subdued to a point where she could tolerate it, 'I think you could have found a way to kill

me by now. If that was what you wanted.'

'You cannot guess what I want.'

When he spoke there was just a wordless absence which somehow made sense, as if carved from

silence. The creature's complex jawbones did not move at all. Speech, she remembered of the

Amarantin, had never been an important mode of communication. Their society had been based

around visual display. Something so basic would surely have been preserved, even after Sun

Stealer's flock had departed Resurgam and commenced their transformations; transformations so

radical that when they later returned to the world they would be mistaken for winged gods.

'I know what you don't want,' Volyova said. 'You don't want anything to stop Sylveste reaching

Cerberus. That's why we have to die now; in case we find a way to stop him.'

'His mission is of great importance to me,' Sun Stealer said, then seemed to reconsider. 'To us. To

us who survived.'

'Survived what?' Maybe this would be her one and only chance to come to any understanding.

'No; wait -- what else could you have survived, but the death of the Amarantin? Is that what it was?

Did you somehow find a way not to die?'

'You know by now the place where I entered Sylveste.' It was less a question, more a flat

statement. Volyova wondered to how much of their discourse Sun Stealer had been privy?

'It had to be Lascaille's Shroud,' she said. 'That was the only thing that made sense -- although not

much, I admit.'

'That was where we sought sanctuary; for nine hundred and ninety thousand years.'

The coincidence was too great not to mean something. 'Ever since life ended on Resurgam.'

'Yes.' The word trailed off into a hiss of sibilance. 'The Shrouds were of our designing; the last

desperate enterprise of our Flock, even after those who stayed behind on the surface were

incinerated.'

'I don't understand. What Lascaille said, and Sylveste himself found out...'

'They were not shown the truth. Lascaille was shown a fiction -- our identity replaced by that of a

much older culture, utterly unlike ourselves. The true purpose of the Shrouds was not revealed to

him. He was shown a lie which would encourage others to come.'

Volyova could see how that lie would have worked, now. Lascaille had been told that the

Shrouds were repositories for harmful technologies -- things humanity secretly craved, such as

methods of faster-than-light travel. When Lascaille had revealed this to Sylveste, it had only

increased Sylveste's desire to break into the Shroud. He had been able to muster the support of the

entire Demarchist society around Yellowstone towards' that goal, for the rewards would be dazzling

beyond comprehension for the first faction to unlock such alien mysteries.

'But if it was a lie,' she said, 'what was the true function of the Shrouds?'

'We built them to hide inside, Triumvir Volyova.' It seemed to be playing with her, enjoying her

confusion. 'They were places of sanctuary. Zones of restructured spacetime, within which we could

shelter.'

'Shelter from whom?'

'The ones who survived the Dawn War. The ones who were given the name of the Inhibitors.'

She nodded. There was much she did not understand, but one thing was now clear to her. What

Khouri had told her -- the fragments that the woman remembered from the strange dream she had

been vouchsafed in the gunnery -- had been something like the truth. Khouri had not remembered

everything, and the parts had not always been related to Volyova in the right order, but it was

obvious now that this was only because Khouri had been expected to grasp something too huge, too

alien -- too apocalyptic -- for her mind to comfortably hold. She had done her best, but her best had

not been good enough. But now Volyova was being accorded disclosure of parts of the same

picture, although from an oddly different perspective.

Khouri had been told about the Dawn War by the Mademoiselle, who had not wanted Sylveste to

succeed. Yet Sun Stealer desired that outcome more than anything else.

'What is it about?' she asked. 'I know what you're doing here; you're delaying me; keeping me

waiting because you know I'll do anything to hear the answers you have. And you're right, in a way.

I have to know. I have to know everything.'

Sun Stealer waited, silently, and then continued to answer all the questions she had for it.

When she was done, Volyova decided that she could profitably use one of the slugs in her clip.

She shot the display; the great glass globe shattered into a billion icy shards, Sun Stealer's face

disrupting in the same explosion.

Khoury and Pascale took the circuitous route to the clinic, avoiding elevators and the kind of well-

repaired corridors through which drones could easily travel. They kept their guns drawn at all times,

and preferred to blast anything that looked even vaguely suspicious, even if it later turned out to be

nothing more than a chance alignment of shadows or a disturbingly shaped accretion of corrosion

on a wall or bulkhead.

'Did he give you any kind of warning he was going to leave so soon?' Khoury asked.

'No; not this soon. I mean, I thought he would try it at some point, but I tried talking him out of

it.'

'How do you feel about him?'

'What do you expect me to say? He was my husband. We were in love.'
Pascale seemed to

collapse then; Khoury reached out to catch her. The woman wiped tears from

her eyes, rubbing them

red. 'I hate him for what he's done -- you would as well. I don't understand him, either. But I still

love him despite it. I keep thinking... maybe he's dead already. It's possible, isn't it? And even if he

isn't, there's no guarantee I'll ever see him again.'

'It can't be a very safe place he's going to,' Khouri said, and then wondered if Cerberus was any

more dangerous than the ship, now.

'No, I know. I don't think even he realises how much danger he's in -- or the rest of us.'

'Still, your husband isn't just anyone. It's Sylveste we're talking about here.' Khouri reminded

Pascale that Sylveste's life had been shot through with a core of rare luck, and that it would be

strange if that fortune should desert him now, when the thing that he had always reached for was

almost within his grasp. 'He's a slippery bastard, and I think there's still a good chance he'll find a

way out of this.'

That seemed to calm Pascale, fractionally.

Then Khouri told her that Hegazi was dead and that the ship appeared to be trying to murder

everyone else left aboard it.

'Sajaki can't be here,' Pascale said. 'I mean, he can't, can he? Dan wouldn't know how to find his

own way to Cerberus. He'd need one of you to go with him.'

'That's what Volyova thought.'

'Then why are we here?'

'I guess Ilia didn't trust her convictions.'

Khouri pushed open the door which led into the clinic from the partially flooded access corridor,

kicking a janitor-rat out of the way as she did so. The clinic smelt wrong. She knew it instantly.

'Pascale, something bad has happened here.'

'I'll... what is it I'm supposed to say at this point? Cover you?' Pascale had her low-yield beam

gun out, without looking like she had much idea what to do with it.

'Yes,' Khouri said. 'You cover me. That's a very good idea.'

She entered the clinic, pushing the barrel of the plasma-rifle ahead of her.

As she moved in, the room sensed her presence and notched up its illumination. She had visited

Volyova here after the Triumvir had been injured; she felt she knew the approximate geometry of

the place.

She looked to the bed where she was sure Sajaki ought to have been. Above the bed floated an

elaborate array of gimballed and hinged servo-mechanical medical tools,
radiating down from a

central point like a mutated steel hand with far too many fingers, all of which
seemed tipped with

talons.

There was not a single inch of metal which was not covered in blood; thickly
congealed, like

candle-wax.

'Pascale, I don't think----'

But she too had seen what lay on the bed below the machinery; the thing that
might once have

been Sajaki. There was also not a single inch of the bed which was not
adorned in red. It was

difficult to see where Sajaki ended and where his eviscerated remains began.
He reminded her of

the Captain; except here the Captain's silver borderlessness had been
transfigured into scarlet; like

an artist's reworking of the same basic theme in a different and more carnal
medium. Two halves of

the same morbid diptych.

His chest was bloated, raised above the bed, as if a stream of galvanising
current were still

slamming through him. His chest was also hollow; the gore pooled in a deep
excavated crater which

ran from his sternum to his abdomen, like a terrible steel fist had reached

down and ripped half of

him out. Perhaps that was the way it had happened. Perhaps he had not even been awake when it

did. For confirmation of this theory she scrutinised his face, the little of his expression she could

decipher beneath the veil of red.

No; Triumvir Sajaki had almost certainly been awake.

She felt Pascale's presence not far behind. 'You shouldn't forget I've seen death,' she said. 'I saw

my father assassinated.'

'You've never seen this.'

'No,' she said. 'You're right. I've never seen anything like this.'

His chest exploded. Something burst out of it, at first so efficiently concealed by the fountain of

blood that it had disturbed that it was not obvious what it was -- until it landed on the blood-slicked

floor of the room and scampered away, wormlike tail lashing behind it. Then three more rats

elevated their snouts out of Sajaki, sniffing the air, regarding Khouri and Pascale with matched

pairs of black eyes. Then they too pulled themselves over the caldera which had been his ribcage,

landing on the floor, following the one who had just left. They vanished into the room's darker

recesses.

'Let's get out of here,' Khouri said. But even as she was speaking it moved; the fist of steel

fingers, activating with blinding speed, reaching out to her with a pair of its clawed, diamond-tipped

digits, so quickly that she could only begin to scream. The claws snagged her jacket, ripping into it,

and then she began to pull away, with all the strength she had.

She wrenched free, but not before it had located a purchase around her gun, dragging it with

brutal force from her fingers. Khouri fell back into the mess on the floor; noticing how her jacket

was soiled with Sajaki's blood; how at least some of the brighter red pooling from the rips must

have been her own.

The surgical machine elevated the gun, cradling it for them to see, as if gloating at its acquisition

of a hunting trophy. Now two of its more dextrous manipulators snaked into place and began to

examine the gun's controls, stroking the leather casing in eerie fascination. Slowly, ever so slowly,

the manipulators began to point the gun in Khouri's direction.

Pascale raised the beamer and blasted the whole assembly, blood-caked metallic chunks

splattering over Sajaki's remains. The plasma-rifle crashed down, blackened

and gushing smoke,

bluish sparks dancing from its shattered casing.

Khouri picked herself up, oblivious to the filth in which she was liberally covered.

Her ruined plasma-rifle was now buzzing angrily, the sparks dancing with increased ferocity.

'It's going to blow,' Khouri said. 'We have to get away from here.'

They turned to the door, and then had a second to adjust to what was now blocking their exit.

There had to be a thousand of them; piled three deep in the ship-slime, each individual careless of

its own life, but acting for the greater good of the whole senseless mass. Behind, more rats;

hundreds and then thousands more, piling back along the corridor; a vast rodent tidal wave,

brimming at the aperture of the clinic, ready to surge forwards in one consuming *tsunami* of

appetite.

She unsheathed the only weapon she now had left, the tiny, ineffectual needler she carried only

because of the precision it allowed. She began to squirt it at the mass of rats while Pascale doused

them with the beamer, which was hardly more suited to the task. Rats exploded and burned

wherever they pointed their guns, but there were always more of them, and

now the first rank of rats

was beginning to creep into the clinic.

Brightness flared down the corridor, followed by a series of bangs spaced so closely together that

they almost merged into a solid roar. The noise and the light came closer. Rats were flying through

the air now, propelled by the approaching explosions. The stench of cooked rodent was

overpowering; worse than the smell which already pervaded the clinic. Gradually, the wave of rats

began to thin and disperse.

Volyova stood in the doorway, her slug-gun belching smoke, its barrel the colour of lava. Behind

them, Khouri's ruined weapon grew suddenly and ominously silent.

'Now would be a good time to leave,' Volyova said.

They ran towards her, trampling over the dead rats and those still seeking shelter. Khouri felt

something slam into her spine. There was a wind, hotter than any she had known. She felt herself

lose contact with the floor, and then for a moment she was flying.

THIRTY-TWO

Approaching Cerberus Surface, 2566

This time the dislocation was briefer, even though the place in which he found himself was the most

foreign he had known.

'On descent towards Cerberus bridgehead,' the suit informed him, voice pleasantly bland and

drained of import, as if this were a perfectly natural destination. Graphics scrolled over the suit's

faceplate window, but his eyes could not focus on them properly, so he told the suit to drop the

imagery straight into his brain. Then it was much better. The fake contours of the surface -- huge

now, filling half the sky -- were lined in lilac, their sinuous mock-geology rendering the world more

folded and brainlike than ever before. There was very little natural illumination here, save for the

twin beacons of dim ruddiness of Hades and, much further way, Delta Pavonis itself. But the suit

compensated by shifting near-infrared photons into the visible.

Now something jutted over the horizon, blinkered in green by the overlay.

'The bridgehead,' Sylveste said, as much to hear a human voice as anything else. 'I see it.'

It was tiny, he saw now. It looked like the tip of an insignificant splinter blemishing the stone of

God's own statue. Cerberus was two thousand kilometres across; the bridgehead a mere four in

length, and most of that was now buried beneath the crust. In a way, it was the device's very tininess

in relation to the world which best testified to Ilia Volyova's skill. It might be small, but it was still

a thorn in the side of Cerberus. That much was obvious even from here; the crust around the

bridgehead looked inflamed, stressed to some point beyond its inbuilt tolerances. For several

kilometres around the weapon, the crust had given up any pretence of looking realistic. Now it had

reverted to what he assumed was its native state: a hexagonal grid which blurred into rock on its

fringes.

They would be over the maw -- the cone's open end -- in a few minutes. Sylveste could already

feel gravity tugging at his viscera now, even though he was still immersed in the suit's liquid air. It

was admittedly weak; a quarter of Earth normal -- but a fall from his present height would still be

adequately fatal, with or without the suit to protect him.

Now, finally, something else shared his immediate volume of space. He called in enhancements

and saw a suit exactly like his own, twinkling brightly against the night. It was a little ahead of him,

but following the same trajectory, heading for the circular entrance into the bridgehead. Two

morsels of drifting marine food, he thought, about to be sucked into the enormous waiting funnel of

the bridgehead, digested into the heart of Cerberus.

No going back now, he thought.

The three women ran down a corridor carpeted in dead rats and the blackened, stiff shells of things

that might possibly once have been rats, though they did not invite close scrutiny. The trio had one

big gun between the three of them now; one gun capable of despatching any servitor which the ship

sent against them. The small pistols they also had might do the same job, but only if used with

expertise and a certain degree of luck.

Occasionally, the floor shifted under their feet, unnervingly.

'What is it?' asked Khouri, limping now, after the bruising she had taken when the clinic had

exploded. 'What does it mean?'

'It means Sun Stealer is experimenting,' Volyova said, pausing between every two or three words

to catch her breath, her side aflame with pain now; every injury which had been healed since

Resurgam seemed on the point of unstitching. 'So far he's moved against us with the less critical

systems; the robots and the rats, for instance. But he knows that if he can understand the drive

properly -- if he can learn how to operate it within its safety margins -- he can crush us just by

ramping up the thrust for a few seconds.' She ran for a few more strides, wheezing. 'It's how I killed

Nagorny. But Sun Stealer doesn't know the ship so well, even though he controls it. He's trying to

adjust the drive very gradually; reaching an understanding of how it operates. When he has that----'

Pascale said, 'Is there anywhere we can go where we can be safe? Somewhere the rats and the

machines can't reach?'

'Yes, but nowhere that the acceleration can't reach in and crush us.'

'So we should get off the ship, is that what you're saying?'

She stopped, audited the corridor they were in and decided it was not one of the ones in which the

ship could hear their conversations. 'Listen,' she said. 'Don't be under any illusions. If we leave here,

I doubt very much that we'll ever find a way to return. But on the other hand, we also have an

obligation to stop Sylveste, if there's even a slim chance of doing so. Even if we kill ourselves in the

process.'

'How could we reach Dan?' Pascale asked. Obviously, stopping Sylveste still amounted -- in her

mind -- to catching him and talking him out of going further. Volyova decided not to disabuse her

of that notion, not just yet; but it wasn't quite what she had in mind.

'I think your husband took one of our suits,' she said. 'According to my bracelet all the shuttles

are still present. Besides, he could never have piloted one of them.'

'Not unless he had help from Sun Stealer,' Khouri said. 'Listen, can we keep moving? I know we

don't have any particular direction in mind, but I'd feel a hell of a lot happier than standing around.'

'He'd have taken a suit,' Pascale said. 'That would have been his style. But he wouldn't have done

so alone.'

'Is it possible he would have accepted Sun Stealer's help?'

She shook her head. 'Forget it. He didn't even believe in Sun Stealer. If he'd had an inkling that he

was being led -- pushed into something -- no; he wouldn't have accepted it.'

'Maybe he didn't have any choice,' Khouri said. 'But anyway; assuming he took a suit, is there

any way we can catch him?'

'Not before he reaches Cerberus.' There was no need to think about that. She knew just how

quickly a million kilometres of space could be traversed if one could tolerate a constant ten gees of

acceleration. 'It's too risky to take suits ourselves; not the kind your husband used. We'll have to get

there in one of the shuttles. It'll be a lot slower, but there's less chance Sun Stealer will have

infiltrated its control matrix.'

'Why's that?'

'Claustrophobia. The shuttles are about three centuries less advanced than the suits.'

'And that's supposed to help us?'

'Believe me, when you're dealing with infectious alien mind parasites, I always find primitive is

best.' Then, calmly, almost as if it were a recognised form of verbal punctuation, she took aim with

the needler and gutted a rat which had dared stray into the corridor.

'I remember this place,' Pascale said. 'This is where you brought us when----'

Khouri made the door open; the one marked with a barely legible spider.

'Get in,' she said. 'Make yourself at home. And start praying that I remember how Ilia worked this

thing.'

'Where is she going to meet us?'

'Outside,' Khouri said. 'I sincerely hope.'

By which time she was already closing the spider-room's door; already looking at the brass and

bronze controls and hoping for some spark of recognition.

THIRTY-THREE

Cerberus/Hades Orbit, 2566

Volyova slipped out the needier, approaching the Captain.

She knew that she had to get to the hangar chamber as quickly as possible; that any delay might

give Sun Stealer the time he needed to find a way to kill her. But there was something she had to do

first. There was no logic to it, no rationality -- but she knew she had to do it anyway. So she took

the stairwells to the Captain's level, into the deadening cold, her breath seeming to solidify in her

throat. There were no rats down here: too cold. And servitors would not be able to reach him

without running the risk of becoming part of him, subsumed by the plague.

'Can you hear me, you bastard?' She told her bracelet to warm him enough for conscious thought

processes. 'If so, pay attention. The ship's been taken over.'

'Are we still around Bloater?'

'No... no, we're not still around Bloater. That was some time ago.'

After a few moments the Captain said, 'Taken over, did you say? Who by?'

'Something alien, with some unpleasant ambitions. Most of us are dead now - - Sajaki, Hegazi; all

the other crew you ever knew -- and the few of us left are getting out while we can. I don't expect to

ever come back aboard, which is why what I'm about to do might strike you as slightly drastic.'

She aimed the needler now; directing it towards the cracked, misshaped husk of the reefer

encasing the Captain.

'I'm going to let you warm, do you understand? For the last few decades it's been all we can do to

keep you as cool as possible -- but it hasn't worked, so maybe it was never the right approach.

Maybe what we need to do now is let you take over the damned ship, in whatever way you see fit.'

'I don't think----'

'I don't care what you think, captain. I'm doing it anyway.'

Her finger grew tight against the needler's trigger; already she was mentally calculating how his

rate of spread would increase as he warmed, and the numbers she was coming up with were not

quite believable... but then, they had never considered doing this before.

'Please, Ilia.'

'Listen, *svinoi*,' she said, finally. 'Maybe it works; maybe it doesn't. But if I've ever shown any

loyalty to you -- if you even remember me -- all I'm asking is that you do what you can for us.'

She was about to fire; about to unload the needler into the reefer, but then something made her

hesitate.

'There's one other thing I have to say to you. Which is that I think I know who the hell you are, or

rather who the hell you became.'

She was acutely conscious of the dryness of her mouth, and of the time she was wasting, but

something made her continue.

'What do you have to say to me?'

'You travelled with Sajaki to the Pattern Jugglers, didn't you? I know. The crew spoke of it often

enough -- even Sajaki himself. What no one discussed was what happened down there: what the

Jugglers did to the two of you. Oh, I know there were rumours -- but that's all they were; engineered

by Sajaki to throw me off the scent.'

'Nothing happened there.'

'No; what happened was this. You killed Sajaki, all those years ago.'

His answer came back, amused, as if he had misheard her. '*I* killed Sajaki?'

'You had the Jugglers do it; had them erase his neural patterns and overlay your own on his mind.

You became him.'

Now she had to catch her breath, although she was almost done.

'One existence wasn't enough for you -- and maybe by then you'd sensed that this body wasn't

going to last too long; not with so many viruses flying around. So you colonised your adjutant, and

the Jugglers did what you wished because they're so alien they couldn't even grasp the concept of

murder. But that's the truth, isn't it?

'No...'

'Shut up. That's why Sajaki never wanted you healed -- because by then he was you, and he didn't

need healing. And that's why Sajaki was able to denature my treatment for the plague -- because he

had all your expertise. I should let you die for this, *svinoi* -- except of course you already are,

because what's left of Sajaki is now redecorating the medical centre.'

'Sajaki -- dead?' It was as if her news of the others' deaths had not reached him at all.

'Is that justice for you? You're alone now. All on your own. So the only thing you can do is

protect your own existence against Sun Stealer by growing. By letting the plague have its way with

you.'

'No... please.'

'Did you kill Sajaki, Captain?'

'It was... such a long time ago...' But there was something in his voice which was not quite denial.

Volyova delivered the needler rounds into the reefer. Watched the few remaining indices on its shell

flicker and die, and then felt the chill fading, by the second, ice on the shell already beginning to

glisten with its own warming.

'I'm going now,' she said. 'I just wanted to get to the truth. I suppose I should wish you good luck,

Captain.'

And then she was running, afraid of what might be happening behind her.

Sajaki's suit stayed tantalisingly ahead of Sylveste as they commenced the descent into the funnel of

the bridgehead. The half-submerged, inverted cone of the device had seemed tiny only minutes ago,

but now it was all he could see, its steep grey sides blocking the horizon in all directions.

Occasionally the bridgehead shuddered, and Sylveste was reminded that it was fighting a constant

battle with the crustal defences of Cerberus, and that he should not count blindly on its protection. If

it failed, he knew, it would be consumed in hours; the wound in the crust would close, and with it

his escape route.

'It is necessary to replenish reaction mass,' the suit said.

'What?'

Sajaki spoke for the first time since they had left the ship. 'We used a lot of mass getting here,

Dan. We need to top up before we enter hostile territory.'

'Where from?'

'Look around you. There's an awful lot of reaction mass waiting to be used.'

Of course; there was nothing to stop them drawing resources from the bridgehead itself. He

agreed, doing nothing while Sajaki took control of his suit. One of the steep, incurving walls

loomed nearer, dense with ornate extrusions and random clusters of machinery. The scale of the

thing was overwhelming now; like a dam wall which curved round until its ends met. Somewhere in

that wall, he thought, were the bodies of Alicia and her fellow mutineers...

There was enough sense of gravity to engender a strong sense of vertigo, not aided by the way

the bridgehead narrowed below, which made it seem like an infinitely deep shaft. The best part of a

kilometre away, the star-shaped speck of Sajaki's suit had made contact with the precipitous wall on

the far side. A few moments later Sylveste touched a narrow ledge, one that jutted no more than a

metre beyond the wall. His feet made soft contact and suddenly he was poised there, ready to topple

back into the nothingness behind him.

'What do I have to do?'

'Nothing,' Sajaki said. 'Your suit knows exactly what to do. I suggest you start trusting it: it's all

that's keeping you alive.'

'Is that meant to reassure me?'

'Do you think reassurance would be especially appropriate at this point? You're about to enter one

of the most alien environments that any human has ever known. I think the last thing you need is

reassurance.'

While Sylveste watched, a trunk extruded from the suit's chest until it made contact with a

section of the bridgehead's wall material. A few seconds later it began to pulse, bulges squirming

along its length, back into the suit.

'Vile,' Sylveste said.

'It's digesting heavy elements from the bridgehead,' Sajaki said. 'The bridgehead gives of itself

freely, since it recognises the suit as being friendly.'

'What if we run out of power inside Cerberus?'

'You'll be dead long before running out of power becomes a problem to your suit. But it needs to

replenish reaction mass for its thrusters. It has all the energy it needs, but it still requires atoms to

accelerate.'

'I'm not sure I like that last bit; about being dead.'

'It isn't too late to return.'

Testing me, Sylveste thought. For a moment he considered it rationally, but only for a moment.

He was scared, yes -- more so than he could comfortably remember; even if he went back to

Lascaille's Shroud. But, as then, he knew that the only way to punch through his fear was to push

on. To confront whatever it was that led to that fear. But, when the refuelling process was complete,

it took all the nerve in the world to step off the ledge and continue the descent into the emptiness

enclosed by the bridgehead.

They sank lower, dropping for long seconds before checking their fall with brief squirts of thrust.

Sajaki was beginning to allow Sylveste some voluntary control of his suit now; slowly decreasing

the suit's autonomic dominance until Sylveste was controlling most of it himself; the transition was

barely noticeable. They were descending now at a rate of thirty metres per second, but it seemed to

quicken as the walls of the funnel came closer together. Now Sajaki was only a few hundred metres

away, but the facelessness of his suit offered little sense of human presence,

no sense of

companionship. Sylveste still felt dreadfully alone. And with good reason, he thought -- it was

possible that no thinking creature had been this close to Cerberus since it was last visited by the

Amarantin. What ghosts had festered here in the intervening thousand centuries?

'Approaching the final injection tube,' Sajaki said.

The conic walls constricted now to a diameter of only thirty metres, then plunged vertically into

darkness, as far as the eye could see. His suit veered towards the midline of the approaching hole

without his bidding; Sajaki's suit lagged slightly behind.

'I wouldn't deny you the honour of being first in,' said the Triumvir. 'You've waited for it long

enough, after all.'

They were in the shaft. Sensing their arrival, the walls lit up with recessed red lights. The

impression of vertical speed was huge now, and more than a little sickening; too much like being

injected down a syringe. Sylveste remembered the time when Calvin had shown him the passage of

an endoscope through one of his patients; the ancient surgical tool with a camera eye at one end of

its coiled length. He remembered the headlong rush along an artery. He

remembered the night flight

to Cuvier after he had been arrested at the obelisk excavation, streaking through canyons towards

his political nemesis. He wondered if there had ever been a time in his life when he was certain of

what lay at the end of those rushing walls.

Then the shaft vanished and they were dropping through emptiness.

Volyova reached the hangar chamber, pausing at one of the observation windows to check that the

shuttles really were accounted for, and that the data she had seen on her bracelet had not been

manipulated by Sun Stealer. The plasma-winged transatmospheric ships were still there, clamped in

their holding pens like rows of arrowheads in a fletcher's workshop. She could begin powering one

of them now, via the bracelet, but that was too dangerous, too likely to draw Sun Stealer's attention

and alert him to what she was planning. At the moment she was safe enough, since she had not

entered a part of the ship where Sun Stealer's senses could penetrate. At least, she hoped not.

She could not simply stroll aboard any of the shuttles. The usual access routes would take her

through parts of the ship she did not dare enter; places where servitors had free range and janitor-

rats were in direct biochemical consort with Sun Stealer. She had only one weapon now: the

needler. She had left Khouri with the slug-gun, and while she did not doubt her proficiency, there

were limits to what could be achieved by mere skill and determination. Especially as the ship would

by now have had time to synthesise armed drones.

So now she found her way to an airlock chamber; not one which led to outside space, but one

which accessed the depressurised vault of the hangar. The chamber was knee-deep in effluent, and

all its lighting and heating systems had failed. Good. No chance then of Sun Stealer being able to

watch her remotely, or even know she was there. She opened a locker and was relieved to find that

the lightweight suit it was meant to contain was still present, and that it had not been visibly

damaged by exposure to ship-slime. It was less bulky than the kind of suit Sylveste would have

taken; less intelligent too, with no servosystems or integral propulsion. Before donning the suit she

recited a series of words -- well rehearsed -- into her bracelet, and then arranged the bracelet to

respond to vocal commands spoken into her communicator, rather than via its own acoustic sensors.

Then she had to latch on a thruster backpack, taking a moment to stare

intently at its controls, as if

knowledge of how to use it would bubble up from her memory by sheer force of will. She decided

that the basics would come back to her as soon as she required them, and carefully stowed the

needler on the suit's external equipment belt. She exited without fuss, jetting into the hangar, using a

small constant thrust level to prevent herself drifting down the chamber. No part of the ship was in

freefall, since the ship itself was not orbiting Cerberus, but holding itself artificially fixed in space,

a tiny drain on the power of its engines.

She selected the shuttle she would use; the spherical *Melancholia of Departure*. Off to one side

of the chamber, she watched a pair of bottle-green servitors detach from their mooring points and

sidle towards her. They were free-fliers; spheres sprouting claws and cutting equipment for

performing repair work on the shuttles. Evidently she had passed into Sun Stealer's perceptual

domain when she entered the hangar. Well, she couldn't help that, and she had not brought the

needler along to assist as an incentive in delicate negotiations with non-sentient machines. She shot

them, each requiring more than one needle-strike before she interrupted a critical system.

Hit, both machines began to drift down the hangar, bleeding smoke.

She thumbed the backpack controls, imploring it to push her faster. The *Melancholia* loomed

larger now; she could already see the tiny warning signs and technical phrases dotted around its

fuselage, although most of them were in obsolete languages.

From around the curve of the shuttle hove another drone. This one was larger, its ochre body an

ellipsoid studded with folded manipulators and sensors.

It was pointing something at her.

Everything turned a bright, hurting green which made her want to tear her eyeballs from their

sockets. The thing was swiping a laser at her. She cursed -- her suit had opaqued in time, but she

was now effectively blind.

'Sun Stealer,' she said, presuming that he could hear her. 'You are making a very grave mistake.'

'I don't think so.'

'You're getting good now,' she said. 'You were a little stiff when we spoke earlier. What's

happened? Did you access the natural language translators?'

'The more time I spend amongst you, the better I know you.'

The suit was de-opaquing as she spoke. 'Better than you did with Nagorny, at least.'

'I did not intend to give him nightmares.' Sun Stealer's voice was still the same absence as before;

like a whisper heard against the white-noise of static.

'No, I doubt that you did.' She clucked. 'You don't want to kill me, do you? The others, perhaps --

but not me; not just yet. Not while the bridgehead might still need my expertise.'

'That time has passed,' Sun Stealer said. 'Sylveste has now entered Cerberus.'

Not good news; not good news at all -- although, rationally, she had known for some hours that it

was probably the case.

'Then there must be another reason,' she said. 'Another reason why you need the bridgehead to

stay open. It can't be that you care about Sylveste making it back. But if the bridgehead fails, you

wouldn't necessarily know that he had progressed any deeper into the structure. You need to know,

don't you? You need to know how deeply he gets; whether he achieves whatever it is you have in

mind for him.'

She took Sun Stealer's lack of response as a tacit acknowledgement that she was not far from the

truth. Perhaps the alien had not yet learnt all the ways of subterfuge, arts which might be uniquely

human and therefore new to him.

'Let me take the shuttle,' she said.

'A vessel of this configuration is too large to enter Cerberus, even if you intend to reach Sylveste.'

Did it honestly imagine she had not thought of that herself? For a moment she felt pity that Sun

Stealer was so singularly ill-equipped to grasp the way the human mind functioned. On one level he

worked well enough; when he could lay lures of fear or reward; lures which depended on the

emotions. It was not that his logic was faulty, either -- more that he had an overestimation of how

important it was in human affairs: as if pointing out to Volyova the essentially suicidal nature of her

intended mission was going to suddenly deter her; turn her willingly to his side. Oh, you poor,

pitiful monster, she thought.

'I've got one word for you,' she said, moving towards the airlock, daring the drone to intercept

her. And then she said that word, having already recited the preliminary incantations which were

required before the word itself could have any effect. It was a word she had not really expected that

she would ever have to use in this context. But it had been enough of a surprise that she had been

forced to use it once already; almost as surprising as the fact that she remembered it at all. Volyova

had decided that the time to rely on expectation was long gone.

That word was *Palsy*.

It had an interesting effect on the servitor. The machine did not try and obstruct her as she

reached the airlock and helped herself into the *Melancholia*. Instead, it hovered aimlessly for a few

seconds and then darted towards one wall, suddenly out of contact with the ship and now relying on

its limited reservoir of independent behaviour-modes. Nothing had happened to the servitor itself,

since execution of the Palsy command only affected ship systems. But one of the first systems to

crash would have been the radio/optical command net serving all the drones. Only the autonomous

drones would continue functioning unaffected -- and those machines had never come under Sun

Stealer's influence. Now the thousands of supervised drones all over the ship would be scurrying to

access terminals where they could tap into the controlling system directly. Even the rats would feel

confused, since the aerosols dispersing their biochemical instructions would be among the affected

systems. Unshackled from relentless machine control, the rodents would begin to revert to an

archetype more characteristic of their feral ancestors.

Volyova closed the airlock and was gratified to feel the shuttle warming to readiness as soon as it

sensed her. She tugged herself along to the cabin, already aglow with navigation readouts, already

reconfiguring itself to match the kind of interface she preferred: surfaces flowing liquidly towards a

new ideal.

Now all she had to do was get out.

'Did you just feel that?' Khouri asked from the metal and plush opulence of the spider-room. 'The

whole ship just shuddered, like an earth tremor.'

'You think it was Ilia?'

'She said we should cast loose when we got a signal. And she said it'd be obvious as hell. That

was pretty obvious, wasn't it?'

She knew if she waited any longer she would begin to doubt the evidence of her own senses; start

wondering if there really had been a shudder, and then it would be too late, because if Volyova had

been clear about anything it was that when the signal came, Khouri had to move quickly. There

would not be very much time, she said.

So she cast off.

She twisted two of the matched brass controls to their extremities; not as she

had seen Volyova

do, but in the simple hope that something so drastic, random, and quite possibly stupid must surely

result in something as normally undesirable as the spider-room losing its purchase on the hull,

which was now all that she wanted.

The spider-room fell away from the hull.

'In the next few seconds,' Khouri said, stomach squirming in the sudden transition to freefall, 'we

either live or die. If that was the signal Ilia meant to give, it's safe to leave the hull. But if it wasn't,

we're going to be in range of the ship's own weapons in a few seconds.'

Khouri watched the ship recede, slowly falling up and away, until she had to squint to avoid the

glare of the Conjoiner engines; barely ticking over, yet still sun-bright. Somewhere in the spider-

room there was a way to close the shutters on its windows, but that was one detail Khouri had not

committed to memory.

'Why won't it shoot us immediately?'

'Too much risk of damaging itself. Ilia said those limits were hardwired -- nothing Sun Stealer

can do about it except live with them. Guess we're about coming up on the mark now.'

'What do you think it was, that signal?' It seemed that Pascale preferred to talk.

'A program,' Khouri said. 'Buried deep in the ship, where Sun Stealer would never find it. Wired

up to thousands of circuit breaks all around the ship. When she ran it -- if she ran it -- it would have

killed thousands of systems simultaneously. One big crunch. That was the shudder, I think.'

'And it takes out the weapons?'

'No... not exactly. Not if I remember what she told me. Some of the sensors, and maybe some of

the targeting systems, but the gunnery isn't affected; I remember that much. But I think the rest of

the ship is so screwed up it'll take Sun Stealer a while to put himself back together again; awhile to

coordinate himself and get his bearings. Then he can start shooting again.'

'But the weapons could be online any time soon?'

'That's why we have to hurry.'

'We seem to be still having a conversation. Does that mean...?'

'I think so.' Khouri forced a manic grin. 'I think I interpreted the signal right, and I think we're

safe -- for the time being, at least.'

Pascale let out a loud sigh. 'What now?'

'We have to find Ilia.'

'It shouldn't be hard. She said there wasn't anything we'd have to do; just wait for that signal.

Then she'd be right...' Khouri trailed off. She was looking back at the lighthugger, hanging over

them like a levitating cathedral spire. And something was wrong with it.

Something was disturbing its symmetry.

Something was breaking out of it.

It had begun with the smallest of excisions; as a chick might force the tip of its mandible through

the shell of its egg. White light, and then a series of explosions. Shards of disrupted hull

mushroomed away, quickly seized by the hand of gravity, so that the veil of destruction was

whipped away to reveal the underlying damage. It was a tiny hole punched through the hull. Tiny,

but because the ship was so large, the hole must really have been the best part of a hundred metres

across.

And now Volyova's shuttle burst through the aperture she had opened, loitering momentarily next

to the great trunk of the ship before pirouetting and diving towards the spider-room.

THIRTY-FOUR

Cerberus/Hades Orbit, 2566

Khouri let Volyova do all the hard work of getting the spider-room safely ensconced in the

Melancholia. The operation was trickier than it seemed; not because the body of the spider-room

was too large to fit the available volume, but because the room's dangling legs refused to fold

themselves neatly away, inhibiting closure of the cargo doors. In the end -- and it could not have

been more than a minute or so after the operation had commenced -- Volyova had to send out a

squad of servitors to wrestle the legs into position. To an external observer -- not that there was one,

of course, except the brooding, semi-paralysed mass of the lighthugger -- the procedure must have

resembled a team of pixies trying to cram an insect into a jewel-box.

Finally Volyova was able to close the doors, blocking out the last narrowing rectangle of twisting

starfield from view. Interior lights came on, followed by the rapid, loudening howl of

pressurisation, transmitted through the spider-room's metallic hull. The servitors reappeared,

quickly clamping the room against drift, and then, not more than a minute later, Volyova showed

up, unsuited.

'Follow me,' she shouted, her voice ringing. 'The sooner we're out of weapons range the better.'

'How far, exactly, is weapons range?' Khouri said.

'I'm not sure.'

'You hit him with your program,' Khouri said, as the three of them pulled themselves hand-over-

hand up to the shuttle's cabin. 'Good work, Ilia. We felt it out there -- one mother of a shutdown.'

'I think it hurt him,' she said. 'After my experience with the cache-weapon, I put Palsy back into

place with a few additional interrupts. This time the paralysis would have reached much more than

skin-deep. But I wish I'd installed destructive devices around the Conjoiner drives. Then we could

torch the ship and run.'

'Wouldn't that make it a bit difficult to get home?'

'Very probably. But it would certainly put an end to Sun Stealer.' As an afterthought she added,

'More than that, too. Without the ship, the bridgehead would begin to fail, since there would be no

more updates from the warchive. We'd have won.'

'Is that the most optimistic outcome you can think of?'

Volyova didn't answer.

They had reached the flightdeck, which Khouri saw was as gratifyingly modern as any she had

seen: all white and sterile, like a dentist's operating room.

'Listen,' Volyova said, looking at Pascale. 'I don't know how much of this has sunk in yet, but if

the bridgehead should fail now -- which is what we want -- it wouldn't necessarily be good for your

husband.'

'Assuming he's reached it yet.'

'Oh, I think we can assume that.'

'On the other hand,' Khouri said, 'if he's already inside, having it fail now wouldn't change

anything, except to prevent us reaching him.' She paused, added, 'That is what we're planning, isn't

it? I mean, we have to at least try.'

'Somebody has to,' Volyova said, already buckling herself into one of the control chairs, reaching

across to interface her fingers with the archaic touch-sensitive control board she affected. 'Now, I

strongly suggest you find yourselves somewhere to sit. We're about to put a lot of space between

ourselves and the lighthugger, in not a great deal of time.'

She had barely finished speaking when the engines came online, howling to readiness, and the

previously indeterminately defined walls and floors and ceilings suddenly assumed very concrete

reality.

When the shaft vanished and they were dropping through emptiness, the sense of vertical speed

suddenly ceasing was so great that Sylveste felt his body tense in expectation of imaginary stress.

But it was illusion: they were still falling, faster now than ever, but the points of reference were so

much more distant that there was little impression of motion.

He was inside Cerberus.

'Well,' Calvin said, speaking for what seemed like the first time in days, 'is this all you expected?'

'This is nothing,' Sylveste said. 'Just a prelude.'

But it was still the strangest artificial structure he had ever seen; the oddest place in which he had

ever been confined. The crust curved over him: a world-englobing roof pierced by the narrow end

of the bridgehead. The place was aglow with its own wan luminescence, seemingly generated by

the immense snakes which lay in coiled complexity across what he now thought of as the floor. The

huge tree-trunk buttresses reached all the way to the ceiling, gnarled and organic. Now that the view

was an improvement on that gained from the robotic probes, he could see that the buttresses looked

more as if they had grown out of the ceiling into the floor than the other way around. Their roots

blended into the floor. The firmament looked less alive; more crystalline. In a flash of insight he

saw that the floor was older than the ceiling; that the ceiling had been constructed around the world

after the floor was already finished. It was almost as if they stemmed from different phases of

Amarantin science.

'Check your fall,' Sajaki said. 'We don't want to hit the floor too quickly. Nor do we want to stray

into some defence system which the bridgehead hasn't neutralised.'

'You think there might still be hostile elements?'

'Perhaps not on this level,' the Triumvir said. 'But lower -- I believe we can count on it. Such

defences may not however have seen much use in the last million years, so they may be rather...' He

seemed to have to search for the word. 'Rusty.'

'On the other hand, maybe we shouldn't count on that either.'

'No, perhaps not.'

Suit thrust increased, and with it the feeling of gravity. Only a quarter of a gee, yet the vaulted

ceiling was still an artefact of terrifying size. There was a kilometre of it between him and open

space; a kilometre he would have to get through again if he ever wanted to leave. Of course, there

were another thousand kilometres of planet below his feet, but he had no idea how far into those

depths he would have to tunnel before he found what he was looking for. He hoped it would not be

far: the nominal five days he had allotted himself for the journey and return now seemed to be

cutting it dangerously close to the mark. Seen from outside, it was easy to accept Volyova's

equations of gain and loss and believe that they had some connection to reality. Here, when the

forces represented by her equations had crystallised into vast and threatening structures, he had

much less confidence in their predictive power.

'You're shit-scared, aren't you?' Calvin said.

'You can read my emotions now, is that it?'

'No. It's just that your emotions ought to mirror mine. We think very similarly, you and I. More

so than ever now.' Calvin paused. 'And I don't mind admitting -- I'm very, very scared. Probably

more scared than a piece of software has any right to feel. Isn't that profound, Dan?'

'Save your profundities for later -- I'm sure you'll get the opportunity.'

'I imagine you feel insignificant,' Sajaki said, almost as if he had been listening in on the

conversation. 'Well; you're justified in feeling that way. You are insignificant.

That's the majesty of
this place. Would you choose it any other way?'

The ground was rushing towards him, strewn with geometric rubble. The suit's proximity alarm

began to chime, indicating the nearness of the floor. Less than a kilometre now, though it looked

close enough to touch. He felt the suit begin to adjust itself around him, remoulding itself for

surface operation. One hundred metres. They were descending towards a flattish crystal slab:

presumably some chunk of the ceiling which had fallen all this way. It was the size of a small

ballroom. He could see the blinding glare of his suit thrusters in its marbled surface.

'Cut your thrust five seconds before impact,' Sajaki said. 'We don't want the heat to trigger a

defensive reaction.'

'No,' Sylveste said. 'That's the last thing we want.'

He assumed the suit would protect him from the fall, though it took an effort of will to follow

Sajaki's instructions, slipping into freefall five seconds before his feet were due to touch the crystal.

The suit bulged slightly, projecting cushioning armour plates. The density of the gel-air rose and for

a moment he almost blacked out. But when the impact came, it was almost

too gentle to register.

He blinked, and realised he had fallen on his back. Great, he thought -- very dignified. Then the

suit righted itself and popped him back on his feet.

He was standing in Cerberus.

THIRTY-FIVE

Cerberus, Interior, 2567

'How long now?'

'We've been out a day.' Sajaki's voice sounded thin and distant, though his suit was only a few

tens of metres away from Sylveste. 'We still have plenty of time; don't worry.'

'I believe you,' Sylveste said. 'At least, part of me does. The other part isn't so sure.'

'That other part might be me,' Calvin said quietly. 'And no, I don't believe we still have plenty of

time. We might do, but I don't think we should count on it. Not when we know so little.'

'If that's meant to inspire confidence...'

'No, it wasn't.'

'Then shut up until you've got something constructive to say.'

They were kilometres into the second layer of Cerberus now; good progress by some yardsticks,

since they had descended more vertical distance now than the tallest

mountains on Earth -- but it

was still too slow. At this rate they would never make it back in time, if they even succeeded in

reaching whatever destination they were striving towards. Before then, the bridgehead would surely

have given in to the tireless expulsive energies being directed against it by the crustal defences, and

it would be digested or spat away into space like an unwanted pip.

The second layer -- the bedrock on which the snakes writhed, and into which the roof-supporting

trees thrust their roots -- had a crystalline topography, markedly different to the kind of quasi-

organic look of the overlying structures. They had been forced to thread their way downwards in the

narrow interstices between the densely packed crystal forms, like ants navigating between courses

of brickwork. It was slow work, and it quickly depleted the suits' reaction reservoirs, since all the

downward movement had to be constantly checked by thrust. At first Sylveste had suggested that

they use the monofilament grapples which the suits could deploy (or grow, or extrude; he did not

bother himself with the details), but Sajaki had argued him out of it: it would have conserved

reaction mass, but it would also have greatly delayed their descent, since hundreds of kilometres

still lay below them. Apart from that, it would also have limited them to strictly vertical motion,

which would have made them easy targets for hypothetical counter-insurgent systems. So they flew

most of the time, stopping when necessary to ablate small quantities of Cerberus material. So far,

Cerberus had not objected to their vampiric activities, and the crystals contained enough heavy

trace-elements to feed the thruster reservoirs.

'It's as if it doesn't know we're here,' Sylveste said.

Calvin answered him. 'Maybe it doesn't. Not much can have reached this far down in living

memory. The systems designed to detect intruders and defend against them might have atrophied

through disuse -- assuming they ever existed in the first place.'

'Why do I have the impression you're suddenly trying to cheer me up?'

'I suppose I have your best interests at heart.' He imagined Calvin smiling, though there was no

visual component to the simulation. 'In any case, I believe what I just said. I think the deeper we go,

the less likelihood we'll have of being recognised as something unwanted. It's like the human body -

- the greatest density of pain receptors lies in the skin.'

Sylveste remembered a stomach cramp he had once experienced through drinking too much cold

water during a surface hike out from Chasm City, and wondered if there was even a glint of truth in

what Calvin had just said to him. It was reassuring though; of that there was no doubt. But did it

also mean that everything deeper would be half-sleeping; as if the mighty defences of the crust were

now meaningless, because what lay below no longer worked as the Amarantin had intended? Was

Cerberus a treasure chest which, though firmly locked and burnished to a high polish, contained

nothing but rusting junk -- if that?

There was no sense thinking that way. If any of this meant anything, if the last fifty years of his

life (and perhaps even more than that) had been anything other than delusional obsession, there had

to be something worth finding. The feeling was nothing he could articulate, but he was more sure of

it than he had ever before been sure of anything.

Another day of descent passed; during intervals Sylveste slept, being awakened by his suit only

when something notable occurred, or the external scene changed beyond some inbuilt tolerance and

the suit decided that he had better be awake to witness it. If Sajaki slept Sylveste was unaware of it,

but he ascribed this to the generally odd physiology of the man; his blood thickened by medichines,

constantly cleansing; his Juggler-configured mind able to do without the auditing hours of normal

sleep. When the going was easiest, they descended at a maximum rate of one kilometre a minute,

which usually happened when some deep abyssal shaft hove into view. The return would be

quicker, of course, since the suits would know the way they had come, barring changes in the

structure of Cerberus itself. Now it was not uncommon for them to descend for several kilometres

before hitting a dead end, or a shaft too narrow for safety, at which point they would retreat to the

last branch point and attempt another route. It was pure trial and error, since the suit sensors could

not see more than a few hundred metres ahead at any point, blocked by the massive solidity of the

crystal elements. But, kilometre by kilometre, they made slow progress, bathed always in sickly

turquoise-green light spilling from the crystals.

Gradually the character of the formations had been altering; there were shards here many

kilometres across, impassive and immobile as glaciers. All the crystals were attached to one

another, but the vaultlike spaces and vertiginous rifts between them gave the impression that they

were floating freely, as if in mute denial of the world's gravitational field.

What were they, Sylveste

wondered? Dead matter -- literally, crystalline -- or something stranger?
Were they components;

parts of some world-englobing mechanism which was too large to be
glimpsed or even imagined? If

they were machines, they must have been exploiting some hazy state of
quantum reality, where

concepts like heat and energy dissolved into uncertainty. Certainly, they were
as cold as ice (the

suit's thermal sensors told him this), and yet beneath their translucent faces he
sometimes sensed

tremendous subliminal motion, like the ticking guts of a clock glimpsed
through a veil of lucite. But

when he asked the suit to investigate with its senses, the results it sent back
were too ambiguous to

be much help.

After forty hours of rambling descent they made a significant and helpful
discovery. The crystal

matrix thinned out in a transitional zone only a kilometre deep, exposing
shafts wider and deeper

than any they had yet encountered; more deliberate in design. They were two
kilometres in width,

and each of the ten shafts they examined fell towards convergent nothingness
for two hundred

vertical kilometres. The walls of the shafts emitted the same slightly
nauseating green radiance as

the crystal elements, and they shivered with the same underlying sense of pent-up motion,

suggesting that they were parts of the same mechanisms, though fulfilling some very different

function. Sylveste remembered what he knew about the great pyramids in Egypt; how they were

riddled with shafts which had been dictated by the construction technique; escape routes for the

workers who sealed the tombs within. Perhaps something similar applied here, or perhaps the shafts

had once served to radiate the heat of engines now quietened.

Discovering them was a godsend, since it enormously quickened their rate of descent, but that

gift was not without its hazards. Constrained by the linear walls of the shaft, there would be

nowhere to seek refuge if an attack came, and only two possible directions of escape. Yet if they

delayed further, they would face imprisonment in Cerberus when the bridgehead collapsed; no more

palatable a fate. So they risked using the shafts.

They could not simply fall. That had been possible before, when the vertical distance was no

more than a kilometre or so, but here the very size of the shafts brought unanticipated problems.

They found themselves drifting mysteriously towards the walls, and had to keep applying bursts of

corrective thrust to stop themselves being dashed against the rushing precipice of sickly jade. It was

Coriolis force, of course: the same fictitious force which curved wind vectors into cyclones on the

surface of a rotating planet. Here, Coriolis force objected to a strictly linear descent, since Cerberus

was rotating, and Sylveste and Sajaki had to shed excess angular momentum with each movement

closer to the core. Yet compared to their earlier slow progress, it was gratifyingly rapid.

They had fallen a hundred kilometres when the attack began.

'It's moving,' Volyova said.

Ten hours had passed since leaving the lighthugger. She was exhausted, despite having catnapped

for odd hours, knowing that she would need the energy soon. But it had not really helped; she

needed more than little intermissions of unconsciousness to begin to heal all the physiological and

mental stress of recent days. Now, though, she was fully awake, as if at the limits of fatigue her

body had grudgingly accessed some stagnant pool of reserve energy. Doubtless it would not last,

and there would be an even heavier premium to pay when she had exhausted this stop-gap -- but for

now she was glad of the alertness, however transitory.

'What's moving?' Khouri asked.

Volyova nodded at the shuttle's glaringly white console, at the readout windows she had called

into being across its horseshoe profile.

'What else but the damned ship?'

Pascale yawned awake. 'What's up?'

'What's up is we have trouble,' Volyova said, fingers dancing on the keyboard to call up other

readouts, though she did not really need confirmation of this. Bad news carried its own certification.

'The lighthugger is on the move again. This means two things, neither of them good. Sun Stealer

must have reinstated the major systems I disabled with Palsy.'

'Well, ten hours wasn't bad -- at least it allowed us to get this far.' Pascale nodded at the nearest

positional display, which showed the shuttle more than one third of the distance to Cerberus.

'What else?' Khouri asked.

'What it implies, which is that Sun Stealer must now have gained enough experience to

manipulate the drive. Previously it was something he was only cautiously investigating, in case he

harmed the ship.'

'Meaning what?'

Volyova indicated the same positional readout. 'Let's assume he now has total control of the drive

and knows the tolerances. The ship's current vector puts it on an intercept trajectory with us. Sun

Stealer's trying to reach us before we reach Dan, or even the bridgehead. We're too small a target at

this range -- beam weapons would disperse too much to hit us, and we could outmanoeuvre all the

sub-relativistic projectiles just by executing a random flight path -- but it won't be long before we're

within kill-range.'

'Just how long is that?' Pascale frowned. It was not, Volyova thought, the woman's most

endearing habit, but she endured it expressionlessly. 'Don't we already have a massive head-start?'

'We do, but now there's nothing to stop Sun Stealer ramping the lighthugger's thrust all the way

up to multiple tens of gees -- accelerations we simply can't match without pulping ourselves in the

process. But that's not a problem for him. There's nothing left alive aboard that ship which doesn't

run around on four legs and squeak and make a mess when you shoot it.'

'And maybe the Captain,' Khouri said. 'Except I don't think he'll be much of a consideration.'

'I asked how long,' Pascale said.

'If we're lucky, we might just reach Cerberus,' Volyova said. 'But it wouldn't give us much time

to scout around and have second thoughts. We'd have to get inside just to avoid the ship's weapons.

And even then we'd have to get pretty deep inside.' She dredged a clucking laugh from somewhere

inside herself. 'Maybe your husband had the right idea all along. He might be in a much safer

position than any of us. For the time being at least.'

Patterns resolved in the walls of the shaft, areas of crystal beginning to glow a little more intently

than the rest. The patterns were so vast that Sylveste did not immediately recognise them for what

they were: vast Amarantin graphicforms. It was not simply their size, in fact, but also the fact that

they were rendered differently from any he had seen before; almost another language entirely. In an

intuitive flash he realised that he was seeing the language used by the Banished; the flock which

had followed Sun Stealer into exile, and eventually to the stars. Tens of thousands of years spaced

this writing from any example he had ever seen, which made it even more of a miracle that he was

able to tease any sense out of it at all.

'What are they telling us?' Calvin asked.

'That we're not welcome,' Sylveste said, half astonished that the graphic forms spoke to him. 'To

put it mildly.'

Sajaki must have picked up his subvocalisation. 'What, exactly?'

'They're saying that they made this level,' Sylveste said. 'That they manufactured it.'

'I guess,' Calvin said, 'that you've finally been vindicated -- this place really was the handiwork of

the Amarantin.'

'In any other circumstances this would call for a drink,' Sylveste said, but he was only paying half

attention to the conversation now; fascinated by what he was reading; by the thoughts which were

springing into his mind. More than once he had felt this feeling when deep into the process of

translating Amarantin script, but never before with this fluency, or this sense of total certainty. It

was enthralling, and not a little terrifying.

'Please go on,' Sajaki said.

'Well, it's what I said: a warning. It's saying we shouldn't progress any further.'

'That probably means we're not far from what we came for.'

Sylveste had that feeling as well, though he could not justify it. 'The warning says there's

something below we shouldn't see,' he said.

'See? Is that what it says, literally?'

'Amarantin thought is very visual, Sajaki. Whatever it is, they don't want us anywhere near it.'

'Which suggests that whatever it is has value -- don't you agree?'

'What if it really is a warning?' Calvin said. 'I don't mean a threat; I mean a genuine heart-felt plea

to keep away. Can you tell from the context if that's the case?'

'If it was conventional Amarantin script, perhaps.' What Sylveste did not add was that he felt that

the message was exactly what Calvin had implied, though there was no way he could rationalise

that feeling. It did not deter him, though. Instead, he found himself wondering just what could have

driven the Amarantin to this; what was so bad that it had to be encased in a facsimile of a world and

defended by the most awesome weapons known to a civilisation? What was so unspeakable that it

could not simply be destroyed? What kind of monster had they created?

Or found?

The thought jarred home, seeming to find a vacant hole in his mind where it fitted precisely. As if

it belonged there. *They found something; Sun Stealer's flock. Far out on the edge of the system, they found something.*

He was still trying to deal with the certainty of that feeling when the closest of the graphicforms

detached from the shaft, leaving a hollow recess where it had been a second earlier. Others

followed; whole words, clauses and sentences unpeeled from the shaft and loomed around him, vast

as buildings, circling Sajaki and Sylveste with raptorial patience. They floated free, suspended by

some unguessable mechanism invisible to the suit defences; no gravitational or magnetic

fluctuation. For a moment Sylveste was stunned at the sheer alienness behind the objects, but then

he grasped that there was a kind of indisputable logic at play here. What made more sense than a

warning message which, when transgressed, enforced itself?

But suddenly there was no time for detached consideration.

'Suit defences to automatic,' Sajaki said, voice rising an octave only above his routine implacable

calm. 'I believe these things seek to crush us to death.'

As if he really needed telling.

The floating words had them spherically corralled now, and had commenced a ponderous

spiralling-in. Sylveste let his suit do its thing, visual shields snicking down to guard against the

retina-melting glare of plasma-bursts, all manual control modes temporarily

suspended. It was for

the best: the last thing his suit needed was a human being trying to do the job better than it could do.

Even with the dense shielding in place, Sylveste's vision was aflame with fireworks, photon events

triggering his circuits, and he knew that there must have been fryingly intense multi-spectrum

radiation just beyond the skin of his suit. He registered bucking surges of motion; episodes of

up/down thrust (he assumed) so intense that he passed in and out of consciousness like a train

threading a series of short mountain tunnels. He assumed that his suit was trying to cut and run, and

with each crushing deceleration was being thwarted.

Finally he blacked out long and hard.

Volyova ramped up the *Melancholia's* thrust, until it was nudging four gees of steady acceleration,

with intermittent random-swerves programmed in for extra effect, in case the lighthugger launched

any kinetics. It was the most they could withstand without protective suits or tabards; more than

was comfortable, especially for Pascale, who was even less accustomed to this sort of thing than

Khoury. It meant they could not leave their seats, and that movement of their arms had to be

restricted to a minimum. But they could speak, after a fashion, and even hold something

approximating a coherent discussion.

'You spoke to him, didn't you?' Khouri said. 'Sun Stealer. I could tell by the look on your face

when you rescued us from the rats in the infirmary. I'm right, aren't I?'

Volyova's voice sounded slightly choked, as if she were in the process of slow strangulation.

'If I had any doubts about your story, they vanished the instant I looked into his face. There was

never any question that I was confronting something alien. And I began to understand some of what

Boris Nagorny must have gone through.'

'What drove him mad, you mean.'

'Believe me, I think I'd have suffered something similar if I'd had that in my head. What worries

me, too, is that some of Boris might have corrupted Sun Stealer.'

'Then how do you think I feel?' Khouri asked. 'I have got that thing in my head.'

'No, you haven't.'

Volyova was shaking her head now, a gesture which verged on the reckless in the four-gee field.

'You had him in your head for a while, Khouri -- just long enough for him to crush what remained

of the Mademoiselle. But then he got out.'

'Got out when?'

'When Sajaki trawled you. It was my fault, I suppose. I should not have allowed him even to

switch on the trawl.' For someone admitting guilt she sounded remarkably devoid of repentance.

Perhaps for Volyova the act of admission was enough in itself. 'When your neural patterns were

scanned, Sun Stealer embedded himself in them and reached the trawl,
encoded in the data. From

there it was only a short hop to every other system in the ship.'

They absorbed that in silence, until Khouri said, 'Letting Sajaki do that wasn't
your smartest ever

move, Ilia.'

'No,' she said, as if the thought had only just struck her. 'I don't think it was.'

When he came round -- it might have been tens of seconds later, or tens of
minutes -- the visual

shields had retracted and he was falling unimpeded down the shaft. He
looked up, and though it was

now kilometres overhead, he saw the residual glow of their skirmish, the
shaft walls pocked and

scarred by energy impacts. Some of the words were still circling, but parts of
them had been

chipped off so that they no longer made much sense. As if in recognition that
their warning was

now hopelessly corrupted, the words seemed to have given up being
weapons. Even as he watched,

they were returning to their hollows, like sullen rooks returning to the
rookery.

But something was wrong.

Where was Sajaki?

'What the hell happened?' he asked, hoping that his suit would interpret the
query successfully.

'Where's he gone?'

'There was an engagement against an autonomous defence system,' the suit informed him, as if

commenting on the weather earlier that morning.

'Thank you, I realised that, but where's Sajaki?'

'His suit sustained critical damage during the evasive action. Crypted telemetry squirts indicate

extensive and possibly irreparable damage to both primary and secondary thrust units.'

'I said where is he?'

'His suit would not have been able to restrict his rate of fall or counteract Coriolis drift towards

the wall. Telemetry bursts indicate he is fifteen kilometres below and still falling, with a blueshift

relative to your position of one point one kilometres a second and climbing.'

'Still falling?'

'It is likely that, owing to the non-functionality of his thruster units, and the inability to deploy a

monofilament braking line at his current speed, he will fall until further descent is inhibited by the

termination of the shaft.'

'You mean he's going to die?'

'At his predicted terminal velocity, survival is excluded in all models except as an extreme

statistical outlier.'

'One chance in a million,' Calvin said.

Sylveste angled himself so that he was able to peer vertically down the shaft. Fifteen kilometres -

- more than seven times the shaft's echoless width. He looked and looked, all the while falling

himself... and thought that perhaps he saw a flash, once or twice, at the extreme limit of his vision.

He wondered if the flash had been the spark of friction, as Sajaki brushed against the walls in his

unstoppable descent. If he had seen it at all, it was fainter each time, and soon he stopped seeing

anything except the uninterrupted walls of the shaft.

THIRTY-SIX

Cerberus/Hades Orbit, 2567

'You learnt something,' Pascale said. 'Sun Stealer told you something. That's why you've been so

desperate to stop him ever since.'

She was addressing Volyova, who had begun to feel slightly less vulnerable once the shuttle had

passed turnover, midway between Cerberus and the point where she had increased the thrust to four

gees. Now, with the drive flame pointing away from the pursuing lighthugger, they would make a

far less conspicuous target. The downside of this, of course, was that the drive flame was now

wafting towards Cerberus, and might be interpreted as a sign of hostility by the planet itself, if it

had not already got the message that its recent human visitors did not necessarily have its best

interests at heart.

But there was nothing any of them could do about that.

The lighthugger was sustaining a comfortable six gees now; enough to steadily whittle the

distance down, bringing it within kill-range of the shuttle in five hours. Sun Stealer could have

pushed the ship faster, which suggested to her that he was still cautiously exploring the limits of the

drive. It was not, she thought, that he particularly cared about his own survival, but if the

lighthugger was destroyed, the bridgehead would quickly follow. And although Sylveste was now

inside, perhaps the alien needed to know that the objective had been achieved, which presumably

required the prolonged opening of the crustal breach, so that some signal could return to outside

space. She did not believe for one instant that Sylveste's safe return had any place in Sun Stealer's

plans.

'Was it what the Mademoiselle showed me?' Khouri asked. After hours of sustained gee-load, her

voice sounded like someone after a heavy drinking session. 'The thing I could never get quite right

in my head -- was it that?'

'I don't think we'll ever know for sure,' Volyova said. 'All I know is what he showed me. I believe

it was the truth -- but I doubt that we'll ever know for sure.'

'You could start by telling me what it was,' Pascale said. 'Seeing as I'm the one among us who

definitely doesn't know. Then you can fight over the details between yourselves.'

The console chimed, as it had done once or twice in the last few hours, signifying that a radar

beam had just swept across them from aft, directed from the lighthugger. For the moment, it was not

especially valuable data, since light-travel delay between the ship and the shuttle was still in the

order of seconds, long enough for the shuttle to displace itself from its radar-tagged position with a

burst of lateral thrust. But it was unnerving, since it confirmed that the lighthugger was indeed

chasing them, and that it was indeed attempting to get a sufficiently accurate positional fix to justify

opening fire. It would be hours before that situation came to pass, but the machine's intent was

grimly obvious.

'I'll start with what I know,' Volyova said, drawing in a generous inhalation of breath. 'Once, the

galaxy was a lot more populous than it is now. Millions of cultures, though only a handful of big

players. In fact, just the way all the predictive models say the galaxy ought to be today, based on the

occurrence rates of G-type stars and terrestrial planets in the right orbits for liquid water.' She was

digressing, but Pascale and Khouri decided not to fight it. 'That's always been a major paradox, you

know. On paper, life looks a lot commoner than we find it to be. Theories for the developmental

timescales for tool-using intelligence are a lot harder to quantify, but they suffer from much the

same problem. They predict too many cultures.'

'Hence the Fermi paradox,' Pascale said.

'The what?' asked Khouri.

'The old dichotomy between the relative ease of interstellar flight, especially for robotic envoys --

and the complete absence of any such envoys turning up from non-human cultures. The only logical

conclusion was that no one else was around to send them, anywhere in the galaxy.'

'But the galaxy's a big place,' Khouri said. 'Couldn't there be cultures

elsewhere, except that we

just don't know about them yet?'

'Doesn't work,' Volyova said emphatically, Pascale nodding in agreement.
'The galaxy's big, but

not that big -- and it's also very old. Once a single culture decided to send out probes, everyone else

in the galaxy would know about it within a few million years. And the galaxy happens to be several

thousand times older than that. Granted, several generations of stars had to live and die before there

were enough heavy elements to sustain life, but even if machine-building cultures only arise once

every million years or so, they've had thousands of opportunities to dominate the entire galaxy.'

'To which there have always been two answers,' Pascale said. 'Firstly, that they are here, but we

just haven't ever noticed them. Maybe that was conceivable a few hundred years ago, but no one

takes it seriously now; not when every square inch of every asteroid belt in about a hundred systems

has been mapped.'

'Then maybe they never existed in the first place?'

Pascale nodded at Khouri. 'Which was perfectly tenable until we knew more about the galaxy,

which begins to look suspiciously accommodating of life, at least in the

essentials; what Volyova

just said -- the right types of stars, and the right kind of planets in the right places. And the

biological models were still arguing for a higher occurrence rate, right on up to intelligent cultures.'

'So the models were wrong,' Khouri said.

'Except they probably weren't.' Volyova was speaking now. 'Once we got into space, once we left

the First System, we began to find dead cultures all over the place. None had survived until much

more recently than a million years ago, and some had gone out a lot earlier than that. But they all

pointed to one thing. The galaxy had been a lot more fecund in the past. So why not now? Why was

it suddenly so lonely?'

'The war,' Khouri said, and for a moment no one spoke. The silence was only interrupted when

Volyova began speaking, softly and reverently, as if they were discussing something sacred.

'Yes,' she said. 'The Dawn War -- that was what they called it, wasn't it?'

'I remembered that much.'

'When was this?' Pascale asked, and for a moment Volyova sympathised with her, caught

between two who had been vouchsafed glimpses of something extraordinary, and who were less

interested in adumbrating the whole of it than in exploring each other's ignorances, shoring up each

other's doubts and misconceptions. But Pascale knew none of it; not yet.

'It was a billion years ago,' Khouri said, and for a moment Volyova let her speak without

interruption. 'And it sucked up all those cultures and spat them out in shapes and forms a lot

different to the ones they'd had when they went in. I don't think we can really understand what it

was about, or who or what exactly survived it -- except that they were more like machines than

living creatures, although as far beyond anything we can envisage as our machines are beyond stone

tools. But they had a name, or they were given it -- I don't really remember the details. But I do

remember the name.'

'The Inhibitors,' Volyova said.

Khouri nodded. 'And they deserved it.'

'Why?'

'It was what they did afterwards,' Khouri said. 'Not during the war, but in its aftermath. It was like

they subscribed to a creed; a rule of discipline. Intelligent, organic life had given rise to the Dawn

War. What they were now was something different; post-intelligent, I guess. Anyway, it made what

they did a lot easier.'

'Which was?'

'Inhibition. Literally: they inhibited the rise of intelligent cultures around the galaxy, so that

nothing like the Dawn War could ever happen again.'

Volyova took over now. 'It wasn't just a case of annihilating any extant cultures which might

have survived war. They also set about disturbing the conditions which could lead to intelligent life

ever arising again. Not stellar engineering -- I think that would have been too great an interference;

too much an act which contradicted their own strictures -- but inhibition on a lesser scale. They

could have done it without tampering in the evolution of a single star, except in extreme cases -- by

altering cometary orbits, for instance, so that episodes of planetary bombardment lasted much

longer than the norm. Life probably would have found niches in which to survive -- deep

underground, or around hydrothermal vents -- but it would never have become very complex.

Certainly nothing which would threaten the Inhibitors.'

'You said this was a billion years ago,' Pascale said. 'And yet we've come all that way since then -

- from single-celled creatures right up to *Homo sapiens*. Are you saying we

slipped through the

net?'

'Exactly that,' Volyova said. 'Because the net was falling apart.'

Khouri nodded. 'The Inhibitors seeded the galaxy with machines, designed to detect the

emergence of life and then suppress it. For a long time it looked like they worked as planned --

that's why the galaxy isn't teeming today, although all the preconditions look favourable.' She shook

her head. 'I sound like I actually know this stuff.'

'Maybe you do,' Pascale said. 'In any case, I want to hear what you have to say. All of it.'

'All right, all right.' Khouri fidgeted in her acceleration couch, doubtless trying to do what

Volyova had been doing for the last hour: avoiding putting pressure on the bruises she had already

gained. 'Their machines worked fine for a few hundred million years,' she said. 'But then stuff

started to go wrong. They started failing; not working as efficiently as intended. Intelligent cultures

began to emerge which would have previously been suppressed at birth.'

There was a look on Pascale's face which showed that she had just made a connection. 'Like the

Amarantin...'

'Just like the Amarantin. They weren't the only culture to slip through the net, but they did happen

to lie close to us in the galaxy, which is why what happened to them has had such an... impact on

us.' Volyova was doing the talking now. 'Maybe there should have been an Inhibition device

keeping a close watch on Resurgam, but that one either never existed or stopped working long

before they emerged to intelligence. So they ascended to civilisation, and later budded off a

starfaring sub-species -- all without attracting the attention of the Inhibitors.'

'Sun Stealer.'

'Yes. He took the Banished with him into space -- changed them biologically and mentally, until

they had little but their ancestry and language in common with the Amarantin who had stayed at

home. And of course they explored, reaching out into their solar system, and later to its periphery.'

'Where they found...' Pascale nodded at the image of Hades and Cerberus.

'This. Is that what

you're saying?'

Khoury nodded in agreement, and then began to explain the rest; what little there was to relate.

Sylveste fell and fell, and in his falling he hardly bothered to note the passing of time. Finally there

came a point where more than two hundred kilometres of the shaft reached above his head; barely a

few kilometres lay below his feet. Twinkling lights shone below, arranged into constellation-like

patterns, and for an instant he entertained the idea that he had travelled much further than seemed

possible, and these lights were actually stars, and that he was on the point of leaving Cerberus

completely. But the thought died as soon as it had come to mind. There was something just a little

too regular about the way the lights were aligned, just a little too purposeful; a little too pregnant

with intelligent design.

He dropped out of the shaft into emptiness as, much earlier, he had passed out of the bridgehead.

As then, he found himself falling through a tremendous unoccupied volume, but this chamber

seemed very much larger than the one immediately below the crust. No gnarled tree-trunks rose up

from a crystal floor to support the ceiling over his head, and he doubted that any lay beyond the

immediate curvature of the horizon. Yet there was a floor below him, and it must have been that the

ceiling was unsupported, thrown around the entire volume of the world-within-a-world below,

suspended only by the preposterous counter-balancing of its own

gravitational infall, or something

beyond Sylveste's imagination. Whatever; he was dropping now towards the starred floor tens of

kilometres below.

It was not difficult, finding Sajaki's suit; not once Sylveste had begun that lonely descent. His own

still-functioning suit did all that was required, locking onto the signature of its fallen companion

(something of which must therefore have survived) and then directing Sylveste's fall towards it,

bringing him down only tens of metres from the spot where Sajaki had fallen. The Triumvir had hit

fast; that much was obvious. But then there were few other options if one had to accept an

uncontrolled fall from two hundred kilometres up. He appeared to have partially buried himself in

the metallic floor, before undergoing a bounce which had resulted in his final resting position being

face down.

Sylveste had not been expecting to find Sajaki alive, but the mangled contours of his suit were

still shocking; rather as if it were a china doll which had been subjected to some terrible temper

tantrum by a malevolent child. The suit was gashed and scarred and discoloured, damage which had

probably happened during the battle and Sajaki's subsequent grazing fall, as the Coriolis force

knocked him repeatedly against the shaft walls.

Sylveste moved him onto his back, using his own suit's amplification to ease the process. He

knew that what he would be confronted with would not be pleasant, but that it was nonetheless

something he had to endure so he could press on; the closing of a mental chapter. He had seldom

felt anything but antipathy towards Sajaki, alleviated by a forced respect for the man's cleverness

and the sheer bloody-minded stubbornness with which he had sought Sylveste across all the

decades. It was nothing remotely resembling friendship; merely the craftsmanlike appreciation for a

piece of equipment which did its job exceptionally well. That was Sajaki, Sylveste thought: a well-

honed tool; shaped admirably towards one end and one end only.

The suit's faceplate was riven by a thumb-wide crack. Something drew Sylveste forward,

kneeling until his own head was next to that of the dead Triumvir.

'I'm sorry it had to end like this,' he said. 'I can't say we were ever friends, Yuuji -- but I suppose

in the end I wanted you to see what lay ahead as much as I did. I think you'd have appreciated it.'

And then he saw that the suit was empty; that all it had ever been was a shell.

This was what Khouri knew.

The Banished had reached the edge of the solar system, thousands of years after their exile from

mainstream Amarantin culture. It was in the nature of things that they progressed slowly, since it

was not simply technological limits against which they were pushing. They were also ramming

against the constraints of their own psychology, barriers no less impervious.

The Banished, at first, still retained the flock instincts of their brethren. They had evolved into a

society highly dependent on visual modes of communication; highly organised into large

collectives, where the individual was of less importance than the whole. Displaced from its position

in a flock, a single Amarantin underwent a kind of psychosis; the equivalent of massive sensory

deprivation. Even small groupings were not enough to assuage that terror, which meant that

Amarantin culture was extremely stable; extremely resilient against internal plots and treason. But it

also meant that the Banished were, by their very isolation, consigned to a kind of insanity.

So they accepted this, and worked with it. They changed themselves; cultured sociopathy. In only

a few hundred generations the Banished had stopped being a flock at all, but had fragmented into

dozens of specialised clades, each tuned to a particular strain of madness. Or what would have been

seen as madness by those who had stayed at home...

The ability to function in smaller groups enabled the Banished to probe further from Resurgam,

out of the immediate volume of light-limited communication. The more psychotic individuals

reached even further from the sun, until they found Hades and the odd, troubling planet which

orbited it. By this time the Banished had gone through the same philosophical hoops which

Volyova and Pascale had just summarised for Khouri's benefit. How the galaxy should have been a

busier place than it really was, if their ideas were correct -- which, as a consequence, was probably

not the case. They had listened in the radio, optical, gravitational and neutrino bands for the voices

of other cultures, others like them, but had heard nothing. Some of the more adventurous among

them -- or the more deranged, depending on one's point of view -- had even left the system entirely,

and had found nothing of great consequence to report back to home: a few ruins here and there

(enigmatic) and a puzzling sludge-like organism which hinted at

organisational sophistication,

encountered on a handful of aquatic planets, as if it had been placed there.

But all of this became incidental when they found the thing around Hades.

It was, beyond any possible doubt, artefactual. It had been placed there by another civilisation,

uncountable millions of years in the past. It seemed to actively invite them to enter its mysteries. So

they began to explore it.

And that was when their problems began.

'It was an Inhibitor device,' Pascale said. 'That was what they found, wasn't it?'

'It had been waiting there for millions of years,' Khouri said. 'All the time they were evolving

from what we'd think of as dinosaurs, or birds. All the time they spent reaching towards

intelligence; learning to use tools; discovering fire...'

'Just waiting,' Volyova echoed. Behind her, the tactical display had been pulsing red for many

minutes now, indicating that the shuttle had now fallen within the theoretical maximum range of the

lighthugger's beam weapons. A kill at this distance would be difficult but not impossible, and

neither would it be swift. She continued, 'Waiting for something recognisably intelligent to enter its

vicinity -- at which point it doesn't strike out mindlessly; doesn't destroy them. Because that would

defeat the point. What it does is encourage them in, so it can learn as much about them as possible.

Where they come from. What kind of technology they have, how they think, how they co-operate

and communicate.'

'Gathering intelligence.'

'Yes.' Volyova's voice was as dolorous as a church bell. 'It's patient, you see. But sooner or later

there comes a point when it decides that it has all the intelligence it needs. And then -- only then --

it acts.'

Now the three of them were on common ground. 'Which is why the Amarantin died out,' Pascale

said, wonderingly. 'It did something to their sun; tampered with it, triggered something like a vast

coronal mass ejection; just enough to scour Resurgam clean of life, and cause a phase of cometary-

infall for a few hundred thousand years.'

'Ordinarily the Inhibitors wouldn't go to such drastic lengths,' Volyova said. 'But in this case

they'd left it far too late for anything less. And even that wasn't sufficient, of course; the Banished

were already spaceborn. They had to be hunted down; across tens of

lightyears, if necessary.'

Again there was a chime from the hull sensors, warning of a directed radar scan. Another chime

followed soon after; evidence that the pursuing ship was narrowing its focus.

'The Inhibitor device around Hades must have alerted others, elsewhere,' Khouri said, trying to

ignore the mechanised prophecies of imminent doom. 'Transmitted the intelligence it had gathered,

warning them to be on the lookout for the Banished.'

'It can't have simply been a case of sitting around waiting for them to show up,' Volyova said.

'The machines must have switched over from passivity to something more active -- replicating

hunting machines, for instance, programmed with the templates of the Banished. No matter which

direction the Banished turned to flee, light would have outraced them, and Inhibitor systems would

always be one step ahead, alert and waiting.'

'They wouldn't have stood a chance.'

'But it can't have been instantaneous extinction,' Pascale said. 'The Banished had time to return to

Resurgam; time to preserve what they could of the old culture. Even if they knew they were being

hunted down, and that the sun was in the process of destroying their homeworld.'

'Maybe it took ten years; maybe a century.' The way Volyova spoke, it was obvious she didn't

think it made a great deal of difference. 'All we know is that some managed to get further than

others.'

'But none survived,' Pascale said. 'Did they?'

'Some did,' Khouri said. 'In a manner of speaking.'

Behind Volyova, the tactical display began to shriek.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Cerberus Interior, 2567

The final shell was hollow.

It had taken him three days to reach it; a day since he had left Sajaki's bodyless suit on the floor

of the third shell, more than five hundred kilometres above him now. If he stopped to think about

those distances, he knew, he would go quietly mad, so he carefully quarantined them from his

thoughts. Simply being in an entirely alien environment was troubling enough; he did not wish to

compound his fear with an additional dose of claustrophobia. Yet his quarantining was not

complete, so that behind every thought there was a nagging background of crushing fright, the

thought that at any instant some action he did would cause the delicate

equilibria of this place to

shift catastrophically, bringing down that vast, impossible ceiling.

With each inward layer he seemed to pass through a subtly different phase of Amarantin

construction methodology. History, too, he supposed -- but nothing was ever that simple. The levels

did not seem to get systematically more or less advanced as he penetrated deeper, but rather evinced

different philosophies; different approaches. It was as if the first Amarantin to arrive here had found

something (what, he had not yet begun to guess) and had taken the decision to englobe it in an

artificial shell armoured and capable of defending itself. Then another group must have arrived and

elected to englobe that, perhaps because they believed their fortifications were more secure. The last

of all had taken the process one logical step further, by camouflaging their fortifications so that they

did not resemble anything artificial at all. It was impossible to guess over what timescales this

layering had taken place, so he studiously avoided doing so. Maybe the different layers had been

emplaced almost simultaneously -- or perhaps the process had been drawn out over the thousands of

years between Sun Stealer's departure with the Banished Ones, and his godlike return.

Naturally, he had been less than comforted by what he found in Sajaki's suit.

'He was never there,' Calvin said, filling in his thoughts. 'All the while you thought he was in the

suit, he wasn't. The suit was empty. No wonder he never let you get too close.'

'Sneaky bastard.'

'I'll say. But it wasn't actually Sajaki being a sneaky bastard, was it?'

Sylveste was desperately trying to find another way to explain this paradox, but was failing at

every attempt. 'But if not Sajaki...' He trailed off, remembering how he had not actually seen the

Triumvir in person before they departed the ship. Sajaki had called him from the clinic, but he had

no reason to believe that had really been Sajaki.

'Listen, something was driving that suit until it crashed.' Calvin was doing his favourite trick of

sounding absurdly calm, despite the situation. But he lacked the usual bravado. 'I'd say there's only

one logical culprit.'

'Sun Stealer.' Sylveste said the words experimentally, testing the idea for its repulsiveness. It was

no less bitter than he had imagined it would be. 'It was him, wasn't it? Khouri had it right all along.'

'I'd say that at this juncture we'd be staggeringly foolish to reject that hypothesis. Do you want me

to continue?'

'No,' Sylveste said. 'Not just yet. Give me a moment to think things through, then you can inflict

all the pious wisdom on me you see fit.'

'What's there to think through?'

'I'd have thought it was obvious. Whether we go on or not.'

The decision had not been one of the simpler ones in his life. Now he knew that, for all or part of

this, he had been manipulated. How deep had that manipulation gone? Had it extended to his very

powers of reason? Had his thought processes been subjugated towards this one end for most of his

life in fact, since returning from Lascaille's Shroud? Had he really died out there, and returned to

Yellowstone as some kind of automaton, acting and feeling like his old self, but really directed

towards one goal only, which was now on the point of being achieved? And did it honestly matter?

After all, no matter which way he cut it, no matter how false these feelings were, no matter how

irrational the logic, this was the place he had always wanted to be.

He could not go back; not yet.

Not until he knew.

' *Svinoi* pig-dog,' Volyova said.

The first graser burst had hit the nose of the shuttle thirty seconds after the tactical attack siren

had begun to shriek; barely enough time to throw off a cloud of ablative chaff, designed to dissipate

the initial energies of the incoming gamma-ray photons. Just before the flightdeck windows

rendered themselves opaque, Volyova saw a silver flash, as sacrificial hull armour vanished in a

gasp of excited metal ions. The structural shock rammed through the fuselage like a concussion

charge. More sirens joined in the threnody, and a vast acreage of the tactical display switched over

to offensive mode, graphing up weapons readiness data.

Useless; all of it useless. The *Melancholia's* defences were simply too small-scale, too short-

range, to have any chance against the pursuing megatonnage of the lighthugger. Hardly surprising;

some of the *Infinity's* guns were larger than the shuttle, and those were probably the ones that it had

not yet bothered deploying.

Cerberus was a grey immensity, filling a third of the sky from the shuttle's perspective. By now

they should be decelerating, yet they were busy wasting precious seconds being fried. Even if they

fought off the attack, they would be moving uncomfortably fast...

More of the hull vaporised.

She let her fingers do the talking, typing in a programmed evasive pattern that would

undoubtedly get them out of the immediate focus of the graser onslaught. The only trouble was, it

depended on sustaining thrust at ten gees.

She executed the routine, and almost immediately blacked out.

The chamber was hollow, but not empty.

Three hundred kilometres wide, Sylveste guessed it to be, though that was sheer guesswork,

because his suit radar stubbornly refused to come up with a consistent distance for the diameter of

the chamber, no matter how many readings he asked it to make. No doubt what was in the middle of

the chamber was causing his suit difficulty. He could understand that. The thing was causing him

difficulty as well, though in perhaps not quite the same way. It was giving him a headache.

In fact, there were two of them, and he wasn't sure which was the stranger. They were moving, or

rather one of them was, locked in orbit around the other. The one that moved was like a gem, but it

was a gem so complicated, and so constantly in flux, that it was impossible to describe its shape, or

even its colour and lustre from moment to moment. All he knew was that it

was large -- tens of

kilometres wide, it seemed -- but again, when he asked the suit to confirm this, it was unable to give

him a coherent reply. He might as well have asked the suit to comment on the subtext of a piece of

free-form haiku, for all the sense it gave him.

He tried to enlarge it with his eyes' zoom faculty, but it seemed to defy enlargement, if anything

growing smaller when he examined it under magnification. Something seriously strange had

happened to spacetime in the vicinity of that jewel.

Next, he tried to record a snapshot of it using his eyes' image capture facility, but that failed as

well, and what the image showed was something paradoxically more blurred than what he appeared

to see in realtime, as if the object were changing more rapidly on small timescales -- more

thoroughly -- than on timescales of seconds or longer. He tried to hold this concept in his head and

for a moment thought he might have succeeded, but the illusion of understanding was only fleeting.

And the other thing...

The other thing, the stationary thing... if anything, this was worse.

It was like a gash in reality, a gaping hole from which erupted white light from the mouth of

infinity. The light was intense, more intense and pure than any he had known or dreamt of -- like

the light which the near-dead spoke of, beckoning them to the afterlife. He too felt the light was

beckoning. It was so bright he should have been blinded. But the more he looked into its fulgent

depths, the less it seemed to glare; the more it became only a tranquil, fathomless whiteness.

The light refracted through the orbiting gem, casting varicoloured, constantly shifting slabs of

illumination on the chamber walls. It was beautiful; intense and ever-shifting, beguiling.

'At this point,' Calvin said, 'I think a little humility may be in order. You're impressed, aren't

you?'

'Of course.' If he spoke, he did not hear his own words. But Calvin seemed to understand.

'And this is enough, isn't it? I mean, now you know what it was they had to conceal from us.

Something so strange... God only knows what it is...'

'Perhaps that's just what it is. God.'

'Staring into that light, I almost believe you.'

'You feel it too, is that what you're saying?'

'I'm not sure what I feel. I'm not sure I like it, either.'

Sylveste said, 'Do you think they made this, or was it something they happened to find?'

'This is a first -- you asking my opinion.' Calvin seemed to deliberate, but his answer was hardly

surprising when it came. 'They never made this, Dan. They were clever -- maybe even cleverer than

us. But the Amarantin were never gods.'

'Someone else, then.'

'Someone I hope we never meet.'

'Then hold your breath, because for all I know, we're about to.'

Weightless, he jetted the suit into the chamber, towards the dancing jewel and the source of

searingly beautiful light.

When Volyova came around, it was to the sound of the radar warning siren, which meant that the

Infinity was preparing to re-aim its grasers. It would not take it more than a few seconds to do so,

even allowing for her random-walk evasive manoeuvre. She glanced at the hull health indicator and

saw that they were down to only a few remaining millimetres of sacrificial metal, that the chaff

throwers were depleted, and that -- realistically -- they could withstand no more than one or two

additional bursts of graser-strike.

'Are we still here?' Khouri asked, seemingly astonished that she was even capable of framing the question.

One more strike and the hull would start outgassing in a dozen places, if it did not spontaneously

vaporise. It was hot now; noticeably. The heat of the first few sweeps had been efficiently

dissipated, but the last one had not been so easily parried, and its lethal warming energies had

seeped inwards.

'Get to the spider-room,' Volyova shouted, momentarily throttling down the thrust to permit

locomotion around the ship. 'The insulation will enable you to survive another few strikes.'

'No!' Khouri was shouting now. 'We can't! At least here we've got a chance!'

'She's right,' Pascale said.

'You'll still have one in the spider-room,' Volyova said. 'Better, in fact. It's a smaller target, for

one. I'm guessing the ship will direct its weapons against the shuttle in preference, or it may not

even realise that the spider-room is anything but wreckage.'

'But what about you?'

She was angry now. 'Do you think I'm the type to indulge in heroics, Khouri? I'm coming too;

with or without you. But I have to program a flight pattern into the shuttle first -- unless you think

you can do it.'

Khouri hesitated, as if the idea was not totally absurd. Then she unbuckled from her couch,

jabbed a thumb towards Pascale and began moving, as if her life depended on it.

Which, rationally, it probably did.

Volyova did what she had promised she would do, inputting the most hair-raising evasive pattern

she could imagine, one that she was not even sure she or her companions would be capable of

surviving, with peak bursts exceeding fifteen gees for whole seconds. But did it really matter now?

Somehow, the idea of dying while already unconscious, in the warm, muggy torpor of gee-induced

blackout, was preferable to being burned alive, in vacuum, in the invisible heat of gamma-rays.

Grabbing the helmet she had worn when she boarded the shuttle, she prepared to join the others,

mentally counting down until the initiation of the evasive pattern.

Khouri was halfway across to the waiting spider-room when she felt the wave of heat slap across

her face, followed by the dreadful sound of the hull giving up its final ghost. The illumination in the

cargo bay was gone now, as the *Melancholia*'s energy grid collapsed under the onslaught of the

attack. But the spider-room's interior was still powered up, its implausibly plush decor visible

through the observation windows.

'Get in!' she shouted to Pascale, and although the noise of the ship's death-throes was now

tremendous, like a concerto played on scrap metal, somehow Sylveste's wife heard what she said

and clambered into the spider-room, just as a tremendous shock wave slammed through the hull (or

what remained of it), and the spider-room exploded free of the moorings in which it had been

locked by Volyova's servitors.

Now there was a terrible howl of escaping air from elsewhere in the shuttle, and suddenly Khouri

felt it tug against her, resisting her forward progress. The spider-room twisted and turned, its legs

thrashing wildly, randomly. She could see Pascale now, in the observation window, but there was

nothing the woman could do to help; she understood the room's controls even less comprehensively

than Khouri.

She looked behind, hoping and praying that she would see Volyova there, having followed them,

and that she would know what to do, but there was nothing except empty access corridor, and that

awful sucking stream of escaping air.

'Ilia...'

The damned fool had done just what they'd feared; stayed behind, for all that she had denied that

she would.

With what little light remained, she saw the hull quiver, like a sounding-board. And then

suddenly the gale that was pulling her away from the spider-room lost its strength; counter-balanced

by an equally fierce decompression halfway across the cargo bay. She looked towards it, eyes

already veiling over as the cold hit them, and then she was falling towards the gap where only a

second earlier there had been metal----

'Where the----'

But almost as soon as she had opened her mouth, Khouri knew where she was, which was inside

the spider-room. There was no mistaking the place; not after all the time she had spent in it. And it

felt comfortable; warm and safe and silent; a universe away from where she had been up to the

point when she could not remember anything more. Her hands hurt; hurt rather a lot, in fact -- but

apart from that, she felt better than she imagined she had any right to feel; not when her last

memory had been of falling towards naked space, from the womb of a dying ship...

'We made it,' Pascale said, although something in her voice sounded anything but triumphant,

'Don't try to move; not just yet -- you've burnt your hands rather badly.'

'Burnt them?' Khouri was lying on one of the velvet couches which stretched along either wall of

the room, head against the curved cushioned-brass end-piece. 'What happened?'

'You hit the spider-room; the draught pulled you towards it. I don't know how, but you managed

to climb around the outside to the airlock. You were breathing vacuum for five or six seconds at

least. The metal cooled so quickly that you got frost-burns where your hands touched it.'

'I don't remember any of that.' But she only had to look at the evidence of her palms to see that it

must have been true.

'You blacked out as soon as you came aboard. I don't blame you.'

There was still that utterly uncelebratory tone in her voice, as if all that Khouri had done had

been pointless. And Khouri thought: she was probably right. The best that could happen to them

was that they would somehow find a way to land the spider-room on Cerberus, and then see how

long they could take their chances against the crustal defences. It would be interesting, if nothing

else. And if not that, she supposed, then a slow wait until either the lighthugger found them and

picked them off, or they died of cold or asphyxia, when their reserves expired. She racked her

memory, trying to recall how long Volyova had said the spider-room was capable of surviving on

its own.

'Ilia...'

'She didn't make it in time,' Pascale said. 'She died. I saw it happen. The second you were aboard,

the shuttle just exploded.'

'You think Volyova made it happen deliberately, so that we'd at least have a chance? So we'd be

mistaken for wreckage, as she said?'

'If so, I suppose we owe her thanks.'

Khoury slipped off her jacket, removed her shirt, slipped her jacket back on again and then tore

the shirt into narrow strips with which she then bound her black, blistered palms. They hurt like

hell, but it was nothing worse than the kind of pain she had known during training, from rope burns

or carrying heavy artillery. She gritted her teeth and, while acknowledging it, put the pain

somewhere beyond her immediate concerns.

Which, now she had to focus on them, made the prospect of submerging herself in the pain

somewhat more tempting. But she resisted. She had to at least acknowledge her predicament, even

if there was nothing obvious she could do about it. She had to know how it was going to happen, as

it surely would.

'We're going to die, aren't we?'

Pascale Sylveste nodded. 'But not the way you're thinking, I'm willing to bet.'

'You mean we don't land on Cerberus?'

'No; not even if we knew how to operate this thing. We're not going to hit it either, and I think

our velocity's too high for us to go into any kind of orbit around it.'

Now that Pascale mentioned it, the hemisphere of Cerberus through the observation windows

looked further away than it had appeared prior to the attack against the shuttle. They must have

slammed past the world with the velocity which had not been negated from the shuttle's approach

pattern, hundreds of kilometres a second.

'So what happens now?'

'I'm only guessing,' Pascale said, 'but I think we're falling towards Hades.' She nodded at the

forward observation window, at the pinprick of red light ahead of them. 'It seems to be in roughly

the right direction, doesn't it?'

Khoury did not need to be told that Hades was a neutron star, any more than she needed to be told

that there was no such thing as a safe close encounter with one. You either kept well away or you

died; those were the rules, and there was no force in the universe capable of negating them. Gravity

ruled, and gravity did not take into account circumstances, or the unfairness of things, or listen to

eleventh-hour petitions before reluctantly repealing its laws. Gravity crushed, and near the surface

of a neutron star gravity crushed absolutely, until diamond flowed like water; until a mountain

collapsed into a millionth of its height. It was not even necessary to get close to suffer those

crushing forces.

A few hundred thousand kilometres would be more than sufficient.

'Yes,' Khoury said. 'I think you're right. And that's not good.'

'No,' Pascale said. 'I rather imagined it wasn't.'

THIRTY-EIGHT

Cerberus Interior, 2567

Sylveste thought of it as the chamber of miracles.

It seemed appropriate: he had been here less than an hour (he assumed, though he had long since

ceased paying much attention to time) and in that period he had seen nothing that was less than

miraculous, and much for which the term itself seemed mildly insufficient. Somehow he knew that

a lifetime would not be sufficient to encompass a fraction of what this place contained; what it was.

He had felt like this before, on glimpsing some vista of tremendous potential knowledge not yet

learnt, not yet codified and shaped into theory. But he knew that those previous occasions had been

pale foreshadowings of what he felt now.

He had no more than hours here, before any chance of return was dashed. What could he do in a

matter of hours? Very little, rationally, but he did have the recording systems of the suit, and his

eyes, and he knew he had to try. History would not forgive him if he did anything less. More

importantly, he would never forgive himself.

He jettied his suit towards the centre of the chamber, towards the two objects which snared his

attention; the gash of transcendent light and the jewel-like thing which

rotated around it. As he

approached, the walls of the chamber began to move, as if he were being sucked into the rotational

frame of the objects; as if space itself were being drawn into an eddy; as if the nature of space were

in flux. His suit told him as much, chirruping with detailed analyses of the way the substrate was

altering; quantum indices ticking towards unexplored new realms. He remembered something

similar on the way in to Lascaille's Shroud. As then, he felt normal enough, as if his whole being

were in the process of being transcribed, transliterated, the closer he came to the jewel and its

radiant partner.

It took hours to reach it, and he began to doubt that his initial estimate of the diameter of the

chamber had been accurate. But, inexorably, the apparent rate of revolution of the jewel dropped to

zero, until the chamber walls were spinning dizzily. He knew then that he had to be close, although

the jewel did not seem very much larger than when he had first glimpsed it. Still it was in constant

motion, reminding him of a child's kaleidoscope, the ever-shifting symmetric patterns revealed by

coloured glints of light, but extended to three (and possibly more) dimensions. Occasionally the

thing threw out spires or spikes which reached threateningly towards him, causing him to flinch, but

he held his ground and even allowed himself to drift closer in the moments when it seemed to shift

into a phase of relatively low-level transformation. He sensed that his survival did not depend on

closely watching the readouts of his suit. He was beyond such simplicities.

'What do you think it is?' Calvin asked, his voice so low that it almost merged with Sylveste's

own thoughts, almost *was* one of Sylveste's own thoughts.

'I was hoping you'd have some suggestions.'

'Sorry; all out of shattering insights. Too many for one lifetime.'

Volyova drifted in space.

She had not died when the *Melancholia* went up, though she had not managed to make it to the

spider-room in time. What she had done was don her helmet just before the hull whispered away,

like a moth's wing against a candle. Falling away from the wreckage, she had not been targeted by

the lighthugger. It had ignored her; just as it ignored the spider-room.

She could not simply die. That was emphatically not her style. And though she knew that her

chances of survival were statistically negligible, and that what she was doing was entirely bereft of

logic, she had to prolong the hours she had left. She scanned her air and power reserves and saw

that they were not good; not good at all. She had taken the suit hastily, thinking that the only use

she would have for it was to reach the shuttle across the hangar. She had not even had the presence

of mind to hook it up to one of the recharging modules aboard the shuttle during their flight. That at

least would have bought her a few days, rather than the fraction of a day she now faced. Yet,

perversely, she did not simply arrange to end things immediately. She knew she could make the

reserves last longer if she slept when consciousness was not required (assuming, of course, that she

ever had any further use for it).

So she programmed the suit to drift, telling it to alert her only if something interesting -- or, more

probably, threatening -- happened. And now, because she had woken, something evidently had.

She asked the suit what it was.

The suit told her.

'Shit,' Ilia Volyova said.

The *Infinity's* radar had just swept across her; the same radar which it had used against the

shuttle, just before deploying its gamma-ray weapon. And it had done so with

an intensity which

suggested that the ship was in her immediate neighbourhood; no more than a few tens of thousands

of kilometres away; not even spitting distance when it came to picking off a target as large,

defenceless, static and conspicuous as she now was.

She hoped the ship would have the good grace to finish her off with something swift. After all,

there was a very high likelihood that whatever it chose to use against her would be a system she had

designed herself.

Not for the first time, she cursed her ingenuity.

Volyova enabled the suit's binocular overlay and began sweeping the starfield from which the

targeting radar had projected. At first she saw only blackness and stars -- and then the ship, tiny as a

chip of coal, but edging closer with every second.

'It's not Amarantin, is it? We agree on that.'

'The jewel, you mean?'

'Whatever it is. And I don't think they were responsible for the light, whatever that is.'

'No. That's not their handiwork either.' Sylveste realised now that he was deeply grateful for

Calvin's presence, no matter how illusory it was; no matter how much it was

a deception. 'Whatever

these things are -- whatever their relationship to each other -- the Amarantin just found them.'

'I think you're right.'

'Maybe they didn't even understand what they had found -- not properly, anyway. But for one

reason or another they had to enclose it; had to hide it from the rest of the universe.'

'Jealousy?'

'Perhaps. But that wouldn't explain the warnings we got coming here. Perhaps they enclosed them

as a favour to the rest of Creation, because they couldn't destroy them, or move them elsewhere.'

Sylveste thought. 'Whoever put them here originally -- around a neutron star - - must have meant

for them to attract someone's attention. Don't you think?'

'Like a lure?'

'Neutron stars are common enough, but they're still exotic; especially from the point of view of a

culture just achieving the capability for starflight. It was guaranteed that the Amarantin would be

drawn here through sheer curiosity.'

'They weren't the last, were they?'

'No, I don't suppose they were.' Sylveste drew a breath. 'Do you think we

should go back, while

we still can?'

'Rationally, yes. Is that enough of an answer for you?'

They pushed forward.

'Take us towards the light first,' Calvin said, minutes later. 'I want to see it closer. It seems -- this

is going to sound stupid -- but it seems somehow stranger than the other thing. If there's one thing

I'd choose to die having seen up close, I think it's that light.'

'That's how I feel,' Sylveste said. He was already doing what Calvin had suggested, as if the

intention had sprung from his own will. What Calvin said was right; there was indeed something

deeper about the strangeness of the light; something more profound, older. He had not been able to

put that feeling into words, or even properly acknowledge it, but now it was out in the open, and it

felt right. The light was where they had to go.

It was silvery in texture; a diamond gash in the fabric of reality, simultaneously intense and calm.

Approaching it, the orbiting jewel (stationary now, in this frame) seemed to dwindle. Smooth pearly

radiance surrounded the suit. He felt that the light should hurt his eyes, but there was nothing except

a feeling of warmth, and a kind of slowly magnifying knowing. Gradually he lost sight of the rest of

the chamber and the jewel, until he seemed to be enveloped in a blizzard of silver and whiteness. He

felt no danger; no threat; only resignation -- and it was a joyous resignation, bursting with

immanence. Slowly, magically, the suit itself seemed to turn transparent, the silver luminance

bursting through until it reached his skin, and then pushed deeper, into his flesh and bones.

It was not quite what he had been expecting.

Afterwards, when he came to consciousness (or descended to it, since it seemed that in the hiatus he

had been somewhere above it), there was only understanding.

He was back in the chamber again, some distance from the white light, still within the rotating

frame of the jewel.

And he knew.

'Well,' Calvin said, his voice as unexpected and out-of-place in the tranquillity that followed as a

trumpet blast. 'That was some trip, wasn't it?'

'Did you... experience all that?'

'Put it this way. That was weirdest damned thing I've ever felt. Does that answer you?'

It was. There was no need to push beyond that; no need to convince himself further that Calvin

had shared all that he had felt, or that for a moment their thoughts -- and more -- had liquefied and

flowed indivisibly, along with a trillion others. And that he understood perfectly what had

happened, because in the moment of shared wisdom, all his questions had been answered.

'We were *read*, weren't we? That light is a scanning device; a machine for retrieving information.'

The words sounded perfectly reasonable before he said them, but in the saying of them he felt he

was expressing himself poorly, debasing the thing of which he spoke by the crudity of language.

But for all the insights he had felt in that place, his vocabulary had not been enlarged enough to

encompass them. And even now they seemed to be fading; the way a dream's magical qualities

seemed to wither in the first few seconds of waking. But he had to say it, to at least crystallise what

he felt; get it recorded by the suit's memory for posterity, if nothing else. 'For a moment I think we

were turned into information, and that in that instant we were linked to every other piece of

information ever known; every thought ever thought, or at least ever captured by the light.'

'That's how it felt to me,' Calvin said.

Sylveste wondered if Calvin shared the increasing amnesia he felt; the slow fading of the

knowing.

'We were in Hades, weren't we?' Sylveste felt his thoughts stampeding at the gates of expression,

desperate to be vocalised before they evaporated. 'That thing isn't a neutron star at all. Maybe it was

once, but it isn't now. It's been transformed; turned into a...'

'A computer,' Calvin said, finishing the sentence for him. 'That's what Hades is. A computer

made out of nuclear matter, the mass of a star devoted to processing information, storing it. And this

light is an aperture into it; a way to enter the computational matrix. I think for a moment we were

actually in it.'

But it was much stranger than that.

Once, a star with a mass thirty or forty times heavier than Earth's sun had reached the end of its

nuclear-burning lifetime. After several million years of profligate energy-expenditure the star had

exploded as a supernova, and in its heart, tremendous gravitational pressure had smashed a lump of

matter within its own Schwarzschild radius, until a black hole had been formed. The black hole was

so named because nothing, not even light, could escape from its critical radius. Matter and light

could only fall into the black hole, thereby engorging it towards greater mass and greater attractive

force; a vicious circle.

A culture arose that had use for such an object. They knew a technique whereby a black hole

could be transformed into something far more exotic, far more paradoxical. First, they waited until

the universe was considerably older than when the black hole had been formed; until the

predominant stellar population consisted of very old red-dwarf stars, stars which were barely

massive enough to ignite their own fusion fires. Next, they shepherded a dozen of these dwarves

into an accretion disk around the black hole and slowly allowed the disk to feed the hole, raining

starstuff onto its light-swallowing event horizon.

This much Sylveste understood, or could at least deceive himself into thinking that he

understood. But the next part -- the core of it -- was much harder to hold in his mind, like a self-

contradictory koan. What he grasped was that, once within the event horizon, particles continued to

fall along particular trajectories, particular orbits which swung them around the kernel of infinite

density which was the singularity at the black hole's heart. Falling along these lines, time and space

began to blend into one another, until they were no longer properly separable. And -- crucially --

there was one set of trajectories in which they swapped places completely; where a trajectory in

space became one in time. And one subset of this bunch of paths actually allowed matter to tunnel

into the past, earlier into the black hole's history.

'I'm accessing texts from the twentieth century,' Calvin murmured, seemingly able to follow his

thoughts. 'This effect was known -- predicted -- even then. It seemed to follow from the

mathematics describing black holes. But no one knew how seriously to take it.'

'Whoever engineered Hades had no such qualms.'

'So it would seem.'

What happened was that light, energy, particle-flux, wormed along these special trajectories,

burrowing ever deeper into the past with each orbit around the singularity. None of this was

'evident' to the outside universe since it was confined behind the impenetrable barrier of the event

horizon, and so there was no overt violation of causality. According to the mathematics which

Calvin had accessed, there could be none, since these trajectories could never pass back into the

external universe. Yet they did. What the mathematics had overlooked was the special case of the

tiny subset-of-a-subset-of-a-subset of trajectories which actually carried quanta back to the birth of

the black hole, when it collapsed in the supernova detonation of its progenitor star.

At that instant, the minute outward pressure exerted by the particles arriving from the future

served to delay the gravitational infall.

The delay was not even measurable; it was barely longer than the smallest theoretical subdivision

of quantised time. But it existed. And, small though it was, it was sufficient to send ripples of causal

shock propagating back into the future.

These ripples of causal shock met the incoming particles and established a grid of causal

interference, a standing wave extending symmetrically into the past and the future.

Enmeshed in this grid, the collapsed object was no longer sure that it was meant to be a black

hole. The initial conditions had always been borderline, and perhaps these entanglements could be

avoided if it remained poised above its Schwarzschild radius; if it collapsed down to a stable

configuration of strange quarks and degenerate neutrons instead.

It flickered indeterminately between the two states. The indeterminacy crystallised, and what

remained behind was something unique in the universe -- except that elsewhere, similar

transformations were being wrought on other black holes, similar causal paradoxes coming into

being.

The object settled on a stable configuration whereby its paradoxical nature was not immediately

obvious to the outside universe. Externally, it resembled a neutron star -- for the first few

centimetres of its crust, at least. Below, the nuclear matter had been catalysed into intricate forms

capable of lightning-swift computation, a self-organisation which had emerged spontaneously from

the resolution of its two opposed states. The crust seethed and processed, containing information at

the theoretical maximum density of storage of matter, anywhere in the universe.

And it thought.

Below, the crust blended seamlessly with a flickering storm of unresolved possibility, as the

interior of the collapsed object danced to the music of acausality. While the crust ran endless

simulations, endless computations, the core bridged the future and the past, allowing information to

channel effortlessly between them. The crust, in effect, had become one element of a massive

parallel-processor, except that the other elements in its array were the future and past versions of

itself.

And it knew.

It knew that, even with this totality of processing power strewn across the aeons, it was only part

of something much larger.

And it had a name.

Sylveste had to let his mind rest for a moment. The immensity of it was dwindling now, leaving

only the ringing aftertones, like the last echoes of the final chord of the greatest symphony ever

played. In a few moments, he doubted that he would remember much at all. There was simply

insufficient room in his head for it all. And, strangely, he did not feel the slightest sorrow at its

passing. For those few moments, it had been wonderful to taste that transhuman knowledge, but it

was simply too much for one man to know. It was better to live; better to carry a memory of a

memory, than suffer the vast burden of knowing.

He was not meant to think like a god.

After many minutes, he checked his suit clock, and was only mildly surprised to find that he had

lost several hours, assuming his last check on the time had been correct. There was still time to get

out, he thought; still time to make it to the surface before the bridgehead closed.

He looked at the jewel; no less enigmatic for all that he had now experienced. It had not ceased

its constant fluxing, and he still felt its beguiling attraction. He felt that he knew more about it now;

that his time in the porthole to the Hades matrix had taught him something -- but for a moment the

memories were too thickly integrated into the other experiences he had gained, and he could not

quite bring them to conscious examination.

All he knew was that he felt a foreboding which had not been there before.

Still, he moved towards it.

*

The agonised red eye of Hades was noticeably larger now, but the neutron star at the heart of that

burning point would never amount to more than a glint; it was only a few tens of kilometres across,

and they would be dead long before they were close enough to resolve it properly, shredded by the

intense differential force of gravity.

'I feel I should tell you,' Pascale Sylveste said, 'I don't think it will be fast, what's going to happen

to us. Not unless we're very lucky.'

Khouri tried her best not to sound irritated at the woman's tone of superior understanding,

admitting to herself that Pascale was probably quite justified in adopting that manner.

'How do you know so much? You're no astrophysicist.'

'No, but I remember Dan telling me about how the tidal forces would limit the close approach of

any of the probes he wanted to send here.'

'You're talking as if he's dead already.'

'I don't think he is,' Pascale said. 'I think he might even survive. But we're not going to. I'm sorry,

but it amounts to the same thing.'

'You still love that bastard, don't you?'

'He loved me too, believe it or not. I know from the way he acted -- what he did -- the way he

seemed so driven, it must have been hard for outsiders to see. But he did care. More than anyone

will ever know.'

'Maybe people won't be so hard on him when they find out the way he was manipulated.'

'You think anyone's going to find out? We're the only ones who know, Khouri. As far as the rest

of the universe is concerned, he was just a monomaniac. They don't understand that he used people

because he had no choice. Because something bigger than any of us was driving him forward.'

Khouri nodded. 'I wanted to kill him once -- but only because it was a way to get back to Fazil.

There was never any hatred in it. Matter of fact, I can't say I honestly disliked him. I admired

anyone who could carry around that much arrogance, like it was his birthright, or something. Most

people, they don't carry it off. But he wore it like a king. It stopped being arrogance, then -- became

something else. Something you could admire.'

Pascale elected not to reply, but Khouri could tell that she was not in complete disagreement.

Maybe she was just not quite ready to come out and say it aloud. That she had loved Sylveste

because he was such a self-important bastard and made something noble of being a self-important

bastard, did it with such utter aplomb that it became a kind of virtue, like the wearing of sackcloth.

'Listen,' Khouri said, eventually. 'I've got an idea. When those tides begin to bite, do you want to

be fully conscious, or would you rather approach the matter with a little

fortification?'

'What do you mean?'

'Ilia always told me this place was built to show clients around the outside of the ship; the kind of

clients you wanted to impress if you wanted to keep the contract. So I'm thinking, somewhere on

board there has to be a drinks cabinet. Probably well-stocked, assuming it hasn't been drunk dry

over the last few centuries. And then again, it might even be self-replenishing. Are you with me?'

Pascale said nothing, during which time the gravitational sinkhole of Hades crept closer. Finally,

just when Khouri assumed that the other woman had elected not to hear her proposition, Pascale

released herself from her seat and headed rearwards, to the unexplored realms of plush and brass

behind them.

THIRTY-NINE

Cerberus Interior, Final Chamber, 2567

The jewel shone with a noticeable bluish radiance now, as if his proximity had stilled its spectral

transformations; forced it towards some temporary quiescence. Sylveste still felt that it was wrong

to approach it, but now his own curiosity -- and a sense of predestiny -- was impelling him

forwards. Maybe it was something springing from the basal parts of his mind;
a need to confront the

dangerous and thereby tame it. It was an instinct which must have driven the
first touching of fire,

the first flinch of pain and the wisdom that came with that pain.

The jewel unfolded before him, undergoing geometric transformations to
which he did not dare

devote too much attention, for fear that understanding them would cleave his
mind open along

similar fault lines.

'Are you sure this is wise?' Calvin asked, his utterances now more than ever
forming part of the

normal background of Sylveste's inner dialogue.

'It's too late to return now,' said a voice.

A voice which belonged neither to Calvin nor Sylveste, but which seemed
deeply familiar, as if it

had long been a part of him, merely silent.

'Sun Stealer, isn't it?'

'He's been with us all along,' Calvin said. 'Haven't you?'

'Longer than you imagine. Since you returned from Lascaille's Shroud, Dan.'

'Then everything Khouri said was right,' he said, while already knowing the
truth of it. If Sajaki's

empty suit had not confirmed it, then the revelations he had shared in the
white light had ended his

doubts, completely.

'What do you want of me?'

'Only that you enter the -- jewel -- as you call it.' The creature's voice, and its voice was the only

thing that he heard, was sibilant; chillingly so. 'You have nothing to fear. You will not be harmed by

it, nor will you be prevented from leaving.'

'You would say that, wouldn't you?'

'Except that it is the truth.'

'What about the bridgehead?'

'The device is still operational. It will remain so until you have left Cerberus.'

'There's no way of knowing,' Calvin said. 'Whatever he -- it -- says, could well be a lie. He's

deceived and manipulated us at every step; all to bring you here. Why should he suddenly start

telling the truth now?'

'Because it is of no consequence,' Sun Stealer said. 'Now that you have reached this far, your own

desires play no further part in the matter.'

And Sylveste felt the suit surge forward, directly into the opened jewel, along a brilliantly

faceted, ever-flickering corridor which extended into the structure.

'What----' Calvin began.

'I'm not doing anything,' Sylveste said. 'The bastard must have control of my suit!'

'Stands to reason. He could control Sajaki's, after all. Must have preferred to sit back and let you

do all the work until now. Lazy bastard.'

'At this point,' Sylveste said, 'I don't think insulting him's going to make a great deal of difference.'

'Do you have a better idea?'

'As a matter of fact----'

The corridor surrounded him completely now, a glowing tracheal tunnel which twisted and

turned until it seemed impossible that he could still be inside the jewel. But then, he told himself, he

had never come to a clear conclusion as to its true size -- it might have been anywhere between a

few hundred metres across or tens of kilometres. Its fluctuating shape made it impossible to know,

and perhaps meant that there was no meaningful answer; in the same way that one could not specify

the volume of a fractal solid.

'Uh, you were saying?'

'I was saying...' Sylveste trailed off. 'Sun Stealer, are you listening to me?'

'As always.'

'I don't understand why I had to come here. If you managed to animate Sajaki's suit -- and you

had conscious control of mine all this time -- why did I have to come along in the first place? If

there's something you want inside this thing, something you want to bring out, you could do it

without me being here at all.'

'The device will only respond to organic life. An empty suit would be interpreted as machine

sentence.'

'This -- thing -- is a device? Is that what you're saying?'

'It is an Inhibitor device.'

For a moment the words seemed meaningless, but only for a moment. Then -- fuzzily -- the words

attached to some of the memories he retained from his time in the white light; the portal to the

Hades matrix. Those memories attached to others; an endless braid of association.

And he came to a kind of understanding.

More than ever, he knew that he should not continue; that if he reached the inner realm of the

jewel -- of the Inhibitor device, as he now knew it to be -- things would be very, very bad. In fact, it

would be difficult to imagine how things could be worse.

'We can't go on,' Calvin said. 'I understand now what this is.'

'Me too, belatedly.'

The device had been left here by the Inhibitors. They had placed it in orbit around Hades, next to

the glimmering white portal; something older even than the Inhibitors. It did not bother them that

they did not properly understand its function, or have any real inkling of who had placed it there,

next to the neutron star which -- according to some puzzling indications they had allowed to linger

unexplored -- was not quite as it should be. But, the enigma of its origin aside, it entirely suited

their plans. Their own devices were constructed to lure the sentient, and by placing one of them

next to an entity even more perplexing, they were guaranteed visitors. It was a strategy they

followed across the galaxy, in fact: leaving Inhibitor devices in close proximity to objects of

astrophysical interest, or near the ruins of extinct cultures. Anywhere where they were likely to

draw attention.

And the Amarantin had come, and tinkered, and made themselves known to the device. It had

studied them, and learned their weaknesses.

And it had wiped them out -- all except for a handful of descendants of the

Banished, who found

two means to escape the ruthless predation of the Inhibitors. Some had used the portal itself,

mapping themselves into the crustal matrix, where they continued to run as simulations, preserved

in the impervious amber of nuclear matter enslaved for computational purposes.

It was hardly living, Sylveste thought, but at least something of them had been preserved.

And then there were the others: the others who had found the other way to escape the Inhibitors.

Their mode of escape had been no less drastic, no less irreversible...

'They became the Shrouders, didn't they?' Calvin was speaking now -- or was it Sylveste, voicing

his own thoughts, the way he sometimes did, in the heat of concentration? He could barely tell,

much less care. 'This was in the last days; when Resurgam was already gone, and most of the

spaceborn had already been tracked down and annihilated. One faction went into the Hades matrix.

Another learned what they could about manipulating spacetime, probably from the transformations

near the portal. And they found a solution; a way to barricade themselves against the Inhibitor

weapons. They found a way to wrap spacetime around themselves; a way to curdle and solidify it,

until it formed an impervious shell. And they retreated behind those shells and sealed them for

eternity.

'But at least it was better than dying.'

Everything, for an instant, was clear in his head. How those behind the Shrouds had waited, and

waited, barely cognisant of the outside universe; barely able to communicate with it, so secure were

the walls they had wrapped around themselves.

And they had waited.

They had known, even at the time of enclosure, that the systems left behind by the Inhibitors

were slowly failing; slowly losing their ability to suppress intelligence. Not soon enough, for them -

- but after a million years of waiting, trapped in their bubble of spacetime, they began to wonder if

the threat had now diminished...

They could not simply dismantle the Shrouds and look around -- far too hazardous; especially as

the Inhibitor machines were nothing if not patient. Their apparent silence might only be part of the

trap, a waiting game designed to entice the Amarantin -- who were now the Shrouders -- out of their

shells, into the open arena of naked space, where they could be destroyed with ease, terminating the

million-year purge against their kind.

Yet, in time, others came.

Perhaps there was something about this region of space which favoured the evolution of

vertebrate life, or perhaps it was only coincidence, but in the newly starfaring humans, the

Shrouders saw echoes of what they had once been. Something of the same psychosis, almost: the

simultaneous craving for solitude and companionship; the need for the comfort of society and the

open steppes of space; a schism which drove them onwards, outwards.

Philip Lascaille had been the first to meet them, around the Shroud which now bore his name.

The tortured spacetime around the Shroud had ripped his mind open, twisted it and reassembled

it, into a drooling travesty of what it had once been. But it was a travesty shot with brilliance. They

had put something in him; the knowledge that was needed for someone else to get much closer...

and the lie that would make him do it.

Just before he died, Lascaille had communicated this to the young Dan Sylveste.

Go to the Jugglers, he had said.

Because the Amarantin had once visited them; once imprinted their neural patterns into the

Juggler ocean. Those patterns stabilised the spacetime around the Shroud;
enabled one to penetrate

deeper into its thickening folds without being torn asunder by the stresses. It
was how Sylveste,

having accepted the Juggler transform, was able to ride the storms into the
depths of the Shroud

itself.

He came out alive.

But changed.

Something had come back with him; something which called itself Sun
Stealer, though he knew

now that this was no more than a mythname; that the thing which had lived
within him ever since

was better thought of as an assemblage; an artificial personality woven into
the shell of the Shroud,

put there by those within who wanted Sylveste to act as their emissary; to
extend their influence

beyond the curtain of impassable spacetime.

What they wanted him to do was very simple, in hindsight.

Travel to Resurgam, where the bones of their corporeal ancestors were
buried.

Find the Inhibitor device.

Place himself in a position where, if the device was still functioning, it would
activate and

identify him as a member of a newly uprisen intelligent culture.

If the Inhibitors were still around, humanity would be identified as the next species to be put to

the slaughter.

If not, the Shrouders could emerge into safety.

Now the bluish light which surrounded him seemed evil; unspeakably so. He knew that simply by

entering this place he might have already done too much; already exhibited enough apparent

intelligence to convince the Inhibitor device that he represented a breed worthy of extinction.

He hated what the Amarantin had become; hated himself for devoting so much of his life to their

study. But what could he do now? It was far too late for second thoughts.

The tunnel had widened, and where he found himself -- still without any conscious control of the

suit -- was in a faceted chamber, bathed in the same putrid blue glow. The chamber was filled with

odd hanging shapes, reminding him of reconstructions he had seen of the inside of a human cell.

The shapes were all rectilinear, complexly interconnected rectangles and squares and rhomboids,

forming hanging sculptures which subscribed to no recognisable aesthetic tendency.

'What are they?' he breathed.

'Think of them as puzzles,' Sun Stealer said. 'The idea is that, as an intelligent explorer, you feel a

curious urge to complete them, to move the shapes into the geometric configurations which are

implied in the pieces.'

He could see what Sun Stealer meant. The nearest assemblage, for instance. It was obvious that

with a few manipulations he could make the shapes into a tesseract... almost tempting...

'I won't do it,' he said.

'You won't have to.' And in demonstration, Sun Stealer made the limbs of his suit reach out

towards the assemblage, which was much closer than he had first guessed. The suit fingers grasped

for the first piece, swinging it effortlessly into place. 'There will be other tests, other chambers,' the

alien said. 'Your mental processes will be subjected to rigid scrutiny, and -- later -- your biology. I

do not expect that the latter procedure will be especially pleasant. But neither will it be fatal. That

would deter others, from which a broader picture of the enemy could be assembled.' There was

something almost like humour in the thing's voice now; as if he had been long enough in human

company to glean some of their manners. 'You, alas, will be the only human representative to enter

this device. But rest assured you will prove an excellent specimen.'

'That's where you're wrong,' Sylveste said.

The first hint of alarm entered Sun Stealer's implacable, noiseless voice.
'Please explain.'

For a moment Sylveste did not oblige. 'Calvin,' he said. 'There's something I have to say.' Even as

he spoke, he was not really sure why he was doing so, not really sure who he was addressing.

'When we were in the white light -- when we shared everything, in the Hades matrix -- there was

something I found out; something I should have known years ago.'

'About you, that is.'

'About me, yes. About what I am.' Sylveste wanted to cry, now, knowing that this would be his

last chance, but his eyes did not allow that; they never had. 'About why I can't hate you, unless I

want to turn that hatred against myself. If I ever really hated you in the first place.'

'It didn't really work, did it? What I made of you. It wasn't the way I planned it. But I can't say

I'm disappointed with the way you turned out.' Calvin corrected himself. 'The way I turned out.'

'I'm glad I found out, even if it has to be now.'

'What are you going to do?'

'You already know. We shared everything, didn't we?' Sylveste found himself laughing. 'Now

you know my secrets, as well.'

'Ah. You're talking about that little secret, aren't you?'

'What?' hissed Sun Stealer; voice like the radio crackle of distant quasars.

'I guess you were privy to the conversations I had on the ship,' he said, addressing the alien again.

'When I let them think I'd been bluffing.'

'Bluffing?' it asked. 'About what?'

'About the hot-dust in my eyes,' Sylveste said.

He laughed, louder this time. And then executed the series of neural triggers, long committed to

memory, which initiated a cascade of events in the circuitry of his eyes, and -
- finally -- in the tiny

motes of contained antimatter embedded within them.

There was a light purer than any he had known, even in the portal which led to Hades.

And then there was nothing.

Volyova saw it first.

She was waiting for the *Infinity* to finish her off; watching the vast conic form of the vessel, dark

as night, visible only because it blocked starlight, edging closer towards her with sharklike

deliberation. Doubtless somewhere in its hugeness, systems were pondering over the matter of how

to expedite her death in the most interesting manner. That was the only explanation for why it had

not already killed her, since she was within strike-range of every one of its weapons. Perhaps Sun

Stealer's presence aboard the ship had given it a kind of sick sense of humour; a desire to put her to

death with sadistic slowness; a process that commenced with this deathly wait for something to

happen. Her imagination was now her worst enemy, efficiently reminding her of all the systems

which might suit Sun Stealer's purpose; the defences which could boil her over hours, or dismember

her without killing her immediately (lasers which were tuned to cauterise flesh, for instance), or

crush her (a squad of external servitors, for instance). Oh, the processes of her mind were a glorious

thing. And it was, by and large, that same fertility which had given rise to so many possible modes

of execution.

But then she saw it.

The flash, sparking from the surface of Cerberus, briefly marking the spot where the bridgehead

was installed. It was as if, for a split second, a tremendous light had ignited within the world, only

to be immediately dimmed.

Or a tremendous explosion.

She watched entrails of rock and scalded machinery puff into space.

Khoury took a moment to come to terms with the fact that she was not actually dead, despite the

certainty she had felt that this would come to pass. At the very least, she had expected to wake

transiently to pain, her last moments of consciousness before Hades pulled her apart; body and soul

flensed by the monstrous talons of gravity around the neutron star. She had also expected to wake to

the worst headache since the Mademoiselle had invoked her buried memories of the Dawn War. But

this time it would be a headache of purely chemical origin.

They had found the drinks cabinet in the spider-room.

And they had drunk it empty.

But her head felt achingly clear of any intoxication, like a freshly scrubbed window. She had

come to consciousness swiftly as well, with no groggy transition, as if there had been no existence

in the instant before her eyes opened. But it was not in the spider-room. Now that she thought about

it, she remembered waking; remembered the terrible onset of those tides; how she and Pascale had

crawled to the midpoint of the room to lessen the differential stresses. But it had surely failed; they

had known at that point there was no possible way to survive; that the only thing they could do was

to somehow lessen the pain----

Where in hell's name was she?

She had awakened with her back against a hard surface, unyielding as concrete. Above, the stars

cartwheeled with insane speed through the sky, and there was something wrong with the way they

moved; as if seen through a thick lens which stretched from horizon to horizon. She found she could

move and struggled to her feet, almost toppling back as she did so.

She was wearing a suit.

She had not been wearing one in the spider-room. It was the same kind that she had used during

her surface activities on Resurgam; the same kind that Sylveste would have taken with him into

Cerberus. How could this be? If this experience was a dream, then it was unlike any she had known,

because she could consciously question its contradictions without the whole edifice crumbling

around her.

She was on a plain. It was the colour of cooling metal; almost but not quite bright enough to hurt

the eye. It was as flat as a beach after the tide had retreated. The plain, now that she looked at it

more closely, was patterned; not randomly, but in the intricately ordered manner of a Persian carpet.

Between each level of patterning was another, until the ordering teetered on the edge of the

microscopic and probably plunged down to even smaller realms, towards the subnuclear and the

quantum. And it was shifting; blurring in and out of focus, never the same from moment to

moment. Eventually it started to make her feel vaguely unwell, so she snapped her attention away to

the horizon.

It seemed very close indeed.

She started walking. Her feet crunched into the flickering ground. The patterns rearranged

themselves to create smooth stepping stones where she could plant her feet.

Something lay ahead.

It rose above the close curve of the horizon: a slight mound, a raised plinth stark against the

tumbling starscape. She approached it, and as she neared it she saw movement. The raised part was

like the entrance to a subway, three low walls enclosing a series of descending steps, burrowing into

the world.

The movement was a figure emerging from the depths; a woman. She heaved herself up the steps

with strength and patience, as if she were taking the morning air for the first time. Unlike Khouri,

she wore no spacesuit. In fact, she was dressed in exactly the way Khouri remembered her from the

last time they were together.

It was Pascale Sylveste.

'I've been waiting a long time,' she said, her voice carrying across the airless black space between

them.

'Pascale?'

'Yes,' she said, and then qualified herself. 'In a manner of speaking. Oh dear; this isn't going to be

easy to explain -- and I've had so long to rehearse it...'

'What happened, Pascale?' It seemed impudent to ask her why she wasn't wearing a suit; why she

wasn't dead. 'Where is this?'

'Haven't you guessed yet?'

'Sorry to disappoint you.'

Pascale smiled sympathetically. 'You're on Hades. Remember that? The neutron star; the one

which was pulling us in. Well, it wasn't. A neutron star, I mean.'

'On it?'

'On it, yes. I don't think you were expecting that.'

'No; you could say that.'

'I've been here as long as you have,' Pascale said. 'Which is only a few hours. But I've spent the

time beneath the crust, where things happen a bit quicker. So it seems like considerably more than a

few hours to me.'

'How much more?'

'Try a few decades... although time really doesn't pass at all here, in some respects.'

Khouri nodded, as if all this made perfect sense. 'Pascale... I think you need to explain...'

'Good idea. I'll do it on the way down.'

'The way down where?'

She beckoned Khouri towards the stairs which descended into the cherry-red plain, as if she were

inviting a neighbour indoors for cocktails.

'Inside,' Pascale said. 'Into the matrix.'

Death had still not come.

Over the next hour, using the suit's image-zoom overlay, Volyova watched the bridgehead slowly

lose its form, like a piece of pottery being inexpertly shaped. Gradually it

began to dissolve into the

crust. It was being digested, having finally lost the battle against Cerberus.

Too soon; too soon.

The wrongness of it gnawed into her. She might be about to die, but she did not like seeing one

of her creations fail, and -- dammit -- fail so prematurely.

Finally, unable to take any more, she turned towards the ship, pointing towards her with

daggerlike intent, and spread her arms wide. She had no idea if the ship was capable of reading her

vocal transmissions.

'Come on then, *svinoi*. Finish me off. I've had enough. I don't want to see any more. Get it over

with.'

A hatch opened somewhere down the ship's conic flank, briefly aglow with orange interior

lighting. She half expected some nasty and dimly remembered weapon to cruise out; perhaps

something she had knocked together in a spasm of drunken creativity.

Instead a shuttle emerged, and powered slowly towards her.

The way Pascale told it to Khouri, the neutron star was in fact nothing of the sort. Or at least it had

been once, or would have been -- had it not been for interference by some third party Pascale

declined to talk about in any great detail. But the gist was simple. They had converted the neutron

star into a giant, blindingly fast computer -- one that, in some bizarre manner, was able to

communicate with its own past and future selves.

'What am I doing here?' Khouri asked, as they descended the stairway. 'No, better question: what

are we doing here? And how do you know so much more than me all of a sudden?'

'I told you; I was in the matrix for longer.' Pascale paused on one of the steps. 'Listen, Khouri --

you might not like what I'm about to tell you. Namely, that you're dead -- for now, at least.'

Khouri was less surprised by this than she had expected. It seemed almost predictable.

'We died in the gravitational tides,' Pascale said matter-of-factly. 'We got too close to Hades, and

the tides pulled us apart. It wasn't very pleasant, either -- but most of your memories of it were

never captured, so you don't recall them now.'

'Captured?'

'According to all the normal laws, we should have been crushed to atoms. And in a sense we

were. But the information which described us was preserved in the flow of gravitons between what

remained of us and Hades. The force that killed us also recorded us,
transmitted that information to

the crust...'

'Right,' Khouri said slowly, prepared to take this as given for the time being.
'And once we were

transmitted into the crust?'

'We were -- um -- simulated back to life. Of course, computation in the crust
happens much faster

than realtime -- which is why I've spent several decades of subjective time in
it.'

She sounded almost apologetic.

'I don't remember spending several decades anywhere.'

'That's because you didn't. You were brought to life, but you didn't want to
stay here. You don't

remember any of that; you chose not to, in fact. There was nothing to keep
you here.'

'Implying there was something to keep *you* here?'

'Oh yes,' Pascale said, with wonder. 'Oh yes. We'll come to that.'

The stairwell reached its foot now, leading into a lanterned corridor, bright
with randomly strewn

fairytale lights. The walls, when she looked at them, were alive with the same
computational

shimmer she had seen on the surface. An impression of intense busyness; of
unguessably complex

machine algebra constantly churning just beyond her reach.

'What am I?' Khouri said. 'What are you? You said I was dead. I don't feel it. And I don't feel like

I'm being simulated in any matrix. I was out on the surface, wasn't I?'

'You're flesh and blood,' Pascale said. 'You died, and you were recreated. Your body was

reconstructed from the chemical elements already present in the matrix's outer crust, and then you

were reanimated, and quickened to consciousness. The suit you're wearing -- that came from the

matrix as well.'

'You mean someone wearing a suit got close enough to be killed by the tides?'

'No...' Pascale said carefully. 'No; there's another way into the matrix. A much easier way -- or at

least it once was.'

'I should still be dead. Nothing can live on a neutron star. Or in it, for that matter.'

'I told you; it isn't one.' And then she explained how it was possible; how the matrix itself was

generating a pocket of tolerable gravity in which she could live; how it was achieved by the

circulation deeper in the crust of awesome quantities of degenerate matter; perhaps as a

computational by-product; perhaps not. But like a diverging lens, the flow

focused gravity away

from her, while equally ferocious forces kept the walls from crushing in at only fractionally less

than the speed of light.

'What about you?'

'I'm not like you,' Pascale said. 'This body I'm wearing -- that's all it is, something to puppet;

something in which to meet you. It's formed from the same nuclear material as the crust. The

neutrons are bound together by strange quarks, so I don't fly apart under my own quantum pressure.'

She touched her forehead. 'But I'm not doing any thinking. That's going on all around you, in the

matrix itself. You'll excuse me -- and this is going to sound terribly rude -- but I'd find it mind-

numbingly boring if I was forced into doing nothing except talk to you. As I said, our computational

rates are highly divergent. You're not offended, are you? I mean, it's nothing personal, I hope you

understand.'

'Forget it,' Khouri said. 'I'm sure I'd feel the same.'

The corridor widened out now, into what seemed to be a well-appointed scientific study, from

any time in the last five or six centuries. The room's predominant colour was brown, the brown of

age: on the wooden shelves which ran along its walls, on the browning spines of the ancient paper

books arrayed along those shelves, the lustrous brown of the mahogany desk, and the golden-brown

metal of the antique scientific tools placed around the desk's periphery for effect. Wooden cabinets

buttressed the walls which did not carry shelves, and in them hung yellowing bones; alien bones

which at first glance might be mistaken for the fossils of dinosaurs or large, extinct flightless birds,

provided one did not pay undue attention to the capaciousness of the alien skull, the roominess of

the mind it had surely once entrapped.

There were examples of modern apparatus too: scanning devices, advanced cutting instruments,

racks of eidetics and holographic storage wafers. A servitor of intermediate modernity waited

inertly in one corner, head slightly bowed, like a trusty retainer taking a well-earned snooze while

still on his feet.

In one wall, slatted windows overlooked an arid, windswept terrain of mesas and precarious rock

formations, bathed in the reddish light of a setting sun, already disappearing behind the chaotic

horizon.

And at the desk -- rising from it as they entered the room, as if disturbed from concentration --

was Sylveste.

She looked into his eyes -- human eyes -- for the first time, in what passed for the flesh.

For a moment he looked annoyed by their intrusion, but his expression softened until half a smile

played across his features. 'I'm glad you took the time to visit us,' he said. 'And I hope Pascale has

explained all that you asked of her.'

'Most of it,' Khouri said, stepping further into the study, marvelling at the fastidiousness of its

recreation. It was as good as any simulation she had ever experienced. Yet -- and the thought was as

impressive as it was frightening -- every single object in this room was moulded from nuclear

matter, at densities so large that, ordinarily, the smallest paperweight on his desk would have

exerted a fatal gravitational pull, even from halfway across the room. 'But not all of it. How did you

get here?'

'Pascale probably mentioned that there was another way into the matrix.' He offered her the

palms of his hands. 'I found it, that's all. Passed through it.'

'And what happened to your...'

'My real self?' The smile had a quality of self-amusement now, as if he were enjoying some

private joke too subtle to share. 'I doubt that he survived. And frankly, it doesn't really concern me.

I'm the real me now. I'm all that I ever was.'

'What happened in Cerberus?'

'That's a very long story, Khouri.'

But he told her anyway. How he had travelled into the world; how Sajaki's suit had turned out to

be an empty shell; how that realisation had done nothing but strengthen his resolve to push on

further, and what, finally, he had found, in the final chamber. How he had passed into the matrix --

at which point, his memories diverged from his other self. But when he told her he was sure that his

other self was dead, he did so with such conviction that Khouri wondered if there was not another

way of knowing; if some other, less tangible bond had linked them, right until the end.

There were things even Sylveste did not really understand; that much she sensed. He had not

achieved godhead -- or at least, not for more than an instant, when he bathed in the portal. Had that

been a choice he had made subsequently? she wondered. If the matrix was simulating him; and if

the matrix was essentially infinite in its computational capacity... what limits had been imposed on

him, other than those he had consciously selected?

What she learnt was this: Carine Lefevre had been kept alive by part of the Shroud, but there had

been nothing accidental about it.

'It's as if there were two factions,' Sylveste said, toying with one of the brass microscopes on his

desk, angling its little mirror this way and that, as if trying to catch the last rays of the setting sun.

'One that wanted to use me to find out if the Inhibitors were still around, still capable of posing a

threat to the Shrouders. And the other faction, which I don't think cared for humanity any more than

the first. But they were more cautious. They thought there had to be a better way, other than

goading the Inhibitor device to see if it still generated a response.'

'But what happens to us now? Who actually won? Was it Sun Stealer or the Mademoiselle?'

'Neither,' Sylveste said, placing the microscope back down again, its velvet base softly bumping

against the desk. 'At least, that's my instinctual feeling. I think we -- I -- came close to triggering the

device, close to giving it the stimulus it needed to alert the remaining devices and begin the war

against humanity.' He laughed. 'Calling it a war implied it might have been a two-sided thing. But I

don't think it would have been like that at all.'

'But you don't think it got that far?'

'I hope and I pray, that's all.' He shrugged. 'Of course, I could be wrong. I used to say I was never

wrong about anything, but that's one lesson I have learnt.'

'And what about the Amarantin, the Shrouders?'

'Only time will tell.'

'That's all?'

'I don't have all the answers, Khouri.' He looked around the room, as if appraising the volumes on

the shelves, reassuring himself that they were still present. 'Not even here.'

'It's time to go,' Pascale said, suddenly. She had appeared at her husband's side with a glass of

something clear; vodka, maybe. She placed it on the desk, next to a polished skull the colour of

parchment.

'Where?'

'Back into space, Khouri. Isn't that what you want? You surely don't want to spend the rest of

eternity here.'

'There's nowhere to go,' Khouri said. 'You should know that, Pascale. The

ship was against us;

the spider-room destroyed; Ilia killed----'

'She made it, Khouri. She wasn't killed when the shuttle was destroyed.'

So she had managed to get into a suit -- but what good did that do her?
Khouri was about to

question Pascale further, when she realised that whatever the woman told her
was very likely to be

true, no matter how unbelievable it seemed -- and no matter how useless the
truth, no matter how

little difference it could possibly make.

'What are you two going to do?'

Sylveste reached for the vodka glass and took a discreet sip. 'Haven't you
guessed yet? This room

isn't just for your benefit. We inhabit it as well, except that we inhabit a
simulated version in the

matrix. And not just this room, but the rest of the base; just as it always was -
- except now we have

it all to ourselves.'

'Is that all?'

'No... not quite.'

And then Pascale moved to his side and he put an arm around her waist and
the two of them

turned towards the slatted window; towards the red-drenched alien sunset, the
arid landscape of

Resurgam stretching away, lifeless.

And then it changed.

It began at the horizon; a sweeping wave of transformation which raced towards them with the

speed of an oncoming day. Clouds burst into the sky, vast as empires; now the sky was bluer, even

though the sun was still sinking towards dusk. And the landscape was no longer arid, but erupting

into tumultuous greenery, a verdant tidal wave. She could see lakes, and trees, alien trees, and now

roads, winding between egglike houses, clustered into hamlets and, on the horizon, a larger

community, rising towards a single slender spire. She stared into the distance, and stared, struck

dumb by the immensity of what she was seeing, which was an entire world returned to life, and --

perhaps it was a trick of the eye; she would never know -- she thought she saw them moving

between the houses, moving with the speed of birds, but never leaving the ground; never reaching

the air.

'Everything that they ever were,' Pascale said, 'or most of it, at any rate, is stored in the matrix.'

This isn't some archaeological reconstruction, Khouri. This *is* Resurgam, as they inhabit it now.

Brought into being by sheer force of will, by those who survived. It's a whole world, down to the

smallest detail.'

Khouri looked around the room, and now she understood. 'And you're going to study it, aren't

you?'

'Not just study it,' Sylveste said, draining a little more of his vodka. 'But live in it. Until it bores

us, which -- I suspect -- won't be any time now.'

And then she left them, in their study, to resume whatever deep and meaningful conversation

they had put in abeyance while they entertained her.

She finished climbing the stairwell, stepping once more onto the surface of Hades. The crust was

still aglow with red fire, still alive with computation. Now that she had been here for long enough to

attune her senses, she realised that, all along, the crust had been drumming beneath her feet, as if a

titanic engine were roaring in a basement. That, she supposed, was not far from the truth. It was an

engine of simulation.

She thought of Sylveste and Pascale, commencing another day's exploration of their fabulous

new world. In the time since she had left them, years might have passed for them. That seemed to

matter very little. She had the suspicion that they would only choose death when all else had ceased

to hold their fascination. Which, as Sylveste had said, was not going to happen any time soon.

She turned on the suit communicator.

'Ilia... can you hear me? Shit; this is stupid, but they said you might still be alive.'

There was nothing but static. Hopes crushed, she looked around at the searing plain and

wondered what she was meant to do next.

Then: 'Khoury, is that you? What business have you got still being alive?'

There was something very odd about her voice. It kept speeding up and slowing down, like she

was drunk, but too ominously regular for that.

'I could ask you the same thing. Last thing I remember is the shuttle going belly-up. You telling

me you're still out there, drifting?'

'Better than that,' Volyova said, voice whooshing up and down the spectrum. 'I'm aboard a

shuttle; do you hear that? I'm aboard a shuttle.'

'How the----'

'The ship sent it. The *Infinity*.' For once, Volyova sounded breathless with excitement; as if this

was something she had been desperately anxious to tell someone. 'I thought it

was going to kill me.

That's all I was waiting for; that final attack. But it didn't come. Instead, the ship sent out a shuttle

for me.'

'This doesn't make any sense. Sun Stealer should still be running it; should still be trying to finish

us off...'

'No,' Volyova said, still with the same tone of childish delight, 'no; it makes perfect sense --

provided what I did worked, which I think it must have----'

'What did you do, Ilia?'

'I -- um -- let the Captain warm.'

'You did *what*?'

'Yes; it was rather a terminal approach to the problem. But I thought if one parasite was trying to

gain control of the ship, the surest way to fight it was by unleashing an even more potent one.'

Volyova paused, as if awaiting Khouri's confirmation that this had indeed been a sensible thing to

do. When none came, she continued, 'This was barely a day ago -- do you know what that means?

The plague must have transformed a substantial mass of the ship in only a few hours! The speed of

the transformation must have been incredible; centimetres a second!'

'Are you sure it was wise?'

'Khouri, it's probably the least wise thing I've ever done in my life. But it does seem to have

worked. At the very least, we've swapped one megalomaniac for another -- but this one doesn't

seem quite so dedicated to our destruction.'

'I guess that's a step in the right direction. Where are you now? Have you been back aboard yet?'

'Hardly. No, I've spent the last few hours searching for you. Where the hell are you, Khouri? I

can't seem to get a meaningful fix on your location.'

'You don't really want to know.'

'Well, we'll see. But I want you aboard this ship as soon as possible. I'm not going back into the

lighthugger alone, in case you had any doubts. I don't think it's going to look quite the way we

remembered it. You -- uh -- can reach me, can't you?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Khouri did what she had been told she should do, when she wanted to leave the surface of Hades.

It made very little sense, but Pascale had been quite insistent -- she had said it was a message that

the matrix would understand; one that would cause it to project its bubble of lowfield gravity into

space; a bottle in which she could ride to safety.

She spread arms wide, as if she had wings; as if she could fly.

The red ground -- fluctuating, shimmering as ever -- dropped smoothly away.